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Turkey

Turkey: Opposition breaks through, Erdogan's bloc “resists”

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Presented as a “matter of survival” by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the municipal elections of March 31, 2019 ended in an undeniable failure for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) with the loss of the most important cities, including Istanbul and Ankara held for 25 years by Islamists, to the benefit of the opposition. However, by challenging the results and calling a recount of spoiled ballots, the AKP “resists”.

Campaign, issues and candidacy

Subject to 20% inflation and an extreme rise in food prices (“food terrorism” according to the head of state), Turkey has once again experienced a brutal, aggressive campaign based on a demonization of the country’s opposition. The latter is held responsible for all the ills of the country. As president of both Turkey and the AKP, Erdogan has travelled the country throughout the last few months in order to demonstrate by his presence and his commitment the real stakes of these elections, whose significance in his view far exceeded that of a simple municipal ballot. It was a question of the “survival of the state” in the face of an “alliance of vice and infamy”. The president did not spare his words, nor did his interior minister Süleyman Soylu who also intervened in these elections. He claimed that hundreds of militants of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) were candidates on the opposition lists and that if they were elected “we will have new martyrs in the cities” thus identifying a probable victory of the opposition with a resurgence of terrorist attacks. He arbitrarily added that “they may have the right to run for office, but not to fulfil their function. If they are elected, we will prevent them.”

The same goes for the Kurdish majority cities of the south-east, where almost all the mayors had been dismissed and replaced by state-appointed administrators (*kayyum*). “If we see that the outgoing candidates are linked to the terrorist organization, we will continue with the *kayyum*. Neither history nor nation will forget the alliance made with those who want to divide the country” said President Erdogan.

Elections transformed into plebiscite

It was as part of a broad alliance that the various opposition forces mobilized for this election. At the official level the so-called electoral “Alliance of the Nation” brought together the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the “Good Party” (İYİ, a split from the far-right Nationalist Action Party, MHP), which had already united during the elections of June 24, 2018. The parties participated in the polls with their own list in various cities and districts, but for the metropolises and other critical cities only one of the parties of the Alliance of the Nation presented a candidate to the municipality so as to prevail over the candidate of the Popular Alliance formed by the AKP and the MHP.

However, the Democratic People's Party (HDP) - a left-wing formation originating from the Kurdish movement - which was not part of the opposition alliance in the June 2018 elections, this time supported in most big western cities the opposition candidate with the slogan of “make the AKP-MHP lose”, while presenting its own candidates in the Kurdish region to recover its municipalities confiscated by the regime. But in the face of the criminalization of the HDP by Erdogan and his regime, to allow the various political sensitivities to vote for the same candidate and mainly not to scare the secular nationalist sectors - which Erdogan has tried to provoke - this alliance was not made official.

However, a mass Kurdish vote for the CHP bloc (which had greatly contributed to the arrest of the HDP's elected

officials) and the IYI, of far right origin, was not assured in advance. And especially for the candidate of the CHP in Ankara, Mansur Yavas - who had been a member of the MHP - and whose name also circulated as a possible candidate on the side of the electoral bloc of the regime, which is also a revealing sign of the lack of political content of the candidacies. Finally, Selahattin Demirtas, former co-chair of the HDP, who is still incarcerated, intervened. After a long and significant silence, he called for following the HDP's strategy: "The past is not unimportant, let us never forget everything we have experienced. But the future is even more important. It is you who will be determining in the results of this election. Our strategic vote in cities where we do not present a candidate will be a sign of our strength" he observed on Twitter, through his lawyers, two days before the election date.

The results

With an 84.6% turnout, the election results indicated a sharp decline for the AKP in the municipalities. The latter lost 15 cities including 8 to the CHP and 7 to the MHP. In fact, in some cities the AKP-MHP bloc did not form an alliance and the two parties presented different candidates. The MHP is therefore one of the winners of this election.

Already in the legislative elections of June 2018 the results of the MHP had surprised. The latter seemed to be destined to collapse due to the submission of its leader Devlet Bahçeli to Erdogan following the nationalist turn that he effected from 2015 and the departure of its secular sector which then formed the IYI. If indeed the MHP lost two thirds of these voters to IYI, this loss was offset by a vote transfer from disillusioned AKP voters. This ballot thus reinforces its position as an essential ally for the "survival" of the Erdogan regime, while expanding its autonomous margin of manoeuvre.

On the other hand, Erdogan's party took over three cities from the HDP, 2 from the CHP and one from the MHP. However, the loss of three major cities - Ankara, Antalya and Istanbul - economic centres concentrating 70% of GDP - is not comparable with its gains. Note however that in total the percentage of votes obtained by the candidates of the AKP-MHP bloc (51.6%) suffered only a slight decrease compared to the results obtained by Erdogan during the presidential election (52.59%) and by his People's Alliance for the parliamentary elections (53.66%) in 2018. It is therefore difficult to speak of a real change in the relationship of social and political forces (with their electoral expression) and to predict that the weakening of the conservative-nationalist bloc will continue. It should also be noted that after eight elections since 2014, the next elections will not be held until 2023.

