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Turkey's elections: five more years of President Erdogan



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The margin of President Erdogan's victory in the first round of Turkey's elections on 14 May came as a surprise. Although Mr Erdogan didn't pass the 50% threshold required to secure the presidency at once, he got close enough (49.5%) for most Turks now to assume that he will beat his opponent, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, in the run-off on 28 May.

Practically every opinion poll before the election had had Mr Kilicdaroglu ahead. The opposition alliance of six parties seemed to have the necessary self-discipline to present a united front and exuded confidence. The 2019 opposition victories in the mayoral elections in Istanbul and Ankara had shown that Mr Erdogan and his AK party could be beaten.

However, it seems that, for half of Turkey's population, President Erdogan's campaigning strategy of supporting a conservative life-style and demonising the PKK, the Kurdish terrorist organisation that has fought against the Turkish state for 40 years, counted for more than the country's economic problems or allegations of corruption.

Although the campaign was heavily biased in favour of Mr Erdogan's government, no-one has argued that the result was stolen from Mr Kilicdaroglu. Unless there is a huge and unexpected turn around in fortunes in the second round, Mr Erdogan remains the most popular politician in Turkey.

Mr Erdogan's AK party and its ultra-nationalist coalition partner, the MHP, together also won a comfortable majority in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. With large numbers of strongly nationalist MPs in the government and opposition alliances, this is the most nationalist Turkish parliament in the Republic's history.

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Meanwhile, Turkey's economy is in deep trouble with the President's unorthodox belief that high interest rates cause inflation making matters worse. The Financial Times has reported investors selling Turkish assets as hopes that an opposition victory would usher in a return to rational economic policy-making have all but disappeared. The ratings agencies are making gloomy predictions about 'persistent very high inflation' and 'severe currency pressures'.

How does this combination of ultra-nationalist sentiment and an ailing economy affect Turkey's foreign policy?

Turkey was, of course, in a similar position before the election. So, with Mr Erdogan back in power, a lot of continuity of foreign policy can be expected. Mr Erdogan will likely continue to cultivate those countries - Russia, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and China - that are prepared to invest in Turkey and help finance its widening current account deficit.

The ultra-nationalist mood means there will not be any political appetite in Turkey for seeking a peace process with the PKK. Turkey's military has anyway succeeded in recent years in subduing the PKK inside Turkey and in northern Iraq. But as part of the US-led anti ISIL coalition in north east Syria, the PKK, rebranded there as the Syrian Democratic Forces, has consolidated its strength.

Even moderate, pro-western Turks find it hard to understand how their NATO allies, especially the US, could be supporting the PKK in Syria. This issue has become a major reason for a growing wave of anti-Americanism in Turkey and a steadily growing frustration with the West in general.

Turkey is not, however, so disenchanted with the West that it will leave NATO. Russia remains the historic enemy and, despite the apparent friendship between Mr Putin and Mr Erdogan, the Turkish system is wary of Moscow and conscious that in many disputes - e.g. Libya, Syria, Nagorno Karabakh - it is on the opposite side to Russia.

President Erdogan will continue, at times, to pursue a policy of strategic independence that is difficult to reconcile with being a good NATO ally. Falling out with the West does not bother him ideologically so long as Turkey can avoid sanctions or other pressures on the Turkish economy.

His equivocal public position on Ukraine is driven partly by the Turkish economy's need for Russian hydrocarbons and tourists and partly by a desire to act as mediator should the opportunity arise (as happened in last year's 'grain deal'). But relations with Kyiv appear very warm, which suggests material support for Ukraine is happening below the radar.

Whether the president will relent and agree to Sweden's application to join NATO is moot. The core issue for Turkey is Stockholm's relaxed attitude to the PKK's political activities in Sweden, which has a big Kurdish minority. The smart money seems to be on Mr Erdogan lifting his veto at the NATO summit in Vilnius in July in response to a further Swedish move to constrain the PKK.

Moreover, allowing Sweden to join NATO this year is in Turkey's immediate interests since it is surely a necessary condition of persuading the US Congress to authorise the modernisation of Turkey's F-16 aircraft, a major defence requirement since Turkey was kicked out of the F-35 programme.

The European Union has lost what leverage it had over Turkey in recent years. Turkey's status as a candidate for membership is dead in all but name. Its two other aims - modernising its customs union with the EU and obtaining visa-free travel to Schengen countries for short stays - look likely to continue to be blocked by Cyprus with the support of some other member states.

But if relations with the EU are stagnant, those with the Council of Europe (CoE) seem likely to fall off a cliff. The CoE has taken a close interest in the cases of two high profile political prisoners in Turkey (the Turkish authorities refer to them as terrorists) - Osman Kavala, a philanthropist, and Selahattin Demirtas, the former leader of the Kurdish political party, the HDP. Continuing disregard of the CoE's and the European Court of Human Rights' rulings on these cases could lead to Turkey's suspension from the organisation.

There are plenty of challenges ahead for Turkey domestically and internationally. In their election on 28 May, the Turkish people will likely vote to retain their strong, populist leader as their best hope of dealing with them.

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