

## Analysis

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**Summary:** The governing AKParty, which has added to its share of the vote in each succeeding election since it first achieved power in 2002, is expected to experience a decline in the June 2015 parliamentary elections. The Kurdish HDP may win enough votes to take seats, and it is possible that no party will win an outright majority, forcing the formation of a coalition government. This would at least postpone the AKParty's hopes to revise the current constitution.

## Turkey's June 7, 2015, Election Campaign Brings Changes

by *Ilter Turan*

### Introduction

Some elections are more important than others. Turkey's June 7, 2015 elections promise to be one such critical event, one in which a clear shift occurs in the distribution of the vote from those that have been obtained in the preceding elections. The governing AKParty, which has added to its share of the vote in each succeeding election since it first achieved power in 2002,<sup>1</sup> is expected to experience a decline this time. As many as four parties may clear the 10 percent national electoral threshold and seat deputies in the legislature. Whether the Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP, by its Turkish acronym), a mainly Kurdish ethnic party with ties to the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) organization, will clear the hurdle remains uncertain but likely. But it is thought that even without the HDP in the legislature, the AKP may not achieve a sufficient majority to change the constitution either directly or by submitting the text to a public referendum after having it approved by a more moderate but still qualified majority in the parliament. Some observers have also raised the further

possibility of no party achieving a majority, raising the possibility of a coalition government. Either of these outcomes, in turn, will invite a revision of the "activist" role Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current president, has adopted, departing from the constitutionally circumscribed practice of his predecessors of remaining distant from daily politics and maintaining relative neutrality toward all political parties. The elections will also determine the extent to which the AKParty government will be able to implement and expand its recent security-oriented policies, which have sometimes been called a manifestation of growing authoritarianism.

Turkey's electoral process is relatively short, through the deliberate design of the military makers of the 1982 Constitution who felt that a prolonged competitive process would be costly and divisive. The formal process lasts only three months. The candidate lists become known only two-and-a-half months before the elections. So the campaign picks up quickly.

1 The AKParty got 34.4 percent in 2002, 46.6 percent in 2007 and 2011, and 49.8 percent in 2011 parliamentary elections.



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### The End of Asymmetric Politics

The campaign for the June 2015 elections reveals some of the changes that Turkish society has been undergoing during the recent years. The most important is what might simply be called the normalization of politics. From its beginnings, Turkey's competitive politics has born the imprint of the state-directed and top-down process that aspired to inculcate "modern values" into the citizenry. Often, in the absence of sufficient economic betterment, centrally directed policies of cultural change generated "traditionalist" resistance, producing a "culturally bifurcated" society. After the competition that was a direct result of the transition to multi-party democracy in 1946, the Republican People's Party (CHP), the party that had founded the republic, felt duty bound to defend the values of the Turkish Revolution, notably secularism, while competitors, in addition to cultural issues, focused on questions of economic prosperity, usually enabling the latter to achieve more satisfactory results. The relationship between government and the mainline opposition has sometimes been called "asymmetric competition,"<sup>2</sup> meaning that while other parties were more likely to focus to varying degrees on the practical needs of the citizens, the CHP belabored the maintenance and promotion of modern values. Government and opposition pursued agendas that were at major variance with each other.

The current CHP president, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, appears to have better internalized the idea that under conditions of democratic competition, parties must win elections to achieve their goals, and, toward that end, voter coalitions need to be built. Accordingly, after gradually consolidating his leadership and removing the modernist ideologues from positions of power within the party, Kılıçdaroğlu has been guiding his party to become more pragmatic, more inclusionary of different groups in society, and more responsive to the daily concerns of citizens. The party program, which has recently been made public, concentrates mainly on questions of prosperity. It also emphasizes rule of law, respect for the rights of the individual and the minorities, and the broader need of democratization.<sup>3</sup> CHP candidates have apparently been instructed not to engage in ideological

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polemics with the AKParty candidates, be future looking rather than bicker about the past, emphasize questions of prosperity, and demonstrate familiarity with district level concerns and expectations.

It seems that the transformed orientation of the CHP took the governing party by surprise. The AKParty's first reaction was to argue that the social programs announced by the opposition could not be financed, inviting CHP to explain where the money would come from. When it became apparent that the promises of the opposition were, nevertheless, generating interest among the voters, the government tried to counter them by also promising more generosity on social programs, adding the contradictory claim that much of what the opposition promised was already being delivered by the government. Naturally, the debate will continue until the evening of the elections, but the critical element is that the government and opposition are talking about the same issues and proposing alternatives. If this becomes institutionalized, as it probably will, we may see an erosion of the bipolarity that has characterized Turkish politics from the latter period of the Ottoman Empire on. This will constitute a major step in paving the way to the consolidation of Turkey's "diminutive" democracy,<sup>4</sup> that is a political system in which elections determine who rules, but one in which some other indispensable elements of democracy, such as freedom of the press or freedom of association, are more limited.

