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TURKISH LOCAL ELECTIONS OF MARCH 28, 2004: A PROSPECTIVE EVALUATION

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One would be hard pressed to claim that March 2004 local elections in Turkey have generated much uncertainty or excitement. Unlike previous ones, these local elections have not dominated the public agenda until the last few weeks. From the very beginning of the campaign period, it was clear to the enthusiasts of Turkish electoral politics that the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*-AKP) and the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*-CHP) would be the two dominant parties in the elections. What remained uncertain was the size of these parties' gains or losses relative to their vote shares in the general election of November 2002.

The much-publicized pre-election polls uniformly predicted unbelievably large gains of support for AKP, while projecting a level of support for CHP similar to its November 2002 vote share. No other party in the polls came even close to these two parties (See Table below). However, these were local elections after all. Their dynamics are quite different from a general election and their results are even harder to forecast than the often unpredictable general election. Speculative assessments of what were in the making for Turkey in the aftermath of the elections nevertheless continued. Some were doomsday scenarios while others were as rosy as any optimist could ever dream of. Once again, all are to be forgotten for being almost completely wrong in the morning of the 29th of March.

POLLING FIRMS' PREDICTIONS FOR MARCH 2004*

	A&G	ANAR	POLLMARK	SESAK	Provincial Assembly Election Results March 2004**	General Election Results November 2002
AKP	49,1	45,2	51,3	48,9	41,6	34,43
CHP	19,1	23	18,2	16,8	18,2	19,41
MHP	8,3	6,4	5,5	5,8	10,4	8,35
DYP	7,1	6,6	6,5	6,4	9,9	9,54
SHP/DEHAP	5,7	6,2	4,1	6,8	5,1	6,14
SP	3,7	2,3	1,8	-	4	2,49
GP	1,7	5,3	5,4	3,4	2,6	7,25
ANAP	2,1	1,6	1,4	-	2,5	5,11
DSP	1,2	-	-	-	2,1	1,22
BBP	-	-	-	-	1,2	1,02

*Source: *Radikal* daily newspaper, March 30, 2004, p. 7

**Source: *Hurriyet* daily newspaper webpage <http://www.hurriyetim.com.tr/secim2004/default.aspx?igm=1>

With respect to the share of votes received by the parties, the only correct prediction to be “appreciated” is that AKP has indeed increased, while CHP decreased, their vote shares from November 2002 to March 2004.¹ However, AKP remained well below 50%, which we were led to believe to be handily exceeded prior to elections. On the other hand, CHP’s vote share shrunk by a larger margin than expected according to most of the pre-election polls.

Contrary to expectations, the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*-MHP) as well as the True Path Party (*Dogru Yol Partisi*-DYP) received respectable shares of the vote with both parties receiving close to 10%. The pro-Islamist competitor of AKP, the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*-SP), the Union of Democratic Forces (*Demokratik Güc Birliği*) of the Social Democratic People’s Party (*Sosyal Demokrat Halk Partisi*-SHP) and the Kurdish ethnicity-based Democratic People’s Party (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*-DEHAP) all received around 4 to 5% of the vote. The Young Party (*Genc Parti*-GP), the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*-ANAP) and the Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Parti*-DSP) each netted less than 3%.

As expected, the March 2003 participation rate was lower than the November 2002 level at 74% down from 79.1%. Plurality rule applied in mayoral elections and the already expected large margin of victory for AKP have both contributed to lower participation rate. However, the total number of votes received by AKP in the provincial general assembly elections increased by about 1.5 million compared to November 2002 general elections. One could speculate endlessly about the preferences of those who chose not to cast their votes. Instead, we should underline the fact that a significant group of voters wait to be mobilized by party organizations, and these voters could play a significant role in changing the electoral balance in future elections.

