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## INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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### **Erdoğan under Political Siege**

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As of 2002, Turkey has been ruled by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). It is not a secret that one of the most important reasons for the AKP's constant success in all general election campaigns is the existence of an ineffective opposition that could challenge the party's head, Erdoğan. Inevitably, this impressive record of victories over the past 17 years has created an image of invincibility among Erdoğan's comrades and also throughout opposition circles. However, this reputation of invincibility suffered a huge blow in the 2019 municipal elections when the AKP lost control of Turkey's largest city, Istanbul, as well as its capital Ankara. Since the president knows well the unwritten fundamental rule of the Turkish politics that whoever controls Istanbul and Ankara will rule Turkey, these municipal election defeats not only rang the alarm bells of the presidential palace in Ankara but also encouraged opposition figures to come out against the Turkish president.

Besides the reasonable attrition that he suffers after being in power for 17 years, Erdoğan is challenged by serious problems, such as the deepening economic crisis due to the Turkish Lira's continuous de-valuation vis-à-vis the US Dollar and the Euro, which impacts all citizens. Additional challenges include the Kurdish question, extra-territorial Turkish military campaigns in Syria, and the status of the Syrian refugees whose official numbers reached 3.6 million people in October 2019.<sup>1</sup> These crucial problems formed a suitable atmosphere for criticizing Erdoğan's policies on the matters that directly affect people's daily lives. This dissatisfaction can be observed easily on the Turkish street and felt in daily conversations as well as in social media.

Turkey's politicians are keenly aware of this tense situation. While still celebrating the municipal victory over the AKP, the secular Republican People's Party (CHP) – the only political adversary that can threaten Erdoğan's rule – is still very busy with its own "Game of Thrones" starring the head of the party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, CHP's presidential candidate for the 2018 elections, Muharrem İnce, and the new Istanbul

mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, who has risen to the ranks of CHP leadership from behind the scenes.

On the other hand, within the AKP, the charismatic figures in the party such as Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ali Babacan (who is secretly supported by Abdullah Gül) seem to be fed up with Erdoğan's unprecedented authoritarianism, and therefore it seems that they will no longer play the role of the president's "rubber stamp," as former Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım did. This new awakening led by Davutoğlu and Babacan resulted in mass resignations from the party. In last two months alone approximately 60 thousand members of the party have resigned from the AKP. It should also be noted that since August 2018 the total number of resignations from the party reached to 902 thousand people, while then the total registered members was above just 10 million people. Erdoğan is aware of this phenomenon but he tries to persuade his followers that the decline in the numbers is due to natural deaths of the party members rather than political resignations.<sup>2</sup>

Besides Davutoğlu and Babacan, there are also some very influential candidates who have not resigned from the AKP but should be taken into account in all future political equations. The former chief of staff and current Defense Minister, Hulusi Akar, as the champion of Turkey's extra-territorial military operations in Syria, and the Minister of Interior, Süleyman Soylu, who is orchestrating the mass arrests of Gülenists, Kurdish separatists and other opposition figures at home appear as the most popular candidates who could replace Erdoğan in the future. It should be noted that given the deteriorating economic situation it seems that Erdoğan's son-in-law, the minister of Treasury Berat Albayrak, who is seen by many as a natural candidate to succeed Erdoğan is unlikely to meet this expectation due to his lack of public support.

Having set the political scene above, it should be noted that last November was a crucial month for all of Erdoğan's rivals given the intra-party power struggle and important progress they made in forming new frontiers against the Turkish president. For instance, the new Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu who managed to defeat Erdoğan's candidate Binali Yıldırım in the Istanbul municipal elections, has been able to implement revolutionary changes in the Istanbul municipality. While making administrative reforms that resulted in cutting the funds to AKP affiliated non-governmental organizations and foundations İmamoğlu is attempting to stabilize the budget of the municipality which suffers from deficit. To fulfill this goal, since his entry to the office, İmamoğlu has fired 3800 people including those who would have retired from their jobs. Given the AKP majority in the municipal council İmamoğlu's task is not an easy one. Since his ascension to power, due to party discipline within the opposition and budget cuts from the central government the construction of eight metro lines were halted. In order to find a solution to the problem the İmamoğlu administration sought to receive credit from Turkish public banks, but could not receive a penny due to pressure from the central government.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in November İmamoğlu signed a 110 million Euro credit agreement with Germany's Deutsche Bank to overcome this obstacle.<sup>4</sup> As can be seen in the example of Deutsche

