

Turkey: Erdoğan's presidential win presages deepening social, political conflicts

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Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won the presidential elections held on August 10 to become the first president to be elected by a national ballot. He will serve a five-year term, with the possibility of re-election to a second term. With 52 percent of the vote, somewhat less than expected, he has nevertheless avoided the need for a run-off.

The result was never in doubt, as the incumbent Abdullah Gül had stepped aside in favour of Erdoğan. It augurs a further shift towards more dictatorial forms of rule, amid increasing political and economic crises, alongside the threat of war in neighbouring Iraq and Syria.

Erdoğan's presidential bid follows twelve years in power, the maximum term, as Turkey's longest serving prime minister.

While the Turkish presidency has thus far been largely ceremonial, it has more powers than the presidency in other parliamentary regimes—including the power to promulgate laws or return them to the parliament for reconsideration, call referendums and new parliamentary elections, and appoint the prime minister, ministers and key bureaucrats.

Put in office by a popular election and secure in his grip over the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Erdoğan is expected to use the presidency to bolster his position. Speaking at the AKP headquarters in Ankara, he said that his victory heralded the “start of a new era”. By this he meant that he would continue to rule the country, but from the Cankaya presidential palace and would seek to amend the constitution to, among other things, give himself executive powers, although as yet the AKP lacks sufficient support in parliament to do so.

The five main bourgeois opposition parties, including the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the

Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which are more closely aligned with Washington and the European powers, fielded Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu as their candidate. The 71-year-old İhsanoğlu, an academic turned diplomat and former head of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), won 38.5 percent of the vote. His 15.5 million votes were nearly 4 million less than the CHP and MHP received in the local elections last March, and just 27.9 percent of the electorate.

Taking third place with 9.8 percent of the vote was Selahattin Demirtaş, the 41-year-old lawmaker and co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), a Kurdish nationalist formation. His close to 4 million votes represented a 40 percent increase on his party's performance in the local elections last March.

However, this success, which has brought HDP very close to the electoral threshold of 10 percent, was largely due to CHP supporters switching their votes to HDP due to the CHP and MHP's choice of a candidate with Islamic credentials.

The most striking feature of the vote was the low turnout in a country where voting is mandatory, indicating the disenchantment with all the choices on offer.

The CHP and MHP leaders have sought to cover their dismal performance, the result of their own discredited right-wing policies, by criticising those who abstained. Out of a population of 77 million, 53 million are registered to vote, and of them only 74 percent cast their ballot, compared with 89 percent last March. Erdoğan received nearly 21 million votes, just 360,000 more than the AKP received last March even though his percentage vote increased to 52 percent from 43 percent.

The main opposition parties, the CHP and MHP, are so discredited by their right-wing policies that they

were unable to benefit from the turbulence of the last 14 months.

In June last year, the government faced a country-wide mass protest movement sparked by the plans to develop Gezi Park and Taksim Square in downtown Istanbul. This was put down with the utmost brutality, leading to further protests. Then in December, the corrupt activities of Erdoğan, his son Bilal, and four cabinet ministers were exposed in a series of leaked phone calls, leading to probes and investigations. This was stopped by Erdoğan, removing thousands of police officers, investigators and state prosecutors, whom he claimed were part of a conspiracy being led by Washington and his former political ally, now in exile in the US, the Islamist preacher Fethullah Gülen.

Other leaked recordings emerged of a conspiracy by Turkish intelligence officers to provoke a war with Syria in support of the Islamists seeking to overthrow the Assad regime—a war that is deeply unpopular with the vast majority of Turkish people—prompting the regime to block access to YouTube and social media sites in Turkey. This followed a long campaign of intimidation against the media. Turkey holds the world record for the largest number of journalists in jail.

Last May, more than 300 coal miners lost their lives in the western town of Soma due to the criminal negligence of the mine's owners who had close links to the government, and lax regulation. Erdoğan dismissed the disaster as unavoidable. One of his advisors was caught on camera tussling with and insulting a citizen who booed him on his visit to Soma.

In June, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seized Turkey's consulate in Mosul, Iraq, capturing 49 Turkish citizens, among them the consul general. The Turkish government's failure to evacuate the consulate and its very close relations with ISIS and other Islamist groups fighting in Syria and Iraq have been bitterly opposed by the public. Erdoğan himself refused to refer to ISIS as a terrorist group.

Under these conditions, the political establishment in Turkey fear a mass uprising of the working class, as occurred in Egypt in the revolutionary movement that toppled US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak in 2011. They were determined to avoid any discussion of the issues facing the Turkish people: growing unemployment, poverty, corruption and social inequality. They said nothing about the daily police

terror, or Ankara's destructive role in Libya, Syria and Iraq, but focused on the reactionary themes of religion, sectarianism and ethnicity.

Erdoğan made Israel's murderous assault on Gaza the centrepiece of his campaign for the presidency, despite the fact that his government works closely with Israel on military, intelligence, political and trade issues.

Throughout the election day, several web sites and media outlets were targeted in crippling cyber attacks, as they had been in the March elections. HDP candidate Demirtaş told reporters that HDP had received widespread reports of fraud, and would raise legal objections after investigating them carefully.

Erdoğan is determined to ensure the appointment to the premiership of a loyalist AKP stooge, possibly the current foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu. Just a day after the election, Erdoğan made a move to forestall the current President Abdullah Gül, who had signalled his wish to return to the AKP and become prime minister after vacating the presidency on August 28.

The party's spokesperson Huseyin Celik announced that the AKP would convene an extraordinary congress to elect a new leader on August 27, making it impossible for Gül to participate. This may provide Erdoğan with an opportunity to liquidate Gül's more secular and pro-Washington faction, in turn escalating factional struggles within the AKP.

The failure of the CHP and MHP candidates has led to bitter recriminations and faction fighting. The secular nationalist wing of CHP has already started criticising the leadership and is calling for an extraordinary congress.

Following the elections, the Istanbul Stock Market fell while the Turkish lira fell against the US dollar. The increasing turmoil in Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Ukraine and Russia have already led to a \$730 million loss in exports to these countries in the last few months, threatening Ankara's target of a total of \$166 billion of exports for this year.



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