

What next for Turkey?

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Following the extended presidential election process that began on April 24th, with the official announcement of Abdullah Gul as the AKP's candidate, and ended on August 28th, with the election of Gul as president, Turkey has entered a new phase in its political life. These developments attracted much attention from the European continent, Muslim world and the other side of the Atlantic. Why was the world watching so closely and what were they expecting to see?

Before answering these questions, a quick recap of recent developments would be beneficial. Although four months may not seem like a long time, Turkey has witnessed a dramatic statement from the military, a constitutional court decision and two elections. The political crisis caused by the presidential election was worsened by the military's e-statement. After weeks of ambiguity, early general elections were called. The military's extraordinary anti-democratic intervention did not escape severe criticism from Europe. This was not the picture our European friends would like to have seen. The "Turkosceptics" couldn't wait to claim that "this is enough proof of Turkey's democracy deficiencies and the lack of civilian control of the armed forces". Although, the "Turkophiles" delivered encouraging messages, the framework for EU negotiations clearly states that Turkey needs to comply with the necessary political criteria. The elections process was heavily criticised in Turkey's latest progress report.

The AKP won 46% of the votes in the subsequent July 22 elections, the highest proportion since the 1960s. Even though many were expecting to see AKP succeed at the poles, the magnitude of their victory was unexpected. Not long after the election Prime Minister Erdogan again declared Gul as their candidate for the presidency. So it was back to square one again. Thankfully, the anti-Gul establishment did not have much room for manoeuvre this time. It was almost certain that Gul would become president after the leader of the nationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party) declared that they would not boycott the vote. The problem that blocked the presidential elections in May was that the Constitutional Court decided 367 MPs must be present for voting to even open, enabling the then opposition to halt the process. So, the MHP's declaration ensured enough MPs would be present for the voting to commence. Thus, due to the AKP's majority in parliament, they were able to secure the requisite 267 votes in the third round (in the first two rounds the president requires two thirds – 367 votes – to be elected). On August 28 Gul became Turkey's new president.

Turning back to our original question, international interest in what was going on in Turkey indicates the importance the world places on the country. Turkey's accession process is not only carefully followed in Europe but also in the Muslim world. Turkey is a Muslim country that has had democratic institutions since 1923 and is often referred to in debates about the "clash of civilizations". Turkey stands at the intersection between East and West. The European media noted that there are two Turkeys and this election was about the new owners and identity of the country: the secular establishment versus the Islamists. If the picture is drawn like this, which is very questionable, then the AKP's victory means the Islamists

won. Alas, such an interpretation is inaccurate. It is true that there were actions taken during the process to provoke early elections. However the clash was actually brought on by the democratisation process. Some sectors of society are more comfortable raising their voices in the changing socio-economic and political culture in the country. It is an undeniable fact that Turkey has undergone enormous change at immense speed. But it would seem that there is no change without pain. Luckily, Turkey was able to come through this period with some scratches but without any major setbacks to its broader progress.

Now, as Turkey returns to normal politics, the next step to be taken should be to put the EU reform process back on track. The new president and new cabinet have made promising statements regarding the EU process, however both the EU and reform supporters in Turkey need more than just statements after a month of uncertainty. There is no doubt that today, both Turkey and the AKP need EU support more than ever. The AKP won convincingly, but it does not have the luxury of being able to lean on this public support and depart from the EU line. The democrats in Turkey, who voted for the AKP, did so because of their strong commitment to the EU. The AKP government needs to continue its democratisation process within the parameters of EU membership in order to prove the opposition wrong and not to lose its legitimacy. In short, the new AKP government needs to be more determined than ever in continuing with the EU process.

Whether the AKP will be able to perform well is one question, while the EU's ability to give full support to Turkey's membership process is quite another. Sadly, the signals from the EU do not seem too promising. The Sarkozy-Merkel block often declares that it would like to see Turkey as a close ally but not a full-member. The EU is currently focused on its own internal reform process, which impacts on its already problematic foreign policies. Since enlargement is seen as a foreign policy issue, (actually the most successful one until now) the EU needs to decide quickly and decisively whether to take this policy further or not. If the answer is yes, then the EU needs to send a clear message saying so.

If the answer is no, however, will the EU accept the failure of its major foreign policy and be ready to face the repercussions, not only from Turkey, but from all around its region? This scenario might seem very pessimistic and the EU may claim that it does not seek to sever links with Turkey completely. As such, the process will continue more or less as it has in past years, marked by ups and downs. However, EU bureaucrats and leaders seem not to acknowledge the significance of clear messages and support during such turbulent times. Turkey has also been emitting confusing messages in recent months. Like some in Turkey, many in the EU were confused about the AKP. The party has Islamic roots, but this does not necessarily mean that it aims to establish an Islamic republic; there is no evidence of such intentions. On the contrary, since 2004 the AKP has been the party most committed to the EU accession process and the Erdogan government introduced sweeping reforms clearing the way for Turkey to open formal negotiations with the EU. From late 2006 until recently the elections have dominated the policies of the AKP and it would be hard to argue that they pleased the reformist camp.

Despite the fact the presidential debate is seemingly at an end, some still predict troubled waters ahead. Discussions over a new constitution have created another source of tension between the AKP and the opposition. Although it is a positive development that Turkey is debating a new constitution, as civil society has long been demanding, there is also a concern that the parties will use the debate to propagate the polarised atmosphere witnessed during the election period. In order for Turkey to survive this constitutional reform period, it needs the EU's support as a stabilising factor. Furthermore, the EU will not regret supporting Turkey in this process, since it will further the country's democratic progress and thereby benefit the organisation itself in realising its regional and global ambitions in the long term.

In many ways the future depends more on Turkey, and its new president and government, than on Eu-

rope. However, one should not forget that this is a parallel process with a high level of interaction. It will be much easier for a Turkey with strong domestic public support to progress. And such public support will only be there if the EU does not adopt exclusive attitudes and policies towards Turkey. So is there any need to worry about the AKP victory and Gul's presidency? Continuous engagement with the EU will assure that Turkey continues along the same path it was following before.

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