

## Analysis

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**Summary:** The June 2015 Turkish Parliament (Grand National Assembly) election may be one of the most important elections in recent Turkish political history. Electoral studies literature may help to put the Turkish electoral debate in context. Three concepts are particularly useful and relevant for the upcoming Turkish elections: political polarization, islands of agreement, and loser's consent.

## Reading the 2015 Turkish Parliamentary Elections: Useful Terms for Analysis

by *Ozgehan Senyuva*

### Introduction

The June 2015 Turkish Parliament (Grand National Assembly) election may be one of the most important elections in recent Turkish political history. In addition to the usual electoral arithmetic and forecasts, this election is surrounded by two extensive debates. First is the involvement and demands of the president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, particularly his advocacy of a presidential system rather than the present system of parliamentary democracy, where the president holds a more symbolic role. Second is whether the People's Democratic Party (HDP), competing for the first time as a party rather than with a list of independent candidates, will be able to pass the required 10% threshold of popular vote. The predominantly Kurdish HDP is attempting to move beyond being only an ethnic rights party to being a party for freedoms and liberties for all. Their ability to overcome the 10% threshold, or not, will determine the number of parliamentary seats for each party, but in addition, many also worry about the consequences of excluding a legitimate party representing the Kurdish movement from parliamen-

tary politics.<sup>1</sup> These issues are being debated in detail at the national and international levels and the discussions seem to get more heated every day.

Electoral studies literature may help to put the Turkish electoral debate in context. Three concepts are particularly useful and relevant for the upcoming Turkish elections: political polarization, islands of agreement, and loser's consent.

### Political Polarization

Political polarization can be subdivided into two forms: popular polarization and elite polarization. Popular polarization refers to an opinion and attitude shaped solely by an individual's identification with a party (or even with a certain leader). Simply, voters do not analyze cases and instead either wholly accept or reject an issue, policy, or idea based solely on party lines. Studies and analysis demonstrate that U.S. politics is currently going through

<sup>1</sup> This issue deserves a whole analysis of its own. The possible disappointment and dissatisfaction of the Kurdish voters should also be taken into account if the party stays below 10% by only a slight margin. In such a scenario, many wonder if the Kurdish movement will concede the election results, or if the internal dynamics within the HDP would pave the way for alternatives, which could also lead to an escalation of political violence.



its most polarized era in its history.<sup>2</sup> The same can be argued for Turkish politics as well.

Turkey's current electoral debates, where political factions polarize all sorts of social, economic, and even cultural issues, are being constructed and consolidated around belonging to a camp rather than building a case on issues and policies. The main division is between those supporting or opposing the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKParty). The divide between pro-AKParty circles and those against grew wider and deeper starting with the anti-government Gezi Park protests in May/June 2013. The government's repressive tactics in handling the protests and the police brutality deeply divided the society. While most AKParty followers saw the protests as a plot against the national will and approved the government stance, the opposition took them as another indication of increasing authoritarianism in Turkey.<sup>3</sup>

According to a recent public opinion survey by Açık Toplum Vakfı, Koç Üniversitesi, and Ohio State University, led by Prof. Ali Çarkoğlu, the number of individuals who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Turkey increased from 33% to 45%. In addition, while AKParty voters have an average satisfaction score of 6.6 out of 10, this figure is 2.63 out of 10 (on average) for the voters for opposition parties.<sup>4</sup> Following the graft scandal in December 2013, the partisan antipathy reached unprecedented levels. AKParty officials and leaders increasingly used a divisive rhetoric in their defense, claiming that both the scandal and the protests are linked with enemies of Turkey, both internal and external. Therefore, for the AKParty leadership, this was a matter of national security. They tried to consolidate their voter base with a constantly increasing perception of threat, encouraging followers to unite around the leader of the movement (Erdoğan). As a result, in the eyes of some AKParty followers, non-AKParty

circles have been transformed from a political opposition into a threat to the nation's well-being or even worse, a threat to the very existence of the nation.

It is a challenge to measure the magnitude of polarization due to the lack of public opinion data as well as the heated pre-electoral debate where the sole attention is focused on electoral forecasting. Careful readings of politicians' rhetoric or news and opinions analyses could display strong indications of polarization, but data on popular polarization, especially long range, is lacking. The analyses all rely on proxies and indirect measures. Nonetheless, on almost every issue, there is a clear division. For instance, on the issue of freedom of expression, 65% of AKParty voters indicate that in Turkey anyone can express their opinion freely without any concerns, but this figure is only 22% for opposition voters.<sup>5</sup>

Are AKParty voters so radically different from opposition voters that there is no room for a common point of agreement, or is it possible to identify *islands of agreement* where people come together?

### Islands of Agreement

Even in most polarized societies, it is possible to find areas of agreement between strongly opposing groups. This is true for Turkey as well. However, the islands of agreement

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<sup>2</sup> See PEW research centre's extensive reports on the issue at <http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/political-polarization/>. A major publication on the issue is Paul DiMaggio, John Evans and Bethany Bryson (1996) "Have Americans' Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?" *American Journal of Sociology* 102: 690-755.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.akparti.org.tr/english/haberler/turkish-pm-resolved-to-punish-plots-against-national-will/69918#1>.

