

**FPC Briefing: Turkey's Year-Long Election Cycle**  
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In Turkey, the March 30th local elections produced a clear win for the ruling Justice and Development Party, but the country's bitter political struggle is far from over. The aftermath of the vote is almost as tense and controversial as the election campaign itself. The results are still contested in several cities including the capital, Ankara. Today, Turkey stands more polarized than ever. With a presidential election due in August and a general election in the summer of 2015, further turbulence awaits the country.

**Referendum on Erdogan**

The campaign for the nationwide municipal elections was dominated by a graft scandal that erupted in December 2013. A steady stream of incriminating leaked recordings appeared on the internet throughout the election campaign. A series of high-profile arrests including the sons of the government ministers and businessmen close to the Prime Minister were made and more than 50 people were detained. The government said that the leaks were part of a campaign, a judicial coup attempt by its former Islamist ally, the US-based preacher, Fethullah Gülen and his followers that have infiltrated the state institutions. The Gülen community was accused of becoming a 'state within the state' or a 'parallel structure' conspiring against the government. Mr. Gülen and his followers have denied orchestrating the corruption investigations.

As the vicious struggle for domination between the Justice and Development Party and the Fethullah Gulen camp intensified, the government went on the offensive, by sacking or reassigning hundreds of judges, prosecutors and police officers across the country; restructured the top judicial body, the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors and tightened the Internet law. Most recently, Twitter and YouTube were banned.

The main opposition The Republican People's Party (CHP), with the support of the other two opposition parties, recalled the Parliament on 19 March, in order to read and discuss prosecutors' files against the four government ministers that left the government following corruption allegations against them. Using its majority in the Parliament, the Justice and Development Party government turned down the opposition demand that proposals to be read out. The Parliament TV has refused to broadcast the session. The opposition accused the government of trying to cover up.

Throughout the election campaign, both the state run media organisations and a large part of the privately-owned but government controlled media acted as the mouth-piece of the Justice and Development Party. Yavuz Baydar, a columnist and a recent co-recipient of the Special Award of the European Press Prize, wrote in his blog about the extent of the biased coverage: 'Over a 12-day period between Feb. 22 and March 2, (state broadcaster)TRT allocated 13 hours and 32 minutes of campaign coverage time to the ruling AK Party, but a total of only 95 minutes to the three opposition parties represented in Parliament, according to a recent report by the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK).'<sup>1</sup> The leaked recordings, alleging movements of illegally acquired money and bribery were outright rejected by the Prime Minister as fabrication, using montage and dubbing. However, the authenticity of a recording of a conversation between Mr Erdoğan and Erdoğan Demirören, the owner of the daily newspaper Milliyet, in which Mr Demirören was reduced to tears, was not denied.

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<sup>1</sup> Yavuz Baydar, Further misery of Turkish media: Anadolu Agency, TRT exposed as AKP 'mouthpieces', April 2014, <http://yavuzbaydar.wordpress.com/2014/04/02/further-misery-of-turkish-media-anadolu-agency-trt-exposed-as-akp-mouthpieces/>

In relation to another leak, this time about the media group Habertürk, Mr Erdogan acknowledged calling the executive while on an official visit to Morocco last June to discuss its coverage of comments by an opposition leader, justifying his interference as his right to object to being insulted. The prime minister also accepted his role in final decisions over public tenders and high-level judicial appointments.

The corruption scandal prompted anti-government protests in Turkey's main cities. When a 15 year-old boy, Berkin Elvan, injured by a tear-gas canister during the Gezi protests, died after spending several months in a coma, the crowds again took to the streets. Right from the start of the campaign, Mr Erdoğan declared the local elections a referendum for himself. The ballot-box would be the final arbiter for all accusations against him and his government. As such, in a gruelling election campaign, covering every corner of the country, the Prime Minister rallied his supporters as if his life depended on the outcome.

Whilst the main opposition allowed the Gulenists' carefully timed and selected leaks to dominate their campaign and said very little else on other crucial issues such as the Kurdish problem and the economy, Mr Erdoğan campaigned on his government's popular achievements. With a heavy emphasis on religion and a perceived threat from the hostile foreign forces, he sounded more nationalist than his right-wing rival the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and more of a man on the side of the underdog than his social democrat rival Republican People's Party.

