

Turkey: Elections, crisis and repression - Before the March 2019 municipal elections

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With four elections, a constitutional referendum and a coup attempt in the space of three years, the least we can say is that instability reigns in Turkey, even though President Erdogan has consolidated his power through all these turns. However, the municipal elections that will take place in March 2019 are already perceived by both the governing parties and the opposition as a new plebiscite, all this against the background of a deep economic crisis that promises to worsen.

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The elections of June 2018

The dual presidential and legislative elections of June 2018, once again under a state of emergency, resulted in the re-election of Recep Tayyip Erdogan as head of state and a victory of the conservative-nationalist bloc composed of the AKP and the historic party of the Turkish far-right, the MHP. While Erdogan won with 52.5% of the vote, the bloc – the “People’s Alliance” – got 53.7% and thus secured a majority in parliament, which also meant the passage from a parliamentary regime to a presidential regime – already validated by the April 2017 referendum – making Erdogan sole leader with extremely strong powers.

The surprise within this bloc was the result obtained by the MHP led by Devlet Bahçeli. Indeed, all the estimates predicted its collapse – because of its submission to Erdogan – to the benefit of the IYI Party, resulting from a secularist and oppositional split with Bahçeli’s party. However, the MHP managed to maintain its votes, getting 11.1%. If the latter lost two thirds of its vote to the IYI Party, it compensated for this with an unexpected transfer of votes from the AKP. The “disillusioned AKP” voters on which the opposition was counting to stop Erdogan’s dictatorial regime thus preferred to express their discontent by remaining within the same bloc; they validated Erdogan’s presidency while weakening the AKP and forcing it to deal with the MHP, thus becoming a decisive force in parliament.

Nationalism on the rise

Scheduled for 2019, the legislative and presidential components of the elections were called almost nine months early. There are several reasons for this. Erdogan first wanted to take advantage of the nationalist climate he had managed to create with the offensive against Afrin, a Kurdish enclave in northern Syria, led by the PYD, the PKK's sister organization. This offensive, conducted with the massive participation of the jihadists of the "Free Syrian Army", was presented as a liberation of territories under terrorist occupation and applauded as a blow to the PKK in Syria by the various components of the opposition (the HDP being the only party to oppose it). Moreover, the fact that neither the Syrian regime, nor Putin, nor Trump really opposed it was perceived as a victory against these powers and as the affirmation of being back in the game as a regional power, able to challenge everyone. This resulted in a military-nationalist consensus that Erdogan did not want to let slip.

Another reason for calling this double ballot in advance, leaving only two months for the campaign, was so that the various opposition parties, in particular the IYI Party, would not have time to organize. It should be noted that at this time, both for the opposition and for the conservative-nationalist bloc, the IYI Party was judged as a real risk that could hurt the MHP. But through the dynamics I mentioned above, there are now two far-right parties totalling more than 21% of the vote, besides the AKP, which in terms of policies implemented could be judged as much more radical than many European far-right parties. Therefore, nationalism and militarism are the two main components of the ideological sensibility that characterizes this period, going beyond the government and opposition cleavages.

A structural crisis

And the last and most important reason was undoubtedly to hold these elections before the economic crisis worsens and penalizes Erdogan. Indeed, while the economic situation has been showing signs of deterioration since the beginning of the year, in August there was a collapse. Fed by the tensions with the White House and specifically Donald Trump's tweet announcing his intention to double tariffs on steel and aluminium, the lira went into freefall to lose 16% of its value against the dollar in August and 40% over 2018.

While for the opposition this deterioration of the economic situation has been interpreted as the consequence of the authoritarianism of the Erdogan regime and of its geopolitical choices, the ruling bloc has resorted, as is usual now, to the thesis of international conspiracy. "If they have their dollar, we have Allah," said Erdogan. To take the lead of any mobilization that the effects of the crisis could cause, the *Reis* (leader, or "Duce") thus accused the "interest rate lobby", targeting more or less directly the United States. There followed ridiculous bursts of "anti-imperialism" in the media (80% under the tutelage of the *Reis*), an anti-imperialism of which of course Erdogan was the champion.

It is clear, however, that this crisis, which is still in its infancy and has now caused dozens of bankruptcies and collective redundancies, is of a structural nature. It results from the specificities of the integration of the Turkish economy into world capitalism (like the massive indebtedness of the private sector in currency) and is deeply linked to the crisis of the accumulation regime of which 2008 marked a first phase. As a result, the global crisis has reverberated in emerging capitalist countries like Turkey and Argentina, which will probably not be the last.

