

The RCLF Minute, Issue 4

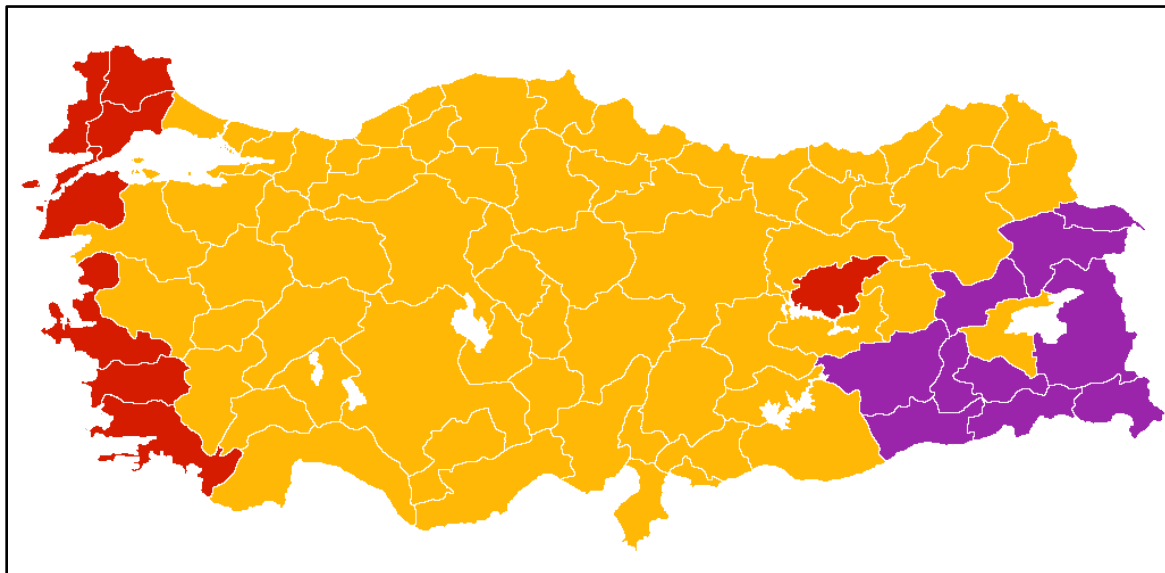
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A More Assertive Turkey

On June 24, 2018 Turkey held elections for president and parliament. The elections marked another milestone for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who won 52.5 percent of the vote for president with 88 percent of the electorate voting; his ruling religious conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) won 53 percent of the parliamentary vote.ⁱ The map of Turkey, showing the results of the three frontrunners, reflects, despite Erdoğan's big win, how deeply divided the country is: the Anatolian heartland favors Erdoğan and his AKP, the western shores voted for the Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party), and the eastern Kurdish-dominated districts went for the Kurdish HDP (Peoples Democratic Party).



Erdoğan (AKP) İnce (CHP) Demirtaş (HDP) **2018 Presidential Election outcome** Source: *Wikipedia*

Erdoğan has headed his nation's government for 15 years as Turkey's longest serving leader, first as prime minister then as president, and this election secured his position for the next five (with the opportunity to run again in 2023).ⁱⁱ The outcome of the vote for president was never in question, because of the tactics employed to suppress and suffocate the opposition—the leader of the pro-Kurdish party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş, has been in prison since November 2016.ⁱⁱⁱ The Office for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) determined that these elections were free (people had a real choice among candidates), but they were not fair (there was opposition intimidation, scores of journalists are in jail, media is effectively under the government's control, and there was fraud at the ballot box).^{iv}

The RCLF Minute, Issue 4

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These elections had tremendous importance for the country and the way Erdoğan will rule it. Erdoğan and the AKP have steadily reshaped the constitution and the very landscape of Turkish politics in important ways, especially from the standpoint of American interests. Over the past 15 years, Turkey has become a personalized autocracy with most powers accumulated in the hands of the president. This election ushered in a new form of governance that fully concentrates power in the presidency, for example, by abolishing the position of prime minister and handing his powers over to the president. Moreover, there has been a weakening in Turkey's commitment to western norms for free press, free opposition and secularism. The following highlight some key changes that have taken place in Turkey recently.

