

A stylized world map composed of grey dots, with several red dots highlighting specific regions. The title 'The Turkish Election' is written in large blue letters, and 'RESULTS AND NEXT STEPS' is in smaller black letters below it.

The Turkish Election

RESULTS AND NEXT STEPS

June 2011

1. Results

For the third time in a row, the conservative Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) – chaired by the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan – won the general election with 49.8% (2007 results:46.5%) of the votes. The runner-up was the Republican People's Party (CHP) with 25.9% (2007:20.8%), followed by the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which received 13% (2007:14.3%) of the votes, thus making the election threshold and securing its representation in Turkey's 550-seat parliament. The 36 independent MPs (2007:21) sponsored by the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) will be able to form their own group in parliament.

With a turnout of almost 87% (voting is compulsory in Turkey), voter participation was high.

higher than during the previous election. 78 of the 550 newly elected MPs were women, thus making up 14.2% of the total number of representatives (2007:9.2%). 45 of those female MPs belong to the AKP, 19 are members of the CHP, 11 are members of the BDP, and three are members of the MHP.

In light of these results, the AKP, having won a total of 326 seats, will not have to form a coalition government with the CHP (135 seats), the MHP (53 seats), or the BDP-sponsored independent group (36 seats). However, it failed to obtain the much-anticipated three-fifths majority (330 seats) by a close margin and will thus have to cooperate with the three opposition parties in its efforts to draft a new constitution.

2. Political Parties

Having won the general election for the third time in a row, the AKP is one of the winners of the recent election. Its victory can be attributed to Turkey's good economic performance; about 60% of AKP voters indicated the economic situation to be the main reason for their choice. Poor immigrants in cities, the rural population, but also the emerging bourgeoisie chose economic and political stability and formed the basis of the electoral success of the AKP as the new people's party.

The AKP's electoral apparatus operated in a highly professional manner, and the juggernaut of government fostered the party's electoral success even further. Nothing, however, compared to the

Prime Minister's populist skills; he continuously came up with new major projects for all the different cities and regions, thus winning over his supporters; among those plans were projects to create new commuter towns for Istanbul, construct new airports, develop Turkey's own defense industry, and even construct a second Bosphorus. These were some of the concrete promises made, which endeared Erdoğan to many voters. The AKP was also very savvy in winning over more conservative voters; almost all of the nationalist parties' strongholds were won by the AKP.

For this to be possible, the AKP deliberately put up with losing votes in the Kurdish regions, which was a strategy that proved successful in the end. The AKP emerged as the strongest party in almost all of the different constituencies except for the regions of Thrace, the Aegean Region, Tunceli, and of course the southeast. It also won the majority of votes in the major cities of Istanbul, Ankara, Adana, and Antalya.

Some people's disappointment in the election results of the Republican People's Party (CHP) was only due to overly high expectations. In fact, the CHP under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was able to mobilize 3.5 million votes and 5% more votes than in 2007. This was possible even though the party had made several leadership changes, replacing almost the party's entire executive committee within only a year prior to the election. Staff changes were implemented all the way down to lower-level party committees. Three changes were made among the party's leading staff in Istanbul and in the national youth association. As a result, the organization of the CHP's electoral campaign and the mobilization of members could have been better, even though some progress was indeed made. The party is still suffering from a credibility problem because many people still identify it with the old Kemalist establishment.

The "new CHP" tried to score points with Kılıçdaroğlu as its top candidate as well as with a number of intelligent policy proposals on matters relating to family policy, women, youth, and other social issues. Kılıçdaroğlu was the only candidate to visit all of Turkey's 81 provinces giving speeches in cities that had not seen a prominent CHP politician in decades. Although he was not able to match Erdoğan's rhetorical power, he nonetheless received credit for his strong commitment and credibility.

Nevertheless, the nomination of several Ergenekon suspects and nationalist candidates, such as Mehmet Haberal, caused the CHP to lose

votes. Moreover, CHP candidates in cities like Antalya and Izmir were punished at the polls for the poor performance of the city administrations; in Aydin, however, candidates were able to profit from the city's well-respected mayor.

Meanwhile, former leading party figures, such as Baykal and Sav, have raised their voices criticizing Kılıçdaroğlu's political style. Rumors are circulating about signature lists that are to be used at an extraordinary party convention; calls for him to resign are also being made. Time will tell if the party's new political leadership under Kılıçdaroğlu is able to assert itself in difficult times like these.

The second winner of the election is the BDP, which led a highly successful campaign with its 36 MPs running as independent candidates due to the 10% election hurdle. The BDP knew how to distinguish itself as a pro-Kurdish party while at the same time attracting new voters by introducing progressive issues and candidates. The Kurdish cause will be vigorously advocated in parliament. It goes without saying that the BDP did especially well in the Kurdish regions in the southeast of Turkey, and even won seats in Istanbul and Adana. The BDP's Erol Dora was the first Christian to win a seat in parliament in 50 years.

