

The 2014 Presidential Election in Turkey

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Abstract

The election of the 12th President of Turkey was remarkably different than the elections of the previous 11. For the first time in the history of the Republic, the head of the state was directly elected by ordinary people rather than chosen by their representatives in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*). On 10 August 2014, the incumbent Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won a simple majority of votes in the first round of the election and became the president for the next five years.

Keywords: Turkey, presidential election, two-round system, overseas voting

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1 Background

The election took place at the end of the seven-year term of the outgoing President Abdullah Gül, a co-founder of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) led by Erdoğan. Erdoğan's AKP had won yet another victory earlier in the same year with the 2014 Turkish local elections, which were held on 30 March. For many voters and parties alike, this was a clear forecast for the presidential election to follow in five months' time. Nevertheless, the background to the 2014 presidential election goes far beyond those five months; as far as the previous presidential elections held in 2007.

The 2007 presidential elections proved to be a highly problematic process that 'triggered a deep systematic crisis' in Turkish politics (Bacik, 2008, p. 377). With its more than enough seats in the assembly, the AKP should have had no arithmetic problem electing its own candidate, then the Foreign Minister Gül. However, there was a very tense political atmosphere outside the assembly as secular groups and elites protested against the idea of having an Islamist president. A controversial decision from the Constitutional Court declaring the first round of voting in the assembly invalid and a statement from the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces intervening in the elections brought the election process to a deadlock.

Although the assembly eventually elected Gül as the president, the same year the AKP introduced a constitutional referendum on electoral reform to avoid future reoccurrences. The approval of the reform meant that future presidents were to be elected by popular vote. Moreover, the reform included two further related amendments to the constitution: the presidential term is reduced from seven to five years while presidents are allowed to seek re-election for a second term in office. However, it was not immediately clear whether these new amendments applied to Gül's presidency, who was elected for a single term of seven years, or to other previous presidents who were still alive. Indeed, many aspects of the upcoming presidential election stayed unclear until the enactment of the Law on Presidential Elections in 2012. An important aspect of this legislation was the declaration that Gül's term would last not five but seven years, which was in effect the declaration of the year of the upcoming presidential election as 2014. It also stated that the single-term limit of the pre-reform era still applies to the previous presidents and therefore that they cannot be nominated for what would be their second term. This part of the legislation was annulled by the Constitutional Court, making it possible for the previous presidents, and most importantly for outgoing President Gül, to be nominated for the 2014 presidential election.

The Supreme Election Council (*Yüksek Seçim Kurulu*) decided to hold the first round of the election on 10 August 2014. If no candidate was elected on that first ballot, a second round would be held on 24 August 2014. The political atmosphere in the summer of 2014 surrounding the presidential election was nothing like in 2007—there was no visible intention to prevent the election process from taking its course. The AKP had been in power since 2002, winning every

single popular vote in the meantime, be it the local and national elections or the referenda. They had the power and the time to change the bureaucracy for their liking. Having a president, who appoints high-level bureaucrats, from their own party for the last seven years had definitely helped in this sense. Besides, a considerable number of ex-bureaucrats were now in jail for allegedly attempting different coups against the AKP governments. Therefore the state elites, who played an important role in the 2007 presidential elections, were not the same actors in 2014.

2 Electoral system

The presidential election system is a two-round voting system. A candidate needs an absolute majority of votes to win the election. If no candidate achieves this in the first round, then all but the two candidates receiving the most votes are eliminated before a second round takes place on the second Sunday after the first vote. The second round of voting guarantees that one of the candidates wins the majority of the votes as there are only two candidates running.

Despite losing the right to elect the president, the members (MPs) in the Grand National Assembly continue to have a central role in the election process. The Law on Presidential Elections subjects the nominations to the backing of MPs where each party can propose only one candidate.¹ More specifically, standing as a candidate requires signatures by at least 20 MPs from the 550-seat assembly. In theory, this limits the maximum number of candidates to 27. However, the actual number of candidates is likely to be much lower in practice and indeed lower than in many other presidential elections in parliamentary systems around the world. On the one hand, smaller parties with less than 20 seats cannot nominate their own candidate. On the other hand, in an assembly with a relatively high party discipline, MPs from larger parties are likely to back the candidate that their leadership proposes.

All Turkish citizens over the age of 18 residing abroad as well as in Turkey are eligible to vote. There are over 2.5 million registered voters outside Turkey (see Table 2), who have long had the right to vote in Turkish elections provided that they go to the polls set up at the customs offices. However, this is a right used by only those who happen to visit Turkey during the election period at the customs, which starts approximately a month ahead of the election day, resulting in a very low turnout. Allowing the citizens abroad to cast their votes in Turkish embassies and consulates had been on the political agenda since 2007, but a series of constitutional and administrative challenges delayed its application (Kesgin, 2012). The 2014 presidential election happened to be the first occasion where the overseas voting system was in place. Voting took place in 103 consulates in 54 countries with a prior appointment.

