

Report

Turkey's November 1 Repeat Elections

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Erdogan says he will not hand the duty to form a new government to another party after the PM gave up trying [Getty]

Abstract

In less than 5 months, Turkey is once again going to the ballot box for a fateful election on 1 November. The time span is too short to expect a major change in the electoral outcome of the upcoming election in comparison to the results of the 7 June election. Nevertheless, the margin that the governing AK Party needs to acquire in order to form the single party government is relatively low, around 3 percent.

It is therefore necessary to address the following questions. First, why couldn't Turkish political parties form a government after the 7 June election? Second, what has changed since then that will lead people to modify their voting behaviour? Third, what are the new items on the agenda of the 1 November election? Lastly, which new voting block are political parties targeting in this election to boost their electoral chances? After carefully examining these questions, this report will also attempt to briefly analyse future political challenges and prospects.

Introduction

Turkey's 7 June 2015 election produced a hung parliament. As this election terminated the governing AK Party's uninterrupted 13-year rule, the business of forming a coalition government was once again in play.

Given the level of polarisation, the debate over the formation of Turkey's next government was heated and impassionate. Anti-AK Party players were hopeful at first that a government excluding the AK Party could be formed. The logic went as follows: a government would be formed excluding the AK Party to settle old scores with the AK Party for alleged misconduct and hold its officials accountable for their actions. Those who shared this logic never considered what such a coalition would have in common –

and on what grounds a coalition government could be formed. Putting aside opposition to the AK Party's continuing mandate, they did not offer any credible argument for the formation of a coalition with such politically disparate political colours. This logic was flawed for having overlooked the deeply political differences between these parties. It did not take into account the conflicting demands and aspirations of their social bases. It assumed that opposition to the AK Party was sufficient to overcome the political differences between Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, for instance. From the start the most fundamental error in this line of reasoning in the elite's political projection was to plan strategy on the basis that not letting the AK Party to be the senior partner in any government would be sufficiently unifying.

Short of a coalition government constituted from all three secularist opposition parties, Republican People Party (CHP), far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and pro-Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP), all other coalition government scenarios necessitated the inclusion of the AK Party as the senior partner. Given the pre and post-election tension and ensuing conflict between the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK) and Turkey, an AK Party and HDP coalition was out of the question. The remaining options were either an AK Party and secularist CHP or an AK Party- nationalist MHP coalition government scenario. Starting from day one, the MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli ruled out any coalition options with the AK Party.⁽¹⁾ The MHP's demand for the termination of Kurdish peace process altogether, its rejection of the granting of any cultural-democratic rights to the Kurds, its problematisation of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's place in the political system, and its request that Erdogan evacuate the new presidential palace and return to the previous one made it unfit for the AK Party to form a coalition government with.

The AK Party and CHP engaged in a relatively extensive closed-door discussion on the formation of a coalition government, but to no avail. Whereas the CHP's account cited the opposition of President Erdoğan as the main reason for the failure of these coalition talks, the AK Party's account focused on differences of opinion and stance on major political issues as the main reason for the failure. This account further stressed that the talks proved the two parties' foreign and education policies were particularly irreconcilable.⁽²⁾ Moreover, the AK Party referred to the wide opposition of its social base to an AK Party-CHP coalition government as another factor in their disagreement.⁽³⁾

An additional factor -- which was less discussed but no less important -- that contributed to the failure of coalition-building efforts was the lack of necessary 'political psychology' among the political parties. The contrast could not be starker. On one side, there was the Islamist AK Party, which appeared not to be able to digest the fact that it had to share the power with other political parties after 13 years of uninterrupted rule. On the other, there was the secularist opposition, which seemed not to be in a position to

vigorously push for the creation of a coalition government. Thus the political parties could not find a common ground, much less sufficient compromise, in order to establish the country's first coalition government in over a decade.

What has changed since the June 7 election?