Diplomacy and repression

Today tensions between Washington and Ankara seem to have eased following the release of US preacher Andrew Brunson, accused of espionage and in detention for nearly two years as part of the anti-Gülenist repression, although the request for the extradition of Gülen was not accepted. [1]

Moreover, Erdogan's position following the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Kashoggi in the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul allowed him to adopt a position of "responsible interlocutor" in collaboration with Western powers against his main regional opponent, Riyadh. However, amid this relative lull, Ankara has not stopped bombarding Kurdish positions in Rojava in Syrian Kurdistan - allied with Washington - in order to make clear that it will not accept the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy, at its border and led by its internal enemy, the PKK. [2]

However, inside the country, the security grip continues to tighten with permanent waves of house searches and collective arrests, even while after a few days only some of the detainees are remanded in custody and the majority are released. We could cite dozens of examples but let us mention two of the most significant. In the middle of September, some ten thousand workers revolted against their unbearable working conditions - which had already left 32 dead - on the construction site of the "largest airport in the world" in Istanbul, one of Erdogan's prestige projects. After hours of conflict between the workers and the military police, nearly 600 workers were taken into custody following violent raids in the dormitories. After a few days the vast majority were released, but a total of 34 workers and trade unionists were remanded in custody awaiting trial. Since then military discipline reigns on the site.

The latest example is the arrest of a dozen people, including academics and NGO employees, accused of being in a hierarchical relationship with Osman Kavala, the businessman presented as the "Turkish Soros" - detained for more than a year without indictment - and to have worked to extend the Gezi revolt by importing professional activists from abroad! Eventually they were all released the same night or the next day, apart from one of them who remains detained, accused of having participated in meetings concerning civil disobedience. The absurdity of the accusations has no limit, but has a very rational function, that of keeping the country in an illusion of perpetual threat, whether it is the terrorist threat, the threat of a coup d'état, the threat of "economic war" or, as in the latter case, evoked five years after the events of Gezi, the threat of a "colour coded revolution".

The opposition

On the side of the opposition forces, it must first be recognized that they were able to outsmart the AKP-MHP bloc to catch them off guard and managed to nominate their candidates and mount their campaigns as quickly as possible. The CHP, IYI Party and Saadet Partisi also joined forces in the Alliance of the Nation - in order to avoid the risk that the latter two parties remained below the 10% threshold and would not be represented in parliament. [3]

But, undoubtedly, the surprise of this campaign period was the performance of Muharrem Ince, the candidate of the CHP whose candidacy the leadership of this party had to accept reluctantly, since he is a rival of the current party leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu. Ince, through his capacity to argue and debate, to thwart the traps of the "organic" journalists of the AKP, to provoke and disorient Erdogan, managed to generate a real mobilization and hope for a second round for "the secular people". Yet Ince did not come from the left of the CHP and said nothing "left" either. In these speeches it was at most a question of "normalization" (rather than democratization), the question of a return to the

parliamentary system remained in limbo and the question of the Syrian migrants was far from being treated in a spirit of “refugees welcome here”.

Requiring the Kurdish vote in the case of a second round, Ince had taken great care to advocate the importance of teaching in the mother tongue (thus Kurdish, among others) and had visited Selahattin Demirtas - former co-chair and candidate of the HDP - in prison (which was considered courageous in a context of unparalleled criminalization of a party represented in parliament).

But it was not to be, despite the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of people and monster rallies, Ince remained at 30.6%. Gaining 1/3 of the IYI vote and ¼ of the HDP vote, Ince exceeded by 8% the results of his party but that was not enough for a second round. The CHP vote was also down because of votes going to the IYI Party and to a lesser extent the HDP. While the IYI Party definitely asserted itself as an actor on the political scene with 10%, of which a quarter came from the right of the CHP and the rest from the MHP, the results for Saadet were far from what was expected. It only elected two deputies, who will come from the contingent opened by the CHP in its lists for Saadet and not from its own lists. Even though its alliance with the secular CHP could have penalized it, the 1.34% that it obtained shows that a political Islamism combined with the defence of social and democratic rights is not able to compete with the corrupt Islamic-nationalist populism of Erdogan.

The Kurdish movement: weakened but standing

As for the HDP, which has been terribly weakened by the various waves of arrests targeting its spokespersons, MPs, mayors and elected officials and thousands of its activists, it managed to increase its votes in relation to the November 2015 elections (10.76%) to 11.7%. Remember that the HDP was not included in the Alliance of the Nation. If the CHP and Saadet (and of course the HDP) were open to such an alliance, it was Meral Aksener of the IYI Party who refused to be on the same platform as the HDP, widely criminalized and denounced as an extension of the PKK by Erdogan.

Thus, it was crucial that the HDP could exceed the 10% threshold, which was done, especially through a campaign led by Selahattin Demirtas from his prison. Also, a candidate for the presidency, Demirtas scored only 8.4%, part of his electorate having preferred to vote for Ince in the first round. The HDP (legislative) + Ince (presidential) formula was largely followed by the “Gezi” generation and part of the left wing of the CHP.

