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Turkey's 2015 elections: a change of direction?

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Summary

The elections for Turkey's Grand National Assembly on 7 June 2015 ended the AKP's long spell in power. It remains the largest party, but without a majority and with no clear coalition partner. A major factor was the pro-Kurdish HDP gaining a place in parliament for the first time after widening its appeal. President Erdoğan's interventions in the campaign failed to gain the AKP the majority it needed to change the constitution and grant him more powers.

The next weeks and months are likely to see behind-the-scenes discussions over possible coalitions, or a minority AKP government. A right-wing coalition between the AKP and nationalist MHP is perhaps possible, but would come at a heavy price for both parties. If no successful government is formed in 45 days, the President – who remains highly influential – may call fresh elections. The uncertainty is likely to damage Turkey's economy as well as its regional influence.

1. Governing AKP wins, but loses its majority

Turkey's parliamentary elections on Sunday 7 June 2015 resulted in a hung parliament, with no clear way forward. This appeared to put an end to President Erdoğan's ambitions to strengthen the presidency, sent Turkey's financial markets tumbling, and weakened Turkey's regional influence.

1.1 AKP is still the largest in parliament

After nearly 13 years in power, Turkey's Justice and Development party (AKP) has lost its majority in Turkey's Grand National Assembly. The drop in support is attributed to opposition to President Erdoğan's increasing authoritarianism and his proposals for a new presidential system – even though he was not standing in the election – as well as Turkey's economic slowdown.

Nevertheless, the AKP is still Turkey's largest party, for the fourth consecutive parliamentary election. It won 41% of the vote (nine points less than in 2011), giving it 258 of the Assembly's 550 seats (down from 326).¹ It represents constituencies from all over the country, and is likely to be in government in one form or other. However, it is 18 seats away from forming a single-party government (276 seats needed), and far off the 330 seats needed for calling a referendum on the constitution – let alone the 367 'supermajority' for changing the constitution on a parliamentary vote alone – that it hoped for.

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and his cabinet formally resigned on 9 June but will stay in place until a new government is formed.²

1.2 Pro-Kurdish party in parliament for the first time

The other major story of the 2015 elections is the success of the People's Democratic Party (HDP). It is the first pro-Kurdish party to reach the National Assembly, having won 13% of the vote and 81 seats (mainly in south-eastern Turkey). This result, which makes it the third-largest party in parliament, was instrumental in depriving the AKP of a majority.

The HDP, formed in 2012 and widely seen as having links with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), had taken a gamble. In the past Kurdish candidates had always stood as independents, as they couldn't reach the high 10% threshold for entering parliament as a political party. If the HDP had similarly failed to get 10% of the vote, most of its seats would have been redistributed to the AKP.

¹ All results taken from ['Turkish General Election 2015'](#), *Hürriyet Daily News*

² ['Turkish PM steps down as ruling party mulls possibilities for coalition'](#), *Guardian*, 9 June 2015

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The HDP attracted support not just from pious Kurdish voters (many of whom had voted for the AKP in the past) but also from urban liberals across Turkey on issues including gender equality and LGBT rights. It also took on the demands of the 2013 Gezi Park protesters: more environmental protection for development, less state intervention, and more citizen involvement. It thus attracted some voters who might otherwise have voted for the centre-left CHP (see below). However, not all Kurdish voters (Kurds make up 18% of Turkey's population) support the HDP.

The HDP's candidate quotas (50% women and 10% LGBT) contributed to the largest ever number of women entering Turkey's National Assembly: a record 98 women members, of whom 32 are HDP.³

1.3 No big change for the other parties

The other two main parties' results were much as expected.

The centre-left Republican People's Party (CHP) – the main opposition – got 25% of the vote, almost the same as its 2011 result, to give it 131 seats (down from 135). Although it had lost some of its more extreme republican elements, it apparently did not present a credible enough alternative to the AKP, and lost some voters to the HDP.

