

## Analysis

June 2, 2015

**Summary:** For the first time in the AKParty's long reign, the opposition is challenging the ruling party on the basis of existing economic conditions. If the HDP manages to pass the 10 percent threshold, this will not just bring a balance of forces inside the Parliament and in Turkey's politics. The Kurdish political movement will have taken a giant step toward its own legitimization in the political system just as the Islamists did over a longer period of time. If Erdoğan wins, this will be in no small part a result of an extremely unfair campaign. The elections will be seminal.

## Reading the Tea Leaves of the Turkish Election

by *Soli Özel*

These are days when fortunetellers can earn their keep. Just a few days before the elections, most Turks, at least in urban centers, want to know what the latest poll numbers are. On one hand, the polls guide forecasts for the night of June 7, but after the failure of pollsters in the Israeli and British elections, no one can really be certain. Moreover, there is growing concern that the counting of the votes may not be reliable. These concerns may well be exaggerated, but given the precedent set by the Ankara municipal election results last year when there was clear evidence of wrongdoing, they are not unfounded. This explains the apprehension, angst, and impatience of the public.

Will there be three or four parties in the Parliament? Related to this, will the ruling party have enough votes to change the constitution or draft a new one by itself and then send it to the public for approval in a referendum?

Arguably the June 7 elections are fateful. The stakes are not limited to who will win the most seats and form the government. The results may signify no less than regime change if things move in the direction that Turkey's tireless, ambitious and

domineering President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan demands. In this context, the broad results of the elections are a foregone conclusion. The ruling AKParty (Justice and Development Party) that has governed Turkey since November 2002 will gain the most seats. Polls predict anywhere between 42-44 percent of the vote, so the identity of the leading party is not an issue.

The two main opposition parties, social-democratic CHP (Republican People's Party) and Turkish nationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party) poll below 30 and 20 percent respectively. For the first time in the AKParty's long reign, though, the opposition is challenging the ruling party on the basis of existing economic conditions. Both parties are proposing their own alternative economic programs. In the case of the CHP, party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu refuses to engage in ideological debates with either the prime minister or the president, who is supposed to be impartial and non-political according to the Constitution.

By focusing on economics instead of ideology, the opposition has made the AKParty uncomfortable, since the days of record breaking growth rates of 7 to 9 percent have long been left behind.

G | M | F OFFICES

WASHINGTON, DC • BERLIN • PARIS

BRUSSELS • BELGRADE • ANKARA

BUCHAREST • WARSAW



## Analysis

The Turkish growth rate lately has been stuck at around 3 percent. As economic reforms stalled and growth heavily dependent on the construction industry faded away, the Turkish economy started to give warning signals. Inflation and unemployment are surging upwards and the Lira lost its value by at least 17 percent since the beginning of the year. Investment is stagnant and the country is increasingly vulnerable to the vicissitudes of short-term capital movements.

Under these circumstances, the votes of the conservative elites and masses of “deep Turkey” or the heartland will be of critical importance. Will they punish the AKParty somewhat or will they give it another, albeit possibly a last, chance? No matter how they go about their decisions, the AKParty may win a majority of the seats to form a government by itself. Yet, if a four-party parliament results, a coalition government might be a probable outcome.

This is what makes the performance of the fourth major party, the pro-Kurdish HDP (People’s Democratic Party), the pivotal factor in these elections. The HDP is currently represented in Parliament, but its deputies were elected as independent candidates in order for the party to circumvent Turkey’s electoral threshold of 10 percent.

This time around, in a controversial move, the HDP leadership decided to contest the elections as a party and risk being curtailed by the unconscionable electoral threshold. If the gamble pays off and the HDP does indeed cross the threshold, the course of Turkish politics might change dramatically. In order to succeed, the HDP will need a majority of the votes from those Kurds who have so far supported the AKParty and do not sympathize with the PKK. It will also need the votes of those Turks who are left-leaning, liberal, or just resentful of the AKParty.

Will [voters] punish the AKParty somewhat or will they give it another, albeit possibly a last, chance?

With the HDP in Parliament, it is impossible for the AKParty to have enough seats (330) to change the Constitution by itself no matter what its level of support is, and call a referendum. Conversely, an HDP failure may be the harbinger of turbulence and social instability.

Therefore whether or not the wily and successful Erdoğan will see his dream of transforming Turkey’s political system into a presidential one come true hinges on HDP vote. Because Erdoğan would not leave his own future to chance, he has stepped in to the fray and been campaigning forcefully. Dissatisfied with the performance of his hand-picked successor, Ahmet Davutoğlu, as party leader and prime minister, he felt compelled to personally and directly take his message to his own fiercely loyal mass base.

Since Erdoğan, who is battered but still extremely popular with his constituencies, has no intention of sacrificing his ambition at the altar of democratic fairness, he militantly defends the 10 percent threshold. Both he and Davutoğlu have relentlessly attacked the HDP leader, Selahattin Demirtaş.

