
Turkey on its way to snap elections: a political gamble?

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Theme

The impossibility of forming a stable government in Turkey following the 7 June elections has led the ruling AKP to call snap elections for 1 November.

Summary

The elections of 7 June 2015 brought a change of scenery to Turkish politics, with four political actors now in Parliament. After many years of single-party rule, a coalition was needed to govern the country at a time of economic and political hardship. However, the current Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who has been the only person given the mandate to form a government, which is against the customary practice in Turkish politics, failed to achieve this target. Historically, the task has been given to various party leaders to seek coalition possibilities until one can be formed. It has not been so this time. The opposition parties, on the other hand, have not managed to agree on any ground for cooperation, even to elect of the President of the Parliament. These are the political highlights of the four months since the elections, but there have also been many other critical developments. Terror and military operations have made a comeback, with an ugly change to the country's face. As Turkey edges closer to snap elections, it is crucial to understand the existing dynamics within the country in order to attempt to foresee what lies ahead.

Analysis

What has happened since the elections?

Turkey held parliamentary elections on 7 June 2015. More than 47 million voters were called to the ballot box to elect 550 members of Parliament.¹ The results brought the country the **possibility of a change** after 13 years of single-party rule, with growing fears of autocracy and a switch in the system from parliamentary democracy to presidentialism. A balanced parliament representing the country's plurality was to be welcomed. However, a very important question remained unanswered: **how to form a government?** There were two main possibilities: a coalition of the opposition (all three parties together) or a coalition with the already governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), including any party from the opposition, also a grand coalition with the Republican

¹ For a more detailed analysis please refer to 'The 'New Turkey' that was not in Erdoğan's plans: the aftermath of the critical June 2015 elections', Elcano Royal Institute, 10/VI/2015, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/web/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/europe/commentary-toygur-new-turkey-that-was-not-in-erdogan-plans-aftermath-critical-june-2015-elections#.Vg0CWZf3RSA

People's Party (CHP). But there has been a domino effect since, with the opposition parties starting to fall by the wayside one after the other.

Table 1. Vote distribution and the number of MPs from 2002 to 2015

	2002		2007		2011		2015	
	Vote (%)	MPs	Vote (%)	MPs	Vote (%)	MPs	Vote (%)	MPs
AKP	34,28	363	46,58	341	49,83	327	40,87	258
CHP	19,39	178	20,88	112	25,98	135	24,95	132
MHP	8,36	0	14,27	70	13,01	53	16,29	80
HDP (Ind.)	6,22	0	5,24	26	6,57	35	13,12	80

Source: The Supreme Electoral Council of Turkey (<https://secmen.ysk.gov.tr/ysk/index.html>).

First, the **National Action Party (MHP)**, the Turkish nationalists, declared that they would not participate in any kind of coalition whatsoever or even accept any indirect support from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' **Democratic Party (HDP)**. The Party leader slammed the door shut on the very first night after the elections and kept it firmly closed. This was the end of the possibility of forming an 'opposition government'. The MHP's voting stance also played a key role in the election of the President of the Parliament. Its attitude in opposing any existing possibility left the post to the AKP's candidate. Prior to the vote there was a certain expectation of cooperation between the opposition parties, which had an opportunity of taking an executive post from the AKP government after more than a decade. The MHP has clearly underlined that such a show of unity between the opposition was impossibility. In addition to preventing the formation of an opposition partnership, the MHP also declared that it would not participate in a coalition with the AKP and would just plan an opposition role in parliament.

From the very beginning, the HDP, the pro-Kurdish party, based its electoral campaign on not permitting the AKP to change the parliamentary system to a presidential one and making Erdoğan 'the President'. It also underlined from the very beginning that it would not be forming a coalition with the AKP under any circumstance. It kept its promise to its voters and did not enter into any kind of coalition negotiations with AKP. This situation withdrew both parties, the MHP and the HDP, from the coalition negotiations and left an AKP-CHP government as the only remaining possibility.

After weeks of bargaining, the grand coalition negotiations between the AKP and the social-democratic CHP failed. Some claimed that political haggling had not been enough to close the gap between their views on various topics, especially foreign policy and education. Others also claimed that President Erdoğan was not supporting a coalition and that therefore the AKP was prevented from reaching any compromise. Given the developments, Davutoğlu returned the mandate to form a government to the President and the task was not subsequently given to any other leader. The situation led critics to

claim, to no effect, that not enough of an effort had been made to form a government. Within a couple of days, a call was made for new elections.

