

# Turkey's Parliamentary Elections and the Quest for Stability

by Şafak Baş

The aftermath of the June 7 parliamentary elections has exposed the critical level of Turkey's social and political polarization. No government coalition could be formed. The country has witnessed terrorist attacks of unprecedented scope. For the first time, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi/HDP) entered parliament with 13 per cent of the vote. But instead of strengthening reconciliation and integration, the peace process between the ruling government in Ankara and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê/PKK) fell apart. Also, for the first time since it came to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/AKP) of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu lost its absolute majority. Turkish and foreign commentators alike perceived this electoral defeat as an explicit blow to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's aspirations to introduce a presidential system and thereby increase his current presidential powers.

## Executive Summary

Turkey is set to hold its parliamentary elections on November 1 in an atmosphere marked by political violence, polarization and insecurity. The ruling AKP has been neither able nor willing to form a coalition government after failing to secure an absolute majority in June. The competing parties CHP, MHP and HDP have also added to the increasingly antagonistic atmosphere on both the political and the societal level. Suicide bombings, unprecedented in scale, have shocked the nation, and are believed to have been carried out by ISIL militants. These attacks on both leftists and pro-Kurdish activists strongly indicate that the war in Syria has now spilled over into Turkey. The suspension of the peace process with the PKK compels Ankara to be at war on two fronts.

Regardless of the election outcome, Ankara will need to focus on national reconciliation and the reduction of sociopolitical tensions. Peace talks with the Kurdish PKK must resume. Only a stable domestic scene enables Turkey to tackle the pressing regional challenges. Even as its Western partners should substantially support Turkey in handling the influx of refugees into Turkey and Europe, the West must also urge Ankara to foster national reconciliation and to respect the democratic principles that are deeply rooted in the history of the republic.

With the snap elections on November 1 approaching, political polarization in Turkey has reached its peak. The war in Syria and the influx of millions of refugees have considerably added to the domestic challenges. In recent months, hundreds of soldiers and police officers, as well as PKK militants and non-involved citizens, have lost their lives – 136 alone in the two most fatal bombings in Suruç (July 20) and Ankara (October 10). It is in this explosive atmosphere that Turkey is going to the ballot box, for yet another time. As the country sharply divides along political and sociological fault lines, an atmosphere of hatred is increasingly becoming a defining feature of Turkey's society. Thus, efforts at national reconciliation are urgently needed and should be made a priority of the new government. Moreover, a stable Turkey is in the strategic interests of Ankara's international partners. The refugee crisis, the war in Syria and Iraq, and Sunni jihadi Islamism are challenging not only Turkey but also the European Union, NATO, and Western and regional countries alike. Turkey and its partners urgently need to join forces and cooperate on the above-mentioned issues. However, the increasing authoritarian behavior of major political actors in Turkey poses a considerable challenge for Western actors to find a mutual satisfactory way of balancing the at times disparate interests.

## Turkey's descent into chaos: The post-election quagmire

*The election is over, the people have spoken. I told you all either stability or chaos; The people chose chaos. Good for you!*<sup>1</sup>

With this statement, AKP member and Erdoğan devotee Burhan Kuzu warns that the election results will bring instability to the country. To outsiders, Kuzu's assessment may sound overly dramatic, but the events that have shattered Turkey since the June 7 vote may support this assessment.

As the governing AKP was not able to form a coalition government after the June elections, President Erdoğan announced snap elections for November 1. According to the chairs of the Republican Peoples' Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi/CHP) and the National Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi/MHP), the AKP had not shown any real intention to discuss a long-term coalition during the coalition talks.<sup>2</sup> Per the constitution, the president can give the second largest party (in this case the CHP) a mandate to form a government if the strongest party (here the AKP) fails to do so. But instead, Erdoğan opted for letting the deadline pass and announcing snap elections.

<sup>1</sup> This quote has been made by AKP lawmaker Burhan Kuzu; see "AKP supporters take to social media to insult nation after election rout", *BGNNews* 08/06/2015. URL: <http://national.bgnnews.com/akp-supporters-take-to-social-media-to-insult-nation-after-election-rout-haberi/6672> (26/10/2015).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the AKP rejected from the beginning any cooperation with the HDP. The same is the case for the HDP, which claimed that under no circumstances would it form a coalition with the AKP.

On July 20, Şeyh Abdurrahman Alagöz, a young man from the Kurdish dominated city of Adıyaman who previously fought with the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria, returned to Turkey as a suicide bomber and killed 34 young leftist and pro-Kurdish activists in Suruç. More violence against Kurdish citizens and HDP headquarters across the country followed, leading many to fear a relapse of the 1990's – a dark era for Kurds and Turks alike.

