



DR. DIMITRIS TSAROUHAS

“The 2009 Turkish Local Elections: a victory for whom?”

At the end of March, local elections took place in Turkey. Traditionally, local elections are politically important in Turkey. In a nutshell, the results show that:

a) The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) remains the country's largest party, strongly represented throughout the country. In contrast to the more regions-based support that the opposition received, the AKP can thus claim to be a truly national party in a way the opposition is not. Despite the (large) decline in support its candidates suffered in both Istanbul and Ankara, the AKP prevailed in both cities.

b) The opposition parties have gained ground in a number of cities and provinces at the expense of AKP. The opposition Republican Peoples' Party (CHP) confirmed its dominance in the Aegean city of Izmir, Turkey's third largest. Its largest gain is the 'capturing' of the coastal city of Antalya, a prestigious win as it was largely unexpected even among most CHP supporters.

c) Those gains are unequally distributed, however, and far from enough to ensure a shift in Turkish politics as hoped for by the opposition. Even in a local election contest, the CHP remains a party whose appeal is confined to metropolitan and coastal areas, while the increase in the nationalists' vote (MHP) is significant but inadequate.

d) In south-east Turkey, the AKP hopes for inroads at the expense of the Democratic Society Party (DTP) have been comprehensively defeated. The opening of a Kurdish-speaking TV channel a few months ago has done little to upset DTP fortunes, which remains in clear control in the region.

e) The election has been largely peaceful and was conducted in an orderly manner. Disturbances in some south-eastern provinces have been recorded, and the opposition cried foul when a glitch in vote counting occurred. Those issues are not significant enough to alter the picture of a free and fair electoral contest in Turkey.

In a press conference after most election results became known, Prime Minister Erdoğan underlined the democratic significance of the vote and thanked his party's supporters for the good showing. By the standards that he had himself set a few days prior to the elections, however, the AKP performance was worse than expected. Erdoğan had used the 47% his party received in the 2007 general election as a yardstick for this year's performance. The results show that the Prime Minister's over-confident mood backfired. The economic crisis has certainly had an effect among voters, who have recently seen unemployment soar and prices for basic goods continue their inflationary spiral.

It should also be noted that the opposition parties have correctly assessed the mood of the electorate and appealed to their socio-economic needs rather than identity politics. Instead of stressing issues such as secularism, CHP and MHP stressed unemployment, poverty and corruption as core issues and gained the trust of the electorate. In Istanbul and Ankara, the impressive performances of the CHP and MHP candidate respectively propel them to national prominence and place them in a favourable position once the succession race of the current CHP and MHP leaders start.

Perhaps the most positive result of the 2009 election in Turkey is the high level of democratic maturity shown by the electorate. The AKP is the winner once more – but this win is qualified by its decreased level of support. The opposition has emerged stronger in a number of provinces – but these gains are inadequate to change the political landscape, a sign that the electorate has yet to be convinced that CHP and MHP offer a credible alternative to the ruling party. The AKP remains strong – but the opposition has been given the chance to build up an alternative political platform and thus rejuvenate Turkish democracy by contesting AKP dominance. For the sake of Turkey’s pluralist democracy, this is a necessary and much-delayed process.

Prime Minister Erdoğan declared after the elections that his party ‘got the message’ of the electorate. Signing a new deal with the IMF, consulting with the opposition to introduce more democratic reforms to Turkey’s Constitution and reshuffling the Cabinet to add fresh faces to his team (hopefully increasing the number of female Ministers) would all be signs that the country has emerged stronger from this electoral contest.

* * *

Dr. Dimitis Tsarouhas is Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations, Bilkent University and GPSG Panel Convenor

Email: dimitris@bilkent.edu.tr