



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Turkish Parliamentary Elections: Results and Repercussions

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | June 2015

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Introduction

Turkish parliamentary elections were held on June 7, 2015, amid varying expectations regarding the outcome and possible developments in Turkish politics. This paper reviews the results of an election that has changed a political scene prevailing since 2002, depriving the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) of another chance to form a new government on its own, and forcing it to work instead on forming a ruling coalition. It explores reasons for the diminished support for the AKP among voters, possible coalition government scenarios, and the implications of it all for the Turkish Republic, in terms of both domestic and foreign policy.

The Results and Significance of the Turkish Parliamentary Elections

With 550 members of parliament representing 85 electoral districts in 81 provinces, understanding the Turkish electoral system is fundamental to any assessment of the significance of the recent elections. Under this system, each party has to pass an electoral threshold of 10 percent of the vote to win seats in parliament. Failing that, a party's votes are distributed among winning parties, in proportion to the total number of votes won by each one. The party with a majority of votes forms the government; with a majority of two thirds of the members of parliament it can amend the constitution.

The 2015 elections had two major outcomes: the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), running in its first election, cleared the 10 percent threshold (with 13 percent of the vote) to obtain 80 seats in parliament; and the AKP lost the absolute majority it had enjoyed in parliamentary elections since 2002. Despite the AKP's overall edge, with about 41 percent of the vote and 258 seats, it failed to obtain the majority of 276 seats needed to form a government alone. The two other parties winning seats in the elections were the Republican People's Party and the Nationalist Movement Party, garnering 25 percent (132 seats) and 16.5 percent (80 seats) respectively. The rest of the parties and independent candidates contesting the elections received only 5 percent of the total votes, insufficient to enter parliament.

Since its inception, the AKP has won consecutive victories in 10 different local, parliamentary and presidential elections, as well as two popular referendums; since 2002, it had been able to form governments of its own accord. The recent election

results have put an end to this unchallenged run, and now it must form a government with coalition partners whose agendas and policies are distinct from those of the AKP. However, it is inaccurate to describe this setback as a defeat, as many Turkish party and media personalities opposed to the AKP have done; it remains by far the largest party, and the one charged with forming a coalition government. The AKP may still reverse this decline in its fortunes in upcoming elections. It seems likely that the Turkish voter sought to teach a lesson to a party that has long ruled the country, to caution it over an accumulation of errors, and to signal that electoral support is not unconditional but depends on the AKP making good on its promises, as well as a continuing commitment to the rules of the democratic game.

Reasons for the Decline in Support for the AKP

This fundamental transformation in the fortunes of the AKP has engendered speculation about the underlying causes of its decline, and about the likely impact upon the domestic and international arenas. There are explanations that have been advanced either linked to the party itself and its policies, or independent of both:

- the entry of the HDP as a listed political party, rather than through independent candidates as it had done in the past, enabled it to cross the 10 percent threshold; in addition, the HDP received the support of other parties, and not only the Kurdish vote;
- the media support given to the HDP by the Fethullah Gulen group, in retaliation against the AKP;
- unintentional help from a misguided AKP electoral strategy too prominently waged against the HDP and its leader Selahattin Demirtas, rather than focusing on the larger Republican People's Party. The end result was that the HDP received more attention than it otherwise would have, ultimately giving it more votes.
- the slowing growth of the Turkish economy, estimated at only 2.8 percent in the current year, contrasted with the high growth rates of past years. In the same vein, the country recently witnessed a marked increase in commodity prices together with a decline in the exchange rate of the Turkish lira. Several events in the country during the recent period reflected negatively on the economy and impacted its growth, such as the "Gazi Park" protests that broke out in mid-2013;

- the struggle between the government and the AKP on the one hand, and the Fethullah Gulen group on the other, the latter being a group that possessed considerable influence within state institutions and brought corruption charges to bear against the party.

