



National Security Program

Foreign Policy Project

Turkey's Local Elections:

Actors, Factors, and Implications

March 2014



BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER



National Security Program

Foreign Policy Project

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Turkey Task Force member Svante Cornell for his invaluable assistance in all phases of this report. We also thank BPC interns Jessica Atlas and Preston Feinberg for their contributions.

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Executive Summary

On March 30, 2014, Turks will vote in municipal elections amid an ongoing political conflict within the Islamic conservative movement between two former allies turned bitter foes. Though sharp divisions within Turkish society are hardly new, the fault line along which the current clash is being contested opened up only within the last three years. These elections, however, are unlikely to speed its resolution.

As recently as five years ago, the main division animating Turkish politics appeared to be the one between the secular, nationalist Kemalist establishment and the Islamic conservative movement. In this battle, the Western consensus was that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) represented a democratic force pitted against the authoritarian remnants of the old, Kemalist order. Opening Turkish society to the freer practice of Islam, the AKP argued and international observers believed, was a gateway to a more vibrant civil society and pluralistic polity.

The 2010 constitutional referendum—which, among other things, revoked protections from prosecution that military coup leaders had previously enjoyed—marked the defeat of the old secularist order. Turkish liberals, and their Western supporters, now hoped that the AKP would fulfill its promises and begin rapidly strengthening Turkey’s democratic institutions and rule of law. But it was not to be. To the contrary, over the last three years Turkish democracy has deteriorated rapidly, and a new political fault line has opened up. This rift, however, is within the Islamic conservative camp.

Erdoğan’s determination to build a system of one-man rule, with himself at the center, and remove any competition, including his former allies, is the proximate cause of this new dividing line in Turkish politics. Ahead of the June 2011 parliamentary elections, Erdoğan purged his party of candidates who were not entirely loyal to him personally. He removed many allies who had previously represented the AKP in parliament, particularly supporters of President Abdullah Gül, once a close confidant and ally, and the Fethullah Gülen movement, a large, Islamic conservative social movement that had been closely allied with Erdoğan since 2002.

The AKP’s victory in those elections, with its largest vote tally ever, was the apogee of Erdoğan’s political trajectory. It also appears to have set in motion his undoing. Those on whose backs he has stepped to ascend to his current position, cut off from power and influence, have now become Erdoğan’s fiercest enemies. The incompatibility of their ambitions set the stage for the conflicts between Erdoğan and Gül, and between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement, unraveling their governing coalition.

It is this new pattern of conflict that will define the election season that has just begun in Turkey—with local elections scheduled at the end of March 2014, followed by presidential elections six months later, and a parliamentary election the next year. Indeed, Turkish politics are consumed by an open war between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement. The prime minister is furiously asserting his control over the state and trying to stamp out Gülenist opposition, which has instigated corruption investigations against him and his government. Erdoğan has termed the movement a “parallel outfit” and a “gang,” blaming it for being a tool at the hands of Turkey’s foreign enemies, especially the United States and Israel. Returning the favor, the Gülen movement has decried Erdoğan as an illegitimate and corrupt dictator, going out of its way to publish evidence of alleged wrongdoing by Erdoğan, his family, and his closest allies. President Gül, meanwhile, has sought, futilely, to remain on the sidelines of this conflict. His strategy of playing both sides—approving laws allowing Erdoğan’s subversion of Turkey’s democracy while protesting his most blatant excesses—appears to have harmed his image, at least in the short term.

The conflict between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement is thus the main fault line of Turkish politics, one that all other political actors must adapt to. Thus, unholy alliances have emerged—with the Kurdish nationalist movement and the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) supporting Erdoğan; and the secularist main opposition People’s Republican Party (CHP) indirectly making common cause with the Gülenists.

The March 30 local elections will be Turkish voters’ first opportunity to respond to this political turbulence. But their usefulness as an indicator of the direction of Turkey’s politics should not be exaggerated. Although Erdoğan is trying to make the election a referendum on his government, he is not on the ballot. These elections are local contests in which major upheavals should not be expected. Indeed, the elections will prove significant only if the AKP were to lose badly.

Three factors in particular will deserve attention: the general percentage of votes received by the major parties and the outcome of both the mayoral races in Ankara and Istanbul. There is no question that the AKP will come in first among the parties running. Given its advantages of incumbency and control over the mainstream media, no party rivals the AKP’s position. The two rough numbers worth watching are whether the AKP’s share of all votes cast falls below 40 percent and whether the main opposition CHP manages to surpass 30 percent. If that happens, the elections would constitute a major upset, showing the AKP to be weaker than expected. On the other hand, the AKP would exceed expectations if its total vote tally comes close to the 49 percent it received in the 2011 parliamentary elections.

The mayoral races are also of important symbolical value. The CHP has selected centrist candidates in both cities. In Ankara, the CHP has a good chance of winning and removing an AKP mayor in power since 1994. In Istanbul, however, the electoral math is different. The well-regarded incumbent AKP mayor will be hard to unseat. Again, losing both cities would be a major upset to the AKP.

If the results do exceed expectations, one way or the other, they could play a significant role in determining Prime Minister Erdoğan's future. A very strong election result might lead him to once again seek to remake Turkey into a super-presidential republic, but this is unlikely to succeed. And a very poor showing might accelerate Erdoğan's decline and departure from politics, but that is also unlikely.

More likely, however, is that the elections will simply keep Turkey on its current trajectory. They are unlikely to convince Erdoğan to lower his ambitions or temper his tactics. He will likely continue on the path he already seems to have chosen, trying to remain prime minister by scrapping internal party rules and seeking a fourth term in the next parliamentary elections. And—whether because he interprets the electoral result as a mandate for his political visions or a threat to his ambitions, or both—Erdoğan is unlikely to back down from his conflict with Gül and the Gülen movement. In fact, a crackdown on the Gülen movement is widely expected following the elections; it remains to be seen how harsh and sweeping it will be.

Thus, there is no indication that the dynamics that have driven Turkey's politics in the past three years will change anytime soon. Erdoğan may still be unmatched as a leader of the conservative movement and a fierce campaigner. But his aura of invincibility, and his very legitimacy, have been severely shaken. His pursuit of absolute power by absolutist means, however successful in the short term, is convincing increasing numbers within the Islamic conservative movement, which brought him to power, that he is a liability, rather than an asset.

In addition, Erdoğan's authoritarianism is driving large numbers of Turks to come together in massive street protests, which have not been common in Turkey. Such pent-up frustration first exploded in the summer of 2013, but as the giant demonstrations in March 2014 indicated, it is becoming the new normal, and could further damage Erdoğan's legitimacy.

There is no reason to believe that Erdoğan will be able to reverse this trend. In fact, his only way of maintaining power is to continue to tighten control over the system, embarking on an outright repressive and authoritarian model of governance that, in turn, will be certain to alienate more Turks, international markets, and Western powers. His attempt to survive will prove his demise. The major questions will be how long this takes and how much damage the current political conflict does to Turkey's democracy, economy, and international standing before Erdoğan goes.

Far from greater stability, therefore, Turkey is entering a period of unrest and instability, one that is certain to see major upheavals before the country can stabilize. On its current trajectory, so consumed by its internal struggle that it can hardly focus its energies on a constructive foreign policy, Turkey is unlikely to be a strong ally for the United States. To craft an appropriate response to this worrisome situation, American policymakers should understand the upcoming election season, the political actors involved, and the key factors driving Turkish politics.