Only three days later, militants of ISIL killed a Turkish border guard and injured two more in Kilis province. Ankara's reaction was to allow the United States to use the Turkish airbase in Incirlik to carry out attacks against ISIL in Syria. Until then, Turkey had been reluctant to confront ISIL out of fear of becoming an ISIL target itself. Perhaps even more importantly, ISIL was perceived as the most effective force against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on the one hand, and a containment force to Kurdish groups in Syria on the other. These three perceptions explain why Turkey's air strikes on Syrian soil mostly targeted Kurdish militias rather than ISIL.

Even more consequential, however, was the dissolution of the peace process between Ankara and its long-time nemesis, the PKK. The Turkish air force attacked PKK hideouts in the Iraqi Kandil Mountains, and the PKK retaliated with attacks on Turkish security forces in urban and rural areas. Once a potential masterly achievement of the AKP government, the peace process with the PKK has now come to a bitter end.

Most HDP members see Ankara's hardened position towards the Kurds in general, and the PKK in particular, as a direct result of the June 7 vote. According to this view, the aim of the AKP government was to punish conservative and pious Kurds for withdrawing their electoral support for the AKP and voting for the HDP instead.

In addition to the above challenges, Turkey has to cope with the consequences of the war in neighboring Syria. Over two million Syrian refugees within Turkey need to be taken care of. Even more significantly, Turkey has turned into a transit country for international jihadist fighters. What the renowned Turkish journalist Kadri Gürsel coined the "jihadist highway"<sup>3</sup> has become an indicator for Turkey's advanced 'Pakistanization'. In explanation of the term: Pakistan actively facilitated the influx of foreign Sunni jihadi fighters to Afghanistan during and after the Soviet occupation. The radicalization in Afghanistan, however, later also destabilized Pakistan. By turning a blind eye to Turkish and foreign jihadi fighters entering Syria via Turkey, Ankara has seemingly made the same mistake. Groups such as ISIL or Jabhat al-Nusra have set up organizational structures in Turkey and are actively recruiting new fighters among Kurds and Turks alike. The terrorist attacks of Suruç and Ankara were both conducted by young ethnic Kurds from Turkey's south-eastern province Adıyaman. Previous terror attacks in the border town Reyhanlı (2013) and in Diyarbakır on June 5 during an election rally of the HDP were also planned and carried out by Sunni jihadi Islamists who

3 Kadri Gürsel, "Turkey paying price for jihadist highway on border", *Al Monitor* 13/06/2014.

URL: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/gursel-al-qaeda-isis-turkey-mosul-iraq-syria-consulate.html> (26/10/2015).

were trained and had fought in Syria. Except in Reyhanlı, all targets have been leftists and/or supporters of the pro-Kurdish HDP. Turkey has become a battlefield for a proxy war between Sunni jihadi Islamists and leftist pro-Kurdish activists.

The bombing of a rally in Ankara on October 10 is the latest of these gruesome events. Two suicide bombers, who were ISIL militants, killed 102 people and injured several hundreds. Similar to the bombing in Suruç, ISIL has not taken responsibility for the attack in Ankara. However, as revealed later by the Turkish daily *Cumhuriyet*, the suicide bombers of Suruç and Ankara had joined ISIL in 2013 and were known as suicide bombers by the Turkish security officials.<sup>4</sup> The Ankara bombing is to date by far the biggest and most violent terrorist attack in Turkey's history.

Turkey is not only divided along ethnic and religious identities, but also along political and social fault lines. The AKP is criticized by its opponents for having turned the already existing polarization between pious and secular Turks (also known under the terms of 'black and white Turks') into a political dichotomy between those who support and those who oppose the AKP. This gap was widened in the course of the Gezi Park protests in 2013. Although polarization has always been omnipresent in Turkey, it has reached a worrying degree in the past two years. Can

Dündar, a renowned Turkish journalist, summarizes the degree of polarization as follows:

*We are a country with 25 million terrorists. Erdoğan turned the nation into those who support him and those who oppose him. Now, as those who oppose him, we have become the world's largest terrorist organization.*<sup>5</sup>

### **'National Will' or another step towards the abyss: The elections on November 1**

On the domestic front, it is not only the above-mentioned political polarization tearing Turkish society apart: the economic situation is also increasingly becoming a matter of concern. Although Turkey's economy has been consistently growing over the past twelve years, the governing AKP did not manage to overcome the middle-income trap.<sup>6</sup> As Ankara is still dependent on foreign investment, any increased instability caused by political and social tensions will critically harm the country's economy.

