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## **Turkey Decides: Creeping Putinization?**

**Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak**

Turkey's upcoming parliamentary elections, to be held on Sunday June 12<sup>th</sup>, will be contested by no less than eighteen parties, as well as additional independent candidates. It will be one of the most important elections in Turkey's history, as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) seeks to further consolidate his hold on power after two terms in office.

Over the past nine years, Turkish voters have preferred AKP candidates for a variety of reasons. In 2002, they sought to overturn Turkey's long-standing political status quo, one dominated by the Kemalist military elite, following a period of economic crisis and political instability within the ruling coalition. In 2007, AKP voters sought to prevent the military's intervention in politics, which was construed as the minority's oppression of the majority. Recent polls indicate that Erdoğan and his party will win the next election handily as well, with 45.5 percent of the vote, while Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's secular opposition, Republican People's Party (CHP) would receive 30.5 percent, and the ultra-nationalist Devlet Bahçeli's Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) 13 percent, just above the minimum threshold of the 10 percent required for a party's attaining parliamentary representation. The Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) members are running as independent candidates so that they may avoid being shut out of parliament by the threshold requirement.

Underpinning Erdoğan's continued popularity has been the performance of the Turkish economy. According to Turkish government figures, Turkey now has the 17th largest economy in the world. The AKP supplied coal and cheap housing for

the country's poor, and provided educational support to underprivileged students. It also initiated the "Grand Tax Pardon" (November 2010), which enabled people to pay their taxes in installments, and have a portion of their debts forgiven. The Turkish public is also happy with government actions in the health sector: the percentage of people expressing their approval of state health services rose from 39 percent in 2003 to 73 percent in 2010.

In addition, Turkey's more assertive foreign policy, in the region and in international forums, is viewed favorably by the electorate. It dovetails with the public's support for Turkish military's (TSK) self-sufficiency in weaponry, i.e. non-dependence on Western powers. To that end, Erdoğan's election manifest also contains a respectable chapter emphasizing the TSK's latest home grown weapons projects.

Furthermore, the AKP has made headway on the contentious Kurdish question. Its Kurdish Initiative ("the National Unity and Brotherhood Project") has considerably broadened linguistic rights, the most fundamental of Kurdish demands. The Initiative lifted the ban on naming places in Kurdish, and granted permission to the TRT-6 TV channel to broadcast in Kurdish 24 hours a day. It also allowed for the establishment of Kurdish language and literature departments in universities. However freedom of education in one's mother tongue and other civil and political rights for the Kurdish community are still not guaranteed in the constitution, as Kurdish activists demand.

Indeed, the whole matter of a new constitution is perhaps the most important issue in the upcoming election. One AKP slogan is "Have your own constitution: vote AKP." If the ruling party—now in possession of 331 seats—wins 367 out of 550 seats (a 2/3 majority), it will be able to ratify a new constitution without requiring the support from any other party. Recent polls show that this is not outside the realm of possibility, particularly if the MHP—ten of whose senior members recently resigned in light of a sex tape scandal—ends up dropping below the minimum 10 percent threshold. Such a constitution might well include the establishment of a more powerful presidency, a post which Erdoğan would presumably seek for himself at the end of the term of the current president, Abdullah Gül

The Istanbul Canal is another controversial issue. The project was first presented in 1994 by the former Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit, and was recently embraced by Erdoğan as a major boost to the economy, including the job sector. The canal is to be constructed between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara in order to facilitate sea traffic. A new city will be built near the canal and an artificial island will be built in the Sea of Marmara. In order to undertake the project, Turkey must persuade Russia to waive the the 1936 Montreux Convention which governs the usage of the straits.

The CHP accuses the AKP of being unrealistic about the canal and instead is focusing on welfare issues. The CHP is initiating the Family Insurance Policy,

which promises to fix the minimal income of a needy family between 600-1250 Liras. According to one poll, 57 percent of Turks support this policy.

Additional matters in the election campaign concern Erdoğan's nuclear power aspirations and Turkey's policy of promoting self-sufficiency in weapons production. Turkish citizens will vote on whether or not to build the country's first nuclear power reactors. Notwithstanding the recent nuclear disaster in Japan, Erdoğan plans on building nuclear reactors in Akkuyu, Sinop and İğneada. CHP members argue against the Akkuyu reactor, as it sits in an earthquake prone region on the Ecemiş fault line.

Building upon his previous election victories Erdoğan managed to further strengthen his government's hegemonic position in the country through the September 12, 2010 referendum. The approval of major reforms in the workings of the Constitutional Court and the High Committee of the Judges and Prosecutors allow President Gül, who is loyal to Erdoğan, as well as other AKP-controlled government bodies, to nominate the majority of the judges and prosecutors. In essence, the AKP gained a complete monopoly on the country's three branches of government, rendering the principle of separation of powers increasingly devoid of meaning. Indeed, one might have suggest that day by day, Turkey is moving towards a more centralized, less plural, "Putinized" Turkey.

As a result, some Turkish columnists argue that the roles of the AKP and the Kemalist elite have been reversed. Now there is talk of "the AKP status quo." Some even speculate that a significant portion of the public will now vote against the AKP in order to protest against its oppresivve actions. These include the adoption of restrictions on the sale and public consumption of alcoholic beverages (since January 2011); an attempt to criminalize adultery; the filtering and tracing of Internet use (due to begin in August 2011); the destruction of some journalists' unpublished manuscripts; and the arrest and trial of prominent secular Kemalist journalists and military personnel due to alleged membership in the shadowy "Ergenekon" organization that was plotting to overthrow the government.

On June 12th, the votes cast by Turkey's citizens will have lasting impact regarding a variety of core issues, domestic and regional. The underlying question in the election is this: will the Turkish electorate move in the direction of establishing a system of checks and balances that will inhibit Erdoğan's further consolidation of power, or will they enable a further creeping "Putinization" in Turkish politics?

*Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School of History in Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. He is a junior research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.*

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