<sup>2</sup> İler Turan, *Turkey's Difficult Journey to Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), ch.2

<sup>3</sup> In this context, it should be noted that the CHP employed primary elections as the basic method of choosing its candidates, which, Kılıçdaroğlu argued, was more in line with democratic practice.

<sup>4</sup> See "Turkey's Diminutive Democracy," *On Turkey*, GMF, November 19, 2012, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkey%E2%80%99s-diminutive-democracy>.



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### There is Room for Everyone

An interesting aspect of the current election campaign is that all parties have tried to make an appeal to groups that have been neglected, and in the case of some, excluded from politics. Each party has made a conscious effort, for example, to place more women to electable spots on their tickets. This reflects as much the growing importance of women in Turkish public and economic life as it does a global trend in which Turkey has actually lagged behind. It is likely to constitute, however, an irreversible development. It is expected that 10 percent or more of the next Turkish legislature will be comprised of women for the first time in its history. The inclusion of women has been accompanied by also including young people on candidate lists.

Parties have also demonstrated sensitivity to the inclusion of Muslim and non-Muslim minority candidates on their tickets, a point that has usually failed to receive attention in the past. Historically, the CHP has made sure that there were a number of Alevi candidates among its ranks, but this time, both the AKParty and the CHP have also included ethnic Armenians. The CHP nominated what appears to be the first Roma candidate in Turkey's parliamentary history. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has responded by saying that he would appoint a Roma advisor to keep him informed on the needs of that ethnic minority. The HDP, on the other hand, has made a deliberate effort to incorporate representatives of groups that have previously not been represented in the parliament into its tickets. HDP candidates include members of the Assyrian and Chaldean churches, Nusayris and Ezidis. There is a sense of being politically correct in this endeavor since some of the groups are very small, but it is important to establish that any Turkish citizen who feels s/he would like to take part in politics is not impeded by religion or ethnic origin.

### HDP Goes National

HDP has decided that this time it will enter the election with a party list. In the preceding elections, the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) whose lineage is now represented by the HDP, had offered independent candidates on an electoral district basis in southeastern Turkey, where the Kurdish population is concentrated, and in big cities where there are also concentrations of ethnic Kurds, in order to bypass the 10 percent national electoral threshold that

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parties are required to achieve in order to seat representatives in parliament. Currently, it seems unlikely that an ethnic Kurdish party would pass the threshold unless it reinvented itself. The HDP leadership chose to enter the elections with a party list after sensing that there were other minorities that the party might try to represent, judging that there were voters whose dissatisfaction with other parties ran deep, trying to benefit from the tide of support that its candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, had received in the recent presidential elections, and finally, seeing that running through independent candidates would always limit the party to a small number of deputies in the parliament. In order to persuade more voters to join its supporters, HDP leaders have emphasized that theirs is not a separatist party aiming for an independent Kurdish state or even a regional party, but a party for everyone and all of Turkey. Although too early to tell, current polls indicate that this strategy may be working.

### What Will Happen?

There is a month-and-a-half before the election. It is too early to speculate who will win how many seats or by what margin. Currently, many of the reliable polls suggest that the AKParty is likely to win a majority of the parliamentary seats, but its majority may be short of the numbers needed to change the constitution. A less likely outcome is that the AKParty will not achieve a majority, making it necessary to form a coalition government. In the hope of preventing the emergence of such a contingency, Erdoğan has been raising the specter in his speeches of “unstable, do nothing coalition governments” that prevailed in Turkish politics during the 1974-80 and to some extent during the 1991-2002 interims. Erdoğan, who never truly let go of the leadership



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of his party, will be held responsible for any outcome that substantially reduces the numbers of AKParty deputies, which would confine him to the more symbolic presidency outlined in the current constitution. If the need for a coalition government arises, on the other hand, the nationalist MHP may be the most likely partner of the governing party.

The forthcoming elections constitute a new “stress test” for Turkey’s democracy. After the elections, it is to be hoped that Turkey will come to look more like an “ordinary” democracy which both most Turks and their friends around the world find highly desirable. Some changes that have already taken place, such as the decline of asymmetric politics and more women in the parliament, among others, indicate that such hopes may not be in vain.

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### About the Author

İlter Turan is an emeritus professor of political science at Istanbul’s Bilgi University, where he also served as president between 1998-2001. His previous employment included professorships at Koç University (1993-1998) and Istanbul University (1964-1993), where he also served as the chair of the International Relations Department (1987-1993), and the director of the Center for the Study of the Balkans and the Middle East (1985-1993). Dr. Turan is the past president of the Turkish Political Science Association and has been a member of the Executive Committee and a vice president of the International Political Science Association (2000-2006). He is a frequent commentator on Turkish politics on TV and newspapers.

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