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Pluralism vs. Ultra-Nationalism: The Real Cleavage Behind Turkey's Elections and Populism's Rise

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NORA FISHER-ONAR, MAY 31 2023

At first glance, Turkey's electoral drama appeared to confirm well-worn readings of Middle Eastern politics as driven by clashing "Islamists" vs. "secularists". The frame has long shaped outsiders' perceptions of the country and, like other familiar binaries (e.g. "Turk" vs. "Kurd", or orthodox "Sunni" vs. heterodox "Alevi") has been internalized by many people in the region. The impression was encouraged by candidates' choice of where to wrap their campaigns. Incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan closed both the first and second rounds with events at Hagia Sofia – a 1,500 year-old structure which has served as church, mosque and museum, and which he reconsecrated as a mosque in 2020. At both events – the first an end-of-campaign rally, the second a celebration of the 570th conquest of Istanbul by an Ottoman emperor – the monument's symbolically drenched spaces pulsated with the leader's electoral formula: equation of Erdoğan's very person with faith, nation, and state. Opposition challenger Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, on the other hand, wrapped his campaign with a more subdued visit to Atatürk's mausoleum in Ankara – a tribute to the ongoing resonance of the secularist founding father for millions of voters.

Yet, closer examination reveals a different cleavage at play – one which is propelling would-be Erdoğan's to power across the globe. This is a clash between people with pluralistic orientations: i.e., folks from all walks of life, who are okay sharing space with people who look, speak, and pray differently than they do, versus ultra-nationalists: people who believe that state and society are best served when we rally around a singular ethnic and/or religious flag.

The opposition's *Milli* (Nation) coalition sought to rally the former. Bringing together moderate, secularist nationalists from the right and left alike, the party fielded an Alevi leader who brokered a cross-camp coalition in pursuit of greater pluralism. This entailed formal alliances with Islamist critics of Erdoğan's hardline turn. It also incorporated an informal, but electorally meaningful, alliance with the restive Kurdish movement. The result, as a savvy Tweeter put it, was that on election day, leftists rushed to vote for rightists, Kurds voted for Turkish nationalists, atheists voted for devout Muslims, homosexuals voted for extreme conservatives, and former ministers of Erdoğan voted for the staunchest opponents of his regime. The fact that this oddball coalition carried almost half of the vote despite Erdoğan's immense incumbent advantage was remarkable, if ultimately, insufficient.

Conversely, Erdoğan's *Cumhur* (People's) coalition with ultra-nationalist parties of both secular and Islamist orientation, gave the leader a crucial boost in the presidential contest which he won on 28 May, and parliamentary elections which wrapped on 14 May. The numbers are telling. In the first round, Erdoğan lost ground within almost every electoral district, including his traditional strongholds, compared to prior presidential campaigns. Similarly, his Justice and Development Party (AKP) underperformed, costing the party 27 parliamentary seats. Yet, ultra-nationalist allies compensated by bringing 55 seats to the coalition. In short, by joining forces with the medium-sized Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and smaller, radical right parties, the AKP-led People's coalition secured a robust parliamentary majority.

Ultra-nationalist swing voters also decided the presidential race. Giving 5.17 percent of the first round vote to the third presidential candidate, Sinan Oğan's ATA alliance, they denied both Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu the margins each needed to win (an especially demotivating outcome for the latter who had set expectations high).

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The imperative, in turn, of courting ATA votes in Round Two, put Kılıçdaroğlu in the impossible position of wooing extreme right nationalists while maintaining the 10 percent of ballots he had been lent by leftists, especially Kurds. Kılıçdaroğlu tried by doubling down on anti-immigrant rhetoric, while scrambling to disassociate Kurdish voters from Kurdish “terrorists”. In the process, he squandered the inclusive spirit which had buoyed the opposition coalition in the first place.

The result was a victory for Erdoğan who took home 52.18 percent of the vote, in comparison to the opposition's 47.82. This translates into a strengthened executive presidency and accelerated state capture, in coalition with ultra-nationalists of both Islamist and secular stripe. At least in the short term then, prospects appear dim for Turkey's *de facto* diverse society to claw back a pluralistic political system, where rule of law, freedoms, and human, women's and minority rights are effectively enshrined.

What lessons can we draw from Turkey's turn? We live, after all, in a world from Modi's India and Orban's Hungary to Trump – or DeSantis's – United States, where populists, their ultra-nationalist allies, and opportunistic enablers are seeking to rewrite the frames and rules of electoral democracy.