Background

As recently as five years ago, the main division animating Turkish politics appeared to be the one between the secular, nationalist Kemalist establishment and the Islamic conservative movement. For many decades, as the military repeatedly intervened in politics, Turkey's democratic progress was interrupted in the name of preserving its secular, liberal order. This struggle continued after the Islamic-rooted AKP came to power in 2002, but with the roles reversed. Thus, it was still along the secular-Islamist fault line that the 2007 presidential election was fought. And in the following years, the flashpoints in Turkish politics included the debate over the Islamic headscarf, the efforts by secularist prosecutors to ban the ruling AKP from politics, and the alleged attempts by secularists in the military and in society to plot coups against the AKP government.

In this battle, the Western consensus was that Prime Minister Erdoğan and the AKP represented a democratic force pitted against the authoritarian remnants of the old, Kemalist order. Opening Turkish society to the freer practice of Islam, the AKP argued and international observers believed, was a gateway to a more vibrant civil society and pluralistic polity. Even those who questioned the AKP's tactics—such as Erdoğan's confrontational tone, concentration of power, or abuses of justice in prosecuting alleged coup-plotters—often saw this as a necessary evil in the battle to rid Turkey of what was known as “military tutelage.”

This particular conflict came to an end with the 2010 constitutional referendum. The AKP had already survived attempts to close it down and succeeded in imprisoning hundreds of alleged coup-plotters. The popular endorsement of Erdoğan's amendments—58 percent of Turks voted in favor of the changes that, among other things, revoked protections from prosecution that military coup leaders had previously enjoyed—marked the defeat of the old secularist order. Turkish liberals, and their Western supporters, now hoped that the AKP would fulfill its promises and begin rapidly strengthening Turkey's democratic institutions and rule of law. But it was not to be. Quite to the contrary, over the last three years Turkish democracy has deteriorated rapidly and a new political fault line has opened up. This rift, however, is within the Islamic conservative camp.

Erdoğan's determination to build a system of one-man rule, with himself at the center, and remove any competition, including his former allies, is the proximate cause of this new dividing line in Turkish politics. As soon as the 2010 referendum had been won, Erdoğan's actions were geared toward this goal. His plan was two-fold: first, create, via new constitutional amendments, a super-presidential system of government in Turkey, one devoid of the checks and balances that, as Erdoğan put it, reduced the “effectiveness” of government; second, accede to the newly-empowered post of president himself. The plan's success, however, required total control over the party.

Therefore, ahead of the June 2011 parliamentary elections, Erdoğan purged his party of candidates who were not entirely loyal to him personally. He removed many allies who had previously represented the AKP in parliament, particularly supporters of President Abdullah Gül, once a close confidant and ally, and the Fethullah Gülen movement, a faith-based group that had been closely allied with Erdoğan since 2002. The AKP's victory in those elections, with its largest vote tally ever, was the apogee of Erdoğan's political trajectory. It also appears to have set in motion his undoing.

With an apparent popular mandate and a free hand, Erdoğan began his march toward complete domination of Turkish politics and society. He eschewed sharing the spoils of victory with the political partners who had helped him rise and, in order to further concentrate power for himself, continued jettisoning former allies. This increasingly naked demonstration of Erdoğan's authoritarian ambitions set in motion a vicious cycle. It alienated his jilted colleagues, disillusioned the liberal intelligentsia that once advocated for him, and sparked public opposition to his agenda. The more friction his moves generated, the harder Erdoğan pushed forward with his objective, engendering ever greater dissent. Former allies who helped Erdoğan ascend to his current position—who are now cut off from power and influence—have now become Erdoğan's fiercest enemies. The incompatibility of their ambitions set the stage for the conflicts between Erdoğan and Gül, and between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement, unraveling their governing coalition.

The tale of the past two years in Turkish politics is how ideological and political allies that had fought the secular Kemalist establishment together suddenly found themselves on opposite sides of the political battlefield. How did this happen? To begin with, the movements were always distinct. Erdoğan and the core of the AKP are products of the *Milli Görüş* movement, which has its roots in the orthodox Nakshibendi order and was strongly inspired by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result of these influences, the AKP—like the Turkish Islamist political parties out of whose ashes it arose and whose direct descendant it is—espouses a traditional political form of Islam, emphasizes the religious bond of Islam over Turkish ethnicity, and is informed by anti-Western and anti-Semitic instincts.

The Gülen community has very different origins: it finds its roots in the *Nur* movement, which traditionally opposed involvement in politics, seeking instead to merge Islam with modernity, science, and Turkish nationalism. Thus, Gülenists have traditionally focused on secular education and social affairs. Indeed, the movement refers to itself as "civil Islam," in conscious distinction to political Islam; and seeks to fuse Islam with Turkish nationalism. Importantly, before 2002, it never supported the Islamist parties in Turkish politics, preferring instead the secular center-right parties. It has positive views of the United States, and less overt strains of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. But while the movement stayed away from electoral politics, its members gradually began entering and establishing their influence in the state bureaucracy, particularly in the police and judiciary.

Entering into the 2002 elections, a tactical alliance formed between these two parts of the Islamic conservative movement. The strengths of each complemented the weaknesses of

the other. The core AKP lacked an educated workforce who could man the bureaucracy; the Gülen movement did not have the political apparatus to gain power in an electoral system. And thus, using Marx's terms, the Gülen movement in a sense formed the infrastructure to the AKP's political superstructure. This alliance was further tightened in 2007 by the common perception of an existential threat coming from the remnants of the Kemalist elite.

But by 2011, Erdoğan's ambitions set the scene for a developing battle within the Islamic conservative movement. Erdoğan had already spent the prior two years undermining his erstwhile close confidant, President Gül, in order to prevent him from being able to seek re-election, a post that Erdoğan coveted for himself. But the Gülenists, seeing Erdoğan as a growing threat to their position, rallied behind Gül as a potential check on the prime minister's power. President Gül is not a member of the Gülen movement, though he has maintained good relations with it. Realizing that they both stood to lose from Erdoğan's expansion of his powers, the Gülen movement and Gül joined together to rein in his ambitions.

Thanks to the Gülenist presence in the judiciary, the Constitutional Court in mid-2012 overturned a law sponsored by Erdoğan that would have barred the incumbent from seeking a second term as president. By the time Gül was reelected, the first direct confrontation in the Erdoğan-Gülenist war had occurred: a prosecutor assumed to be affiliated with the Gülen movement in February 2012 sought to detain Hakan Fidan, one of Erdoğan's closest allies and head of the National Intelligence Organization, over his role in peace talks with the outlawed PKK.

But it was not until June 2013 that this rift widened to the point of exploding into public view. Public protests against Erdoğan's rule began in Istanbul's Gezi Park, eventually growing in size and spreading across the country. The Gülenist media, already disenchanted with the prime minister, were the only mass circulation outlets to provide extensive and critical coverage of Erdoğan's repressive handling of the crisis. And in November 2013, it emerged that Erdoğan planned, perhaps in retaliation, to close down the preparatory schools for the centralized university entrance exam, many of which are run by the Gülen movement and are one of its major sources of recruits. The Gülenists interpreted this move as a declaration of open war, with the aim of destroying the movement. Barely a month later, on December 17, more than 50 people with close ties to Erdoğan and the AKP—including the sons of government ministers—were arrested in a large corruption probe against the government in which the movement is thought to have played a critical role.