The geographical spread of the AKP vote shows a striking domination all over the country with 58 municipalities captured. CHP, in contrast, won a total of 8 municipalities,

¹ In local elections it is customary to compare the provincial general assembly vote shares, which are seen to move in close relation with the partisan attachments of the electorate, with the general election results, rather than the mayoral elections, which are seen to be affected more by personality of the candidates. Unless otherwise noted I will also follow this custom in the ensuing analyses.

all being in coastal Anatolia and Thrace (Izmir, Artvin, Canakkale, Mugla, Trabzon, Mersin, Edirne, Kirklareli). MHP (Kastamonu, Igdir, Nigde, Gumushane) and SHP (Batman, Hakkari, Diyarbakir, Sirnak) won 4 municipalities each. DSP (Bartın, Eskişehir, Ordu) won 3, DYP (Elazığ) won 1 and SP (Mardin) won 1, while independent candidates won 2 municipalities (Tunceli, Ardahan). One overall pattern that emerged from these results is that AKP's municipality losses were in the most developed coastal provinces and the least developed southeastern provinces where either strong personalities ran as mayoral candidates or the ethnic Kurdish vote predominantly supported AKP's competitors.

The underlying theme in local elections of March 28th has been the perceived success of AKP since it assumed the executive office in November 2002. Despite two considerable foreign policy difficulties at the very start of this tenure, AKP successfully managed to maintain credibility through its keeping inflation under control and overseeing 5.8% economic growth in 2003. On the European front, AKP's December 2002 efforts to obtain a firm commitment for the start of membership negotiations did not result in much of anything other than a "date for a date" settlement. Turkey's bid for membership would reach the negotiation stage only at the end of 2004, depending on the progress in legal adjustments for compliance with the Copenhagen criteria and their implementation. The first few weeks of 2003 also witnessed AKP's hesitant foreign policy on the then fast developing Iraqi conflict. The AKP-dominated Turkish Parliament unexpectedly failed to support the government's recommendation to allow the United States to deploy troops to northern Iraq through Turkish territory. Rising tensions between Ankara and Washington peaked in July 2003 when US troops arrested a small Turkish military liaison unit in northern Iraq. The strategic alliance between Turkey and the United States that had once seemed rock solid was then, at best, questionable. However, on domestic front, the government's popularity seems to have increased because of its ultimate non-intervention in the Iraqi war. One important consequence of these uncertainties in foreign policy was a strict adherence to the economic austerity program, which resulted in a noteworthy improvement of the economy.

As a result, at the beginning of 2004, surveys showed significant rise in optimistic economic expectations for the future. A recently released survey supported by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (*Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etudler Vakfi-TESEV*) reports that 55% of the respondents expects better economic conditions over the next one year while only 18% expects deterioration. More significant, 65 % reports improvement in the economy over the next three years while only 14% expects deterioration over the same period. Similarly, ratings of central government service delivery nearly doubled and trust in central government institutions significantly increased compared to similar measurements in 2000 (<http://www.tesev.org.tr/>). Turkish voters do not typically give foreign policy issues much consideration in their decision to vote. However, strong support for EU membership seems to have helped maintain support for AKP's commitment to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria and resolve the conflict in Cyprus. Relative improvements in relations with the US also helped relieve the potential feeling of isolation in world politics among the electorate. Consequently, efforts of the opposition to turn the local elections into a vote of confidence for the AKP government could not have resulted in anything other than an increased level of support for the governing party.

One immediate question that comes to mind is the extent to which these election results can be taken as an indication of potential general election success by AKP. Municipality elections in Turkey exhibit a significant degree of split-ticket voting depending on the personal appeal of the candidates in different localities. Examples of such split-ticket voting can be found in 1999 elections when general and local elections were held on the same day. Similar patterns in the most recent local elections are also apparent when examining mayoral election results across districts and provincial general assembly results. Considering the fact that prior to elections expectations for AKP's success were widespread, many credible candidates chose to run under AKP rather than any other opposing party banners, thus contributing to the even larger credibility of AKP compared to its opposition. Moreover, AKP successfully used in its pre-election campaign the commonly held view that in the competition to use the central government resources, municipalities under AKP control stood a better chance than others.

All considered, one might be led to conclude that AKP's local election success could not fully translate into a general election victory. Survey findings, however, contradict this view, suggesting that general election tendencies among the electorate may be in larger favor of AKP compared to local election preferences for its mayoral candidates. Methodologically, asking people of their party preferences in a hypothetical general election at the time of local election campaign has its limitations. Nevertheless, answers to general election party preferences clearly show an even heavier leaning towards AKP. One factor that supports this view is that in a general election milieu, the organizational, programmatic and leadership appeal of the opposition parties may be lower compared to their credibility in running smaller municipality administrations.