Internal Politics—Largely by Erdoğan's hand, Turkey's internal politics have been reshaped in ways that have centralized power, shifting from a Parliamentary to a Presidential system.^v

- The office of prime minister will be abolished. The president will appoint the cabinet and an undefined number of vice-presidents.
- The president will be able to issue decrees to form and regulate ministries and appoint and remove senior civil servants, all without parliamentary approval.
- The president will be able to declare a state of emergency for up to six months and will no longer require cabinet approval to do so. During the emergency rule, the president will be able to issue decrees on basic rights and freedoms.
- The president will be able to draft the budget, currently drawn up by parliament.
- The State Supervisory Board (DDK), a presidential institution that oversees the activities of public and private bodies, will be able to open administrative investigations, giving the president direct power over a wide range of groups, including the armed forces.^{vi}
- Turkey's foreign policy, once based on advice from the armed forces, a civilian government and career diplomats, will now be determined by Erdoğan alone. Rather than a deliberative process foreign policy will be based on his personal preferences.^{vii}

In a study examining public attitudes of Turkish self-perception, a majority of Turks—55 percent—agreed with the idea that “a strong leader like Erdoğan is necessary to protect Turkey's interests, and he should be free to do what is necessary to keep the country safe and prosperous.”^{viii} This strongman has a mandate.

The RCLF Minute, Issue 4

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An election campaign poster in Istanbul featuring Erdoğan reads: "Istanbul is Ready, Target 2023"; referring to the next election.

Source: Wikipedia

Kemalism—The AKP, which Erdoğan helped found, has nearly eclipsed the Kemalist Party which was pre-eminent in Turkish politics from the time of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), founder of modern Turkey. In fact, many observers believe that Erdoğan’s dream is to be seen as Atatürk’s equal in shaping Turkish history.

From the fall of the Ottoman Empire and establishment of the modern Turkish state under Atatürk, secularism was a central thread in Turkish politics. Islam was not repressed by harsh means seen in some other states, such as Egypt or Iraq under Baathist rule, but “Kemalism” privileged western secularism and defined limits on the expression of the Muslim faith, both during periods of democratic as well as

military rule between the 1920s until the initial successes of the AKP in the early 2000s. Erdoğan has sought to change this feature of Turkish society from his earliest years, and as his power and popularity have grown, so has his commitment to de-emphasizing earlier commitments to secularism and western values. President Erdoğan will continue to invoke Muslim concepts and symbols, Ottoman history and legends to weave new Turkish nationalist images and aspirations as he excites his supporters.

Turkish nationalism—Under Erdoğan’s leadership, the AKP is promoting a Turkish nationalism that is “assertively Muslim; fiercely independent; distrusting of outsiders; and skeptical of other nations and global elites.”^{ix} This new national image has lent itself to an antagonism towards the West (Germany and Europe as well as the U.S.) and there is growing hostility toward the 3.5 million Syrian refugees and other immigrants who have settled in the country. The main reason for the rise in anti-U.S. attitude among Turks is frustration with Washington for refusing to extradite the Turkish (Muslim) cleric Fethullah Gülen, who lives in Pennsylvania,^x and for supporting the Syrian Kurdish-aligned forces known as the People’s Protection Units (YPG) in the war against Islamic State. Turkey does not see a difference between the YPG—the main U.S. partner on the ground fighting ISIS—and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which the U.S., the European Union (EU), and Turkey have labeled as a terrorist organization.

The AKP driven sense of nationalism will only increase under the influence of the ultranationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party), which formed an alliance with the AKP to gain control of parliament. MHP’s “hypernationalism,” combined with the already acute level of anti-

The RCLF Minute, Issue 4

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Americanism, will likely contribute to an even more reactionary Turkish foreign policy and will further strain U.S.-Turkey bilateral relations.^{xi}

State of Emergency—On July 15, 2016, members of the military attempted to overthrow the government through force. Immediately following this coup attempt, Erdoğan imposed a state of emergency that allows the government to rule by decree, restricts movement, assembly, and expression. It was supposed to last for 3 months, but the government has extended it, most recently in April 2018. It gives the president the right to rule by decree. There was also a post-coup backlash against anyone suspected of involvement—this extended to people who exhibited oppositionist tendencies or simply did not support the AKP fervently enough. 60,000 individuals have been jailed and over 100,000 civil servants and military personnel have been removed from their positions; this includes teachers, scientists, police, and journalists—in 2018, Turkey had the most journalists in jail of any country.^{xii} Even an American pastor living in Turkey, Andrew Brunson, was arrested for allegedly associating with the PKK and followers of Gülen. In July, members of Congress paid a visit to Erdoğan in Ankara to plead for the Brunson’s release.^{xiii}

Turkey’s Relations with the West, and Geo-Strategic Self-Perception

Turkey’s position with respect to the West has shifted in subtle but important ways during the years of Erdoğan’s executive rule.