Potentially, the most damaging leak came a few days before the election. In an illegally recorded conversation, the Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, National Intelligence Organization (MIT) Undersecretary Hakan Fidan, Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioğlu and Deputy Chief of General Staff General Yaşar Güler, were heard discussing possible military operations in Syria. The Prime Minister Erdogan called it 'villainous' while Davutoglu saw it a 'declaration of war'. As well as criticising its content, the opposition blamed the government for 'endangering national security through incompetence'. Together with a shooting down of a Syrian plane, said to have crossed into Turkish air space in an area where the Islamist rebels have been battling President Bashar al-Assad's forces, the bugging incident at the Foreign Ministry firmly put Syria on the election agenda.

Once again, Mr Erdoğan managed to turn the adversity into a distinct advantage over his rivals. What was seen as an act of espionage, targeting the national security of the Turkish state, the Foreign Ministry leak strengthened Erdoğan's hand in his battle against the Gülenists and gave him a convenient excuse to ban YouTube, the main platform for other embarrassing revelations. During my brief visit to Turkey in early March to observe the election campaign on the ground, I had come across many voters that dismissed corruption allegations altogether. But even larger numbers told me that they did not dispute there might be corruption by the government. 'At least, this government made the ordinary people's lives better, even if they filled their own pockets at the same time', I was told time and time again.

Two days after the election, the daily Vatan columnist Sanem Altan put it very succinctly in her Twitter message: 'The Justice and Development Party voters did not clear Erdoğan. They do not have the power or the authority to do that. They did not say 'we know you are clean'. Instead, they said 'we know you're not but we still love you as you are'.<sup>2</sup>

### **The ballot-box**

After a campaign, run as if it was for a general election, Turkey went to polls on 30 March, in a tense and highly polarised atmosphere. All main political parties had voiced their fears over possible

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<sup>2</sup> Sanem Altan Twitter feed, April 2014, <https://twitter.com/AltanSan>

election fraud. Tens of thousands of volunteers were mobilised to observe and monitor the vote and the count.

Unlike previous elections, this time during the vote and afterwards, there were widespread allegations of fraud. Power cuts in many towns during the count, discovery of burnt out ballot papers and irregularities in transportation and counting of the ballot boxes led to unprecedented number of complaints. The main opposition the Republican People's Party (CHP) claimed that the biggest electoral fraud ever was being staged in Turkey. In a crowd-sourced report, CHP EU representation posted alleged irregularities, claiming it was not a fair contest.<sup>3</sup>

The biggest battle was over the mayoralty of Ankara. Mansur Yavaş, the opposition candidate running against the controversial AKP mayor for four terms Melih Gökçek, has demanded a recount, saying that the results were incorrectly recorded by the central electoral system. His supporters that gathered outside the Supreme Electoral Council offices were dispersed by the police using tear-gas and water cannons. Finally, five days after the vote, the Ankara Election Board has rejected the Republican People's Party's (CHP) appeal for the recount of votes in Ankara.

The Supreme Electoral Board's final announcement of the official results is expected to take several days. According to unofficial results, the AKP had more than 45 percent of the vote nationwide, the CHP had 28 percent, and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) had 15 percent. Pro-Kurdish the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and its sister People's Democratic Party (HDP) received around 6.4 percent.

The AKP has gained the control of 49 of Turkey's 81 metropolitan municipalities, including Istanbul and Ankara. In contrast, the CHP had very little presence outside the country's western and coastal regions and some major towns. In the south east and the east, it has almost no support. The leader of the Republican People's Party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has spoken to the Wall Street Journal-Turkey soon after the election. He blamed his party's failure to reach 30 percent target on the electorate's economic concerns and high level of personal debt. When asked about their election campaign tactics, Mr Kılıçdaroğlu said that it was their democratic duty to hold the government to account on the corruption charges.