The fact that AKP's number of votes has significantly increased in local elections despite lower voter participation rates than November 2002 indicates that AKP continues to carve into centrist electoral constituencies. Among its center-right competitors, DYP remained stagnant just below 10% while ANAP's votes continued to shrink by about an additional 50%. On the other hand, right of center MHP managed to increase its share by about 25% compared to 2002. Some experts attribute this rise to the shrinking populist GP support. However, geographically speaking, MHP's and GP's support bases do not overlap at all. While MHP has predominantly a central Anatolian support base, GP receives its votes mostly from western coastal provinces. Micro survey evidence also suggests that the voter profiles of GP and MHP have very little in common. It is equally not plausible to claim that MHP voters from 2002 have totally remained loyal to MHP and its candidates in 2004. A more reasonable explanation is that AKP was able to attract voters from the centrist as well as right-of-center parties, including MHP. The fact that MHP was able to keep, and even increase, its vote share despite AKP's competition in the provincial general assembly votes is an indication of the organizational ability of MHP to mobilize and attract voters. Some experts in the media have claimed that this is due to uneasiness among the electorate concerning the developments on the Cyprus front. The above-referred survey supported by TESEV suggests that for the Turkish electorate, foreign policy issues, including the debate over the Cyprus conflict or issues under the EU adjustment process do not constitute an important concern for the urban electorate.

Despite significant losses of municipalities, center-left CHP and DSP's total vote shares remained almost constant compared to November 2002, thus rendering the assertions about a melting left support base devoid of much empirical support. On the other hand, the center-right, including the populist GP, lost about 6.9 percentage points of support

while right of center, including MHP and SP, gained about 3.6 percentage points compared to November 2002. If one takes AKP to be the successor of the pro-Islamist tradition of the National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*-MSP) of the 1970s, and the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*-RP) of the 1990s, then the electoral support behind the right-of-center seems to have expanded another 7.2 percentage points. However, if one is inclined to see AKP as a new brand center-right party in Turkish politics, then the above mentioned losses of ANAP, DYP and GP group are more than compensated by the gains of AKP. The resulting picture would then show a solid and dominant center-right in the country, totaling about 56.6% support level. It is true that early analyses of the November 2002 tended to classify AKP within the MSP-RP tradition. More recent debates, however, are at best inconclusive.

What is critical in AKP's classification along the conventional left-right continuum is surely the degree to which it is committed to the pro-Islamist agenda and traditionally conservative constituencies. The expanded electoral base of AKP may be enough to safely claim that its support cannot be taken as a reflection of rising Islamic vote in the country. The voters, who just over the last three years joined the AKP support base, come from a variety of centrist party bases and there is little basis for claiming that they were attracted to AKP on the basis of its emphasis on pro-Islamist issues. However, AKP voters still show a considerable degree of conservatism compared to competing party supporters. The content of this conservatism does include elements, which clearly see the banning of headscarves (*turban*) from higher education and administrative posts as an important issue to be resolved. Thus, they are clearly challenging the traditional secularist interpretations of the bases of the Republican regime. Similarly, demands for policy changes concerning the religious schools for preachers (*Imam Hatip Okullari*-IHO) are running high among some segments of AKP voters. However, it is questionable as to whether AKP leadership will choose to cater into these pro-Islamist challenges or rather remain ambiguous and irresponsive to these expectations and demands. The enlarged electoral base of AKP should allow party leadership more room to maneuver and resist these demands from segments of their electoral constituencies. Assuming that AKP leadership is not ideologically pre-committed to pro-Islamist policy preferences and relying on the observation that Turkish electorate is predominantly located around centrist positions in single or multi-dimensional political space, AKP seems to have more to gain by sticking to centrist positions and avoiding much association with the perceived extremist positions concerning the turban issue and IHOs. This is primarily because their newly gained voters are less likely to remain loyal if the AKP leadership chose to go down the path of allowing turban in the higher education system and act in response to the demands for looser regulations over the IHO students enrolling into the university system.

Since the recent increase in AKP support is primarily linked to widespread optimism about the economy, if the economy continues to perform acceptably well, it is unlikely that AKP support bases will disintegrate. Two potential threats to success on the economic front are; first, the likely developments in Cyprus referenda on both Turkish and Greek sides of the island concerning the Annan Plan, and second, the potential failure to secure the start of negotiations for the EU membership in December 2004 Summit. Failure in either one would signal to economic agents that an economic downturn is in the making and potentially spark the beginning of the end for AKP. In all likelihood, AKP leadership would not want to open yet another front of conflict with the opposition before Cyprus issue is settled and wait until the end of the year to see how the decision to start negotiations with Turkey goes. If the unexpected happens and no firm start date is

obtained, then AKP's electoral base is more likely to erode, and erode rapidly, depending on how the economy responds to such a negative outcome in Brussels. Then AKP's damage control policies might include some pro-Islamist signals to their core constituencies.

