

Early Turkish elections: Erdoğan's strengths and challenges. The main protagonists, the economic crisis and the transition to a new regime

by Dr. Nikolaos Stelgias

Historian, Academician-Researcher, Journalist

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HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN AND FOREIGN POLICY (ELIAMEP)¹

49, Vassilissis Sofias Ave., 106 76 Athens, Greece

Tel: (+30) 210 7257110-1, Fax: (+30) 210 7257114,

e-mail: eliamep@eliamep.gr,

url: www.eliamep.gr

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The main protagonists, the economic crisis and the transition to a new regime

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Author's Information:

Dr.Niko Stelgias was born in Istanbul in 1982. He completed his doctorate in Panteion University of Greece (Department of Political Science and History) in 2011. Dr Stelgia is a well-known author and researcher in Cyprus and Greece. His research interests focus to the Cyprus Problem, the modern Turkish reality and the modern political and social affairs of Greece. He is also the correspondent of Kathimerini newspaper in Turkish Cypriot community and Istanbul.

Summary:

Fifteen years since the party's ascendance in power, AK Parti enters for the first time an electoral race facing several important challenges. Despite the economic crisis and the government's authoritarian policy, Erdoğan could still win the elections based on his advantages and the weaknesses of the opposition. In the early elections of 24th June, AK Parti could secure the continuation of its power, but in the second round of elections may create interesting balances in the new parliament.

Key Words:

Turkey, Elections

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Introduction: The call for snap elections: economic and systemic factors

"The presidential system is not yet in force, and it is difficult for Turkey to wait until November 3, 2019. For the sake of Turkey's national security, it is essential that the People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı) will preserve the power. For the success of the alliance in the elections, we must follow the social developments (...). Turkey's relations with the United States, France and Britain have changed. There is an urgent need for our country to move to the presidential system. The political picture we will face after the local elections of 31 March is not clear. (...) It is our main goal to prevent these risks and hit them at their source. We have two choices. Either to wait for the regular date of elections or, based on the needs of the nation and according to legitimate reasons, we will move to early elections"².

The above mentioned historical call was made in mid-April 2018 by the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), Devlet Bahçeli. Considering several political and geo-strategic factors, Bahçeli asked president Erdoğan to proceed to the early presidential and parliamentary elections. Just before that, Bahçeli's party agreed with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) to create a conservative electoral front, named People's Alliance, for the forthcoming elections. The ruling party accepted the call, and the government set a date for the early elections on the 24th of June. In the meantime, the nationalist Great Unity Party (BBP) joined the People's Alliance strengthening thus the common conservative front.

Apart from the political and geostrategic reasons invoked by Mr Bahçeli, the condition of the Turkish economy was also calculated in the decision for early elections. Experienced Turkish analysts emphasised how important the declining state of the country's economy could be to the

² "Bahçeli'den Son Dakika Erken Seçim çağrısı! Devlet Bahçeli Kulisleri Allak Bullak Etti!"

outcome of the elections. "We need to stop the growth; otherwise the engine will burn. If we accept that (the previous economic crisis) was a heart attack then, then what we are experiencing today, is cancer. It progresses and damages the whole system. In Istanbul, you can see concrete mixers everywhere, but still, the houses built are not sold. Since 2009, all the necessary actions (in the economy) were put aside and replaced by populism. (At the same time) The great exodus of capitals began during the Gezi Park events, and even after that, there was fear of one's assets being confiscated in the FETÖ trials. Thus, as I know, most of the capitals left for Switzerland. In the scenario of regular elections, Erdoğan could become president, but his party could lose the majority in the parliament. (In any case) This economic trend cannot carry us to the end of 2019"³.

In the light of the above, two factors played a decisive role in the government's decision for early elections. First, the deteriorating economic situation in Turkey was a catalyst for the political developments in the middle of 2018. Second, the march to the early elections has been accelerated due to the persistence of the government and its supporters for the immediate transition to the new presidential system and the developments in the Kurdish Issue and the wider region.

³ Sevinç and Zaman, "İktisatçı Muratoğlu: 2001'deki Krize 'En Kötüsüyü' Diyenler Daha Bir şey Görmedi - Diken."

The main protagonists of the early elections

In the early presidential and parliamentary elections of 2018, there are five protagonists. First, the People's Alliance which consists of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AK Parti and two smaller conservative and nationalist parties, the MHP and the BBP. The Alliance supports the candidacy of Mr. Erdoğan for the presidency of Turkey.

