

Turkish Presidential Elections and the Kurdish Peace Process

Written by Sibel Oktay

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On August 10th, Turkey goes to the ballot box to vote for their first publicly elected president. Three candidates are running in this first round of the majority run-off elections: Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, a scholar-diplomat nominated by the CHP-MHP bloc, and Selahattin Demirtas, the young and energetic leader of the pro-Kurdish HDP, are the contenders alongside Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the AKP candidate and the current Prime Minister. While Erdogan leads the polls by a considerable margin compared to his closest contender, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the question is whether Erdogan would need the Kurdish vote if no candidate declares victory in the first round. The recent framework law that legalizes the negotiations between the Turkish state and the Kurdish movement can be Erdogan's major bargaining chip towards that outcome.

As Tayyip Erdogan concludes his 11th year as Turkey's prime minister, the country's agenda continues to bulk up with serious problems at home and abroad. Turkey has been practically trapped by the ISIL terrorists, as they have kidnapped 49 Turkish diplomats and their families in the Iraqi province of Mosul almost two months ago. The relations with Egypt, Israel, and Syria continue at an all-time low, and the EU membership process has completely lost its momentum. At home, the massive social unrest that the Gezi protests have sparked last summer took a new form by December 2013, with the corruption and graft allegations against the government and Erdogan himself, only to be exacerbated by the not-so-unexpected clash between AKP and its former ally, the Gulen movement, which continues to intensify. Perhaps in any other context, this would be a recipe for a politician's definitive defeat.

And yet, against all odds, Erdogan continues to enjoy broad electoral support, most recently observed during the March 2014 local elections, when the AKP garnered over 45% of the votes. Many have interpreted the results not just as the electorate's response to the graft probe, but as the consent to a possible presidential bid by Erdogan.

Undoubtedly, Erdogan has what it takes to be a masterful politician, and his successive electoral victories attest to these qualities. He is a remarkable orator who rose to the zeniths of power and influence from the slums of Istanbul. His authoritative figure and charisma remain unchallenged, making him one of the very few politicians in the history of modern Turkey to undertake bold initiatives – such as the Kurdish resolution process; indeed a top agenda item of historic proportions. If successful, Erdogan is destined to reserve his chapter in history books as the leader who achieved a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue and, consequently, social and political reconciliation with Turkey's largest ethnic minority.

The latest initiative towards resolution is the recent framework signed into law by Abdullah Gul, the outgoing president, on July 15th. The bill, entitled "Law on Ending Terrorism and Strengthening Social Integration", was proposed by the government in June 2014 in response to the opposition's growing criticisms of the lack of parliamentary oversight and accountability regarding the negotiations between the state and the leaders of the Kurdish militant group PKK, including its imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan. Indeed, doubts about the negotiations had struck the government back in February 2012, when the state prosecutors summoned Hakan Fidan, the then-undersecretary and the current chief of the National Intelligence Agency (MIT). Fidan, alongside other members of the organization, were asked to testify in relation to the voice recordings of MIT members during a series of secretive meetings they had with the PKK leaders in Oslo. The resulting political crisis raised concerns about the legality of the

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process, as well as questions about its extent, such as the possibility of amnesty for Ocalan. In order to preempt any political or judicial reactions framed as 'treason', the government passed a law within 10 days, which shielded MIT members from prosecution unless allowed by the prime minister.

The framework law of July 15th is critical, first and foremost, because it extends the legal safety of negotiators: the law stipulates that those responsible for negotiations do not incur any administrative, legal, or criminal liabilities. As for the Kurdish militants, the law allows them to disarm weapons and integrate into civilian life as long as they have not actively participated in armed struggle. Those imprisoned, on the other hand, will be given greater attention, the law says, should they suffer from health problems. Members of the government, such as Besir Atalay, emphasize that the law ultimately gives parliamentary authorization to the Kurdish negotiation process and allows all institutions of the state to participate in the process. Indeed, the law is an important step towards reaching a lasting peace with the Kurds of Turkey and lends credibility to the government's resolve.

