

Position Papers

Turkish Parliamentary Elections: Risks and Predictions

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The signs of upcoming parliamentary elections are clear on Turkey's streets [AlJazeera]

Abstract

Turkey's president and prime minister have not hidden the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) intention to write a new constitution which converts the system of governance from parliamentary to presidential. In some ways, the 7 June 2015 Turkish parliamentary elections, the fourth parliamentary elections the AKP will contest, will decide the future of the country's constitution and its system of governance. The most difficult factor to predict in this election has been the Kurdish vote, because the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) ran candidates as independents in the last parliamentary elections and received six per cent of the vote share. This time, the party has decided to run under its party banner, which will surely increase their vote share. The only question is how much.

Introduction

Malatya is the nearest Kurdish city to the centre of Anatolia in Turkey, and thus it is not surprising it is home to both Turks and Alawites. The city is located in the southeast of Turkey, while Diyarbakir – the centre of the Kurdish nationalist movement – is over a few hours' drive to the south. Nearly ninety per cent of Malatya residents give their votes to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), whose members hold all the parliamentary seats allocated to the city, with the exception of the one seat held by the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), which won the votes of the Alawite minority. This city, whose neighbourhoods and nearby villages spread over some of the most beautiful and most green hills of the southeast, is in fact one of the electoral strongholds of AKP. Malatya is also a centre for the Islamist trend and for Turkey's solidarity with the people of the Muslim world. Because it is very far from Ankara and Istanbul, the

intellectual and political centres of the country, Malatya can be considered one of the most politicised cities in Turkey.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in the weeks leading to the Turkish parliamentary elections of 7 June 2015, Malatya has become a venue for major panel discussions on what the elections mean. There is no threat to any of the candidates of the ruling AKP, and the results are likely to be similar to those of the previous elections. However, the most debated issue is whether the AKP will return to Parliament with a sufficient number of ministers to qualify it to propose a new constitution for the country.

Because Recep Tayyip Erdogan – the president of the republic – and a wide spectrum of the Justice and Development Party, including Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, do not hide their intention to write a new constitution that restructures the Republic's political system and transforms it into a presidential one, the clear objective of the fourth parliamentary election for the AKP is to put forward a new constitution and system of governance.

Local development issues, as is always the case in Turkey, still play a major role in determining the election results. The general economic situation of the country still plays a key role, and perhaps a significant one. The most important issue with regard to peace and security in the country, the Kurdish issue, is also important. However, because everyone realises the close connection between the results of this electoral campaign and the future of the system of governance in the country, the issue of the new constitution seems to have pushed aside all other issues and reduced their importance. This paper gives an overview of election

The numbers and their implications

The Turkish Parliament, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, comprises 550 members, and any party that captures 276 seats can form a government alone.⁽¹⁾ This has been the case for the AKP since 2002, when it first participated in the elections. However, passing a new constitution (or even a constitutional amendment) requires different calculations. In order for a constitution's final draft to be approved in Parliament, a two-thirds majority, or 367 votes, is required. In the case that three-fifths of ministers (330 total) support it, the draft passes conditionally in Parliament and would not be officially approved unless a majority of eligible voters endorses it in a referendum.

During the previous elections in 2011, AKP clinched nearly fifty per cent of the votes, the highest percentage of votes it had achieved in all parliamentary or local elections since it first came to power. However, the number of AKP deputies in Parliament was 326. (2) Then, it lost a handful of deputies who resigned from the party after a clash with the Fethullah Gulen group. Meanwhile, the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP) won twenty-six per cent of the seats, and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) won thirteen per cent of votes.(3) The two Islamic parties, the Felicity Party (FP) and Great Union Party (BBP), received two per cent of the votes combined,(4) and could not enter Parliament because the Turkish electoral system requires parties to receive at least ten per cent of the votes in order to be represented in Parliament.

The Kurdish factor was difficult to quantify in the 2011 elections because the nationalist Kurds stood for election as independent, individual candidates and won six per cent of the votes combined. At the time, the Kurds decided to take a risk and contest the elections under the banner of their party, the People's Democratic Party (HDP), in hopes of exceeding the required ten per cent mark. Running in these elections under a party banner has certainly increased their chances of winning more votes, but no one can be certain the size of the increase.

Since the 2011 parliamentary elections, Turkey has held two elections. The first were local elections in March 2014, and the second were the first direct presidential elections in August of the same year. In local elections, the AKP won forty-six per cent of the votes, while the CHP received 27.5 per cent, the MHP received fifteen per cent, the nationalist Kurds received six per cent, and the FP and the BBP received less than four per cent.(5) This means that the relative drop in the number of votes to the AKP allowed the main opposition parties to slightly increase their electoral vote share compared to what they had achieved during the 2011 parliamentary elections. In the presidential elections, Erdogan won the first round with fifty-two per cent of the vote.(6) Although the presidential elections are different from parliamentary and local ones, the success of Erdogan's victory in the first round raised a lot of interest among observers of the Turkish elections. These factors beg the question of what can be expected in these parliamentary elections. They also raise speculation about the AKP's chances at winning these elections.

