

## Oy Vey (İ)z-mir: The Turkish Elections and Erdoğan's Options

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*"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."*

Sherlock Holmes\*

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) leader and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attended a grandiose election rally in İzmir, in advance of the forthcoming municipal elections. The rally followed what has become the standard format in Turkish politics: The PM rebuked his adversaries, tarring all opposition with the same brush and boasting that his campaign represented a new "War of Independence."<sup>1</sup> The common "rituals" of tear gassing the homes of those who protested against the AKP, exchanging insults, and street skirmishes followed. The occasion might have easily left one muttering the old Yiddish expression: "Oy vey (İ)z Mir." The phonological resemblance is almost impossible to resist. İzmir, after all, was a town with a rich Turkish-Jewish heritage, populated by Sephardic Jews, although of course their ancestral language was Ladino, not Yiddish.

Turkish society appears to be deeply divided.<sup>2</sup> Recent stories about Erdoğan, his family, and his government have ignited a firestorm of controversy as a result of allegations that he had established what effectively amounts to a kleptocracy. In this fraught atmosphere, what will Turkish politics look like after the March 30 elections? The answers will be directly and indirectly affected by Erdoğan's

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\* Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of Four*, Chp. 6.

<sup>1</sup> "Başbakan Erdoğan'ın İzmir Mitingi'nde yaptığı konuşmanın tam metni," AKP Official Website, March 18, 2014, <http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/basbakan-erdoganin-izmir-mitinginde-yaptigi-konusmanin-tam-metni1/61059#1>.

<sup>2</sup> "Yolsuzluk Operasyonu Sonrası İlk Seçim Anketi," *Cumhuriyet*, February 10, 2013, [www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/foto/26145/3/Yolsuzluk\\_Operasyonu\\_sonrasi\\_ilk\\_secim\\_anketi.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/foto/26145/3/Yolsuzluk_Operasyonu_sonrasi_ilk_secim_anketi.html).

choices. Efforts to understand his decisions are complicated by Erdoğan's unpredictable temperament and keen political instincts.<sup>3</sup>

These two elements of Erdoğan's persona might be treated as two sides of the same coin: the agile reflexes of a ferocious and populist *zoon politikón* preoccupied with his political survival. On the one hand they lead him to what some would call solecism, namely, displaying an almost impulsive tendency for the indecorous, especially when he goes off script.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, they help him to quickly consolidate political gains. This is especially the case when he senses an opportunity to secure his popularity and votes at home. The "One Minute" episode with Israeli President Shimon Peres at Davos in 2009 is a case in point.

Nevertheless, despite Erdoğan's love of risk, there is also a structural limit to his choices, dictated by capabilities. His understanding of this limit dictates the level of rationality of his choices. In methodological terms, it is permissible to employ an analytical scenario-building approach, making use of game theory logic, to attempt to anticipate Erdoğan's future decisions within his strategic environment by factoring in his character and his structural limits.<sup>5</sup>

Needless to say, such an analysis has its limitations, and is not solely conditional on a certain assessment of Erdoğan's nature. However, the analysis, potentially, has the benefit of providing a point of departure for subsequent efforts to evaluate and forecast future decisions of a leader who has already secured a place in Turkey's and the region's political history and whose legacy may remain influential beyond his own active career.

This article will examine Erdoğan's alternatives in the event of potential outcomes in the upcoming elections. First, there are some general points to be made about these elections.

- i) They are presented and perceived as a general referendum of approval and support for AKP and Erdoğan. This works to Erdoğan's advantage, mainly because of the strength of his cult of personality and loyal political base. Allegiance to his personality cult is perceived as stronger than the

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<sup>3</sup> There are studies on Erdoğan's personality and leadership style. For one example, see: Aylin Şeker Görener and Meltem Uçal, "The Personality and Leadership Style of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy," *Turkish Studies*, pp. 357 – 381.

<sup>4</sup> He doesn't seem to regard this as particularly problematic. On the contrary, he repeatedly went on record to say, "Anger is part of the art of rhetoric".

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this article I define a "strategic environment" as a situation where there is multiplicity of players, making different decisions, based on perceived utility where expected pay-offs of each decision depends on an actor's own choice, as well as on the choices of others.

allegiance to the AKP.<sup>6</sup> Erdogan utilizes this to mobilize his constituency and discipline the AKP organization.

