

Position Papers

Turkish Government Crisis Makes Early Elections a Reality

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The Turkish parliament, seen here, has been unable to form a coalition government post June 2015 elections, meaning the country will go to early elections in the next three months [Umit Bektas/Reuters]

Abstract

Following the results of the recent parliamentary election in Turkey, efforts by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the centre-left Republican People's Party (CHP) to form a coalition government failed. An alliance between the AKP and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) seems unlikely because, among other reasons, the latter is connected to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) this week also rejected the idea of a coalition with the AKP. Turkey is thus set for early elections in October or November.

Introduction

On Thursday, 13 August, after a short meeting between Ahmet Davutoglu, the Turkish Prime Minister and leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and Kemal Kilicdaroglu, leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Davutoglu announced the collapse of talks between the parties to form a coalition government. Following several weeks of marathon negotiations, last week's meeting was expected to be decisive. Three days earlier, Davutoglu had met Kilicdaroglu for more than four hours to attempt to bridge the earlier gap. The leaders had agreed to meet again after briefing their respective leadership councils. It is now clear that it was impossible to bridge the gap.

Within hours of the announcement, the Turkish lira fell to its lowest level against the US dollar in more than a decade, and the Turkish stock index fell significantly. This week,

after a meeting between Davutoglu and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli, the MHP also rejected a coalition with the AKP. Clearly, Turkey faces a political crisis. This paper addresses the following questions: Why did the negotiations for a coalition government with the CHP fail, despite the climate of optimism? And where is Turkey headed politically, considering that the only certainty now seems to be another parliamentary election?

Possibility of coalition government

Between 1960 and 2002, Turkey experienced twenty coalition governments, with the longest lasting three and a half years. The last was from 1999 to 2002 when the Democratic Left Party, led by Bülent Ecevit, failed to obtain the majority that would qualify it to rule independently; it therefore formed a coalition with the MHP and the Motherland Party. However, the legacy of coalition governments has not always been positive or reassuring. On the contrary, they have been overwhelmingly unstable and not reflective of good governance. Some dragged the country into complex economic and political crises, while others led to military intervention.

After nearly thirteen years of political stability under the AKP, the current need for a coalition government resulted from the AKP failing to achieve a sufficient majority in the June parliamentary election, which could have allowed it to govern on its own. The ruling AKP won forty-one per cent of the vote, giving it 258 seats in the new parliament – eighteen seats less than a parliamentary majority. The CHP won twenty-five per cent of the vote (132 seats), the MHP received seventeen per cent (eighty seats), and the HDP thirteen per cent (eighty seats). Clearly, the Turkish people wanted to send a message of protest to the AKP, which had appeared confident of victory, and whose leaders and cadres had become accustomed to winning at low cost.

The main change (and surprise) in the election was the success of the pro-Kurdish HDP – which contested elections for the first time – after it crossed the critical ten per cent threshold necessary to enter parliament. With the HDP getting eighty seats, it is more difficult for the AKP to obtain half of the seats in the Turkish parliament. The HDP's resounding success was not only because of Kurdish voters, but also because of the votes of many non-Kurds who sought to prevent the AKP from obtaining a parliamentary majority. Without this majority, the AKP cannot govern alone, nor is it allowed to draft a new constitution – one of the objectives of the AKP in its attempt to change the political system to a presidential one.

On 9 July, after new members of parliament were sworn in and after the election of the parliamentary speaker, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan requested Davutoglu, as leader of the largest parliamentary bloc, to form a government. Constitutionally, a government must be formed within forty-five days. If the party requested by the president to do so fails to form a government comprising a sufficient parliamentary majority, the president must declare new parliamentary elections within ninety days thereafter. Thus, the deadline to form a new government would be 23 August, and given the unlikelihood that talks would result in a coalition government in the next three days, it is quite clear the country is headed for early elections.

Why coalition-building attempts failed

Davutoglu's efforts to form a coalition government included meeting with leaders of the other three parties. Given links between the HDP and the PKK, which the Turkish state regards as a terrorist group, and that the HDP's position on the Kurdish peace process and disarmament of the PKK is unclear, the option of forming a coalition government with the HDP was not initially on the table for the AKP, and the HDP had also indicated that it would not entertain such an option.

Furthermore, the MHP was unwilling to join a coalition government and preferred new parliamentary elections, hoping that new elections will result in the exit of the HDP from parliament. The Kurdish question occupies a central place in the MHP's platform. It opposes the Kurdish peace process and negotiations conducted by the AKP government with Kurdish leaders, especially PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. The MHP demands an end to the process and seeks, instead, to crush what they call the "terrorists and Kurdish separatists". This issue thus prevented the MHP and AKP coming together because of the AKP government's engagement in the peace process.

The AKP's only choice, therefore, was a coalition with the CHP. However, there are substantial differences between the two parties, in terms of both domestic and foreign policies. The parties formed delegations for detailed policy discussions. Although their meetings took place in an atmosphere of optimism and were marked by a desire for convergence, their views on education and foreign policy were too divergent. The CHP wanted the education portfolio in a future government, and expressed its intention to make radical changes in the structure of the educational process and in the curricula. It also wants radical change in Turkish policy towards Syria, Egypt and Israel – seeking Turkey's withdrawal from the Middle East in favour of a greater involvement in Europe.

