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## ERDOGAN PRESIDENT – A NEW CHAPTER OPENED UP IN TURKEY

*Marius Calligaris*

The presidential elections in Turkey brought about Erdogan's victory already in the first round. His popularity is unabated; in the minds of the majority of the population he stands for economic boom and closeness to the people. Foreign Minister Davutoglu was designated new Prime Minister and AKP leader. Erdogan will try to shift political power to the president's office. Many fear that the polarisation of the country will continue. In order to avoid that, the new President would now have to reach out to the people holding different political opinions.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan took office as the 12th Turkish president on 28 August.

The former Prime Minister had won the election as early as in the first round on 10 August. With 51.76% of the votes he obtained the necessary absolute majority. The joint candidate of the two opposition parties CHP (Republican Peoples' Party) and MHP (Nationalist Action Party), the Islamic scholar and former Secretary General of the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu gained 38.44%. Selahattin Demirtas, mayor of the major Kurdish town Diyarbakir, who ran for president with the HDP (Democratic Peoples' Party, a group consisting mainly of Kurds but also leftist circles), won 9.76%. This can be seen as a remarkable result, lying just slightly below the 10% hurdle for parliamentary and local elections.

Considering the former political conditions regarding the Kurdish question, Demirtas' running for president as such can be rated as a sensation. The previous incumbent, Abdullah Gül, had refrained from standing for the office again in June 2014, which would have been possible constitutionally.

Voter turnout amounted to 73%, thus lying markedly below the turnout of the local elections in March of this year (89%). In this way, the percentage in favour of Erdogan rose from 45.5% to almost 52%, with roughly the same number of votes as in the above-mentioned elections. For the first time, also approximately 2.7 million Turks residing abroad were entitled to vote; however, only 8.6% exercised this right.

The former head of government's success had largely been expected in the first ballot.

All surveys – though mostly by media loyal to the government – had predicted up to 57%. In this sense, the victory turned out to be a little scunter than expected.

### **The election campaign**

The election campaign proceeded on a low level and was primarily limited to attacks against the opponents. Hardly any concrete topics were addressed. Erdogan, in particular, conducted an aggressive campaign based on insults and personal attacks against Ihsanoglu, who also found himself confronted with defamatory rumours – for example, that he was planning to ban the headscarf. The Prime Minister tried to sharpen his profile by stressing religious elements. In addition, he sought to stir the strong anti-Israeli feelings in the population with harsh statements, the escalation of the conflict in Gaza constituting a welcome backdrop. The evident use of public money for the campaign of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) was not only criticised by the opposition, but also in a 31 July report of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). It should be noted that all candidates made extensive use of social media and held their political meetings mostly in cities, not rural areas. For the first time, popular personalities from art and culture played an active part in the election campaign, primarily in favour of Erdogan. Media coverage, particularly state-broadcasting services, but also the now predominantly pro-government newspapers, clearly favoured the Prime Minister. He was given a strikingly higher media profile compared to his competitors. Moreover, his victory was celebrated virtually in advance ever since the announcement of his candidature.

Altogether, according to Turkish observers, the population's interest was low in comparison with former parliamentary and local elections. Since the head of state was elected directly for the first time, this comes

as a surprise and may be due to the fact that Erdogan's victory was practically clear from the beginning.

### **Reasons for Erdogan's election victory**

The outgoing Prime Minister's victory proves that – like in the local elections on 30 March 2014 – he still enjoys the unreserved support of the public. The negative events of the past 15 months – the riots around Gezi Park, the uncovering of a corruption scandal involving the ruling party, the interference with Justice and the separation of powers, and Erdogan's cynical reaction to a severe mine accident with 301 miners dead, had no adverse effect on his popularity. For the majority of the population Erdogan stands for economic upturn, the tripling of per capita income, the reduction of inflation and unemployment as well as for the realisation of a number of infrastructure projects. Further large-scale projects are in planning. Common people feel represented by Erdogan and are now hoping for a more direct contact with state leadership. The former Prime Minister is the classical popular hero of the lower classes, whose language he speaks. Moreover, many people feared the loss of some achievements and advantages in case one of his opponents would be victorious.

In this sense, the Head of Government knew how to mobilise the party and its grass-roots, of which comprehensive campaign donations are proof; contributions by some industrial companies have probably been motivated, at least in part, by the prospect of future government orders. By contrast, Ihsanoglu did not enjoy the full backing of CHP and MHP party members. On the one hand, Ihsanoglu's nomination brought about the acceptance of religious (=AKP) circles, in view of his pious background, but on the other hand, it caused critique from secular and national elements within both parties. With his conservative campaign he was hardly able to win the support of liberal

groups. Moreover, he lacked charisma to a certain degree and his talent as a speaker was limited. Many commentators think that fielding a joint candidate of the CHP and MHP was a mistake. Separate candidates would probably have prevented an absolute majority for Erdogan in the first ballot. The 38.44% for Ihsanoglu were faced with 43% for CHP and MHP together in March, which means a clear loss. Consequences within both parties can not be ruled out.