Whilst agreeing with the need to keep the graft probe on top of the campaign agenda, I, too, criticised the opposition for failing to distinguish itself from the movement of Fethullah Gulen .<sup>4</sup> They allowed the Gulenists' carefully timed and selected leaks to dominate their campaign. As I wrote earlier in the campaign about the dangers of 'waiting for deliverance with further scandalous evidence against a corrupt government', the opposition chose to be dragged by the rip current.<sup>5</sup> On crucial issues such as the Kurdish problem and the economy, they remained mostly silent. However, Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu was clear about the dangers of the government policy towards Syria. People in some border areas responded by voting the opposition party candidates in, but like the corruption issue, this did not have much impact on the rest of the country.

### **The balcony speech**

With barely half the votes counted, a triumphant Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appeared before the cheering supporters from the balcony of the headquarters of his ruling Justice and Development

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<sup>3</sup> CHP EU Representation – Brussels, Biggest Electoral Fraud Ever Staged In Turkey, April 2014, <http://chpbrussels.org/2014/04/04/biggest-electoral-fraud-ever-staged-in-turkey/>

<sup>4</sup> Firdevs Robinson, Erdogan's Ottoman Slap, Firdevs Talk Turkey, March 2014, <http://www.firdevstalkturkey.com/turkeys-world/erdogans-ottoman-slap/>

<sup>5</sup> Firdevs Robinson, Turkey in waiting, Firdevs Talk Turkey, March 2014, <http://www.firdevstalkturkey.com/turkeys-world/turkey-in-waiting/>

Party in Ankara. On his side stood the members of his family, including his son Bilal and his former minister responsible for European Affairs, Egemen Bağış, both implicated in the corruption scandal. Mr Erdoğan's victory speech was far from conciliatory, peppered with words like "traitors," "terrorists", "an alliance of evil" and "the Assassins". He talked about "entering their lair", "making them pay the price" and "people soon having to flee the country".<sup>6</sup>

The 'Ottoman Slap' delivered by the people of an 'invincible Turkey' landed on the faces of not only the rival Islamists who initiated the corruption probe, but also on everyone else that took up their claims seriously. "We have the democracy that the West yearns for" Mr Erdoğan said, adding "The old Turkey is no more; there is now a brand new Turkey". A new mandate must have given Mr Erdoğan a renewed vigour to revive his government's claim to Turkey's regional leadership role. As well as declaring that Syria was in a state of war with Turkey, he addressed the peoples of Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Macedonia and Kosovo, thanking them for their prayers and support for Turkey.

The day after the balcony speech, his senior advisor Yiğit Bulut articulated the government's grand vision for future in his pro-government daily Star column: 'There is no longer any doubt. Turkey will become a new super power. The new Turkey as a global power is on its way'.<sup>7</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's balcony speech was perceived as his intention to crack-down on his opponents. The leader of the main opposition, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu called it a "threat". In Germany, Andreas Scheuer, the general secretary of the Christian Social Union, the Bavarian sister party to Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, had called for EU negotiations with Turkey to be stopped. "It is becoming clear that Erdogan's Turkey does not belong to Europe," he said in Munich. "A country in which the government threatens its critics and tramples democratic values cannot belong to Europe."

A scheduled meeting between senior officials from Turkey and the European Union, scheduled for early April has been postponed. According to Turkish diplomatic sources, the decision was taken by mutual consent in order to prepare for the meeting more thoroughly. The same source insisted that there were no tensions. It was business as usual. However, shortly before that, European Union Affairs Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu had dismissed the prospect of the accession talks being suspended by the EU. "A suspension of talks would mean the EU is controlled by the parallel structure and defends that structure. The EU will not do this and we refuse to believe this would be the case," Çavuşoğlu said.<sup>8</sup>

Henri Barkey, a professor of international relations at Lehigh University and a veteran Turkey commentator reacted to Erdoğan's balcony speech in an article titled: 'Erdogan Jumps out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire'.<sup>9</sup> 'Erdogan may have vanquished his opponents at home for the time being, but he has not recovered from the self-inflicted damage he has incurred abroad. The Erdogan brand is severely damaged and diminished. His outlandish accusations against his allies for fomenting coups against him, his open interference in the media, and his ban on social media outlets have made Europe and the United States question his reliability as a partner. He may try to assuage their concerns by opening dialogues with Cyprus and Israel, but it is unlikely that he would be taken seriously as a player. He will be treated merely as the current leader of an important ally' Professor Barkey wrote. The Prime Minister attracted further criticism for his comments about the decision