For the AKP, the divergence between the parties' positions widened to the extent that it believed a stable coalition government to be unachievable. Davutoglu thus proposed a short-term coalition government to the CHP leader, who rejected the proposal, leading ultimately to the collapse of the talks, with no hope for a new round.

The Erdogan factor

The CHP's explanation for the failure of the talks differed significantly from the AKP's, however. Kilicdaroglu and other party leaders placed the greatest responsibility for the collapse of negotiations on Erdogan. The CHP argues that Erdogan continues to exercise considerable influence in the AKP, and that he does not want a coalition government because such a government would end the extra-constitutional role he is seeking. Erdogan's only opportunity to continue doing so, or to revive the project for a new constitution, is early elections. The president hopes new elections will give the AKP the majority it lost in June, and thus allow it to govern alone. The CHP, supported by the liberal-secular media, claims that Erdogan encouraged the recent sudden escalation in the confrontation with the PKK – inside Turkey and in Iraq – as a means of restoring the popular support lost by the AKP.

Erdogan was open, especially in his own circles, about his desire for new elections. His close associates have said that the June results convinced him of the need for a presidential system. Erdogan believes the presidential system is most suitable for this phase in Turkey's history, and that it would protect the country from a descent to instability or uncertainty, as created by the June election. He referred to the presidential system in a speech on 14 August, after the collapse of AKP-CHP talks.

However, even before the announcement that AKP-CHP talks had failed, it seemed negotiations were on track to certain failure, irrespective of Erdogan's influence within the AKP or his desire for early elections. The problem was not only related to the parties' diverse ideological and cultural backgrounds, but also to the strategic nature of the issues in dispute. The AKP regards the educational system founded in 2011 as a huge legislative achievement of its administration. Accepting structural changes to the educational system would mean abandoning one of the party's most important visions for Turkey's future. Further, no AKP leader will accept CHP demands for strategic change in Turkish foreign policy, particularly regarding Syria, and in the Arab world as a whole.

Future of the crisis

In his media conference, Davutoglu did not refer to early elections unequivocally or decisively, but as only a possibility. The Turkish media were quick to point out that elections were inevitable after the talks had failed. In reality, Turkey still faces two paths: another attempt to form a government within the next three days – regardless of whether it is a coalition or a minority government, or early elections.

Immediately after his announcement of failed talks with the CHP, Davutoglu requested a meeting with MHP chairperson Devlet Bahçeli, who agreed. The meeting, a last-ditch attempt by the prime minister to form a coalition government, took place on Monday, 17 August, and Davutoglu proposed an AKP-MHP coalition. Bahçeli refused. He insisted on various MHP positions: that talks with the PKK must end (though in reality they have, after Turkish attacks on the PKK in the middle of August); that Erdogan and his family must be investigated for corruption; and that Erdogan's aspirations for a presidential system must be curbed. He also said his party opposed any amendment to the first four articles of the constitution – which include clauses about Turkey as a secular state, and states that Turkey's language is Turkish (thus denying language rights to Kurds and other linguistic minorities).

Davutoglu indicated that he would consult with the president before resigning his position as prime minister. Erdogan will have to call new elections, to take place within ninety days from his announcement, and will have to agree with the parliamentary speaker on the establishment of a caretaker government, in which all parties in parliament will be represented proportionally. The HDP's participation in such a government will cause great dissatisfaction to the MHP, which has rejected the participation of Kurdish nationalists in any government. How the two parties will cooperate in a caretaker government remains to be seen. It is possible that the MHP will refuse to exercise its right to join the interim structure.

Expectations

The question now is whether the election will significantly change the proportions of seats in parliament, and whether it will open the way for the AKP to attain a parliamentary majority. Some recent polls indicate that the AKP will receive just over forty-four per cent of the vote – up from forty-one in June, giving it a small parliamentary majority, but insufficient for it to form a government. Opinion polls, of course, do not always provide a definite indication of trends in public opinion in

democratic systems. Also, opinions can easily change in ninety days, particularly given rapidly changing dynamics in Turkey and surrounding countries.

Those who argue that the new election will benefit the AKP suggest that Turkish voters wanted to send a warning to the AKP, but that the message was too strong. Thus, a large number of those voters, concerned about instability and a resurgence of violence in the conflict with the PKK will return to vote for the AKP. A number of AKP voters switched to the HDP and MHP, some because they believed the AKP had not gone far enough in negotiations with the PKK; others because they opposed those negotiations.

The other view argues that even if the election does not provide an adequate parliamentary majority for the AKP, it will emphasise to all parties that future governance in the country will require coalitions, and that parties must abandon political manoeuvring in their negotiations with each other, and seriously work to form coalitions. The problem with the AKP not receiving a clear majority, however, is that the current stalemate will likely be repeated after another election, laying the ground for an even more serious political crisis.

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