

INSS Insight No. 1069, July 1, 2018

The Elections in Turkey:
Strengthened Ultra-Nationalist Forces and the Possible Impact on
Turkish Foreign Policy
Gallia Lindenstrauss

In Turkey's June 24, 2018 elections, incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was elected for another term, and the ultra-nationalist parties grew stronger. This is significant first and foremost in the Kurdish context, since the nationalists can be expected to be among the main opponents of renewing the peace process with the Kurdish underground. This will also have extensive repercussions on Turkish foreign policy toward Syria and Iraq, and as such, on Turkey's relations with the regional and global powers. While the Turkish public was united in its criticism of Israel during the crisis between Israel and Turkey regarding the relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem and the escalation in the Gaza Strip, both the nationalists and the AKP voted against a proposed resolution in the Turkish Parliament to terminate existing agreements with Israel. Although the Turkish nationalists' urge to "march alone" (but not withdraw from NATO) - in part due to their suspicions of the United States and Russia - may to some extent also contribute to a pragmatic position vis-à-vis Israel, President Erdogan is confident in his challenging stance vis-à-vis Israel, and therefore, Ankara's hostility toward Israel can be expected to continue.

Turkey's incumbent president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was reelected for another term in the June 24, 2018 elections with a 52.5 percent majority, even though the Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost its parliamentary majority (a decline in support of 7 percent from the November 2015 elections). Therefore, the AKP will likely maintain its alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Erdogan's victory in the first round indicates that the majority of the public has accepted the constitutional changes that he decided to implement, even if the elections were held under conditions that made it very difficult for opposition parties to conduct their campaigns. Not surprisingly, holding parallel elections for the presidency and the parliament prompted some people to vote tactically – voting for a presidential candidate from one political party and voting for a different political party for parliament. Consequently, one of the outcomes was the strengthening of the ultra-nationalist parties. The votes received by the MHP, together with votes received by the MHP breakaway party, the İYİ "Good" Party, account for

more than 21 percent of the vote. Support has thus risen since the June 2015 elections, when the MHP won approximately 16 percent of the vote, and even more since the November 2015 elections, when the MHP earned some 12 percent of the vote.

Several explanations have been given for the increased support for the ultra-nationalist parties. One assessment is that some AKP voters who, *inter alia*, wanted to express their disappointment with the economic situation in the country, decided to vote for Erdogan for president, but as a protest vote, chose MHP for parliament. A second claim is that the young generation, particularly those voting for the first time, is more nationalist; another hypothesis is that the heightened nationalist sentiments among the Turkish public are in response to the heightened nationalist sentiments among the Kurds in the wake of the upheaval in the Arab world; and some argue that the strengthening of the ultra-nationalist parties reflects the growing frustration with the presence of some three and a half million Syrian refugees in Turkey. Those believing that the elections were rigged point to the wide gap between the election results and the pre-election polls that indicated lower support for the MHP party, and point to the success of the MHP in rural regions, where it is ostensibly more difficult to supervise the purity of the voting process. However, unlike the suspected vote-rigging during the referendum in Turkey in April 2017, this time, even some of Erdogan's critics are not pointing to instances of irregularities in particular ballot boxes as a factor that substantially distorted the election results.

The strengthening of the ultra-nationalist powers has significance, first and foremost, in the Kurdish context, since the nationalists can be expected to be among the main opponents of any possibility of renewing the peace process with the Kurdish underground. This will also have extensive repercussions on Turkish foreign policy toward Syria and Iraq, and as such, on Turkey's relations with the regional and global powers. The attempt to contend with the Kurdish issue solely by military means has driven Turkey to greater involvement at its southern borders and prompted it to continue the dialogue with Russia and Iran within these contexts. This was reflected in the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch military operations in northern Syria, and in the Turkish military presence in these territories since the operations ended. During the election campaign, threats were voiced regarding military involvement in additional territories where there is Kurdish dominance (as well as an American military presence) in northeastern Syria. Furthermore, Turkey is taking military action at a wider scale than it had in recent years against strongholds of the Kurdish underground in the Qandil Mountains and in the Sinjar Mountains in northern Iraq. Regarding the refugee issue, Turkey is eager for refugees to return to areas it controls in northern Syria, even though it is doubtful that this is a feasible solution for most of them, as the ultra-nationalist parties would like.

