

Is Erdoğan Losing His Touch?

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President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan refused to accept the outcome of the Istanbul mayoral election on March 31, won by the main opposition the Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, with a wafer-thin majority. It is clear that behind the scenes, Erdoğan placed pressure on the Supreme Electoral Council (YSK) to invalidate the result and call a rerun, which was held on June 23. The result was a stinging rebuff for Erdoğan and his Justice Development Party (AKP). İmamoğlu won again, but this time by a margin of almost ten percentage points.

AKP ran a poor campaign, with several tactical blunders. They tried to woo Kurdish voters by allowing lawyers to access the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, for the first time since 2011. Öcalan, on a life sentence for terrorist offences, put out a statement calling on Kurds to stay neutral in the election. The effect was to annoy Kurdish voters, who saw through the ruse, as well as many nationalists, for whom Öcalan is considered a hate figure. Indeed, a year or so ago, Öcalan finished comfortably on top of a poll on who should be hanged first if the death penalty was reintroduced.

A second blunder was for AKP related media to spread a rumour that İmamoğlu, from the Pontus region of the Black Sea, was a crypto-Greek. This offended many Istanbul voters whose origins are by the Black Sea. İmamoğlu was given a hero's welcome with a massive turnout when he attended a rally there. Erdoğan himself (ironically, his own roots are by the Black Sea) kept a much lower profile than in March. This sparked suggestions that he realised it was a losing cause and did not want to be publicly associated with failure.

The fall of Istanbul to the CHP is a serious blow to AKP and Erdoğan personally. AKP had already lost Ankara and Izmir to CHP in March. However, Istanbul is where Erdoğan's rise to power began - he was elected mayor in 1994 - and the city accounts for at least 40 percent of Turkey's gross domestic product. Losing control of Istanbul means more than just the loss of patronage. İmamoğlu has already begun to uncover abuses built up over 25 years: waste (hundreds of cars available to city officials), kickbacks, inflated contracts, cronyism, nepotism (Erdoğan's children control charitable foundations heavily subsidised by the municipality) and more. Stones are being turned over and underneath is not pretty. To be sure, corruption and venality are not exactly unknown in local government. However, AKP swept to power in the first place on a promise to clean up - and 'AK' was chosen as the acronym of the party precisely because it means 'white', with a connotation of 'clean' and symbolising a break with the corrupt past.

Wider implications

The loss has significance beyond Istanbul:

- Erdoğan would have been better advised to let the original vote stand. Many even among his natural constituency were offended by the blatant manipulation of the system. Losing by 14,000 votes is surely more palatable than a huge swing of nearly ten percent in the rerun. This poses a question over the President's judgement;
- İmamoğlu's victory, despite AKP's near monopoly of the mass media, dents Erdoğan's image of invincibility. Democracy faces undeniable difficulty within Turkey. But it is still alive. And kicking;
- the loss encourages the opposition, including internal opposition to Erdoğan's authoritarian ways. There has been persistent talk that at least one, possibly two centre-right parties will be launched in the autumn: one led by Ali Babacan and the

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other by Ahmet Davutoğlu. Babacan is a former Cabinet minister and architect of the highly successful economic reforms of the early AKP years in government. Davutoğlu is a former academic, Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, who was forced out of office by Erdoğan. Both will look to draw on the same pool of disaffected MP's and other senior AKP figures. Babacan will not work with Davutoğlu; but he does enjoy the moral support of former President Abdullah Gül, who does not wish to be drawn back into party politics;

- the arrival of a new party or parties will mark a first real crack in the facade of AKP, though dissatisfaction has been brewing for quite a while. One of Erdoğan's most impressive achievements was to unify the centre-right in Turkish politics. Historically this is an anomaly as for most of Turkey's multiparty era two or more parties have represented the centre-right. AKP is a mosaic, not a monolith, composed of a mix of nationalists, conservative Kurds, pious conservatives, modernisers and pragmatists. Erdoğan's endless refreshing of the leadership and insistence on a parliamentary policy of 'three terms and you're out', coupled with a growing trend towards confrontation at home and abroad, has loosened the glue. Some 25 percent of voters will stick with him through thick and thin. However, support for AKP looks to be in decline and the days of 50 percent plus election victories are probably a thing of the past;
- the Kurds discovered tactical voting for the first time and were kingmakers in both Istanbul elections. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) did not run a candidate, deliberately, and called on their supporters to vote for Imamoğlu though there was no formal alliance. This will strengthen their hand in future national elections and help bring them into the political mainstream, even though most of the HDP leadership are in prison awaiting trial on what appear to be somewhat flimsy charges of supporting terrorism; and
- the economy is becoming a significant factor in voting patterns. What is surprising is that this has taken so long, given the dire straits of the economy and the plight of most urban Turks, beset by rampant inflation, mounting debt fuelled by cheap and now unaffordable credit card borrowing, and high unemployment. Erdoğan has been blaming all this on foreign conspiracies against Turkey. However, in the end 'it's the economy, stupid'.

What happens now?

The question is how will Erdoğan respond to these setbacks? He faces a choice – double down on his present course of stridency at home, stridency abroad, alliance with the extreme Nationalist Action Party, confrontation with the United States (US) over the S-400 missiles and Syrian Kurds, continuing flirtation with Putin's Russia, moving away from Turkey's traditional policy anchored in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Western alliance? Or move back towards the centre in domestic politics, abandon the hardline military policy on the Kurdish issue and restart a political process, rebuild the damaged relationship with the US and the European Union (EU)?

The answer is: it's too soon to tell. Erdoğan has always been an unusual politician in that he is good at both strategy and tactics. He is a compulsive reader of polls. An external adviser might conclude that AKP's alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) has reached its limits and is benefiting MHP more than AKP while alienating conservative Kurds. MHP won several municipalities in March at the expense of AKP. It looks as if voters disgruntled with the economy simply switched to MHP.

The same adviser might conclude that the dispute with the US over the S-400 missiles and the flirtation with Putin were unwise and self-defeating, given Turkey's likely need for economic

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support and an International Monetary Fund (IMF) style programme. Moreover, that Turkey needs more of a supple policy in relation to the Kurdish issue in Turkey itself and in Syria.

So far, however, there has been no indication in Erdoğan's public statements of a change of course. The S-400's are due to be deployed later in July. Bombardment of PKK targets in Northern Iraq continues. Harsh and polarising rhetoric continues. Erdoğan continues to reject any thought of an IMF programme. There is discussion of ditching unpopular ministers, including the President's son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, the Minister of Finance and the Treasury. However, vanity infrastructure projects have been reaffirmed.

As one well-placed Turkish observer put it to me 'Erdoğan does not understand that he does not understand economics'. On the S-400's he is relying on his relationship with Trump to protect him, whereas power on sanctions, in fact, lies with Congress, who are not pro-Erdoğan.

Erdoğan is capable of great tactical flexibility when required; he can execute a U-turn on a sixpence without discernible discomfort. His position as an Executive President with vast administrative powers is not at risk. Presidential elections and a general election are not due until 2023. Turkey will not tolerate another attempted coup. Nevertheless, there is a sense that a turning point may have been reached and that the tide may at last have started to turn against Erdoğan, however slowly. Further misjudgements and misreading of the national mood will only solidify that feeling.

[Since the above was drafted, Erdoğan has abruptly dismissed the Governor of the Central Bank, Murat Cetinkaya, evidently over interest rate policy. A case of shooting the messenger.]



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