

Analysis

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Summary: Results of the June 7 general elections opened a new chapter for the AKParty and Turkey in general. The performance and ambitions of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Turkey's struggling economy are both widely thought to be behind the votes. A coalition government is possible, but only if one or more of the opposition parties is able to resolve enough differences with the AKParty, or if the three leading opposition parties can work together, or if the AKParty is able to form a minority government. This policy brief examines the details of all three of these scenarios.

Turkey's Hot Summer

by Emre Erdoğan

Erdoğan's longest year¹ seems to be ending with a very hot summer, perhaps the hottest in Turkey's recent history. Results of the June 7 general elections opened a new chapter: the "predominant" AKParty failed to win a parliamentary majority and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which has recently repositioned itself from a pro-Kurdish party to a left-wing party addressing a wider audience, passed the national electoral threshold of 10 percent and doubled its vote in almost every part of Turkey. Major opposition parties, such as the Republican People's Party (CHP) despite losing 1 percent of its votes and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which increased its vote total by 3 percent compared to the 2011 elections, could take part in coalition government negotiations, and therefore also be considered winners.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's role in this first electoral loss the AKParty has suffered needs close examination. Although Turkey's current constitution decrees that the president of the Republic should be non-partisan, Erdoğan played a very active role in

the campaign. He conducted 62 public meetings in 56 provinces asking for votes for the AKParty. The public television allocated more than 45 broadcast hours to the president's speeches, three to six times the allocation for the opposition parties. Moreover, Erdoğan did not hesitate in directly attacking the opposition leaders by using a dichotomist language of "us" versus "them." Not surprisingly, the AKParty was on Erdoğan's side.²

This unusually active involvement of the "non-partisan" president in the electoral process did not generate the expected results. Erdoğan's agenda of advocating for a more powerful executive and a new Turkey with presidential rule created a negative reaction. As a result, a significant part of the voters used their oldest weapon: tactical voting. According to a post-election survey, 14 percent of voters switched their votes to another party in order to prevent the AKParty from gaining the mandate to unilaterally change the

1 Please see the earlier pieces by Emre Erdoğan in this series <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/erdogans-longest-year> and <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkeys-longest-year-continues-presidential-elections>.

2 For a short analysis of Erdoğan's rhetoric, Sezin Öney and Emre Erdoğan, "Turkey's 2015 general election: a final look at the parties and the campaign," <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/06/05/turkeys-2015-general-election-a-final-look-at-the-parties-and-the-campaign/>.



constitution. An estimated 3 percent of HDP voters were such “tactical voters.”³

The AKParty’s poor electoral performance cannot be attributed to Erdoğan’s performance alone. The AKParty lost considerable support in the Kurdish populated provinces, despite a significant investment in the Kurdish peace process and negotiations with the armed branch of the Kurdish separatist movement. Macro-level analyses show that the AKParty lost about 4 percentage points to the HDP, especially in the southeastern part of the country.⁴

The economic situation also played a negative role for the AKParty. According to the official statistics, Turkey experienced a growth rate of 3 percent in 2014, whereas economic growth in the first quarter of 2015 was 2.3 percent. This negative economic climate is echoed in the perceptions of voters; the Consumer Confidence Index stood at 64 points in May 2015, a 12 percent point decline in one year. A pre-election survey showed that 48 percent of the Turkish voters have a negative perception of the economy, as opposed to 33 percent before the general elections of 2011. These perceptions led to a punishment of the governing party. As a result, the AKParty’s past economic performance has lost its ability to diffuse corruption allegations against Erdoğan and his family, which dominated the political scene during 2014.⁵

These same dynamics will also be defining factors in the coalition government formation process. Turkey’s modern political history is dominated by coalition governments. For the last 50 years, only 13 out of the 32 democratic governments in Turkey were single-party majority governments, including the five AKParty governments. While statistical figures demonstrate that there is no significant difference between performances of coalition and single-party governments, coalitions are almost synonymous with political instability in the Turkish political dictionary, mainly

3 <http://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/ipsostan-cnn-turke-secim-sonrasi-arastirmasi?page=14>.

4 Talha Oz, “Vote Transitions in Turkish General Elections (2011-2015),” <http://talhaoz.com/?p=735>; Erik Meyersson, “How Turkey’s social conservatives won the day for HDP,” <http://erikmeyersson.com/2015/06/08/how-turkeys-social-conservatives-won-the-day-for-hdp/>.

5 <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/certain-inexplicable-things-about-turkey.aspx?PageID=238&NID=81328&NewsCatID=412>

because of the negative memories of the unstable 1990s.⁶ This prejudice is a Janus-faced factor: some parties may exploit it, while it will be a handicap for others.

The arithmetic composition of the new parliament limits the number of feasible coalition alternatives. According to the calculus of coalition making, there are two main alternatives: coalitions with or without the AKParty. Having an important mathematical advantage, the AKParty can form a coalition with any party in the parliament. The other three parties do not have such an advantage, and must either form a coalition with the AKParty, or all three of them need to come together to gain a majority in the parliament. If we include minority governments, the number of alternative government configurations increases, but only a few of them are feasible.

