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All Alone at the Summit

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Last summer's Gezi Park protests and the subsequent corruption allegations against Prime Minister Recep Tayipp Erdoğan's government triggered a period of unprecedented turmoil in Turkish politics leading up to Turkey's March 30 municipal elections. The mass protests and the effect of an official probe into the corruption allegations, along with confidential records that were allegedly leaked to social media by U.S.-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen's "Hizmet" Movement, turned the municipal election campaign into a no holds barred struggle for political survival in which Erdoğan's legitimacy was seriously damaged. Indeed these challenges to his authority have further deepened the polarization in Turkish society. Ignoring the calls for a comprehensive investigation into the prime minister's conduct, which may or may not have cleared his name, Erdoğan instead chose to take his chances at the ballot box.

The conventional wisdom was that the Gezi Park unrest and the corruption charges had endangered Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party's (AKP) chances of victory in the municipal elections. Political tension reached its peak in the week prior to the vote when a confidential discussion about Turkey's hawkish Syria policy was leaked on YouTube. Immediately, the opposition accused the government of trying to launch a war in order to postpone the elections. Erdoğan's reaction to the leaks was harsh. He portrayed the leak as an act of treason against Turkey's national security.[1] In order to limit the damage, the government officially banned access to YouTube in Turkey.[2] The leak may well have foiled Erdoğan's military plans, but the incident also proved useful to him. Since the beginning of his election campaign, Erdoğan insisted that the corruption probe was based on false accusations. Instead of dealing with their

[1] "Başbakan Erdoğan'dan Tape Açıklaması," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CMDW9--oKc
[2] "YouTube Yasaklandı," http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/haber.aspx?id=26097022&tarih=2014-03-27 .

substance, he and his government emphasized that the probe was the product of an international plot that was using Gülen's Hizmet Movement as a proxy in order to prevent the rise of a powerful Turkey. Indeed the AKP election propaganda video reflected this "rallying around the flag" mentality. In the short film, an anonymous person was shown cutting the ropes holding a Turkish flag to a flagpole while masses of Turkish people raced to the flagpole in order to prevent the flag from falling to the ground. They then returned it to the top of the flagpole by forming a human tower.[3]

Despite all of the negative media attention leading up to the March 30 election, the results were good for Erdoğan: the AKP declared victory, achieving 44.19 percent of the total votes. Moreover, the AKP crowned its success by winning the most important municipalities, Istanbul and Ankara. Despite the Gezi protests, the corruption probe, and the aggressive campaign, as well as allegations of election fraud due to mass power outages on the day of the vote, the results demonstrated the weakness of the political opposition. The Republican People's Party (CHP) did not substantially increase its share of the vote, which remained at 28.6 percent. Similarly, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) remained at 15.8 percent.[4] Yet, neither the leader of the CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlunor, nor the leader of MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, are inclined to step down and give way to successors. This makes it almost inevitable that Erdoğan will be able to secure future political victories despite the specter of scandal and discontent hovering over him. Another crucial problem for the opposition is the unwillingness of the two parties to work together against the AKP. Certainly the CHP's Ankara candidate Mansur Yavaş, who has an MHP past and who lost these elections by a slim margin, would be an ideal candidate to lead such an alliance.

The Kurds are also an important factor to consider in gauging the opposition. The Kurds adopted a new election strategy that changed the dynamic in many provinces, and particularly in Istanbul itself. In 2012, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) was formed to run as a "party of Turkey" rather than a strictly Kurdish party in order to broaden its appeal in provinces where the Kurdish population was smaller and the main Kurdish party, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), had no chance of winning.[5] Sırrı Süreyya Önder, a member of parliament who became a hero in the first days of the Gezi Park protests when he stopped builders from uprooting the trees in the park, was nominated by the HDP for the office of mayor in Istanbul. Having used Gezi Park's symbol – the tree – as the party logo, the HDP won approximately 411,000 of the votes, almost five percent of the total. Its supporters included the Gezi demonstrators and

