

TURKEY'S JUNE 7, 2015 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: VOTERS OPT FOR CHANGE

- Despite significant losses, the AKP remains the strongest party and the only political organization with nation-wide influence.
- Electoral victory by the HDP opens opportunities for democratizing the electoral system and for peaceful resolution of the Kurdish conflict.
- The outcome strengthens the parliament's position relative to the existing strict control by the President and his administration.
- Political polarization will make it difficult to form a government and likely that the next round of elections will be called early.

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1. Parliament Gains Power

With 40.86% of the vote, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) emerged from the elections held on June 7 as the strongest party in Turkey, however its share has declined by more than 9% since the 2011 parliamentary elections and 2.7% since the 2014 municipal elections. The party's 258 parliamentary seats fall short of an absolute majority of 276. The real winner in this election was the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party), which, at 13.1%, managed to double its votes. The party may have been able to exceed the 10% voting threshold for parliamentary representation for the first time on the strength of new voting blocs in population centers Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara.

With 25.16% of the votes, the CHP (Republican People's Party) missed its electoral goal and lost three seats. Nonetheless, its campaign was very well received. This unfavorable outcome may be explained by the fact that a failure on the part of the HDP to reach the voting threshold would have moved the AKP closer to its goal of a majority to amend the Constitution: The prospect of an AKP-led constitutional amendment process was enough to convince many CHP voters to opt for the HDP in this election.

The 16.29% vote for the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) was a significant increase over its results in the 2011 parliamentary

election, however this was down slightly relative to the March 2014 municipal elections.

These electoral results are remarkable not only because, at 96 seats, there are 17 more women in the parliament than before the election (this figure still amounts to well below one fifth of the total representatives) but also because there are now three Armenian representatives for the first time in decades and there is now a significant number of freshman representatives.

2. The Parties' Electoral Campaigns

The AKP fully exploited its incumbency during this campaign, a point made clear not least of all by the slogan it employed during the latter stages of the race: "The others only talk. We act." Opening ceremonies for public investment projects like the airports in Giresun and Hakkari highlighted the message that the AKP represents achievement and development. Another important argument was political stability, which the party claimed was preferable to a coalition government during a period of economic difficulty. This kind of argument proved surprisingly effective given that the AKP had emphasized positive messages and its projects during previous electoral campaigns. This time, by contrast, it focused more on portraying the opposition's projects as financially untenable. Late in the campaign, it directly attacked the HDP with a polemic about real piety as well as a charge that the HDP takes its orders from the PKK.

Voting trends by partyⁱ

| | 2011 parliamentary election | 2014 municipal elections | 2015 parliamentary election |
|------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| AKP | 49.83 | 43.39 | 40.86 |
| CHP | 25.98 | 25.61 | 25.16 |
| MHP | 13.01 | 17.62 | 16.29 |
| HDP | - | 4.52 | 13.10 |

Distribution of seats in parliamentⁱⁱ

| | 2011 | 2015 |
|------------|------|------|
| AKP | 327 | 258 |
| CHP | 135 | 132 |
| MHP | 53 | 80 |
| HDP | 29 | 80 |



The impression that the AKP is under dual leadership made the campaign more difficult. Particularly late in the election cycle, President Erdoğan, who is in fact constitutionally barred from campaigning, held several rallies daily in which he promoted transitioning to a presidential system. But his emphasis was not always what party leader and Prime Minister Davutoğlu had in mind. Additionally, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu both utilized the rhetoric of victimhood, framing the opposition as aligned with terrorist organizations and foreign powers for the purpose of stopping development in Turkey.

By contrast, the CHP ran a program-oriented campaign focused on economic and social policy. They got off to a good start in March and April by choosing most of their candidates through primary elections. They were also the first party to make their election platform public, which gave them the advantage of being able to set the tone for the whole election process. The party was far better received in the media than it had been in the past due to the fact that it avoided the anti-AKP polemics that have dominated previous campaigns and downplayed claims that its candidates were really going to take down the AKP this time.

