

Turkey votes: Part I - The storm before the election

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At an election rally on 20 March 2014, Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, declared he wanted to “root out Twitter, no matter what the international community thought”. A few hours later Twitter was shut down.

The decision backfired. Turkey's some 12 million Twitter users immediately found ways to circumnavigate the ban; it highlighted the increasingly authoritarian trend of Erdoğan; and it brought immediate condemnation from numerous foreign leaders.

The move has been viewed by many Turks as part of an operation to cover up a corruption probe that has consumed Turkey since 17 December, before key local elections on 30 March. The elections, which will be followed by Presidential election in August and political ones expected in 2015, have become a referendum on Erdoğan's popularity, and are set to shape Turkey's political landscape. A lot is at stake as a big win for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) may not only be used by Erdoğan to justify his response to the corruption scandal but also risks consolidating his increasingly authoritarian style of governance.

Corruption, conspiracy and the parallel state

Only a short time ago Turkey was seen as democratic role model in a volatile region. This image has been shattered as a consequence of a number of decisions actions taken by the AKP during the past months, changing Erdoğan's image from that of a reformist and democrat to someone who has no respect for democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights and freedoms.

The massive anti-government Gezi Park protests of June 2013 let the genie out of the bottle in terms of the built-up discontent of many Turks over Erdoğan's style of governance, and ideology. Paradoxically, Gezi Park presented Erdoğan with an opportunity to address the problem. If he has addressed the very real concerns raised by protestors, demonstrating the government's rhetoric that Turkey is a country of equality where “no culture and identity can be denied and that governance should be an inclusive process, it could have strengthened the party. Instead the AKP's response was to try and repress the symptoms of discontent through the same mind-set that led to them in the first place including by pinning the protests on “foreign agents”, “terrorist groups” and various lobbies.

Five months later, on 17 December Turkey was confronted with a corruption investigation that turned the country upside down when police arrested the sons of three cabinet ministers and at least 34 others close to Erdoğan's administration. This included leading businessmen known to be close to the government and officials, who are said to be engaged in suspected corruption, bribery and tender-rigging including his son Bilal.

Erdoğan declared it a “conspiracy” of both an international and domestic nature. He claims that “foreigners” who envy Turkey's rise are working to end his rule in collaboration with a “parallel state” which has been created under the tutelage of his former close ally Fethullah Gülen, the US-resident moderate Islamist scholar.

Alleging that Gülen's Hizmet Movement had infiltrated the police and the judiciary in an effort to overthrow the government, a mass purge of thousands of police, judges, government officials, and prosecutors began and is still going on. On 23 March 271 judges and prosecutors were reshuffled. Meanwhile the Parliament, where the AKP has a majority, pushed through two very controversial laws. The first increased the power over the Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) bringing it back under the Executive. The second was a new internet law which allowed the Communication Technologies Institution, a branch of the government, to take control of the internet. This paved the way for the Twitter ban with Erdoğan threatening to go further and also shut down Youtube and Facebook.

The vendetta with Hizmet

The Hizmet Movement had aided the AKP in its rise to power. Gülen is a source of inspiration for millions of people, not just in Turkey but far beyond. The Movement's alliance with the AKP was based on their common opposition to the Kemalist establishment, including the army: joining forces to consolidate democracy and the rule of law, as two religious groups which have suffered under the military secular rule of the Kemalists. But the weakening of the army, combined with Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian and what many view as "sectarian" tendencies eroded this relationship. This was particularly visible in November 2013, when the government decided to close down "dershaneler" – private prep-schools, many of which are run by the Gülen Movement.

Today the conflict between Gülen and Erdoğan has polarized the country and continues to intensify. A number of serious leaked wiretaps of conversations between Erdoğan and his family members, Cabinet members, media figures, and business figures, containing claims of corruption and stolen money have been revealed. Despite Erdoğan claiming these are fabricated by Gülen, they have further damaged the AKP. Despite calls for Erdoğan to have a professional lab determine whether or not these wiretaps are authentic, he has not done so.

Erdoğan destroys his own Legacy

Erdoğan has led the AKP to three election wins. These wins can be attributed to a successful economic policy, which revamped the economy making it a global success story, and addressing issues that were previously taboo, such as the Kurdish problem and Armenian issue. The second thing in his favour has been the weak opposition, meaning that for the past 12 years AKP has faced no serious competition or "checks and balances". Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican Peoples Party (CHP) helped the AKP more than they have helped themselves or their supporters.

However, after his third election win in 2011, with the AKP taking almost half the vote, Erdoğan increasingly adopted autocratic tendencies justifying them by the AKP's "fifty per cent". The AKP openly professes a majoritarian understanding of democracy – with democracy beginning and ending at the election box. Hence with each victory Erdoğan has felt increasingly powerful at the expense of a pluralist understanding that recognizes the rights and liberties of a wide variety of social and political groups.

This understanding of democracy does not fit with Turkey's very complex society. Turkish democracy is a fragile work in progress, it has never had an independent judiciary or fully functioning rule of law. Freedom of expression was problematic in the "old Turkey" and it still is. While Erdoğan may have taken steps to advance democracy, he is now backtracking. Turkey' EU membership process has been a key in the democratic development of the country. When it stalled, democracy-development in the country quickly began to stall.

The local elections

Everything will come to a head at the elections. The AKP's policies have not only alienated many Turks and damaged Turkey's global image, they have also had a negative impact on the economy, which has started to decline. However, despite the crisis, the AKP still enjoys a loyal support base estimated to be around 35%. These people will vote for the AKP, despite the corruption and democratic backtracking, because firstly they believe they may never have another opportunity to be represented in power again and secondly because they genuinely believe Erdoğan conspiracy rhetoric.

While the majority of Erdoğan's Ministers have toed his "conspiracy line", he is becoming increasingly isolated within the AKP. There is a real possibility that in the event of the AKP taking less than 35% it may result in either an attempt to sideline Erdoğan, or a total split of the party, raising the issue of who would lead a new party? Perhaps Turkish President, Abdullah Gül could do this but despite his "good cop" appearance, and declaring the Twitter ban illegal, he remains close to Erdoğan and his credibility was seriously eroded when he signed the new internet bill and HSYK into power only a few weeks ago.

Furthermore, while many Turks do not want to vote for the AKP again but there is no real alternative. In order for the AKP to take a heavy loss they need to lose either Istanbul or Ankara to the CHP. Ultimately, the election will set the scene for the Presidential elections and 2015 Parliamentary elections, indicate whether or not we are likely to see an escalation or de-escalation of tensions between Hizmet and Erdoğan and open the way for either an increasingly authoritarian style of governance or a return the democratic track. Much will depend on what happens in the coming days with new "leaks" expected.

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