The coming year—but not necessarily the March 30 local elections—will largely determine the outcome of this new conflict and, mainly, the fate of Prime Minister Erdoğan. Far from greater stability, Turkey is entering a period of unrest and instability, one that is certain to see major upheavals before the country can stabilize. Understanding how the upcoming election season, especially the local contests, will impact this process requires examining both the political actors involved and the key factors driving Turkish politics.

Turkey's Main Political Actors

Although the conflict between Prime Minister Erdoğan and the Gülen movement has taken center stage in these elections, these two are not the only political actors in Turkey. President Gül, the AK Party, the opposition CHP, and the Kurdish movement are also hoping to capitalize on the current turmoil in these elections. Thus, to understand Turkey's political prospects over the next two years, a closer look at the main political forces and their respective goals and capacities is in order.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Prime Minister Erdoğan's main motivation is clearly to remain in power, first and foremost, and amass more power, if at all possible. He continues to harbor the ambition to be the sole and unchallenged ruler of Turkey, in order to further the AKP's ideological aims; but now, this urge is motivated not simply by ambition, but by fear of the consequences of losing power. He is desperate to avoid being prosecuted for the multitude of alleged wrongdoings that his opponents have unearthed since December 17.

Erdoğan's key asset is his control over the practical levers of executive and legislative power. As he has shown during the recent crisis, he is able and willing to respond with force to his opponents' attacks against him. From firing or reassigning thousands of police officers to taking control of the judiciary, Erdoğan has doubled down on an aggressive strategy of rooting out his opponents and stifling dissent. But therein lies also his chief weakness, too. He is maintaining his power at the cost of dismantling much of the facade on which he built it: as a forward-looking, democratic leader. He has lost most of his international legitimacy, and even though he maintains a devoted base of followers, he has clearly lost the aura of an invincible leader that he commanded domestically only a year ago. His approval ratings are at their lowest ever, having dropped 15 points in the last year to 43 percent.¹ To stay in power, Erdoğan is increasingly appearing to borrow from the playbook of the world's other autocrats. Whether Turkish society is going to tolerate this type of leader, and, thus, whether Erdoğan will prove to be more of a Vladimir Putin or more of a Viktor Yanukovich, is the main question in the coming years.

President Abdullah Gül

President Abdullah Gül is the country's second-strongest political force, by virtue of his position. While Turkey's president is often termed "ceremonial," that term is erroneous. The president in Turkey has important influence primarily because he must approve personnel

appointments in the cabinet and civil service. He also wields veto power, although parliament can overturn it by simply passing legislation again.

During his time in office, Gül has cultivated a decisively different profile than Erdoğan, appearing the man of caution and diplomacy, supporting internal reform and EU integration. His primary motivation is to remain president, and in all likelihood to succeed Erdoğan as the leader of the Islamic conservative movement should Erdoğan be removed or resign. But the recent crisis has been most unwelcome for him, because it has pushed his image of caution to the limits and confronted him with difficult decisions.

While he has sought to act as a brake on Erdoğan's rash and authoritarian actions, he has also gone to great lengths to prevent open conflict with the Prime Minister. As Erdoğan has pushed several clearly undemocratic bills through parliament, Gül was confronted with a difficult choice. Vetoing these bills would have burnished his image as a softer, kinder alternative to Erdoğan. But it would have also been a decisive break with Erdoğan, leading him to be seen as fully siding with the Gülen movement, which might hurt his future prospects to take over the AKP; and it might ultimately have been futile, since parliament could just override his veto. Thus, Gül has repeatedly sought instead to stake out a middle ground by signing the laws put before him, but only after softening some of their provisions. The danger in this strategy for Gül is that rather than appearing wise and cautious, he is increasingly appearing weak, as well as a leader whose ostensible moderation is rhetorical at best.

The Justice and Development Party

It is questionable to what degree the AKP, as a party, has an identity apart from that of its leader. But while its parliamentary group was handpicked by Erdoğan, it is possible to discern a somewhat different AKP identity. At the outset, the AKP was an alliance of Islamists, conservatives, nationalists and liberals, who came together largely as a result of their common interest in confronting the military tutelage regime. But under Erdoğan, the Islamist and authoritarian drift has alienated key constituencies from this original coalition. Senior figures within the AKP – such as Deputy Prime Ministers Ali Babacan and Bülent Arınç – have clearly tried to establish a certain distance to Erdoğan's rashness, authoritarianism, and Islamism.

This has not been enough to threaten an open split within the party. Nevertheless, the defections from the party have grown—at last count 10 members of parliament have left the AKP—as Erdoğan is increasingly seen as a liability rather than an asset to the party and the movement. This means that the cohesion of the AKP can no longer be taken for granted; and that the party's loyalty to Erdoğan should not be assumed to be iron-clad either. The politicians forming the AKP are, more than anything, motivated by continuing to hold power. Given the current political turmoil, the party might be approaching a tipping point, in which Erdoğan is seen as threatening the very edifice on which their power is built.

Erdoğan's authoritarian and Islamist drift has also created a political vacuum in the center-right, which is waiting to be filled. The self-destruction of the Turkish center-right, which had been the umbrella party capable of uniting diverse elements ranging from liberals to Islamists, created a vacuum in Turkish politics in the late 1990s. The great success of the AKP was in building a grand coalition to fill that vacuum, something it accomplished thanks in great part to its official rejection of Islamism. Thus, with Erdoğan's embrace of the Islamism that defined the AKP's predecessors, and banished them to Turkey's political fringe, many who had been convinced to vote for the party are feeling increasingly uncomfortable. Only the absence of the credible alternative in the center-right is keeping the AKP together.

The Fethullah Gülen Movement

The Fethullah Gülen movement is not, strictly speaking, a political force. It neither seeks power per se, nor fields candidates in elections; it is not a political party. But it is certainly one of the most important forces in Turkish politics.

The movement's goals are difficult to ascertain given its opacity. It overtly states only a commitment to democracy and freedom and defends its criticism of Erdoğan with the correct observation that the prime minister has become increasingly authoritarian. But the movement has proven itself comfortable with equally authoritarian practices in the past. Indeed, it strongly supported, and appears to have taken a leading role in, onslaughts against its secular and Kurdish nationalist opponents in 2008 to 2010. This, in turn, lends credence to the notion that the movement is motivated not by ideological opposition to Erdoğan or AKP Islamism, but to a great extent by opposition to Erdoğan's attempts to dominate the Turkish state and, in the process, remove the movement's representatives from their positions of influence in key political institutions. In other words, the movement is motivated by Erdoğan's authoritarianism insofar as the movement itself is being targeted. Thus, it seems safe to assume that a fundamental goal of the movement is to continue wielding indirect influence over Turkish politics and society through continued positions of influence in the state bureaucracy.

That influence is at great risk of being reduced, at least in the short term, by Erdoğan's onslaught. In early March, it became increasingly clear that the government was preparing a major purge of Gülenists across the civil service, this time seeking ways not only to rotate but to fire Gülen supporters. It remains to be seen whether this purge will include the arrest and detention of Gülenists, as some pro-government voices are agitating for, or action against the Gülenist media outlets.

In the long term, however, the Gülen movement will benefit from its global nature, which may help it absorb and survive a body blow to its position in Turkey. What seems clear is that the Gülen movement, too, has suffered serious damage from the confrontation with Erdoğan.