Second, an electoral alliance between the Republican People's Party (CHP), which is the main opposition party, the nationalist Good Party (İyi Parti), the centrist Democratic Party (DP) and the conservative Felicity Party (SP). This electoral coalition is not as united as the People's Alliance, and as a result, only the CHP and DP support the candidacy of Mr Muharrem İnce, an ex-teacher and MP of the CHP from Yalova.

Third, the İyi Parti chose to support its leader and founder, Mrs Meral Akşener, for the presidency of Turkey. Mrs Akşener is an ex-Interior Minister with a nationalist and populist political agenda.

Fourth, the political forces of the Kurdish Movement and the Turkish Left are supporting the independent candidate Selahattin Demirtaş, who is the jailed ex co-leader of Halkların Demokratik Partisi (HDP).

Lastly, in the coming elections of 2018 smaller political parties are supporting their independent candidates. For example, the SP is supporting its leader's, Temel Karamollaoğlu, candidacy. At the same time, the nationalist and anti-Western Fatherland Party (VP), which has close ties with former members of the Turkish Armed Forces, nominated its president, Doğu Perinçek, as a candidate.

The first candidate, Mr. Erdoğan was born in February 1954 and in the 1970s he was an active member of Necmettin Erbakan's conservative movement. He was elected Mayor of Istanbul in 1994 and remained in his post until 1998 when the military junta banned his party, the Welfare Party. In 1999 he spent four months in jail after reading a forbidden nationalist poem in public. In August 2001, he co-founded the AK Parti with his friend and ally, Abdullah Gül.

Erdoğan came to power in 2002, only a year after the establishment of the AK Parti. He spent the next eleven years as Turkey's prime minister before becoming the country's first elected president (a ceremonial office) in August 2014. During his years in power, the majority of the opposition voices in Turkey have been silenced. Due to this practice, Turkey is severely criticised by foreign powers, and the EU is stalling the negotiations for the country's bid to join the bloc. Since the failed coup of 2016, thousands of people have been detained, including many soldiers, journalists, lawyers, police officers, academics and Kurdish politicians. The authorities have also removed 120,000 public servants, and at the same time, the complaints of AK Parti-inspired intimidation practises are widespread⁴.

⁴ "Erdogan: Turkey's Pugnacious President."

Erdoğan's main aim in the elections of 2018 is to perpetuate his power as president of Turkey. Based on the new laws of Turkey, if elected in 2018 and re-elected in 2023, Erdoğan will occupy the new presidential palace of Ankara for the next decade.

The second and most threatening candidate for the current president Mr. Erdoğan is the competent orator Mr. İnce. The 53-year-old candidate was elected as a parliamentarian for four consecutive terms between 2002 and 2015 from his hometown the Yalova district. He is well known for his speeches against the AK Parti and Erdoğan's anti-democratic policies, which went viral amongst his 3.6 million followers on Twitter. İnce, who served as CHP's Deputy Parliamentary Leader, is known in Turkish politics as one of the fiercest opposition speakers against Erdoğan's regime. He is regarded as a charismatic and resilient politician who is also well-versed in local politics due to his former profession as a physics teacher, his civil background and the years he spends as the Deputy of CHP in Yalova. Being the son of a right-wing supporter of the Democratic Party originated from Thessaloniki in Greek Macedonia, Muharrem İnce may also draw votes from the conservative voters too ⁵.

The third candidate is the veteran Turkish politician, Meral Akşener, who has stolen the spotlight as the country gears up for the 2018 presidential elections. Dubbed the Iron Lady, after former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Akşener rose to prominence in 2016 after her dispute with Devlet Bahçeli of the Nationalist Movement Party. Born to Greek immigrants in İzmet (northwest of Istanbul) in 1956, Akşener acquired a degree in History from Istanbul University and a PhD in the same field from Marmara University. She pursued an academic career before deciding in 1994 to try her hand in politics. She ran for parliament in 1995 and won a seat in one of the Istanbul's provinces as a representative of the conservative True Path Party (DYP). During the term of the late Prime Minister Neçmettin Erbakan, Akşener was appointed Interior Minister in 1996 and 1997, making her the first woman in her country to assume this position. During her turn in office, she displayed a noticeable hard line in confronting the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Akşener was re-elected to parliament in 1999, gaining prominence among right-wing parties. She joined AK Parti. She, however, quit after four months when she realised that the party offered nothing new. In 2007, Akşener joined MHP and remained in the party until her fallout with Bahçeli in the aftermath of the failed July 2016 coup against the government. After the establishment of İyi Parti, Akşener embarked on various campaigns throughout Turkey in what was interpreted as an effort to garner supporters not only from right-wing groups but other segments too⁶.

