



PERSPECTIVES

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Post-Election Turkey: The Birth of an Islamist-Nationalist Alliance

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Four decades after they emerged as marginal parties in the 1970s, Turkey's militant Islamists and ultranationalists won a combined 53.6% of the national vote and 57% of parliamentary seats. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has said in the past that he would make foreign policy "in line with what my nation demands," highlighting the Islamist sensitivities of his voter base. He will now add nationalist sensitivities to that foreign policy calculus. This will likely mean confrontations with nations both inside and outside Turkey's region.

Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections on June 24 sent messages on many wavelengths. The voters asserted the unchallenged popularity of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who is the longest-serving Turkish leader since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. They welcomed an infant center-right party, İYİ ("good" in Turkish); recognized the country's Kurds as a legitimate political force; and gave a cautious nod to an emerging social democrat politician, Muharrem İnce, Erdoğan's closest presidential rival.

More strategically, Election 2018 marked the official birth of an Islamist-nationalist alliance that will recalibrate Turkey's foreign policy calculus in line with the strong wave of religious/nativist nationalism that brought this alliance to power.

In power since November 2002, Erdoğan easily won the presidential race with 53.6% of the national vote in the first round (any number beyond the 50% mark would have sufficed). But his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) won only 42.5% of the parliamentary vote, down seven percentage points from its

result in the elections of November 2015. The AKP won 293 seats in Turkey's 600-seat house, falling short of a simple majority of 301.

Had this been just another parliamentary election, the AKP would be unable to form a single-party government. But legislative changes that followed the April 2017 referendum now allow political parties to enter the parliamentary race in alliance with other parties. Erdoğan chose as his ally the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which has its ideological roots in the militantly ultranationalist, pan-Turkic ideology of the 1970s. On June 24 the MHP won 11.1% of the national vote and 50 seats, bringing up the "allied" (i.e., the governing) seats to 343 – which gives the AKP-MHP alliance a comfortable parliamentary majority.

Four decades after emerging as marginal parties in the 1970s, Turkey's militant Islamists and militant ultranationalists won a combined 53.6% of the national vote and 57% of parliamentary seats. Erdoğan has said in the past that he would put foreign policy "in line with what my nation demands," highlighting the Islamist sensitivities of his voter base. He will now be adding nationalist sensitivities to that foreign policy calculus. This is likely to mean confrontations, perhaps bold ones, with several nations both inside and outside Turkey's region.

Turkey's new ruling ideology will, first of all, make it practically impossible to return to the negotiating table for peace with the Kurds. That is an MHP red line that Erdoğan will prefer not to cross. MHP's militaristic posture will also boost Ankara's desire to show more muscle in Kurdish-related disputes in northern Syria and northern Iraq. (MHP's only solution to the Kurdish dispute is military might.)

Turkey's decades-long, obsessive foreign policy goals include making Jerusalem the capital of the Palestinian state, asserting an ideological kinship with Hamas, stoking sectarian hostilities against Syrian President Bashar Assad, and making threats about drilling off the shores of the divided island of Cyprus. To these will probably be added an "Uighur cause," a subject about which the MHP is particularly sensitive.

The AKP's election manifesto stated an intention to "overcome problems and improve bilateral relations with the United States." But the manifesto also said Turkey would make an effort to "improve bilateral relations with Russia." It said, "We will continue our close coordination with Russia on regional subjects, especially on Syria."

In practice, Erdoğan's balancing act between Russia and the US resembles Brazilian dictator Getulio Vargas's "pendulum policy" during WWII. Vargas

offered support to Hitler and Mussolini at times, but ended up siding with the Allies.

MHP's involvement in government policy will be totally irrelevant when it comes to operating the modern-day Turkish pendulum.

Erdoğan's relations with the US are ideologically hostile but *de facto* transactional. They will remain so. His relations with Russia are largely transactional and will probably gain further ground, politically as well as militarily, as the discrepancy between Turkish and western democratic cultures widens. Erdoğan ideologically belong to the strongmen's club.

As Turkey's gross democratic deficit, largely created under Erdoğan's governance, is blended with MHP's notoriously isolationist, xenophobic ideology, Turkey's theoretical goal of accession into the European Union (EU) will gradually become null and void. Erdoğan will soon announce plans to shut down the ministry dealing with accession negotiations with the EU and turn it into "a department of the Foreign Ministry." This should not surprise anyone.

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