The Republican People's Party

The main opposition Republican People's Party largely represents Turkey's urban, Western secular communities. As a result, it has traditionally been unable to attract more than a quarter of the votes or so. Party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, selected in 2010, has tried to pull the party away from dogmatic Kemalism, minimized the importance paid to secularism, and sought to reinvigorate the party's social democratic legacy, which all could conceivably enable it to appeal to a wider audience – not least many of the AKP's disillusioned voters. So far, this remains a work in progress, because the CHP is widely discredited among the conservative masses, due to its historic connection to the military tutelage regime that long repressed Turkish Islamism. Opinion polls show the CHP is indeed gaining some support, but unlikely to be able to rival the AKP at this point. Similarly, the other opposition party, the Nationalist Movement Party, is likely to be able to siphon some voters off the AKP, but its unreformed leadership makes it even less appealing to voters.

Kurdish Nationalists

Finally, the Kurdish nationalist movement is a key political actor in Turkey. Kurds form up to a fifth of Turkey's population, and are heavily concentrated in the southeast of the country, where they dominate. Currently, they are rallied behind Prime Minister Erdoğan in the confrontation with the Gülen movement. In 2009, the AKP government started a peace process with the PKK which has gone further than any earlier attempt to resolve the conflict as well as the broader Kurdish question in Turkey. The prospect of achieving their political demands and freeing their imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, will prove incentive enough to keep most Kurdish nationalist in Erdoğan's column. Indeed, opposition to peace talks was among the triggers of the Gülen-AKP confrontation. The Kurds view the Gülen movement as a strongly Turkish nationalist entity, thus preferring Erdoğan in spite of their apprehensions of his authoritarianism.

Thus, the Kurdish vote will play very differently in different elections. Where a Kurdish nationalist candidate has a chance of being elected – either in mayoral races in the southeast, or as independent candidates for parliament – the Kurdish nationalist vote will go to the Kurdish nationalist candidate. But where such candidates do not exist or cannot win, such as in Turkish cities where Kurds form minorities, the vote is likely to go to the AKP. Finally, in presidential elections, the Kurdish vote will benefit the AKP candidate if the opponent is viewed as a Turkish nationalist. But it should be noted that the Kurdish nationalist community in the southeast of Turkey is increasingly dissociated from Turkish politics. Increasingly, these Kurds are focused on their local affairs, and building de facto self-government on the ground, Ankara be damned.

Key Factors Driving Turkish Politics

The outcome of Turkey's election cycle is likely to be dependent on a series of factors. Chief among these are the corruption probes against the government and the state of the country's economy. Other key elements will be whether the military is able to reassert a role in politics, and what the stance of the West will be.

Corruption Probes

The central question for Turkish politics is what impact the corruption allegations involving Prime Minister Erdoğan will have on his party's electoral fortunes. The allegations against Erdoğan are, after all, serious: after using excessive force against protesters last summer, government ministers and other close associates of the Prime Minister have been found to launder Iranian money, stash millions of dollars in cash in their houses, and to illegally alter zoning laws to benefit the party, among other possible crimes. The prime minister himself has been credibly accused of collusion with a Saudi terrorist financier, Yasin Al Qadi; of interfering directly with media outlets, demanding the removal of news he disagrees with; and, most recently, of conspiring with his son and other family members to hide tens of millions of dollars in cash once the corruption probe started.

Public opinion polls, moreover, show that the public generally believes these allegations are true. Erdoğan has a die-hard following of about 25 to 28 percent of the population, who appear to believe that he is right no matter what he does, that he is the subject of a conspiracy, and that the allegations are a coup attempt. But, 60 percent or more agree that the graft inquiries are justified and that the corruption allegations are true. Similar numbers, close to 60 percent, agree that the government is engaged in a cover-up, obstructing the inquiries, and preventing the press from reporting on the developments.² This has led to considerable drop in Erdoğan's approval ratings. In late January, 39.4 percent of Turks approved of Erdoğan, down from 48 percent in December 2013, and almost 60 percent in 2012.³

At the same time, the AKP's electoral fortunes are not falling like a stone, as one might expect. Polls in Turkey are notoriously unreliable, with polls commissioned by pro-government papers showing much higher figures for the AKP than those appearing in Gülenist publications. Nevertheless, the support for the AKP in February polls ranged from 37 to 45 percent. This is certainly a drop compared with the 49.9 percent it received in the parliamentary elections of 2011; but not compared with its share in the 2009 local elections, which was 38 percent.

Thus, the corruption probe does not appear to have significantly dented the AKP's electoral fortunes so far. Yet it is useful to recall several factors. First, polls show that many Turks also believe that the timing of the release of these allegations is political and that the Gülen movement has established a "parallel state" within the state. They may not be pleased with the prime minister's actions, but they are also wary that the corruption probe is a political ploy.

Second, it is not clear that the Gülen movement is trying to destroy the AKP as a party. Quite to the contrary, it seeks to focus its energies with increasing precision on taking down Erdoğan personally. This has been clear since December 17, when prosecutors went after ministers close to Erdoğan, followed by a series of recordings released involving Erdoğan and his immediate family. Yet Erdoğan is not on the ballot in the March elections; thus, while the Gülenists are unlikely to vote for the AKP in the local elections, their ambition is rather to slowly but surely chip away at Erdoğan's public legitimacy ahead of the later presidential and parliamentary contests, in order to force his removal from the political scene. The dilemma, of course, is that an AKP victory in the local elections would embolden and strengthen Erdoğan.

Thus, the release of damaging and incriminating evidence implicating Erdoğan is likely to continue well beyond the March 30 local elections and in all likelihood increase as the presidential elections near. And thus, even if the AKP does well in the local elections, this should not be taken as evidence that Erdoğan is safe. On the contrary, the methodic effort to take him down will, in all likelihood, continue and perhaps gather steam. And in the longer term, there is no question that a constant stream of evidence reminding the population of the corruption and authoritarianism at the top of the state will wear down Erdoğan's standing in society, the cohesiveness of his coalition, and thus his ability to lead the country.

The corruption probes have, in sum, put Erdoğan on the defensive. Where his earlier authoritarian steps were designed to extend his power, they are now designed to prevent him from losing power. Given this reality, he can only remain in power by adopting increasingly repressive and authoritarian means designed to stifle opposition and prevent incriminating evidence from reaching the public. The legislation adopted thus far points in this direction; yet the mission will remain incomplete as long as the Gülen community's media outlets and public organizations, let alone their presence in the state bureaucracy, remains. The question, thus, is whether Erdoğan will escalate the conflict further by seeking to close down the community's media outlets, or even to jail large numbers of Gülenists.

A Deteriorating Economy

The importance of Turkey's economy in this electoral season cannot be overstated, because it is economic growth and the AKP's management of the economy that has ensured its success over the past decade. It is the contrast between the economic chaos and weak coalition governments of the 1990s and the prosperity and improved social services of the 2000s that has been Erdoğan's main asset.

Electoral, many fear that the alternative to the AKP would be a return to a weak coalition lacking the capacity to govern the country, and the economic crises that attended such governments: this has led numerous centrist voters to hold their noses and vote for the AKP. A similar calculation colors public reaction to the corruption charges. If the AKP is corrupt but people's lives are improving, people may be willing to tolerate the transgressions at the top – after all, which of Turkey's governments has not been corrupt? But if, by contrast, the country would suffer a tangible economic downturn, then the corruption allegations are much more likely to have political implications.