Growing violence, with a heightened nationalist vote

In the meantime, growing violence in the country became a major problem. There are two explanations for this development. The first is that AKP realised that the peace process with the Kurds was failing to bring it any additional political support. It is very important to underline that the HDP has been the main obstacle to the AKP continuing its single party rule and attempting a regime change to a presidential system. For this reason it ceased in its efforts to keep peace negotiations going and declared the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) the equal of the self-styled Islamic State (IS) –a dangerous terrorist group–. The party had been involved in this peace process for years, including its imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan. There have been many rounds of dialogue that aimed to end the terror for good. But attacks by the Turkish Military forces restarted after a two-year ceasefire following the deaths of two policemen. This led to immediate attacks on the PKK's bases. The Kurdish armed movement, which also consists of diverse groups, began to respond to the attacks and in no time the country had reverted back to the 1990s, when terror was an everyday problem throughout Turkey.

Another explanation for the PKK's action is that it is also unhappy that the HDP has gained too much ground and placed itself as the key actor in the Kurdish political movement. This casts a shadow over the PKK's central role while the HDP has not achieved any real progress regarding the rights of Kurdish citizens – according to their understanding. For the PKK, since the government has ended the peace talks, there is no longer any reason to halt its armed struggle against the State. Even if it accepts that armed action is not the way to achieve democratic rights, it also underlines the need for specific and concrete steps to be taken to agree to another ceasefire.²

To understand the existing conflict it is necessary to go back 30 years, which is obviously beyond the scope paper. However, to understand the electoral dynamics for the coming elections, it is convenient to bear in mind an evident fact: in Turkey terrorism always intensifies the nationalist vote –as it does in many other countries–. It also increases the desire for stability at the expense of freedoms –which can also cause a shift towards voting for the AKP–.

Calling for snap-elections: a political gamble?

According to the latest polls, **the distribution of votes is not quite changing**³. For the political scene to change drastically there are two possibilities. The first is that the

² For an interview in English with Cemil Bayık, member of the leadership of PKK see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/11806481/PKK-urges-US-to-mediate-in-its-war-with-Turkey-and-admits-to-secret-talks-with-Washington.html>.

³ The detailed results of one of the latest polls, MetroPoll, can be read in English at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/analysis-why-turkeys-akp-failed-to-make-a-comeback-in-polls.aspx?pageID=238&nID=87550&NewsCatID=338>.

nationalist vote might be channelled towards the AKP given the concerns about terrorism, or even that this very same reason might leave the HDP under the 10% threshold. The second option does not look as likely at the moment. Since it appears that the government has burned all its bridges with the Kurdish population on account of its anti-PKK/anti-HDP rhetoric, the Kurdish vote has focused on one party, which is why the HDP remains strong despite the rising terrorist threat. Additionally, most western voters who are against anti-democratic practices in Turkey are maintaining their support for the HDP as a reaction. According to the polls, it is not currently in danger of falling under the threshold. However, it is very important to underline that **election security will be the key to the HDP's success**. It is crucial to bear in mind that many Eastern Turkish districts are under emergency rule –including prohibitions on the free movement and also relocation of citizens–. Cizre, a Kurdish town, has also been on the international agenda after days under curfew, with no healthcare, food or drinking water. All in all, it is debatable whether free and fair elections are possible under these circumstances.

