

The AKP rebooted – What next for Turkey?

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The Justice and Development Party (AKP) [scored a huge victory](#) in Turkey's snap general elections on 1 November, increasing its vote over the June 7 elections by almost 9 percentage points to just over 49 percent (317 out of 550 seats). The result not only guarantees the party a fourth term as a single party government, but also demonstrates that President Erdogan's strategy to push for a second election and shift the focus from economic-social issues to a security one proved a success. However, unless the AKP is ready to build bridges with its opponents it seems unlikely that this result will bring an end to the polarisation, tension and gagging of freedom of expression that has engulfed Turkey for months.

As in June, three other parties passed the 10 percent threshold and also made it into the Parliament: the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) with 25.4 percent (24.8 percent in June), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) with 12 percent (16.3 percent in June) and the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) taking 10.8 percent (13.5 percent in June). While the CHP maintained its June numbers, both the MHP and the HDP lost many votes.

How to understand this result?

Turkish voters chose stability over fundamental rights and freedoms. While the AKP has been criticised for backtracking on the rule of law and civil liberties, these were not priority issues for a large number of Turkish voters. Since June instability and violence has gripped the country, due to the renewed conflict between Turkey and the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and a series of attacks by the Islamic State (IS). The resulting political and security vacuum was reminiscent of the 1990s, during which time Turkey was led by unsuccessful coalition governments. These bad memories seem to have played a role in convincing many Turks that only a single-party government could guarantee stability.

The political system in Turkey has been approved as *de facto* presidential, where President Erdogan acts like an 'executive president'. This means that Prime Minister Davutoglu is expected to remain a subordinate prime minister. However, the AKP remains short of the three-fifths majority of 330 seats that would allow it to call a referendum on a potential constitutional amendment introducing an executive presidency.

The result once again demonstrates the weak and divided nature of Turkey's opposition parties and their inability to provide a credible alternative to the AKP. The biggest loser was the MHP. The Turkish electorate did not appreciate the unconstructive approach of MHP leader, Devlet Bahçeli, following the June elections. Not only did he refuse to enter into any coalition, he also purged many of the party's competent members from candidate lists.

The HDP lost many votes as a consequence of the AKP demonizing the party by linking it to PKK violence. The party had a historical opportunity to distance itself from the PKK, yet - with the exception of a few leading figures - it failed to do so which cost them votes. While some conservative/Islamist Kurds and small and medium sized business owners in the South East - who were directly affected by PKK violence - returned to the AKP, there was also a decline in votes from big cities. However, the fact that the HDP still managed to make it into Parliament is positive. If they had not the AKP - being the second party in the constituencies the HDP won - would have taken their seats. Nevertheless, if the HDP continues to ignore the message of the electorate, the party risks a return to its traditional level of 6-7 percent in the next elections.

The fact that the CHP failed to attract voters lost by MHP and HDP is disappointing because the CHP played a constructive role in the post-June elections period and created a positive mood with their election promises. There are clearly limits for any left party, as the majority of voters are on the right side of the political spectrum. While the party has done much to attract secular central-right voters this is apparently not a role that can be played by a central left party.

The result also underlined that the Gulen Movement, which played an important role in AKP governments until 2013, has neither influence in Turkish politics nor a broad support base. The AKP was able to increase its votes while increasing the pressure on the Movement's business and media networks.

Potential consequences

With the AKP having achieved its victory through instability and polarisation, it is likely that a new 'problem solver' policy will emerge as the AKP will need to demonstrate that under single-party rule things will be different. Moreover, because 49 percent is insufficient to amend the constitution in order to bring about the presidential system that Erdogan hankers after, the AKP will need to increase its support by delivering quick success stories. While returning to the Kurdish peace process will be difficult, in the short term an end to the violence is expected as part of a post-election normalisation process.

While Turkey's economic woes were used as leverage by the AKP in recent months, with a return to political instability steps will need to be taken to get the economy back on track. While a major improvement in terms of the rule of law is not expected, certain window dressing reforms could be realised to improve the country's tarnished image, which has negatively impacted on foreign investment. Further restrictions on freedoms and civil liberties are also expected, although a major crackdown on media and opponents may not happen immediately as it would undermine efforts to create economic and social stability. However, there remains a risk that direct and indirect censorship will increase.

Although there are serious risks, the picture in Turkey is not totally bleak. While the OSCE stated, there were serious democratic problems during the election campaign period which created unfair competition, there were also positive developments illustrating the deep roots of democracy in the country. For example, there are no big concerns about free and fair voting and counting thanks to the very active involvement of voluntary groups organised by young Turks. Moreover, there was a very high turnout of 85 per cent. We should not ignore these positive signs. Pro-democracy forces in Turkey are still quite strong and their high level of engagement should keep hopes for Turkey's future high.

Relations with the EU

With the election over, the Turkey-EU Action Plan as a reaction to the Syrian refugee crisis is expected to be speedily finalised. While the EU needs quick responses to limit the worst effects of the crisis, for the AKP it would be an important success story.

The refugee deal not only offers an opportunity to re-build trust and re-establish dialogue, if successful it could create a spillover effect into other areas. The opening of new chapters – as promised by Angela Merkel – and a re-energised process may result in the EU regaining some of the leverage it lost by freezing the negotiation process. However, this will also depend on the willingness of Erdogan to reengage and show a readiness to respond to EU concerns on key issues such as the rule of law. While this may seem unlikely, instability in the Middle East, the emergence of Russia as a big security threat and increasing support from the Turkish public to the accession process may play a role in pushing Erdogan closer to the EU. The EU will only be able to have an influence on Turkey by better engaging. Keeping negotiating chapters frozen and blocking cooperation will only push Turkey further away from the West and democracy. In this sense pro-democracy Turks (particularly youth) should be supported. If the EU can reach out to the Turkish public and gain their hearts and minds one more time, the EU can play a key role in keeping Turkish democracy on track. Furthermore, concrete steps - like granting visa liberalisation to Turks - may also make the EU even more attractive in the eyes of Turkish public.

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