

Kurds, Democracy and a New Coalition Government

Written by Kubilay Yado Arin

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KUBILAY YADO ARIN, AUG 11 2015

Turkey's ruling party, the AKP, lost its majority in parliament, ending its single-party rule. The AKP lost votes because of the increasing charges of corruption and autocracy leveled against its administration (Karaveli 2015). Nonetheless, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on June 11, 2015 called in a televised speech for the swift formation of a new coalition government after legislative polls seen as a blow to his authority. In a message to investors rattled by the political uncertainty, Erdogan insisted that the election result "certainly does not mean Turkey will remain without a government." He said he hoped political parties will "prefer a solution rather than crisis". He warned that all those "who pinned their hopes on Turkey entering into a climate of crisis or chaos will be disappointed once again." He said the election result was "the people's will" and must be respected. It is Erdogan's turn to prove that he has accepted the national will. The result affirmed the stabilizing power of democracy and the wisdom of an informed electorate. The fear of consolidation of power by Erdogan, which was perceived as a shift back towards authoritarianism reminiscent of military tutelage: This increased the votes of opposition parties, which are opposed to the presidential system (Tol 2015). This embrace of pluralism in Turkish life may be as important as the rejection of Erdogan's executive-power grab. The opposition parties demand that Erdogan stays within the constitutional boundaries of the largely ceremonial presidency (AlJazeera 2015). Whatever the outcome in the formation of a new government, this election result will certainly impact on the AKP to reset its domestic and foreign policy, but also the potential for a new, democratic Turkey (Arin 2015).

Making his first *televised* appearance since the loss of the parliamentary majority, Erdogan slammed Western media organizations for their "nasty and aggressive" attacks on him, but said their "intolerance" was proof that he was "on the right path." Some in the AKP are unhappy with Erdogan's aggressive campaign, where he lashed out at enemies in all directions. Ignoring a constitution requirement^[1] to remain neutral, he had campaigned for the ruling party but the electorate dashed his hopes to rewrite the constitution to create a presidential system rejecting his control of government (Karaveli 2015). He asked voters to endorse his form of arbitrary and authoritarian rule, and they refused (Tol 2015). Some AKP leaders will blame Erdogan's polarizing tactics for their election setback. His ambition to create a strong-president system with himself at the center is no longer realistic (AlJazeera 2015). Voters dealt a blow to this reprimand to creeping authoritarianism despite an intense pro-government press campaign. As stated in the Human Rights Watch's 2015 report, Turkey increasingly faces criticisms due to a rise in broadcasting watchdog disciplinary fines applied selectively to anti-government media, criminal defamation cases against journalists, the firing of some prominent journalists, and blocking orders on particular accounts and content on social media. Through these measures, the government is impeding the ability of media to hold government authorities to account. Many newspapers and television stations have come under government influence, but their propaganda did not translate into votes.

Turkey has taken wrongly a pro-religious turn and developed ties directly with Islamist political parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in the Palestinian territories (Özkan 2015). Analysts say the election result also marks the end of an ambitious and increasingly ideological "imperial" foreign policy – the word "failure" comes up repeatedly – that bogged down in the Syria war and witnessed Turkey's influence shrivel (Cook 2015). A once-vaunted policy of "zero problems with neighbors" has in recent years turned combative and overtly Islamist. Turkey now has no ambassadors in five Middle Eastern countries, among them Israel, a former friend, and Libya and Egypt. Turkey-US ties have been fractious over a number of issues, from the refusal of Turkey – a NATO ally – to permit the US-led anti-IS coalition to use the Incirlik airbase for bombing raids into Syria and Iraq, to its troubled relations with

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Israel (Reuters 2015). Rather than another election marking a continuation of the status quo, this election reveals a subtle but major shift in the future of Turkish politics and in its foreign relations. The voters seek more freedoms and democracy and a more conciliatory foreign policy and reconciliatory relations with the neighboring states. The election results are almost sure to limit Erdogan's and Davutoglu's influence on foreign policy.

However, the uncomfortable truth for all Turkey's allies is that Brussels and Washington require meaningful dialogue with Ankara in order to be able to deal with a whole checklist of geopolitical crises in the region (Gül 2015). Terrorism, ISIS, Syria and Ukraine are just the start. The Cyprus issue, energy security, the Syrian refugee crisis and the people-trafficking routes that pass through Turkish territory en route to the EU are all pressing matters too. Standing above the sectarian fray continually championed by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, Turkey – through these elections – has a chance to demonstrate its regional importance, its democratic values, and reset its relations with Europe. Given the necessity of strong economic and political ties, the European Union, Turkey and the United States now can grow relations through a fresh push for the Customs Union, resolution in Cyprus, and transparency in the corruption probe (Reuters 2015).

Coalition Searches or Early Elections?