Turkey's 7 June election produced a political picture in which while the mainstream parties were losing ground, the identity-focused/protest parties were gaining in strength. The governing conservative AK Party saw its share of the vote falling by 9 percent when compared with the result of the last general election held in 2011. It went from approximately 50 percent to 41 percent of the vote. Though slight, the main opposition secularist CHP also saw some decline in its vote. In contrast, the representatives of Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms increased their share of the total vote. Though this increase was relatively moderate for Turkish nationalist MHP, it was spectacular for the pro-Kurdish HDP. HDP more than doubled its share of the vote. Pro-Kurdish parties traditionally hovered around 6,5 percent, but the HDP received over 13 percent of the vote in the 7 June election.

But the political picture since the 7 June suggests that there is some change in this regard. Mainstream parties are once again gaining in strength. Many polls results register declines in HDP and MHP's electoral standing. In contrast, the same polls indicate a slight upward trend for the AK Party and CHP. While dissatisfaction with the mainstream parties were one of the main reasons for the voters' swing in favour of identity-focused parties; the political uncertainty and the emerging prospect of economic instability since the 7 June election has once again turned the tide in favour of mainstream political parties who are believed to offer a better formula to these concerns than populism of the identity-driven parties.

The new items on the agenda

The return of the Kurdish question in its conflictual form⁽⁴⁾

Since 1984, when the armed conflict between the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and Turkey first broke out, the state and the PKK have engaged in fighting. Despite some lulls, this fighting has been almost continuous. Nevertheless, there seemed to be a political breakthrough in the early part of the 2013: the announcement of a peace process between Turkey and the PKK at the highest level.⁽⁵⁾ In fact, both sides had observed this peace process for almost two and half years. Turkey entered the 7 June election with a peace process, though already fragile and stalling, in the background. Yet, this two-and-a-half year cease-fire has come to an end with PKK's execution-style killing of two police officers, on 22 July 2015. The PKK claimed the two officers had links to the Suruc bombers who undertook suicide attacks against a cultural centre. On July

20, the centre in the Kurdish town of Suruc was filled with mostly left-wing youth activists.(6)

Turkey swiftly responded to this killing by conducting aerial bombing of the PKK's base and hideouts in Northern Iraq. This military response soon escalated into open conflict between the PKK and the Turkish army. The death toll from this recent conflict has already reached three-digit figures for both sides. In fact, Turkey claims that the PKK losses has already exceeded four-digit numbers. Once again, the security dimension or the conflictual phase of the Kurdish issue has dominated politics. The PKK has employed its old tactics, and supplemented them with new ones. Likewise, the government also brought to the table Turkey's erstwhile formulas to deal with the Kurdish issue: hiring thousands of village guards or Kurdish militias to fight the PKK; declaring temporary state of emergency laws in some part of the Kurdish regions of Turkey; transferring some of the power held by governors who are appointed by the civilian government to the military; intensifying its military campaign against the PKK, and using a language that risks re-securitising the Kurdish issue. These measures partially undo one of the government's major political achievements since coming to power more than a decade ago.(7)

As for the PKK, it has once again conducted a bloody campaign, not just against on-duty officers but also off-duty officers as well. It is trying to copy the tactics of its sister organisation, the Democratic Union Party's (PYD). One of PYD's strategies aim to establish a self-rule enclave in the Kurdish part of Syria in the Kurdish part of Turkey. In fact, the PKK has since the resumption of hostilities vigorously attempted to establish self-governing areas with Kurdish majority population within Turkey, but to no avail. The most obvious case in point was the PKK's drive to establish such a self-governing enclave in Cizre, a Kurdish town bordering Syria, In response, the government has placed the city under curfew . Ensuing clashes claimed the lives of many fighters as well as civilians with each side blaming the other with the responsibility for the civilian deaths.(8)

As a corollary to the military-PKK fighting, waves of anti-PKK protests were held across the country. And these protests soon morphed into mob-attacks against the Kurds. Kurdish-owned shops were arsoned, and so were the HDP's branches across the county, barring the Kurdish-majority regions of Turkey.(9) Such turn of events has increased the sense of communal solidarity amongst the Kurds. In particular, it has further swayed the Kurds' voting preferences. For instance, the pious Kurds who previously voted for the AK Party changed their vote for one reason or another in favour of the HDP in the 7 June election. It is unlikely that the AK Party will gain back the Kurdish vote that it lost to the HDP in the 7 June election in any meaningful way.