Points of Bilateral Tension—The U.S.-Turkey relationship has always been complicated. Since the 2016 coup attempt, several differences and increased public tension have developed between the two countries. Disagreements have surrounded Turkey’s plans to acquire S-400 from Russia (this air defense system is not compatible with NATO systems) and U.S.-Turkey disputes over Syria.

Turkey is multifaceted ally. Although Turkey has been a member of NATO since 1952 and a candidate for membership in the EU since 1999, it looks eastward as much as it looks westward. For example, it recently established a military base in the Republic of Djibouti, has deployed troops to Qatar, and signed an agreement with Sudan to restore the Red Sea port of Suakin.^{xiv} This is in addition to the strong Turkish presence in Syria since August 2016, when Ankara began its direct military intervention in pursuit of ISIS and the YPG.

NATO—Today, as it was when Erdoğan came to power, Turkey’s single most important geo-strategic tie is its membership in NATO. Turkey has been a key member in the Trans-Atlantic security alliance for more than fifty years. Turkey continues to play a major role in NATO, despite the more autonomous reorientation of its foreign policy, developing relations with the Russian Federation, and the acquisition of the S-400 air defense missile system from Moscow.^{xv}

The RCLF Minute, Issue 4

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- Since 2012, the Allied Land Command headquarters in Izmir, Turkey has been responsible for the readiness of NATO forces, conducting land operations, and synchronizing land force command and control. Izmir assumed responsibility from Force Command Heidelberg in Germany and Force Command Madrid in Spain, which were deactivated in an aim to trim the costs of NATO's command structure.^{xvi}
- Ankara hosts the NATO Centre of Excellence for Defence Against Terrorism (DAT), which since 2006 has trained over twelve thousand officers and civil servants coming from more than one hundred countries and publishes the *Defence Against Terrorism Review*.^{xvii}
- Turkey has offered a significant contribution to the ISAF mission, also in command roles, and is in the process of increasing its military contingent in the Resolute Support mission to Afghanistan, currently made up of 550 personnel.
- Turkey is also actively involved in NATO's assistance, cooperation and projection of stability programs beyond Afghanistan, in Asia, Iraq, Ukraine and the Balkans.^{xviii}
- Finally, the Forward Operating Base (FOB) in Konya, Turkey hosts NATO aircraft that provide air surveillance and support to the operations of the Anti-ISIS Coalition.^{xix}

Conclusion—The elections are over and Erdoğan has a clear mandate to rule. Under the new presidential system, ruling will be even easier for him. Turkey's system of government has changed and is unlikely to return to what it was before the AKP came to power in 2002. It is also unlikely that Erdoğan's new government will be more cooperative with Washington on Syria. Moreover, there has been an important shift in Turkish identity in recent decades. Kemalism asked Turks to think of themselves as secular, modern, European, and western; Erdoğan and his supporters are reorienting toward Islamic and Ottoman symbols, myths and memes. This is a well-spring for anti-Europe, anti-U.S. sentiment. Erdoğan will persist in his view that the United States and the West are working against Turkey. The Turks are unlikely to ease their campaign against Kurdish groups in and beyond Turkey.^{xx} Turkish aggression in Syria is a major point of contention between Turkey and the U.S. Indeed, bilateral relations are tense. Despite all of this, Turkey is still a valued NATO ally in a strategically important territory.

ⁱ "Recep Tayyip the First," *The Economist* (June 30, 2018), 46.

ⁱⁱ The Turkish president is directly elected for a five-year term and may serve up to two terms, with a possibility of a third term if an early presidential election is called while the second term is being served.

ⁱⁱⁱ Demirtas, along with others, is accused of having ties to the PKK. See, "Turkey detains HDP leaders Demirtas and Yuksekdag," *Al Jazeera* (November 4, 2016). Accessed July 2, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/turkey-detains-hdp-leaders-demirtas-yuksekdag-161104042853124.html>

^{iv} International Election Observation Mission, Republic of Turkey, *Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections* (Ankara: OSCE/ODIHR, 2018).

^v Sinan Ekim and Kemal Kirişçi, "Order from Chaos: The Turkish Constitutional referendum explained," *Brookings* (April 13, 2017). Accessed July 2, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/04/13/the-turkish-constitutional-referendum-explained/>

The RCLF Minute, Issue 4

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