



Explaining Turkey's Snap Elections

By İlter Turan

President Erdoğan persistently dismissed rumors that presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for November 2019 would be moved ahead of schedule. Until suddenly on April 18, he announced that he would accommodate the request of his partner for early elections in response to leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) Devlet Bahçeli who has supported efforts to transform the Turkish political system. An obedient parliament quickly yielded to his wishes and set the date as June 24. Holding elections on such short notice came as an unpleasant surprise to the opposition parties that needed more time to prepare. But they quickly went into action to meet the challenge.

A Rational Decision?

In retrospect, the decision to move the elections up by over one year appears to be a rational political choice from the perspective of both the governing Justice and Development Party (AK Party) and its ally MHP. Ahead of the decision, many polls indicated that Erdoğan electoral support for AK Party and its natural candidate President Erdoğan was remaining stagnant or decreasing. While it might be possible to reverse these negative trends over time, Turkey's deteriorating economic performance provided a powerful rationale for moving the elections to ensure a re-election before introducing belt-tightening measures.

There were also pressing problems for MHP. In contrast to the party's leadership that had been very accommodating to Erdoğan, the rank and file

entertained doubts about such close cooperation. A group splintered from the party under Meral Akşener's leadership, a former minister of interior, to form the Good Party (IYI), which criticized the unqualified pro-government path the MHP had taken. Her words and actions proved popular with the electorate. Early elections would deprive the new party of the time to organize and challenge the MHP at the polls. Observers have suggested that both the AK Party and the MHP may have calculated that rushing the elections would render it impossible for Akşener to offer her candidacy for president, and her party to be effective competition.

Unexpected Resilience from Opposition

Regardless of the outcome, the June 24 elections will be remembered for the resilience that the opposition injected to Turkish political life. Until now, opposition parties were demoralized and lacked the confidence to seriously challenge the AK Party. Such resilience owes much to the emergence of a new realignment in Turkish politics — which the governing party thought would never happen. Historically, Turkish politics has been a competition between two cultural camps, one representing the secular/modern/urban/educated and in many instances reasonably affluent Turks, and another comprising more religious/traditional/provincial/less educated citizens. The major opposition, the Republican People's Party (CHP), is the right address for members of the first camp; while the place for the second is among a variety of parties, AK Party being the most prominent. Not reflecting accurately the dichotomy developed in Britain and



Western Europe, the first camp represents the “left” and the second the “right.” Cooperation between the right and left has been rare and not particularly successful in the past. Yet, on this occasion, the left and right opposition have come together to form a pro-liberal democratic and anti-authoritarian camp. Its formation has produced a set of developments that may render government plans to stifle the opposition ineffective.

The most surprising development may well be that Akşener and her IYI Party are able to compete in the elections. Observers speculated early on that the IYI Party lacked the time to meet the organizational requirements deadline. The law allows, however, parties that have a group in the parliament (20 deputies) to enter the competition. Much to the surprise of the AK Party, the CHP asked 15 of its deputies to join the IYI Party so it would be allowed to form a parliamentary group and compete in the parliamentary election — notable given that CHP is on the opposite side of the political spectrum. Deputies later returned to the CHP. Akşener, rather than relying on the nomination of her party group, chose to use another option available for presidential candidates and collected more than the required 100,000 voter signatures to place her name on the ballot. The opposition was so energized that nearly 400,000 people lined up at sub-provincial electoral boards to give their signature backing not only Akşener as a candidate, but also Temel Karamollaoğlu, head of the religious Felicity Party (SP) out of which the AK Party was born, and Doğu Perinçek, head of the hardline nationalist Homeland Party. Those who offered to support these candidates came from across the opposition spectrum, not necessarily belonging to the same party as the candidates..

Another unconventional development is the announcement made by CHP and IYI Party candidates Muharrem İnce and Akşener that if the presidential contest results in a runoff (50+ is needed to win in the first round, or two with highest votes compete in a second round) each will support the one who comes second. In addition, the CHP, IYI, and SP candidates have all agreed that if one of them is elected president, they will appoint their vice presidents from the others. There is

general agreement that if the opposition wins it will implement a democratization program and a return to the parliamentary system.

This cooperation among the three opposition parties has not been confined exclusively to the presidential contest. To ensure that the MHP not remain outside the parliament owing to a 10 percent national electoral threshold, the AK Party enacted legislation that allowed parties to form electoral coalitions. Under the formula, the voters choose the party they want, but the votes of the members of the electoral coalition are tallied together in passing the threshold. While the system was designed to accommodate the MHP with the expectation that the opposition parties were so distant from each other that they would not be able to come together, this has been proven wrong. CHP, IYI, and SP are coalition partners ensuring that both IYI and SP will be represented in parliament. Also, the distribution of seats in the parliament will better reflect the distribution of the vote than would have the case if the 10 percent threshold were operational.

The Dynamic Mr. İnce

The common expectation in Turkish politics is that the president of a political party will become the candidate of that party in a presidential election. CHP President Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, however, surprised everyone by announcing that he would not be his party’s candidate. The party instead nominated Muharrem İnce, a deputy from Yalova who originally taught high school math and with considerable political experience as mayor of his hometown and as a deputy from CHP. İnce was known to be a rival of Kılıçdaroğlu and some have alleged that this was a clever way of getting rid of him. More knowledgeable analysts, however, have identified more elaborate reasoning behind İnce’s nomination. He is a graduate of a preacher training high school, just like Mr. Erdoğan. His family is known to be religious. He comes from a modest peasant family and has made it through the system by receiving a good public education. He is not a man alienated from his society by having been born with a golden spoon in his mouth, having gone to a foreign language school, and distinguished by his

Frankish manners. He is a good public speaker, he speaks the language of the common man and can relate easily to him. He is also a Sunni Muslim, not a member of the minority Alevi sect which creates electoral difficulties in the conservative provincial centers and on the countryside. His attributes make him a good match for Erdoğan — which appears to have surprised the president, who was prepared and ready to tackle Kılıçdaroğlu.

The Weak Spot in the Picture

The missing piece is the Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP), with several of its deputies in prison after their immunity was removed. This includes the past president of the Party, Selahattin Demirtaş, who is awaiting trial but still nominated as his party's presidential candidate. Other parties have shied away from including the HDP in the electoral coalition for fear that it might cost them votes, though opposition candidates have all said Demirtaş should be released from prison for the competition to be fair. The performance of the HDP in the parliamentary elections and how the HDP voters behave if there is a second round in the presidential elections render the party a most critical actor. If the party goes over the electoral threshold, the AK Party–MHP team may not be able to achieve a parliamentary majority. If it fails, it is sure that the AK Party will prevail. Similarly, if the presidential election goes to the second round, whether those who voted for the HDP in the first round will stay home or vote for the opposition candidate is going to have an important impact on the outcome. Many observers think that İnce finds some support among HDP supporters.

It is sometimes said that governing parties do not call an early election unless they think they will win. Yet, in a competitive election, the outcome is never assured. The upcoming elections will constitute the strongest electoral test that Turkey's governing party has faced since its founding. No matter who wins, the elections should offer hope to those who have been concerned about Turkey's growing democracy deficit in the recent years.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

About the Author

Dr. İltar Turan is emeritus professor of political science at Istanbul Bilgi University and the president of the International Political Science Association (IPSA). He served as the president of Istanbul Bilgi University from 1998 to 2001.

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 website.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. 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 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization 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 offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org
<http://www.gmfus.org/>