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## **HOPE TRUMPS FEAR**

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The elections of July 22 were one of the most important in Turkey's political history. The result of the vote was arguably the victory of hope over fear, civilianization over military tutelage, and economic and political openness over introversion.

The victory of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma; AKP) was first and foremost a function of the country's successful economic performance during its first five-year term in office, in which the average growth rate stood at 7.3% percent. In addition, the inflation rate dropped dramatically as a result of economic and political stability. In more political terms, the AKP victory was the electorate's democratic response to the military intervention by "e-memorandum" on April 27 that was aided and abetted by the constitutional court and state elites. In that sense, the Turkish electorate remained true to its tradition of supporting the party that was most opposed by the military in the wake of military interventions in 1960, 1971 and 1980. Therefore, these elections strongly highlighted the democratic maturity of the Turkish electorate.

What these elections were not about was the choice between an Islamist Turkey and a secular modern one. Turkey has emphatically not backtracked to "the road not taken" and given up on its quest for modernization. After all, the diehard anti-Semitic Islamist Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi; SP), received only about 2 percent of the vote. But Turkey has embarked upon a modernization track very different than the one pursued up until now: the new direction is embedded in a cultural conservatism that seeks an appropriate synthesis between Islam, capitalism and liberal democracy.

The rate of participation in the elections was high (85 percent). Moreover, changes in the electoral law resulted in the incoming Parliament representing close to 90 percent of the voters, as opposed to the outgoing parliament, in which only 54 percent of the public was represented. The ruling AKP increased its share of the vote by over 12 percentage points. Most importantly, the AKP received almost uniform levels of

support from across the country, making it the only party whose support is not confined to a specific region or social class. Notably, its victory over Kurdish nationalists in many of Turkey's predominantly Kurdish provinces provide it with a mandate and an opportunity to launch a new democratic opening to deal with the Kurdish problem while fighting separatist terrorism.

The traditional center-right has been wiped out. The sclerotic Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi; CHP), the founding party of the Republic that allied itself with the military and waged a campaign based on fear over the fate of Turkish secularism, remained stagnant. The voters refused to support the CHP's project of maintaining a status quo that privileged non-elected officials over elected representatives and fostered xenophobia.

The rising tide of nationalism caused by both domestic and international factors brought the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi; MHP) back into Parliament. Yet the results also indicated that the alleged strength of the nationalist wave and accompanying poisonous nationalist discourse were blown out of proportion. Last but not least, a large contingent of independent candidates made it to the Parliament; 23 of these independents were supported by the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Turkey Parti (Demokratik Türkiye Partisi; DTP).

The agenda of the new government will be full. The need to reignite the spirit of EU integration, notwithstanding the obstructionism of some EU members, will be a major challenge. This will require a more aggressive push for political modernization and consolidation of the rule of law, something that the ruling AKP party, for all its democratizing claims, has lately put on the back burner.

The economic modernization program that the AKP faithfully implemented needs a major update as well, in order to address the micro-level problems of the economy. Finding ways to quell the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan; PKK) terrorism, whose cadres find refuge in northern Iraq, as well as managing relations with the authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan's Regional Government, are urgent matters. Prior to the elections, there was much speculation about an imminent Turkish invasion of northern Iraq. However, this was mostly hype. The AKP is not intent on a military operation, especially after having won overwhelming support from Turkey's Kurdish population. Yet in the absence of any progress on restraining the PKK, the pressure will be enormous on the government to do something.

A full-scale invasion by the Turkish military is not the only alternative. It is more likely that the government will want to exhaust all diplomatic options first. This, in turn, puts a heavy burden on Turkey's ally, the United States - the occupying power in Iraq, - to do something tangible in assisting Turkey's fight against PKK terrorism. In the July 30th *Washington Post*, Robert Novak reported that "high-level US officials are working with their Turkish counterparts on a joint military operation to suppress Kurdish guerillas and capture their leaders". Such a move would go a long way in reducing the anti-American sentiment in the country. Undoubtedly, it would also contribute to repairing the Turkish-American relationship, which is increasingly crucial for both parties.

The most immediate task of the new Parliament, though, is the election of the new President. Given the fact that this was the very issue that triggered the constitutional and systemic crisis that led to early elections, how it will be managed is of great importance.

About two months ago, a tête-à-tête took place between Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and the Chief of Staff, Yaşar Büyükanıt, that lasted for over two hours. It was widely assumed that the two protagonists came to an agreement on fundamental matters. Indeed, Erdoğan's magnanimous victory speech suggested that he would follow a conciliatory and consensus-seeking path.

Yet, in a surprise move, Abdullah Gül, the foreign minister, whose candidacy for the Presidency had been blocked by the military, made known his continued desire to be elected President. Undoubtedly, Gül put Erdoğan in a tight spot. He certainly deserves to be elected President, since few are more qualified than him for the post. The real objection to his ascent by the secularist forces stems from the fact that his wife wears a headscarf. At the moment, direct intervention by the military over this issue is not a strong possibility. But the symbolism of the headscarf is so potent that the political environment in the country will likely be tension-ridden if Gül is chosen to be the country's commander-in-chief. This may yet be another bridge that the country must cross.

Once the Presidential election is over, Turkey will face a formidable domestic and foreign policy agenda. Its relations with the US and the EU are on the rocks, and most Turks believe that their country is not being treated fairly by its allies. The AKP will, in all likelihood, return to the EU track and pick up the domestic reform movement where it left off. But the continuation of Turkey's EU orientation also depends on how the EU members treat it. If the current obstructionism of France's President Nicolas Sarkozy gains the upper hand, the task of moving these relations forward would be formidable.

Turkey is a unique country - one with a secular, democratic, capitalist order in a Muslim setting and institutionally part of the Western world. Therein lies its ultimate importance, beyond its geography.

The entire world turned its attention to the country's elections. The success of Turkish modernization through a Western-oriented democratic system will certainly have an effect in the Muslim world, as well as having major regional and global implications. One must hope that enough responsible people in the US and in the EU are also aware of the stakes invested in this success.

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