Erdoğan’s electoral narrative, among other themes, is built on the vilification of the HDP as a terrorist organization because of the party’s connection to the outlawed Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), which has initiated a violent campaign against the Turkish state in 1984. Indeed, the PKK and the HDP share the same mass base. Many Turks question how independent or autonomous the HDP could be from the PKK.

Yet it is with the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, that Erdoğan’s government has negotiated a ceasefire, which has held since the beginning of 2012, the most concrete and precious result of AKParty’s “peace” opening to resolve the Kurdish problem so far. The talks continued until the campaign season, when they were abruptly halted when Erdoğan decided that they harmed his electoral prospects. Conservative constituents with a nationalist bent had begun to turn to the nationalist MHP.

The incessant stream of abuse against the HDP actually shows that in the young, spirited, and humorous Demirtaş, Erdoğan has found his match as a campaigner. Demirtaş has managed to present himself not just as a leader of the



Kurdish nationalist movement but as a national politician that speaks to all of Turkey. He has succeeded in reaching out to constituencies beyond ethnic Kurds. His sharp wit and ability to keep his cool under attack, along with his refusal to respond to the government's and the president's relentless provocations continue to be his main assets. It was just this profile that enabled him to get 9.8 percent of the vote in last year's presidential elections.

It is imperative for the AKParty that the pious Kurds who make up half the Kurdish electorate are not lured into supporting the HDP leader. These voters have long been faithful to the AKParty and justified its claim that the Kurdish problem could be resolved in the framework of Islamic community solidarity.

In order to keep the support of these pious and conservative Kurds, Erdoğan has ruled out no tactic or rhetorical excess. His second line of attack against the HDP relied on the alleged irreligiosity of that party's leadership. With a Qur'an in Kurdish in his hand, Erdoğan has accused Demirtaş and the party of impiety and of being believers in pre-Islamic religions.

Erdoğan is so vehemently against the HDP and the possibility of it thwarting his plans that he could not even offer sympathies to Demirtaş after a bomb exploded at the election headquarters of the HDP in Mersin. The bomb, and a similar one that was planted to explode simultaneously in the neighboring city of Adana, possibly targeted the HDP leader, who was in Mersin for a scheduled rally that day.

If the HDP manages to pass the 10 percent threshold, this will not just bring a balance of forces inside the Parliament and in Turkey's politics. The Kurdish political movement will have taken a giant step toward its own legitimization in the political system just as the Islamists did over a longer period of time. Now, of course, Islamists rule the country, and reshape the fundamental tenets of the Republican order and redefine its ideological references.

As the first popularly elected president of Turkey, Erdoğan is loath to accept a passive role. He is right that the presidency in the military-drafted Constitution in place today does hold some limited executive powers. But Erdoğan wishes to go beyond these powers. Despite stiff resistance

Erdoğan is so vehemently against the HDP and the possibility of it thwarting his plans that he could not even offer sympathies to Demirtaş after a bomb exploded at the election headquarters of the HDP in Mersin.

from the public, he has relentlessly pursued his goal and has so far succeeded in bending his party's identity and purposes to his will.

Erdoğan's ideal presidential system is one where the executive is not burdened with checks and balances and where both the legislative and the judicial branches are virtually extensions of the executive. All power would emanate from the presidency and in all likelihood dissenting voices in the media and elsewhere would be increasingly muzzled.

Two weeks ago, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu both heavily criticized Turkey's leading mainstream newspaper *Hürriyet* because of its headline concerning the death sentence passed on Muhammed Morsi of Egypt. That the headline was verbatim the same as what Erdoğan said in a rally did not matter. The publisher of *Hürriyet*, the Doğan media group, a few years ago was "punished" with a prohibitive tax penalty. The intensification of the pressure on *Hürriyet* may be the harbinger of a further tightening of the noose around independent media once the elections are over.

If Erdoğan wins, this will be in no small part a result of an extremely unfair campaign. The state's resources have been made accessible to the incumbents, and the president repeatedly skirted his oath of office by openly taking a partisan position and using accusatory language against the opposition. A victory under such conditions might give the AKParty the requisite 330 seats to change or redraft the



constitution and would usher in a regime change. Such a change is likely to take Turkey further away from the principles of a ruled-based liberal order that respects the separation and independence of governmental powers.

This is precisely what makes these elections so seminal.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

### **About the Author**

Soli Özel teaches at Istanbul Kadir Has University and is a Richard Von Weizsacker Fellow at the Robert Bosch Academy. He is also a columnist for the national daily *Haberturk* and senior advisor to the chairman of the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association.

### **About GMF**

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF contributes research and analysis and convenes leaders on transatlantic issues relevant to policymakers. GMF offers rising leaders opportunities to develop their skills and networks through transatlantic exchange, and supports civil society in the Balkans and Black Sea regions by fostering democratic initiatives, rule of law, and regional cooperation. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

### **About the On Turkey Series**

GMF's On Turkey is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey's current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and U.S. writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our web site at [www.gmfus.org/turkey](http://www.gmfus.org/turkey).