

# The enduring popularity of Recep Tayyip Erdogan

Tuesday 24 March 2009, by [The Economist](#)

**AT A recent rally in the predominantly Kurdish city of Van, in south-east Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan was in his element. Turkey's prime minister rattled off his government's achievements, bellowing out to a jubilant crowd, "22 primary schools, five health clinics, 82 kilometres of paved roads".**

With only three weeks to go before countrywide municipal elections on March 29<sup>th</sup>, Mr Erdogan has hit the campaign trail in a confident mood. Most opinion polls suggest that his mildly Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) will clobber its opponents yet again. The secular opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) is so desperate that it no longer talks much of the risk of sharia law or the dangers of Kurdish separatism. Instead it has resorted to recruiting female candidates who wear the Islamic headscarf and calling for the Kurdish new year to be declared a national holiday.

None of this is likely to make much impression on voters, most of whom will stick with the AKP. Nor will it affect Mr Erdogan's policies. Ever since he was handsomely re-elected in the 2007 general election, his critics say that the prime minister has become increasingly autocratic, drifting away from the reformist agenda that first brought the AKP to single-party rule in 2002. It does not help that the European Union is continuing to prevaricate in the long-drawn-out talks about Turkey's membership application, sapping enthusiasm for reform in Ankara.

As further evidence of autocratic tendencies, the critics point to Mr Erdogan's continuing quarrel with Aydin Dogan, the country's biggest media mogul, whose outlets have exposed corruption scandals in which individuals close to the government have been implicated. Mr Dogan believes this explains why he faces a \$500m claim for allegedly unpaid taxes, a charge he passionately denies. "Turkey has become a republic of fear," complains Sedat Ergin, managing editor of Milliyet, a leading Dogan newspaper.

On the international front Mr Erdogan is raising eyebrows for more than his (understandable) loss of enthusiasm for the EU. He has also attracted unfavourable attention for his virulent attacks on Israel, especially during its war in Gaza, and for his budding friendships with Iran and Sudan.

Among ordinary Turks, however, Mr Erdogan remains the most popular and charismatic leader since a visionary former prime minister and president, Turgut Ozal. One old Kurdish woman in Van sums up the mood: "Tayyip is one of us, he treats us as equals." Mr Erdogan's popularity has even forced his enemies, notably the country's hawkish generals, who have often tried to topple his government, to back off. Mr Erdogan's touch was in evidence in Van as he and his vivacious wife, Emine, handed out toys to ragged children. Elsewhere in Turkey, the government has been giving away coal, school textbooks and, as the elections draw near, even fridges and washing-machines to the poor.

Such profligacy has angered the IMF. A long-delayed standby facility with the fund has yet to be signed because of differences over public spending. But a defiant Mr Erdogan insists, in an interview, that Turkey's economy is robust enough to get through its current troubles without IMF help.

## **Profligacy and pragmatism**

Like most countries, Turkey has been hit by the world financial crisis. The Turkish lira is slipping against the dollar, GDP is expected to shrink this year and unemployment is rising. Yet, partly thanks to tough

regulation, not a single Turkish bank has gone under. The economy is wobbling but remains on its feet. No wonder Mr Erdogan is so confident. Many worry that another big electoral win may swell his head further. Yet for all his pre-electoral posturing, there are signs that his pragmatic self may come back. He seems to have grasped that he has an image problem. He has hired a new, affable spokesman and is courting foreign journalists for the first time. In an interview with this correspondent, he freely bestowed smiles (and dried fruit) as he insisted he was no autocrat. "I can be impatient at times," was all he would admit.

The launch of Turkey's first official Kurdish-language television channel in January and the government's calls for the establishment of Kurdish literature departments at state universities have raised hopes of more reforms. After years of mutual hostility, Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds are at last talking. A deal with separatist guerrillas from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who have been fighting the Turkish army since 1984 from bases in northern Iraq, is said to be on the table. Turkey's generals are tentatively compliant.

All of this will make Mr Erdogan's meeting this weekend with Hillary Clinton, America's secretary of state, especially significant. Mr Erdogan will brief her on talks with another former Turkish foe, Armenia. Once the local elections in Turkey and the April 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the mass killings of Ottoman Armenians in 1915 are past, it is expected that formal ties will be re-established between the two countries and their long-closed border will be reopened. This may also stave off attempts by America's Congress to pass a resolution calling the massacres a genocide.

An IMF deal is widely expected after the local elections as well, though Mehmet Simsek, the economy minister, insists that the IMF must drop some of its more "orthodox" demands. On progress towards joining the EU, the next big test for Mr Erdogan will be whether he can budge a bit more on the opening of Turkish ports and airports to Cyprus, shaming Turkey's detractors within the EU (notably the French) into stopping their efforts to undermine the membership talks.

The appointment of Egemen Bagis, a sharp young English-speaker, as Turkey's first cabinet-rank EU negotiator suggests that Mr Erdogan may make a fresh effort to put the EU talks back on track. But if he is genuinely serious, he will have to take a second shot at rewriting Turkey's constitution, crafted by the generals after a military coup in 1980. His previous attempt at this almost led the Constitutional Court to ban the AKP on the ground that it was trying to impose sharia law. That is because he started off in piecemeal fashion by trying to ease bans on the Islamic headscarf in government offices and universities. Mr Erdogan would do better this time if he worked with the opposition to produce a constitution that met the wishes of all Turks, not just pious ones.

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## Sources

Source: The Economist, le 5-03-09