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<sup>6</sup>FULL TEXT: Turkish PM Erdoğan's post-election 'balcony speech', Hurriyet Daily News, March 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/full-text-turkish-pm-erdogans-post-election-balcony-speech.aspx?pageID=238&nID=64341&NewsCatID=338>

<sup>7</sup>Yigit Bulut, Now do not hesitate: Turkey will be a new superpower, Star Yazarlar, March 2014, <http://haber.stargazete.com/yazar/artik-hic-tereddut-yok-3b-turkiye-yeni-bir-super-guc-olacak/yazi-862889>

<sup>8</sup>Today's Zaman, Turkish minister: shelving of talks would mean parallel structure-EU cooperation, April 2014, <http://www.todayzaman.com/news-343785-turkish-minister-shelving-of-talks-would-mean-parallel-structure-eu-cooperation.html>

<sup>9</sup>Henri J Barkey, Erdogan jumps out of the frying pan and into the fire, The American Interest, April 2014, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/articles/2014/04/01/erdogan-jumps-out-of-the-frying-pan-into-the-fire/>

taken by the country's Constitutional Court, declaring the ban on Twitter 'unlawful'. Considering a number of individual applications filed following the blocking, the Court unanimously ruled that the ban was a violation of free speech guaranteed by Article 26 of the Constitution on April 2.

The government lifted the ban the next day but the Prime Minister said whilst they had to implement the ruling, he did not have to respect it. Mr Erdoğan criticised the Constitutional Court for giving priority to the Twitter case while there were so many other files waiting to be considered, adding: "While they are protecting an American company, our national and moral values are being disregarded".

### What is next?

During the balcony speech, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave the first hint that he may be running for the presidency in August, by saying "We are ready to devote ourselves to whatever mission we will be endowed with." After the 2013 Gezi protests and the corruption probe launched by the Gulen sympathizers in the judiciary, Mr Erdoğan's prospects for presidency were seen weakened. However, after the recent local election victory, it now seems the presidency is firmly back on the agenda. The presidential election due in August this year will be the first time in Turkish history the President will be directly elected by the people. The successful candidate will have to cross the 50 percent threshold.

Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç said on 4 April that the strong support for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the March 30 local elections is a crystal clear sign showing that Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan would comfortably be elected if he decides to run for presidency in the upcoming August election.<sup>10</sup> "In my opinion, if our prime minister wants to be a candidate, Mr. [President Abdullah] Gül will show respect to this and support him. They will consult each other and one of them will express [the will]," Arınç said in an interview on NTV television.

In order to guarantee the absolute majority, Mr Erdoğan needs the support of the Kurdish voters. In order to come up with a candidate that can challenge the AKP, the opposition need to agree on a joint candidate. The leader of the CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has told daily Hürriyet that he predicts Turkey's new president to be elected in the second round of the August presidential elections. "I say the new president shouldn't have a party background or a political identity. He should be a civilian. We want a highly educated president who can read the global balance well; somebody that all citizens accept," Kılıçdaroğlu said.<sup>11</sup>

The possibility of deciding to change the party rules in order for Mr Erdoğan to run for the post of the prime minister for another term should not be ruled out yet. Mr Erdoğan may believe the recent local election victory has vindicated him of all charges but in the eyes of the other 55 percent that did not vote for him, he still has questions to answer. In a country where there is any judicial independence and integrity, allegations of this kind would have to be thoroughly investigated. Whichever formula that would be most likely to give Mr Erdoğan another four or five years of immunity, would be the preferred solution at the end.

### April 2014

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<sup>10</sup> Hurriyet Daily News, Deputy PM: local poll showed presidential road open for Erdoğan, April 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/deputy-pm-local-poll-showed-presidential-road-open-for-erdogan.aspx?pageID=238&nID=64550&NewsCatID=338>

<sup>11</sup> Deniz Zeyrek and Şükrü Küçükşahin, A 'civilian' president should be elected, Turkey's main opposition leader says, April 2014, Hurriyet Daily News, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/a-civilian-president-should-be-elected-turkeys-main-opposition-leader-says.aspx?pageID=238&nID=64538&NewsCatID=338>