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## **Elections of November 3: A victory for Turkish democracy**

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The results of the parliamentary elections of November 3 can best be described as a victory for democracy in Turkey for a number of reasons. Firstly, both the election campaign and the election itself took place without any serious incident, and in a very orderly manner. The participation rate of 78 percent was slightly lower than previous elections, but satisfactorily high judged by international norms. These should be noted as signs of the democratic maturity of the Turkish electorate.

Secondly, **despite perhaps the world's worst election system** (a system based on the principle of proportional representation with a 10 percent threshold which produces neither stable government nor fair representation), **democracy worked**. The government of Mr. Bulent Ecevit, composed of three parties with different agendas, which led the country into its worst financial crisis ever, was brought down, and a new, a single party government rose to power for the first time in 11 years.

When the parliament decided for early elections last August, the aim was to overcome the continuing quarrel in the coalition government, and pave the way for a government that could work in harmony and get rid of the political uncertainties that were adversely affecting the implementation of the economic stability program, and the political reforms necessary for EU membership. Elections have indeed served that purpose, and perhaps brings to an end the period since 1991 of unstable coalition governments composed of parties with widely different ideologies and priorities. Turkish party system, in growing fragmentation since the

1970s, can now be on the way back to a system dominated by two parties with AKP on the center-right and CHP, led by Mr. Deniz Baykal, on the center-left.

Elections of November 3 is of historical significance in a way that resembles the elections of 1950 and 1983. On all three occasions, parties not favored by the political and economic establishment have won, this last time despite efforts by the establishment to stop it.

Thirdly, **thanks to perhaps the world's worst election system**, a generation of incompetent, corrupt, and wornout political leaders were swept away from the political arena, hopefully for good.

Fourthly, Turkish electorate did not give much support to a nationalistic populism of the cheapest kind marketed with free music concerts and lunches. Young Party (GP) led by the media tycoon Mr. Cem Uzan managed to garner not more than 7 percent of the total vote.

The victory of democracy in the elections of November 3 in Turkey is however is a **shadowed one**. Due to the 10 percent threshold, 45 percent of the electorate that voted for 16 different parties will not be represented in the coming parliament, and it is likely that some of the losers will soon declare the new government illegitimate, because it is supported by only 55 percent of the people. The 10 percent threshold was not lowered to internationally normal levels (of 4 or 5 percent) despite all the warnings about its undemocratic nature by political scientists, and even by the EU Commission's Progress Reports on Turkey's Accession to the EU. It may be argued that the government parties fell into the very trap which was designed to stop pro-Islam and/or pro-Kurdish parties from acquiring parliamentary representation.

The victory of democracy in the elections of November 3 in Turkey is shadowed also by the fact that the leader of the winner party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan cannot lead the government to be formed. Mr Erdogan, a former mayor of Istanbul, was barred highly controversially from running for a seat in the parliament, on the grounds of a conviction in 1997 for reading a poem that, according to a court, incited religious hatred. The Constitutional Court is yet to decide whether he can remain as the party chairman or even as a member in the party.

There are many factors that have contributed to the landslide victory of AKP, which won nearly 35 percent of the vote and, **thanks to the world's worst election system**, nearly two thirds of the seats in the parliament, just 3 seats short of the majority needed for constitutional amendments.

It would be misleading to think that the votes of AKP are mainly those cast in protest against the incompetent, corrupt and wornout politicians who ran the former government. Protest vote is only part of the picture. AKP is not a recently organized, "15 months old" party. It has its roots in a social movement that was carefully organized since the early 1990s, and has an organization that in some ways resemble the mass parties of Western Europe. AKP is a mass party of Turkish style with strong roots especially among the urban poor, and it is very likely to remain as one of the main political actors of Turkey for a long time to come. AKP has managed to bring together urban poor, industrialists, and urban educated in an organization based on traditional solidarities. It has politically mobilized women to an unprecedented scale.

For those who would like to have a clearer understanding of the social movement AKP rests on, I strongly recommend a fresh out of the print book by a Boston University social anthropologist who has spent many years researching in Turkey since the 1970s. **Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics** (University of Washington Press, Seattle & London: 2002) by **Jenny B. White** explains why the political movement with an Islamist populist message has kept growing despite the fact that its parties have been closed down one after the other.