So two questions remain: What will Erdogan do next and can Turkey form a functioning government without months of uncertainty and possible civil unrest? The need for political compromise to solve Turkey's long festering Kurdish issue has never been more pressing for any Turkish government and parliament entering office given terrorist attacks as recently as two days before the elections on a HDP rally. Rather than another election marking a continuation of the status quo, this election reveals a subtle but major shift in the future of Turkish politics and in its foreign relations (Leventoglu 2015). Given the tenor of June 7 elections, building pragmatic coalitions and globally repositioning Turkey as an inclusive model of political compromise would distinguish the new parliament and reap the seeds that have been sewn for a new Turkish future (AlJazeera 2015). By thwarting Erdogan's efforts, could Turkey be turning back to a more vigorous democracy or heading down the road to chaos?

The international implications of this domestic uncertainty are more long term. Erdogan's executive presidency ambitions may have been thwarted for now but Turkey's democratic and economic well-being depends on the establishment of a stable government and the implementation of liberal democratic constitutional reform. This is what Turkey deserves and what its international partners need. Opposition parties are also demanding the re-opening of corruption investigations that implicated people in Erdogan's government, businessmen close to him as well as family members including his oldest son (White 2015). Parliamentary probes were stalled by the AK Party-dominated legislature, while hundreds of police officers and prosecutors were fired, tried or re-shuffled before the cases were officially dismissed. (ibid) The AKP has been steering the country down a highway toward autocracy thus the new parliament aims to pursue corruption investigations of the AKP regime (Tol 2015).

Interpreting the June 7 Elections

The result was a strong rebuke to Erdogan who, flouting constitutional rules that require the president to be neutral, had waged a fierce and confrontational campaign targeting the pro-Kurdish HDP. Erdogan's comments angered Turkey's Kurds (Marcus 2015). The HDP was able to expand its base of support by attracting liberals who became disenchanted by Erdogan's authoritarian governance. The HDP thus demands democratization in Turkey and good neighborhood relations and membership in the EU and has won the voters who support a more democratic Turkey (Ibid). Its electoral victory is a historic watershed moment of political empowerment for the suppressed Kurdish minority, which has been fighting a three-decade insurgency against the Turkish state. The HDP's election victory is described in an interview on CNN Türk on June 12, 2015 as "the victory of peace against war" by Sırrı Süreyya Önder, an HDP lawmaker. Now, the Kurdish win in the Turkish election is seen regionally as another pivotal step.

During the upheaval of the Middle East, the Kurds are reaching for autonomy. Mr. Demirtas, speaking to on TurkishTV in Ankara on June 10, 2015, essentially accused Turkish intelligence of stoking unrest in the Kurdish region. Mr. Erdogan, it seems, sees Kurdish autonomy in Syria and Iraq as a greater threat to Turkey than the Islamic State (Reuters 2015). Critics also took aim at what critics called his "neo-Ottoman" political discourse, his repression

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of the media and perceived desire for absolute power. (Arin 2015) A lasting peace deal, Kurds say, could serve as a powerful example for stability in a region in upheaval. In foreign policy, a coalition government would limit Erdogan's ability to send clandestine arms shipments to extremist factions in Syria and elsewhere. The voters seek more freedoms and democracy and a more conciliatory foreign policy and reconciliatory relations with the neighboring states. Their demands may strengthen the Kurdish stance in talks with the Turkish government over demands including local autonomy and cultural rights, such as education in Kurdish.

Though, even as the Kurds enter Parliament, the future of the peace process is in question. Political uncertainty, unprecedented since 2002, results from the AKP facing either a coalition government or early elections. One way out of Ankara's political impasse could be a grand coalition between the Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party) and AKP. A new government could meet changes both within the country and in foreign policy. It may propel a new and promising force to the center of national life. A justice minister or foreign minister from another party may hinder Erdogan to dictate policy and prosecutions as he has in recent years. But with 13 percent of the vote nationwide, Kurds have now moved into the mainstream of Turkish politics for the first time. The continuation of peace talks with the HDP could become an issue in coalition talks now under way. The Kurdish issue has assumed an increased priority since the pro-Kurdish party won parliamentary seats in elections that stripped the ruling AK Party of its overall majority. (Leventoglu 2015). Erdogan was condemned during the campaigning by opposition parties for failing to act as an apolitical leader as demanded of the head of state by law.