The rise in political terrorism and the debate over the “security deficit” in Turkey

Turkey is not unfamiliar with political violence. In fact, it has been experiencing it for decades. Putting aside the fight between the PKK and Turkey, in 1960-1970 period, violence by the left and right-wing activists had dominated Turkey's political scene. Yet in recent times, Turkey is experiencing a new form of political violence and terrorism. These terrorist activities, which are a direct spill-over from the Syrian crisis, pose a unique security challenge for Turkey. They introduce a new set of questions that needs to be answered. The timing of these terrorist acts, their targets, undeclared aims, and scale all shed light on the nature of threats and challenges that Turkey is facing today.

In less than half a year, Turkey has been the target of three major terrorist attacks, which are widely believed to be the work of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The first targeted the pro-Kurdish HDP's election rally, which took place on 5 June 2015 in the largest Kurdish majority city, Diyarbakir, two days before , the 7 June general election. This attack killed two and wounded hundreds.⁽¹⁰⁾ The second attack targeted a cultural centre which was hosting a meeting of left-wing and Kurdish activists. They were discussing the reconstruction of the Kurdish town of Kobane, in Northern Syria. Kobane endured over 5 months of ISIS siege and suffered a significant level of destruction as result, in the Kurdish-majority town of Suruc on 20 July 2015.⁽¹¹⁾ This attack killed at least 30 and wounded over 100 people. The third attack took place in central Ankara on 10 October 2015. Targeting a peace march organised by the Kurdish and leftist groups, this explosion claimed the lives of 102 and wounded close to 300 people, according to official accounts of the attack.⁽¹²⁾ This was the deadliest terrorist attack in Turkey's political history.

There are some common features in all three terrorist attacks. First, as stated above, all these terrorist attacks are believed to be conducted by ISIS. Besides, the fierce battle between the Kurds and ISIS in Iraq and Syria and ideological/organisational relations between the main Kurdish groups in Syria, PYD, and in Turkey, PKK , Turkey's joining of the anti-ISIS coalition and cutting a deal with the United States. The deal allows the US to use Turkey's military base to conduct operations against ISIS in Syria. This deal appears to be the motivating factor behind ISIS's attacks against the Kurds in Turkey. Second, all of the attacks targeted the Kurdish Movement; the latest two also included the left-wing groups. Third, as ISIS is seen as the perpetrator, all of these attacks are considered as a direct spill-over from the Syrian civil war. In fact, the detractors of the government were quick to portray these attacks as the result of the government's “ill-conceived Syria policy”⁽¹³⁾ and its alleged previous support for the Islamists, including ISIS. In this respect, it may be plausible to argue that change of Turkey's Syria policy in particular, and Middle East policy in general, was another target of these attacks.⁽¹⁴⁾ Fourth, these attacks had a sensitive timing, coinciding with the election, the outcome of

which they intended to influence . Fifth, as a corollary, these attacks led to major debates on the “security deficit” in Turkey. The opposition contended that the AK Party-led government was incapable of protecting people from a series of major terrorist attacks, insisting there was a “security deficit”. Stretching this argument a bit further, the opposition argued that these attacks illustrated that the AK Party was not as capable as it was before, in terms of governance. The pro-Kurdish HDP went even further by arguing that the fact that ISIS could carry out a series of attacks of that magnitude in such a short span of time without being foiled by security services attested to the fact that ISIS had some links to either the Turkish government or to the security services.

