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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

TURKEY/ Evaluating the result of the referendum

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The referendum held in Turkey on 12 September is the centre of both the news and opinion-pieces in the Turkish newspapers this week. Attention is being drawn to the victory of the ruling party, the AKP, implicit in the result of the referendum. It was widely pointed out in the press before the referendum took place, that large numbers of voters were unaware of the details of the reforms to be voted on, which included amendments to 26 constitutional articles, and would thus mainly vote along party and ideological lines. Given this, many consider that the referendum has been a vote of confidence for the AKP, which has been thereby strengthened before the upcoming legislative elections in 2011. In this respect, it has also been suggested that Tayyip Erdogan may be weighing up a possible presidential candidacy for the 2012 presidential elections.

Reactions among political parties

The AKP has repeatedly declared its intention to draw up a new Constitution if it wins the next general elections, an attitude bolstered by the majority support for reform shown by the population this time round. The press has also drawn attention to the activity of Fethullah Gülen's religious community in support of the yes-vote, which may have had a decisive effect on the results.

The principal opposition party, the CHP, is currently analyzing the results, which show that its political weight is mainly felt on the coastal regions of the Aegean Sea and Mediterranean. The new leader of the party, Kemal Kiliçdaroglu, who succeeded the previous leader Deniz Baykal following a sex scandal, may in turn find his leadership challenged by those who believe that his candidacy may not be the best to compete against Tayyip Erdogan in the next general elections.

The MHP meanwhile, has been described by the Turkish media as the party most disappointed by the results, given that despite the party's opposition to the reforms, the yes-vote won even in those provinces where its candidates obtained victory in the 2009 local elections. This fact has made it clear that the party's rhetoric has failed even to convince part of its regular electorate.

As for south-eastern Turkey, the yes-vote was the clear winner except in Tunceli province. Nevertheless, the boycott declared by the pro-Kurdish BDP party was evident in the high level of abstention of certain areas. The most notable was the abstention in Hakkari where only 7 % of the population voted. In Sirnak and Diyarbakir also, the rate of abstention was notable, and in the rest of the provinces of this part of the country, the participation ranged between 40 % and 78 %. These results show the importance that the Kurdish question will bear in the political affairs of Turkey in the following general elections, being, as it is, a key issue of the country's democratization process. This area will likewise be the scene of some very interesting electoral competition between the two most important parties in the area, the AKP and BDP.

Reactions among the Turkish press

As far as the reactions of the Turkish press go, there have been three types of headlines as summarised by Hürriyet Daily News. There have been those clearly in favour of the yes-vote, such as the daily Zaman with its "Victory of democracy", or the daily Sabah "*Turkey cleans away the shame of the coup*". Clearly in favour of the no-vote have been some ultranationalists' newspapers of somewhat lesser impact, such as Sözcü that opened its front page with "Long live the Sultan" in reference to the prime minister. The socialist BirGün led with the headline "The nationalist conservative picture fails to change again". Other

newspapers of major impact opted for a more neutral position, such as Radikal with "Yes, but it is not enough", or Milliyet "Yes by 6 million-vote difference" or the Kemalist Cumhuriyet "Yes comes out of the ballot box".

Criminal proceedings opened

Another consequence of the referendum is the opening of criminal files against the leaders responsible for the 1980 military takeover. The day following the referendum, civil society platforms, NGO's and several individuals opened cases against the military involved in the 1980 coup. Thirty years later, the curtain of silence imposed by the military junta that became institutionalized in an article of the Constitution of 1982, has been shattered with the abolition of article 15 of the Constitution in this weekend's referendum.

Conclusions

The referendum has shown that the Turkish people are not opposed to democratization reforms, but the fight between political parties has been so intense that it is difficult to conceive of any consensus being found in the near future, such as for the draft, for example, of a new constitutional text. The AKP has gained momentum for next year's general elections and may feel encouraged now to continue or even expand its harsh criticism of the opposition, instead of tending bridges towards it. The opposition on the other hand, may consider that they are not in a position to rival the AKP in the general elections, and, as a consequence may descend into irresponsible rhetoric, making any possible consensus impossible. To deepen the complex process of democratization in which Turkey is immersed, internal consensus and adequate external support are needed. This is especially true of the EU, whose reticence towards Turkey's candidacy, is far from offering the committed support that is so necessary.