Another important issue related to the observed election results of March 2004 concerns the support level for the SHP/DEHAP election coalition. Compared to DEHAP's 2002 performance, this coalition suffered considerable losses. Some have commented, I think prematurely, that these results show the erosion of ethnic-based Kurdish electoral politics in the country. If one takes into account the municipal service expectations in the southeastern Anatolia provinces, these results could only be interpreted as a sign of a safe bet on the part of the voters for receiving the much needed attention and service delivery to the region by the AKP administration. Moreover, the unfolding developments in northern Iraq also could have had a decisive effect on voters' decision to support the ruling party in order to once again secure Ankara's attention and electoral interest until the next general election. The left-wing ideological emphasis of SHP might also be partly responsible for lower than expected support from Kurdish constituencies, which also have traditionally shown conservative cultural tendencies and have in the past supported the pro-Islamist RP in significant numbers. One should also note that in three years until the next general election, the already passed legal packages concerning the broadcasting and teaching of Kurdish will have sufficient opportunity to be fully implemented. The impact of this new sphere of civil freedoms on ethnically motivated electoral movements is at best unpredictable.

Following mass protests against any military involvement in Iraq prior to the start of the war, up until recently the Turkish public remained very much silent to recent momentous developments in the occupied Iraq and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The media coverage of both conflicts is typically shallow and secondary to domestic politics. However, in the aftermath of the local elections and as a result of even more earth-shattering developments in the region, public attention is likely to focus more on these two conflicts. Any potential public attention on Palestinian-Israeli conflict may be stressful to the AKP leadership due to their National View (*Milli Gorus*) roots. Over the last year, the press asserted an existence of uncomfortable links between Kurdish elements and Jewish business interests in northern Iraq. Such alleged links are obviously fertile ground for easily inciting disproportionate reactions in the public sphere by politicians under pressure from conservative circles. However, Turkish public opinion has in the past shown few signs of a prevailing anti-Israeli sentiment. For example, the synagogue bombings last fall had been unanimously condemned and the AKP leadership was comfortably forthcoming in its approach to the Jewish victims. Increased electoral self-confidence of AKP should help ease any potential pressures from the Islamist circles that could sever the cooperative links between Israel and Turkey.

On the Iraqi front, the Turkish public opinion would be almost single-mindedly focused on developments in northern Iraq. Potential portrayal of developments in Kurdish controlled northern Iraq, as a prelude to a Kurdish state in the minds of the laymen on the street, would be seen as a fertile ground by the opposition for building a nationalist reaction to AKP tenure. No opposition party could then afford to remain silent to a successful nationalist assault against AKP, and in addition to MHP, the centrist CHP and DYP would be tempted to join in the nationalist assault frenzy against the party. Such a development is already evident in the Cyprus policy debate in the country, despite the fact

that the outcome of the referenda on both sides is at best uncertain if not in favor of mutual approval of the Annan Plan.

In short, successful integration of AKP into the center-right tradition depends primarily on continued economic growth and stability. There are potential threats to AKP's centrist tendencies, especially from the nationalist camp, that could easily expand to include both the traditional right-of-center parties as well as the centrist right and left traditions. Such nationalist threat potential could be triggered by developments in the foreign policy front concerning policies over Cyprus and northern Iraq. Expectations concerning the future of the economy heavily depend on securely anchoring the country into the expanding EU, which in turn primarily depends on resolution of the conflict in Cyprus. Approval of the Annan Plan in Cyprus would certainly not guarantee the start of negotiations after the EU Summit in December. However, a disapproval of the plan could seriously hamper rosy expectations about EU membership and the future of the country as a whole, potentially leading to bottlenecks in the financing of the internal debt and subsequent economic crises. Consequently, the morning after the Cyprus referenda could be the beginning of a domino effect that, depending on the outcome of the referenda, could tip the balance totally in favor of or against the AKP government.

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