Lesson 1: It's not only the economy, stupid

Much of the pre-election optimism surrounding the opposition was due to the sorry state of Turkey's economy: its hyperinflation and ravaged currency, and Erdoğan's counterintuitive response (e.g. refusal to raise interest rates; expansive economic populism). The government's bungled relief efforts after devastating earthquakes in February – which killed at least 50,000, and left some 1.5 million homeless – also were thought to advantage the opposition.

But, it seems that when a race is framed as if survival of the national “in-group” is at stake, identity politics beat out bread-and-butter concerns. Exceptionally high turnout by the AKP base underscores the urgency which Erdoğan communicated to supporters. Populists' claim to be bulwarks against existential threats – real or imagined – likewise render them remarkably immune to scandals for which conventional politicians are punished. In short, polarization, post-truth communication, and fear-mongering worked, from fomenting moral panic about women's and LGBTQ+ activism under the opposition umbrella, to a doctored video showing Kılıçdaroğlu conspiring with Kurdish militants.

The results further suggest that conventional wisdom regarding “bad economy = poor electoral performance” ignores interest group preferences at its own peril. In other words, unsound policies which nevertheless benefit key constituencies can help a platform prevail at the ballot box, even though the result is managed decline for the economy overall. (In this case, smaller business owners, shopkeepers, and their workers– key demographics for the pro-religious and ultra-nationalist base –either benefit from Erdoğan's economic policies, or from his compensatory, economic populism.)

Lesson 2: Pre-election fairness matters as much as Election Day free-ness

Democracy's minimum criterion is “free and fair” elections. In Turkey's case, there is wide consensus that election-day is relatively free (despite a number of anomalies reported at polls across the country). But the build-up to elections simply was not fair.

When it comes to mining the electoral playing field, the tactically brilliant Erdoğan wrote the playbook which right-wing populists around the world are reading. Choice elements include control of traditional media through coercion and cooption, while policing and manipulating social media. Meanwhile, critical external media is delegitimized as driven by nefarious (Western/Zionist/fill-in-the-blank) interests. The result, since Turkey's far-right coalition coalesced in 2015, has been a steady drumbeat of “very heavy nationalistic and militaristic narrative every day from morning till night on the TVs, in the newspapers,” and beyond, shaping voter sensibilities.

A second strategy is to stack governing bodies with allies from election boards to the Courts. This helps to hedge against a vote gone awry—allowing, for example, a populist incumbent to challenge an unfavorable electoral outcome (as Erdoğan sought to do during nation-wide municipal elections in 2019).

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As importantly, however, capturing institutions enables the incumbent to shape the opposition bench by disqualifying charismatic rivals. For example, the mediatic mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, had a better chance of bridging two key demographics – right-wing Turks and left-wing Kurds – than Kılıçdaroğlu. But he was prevented from running by dubious charges brought in December 2022. Forced to appeal, he would have campaigned with Damocles sword dangling over not just his presidential candidacy but his Istanbul mayorship. This danger compelled the opposition, in turn, to line up behind a weaker candidate.

Lesson 3: From Illiberal to Potemkin Democracy?

A key question then after Turkey's elections is whether the very notion of "illiberal democracy" is meaningful in our age of performative politics? Or, as some have argued, does the hope it evokes do more harm than good—allowing earnest voter engagement on election-day to legitimize outcomes obtained through post-truth polarization, and the mined playing field? Right-wing populists like Trump and Bolsonaro did weaponize democracy, embracing the vote when they won, but unleashing ultra-nationalist rank and file to overturn results when they lost. Erdoğan – a more sophisticated player than his western copycats – stated, for his part, that he would accept any outcome. But there is evidence that at least some elements within his coalition were positioning for a "stop the steal" spectacle, had identity politics and the uneven playing field not prevailed.

Yet, ultimately, the only way left to prevent illiberal democracy from devolving into Potemkin farce may be the ballot box itself. In this respect, an uplifting takeaway from Turkey's elections was voters' commitment to electoral participation (which was over 90 percent at many polling stations). In the build-up to March 14th & 28th alike, they turned out droves – in diaspora and at home – to vote and monitor, to celebrate and console. It is this conviction, that government is legitimized by the will of the people, which may compel even the most cynical populists, and their ultra-nationalist partners, to allow intermittent opportunities for democratic contestation, even if there is less democracy to save.

About the author:

Nora Fisher-Onar is Associate Professor of International Studies at the University of San Francisco. She has written extensively on how to learn about key trends in world politics from "non-Western" experiences. Her books on Turkey include *Contesting Pluralism(s): Islam, Liberalism and Nationalism in Turkey and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), and *Istanbul: Living with Difference in a Global City* (Rutgers University Press, 2018 – with Susan C. Pearce & E. Fuat Keyman).