¹Parties can propose a joint candidate if their total share of votes in the previous general elections is above 10 per cent—the threshold to secure any parliamentary representation.

3 Candidates

Beside the AKP who had been governing the country since 2002, there were three other parliamentary party groups in opposition in the Grand National Assembly in 2014: Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), National Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), and the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP). All eyes were on the leadership of these four parties before the candidate nomination process as they each had enough number of MPs to nominate their own candidate for the presidential election. However, it became clear after the 2014 Turkish local elections that no opposition party could realistically compete with the AKP on their own.

There were three contenders in the election. The first move came from the leaderships of CHP and MHP in cooperation, who proposed Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu as their joint candidate on 16 July 2014. Despite being a successful academic and diplomat who previously served as the Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation among other positions, İhsanoğlu was very little-known nationally. So much so that he had a lot to explain even to the CHP and MHP voters, from how to pronounce his unusual name to his understanding of Islam and democracy. Some CHP MPs were unconvinced by İhsanoğlu and therefore did not sign for his nomination whereas he received the full support of the MHP parliamentary group. During the campaign process, several other political parties across the political spectrum that do not have any representation in the assembly also announced their support for İhsanoğlu.

Nevertheless, the HDP, a party of pro-Kurdish and left-wing movements, did not join this block of parties. Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-leader of the party, was nominated as the second candidate with full support from his MPs on 30 July 2014. Unlike İhsanoğlu, Demirtaş was a well-known political figure in Turkey. He first entered the Grand National Assembly in 2007 and was re-elected again in 2011, both times as an independent MP to bypass the 10 per cent threshold—an election strategy used by the Kurdish candidates in Turkey (Bacik, 2004, 2008; Kesgin, 2012). Demirtaş had been the co-leader of these independently elected MPs since 2010 although the name of their party changed more than once due to closure by the Constitutional Court or strategic reasons. The switch from Peace and Democratic Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*) to the HDP before the 2014 presidential elections was one of these strategic moves to create a party that would mobilise a larger population than just the Kurds. Several left and extreme left parties with no electoral significance declared their support for Demirtaş.

The AKP delayed the announcement of their candidate as long as possible, leading to speculations about the negotiations between the two potential candidates of the AKP—the outgoing President Abdullah Gül and the incumbent Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Meanwhile, the party whips collected signatures from all of their MPs without letting them know whom they were actually nominating for the presidential election. A few days after Gül publically ruled his candidacy out, the AKP announced its leader Erdoğan as the third

candidate in the presidential election on 1 July 2014. Erdoğan, a former Mayor of Istanbul, had been dominating Turkish politics ever since he became the Prime Minister of Turkey in 2003. An internal AKP regulation limits the number of terms that its members can serve as MPs to three, which would apply to Erdoğan in 2015. However, the reason behind Erdoğan's wish to become the president, a position that he effectively refused in 2007 by nominating Gül instead, could not be a party regulation that he could have easily changed. A more plausible reason would be the changing nature of the Turkish presidency that he envisages as a result of the change in the election system discussed above. The only other party, out of the almost one hundred registered in Turkey, to declare support for Erdoğan was the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP).²

4 Campaign

The official campaign period, as announced and regulated by the Supreme Election Council, ran from 11 July to 9 August 2014. The first part of this campaign calendar coincided with Ramadan, the holy month of fasting for the vast majority of the population in Turkey. İhsanoğlu decided not to hold election rallies until after Ramadan and instead concentrated on smaller events for a while. His first election rally was only a week before the election day. Demirtaş and Erdoğan did have rallies throughout their campaign, which they tailored around the fasting time and the heat of the summer season. Beside the mass election rallies, all three candidates engaged in other forms of conventional campaigning activities. Nevertheless, a live televised debate among the candidates never materialised despite the calls from İhsanoğlu.

An important controversy of this period was about the campaign resources. The candidates were allowed to accept personal donations to fund their campaigning activities—another novelty for elections in Turkey. However, as Table 1 shows, there was a gulf between the funds raised by the candidates. At the end of the campaign period, the donations to Erdoğan were almost 6 times higher than the total donations made to İhsanoğlu and Demirtaş together. Despite being the joint candidate of the two largest opposition parties, İhsanoğlu did not have the kind of partisan support that the other two candidates enjoyed as the leaders of their own parties. In addition to being a party leader, with the approval from the Supreme Election Council, Erdoğan remained as the Prime Minister throughout the campaign. He was heavily criticised by the opposition for misusing his position and government resources for electoral purposes—an accusation denied by the Erdoğan campaign. For example, at the centre of this particular controversy was the coverage of the candidates by the national public broadcaster of Turkey (TRT), which is funded by the taxpayer and legally bound to be impartial. However, their coverage was highly biased towards Erdoğan as also shown in Table 1.

²The majority of these parties do not regularly contest elections due to lack of organisation, resources, and voter base. The last time the ANAP contested the general elections was in 2002, when it failed to win any seat in the assembly.

