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Turkey's elections

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After his unexpectedly big win, Recep Tayyip Erdogan should be magnanimous

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IT WAS a triumph by any standards. In Turkey's local elections on March 30th, the ruling Justice and Development (AK) party took over 45% of the vote. Although the results are contested in 41 cities including Ankara, the capital, AK held on easily to Istanbul. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minister, had turned these elections into a referendum on himself and his government. The past 12 months have seen a veritable maelstrom of protests and corruption scandals, a controversial clampdown on judges, prosecutors and the media, and a ban on YouTube as well as one on Twitter that the constitutional court has ruled illegal. For Mr Erdogan to do even better than pollsters expected has confounded his opponents.

Yet although Mr Erdogan's voter base may still be strong, his democratic credentials are looking weaker, for his behaviour has become increasingly autocratic. Faced with demonstrations and allegations of corruption, he has undermined freedoms of assembly and speech. In a centralised country with few checks and balances, he has vastly increased the government's control over the judiciary, the security services and the police. He is fiercely pursuing people or firms linked to an influential Pennsylvania-based Sunni cleric Fethullah Gulen, who was once his close ally but is now a vocal opponent.

As a result, Turkey is becoming increasingly polarised: between AK and its rivals, between Anatolia and the cosmopolitan west, between the devout and the secularists, between Sunni Muslims and Alevis. The prime minister's domineering instincts have led him to treat his electoral majority as a mandate that gives him licence to punish the minority. Whereas after earlier election victories the AK leader promised piously to work for all Turks, this time Mr Erdogan has vowed to go after his opponents, threatening to enter their "lair" and make them pay (see [article](#)).

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Such divisive talk is dangerous in an unsteady country. After the chaos of the 1990s, Turkey enjoyed a decade of stability and prosperity under Mr Erdogan that depended on two strong anchors. One was sound macroeconomic policy, backed initially by the IMF and later by financial markets; the other was the prospect of joining the European Union, with which Mr Erdogan opened membership negotiations in October 2005. Today Turkey risks losing both.

Growth has already slowed sharply. Investors have become warier of all emerging markets, and Turkey, with proportionately one of the biggest current-account deficits in the world, is especially vulnerable, which explains why the lira has lost a quarter of its value in 12 months. Internal strife between AK's supporters and opponents may further discourage the foreign investors whom Turkey so badly needs.

Although EU membership was always a distant and uncertain prospect, talks about joining the club have provided an incentive to reform and a brake on misconduct. But they have stalled in recent months, and they seem unlikely to revive as long as Mr Erdogan continues to undermine the rule of law and attack the independent media.

A problematic legacy

Mr Erdogan seems to be planning a run for the presidency in August. His ambition, it is generally believed, is to hold the post in 2023, the centenary of the republic's foundation, and to be feted during those celebrations as the country's greatest leader since Ataturk. Ataturk was not without authoritarian impulses of his own, but he is remembered by Turks as a unifier. If Mr Erdogan wants to be mentioned in the same breath, he should try much harder to represent the interests of all Turks, not just those who rallied to him this week.

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