Turkey's Surprise Election Results - What Next?

In the run-up to last week's Turkish elections, most observers expected Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his AK Party to win a healthy two-thirds majority. Had the AKP won, it would have paved the way for President Erdogan to make sweeping changes to Turkey's constitution, potentially granting him dictatorial powers reminiscent of those of long-dead Ottoman Sultans.

In the run-up to last week's elections, there were two major schools of thought predicting a massive AKP victory. One was composed of those convinced that Erdogan would intervene behind the scenes and rig the elections in AKP's favor. The other was composed of people, many of whom are paid by President Erdogan's corrupt party machine, to believe and spread the word internationally that Erdogan's Turkey is a fantastically modern, democratic, free society on a path towards economic super-stardom.

The shocking game-changer for AKP fortunes came in the form of a spike in votes for a primarily Kurdish political party called HDP ("Peoples' Democratic Party) mostly located in Turkey's Southeastern region. The HDP picked up enough new seats to pass the minimum 10% threshold for any political party in Turkey to be included in government.

The fact that a predominantly Kurdish party could get this far was something of a shock to all. Many people are unaware that President Erdogan's forces have never really stopped oppressing the Kurds in Turkey's Southeast. This is largely because they only hear good news concerning President Erdogan's reasonably amicable relations with Iraqi Kurds, as well as meaningless announcements that President Erdogan has negotiated a tentative ceasefire with the terrorist Kurdistan Workers'Party or PKK through an agreement with its incarcerated former leader. Few have actually paid attention to the never-ceasing military and law-enforcement operations against Turkey's Kurds. After all, those who report bad news in Turkey risk losing their livelihood or even their lives in President Erdogan's Turkey.

For those who do not have time to read the lengthy background outlined below, Erdogan is unlikely to accept this defeat for his AK Party without a fight. He does not want to draw too much international criticism and is thus likely to look for a simple democratic solution. The simplest thing he can do in the short term is to reduce the numbers of HDP members to below 10% by charging enough HDP members with the crime of supporting Kurdish separatism, or even banning the HDP party outright. During the past few days, Erdogan has begun decrying Kurdish terrorist activity in Syria and in Turkey. This could well be "preparation for surgery" in excising the HDP from Parliament. Such a move would be unlikely to elicit intense Western criticism or even hold the public's attention via CNN for more than ten days. New elections would be called and this time President Erdogan would pay much closer attention to securing his desired results.

Even if President Erdogan does not remove the HDP obstacle, he is almost certainly ready to stop at nothing to maintain his iron grip on Turkey. He has fought hard, stopping at nothing to attain his powerful position and it is almost inconceivable that he would accept defeat now, when he has come so far. Few people want to acknowledge just how far Turkey has drifted from its once crucial role as a critical Western ally in a dangerous neighborhood,
Turkey has gone from being NATO's arguably most strategically positioned member during the Cold War to being, at best, a bridge between the West and the Muslim World and to being, at worst, a corrupt troublemaker run by a megalomaniac who has publicly called on his followers to start a possibly nuclear war in the region by rising up and marching to wrest Jerusalem from Israeli control. How could this dire change have occurred without anyone stepping in earlier?

The world has been very slow to notice the dangerous erosion of Turkey's role as a Western ally since the AKP came to power in 2002. Erdogan was hailed as the best hope for Turkey to be admitted to the European Union, because he was willing to undercut the Turkish military's role as guarantor of a secular Turkish state. No one stopped to consider that Erdogan's touting of "religious freedom" might be a ruse to destroy the Western-allied, secular Turkish state created by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In hindsight, while politically incorrect to say so, it was always absurd to think that the European Union would allow a truly Muslim state into its club. Anti-Islamic sentiment runs too high in various European Union countries. A secular Turkey would have been the only acceptable Turkey for the EU and even then, the Greeks and Cypriots would never have agreed. Yet over the past decade, the U.S. and Europe cheered on Erdogan as the best hope for Turkush EU membership even as secular, military, political, media and business figures were steadily but quietly incarcerated and/or served with ruinous fines to force them into submission. If those tactics did not work, critics of Erdogan have died under mysterious circumstances, been ruined financially, been driven into exile or silenced through blackmail and threats.

Meanwhile, during the past decade, Turkey has increased its popularity as a tourist destination and investment opportunity and few visitors ever scratch below the shiny AKP gilded image of Turkey to see the unprecedented corruption of President Erdogan and his cronies. Certainly it was clear that there were popular protests: we all heard about them on the news, but they seemed to be about trivial things like shopping malls and were thus easily ignored. More women were wearing headscarves, but it was politically incorrect to question that since it seemed to be a personal religious or fashion choice. Billboards of Erdogan were popping up everywhere and some observers commented that they were replacing images of Atatürk, but again, it did not seem that important. For many, it was not until President Erdogan unveiled his 1,150 room Presidential Palace in 2014 that they started to look more closely at President Erdogan's agenda.

During this time of tourism, economic boom and public glitz, Erdogan had presented himself as the only credible regional champion of Palestinian rights while also advertising himself as a friend to Turkey's fractious Kurdish population. As far as the Kurds were concerned, Erdogan managed to focus international attention on an apparent peace deal he had reached with Adullah Öcalan, the long-imprisoned former leader of the terrorist Kurdish PKK organization. Few people questioned whether Öcalan, after almost 20 years in prison, actually still wielded sufficient power among Turkey's Kurdish population to be able to influence events. People wanted to believe in Erdogan and those who questioned him frequently found themselves in grave danger.