Table 1: Donations and public broadcasting received by each candidate.

Candidates	Donations ^a		Public broadcasting ^b
	in Turkish Liras	in U.S. dollars	
Erdoğan	55,260,778	25,489,28	559
İhsanoğlu	8,500,000	3,920,664	137
Demirtaş	1,213,000	559,501	18

Notes: ^a Denotes the total amount of self-reported donations on 9 August 2014. Source: Hürriyet Daily News (2014a). The figures in brackets are the approximate values in U.S. dollar on that day as calculated by the author..

^b Denotes the total number of minutes devoted to the coverage of each candidate by the public broadcaster’s news channel TRT Haber between 29 June and 10 July 2014. Source: Hürriyet Daily News (2014b).

The prominent issues of the earlier local elections, such as the Gezi Park protests or the government corruption scandal from 2013, featured in this campaign albeit to a lesser extent. The Kurdish–Turkish peace process and the 2014 Gaza–Israel conflict were also part of the debate as the ongoing issues that coincided with the campaign. The future of the presidency as an office in the political system of Turkey, however, was probably the key aspect of the campaign. Previously as chosen by the MPs, Turkish presidents played a largely ceremonial role in the parliamentary system by staying away from day-to-day partisan politics. Now that the president was to be elected by the people for the first time, Erdoğan declared that it would not be the low-profile business as usual at the presidential palace and that he would continue to play an ‘active role’ in politics as a president. In contrast, both İhsanoğlu and Demirtaş vowed to stick by the legal and traditional frameworks around the role of presidency, pointing out the fact that nothing but the election method had changed in the constitution.

5 Results

For many, the real question to be answered on 10 August 2014 was not who would win the election but whether Erdoğan would win an absolute majority of votes in the first or second round. Table 2 presents the results of the election, showing that Erdoğan won the election in the first round with 51.5 per cent of the votes. This is 8.8 percentage points higher than the overall share of votes that his party achieved in local elections earlier in the same year. In the same local elections, the total vote share of the CHP and MHP was 44.2 per cent. Their joint candidate İhsanoğlu came second in the presidential election with 38.4 per cent of the votes. Finally, Demirtaş earned the support of the 9.7 per cent of the voters—3.4 per cent more than what his party won in the most recent elections

Table 2: Results of the presidential election in Turkey, 10 August 2014.

Candidates	Homeland		Customs		Overseas		Total	
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%
Erdoğan	20,670,826	51.7	185,444	62.7	143,873	62.3	21,000,143	51.8
İhsanoğlu	15,434,167	38.6	89,070	30.1	64,483	27.9	15,587,720	38.4
Demirtaş	3,914,359	9.8	21,107	7.1	22,582	9.8	3,958,048	9.8
Invalid Votes	734,140		1719		1857		737,716	
Total Votes	40,753,492		297,340		232,795		41,283,627	
Electorate	52,894,115		–		2,798,726		55,692,841	
Turnout	77.1				8.3		74.1	

Source: Supreme Election Council (2014c, 2014a, 2014b).

The overall turnout of 74.1 per cent was lower than in any parliamentary election held since the introduction of compulsory voting in 1983. Perhaps the most surprising result of the elections was the single digit turnout rate of the voters abroad. Despite all the legal and administrative efforts, only 8.3 per cent of the Turkish citizens abroad went to the polls at the consulates, for which many blamed the compulsory appointment system. Overall, as this was the first election of its kind, it is hard to interpret the lower-than-normal turnout at this stage. On the one hand, it could be a result of characteristics particular to the election held on 10 August 2014, such as seasonal factors, voter fatigue, or the one-sided nature of the competition (Rallings, Thrasher, & Borisyuk, 2003). The election was held only five months after the previous ones and in the middle of a hot summer when an important portion of the population is traditionally away from their voting districts for their holiday. On top of all this, the result of the election was known not to be a close call. On the other hand, it could be the start of a trend that reflects a perception of the presidential election as less important than parliamentary elections. Low turnout is one of the characteristics of such ‘second-order elections’ irrespective of the particularities of the election day (Reif & Schmitt, 1980).

6 Aftermath

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was officially sworn in as the 12th Turkish president on 28 August 2014. Since then, just like he declared before the election, Erdoğan has been a different president than the previous ones in the recent history of Turkey. Despite the fact that former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has replaced Erdoğan as the AKP leader and prime minister, the President Erdoğan calls cabinet meetings—a constitutional right that previous presidents hardly ever used. As well as this, he continues to hold mass rallies where he openly criticises the opposition parties and their leaders while at the same time claiming to be impartial to all parties. In these

and other public occasions, Erdoğan often brings the conversation around the arguments for a change from parliamentary to presidential system.

The 2014 presidential election has initially unsettled the relatively stable political system in Turkey. Will these initial waves lead to a complete overhaul of the system? Regardless of the answer, the 2014 Turkish presidential election is likely to be remembered as a benchmark in the future.

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