Bank, Istanbul's mayor proved that he is capable of thinking out of the box. As it is expected from him, he is utilizing his current office as a springboard to go further. In an exceptional move last October İmamoğlu paid a visit to European Council where he emphasized his commitment to European values, while expressing his gratitude for European support in the second round of the cancelled municipal elections. On the same stage, İmamoğlu went on and made important criticisms against the EU and the Turkish government regarding the Syrian refugees and Turkey's Kurdish question respectively.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, these brave statements once again showed İmamoğlu's great ambitions. However, the Istanbul mayor should also be aware that he is not alone in this race in his camp. The recent loud quarrel between the party head, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and CHP's defeated presidential candidate Muharrem İnce over the rumors regarding whether İnce paid a secret visit to Erdoğan's palace to seek Turkish president's support in order to gain the control of the CHP or not also indicates that the CHP will likely be the base of any future "game of thrones."<sup>6</sup> In other words, in the event that this disagreement within the CHP leadership will deepen there is a danger that it will split the secular votes, which will in turn help the Turkish president.

Despite the above, the internal power struggles are not only the headache of the CHP, they also create serious problems for the ruling AKP. In this regard the former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and former Foreign and Economy Minister Ali Babacan could steal a huge number of votes from the AKP. While Davutoğlu may attract those Islamist AKP supporters with his Neo-Ottomanist political discourse, Babacan will most probably appeal to those who are displeased with Erdoğan's son-in-law's economic policies. However, Babacan, as one might expect, is not limiting his scope to economics. In a recent TV interview with Habertürk, Babacan openly criticized the AKP for leaving the democratic path it initiated back in 2002, and openly criticized the Erdoğan-Davutoğlu oriented Neo-Ottomanist Turkish foreign policy while advocating for an end to Turkey's isolation in the region. Babacan moreover expressed his desire to strengthen the relations with the United States and the West while normalizing Turkey's relations with Middle Eastern actors, namely Syria, Egypt and Israel - but refrained from giving the specific names of these countries in the interview. Babacan's criticism of the isolation of Ankara in the Eastern Mediterranean gas question can also be seen in the same frame. Despite this ambitious stance, it seems that Babacan lacks the charismatic charm that the Turkish president and İmamoğlu have. For instance, during the Habertürk interview, Babacan kept using the term "we" instead of "I" that most Turkish leaders tend to use to emphasize their authority in the party.<sup>7</sup> Thus it seems that Abdullah Gül's external support for Babacan has also some side effects. Despite this, thanks to Davutoğlu and Babacan conservative Turkish voters, who had complained for years that there is no real alternative to Erdoğan, finally began to see a different reality.

Since his ascent to power President Erdoğan has found himself in a political siege where the above mentioned players can pose a real threat to his office. Nevertheless, there is a concern that Erdoğan may see the new AKP-rooted opposition as his party's

offspring. It means that neither Davutođlu nor Babacan will declare a total war against Erdoğan, rather they will likely adopt a moderate opposition stance which the Turkish president could tolerate to some extent. This will eventually pave the way for partial future parliamentary voting collaborations in the parliament that will threaten Erdoğan's chair less directly. However, as far as the CHP is concerned, the threat seems to be more direct. In case of the formation of a consolidated leadership, the CHP will attempt to replace Erdoğan at all costs. The party head Kılıçdarođlu appears to act as an auxiliary force in this battle as he did in the last presidential elections, where he supported İnce. The undeclared rivalry between İmamođlu and İnce for CHP leadership will not only shape the future of the party but also Turkey's destiny in the 2023 elections. Now Erdoğan is once again hoping for, and may be helping to create a new political miracle, which would occur if the ego wars inside the CHP pave his way to the victory - in the shadow of a "tamed opposition" that split from his own party.

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<sup>1</sup> *Mülteciler Derneđi*, "[Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Sayısı Ekim 2019](#)," October 9, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Hayri Demir, "[AKP'de erime sürüyor iki ayda 60 bine yakın istifa](#)," *Artı Gerçek*, November 26, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> *Bir Gün*, "[İmamođlu'ndan 'Bugüne kadar ne yaptınız?' sorusuna yanıt](#)," November 27, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> *Bloomberg HT*, "[İmamođlu: Deutsche Bank ile kredi anlaşması 110 milyon euro](#)," November 25, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> *Cumhuriyet*, "[İmamođlu Strasburg'da konuştu: İstanbul seçimleri tüm dünya için öğretici](#)," October 30, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> *Bir Gün*, "[Rahmi Turan, Saray'a giden CHP'li iddiasının kaynađını açıkladı](#)," November 23, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> *Habertürk*, "[Ali Babacan'dan yeni parti hakkında önemli açıklamalar](#)," November 26, 2019.