

Report

Turkey's 7 June 2015 General Election: Significance versus Narrative

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5 June 2015





Turkish security officer secures the area on an elevated platform as Turkey's president delivers his speech in Istanbul [AP]

Abstract

The electoral outcome of Turkey's upcoming general elections is set to bear a significant impact on the country's state structure, the governing AK Party's internal progress, the makeup of a new constitution, the changing of the political system, and the development of the Kurdish Peace Process. Few elections in any democracy can match the upcoming Turkish general elections in terms of possible repercussions. In spite of this, both the government and the opposition have failed to situate these issues within a bigger picture and make them components of a compelling narrative that people can relate to. The highly publicized change of the political system from a parliamentary to a presidential system is just one of many action items on the electoral agenda, accounting for the people's apathy towards it. Like the election itself, this proposal can only gain significance and become relevant for people when it is situated within a bigger picture and a compelling narrative. Though the stakes are high for all parties and Turkey at large in the upcoming election, there are no narratives being advanced that resonates with people's emotions and aspirations.

Introduction

Turkey has been gripped by election fever uninterrupted since late 2013, with three important consecutive elections. This cycle began with the local elections on 30 March 2014, and continued with the presidential elections on 10 August 2014, and will come to an end with the upcoming general elections scheduled for 7 June 2015. The result of each election has not been thought of separately. Rather, each election's significance has been judged by the result it produces and what it entails for the election coming after it. As a result of these elections, the political climate was tense prior to the local elections of 30 March 2014 - the first round - and has steadily decreased at each successive

election since then. The political picture has become clearer as to who the winner is and who is likely to be in subsequent elections.

The significance of this election

The upcoming general elections are the last round of Turkey's 'triad election' that began in March 2014. This election cycle has been one of the main factors that have accounted for the growing political polarization of the country, as all parties believe that once this election cycle is completed, Turkey will have an election-free, for four years. Expectations are that during the electoral respite, the governing party will be free from electoral pressure to pursue its political agenda as it pleases, with the possible exception of a referendum on changing the political system. All political parties have geared their political calculations towards this election, having invested significant time and energy into the selection of candidates, political programmes and broader campaign strategies.

The agenda of the June general election

For different parties, this election has different meanings. However, the issue of changing the political system from a parliamentary to a presidential system overshadows all other issues. In a sense, this election serves as an early referendum on the changing of the political system. Whereas the governing AK party - but primarily President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan - is campaigning for a change of political system, all other opposition parties oppose such a change. Even within the governing camp, no other group or figures can match Erdoğan in terms of advocating for systemic change. Erdoğan is a risk taker. Over the last 12 years, his career at the helm of the AK Party has demonstrated that he has won each time he took a risk. But this time is qualitatively different from his previous experiences. It is not only that all opposition parties are set against changing the system: some of the governing AK party and Erdoğan's Islamist-conservative social base are not yet fully convinced of the necessity of such a change, especially if this change comes at a significant cost. This is one of the reasons that Erdoğan has not waited for the upcoming election to be completed before he goes to the public. Instead, he has decided to take matters into his own hands and begin campaigning for the changing of the political system in relation to the political parties' campaigns for the upcoming elections.

As a consequence, the creation of a new constitution is also on the agenda of the upcoming elections. For Turkey's democratic civilian politics, setting forth a new constitution has been a century-old dream that remains unfulfilled. As such, it has acquired a psychological dimension and serves as a litmus test to assert the potency and primacy of civilian politics. Furthermore, the Kurdish peace process is another hot item on the agenda for the upcoming elections. Nevertheless, both the AK Party and the pro-

Kurdish People Democracy Party (HDP), who are peace partners, are downplaying the salience of the process in their election campaigns for different reasons. On the one hand, the governing AK Party, but primarily Erdoğan, believes that it has to appeal to nationalist voters besides its conservative Islamist base, if the change of the system is to be put to a referendum, and therefore it avoids taking actions that might alienate this segment of voters.(1) On the other hand, fashioning itself as Turkey's genuine left wing party, the HDP is trying to avoid emphasising Kurds and Kurdish themes in order not to be seen as solely a pro-Kurdish ethnic oriented party, since they are convinced that in order to overcome the 10 percent election threshold they need to receive votes from Turkish leftists and liberals too.(2) That accounts for the HDP's relatively minimal criticism of Erdoğan's increasingly nationalist rhetoric on the Kurdish issue. Finally, this is the first election that the AK party has entered without Erdoğan formally being at the helm of the party since 2002. Therefore, whether the new leadership and elites like it or not, this election will also be regarded as a test for them too. The opposition regards this as an opportunity to dent the AK Party's aura of invincibility.

