

Turkey votes: Part III – President Erdoğan – A foregone conclusion?

Amanda Paul

On 1 July, after months of speculation, Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, announced he would run in the country's first direct presidential elections on 10 August. Erdoğan, who has dominated Turkish politics for over a decade, is viewed as the clear favourite. With current polls suggesting he could take as much as 52% of the vote, an outright victory in the first round is possible.

His main rival, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, is very much the underdog. Until recently, an international diplomat with no experience in politics, he is the joint candidate of Turkey's two main opposition parties, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Selahattin Demirtaş, the Co-Chairman of the Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) is also in the race, but is not expected to make it into double digits. The Kurdish vote however, could prove to be crucial if the ballot goes to a second round on 24 August. With Erdoğan wanting to increase Presidential powers, the stakes are high. With his belief in majoritarian rule, and increasingly authoritarian style of governance there has been an erosion of democracy and civil liberties. Many observers fear this trend may increase.

Erdoğan – A man on a mission

Prime Minister since 2002, Erdoğan has long coveted the position of President which could allow him to remain in power until 2024. The statutes of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) prohibit him from running for prime minister for a fourth term. Over the years, as he has assumed more power he has become increasingly intolerant toward criticism, especially regarding civil liberties and freedom of the press. Since beginning his third term in 2011, his approach has been particularly polarizing, rejecting parts of Turkish society that do not share his ideology, and snubbing calls for a more pluralistic, participatory decision-making system. In the past year, despite having faced anti-government protests, and a corruption scandal, his popularity has survived with the AKP taking some 43% of the vote in the March local elections.

Erdoğan's enduring popularity can be put down to several reasons. Firstly a significant part of Turkish society identifies itself with the AKP, believing their improved socio-economic status and social recognition was possible thanks to the party. These people consider they were under-represented in Turkey under the country's former ruling elites and are afraid of losing this in the event the AKP loses ground. Secondly, the AKP continues to be credited with building a strong economy and taking important steps to improve healthcare, public transportation and infrastructure. Thirdly, Turkey's opposition forces have proved themselves to be impotent and uninspiring. In fact, Turkey badly needs a new opposition that can attract both conservative and centre-left voters, which would represent a real challenge to the AKP. Lastly, Turkey remains a rather patriarchal society where many admire a strong leader who leads the nation without checks and balances.

Does İhsanoğlu stand a chance?

İhsanoğlu is a non-partisan academic who recently stepped down as Secretary General of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). He is a devout Muslim but also committed to upholding Turkey's secular tradition. His nomination was a pragmatic choice and demonstrates that the opposition seems to have understood that they would not stand a chance against Erdoğan if they presented a centre-left candidate. It also demonstrates that they are capable of overcoming their own ideological divisions in favour of unity against Erdoğan.

With his inclusive approach, İhsanoğlu is well placed to reduce the prevailing tensions in Turkey and with its neighbours and international partners including the US and EU, which are concerned over negative developments in the country. The recent EU-Turkey Association Council conclusions underline concerns on the independence of the judiciary, the separation of powers, freedom of expression and press, including the internet and the dismissals in the police, the judiciary and civil service over the last months. Furthermore, with his experience on Arab issues İhsanoğlu could help Turkey carve-out a new and much needed policy towards the Middle East. However, despite these positive elements, taking on Erdoğan's political machine will be far from easy.

Firstly İhsanoğlu is not well-known in Turkey, having been born in Egypt where he spent almost three decades before pursuing an international career. Erdoğan is a battle-hardened and experienced politician, who has an uncanny ability to connect with ordinary Turks, while İhsanoğlu is a complete novice.

Secondly, being a devout Muslim his profile does not reflect the traditional CHP and MHP ideology of hard-line secularism. While he has pledged his allegiance to Atatürk's principles and the majority of the CHP supported their leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's decision, the ultra-secular wing of the party rejected the shift from the party's traditional ideology. Therefore, despite animosity for Erdoğan, there remains a risk that some CHP-MHP supporters may not go and vote.

Thirdly, it may prove difficult to persuade AKP voters to switch to İhsanoğlu, simply because they believe that Erdoğan meets their needs will therefore see no need to jump ship.

Fourthly, the fact that the media, in particular television, is increasingly under the control of the government (Erdoğan announced his candidacy live on 28 channels), means that İhsanoğlu is not able to compete on a fair playing field in terms of campaigning. Calls for a nationwide television debate with all three candidates were rejected by Erdoğan.

The Kurdish vote

In the event of a second round run-off, the Kurds could find themselves as kingmakers. In the first round the Kurdish vote will be split between the AKP (very conservative voters who align with Erdoğan's ideology) and ultra-nationalist Kurds that will back the HDP.

Despite İhsanoğlu reaching out to the Kurds, winning their vote could prove very difficult. Firstly, it is highly unlikely that a nationalist Kurd will vote for a nationalist MHP candidate. Secondly, for decades Kurdish identity was suppressed, with the Kurds subjected to forced assimilation, under Kemalist governments which has left deep-rooted misgivings towards the CHP. Therefore, despite Erdoğan's divisive politics and authoritarian trend, the fact that the AKP is the only party to have taken steps to solving the decades old Kurdish problem, has made him the lesser evil by many Kurds. Therefore, in the second round of the presidential election, the majority of the Kurdish voters are likely to support Erdoğan unless the HDP calls for a boycott. To this end it comes as no surprise that the government has announced a new Kurdish reform package that will be launched in the coming weeks.

On the brink of a new era

Whoever wins, Turkey will enter a new era. An İhsanoğlu victory would probably reinstate the system of checks and balances which has been eroded under the current Presidency of Abdullah Gül. Gül, who is a close friend of Erdoğan, has signed into law a number of highly controversial reforms which have undermined fundamental freedoms and separation of powers in Turkey. It would also be the first major setback for Erdoğan since coming to power, and will probably mark the end of his political career as it would be difficult for him to continue as prime minister after such a defeat. However, this scenario looks unlikely.

If elected Erdoğan is expected to try and increase Presidential powers. Hence Turkey's political system may slowly shift from a parliamentary system of governance to a semi-presidential system even if the president's powers and authorities remain as they are now.

While the existing system already gives the president some executive powers, it is primarily a ceremonial role. While it may not be impossible *de jure* for Erdoğan to have his hands on all the levers and buttons, *de facto* the situation will be made possible not by expanding the president's powers via constitutional reform, which could prove difficult, but by weakening the prime minister via the president. With a pliant and obedient prime minister, there is no end to what Erdoğan could do. AKP members have been consistent in their loyalty to Erdoğan. Therefore, whoever will be appointed as Prime Minister and leader of the AKP are unlikely to question Erdoğan's rule. However, this could ultimately lead to legal challenges through Turkey's increasingly assertive Constitutional Court and even more polarisation.

The already worrisome derailment of Turkish democracy is likely to accelerate with an Erdoğan Presidency. This may result in growing domestic turmoil and anti-government protests, as well as increased tensions with Turkey's Euro-Atlantic partners. Dealing with this 'new' Turkey, including possible repercussions for the already beleaguered accession negotiations, should be high up on the EU agenda. In the meantime the EU is waiting to see how the elections go. However, with the economy cooling-off and vulnerable to internal instability, it is unlikely that governance *à la* Erdoğan is sustainable in the long run. Yet Turkey may have to hit rock-bottom in order to be able to return to a democratic path. While the storm that Turkey is presently travelling through could ultimately serve to strengthen democracy, it seems set to be a very rough ride.

Amanda Paul is a Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre (EPC).