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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

Turkish Election Results June 2018

Policy Analysis Unit | June 2018

Surprises in the Turkish Election Results

Series: Situation Assessment

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Introduction

Following elections for both the parliament and the presidency on 24 June, the Justice and Development Party (“AKP”) together with the Nationalist Movement Party (“MHP”), a nationalist group with which the AKP is allied, took home more than half of the votes cast. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the AKP’s leader, will lead the country for the next five years, the end of which—in 2023—Turkey will mark the centenary of the foundation of the ~~secular~~ Republic under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

The results flew in the face of most predictions by journalists, observers and pollsters who had expected Erdogan, at the very least, not to win an outright majority in the first round of the presidential polls. Nor did most expect that the AKP-MHP alliance would take a majority of parliamentary seats. Instead, pollsters had exaggerated the predicted gains by the “Iyi Party,” a group that had originally splintered off from the MHP ~~and which was now leading the opposition to Erdogan~~. Similarly, observers had underestimated the popularity of the AKP among ethnic Kurdish voters in the southeast of Turkey, particularly in Mardin, Urfa, Batman and Ughri. Indeed, some observers had expected that a second round of elections for the presidency would have handed the post to Muharrem Ince, the candidate of the opposition “Nation” alliance who was running against Erdogan.

Reasons behind the Failure of the Opposition

The coalition of opposition parties—led by the Republican People’s Party (CHP)—failed to prevent ~~almost~~ two decades of continuous AKP rule in Turkey. Their incapacity stems from a number of factors. Primarily, the organized opposition to Erdogan has failed to provide a viable and comprehensive economic and political platform to rival that of the incumbent AKP. At a time when their country was facing considerable challenges on the world stage, Turkish voters were left feeling that any opposition to Erdogan would be a shot in the dark in contrast to the proven track record of the AKP. The inability of the far-flung opposition to consolidate behind a single candidate—for example, the refusal of Iyi’s Meral Aksener to back former president Abdullah Gul against Erdogan—in order to counter Erdogan further bolstered the incumbent’s chances. Similarly, the unwillingness of most of the opposition parties to accept the Democratic Peoples’ Party, a Kurdish aligned group, in their fold ensured that Erdogan opponents would never get the backing of the large Kurdish community in the southeast of Turkey. ~~The loss of~~

~~the Kurdish electorate ensured that the AKP did not have to worry about a second round of the presidential elections.~~ With these lost opportunities and fragmentation, the Erdogan opponents failed to persuade Turkish voters of their ability to win an election and govern effectively.

Additionally, the AKP has been able to win back some of the constituencies which it had previously lost due to disaffection with the ruling party's economic policies and/or its stance on civil liberties. Equally repulsive for large numbers of voters was the AKP's capitalization on the coup attempt of July, 2016, to silence its political opponents. For his part, Erdogan has promised to end the state of emergency in place since the coup two years ago, as well as to raise pay and ~~create more job increase the number of employment~~ opportunities in the public sector ~~in the event of his electoral victory this month.~~ In ~~addition, contrast, the way in which the opposition turned their election into an the~~ ad-hominem attack on Erdogan ~~by the opposition~~ was counterproductive, serving instead to enhance the president's chances. It was further evidence that the opposition had only a personal gripe with the leader of the country, instead of a viable alternative platform of its own.

Notably, despite few Turkish voters knowing who he was before the election, Muharrem Ince did manage to secure a full 30% of votes cast—although not enough to drive the poll into a second round. This is particularly noteworthy given that the political parties which supported him failed to deliver a large-scale promotional campaign. The votes cast for Ince as president outstripped those cast for members of the opposition in the parliamentary polls. In effect, Ince had served to bolster his own political party, and not the other way around.

Surprising Results

Perhaps the most surprising result from the elections was the fact that the rightwing MHP, led by Devlet Behceli, had taken a full 11% of the votes for the parliamentary seats. Earlier, observers had expected that the fact that Meral Aksener's abandonment of the MHP would have deteriorated the party's electoral share to the point that they would not have cleared the 10% threshold to get into the legislature. When the results for the MHP are combined with those from other parties, a total of 21% of Turks voted for extreme rightwing parties. This result should be worrying for all other Turkish political movements, including the AKP. Despite the personal tensions between Aksener and Behceli, the two leaders of the nationalist camp within the Turkish parliament, it remains possible that their respective parties, which see eye-to-eye on a range of issues, will form a political alliance in the legislature that will make them pivotal to Turkish alliances.

