**Turkish surprise**

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On May 14, the Turkish nation voted for their president as well as for their parliament. This was the most closely watched Turkish election in living memory.

Sitting at the juncture of the Middle East, Asia and Europe, Turkey has taken on a pivotal role in geopolitics. While Turkey is a member of the Nato alliance, many recent decisions of incumbent President Erdogan have greatly irked its Western allies such as acquisition of Russian anti-missile systems and blocking Sweden’s entrance into Nato due to differences on acceptance of Kurdish exiles who now reside in Sweden.

Erdogan first came to power as prime minister in 2002 at a time when the Turkish economy was in deep crisis and the country was often referred to as ‘the sick man of Europe.’ He won on a platform of economic reform and growth. During the first ten years of his leadership the performance of the Turkish economy was nothing less than spectacular. According to the World Bank, per capita GDP of Turkey grew from $3,641 in 2002 to $12,508 in 2013 – more than tripling in 10 years.

Having delivered strong economic growth, Erdogan then started to focus on issues more aligned with his AK Party’s Islamist and nationalist roots. His initial overtures towards the sizable Kurdish minority in Turkey were halted and many Kurds were charged with being sympathetic to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) terrorists. HDP, a popular party formed in 2012 aligned with Kurdish aspirations, was essentially shut down in 2016 and its leadership jailed on terrorism charges.

Over the course of Erdogan's 20-year rule, he has managed to steer the country from a parliamentary system to a presidential one, with most power consolidated into the hands of the president, Erdogan, himself. The role of the military in politics was eliminated with the jailing of several top generals. The judiciary has been largely brought under the control of the executive, and media mostly made compliant through pressure or even outright banning.

Erdogan has clearly been the most successful politician in the electoral history of modern Turkey. In 1994, he was first elected to the office of mayor of Istanbul. He has not lost a single election since then, leading to his victories as prime minister and then president of the country.

After great success growing the economy in his first ten years in office, the Turkish economy has struggled over the past several years of Erdogan's leadership. Per capita GDP, having reached $12,508 in 2013, now stands at $9,661. Economic mismanagement by the Erdogan administration is blamed for this. Annual inflation in 2022 reached over 80 per cent and now stands at around 45 per cent, causing severe hardship. Accusations of widespread corruption abound.

Politically, Turkey remains a deeply divided country between secularists who would like to see a revival of the ideals espoused by the founder of modern Turkey Kemal Ataturk, and the nationalist and Islamist aspirations of Erdogan's AKP.

Leading up to the 2023 elections, six opposition parties formed an alliance to challenge Erdogan. Led by Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the head of secularist CHP, it was felt for the first time in many years that Erdogan could be unseated. Most polls pointed to a small edge for the opposition.

However, the results of the May 14 elections came as a surprise to all who were expecting a loss for Erdogan. While he failed by a small gap to reach the 50 per cent threshold, with a 2.5 million vote lead over the opposition, success for Erdogan in the runoff on May 28 is all but assured. Deep disappointment is being felt among Turks hoping for a return to full secular democracy and an end to corrupt politics.

There has been fatigue in Western capitals with Erdogan marching to his own tune, often defying Nato goals and even questioning the leadership of the US. However, in the ultra-nationalist and religious campaign run by Erdogan, this may have been seen as a strength by his supporters. The opposition's platform of returning into a close alliance with the West did not resonate with many voters. The support of the opposition alliance by Kurdish parties was cynically painted by the AKP as support for terrorists.

With Erdogan’s electoral successes over the years, a blueprint has emerged on how elected leaders can take over institutions in a democracy to bend them to their advantage. And, sadly, Turkey isn’t the only country where this is happening.

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