

Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during March 1-15th 2014

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Key Points:

- *The death of another Gezi Park protester sends opposition protesters into the streets two weeks ahead of municipal elections.*
- *While the AKP has been hampered over the last year, polls indicate little change from past election results as opposition candidates lack the star power to counter the AKP's leadership.*
- *Fethullah Gulen blasts the ruling government in an op-ed, calling its authoritarian tactics a challenge for Turkish democracy.*
- *The AKP-Gulen Movement split causes further mistrust between Washington and Ankara, as the White House openly rebukes Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan for mischaracterizing a discussion with President Barack Obama.*
- *Crimea secedes from Ukraine, though its Tatars sit out the referendum. Aside from expressing concern about their plight, Ankara has little leverage over their fate in the new Crimean Republic.*

Election Day approaches in Turkey

On March 30, voters will go to the polls in local elections. In the more than thirty municipalities holding elections, the AKP is looking to best their 39 percent result in 2009. A strong showing of 40 percent in the March 30 elections will give Erdogan momentum to push for an amendment to AKP bylaws that term limit his party leadership. If this occurs, look for a constitutional amendment to be pushed through the parliament enabling him to take over as president in August's election for that office.

Those opposed to the AKP, and particularly the prime minister, spilled out into the streets following the death of a Gezi Park protester after 269 days in a coma. Fifteen year old Berkin Elvan was struck in the head by a tear gas canister during last summer's unrest, spending the past months comatose before finally succumbing to his injuries. An estimated two million people across thirty two provinces joined protests on the day of his burial, which in some cases resembled the street battles that roiled Turkey last summer. ("As it happened: Clashes in Istanbul after funeral of young Gezi victim Berkin Elvan," Hurriyet Daily News, 14 March 2014.)

Despite the unrest, polls indicate that a major change from previous contests is unlikely. The AKP will likely hold its strongholds in Istanbul and Ankara, despite a hard push by the CHP in the latter. In an excellent analysis of the March 30 elections for the Brookings Institution, Ali Carkoglu predicts an AKP victory, albeit by slimmer margins than in their last electoral victory. (Carkoglu, "Turkey goes to the ballot box: 2014 Municipal Elections and Beyond," The Brookings Institution, February 2014.)

The implications of the past year's events, particularly Gezi Park and the December 17 corruption investigations, have damaged the AKP with some voters who are wary of the ruling party's lack of tolerance for dissent. Yet while dissatisfaction with Erdogan and the AKP is more paramount than in previous years, the political opposition is woefully unable to coalesce that sentiment into an electoral advantage. The main opposition parties CHP and MHP continue to appeal to their core Kemalist and nationalist constituencies and little else. Meanwhile, the BDP has limited influence outside the country's

Kurdish community. This is why the hopes for an Abdullah Gul presidency in August remain so potent for Turks across the political spectrum. His popularity is indicative of the lack of credible opposition figures capable of countering the prime minister's cult of personality.

As it stands, the reliable core of AKP voters will turn out in force. Seeing all challenges to the prime minister as conspiratorial plots, both foreign and domestic, the AKP's conservative Sunni electorate can be relied upon to deliver at the ballot box. (Dombey, "Turkey local elections turn into test of support for Erdogan," The Financial Times, 14 March 2014.)

Those running against AKP candidates are not under the banner of Fethullah Gulen, but their own political parties. The Gulen-AKP split, while weakening the ruling party, does not equal a victory for its opponents.

One race that is worth watching is Istanbul's mayoral contest, with CHP politician Mustafa Sarigul. The current mayor of the Sisli District in Istanbul, Sarigul has gained momentum at a local and national level. His campaign has mainly focused on countering the massive public works projects taking place in and around the ancient Ottoman capital city. He has taken particular aim at the third airport and Istanbul canal projects, saying they were unnecessary. Secular and urban Turkish citizens are watching the race closely in hopes that someone may have finally emerged who can counter Erdogan. Sarigul's hopes are pinned on capturing the momentum from last year's Gezi Park events, which were originally small protests against the AKP's continued development of Istanbul's green spaces. Yet the AKP still has a formidable political machine, so Sarigul's only hope is to unite CHP and nationalist MHP voters who are commonly split.

While the race will be tighter than the AKP is used to, Sarigul is unlikely to succeed in his bid. Though the battle for Istanbul may be lost for him in the short term, a strong showing by the charismatic CHP politician has the potential to be an official coming out party on the national level.

Gulen-AKP split and the United States

Fethullah Gulen, once reclusive and rare to speak on the record, has obviously been troubled by the government's turn against the Hizmet Movement.

In an op-ed with The Financial Times, he pointedly condemned the ruling party's authoritarian bent, saying "...the dominance in politics that was once enjoyed by the military now appears to have been replaced by hegemony of the executive. A dark shadow has been cast over achievements of the past decade – the result of insidious profiling of certain groups of Turkish citizens for their views, constant shuffling of civil servants for political convenience, and an unprecedented subjugation of the media, the judiciary and civil society." (Gulen, "Turkey needs a new constitution to save its democracy," The Financial Times, 10 March 2014.)

