

Analysis

May 26, 2011

Summary: The June 12, 2011, national elections look as normal as a democratic election could look in the Turkish polity. Do the elections signal that a stable pattern of parliamentary politics is likely to continue? The chances are that the same party groups will return to the parliament, but how many seats will each of them have? There are several potential scenarios. If the MHP gets about 5 million votes and if the CHP receives around 30 percent of the vote, even though the AKP obtains close to 50 percent of the votes, it may barely win a simple majority in the parliament and form the government alone. Or if the MHP fails to get 4 million votes and the Kurdish nationalists fail to get more than 20 seats, with no more than a few non-Kurdish independents winning any seats, the AKP and the CHP will share all the remaining seats among themselves. If we focus only on these two more likely scenarios of a simple versus super AKP parliamentary majority, we would realize that the consequences for Turkish democracy would be dramatically different.

Looking Beyond the June 12 Elections

by Ersin Kalaycıoğlu

Introduction

There is a characteristic of the June 12, 2011, elections that make them somewhat different than the previous elections in Turkey in this century. In the 2002 national elections, the Turkish economy was emerging from the shock of the financial meltdown of 2001, and in 2007, there was a crisis when the election of the president deeply divided the public into secular versus Islamist camps, which re-invigorated the three centuries old kulturkampf in the Turkish polity. In contrast, the June 12, 2011, national elections look as normal as a democratic election could look in the Turkish polity.

Turkish electoral laws make voting mandatory for every citizen, so there should be a relatively high participation rate of more than 80 percent. The total number of voters has grown from 42.8 million in 2007 to 50.2 million by May 2011, so no less than 40 million voters are expected to cast their ballots on June 12. Turkey also has a 10 percent national threshold for the political parties to surpass to gain any representation in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM). Therefore, parties must garner more than 4 million votes to gain any parliamentary seat. Only three political parties enjoy any chance of winning more

than 4 million votes: the governing conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP); the main opposition secular, social democratic Republican People's Party (CHP); and the Turkish ethnic nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP). The Kurdish ethnic nationalists are fielding independent candidates who are also expected to win more than 20 seats to establish a parliamentary party group. The most likely scenario is to have a National Assembly with four party groups to re-emerge after the elections, just like the current parliament, which also hosts the same four party groups. Do the elections signal that a stable pattern of parliamentary politics is likely to continue?

Similar Voting Patterns and Different Legislative Consequences

In fact, it is not so simple. The chances are that the same party groups will return to the TBMM, but how many seats will each of them have? Much depends upon the voting behavior of the electorate. There are several potential scenarios. If the Kurdish nationalists get 30 or more seats, as they claim they will, and independent candidates also win additional seats, there will be far fewer than the total 550 seats in the TBMM to be allocated to the party



lists according to the largest average (d'Hondt) formula, which is to be used to convert votes to seats for those parties receiving more than 10 percent of the national vote. Under those conditions if the MHP gets about 5 million votes in a repeat of its 2007 national elections performance, and if the CHP, as expected, does better than the 2007 elections and receives around 30 percent of the vote, even though the AKP obtains close to 50 percent of the votes, it may barely win a simple majority in the TBMM and form the government alone.

However, another scenario is also possible. If the MHP fails to get 4 million votes and the Kurdish nationalists fail to get more than 20 seats, with no more than a few non-Kurdish independents winning any seats, the AKP and the CHP will share all the remaining seats among themselves. Then the AKP can theoretically win even a super majority of more than two-thirds of the seats and re-establish its hegemony over the legislative process: a rerun of the 2002 national elections. There are also several possible scenarios in between, including the possibility that no party may get enough seats to form the government alone.¹

If we focus only on the two more likely scenarios of a simple versus super AKP parliamentary majority, the consequences for Turkish democracy would be dramatically different. A simple majority AKP presence in the TBMM would lead to a regular party government in a democratic context. The AKP government would be compelled to operate within bounds of the constitutional order, going through prudent interactions with the sizeable opposition groups in the legislature. Such a government could only initiate major political reforms, such as amendments of the 1982 constitution, through parliamentary negotiations, deliberations, and compromises with the other parliamentary groups (parties). Under those circumstances, a nonconfrontational, conflict-resolving, and compromise-building AKP must emerge to initiate any major constitutional reform agenda. Such a development would be a novelty for the AKP and the rest of the parliamentary parties, for the AKP has never had less than a super majority in the TBMM. Therefore, it is a mystery for observers of Turkish politics as to how the AKP government would choose to operate with only the support of a simple legislative majority from June 13 onwards.