<sup>4</sup> Çarkoğlu, Ali and Erdem Aytaç (2015), Haziran 2015 Seçimlerine Giderken Kamuoyu Dinamikleri (Turkish Public Opinion Dynamics on the way to June 2015 Elections), whole presentation, along with tables and technical data can be downloaded from: [http://t24.com.tr/files/20150506015156\\_20150505232435\\_ali-carkoglu-2015-secim-arastirma-si-sunum-4.pdf](http://t24.com.tr/files/20150506015156_20150505232435_ali-carkoglu-2015-secim-arastirma-si-sunum-4.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Çarkoğlu 2015, slide 16.



in Turkey seem to be mainly around negative issues. The first striking example would be anti-immigrant attitudes. As demonstrated by Emre Erdoğan, Turkish citizens display a shared intolerance of immigrants, particularly toward those from Syria, regardless of their party preferences.<sup>6</sup> Another island of agreement would be the concerns of Turkish citizens regarding unemployment and terrorism as the major problems that Turkey is facing.<sup>7</sup> Finally, a striking example relates to views on foreign policy and relations with other countries. According to PEW 2014 Global Attitudes Survey, Turks stated an unfavorable opinion of the EU (66%), China (68%), Brazil (65%), NATO (70%), the United States (73%), Russia (73%), Iran (75%), and Israel (86%).<sup>8</sup> If constructive, islands of agreement can normally be used for the sustainability of a system in a polarized society. For instance, if Turkey's entry to the EU were an island of agreement, the parties could maintain dialogue and cooperation on this issue, contributing to normalizing the situation. Negative islands of agreement, however, should be approached cautiously, as an opportunist party may try to capitalize on these subjects, as we observe in the rise of far-right anti-immigrant parties across Europe.

### Loser's Consent

In highly polarized settings, the aftermath of elections becomes crucial.<sup>9</sup> If groups equate their very existence with remaining in power or ousting the incumbent from power, losers of elections may withhold their consent from the electoral process and its outcomes. Trust in the integrity of the electoral process is also closely linked with loser's consent. The *loser's consent* is crucial for the sustainability of any democratic regime. In the Turkish context, the loser's consent seems to be eroding with each election. According to Çarkoğlu study, the ratio of citizens who think the upcoming elections will be *fair* has been on a constant decline since 2007. While 70% of the overall population

6 Emre Erdoğan, "Unwanted, Unwelcome: Anti-Immigration Attitudes in Turkey," On Turkey Policy Brief, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, September 10, 2014, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/unwanted-unwelcome-anti-immigration-attitudes-turkey>.

7 [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82\\_fact\\_tr\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_fact_tr_en.pdf) and <http://t24.com.tr/haber/akpliler-sansur-ve-internet-yasaklarini-onayliyor-mu,293780>.

8 Jacob Poushter, "The Turkish people don't look favorably upon the U.S., or any other country, really," 2014, available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/10/31/the-turkish-people-dont-look-favorably-upon-the-u-s-or-any-other-country-really/>.

9 Blais, André, et al. *Losers' consent: elections and democratic legitimacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

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expected the 2007 elections to be fair, this number went down to 57% for the 2011 elections. For the upcoming elections, it is a record low of 48%. Forty-three percent believes the 2015 elections will *not* be fair.<sup>10</sup> This divide is mainly between AKParty voters and the opposition. While 83% of the AKParty voters say the elections will be fair, this figure is only 26% for opposition supporters. One should note down that the local elections were marked by allegations of wrong-doing, both before and after the elections, but most attention was paid to the vote-counting process. There were claims that certain electoral officers manipulated the vote counting and registering in favor of AKParty. Social media was overheated on election night, with people sharing suspicious incidents where the votes may have been counted in favor of the AKParty at the expense of opposition candidates, particularly in the metropolitan areas.<sup>11</sup> Faith in proper and legitimate vote counting is also a major divisive point. While 78% of AKParty voters believe that votes will be counted correctly, 72% of the opposition voters do *not* believe that votes will be counted correctly in the upcoming elections.<sup>12</sup>

Turkey's 2015 parliamentary elections will take place in a very different setting compared with the elections of the past decade. For instance, in the 2007 elections, the losers

10 Çarkoğlu, 2015, slide 58.

11 <http://www.idp.org/makaleler/cem-toker-elections-in-turkey.pdf>; <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/03/no-opposition-no-democracy-in-turkeys-elections/>.

12 Çarkoğlu 2015, slide 60.



accepted and *respected* the AKParty victory even though they were very dissatisfied with the outcome.<sup>13</sup> The current popular polarization is unprecedented and the bipartisan lines only lie along negative issues. Almost all parties contesting the election doubt the integrity of the electoral process, which paves the way for a dangerous withholding of *loser's consent*. Any debate and analysis of the upcoming elections and the events that will follow could benefit from the inclusion of these three important concepts.

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### About the Author

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14683840802012116?journalCode=ftur20>.