While an economic crisis has not occurred, the state of Turkey's economy is fragile. This is related in part to Turkey's political turmoil, but also to a global trend of weak emerging economies. These economies had all lived well from the rock-bottom interest rates resulting from the Federal Reserve's Quantitative Easing program, which pushed investors to seek out gains beyond the depressed markets of developed countries. As a result of this easy money, many emerging economies put off internal reforms, developing growing vulnerabilities. Turkey, for example, suffers from a chronically high current account deficit and a preponderance of short-term capital flows.

In November 2013, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) released a report warning in unusually blunt language that failure to address Turkey's economic imbalances could lead to "systemic distress." The report's tone was clearly colored by the Turkish government's decision to ignore the IMF's long-standing recommendations to tighten monetary policy, address the current account deficit, and rein in credit growth the IMF termed "excessive."⁴ Significantly, the IMF called Turkey's economic path "unsustainable."⁵ Furthermore, analysts have observed that Turkey's economic boom may have come to an end. Because the country's growth has not been invested in education, the 2013 Human Development Index shows that Turkey's average 25-year old has 6.5 years of education. Furthermore, as the Turkey-based journalist Piotr Zalewski observes, the labor participation rate of women is 29 percent, half the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average. Clearly, without serious structural reforms in education and promotion of women's participation in the workforce, Turkey will be unable to take the leap to a modern, post-industrial economy.⁶ As a result, Turkey, like other fragile, emerging markets, is particularly susceptible to capital flight once investors can find sufficient returns in more stable markets. The mere mention by then-Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke in May 2013 that the Fed would begin "tapering" the bond-buying program led to rapid capital outflows in, among other nations, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.⁷

However, the political risk created by the combination of the Gezi Park protests and the corruption probe, on top of all these structural weaknesses, has proved too much for Turkey's economy. During the second half of 2013, no country saw a larger decline in stock market value than Turkey's, which lost close to 30 percent of its value. And the Turkish lira slipped dangerously following the revelation of the allegations, losing almost 16 percent against the dollar in just six weeks.

Erdoğan's actions have certainly not bolstered Turkey's economy. His decision to blame the "interest lobby" for the protests had a decidedly negative effect on investor confidence. He also long opposed, partly for ideological reasons, raising interest rates. Turkey's Central Bank, however, eventually felt forced to act. It raised the overnight funding rate from 7.75 to 12 percent, a move dubbed as "drastic" by commentators.⁸ This temporarily stabilized the exchange rate. But in a vulnerability index released by the Federal Reserve in early February 2014, Turkey is ranked as the most vulnerable economy of all, just ahead of Brazil.⁹ Not two weeks later, the IMF once again singled out Turkey, alongside India, as the two countries needing to tighten monetary policy.¹⁰

If the domestic situation in Turkey worsens, with additional corruption allegations and repressive responses from the government, capital markets are likely to take notice, and serious capital flight could occur. Whether this translates into a full-blown economic crisis will largely depend on the health of the global economy. And while Turkish household debt is on paper among the lowest in the OECD, this is largely because Turkish low- and middle-income families borrow not for real estate, but for credit card and consumer goods credits.¹¹ Thus, an economic downturn could rapidly hit the pocketbooks of Erdoğan's core supporters, let alone reluctant AKP voters. Indeed, an economic crisis would be the most likely trigger for Erdoğan's downfall, as it might lead AKP politicians to desert him in droves. And given that Erdoğan's rhetoric and policies are becoming increasingly threatening to investors at a time when Turkey is less attractive as a destination, Erdoğan is clearly playing with fire.

The Wildcard: Is Turkey's Military Making a Return?

Erdoğan's power grab was made possible first and foremost by the weakening of Turkey's military, which has traditionally taken it upon itself to interfere in domestic politics. For many years this generated what many Turks call a "regime of military tutelage," in which politicians always knew that the top brass of the military had the last word on important developments. And indeed, as noted above, Erdoğan enlisted Gülen's supporters in the police and judiciary to take the lead in destroying this tutelage regime.

In light of this history, it seemed unthinkable that Erdoğan would ever make common cause with the military. But following the December 17 corruption probe, that is exactly what he did, seeking a tacit and tactical alliance with the military leadership. Already on December 20, five high-profile generals detained since April 2012 in the ongoing trial over the 1997 military intervention, were summarily released. Four days later, in his column in the pro-government *Star* newspaper, Erdoğan's chief advisor implied that the Gülen community had framed the military officers now incarcerated.¹² This remarkable statement drew disbelief among AKP leaders and Turkey watchers. Of course, this assertion was factually correct; it has been clearly demonstrated by scholars that the trials against former and serving officers in many cases rested on both absurdities and blatantly manipulated evidence.¹³ What was maddening about the statement was its cynicism: Erdoğan had once called himself the "prosecutor" of the Ergenekon trial, and had been briefed personally on a weekly basis by prosecutor Zekeriya Öz, who was now involved in the corruption probes against the

government. Indeed, if the officers had been framed, Erdoğan and his governments were in no way bystanders to an independent judiciary – they were equally guilty of the crime.

On January 1, the General Staff issued a press release decrying the abuses of the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials, and demanded retrials.¹⁴ Opposition parties joined these demands. To remove any doubts, as well as to stifle the protests within the AKP leadership (including from Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç), the prime minister himself weighed in on January 6, making clear he supported retrials for the incarcerated officers.¹⁵ Chief of Staff General Necdet Özel then went into overdrive, raising the issue in the National Security Council, as well as in conversations with the Prime Minister, President Gül, and Constitutional Court Chairman Haşim Kılıç. On March 7, former Chief of Staff Ilker Başbuğ—serving a life sentence on coup plotting accusations—was released, and it is likely that many if not most of the incarcerated officers will follow. In other words, the military is now back in politics, issuing press releases after a long period of silence, being invited back to the table by the same prime minister who once sent it back to its barracks.

Erdoğan's gamble smells of desperation: faced with a challenge from the Gülenists with their base in the judiciary and police, he appears to have calculated that he needed to enlist the military on his side in the struggle. Moreover, seeing on the horizon a possible tactical alliance between the Gülenists and the CHP, what better step to take than to release those secularists who hate the Gülen movement more than anything?

While the move may yield short-term benefits for Erdoğan, it is a highly risky move in the long term. The composition of the military has changed considerably in the past decade, primarily because the previously ubiquitous practice of discharging officers suspected of membership in religious groups was discontinued following the AKP's re-election in 2007. It is generally believed that this has accelerated efforts by Gülen supporters to establish an influence within various sectors of the armed forces. Indeed, the leaks of military information that made the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials possible could not have taken place without such infiltration. As a result, two forces appear to be vying for influence within the military: the secularist old guard, the more moderate representatives of which are now in charge; and Gülen sympathizers, who are believed to possess growing power in the middle ranks, from majors up to colonels. On January 6, pro-government *Sabah* daily's Abdurrahman Şimşek stated that 10 percent of colonels and up to 40 percent of majors were affiliated with the movement. Given Şimşek's alleged ties to the National Intelligence Organization, these figures should be taken with a grain of salt – but they are comparable to estimates made privately by other analysts. What is glaring is the absence of core Erdoğan supporters in the military and his inability to change that fact given the hierarchic system of the military.