¹ See Betam of Bahcesehir University for five different election outcomes at <http://www.secimanketi2011.com/betam-secim-anketi-sonuclari-secim-sonucu-tahmin-ve-analizleri/1.html>

Stability versus Change

If the AKP obtains a super majority again, then the party would continue on with its post-2007 policy of majoritarian confrontation and conflict with the opposition, as it attempts to ram through its legislation, and even a new constitution in the TBMM. Any two-thirds legislative majority voting for a constitutional amendment would be enough to pass it, according to the 1982 constitution.

However, more seems to be at stake. The AKP's leader and current prime minister, R. Tayyip Erdoğan, has already declared that he not only intends to create a new democratic constitution but that he also desires a new political system, which he calls presidential (*başkanlık*). Yet, the AKP campaign manifesto declares that the AKP will initiate a process to draw up a new and democratic constitution that will be designed with the participation of the people. No mention of presidentialism appears there. No one yet knows what Erdoğan means by presidentialism either. For example, in one comment, he seemed to imply that the German political regime is what he has in mind as presidentialism. Vying for a constitution that ushers in presidentialism a la Erdoğan would be no less than opening a Pandora's box. Some of the more prominent members of the AKP have also registered their doubts about a dramatic systemic change from parliamentary to an unknown form of presidentialism in Turkey. The prime minister already enjoys a huge accumulation of power, as he controls the executive and the legislative branches of the government and since the September 12, 2010 constitutional amendments even some of the most critical institutions of the judiciary. So, political pundits wonder, what motive could such a powerful prime minister have for introducing the idea of a presidential system? Does he have the United States or Venezuela or even Russia in his mind? If Turkey moves toward a system change, will that help to introduce further improvements in the Turkish civil liberties and human rights records? Or, as some pundits suspect, will such issues as civil liberties and rule of law be bypassed in the mayhem that emerges in the continued conflict and confrontation of the government and the opposition parties debating systemic change?

In the meantime, the process that was unleashed by the referendum of October 21, 2007, converted the current Turkish Presidency to a popularly elected office. No later than August 2014, Turkey will hold a popular election for a president for the first time in its history. The role of the



president in the current constitution is one of administrative oversight or even tutelage. However, a popularly elected president will become a politician, who will seek re-election in five years time. Those articles of the existing constitution that define the president as a politically and legally non-responsible actor for his ex-officio decisions would make no sense if the president is going to seek re-election. In short, even when the AKP wins only a simple majority of seats, a constitutional amendment over the institution of the Presidency is just around the corner.

Conclusion: Super Majority versus Mayhem

It looks as if the most important political development awaiting Turkey after the June 12 elections is the issue of constitutional amendments. It also seems as if the AKP and Erdoğan are now strategically situated to decide whether or not to go for a major overhaul of the Turkish political system. So far, Erdoğan seems to have continued with his confrontational, aggressive, abrasive style of campaigning, burning all remaining bridges between the AKP and the other major parties. The AKP seems to have adopted a campaign strategy of majoritarian grandeur: belittling the main opposition CHP and championing ethnic Turkish nationalism to undercut the electoral support of the MHP, on the one hand, while clashing with the Kurdish nationalist challenges in the east of the country, on the other. If that strategy does not work and the AKP fails to obtain a super majority in the TBMM, will the PM be able to go through a complete change of character and build a national compromise and coalition for change of the political system? Or, will he just continue with his confrontational politics and abort his plans for a new constitution? Since 2002, the AKP government has enjoyed more than 60 percent of the seats in the TBMM. There is no way of knowing how it will perform with simple majority support in the legislature. The moral of the story is that whatever the outcome of the June 12, 2011, elections may be, Turkey seems to be moving towards another period inlaid with several unknowns and uncertainties.

About the Author

Dr. Ersin Kalaycıoğlu is a Full Professor of Political Science at Sabancı University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Between August 2004 and September 2007, Prof. Kalaycıoğlu functioned as the Rector (President) of Işık University, Istanbul, Turkey. He is a student of comparative politics and specializes in political representation and participation. He co-edited *Turkey: Political, Social and Economic Challenges in the 1990s*, authored *Turkish Dynamics: A Bridge Across Troubled Lands*, co-authored *Turkish Democracy Today: Elections, Protest and Stability in an Islamic Society* and *Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey* with Ali Carkoğlu of Sabancı University, as well as editing and writing other publications in Turkish. Currently, Prof. Kalaycıoğlu is carrying out studies of sociopolitical orientations and attitudes toward politics and voting behavior in Turkey in collaboration with Ali Carkoğlu of Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey, and conducting annual national social surveys as part of the International Social Survey Program.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a non-partisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting better understanding and cooperation between North America and Europe on transatlantic and global issues. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 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 six offices in Europe: Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, and Bucharest. 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 American 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 or subscribe to our mailing list at <http://database.gmfus.org/reaction>.