Mr Erdogan, Mr. Abdullah Gul (a likely candidate for premiership), and their generation (and **not** Mr. Necmettin Erbakan, former leader of the Turkish Islamist movement, and his close circle of followers) are the people who have masterminded the social movement and the political organization which made its first big impact on Turkish political scene with the victory of the Welfare Party (RP) in the local elections of 1994, and soon after in the parliamentary elections of 1995, when the party garnered 21 percent of the vote, and became the leading party of the country.

That same generation of politicians led by Mr. Erdoğan and Mr. Gul, or the so-called “reformist” wing of the RP is also responsible for the initiation of the remarkable ideological shift from an Islamist discourse that aimed at the establishment of an Islamic political and economic order to a discourse which emphasizes respect for human rights, and the establishment of an economic and political system based on European standards. That transformation began with the Virtue Party (FP), which was formed soon after the banning of RP in 1998, and Mr. Erdoğan and his followers did not hesitate to throw the burden of the Erbakan and his clique off their backs when the opportunity arose with the banning of FP in 2000. They split to form AKP in 2001, thereby giving the first signals to the country that they may mean what they say. Now in power, they will have an opportunity to prove that they really mean what they say.

Behind the remarkable ideological transformation Mr Erdogan and his followers have initiated lies the understanding that the overwhelming majority of the Turkish population is strongly attached to democracy and secularism as much as it is attached to Muslim religious values. They have realized through bitter experiences, and through participation in competitive politics that if they want to lead the nation, they have to move their party from a marginal Islamist position to a Conservative, center-right one. With its current discourse, AKP can best be described as a Muslim Democratic Party or a “Conservative Democratic Party” as its spokesmen call it, who add that it is necessary to put “an end to exploitation of religion”.

The remarkable ideological transformation of its leadership justifies the argument that AKP itself is a victory for Turkish democracy. Democracy educates radicals, and transforms them into moderates. Turkey can be proud of its democracy that works despite many deficiencies and shortcomings, which AKP promises to correct in an effort not just for the sake of joining the EU, but to make the country a democracy with all of its basic principles and institutions in place.

Turkey’s recent elections have also given an important message to the whole world. It is simply the message that Islam does **not at all** mean fundamentalism, terrorism, backwardness and fanaticism... Islam is one of the great religions of the world, and is open to all sorts of interpretations like all other religions. A Muslim nation can be both secular and democratic, and liberal democracy is perfectly compatible with Islam.

AKP is taking over the responsibility of government under difficult circumstances. The financial crisis is somewhat under control, thanks largely to the reforms put into force by the former economy minister, Mr. Kemal Dervis, and the markets have responded quite positively to the prospect of a single party government. Increasing poverty and unemployment, however, have to be addressed while the stabilization program supported by the IMF is continued. The reforms to fulfill the “Copenhagen Political Criteria” are to be implemented, and a solution to the Cyprus problem has to be soon found if Turkey is to get a date for start of negotiations for membership in the EU.

AKP has a lot of experience in running municipalities, but is likely to suffer at least initially from a lack of experience in the running of a government. The state bureaucracy and primarily the military, which suspects AKP for having a hidden Islamist agenda will be watching carefully over every step the government takes, and is likely to try to impose its own agenda especially in foreign and security policies. The business establishment and the powerful media tycoons, who, together with the civilian-military high bureaucracy, constitute an “iron triangle” of power may be upset if AKP government takes measures favoring business groups which have traditionally been excluded from power and/or attempts to establish fair competition in the economy. Politics, after all, are about economics before all.

The advantages of AKP, on the other hand, lie primarily in the strength of its powerful mandate. AKP leaders and spokesmen are careful to emphasize that they will seek consensus with the opposition parties and civil society institutions before introducing any major policy. The only parliamentary opposition party, CHP led by Mr. Deniz Baykal, has declared it will follow a cooperative approach in its relations with the governing party. Mr. Baykal has stated that CHP will support the positive steps taken by the AKP. Both parties stand for a full implementation of economic and EU reforms. Turkey, in the first week of November 2002, is full of optimism and strongly hopes for sustained stability in both politics and the economy.