

Analysis

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Summary: Turkey's June elections failed to give any one of the parliamentary parties a majority. After attempts to form a coalition government failed, Turkey scheduled new elections for November 1, but among ordinary Turks, there was little enthusiasm for them. Unless there is a totally unexpected turn of events, the greatest probability is another split parliament that will make rule by coalition necessary. The difficulties that each coalition possibility harbors may mean a long, drawn-out process of coalition forming. After the elections, we might see that nothing much has change at all.

Plus Ça Change: Turkey and the Upcoming Elections

by *Ilter Turan*

Introduction

Turkey's June elections failed to give any one of the parliamentary parties a governing majority. After attempts to form a coalition government failed, Turkey scheduled new elections for November 1.

In retrospect, it seems that the Justice and Development Party (AKParty), under the firm hand of its former leader, Turkey's current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was convinced that it could return to power by itself in new elections. All it had to do in the interim was to make certain policy adjustments and remind voters that coalitions, as past experience had shown, only produce inefficiency and instability. Hence, the AKParty did not pursue forming a coalition with much determination. In fact, soon after coalition talks commenced, the media started counting the days before the president would dissolve the parliament and call new elections.¹

We Want to Stay in Power Come...!

Among ordinary Turks, there was little enthusiasm for new elections. Concerns were raised aloud in the business community, including from some supportive of the government, that new elections would mean a lost year for the economy. Why then did the president and the government insist? We must begin by noting that the government is highly responsive to Erdoğan's choices. He has refused to cut his "informal" ties with his "former" party. It was his advice rather than the preferences of the prime minister and the party to hold new elections. The reluctance to share power, however, is broadly shared among the AKParty leadership and backbenchers. The AKParty cadres are frustrated that their efforts to reshape Turkish society and the Turkish political system according to a "socially conservative" vision may end for good. In addition, the loss or reduction of patronage undermines the solidarity of Turkish political parties producing fragmentation, a fear that may haunt the AKParty as well.

The opposition, on the other hand, alleges that the AKParty's cling to power derives from the fear that its

¹ The Turkish constitution gives the president discretionary powers to dissolve the parliament if a government is either not formed or it fails to receive a vote of confidence within 45 days of the commencement of a government-forming process and prospects for another government does not look promising.

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Analysis

cadres have committed many questionable deeds that they cannot account for. Whatever the reasons, the AKParty did not try hard to form a coalition and the president appeared only too enthusiastic to dissolve the parliament and initiate new elections.

Take All Measures Necessary...

Since then, the AKParty, in tacit coordination with Erdoğan, developed its campaign strategy. The heart of it is undermining the Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) so that it will not surmount the 10 percent national electoral threshold. The AKParty argues that there is no Kurdish problem but a terrorism problem. The HDP, it argues, is part of the ethno-terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) whose mission it is to divide the country in collaboration with outside powers. If the HDP is below the threshold, most of the seats in the southeastern provinces will go to the AKParty, thus giving it a parliamentary majority — perhaps one that is large enough to change the constitution. Even if the need for a coalition arose, the change of policy would make it easier for the AKParty to form a coalition with the nationalist MHP, a choice that AKParty members find more attractive than other options.

Understandably, the governing party has also had to meet the populist challenges of the opposition People's Republican Party (CHP) on many fronts: from higher minimum wages to bonus payments to retired persons on religious holidays. Finally, it argues that its record shows that it is good at getting things done and bringing peace and stability to the country.

Calculations at Home and the Realities of the Market

A Turkish folk saying suggests that “calculations made at home may not match what one finds in the market.” This describes the situation that the AKParty faces. In response to an outburst of terrorist activity in the country's southeast, for example, the party has adopted a strongly nationalist line, a policy that has usually generated voter support in the past. Contrary to previous experience, however, the current public response has not been one of calls for revenge, but rather for peaceful resolution of the conflict. Most recently, bombs have killed more than 100 and wounded several hundred citizens who had come to the capital to take part

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in a peace demonstration. It is becoming evident that the perpetrators were associated with the self-proclaimed Islamic State group and were known to the police. The government has tried unsuccessfully to link the PKK to the violence.

The economy has also been slowing; the rates of inflation and unemployment have risen. It seems that the prolonged period of reasonably rapid economic development and prosperity that Turkey shared with other emerging economies is coming to an end — a reality that does not bode well for the governing party. Dissatisfaction is reflected in the polls. The distribution of the vote is unlikely to change from the previous elections, though some predict that the AKParty will suffer further electoral losses. It also seems certain HDP will enter the parliament.

What the Future Holds

Despite concerns about the violence in the country's southeast, elections will be held. Unless there is a totally unexpected turn of events, the greatest probability is another split parliament that will make rule by coalition necessary. A lesser likelihood is an AKParty majority, but not one big enough to enable them to change the constitution. In either case, the political situation in the country will be redefined. No one would insist that another election be held within three months. An AKParty majority short of that necessary to change the constitution (more than 330 for a referendum and 367 directly of 550 members) is a clear sign to the AKParty that the parliamentary system is here to stay and that it is necessary to work with other parties to rule the country.

Such a state of affairs would likely serve to confine Erdoğan to his constitutionally defined duties, while parliamen-



Analysis

tary life would assume its normal course. It is not clear, however, that the president will accept a reduced political role. Outgoing AKParty leaders as well as former President Abdullah Gül have made discreet remarks about the possibility of a political storm after the elections.

Who would form a coalition with whom? Accepting as a given that the nationalist MHP would not join a government with HDP, and dismissing the unlikely case of a minority government, three coalition possibilities exist: AKParty-MHP, AKParty-HDP, and AKParty-CHP. The first, attractive from the point of ideological similarity, is impeded by two considerations. First, such a coalition might undermine MHP's identity and hence its existence. Deputies of a MHP whose leadership is uncooperative might break away to form a new party. Second, the total refusal of the MHP to acknowledge a "Kurdish question" might paralyze the AKParty, which would have to deal with it. An AKParty-HDP coalition, on the other hand, is not likely to find wide support among AKParty's ranks. This brings us to the possibility of an AKParty-CHP coalition. In a polarized political arena, in which the AKParty has pictured CHP as the other, this choice will necessitate a major attitudinal adjustment on both sides but even more so from the AKParty.

The difficulties that each coalition possibility harbors may mean a long, drawn-out process of coalition forming. The failure to give Turkey a government, on the other hand, might undermine confidence in the entire political arrangement, which would not benefit any of the existing parties. What outcome such a state of affairs might produce would be impossible to say at this point.

The November 1 elections were intended to give Turkey the one-party government that the June elections failed to do. Yet after the elections, we might see that nothing much has changed at all.

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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).

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