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Turkey

## TURKEY'S ELECTIONS AND THE UNITED STATES: CHALLENGES AHEAD

*Henri J. Barkey and Philip H. Gordon*

The landslide victory of an Islamic party in a Turkish election would hardly seem to be good news for Americans at any time. But with war looming in Iraq, Turkey trying to recover from its worst financial crisis ever, emerging questions about European defense and NATO, Cyprus talks at a critical stage, and Ankara's application for membership in the European Union in the balance, the November 3 electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) probably struck many U.S. observers as the wrong outcome at the wrong time.

There are certainly grounds for concern. Although the AKP played down its Islamist roots throughout the campaign, no one can be certain where its real sympathies lie. The party's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, once asserted that "Islam and secularism are incompatible." Five years ago, he was convicted of sedition for a fiery speech condemned by the Turkish authorities as an incitement to religious hatred. As a result of that conviction, Erdogan is now banned from serving in Parliament—and

thus from becoming prime minister. Even now, Turkey's chief prosecutor is petitioning the Constitutional Court to close the entire AKP for having allowed Erdogan to lead it, allegedly in violation of the constitution. The last time an Islamic party—an ancestor to the AKP and subsequently banned from politics—won an election in Turkey in 1995, its leader immediately

**Elections in Turkey** (% of votes and seats of total 550)

Major Parties	Dec. 1995		Apr. 1999		Nov. 2002	
<b>Pro-Islamist</b>						
Welfare Party (RP)	21.3	158	NA	NA	NA	NA
Virtue Party (FP)	NA	NA	15.4	111	NA	NA
<b>Justice and Development Party (AKP)</b>	NA	NA	NA	NA	34.3	363
<b>Center-right</b>						
Motherland Party (ANAP)	19.7	132	13.2	86	5.1	—
True Path Party (DYP)	19.2	135	12.1	85	9.6	—
<b>Center-left</b>						
Democratic Left Party (DSP)	14.6	76	22.1	136	1.2	—
<b>Republican People's Party (CHP)</b>	10.4	49	8.7	—	19.4	178
<b>Ultra-nationalist</b>						
Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)	8.2	—	18	129	8.3	—
<b>Pro-Kurdish</b>						
People's Democracy Party (HADEP/DEHAP)	4.2	—	4.8	—	6.2	—

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sought to strengthen relations with Iran and Libya. Within two years the military had intervened and forced the party from power.

These uncertainties notwithstanding, there is no room for overreaction or misinterpretation of the election result. The AKP's success in the recent election has little to do with the party's Islamic roots and much to do with the abject failure of all the other main parties to overcome their reputations for corruption, economic mismanagement, political infighting, and entrenched clientelism. Although the AKP received only about one third of the overall vote, it still managed to secure 363 out of 550 seats in Parliament because of the unusually high 10-percent threshold needed to secure parliamentary representation. (Only one other party—the Republic People's Party, or CHP—managed to reach that threshold.)

This strict constitutional requirement proved a terrible indictment on the previous governing coalition's political and economic record. Indeed, 90 percent of sitting parliamentarians, including every single member of the ruling coalition, lost their seats. The refusal of potential centrist leaders, such as Deputy Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz, former economy minister Kemal Dervis, former foreign minister Ismail Cem, and former prime minister Tansu Ciller, to form coalitions with each other, mostly due to longstanding personal rivalries, doomed all of their parties to failure.

### **Democracy versus secularism**

**W**hat ensured the AKP's victory in the polls was precisely the opposite of its alleged Islamism. Erdogan and his even more moderate deputy leader, Abdullah Gul, went out of their way throughout the campaign to present their party as a values-based party, for which the moniker "Islamic" would have no more meaning than that of the "Christian" Democrats who for years have governed in many West European countries.

While it is true that the AKP is a direct descendant of the Welfare Party, which tried to put a more Islamic stamp on Turkey in the late 1990s, it is also true that it has deliberately represented the more modern, pragmatic branch of that lineage. The other, more traditional branch of the movement ran on a different platform in the elections

and collected less than 3 percent of the vote.

