

Turkey's local elections

Erdogan on a roll

The AK party wins convincingly. What next?

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HE SEEMS unbeatable. Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, secured his eighth big win in 14 years when his Justice and Development party (AK) swept to over 45% of the vote in local



elections on March 30th. After facing down corruption charges, mass protests and accusations of authoritarianism, Mr Erdogan may feel emboldened to run for president in August. In an overtly polarising victory speech, he hinted as much. “We are ready to devote ourselves to whatever mission we are entrusted with,” he said. He also promised to go after his enemies: “we will enter their lair. They will pay for this.”

Mr Erdogan was referring to Fethullah Gulen, a Sunni cleric and former ally, who runs an empire of schools, media outlets and charities and was expected to hurt the AK party in the polls. The Pennsylvania-based preacher is accused of being behind leaked tapes that support corruption claims against Mr Erdogan, his children and various cabinet members. Mr Erdogan, who denies any wrongdoing, has resorted to a reshuffle of thousands of policemen and judges said to be Gulenists and, most recently, to a ban on Twitter and YouTube for airing the recordings.

There are many reasons for Mr Erdogan's electoral success. To many, AK means financial stability and competent management. “They may steal but they also get things done,” is a frequent line from voters. Urban migration remains high and AK's seamless social services and conservative values are a magnet for new arrivals.

The left has seldom won more than 30% of the vote. Even with the Gulenists' tacit backing, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) trailed a distant second in the elections, with 27% of

Erdogan rules and divides

the vote. It lost narrowly in Ankara and decisively in Istanbul. In Turkey's Kurdish regions it scored a miserable 1%, not least because of its opposition to peace talks with the imprisoned Kurdish rebel leader, Abdullah Ocalan. The CHP did best where it fielded moderate conservative candidates, as in Mr Erdogan's home district, Uskudar.

The other big winner was the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), which called the elections "a referendum on Kurdish autonomy". The Kurds raised the number of cities under their control in the south-east from eight to 11, snatching the provinces of Mardin, Bitlis and Agri from AK. They are expected to support Mr Erdogan for president.

The big question then would be who becomes prime minister. Abdullah Gul, co-founder of AK and current president, still seems the most likely choice, unless Mr Erdogan wants a puppet prime minister so that he can consolidate his presidential power. Mr Gul has proved his loyalty. He was mildly critical of police brutality during last year's Gezi Park protests. Turning a deaf ear to rebukes from the European Union, he recently approved a law on internet censorship. He seems to have burnt his bridges with the Gulenists.

Turkey's friends (and the financial markets) would welcome Mr Gul. As foreign minister and then president, he is credited with curbing Mr Erdogan's impulsive nature. His supporters insist that concessions to Mr Erdogan are purely tactical. Once in charge, they say, he will steer Turkey back to reform and away from adventurism, particularly in Syria, where Mr Erdogan's support for the rebels is questioned by secularists and Islamists alike.

With the economy heading into the doldrums and the Gulenists unlikely to give up, Mr Erdogan may yet decide instead to junk the AK party's three-term rule and run for a fourth time. This would give him four more years of parliamentary immunity from prosecution. Some speculate that he might call a snap parliamentary election before the effects of a slowing economy kick in. Should AK win a two-thirds majority, it could rewrite the constitution to fulfil Mr Erdogan's long-held dream of being a more powerful executive president. Either way, as the elections on March 30th showed again, Mr Erdogan remains Turkey's dominant political figure.

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