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Turkish General Election, 2018

KEY POINTS

- President Erdogan called a snap general election for 24 June 2018.
- A series of reforms and constitutional amendments have appeared to strongly benefit the ruling AKP party.
- Increased levels of discontent with Erdogan and the AKP's rule makes the outcome unpredictable.



President Erdogan

SITUATIONAL SUMMARY

Political: Turkey's president, Recep Erdogan, announced the Turkish general election was to be brought forward from 03 November 2019, to 24 June 2018. The 24 June poll will select all 600 members of the Grand National Assembly, and also includes the first of two potential rounds in the presidential election. The run-off round of the presidential election is scheduled for 08 July if no candidate earns more than 50 per cent in the first round.

Eight parties are contesting the elections, with six putting forward presidential candidates. In the parliamentary elections, the governing Justice and Freedom Party (AKP) has allied itself with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Opposed to this coalition is the so-called "Nation Alliance", containing the iYi Party (iYi), Felicity Party (SP), and Republican People's Party (CHP). The People's Democratic Party (HDP), Patriotic Party (VP), and Free Cause Party (HUDAPAR) are standing only on an independent basis.



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This election will be the first in Turkey to follow the extensive constitutional and electoral reforms enacted following a disputed referendum in April 2017 and a failed military coup in July 2016.

SOLACE GLOBAL COMMENT

Despite Erdogan presently riding at his highest point, from the perspective of personal power, the outcome of the elections are not the foregone conclusion that AKP leaders wish them to be. Since 2013, the exchange rate between the Turkish Lira and US dollar has depreciated from 2:1 to 4.6:1. This has had significant knock-on effects on the Turkish economy, which has not grown at a rate sufficient to offset this change and has thus curtailed the purchasing power of Turkish citizens while increasing dissatisfaction. It has widely been suggested that the continued reductions in economic growth are the driving force behind the AKP's decision to bring the elections forward, assessing that a continued economic slump would eradicate any chance of winning an election held in 2019.

Another potential argument for the earlier election was that the AKP calculated that it may prevent opposition parties effectively mobilising their supporters and electoral machines due to the drastically shortened notice. Some evidence exists to suggest that the timing was directly intended to eliminate iYi from contending due to a failure to meet parliamentary membership requirements; an effort defeated by the transfer of 15 CHP MPs to iYi, a measure which led to enraged outbursts from AKP leaders.

The Turkish electoral committee, YSE, has released a series of revisions to electoral processes which were seen as irregularities during the 2017 referendum. The revisions appear tailor-made to support the AKP and facilitate voter suppression or fraud efforts. Most notably, voting forms without verification stamps will be accepted and counted and numerous voting stations in Kurdish-majority regions will be relocated for alleged security purposes. To indicate the potential impact of these measures, the margin in the 2017 reform referendum was 1.25 million votes in favour of the reforms after 2.5 million unverified ballots were permitted. The removal of voting sites from Kurdish areas will result in the local majority of HDP supporters being forced to travel significant distances to vote in AKP strongholds. Whilst not physically barring these people from voting, the time and effort required to travel these distances will almost inevitably result in lower turnout, directly increasing the likelihood of the AKP winning the seats in those regions.

The areas of friction outlined above are likely to be the driving factors behind unrest or violence around the elections. Protests in relation to economic issues or the AKP's increasing religious conservatism should be expected in major cities such as Ankara and Istanbul, particularly as their predominantly young and secular populations have been increasingly marginalised by government policy. Previous instances of urban unrest have resulted in a heavy-handed response from security forces; the threshold for the use of force remains low due to the oft-extended state of emergency enacted after the failed coup in July 2016. Protests are likely to focus on government buildings and large public spaces, such as Istanbul's Taksim square.

In the predominantly Kurdish south-east of the country, the redistribution of polling stations and the persistently repressive security apparatus is likely to lead to isolated instances of violence. Pro-Kurdish insurgent groups regularly conduct hit-and-run attacks or ambushes against Turkish security forces and may respond violently to any perceived repressive actions undertaken by the Turkish government. Internal security forces and army units have conducted violent clearances against Kurdish villages, including the mass demolition of residential dwellings. The security environment in this region is challenging at any time and is only likely to worsen due to the election.

Present polling suggests that no clear winner may emerge during the parliamentary elections, with the emergence of an opposition coalition as the key force in parliament a realistic probability, provided the impact of voter suppression and fraud is negligible. In addition, but with the same caveat, President Erdogan appears unlikely to win an outright majority in the first round of presidential



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voting, which would lead to a run-off in which he is forecast to be running within two percentage points of both the CHP and İYİ candidates. Whichever way the two elections develop, it is likely that a situation could arise where an opposition parliament is elected to work with an AKP/Erdogan presidency. With the recent re-balancing of the executive and legislature, it is likely that such a situation would seriously hamstring both branches of government from effectively implementing their policy platforms, a situation that the reform's writers were not likely to be expecting.

Turkey has previously experienced widespread and indiscriminate terror attacks from a variety of groups including the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and various Kurdish separatist groups. Although the recent tempo of attacks in Ankara and Istanbul has fallen significantly, travellers should remain aware that the large rallies likely to occur around the election period are likely to prove tempting targets for terror groups. They have previously targeted public transport during rush hour, and nightclubs during holiday periods.

SECURITY ADVICE

MODERATE POLITICAL RISK



Travellers to Turkey should be aware that disruption to travel is highly likely during the election period. Increased security measures should be expected across the country, but particularly in major cities, near polling stations, in minority dominated areas, such as Turkish Kurdistan.

Political rallies, demonstrations, and protests are also likely to be widespread. Whilst most protesters are likely to seek a peaceful demonstration, violence remains a realistic possibility, and police may seek to disperse crowds forcefully and without provocation. All efforts should be made to avoid rallies and protests, and residential locations should be selected away from known hotspots.

The Turkish government is highly sensitive to criticism and has acted to forcefully detain prominent critics and journalists, regardless of nationality. This sensitivity is likely to be heightened during the election period with travellers perceived as engaging in political activities likely to be directly targeted.

Solace Global would generally advise clients to employ enhanced security measures when visiting Turkey – airport meet and greet and a security driver for the length of a visit should be minimum security precaution. Travellers may also wish to employ executive protection, depending on the profile of their visit, and the locations on their itinerary. All travel should be undertaken whilst using travel tracking and intelligence technology in order to support situational awareness and allow effective implementation of duty of care.



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