AKP voters are drawn not only from the resentful underclass that has suffered most from the recent economic crisis, but also from conservative, middle-class professionals and intellectuals fed up with the current crop of alternative politicians—most of whom have dominated the political scene for 20 years or more.

Obviously, an AKP government should and will be judged not on what it says or represents but on what it does—and in that regard, one can be certain that Turkey's powerful military establishment will be watching the party's moves very carefully. All accounts so far, however, indicate that the party is

not just saying the right things to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), NATO, and the EU as a means to forestall any attempt of military intervention. Rather, it seems to genuinely believe that the party's and the country's best interests lie in anchoring Turkey strongly in the West and maintaining its secular nature, even while stressing religious values.

Indeed, on the question of Turkey's possible EU membership, the mere prospect of which is one of the most powerful incentives for Turkish political reform, the AKP is arguably even more reformist than the other main parties, given its belief that EU membership would be the best way to reduce the power of the Turkish military and ensure respect for human, religious, and minority rights. Since the election, Erdogan has gone out of his way to reassure observers that he is not the same man he was ten years ago, and that Turkey under his party's leadership will abide by its alliance and economic commitments.

### **Challenges Ahead**

**B**ecause in so many ways Turkey is such a critical partner for the United States, the AKP's victory will affect a number of issues of significance for Washington—potentially in mostly positive ways.

On Iraq, for which cooperation from Turkey is essential to U.S. plans to overthrow Saddam Hussein, the AKP is unlikely to veer away from a policy of cautious support for the United States. Whereas one might expect a party with Islamic roots to be even more opposed than other Turks to a U.S. intervention in the Muslim world, in fact AKP

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leaders have always stressed their abhorrence of Saddam and his regime. They have, moreover, privately indicated that they will consult with, and even defer to, the Turkish military leadership on questions of national security, including Iraq. If the AKP plays its cards well, the Iraq issue could even serve the cause of rapprochement with the Bush administration. Party leaders know that by facilitating U.S. action on Iraq, the AKP can dispel many of the doubts Washington harbors about its reliability at the head of a critical U.S. ally.

A second key challenge for the new government will be economic policy. Suffering from its worst crisis ever, the Turkish economy had recently begun a slow but steady recovery thanks to a massive \$31.5 billion IMF bailout package. The Bush administration's commitment to Turkey was one of the main reasons the IMF was willing to approve the largest such package in its history. Along with the financial package came an international civil servant to administer it: former World Bank vice president Kemal Dervis, who became Turkey's economics minister in April 2001. But Dervis, whose party came in second in the final count and is not needed for the AKP to maintain a majority, will not be part of the new government.

The AKP has no Dervis equivalent. In fact, its economic team lacks expertise and experience. Although during the campaign Erdogan had indicated that he would adhere to the IMF program, he had also stressed that his party would "modify" it. Having campaigned for and received the votes of those who have suffered economically in recent years, the AKP will have to institute measures that are likely to violate IMF guidelines. What is more likely is that they will make mistakes because of their inexperience, thus possibly compounding Turkey's economic travails or

failing to renew confidence in the Turkish economy. Still, as on Iraq and other issues, Erdogan has shown a committed effort since the election to reassure the international community. So far the financial markets seem reassured. The Istanbul stock market and the Turkish lira have both risen slightly since the election.

Another important area concerns Turkey's relations with the European Union. As already mentioned, the AKP has presented itself as extremely pro-European. For a party still very much influenced by religion, striving to become a member of a "Christian" club may appear contradictory. AKP leaders know, however, that their best chance to stand up to the pressures of Turkey's secular military-civilian elite is by furthering the process of democratization in Turkey. Membership in the EU is seen as the best insurance policy the AKP has for its continued existence. Hence Erdogan's insistence on placing improved

relations with the EU on top of his agenda.

