

Analysis

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Summary: Following Turkey's June 7 elections, there seems to be two alternative scenarios for Turkey. Either two or more of the parties will reach an understanding to form a coalition, or one of the parties will split and choose to be a coalition partner in some combination with the rest. Formation of a coalition would have several virtues beyond just providing the country with a government, but forming a coalition presents serious challenges. Turkey is at a junction, choosing between remaining a procedural, majoritarian, and weakly institutionalized, even illiberal, democracy or renewing its social contract and democratic system for good.

Turkey's Elections: A Short-Lived Parliament Anyway?

by *Ahmet K. Han*

After almost 13 years of one-party rule, characterized by increasing consolidation of political power, Turkey's June 7th elections gave none of the competing parties a mandate to rule alone. The elections left the Justice and Development Party (AKParty) with 258 seats, 18 seats short of majority in the 550-seat parliament. There is no easy calculus to form a government on the horizon. Therefore, it is time to ask the age-old question: where do we go from here?

It may be said that, while he is still arguably the most popular politician in the country, the voters are increasingly disapproving of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rhetoric, and there is no momentum behind his desire for an executive presidency. The religiously laced triads that became part of routine AKParty political discourse is not holding up either. The Turkish economy has been growing at 3.27 percent on average for the past seven years, lower than Turkey's long-term average growth rate, which is 5.1 percent, and the disappointment that this has generated is also kicking in.

But while the "bread and butter" issues are regaining dominance, this does not mean that the "AKParty years," as its

supporters affectionately call the party's time in power, or the influence of Erdoğan are decisively over. Receiving 40.8 percent of the votes, the AKParty still is the dominant party in Turkey's cumbersome politics. It is true that the electorate has given the AKParty a warning, but in the short run, there seems to be not enough momentum behind any opposition party to overthrow the AKParty. As such, the public's choice could be interpreted as a call for the amelioration of the AKParty's unamenable policies and, possibly, alleviation of Erdoğan's nerviness. In this regard, the real message of the electorate, to the extent that such messages are embedded in election outcomes, is one of reconciliation and balance. The AKParty may have lost the day, but the battle for the hearts and minds of the jittery people of Turkey is still going on. And the war over Turkish politics is far from over.

Formation of a coalition would have several virtues beyond just providing the country with a government. A broad-based coalition, if possible, may even deliver the super-majority that would be able to change Turkey's feeble constitution. This would be an enormous opportunity to enlarge freedoms, notably of speech and association, while

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changing the existing political parties and election laws. A coalition with a narrower parliamentary base may have the virtue of being ideologically more coherent, and as such, may represent further political normalization for a country accustomed to awkward political alignments. Reaching a sustainable coalition arrangement is important also for the future of Kurdish political movement. If the People's Democratic Party's (HDP) surpassing the threshold has a positive meaning for Turkey's socio-political futures, it will be closely correlated with the fate and longevity of this parliament, whether or not they are part of the government. While, the elections have created a map that illustrates a country infested with ideological and ontological separations, the dangers of deepening divides are staved off at present.

A sustainable coalition would reflect the representativeness of the new parliament in governmental processes, and offer a much-needed chance to rehabilitate Turkey's tattered politics. A coalition would also potentially help the country go beyond looking increasingly like a procedural democracy. In a sense, the function of politics is to build consensus through compromise. But in Turkey, politics has become a mechanism through which power is consolidated by estrangement. Despite the ambiguity that the elections brought, and the widespread anxiety about what a country ruled by a coalition government would mean, if Turkey's politicians do rise to the challenge, the elections might turn out to be an opportunity.

That said, forming a coalition presents serious challenges, firstly because of the present deeply fragmented outlook of Turkish society. It is hard for the opposition to sell cooperation with the AKParty to their constituencies. Secondly, the constituencies may be unforgiving and becomes disillusioned especially in an environment where swing votes constitute a majority, the public is weary with politics, and the electorate tends to vote according to who they do not want in government rather than who they do. Thirdly, the ability of the AKParty's leadership to address issues of fundamental importance for any potential coalition partner seems limited if they cannot distinguish between the interests and identity of the party with those of Erdoğan. These issues include, but are not limited to, readjustment of Turkey's foreign policy; reinstatement of checks and balances in politics; revisiting recently enacted laws on domestic security, Internet, and national intelligence; and perhaps most importantly, allegations of corruption. Furthermore, any coalition arrangement

would need Erdoğan to stay within the current constitutional arrangements for a non-executive presidency, which would test the limits of his ability to adapt to limitations on his power, one trait that he has yet to prove himself at.