The AKP's structure also underwent radical transformation following the election of Recep Tayyip Erdogan as President of the Republic and Ahmet Davutoglu as head of the party and the government, along with the departure of nearly seventy deputies, including senior party leaders, from electoral competition under party by-laws prohibiting deputies from nominating themselves for more than three parliamentary sessions. In addition, internal party differences contributed to the AKP's negative electoral performance, with a marked lack of consensus on the most appropriate candidates. Moreover, in the midst of the election season, Erdogan called on voters to vote to change the constitution and establish a presidential system instead of the current parliamentary one. This raised the ire of some voters, and even some supporters of the AKP. The Turkish people clearly did not consider such a change to be a priority, and would not accept there being two heads of executive power. Meanwhile, Erdogan's frequent public appearances left Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoglu in a weaker position on the sidelines. Ultimately, the main election issue under contention became the proposed presidential system, which the public simply voted to reject.

Scenarios for the Formation of a Government

It is likely that the president of the republic will assign the leader of the largest party represented in the parliament, Ahmet Davutoglu, the task of forming the republic's sixty-third government, a task that must be completed within 45 days. Government-formation scenarios are seen to include the following:

1. The ruling AKP, with its majority of votes cast, could form a coalition government with one of the other parties, or else it could form a minority government with the support of independent individual members of parliament.
2. In the event that the AKP is unable to form a government, responsibility for the task will shift to the other parties who could themselves form a coalition government. This remains unlikely, due to the distance between the positions of these political parties on the key issues, and their widely differing orientations. That these parties oppose the ruling AKP does not mean there is any consensus among them, or any compatibility.

3. In the event of failure to form a government, as stipulated in the Turkish constitution, the president calls for early parliamentary elections.

Domestic and Foreign Repercussions of the Election Results

Throughout the years of AKP rule, the domestic and foreign policies of the Turkish state were characterized by stability and clarity. The results of the recent parliamentary elections, however, make it likely that changes will occur with the incoming Turkish government, given that it will be composed of more diverse constituent elements. Speculation has arisen about the consequences these results might have for domestic and foreign policies, and the most important of these likely consequences are outlined below.

Repercussions on Domestic Policy

The Turkish people have effectively brandished a "yellow card" at the AKP; provided the party reviews some of its policies, they want the AKP to continue to be part of the government. They have rejected the party's proposals on changing the constitution and the adoption of the presidential system, disagreeing that these are a priority for the country. The priorities of the Turkish people are not a presidential system, but political, social, and economic stability, along with continued economic growth. In forcing the AKP to form a government with one of the opposition parties, the Turkish people rejected the politics of polarization, in favor of consensus-building and conciliation. In the event that the AKP forms the next government, it is likely that this government will continue with the party's massive development projects, without any significant change in domestic policies. In addition, the coalition government's policies will likely be oriented more towards compromise rather than confrontation.

Repercussions on Foreign Policy

1. The coalition nature of the incoming government will see the orientations of its constituent political parties stewarded with care, such that foreign policy will become more conciliatory and moderate, and the influence of the president on the country's policies will be diminished from what it was before the elections.

2. The Syrian situation is an extremely complex challenge to Turkish foreign policy, and all opposition parties are critical of the AKP's policies in this regard. These parties realize, however, that no Turkish government can abandon its obligations to the Syrian people, despite attempts made to reduce the negative impact of the Syrian crisis on the Turkish economy and society.
3. Turkey's relations with other neighboring countries, such as Iran and Iraq, are not to undergo significant changes, and will remain cooperative in nature, despite differences on some regional issues.
4. Under the previous government, AKP's relations with the Arab Gulf states were highly developed, with the exception of the United Arab Emirates, due to differing positions on issues including the appropriate stand to take towards moderate Islamic movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. In general, it seems that Turkish relations with the Arab Gulf states will continue to develop positively.

Conclusion

After the announcement of the results of the June 7, 2015 elections, Turkey entered into a period of political and economic instability, which may extend for a few months or drag on for years. This is following a long period of stability under AKP rule since 2002. During this time the country recorded a boom in political and economic development that had a direct positive impact on the lives of Turkish citizens.

In spite of Turkey's entrance into a phase of uncertainty in the wake of the elections, their outcome has been a triumph for Turkish democracy, one in which AKP policy and the electoral process itself have proven able to accommodate the Kurdish people as citizens who enjoy the same rights and obligations in the political system as do Turks. The results of the elections constituted a direct rebuff to any attempt to revive an absolutist authoritarian political system: they clarified the boundaries that must be adhered to in a democracy, and to which any political figure, no matter how elevated, must remain subject.