The AKP's pro-EU approach could yet be complicated if, as expected, the Greek part of Cyprus is invited to join the union in December while the Turkish part is left out—a prospect that could provoke a nationalist backlash in Turkey and make it difficult for political leaders to remain passive. With Cyprus talks

still going on and the United Nations about to put forward a plan for resolving the conflict, there is still a chance for a deal before December.

The election of the AKP may make that deal more likely, both because it will not have coalition partners to worry about and because it owes little to Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktas. Because the continuation of the Cyprus conflict remains an impediment to Turkey's EU aspirations, the AKP may even be more willing to push the Turkish Cypriots to settle on a compromise solution as a

Turkey: Statistical Data					
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
GDP per capita at current prices (ECU/euro)	2,700	2,800	2,700	3,200	2,400
GDP per capita at current prices (in purchasing power standards)	5,600	5,800	5,600	5,600	5,200
Government debt (% of GDP)	55.6	50.1	65.9	56.4	102.5p
Gross foreign debt (% of GDP)	38.3	38.0	48.0	47.7	:
Unemployment (% of labor force)	6.7	6.8	7.7	6.6	8.5
Exports with EU-15 (% of total exports)	46.6	50.0	54.0	52.2	51.6
Imports with EU-15 (% of total imports)	51.2	52.4	52.6	48.8	44.6

p = provisional figures

Source: European Commission, 2002 Regular Report on Turkey's Progress Towards Accession, October 9, 2002

means to facilitate Turkey's candidacy—especially if the EU were willing to offer a date to start negotiations on Turkish membership in exchange for a deal on Cyprus. A deal on Cyprus and a date for Turkish negotiations with the EU could overcome much of the resentment toward

creation of a government with two leaders; the prime minister will have to consult informally with Erdogan at every turn.

Finally, there is the possibility that the secularist forces will try to polarize the political scene as a way to undermine the government and, thereby, hope to trigger another military coup. Indeed the military itself, even if it decides not to overtly block the new government from power, may try to discredit the latter and make it fail.

For all these reasons, anxiety in Washington—and among the Turkish General Staff—about the success of the AKP is understandable. But the outcome of the Turkish election may not be bad news. The elections were clean, and the winner will assume power according to normal democratic practice. Although many uncertainties, domestically as well as internationally, remain and the challenges facing the new government are enormous, the AKP has an opportunity to reconcile its Islamic roots with Turkey's secular democracy and Western orientation. Should its leaders prove successful, with U.S. and European support, the result will be a powerful message to a democracy-starved and economically deprived Muslim world. ■

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*This analysis draws on a CSIS Europe Program congressional briefing, led by Philip Gordon, on November 4, 2002.*

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<b>Non-EU Pivot State – Transatlantic Defense Spending</b>						
Total defense spending (in constant 1999 US\$ million)						
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
EU-15	171,097	151,627	149,519	139,585	129,349	120,474
Turkey	5,383	4,180	7,903	8,901	7,577	4,898
<i>in lira</i>				3,818tr	4,742tr	5,875tr
U.S.	282,699	281,243	276,618	278,398	281,601	284,448
R&D spending (as % of total defense budget)						
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
EU-15	2.8	2.8	2.6	2.5	2.6	2.8
Turkey	0.3	1.0	0.6	0.5	0.6	1.0
U.S.	13.3	13.5	13.7	13.1	13.2	13.8

*Source: IISS, Military Balance 2000–2001 and 2001–2002*

Europe that has built up over the years and have important spillover into other policy areas, including European defense, EU relations with NATO, Greece-Turkey relations, and domestic political reform.

A final area of concern involves domestic stability. Since 1991, Turkey had been governed by a series of unsuccessful and internally divided coalition governments. The AKP's decisive parliamentary majority could herald a period of lasting stability. Before such a point can be reached, however, a few dark clouds remain on the horizon.

First is the fact that whereas the AKP and CHP won a practical monopoly of parliamentary seats, they did so with just 55 percent of the total vote—that is, about 45 percent of the Turkish electorate will feel disenfranchised. This may raise questions about the legitimacy of some of the party's decisions. Second, by banning Erdogan from becoming prime minister, the establishment has forced the