

Turkey's new election: War or peace?

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Turkey is headed to its second parliamentary election in five months with snap polls slated for November 1. The election will take place in a highly charged atmosphere with escalating violence and financial volatility. The renewed conflict between Turkey and the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is spreading throughout the country with the rise of ethnic tensions posing a big threat to internal harmony. Even a peace rally in the capital Ankara was hit by suicide bombers marking the deadliest terror attack in Turkey's history. Turkey, which has always been the most stable country in a turbulent region, risks its security being seriously jeopardised unless the violence is urgently stopped and the political ambiguity is ended through a stable government.

Aftermath of June 7

The June 7 parliamentary elections failed to deliver a fourth term as a single party government to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the country was left with a hung parliament. The success of Selahattin Demirtas, the co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which passed Turkey's high 10-percent electoral threshold to enter the parliament, pulled the rug from under the AKP, while also trouncing Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's goal of creating an executive presidency that would have given him unprecedented powers.

Efforts to form a coalition government failed despite long talks between the AKP and the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP). While the CHP showed flexibility on several issues, the AKP took a much harder line. Furthermore, Erdogan broke with political custom and refused to offer the CHP the mandate to try and form a coalition. This would seem to indicate that Erdogan preferred to gamble Turkey's political and economic stability by calling for new snap elections in the hope of changing the results of the previous election.

Celebrations among Turkey's Kurdish community were short-lived. In the aftermath of the election, the HDP began to pay a hefty price for its success. The party was accused by the AKP and Erdogan of supporting the PKK with Demirtas accused of having links to terrorist groups. Moreover, anti-HDP rhetoric has risen as a result of a strategy of targeting nationalist voters. The AKP lost a significant number of conservative and Islamist Kurdish voters to the HDP on June 7 and replacing them with nationalist voters has become a priority. This has resulted in a harsh political rivalry between the AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) through the Kurdish issue and HDP. Furthermore, the HDP's success did not only bother other political parties but also the PKK's leadership, which viewed the political rise of HDP and the peace process as the end of their influence. In this sense, HDP has been forced to carry out a delicate balancing act.

What's next?

The HDP will once again play a key role in the snap elections, but increasing violence in majority Kurdish populated cities may create problems in terms of election security and turnout. Moreover, the party may lose some of its new Turkish electorate as a result of the increasing PKK attacks. The Turkish electorate has given the party more legitimacy in Turkish politics, but they could cease their support due to the rising violence. However, this could also be an historical opportunity for the party to distance itself from the PKK and terror. This seems to be a big challenge for many members of the HDP.

While some leading figures of the party, such as Leyla Zana, the Sakharov-prize-winning Kurdish woman politician, are openly calling for an end to the violence, the party does not seem to totally distance itself from the PKK. Additionally, calls from some HDP mayors in Turkey's southeast for autonomy have increased the concerns among many Turks.

The AKP wants to regain a majority on November 1, and will be hoping that the recent increase in attention from the EU, including the visit by German Chancellor Angela Merkel to Turkey, as a consequence of the crucial role Turkey has in finding a solution to the Syrian refugee crisis, will help boost the party's ratings. However, recent polls suggest that the outcome may not be that different from the June election, potentially ushering in another hung parliament. Maintaining a majority is a very strategic issue for the future of the AKP and Erdogan because all coalition options, with or without the AKP will have a direct impact on Erdogan's role in Turkey's governance.

So much at stake

AKP's failure to secure a simple majority would also bring about the re-opening of the corruption files against senior AKP members. Indeed, this is another reason explaining the failure of coalition talks following the June 7 elections. With so much at stake, it comes as no surprise that despite the impartiality principle in the constitution, Erdogan, as he did in June, has championed the AKP in the election campaign. If the AKP manages to push the HDP below 10 percent, or increases its votes substantially and takes a majority and sweeps back into government, Erdogan could once again push to exercise broad executive powers from his mostly ceremonial office, and a further deterioration in freedoms and civil liberties, which are already under considerable pressure, is likely. If the results mirror those of June, it may force AKP and CHP to form a "grand coalition" by giving certain concessions. The dialogue established between the chairmen of the two parties in the post June 7 election is a positive sign in this sense.

However, a stable four-year coalition seems highly unlikely. In the event the coalition talks fail and Turkey is faced with a political deadlock and increased instability as a result of Erdogan's non-constructive approach, some moderate figures within AKP may leave and form a separate political group. This group may be led by Ali Babacan, the former deputy prime minister responsible for the economy in coordination with Abdullah Gul, the former president. The formation of such a group could also bring about different coalition options as well as an alternative for the central right electorate of AKP in next elections. Surely there is also a chance that Erdogan will push for yet another election in the spring. Hence, Turkey may need to wait for at least one more election for the normalisation of Turkish political scene.

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