If the IYI did not win a municipality, this party of far right origin which aims to become a secular right wing formation held a key position in the victory of the CHP. Apart from the cities taken from the AKP, the CHP also won in Mediterranean cities like Adana and Mersin, which the MHP previously held. Thus, the biggest party of the parliamentary opposition now controls almost all the cities of the Mediterranean coast to the south and the Aegean coast to the west. "According to the political map of the country, the Aegean coast and Thrace in the north are traditionally nationalist and secular and generally vote CHP" says Gorkem Dogan, professor of political science at Istanbul University. "But southern cities like Antalya, Adana and Mersin are so-called swing states, and the opposition has prevailed here. It is the same for Kars in the east of the country where the HDP won. The ruling bloc has not lost in its bastions stretching from central and northern Anatolia to the Black Sea coast. But there it is the MHP that wins inside the bloc. The AKP is also influential among the poor and working strata of the industrial cities. And there also it is the CHP that won in Bilecik and Eskisehir - which it already held - and of course in Istanbul. In other industrial areas such as Bursa and Kocaeli, the opposition is significantly stronger and sometimes won municipalities in central constituencies. These are the results of the long period of recession into which Turkey has entered. There is a 5% drop in participation in these elections, I think it is due to a loss of motivation to vote among the poorest of AKP voters, but of course that has to be verified. And without forgetting the massive support of the Kurds for opposition candidates which was decisive in some cases, we can see that the loser of these elections is indeed the AKP" he said.

As for the HDP, among the 11 cities that it had obtained in the municipal elections of 2014, 10 had been put under state tutelage and their dismissed mayors under the accusation of “being related to the PKK terrorist organization”. The challenge was to regain these administrations, as well as nearly a hundred sub-prefectures and villages also confiscated by the regime. Despite unprecedented repression and criminalization and extraordinary censorship, the HDP succeeded in taking over six of these cities, including Diyarbakir, considered the capital of “Northern Kurdistan” (Turkey). The party also won in Kars, held by the right-wing MHP since 2014. One of these cities, Dersim (officially Tunceli) was lost to the candidate of the Communist Party of Turkey, Fatih Macoglu. The latter, thanks to the application of progressive and egalitarian measures in a municipality in Dersim (Ovacik) during the preceding period, had gained a reputation in public opinion. But it was the AKP that took Bitlis, Agri, and Sirnak - arguably one of the most politicized Kurdish cities, and also one where the people were most severely “repressed”. It was the most subject to real destruction during the fighting between special military and police units and young urban militias linked to the Kurdish guerrillas. HDP votes fell from 70.6% to 35% and the AKP dropped from 20.3% to 61.8%. If repression, forced displacement of population, and a massive presence of military personnel partly explain these results, the possibility of a desire to ease tensions with the state on the part of certain layers of the urban population - which is the result of the regime's repressive policy towards the Kurds - is not to be neglected.

Ankara and Istanbul

Of course, it was the victories won in the two major cities of Ankara and Istanbul - the city council of Izmir is already under its control - that matter most from the point of view of the Alliance of the Nation. Mansur Yavas, already a candidate for the CHP in Ankara at the previous municipal elections in 2014, had lost narrowly - following a long power cut that raised suspicions of fraud - to the AKP candidate with 43.8% against 44.9%. This time he won, with 50.9% of the votes against 47.1% for the AKP-MHP.

In Istanbul, the former mayor of the Beylikduzu district, Ekrem Imamoglu, a candidate for the opposition alliance, clashed with the former Prime Minister and Speaker of the Turkish Parliament, Binali Yildirim. “Imamoglu is the kind of political figure that can be compared to Macron or Obama,” said Gorkem Dogan, professor of political science at Istanbul University. He says, “It's a new face that we did not really know before. The mayor of a borough who apparently did a good job. He does not talk about politics but reflects a personality, or at most speaks of concrete business and work for everyone. And that reassures public opinion. This is effective during periods of political or economic crisis, when, regardless of the policy you are conducting, it is difficult to solve problems. The Imamoglu phenomenon, this figure of the ideal son-in-law for all families, can be sustainable if he can be officially appointed mayor of Istanbul. But under conditions of prolonged recession, it can also play a key role in overcoming the problems of the legitimacy of capital. But we are not there, the current challenge is to weaken Erdogan's regime.”

The results immediately after the elections were 48.8% for Imamoglu and 48.5% for Yildirim, 25,000 votes difference. However, for inhabitants of Istanbul as much as for the rest of the population focused on this critical issue, it was difficult to find out about the results. Indeed, while the gap - in favour of Yildirim - according to the figures transmitted by the State Agency of Anatolia (AA) to the media began to tighten up over the hours, the latter appeared on the screens to claim his victory. At the same time, unlike the CHP presidential candidate of 2018, Muharrem Ince, who could not be found during the vote count and the announcement of his defeat, Imamoglu took care to inform the public throughout the evening about the provisional results forwarded to him by the electoral coordination of the opposition, on the basis of the minutes. He pointed out that the latter indicated greater votes than those of his opponent, calling the Higher Electoral Council, through which the AA relayed the results, to take responsibility. At around 11pm, the AA stopped providing information about the results throughout the night and finally announced in the late morning the results according to which Imamoglu came in first. Meanwhile, during the election night, President Erdogan was speaking to his audience from the AKP centre in Ankara to vaguely admit the election results while stressing that his alliance was winning nationally.

