



# TURKEY UPDATE

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## **A STRONGER SECOND MANDATE FOR ERDOGAN AND THE JDP**

By winning a decisive victory in the July 22 parliamentary elections, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) firmly underlined its stunning success in the November 2002 elections - achieved only a year after its establishment - and consolidated its clear superiority over its rivals. Having increased its support by gaining the votes of nearly half the Turks who went to the polls, the JDP can legitimately claim durability as well as formidable strength in the turbulent world of Turkish politics.

The new mandate represents a personal victory for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the leader of the JDP, who confirmed during his second successful electoral campaign that his charisma, popular touch and seemingly inexhaustible energy and enthusiasm make him the dominant political personality in Turkey. His declaration during the campaign that he would resign if the JDP did not win was a vivid illustration of his immense confidence in his ability to connect with the Turkish voters. Although the JDP might well have won the elections without him, it surely could not have won as comfortably if Erdogan had not been leading the party ticket.

The most remarkable aspect of these elections was not the reconfirmation of the JDP as the leading political party or even the unexpectedly large percentage of Turks who chose to back the JDP, but the relative calm and predictability that characterized the entire campaign as well as its immediate aftermath. This is noteworthy as the elections had been forced on the JDP in early May in an atmosphere of acute crisis following mass demonstrations by secularists, a virtual demarche by the Turkish General Staff (TGS) and the intervention of the Constitutional Court which had led to the abandonment of its effort to use its majority in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) to elevate Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul to the presidency to replace outgoing president Ahmet Necdet Sezer.

It is almost difficult to recall that the outset of the campaign was accompanied by feverish speculation in Ankara that the TGS might take additional steps to influence the result of the elections or to undertake a military intervention in northern Iraq to prompt a postponement in order to block the JDP and that the judiciary might begin a process to close down the JDP like its Islamist predecessors. In fact, there were no surprise moves by the military or judicial establishments while the enthusiasm displayed by the crowds which had flocked to the secular marches was notable by its absence.

With the elections over, Turkey has passed what Erdogan has characterized as its democracy test. However, while the campaign has fortunately not exacerbated the dangerous polarization, it failed to contribute to the achievement of a new national consensus relating to the accommodation with the strictly secular system of the increasingly visible religiosity of a growing number of citizens and their support for a party sensitive to their preferences. Consequently, having shown that it could govern effectively while maintaining and even increasing its mass support despite the open skepticism and outright hostility of opponents who are fearful of its Islamist roots, the JDP will now face fresh challenges conceivably as great as those it confronted after the previous elections.

## **ANATOMY AND IMPLICATIONS OF A DECISIVE VICTORY**

The percentages of the vote received in the July 2007 elections and the seat distribution in the 550-seat TGNA and the November 2002 results are as follows:

	<b>2007</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2002</b>
	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Seats in TGNA</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Seats in TGNA</b>
<b>JDP</b>	46.5	341	34.3	363
<b>RPP</b>	20.8	112	19.4	178
<b>NAP</b>	14.3	70	8.3	0
<b>Independent Kurds (Ran as DEHAP in 2002)</b>	4.8	22	6.2	0
<b>DP (Ran as TPP in 2002)</b>	5.4	0	9.6	0
<b>YP</b>	3	0	7.2	0
<b>CP</b>	2.3	0	2.5	0
<b>Other Independents</b>		4		9

From the outset of the campaign, most opinion polls suggested that the JDP was likely to retain and possibly exceed its 34 percent vote in the 2002 elections. The favorable ratings, which were to be sustained throughout the campaign, reflected the impressive organization and nationwide grassroots operation of the JDP, as well as of Erdogan’s political skills, which were clearly superior to the JDP’s rivals. They may also have reflected the impact of Erdogan’s decision to refrain from re-nominating close to half of the JDP parliamentary group in the July 2007 slate -many of them with links to Turkey’s Islamist movement - in order to bring in new candidates from a broad spectrum to widen the party’s appeal and to project a fresher image.

