

Turkey's 7 June parliamentary elections – Part I A pivotal moment for Turkey's future

Amanda Paul and Demir Murat Seyrek

On 7 June, Turks will head to the polls to elect a new parliament. This election is a pivotal moment for Turkey's future, with two battles being played out. While the first is about securing a majority in parliament, the second is related to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his goal of creating a presidential system of governance. Furthermore, the future of the Kurdish Peace Process and the stability in the southeast of the country will almost certainly hinge on the outcome. Hence, this election is a battle for Turkey's future.

Apart from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), three other parties are expected to pass Turkey's high 10% threshold and enter parliament: the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP).

For the AKP, which has been in power for more than 12 years, winning a fourth term would be a significant achievement. The party's success can be attributed to several factors, including large investments into infrastructure and social services that significantly improved the lives of a large segment of society, the fact that the AKP remains the only right-wing party, and rapid economic development during the first 10 years of their rule despite the recent slowdown and rising economic problems. However, at the same time, many Turks are increasingly concerned over what a fourth term could mean for Turkish democracy given the erosion of human rights, the rule of law and civil liberties that has taken place in the past few years. This state of affairs has also raised fears in the West, including in the EU, about the country's commitment to western values and democracy being little more than lip service.

There are several possible outcomes, including a shift to a presidential system, the AKP returning weaker or a coalition government with or without the AKP. There is also a chance that the formation of a coalition will prove to be impossible, leading to early elections, possibly with the emergence of new political movements.

If a presidential system were to be adopted, it would be the greatest systemic transformation Turkey has ever witnessed. Erdoğan claims the advantages of this system are efficiency, stability and a clear separation of power. Such a transformation, however, generates major concerns, as the changing dynamics of the political system would have serious consequences for the legislature, executive and judiciary in terms of the separation of power. Erdoğan wants to combine the power of the executive branch under one strong president (himself) with extended power on the judiciary. This would leave very few (if any) checks and balances. His comments over the past couple of years describing the judiciary and the separation of powers as a nuisance have increased concerns.

Nonetheless, bringing about the necessary change to the constitution in order to adopt a presidential system is difficult. 367 MPs out of a total of 550 are required for a constitutional change; 330 MPs are required to organise a referendum. The AKP would need to significantly increase their parliamentary share from the current 311. This means taking more than 55% of the vote. At the 2011 parliamentary election, they only managed to get 49.95%. Given the opposition to a presidential system from other parties and a large part of Turkish society, along with some discontent within the AKP itself, it seems unlikely the AKP would be able to secure the necessary support to implement this change.

The HDP as a game changer

While recent polls show the AKP is expected to win the most votes, whether the party will be able to maintain the majority it currently holds is uncertain. The AKP has lost votes to the HDP, firstly because the latter is now viewed by the AKP's Kurdish voters as being pro-peace and secondly because of allegations that the government backed Islamic State (IS) jihadists against Syria's Kurds in the battle for Kobani. They also seem set to lose some votes to the MHP, which has been opposed to the AKP in reaching out to the terrorist

Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) as part of the Kurdish Peace Process. Furthermore, many ethnic and religious minorities, including the Alevis, will not support AKP because of its discriminatory approach.

Polls predict the MHP will take 16-18%, the CHP 26-28% and the AKP 39-43%. Such an outcome would reduce the power of the AKP. However, the real game changer would be if HDP, as polls predict, makes it into the parliament. This would further reduce the AKP's power and reinvigorate the parliament. There is also a chance that it could bring a new coalition government to power or even send the AKP into opposition. Because the HDP vote is viewed as such a significant game changer, many Turks have declared an intention to vote strategically and back the HDP rather than their traditional choices. This could be considered as a historical rapprochement between the Turkish elite and Kurds.

If the HDP is left out of parliament, this could have serious consequences (particularly if the party comes very close to the threshold), overshadowing the election's legitimacy. Because the AKP is the second party in terms of the number of votes in the dominantly Kurdish populated cities, the seats would go to the AKP. Such an outcome might result in a severe backlash, including rising tensions in the southeast regions and a derailment of the Kurdish Peace Process.

A far from fair playing field

With the stakes being so high, and taking into consideration the irregularities in the 2014 municipal and presidential elections, there are concerns over election fraud, including vote stealing. The opposition has demanded a more strict ballot box and vote counting monitoring. International monitors will be joined by civil youth initiatives, such as Oy ve Ötesi (Vote and Beyond). Tens of thousands of voluntary observers are being mobilised all around Turkey. This could be considered as one of the direct consequences of the Gezi protests that reactivated Turkish pro-democracy and pro-Western youth.

The AKP has used its position in power to boost its campaign. The president, alongside public officials, has attended numerous public events, mostly to inaugurate public works, during which AKP achievements were emphasised. Furthermore, because of the AKP's dominant position in Turkey's media landscape – it controls a reported 70% of the country's television channels – opposition parties have only received a fraction of airtime compared to the AKP. The OSCE/ODHIR interim monitoring report expressed concern over direct interference of media owners and public officials in the process. Moreover, President Erdoğan has been openly campaigning for the AKP and attacking the opposition parties, despite the fact that Article 101 of the Turkish Constitution states the president must carry out his activities without bias.

7 June could potentially change Turkey in an irreversible way. If the AKP succeeds, their 'new' Turkey project will turn into reality. If not, it will mark the beginning of a normalisation process in Turkish politics and society. Turkey has a highly polarised society as a result of the AKP's strategy of consolidating their power base through an 'us versus them' rhetoric. The election results will thus either lead to the beginning of a rapprochement between different pillars of society or to further polarisation and rising tensions in the country.

Amanda Paul is a Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre (EPC). Demir Murat Seyrek is a Senior Policy Advisor at the European Foundation for Democracy.