Part of Erdogan's success has probably resulted from the measures in favour of the Kurds during the AKP's rule, such as easing the restriction of the use their language and the launched process towards a solution or, respectively, the (provisional) "peace" with Öcalan. In this way, the Prime Minister was able to attract new voters among the mostly religious-conservative Kurds, who are ideologically often closer to the AKP than the HDP. By comparison, Ihsanoglu was fighting a losing battle as the quasi representative of the Kemalist and national element, which stands for the suppression of the Kurds.

### **New minister president and AKP leader**

Besides the question as to whether the new president would be elected as early as in the first ballot or whether Erdogan had to undergo a run-off (every other result was a priori ruled out), public and media attention in Turkey were on the question of who would be new Prime Minister and AKP leader as well as on Gül's political future. After the election, the latter had announced his return to the AKP. However, Erdogan scheduled a party convention for 27 August to elect his successor, obviously in order to make Gül's candidature (end of the mandate: 28 August) impossible. The relationship of the two politicians has recently been rated as tense because of differences regarding the Gezi riots, the corruption scandal or the freedom of speech, to name just a few. At the Prime Minister's suggestion, the AKP convention

appointed Foreign Minister Davutoglu as Erdogan's successor, probably giving him the role of a performing agent. It remains to be seen to what extent Davutoglu will be able to keep the AKP together. In view of the fact that Erdogan can no longer function as its driving force, the party will have to face a loss of votes in the parliamentary elections in 2015. In this case, the establishment of a presidential system would be postponed even further.

### **Shift of political power to the president's office to be expected**

Before his candidature Erdogan had tried to put through a constitutional amendment introducing a presidential system. He failed, however, due to the lack of a two-third majority in parliament, since he was not able to bring some MPs of the opposition on his side. Nonetheless, he has announced to be an active head of state and to take direct action in everyday politics. It is to be expected that he will make full use of the constitutional possibilities (like the appointment of prime minister and chief of the armed forces, the right to send bills back to parliament, to appeal to the Constitutional Court, etc.). In addition, he will probably also try to add to his office, which so far has had mostly representative functions, new powers and to shift competences – at the expense of parliament and the government – to the presidential palace. He has, for example, expressed his intention to chair the weekly cabinet meetings (constitutionally, the president has the right to take part; a right, however, that so far has only been exercised once a month at the maximum). Some of Erdogan's statements suggest that he will surround himself with an advisory staff, who will exercise the real governmental power as a "shadow cabinet". In this respect, a victory in the first ballot was important for Erdogan because he considers this to be the backup for his plans concerning an active presidency. The necessity of a run-off would have been a setback for the Prime Minister, who had been spoiled by success.

## Future perspectives

A number of commentators, among them also foreign ones, say that Turkey will, in future, have to brace itself for a “one-man state” and that the course has been set for an autocratic regime. Critics also predict that the principle of the separation of powers will be more and more reduced, and secular circles fear that increased Islamisation will affect the citizens’ everyday life. There are positive expectations as regards an acceleration of the solution process with the Kurds. In this context, a package of measures was adopted in parliament before the elections.

Erdogan held a conciliatory speech on the election evening. He said that his success was a victory of democracy and thus also for those who had not cast the ballot in his favour. A new era had begun, he would be the president of all Turks, and conflicts of the past should remain part of the “old” Turkey.

It remains to be seen, however, whether his election will lead to an accentuation of authoritarian tendencies and a further polarisation in Turkey. The new president has up to now rather acted as divider than a conciliator, and his rough style does not fit in with the position of “father of his country”. After the experiences of the past years, there seems to be little hope that in future Erdogan, as head of state, will act in a more conciliatory way, having reached his political ambitions. However, there may be surprises.

### Recommendable course corrections

Erdogan sees himself as a reformer and innovator in the tradition of Atatürk. His success as president and his role in Turkish history will depend on to what extent he is ready to change his polarising manner and to approach people with different political opinions. So far, he has often consciously intensified the antagonisms within Turkish

society in order to mobilise his supporters. The challenge will now be to win the trust of the part of the population that is sceptical to adverse towards him. A prominent Turkish journalist wrote that further polarisation, as for example a forced Islamisation, would pose a threat to democracy and the social peace in the country. A study of the Pew-Institute in Washington shows that Turkey is divided into two factions, which are almost equally strong. The one perceiving Erdogan as positive for the country, and the one holding the opinion that he is detrimental to Turkey.

The new president was in the past regarded by the West as a synthesis of a modern, moderate Islam and economic liberalism, someone who had brought political and economic stability to the country, introduced reforms in the sense of Western standards and opened up the chance for Turkey’s possible accession to the EU. Recently, these achievements have clearly unravelled and Turkey’s international prestige has suffered. The new president should put the secular and European perspective into the foreground again. In this way, a good relationship and cooperation with the Union will be possible and of advantage for both sides – whereby the EU or, respectively, its member states should prove their genuine interest in Turkey. Otherwise, the country would go on an adventurous journey with an insecure future.

#### **Personal Data:**

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