

TURKEY'S ELECTIONS AS SEEN FROM BEIJING

Martina Poletti

"These elections have been the most important in the last 13 years, essentially for three reasons: for the first time, since 2002, President Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) did not win a majority in parliament, and indeed lost votes; secondly, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), representing the Kurdish minority, made it past the steep 10% threshold for entering parliament and, winning more than 12% of the votes, obtained 80 seats out of 550, becoming a new actor with a great potential for Turkey's political life; last, but not least, President Erdoğan, without a three-fifths majority in parliament, is unlikely to be able to change the constitution and transform Turkey into a presidential system, expanding his powers to rule

smoothly until 2024." An Associate Professor of Turkish Studies at the History Department of Peking University and vice-director of the newly established **Center for Mediterranean Area Studies (CMAS)**, co-sponsored by the Torino World Affairs Institute (T.wai), Professor **Zan Tao** 答涛 shares his views on the current situation in Turkey after the June elections.

When we first met in June, right after the surprising results of the elections, we discussed the difficulties of forming a new government. And we were right to see new elections in the Fall. What has happened over the past few weeks?

We know that the AKP lost the majority of seats in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey with the June election. The AKP is President Erdoğan's tool to change the Turkish political system into an executive presidential one, which might be regarded as

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pre-condition for Erdoğan's political and personal safety. Clearly, there are those who believe that Mr. Erdoğan himself does not want a coalition government which will very likely slip from his control. The timetable of the new election has been set now. All the parties have to compete again on November 1st this year.

Going back to the June elections, Gencer Özcan, a Professor of International Relations at Bilgi University in Istanbul, said that "this is the end of identity politics in Turkey," since the HDP managed not only to overcome the 10% threshold, but also emotional and identity barriers among voters, drawing support both from the Kurdish population, and from centre-left and secular voters disillusioned with Erdoğan and inspired by the HDP campaigns focused on representing ethnic minorities, women and the LGBT community. Would you agree with this view?

I do not think this is the end of identity politics in Turkey. The identity conflict between Turks and Kurds and the divide between Islamists and secularists are still there, and set to endure.

In March President Erdoğan was talking about the "brotherhood project" and the HDP was facilitating the dialogue between the government and the PKK (the Kurdish Workers' Party, widely considered a terrorist organization), aiming at an immediate stop of all hostilities, in order to turn the 2013 ceasefire into a long-lasting peace settlement. Then came the June 7 elections, political stalemate, renewed polarization in Turkish society and an unprecedented wave of violence and terrorist attacks. Why?

We can tell from the various reports concerning the question of the relationship between the PKK and the Turkish government that the recent attacks against the PKK are mainly driven by internal politics. This strategy will both weaken the credibility of the HDP and meet with the satisfaction of Turkish nationalists. All of these facts are mainly a result of an election-dominated game. The stalemate in the peace process in Turkey is a huge failure for both Turks and Kurds. People will soon realize that they have missed the opportunity to solve the long-term ethnic problem that has tortured Turkish society for decades.

How much do you think the authoritarian character of the last years of Erdoğan's presidency has affected these elections?

We can say that the Gezi Park protest of 2013 was a turning point for Turkish society. I believe that the protest reflected very well people's increasing anger towards Mr. Erdoğan's authoritarianism. As for Mr. Erdoğan, there will always be people who love him and people who dislike him. What we saw during these last elections is that the liberals have turned their back on Erdoğan. I think that the ongoing economic problems that Turkey is currently facing might be the biggest concern for the population. And all these will be tested during the new election.

How does China look at this situation? Since former Premier Wen Jiabao's visit in 2010, China has become Turkey's third largest economic partner, after Russia and Germany, while at the geopolitical level in 2012 Turkey obtained the symbolic position of dialogue partner within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Despite this, Turkish public opinion is the least favorable towards China in the Middle East, because of its close religious and ethnic ties with the Uyghurs, a Turkic-speaking Muslim minority living in China's far western region of Xinjiang, which has been facing cultural and religion suppression under Chinese rule. Just a few weeks ago there were protests in front of the Chinese Embassy in the capital Ankara, following Thailand's decision to deport some hundred Uyghurs back to China. President Erdoğan visited Beijing in July to restore confidence between the two countries.

A stable Turkey is fundamental for strengthening bilateral economic relations with China. So far the relations between the two countries have been normal, but two main issues – the imbalances in trade (over USD 18 billion in 2012), and the Uyghur issue – continue to raise concerns. Turkey is still firmly anchored to the West, but it is also turning east as it rebalances its foreign policy. As for the situation you mentioned, Turkish diplomats in Southeast Asia were found to be involved in the Uyghurs' flight from China. Beijing considers this a state activity which

risks damaging the bilateral relationship between Turkey and China. Turkish leaders have to realize how China defines its core interests. As for Erdoğan's visit, I think there was something new in it. For example, Erdoğan mentioned the East Turkistan Islamic Movement as a terrorist

group. There are some people in China who see this as a change of attitude by the Turks towards the complicated Uyghur issue. The direct dialogue between the two State leaders is important both for the mutual understanding of their different ideas and for restoring trust.

The creation of a research center like the CMAS can be pivotal for a better comprehension of China's growing role in the Mediterranean Sea.

Yes, the creation of an institute like the Center for Mediterranean Area Studies at the best university in China will greatly help the development of this field of research. The Mediterranean is rich in terms of economy and culture and has nurtured the development of the world's major civilizations. Our center is a pioneering institute and will definitely serve the needs of China in establishing closer links with all Mediterranean countries.

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