Turkey Election Results: Erdogan Remains in Power with Odds in his Favour

On June 24, Turkey held the Presidential and Parliamentary elections simultaneously for the first time. They were to conclude the process of the Constitution reform aimed at the country’s transition from the parliamentary governmental form to the presidential one. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ventured this move (note: preliminary presidential elections) against the backdrop of a difficult situation in Turkey, both in its home and foreign policy. Many political powers in the country and the major part of the secular-minded city population and intellectuals represented by the Kemalist political party bloc presented by Muharrem İnce spoke against the republic’s Islamisation and return to its conservative and traditional ways, which would hamper its westernisation and Europisation that had been underway since the 1980s. On the contrary, the rural population, the class of originally provincial junior clerks and small shop keepers living in cities, as well as the nationalists (the pan-Turkists) supported the policy of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, seeing it as an attempt to go back to their roots, leaving behind the ‘foreign’ western culture, the pro-American orientation and even the dependence on the US in various spheres, including defence and security. Many Turks are displeased with the fact that Europe (represented by the EU) had been delaying the Eurointegration of Ankara for decades, though the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states were admitted to the EU over short periods of time despite having less developed economies and lower all-European market involvement levels. Incidentally, Washington and Brussels demanded that Ankara fulfill the whole scope of its duties concerning the NATO, including those that were in conflict with the Turkish national interests, such as seeking serious cooperation with Russia in politics, economy, energy and army. Many accused Erdoğan of neo-Ottomanism due to the country’s increased involvement in the affairs of the Arabs and the Middle East, including the participation in the Syrian Civil War and the sharp degradation of the country’s relations with Israel. Statements were made that, in doing so, the Turkish leader was trying to retrieve the predominance in the region and even become the Middle East hegemon by subduing the neighbouring Arab states to Ankara, which had already resulted in the sharp degradation of relations with the new and well-to-do leading Arab states, namely Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Against the backdrop of reduced US-EU cooperation (including instances of mutual abuse and threats), increasingly spreading Islamism and pan-Turkish nationalism, increased Ankara’s involvement in the Syrian Civil War, as well as the sharp deterioration of the criminal and terrorist situation in the Kurd regions, many experts foretold Erdoğan’s failure at the presidential elections and his party’s failure at the parliamentary ones. He was expected to receive 45% of the votes at best and quite probably lose the second round of the elections to his main opponent, the Kemalist Muharrem İnce, in coalition with the pro-Western liberal parties, as well as the legal moderate Kurd parties in league with the leftists led by Selahattin Demirtaş. Western analysts, first and foremost those from the US, suggested this idea as well, de facto calling on the Turkish voter not to support Erdoğan, who will just not succeed this time.

However, this turn of events never happened. The Turkish leader managed to use his partaking in the Syrian operation with good effect. That operation included a de facto occupation of the northern (note: Kurd and Turkmen) areas of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR) by means of his own military and pro-Turkish proxy forces comprising Turkmen and Sunni Arabs; and a certain success in neutralising radical Kurds from the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and its affiliates, which all legal parties and organisations of Turkey support. Establishing close economic cooperation with Russia also went to his credit, because it brings dozens of billions of dollars to the state budget due to Russian tourists and the export of agricultural and farming products to Russia. The increased Ottoman nationalist attitudes and great power ambitions of the Turkish people and a well-placed stake on getting back to the Islamic roots contributed to his success.
Erdoğan gained 52.56% of the vote, leaving Muharrem İnce (circa 30.5%) and Selahattin Demirtaş (8.3%) far behind. His political party won the parliamentary elections as well. Having counted almost all of the ballots, the Turkish Election Committee announced that the incumbent President had won and thus had become the head of the government as well. He managed to win in the first round of the elections, which was the main intrigue of the elections. On the whole, the breakdown remains the same: big cities of Turkey support the Kemalists; the Kurds and the leftists support Selahattin Demirtaş; and the rural areas support Erdoğan.

If we compare the new election results with those of the previous elections, we shall see that they are practically the same. The explanation is obvious: Turkey stepped into a transition period which is characteristic of any society experiencing urbanisation, when the traditional society has the socially active population living mainly in the cities and the socially passive conservative population living in villages. It is well known that secular Kemalists used to dominate before the mass migration of people from the countryside to the cities in the 1970s-1980s (that is, before the beginning of urbanisation). They were supported in the cities, and the villages remained passive. The people’s migration to the cities changed the social structure abruptly: a powerful stratum of marginal people emerged. They were no longer villagers, but they were not yet citizens either. They became socially active, remaining true to their conservative values. Moreover, they made the countryside socially active too. It was then that the Islamists emerged too, receiving a powerful and active electorate, given the crisis the secular authorities encountered finding themselves in a strategic development dead end. One of the reasons for that was the position of the EU that delayed accepting Turkey as its member state.

The situation remains the same for now, because the Kemalists have nothing else to offer, but the already failed strategy. They remain unsupported by both the countryside and the first and second generations of the citizens. And their former support represented by secular-minded generals and commanding officers, as well as state officials, was destroyed by force a while ago via mass purges. As Turkey developed, the Islamists managed to get out of the dead end the secular authorities found themselves in and resumed the country’s development process. With all the currently existing difficulties and problems, their success is undeniable. And as the yesterday’s villagers root into the urban life, the secular politicians will receive a serious social backing of their today’s political opponents. But first, the Kemalists will have to formulate a new concept that would be different both from the previously failed approaches and from the clerical society development strategy. It is there that the Turkish secular politicians do not show anything substantial as yet. And currently, the Islamists from the Justice and Development Party managed not only to take power, but to keep it again as well.

For Russia, the Turkish election results are ambiguous, but mostly positive. Erdoğan is currently a situational partner, however Ankara’s strategic goals are largely in conflict with those of Russia. Then, there are no illusions about Erdoğan in Moscow. Just as there is a clear understanding that any other politician who could rule Turkey is even a bigger issue, since it is a major uncertainty factor. Especially if it is a Kemalist politician, one of those who have a tradition of orienting to the West, Europe and the NATO with its anti-Russia mission. The secular Turkish politicians have a way more negative attitude to Russia than Erdoğan does. Besides, Russia still needs him in a number of critical economic projects, including stretching a gas corridor to the EU via the Turkish territory, not to mention Syria, where, without close cooperation with Ankara and Tehran, Moscow would fail to withstand the coalition of the US and its allied Arab states who joined the armed opposition to Bashar al-Assad.

*Pyotr Lvov, Ph.D in political science, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”*