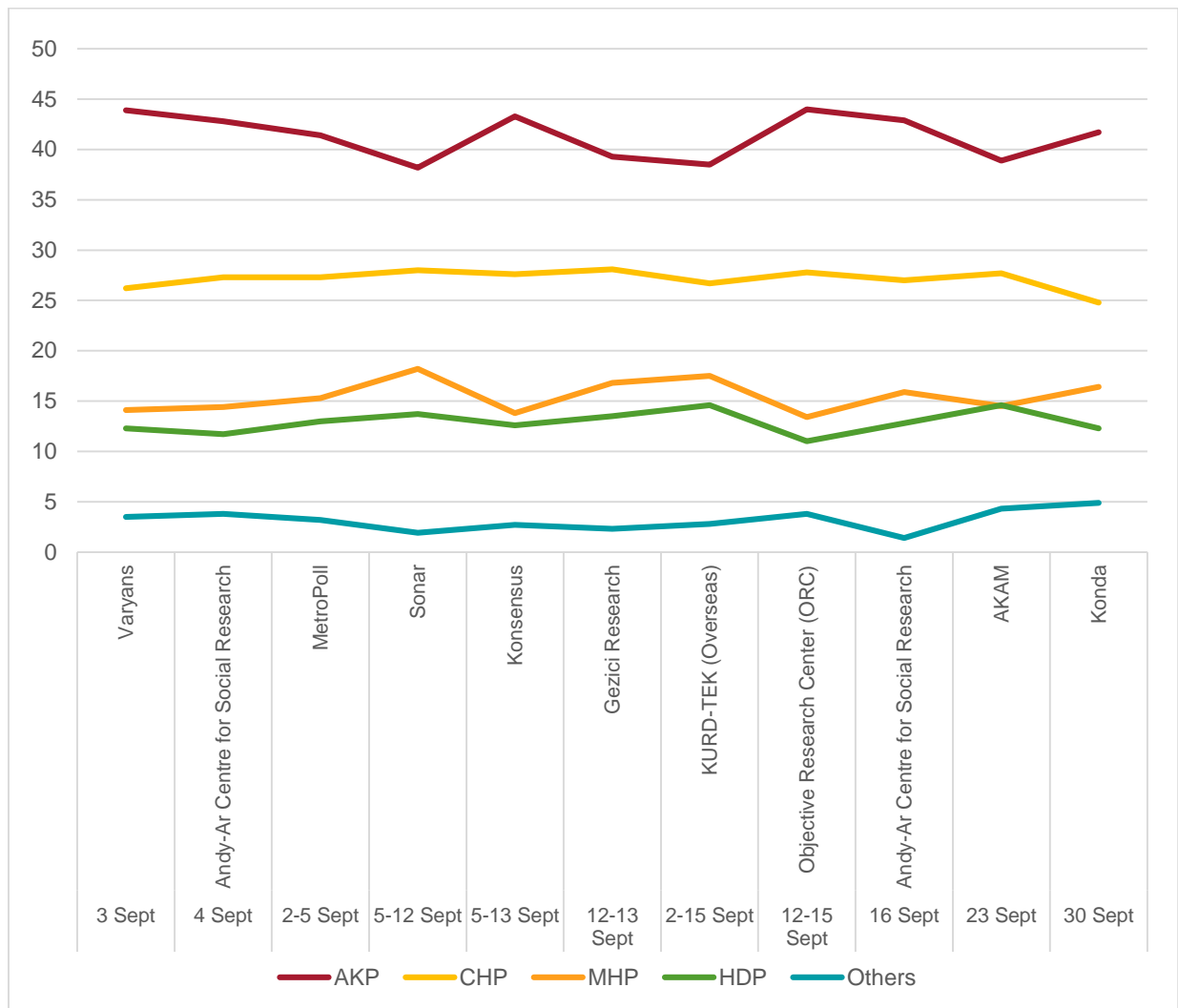
Regarding the option of the nationalist vote being concentrated in the AKP, it must be said that the MHP is also well positioned to pick it up. However, the AKP is likely to gain more since they have very similar voting base. It looks like this will be the main strategy to increase the AKP's share of the vote, playing all the cards necessary to intensifying nationalistic feelings. This may lead the MHP to end up being the fourth party in Parliament, according to some polls.

Table 2. Current vote distribution in Turkey (polls conducted in September)

Date	Pollster	Sample	AKP	CHP	MHP	HDP	Others
30 Sept	Konda	-	41.7	24.8	16.4	12.3	4.9
23 Sept	AKAM	1214	38.9	27.7	14.5	14.6	4.3
16 Sept	Andy-Ar Centre for Social Research	-	42.9	27.0	15.9	12.8	1.4
12-15 Sept	Objective Research Center (ORC)	2760	44.0	27.8	13.4	11.0	3.8
2-15 Sept	KURD-TEK (Overseas)	5348	38.5	26.7	17.5	14.6	2.8
12-13 Sept	Gezici Research	5000	39.3	28.1	16.8	13.5	2.3
5-13 Sept	Konsensus	1500	43.3	27.6	13.8	12.6	2.7
5-12 Sept	Sonar	2500	38.2	28.0	18.2	13.7	1.9
2-5 Sept	MetroPoll	2540	41.4	27.3	15.3	13.0	3.2
4 Sept	Andy-Ar Centre for Social Research	-	42.8	27.3	14.4	11.7	3.8
3 Sept	Varyans	15000	43.9	26.2	14.1	12.3	3.5

Source: polls by various companies.

Current vote distribution in Turkey (polls conducted in September)



Source: polls by various companies.

For a long time, the AKP has been perceived as affording the country ‘stability’. After decades of coalition governments, many different sectors welcomed the advent of the AKP in 2002, including the business world. The AKP will play this card also, claiming that single-party government will bring back very much needed political stability. Since the Turkish economy is in sharp decline, mainly due to mostly local factors –but global ones too–, the argument might be a two-edged sword. The AKP might increase its vote thanks to a yearning for political and therefore economic stability. However, if the AKP comes to be perceived as the factor that is causing economic instability, which might yet occur in the future, voters might opt for other parties in order to restore a stable economic environment. That is why the President has called for snap elections as early as possible.

Formation of an interim government

Since the coalition talks failed, an alternative form of government has been necessary in Turkey until the new elections are held. There is a Constitutional mandate for the formation of an interim government, something that has never occurred before.