But the next day, as soon as the results were announced, the AKP refused to concede defeat and lodged appeals in all the districts of Istanbul, as well as for several districts of Ankara and other lost cities to re-examine the validity of the ballot papers considered invalid. An “anecdote” about this: while the 58 appeals filed by the AKP were accepted, all those filed by the HDP were refused. However, in addition to the votes counted as invalid, several districts are recounting all votes without any evidence of fraud. By the end of the week following the poll, as the count continued, the gap between the two Istanbul candidates had fallen to around 18,000 votes.

“They cannot afford to lose Istanbul,” says Gorkem Dogan. “This municipal administration was the birthplace of the AKP. By becoming mayor of Istanbul in 1994, Erdogan transformed the functioning of the municipal administration. By centralizing and making profitable services such as public transport cards or parking lots, he produced important financial resources that he put at the service of the Islamist political cause. Just as the Young Turks tended to create a national bourgeoisie at the beginning of the twentieth century, Erdogan, notably thanks to the calls for tenders of the city council, stimulated the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises and thus favoured the development of capital. Islamist. It was still part of the Prosperity Party, but that is where the AKP emerged, and the financial resources created by the city halls of Istanbul, but also Ankara, were one of the most important material foundations of Erdogan’s rise and movement. Town halls can likewise provide jobs for their supporters, support small businesses, make large donations to Islamist foundations, support the Erdoganist press with the mass purchase of newspapers that are not read at all. Beyond the political or symbolic level, losing the mayor will cause economic difficulties for the AKP. With such a small gap in votes, no one would give up, even in liberal democracies, of which I am not a worshiper either. Look at Al Gore's case against Bush in Florida in the 2000 elections.”

According to figures provided by Deutsche Welle Turkey, the annual budget of the Istanbul City Hall for 2019, including those of the Public Transport Company and the Water Administration, amounts to almost 6 billion euros. And the total turnover of the 28 companies located within the town hall is around 4 billion euros. If it were a private company, the Istanbul municipality would be in second place - behind the Turkish refinery company TUPRAS - in the list of the 500 largest companies in the country, according to the report published in 2017 by the Chamber of Istanbul Industry.

The Pelican network

However, the decision not to accept the defeat and to file appeals on the part of the AKP was preceded and accompanied by a campaign, initiated of course on the social networks, and this from the night of the poll. Its aim was to create an atmosphere of “resistance” to a new aspect of the coup attempt aimed at overthrowing Erdogan, this time by electoral fraud. The actors in this campaign? The various twitter accounts linked to the network known as “Pelican”, initially formed in 2015 to counter the Gülenists on the web.

This unofficial team headed up by Berat Albayrak, Erdogan's son-in-law (and the current Treasury and Finance Minister) became known to the public in May 2016 with the publication of an article on a blog under the name “Pelican case”, accusing Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu of not being loyal enough to Erdogan and “demonstrating” point by point his infidelities.

Davutoglu, understanding what the Chief thought of him, resigned in the days that followed. Run from a villa rented by the NGO Bosphorus Global, the network of journalists, young activists and businessmen - whose ranks have grown over time - will serve as a propaganda machine through the media and internet in order to discredit any criticism of Erdogan, calling for sanctions. “It has almost become an AKP intelligence and homeland security office,” says Hakki Ozdal, a journalist who closely follows the party's internal reports. He continues: “The group was of course not formed independently of Erdogan who, aware of the existence of various tendencies in the party, wanted to have his own group of the faithful to ensure a consolidation around himself. Thus, this network has become a kind

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of traitor detector, for example having the power to dismiss any journalist expressing any criticism of the Chief. The campaign they began on the first night was aimed at putting pressure on Erdoğan so that he did not resign himself to recognizing defeat and probably also avoid taking responsibility for it. I think Erdoğan was recalcitrant about not recognizing the results. AKP spokesman Omer Celik even called for vigilance against manipulation and provocation, relaying the fake news spread by the accounts linked to the “Pelican” network. As for Erdoğan, he did not speak for several days. I think he was not convinced but waited to see if the campaign was working, if the party base approved this argument of fraud and coup by the ballot box. And unfortunately, it seems to work and for this first week there was no debate on defeat. "

Speaking publicly on Friday, April 5, the head of state announced that the final decision went to the Higher Electoral Council, giving his own example: “I had also been elected deputy, but there was an appeal against this election, and it was cancelled. But we had nothing to do in this case. It was the final decision ...” Nothing reassuring about that.

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