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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Snap Parliamentary Elections 2015: Turning a New Page in Turkish Politics?

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Nov 2015

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Introduction

Turkish voters have gone to the polls four times over the past two years. Following the presidential elections and local elections of 2014, Turkey went to the ballot box twice more to decide who will govern Turkey until 2019. On November 1, in the latest election called by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) appears to have won just under 50 percent of the votes, securing 317 seats in the 550-seat parliament –after previously failing to secure a majority of parliamentary seats in the June 7, 2015 elections.

With a voter turnout of over 85 percent, once again four parties succeeded in surpassing a 10 percent threshold needed to win representation in the legislature. A closer look at the outcome of the polls shows that the latest results have distinct implications for Turkish politics. First, the AKP will be able to again govern without coalition partners, although it will lack the majority it would need to amend the constitution. Second, the elections have shown that the nationalist political parties have failed to preserve their popularity gained in the June elections. Third, these elections have provided the much needed boost for the AKP, which is now equipped with the necessary political support needed to address the challenges confronting Turkey's economy and political sphere.

Within this framework, the analysis below is composed of three parts. It first looks at the main themes of discourse which emerged following the June 7, 2015 elections; it then goes on to analyze the outcomes of the snap elections of November 1, 2015; and lastly it will attempt to provide some projections of possible scenarios and challenges awaiting Turkish politics.

The AKP's Dilemma: Coalition Formula or Ballot Box?

The June 2015 results took both the AKP and the opposition by surprise. Under the leadership of Ahmet Davutoglu, on June 7 the AKP faced a dilemma. With 40.9 percent of the votes, securing just 258 seats out of 550, the party lost its majority in Parliament, forcing it to either form a coalition with one of the opposition parties or go for another round of elections. More important, however, was the message of the June elections. On the eve of the elections, Davutoglu stated that his party acknowledged the message coming from its constituency, and would at once take the necessary steps to restore the voters' confidence.

From the start of the elections, both experts aligned with the AKP as well as its critics argued that several reasons caused the loss of the party's popularity. Among these were the mismanaged party campaign that overemphasized the replacement of a parliamentary system with a presidential one; falling short of putting forward concrete future projects; the prominence of new, untested candidates on the party's electoral rolls; the party's policies towards the Kurds; and the failure to restore the reputation and improve the perception towards the AKP following the 17-25 corruption probe¹. While the AKP analyzed these issues in depth and prepared a list of lessons learned, in approaching the opposition parties to start coalition negotiations Prime Minister Davutoglu could only secure a positive signal from the Republican People's Party (CHP) – the main opposition party. After 35 hours of "exploratory talks" between the AKP and the CHP, held over more than a month, talks failed to lead to a coalition model. In a press conference, the CHP's leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu declared that his party had received an AKP offer to form not a coalition, but a transitional government which would rule the country in the interim until further legislative elections. After the failure in discussions with both the CHP and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Davutoglu and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan openly floated the idea of snap elections. The date set for these new elections was November 1, 2015.

For the first time since 2002, the CHP, MHP, and the People's Democratic Party (HDP) – having received 25, 16.3 and 13.1 percent of the votes, respectively – outnumbered the AKP in parliament. In the aftermath of the elections, however, the opposition parties performed poorly. Even though they pursued an active campaign against the AKP, they failed to cooperate in electing a Speaker of Parliament. This was a lost opportunity for these parties, their failure having paved the way for the AKP to recover. Davutoglu and Erdogan had gained both psychological and legislative advantages over the opposition, thus adding momentum to the AKP's campaign in the run up to the November polls.

Snap Elections: The AKP's Victory and the Opposition's Dilemma

In comparison to the previous election on November 1, the AKP's votes increased by more than 4 million. It should be noted that no major opinion polls predicted that the

¹ The corruption probes of 17-25 December 2013 refer to investigations involving key figures in the AKP government together with businessmen, bureaucrats, and bank managers.

AKP would win nearly half of the votes, with most surveys projecting that Erdogan's party would secure between 40-44% of the ballots cast, and perhaps up to 47%.

A look at the results shows that on this occasion, both Kurdish and Turkish nationalists voted for the AKP party, whereas they had voted for the HDP in the June, 2015 elections. In this election the AKP also gained the vote of the conservative electorate, who, in previous elections voted for either the MHP or other parties. According to unofficial results, the AKP Party's popularity increased by more than 8% and almost half of this came from the MHP's constituency; a quarter from the Kurds; and the remaining two percent from other groups of voters. While the popularity of the MHP and the HDP decreased, the CHP's increased – albeit only by 0.4 percent – among the ranks of the opposition.

