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The political consequences of the attack in Ankara

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On 10th October Ankara experienced one of the largest terrorist attacks in the history of modern Turkey. According to the official data, 97 people were killed and 365 injured as a result of what was probably two suicide attacks (according to unofficial data 105 people died). The attack targeted a peaceful anti-government demonstration organised by the opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and trade unions with slogans calling for an end to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Nobody has yet claimed responsibility for the attack. The Turkish government has accused Islamic State (IS) of carrying out the attack; the opposition has however lambasted the government, accusing it of negligence, of condoning the attack and even of being complicit in organising it. Following the blast, a number of anti-government protests were held by Kurds and trade unions and a two-day strike was organised at many universities and workplaces.

The attack has exacerbated the already tense situation in Turkey, which has been manifested by a political crisis, a snap election and a new development in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Paradoxically, this makes it more likely for Turkey's ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), to win the election scheduled for 1st November. It must be borne in mind, nevertheless, that the possible temporary stabilisation of the political scene in Turkey that would be a result of this, would be accompanied by a further deterioration of the conflict with the opposition and Kurds.

Controversies surrounding the attack

The Turkish government believes the most likely perpetrator of the attack is Islamic State (IS) – the terrorist organisation and para-state which operates in Syria and Iraq. IS has well-developed structures in Turkey and has already been accused of carrying out a similar attack in the town of Suruc on 20th July this year. The attack also targeted Kurds and claimed the lives of 33 people. In the wake of the Suruc bombing, Turkey officially launched military operations against IS (airstrikes, giving US air forces access to Turkish bases in order to fight IS in Turkey). It is possible that this latest attack could be a retaliatory operation by IS, and a desire to exacerbate the Turkish-Kurdish conflict (which would benefit IS) or also the possible mobilisation of Islamic radicals in Turkey. However, the Turkish government has not provided any details confirming that it was IS who claimed responsibility for the attack; nor did Turkey carry out retaliatory actions targeting them.

The opposition and its supporters (mainly HDP and Kurds but also the Turkish left, trade unions and liberals) have roundly rejected the version the government has put forward about the involvement of IS. They have blamed the government and/or state structures for at least condoning or even instigating and cooperating in the attack, possibly by involving IS. They have based their accusations on the conviction that there were failures in ensuring the security of the demonstration and strong security structures in Ankara should not have overlooked preparations for such a spectacular attack.

The version involving the government's complicity in the bombings refers to the Turkish tradition of the deep state - underground structures at the intersection of special services, the criminal world and terrorist groups which were used in the past, for example to fight Kurds and opposition movements. Identical accusations were made of the collaboration of the special services and IS had already been formulated following the attack in Suruc. At that time the alleged co-operation between IS and the Turkish police in fomenting the attack was the main reason for PKK's intensified attacks on Turkish forces and Kurds/PKK became the principal target of Turkey's operations (as opposed to IS against whom Turkey formally declared war). The opinion that the government was complicit in the attack is based on an assumption which is widespread in circles critical of the government, i.e. that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and AKP display unbridled authoritarian tendencies.

Irrespective of the uncertainties linked to the attack, it has confirmed two unsettling trends. Firstly, in recent months terrorism and political violence has become widespread in Turkey. They are connected to the Middle East conflict and affect mainly Kurds. According to the HDP leadership, since June this year approximately 150 HDP activists and supporters have been victims of violence. In parallel, the war between the Turkish government and PKK has been ongoing and it is said to have claimed the lives of approximately 140 representatives of the Turkish security forces and approximately 2,000 PKK fighters and followers (in Iraq and Turkey). Secondly, social approval of the state and the political elite has been progressively eroded. This means that anti-government feelings have intensified among declared opponents of the government (Kurds, leftists and liberals). This has also opened up a space for the effectiveness of the present model of democracy in Turkey to be challenged and for apathy in an environment of radical political polarisation and an escalation of violence.

The election in the shadow of the attack

Nevertheless, the snap election planned for 1st November is now undisputedly the most pressing issue. In the last election (held on 7th June this year) AKP lost its parliamentary majority – the fact that HDP passed the electoral threshold deprived AKP of key seats. Regaining the parliamentary majority has become the political raison d'être for AKP, particularly for its leader President Erdogan. In practice Turkey and its stability are hostages to the position of AKP: under the rule of AKP, which has ruled independently since 2002, there has been a fundamental reshuffle of the political and business elites and the line dividing party structures and state structures has become blurred. At present a relatively weak and divided opposition does not represent an alternative for AKP. A day before the twin bombings in Ankara the support for particular parties was generally the same to the results of the June election – approximately 42% for AKP, 13% for HDP, 26% for the centre-

left CHP and 15% for the nationalist MHP. This would mean the deadlock would continue after the election and would spell a further erosion of the authority of AKP and Erdogan. In this context, the attack in Ankara would prove to be a catalyst for change, given that for both HDP and AKP it is a struggle for survival.

For HDP and the government's radical opponents of the bombings have provided an opportunity to raise the volume on accusations of an authoritarian system being developed in Turkey with the use of all methods, resorting even to terrorism against its own citizens. These accusations are accompanied by intense emotions which are beneficial for mobilising voters but carry the risk of taking irrational and perilous political steps. Given the opinion polls to date, HDP can count on seats in the Turkish parliament and may challenge the election results if they are lower than expected, particularly if it deprives the party of parliamentary representation (the electoral threshold is 10%). HDP carries the threat of destabilising the country in its political arsenal, including using the discontented Kurdish minority (in the south of the country but also in main metropolises).

For AKP the attack in Ankara, the radicalism of HDP and the threat of destabilising the country provide a chance for them to gain credibility in society as the only force which can guarantee the country's stability and unity. In this context it is likely that society will accept the government's measures aimed at defending order and security, even at the expense of civil liberties. It may therefore be expected that the government will continue to use real tensions and anti-government sentiment to its advantage, that it will intimidate opposition voters (fears over the security of polling stations in the south of the country are being discussed in public), make it impossible to cast ballots in key polling stations or, as has previously been the case, prevent particular persons and parties to stand in the election.

Summary

The attack in Ankara is another manifestation of the fact that Turkey is mired in Middle Eastern issues – directly in the war in Syria, the IS and Kurdish problems. Both the Turkish government and the opposition agree with this, believing that IS is directly responsible for the bombings. They do, however, differ in their assessment of the autonomy of this organisation. Further negative implications of this entanglement, such as other terrorist attacks, shifting the conflict to Turkish soil or risky manoeuvers between Turkish and Middle Eastern actors, should be expected. Furthermore, the Middle Eastern crisis has become a permanent element of Turkey's internal policy, and it bears indirect but considerable impact on the present election campaign.

In the short span of time ahead of the elections, the bombings in Ankara will contribute to a further escalation of the huge social and political tension in Turkey. Paradoxically, this may lead to victory for the ruling AKP in the election at the price of intensifying existing problems (the threat of exacerbating authoritarian tendencies and the intensification of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict).

At both the international and domestic levels the attack in Ankara is another manifestation of a deepening crisis in the Turkish model of politics, its premises and instruments. Their visible limitations and dysfunctionality may in the not so distant future be challenged and reassessed (the need to break the deadlock in Turkey's policies with regard to Syria and the Kurds; the fight for complete and unthreatened domination of AKP in Turkey).