What has the election process thus far revealed?

A) The victory of identity politics

Since the birth of modern Turkey, one of the primary political-social battles has fought over the identity of the country. This battle has been the source of many of Turkey's ills. The identity of the country, chosen by the founding fathers of the republic, composed of elements of 'Turkishness', laicism, and Western orientation, also formed the ideology of the Kemalist establishment.(3) The military-led Kemalist establishment regarded the protection of this ideology as its primary prerogative. It regarded any manifestation of a counter identity as a threat, and hence sought to stifle it before it became fully developed in the public sphere. The military-led bureaucratic elites' reading of Turkey's identity and their perception of it being their duty to preserve it formed the ideological foundation for the establishment of Turkey's tutelary regime.(4) During the majority of republican history, mainstream politics has refrained from dealing with the demands of these different identity groups and left the representatives of these identities off their candidate lists for elections. From the early 1990s onwards, this picture started to gradually change. But in no election has such a change been clearer than in this upcoming general election.

In this election, fielding candidates with different identity backgrounds has become a matter of prestige for the main political parties. Three out of four political parties represented in parliament nominated minority candidates - not just Kurdish, Alevi, and Islamist candidates but also Armenians and Greeks too. The pro-Kurdish HDP also

fielded Ezidi and Assyrian candidates too.(5) Aside from the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), all the main parties have applauded Turkey's ethnic, cultural and religious diversity in their election manifestos as well. As expected, the pro-Kurdish HDP went the farthest in this respect. But the governing AK Party has been very clear in its election manifesto on this account too. It pledged that "the new constitution will recognize Turkey's cultural and societal diversity and in its definition of citizenship, it will not make any reference to any ethnic or religious identity."(6) This stands in stark contrast to Turkey's previous citizenship clause that regarded all citizens of Turkey as (ethnic) Turks, which received much criticism, primarily from Kurds, but also from other segments of society.

This constitutes a clear rupture with the past, where mainstream parties sought to avoid fielding candidates with different backgrounds in order not to attract the wrath of the Kemalist establishment. The promotion of different ethnic, religious or cultural identities in party programs or manifestos was sufficient cause for their closure. In fact, no other justifications were cited as much as identity-related justifications for the closure of political parties in Turkey.(7) Travelling from the avoidance of different identities to appreciation and promotion of them in political sphere represents a clear victory for identity politics in Turkey.

B) The salience of the economy in the opposition's election agenda

For the first time, 'anti-Erdoğanism'(8) or an anti-AK Party stance has not been the defining character of all the opposition parties' election manifestos and platforms. Instead, though in a populist manner, the Republican People Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and even the pro-Kurdish HDP have emphasised economic issues much more extensively in their election pledges and manifestos. This is something to be expected in a normal capitalist democracy. Yet, given Turkey's political history since the AK Party first came to power in 2002, such an approach represents a novelty for the opposition. Several factors seem to account for such a change.

First, one can plausibly argue that this change of political style and content is the result of opposition's political learning. Over the last 12 years, the governing AK Party has won every single election that it contested with an economy-focused, proactive and positive agenda, whereas Turkey's opposition, with its political platform reduced primarily to anti-Erdoganism/AK Partyism, has lost all the elections that it has participated in. The opposition appears to have drawn a conclusion from this picture; voters prefer an economy focused proactive agenda over an ideology driven, reactive and negative agenda. Therefore, the opposition is trying to beat the AK Party by mimicking its style of politics.

Second, the opposition recognises the fact that as Turkey has dramatically changed in many respects over the last 12 years, fighting the ideological battles of the bygone era does not appeal to voters.

Third, the opposition has come to grips with the reality that it cannot become a viable alternative for power or sustain its support base if it solely repeats the same trite lines of anti-AK Party/'Erdoğanism' in each election instead of advancing a vision and a credible program for the country.

Fourth, public surveys have encouraged opposition parties to venture more into the economic sphere in order to attract voters' support as the public's economic dissatisfaction increases in relative terms. A recent survey found that 48 percent of voters expressed a negative view of the country's economic performance.⁽⁹⁾ This figure stood at 24 percent in 2013 and 30 percent in 2014.⁽¹⁰⁾ These figures appear to have convinced the opposition that conditions are ripe for launching economy-focused election campaigns.

