



Three Uncertainties in Turkey's Upcoming Elections

By Emre Erdoğan

Over the past three years, Turkey has witnessed two parliamentary elections, one referendum, and one attempted coup. Another hot summer with transformative presidential and parliamentary elections is on the horizon. Though originally scheduled for the fall of 2019, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which have been in a de facto coalition since the coup attempt, decided to hold the elections on June 24, 2018, a move that was expected by the opposition but denied by the government.

The first round of the presidential and parliamentary elections will be held simultaneously and the country will complete its transition to the presidential system, a decision approved with a narrowly passed referendum last year. This change is not easy and requires fundamental amendments to many laws and regulations. However, due to political dynamics, the AK Party called for early elections at the request of the informal minor partner of the ruling coalition, namely the MHP, before these changes were made. As a result, Turkey is now facing three major uncertainties.

First is the question of who will be Turkey's next president. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, ruling the country since 2003 as first prime minister and then president, is running for the presidency with the support of his own party and the nationalist MHP, under the umbrella of the "People's Alliance." After a failed quest for their own umbrella candidate, the opposition parties each decided to run with their

own candidates. The main opposition, Republican People's Party (CHP), nominated Muharrem İnce, a prominent politician and acute internal opponent to the party leadership. The newly founded Good Party (İYİ), which attracted some votes from the CHP and MHP, nominated its leader, Meral Akşener, a nationalist woman leader called "She-Wolf" by some of her supporters. The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) nominated their leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, who is in pretrial detention on charges of terrorism. The Islamist Felicity Party (SP) nominated their leader, Temel Karamollaoğlu. Despite the fragmentation, almost all opposition parties have declared that the forerunner in the second round — if there is one — will support the candidate that runs against Erdoğan.

This strategy shows the expectation that while Erdoğan will lead the first round, there will still be second round and whichever of the opposition candidates comes second in the first round will get a chance to win the presidency in the second round. There are no reliable polls available yet, but the calculus is not very complicated. Erdoğan will get the support of his constituency, and the MHP leadership will direct its supporters to Erdoğan. Optimists of the Erdoğan camp rely on their performance in the latest general elections, on November 1, 2015, when they received 61 percent of total votes in total. Meanwhile, the opposition's optimists remind that in the most recent referendum vote, the "YES" camp supported by these two parties secured only 51 percent. Erdoğan's opponents believe that the recent economic developments — foreign exchange fluctuations,



increased inflation, and rising unemployment — would cost an additional 2 to 3 points which will bring the country to the second round.

While both perspectives have merit, the second is weaker. The argument that the AK Party will lose voters as a result of the economic downturn assumes that voters can easily perceive rapid economic fluctuations and change their partisan preferences according to their relative gains or losses. This voter profile, called “homo economicus,” is already diminished as voters today tend to adjust their economic perceptions according to their partisan affiliation. A recent survey shows that the supporters of the AK Party and the MHP are much more optimistic on the economy compared to the constituencies of opposition parties, and they attribute the responsibility of the recent economic downturn to “foreign powers” who are trying to undermine the Turkish president,¹ as framed by Erdoğan in his recent speeches.² Hence, it will not be surprising if Erdoğan is successful in the first round because he is rapidly consolidating his supporters against the opposition and convincing them to ignore the crude facts of the economy.

The second uncertainty is what Turkey’s parliament will look like a month from now. While the recent constitutional changes substantially reduced the powers of the legislative branch vis-à-vis the executive embodied in the presidency, its remaining powers are not insignificant. With the recent changes in election law making formal alliances possible, the AK Party and MHP formed the “People’s Alliance” whereas the CHP, İYİ Party, and SP formed the alternative “Nation’s Alliance.” The pro-Kurdish HDP was excluded by the other parties from either alliance and will run alone. A double D’Hont formula will be used in distributing seats in these elections.³ First, seats will be distributed among the two alliances and HDP according to the total votes they get using the D’Hont formula. Then, seats will

be distributed within the alliances according to the individual votes each party in the alliances gets again using the D’Hont formula. While there is a 10 percent electoral threshold, even if only one party in an alliance gets more than 10 percent the threshold will not be applied to other parties in the alliance.

Without any reliable polling data, it is not possible to forecast the outcome of the parliamentary election with any certainty, but likely scenarios can be reduced to three. If the AK Party and MHP (People’s Alliance) get the same number of votes as the latest parliamentary elections they will control two-thirds of seats in the parliament. But this is not very likely as a lot has changed since the latest parliamentary election. The emergence of the İYİ is the most significant of those changes, as it draws votes from MHP, CHP, and to a lesser extent from the AK Party. If the İYİ performs well, attracting the majority of the MHP votes, and a small part of the CHP constituency in addition some votes from the frustrated AK Party voters, the People’s Alliance could possibly gain a majority of seats in the parliament. If SP is also successful in attracting voters from AK Party, this scenario would become even more likely. There is also a possibility, if not likelihood, that HDP could fall below the threshold which would make it very easy for the People’s Alliance to gain a large majority in the parliament. These scenarios show that the performances of the newly founded İYİ Party and the pro-Kurdish HDP will be key factors determining whether the People’s Alliance can gain majority in the parliament or not.

Finally, there is uncertainty about the day after the elections. If the same alliance wins the presidency and controls a majority in the parliament, there will not be a governability problem, but this does not ensure stability. The AK Party has had control of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches since 2015, but the country still experiences political and economic instability. If different parties or alliances win the presidential and parliamentary elections, governability will be a major issue as Turkey’s political culture does not favor cohabitation, and

1 Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey: https://goc.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2018/02/06/dimensions-of-polarizationshortfindings_DNzdZml.pdf.

2 See Emre Erdogan, “Dimensions of Polarization,” *GMF’s On Turkey*, February 20, 2018; and John Halpin, Michael Werz, Alan Makovsky, and Max Hoffman, “Is Turkey Experiencing a New Nationalism?” Center for American Progress, February 11, 2018.

3 D’Hont formula is used to distribute seats to competing parties and it favors larger parties in districts.

this did not work well even in France. This situation could potentially lead to a series of political crises and trigger early presidential and parliamentary elections.

Before every election, there is tendency to believe that political tension in Turkey has climaxed and that stability is on the horizon. In reality, irrespective of the results of these elections, we will likely witness another period of political uncertainty in Turkey during which the political class, the bureaucracy, and the society at large will try to adapt to the new system of government, namely the presidential system. And this adaptation process will take place in a setting where society is deeply polarized, the economy is in a downward trajectory, and municipal elections are scheduled to take place in less than a year, March 2019. Meanwhile important decisions that Europe and the United States need to take regarding Turkey cannot be delayed any longer. The United States will need to take decisions on its differences with Turkey over Syria and other issues such as how to respond to Turkey's decision to buy S-400 systems from Russia. The EU on the other hand will need to decide whether or not it can launch the negotiations on Customs Union modernization with Turkey and implement visa liberalization toward Turkey. In conclusion, any expectation that these elections will lead to normalization of Turkish politics and normalization of Turkey's relations with allies will likely end in disappointment.

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