Socio-political projects such as raising the minimum wage and additional pension payments on the feasts of Ramadan (*Eid el-Fitr*) and Sacrifice (*Eid el-Adha*) drew public attention to the CHP. The AKP's claim that these measures would be financially untenable only helped increase that attention. Given the growing number of debt-ridden households, the CHP wants to implement a debt-restructuring program that would abolish a large portion of the interest on debt and hold banks accountable. Its platform also called for giving public sector employees who work for subcontractors permanent positions. This would be financed with the savings that would have otherwise gone to the subcontractors. In light of the claims that Erdoğan and the AKP have been profligate spenders, the CHP promised a transparent and sound budgetary policy. It would opt for a member of the largest opposition party for the position of budgetary

committee chair, an official whose job includes signing off on detailed budgetary calculations. Late in the campaign the CHP also proposed a "mega-city project" that would involve building a new city in Anatolia for 3.5 million inhabitants and would serve as a logistics center for a region ranging from Asia to the Balkans and North Africa.

In their campaign, the national-conservative MHP charged the government with betraying national interests but it addressed socio-political issues as well. In his stump speeches, Party Chairman Devlet Bahçeli consistently stressed the accusations of corruption and profligacy against the government and accused the AKP of seeking a secret coalition with the HDP, which he regards as an extension of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). This was in part an attempt to win back voters who had previously turned from the MHP to the AKP but who have been unsettled at least since the AKP and the HDP issued a joint statement on the peace process last February from Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul. The MHP platform also addressed socio-political topics such as a significant minimum wage increase while deftly linking the dismal finances of many Turkish households with the claims of government profligacy, which have frequently been connected to the new presidential palace.

The fact that the HDP needed to surpass the 10% hurdle in order to enter parliament mobilized voters in the party's favor. But the HDP also benefitted from the tremendous charisma of co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş, whose sense of humor and quick wit drew the interest of voters who would not have even considered voting for the HDP a year ago. The party's message of pluralism was linked to a selection of candidates from a wide range of Turkish political and social movements. While President Erdoğan tried to minimize the process of finding a peaceful solution to the Kurdish conflict to the greatest extent possible, the HDP campaign was defined by calls for democratization. Its demand for the abolition of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which drew charges of godlessness from the AKP and the President, became a central theme late in



the campaign. This was partly due to the AKP's desire to win back religious Kurds who had turned to the HDP out of frustration with the peace process and the government's reluctance to offer support in the fight over Kobani, Syria. Voters who were leaning toward the HDP out of a tactical desire to deny the AKP a majority to amend the Constitution made it clear that they were not interested in a coalition with the AKP and that Erdoğan's proposed presidential system should be stopped.

3. Fairness and Equality of Opportunity in the Election

There are at least three principles that make it difficult to say that all parties had an equal opportunity to convince voters. First and foremost, the resources for conducting an electoral campaign were very unequally distributed. On a national level as well as in certain municipalities, incumbents diverted public funds for the benefit of the AKP while obstructing other parties' campaigns. This meant that campaigns were overshadowed by numerous physical attacks.

President Erdoğan's intervention was also problematic. While his oath of office obligates him to remain neutral, the Constitution nonetheless gives the President an extremely high degree of immunity. Appeals by the opposition for the Supreme Electoral Council to stop Erdoğan's rallies or at least ban radio and television broadcasts of them were rejected on the basis of his immunity. A case before the Constitutional Court remained undecided at the time of the election.

State financing makes up a large part of most parties' revenue and that support increases significantly during election years. Among the parties with seats in the parliament, only the HDP did not receive government financing because it was only represented by independent candidates and not as a party in previous elections. By contrast, the AKP was given TL 198 million, the CHP TL 103 million, and the MHP TL 53 million in state funding. In April, Turkish newspaper *Sabah* estimated spending per candidate at TL 50,000. Candidates raise part of those funds themselves, however,

and each pays his or her party a fee for candidacy. It is unclear just how the money for these campaign costs is raised.