The opposition had several aims with such political manipulation of the terrorist attacks. First, by focusing on the “security deficit”, the opposition aimed to discredit the AK Party’s strong governance credentials, which was one of the major factors for its continuing electoral success for over 13 years. Second, one of the dangerous themes that has been utilised in the aftermath of these attacks was accusation of the state as being responsible for the attack against “the people”. This discourse equated state with the AK Party, hence it indirectly accused the “statist” AK Party as orchestrating such bloody attacks against the “people” in order to shore up its electoral fortune.⁽¹⁵⁾ Unless countered with the power of reason and argument, this argument can further divide Turkey’s already deeply fractured society. Third, the pro-Kurdish party, by accusing the government for implicitly either aiding or condoning these attacks, it tried to stave off any change of minds amongst the pious Kurds (previously AK Party voters) in favour of the AK Party in the upcoming election. All in all, these terrorist attacks added a new dynamic to the political debate surrounding the upcoming election.

Fiscal discipline versus election economics

In analysing the 7 June election results, the AK Party leadership denoted their economic prudence or fiscal discipline program as one of the factors that contributed into the AK Party’s electoral decline. In it they did not make populist economic offers to different segments of the public,. Prior to this election, while the opposition parties made generous and probably unsustainable economic offers to the voters, including but not limited to increasing the salaries of the pensioners and significantly raising the minimum wage, the AK Party stuck to its fiscal discipline and did not make any such promises. This did not go well with some sections of the voting population. In this election, the AK Party also adopted election-specific economics.⁽¹⁶⁾ It is offering salary increases for certain groups of public workers and pensioners. It has pledged to increase the monthly minimum wage to 1300 Turkish Lira per month. It has promised to add 1200 Turkish Lira annually to the earnings of all pensioners.⁽¹⁷⁾ On top of all of this, It is promising to hire more people for certain public occupations. It remains to be seen whether this election-oriented economic policy, unlike the fiscal discipline that was in place prior to

the June 7 election, will shore up the AK Party's electoral standing. If the previous election is a benchmark to go by, it should help the AK Party to recover some of its lost votes, though the level of this recovery might be minimal.

The youth factor

The more the AK Party is seen as a statist party and its leaders as adopting an domineering language, the less it appeals to the voting youth. In fact, the AK Party's popularity amongst young people is significantly declining. This has been recognised by the party leadership with Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu defining this trend as a cause of grave concern for himself. In the last election, of the four parties represented in the parliament, the AK Party received the least votes from the new voters according to the polling firms. Having this in mind, the AK Party has striven to alter this trend. In its election manifesto and in the party chairman Davutoglu's speeches, the AK Party has allocated a significant section of its effort towards wooing the youth. It makes many socio-economic promises to this constituency. For instance, it pledges that it will provide marriage support (financial), student dormitory for all students who need it, unlimited free internet access, free access to healthcare, down payment of up to 50000 Turkish Lira for the ones that aim to set up their own business as a subsidy, among other incentives.⁽¹⁸⁾

The party, but especially the Prime Minister and the party's youth branch, are attempting to use social media more vigorously to reach out to the people. For instance, beside election rallies and TV appearances, Davutoglu has used a Facebook session to try to engage the youth, share with them the AK Party's vision for young citizens, and respond to their questions and concerns.

The glaring absence of debates on the presidential system

Prior to 7 June election, the major debate in Turkey was whether Turkey should keep its parliamentary political system or change it to an executive presidency as desired by the AK Party, but particularly the president, Erdogan. The presidency formed the central theme of almost all political parties. While the governing AK Party contended that Turkey needed to change its political system from the current parliamentary system to executive presidency, the opposition was united in its rejection of such a change. Instead, they argued this move was intended to pave the way for one-man rule, i.e. Erdogan's rule, over the country. They feared Turkey would inevitably become an authoritarian state if this were to happen. In this regard, the 7 June election can be plausibly portrayed as a referendum on the form of political system, particularly the presidency. The AK Party's loss of single party government was seen to some extent as people's rejection of change to the political system. Against this background, the AK

Party dropped the presidency as its central theme for the 1 November repeat election. Instead, it focuses on the political instability and economic uncertainty that will result if unstable coalition government returns back to Turkey. Hence, the AK Party focuses on the theme of “stability”, “economic prosperity”, and “political predictability” in this election.