The conflict between the AKP and members of the Movement continues to play out behind the scenes, though its ramifications are far reaching. In international affairs, a chill has set in between the United States and Turkey. The AKP and the prime minister believe the U.S. is behind the Pennsylvania-based Gulen's actions. The administration of President Barack Obama has little leverage over the situation, as Gulen is far from the religious fanatic his opponents paint him as and cannot be simply ejected from the country on a whim.

Obama has scant reason to do such a thing, even if it were possible. Statements and actions of the prime minister and his government over the past year have deeply troubled the U.S. As an act of political convenience, Erdogan alludes to Western involvement in plots to undermine his government. He has even gone so far as to accuse the American ambassador of stirring up the Gezi Park protests.

The signing of a missile defense system agreement with a Chinese firm that has already been sanctioned for sales of arms to Iran, Syria and North Korea was a significant step in worsening U.S.-Turkey relations. If it goes through, Turkish sub-contractors working with the Chinese firm risk sanctions by the U.S. (Stein, "MIT, Gulen, and the Chinese Missile Defense Deal: Questions about Cyber Security," www.TurkeyWonk.wordpress.com, 11 March 2014.)

Conversations between Obama and Erdogan, occurring regularly in the early days of the Arab Spring, are now infrequent. Following the most recent call, the White House issued a strong rebuke of Erdogan's take on the discussion. In a televised interview, Erdogan said he had received a sympathetic response from the American president regarding Gulen's presence in the U.S.

The next day, the White House issued a terse correction to the prime minister's representation of the discussion, saying "the response attributed to President Obama with regard to Mr. Gulen is not accurate." (Gutman, "White House says Turkey's Erdogan misrepresenting his phone call with Obama," www.McClatchyDC.com, 7 March 2014.)

Aside from the occasional conspiratorial allusion by the prime minister when he needs to drum up his political base, a public rupture is unlikely. This is due in large part to the fact that the two military allies continue to have more to gain by keeping the relationship going than they do in severing it. Turkey benefits mightily from its membership in the NATO alliance, and with the situation in Ukraine, U.S. naval navigation in the Black Sea makes relations with Ankara as paramount as ever. But it should not be surprising that American officials would welcome a change in leadership in Ankara as the elections draw near and political fortunes become clearer.

Turkey and the Crimea

With 97 percent in favor of the separatist referendum, Crimea essentially became an independent state which will soon be annexed by the Russian Federation. Just days before the vote, the political representatives of the Tatars of Crimea, the Mejlis, called on the United Nations to intervene in Crimea to avoid bloodshed and ensure Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Entreaties by Moscow, which sent its own ethnic Tatar representatives to the peninsula to negotiate acquiescence to the referendum, ultimately failed.

Leading Crimean Tatar politician Mustafa Djemilev called the vote a "circus". In a later interview, he told reporters that "It's a huge strike against the world order, an insolent challenge to the entire humanity." ("Shishkin and Troianovski, "Crimean Tatars Appear to

Boycott Voting,” The Wall Street Journal, 17 March 2014.)

In the context of the 97 percent vote for independence, the Crimean Tatars, at 12 percent of the peninsula’s population, appear to have largely stayed away from the ballot box.

For Turkey, concerns are twofold regarding the developing situation in Ukraine. Given their historical ties to the Ottoman Empire, as well as an estimated three million voters of Tatar descent in the Turkish Republic, the AKP government must monitor the situation closely. Already, many Turkish media outlets are drawing comparisons to the early days of the breakup of Yugoslavia. Memories of massacres by Serbian Chetniks against Balkan Muslims remain fresh in Turkey, and reports of clashes between pro-Russian and Tatar groups only exacerbate those fears.

The prime minister has called Russian President Vladimir Putin to express his concern for the Tatars’ well-being. The prime minister has been uncharacteristically reserved over Ukraine, a stark

difference for the typically polemical AKP leader. This is due mainly to Turkey’s reliance on energy imports from Russia. As Turkey’s account deficit swells from these imports, neither the prime minister nor his diplomatic corps are willing to antagonize Moscow.

Chilly relations between Washington and Ankara are also a variable in this regard. Erdogan’s poor relationship with Turkey’s western allies has left him with little reason to antagonize Russia. Turkey has little to gain and much to lose in confronting Russia in its takeover in Crimea.

The situation will have to become dire for the Tatars before leaders in Ankara speak with their usual zeal.

In reality, Turkey has little leverage over the situation aside from the ability to close the Dardanelles, and even this would be highly unlikely unless full scale war broke out. The Turkish government will let its NATO allies do the criticizing, while keeping its head down. For the moment, that is the best option it has.

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