However, even the best party organization requires effective messages to be successful and the entire JDP machine led by Erdogan was able to focus in a highly disciplined manner on two such themes throughout the campaign. The primary message to voters emphasized the importance of preserving the stability of Turkey’s first single party government in over a decade to sustain the financial recovery and overall development in the economy as the JDP slogan ‘There is no

stopping, we have to continue on our way' underlined. Erdogan and his colleagues constantly stressed the high growth rates and improved personal income under the JDP, while pointedly reminding voters of the economic difficulties which had characterized the period before the 2002 elections. This message was duly amplified by most sections of the influential Turkish media with close links to the domestic business sector which has benefited considerably from the improvement in the economy under the JDP. It was also echoed by foreign investors who have been making enormous profits by directing increasing amounts of funds into the Turkish stock market, treasury bills, high interest lira accounts and the banking sector as well as into privatized institutions.

In its other main theme, the JDP tirelessly stressed the 'injustice' perpetrated in the prevention of the election of Gul as concrete evidence of what it charged was its opponents' aim of denying the implementation of the political will of the Turkish people. This message had the effect of solidifying the backing for the JDP of its more devout supporters who greatly resented the negative focus on the Islamic headscarf worn by Mrs. Gul, while attracting the less observant who were persuaded that the opposition had been unfair. The theme was picked up by sections of the domestic media and most of the foreign media. In fact, much of the foreign comment went further than the JDP itself was inclined to go in portraying the election as a contest involving a minority trying to use secularism - with the not so discreet help of the powerful military establishment - to deny power to the majority.

The JDP was thus able to conduct a unique campaign which combined justifiable boasts of its achievements in government with expressions of resentment against its rivals in the political arena as well as beyond in a manner more reminiscent of an opposition party. The success of the strategy employed by Erdogan and the JDP was confirmed by the results which showed that the JDP did not only retain power but actually increased its vote to 46.6 percent representing a 12 percent and 5.5 million vote increase over its previous figures. While ruling parties in Turkey normally lose votes in elections, the JDP actually boosted its support and thus repeated a remarkable feat achieved only by the Democrat Party in the 1954 elections. However, with three parties instead of two entering the TGNA along with a greater number of independents, the JDP ended up with 22 fewer seats than in 2002.

While the effectiveness of Erdogan and the JDP is undeniable, successful political leaders and parties are only as good as their rivals allow them to be and the results of the election also reflected the disarray of the opposition. Although the JDP's main rival, the Republican People's Party (RPP) had long been pressing for early elections, when the abortive presidential process actually forced the JDP to the polls, the RPP proved to be surprisingly unprepared compared to the governing party. Clearly, expecting electoral benefits from the secular demonstrations in April and May and his own key role in denying the JDP the presidency, the septuagenarian RPP leader, Deniz Baykal, built his campaign on the theme of preventing the JDP from further undermining Turkish secularism. Baykal also anticipated that his electoral alliance with the Democratic Left Party and the transfer of a number of high profile candidates from the center right would bolster the RPP. However, his failure to articulate a clear alternative to the JDP, particularly on how to help those who had not seen the benefits of the improvement in the macroeconomic figures, combined with a proven lack of appeal to voters - Baykal had resigned as RPP leader in 1999 after failing to get his party over the 10 percent national barrier - meant that the RPP only increased its vote by 1.5 percent while getting 66 seats fewer than in the last election.

Consequently, with the support of just over one fifth of the Turkish electorate, the RPP has to ask itself whether it can ever win an election under Baykal and, more fundamentally, what exactly it can offer the Turkish voters. Having metamorphosed from the authoritarian single party governing Turkey between 1923 and 1950, through a brief advocacy of social democracy under Bulent Ecevit to its current incoherent combination of virtually xenophobic patriotism and opposition to liberal economics, the RPP seems unsure where it is heading. The immediate post-election comment by one of Baykal's loyal lieutenants, Onur Oymen, that the electorate's vote was 'inexplicable' indicates the dimensions of the RPP's problems.

Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the National Action Party (NAP) had also entered the elections with a record of resignation after a failure at the polls, in his case after the 2002 elections which the NAP had entered as part of the governing coalition but had failed to gain parliamentary representation. Tapping into the undeniable nationalist surge which has been sweeping Turkey, the NAP was able to get back into the TGNA with just over 14 percent and 70 seats. However, the NAP was unable to gain as much resonance as it surely hoped for its primary message that the JDP, which it alleged was under 'foreign influence,' was unable to confront the threat from separatist terrorism perpetrated by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) based in northern Iraq. Bahçeli's public promise to hang the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, underlined by his display of a symbolic noose at meetings, was effectively countered by Erdogan through his own use of nationalist symbols and slogans as well as his pointed reminder to Bahçeli that he was part of the government which had decided not to execute Ocalan after his capture. While the NAP will undoubtedly make its voice heard in the TGNA, especially on the terrorism issue, it is not clear whether it has the potential to tap into sufficient additional votes to prove to be a real challenger to the JDP in the foreseeable future.

The JDP also benefited from the ignominious failure of yet another attempt at unity between its rivals in the center right, the True Path Party (TPP) and the Motherland Party (MP). Their much-trumpeted merger, announced in the immediate aftermath of the presidential votes in the TGNA which were boycotted by both parties, quickly collapsed in a welter of bitter recriminations between Mehmet Agar, the leader of the TPP, and Erkan Mumcu, the leader of the MP, leaving the TPP to run alone under the Democrat Party (DP) label while the MP sat out the elections. With the loss of crucial momentum, Agar had little chance of reestablishing his party in the center right and his failure to exceed 5.5 percent has bolstered the JDP's claim to ownership of the middle ground in Turkish politics dominated for almost two decades by the TPP and the MP. With Agar having announced his resignation, there is speculation that the TPP may turn to former leader Tansu Ciller for salvation, while the MP may be facing a renewed takeover bid by its own former leader, Mesut Yilmaz, who won election as an independent. Ample evidence if any were needed that the future is likely to be bleak for both parties.

As the Youth Party (YP) of controversial businessman Cem Uzan and the traditionalist Islamist Contentment Party (CP) were reduced to the margins of Turkish politics in the elections, Erdogan's only other serious challenge was from Kurdish politicians who chose to run as independent candidates in the predominantly Kurdish southeast region instead of on a party slate certain to fall below the national threshold. Although the JDP polled strongly in the southeast, these politicians still won 22 seats which previously went to the JDP through the electoral redistribution system. They now intend to regroup in the TGNA behind the label of the Democratic Society Party (DSP) to which they belonged. However, while they will help to broaden the representative nature of the TGNA, they run the risk of being portrayed by the NAP and, to only slightly lesser extent the RPP, as apologists for the PKK, a position which could create serious problems for them in the event of future PKK terrorism.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Just as after the 2002 elections, Erdogan chose to strike a theme of magnanimity and conciliation in his victory speech to JDP supporters on the night of the elections. After thanking the voters for their continued confidence in the JDP, he noted that “democracy had emerged strengthened” from the elections and that the real winners were “Turkey, the nation’s future and stability.” Reaching out to those who had not voted for the JDP, Erdogan said that he “respected their choice” and that they had “no reason to be concerned” as he “understood the message they had given at the ballot box.” Pledging that the JDP would “protect the diversity that enhanced democratic life,” Erdogan significantly cited secularism as one of the “common values that united all Turks” and referred to the goal of the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, of “reaching the level of contemporary civilization.”

It is clear that Erdogan is signaling his desire to avoid a return to the dangerous tensions of the pre-election period, which had even witnessed discussion of a possible coup. However, it remains to be seen whether his opponents in the political arena will respond to his olive branch. Many of those who voted for the other parties still harbor fears about the ultimate intentions of the JDP relating to Turkish secularism and it is unlikely that the leaders of those parties will quietly accept its supremacy in a new spirit of goodwill notwithstanding their current weakness vis a vis the JDP.