In the coming elections, the HDP and Mr Demirtaş will try to challenge the political hegemony of Erdoğan and his AK Parti, as the fourth candidate in the presidential elections of 2018. Born in the Kurdish-majority south-eastern city of Elazığ, Demirtaş is the second-born in a family of seven children. He realised his Kurdish identity at age fifteen after he attended the funeral of a prominent

⁵ “Muharrem İnce Is the CHP's Presidential Candidate for the Upcoming Elections in June (The Bio of the Candidate).”

⁶ “Turkey's Iron Lady Threatening Erdogan's Control.”

politician who is believed to have been murdered by security forces in Diyarbakır, the Kurdish-majority city in central Turkey. At that funeral, eight people were killed when unidentified shooters opened fire against the mourners. After completing his studies at the prestigious Ankara University, he worked as a human-rights lawyer in Diyarbakır before going into politics in 2007. Demirtaş came in third in the 2014 presidential elections acquiring just under ten percent of the votes, a development which emboldened HDP to run as a political party in the following parliamentary elections for the first time. After the presidential elections, he transformed HDP into a mainstream liberal-left party by incorporating a large faction of women, leftists, LGBT, anti-nationalists, and Kurdish voters. Despite the violent attacks on HDP's offices shortly before the parliamentary elections aiming to intimidate the voters, Demirtaş's party managed to overcome the ten percent electoral barrier. Demirtaş was imprisoned shortly after the 2015 repeat elections when the Turkish authorities accused him of providing support to the armed wing of the Kurdish Movement and motivating the people to rebel.

As mentioned above, the smaller parties of VP and SP will likewise support independent candidates for the presidential elections. At the same time, the small political parties of Turkey will participate in the simultaneous parliamentary elections and according to the new electoral law will be able to circumvent the anti-democratic threshold of ten percent. In particular, in these elections, the smaller parties concluding an electoral alliance with AK Parti (MHP, BBP) and CHP (İyi Parti, SP, DP) will enter parliament. Similarly, the HDP, the VP, the conservative Kurdish party HÜDA PAR and the conservative Büyük Türkiye Partisi (BTP), will also participate in the early parliamentary elections of 2018 as independent political parties⁷.

⁷ “YSK Seçime Katılacak 10 Partiyi Açıkladı: İYİ Parti Seçime Katılıyor”; “Seçime Katılacak Parti Sayısı Arttı.”

Conclusion: Erdoğan's challenges, weakness and strengths before the early elections

"In the People's Alliance, there are two big parties (AK Parti and MHP) and one small party (BBP). In the previous elections (1 November 2015) the percentage of the two major parties was over 60% (49,5 and 12). (...) The AK Parti's Vice President and Spokesman, Mahir Ünal analysed the Alliance's new percentages based on the polls and found that: "According to our polls, the Alliance is now between 54-56%. The AK Parti maintains its position (...), which is between 46-48%". (Thus, based on the confession above that the Alliance's percentages were reduced from 60 to 54%, the outcome of the elections cannot be guaranteed)"⁸.

The quote mentioned above belongs to Fehmi Koru, a conservative political analyst affiliated with the AK Parti's leadership. Mr Koru's words shed light on the climate of anxiety that is affecting the government party ranks due to the decrease in the Alliance's percentages, shortly before the early elections of 2018. The experienced analyst also studied the Konda Research Institute's detailed report of 131 pages regarding the AK Parti's voters and concluded that it contains some alarming points for the party's leadership. "One of these points is that: The percentage of voters saying that "they will vote the AK Parti regardless of the circumstances" is 71%. An electorate of about 30% is ready to leave the party at any moment. According to the report "as the level of education and income increases, the party loyalty seems to decrease". It is also stated that the percentage of voters from the middle class who say that "I will stay with AK Parti", has decreased to 58%"⁹.

Within this framework, an important question arises regarding the new challenges the Alliance is facing moving towards the early presidential and parliamentary elections. Responding to this question, Turkish and foreign analysts and economists focus on two factors that shape the abovementioned challenges. First, the deepening economic crisis and second, the authoritarian path the AK Parti has taken which is based on conservatism and nationalism. Analysts conclude that these two factors could cost not only the presidency for Erdoğan but also the majority in the new parliament for the parties of the Alliance.