The preliminary results show that two indicators were influential in voters' behavior. First, the Turkish electorate could not countenance the economic and political uncertainties inherent in a government-by-coalition scenario. Second, the destabilizing climate following the PKK's attacks throughout the summer, and the active struggle with the terrorist organization, helped the AKP to attract both Kurdish and Turkish nationalist votes. Additionally, rather than turning the election into a referendum for a presidential system, the low profile maintained by President Erdogan during the campaign contributed to these results.

The power vacuum that followed the June 7 elections unleashed both economic and political risks in Turkey. Within the global market, the Turkish economy had become more prone to risks: the Turkish Lira depreciated, observed capital outflow became noticeable and the pace of investment slowed down. Economic challenges became even more problematic in the southeastern part of the country where the PKK attacks disrupted citizens' daily lives. While the AKP emphasized the importance of stability under a government led by a single party, and adopted a populist economic agenda in its electoral program, the opposition parties failed to address societal concerns – this with a population that still carries the trauma of the 2001 economic crisis. Unlike their party manifesto on June 7, this time round the opposition parties failed to promise anything new. It would also seem that a majority within Turkish society approves of the AKP party's tough stance against the PKK, whereas they are clearly not too keen on the links between the terrorist organization and the HDP.

Also contributing to the AKP victory is the party's control of a significant section of the country's media, whereas the opposition had limited access to mass media organs.

Additionally, failing to receive treasury aid, the opposition parties couldn't compete with the AKP's campaign resources. A recent terrorist in Ankara also drove some political parties to slow down campaigning, in response to increased security risks. All these factors coalesced to cause an under representation of the opposition parties in the election period, whereas – by capitalizing on its comparative advantages – the AKP managed to reach out to its constituency more easily than its opponents.

Tomorrow's Agenda

One of the main debates on election night was "Following the AKP's victory, whose success are we talking about?" It is true that Davutoglu has gained important leverage as a leader after his party received 49.4 percent of the votes. However, during his speech, Davutoglu mentioned President Erdogan several times as the audience cheered Turkey's president, the founder of the AKP party. In this regard, ongoing discussion about the return of Abdullah Gul as a savior for the AKP seems a moot point. The results consolidate Ahmet Davutoglu's position as the leader of the party, but there is no doubt there is still a delicate balance between him and President Erdogan as leader of the AKP.

In his "balcony speech"² Davutoglu said that he is ready to cooperate with the opposition to prepare a new constitution thus getting rid of the legacy of the 1980 military coup. This is actually an important statement since, after 2011, the political parties failed to draft a text. According to these results, the AKP party does not have the necessary majority to change the constitution itself or with a referendum, which requires 367 or 330 seats respectively. This actually makes it obligatory for the AKP to cooperate with the opposition if it wants to change or reform the constitution. It cannot be overruled that a debate on a new constitution might pave the way for discussions around presidential or parliamentary systems.

In fact, drawing a framework on the terms of references between the President and the Prime Minister remains a critical issue. In the last year, the blurred lines between Erdogan and Davutoglu gave the President serious maneuvering space to act as an executive power alongside the government. With or without a new constitution, it is likely Erdogan will continue to dominate Turkish politics as the country's first popularly

² It has become a tradition for the AKP leader to make an election night speech from the balcony of the party's Ankara headquarters .

elected president. Until now, both have succeeded to avoid stepping on each other's feet, more or less; from now on the way this will be institutionalized in *de facto* or *de jure* terms will define the character of Turkish politics in the foreseeable future.

In addition to defining the new rules of the game, other pressing matters await resolution in Turkey. Two issues high on the agenda are the economy and the Kurdish issue. For a long time, the AKP's economy technocrats like Ali Babacan and Mehmet Simsek have been repeatedly stressing the need to frame and implement economic reforms. Considering how recent fluctuations in the global markets impact developing economies, a focus on bolstering the strength of the Turkish economy and averting possible risks is vital. This requires preparation of a well-framed reform package and political will by the new government. It is also likely that the new government will work to quickly address the Kurdish issue, with Erdogan having previously stated that "the process had been put into deep freeze", but had not ended. The results show that the AKP received strong political support from both Kurds and Turks on November 1, 2015, and this time it can find serious counterparts in the Parliament for a political solution. The approach to this problem is not only important for domestic peace in Turkey, but also has implications for regional balances considering the situation in Syria and Iraq.

Aside from the above challenges there is a need to decrease political tensions in Turkey, which has peaked in the last two years due to a flurry of repeated elections, and the domestic and regional climate. In this regard, the AKP needs to pave the way for a smooth transition in the country by adopting a constructive tone and seeking a conciliatory form of politics. This might help the AKP to consolidate its power and turn back to its "factory settings of 2002" as the party leadership has stated during the campaign for building a "New Turkey".