

Turkey: AKP leader Erdogan wins by-election in Siirt

By Justus Leicht
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The way is now free for Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the leader of the Islamic AKP (Party of Justice and Development), to become Turkey's president. On Sunday, March 9 he won a parliamentary seat in a by-election in the province of Siirt, following his exclusion as a candidate in last November's general election. Erdogan had been barred from standing because of a prior charge of encouraging religious hatred. He is now widely expected to replace his governor, Abdullah Gül, as head of government in the next few days.

Even before this, Erdogan's popularity had been badly dented. Since March 1, when the Turkish parliament refused permission for US troops to use Turkish territory for an invasion of Iraq, Erdogan has been forced to publicly adopt a more pro-American stance than he would have liked. It is presumed that he will call upon parliament to vote a second time on the issue of support for US and Turkish involvement in a war with its neighbour Iraq—an acid test for the AKP.

Erdogan, who describes himself as a pacifist, was able to secure a powerful victory for his party in November with promises of freedom at home and abroad, combined with an improvement in living standards. At the same time he made clear that he was not prepared to take on Turkey's military and business establishment, especially when "national interests" were at stake.

Turkey's "national interests" now dictate support for a US invasion of Iraq in which its troops will participate in order to disarm the Kurds, prevent the possible emergence of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq and win Turkey the right to have a share in decisions over the oil wells in Kirkuk and Mossul. In addition the Turkish economy needs the \$30 billion in advances and credit guarantees which Washington has

dangled in front of Ankara as the price for cooperation in a war. Without the credits it is feared the consequences of an Iraq war for Turkey would be disastrous. The Association of Turkish stock markets and chambers of trade currently reckon with economic losses of \$16.6 billion—whether Turkey supports the war or not.

These questions are being quite openly and frankly discussed in the press. The pro-Bush *Wall Street Journal* explicitly stated what was at stake for Ankara:

"The badly needed cash (and US goodwill) aside, Turkey would benefit as much as any nation from a neighbouring Iraq that was free of both a dictator and UN sanctions. Turkey would also give itself a larger voice in post-war Iraq, especially in dealing with the Kurds.... Now the US will have every right to ignore Turkish desires and work with Kurds militarily and politically after the war. And the Turks can forget about any post-war Iraqi oil spoils."

The problem is that public opinion in Turkey in no way corresponds to the "national interests". According to an opinion poll, 94 percent of the people reject a war with Iraq. Erdogan has to take a stand. He can no longer play the role of pacifist and people's tribune and at the same time defend the national interests of the Turkish military and business circles.

He has made his choice. Erdogan has proffered his solidarity to the chief of the general staff Hilmi Özkök, who has sided with the US. Over the past days, under the protective hand of the Turkish army, US troops have been transferred from the Mediterranean port of Iskenderun in eastern Turkey, completely contravening the spirit of the parliamentary decision of March 1. In addition it has been reported that Turkish tanks and soldiers have crossed the border and entered northern Iraq.

On the day of the latest by-election, Erdogan met for a number of hours with the American ambassador Robert Pearson who told him bluntly what Turkey was called upon to do. According to the newspaper *Milliyet*, Pearson stated that the US wanted to start the war in 10 days and that therefore Turkey “must make its decision as soon as possible.” Erdogan reacted by demanding that he should not be confronted with an ultimatum.

It is taken for granted, however, that Erdogan will do everything necessary in order to comply with the demands of the US and Turkish military and business circles. According to *Hürriyet*, four ministers who voted on March 1 against the stationing of American troops will be sacked as part of a reorganisation of the government.

Prominent opponents of the war in the ranks of the AKP are also in the process of changing sides. Parliamentary speaker Bülent Arinc stated that a second vote with a “positive” result would not damage the image of parliament: “Everyone will respect us.” Mehmet Elkatmis, head of the parliamentary commission on human rights, prophesised: “I can say with 100 percent security that when the motion is once more put before parliament it will be carried.”

Immediately after the lost vote of March 1 the government put pressure on deputies with a budget to raise indirect taxes—including cuts to the social welfare provisions of public sector workers, the trimming of subventions for farmers and an increase in motorway and bridge levies. Apparently the government is already including the consequences of “American war damage” in its budget calculations.

Even so, in the Siirt by-election the AKP won nearly 85 percent of the votes cast and was therefore able to win all the available seats in the constituency, which was required to hold a renewed poll after irregularities arose in the constituency in the course of the November general elections.

One should be under no illusions regarding the democratic nature of the vote held in Kurdish East Anatolia, a region beset by bitter poverty and unemployment. The only two parties admitted to the vote were those which in the November election were able to exceed the very discriminatory 10 percent hurdle and win representation in parliament: the AKP and the CHP (Republican People’s Party), which stands in the tradition of Kemalism.

In November the AKP won just 18 percent of the vote in Siirt with the CHP gaining 9 percent. The winner of the November election in the constituency was the Kurdish nationalist party DEHAP, which won 33 percent but failed to clear the 10 percent hurdle nationally. In this latest election the DEHAP call for an electoral boycott found a resonance: over 40 percent of the electorate did not turn out to vote or gave up spoiled ballot papers.

According to reports in the Turkish media, local considerations also played a role in Erdogan’s victory. Many voters were hoping for better treatment from a prime minister who came from the region himself—the so-called Özal effect. Turgut Özal, who comes from the southeastern Anatolian town of Malatya, diverted large sums of public money to his homeland when he headed the Turkish government between 1989 and 1993.

Despite his electoral victory in Siirt and the pressure which has been exerted on deputies from all sides, Erdogan must anticipate problems should he present to parliament a second resolution calling for support for the Iraq war—especially when the UN fails to pass a second resolution legitimising war. Opponents of war in Turkey have had their hand strengthened by French and Russian announcements of intent to use their veto against a new UN resolution.

Erdogan has been forced to link his own future with the policy and war fortunes of the United States. Just months after its triumphal takeover of the Turkish parliament with an absolute majority the AKP faces crisis. Swept into power on the wake of broad popular discontent the party has chosen to function as a mercenary in the pay of the US and, fearful of the mass demonstrations against war, is now clinging to the military’s coattails.

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