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The experience of Western democracies with coalition governments — only 12 percent of all governments in Europe, including in the U.K., since World War II were single-party governments — show that there are factors beyond arithmetic that limit the number of coalition alternatives. The position of potential coalition partners on critical issues is the most important factor. Any coalition government has to be based on a minimum level of agreement on some fundamental issues, and bridges should be built on islands of agreement, hopefully on positive ones.⁷

6 Between 1991 and 2002, eight coalition governments ruled Turkey, with an average duration of 20 months. During 1990s, Turkey experienced two big economic crises and an enduring conflict in the Southeastern region.

7 Özgehan Şenyuva defines “islands of agreement” as “areas of agreement between strongly opposing groups,” and makes a list of negative islands of agreement in Turkey in a previous On Turkey piece, “Reading the 2015 Turkish Parliamentary Elections: Useful Terms for Analysis,” <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/reading-2015-turkish-parliamentary-elections>.



In this specific case, the most important fault line between the AKParty leadership and the current opposition parties is the role of the president in the political system. Turkey is constitutionally a parliamentary democracy, and the presidency is largely a symbolic role, though it is endowed with some executive powers that are unusual for a parliamentary system. However, since deciding to run for the presidency, Erdoğan has called for a change to a presidential system, and has systematically exceeded the role and authority defined for the president by the constitution. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has made this “de facto presidential system” possible by power devolution to Erdoğan. All of the current opposition parties included returning the president to his constitutional role and limits on their electoral manifestos. A compromise on this issue would not be very easy to explain to their constituencies. Likewise, the AKParty is still under Erdoğan’s control, and a compromise by the AKParty on the president’s role would be equally difficult.

However, other fault lines are easier to overcome. The Kurdish problem, where constituencies of the AKParty and the HDP took similar positions, is one. The last survey regarding the Kurdish problem showed that the largest support for the Kurdish peace process (officially called the “Solution Process”) is seen among the supporters of the AKParty and HDP. The CHP leadership has also declared that they are not against the Kurdish peace process, but they do demand more transparent implementation under the supervision of the Parliament. On the other hand, the MHP is strongly against the Kurdish peace process. While the AKParty used the “Solution Process” theme in its campaign, the MHP put “stopping this process” in its list of red lines for building a coalition. From the HDP’s point of view, the AKParty’s sincerity about the Kurdish issue was questionable. At this point, the AKParty has a room for maneuver: to invest more in the Kurdish peace process, to attract the HDP, or it can accept the proposal of the MHP. The latter would cost it Kurdish voters, but that would be relatively small since the AKParty had already lost the support of most of the Kurdish population, at least in the region.

Corruption allegations are another fault line, one on which the parties have little room to maneuver. Although the AKParty’s majority in the parliament had prevented further investigation of the allegations last year, Davutoğlu already

put the fight against corruption on his personal agenda. The CHP and the MHP have very rigid positions on this issue, in contrast to the flexibility of the HDP. However, since corruption allegations are framed as an attack against Erdoğan and the stability of the country, a possible compromise of the AKParty’s position may lead to a strong reaction by Erdoğan and possibly create a crisis in the AKParty’s parliamentary group.

These divisions between the AKParty and the opposition parties create the positive islands of agreement for the CHP, MHP, and HDP. Restoration of the parliamentary system through the restriction of the role of the president in accordance with the constitution is the first among these islands of agreement. All opposition parties are also already agreed on further investigation of corruption allegations and holding those involved accountable. In addition, all three parties have common distributional policies, such as increasing the minimum wage, in their electoral manifestos. However, since the saliency of the Kurdish issue is very high for the MHP and HDP at least, it is the biggest obstacle to a coalition among the three parties.

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People are loss averse, meaning that they tend to strongly prefer avoiding losses to acquiring gains. The nightmare of the political instability of 1990s due to incompetence of coalition governments is the biggest of all possible losses for Turkish electorate. Since politics is the art framing, every potential coalition partner may advocate for its compromise by framing it as a sacrifice for the sake of the country, and way to minimize electoral losses. The AKParty as the pivotal element of a potential coalition government, has more maneuverability and a better chance to reframe critical issues.



On the other hand, the AKParty is the main candidate to form a minority government supported by any of the other parties. However, the additional party that supports a minority government holds a great deal of blackmail potential. Depending on the saliency of the issue and mathematical composition of the parliament, the external supporter's power may be so high that the governing party is a hostage to it rather than a ruler. Minority governments generally end in crises and early elections.

Another actor having a significant blackmail potential is Erdoğan, thanks to enormous powers given to him by the constitution, from vetoing appointments of ministers to calling for an early election. If Erdoğan decides to use his blackmail power, any coalition government will be short lived.

According to the official timeline, a government needs to receive a vote of confidence before August 20. If not, the president has the power to call for elections again, which is not the first preference of the newly elected members of parliament. While Turkey experiences its hottest summer, this threat will be the most important factor in pushing negotiating parties to act reasonably, if not rationally.

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About the Author

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