None of these issues lend themselves to easy solutions. The shadow of Erdoğan looms large in Turkey's politics, and focusing on these issues without compromising the AKParty's and Erdoğan's political priorities would be problematic, to say the least. As such, the AKParty is split between its institutional identity and the personality of its founding leader and there are fundamental difficulties for the sustainability of any coalition.

There are some who would say that the remedy could come with a change in party leadership. In this context, former President Abdullah Gül's name comes to fore. The prospects for such a change seem to have dwindled quickly, however. There is no surprise in that, as the enthusiasm within the AKParty to disturb the political inertia further following the initial shock of the elections is low and the pull of Erdoğan's charisma is still high. Gül, who has proven his awareness of risks, needs a disturbance of inertia to create a conducive environment for making his move. It is hard for either Gül or Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu to play agency for such change as long as the credo in Erdoğan's political power and versatility holds within the party. In the longer run though, the health of Turkey's democracy seems closely tied to a genuine revival of center right/liberal politics rather than a change in the AKParty.

Under the circumstances, there seems to be two alternative scenarios for Turkey. Either two or more of the parties will reach an understanding to form a coalition, or one of the parties will split¹ and choose to be a coalition partner in some combination with the rest. The issues related to Erdoğan's future role, the structural future of Turkish politics, irreconcilable differences between the parties, the prickly nature of the most important political issues, and the uncompromising

1 Even though such a scenario is not very likely, it has been voiced for the AKParty and HDP before and after the elections. Albeit in different forms than an outright split, historically this is not unprecedented. Possible variants include 1) some members of the parliament going through "a change of heart and mind" and resigning from their parties to join with another to enable a vote of confidence, as in the infamous Güneş Motel episode of December 1977; or 2) a so-called post-modern coup such as that on February 28, 1997, which involved parliamentarians from the True Path Party of Tansu Çiller that either resigned and founded Democratic Turkey Party or later joined in and supported the 55th coalition government of Mesut Yılmaz that replaced the REFAHYOL Government of Necmettin Erbakan and Çiller.



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attitudes of some parties, partly induced by the resentment of their constituencies, makes any arrangement problematic. If no consensus is possible an early election is likely. Under the circumstances though, beyond the question of who the prospective coalition partners would be, there seems to be no long-term sustainability for any coalition composition, even if a transient consensus is possible. It seems right to assume that the 25th Parliament of the Republic is fated to be a short-lived one indeed.

If present election laws and the 10 percent threshold are preserved, any round of elections hereafter may lead to similarly short-lived governments. However, it should not be forgotten that the Turkish electorate's patience is low with coalitions. Any party that is perceived as playing the spoilsport may be punished with a swift swing of the voters. It is no coincidence that Erdoğan, unquestionably the most assertive actor in Turkish politics, is seemingly trying to keep his penchant for bravado in check. This should be telling, especially for opposition leadership. Even if it may be hard for the opposition to explain cooperation with AKParty (and in the case of the Nationalist Movement Party, also with the HDP), the costs of playing the misanthrope might be higher. There is every indication that if the lack or composition of the government is seen as a factor of disability, disenfranchised voters may turn back to the AKParty in search of consolatory stability in one party rule, despite the risks of authoritarianism it brings. This would be both detrimental to the opposition and postpone the country's normalization, all the while driving the political costs higher.

Turkey's democracy has witnessed the most uneven political campaign since 1946, with the AKParty and Erdoğan throwing in substantial weight. Ironically, this led to increased activism and awareness in the civil sector, which could be a beacon of hope for the future. It also possibly substantially influenced HDP's ability to surpass the 10 percent threshold. If the parliament fails to engage the fundamental issues and proves instead to be short-lived, Turkey's political agenda will potentially rotate around the question of the legal framework that will govern the next elections. The lowering of the derisory 10 percent threshold is vital for the future of Turkey's democracy. However, the question of what should replace it goes beyond that. Under the circumstances, the best option is a set of rules that would seek the most representative outcomes, rather than further consolidation.

Turkey is at a junction, choosing between remaining a procedural, majoritarian, and weakly institutionalized, even illiberal, democracy or renewing its social contract and democratic system for good. The elections provide Turkey with true hope for pluralism. The "balance of democracy has been adjusted," in words once used to describe the Army's domain, but this time truly achieved by the votes the people. Still a deeply divided country, Turkey's future depends on the ability of politics to facilitate rehabilitation and create bridges between the different identities that are the real strength of the country.

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About the Author

Dr. Ahmet K. Han is an associate professor at Kadir Has University, Istanbul. He is also an adjunct faculty member with Turkish Armed Forces War College Institute of Strategic Studies, and serves as a member of the board of EDAM, a leading Turkish think-tank.

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