According to the law, such a government should include all the parties represented in Parliament proportionally and leave three important Ministries –Justice, Transport and Internal Affairs– to independents. Under these conditions, the AKP would get 11 Ministers and one additional post in the person of the Prime Minister. The CHP, as the main opposition party, would be entitled to five. The MHP and the HDP, sharing the same number of MPs in Parliament, would get three posts each. Davutoğlu has also received the mandate to form the interim government and select all its members, leaving the parties themselves with no say in the matter. So the offer has gone to opposition MPs individually, without allowing the parties as such to choose their candidates.

Following the party's decision, the designated CHP members declined the posts they were offered. Similarly, in the MHP the consensus was that any offer would be declined, although a single MP broke ranks and accepted his designated position. In a strategy designed to attract the nationalist vote, an MHP deputy has been assigned the role of Deputy Prime Minister. This individual is a highly important personage in the nationalist movement, since his father established the MHP in 1969. He will be entering the forthcoming elections as an AKP candidate, after being expelled from his own party.

The HDP, which is a combination of the pro-Kurdish movement and other leftist groups, on the other hand, decided to accept all the posts its MPs were offered, claiming it wanted the cabinet to reflect the will of the voters. But it was also incapable of making its members toe the party line: one MP refused to serve in a government under the AKP since his own leftist faction group was adamantly opposed. Finally, two HDP Ministers have taken up posts in the interim government. However, they didn't last there long. On September 22, they resigned from the interim government, claiming that the cabinet serves as a "war cabinet" and they don't want to continue be named a part of it. The posts were replaced by independents.

In order to cover all the positions that were refused from the beginning, independent candidates –close to the AKP– were selected instead. Many of them had served in different positions appointed by the government in previous years. As expected, this gave rise to much criticism. Another reason for disappointment is that **there is only one woman in the cabinet**, to serve as Family and Social Policies Minister. It is important to underline that she is the first Minister to wear a headscarf in the entire history of the Turkish Republic.

What next?

President Erdoğan has announced that the elections will be held on 1 November 2015. It is safe to say that the AKP wants to go to the ballot box as soon as possible, before the awareness of the tremendous decline in the economy increases. There is also a national holiday on 29 October that lingers on until 1 November. This is important, since it is mostly CHP voters who will be vacationing in the country.

The AKP's popularity has been in a decline since 2011, both within the country and outside. It is commonly believed that it has lost its focus on democratisation and also that the economy's momentum has suffered under it. This is the reason underlying much of the opposition to its single-party rule. However, looking at the political scene it is also

clear that there is no other stable political alternative to govern the country. All political parties need to concentrate on finding common ground to cooperate. If such is not the case, the results of the forthcoming elections might well be no different from the current situation.

Conclusion

Turkey is undergoing very hard times. The country has been in post-electoral chaos since June. There are two main questions to be asked: why did the government break off the peace process, which was mainly initiated by and built on the leadership of President Erdoğan? And why has the PKK responded with deadly violence, beyond any reasons of self-defence, after two years of ceasefire? There are various answers to these questions depending on where one stands in the political spectrum.

First and most importantly, **the AKP has lost its Kurdish voter base to the HDP in the June elections.** In many eastern cities, the AKP's vote declined catastrophically following the successful campaign led by HDP candidates that used to be independent MPs in the region. This has been the main reason behind the AKP's loss of its single-party rule and of the possibility of proposing Constitutional regime change, which was President Erdoğan's quite open objective. Thus, the party decided to halt the so-called peace process with the Kurds, a state policy for many years. The military have resumed the bombing of PKK bases. Kurdish forces have done likewise, organising deadly attacks on both the military and the police. The result has shaken society and heightened political polarisation.

In addition to all these developments, **press freedom is very much under pressure.** The situation is highly alarming. A newspaper building was attacked twice over the previous weeks after its online edition wrote what President Erdoğan had said on a live TV programme that 'The situation today would have been very different if a party had won 400 MPs in the Parliament'. These words gave rise to a sharp feeling of anger since they interpreted as an insult to society for not voting for the AKP as the single party.

The attacks did not stop there. HDP offices all over the country have been under attack in the recent past. The party's press representative claims there have been hundreds of attacks on party buildings. The party headquarters in Ankara was gutted with all its archives, with all the documentation necessary for the forthcoming elections. Nevertheless, Demirtaş, the party's co-leader, said that all would be ready again to ensure participation by the time the Turks next go to the ballot box.

On the other hand, looking ahead, **election security, fairness and impartiality will be the most important concerns.** As things are today, it is difficult to envisage that the ballot will truly reflect the free will of the country's citizens. The situation in Eastern Turkey is alarming, definitely meriting international attention. There have been suggestions that the elections might be postponed if the current situation continues unchanged.