Although the AKP was given nearly two thirds of the party funds, it largely used state resources for its campaign. The opposition parties particularly complained about ceremonial openings across the country that were attended by public officials and that public sector employees and schoolchildren were frequently delegated to attend as a way of ensuring higher turnout. This also applies to numerous events attended by President Erdoğan, although his oath of office prohibited him from actively campaigning.

On the municipal level, campaigns were hampered when, for example, sanitation departments were used to remove other parties' campaign posters and party symbols. In the city of Erzurum, the CHP was denied approval to build its voting station in the central plaza for more than two weeks in the latter stage of the election cycle. Also in Erzurum, an HDP rally was attacked just a few days before the election. That event alone left 200 people injured and extensive property damage.

There were also numerous violent attacks on polling sites and election meetings this campaign season and the HDP was often a target: The party and its supporters were subjected to more than 100 known attacks. Bomb attacks on HDP campaign offices in the cities of Adana and Mersin in May particularly gained a lot of notoriety. It was only by luck that nobody was killed. Two explosions injuring ten people prevented the party from holding its final rally in the city of Diyarbakır. No one had been held responsible for most of the attacks by the time of the election.

4. Outlook

The voting results left no clear majority to form a government. For the first time since 2002 when it was founded and first took power, the AKP does not have an absolute majority. Due to their performance in the 1990s, coalition governments are not popular in Turkey yet the current high



degree of political polarization also means that any mathematically possible coalition will put all of the involved parties at risk of alienating their voters.

In this context, a minority or caretaker AKP government might conceivably be tolerated by one of the opposition parties until likely early elections are called. A second possible scenario would be an AKP-led coalition government, however the MHP and the HDP both rejected that option on the night before the election and, given the hostility between AKP and CHP voters, they also appear unlikely to form a coalition.

The third scenario would be unification of what has to date been the opposition. The MHP has rejected that option as well, but a CHP-HDP coalition might possibly have enough support for a minority government. Here again, however, a weak parliamentary majority combined with a high degree of political difference between the partners would give such a government a minimal chance of survival. Nonetheless, such a coalition might come together around the objective of preventing an AKP-led transitional government.

Regardless of the formation, the new parliament will be in a significantly stronger position than it was vis-à-vis the President and his government. The lack of an absolute majority means that the ruling party will have to compromise and that will give the parliament new significance. Additionally, the new parliament will have the option of using legislative means to limit President Erdoğan's scope of action.

Two determining factors in this electoral outcome were probably the peace process in the Kurdish conflict and the 10% election threshold for entry into parliament. Reducing the peace process to an appeal for the PKK to disarm was implausible given the heightened expectations and offered no hope of success. The 10% threshold and the understanding that failure to reach it would put the AKP close to the 330 seats it would need to pass a constitutional amendment by referendum took voters away from all of the other parties (particularly the AKP) and turned their sympathies toward the HDP.

Initial observations indicate that traditional AKP voters primarily voted for the HDP and the MHP in this election cycle. The nationalist and religious rhetoric that dominated the AKP campaign appears to have been mostly intended to retain the MHP voters. Commentators also regard the outcome as a red card for Erdoğan, who conducted a shadow campaign in violation of his oath of office as a non-partisan President. Exclusion of the party's founding generation, charges of profligacy and corruption, and actions against critical media outlets and the Gülen movement have been cited as additional factors that pierced the veil of AKP invincibility. The AKP remains the defining power in every region of the country – analysis will show that it is the strongest or second-strongest party in each province.

In the wake of this election, the challenge for the HDP will be to transition from a Kurdish party to a nationwide left party. It was able to win over not only Kurdish but also left and liberal voters particularly in the major cities. It will not be long before we see whether or not the party can retain them.

(Endnotes)

ⁱ The figures for 2011 and 2014 were taken from the official national electoral council and the data for 2015 was taken from CNNTürk. The HDP (known at the time as the BDP) was represented by independent candidates in 2011 and is therefore not listed here.

ⁱⁱ The distribution of seats in 2011 corresponds to the status after the election as determined by the national electoral council. This overview shows that 29 of what were initially 35 independent representatives joined the HDP.



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