To date, none of the political parties has come up with a strategy to address and mitigate these manifold challenges. The CHP and the HDP are urging Ankara to resume peace talks with the PKK. Both parties are also stressing the need for societal dialogue in order to alleviate polarization, but concrete

<sup>4</sup> "Polis bombacıları biliyordu", *Cumhuriyet* 16/10/2015.

URL: [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/389483/Polis\\_bombacilari\\_biliyordu.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/389483/Polis_bombacilari_biliyordu.html) (26/10/2015).

<sup>5</sup> Can Dündar, "25 Milyon teröristiz", *Cumhuriyet* 16/10/2015.

URL: [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/388717/25\\_milyon\\_teroristiz.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/388717/25_milyon_teroristiz.html) (26/10/2015).

<sup>6</sup> Martin Raiser, "From know-who to know-how: Turkey and the 'middle-income trap'", Brookings Institute 19/02/2015.

URL: <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/future-development/posts/2015/02/19-turkey-middle-income-trap-raiser> (26/10/2015).

measures are yet to be presented. The AKP and the MHP, in contrast, have mainly focused on their traditional conservative topics and nationalistic agenda, falling short of offering reconciliation.

However, former AKP politicians such as Abdullah Gül and Bülent Arınç have signaled that the party needs to refocus on serving the nation. That is, the AKP should consider forming a coalition rather than insisting on an absolute majority, which seems unlikely according to recent polls. In case of a consecutive electoral defeat – the failure of securing absolute majority is seen as such – the AKP leadership's reaction to the election results will be crucial, and will serve as an indicator as to whether or not the party is still 'Erdoğan-driven'.

As the most popular party, the AKP claims to mirror the 'national will'. Since 2002, the party has won every single election with a clear majority, and Erdoğan became the country's first elected president. However, his rule in recent years has become more and more authoritarian. Erdoğan perceives and represents 'national will' solely as that of his party supporters and increasingly tends to discredit and criminalize any opposition. He paid a high price for this conduct at the June 7 vote: now all eyes will be on the snap election results. As Turkey's citizens go to the ballot box on November 1, at least three scenarios are conceivable:

## What if...

### 1) ...the elections are postponed?

If the security situation deteriorates further, the interim government, in coordination with the president, may deem it necessary to postpone the elections. While some believe it could serve President Erdoğan's political ends to do so, such a scenario seems unlikely. Similar suggestions had been expressed after the bombing of the HDP rally in Diyarbakır, but the June 7 elections were held regardless. Also, Erdoğan will most likely realize that postponing the elections would only further destabilize the country and make Ankara look weak, incapable of addressing the country's many problems and unable to set up elections amidst political crises.

### 2) ...the AKP secures absolute majority in parliament?

From the AKP's point of view, this would certainly be the best-case scenario. The party's major goal is to introduce a presidential system that would enhance the president's position significantly. In order to do this, the AKP needs to change the constitution. With 330 parliamentary seats, the AKP would be able to conduct a plebiscite on the matter. If the party manages to secure 367 parliamentary votes, it could change the constitution without a plebiscite. However, the latest polls suggest that this is highly unlikely to happen. The AKP's share of votes is generally expected to range between 40 and 42 per cent. There is concern among opposition parties and their supporters that the AKP will try to

rig the elections. Continued censorship of and crackdown on the media, as well as the deteriorating security situation in the Kurdish-dominated east of the country, fuel such suspicions. Regardless of whether or not such concerns are justifiable, they are further evidence of the tense atmosphere surrounding the upcoming elections.

3) ...the current share parliament votes remains unchanged?

According to current polls, this seems to be the likeliest scenario. While the HDP is expected to surpass the 10 per cent threshold, the AKP will probably fail to secure more than 40 to 42 per cent of the votes. In this case a coalition government becomes inevitable. The AKP would have to accept the result and try to form a long-term coalition government. Progressive and pragmatic forces within the AKP would need to pressure the party leadership. Unlike the HDP and MHP, which opted to stay out of an AKP-led government, the CHP has shown willingness to enter coalition talks with the AKP.

As the past three months have shown, Turkey is in dire need of political stability. Domestic and external challenges are too urgent to gamble for another round of parliamentary elections. Compromise will be key after 13 years of undisputed AKP rule. No matter the election results, a strong government with a stabilizing effect on the country will be needed.