In this respect, this election is less of a referendum on the presidential system and Erdogan. Instead, the major narrative of this election is whether Turkey should continue to be ruled by a single party, in this case an AK Party-led government or by an AK Party-led coalition government.

Which new voters' blocs are the parties targeting?

Since the parties, but particularly the governing AK Party, have opted for a repeat election instead of a coalition government, it is necessary, firstly, to probe the possibilities of a different outcome as expected by some political parties. Secondly, which new voter blocs are they appealing to in order to boost their electoral standing? The AK Party seems to hope that it will increase its vote by appealing primarily to three categories of voters: the voters who, for one reason or another, did not go to vote in the 7 June election (the AK Party believes would-be AK Party voters were disproportionately represented in this category); the voters who are fearful of the prospect of unstable coalition governments that cause political instability and economic uncertainty; and previous AK-Party voters who switched to the MHP in the 7 June election and who have become disillusioned with the party and its leader's performance. Though the AK Party lost the bulk of its vote to the pro-Kurdish HDP, the party has little hope of gaining them back due to the stalled peace process and intensification of the conflict between the PKK and Turkey.

The main opposition secularist CHP seems to target two primary groups to boost its election outcome on 1 November. First, it tries to woo back some of Turkey's liberals and leftists who voted for the HDP in order to kill the prospect of Erdogan's executive presidency. This group is believed to figure between 1 - 2 percent in HDP's total vote, which is over 13 percent. Secondly, it aims to capitalise on the Turkish nationalist MHP's lacklustre performance by appealing to its more secularist-leaning social base. Its chance of making inroads into the AK Party's constituency is limited. In contrast, both the MHP and HDP are striving to cling on to the level of support that they received in the 7 June election, respectively over 16 and 13 percent. In order to do so both want to capitalise on the stalled peace process. While the MHP wants to whip up the nationalist sentiments by pointing out to the intensification of the violence resulting from the conflict between the PKK and Turkey, and portrays the whole process as treason, the HDP blames the derailment of the peace process on the AK Party and particularly Erdogan. Moreover, it

portrays the AK Party-led Turkey as hell-bent on not allowing Syrian Kurds to establish their own autonomous region and gain a bigger say in the future of Syria. By pursuing such a strategy, the HDP tries to make sure that the AK Party will not be able to steal back some of the Kurdish votes that it had lost to the HDP in the 7 June elections. While “we are the only force that can stop Erdogan from becoming executive president of Turkey” theme was one of the themes that vigorously utilised by the HDP to appeal to the Turkish liberals and leftists prior to the 7 June election, the value and the usage of this theme is considerably lower in this election given that the debate over executive presidency is not at the centre of the upcoming election.

Conclusion

In less than 5 months, Turkey is once again going to the polls for a fateful election. The time span is too short to expect a major change in the electoral outcome of the upcoming election in comparison to the results of the 7 June election. Nevertheless, the margin that the governing AK Party needs to acquire in order to form a single party government is relatively low, around 3 percent. The polls register some increase in the AK Party's vote. But this increase is yet to reach the level needed by the AK Party to acquire the simple majority needed to form government in its own right. Irrespective of whether the AK Party gains the simple majority, Turkey will have a government, be it single party or coalition government, in the aftermath of 1 November election. Turkey is unlikely to opt for another election soon, hence the question of the government will be restored to a functional condition. However, sorting out the question of the government might not mean fixing the question of governance. This is the real challenge that awaits Turkey after the November 1 election.

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