A further surprise was the way in which the Peoples' Democratic Party, a largely Kurdish grouping, was able to win 12% of the parliamentary vote, despite the group's leader, Selahattin Demirtas, remaining in prison and only garnering 8% of the votes in the presidential race. This was a replay of the results from the June 2015 elections, in which the Kurdish group was able to rely on the ballots of large numbers of voters who do not necessarily espouse ~~all of the PDP's views across all topics~~. This reflects a tactical voting approach common in Turkish elections: when ~~the members of one party helps another to feel that their own group is not likely to cross the threshold to win an election in order to prevent a third party from winning the votes. , they transfer their votes over to another candidate.~~ In the last elections, this could be seen in the way supporters of the CHP living in mainly Kurdish areas in the southeast came out to support the PDP as a way of thwarting the AKP in heavily Kurdish regions of the country. The fact that the PDP has managed to secure a place in parliament—despite its ~~extreme activist approach and sympathy for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—has served the cause of marks a historic turning point for the party itself and for~~ democracy in Turkey ~~in general~~. It ~~has also~~ meant that the votes of millions of Kurdish citizens of Turkey have not been wasted.

Erdogan's securing of 52% of the vote in the first round of the presidential election was the third major surprise of Turkey's June 2018 poll. This contrasts to the 42% of voters who voted for AKP candidates to parliament. Consequently, the AKP will now be reliant on the support of its junior coalition partner, the MHP, in order to command a majority of the 600 parliamentary seats in the Turkish legislature and thus be able to govern.

Mirroring this, the fact that Ince won 30% of votes cast for president contrasts with the only 22% of votes cast for lists and candidates for the CHP in parliamentary seats. This foreshadows coming internal disputes, and even the risk of an internal split, within the MHP. One likely consequence of this is that Party Chief Kemal Kilicdaroglu will likely be forced to resign and make way for the more successful Ince in order to spare the MHP further internal splits.

The Stakes for the Future

Erdogan seems to have made the right bet by deciding on early elections which have secured him a further five years in the presidency—and, following the 2017 constitutional amendments, the President of the Republic is effectively unbridled in power. The latest election results further suggest that the political landscape in Ankara will remain stable in the coming years. This has overturned the expectations of pollsters, who expected that the results of the Turkish elections would be indecisive and unsettling for the country's future.

Nonetheless, the number of political parties with parliamentary representation has increased from four, in the present legislature, to five, in the incoming parliament. The latest elections have also strengthened opposition factions in the legislature; this is particularly relevant when one considers that the continuation of the present-day coalitions cannot be taken for granted. The AKP may find itself having to face the dilemma of dealing with the MHP—despite being in an electoral alliance, the nationalist group’s platform diverges from that of President Erdogan’s party on a number of key points.

More considerable than the dynamics within the electoral coalition, the ruling AKP will have to deal with the increasingly complex economic and fiscal crisis as well as other domestic, regional and global challenges. Regionally and globally, Ankara will have to face challenges in Syria and Iraq to its south, as well as the situation in Cyprus together with the stalled relationship with the European Union. Finally, Erdogan will have to address the unending crisis in the relationship with Washington.

The election results entitle Erdogan and his party to the right to demand that foreign governments respect the wishes of Turkish voters in choosing an AKP government again. Likewise, the AKP leadership is overdue some introspection and self-critique. Most pressingly, the leaders of Erdogan’s political party need to understand how their treatment of a number of domestic issues—such as questions of civil rights and social issues—as well as how they dealt with Turkish-European relations helped to intensify internal social discord within Turkish society. It is worth recalling that the adoption by the AKP of a set of social and political covenants, partly as an overture to Europe, was one of the reasons the party was first able to take political power in 2011.

Today, the AKP has no choice but to examine the factors which led to the fracturing of Turkish society. The policies of the ruling party which led to the sharp fault lines in the Turkish population will not serve the ruling party in the future. Instead, onlookers expect Erdogan to make good on his promise that the AKP’s victory in the latest elections would be the beginning of a new era of stability for Turkey, and that this victory would usher in reforms and change as well as a new openness both at home and abroad.