[3] "Millet Eğilmez," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80J0FCe69to
[4] "Seçim 2014," *Hürriyet*, http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yerel-secim-2014/
[5] "Kongresi bitmeyen parti kuruldu," *Radikal*, http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/kongresi_bitmeyen_parti_kuruldu-1104993

sympathizers, liberals, and Kurds. Yet HDP and its popular hero Önder were very much aware that they had little chance of defeating AKP in Istanbul. Önder was in Ankara for the elections and did not even vote in Istanbul, where he was a candidate. In fact, Önder's candidacy only succeeded in weakening the anti-AKP camp in Istanbul. The HDP's attempt to minimize the Kurdish cause in its party platform, and its emphasis on the "mosaic of Turkey," had the unintended consequence of mobilizing many Kurds to support the AKP, because it was viewed as providing the best opportunity to advance Kurdish civil rights in the country. The CHP and MHP, which espoused hawkish views on the Kurdish question, were not viable alternatives for the Kurds who did not want to vote for the HDP. Therefore, the Kurds unofficially and informally supported the AKP in western Turkey. Unofficially, because the Kurds did not declare an official alliance with AKP and they also had their own candidates that challenged AKP. In southeastern Turkey, which is densely populated by Kurds, the story was different. The BDP once again demonstrated its strength, carrying the day in the vast majority of the municipalities, while some Islamist Kurds voted for Turkish Hizbullah's political wing, the Free Cause Party (HÜDAPAR – the acronym literally means the "Party of God").

The "Metropolitan Law" (2012) was another crucial factor that contributed to AKP's victory. The law expanded the borders of the metropolitan municipalities to include predominantly rural settlements, which are largely supportive of the AKP. This change enabled the AKP to score victories in Ordu, Antalya, Van, Manisa and Balıkesir, where it had previously been defeated. In contrast to the AKP's 22 metropolitan municipal victories, the CHP managed to win 5, MHP 2 and BDP only 1.[6]

The most important message expressed by many of the country's voters was that they rejected any meddling by outside actors and institutions in Turkish politics. In the past, the public did not hesitate to punish the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) for its interference in the political decision-making process. This time, AKP supporters chose to punish Gülen's Hizmet Movement for reportedly leaking confidential phone calls to social media. Another powerful lesson from these elections was that the public cares more about the projects and services delivered by the AKP government than they do about its corruption. The AKP election propaganda videos successfully emphasized the AKP's grandiose projects like the Marmaray (the subway that connects the Asian side of Istanbul to the European side through a subsea tunnel), superhighways, intercity rail

[6] "Büyükşehir Yasası AKP'ye yaradı," *Milliyet* http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/buyuksehir-yasasi-ak-parti-ye/siyaset/detay/1859672/default.htm

projects, and other large scale infrastructure projects. Therefore, maintaining the outward signs of a healthy, growth-oriented economy would appear to be a *sine qua non* of Erdoğan's remaining in power.

Erdoğan, having survived this serious challenge to his legitimacy, is now much more confident of his position in the run-up to the presidential elections that will be held in August. Since his party's regulations will not allow him to run for another term as prime minister, he may choose to run for president. On the other hand, in the event that he would be elected president, Erdoğan would have to have a loyal prime minister to provide him with full immunity from all possible corruption charges. Further, Erdoğan would want a pliant prime minister who would be willing to implement his legislative program. The conventional wisdom immediately following the elections was that there will be an early general election in August; but, according to deputy prime minister Ali Babacan, in order to secure Erdoğan's "2023 vision" – the year in which Turkey will be a hundred years old – he would like to hold the general elections in 2015 in order to set the following general election in 2019, which would make the 2023 centennial an election year. By focusing on his long-term political survival at the expense of the short-term political advantage of holding an early election, Erdoğan is once again demonstrating supreme confidence and underscoring the fact that he is all alone at the summit of Turkish politics as the ultimate decision maker.

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