The far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) slightly increased its share of the vote, from 13% to 16%, and gained quite a few more seats (80, up from 53). But it did not pick up as many votes from the AKP as it might have wished.

1.4 President Erdoğan's role

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was a central figure in the 2015 election despite technically not being directly involved. He is hugely popular: having been Prime Minister at the head of the AKP three times in succession, he was elected President of the Republic in August 2014 with almost 52% of the vote, in the country's first direct presidential elections.

The President's role is largely symbolic, but Erdoğan has stretched it to its limits (and arguably beyond). He is accused of campaigning on behalf of the AKP, despite the constitution requiring him to be neutral⁴ and despite Turkey's Supreme Election Board having imposed pre-election restrictions on 10 March.⁵ For him personally there was a lot at stake: he wanted to change the constitution to increase the President's executive powers and sideline or even remove the office of Prime Minister. He argued that streamlining decision-making would allow the President to create a truly powerful Turkey. For this the AKP needed at least 330 seats in parliament – which it signally failed to obtain.

³ [‘Turkey female MPs elected in record numbers: Who are they?’, BBC news online, 9 June 2015](#)

⁴ [Constitution of the Republic of Turkey](#), Article 101: ‘If the President-elect is a member of a party, his/her relationship with his party shall be severed...’

⁵ See [‘Erdoğan promotes AK Party, violating pre-election restrictions’, Today's Zaman, 21 April 2015](#)

Erdoğan's public response to the result has been muted and unexpectedly conciliatory. His one statement so far (other than to respond to the Prime Minister's procedural resignation) recognised that no single party had won a mandate to govern alone.⁶ It appears that he is encouraging a coalition.

In a sign of where Russia sees the power lying, President Putin congratulated Erdoğan on the result - not Prime Minister Devotoğlu. A Kremlin statement reportedly said that Putin 'congratulated Erdoğan on his victory' and that the two Presidents agreed to continue 'intensive personal contacts'.⁷

1.5 Were the elections free and fair?

Election monitors considered the elections to be largely free and fair, with fundamental freedoms generally respected.

There were however several attacks on party offices and serious physical attacks, as well as intimidation of media and journalists critical of the ruling party.

OSCE observers criticised the 10% barrier for representation in parliament, and the President's role in the campaign:

While Turkey has a history of a generally functioning, pluralistic system, challenges related to freedom of expression and the dominant role played by the President in the campaign partially undermined fairness in this election.⁸

However, the fact that the AK party saw its ambitions frustrated suggests that democracy was working:

The EU described Sunday's elections as a 'clear sign of strength of Turkish democracy', and as an opportunity to 'further strengthening the EU-Turkey relationship and to advance in broadening EU-Turkey cooperation'.⁹

⁶ ['Erdoğan concedes no party has mandate after shock Turkish vote'](#), *Guardian*, 8 June 2015

⁷ ['Turkey election: Erdoğan accepts no party has mandate to govern alone'](#), *Guardian*, 8 June 2015

⁸ ['Turkish elections characterized by high participation and wide choice among strong and active parties, but 10 per cent threshold limited political pluralism, international election observers say'](#), *OSCE press release*, 8 June 2015

⁹ ['What does Erdogan's setback at the elections mean for Turkey's role on the global stage?'](#), *Telegraph*, 9 June 2015

2. What are the options?

2.1 Coalition

As no party has an overall majority, coalition is an obvious option. However, before the election a coalition with the AKP was ruled out by each of the other three main parties, and considerable obstacles lie in the way of any of the possible options. Moreover, Turkey has a long history of fractious and unstable coalitions.

AKP and MHP?

A right-wing coalition between the AKP and the nationalist MHP is possible, as the two parties share some ideology. It would have enough votes in parliament to call a referendum on constitutional reform.

However, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli has been strongly opposed to President Erdoğan's interventions in governmental affairs:

For example, it would be a huge concession on Bahçeli's part if he agrees to go to the grandiose presidential palace to attend a cabinet meeting under Erdoğan's leadership.¹⁰

The MHP is opposed to EU accession, and to negotiation with the PKK over the Kurdish question. Shelving the Kurdish peace process is likely to cause widespread unrest, if not radicalisation and destabilisation.¹¹ The MHP's position on the Kurdish question could affect Turkey's involvement in Syria – it would be likely to push for more support for Syria's Turkmen minority and less for Syria's Kurdish fighters.¹²

If the AKP entered a coalition with the MHP, it would certainly lose more votes among Turkey's Kurds, and risk perpetuating some of the problems it encountered in the 2015 election.¹³

AKP and CHP ('grand coalition')?

The secularist CHP stands fundamentally opposed to the AK party with its Islamist roots. Coalition is very unlikely.

AKP and HDP?

Given the HDP's strong anti-government stance, coalition with the AKP would alienate many of the supporters who helped to get it into parliament.

CHP, MHP and HDP?

A coalition of the 'losing' parties is technically possible, but unlikely given the nationalist MHP's position on the Kurdish question, and the gulf between the CHP and the MHP. However, they may wish to unite for a short while and then go to the polls again calling for a reduced

¹⁰ 'Coalition or minority gov't: What's next in Turkish politics?', *Hurriyet*, 8 June 2015

¹¹ Dimitar Bechev and Nathalie Tocci, '[What next in Turkey?](#)', *Open Democracy*, 9 June 2015

¹² '[What does Erdogan's setback at the elections mean for Turkey's role on the global stage?](#)', *Telegraph*, 9 June 2015

¹³ Aaron Stein, '[Turkey's Political Future](#)', *RUSI Analysis*, 9 Jun 2015

election threshold and other constitutional reforms.¹⁴ They would not between them have enough votes in parliament for constitutional reform.

2.2 Minority government

The AKP could try to run a minority government, seeking support from another party issue by issue, in return for significant concessions:

The MHP is the most likely to support this move, but would again seek to extract concessions such as a guarantee of an early election. Analysts see little interest for the CHP or HDP in supporting such a move.¹⁵

A minority government would have to pass an initial confidence motion in the National Assembly, and would be vulnerable to any further confidence motions brought by other parties.

2.3 Fresh elections

Under the [Turkish constitution](#), the parties have 45 days to form a government. If at that point there is no government, or if a minority government fails to win a confidence motion in the National Assembly, the President can call fresh elections.

Either a fractious coalition or a weak minority government could also result in elections before the four-year term is up.

Fresh elections could offer President Erdoğan the opportunity to press for constitutional reform, perhaps even arguing that a presidential system is needed to overcome the problems of coalition or minority governments. But equally, other parties could argue for their own constitutional reforms, for instance on the 10% threshold for parliamentary representation.

In the event of fresh elections, a small slip in support for the HDP could see it falling below the 10% threshold and losing all its seats. The AKP would be the main beneficiary.

¹⁴ [‘Coalition or minority gov’t: What’s next in Turkish politics?’](#), *Hurriyet*, 8 June 2015

¹⁵ [‘Turkey’s possible post-election scenarios’](#), *Reuters*, 8 June 2015

3. Outlook

Turkey appears to be heading for a summer of uncertainty, as the parties debate their results and discuss options behind closed doors. Either coalition or a minority government is likely to be more inward-looking than the confident majority AKP government of the last 13 years, so progress on EU accession, for example, is unlikely to pick up. Investors are likely to shy away from the uncertainty, further challenging Turkey's economy.

Elections in the near to medium term are likely, even if a government is formed this summer.

President Erdoğan's actions are likely to be pivotal. If he decides to continue with his presidential ambitions, his calculations could inform the AKP's position on negotiating a coalition or a minority government. Or it could be in his interests for no coalition to emerge. He could then call fresh elections and present himself as a conciliatory President, seeking only those reforms that would deepen Turkish democracy. But there is no guarantee that fresh elections would return the AKP to the power it has recently enjoyed.

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