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Turkey's Local Elections: A Blow to the AKP

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The results of the local elections held in Turkey on March 31, 2019 dealt a substantive political blow to the AKP (the Justice and Development Party), which since its founding has been led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Noteworthy indications of this are the victory of the opposition candidate in Ankara and the AKP's demand for a sweeping recount in Istanbul as a challenge to the opposition's victory in the city, and even calls for new elections. Though from an historical perspective the AKP has garnered ample victories at the ballot box, there have also been elections in which it did less well. Common to all of these cases was the AKP's ability to regain sufficient support for the next round of elections. In keeping with his election campaign rhetoric, and in an effort to minimize the image of AKP failure, President Erdogan will likely continue trying to divert public and media attention to domestic and foreign threats facing Turkey. Erdogan's rhetorical attacks on the Israeli Prime Minister and the responses by Benjamin Netanyahu were also part of the local elections campaign in Turkey and the general election in Israel. Yet given the absence of ambassadors and consul-generals in Israel and Turkey since May 2018, the potential to follow up the rhetoric with additional diplomatic steps is limited, as it seems that neither side is interested yet in going so far as to cut off ties.

The results of the local elections held in Turkey on March 31, 2019 dealt a substantive political blow to the AKP (the Justice and Development Party), which since its founding has been led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Noteworthy indications of this are the victory of the opposition candidate over the AKP candidate in Ankara and the AKP's demand for a sweeping recount in Istanbul as a challenge to the opposition's victory in the city, and even calls for a repeat of the elections. Pro-government media pundits went so far as to air allegations of an "attempted ballot box coup" against the AKP that would constitute a direct sequel to the failed coup of July 15, 2016, and Erdogan charged that organized crime figures are behind the success of the opposition candidate in Istanbul.

An analysis of the results presents a mixed picture for the AKP. On the one hand, it appears that the party's traditional base has not eroded and that it remains the most popular party (with some 44 percent of votes, around 2 percent more than it earned in the general elections of 2018). On the other hand, losses in big cities like Istanbul, Ankara,

and Antalya hint at a weakening of its influence over portions of the public. There was a drop in the number of provinces in which the party won (39 provinces, compared to the 48 it won in the elections of 2014). Beyond that, despite the centralization of the presidential system in Turkey and the effort already underway to reduce the influence of opposition municipal leaders, the failure of the AKP in the major cities is substantive as well as symbolic. Ankara, home to all state institutions, is the center of government power, while Istanbul, won by CHP (Republican People's Party) candidate Ekrem Imamoglu, is Turkey's most important economic powerhouse. The CHP won 21 out of 81 provincial capitals, which account for some 60 percent of Turkish GDP and which, to judge from the result, represent municipal control over around half of the Turkish population.

Though the election results have no direct impact on President Erdogan or the parliamentary majority, the voting patterns suggest that some of the public "punished" the AKP for the deterioration in Turkey's economic situation. The decision to set up stands selling food and produce at reduced prices in the big cities, in a bid to offset public anger at the economic situation, may have backfired, making the government seem even less in control of the markets.

The election results raise doubt about the success of the tactical bloc formed by the AKP and nationalist forces led by the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party). This alliance helped the nationalists in the general elections of June 2018 and strengthened their position in parliament. The "people's alliance" between the two parties generated significant gains against opposition parties on the national level (around 52 percent to 38 percent), but in this case it proved useless given the AKP loss of control over the major cities. Furthermore, the AKP even lost in seven provinces to its nationalist ally. The alliance with the nationalists prompted Erdogan to wage an aggressive election campaign, which included portraying the leaders of opposition parties – and especially the pro-Kurdish party HDP – as "traitors" and "supporters of terrorism" serving as an operational arm of foreign forces arrayed against Turkey.

In contrast, the opposition's election campaign focused on messages against Erdogan's divisive tactics and ways to heal the Turkish economy, shrink the high rate of youth unemployment, and reduce fruit and vegetable prices, which since February 2019 have spiraled to record heights. The gains of the opposition alliance were especially beneficial to the CHP, which won control over Ankara for the first time in 25 years as well as over most of Turkey's southern coastal districts, an important tourism hub. This alliance scored other dramatic gains, particularly in Istanbul, home to a few million Kurdish voters, despite the ideological rifts among the founding parties (secular-left, the other nationalist-right party, and the party representing the Kurdish constituency). It seems that

resentment of Erdogan and of government persecution of the pro-Kurdish party's leaders in recent years tipped the scale in favor of the opposition in Istanbul.

In keeping with his election campaign rhetoric, and in an effort to minimize the image of AKP failure, President Erdogan will likely continue trying to divert public and media attention to domestic and foreign threats facing Turkey. Calls from Washington and Brussels to respect the outcome of the elections have already been condemned by Ankara. Given the depth of the crisis between Turkey and the United States, and between Turkey and the European Union, it is doubtful that these statements from the two Western powers will bring about real change in relations. At the same time, the initial discussion of the election results reflects a more optimistic discourse in the West regarding authoritarian trends in Turkey and respect for the voter outcome. If indeed the voters' will is ultimately respected, including in Istanbul, this may, to a degree, project positively on Turkey's image in the West.

Though from an historical perspective the AKP has garnered ample victories at the ballot box, there have also been elections in which it did less well – for example, in the 2009 local elections, which marked a loss of ground when compared to the results of the 2007 general elections, and also in the results of the elections of June 2015, where the AKP lost its parliamentary majority, prompting Erdogan to call a snap election for November 2015. Similarly, while the AKP managed to enact changes to the constitution and transition to presidential rule in a 2017 referendum, these were opposed in Ankara and in Istanbul. Common to all of these cases was the AKP's ability to regain sufficient support for the next round of elections. Indeed, calls from the AKP ranks for a repeat of the Istanbul election recall Erdogan's conduct in June 2015. In any event, no matter the final outcome of the local elections, the AKP has time for a fundamental overhaul, because the next general and presidential elections are scheduled only for 2023 (which will also mark modern Turkey's centennial).

Erdogan's rhetorical attacks on the Israeli Prime Minister and the responses by Benjamin Netanyahu (as well as by his son) were also part of the local elections campaign in Turkey and the general election in Israel. Tongue-lashings are not unique to election periods in Turkey (though they tend to escalate then) and Erdogan relates this way toward other international actors as well. It appears that in this case, each side benefited somewhat from the exchanges. Still, given the absence of ambassadors and consul-generals in Israel and Turkey since May 2018, the potential to follow up the rhetoric with additional diplomatic steps is limited, as it seems that neither side is interested yet in going so far as to cut off ties.