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‘The polarisation of Turkey into two camps continues’

The Turkish elections will go into a second round. Henrik Meyer from Istanbul on Kılıçdaroğlu’s remaining chances and the unfair election campaign

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his challenger Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu have to go through a second round of voting. But the first round of the presidential election was not as close as expected. How should the outcome be interpreted?

Indeed, most election research institutes expected Kılıçdaroğlu to be in the lead, while only a few saw Erdoğan ahead. In this respect, the result – if it is eventually confirmed – is quite surprising, especially because the polls before the election actually indicated that by far the most important issue this year would be the economy – and above all inflation. Inflation is currently the biggest problem that people in Turkey have to face in their everyday lives. Hence, the expectation was that Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who ran with a broad alliance of six parties and was also supported by the pro-Kurdish HDP, would be able to benefit from this. But the problem of the economic and monetary crisis was apparently not deemed to be so dramatic as to create a real mood of change for many people.

In fact, the election results are very, very similar to those of 2018. The polarisation of Turkey into two camps continues as before, with Erdoğan’s government camp being slightly stronger than the opposition camp. The opposition has gained some ground – but far less than expected.

In the second round, the votes for the third-placed candidate Sinan Oğan, who received 5.2 per cent of the total vote, are likely to be decisive. What does this mean for the run-off and for the future presidency?

Last doubts about the accuracy of the election results remain, but it looks like President Erdoğan won the first round with 49.51 per cent

of the vote. Of the slightly more than five per cent of the votes that Sinan Oğan received, he would not need many to win the second round. Moreover, Oğan's electorate comes from the national conservative, nationalist camp. For his voters, it should probably be easier to elect Erdoğan than Kılıçdaroğlu, who was able to invoke the support of the Kurds in the first round.

Erdoğan is certainly the favourite for the second round. But it is not a given that he will win. All sides have been able to mobilise their supporters to a great extent and the opposition has yet to give up victory. Thus, in two weeks, it will get very exciting again.

The AKP and the opposition alliance are blaming each other over the vote count while the opposition is also questioning the results. What is there to these accusations?

There are various reports of incidents during the voting and they should be investigated. But I don't think that this was to such an extent that it decisively changed the election. The election itself went relatively correctly according to the findings so far. However, the counting of the election last night was indeed a bit odd. The numbers presented at the beginning were very different from the numbers at the end. The opposition has long accused the pro-government media of distorting the vote count, which is true if you look at the figures initially published. But as the evening progressed, the figures became more realistic.

The problem in Turkey is that while the elections are relatively free, the election campaign is not fair. The government controls a big part of the media and has a much greater presence there than the opposition. Important opposition politicians are in prison or banned from politics. Hence, the conditions to succeed in the elections are very unequal.

Erdoğan performed unexpectedly well in some of the areas affected by the earthquake. Is this a result of unfair campaigning opportunities?

It is still too early to say what Erdoğan has specifically scored with. As I said, for me the most interesting finding remains that the election results are very similar to those of 2018. There simply hasn't been much change. It was already expected that the earthquake would not be a deciding issue in the election. Erdoğan has been handing out a lot of campaign gifts in the past few weeks. There were various increases in the minimum wage, in salaries for state employees and in pensions, and in May, households did not have to pay their natural gas bills, which was justified by the fact that Turkey had accessed natural gas in the Black Sea. In the earthquake zone, Erdoğan has also made many

promises.

The gifts may have secured some votes, but I don't actually think that this was the all-important thing. More significant is the realisation that 'camp thinking', or a certain partisan mentality, in Turkey is much more resilient than we expected. Many observers thought that the economic crisis would lead to a softening of the contours of the camps; that more switching between the camps would be possible; that people who feel affected by the economic crisis would be more willing to move away from Erdoğan. But that just hasn't been confirmed to that extent.

In the parliamentary elections, the government alliance received 49.3 per cent – almost the same result as Erdoğan in the presidential election. How important is the parliament still after Erdoğan transformed Turkey into a presidential system?

The parliamentary election outcome mirrors the presidential election result. Due to the counting procedure in Turkey, the previous government coalition, the so-called *Cumhur* Alliance (People's Alliance), has probably secured an absolute majority and will most likely receive 320 of the 600 seats. What this ultimately means is the subject of much debate in Turkey. In the Turkish presidential system, the president can determine most things by decree. He also does not need the approval of parliament to appoint his government — the Turkish president can effectively govern outside parliament. This is one of the peculiarities of this system and something that the opposition wanted to abolish — if they had won the elections.

That seems to be rather difficult now, although we can't say for sure yet. What could be important, however, is that the Turkish people do not want parliament and government to be run in different ways. So, it may well be that the fact that parliament is now dominated by the president's party alliance means that Erdoğan has a better chance in the second round.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.



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