

## Analysis

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**Summary:** Turkey is preparing for another national election. The political parties and leaders fielded candidates who seem to both represent a wide array of ideologies and make strong statements on where they stand on the political issues. Turkish politics still operates under sharp divisions that follow the cultural fault lines that separate Turkish society into communities with disparate and irreconcilable images of what a good society is. It is these differences that lead to divergent paths of political socialization, which on one hand, help to shape party identification, and on the other mold political ideologies that cohere with that identification. Ideological positioning seems to be critical in understanding their party preferences. However many do not seem to identify with any political party at all. For them, a second tier of party evaluation seems to occur. Those who seem to be dissatisfied with what they consider to be the economic record of the government and/or have little to expect from the economic performance of the government in the near future tend to vote for an opposition party close to their ideological position.

## Turkish Elections: Voters at the Crossroads?

by *Ersin Kalaycıoğlu*

### Introduction

Two years and three months after nationally held local elections and nine months after a referendum on constitutional amendments, Turkey is preparing for another national election. Frequent national elections are not necessarily a bad sign for democracy, especially when there is no major socio-economic crisis and large majorities participate enthusiastically. The expectation of the pundits is that about 85 percent of the voters will participate in the June 12, 2011, legislative elections to renew the single chamber of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM). We also know by now that 53 percent of the current deputies have already been eliminated from the party lists and thus from the electoral competition. Thus, the TBMM will experience another stellar turnover of its deputies. The Republican People's Party (CHP) was alone in selecting its candidates in 29 out of 81 provinces of Turkey through primaries. All of the other political parties' candidates were hand-picked by their party leaders and their close associates.

Turkey has multi-member electoral districts, except in Bayburt, a province with very few voters and only one legislative seat. A few provinces, such as Yalova or Gümüşhane, have only

two seats, but in Istanbul, where 18 percent of the Turkish population lives, there are 85 seats to be contested in three electoral districts. There is some proportionality between the distribution of the voting age population and the sizes of the electoral districts, but it is far from perfect. In the final analysis, it seems as if the voters in Yalova are more represented than those in Istanbul, which should have no less than 99 seats out of the 550 if the "one man, one vote" principle were meticulously applied. The typical voter will face a large list of names per party on the ballot sheet, and vote for the list of candidates, which will boil down to voting for a party or perhaps the party leader. In essence, when there are 30 names on a party list, the identity of the candidates is not going to matter much.

However, the political parties and leaders have been careful to field candidates who seem to represent a wide array of ideologies, on one hand, and also make strong statements on where the government and opposition parties stand on the political issues on the other. Former socialists, social democrats, and Turkish and Kurdish nationalists stand side by side with liberal, conservative, and Islamist candidates on the same lists of the



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ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The CHP lists have a similar wide array of candidates, with the addition of some candidates from among those who had been accused of participating in plots against the AKP government and have been detained for more than two years. The CHP has started to argue that those candidates were victims of a political trial, sort of a Turkish version of the famous Dreyfus trial. The AKP is also leveling ethical criticisms at the main opposition CHP, as well as the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and the Kurdish nationalist Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and their candidates. Various charges of corruption, unethical political behavior, and the like have already begun to fill the airwaves. Will they matter? If so, how?

### Turkish Voters at the Polls

We now have three decades of research on voting behavior in Turkey, which has focused on how Turkish voters registered their preferences across the political parties since Turkey went back to democratic politics in the 1980s. Some of these studies have used aggregate data, while others have used individual level of analysis and observation units collected through national surveys. The latter have taken into consideration such traits of the voters as ideological preferences, parental political socialization, party identification, perceptions of the performance of the economy, and such values and attitudes that pertain to religion and ethnicity. If it is at all possible to generalize from these research findings, it seems that Turkish politics, politicians, and voters still operate under sharp divisions that follow the cultural (i.e., religious, sectarian, ethnic) fault lines that separate Turkish society into communities with disparate and irreconcilable understandings of life styles and images of what a good society is.

It is these differences that lead to divergent paths of political socialization, which on one hand, help to shape party identification, and on the other, mold political ideologies that cohere with that identification. Religious and ethnic identities also play a strong role in determining of the ideologies of the voters; ideological positioning seems to be critical in understanding their party preferences. Voters seem not only to place themselves on a left-right spectrum that makes individual sense to them (seemingly correlating with ethnic and religious identification), but also seem to determine where each and every major party stands on such a spec-

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trum. It seems as if once this evaluation is made, then they seem to orient themselves to a few parties, if they do not strongly identify with a political party. For example, for a Kurdish nationalist voter who identifies with the BDP, there is little doubt where s/he stands, and where her/his party stands, and the choice s/he makes at the ballot box is a very straightforward one. The same is also true for a staunch secularist who identifies with the CHP or a very pious Sunni voter who identifies with the AKP. However, preliminary analyses seem to indicate that currently little more than 50 percent of the Turkish voters have some identification with the main political parties. But, not all of those identify very intensely with those parties, and many do not seem to identify with any political party at all. For them, a second tier of party evaluation seems to occur.

These voters seem to turn their attention to a certain ideological position and examine the position of the nearby political parties. Some research findings indicated that second tier evaluations are much more pragmatic and often involve either retrospective or the prospective performance of the Turkish economy under the current government. Those who seem to be dissatisfied with what they consider to be the economic record of the government and/or have little to expect from the economic performance of the

government in the near future tend to vote for an opposition party close to their ideological position. Currently, such voters are most likely to consider voting for the CHP or the MHP. In fact, in 2007 it looked as if about two-thirds of the voters were both retrospectively and prospectively satisfied with the AKP government's economic record. In 2009, about one-third of the voters registered a similar satisfaction with the economic performance of the same government. In 2007, the AKP got 46 percent and in 2009, it obtained 38 percent of the national vote.

### Conclusion

If one were to speculate about how the June 12, 2011 legislative elections will fare in Turkey, one may consider the fact that the left – right distribution of the Turkish voters has been stable since the mid 1990s but quite lopsided, with a distinct concentration of the voters on the right. Under the circumstances, for about half the voters, it is the perceptions of the government's management of the economy by the voters and their evaluation of the economic proposals of the opposition that will determine their party preferences at the polling stations. One caveat is that the majority of the voters also indicate unemployment, poverty, and security as their major concerns. We have little data to argue how these issues will impact the decisions of the voters one way or the other. The economic policies of the AKP government have produced growth but not jobs. Unemployment still hovers around 11-12 percent, and youth unemployment is twice as high. The CHP has some concrete economic projects to offer to the poor, which also promise to alleviate unemployment. Incidentally, no party seems to stand in the middle of the left-right divide, and close to 40 percent of the voters seem to place themselves there. So, will voters support the AKP's economic policies for another four years, or will they consider supporting the CHP and/or the MHP for a change? We will know the answer by June 13, 2011.

### About the Author

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