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## Erdogan warns rivals: Next step is mass purge!

Turkey's premier vows to go after hidden enemies in police, justice and media he blames for online leaks and pursue them 'in their lairs.'

By Dilay Gundogan

3/341/2014

Turkey's premier is bound to tighten and extend his grip on power, emboldened by sweeping local poll wins that came despite damaging graft claims and Internet clampdowns, analysts said Monday.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, after delivering a rousing "balcony speech" to thousands of jubilant followers overnight, is now almost certain to run for president this year or seek a fourth term as prime minister, they said.

Needled by months of corruption claims spread via Twitter and YouTube, Erdogan has vowed to go after hidden enemies in the police, justice and media he blames for the online leaks and pursue them "in their lairs".

"Emerging strongly from the elections, Erdogan will likely run for president during the summer," said Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute think-tank.

With memories fresh of last June's violence -- when eight people died, thousands were injured and clouds of tear gas wafted through Istanbul's Gezi Park -- many commentators feared further dangerous tensions ahead.

"Erdogan will become more authoritarian," predicted Cagaptay.

"Turkey will be polarised further, with unrest and demonstrations. The government will crack down on the opposition further, with the potential of a deadlock and regime crisis."

Even though Sunday's nationwide polls were for city mayors and municipal officials, they were seen by all sides as a crucial popularity test for Erdogan and his Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP).

The AKP had a nationwide 45-28 percent lead over the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), scored a crushing victory in megacity Istanbul and claimed a narrow win in the capital Ankara.

"Going forward Erdogan will see himself as invincible, and as deeply wronged by his rivals," said Brent Sasley of Texas University.

"He might feel safe now, and so relax his grip a little on Turkish media. More likely he will seek revenge against those who, in his view, tried to take him down but failed."

Erdogan has earned rebukes from NATO partners for heavy-handed police action against Gezi protesters, and by blocking Twitter and YouTube to stop a torrent of corruption claims against his allies and relatives.

The premier has accused Fethullah Gulen, an influential US-based Muslim cleric, and his loyalists in the Turkish police and justice system, of being behind the leaks that went viral on social media.

Despite the turmoil, millions of Turkish voters shrugged off such concerns and preferred to take their chances with the man often dubbed "the sultan", whose 11-year rule has driven strong economic growth.

"In the end nothing was able to dent Erdogan's allure," Sasley said.

"The Gezi protests, corruption accusations, leaks about immoral goings-on among Erdogan's own family, hints of a faltering economy ... didn't matter all that much in the end. It seems that the Turkish public was simply not ready to take a chance on an uncertain future."

Most observers agreed the result exposed deepening faultlines in Turkey, between a secular and globally connected urban middle class and the vast

country's conservative Muslim heartland.

Among the changes brought by the votes, Turkey's first mayor wearing a Muslim headscarf -- long banned for civil servants under previous secular governments -- won office in a district of the central AKP stronghold of Konya.

Meanwhile Twitter user Gizemm56, defying Turkey's ban on the short message service, wrote: "My biggest concern is, this man shut down Twitter before the elections, I cannot imagine what's going to happen after the elections."

Finansbank economist Deniz Cicek noted that, while post-election "balcony speeches" are usually conciliatory, Erdogan's midnight address "was peppered with references to treason and traitors".

"The tone of the speech suggests that Erdogan is unlikely to back down from his confrontational stance and a highly charged political environment is set to continue until the presidential elections in August," Cicek said.

He added that "in an extremely polarised environment", and given the fact that Turkey's next head of state will for the first time be elected in a direct vote, "it would be surprising for Erdogan to run for president".

"The safer choice seems to be changing the by-laws of his own party and run for a fourth term as prime minister," he said in the Finansbank note.

Financial markets -- which Cicek said had already factored in a likely solid AKP win -- rose Monday, with the Istanbul stock exchange gaining almost 2 percent after opening and the lira up against the dollar.