An election without a narrative

Despite the significance of this election, in comparison to Turkey's previous elections, this election generates less excitement and fails to offer a compelling narrative.⁽¹¹⁾ Almost all of Turkey's elections since 2002 have had a narrative that has resonated with people. The governing AK Party was more pro-active in constructing the narratives of these elections. In contrast, opposition parties were reactive and portrayed these narratives as threatening. As a result, some strongly related themselves to this narrative and supported it, whilst others regarded the election story as threatening and strongly rejected it. These narratives have had a positive effect on people's behaviour and motivated them to go to the polls. The fact that the average turnout has increased in every general election since 2002 only testifies to the power of such narrative. The average turnout in 2002, 2007 and 2011 stood respectively at 79, 84, and 87 percent. This is the same for local elections.⁽¹²⁾ Since the governing AK Party first came to power in 2002, the average participation rate has steadily increased, from 76 percent in 2004, to 85% in 2009 and 89% in 2014. Yet, this trend experienced a stark reversal on the 10 August 2014 presidential election, in which the electoral turnout stood at approximately 74 percent.⁽¹³⁾ This relative decline in electoral participation is likely to continue in the upcoming elections on June 7.⁽¹⁴⁾ Many factors account for the relative public disinterest in these elections, but the lack of a compelling and convincing narrative put forward by all political parties, and especially the governing AK Party, appear to play a major role in the emergence of this scene. A review of the narratives used in Turkey's

previous general elections reveals that the upcoming general election lacks a resonating narrative that animates and appeals to people.

The elections of 3 November 2002 had a massive effect on Turkey's political scene, as the public voted out all incumbent political parties and voted in the newly established AK Party as a single party government. The narrative of this election showed that people rejected the status quo and old style politics and would rather vote in the representatives of a new style of politics. In another words, this election was cast in the lexicon of the victory of a new and responsive politics over the old and decadent politics. Turkey entered the 22 July 2007 general election with competition between civilian politicians and the military over the selection of Turkey's next president. In 2007, Turkey's then secular president, Ahmet Nejdet Sezer, came to an end of his seven year stint in the presidential office. The Turkish parliament was set to vote to select a new president to replace him. When it became clear that the former foreign minister Abdullah Gul of the AK Party would succeed him as the next president, the Turkish military intervened by issuing a threatening memorandum against the presidency of an 'spuriously laic' figure. This intervention was a clear demonstration of the military's undue influence over meddling in democratic civilian politics. In response, the governing AK Party did not bow to this threat, and instead called for an early general election in which it emerged victorious and subsequently selected Abdullah Gul as president. This election's narrative affirmed the primacy of civilian, democratic politics over the military and other unaccountable tutelary forces in the system.

Having emerged stronger from this election, the AK Party actively embarked on a struggle against the civil-military bureaucratic guardianship system which had crippled Turkey's democracy and civilian politics since the military coup in 1960. The active phase of this struggle lasted until 2010's constitutional referendum, in which the AK Party devised and spearheaded constitutional amendments that were approved by almost 58 percent of popular votes. The result of this referendum was seen as a decisive victory for civilian politics over the military-led tutelage system. With the defeat of the civil-military bureaucratic establishment and the further boosting of its self-confidence in the background, the AK Party entered the 2011 general election with the promise of building a 'new' Turkey. Believing that its struggle was primarily aimed at deconstructing the undemocratic civil-military tutelary structure, the establishment of a "new" Turkey, though ambiguous and fuzzy, became the party's primary narrative in the 2011 general elections. All these narratives from previous elections were powerful, and generated excitement among AK Party supporters and displeasure among their opponents. It also motivated people to go to the polls and associate themselves with the party's narratives.

Possible implications

The possible repercussions of this election are largely based upon the performance of the pro-Kurdish HDP. The HDP's failure or success in passing the 10 percent election threshold will lead to very different scenarios. In case of failure, the AK Party will be the main beneficiary of the HDP's misfortune, acquiring the vast majority of potential HDP seats. In this scenario, it will acquire sufficient seats to place the changing of Turkey's political system to a referendum, which requires the approval of at least 330 out of 550 MPs in parliament. However, even in this scenario, the AK Party is unlikely to acquire enough seats to make the necessary constitutional amendments within parliament without a referendum, which requires the assent of 367 MPs.

In case of success, the AK Party appears to be able to gain enough seats to continue with single party governance. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that it will receive sufficient electoral support either to amend the constitution within the parliament or to put this proposal to a referendum. HDP's electoral performance will bear significant impact on the course of the Kurdish Peace Process and the makeup of a new constitution. Therefore, Turkey's three most important action items for the elections, is to set up a new constitution, amend Turkey's political system, and develop the Kurdish Peace Process. These are all are dependent on the HDP's electoral success.