Regardless of the government measures taken recently and the reassuring messages coming from the authorities in Ankara, analysts insist on warning that the deepening economic crisis has reached a point where it could very well lead the People's Alliance to an electoral defeat. The choices the government has in the new period seem limited: "The 2018 IMF's report (for the Turkish economy) refers to the neoliberal policy that could be discussed in Turkey in 2019. (The elements of this neoliberal policy being: The shrinkage of the economy and the marginalisation of the worker's rights. (...) If in 2019 a crisis erupts there (in Turkey) then there will be no other alternative than asking

⁸ Fehmi Koru, "AK Parti'de Bir Telaş Var. Sebebi üzerinde Düşündüm. Bu Yazıda Irdelediğim Konu O."

⁹ Koru.

for the IMF's help. (...) (Only if) there is a government change in June, then moderate, limited improvements in distribution policies could be possible"¹⁰.

Critical thinkers, economists, independent analysts and institutions believe that the AK Parti's government, with its authoritarian policy, has great responsibility for the country's economic crisis. The declining economic situation, in combination with the authoritarianism, nationalism and conservatism implemented by the government plays a crucial role in the alienation of the bourgeoisie, meaning the people with high education and a high allowance, from AK Parti. An EU report of 2018 regarding the situation in Turkey writes: "The state of emergency declared in the wake of the attempted coup on 15 July 2016, aiming at dismantling the Gülen movement, remains in force (...). The broad scale, the collective nature, and the disproportionality of the measures taken under the state of emergency since the attempted coup, meaning the widespread dismissals, arrests, and detentions, continue to raise serious concerns. (...) A State of Emergency Appeal Commission (..) begun taking decisions only in December 2017, and it has so far redressed the complaints of only a few applicants. (...) In April 2017, Turkey held a referendum which by a close majority approved the constitutional amendments introducing a presidential system. The Venice Commission assessed the amendments as lacking sufficient checks and balances, as well as endangering the separation of powers between the executive and the judiciary. The referendum itself raised serious concerns (...). The situation in the south-east continued to be one of the acutest challenges for the country. (...) While the government has a legitimate right to fight against terrorism, it is also responsible for ensuring this is done following the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms. (...) Turkey's judicial system is at an early stage of preparation (for EU membership). There has been further serious backsliding in the past year, in particular concerning the independence of the judiciary"¹¹.

Within this framework of economic crisis and authoritarian governance, can we then assume that the AKP will be defeated in the upcoming simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections? The answer to this question can only be negative for five main reasons¹². First, AK Parti remains a hegemonic power that controls the state apparatus and takes full advantage of all the undemocratic provisions of the emergency laws and the Constitution (i.e. the 10% electoral threshold which could exclude the HDP from the new parliament and strengthen the government's position on the political front). Secondly, despite the economic crisis, the country's rising middle class and capitalists are still closely affiliated with the AK Parti. Thirdly, nationalism and conservatism, which are instrumentalised by the People's Alliance, are the dominant ideological elements of the country's political field. Fourthly, Erdoğan's charismatic leadership and his acceptance rates are undeniable factors which minimize the opposition's chances to an electoral

¹⁰ Boratav, "2019'da Ekonomiye IMF Programı...."

¹¹ EU, "Comission Staff Working Document."

¹² Στέλιος, *Η Ανελεύθερη Τουρκική Δημοκρατία*.

victory. Within this framework, an opposition candidate may win the presidency only if he or she passes to the second round of the elections and succeeds in uniting all the opposition forces. Lastly, Mr Erdoğan will benefit from his opponent's weaknesses (gaps in ideology, poor representation in the political field, lack of a clear and efficient strategy in the national issues such as the Kurdish question, etc.) and their difficulty in establishing cooperation channels.

Thus, sixteen years since the party's ascendance in power, AK Parti enters for the first time an electoral race facing several challenges. Despite the economic crisis and the government's authoritarian policy, Erdoğan could still win the elections based on his above-mentioned five advantages and the weaknesses of the opposition powers. In addition, we must bear in mind that, AK Parti could secure the perpetuation of its power, but the second round of elections may create interesting balances in the new parliament (e.g. after his possible re-election, Erdoğan could face a "hostile" parliament where the People's Alliance won't have the majority of seats).

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