The key point is that while the two forces vying for influence in the military have no love lost for each other, neither do they have any affection for Erdoğan. Will the common fear of the Gülenists be enough to ensure the military leadership's loyalty to Erdoğan? And, recalling that it was colonels and majors who carried out the 1960 coup, is there a risk that the Gülenists in the military might act independently in the event, for example, that a major

operation against the Gülen movement is launched? These are questions that cannot be answered at present, but which will play a key role in determining Turkey's future. In the broader perspective, the internal conflicts in the Turkish state – with the Intelligence Organization under Erdoğan's control, and with Gülenist influence in the judiciary and police – have provided the conditions for the military to reassert some form of influence in Turkish domestic affairs. Anecdotally, Turkish observers already note a distinct change in the behavior of military officers, as they have begun to once again exhibit self-confidence in their dealings with civilians in recent weeks, something that had largely been absent in the past few years.

External Pressures

Finally, an important element in Turkey's development will be the stance of the international community, especially the United States and Europe. Too often, Western powers underestimate their influence on Turkish leaders, appearing to fear that explicit criticism of Erdoğan's domestic record will backfire and turn Erdoğan into an overtly anti-Western leader. While such concerns cannot be entirely ignored, it is important to note that in the Turkish collective mind, often prone to conspiracy theories, it is exactly support from the West that has enabled the AKP and Erdoğan to stay in power. Indeed, the reason for the marked anti-Americanism in Turkish secularist milieus is the perception that the United States lent support to "moderate Islam" in Turkey, thereby throwing out the secular republic. More concretely, there is a general consensus – whether stated or not, and whether true or not – that no coup in Turkey has taken place without America's tacit approval. By contrast, U.S. support for the AKP government is generally viewed as a key reason why the military did not intervene against the AKP, and why the party was not closed down in 2009.

This, of course, is exactly why the bulk of the corruption probe featured the Iranian gold-for-gas scheme, Erdoğan's ties to alleged Saudi terrorist financier Yasin Al-Qadi, and arms shipments to Syria – allegations that hurt Erdoğan's international legitimacy more than his domestic standing. In other words, one of the key aims of Erdoğan's enemies has been to reveal his true nature to the world. Furthermore, the debacle of Turkey's Middle Eastern adventures in the past several years – and the country's increasing regional isolation – has led Turkey to once again attach great value to the only security mechanism protecting the country: its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

This means that the more embattled Erdoğan becomes, the more stances adopted by the United States and Europe will matter. Private, but especially public, criticism from leading Western politicians is bound to be registered by Erdoğan and his government. While Erdoğan's instinct thus far has been to deal with opposition to his authoritarian tactics with more authoritarianism, his primary concern is political survival. But his need for international support at the moment might prove stronger than his autocratic impulses. Whether Western leaders will choose to use this leverage amid competing crises in Ukraine, Syria, and Iran is another matter entirely.

The Turkish Street

A final wildcard in these elections will be the extent to which popular opposition to Erdoğan's corruption and authoritarianism returns to the streets. The Gezi Park protests, which were not limited to Istanbul alone, but spread all across Turkey, indicated the existence of a pent-up frustration with Erdoğan, and that it had the potential for spilling over. These spontaneous protests were motivated much more by Erdoğan's brutal crackdown on the initial protesters than on the actual issue of Gezi Park itself. The protestors were not able, however, to morph into an organized political force and eventually faded into the background.

Yet Erdoğan did not seem to learn from Gezi that his harsh rhetoric and penchant for repression is alienating millions of Turks. More than simply opposing his views and policies, the Gezi protestors felt that Erdoğan's systematic efforts to protect his power and restrict fundamental freedoms were effectively disenfranchising them. To these people, street protests may be the only form of opposition remaining aside from voting in elections. Thus, the prospect of punishing the AKP at the ballot box may be inhibiting some of the tendencies toward public demonstrations ahead of the local elections.

Yet the events of March 12 provided a reminder that something has changed in Turkish society since Gezi Park. The day before, Berkin Elvan, a teenager who had been in a coma since being struck by a tear gas canister during the Gezi protests, passed away. His funeral service drew one of the greatest crowds ever gathered in Istanbul, certainly since June's protests. Again, the demonstrations spread to other cities; and again, police used excessive force to repress the protestors, leading to at least one new civilian death.

Large street demonstrations may not have been common in Turkey; but after Gezi Park, it has become clear that they now are a factor in its politics. If Erdoğan's authoritarianism and repression is further ramped up following the March 30 elections, it is highly possible that this type of demonstrations will grow in size and frequency in months to come, leaving Erdoğan with the choice of heeding their demands or using any, and all means, to try and suppress their voices.

The March 30 Local Elections

On March 30, in this chaotic atmosphere, Turks will go to the polls to elect municipal leaders. They will be aware of the growing allegations of corruption against Erdoğan and his government; they will also be exposed to a barrage of counteraccusations of a Gülenist “parallel state,” doing the bidding of powers in the United States and Israel that want to keep Turkey down.

Erdoğan’s control over the majority of the mass media, his ability to use the power of incumbency, and his use of ill-gotten revenues to buy, or otherwise cajole, the electorate should not be underestimated. Nor should it be assumed that all the evidence of graft has already been released; more tapes and allegations are sure to surface. And in the midst of this, the opposition parties will jockey for position, utilizing the incriminating evidence provided without appearing to side with the Gülen movement. Voters will recall that Erdoğan’s decade in power brought Turkey unprecedented stability and growth; yet they will also wonder whether Erdoğan himself has become a liability. Importantly, they will wonder whether the opposition would be better at running the country than the AKP. Still, these are local elections; and as such, Erdoğan is not on the ballot: many voters will simply vote for local candidates and on local issues without parsing the larger issues that the nation is grappling with.

That last point means that the local elections should not, and cannot, be seen as a referendum on Erdoğan. Nevertheless, he is certainly trying to make it one, going so far as to allege that if the AKP gets 40 percent of the vote, that would mean his party is not corrupt. Leaving aside the remarkable conflation of popularity and the rule of law inherent in this statement, it betrays two things. First, Erdoğan is aware that his party has taken a hit and will not achieve the 50 percent of the vote it got in the 2011 parliamentary elections. Second, he knows his party remains well-positioned, thanks to its incumbency, control over the media, and enormous financial resources, to come in first nonetheless.

Conversely, the Gülen movement’s strategy does not appear to stand or fall with the local elections – in fact, it appears to be a long-term strategy to grind down Erdoğan’s international as well as domestic legitimacy, in which the local elections are only one element. Thus, if the AKP wins the elections, that should not be taken as a sign that Erdoğan is out of trouble. On the contrary, this contest is in all likelihood only a precursor to the even fiercer battles to come during the looming presidential and parliamentary elections. Indeed, the local elections would be truly significant only if they expose Erdoğan and the AKP to be even weaker than assumed on three chief criteria: (1) the total vote percentage; (2) the mayoral race in Istanbul; and (3) the mayoral race in Ankara.

The Total Tally

Regarding the total vote tally, it is instructive to recall the results in the local elections of 2009.