Why Now?

One critical question remains, however: *why now?* Why did the government wait until the summer of 2014 to take the necessary legal steps towards a resolution? As the law was passed merely four weeks away from the first round of the presidential elections, one wonders whether this was an electoral move by the AKP to help their candidate capture the Kurdish vote. Baskin Oran, a political science professor from Ankara University, argues that this is indeed the case.

As Carkoglu and Hinich (2006) argue, the Turkish party system is characterized by two competing axes: secularism versus Islamism on one hand, and nationalism versus Kurdism on the other. With the AKP moving forward to solve the Kurdish issue, it seems clear that it continues to work towards crosscutting both axes by capitalizing on the conservative and Kurdish votes.

Empirically, this has been yielding positive results. During the last parliamentary elections in 2011, the AKP came out as the first party in provinces such as Diyarbakir, Batman, and Mardin, where Kurdish voters are heavily concentrated. With a few exceptions, the AKP continued to perform well in the region in the March 2014 local elections as well. As such, the party seems to strengthen its presence within the Kurdish population.

The framework law therefore stands as a major bargaining chip for the Erdogan campaign, as it clearly communicates that the political movement that he has been leading for the past decade is eager to solve the Kurdish matter. In this sense, it seems that Erdogan intends to capture not just the conservative Kurdish vote, as his party has done before, but also reach over to the HDP base, which is more likely to define itself along the left of the political spectrum.

Additionally, the law has provided the Erdogan campaign with a spectacular tactical advantage, as it has left the Ihsanoglu campaign in a dilemma, as Asli Aydintasbas, a prominent Turkish journalist, also argues. The Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which co-nominated Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu with the Republican People's Party (CHP), has strongly opposed the Kurdish resolution process, and particularly the new framework law, arguing that it is a legal cloak against treason. The CHP, on the other hand, states that it sees the legal framework as a positive step towards achieving peace. This lack of consensus between the two parties, therefore, leaves Ihsanoglu and his campaign in a political purgatory: he cannot deliver the same bold perks to the Kurdish electorate – not least because he has no track record on the issue to compete with Erdogan. Even though he has declared his support for Kurds' demands for the freedom of language, Ihsanoglu simply lacks the political capital of both parties behind him to declare a firm position.

As for the HDP candidate Selahattin Demirtas, the competition is even more problematic. The HDP has raised concerns before that the state takes Ocalan and the PKK leadership in Qandil as the main actors in the resolution process, effectively sidelining the HDP. More recently, the HDP leadership criticized the framework law for not including terms regarding local governance, a prime issue for the HDP platform. Nevertheless, in a recent interview, Demirtas also stressed that if he could not make it to the run-off on August 24th (assuming that no candidate captures

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a majority vote in the first round), his party would not support either candidate. Indeed, he has argued throughout his election campaign that neither Erdogan nor Ihsanoglu represent the ideals championed by the HDP. It is a mathematical fact, however, that a Kurdish non-vote is actually a silent vote for Erdogan. In this sense, it is not difficult to speculate that the HDP acknowledges that Erdogan is the only viable candidate who can pursue the Kurdish resolution process in these circumstances, but Demirtas cannot declare a position in order to avoid antagonizing the socially liberal, left-wing secular voters who are much more likely to vote for him during the first round to protest Erdogan.

Naturally, the current political setting puts Erdogan in an immensely advantageous position, as the first round of elections are scheduled to take place this weekend. It could very well be that Erdogan's government held off working on the articles on local governance in the framework law to retain some bargaining edge for the second round, as two different polls a week before the law was signed showed that Erdogan would fall short of the 50 percent threshold in the first round. This scenario seems plausible, as Abdullah Ocalan stated only a few days ago that he expected the AKP government to take firm steps "within a week" to continue the resolution process.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan will most likely be elected as the next president of Turkey – perhaps as early as this weekend. If not, expect to see some major progress on the Kurdish peace process from the AKP government in the next two weeks.

About the author:

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