Though it remains unclear how far a new coalition partner will be able to change long-held AKP policies. But the AKP's unlikely coalition partner, the leader of the ultranationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), talks of Turkey on the news channel Habertürk on June 5, 2015 as the "regional leading country" and declares that it will pursue a policy of regional stability and "will not take part in any global projects that destabilize the region and cause bloodshed and tears." Though the MHP shares much ideologically with Erdogan but bitterly disagrees with his flexible approach to peace talks with Kurdish militants and thus rejects to participate as a coalition partner in the next government. A coalition between the AKP and the far-right MHP, which Kurds fear would abandon the peace talks, given MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli's insistence that Abdullah Öcalan – the nominal head of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) be excluded from the process. While the party has toned down the neo-fascist and Turkish-supremacist views that once defined it, the MHP is still hostile toward minority-rights and has opposed Erdogan's efforts to reach a peace deal. In this regard, the MHP also demands limits on President Erdogan's role in the next government. Erdogan ought to stay within the constitutional boundaries of the largely ceremonial presidency as his AKP gives up on the presidential system. The AKP now faces difficult negotiations to coax the Kemalist CHP into the new government. If no deal is reached on a coalition, early elections loom. Turkey has 45 days in which to form a coalition government or another election will have to be called. The political bargaining is already underway but there is no obvious coalition forming – yet. Coalitions require dialogue, consensus, and a healthy system of checks and balances things that looked more attractive to voters the more the AKP sought to curb them.

Conclusion

The June 7 election results mark the end for single-party rule and breathe new life into a nation that has been struggling with freedom of the press, urban protest movements over Gezi Park, Kurdish unity over Kobane more broadly to name but a few challenges. The Kurdish issue has assumed an increased priority since the pro-Kurdish party won parliamentary seats in elections that stripped the ruling AK Party of its overall majority. The ruling party lost Kurdish votes as Erdogan denied the existence of the Kurdish question. His rhetoric was seen as pandering to far-right Turks, and it incensed Kurds who still seek a resolution to a long-stalled peace process with the PKK, amnesty for militants and inquiries into abuses during decades of counterinsurgency. The real risk is that popular support might shift from the HDP to more radical elements of the Kurdish movement enforcing a state of war with Turkey. The emergence of Kurdish political power grants a voice not only to the Kurds, but to women, and to minorities: Armenians, Syrians, Yazidis, Alevis, Roma, and LGBT activists. The election results validate the path towards a political solution to the Kurdish question and point towards further Kurdish unity in the region and across the region's borders. This parliament reflects for the first time in Turkish history the ethnic and religious mosaic of Anatolia. All Politicians should not squander this unique feature of representative democracy in new elections. Political uncertainty, unprecedented since 2002, though results from the AKP facing either a coalition government or early

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elections. If an early election is called, however, it would likely be held on Nov. 22, around 90 days after the provision of the mandate to form a government.

On the June 7 elections the AKP lost the vote of confidence. The HDP votes of 13% could have strengthened the Kurdish stance in talks with the Turkish officials. But the peace efforts, now in their second year, have broken down as the Turkish government has failed to meet Kurdish demands for greater rights and more autonomy after decades of being ostracized by the Turkish state. If the HDP falls short to continue the peace talks, the Kurdish movement is said to establish a Kurdistan parliament in Diyarbakir. As it vies for influence in Syria and Iraq, Ankara needs to make peace and reconcile with its Kurdish minority, time has come for its moment in history and the region. Although, the AKP is dependent on Kurdish votes in a referendum needed to pass a new constitution, the pro-Kurdish party, the HDP, will only consent, if its demands for armistice with the PKK and administrative autonomy in the southeast are given in.

Tensions have been flaring with the Kurds following the IS suicide bombing in Suruc. In this terrorist attack 32 leftist activists who wanted to bring humanitarian aid to Kobane were killed. Days after, the PKK 'retaliated' with the killing of two policemen. Then Turkey conducted its first aerial raids in northern Iraq against the PKK since Turkey embarked on peace talks with Öcalan. The strikes on the PKK threw into doubt a fragile ceasefire between Kurdish separatists and Turkey in place since 2013. While the HDP alleges that in appealing to nationalist Turks, the AKP uses the air strikes as a 'rallying around the flag' moment to regain votes in possible early elections to form once again a single-party government without going into coalition with the Kemalist CHP or the neofascist MHP parties. Many analysts believe that by reviving conflict with the PKK, Erdogan seeks to undermine support for the HDP ahead of a possible fresh election. Not surprisingly, Erdogan alleged that HDP parliamentarians have ties to the PKK and asked therefore to lift their immunity, a move aimed to reduce the HDP's influence in Turkish politics. Rather than the stalemate in negotiations, the Turkish air strikes on PKK bases in Northern Iraq effectively ended the peace process.

Notes

[1] According to Article 101 of the Turkish constitution, which regulates the issue of impartiality, the president-elect, if he is a member of a party, shall sever his relations with his party while his status as a member of Parliament shall cease. Furthermore, Article 103 which regulates the president's oath taking, clearly states that the president must assure the public that he will remain impartial while performing his duty. Holding extraordinary powers, Erdoğan is accused of regularly breaching the Constitution by acting as though he is the prime minister by addressing masses in rallies across Turkey.

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