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Erdogan’s fateful election

The upcoming elections in Turkey on June 7 are momentous and arguably fateful. The stakes in these are not limited to who will come ahead and win most seats to form the government. In that sense the broad results of the elections are a foregone conclusion. The ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) that has governed Turkey since November 2002 will gain the most seats with, polls predict, anywhere between 42-44 percent of the vote. So the identity of the leading party is not an issue.

The two main opposition parties, social-democratic CHP (Republican People’s Party) and Turkish nationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party), poll below 30 and 20 percent respectively. For the first time in AKP’s long reign though the opposition is challenging the ruling party on the basis of existing economic conditions and proposing its own alternative economic programs. By privileging economics over ideology the opposition renders the AKP uncomfortable since the days of record breaking growth rates of 7 to 9 percent have long been left behind. Turkish growth rate lately has stuck around 3 percent.

So, although the AKP will possibly win a majority of the seats to form a government by itself, if a four party parliament results from the elections even a coalition government might be a probable outcome.

This is what makes the performance of the fourth major party, pro-Kurdish HDP (People’s Democratic Party) the pivotal factor in these elections. If it receives enough votes to beat Turkey’s unfair electoral threshold of 10 percent, the course of Turkish politics might change dramatically. With HDP in Parliament, it is impossible for the AKP to have enough seats (330) to change the Constitution by itself no matter what its support level is, and call a referendum. Conversely an HDP failure may be the harbinger of turbulence and social instability.

Therefore whether the wily and successful Mr. Erdoğan will see his dream of transforming Turkey’s political system into a Presidential one come true, hinges on HDP vote. Because Mr. Erdoğan would not leave his own future to chance he stepped in to the fray, and began to campaign forcefully.

Dissatisfied with the performance of his handpicked successor as party leader and Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, he felt compelled to take his message personally and directly to his own fiercely loyal mass base. And the formidable AKP political machine, with 12 years of successes behind it is working full blast.

Since Mr. Erdoğan who is battered but still extremely popular with his constituencies has no intention to sacrifice his ambition at the altar of democratic fairness either, he militantly defends the 10 percent threshold. Both he and Davutoğlu relentlessly attack the HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş.

Thus Mr. Erdoğan's electoral narrative, among other themes, is built on the vilification of HDP as terrorist because of the Party's connection to the outlawed PKK that has initiated a violent campaign against the Turkish state in 1984. Indeed the PKK and the HDP share the same mass base. Many Turks question how independent or autonomous the HDP could be from the PKK, deemed to be a separatist, terrorist organization.

Yet it is with the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan that Mr. Erdoğan's government has negotiated a ceasefire that has held since the beginning of 2012. Although talks continued until lately, this is the most concrete and precious result of AKP's "peace" opening to resolve the Kurdish problem.

It is also imperative for AKP that pious Kurds who make up half the Kurdish electorate are not lured by the HDP leader. These have long been faithful to the AKP and justified its boost that the Kurdish problem could be resolved in the framework of Islamic community solidarity.

In order to keep these pious and conservative Kurds Mr. Erdoğan will rule out no tactic or rhetorical excess. Therefore, he has been sharply attacking the HDP for being in cohorts with terrorists and accused Mr. Demirtaş and the party of impiety and of being believers in pre-Islamic religions.

In fact Mr. Erdoğan could not even get himself to offer his sympathies to Mr. Demirtaş after a bomb exploded at the election headquarters of HDP in the city of Mersin. The bomb, and a similar one that was planted to explode simultaneously in the neighboring city of Adana, possibly targeted the HDP leader who was in Mersin for a scheduled rally that day.

The incessant stream of abuse against the HDP actually shows that in the person of the leader of HDP, the young, spirited and humorous Selahattin Demirtaş, Mr. Erdoğan found his match as a campaigner. Mr. Demirtaş managed to present himself not just as a leader of the Kurdish nationalist movement but as a national politician that speaks to all of Turkey. Therefore, he succeeded in reaching out to constituencies beyond ethnic Kurds.

His sharp wit and ability to keep his cool under attack, his refusal to respond to the government's and the President's relentless provocations continue to be his main assets. It was precisely this profile that enabled him to get 9.8 percent of the vote in last year's Presidential elections.

If the HDP manages to pass the threshold, this will not just bring a balance of forces inside the Parliament and in Turkey's politics. The Kurdish political movement will have taken a giant step towards its own legitimization in the political system just the way the Islamists did over a longer period of time.

Now, of course Islamists rule the country and reshape the fundamental tenets of the Republican order and redefine its ideological references.

Mr. Erdoğan's ideal presidential system is one where the executive is not burdened with the checks and balances of a rule-based order and where both the legislative and the judicial branches are virtually extensions of the executive. All power will emanate from the Presidency and in all likelihood dissenting voices in the media and elsewhere will be increasingly muzzled. Just last week, Mr. Erdoğan and Mr. Davutoğlu both bombarded Turkey's leading mainstream newspaper Hürriyet because of its headline concerning the death sentence passed on Muhammed Morsi of Egypt. That the headline was verbatim the same as what Mr. Erdogan said in a rally did not matter. The intensification of the pressure on the publisher of Hürriyet, the Doğan media group that, a few years ago was "punished" with a prohibitive tax penalty, suggests a further tightening of the noose around independent media.

As the first popularly elected President of Turkey, Mr. Erdoğan is loath on accepting a passive role. In fact he is right that the Presidency in the military drafted Constitution in place today does endow the President with some executive powers. But Mr. Erdoğan wishes to go beyond them. Therefore despite the stiff resistance from the public to the possibility of a Presidential system, he pursues his goal and has so far succeeded in bending his party's identity and purposes to his own will.

If Mr. Erdoğan wins, this will in no small part be as a result of an extremely unfair campaign. The state's resources have been made accessible to the incumbents and the President repeatedly skirted his oath of office by openly taking a political position and using accusatory language against the opposition. A victory under such conditions that might give the AKP the requisite 330 seats to change or redraft the constitution will be the harbinger of regime change. Such a change might take Turkey away from the principles of a ruled based liberal order that respects the separation of powers. And this is precisely why these elections are so seminal.