

*Viewpoints*  
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# Turkey after Erdogan's Non-Victory

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Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan unquestionably won the presidential poll, the first ever direct election of a president by the populace in Turkey.

His score of 51.7 percent represents a first round victory, but it is likely to have disappointed the Prime Minister and his close supporters. In fact, less than 24 hours after the conclusion of the contest, the political jockeying that has started reveals Erdogan's hand may not be as strong as his die-hard supporters claim. Turkey may be entering a period of political turbulence for which there is no precedent.

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Turkey may be entering a period of political turbulence for which there is no precedent. Erdogan campaigned on a platform that clearly signaled that his presidency would be like none other before. He intends to run the country from the presidential palace despite the fact that the Turkish parliamentary system puts executive power in the hands of the prime minister and the cabinet. In his acceptance speech, he stressed that Turkey was entering a new era, one in which he would take the country in new directions; it was a victory speech as much as a roadmap for his new "rule."

The campaign was a lopsided one; Erdogan had all the advantages of incumbency, including a press, state-owned and mostly subservient privately-owned, that provided wall-to-wall coverage of his campaign, ignoring the opposition for the most part. In addition, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) had a tremendous financial advantage.

The main opposition parties, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Action party (MHP), joined forces and fielded a common candidate in the hope of challenging a popular and powerful Erdogan. It was a dismal failure; the joint candidate, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, was not a natural politician and was prone to making mistakes. He appeared weak when faced by a fiery, aggressive, and polarizing Erdogan. The CHP-MHP candidate barely received the same percentage of votes the two parties won in the last national elections of 2011. More worrisome for the main opposition party is the fact that in 11 provinces their combined score was less than five percent.

The only other candidate, Selahattin Demirtas, representing the Kurdish political party, did much better than expected, garnering some 9.8 of the votes and coming close to the 10 percent threshold for winning representation in national elections. He is probably the only real victor in these elections, and this augurs well for the future provided he and his party carefully build on this score.

Considering that the choice of Ihsanoglu was a controversial one causing many among CHP and MHP supporters to sit out this election, Erdogan ought to have won by a much larger margin. Never mind that the pro-Erdogan press is trumpeting the results as an unqualified victory, the fact remains that a greater margin would have enabled Erdogan more room to maneuver.

## The Coming Constitutional Games

Erdogan and his close advisers have made no secret for their preference to change the constitution in order to transform Turkey into a presidential system, perhaps more like the French system. They have, however, been thwarted in this effort so far. Their hope is that the upcoming national elections, which will be held within the next 10 months, will produce a parliament that is more conducive to refashioning the constitution.

In the meantime, Erdogan will try to usurp the powers of the prime minister through the use of the bully pulpit, his control of the AKP, and the vast network of clientelistic relations he has built over the years. He is a formidable politician and his ability to dominate the national agenda is unrivalled. Critical to these plans will be the selection of a new party leader and prime minister who will succeed him. The two leading candidates for the position are the current Transport Minister, Binali Yildirim, and the Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, although Erdogan has at times hinted that he may surprise everyone. He needs this person to be subservient to him but also not appear to be a lap dog with no independent personality that would alienate potential voters down the line. This is not as easy as one may think.

Once he assumes the presidency, Erdogan has to sever all relations with his party and will not be able to campaign for the AKP. Were he to cross that line he would trigger the first constitutional crisis. From the party's rank and file perspective, however, Erdogan's absence at the head of the ticket is likely to engender worries, especially among parliamentary candidates, about how well the AKP would do in national elections.

This is also where Erdogan is facing his first challenge. The day after the elections, the outgoing president, Abdullah Gul, a co-founder of the party with Erdogan, told the press that he would be returning to the ranks of the AKP. Gul is widely respected throughout the AKP, despite his support for many of Erdogan's controversial initiatives, and is seen as an AKP centrist and the one person most likely to stand up to Erdogan within the party.

There was a great deal of speculation regarding Gul's future plans. Despite Gul's validation of Erdogan's laws, the two have increasingly grown apart. This is especially true after the corruption scandals of December 2013 that ensnared four government ministers and provoked a furious backlash by Erdogan and his cronies on anyone deemed responsible for bringing the issue to light. Gul has become increasingly unhappy with Erdogan's divisive politics, his witch hunts against his critics – a telling example was his personal, ad hominem, and dangerous attacks against *The Economist's* Turkey correspondent by accusing her of being against Islam in the closing days of the campaign – and his foreign policy style, if not initiatives. Erdogan's displeasure with Gul could not have been more evident than in his victory speech Sunday night when he failed to even acknowledge Gul.

Hence, Gul's announcement that he is returning to retail politics is a sign that he would like to run for the party's leadership and eventually become prime minister (he could not become prime minister now even if he were to assume the presidency because the law requires the prime minister to be a member of parliament). The same day that Gul made his announcement, the AKP declared that its special convention to decide Erdogan's successor would take place on

August 27, one day before the official end of Gul's term, effectively blocking the latter from putting his candidacy forward.

This is tantamount to a declaration of war on Gul by Erdogan. The party rank and file would be much more comfortable with Gul as their leader: it gives the best chance to compete in the next elections and he is an experienced politician with extensive service in different levels of government. However, Erdogan clearly will not allow the party faithful to cast a vote for his old comrade-in-arms.

It is also a perilous strategy for Erdogan because he risks alienating a segment of AKP which still reveres Gul and will not take kindly to his shunning aside in an unceremonious way. Erdogan's greatest weapon at the moment is the slavish media he has painstakingly built with the monies of businessmen dependent on his largesse, which will parrot anything he says, support anything he does, and smear anyone who stands in his way. This, however, is not the ideal way of governing. In fact, the president is not constitutionally accountable for the government's policies.

A government surreptitiously run by Erdogan through a docile prime minister is worrisome from another perspective. One of the most critical challenges facing Turkey in the next couple of years is the completion of the "peace opening" to Turkey's Kurds. To be fair, the government has made significant way along this endeavor. The presidential election results can also be interpreted as an overwhelming vote in support of the continuation of the peace process in the predominantly Kurdish provinces. There the Kurdish candidate and Erdogan jointly swept the electorate often with 90 percent of the vote.

The peace process cannot be compromised by constitutionally dubious governance policies; Erdogan risks undermining it if it is perceived that he is orchestrating it from the presidential palace. That is one risk Turkey cannot afford to take now.



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