One of the trends in Ankara's foreign relations during the period prior to the elections was the rise in tensions between Turkey and the United States. The restrictions on the supply of the F-35 fighter jets to Turkey that the US Congress is trying to pass, as well as the possible imposition of sanctions as a result of the Turkish-Russian deal for the purchase of S-400 anti-aircraft weapons systems, are now the focus of the discussions. It is doubtful that Erdogan and the ultra-nationalist parties will present these restrictions and possible sanctions in any way other than by claiming that the United States is taking action against Turkey because of its growing strength in the international arena, and therefore, it is trying to undermine Turkey's security. The issue of extraditing the preacher Fethullah Gulen from the United States to Turkey remains at a standstill as far as Ankara is concerned, and concurrently, Washington has grievances about the detention of American citizens in Turkey, presumably under false accusations. Nonetheless, US President Donald Trump, who apparently identifies potential for cooperation with Erdogan, will likely opt to allow the jet deal and block the imposition of sanctions on Ankara. Furthermore, the Turkish grievances about the American support of the Syrian extension of the Kurdish underground, the PYD, appear to have been somewhat allayed, after the United States acceded to pressure from Ankara and brought about a withdrawal of Kurdish forces from the town of Manbij in Syria, which had been a bone of contention between the sides. Other, more general issues that the Trump administration is promoting could trigger additional crises in the relations: tariffs on steel imports have already adversely affected Turkish exports to the United States, and the Turks are concerned about the planned tariffs on imports of European cars. Ankara will also have a hard time contending with the American demand for restrictions on oil imports from Iran.

The strengthening of the ultra-nationalist parties likewise does not bode well for Turkey's relations with some EU countries, particularly with Germany and France, since Turkey's obdurate position in relation to the Kurdish issue can be expected to perpetuate the tensions in this regard. The nationalist forces will also block progress on the matter of Cyprus. The visa liberalization for Turkish nationals travelling to EU countries – a course of action that was promised within the scope of the 2016 refugee agreement between Turkey and the EU – will be harder to achieve as long as Turkey does not relax its anti-terrorism legislation, which is considered to impinge excessively on individual rights. At the same time, the relations between Turkey and the UK seem to be warming a bit as part of the Brexit process, evidenced, inter alia, by Erdogan's visit in the UK in May.

In the Israeli context, the Turkish public was united in its criticism of Israel during the crisis between Israel and Turkey against the backdrop of the relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem and the escalation in the Gaza Strip. Nonetheless, both the MHP and AKP voted against a proposed resolution in the Turkish Parliament to terminate existing agreements with Israel. Although the Turkish nationalists' urge to "march alone"

(but not withdraw from NATO), inter alia due to their suspicions with regard to the United States and Russia, may to some extent also contribute to a pragmatic position vis-à-vis Israel, President Erdogan is confident in his challenging stance vis-à-vis Israel, and therefore, Ankara's hostility toward Israel can be expected to continue.

One of the frequently voiced criticisms against Turkey by opposition factors in Turkey's domestic arena, as well as by sources in the West, is that the changes that Erdogan made to the regime structure in Turkey enable a one-man rule. In many respects, this is an accurate description, but at certain junctures, and when a response to unforeseen events is required, the alliance with the ultra-nationalists (as long as the alliance exists, along with a desire to entice some of the nationalists back to the AKP), will not only constitute part of Erdogan's posture when the time comes to set policies but even more, the alliance will limit the range of options that he will be prepared to consider from the outset, particularly on the Kurdish issue. The results of the recent elections will strengthen this trend, which in many respects was already apparent.