

Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan wins third term

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As expected, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party won the general election on Sunday. With a turnout of 87 percent, the conservative Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) received slightly more than half of all votes. In 2007 it won 46 percent, and 34 percent in 2002.

However, the AKP failed to achieve its own target of winning 367 of the 550 parliamentary seats. A two-thirds majority would have enabled it to decide a new constitution without needing opposition support. With 326 deputies in the new parliament, it is also four short of the 330 needed to table a new constitution for parliamentary vote and approval in a subsequent referendum.

Erdogan had planned to replace the 1982 constitution, implemented under military rule, with a presidential system. That would have enabled him to rule as an authoritarian president after the expiration of his third and final period in office.

The discrepancy between the percentage of the AKP's share of the vote and the number of seats awarded is a result of Turkish election law, which sets a 10 percent hurdle for parties to be represented in parliament. Erdogan had hoped that the extreme right-wing MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) would fail to clear the 10 percent threshold, which would have resulted in the AKP being awarded at least 30 more seats.

Shortly before the election, several anonymous videos emerged showing MHP politicians engaged in compromising sexual activities. It is thought that the source of these videos might be someone on the periphery of the AKP or in pro-government circles among the police. However, the MHP eventually won 54 seats in parliament. Although its share of the vote fell from 18 to 13 percent, it remained well above the 10 percent mark.

The largest opposition party, the Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party), however, significantly improved its vote. Its share rose from 21 to 26 percent; it will have 135 deputies in the new parliament. Its new chairman, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, has given the party a more pronounced social-democratic profile, after it had been reduced to a mouthpiece of the military under his predecessor Deniz Baykal.

The Kurdish BDP (Party of Peace and Democracy) also made clear gains. Its candidates received almost 7 percent of the vote,

and it will now have 35 deputies in parliament, instead of the 20 it had previously. Since they participated in the election as independents, the 10 percent threshold does not apply.

The AKP owes its absolute majority to the backing it has received from wealthy traders, and its promise of "prosperity for all". When Erdogan took over the government in 2003 the country was at rock bottom economically. Triple-digit inflation and an economic collapse in 2001 had destroyed the savings of the middle class and the means of existence of numerous people. The government was forced to accept the tough conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund.

During Erdogan's rule, the Turkish economy then experienced strong growth. Average per capita income has tripled. Last year, economic output grew by 9 percent. Turkey has risen to become the 17th largest economy in the world. In his election campaign, Erdogan promised to continue this recovery and announced several massive projects, for example the construction of a 50-kilometre, 150-metre wide canal to bypass the Bosphorus, and the building of several satellite towns to address the housing shortage.

The Turkish economy, however, is still extremely unstable. This was shown in 2009, when economic performance collapsed by 14 percent as a result of the international crisis.

Social and political divisions in the country remain very deep. The unemployment rate is over 9 percent, and there is a wide gulf between the industrialized west and the largely agrarian and underdeveloped east, which is also reflected in the unresolved Kurdish question.

Erdogan began his political career in the 1970s in the Islamist camp. In the 1990s, as mayor of Istanbul, he gained a certain popularity in poorer neighbourhoods, particularly among newcomers from Anatolia. In 2001, he broke with the Islamist Welfare Party and joined with other former members to establish the AKP.

The AKP became the voice of the so-called "Anatolian bourgeoisie", i.e., those representatives of Turkish big business who felt disadvantaged by the Kemalist establishment. Erdogan's first years in power were dominated by a power struggle with the Kemalists and the military, which controlled large parts of the economy and the state apparatus, in part through mafia structures. In 2008, when Erdogan had already

been head of government for five years, they still tried to use the judiciary to have the AKP banned.

In the struggle with the Kemalists, Erdogan found himself forced to appeal to broader layers of the population. In dealing with the judiciary and the military he presented himself as a “democrat”, winning the support of liberal intellectuals. He eventually succeeded in pushing back the influence of the military. In the meantime, several generals sit in custody. He also made concessions to the oppressed Kurdish minority, lifting the long-standing ban on the use of the Kurdish language, although its use as an official language is still not permitted.

The Anatolian bourgeoisie has been able to enjoy a rapid ascent. Many of the wealthiest employers in the country—such as Nahit Kiler, who operates power plants, hotels and shopping centres and construction, and media entrepreneur Ahmet Calik—are among those closest to Erdogan.

“What is growing in Turkey is a perfect alliance”, commented *Die Zeit*, “the AKP as political patron of new business groups—and businessmen and businesswomen as the supportive sponsors of the AKP. It is not religion that binds them, but a pro-growth ideology.... One is valued, one is befriended—and in the evening by the fire, drink many a glass of fruit juice with each other.”

Once Erdogan had largely dealt with the old Kemalist establishment in his favour, he has increasingly shown authoritarian traits. During the campaign, this was a constant theme. Journalists and scientists complained that government critics are put under pressure and posts at the universities are awarded solely on the basis of party affiliation.

Erdogan has also undergone a change of course on the Kurdish question. In the 2007 election campaign he had said emotionally, “The Kurdish problem is also my problem”; now he claims that there is no Kurdish problem in Turkey any longer. And this despite the fact the Kurdish areas are still stricken by poverty, and Kurdish politicians are subjected to constant persecution by the police and judiciary.

Erdogan’s authoritarian impulses are not only the result of personal hubris, as claimed by some European commentators, who compare him to the former Russian President Vladimir Putin for wanting to introduce a presidential system. The AKP owes its recent electoral success to the promise of rising prosperity, but the circumstances under which the Turkish economy could grow rapidly are quickly drawing to a close. With his authoritarian methods, Erdogan is preparing for future class struggles.

The economic growth of recent years was due, not least, to a foreign policy offensive with which Turkey tried to establish itself as a regional power. Where the Kemalists had been completely subordinated to US foreign policy and pursued a virtually autarkic economy policy, Erdogan and his Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu developed a foreign policy offensive along the lines of the old Ottoman Empire.

US involvement in Afghanistan and the Iraq war created a certain amount of room for manoeuvre for Turkish foreign policy. Without breaking with its NATO membership or its close military ties to the US, Ankara pursued a course labelled “zero problems with your neighbours” by Foreign Minister Davutoglu. Ankara sought membership of the European Union, and maintained close political and military ties with Israel, while also cultivating close ties with Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf sheikdoms. Erdogan was able to benefit from the Islamic background of the AKP.

The recent escalation of tensions in the Middle East has now undermined this policy. Turkey’s relations with Israel cooled considerably after the Gaza war three years ago. Now there is the risk of an open conflict with Syria, after the Assad regime has shot down oppositionists near the Turkish border, and tens of thousands have fled into Turkey.

The growing confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia for hegemony in the Persian Gulf also makes it increasingly difficult for Turkey to maintain good relations on both sides. For its part, Washington is demanding increasingly stridently that NATO members must stand fully on the side of the US. Ankara’s attempts to mediate in the Libya conflict, and find a compromise with Gaddafi, were met in Washington with anger.

Erdogan and his admirers are trying to present the recent electoral success of the AKP as part of an unbroken track record, in which Turkey becomes the “China of Europe” (the *Economist*). In fact, it represents a turning point; Turkey confronts violent social upheavals and regional conflicts.



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