- ii) Since the *Gezi Park* events in the early summer 2013 and, increasingly, after the explosion of the corruption scandal in mid-December, Turkish society has become deeply divided.
- iii) Erdoğan's campaign rhetoric indicates that his primary interest is to receive as many votes as possible in order to secure and "re-legitimize" his rule. Thus, he doesn't mince words when it comes to employing polarizing rhetoric.
- iv) Since the *Gezi Park* events, it is safe to assume that there is no chance that Erdoğan will be able to create a presidential system. The popular support for such a change appears to be non-existent.<sup>7</sup>
- v) Erdoğan prefers an ambiguous yardstick for measuring the AKP's success in the coming elections. In 2002, attaining 34.29 percent of the vote was enough to bring it to power. However, such a result this time would mark a steep decline from the 49.95 percent that it won during the general elections of 2011.

I propose a framework of two likely scenarios in the upcoming elections: The more probable "A" scenario is that AKP receives 38-42 percent of the votes; and the less probable "B" scenario in which AKP receives 34-38 percent.

In the absence of credible polling data indicating to the contrary, it would be hard to anticipate AKP votes dipping below the 34 percent it received in 2002. In municipal elections, traditionally the ruling party has an advantage; moreover, Erdoğan is billing the elections as a vote of confidence in him and the party. The upside threshold of 42 percent is based on an integrated analysis of recent opinion polls.<sup>8</sup> Given the fact that the elections are being held during a period of increasing polarization in society, a precarious economic outlook, and allegations of corruption, it is unlikely that the AKP will attain more than a 10 percent increase from the previous municipal elections.

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<sup>6</sup> Consecutive studies show that both AKP and Erdogan were less "approved" by the public from 2011 to 2013: AKP was up from 36.5% to 38.9% and then down to 35.8%, while Erdogan was down from 45% to 42.4% and then to 38.7%. Still, Erdoğan is clearly perceived more successful than his Party. *Kadir Has Üniversitesi Türkiye Sosyal-Siyasal Eğilimler Araştırması 2013*, February 5, 2014, <http://www.khas.edu.tr/uploads/pdf-doc-vb/news/05022014-1siyasal-egilimler.pdf>, p.17.

<sup>7</sup> The respondents of the Kadir Has study declared 76.7% support for parliamentary system, while presidential system received 14.4% support. Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> For one example, see: "AK Parti mi? CHP mi? MHP mi? Seçim Anketleri 2014," *Bugün*, March 9, 2014, <http://gundem.bugun.com.tr/ak-parti-mi-chp-mi-mhp-mi-secim-anketleri-2014-haberi/1006870>.

In the event of scenario “A,” it is plausible that Erdoğan would then soon call for early general elections, anticipating that further erosion of his support is imminent. He would want to go to elections at a point where he is still able to secure a majority in the parliament. He would take some time before announcing a final decision on early elections, and he would most likely alter AKP bylaws to allow himself to run for a fourth term as prime minister.<sup>9</sup>

Erdoğan would also need to find a convenient candidate for president. He could go with someone who would be regarded as his proxy. However, it would be relatively easy for the opposition to defeat such a candidate, provided it can build a consensus around a name that has wider appeal and acceptability, particularly amongst the conservative voters. Or Erdoğan could choose the more logical option, which would be a stronger candidate who won’t be cowed by Erdoğan’s personality. Under the given circumstances, President Abdullah Gül<sup>10</sup> still appears to be the best choice for Erdoğan. However Gül’s image seems to have been tarnished as a result of his mid-December approval of what is commonly known as the internet law, which effectively grants the government broad discretionary powers over the internet. Gül also confirmed a controversial judicial law that affectively diminishes the constitutional principle of separation of powers.<sup>11</sup>

A relatively unlikely alternative in scenario “A” is that Erdoğan chooses to run for president. He may do so either as a result of not being able to resist obtaining the most prestigious position of Turkish politics, like many before him, or due to pressure from his inner circle. However his authority would be circumscribed by existing laws, which render the position limited and largely symbolic. Gül, an adamant risk avoider would most likely not run against Erdoğan. It is also hard to imagine anyone else from the AKP running against him. In this case, Erdoğan’s success would again depend on the opposition’s ability to field a formidable candidate. Erdoğan would still call for early elections and try to determine his successor to the premiership, as well as influence the AKP’s list of parliamentary candidates. However, Turkish political history is rich with examples of strong leaders not being able to control their successors after assuming the presidency.