Despite a sex scandal, which cost many top politicians in the party their candidacies, the MHP was able to make the 10% threshold by a comfortable margin. However, the MHP was only able to win Iğdır province in the northeast of the country. Meanwhile, the AKP made use of nationalist rhetoric and used the MHP's sex scandal to its own advantage, making it a major component of its campaign strategy and thereby winning over a number of the MHP's voters. Among other things, the two major parties' fierce campaigning strategies reduced the size of smaller parties to the point of insignificance. This caused fewer votes to be lost than during previous elections, despite the high election threshold.

3. The tasks at hand: a new constitution, the Kurdish question, and foreign policy

The new government's most important task will be to draft and pass a new constitution in cooperation with all the political and social forces involved. For the first time, it is not the state but the citizens and their rights that are to be protected, which would constitute a significant step in the protection of

human rights, and towards Turkey's potential EU accession.

It was only several days ago that Erdoğan openly talked of his intentions to transition Turkey to a presidential democracy. In light of the new

distribution of seats in parliament, however, this will be more difficult to put into practice than before. Even his own party is divided over the issue. The speaker of parliament Sahin, and President Gül for instance have expressed their opposition to such a system.

As a consequence, Prime Minister Erdoğan will have no choice but to compromise and to meet the opposition half-way. It is not yet clear which one of the opposition parties he will first sit down with at the negotiation table. The BDP would want to lower the 10% election threshold, have Kurdish taught in schools, secure cultural rights, and grant the provinces more autonomy by moving towards a federal system. Talks with the CHP are also conceivable; after all, both parties have a lot in common regarding their vision of a new constitution.

The necessary willingness to compromise on points like these constitutes one of the main demands issued by the European Union, the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association TÜSIAD, and other representatives of civil society. Time will show whether the AKP is capable of adapting to this new situation.

Further legal changes will be necessary in the area of electoral as well as party law. The legal reform currently underway must also be finalized. Moreover, many people are hoping that a new constitution will decentralize the decisionmaking process, which will be a particularly sensitive issue due to the Kurdish question. A reform of the educational system is overdue, and so is the process of female empowerment. An issue that has been frequently raised over recent months is the stronger protection of the freedom of opinion and the press, which will hopefully be part of the new constitution, as well.

Opportunities to solve the Kurdish issue are given; after all, the problem is no longer being swept under the rug, and all the important political parties, such as the AKP, the CHP, and the BDP have recognized the need for a solution. Though Erdoğan denied the existence of the Kurdish issue during the electoral campaign again and spoke only of problems of the Kurdish brothers, however, this could easily be retracted.

More democracy, the protection of cultural rights, and the granting of democratic autonomy by transferring powers to individual regions, provinces, and municipalities are some of the

elements of the BDP's political platform. The BDP has been significantly strengthened politically by the recent election. The party wants autonomous regions to be able to implement their own political structures and have their own say on matters relating to education, health, the environment, infrastructure, housing, and the use of natural resources.

In addition to their campaign of civil disobedience, which was initiated by the BDP in cooperation with a number of civil-society organizations during the electoral campaign, the block of independent candidates is making the following demands: the immediate suspension of military actions taken against the PKK, the launch of negotiations that include the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, the release of political prisoners, the instruction of Kurdish in public schools, and the creation of truth commissions to come to terms with the conflicts of the past 25 years.

Due to the imminent generational shift in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the window of opportunity for a peaceful solution may soon close. The country must therefore act soon. For a generation of members dedicated to armed struggle, the Turkish model may no longer be the only possibility; Iraqi Kurdistan may constitute an attractive alternative. A whole generation of Kurdish youngsters without real prospects is difficult to control.

Furthermore, difficult foreign policy decisions were deferred before the election. Time will tell whether Turkey's interest in continuing its efforts towards a future accession to the EU amounts to nothing more than the creation of a ministry for European affairs. The Cyprus issue will constitute one of the litmus tests for the new government's reform-mindedness. Turkey's unilateral opening of a port to traffic from Cyprus could yield some progress. At the moment, however, this step still seems unrealistic, even though it would open several windows of opportunity for accession talks, which are currently closed due to the EU's disapproval of Turkey's handling of the Cyprus question.

Since the beginning of the Arab spring, some of the shine has gone off Turkish foreign policy. Neither did Turkish diplomats anticipate the uprisings, nor did they – in the beginning – present a coherent approach to dealing with the new groups that had emerged. The complete change of tack with regard to Libya, as well as Turkey's lack of clarity concerning its conduct toward neighboring Syria have illustrated the limits



of Turkish foreign policy. In his victory speech, the Prime Minister once again underlined Turkey's new aspiration to be a leading nation in the region.

It is telling, however, that the talks between Fatah and Hamas were initiated by Egypt. Turkey will soon have to decide how to handle the new aid flotilla, which is to set sail for Gaza in a few days. A further deterioration of Turkey's relationship with Israel would be extremely counter-productive and would once again call into question Turkey's mediating role in the region.

Negotiations with Armenia had reached an impasse before the election; at the moment, further progress on that issue seems out of sight.

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