## Outlook and recommendations

Any future Turkish government – regardless of composition – will have to address several urgent topics: national reconciliation, re-establishment of security, and containment of regional threats posed by violent extremism. The earlier mentioned political polarization is resolvable only through dialogue and reconciliation; and such a process needs to be initiated by the political elite as a top-down process. Once the new government demonstrates that compromise is possible despite the highly antagonistic atmosphere, the people will follow.

Turkey has turned into a nation divided by the personality of Erdoğan. He has certainly become one of the most influential politicians in the country's recent history, but he urgently needs to act according to the constitution and be a truly non-partisan president, solely focused on his representative function. At stake is not only the well-being of the party, but the well-being of all of Turkey. This is a fact which also needs to be realized by all AKP delegates, as party pressure will be needed to convince Erdoğan to change his approach and become a more inclusive president. Turkey's political elite have caused the antagonistic atmosphere in the country: It is, therefore, this very elite's responsibility to pave the way for political compromise and facilitate reconciliation.

The future government should resume the peace process with the PKK. During the ceasefire, tensions in the country calmed down considerably, and the government was able to refocus its interests on other urgent matters. This should be the priority of the future government. Peace with Kurds within Turkey could lead to peace and cooperation with Syria's Kurds. The new government should try to 'de-securitize' the Kurdish question within its own borders in order to increase its flexibility abroad.

External actors, such as the European Union (EU) and its member states, as well as the United States, can have an impact on such a process. Turkey, as a NATO member, is an important regional actor with whom the West will need to cooperate on several issues. Turkey has proven itself a reliable partner. Western countries – EU member states in particular – will need to develop policies towards Turkey which tackle relevant security concerns (such as the refugee crisis and the threat posed by militant extremists) while at the same time maintaining a value-oriented foreign policy approach.

Given the deep-rooted democratic tradition of the republic, calls by Western partners to the Turkish government to revitalize that very tradition and refrain from authoritarian tendencies will prove effective. Cooperation

with Turkey must not mean turning a blind eye to Ankara's shortcomings.

Unlike Europe and the US, Turkey has been directly affected by the war in Syria from its very beginning. Turkey currently hosts over two million Syrian and Iraqi refugees, spending over 16 billion USD; however, to date, the EU has not yet offered substantial assistance. Only after hundreds of thousands of refugees continued west, aiming mainly for Austria and Germany, have EU decision-makers realized that cooperation with Turkey on the refugee crisis is necessary. Sinan Ülgen, a former Turkish diplomat, recently warned Europe from assuming that Turkey would continue to serve as its "gatekeeper".<sup>7</sup> The millions of refugees within Turkey's borders have become a bargaining chip for President Erdoğan. Ankara's Western partners need to support the country in handling the refugee crisis.

Only a politically stable Turkey can be a reliable regional and international partner in coping with major challenges such as the refugee crisis and the war in Syria. Turkey's external partners should urge the country's elite to seek compromise and form a functioning government.

Finally, Ankara needs to rethink its regional policies. Once celebrated as the 'Turkish

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<sup>7</sup> Sinan Ülgen, "Turkey can't be Europe's gatekeeper", *New York Times* 01/10/2015.

URL: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/02/opinion/turkey-cant-be-europes-gatekeeper.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/02/opinion/turkey-cant-be-europes-gatekeeper.html?_r=0) (26/10/2015).

model', Turkey has become considerably isolated over the past two years. Euphemizing this dangerous development with empty phrases such as "precious loneliness"<sup>8</sup> is not adjuvant. In recent years, Turkey's foreign policy has been basically degraded to a tool of domestic politics. As these policies' repercussions have resulted in regional isolation, any future government needs to abandon such an approach: Less ideology and more rational thinking will be key to overcoming this isolation. Turkey should also try to reshape its relations with the United States, NATO and the European Union. All four actors have overlapping interests (e.g. confronting Sunni jihadi Islamism, tackling the refugee crisis, containing Russian expansionism), which make cooperation essential.

In summary, the upcoming parliamentary elections will be crucial for Turkey's future. Domestically as well as externally, Turkey is at the crossroads. Its many problems need to be dealt with in a serious and responsible way. The precondition for this is political stability, which will hopefully return to Turkey after the elections on November 1.

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**8** "Turkey not 'lonely' but dares to do so for its values and principles, says PM adviser", *Hurriyet Daily News* 26/08/2015.  
URL: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-not-lonely-but-dares-to-do-so-for-its-values-and-principles-says-pm-adviser-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=53244&NewsCatID=338> (26/10/2015).



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