Conclusion

The electoral outcome of Turkey's upcoming general elections is set to bear a significant impact on the country's state structure, the governing AK Party's internal progress, the makeup of a new constitution, the changing of the political system, and the development of the Kurdish Peace Process. Few elections in any democracy can match the upcoming general elections in terms of its possible repercussions. In spite of this, both the government and the opposition have failed to situate these items into a bigger picture and make them components of a compelling narrative that people can relate to. The highly publicized change of the political system from a parliamentary to a presidential system stands as just one of many issues on the electoral agenda. This accounts for people's apathy towards it. Like the election itself, this proposal can only gain significance and become relevant for people when it is situated within a bigger picture and a compelling narrative.

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Endnotes

1. Erdogan has recently announced on several accounts that "there is no longer a Kurdish problem in Turkey, but our Kurdish brothers and sisters have problems." See, "Erdogan: There is no Kurdish 'problem' in Turkey", Anadolu Agency, 23 March 2015, <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/482533--erdogan-there-is-no-kurdish-problem-in-turkey> (Accessed: 08 May 2015)

2. Pro-Kurdish HDP emphasizes left-wing themes with broader appeal. It purposefully avoids being seen as a solely Kurdish-issue focused party. The party's posture can be clearly seen in its election manifesto. "Buyuk Insanlik (Big Humanity)", 2015 Secim Bildirgesi, HDP, Ankara
3. To have a better understanding of place and importance of Kemalism in Turkish politics see, Sinan Ciddi, *Kemalism in Turkish Politics*, London: Routledge, 2009.
4. Hakan Yeşilova , 'Kemalism: Ideology, Tutelary Regime, and Incompatibilities' in *Turkish Journal of Politics*, Vol.1 , No. 2 (Winter 2010), pp. 37-49.
5. Galip Dalay, "Milletveki aday listelerinin siyasal anlami" (The political significance of the parties' candidate lists), *Star Acik Gorus*, 11 April 2015, <http://haber.star.com.tr/acikgorus/milletvekili-aday-listelerinin-siyasal-anlami/haber-1019896> (Accessed: 10 May 2015)
6. "Demokratikleşme ve yeni anayasal system" (Democratization and new constitutional system), 7 Haziran 2015 Genel Secimleri Secim Beyannamesi, AK Parti, April 2015, p. 37.
7. See, Galip Dalay, "Kurdish peace process: The latest phase of de-securitisation politics", *Al Jazeera*, 14 May 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/05/2013514154722778273.html> (Accessed: 11 May 2015)
8. Anti- Erdoğanism refers to a political stance taken especially by Turkey's opposition parties which reduces their political platform to mere opposition to whatever policy or political stance Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan advances.
9. Ekonomi algısı kötüleşiyor (Economic perception is deteriorating), *Aljazeera Turk*, 06 May 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/ekonomi-algisi-kotulesiyor> (Accessed: 11 May 2015)
10. Ali Çarkoğlu and et al. 'Haziran 2015 Seçimlerine Giderken Kamuoyu Dinamikleri', 5 May 2015, Center for Survey Research, Koc University.
11. See, Ali Unal's interview with Galip Dalay, "Upcoming elections in Turkey unable to advance a narrative", *Daily Sabah*, 03 May 2015, <http://www.dailysabah.com/elections/2015/05/03/upcoming-elections-in-turkey-unable-to-advance-a-narrative> (Accessed: 13 May 2015).
12. Son 12 Yılın Katılım Oranları ve 30 Mart Dağılımı (turnout rates in elections in the last 12 years and the 30 March local elections), *Bianet*, 10 August 2014, <http://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/157722-son-12-yilin-katilim-oranlari-ve-30-mart-dagilimi> (Accessed: 13 May 2015).
13. Ibid.
14. Politicians, political analysts, and experts have acknowledged the voters' apathy towards the upcoming election. For instance, President Erdoğan has openly admitted this voters' indifference towards the election and said, unless reversed, this trend may culminate in unpalatable results for the governing party on 7 June 2015. See, "Erdoğan: 7 Haziran'da sürpriz olabilir (7 June results might prove surprising)", *Radikal*, 22 May 2015, http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/erdogan_7_haziranda_surpriz_olabilir-1363421 (Accessed: 25 May 2015).