

Analysis

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Summary: Political identities and proximity on significant policy issues will be decisive in the formation of Turkey's next government. But this process takes place in a highly polarized context, a perilous feature of Turkey's politics in recent years. The next government should therefore have two primary purposes: reduce the political polarization and facilitate progress on major policy issues. This, in turn, necessitates that the prospective coalition government be made up of parties with significantly different political identities in order to reduce the level of political polarization. They should also have common ground on policy issues.

Forming Turkey's Next Government: What are the Implications for Polarization and Policies?

by Galip Dalay

Introduction

Turkey voted in an unusual but pivotal election on June 7, 2015. Generally, elections serve as a medium to select officials to undertake the mundane job of governance in a stable democratic polity. However, this election was essentially a referendum on regime change from a parliamentary system to an executive presidency. While the governing AKParty campaigned for this change, all the other parties fiercely resisted such a step. The picture that emerged from the June 7 elections was that voters were not persuaded of the wisdom of this change. According to preliminary results, the AKParty received 40.87 percent of the votes, which translates into 258 seats in the parliament. The main opposition parties Republican People Party (CHP), Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and People's Democratic Party (HDP), respectively, received 24.95 percent, 132 seats; 16.29 percent, 80 seats; and 13.12 percent, 80 seats. The AKParty not only did not reach the number of seats — 330 — required to put a proposal to change the political system to a referendum, it also fell short of gaining sufficient seats

— 276 — to form a simple majority government.

Though crucial, the debate on an executive presidency was not the only significant item on the agenda of this election. The Kurdish peace process, the devising of a new constitution, and the economy were other major items. Issues facing Turkey's Alevi community were also notable and will only gain steam down the road. A comparatively high number of Alevi candidates gained seats in the parliament on the CHP and HDP tickets in this election, the result of the Alevi community's increasing demands for more political and parliamentary representation. This is also a sign that Turkey will face growing pressure from the Alevi community for the greater recognition of their rights and liberties.

Additionally, political polarization has been the root cause of tension in Turkey in recent years, which led parties to sometimes sacrifice their proclaimed principles in favor of popular positions. The culture of political compromise and consensus has almost disappeared in Turkey. Any

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change on this front will have significant implications on the smooth functioning of the next government. Though the next government's policies and discourse will also affect polarization, the degree of polarization will determine the ability of the next government to govern. Through all this, it is imperative not to lose the sight of what Turkey needs: a reduction in political polarization and progress on major policy issues.

The parliament that emerged from the June 7 election is the most representative of Turkey since the foundation of the modern republic. Besides Kurds, Alevis, and Islamists, members of religious and cultural minority groups — Armenian, Romas, Syriac, and Yazidi — also made their way into the parliament. The representative power of this parliament is very high. But this diversity will make the task of governance more challenging. It will be difficult for the parties to form coalitions around either thematic issues or ideological affinities. Any possible coalition can only materialize if those parties significantly revise their political visions and aspirations both on the domestic and foreign policy fronts. Unless they sacrifice a part of their political aspirations, a long-lasting and functioning coalition will remain a challenge. Nevertheless, the necessity for compromise between parties is not bad news since it would reduce political polarization at the elite level.

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Polarization in Turkey is primarily a political phenomenon rather than a social one. Social polarization has been in decline for the last several years. The social distance between Turks and Kurds, Alevis and Sunnis, and Secularists and Islamists has shrunk over the last decade or so. But in spite of this, Turkey has experienced a significant level of political polarization, engineered mostly at the elite level. This has provided both the government and opposition with

the opportunity to consolidate their political base relatively easily. This polarization, at its core, takes place along anti and pro-AKParty lines, or more precisely, anti and pro-Recep Tayyip Erdoğan lines. The fact that almost all opposition parties pledged that they would not take part in any AKParty-led coalition government illustrates this. Erdoğan and the AKParty's deeds and discourse have undeniably contributed to this polarization. Less discussed but no less important is the extent to which the opposition parties also contribute. If Turkey wants to reduce political polarization, the onus is on both the government and opposition. Turkey has a chance as the social space between different identities declines and political representation increases.

Polarization and Political Identities

The outcome of this election provides Turkey with three possibilities with regard to the formation of the next government: a coalition government, a minority government, or early elections. Putting aside the initial announcements of the MHP, all major political parties have ruled out an early election as their preferred choice. Instead, they have indicated their willingness to take part, one way or another, in the formation of the next government. Coalition negotiations are already informally underway. The formation of a coalition government necessitates compromise and consensus. Likewise, the establishment of a minority government is contingent upon the support of one or more parties in parliament, which attained through meeting some of the demands of third parties. This process will increase the level of interaction between the political elites, forcing them to work together on certain issues, themes, or policies. Politicians would also have to convince their social bases of the necessity and wisdom of such a coalition.

Nevertheless, not all coalition options or compositions will result in the same reduction in political polarization. Given this, there are two likely coalition options. The first option involves a grand coalition between the AKParty and CHP. The second is a prospective partnership between the AKParty and the MHP. Many analysts assume that an AKParty-MHP coalition is more likely given their ideological affinities. It is hard to predict how this is likely to evolve, but because of the ideological affinities between these two parties, an AKParty-MHP coalition government is unlikely



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to significantly decrease the level of political polarization in the country.

In contrast, the AKParty and CHP are each other's political antithesis. The CHP has historically served as the political guardian of Turkey's official ideology of secularism and nationalism. It has regarded itself as a bulwark against political Islam and other threats to Turkey's now frail ideology. The AKParty has constructed its political identity in opposition to the CHP's historical legacy. While the CHP serves as the political spokesperson of the secularist section of society, the AKParty serves the same role for the conservative/Islamic section of society. The political differences between them are real and wide. This distance between them makes a grand coalition between them difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, it is exactly this ideological gap that makes it possible for such a coalition to potentially considerably reduce the level of polarization in the country.

Proximity on Policy Issues

Besides the role of political identities, parties' relative proximities on major policy issues should be another factor that determines the make-up of the next government. The most pressing issues that Turkey currently faces are the Kurdish peace process, the Alevi issue, the devising of a new social contract, and the economy. The MHP has already stated that it will not join any government that intends to advance the Kurdish peace process. Related to this, a coalition government that includes the MHP is unlikely to produce a new constitution that will address Turkey's different identity groups' long-held demands. In contrast, a coalition government between the AKParty and CHP, which would probably also receive the outside support of the HDP, would be capable of addressing both the Alevi and Kurdish issues. Hence, such a coalition may be able to lay the groundwork for devising Turkey's new constitution. The combined AKParty and CHP vote stands at around 66 percent. Adding in the HDP's votes would reach around 80 percent of the vote. A constitution that would be the product of such a large political and societal consensus is highly likely to prove durable.

Democracy is not a system of magic formulas. It is a system whose merits can only be judged in relative terms. Turkey's imperfect democracy did not produce an ideal result in the

June 7 general election. Nevertheless, it has provided the country with diverse coalition options. The better of these would be a coalition government made up of parties with significantly different political identities and yet proximity on policy issues in order to reduce the level of political polarization and make progress.

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About the Author

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