Varying predictions (7)

According to an opinion poll conducted by the Denge polling company in March, with the participation of 5,000 citizens from twenty-five constituencies, the AKP could win forty-

seven per cent of the votes, while the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) could secure twenty-six per cent and 14.5 per cent of the votes, respectively. The Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), on the other hand, is expected to fail to exceed the ten per cent mark, according to the poll.

The Objective Research Center (ORC), whose predictions were the closest to the actual results in 2011 and 2014, published an opinion poll conducted between 9 and 13 April 2014. Forty-eight per cent of the participants chose the AKP, twenty-four per cent the CHP, fourteen per cent the MHP and nine per cent the pro-Kurdish HDP.

In a MAK Consultancy poll, held between 18 and 25 April in thirty-eight metropolitan cities and seventeen provinces with the participation of 5 400 eligible voters, the AKP received forty-five per cent of the votes, the CHP received twenty-five per cent and the MHP received fifteen per cent, while the HDP remained under the ten per cent threshold, receiving nine per cent of the votes.

In the latest and largest survey conducted by Denge polling company between 16 and 24 May, with more than 11,000 participants, the AKP ranked first with 44.6 per cent of the votes, while the CHP received 25.5 per cent, the MHP received 16.1 per cent and the HDP received 10.5 per cent.

Generally, most opinion polls conducted by recognised and unbiased institutions gave the AKP forty-five per cent of votes, with little variation. They also indicated that the CHP and the MHP would achieve similar results to what they had obtained in 2011 elections with little variation. Yet, polls vary greatly in estimations of the HDP's share of the votes. Because these are abstract numbers, they alone cannot provide an overall picture of the composition of the next Turkish Parliament.

Other factors to consider

Polls, then, are not the only indicators of Turkey's parliamentary future. There are several factors that must also be taken into account to predict the new parliamentary map in Turkey:

1. No party in a democratic system can consistently keep its share of the number of votes after twelve years of rule. The reality that governing exhausts rulers in democratic systems applies to Turkey as it does to other democracies.

2. Turkey is not only divided by politics. The issue of the constitution and the system of governance itself have become an additional dividing factor. Certainly, an unspecified percentage of voters may choose to vote for any of the opposition parties for the sole purpose of preventing the Justice and Development Party from obtaining a sufficient majority that will enable it to devise a new constitution and transform the system of governance.
3. In spite of the multiplicity of opinion polls conducted so far, no one can ascertain the fate of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party and whether the party will succeed in reaching the ten per cent threshold or not. Given that the Justice and Development Party ranks second in most constituencies in which the People's Democratic Party competes, the latter's success or failure in the entry to the Parliament will have a direct impact on the AKP's fortunes.
4. This final factor is one that the Prime Minister complained about in a recent speech. He said that the opposition parties seemed to be engaged in an unofficial coalition, under the slogan of "Stop the Justice and Development Party".

Scenarios

Turkish opinion polls are not known for the accuracy of their predictions, not only because of the country's ethnic and sectarian pluralism, but also because democratic traditions in the country have not yet settled. The recent elections in Britain, a country with deep-rooted traditions of measuring democratic life and public opinion, highlighted anew the fact that although politics is a science, it is not an exact one.

Generally, the democratic system is based on a purely human situation and the decision of the voter at the ballot box. And until the last minute before the polls open, there will always be a percentage of the citizens who are likely to change their mind.

In the upcoming Turkish case, generally speaking, if the People's Democratic Party (HDP) fails to receive ten per cent of the votes, and support to the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) remains in the range of the votes they won in 2011, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) will probably achieve a majority that exceeds the 330 seats in Parliament, which will enable it to pass a new draft constitution at the level of Parliament, and then seek approval through a popular referendum.

As to the possibility of the AKP winning a two-thirds majority, which will allow it to have a draft constitution approved in Parliament without the need for a referendum, it seems unlikely for now. On the other hand, in the event that the HDP fails to enter Parliament, the CHP and the MHP need to achieve significantly better results than those in 2011 in order to be able to prevent the AKP from securing a sufficient parliamentary majority that enables it to put forward a new draft constitution.

In the event that the HDP exceeds the ten per cent proportion, and the CHP and the MHP maintain a ratio that is close to what they obtained in 2011, the AKP will not probably be able to achieve a majority of 330 seats.

In the case that the HDP enters Parliament, and the CHP and the MHP succeed in significantly increasing their share of votes, the AKP will not be able to achieve a sufficient outright majority to rule alone, even if it remains the largest party in Parliament. On the other hand, in the event that the HDP fails to exceed the ten per cent threshold and enter Parliament, the CHP has to receive more than thirty per cent and the MHP more than twenty per cent of the votes to prevent the AKP from ruling alone again. It is important to note this scenario is unlikely.

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