However, the HDP’s campaign this time was totally reduced to the arithmetic of the Assembly and the need for the HDP to enter parliament to limit the power of the AKP. No clear political message or demands were put forward. We were far from Demirtas’ challenge to Erdogan, “We will prevent you from being president”, which marked the elections of June 2015. It was rather the personalities who joined the ranks of the HDP as parliamentary candidates which served as a “campaign”: a journalist freshly released from prison, representatives of revolutionary currents outside the HDP, academics sacked for defending peace, a figure who has become the symbol of resistance to the state of emergency and so on.

Note also that the HDP vote increased in all the major western cities like Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, and that the HDP vote in these three cities constitutes 30% of the total HDP vote. On the other hand, the vote fell in the Kurdish cities. So, in Sirnak the HDP vote dropped from 84% to 70%, in Hakkari from 84% to 72%, in Diyarbakır from 72% to 67% and likewise for Mus, Bitlis, Siirt and so on. The state of repression and the moving of several polling stations is not enough to explain these results. But with the AKP having either stagnated or slightly increased its vote in this region, it is more a question of a shift from the AKP to the MHP, especially at the level of the Turkish and Arab populations (and the military and police personnel on the ground), and from the HDP towards the

AKP for sectors of conservative Kurds.

Apart from some currents hostile to the Kurdish cause, the radical left mainly called for a vote for Demirtas and the HDP. For the third time since 2015, an independent and unitary campaign was launched to vote for Demirtas and the HDP, of which Yeniyol, the Turkish section of the Fourth International, was one of the initiators. This initiative, called “One Step More”, along with the call to vote, included in its campaign Demirtas’ request for release for fair elections and the highlighting of the economic demands of the HDP in the context of crisis.

However, if the party came in third place in the parliament, ahead of the currents of the extreme right, which constitutes a real victory, the HDP is beset by various tensions, which little by little are being made public. The first is the conflict between Demirtas and the current leadership of the party. In Demirtas’ candidacy for the presidential election, with the latter’s call to the HDP to come out of “holiday mode” and to get active on the ground, and the video prepared to mark the 6th anniversary of the HDP, where Demirtas is almost absent, the frictions are clearly visible. [4] But these tensions are largely the result of the party’s identification with Selahattin Demirtas, whose character, attitude and sincerity mainly enabled the HDP to rise from 6% to 13% in the June 2015 legislative elections and to be represented in parliament.

The party leadership is therefore concerned about this identification – especially in the absence of Demirtas, imprisoned for 2 years – and is trying to break from it. But it seems clear that it is not by removing the latter from the picture or relativizing his contributions that the question will be resolved. It results from a crisis of the HDP, which is unable to act in the Assembly because it has almost no function, nor in the street, because of the repression. However, the leadership of the PKK, which has never digested the HDP’s relatively greater autonomy –where Demirtas again played an important role – and has expressed this many times, is taking advantage of this situation to reconsolidate these links of subordination with the party.

The second source of tension, or criticism rather, results from the fact that the HDP is increasingly losing its character as a “Kurdish party” in the eyes of a fringe of this population and seems to them today subject to the Turkish left. Several articles published in recent weeks testify to this feeling, which is partly well-founded (the majority of the deputies are Turkish for example), but which precisely relies on the very project of the foundation of the HDP, to make it a party of all Turkey, to “Turkify” it as they say here; which was the idea of Abdullah Öcalan, the historic leader of the PKK, imprisoned for twenty years.

It is in these circumstances that all political actors are preparing for the municipal elections and reconsidering their alliances. However, for the various tendencies of the opposition it seems more and more difficult to mobilize. These elections, where the AKP wins every time, bring about a real loss of credibility in institutional politics, which does not translate into radicalization but depoliticization.

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P.S.

• <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5807>

Footnotes

[1] Fethullah Gülen, a cleric who has been exiled in the USA for 20 years, is a former ally of Erdogan whose movement, which had vastly infiltrated the Turkish state apparatus, is accused of having fomented the 2016 coup attempt. See <http://www.internationalviewpoint.o...> .

[2] See <http://www.internationalviewpoint.o...>

[3] The CHP (Peoples' Republican Party, founded by Mustafa Kemal, adopted a centre left discourse from the 1960s onwards, but one with a strong nationalist accent. It is the main opposition party. Originating from a split with the MHP following the expulsion of internal opposition leaders, the IYI Party ("Good Party") is an attempt to form a secular nationalist centre right party to attract voters who dislike the authoritarian Islamic turn of the AKP. Led by a former Interior Minister, Meral Akşener, and relying on cadres of far-right origin, the party had neither the ability nor the time to shift itself to the centre right. The Saadet Partisi is a party of Islamist origin which has adopted a more tolerant, democratic and "social" posture.

[4] See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgLO—Ippts>