As for the Palestinians, in 2010 Erdogan tried a doomed-to-fail publicity stunt and sent a flotilla of ships, purportedly carrying humanitarian relief supplies but also heavily packed with international journalists, to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza. Nine Turkish activists were killed in the Israeli operation to block the flotilla. Erdogan's image as a defender of the Palestinians received a huge boost, even though he accomplished nothing that actually helped the Palestinians. When the flotilla incident publicity died down. Erdogan apparently decided that the best way to harass the Israelis was to wield power over the government of a country bordering Israel. In 2011, Erdogan held high hopes that Egypt, under the new leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, would help him lead the effort to pressure Israel. Simultaneously, Erdogan was quietly stirring up tensions in neighboring Syria by arming disenfranchised Sunni Muslims and encouraging them to overthrow the Syrian Ba'athist government led by President Bashar Al-Assad, himself a member of the Shi'a Alawite sect. Erdogan stressed the sectarian Sunni vs. Shi'a aspect of Syrian society and managed to unleash complete chaos inside Syria by training and arming disenfranchised Syrian Sunnis. Still, however, Bashar Al-Assad retained control in Syria and furthermore, in a serious blow to Erdogan's strategy, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood was overthrown with support from the U.S., Europe and Israel.

In spite of disappointment over losing Egypt, Erdogan was full of hope that he would gain Western military support in overthrowing Syrian President Assad if he could just stage a false-flag chemical weapons attack. He appears to have done so in Aleppo, Syria and in Rehanli, Turkey, although he vigorously denies having done so. Still, as Seymour Hersh noted correctly, forensic studies of the chemicals used in these attacks did not come from weapons in Syria's military arsenal. U.S. President Obama, fortunately, was advised quietly at the last minute in August 2012 that he was being advised to bomb Damascus based on false information about supposed use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime against the Syrian people. President Obama also realized that even some of his closest advisors, many of whom were being lobbied by former US officials on Erdogan's payroll, were feeding him Erdogan's lies...
about Assad. A number of prominent Obama administration foreign policy advisors were subsequently replaced in 2012 and 2013, albeit under the guise of unrelated reasons, from sexual misconduct to normal turnover of cabinet members following a Residential election.

Meanwhile, President Erdogan ensured Turkey became the undeclared gateway for any terrorist wishing to fight with the radical, brutal Sunni An-Nusrah rebel brigades in Syria. An-Nusrah was not strong enough to unseat Assad however. What the world next witnessed was the formation of the even more brutal Islamic State in Syria or ISIS, which was made up largely of exiled Iraqi Sunnis who had fled to Syria and were prepared to fight to the death to drive the Iranian-backed Shi’a militias out Iraq. The weapons used by An-Nusrah and later ISIS were and are frequently NATO weapons, further implicating Erdogan and Turkey. Apologists for Erdogan claim that the NATO weapons have been seized came from the camps of Western-armed Iraqi Army forces crushed by ISIS but it is highly likely that Turkey is responsible for providing many sophisticated Western weapons to ISIS. Erdogan also likes to turn a profit, so thanks for Turkish materiel and other support must also be given for the financial support for ISIS by Gulf Arab states wishing to offset Turkey's role as the primary supporter of this radical Sunni movement. It is a classic case of rivals exploiting each other unthinkingly, but with devastating consequences.

Erdogan took his continued support even further. According to credible reports, when three trucks belonging to the Turkish Intelligence Service were stopped at the Turkish border with Syria, they informed the border guards that they were carrying humanitarian aid. The border guards managed to open one van and reportedly found it full of weapons. When the border guards tried to seize the trucks, an armed stand-off ensued and the trucks passed into Syria. The Customs Service complained and Turkish judges ruled the actions of the truck drivers illegal. Erdogan's response to the judicial finding against his own weapons smugglers operating government trucks epitomized Erdogan's illegal tactics: he charged the judges with treason for daring to support any challenge to his National Intelligence Service operations.

Being able to act without any lasting negative consequences may help explain why President Erdogan lost track of political reality somewhere along the way, as he successfully silenced all opponents and critics inside Turkey. Most observers believed that Erdogan would rig these latest elections to ensure AKP a two-thirds majority in Parliament. It seems, however, that Erdogan has been riding so high on the crest of his wave of corruption that he convinced himself he no longer needed to worry about internal political opposition. He looked as stunned as everyone around him when, instead of gaining seats in Parliament, the AKP lost a significant number of seats and with it, the AKP majority.

It is clear that Erdogan is leading Turkey down a dangerous path. He operates behind a cloak of normalcy and it is only once a new onerous policy has been implemented that anyone takes notice. Even then, in this world of 24 hour news coverage, the world audience quickly turns their attention away from significant events inside Turkey. As long as the archaeology, the beaches, the hotels and the friendly tour guides continue to be accessible, outsiders will ignore even the most egregious violations of acceptable democratic practices.

It is now up to the Turkish people who said “No” to Erdogan in these recent elections to follow through and stop the AKP from regaining its previous levels of power. Political parties like the HDP will have a tough time standing up to AKP pressure and harassment, but they and their sympathizers are Turkey's only hope of stopping Erdogan from turning Turkey into a truly destructive force in the region. The outside world has shown that they will not intervene, regardless of how distressing it may be to witness Erdogan's destruction of modern Turkey as we know it.

Gwenyth Todd a former Adviser to President Clinton and an expert in international security policy with a M.A from Georgetown University, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.