

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY - BEST IAS COACHING IN CHENNAI

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The Erdoğan victory, a triumph for Ottoman glory

May 29, 2023 marked the 570th anniversary of the capture of Istanbul (then Constantinople) by the Ottoman sultan, Mehmed II, in 1453. This day also signalled the electoral victory of Turkey's modern-day sultan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has begun a fresh term as President of the Turkish Republic.

The elections for the presidency and the 600-member Parliament on May 14 had upset most forecasts which had suggested that the incumbent President would finally bow out of office and his challenger, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, would replace him. However, with an 88% turnout in an electorate of 64 million, Mr. Erdoğan had then obtained 49.5% (27.1 million) of the vote, while his rival got 44.8% (24.6 million). Mr. Erdoğan's alliance, the People's Alliance, also won 323 seats in Parliament as against Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu's Nation Alliance that got 213 seats.

After the May 14 elections, Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu saw the swing to the nationalist right and adopted hard line rhetoric, promising to send back "ten million" Syrian refugees within a year. This did not attract any new support. Most commentators now conceded that Mr. Erdoğan would win in the runoff on May 28.

Erdoğan's appeal

This has now been confirmed. In the May 28 runoff, in a turnout of about 84%, Mr. Erdoğan has obtained 52% of the vote, while his rival got 48%. Both candidates have retained their earlier support base, but Mr. Erdoğan romped home with a larger number of votes – 27.7 million votes versus 25.4 million votes for Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu.

The results of both elections reveal a sharp three-way geographical divide among Turkey's voters. Most of the Turkish heartland of Central Anatolia voted for Mr. Erdoğan, giving him 72% of its vote. The Kurdish areas in the east, the more modern and better developed coastal areas in the



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The results of Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections reveal a sharp three-way geographical divide among its voters, with Mr. Erdoğan scoring in the heartland

west and south and most major cities voted for Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu. Mr. Erdoğan attracted the heartland by identifying with the region's Sunni identity and religious and nationalist values, even as he presented himself as the legate of Ottoman legacy, upholding its political and military achievements and its civilisational glory. Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu, with his Alevi identity and his liberal persona, was at a disadvantage in this area. However, in the Kurdish and more modern areas of the country, his agenda of returning to the parliamentary system, mainstream economic policies and improved ties with the West were found appealing.

The economy will be Mr. Erdoğan's primary concern. Many critics have blamed the President for the country's parlous situation – inflation at 44%, currency depreciation of 80% since 2018, and negative foreign exchange reserves of \$151 million just before the May 28 elections.

But Mr. Erdoğan had also benefited from substantial foreign support. Last year, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia had deposited \$5 billion each in Turkey's central bank, while Russia had provided about \$10 billion to finance the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. Russia has also agreed to postpone a \$600 million Turkish gas bill to 2024.

Turkey's foreign policy

These developments suggest that Turkey is unlikely to change its foreign policy posture in the West versus Russia competition. Western powers find it impossible to accept that their allies could, over time, shape new ideas relating to their interests and role in world affairs. This is particularly true of Turkey, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member since 1952; it has clearly acquired the capacity and the aspiration to chart its own foreign policy positions.

Turkey under Mr. Erdoğan has also expanded its strategic horizons and interests, extending to the Mediterranean, North Africa, West Asia, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, and wishes to shape its own place in the emerging multipolar order.

This approach, reflected in Turkey's role in the Ukraine war – where it is the only NATO member with close ties with both Ukraine and Russia – is, therefore, likely to continue. As will Turkey's close relations with China, based on the importance Turkey attaches to its place in the Belt and Road Initiative.

In West Asia, Turkish diplomacy will include building ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while retaining close links with Qatar. Turkey will also pursue improved relations with Egypt and their working together, with the UAE, to address differences in Libya and the East Mediterranean. Ties with Iran, defined by shared economic interests as also differences in Syria, Iraq and the south Caucasus, will also be a priority concern for Turkey.

The challenge of Syria

The biggest challenge Turkey will face will be in Syria. Before the runoff, Mr. Erdoğan had spoken of engagement with the Bashar al-Assad government in Damascus. They will need to look at Turkey's concerns relating to the Syrian Kurds at the border as also Syria's unhappiness at Turkey's ties with the al Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al-Sham at Idlib, and Mr. Assad's insistence on the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syrian territory.

As Mr. Erdoğan commences his third decade in power, he will, to the chagrin of the West, ensure that Turkey asserts strategic independence in regional and world affairs. In the fresh electoral victory of the President, Turkish nationalism epitomised by Ottoman glory has triumphed.

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