

## Turkey votes – Part II

### All shook up – A first assessment of Turkey's post-election political landscape

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After nearly 13 years in power, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) suffered its first defeat in the 7 June parliamentary elections, failing to win enough seats to continue as a single party government. This result not only ends Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's dream of creating an executive presidency, it has also demonstrated that Turkey is still a democracy where elections can change governments, despite the significant back-pedaling in terms of democracy over the past few years.

While the AKP took the largest share of the vote with some 40.7%, this is 9% less than in 2011 and far from their target of 55%. Only three other parties crossed the high 10% threshold and will enter parliament: the Republican People's Party (CHP) – the main opposition party – with 25.1%, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) with 16.5% and the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) with 13%.

The HDP's success is particularly significant and opens a new chapter in Turkey's history, given that only a short time ago it would have been impossible for a pro-Kurdish party to pass the threshold with only the support of Kurdish voters. Key to their success was the support the party received from Turks in the Western provinces and big cities who usually vote for the CHP. They voted strategically in order to help push the HDP over the threshold as a means to counter the AKP's political dominance. Not only does this mean the parliament will be more diverse than ever before, it also opens the way for a historical rapprochement between Turks and Kurds.

#### Why did the AKP lose support?

The AKP's loss of votes is by and large a consequence of the party's increasingly authoritarian governing style, the corruption allegations against senior members of the party, the crackdown on the freedom of media and individual rights, as well as its isolationist foreign policy. Furthermore, it reflects many Turks' opposition to the idea of an executive presidency with much more powers for President Erdoğan. This change in mentality began with the Gezi protests two years ago and has become widespread among the youth and the middle class, breaking down old stereotypes related to animosity between Turks and Kurds and moving away from intolerance to certain ethnic, religious or LGBT groups, among other things. Thus the majority of Turkish society has again chosen the European path, with its democratic values and principles, rather than the illusionary neo-Ottoman politics of the AKP.

#### What sort of government?

With the AKP having the largest percentage of the vote Erdoğan will ask Prime Minister Davutoğlu to form a government. He will have 45 days to do this. With the AKP no longer having enough votes to form a single party government, a coalition, with or without the AKP, needs to be formed. Given the different ideologies of the parties, an analysis of the potential coalitions shows that this will not be easy.

- *A CHP/MHP/HDP coalition.* While in theory such a government could help reintegrate and normalise Turkey's highly fragmented society, the significant differences between the MHP and the HDP related to the Kurdish peace process makes this improbable.
- *A Grand Coalition between the CHP and the AKP.*
- *A CHP/MHP minority government with HDP support.* This could be a more natural alliance given that the parties have fairly similar domestic and foreign policy aims. While there may be concerns about MHP's commitment to the EU, it is worth recalling the important role the party played in supporting EU accession reforms at the end of the 1990s.
- *A CHP/HDP minority government with MHP support.* While based on Turkey's governing history, a fully left government would be a very peculiar scenario, taking into account their party manifestos. This coalition could result in several groundbreaking reforms related to the EU accession process, and the Kurdish peace process.

- *An AKP minority government with HDP support in exchange for some concessions on the Kurdish peace process and more rights for Kurds.* While HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtas promised his electorate that he would not form a coalition with the AKP he may be tempted to do so in order to be part of a new government. However, this would seriously damage his credibility and almost certainly reduce support for the party in future elections.
- *An AKP/MHP government.* This potential coalition would almost certainly mean the end of the Kurdish peace process given the strong opposition of the MHP.

Looking at the differences between the parties, there is also a chance that no agreement can be reached and early elections will take place. This could pave the way for significant changes in the structures of the AKP and/or even the emergence of new parties, in particular from the centre-right. Former President Abdullah Gül along with other liberal and former centre-right politicians from the AKP could be involved.

Because the election was more or less a referendum on Erdoğan's rule, the result signifies a serious blow to his dominance over Turkey's political scene. Whatever coalition is eventually formed, Erdoğan's ability to influence policy making has been constrained and he will find himself restricted in carrying out his role as defined by the constitution: respecting the separation of powers and the constitutional attributions of the prime ministerial office.

### **Consequences for the Turkish economy**

AKP governments have been a strong political stability factor for the past 13 years. This contributed to the economic development of the country, especially in the first two terms. However, the AKP's increasingly authoritarian style of governance, including the erosion of the rule of law and its anti-West narrative, has undermined investor confidence, particularly in the West. Nevertheless, a coalition government may be less stable, which could have an impact on economic policy which could in turn, present an opportunity for Erdoğan to reassert himself by claiming the AKP is the only party able to keep Turkey on a strong economic track. A change in economic leadership, with the possible departure of Economy and Finance Ministers Ali Babacan and Mehmet Simsek, represents another significant change. While this could deepen economic problems in Turkey in the short term, at the same time a more democratic coalition government has the potential to initiate new economic reforms and strengthen the rule of law in the mid- and long term. In this sense, short-term economic problems may pave the way for long-term economic success under a more democratic government.

### **Implications for Turkey's relations with the EU**

While the result might help bring Turkey back to a more democratic path, including the undoing of a number of new laws that have restricted civil liberties and freedoms, it seems unlikely that it will bring about a significant change in Turkey's blocked EU accession process. However, at the same time, it represents an opportunity for the EU to demonstrate its support for pro-democracy forces in Turkey by finding ways to re-engage and rebuild trust. This could be translated into the opening of new chapters, in particular chapter 23 dealing with basic EU values, fundamental rights and freedoms, and further cooperation on issues of mutual interest, ranging from TTIP and the updating of Turkey's Customs Union to illegal immigration and Syrian refugees. But in any case, only in the event of the Cyprus problem being finally resolved could a real opening in the accession talks occur. But only strong commitment from both the Greek and Turkish Cypriots along with Turkey will achieve this. The recently re-launched peace talks will be a litmus test in this respect.

In conclusion, yesterday's result marks a long-awaited change of the Turkish political scene, restoring a workable multiparty system rather than solidifying the dominance of a single party. However, given the frailty of all possible coalition options, this vote will not automatically lead to a long-term solution to the country's problems. Considering none of the potential alliances will be able to provide a stable government, this election is only one step on a long way towards normalisation, which began with the Gezi Protests of 2013 and could eventually result in an entire overhaul of existing political structures.

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