PARTY	PERCENTAGE OF VOTES RECEIVED IN 2009
AKP	38.8
CHP	23.1
MHP	16.1
DTP	5.7
Saadet (Felicity) Party (S.P.)	5.2
Democratic Party (D.P.)	3.7
Democratic Left Party (DSP)	2.8
Grand Unity Party (BBP)	2.2

The AKP received only 38.8 percent of the total vote in the 2009 local elections, compared with 49.9 percent in the parliamentary elections of 2011. Even though the March 30 elections are local ones, it is the 2011 tally that is a more instructive comparison by which to judge the AKP's success in this round of voting. That is because since the 2009 contest, Erdoğan incorporated two rival, right-of-center parties into the AKP. In 2009, the Saadet Party (S.P.) was led by charismatic Islamist politician Numan Kurtulmuş, and was beginning to cut into the AKP's base.¹⁶ Yet in 2010, internal differences led Kurtulmuş to leave to start another party – which was then folded into the AKP in 2012, with Kurtulmuş becoming a deputy chairman of the ruling party. Similarly, the remnants of the secular center-right Democratic Party (D.P.) disintegrated as a result of the 2010 constitutional referendum, on which its leadership was divided on whether to vote for or against it. Erdoğan used this opportunity to invite former party leader Süleyman Soylu to join the AKP; like Kurtulmuş, he is now a deputy chairman of the AKP. This means that the AKP's vote in 2014 should effectively be compared to the total vote of the AKP, SP and DP in 2009: 47.7 percent, a figure much closer to the AKP's 2011 result. In other words, even if the AKP does get 40 percent of the vote—the expectation Erdoğan has set for his party—this would in fact constitute a major setback compared with its recent electoral record. By the same token, the CHP's vote in 2014 should be held up against the total vote of the CHP and the DSP in 2009, that is, 25.9 percent.

Dissatisfied AKP voters in practice have two options in the upcoming election: voting for an opposition party, either the CHP or the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP); or staying home. While the strength of the Gülen movement never lay in its electoral numbers, it nevertheless has an important mobilizing potential. In earlier elections, Gülen supporters played a significant role in the AKP's get-out-the-vote efforts, something that will not

happen this time. The AKP itself appears to have investigated the issue through its pollsters. An August 2013 article in *Taraf* daily by Mehmet Baransu, a journalist thought to be close to the Gülen movement, revealed that AKP Deputy Chair Kurtulmuş had asked a director of a polling company about the strength of the Gülen movement’s electorate, indicating his own figures suggested 3 percent. The polling executive reportedly replied that his figures suggested 8 percent, with as much as 16 percent of the electorate influenced by the movement.¹⁷ Sources within the Gülen movement suggest that the movement’s sympathizers are being advised to vote for whichever party has the most realistic chance of defeating the AKP in a specific region or city of Turkey. This is likely to mean that in practice, the Gülenist vote will benefit the CHP in the big cities in urban, western Turkey; and the MHP in central Anatolia.

As unreliable as they are, surveys presently suggest that the AKP polls around 40 percent of the vote, and the CHP at or above 30 percent. Should this be the result of the election, it would already constitute a distinct increase of the CHP’s vote and an even more significant drop in the AKP’s fortunes. Should the CHP poll over 30 percent and the AKP under 40 percent, that would likely be considered a game-changer.

Istanbul

Istanbul is the biggest prize in a Turkish local election. Being mayor of Istanbul is what launched Erdoğan’s career and it was in Istanbul that present CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu launched his rise to the national scene by achieving almost 37 percent of the vote in 2009.

CANDIDATE, PARTY	PERCENTAGE OF VOTES RECEIVED IN 2009
Kadir Topbaş, AKP	44.7
Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, CHP	36.9
Ahmet Turgut, MHP	5.0
Mehmet Bekaroğlu, SP	4.8
Akın Birdal, DTP	4.5

As the 2009 results show, the AKP incumbent, Kadir Topbaş, was, and remains, a formidable opponent. The future CHP leader trailed Topbaş by 8 percentage points, even with the S.P. candidate siphoning off five percent of the votes that would otherwise likely have gone to the AKP candidate. Topbaş remains popular in Istanbul, where he is generally thought to have done a good job at running the megalopolis. In 2014, the CHP is fielding Mustafa Sarıgül, the mayor of the Şişli municipality, one of Istanbul’s boroughs. In the position since 1999, Sarıgül has developed a center-right image in spite of being part of the CHP. In fact, over the years, he has been known to engage in religious discourse as part of his populist platform, and has in particular been said to be close to the Gülen movement. Sarıgül is known to be very sparse with criticism of Erdoğan, and has over the years in

general praised the AKP leader more than he has criticized him. Journalists also allege that Sarigül cultivated a close relationship with Erdoğan’s wife, Emine, and that the AKP possesses a number of files involving corruption allegations that could be used against Sarigül.¹⁸ Indeed, in late January, Erdoğan began calling attention to documents he alleged prove Sarigül’s involvement in corruption.¹⁹

Thus, while widely hailed as the hope of the Turkish left, Sarigül is a controversial candidate with important vulnerabilities. Politically, he is a force acceptable to people of the center-left and center-right persuasion, including religious voters. But personally, he suffers from a reputation of having been an often disloyal member of the CHP (and Democratic Left Party) over several decades, and there are questions concerning his personal integrity. He could defeat Topbaş if the March 30 elections turn into an anti-AKP wave, but his chances of success should not be exaggerated.

Ankara

The mayoral race in Ankara is quite different from Istanbul. Istanbul is a two-way race between the AKP and the CHP, with smaller parties playing a role. In particular, the Kurdish vote in Istanbul is likely to go to the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) candidate, splitting the left-wing vote. By contrast, the BDP is not a force in Ankara; but the Turkish nationalist MHP is. In 2009, the CHP and MHP together received 58.6 percent of the vote, 20 percentage points more than the victor, AKP Mayor Melih Gökçek, who was first elected mayor in 1994. In other words, only the split of the anti-AKP vote ensures Gökçek’s position. Moreover, unlike Topbaş, Gökçek is controversial, especially given the myriad corruption allegations against him.

CANDIDATE, PARTY	PERCENTAGE OF VOTES RECEIVED IN 2009
Melih Gökçek, AKP	38.5
Murat Karayalçın, CHP	31.3
Mansur Yavaş, MHP	27.3

In 2014, the CHP secured a minor upset: it enlisted the MHP candidate from 2009, Mansur Yavaş, as its candidate. The aim is obvious: to combine the center-right and nationalist vote with the CHP vote, in order to achieve enough of a concentration of votes to surpass Gökçek’s tally. Indeed, if only a third of the MHP’s voters in 2009 had switched to the CHP, the CHP candidate would have been mayor today. It would thus seem that because Gökçek is controversial and has been mayor for so long, and because of its choice of candidate, the CHP has a good chance of wresting the position away from the AKP.

In sum, it is unlikely that the local elections will provide a major upset of the existing political order in Turkey. The CHP stands a very good chance of winning Ankara; a fair chance of winning Istanbul; and a good chance of polling within 10 percentage points of the

AKP. These would not push Erdoğan over a tipping point in which he would rapidly lose control over his coalition; but it would constitute yet another chink in his armor and blow to his legitimacy.

Prospects for Erdoğan's Power

Given how quickly Turkish politics can change, predictions for presidential and parliamentary elections that are months away are bound to be overtaken by events. Nevertheless, the political maneuvering of the past several months lends itself to several conclusions.