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<sup>9</sup> AKP, spokesperson Hüseyin Çelik, among others, said that they were receiving “pressure” to annul the article limiting deputies and mayors to three consecutive terms. The annulment might come into effect even if the rule is “changed just an hour to elections.” “Hüseyin Çelik: ‘Üç dönemi kaldırın baskısı var’” *CNNTurk*, March 8, 2014, <http://www.cnnurk.com/haber/turkiye/huseyin-celik-3-donemi-kaldirin-baskisi-var>. It is to be anticipated that in all scenarios this change will be explained with a narrative that refers to the public will.

<sup>10</sup> In 2012, the Turkish Supreme Court decreed that after a first term of seven years, Gül, who founded the AKP with Erdoğan, could run for the presidency a second time.

<sup>11</sup> Erdoğan has professed distaste for separation of powers, seeing it as an impediment to effective governance. “Erdoğan, Kuvvetler Ayrılığı Eleştirisi,” *Milliyet*, December 17, 2012.

It is hard to see why Erdoğan would be the first exception. It is actually more conceivable that he would lose such a presidential election.

In scenario “B,” facing pressure as a result of diminished results, if he secures close to 38 percent, Erdoğan could call for early general elections, even earlier than in scenario “A,” hoping to secure a majority, or, at the very least, the opportunity to lead a coalition. However, Erdoğan’s appetite for early elections would be diminished if he obtains a percentage of votes closer to 34 percent. In this case, his likely strategy would be to hold on to his position until the end of the term and try to broaden his support in advance of elections in 2015. The AKP bylaw on term-limits would still be changed. In any event, in scenario “B” Erdoğan’s appetite for the presidency will be lower and his alternatives in that case will be very similar to scenario “A.”

It is almost certain that in both scenarios, Erdoğan will declare victory. The AKP will almost certainly receive the highest percentage of votes and win the most municipalities. Further, if it is able to secure the metropolitan municipality in Istanbul he will have more breathing room, and a win in Ankara might be the icing on the cake. To an extent, he could endure losing Ankara – a likely possibility, in fact – even though in the medium term this will signal that he is entering troubled waters. However, a defeat in Istanbul, which is less likely, would be especially damaging. In the unlikely event that the AKP loses in both cities, and with no hope for winning İzmir, the sun would be considered as setting on Erdoğan’s political career.

In both scenarios, early general elections for parliament are likely and would be held in tandem with presidential elections. It is also highly probable that Erdoğan will not run for president. A study indicates that as Erdoğan’s rhetoric and style has become more rigid, the support for a change to the presidential system eroded by approximately seven percent in one year.<sup>12</sup> It seems that Erdoğan’s preference for engendering controversy and crisis, which to an extent has secured him election victories time and again, has destroyed his prospects for the presidency. In any event, post-election Turkey will be less governable for Erdoğan. He will find it increasingly problematic to impose his will on the public and control the bureaucracy. In the same vein, if the AKP wins less than 34 percent of the vote, it means the end of an era. On the other hand, if the AKP manages to gain more than 42 percent of the vote without suspicion of fraud, AKP rule will be reaffirmed, and Erdoğan will be declared totally absolved of all the charges that are swirling around him.

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<sup>12</sup> Kadir Has..., *ibid.*

However if there are credible claims of election rigging, there will be more chaos in Turkey, tarnishing its already fragile democracy. What has kept anti-Erdoğan crowds out of the streets, for the most part, is the belief in honest elections and a properly functioning democracy. If the AKP receives anything between 34 and 42 percent and Erdoğan insists on maintaining his style of government, which will further polarize society, he may be risking the sustainability of his party beyond his own career. This might even create a dissident movement within the AKP.

Erdoğan originally reached the pinnacle of power through an unlikely alliance of liberals, Islamists, center right conservatives, Gülenists, the business community, and a good deal of goodwill from the international community. The tide has turned. He ironically faces an equally unlikely alliance opposing his rule and tries to counter it by employing idiosyncratic maneuvers, such as “uncovering” and “disclosing” foreign plots, declaring a “war of independence,” feigning ignorance of controversial judicial processes like the Ergenekon trials, absolving himself of responsibility for all past controversies, and calling for renewed “brotherhood” with the Kurdish political movement. It seems that Erdoğan is hoping to create a problematic alignment that consists of nationalists and the military, along with the Kurdish movement, and his AKP core.

At present, Erdoğan is in a tooth and nail battle for his political survival. He doesn't seem to be keen on taking any prisoners either. What Turkey urgently needs, on the other hand, is a renewed consensus on pluralism, an effective and genuine separation of powers, and civil liberties. Whether or not this will come from an Erdoğan-led AKP is the “million dollar question.”

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