



255

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SEVEN CLUES TO INTERPRETING THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN TURKEY

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Turkey is a parliamentary system. The presidential election on the 10th of August 2014 should therefore go unnoticed. But it won't. Not only because one of the candidates, the current prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has an indubitable gift for generating controversy, but also because, thanks to a constitutional modification, for the first time Turks are electing their president by direct suffrage. The importance of these elections and the message the ballot boxes give can be interpreted with the help of seven clues.

- 1. These are exceptional elections.** They are exceptional because the Turkish people will vote directly for their president for the first time, and because of the profiles of the two main candidates. The most likely winner is the current prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who sees these elections as the culmination of his political career. His main rival, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, is the consensus candidate of the two main opposition parties, the Kemalists of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). That both parties have managed to agree reflects the exceptional nature of these elections and of the political situation Turkey has been in for more than a year now.
- 2. The way Turkey is to be governed is at stake.** Until now, the prime minister has always set the political line of the country. The president's work has basically consisted of representative functions, though presidential power does extend to the appointment of senior state officials (including constitutional court magistrates, deans of universities, etc.), presiding over certain high level bodies, such as the National Security Council and the authority to return a law to parliament for revision before it is enacted. There are, however, so-called "latent competences". The current constitution (approved in 1982 after a coup d'état and amended on various occasions) allows the new president a larger political role than that taken on by his predecessors. It provides for the discretionary power to call and chair government meetings, something that Erdoğan has already announced that he will do, if elected. In these circumstances, the president will be less the referee of Turkish politics than the captain of the winning team.
- 3. The fairness and transparency of the elections.** In Turkey elections normally unfold in a normal fashion. Notwithstanding this, the accusations made by some of the media and opposition parties about the vote counting in some cities during the March 2014 municipal elections prejudiced the comprehen-

sive victory of the AKP. It is to be expected that Turkish authorities will do whatever possible to dispel any doubts about the propriety of the presidential election. Additionally, the OSCE is sending an electoral observation mission. Although it hardly seems likely, if doubts are again raised about the normality and transparency of these elections, then, taking into account the high level of political tension in the country, this could have a destabilising effect.

4. **The importance of the Kurdish vote.** The main opposition parties, the CHP and MHP, have big problems attracting votes in the provinces with mainly Kurdish populations. These voters tend to favour the Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Erdoğan, or the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the voice of Kurdish nationalism, supported in the rest of the country in a new format, the People's Democratic Party (HDP). The leader of this last group, Selahattin Demirtaş, is the third candidate on the ballot paper and in the case of a second round of voting, his followers would tip the balance. Whether that happens or not, the "Kurdish Question" has been placed at the centre of the agenda. In both a domestic setting—with the negotiations for a lasting peace with the PKK in progress—and at a regional level, with aspirations for further self-governance or even independence for the Kurdish government in northern Iraq.
5. **The climate of polarisation.** Turkey has been immersed, for more than a year, in a polarised, strained climate. The Gezi protests, the corruption scandals purportedly involving senior members of the AKP and their family members, the open war between the AKP and the Hizmet movement (led by Fethullah Gülen, a cleric who lives in the US) and, more recently, the controversy over the handling of the Soma mining incident have all contributed to making Turkish political life tense. Erdoğan is accused by his detractors of governing the country in an authoritarian manner and he defends himself by claiming to be the victim of a conspiracy. The presidential elections have become a plebiscite on the leadership of the incumbent prime minister. The Turkish people will be paying a great deal of attention to the tone of the next president's first speech, especially those who didn't vote for him. Will it be a speech of victory or of conciliation?
6. **The effects on the party system and the electoral calendar.** The move by the two main opposition parties to give their support to a single candidate and the profile of the person chosen has generated a certain level of reservation. Some members of the CHP think İhsanoğlu too conservative and too religious. If the gamble doesn't come off (while he does not need to win, he needs, at least, to lose respectably), it is probable that the critical voices in the party will grow louder. A crisis at the CHP could be to the advantage of the nationalist MHP, who were already strengthened at the local elections. Likewise, too slim a victory for Erdoğan could also revive tensions within the AKP. If, on the other hand, Erdoğan is elected president with significant support, his leadership of the party will be seen to be strengthened and he may even decide to bring the legislative elections planned for June 2015 forward.
7. **The international importance of the results.** Turkey has been in the news for months, and not always for pleasant reasons. The figure of Erdoğan generates controversy not only within Turkey but also outside a fact that he himself recognised at an *Iftar* (the meal that breaks the fast during Ramadan) put on by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to Erdoğan, if people detest him it is because he speaks uncomfortable truths about, for example, Israel. The result of these elections will be followed very closely by the countries that have difficult relations with Erdoğan, such as Israel and Egypt. In Iraq, especially in the Kurdish areas, they will also be paying great attention to the result. Turkey is, for the moment, one of the few allies of the Kurdish government of northern

Iraq, and their leader, Barzani, has made a show of this closeness to Erdoğan on various occasions. The relationship with the United States, by contrast, has gone cold. Nevertheless, whoever wins and however they win, Turkey and the USA know that they need each other. A further conundrum is whether these elections will have any effect on the difficult relations between Turkey and the EU. Neither side wants to bring about a crisis. But it is also true that the attitudes and arguments that may end up dominating in Turkey could erode the credibility of those of us who have defended a policy of engagement openness and strengthening of ties with this country.