In fact, even more than the reaction of its rivals to the new arithmetic in the TGNA, it is the attitude of the TGS to the strengthened position of the JDP that will determine the political temperature. The TGS may have expected the JDP to be weakened by its reverse in the presidential election process and that the combined votes of the opposition parties would deny Erdogan an overall majority. However, with the JDP having apparently benefited from the confrontation with the TGS, the military establishment has to decide how to interact with the JDP government in its second term. Its stance on the election of a new president within thirty days of the convening of the new TGNA in early August and, more specifically, on the possible re-nomination of Gul, is likely to be a strong indicator of the TGS approach. Although Chief of Staff Yasar Buyukanit stated on July 30 that “the views of the TGS did not change from day to day” and that the “TGS stood by its previous statements,” it is possible that the still-unrevealed understandings that may have been reached in the Erdogan-Buyukanit meeting on May 4 could help to avert a repeat of the dangerous confrontation of April 27-28.

If he can manage to avoid renewed serious domestic tensions over the presidency, Erdogan’s immediate attention is likely to focus on the PKK threat from northern Iraq. Having avoided making a decision during the campaign on sending forces beyond the Turkish-Iraqi border to attack PKK bases as Buyukanit had publicly recommended, Erdogan will inevitably come under increasing pressure to act if PKK terrorism continues. Although he has said that Turkey would not seek the permission of the United States to protect itself from terrorism, Erdogan nevertheless needs to take into account Washington’s continued opposition to Turkish military action, which would further complicate the current situation in Iraq for the United States, along with all the other possible implications of military action.

At a broader level, Erdogan has to determine how best to conduct Turkey’s important relationship with the United States. When the JDP was elected, the Bush Administration was only in its second year and Erdogan was careful throughout his first term in endeavoring to maintain a working

relationship with President George Bush despite serious tensions caused by the American intervention in Iraq. However, more recently, Erdogan was disappointed by the initial reluctance of the Bush Administration to support him after the TGS declaration on April 27 and its continuing inability to deliver on promises of concrete steps on the PKK presence in northern Iraq. Consequently, recognizing that his new mandate will stretch beyond the end of the Bush presidency, Erdogan might choose to pursue a more nuanced relationship with Washington between now and the 2008 American elections. With polls confirming that most Turks have an extremely negative view of the Bush Administration, Erdogan could find it easier than before to defy Washington on northern Iraq or on the possibility of military action against Iran.

Erdogan also has to make urgent decisions on Turkey's other crucial relationship, namely with the European Union (EU). Having reaffirmed Turkey's commitment to the goal of EU membership after the elections, Erdogan must find a way to reinvigorate the accession process. Turkey's domestic preoccupations during recent months, combined with growing opposition to Turkish membership in the EU - now spearheaded by the new French President Nicolas Sarkozy - led to a perceptible slowing down of the process and Erdogan may find it difficult to reverse the trend. While the EU Commission remains fully committed to completing the negotiations with Turkey, it is inevitably running into complications created by the membership in the EU of Cyprus which are compounded by the covert or less covert support for the Greek Cypriots from other EU members. In view of the significance of the EU factor for the JDP government in the Turkish domestic political equation, it is easy to understand Erdogan's desire to proceed on the path to membership but much more difficult to see how he will clear that path.

Whatever he decides to do in foreign affairs or domestic politics, Erdogan will now essentially be making the decisions on his own. When he created the JDP out of the discredited and demoralized Islamist movement with Gul, Bulent Arinc and Abdullatif Sener, Erdogan was *primus inter pares*. After steadily consolidating his leadership during the past six years, Erdogan now has as much control of his party as Adnan Menderes and Turgut Ozal in their heyday. Having shaped the new JDP parliamentary party through the candidate selection process, Erdogan will now fashion a cabinet to his own liking. Consequently, just as in the campaign, he will have to take the responsibility for failures as well as successes. However, unless his opponents find a leader who matches his abilities, develop party organizations as good as the JDP's, the remarkable cohesion of the JDP begins to fray, the economy takes an unexpected turn for the worse or there is an unlikely but irresistible extra-parliamentary challenge, Erdogan will almost certainly deal with successes rather than failures for some time.

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