First, Tayyip Erdoğan will not become the president of Turkey under a super-presidential constitution. The Gezi Park protests last summer and the current corruption probe have sunk Erdoğan's dream of emulating Vladimir Putin and running Turkey by decree for the next decade. There is no scenario now under which Erdoğan could muster the 330 members of parliament necessary to send a constitutional amendment to referendum. And even if he could, every opinion poll suggests that the Turkish public opposes a presidential system—and did so even before the twin political earthquakes (Gezi Park and the corruption probes) that shook Erdoğan's standing in the past year.

This led speculations to gravitate toward the question of whether Erdoğan would seek the presidency under the current, semi-presidential constitution. A leading argument in favor of this possibility was that the AKP's by-laws prevent Erdoğan – and several dozen other members of parliament – from seeking a fourth term in office. But party by-laws can be easily changed, although with some risk of negative public reaction. But with the corruption probe, Erdoğan's rationale for remaining prime minister has grown more powerful than ever. Indeed, if the experience of past Turkish presidents Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel is of any guidance, powerful Turkish politicians have never been able to maintain control over their political parties once they acceded to the presidency. Given the Gülen movement's assault on Erdoğan, he would be highly unlikely to fare any better, even if he were to win a presidential election. And should he lose control over the party, Erdoğan would be reduced to a position similar to Gül's today. But even that scenario assumes that President Gül would be willing to step aside in Erdoğan's favor, something that does not appear to be the case. Given the challenges facing Erdoğan, he seems to have concluded that he can best ensure his power and political survival by remaining as prime minister. Only a very strong showing on March 30 could likely change that calculus.

Indeed, in early 2014, Erdoğan passed laws that considerably strengthened the powers of the prime minister. The controversial and restrictive Internet law, the law asserting control over the judiciary, and the proposed legislative amendments strengthening the National Intelligence Organization all further empower the government and agencies and offices under the prime minister. It is highly unlikely that Erdoğan would be engaging in such reforms if he had the intention to seek the presidency in six months time.

Thus, in early February, preparations were already being made for changing the internal party rules. On February 11, Erdoğan hinted that the rules might be changed if the party wants him to continue as leader.²⁰ And on February 20, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç told reporters that while nothing concrete was on the agenda, the party bylaws could be changed if there was an “emergency.”²¹ Of course, an assault on the government by a parallel state serving the interests of foreign power, which is how Erdoğan describes the corruption probe, could easily be construed as just such an emergency.

Thus, the August 2014 presidential elections will likely see President Gül seeking re-election. In some ways, the current crisis has strengthened that likelihood, because the crisis appears to have weakened Gül’s chances of taking over the leadership of the AKP. He has not shown strength or been able to lead the country through this crisis. Quite to the contrary, he has sought to stay on the sidelines and avoid being caught in the cross-fire. Furthermore, as he signed legislation widely deemed to be anti-democratic as well as intended to destroy the Gülen movement, he has lost the trust of the movement as well as of Turkish liberals.

The main question will be whether the CHP and MHP can agree on a joint opposition candidate, in which case they stand a reasonable chance of defeating Gül. If not, a split opposition vote could very well ensure Gül’s continued occupancy of the Çankaya Palace until 2019. Speculations include the notion of the CHP repeating the Ankara gambit and nominating an MHP politician for the presidency. One candidate for this position is Meral Akşener, currently a vice-speaker of parliament. Akşener is a politician with a center-right background, and she served briefly as minister of the interior from 1996 to 1997. Representing the MHP in parliament since 2002, Akşener is seen as one of the most centrist members of the MHP, who could help to the CHP fill the center-right vacuum. She would certainly be able to attract voters from the conservative and nationalist circles, not to mention Turkey’s women.

The release of high-profile military officers may also be a factor. In particular, former Chief of Staff General Ilker Başbuğ, released on March 7, is certain to become a political force in his own right, already having been mentioned as a possible presidential contender. Whether he can overcome the legal hurdles generated by his incarceration remains to be seen, but he would form a powerful candidate rallying the nationalist and centrist votes.

Irrespective of the outcome of the presidential election, the grand prize remains the parliament and control over the government. The result of the local elections will likely contribute to whether Erdoğan decides to hold early parliamentary elections, as he did following the military’s e-memorandum in 2007. He may well utilize this option if he calculates he can win a new mandate before his legitimacy is further eroded—and before the opposition is able to regroup.

What does the analysis above mean for Erdoğan’s prospects in power? As argued above, and by members of this group elsewhere, Erdoğan’s power has been on a gradually declining trajectory since 2010.²² From the moment he decided to embark on a quest for

one-man rule, Erdoğan began to erode the very coalition that brought him to power and kept him there for a decade. By 2011, Turkey's liberal intelligentsia had deserted him, once they realized that Erdoğan had turned away from his earlier stated ambition to make Turkey more democratic and liberal. He then spent the better part of two years seeking to undermine the position of his erstwhile ally President Gül and, from early 2012 onward, the rift with the Gülen movement grew into an open and existential conflict. Along the way, Erdoğan turned Turkey from a country with a strongly growing economy into the most fragile emerging economy in the world and tarnished the image of a statesman that he had meticulously cultivated.

Thus, since Erdoğan decided to become, in effect, an elected sultan—or an Islamic caudillo—his days at the helm of the state were numbered. With every move to concentrate power, he lost further legitimacy and support within society at large, as well as within his own power base. His increasingly irrational behavior and conspiratorial worldview, furthermore, make him seem increasingly a liability to his erstwhile political allies. These supporters will follow him and support him only as long as they make the calculation that this is in their own political interest over the medium to long term. So far, that equation has been simple: Erdoğan has been unmatched as a leader of the conservative movement, and as a campaigner in elections. But in 2013, his aura of invincibility, and his very legitimacy, was first pierced by the Gezi protests, and then severely shaken by the corruption probe.

There is no reason to believe that Erdoğan will be able to reverse this trend. In fact, his only way of maintaining power is to embark on an outright repressive and authoritarian model of governance, further eroding the gains of democratization made a decade ago. Clearly, such steps will only continue to alienate international markets as well as Western powers. The more he tightens his grip on power, the more quickly it will slip from his grasp. Erdoğan will eventually be forced out, though the question is: what damage will he do to Turkey in the process?

Long-Term Implications for Turkey's Stability and U.S. Interests

For the United States, Turkey's current trajectory is highly worrisome. The more authoritarian and Islamist Turkey becomes under Erdoğan, the less reliable and stable an ally it will be for the United States. Indeed, the longer Erdoğan remains in power, the greater the risk becomes of the already fragile Turkish-American alliance—based, as it is, in the shared desire and respect for a “way of life...based upon the will of the majority, and...distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression”—being fully eroded. In other words, the U.S. relationship with Turkey could begin to more closely resemble that with Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, large Middle Eastern powers influenced by political Islam with which the United States can do business whenever interests align, but with which it lacks the shared values that underpins a true alliance.

Beyond this, it is clear that a Turkey under Erdoğan, or indeed an authoritarian Turkey in general, cannot be a stable U.S. ally or an asset in dealing with complicated conflict zones in the Middle East, the Balkans, or the Caucasus. America's attempts to use Turkey to implement its policies in Syria failed miserably; and on its current trajectory, Turkey is looking to be so consumed by its internal struggle that it can hardly focus its energies on a constructive foreign policy. Moreover, rather than being an ally helping to stabilize a difficult environment, Turkey itself is becoming a problem in its own right for American decision-makers.

Endnotes

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