



What a 3rd Erdogan Term Means for Turkey

With Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's win in the recent runoff election comes many questions about the path forward for Erdogan and Turkey. This was the most difficult elections he has ever faced. Inflation hovers at around 60%, entire cities were destroyed by an earthquake (a disaster made worse by the government's lackluster response), and the increasing pressure from the West to put sanctions on Russia all add up to significant negative attention for a president running for re-election. Nonetheless, these issues were not enough to unseat him. In the end, Erdogan won with 52.2% of the vote, while his opponent, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, won 47.8% of the vote. Erdogan's win does come with a lot of work for his government though. They must address the ongoing economic crisis fueled by ever-increasing inflation, rebuild entire cities, and navigate the progressively tense relationship with its NATO allies if they hope to be able to govern effectively.

Erdogan largely owes his victory to the vast and unwavering support he has in the rural areas of central Turkey. Election results show that every large city and coastal region except for Hatay, Gaziantep, and Sanliurfa voted for his opponent, Kilicdaroglu. Erdogan has long enjoyed a wide base of support in the rural regions of Turkey, where his Islamic and nationalistic stances appeal to many people. This is despite the continuing pressure of inflation that particularly affects those living in rural areas. Many families are facing increased hardship because of this inflation. This was not enough to sway the voters away from Erdogan. Erdogan utilized Turkish nationalism to great success, often referencing the past glory of the Ottoman Empire and other exploits in Turkish history. This coupled with his push to incorporate Islam more in government propelled him to his election victory.

Traditionally in governance, Turkey followed Kemalism, a modernization philosophy created by the founding father of modern-day Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Kemalism is mainly based on the idea that to progress and modernize, the Turkish government must shift to a more secular form of governance, among other reforms. Erdogan has always pushed back against this idea, even landing himself in prison before being elected as the mayor of Istanbul because of his resistance to secularism. His religious upbringing still influences many of his policies, and these policies appealed to the large base of devout Muslims in Turkey.

Erdogan is in a very precarious but potentially advantageous position on the geopolitical stage. He appears to be positioning himself between NATO and Russia allowing Turkey to serve in the mediating position, elevating its stance and allowing them to punch about their political weight class. Erdogan has already shown his ability to mediate after his government and the United Nations negotiated a deal that allowed for the transportation of grain and fertilizers from Ukraine to Middle Eastern countries suffering from food shortages. As both a NATO member and a country with positive relationships with Russia and Iran, Turkey could prove to be a valuable partner to have in the Middle East. These relationships are a double-edged sword, as in fostering a relationship with Russia and Iran, they have caused a significant

strain in their relationship with their traditional Western allies. This has not been aided by Russian President Vladimir Putin's efforts to exploit the deepening wedge between Turkey and the West. Turkey also has reasons to begin to explore other options, as their NATO allies haven't been helpful partners in the past. One notable example is Turkey repeatedly being blocked from joining the European Union, of which there is significant overlap with NATO, even before their economic woes. This is despite their modernizing economy, impressive production abilities, and their growing military-industrial complex.

Maintaining relationships with both Russia and NATO will be a difficult but possible balancing act to pull off. Erdogan does not venture without a few safety lines, however. The main stabilizing factor is Turkey's continued NATO membership. With this not only comes stability in times of tension with NATO allies, but it also gives Turkey a bargaining chip. In NATO, all new members must be unanimously approved. Recently, largely influenced by the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, Finland and Sweden have asked to join NATO. Finland was accepted in April of this year, but there is still a holdout on Sweden. That holdout is Turkey. The power of this bargaining chip can already be seen, as despite strained relations, U.S. President Joe Biden was on the phone with Erdogan soon after he won the election congratulating him and discussing the possible sale of F-16s. Concerning Russia, Turkey has become a lifeline as the country continues to be ostracized for its invasion of Ukraine. This economic connection offers stability in this relationship, at least for the time being.

Democratic backsliding is a major issue to consider in U.S. relations with Turkey. Erdogan has worked to consolidate his power and dismantle the checks and balances. He has also significantly restricted freedom of the press and jailed political opponents to keep them from running against him or members of his political party. This democratic decline continues to push Turkey closer to Russia and away from the West. Working with authoritarian governments is not a novel practice for the U.S., however, it will make any coordination between the two subjected to intense criticism. Promoting human rights and democracy must be an ever-present consideration in U.S. foreign policy. Strengthening our relationship with Turkey may give the U.S. an avenue later to address these issues.

As Turkey navigates these new challenges, its transition toward authoritarianism will likely continue. Many analysts also indicate that without a significant change in policy, which is currently unlikely, the economy will continue to suffer. The challenges Turkey is facing offer many potential paths for the West to rekindle relations with Turkey, and with its growing power in the Middle East, it is a wise step to explore these options.