A radically different political landscape has emerged in Turkey since the parliamentary elections held on 7 June 2015. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has dominated the political scene since 2002, fell short of winning enough parliamentary seats to form a majority government, as voters rebuked it for its hubris and growing authoritarianism. With much at stake, including the future of parliamentary democracy, the turnout was high, at 86 percent.
While some AKP supporters blamed the results on foreign conspiracies, many Turks rejoiced and welcomed the return of hope. The outcome is expected to reduce pressure on the media and on dissenting voices, but it has also ushered in a period of uncertainty, as the four parties represented in parliament struggle to form a coalition government. Markets, perhaps fearing a return to the politics of the 1990s, a period marked by a succession of weak coalition governments and economic stagnation, reacted negatively, and the Turkish lira lost more than five percent of its value after the poll.

With 258 of the 550 seats in the National Assembly (compared to 327 won in the 2011 election) and 41 percent of the vote, according to unofficial results, AKP remains the largest political formation. But by denying the AKP a chance to rule single-handedly for a fourth term, voters also thwarted President Erdoğan’s plans to change the constitution in favour of a presidential system.

The main winner was the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), which has its roots in Turkey’s Kurdish movement. Beating all expectations, the HDP won 13 percent of the vote and 80 seats. HDP’s charismatic co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş ran a progressive campaign, drawing support from young people, Turkish liberals, tactical voters intent on denying further powers to President Erdoğan, and its usual Kurdish nationalist base. Had the party failed to clear the 10% national threshold, many of its seats would have gone to the AKP, which was runner-up in most of the districts where HDP won.

Turkey’s main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) failed to capitalize on the voters’ frustration and attracted only 25 percent of the vote and 132 seats, compared to 135 in the present parliament. The ultra-nationalists of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) increased their presence in the National Assembly from 53 to 80 deputies.

The new political map reflected Turkey’s cultural and political diversity, with deputies of Yazidi, Roma, Assyrian, and Armenian origin now taking seats in the National Assembly. Ninety-seven women were elected, boosting female representation from 14 to 18 percent. Nearly one-third of them came from the HDP, which ran with an almost gender-balanced candidate list.

The Reaction of Erdoğan and the AKP

Present throughout the electoral campaign—in defiance of the constitution, which requires the head of state to be non-partisan—President Erdoğan kept silent for nearly four days after the nation issued its electoral verdict. “Everyone must put egos aside, and a government must be formed rapidly,” he said during his first public appearance, striking a conciliatory note on the domestic front while railing against Western hypocrisy.

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who remained in the shadow of the powerful president, stated that the AKP, respectful of the people’s will, was open to a coalition government. According to the constitution, a government must be formed within 45 days after the election results. If parties fail to form a government capable of winning a vote of confidence, the president can call snap elections to break the stalemate.

Politically, the right-wing MHP was the best match for the AKP. However, its leader showed no inclination to form such an alliance. The nationalists would probably insist on ending the fragile peace process with the Kurds. During the campaign, the HDP ruled out forming a coalition or supporting an AKP minority government. HDP’s Selahattin Demirtaş renewed this pledge in the days following the elections.

Before he reappeared in public after the election, President Erdoğan spoke with veteran politician Deniz Baykal, former leader of the CHP. The unexpected meeting raised speculation that AKP was
interested in forming a grand coalition with the CHP. Before agreeing to pair with AKP, CHP would undoubtedly demand that the corruption files against senior AKP officials, including the president’s relatives, be reopened.

Turkish voters punished Erdogan for his disappointing track record: a slowing economy, the president’s overbearing involvement in the political campaign, and his efforts to grab more power have all contributed to the erosion of support for the party, which abandoned its reformist mandate and injected more religion into its policies. Did Erdoğan understand that a growing number of people, including conservatives who previously supported the AKP, were put off by his confrontational style and his new 1000-room palace, as well as by Prime Minister Davutoğlu’s lacklustre performance?

This election has demonstrated that the AKP is not invincible, but it is too early to write the party off. Following the local elections in March 2014, the AKP and Erdoğan had stepped up their nationalist rhetoric, fearing that the peace process with the banned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) would lose them votes on the right. In fact, the polls showed that the main loss for the AKP was among religious Kurds, who were incensed by the government’s unresponsive attitude during the Kobani crisis, when Syrian Kurds, at risk of defeat by the Sunni extremist Islamic State, shifted to the HDP. Also on many people’s minds was the question of what would happen to the peace process, now that pro-Kurdish deputies were present in unprecedented numbers in the National Assembly.

Reelection

PKK and AKP Aligned in Election Campaign against Leftist Kurds

Although President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced his decision, in a written statement on 24 August 2015 to take Turkey to a reelection, the campaign’s kick off had to wait until at least a week
after the Kurban Bayramı holiday (Feast of the Sacrifice) on 28 September. The incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP) waited till 4 October to announce its manifesto for the election of 1 November, the first ever in the country’s history. An “anti-terror” mass rally in Istanbul on Sunday on 20 September was a dress rehearsal for the upcoming election campaign for the AKP.

Three things became clear. First, Erdoğan would again campaign for his party as intently as before the general election of 7 June, despite constitutional provisions that require him to be impartial. Second, the targets of AKP’s campaign would be the same: to get an absolute majority in parliament in order to form a single-party government and to introduce a unique Turkish-style presidential system (Türk tip başkanlık modeli) with fewer checks on Erdoğan’s power.

To reach these goals, it was necessary that the leftist pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) receive less than ten per cent of the vote. The HDP, under its charismatic leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, passed that high election threshold in June, with 13 per cent of the vote, thereby depriving the AKP of an absolute majority and making it unable to form a single-party government for the first time since winning three consecutive elections beginning in November 2002.

The third notable aspect of the election campaign that began on 5 October was the continuation of the smear campaign against the HDP, which was held responsible for the more than 120 soldiers and policemen killed by the PKK since mid-July. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu made this perfectly clear during the “anti-terror” rally: “You will make sure these people stay below the election threshold on 1 November, and you will bring the AKP back to single-party power again.”

Tens of thousands shouted, “martyrs never die, the homeland cannot be divided,” and President Erdoğan added, “We will show no mercy to terror and terrorists, we will enter their caves and chase them. The life of a martyr cannot be compared to anything. But I have one demand from you. I want you to make a historic effort for the election of 1 November. Send 550 domestic and national deputies to the parliament. You know what I mean.”

It was obvious to everyone what he meant: HDP candidates, too, are indirectly responsible for the PKK terror victims, and the terrorists are not part of the nation but are “traitors” supported by foreign enemies.

A second actor that was attempting to push the HDP back under the ten-per-cent election threshold was the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK). This radical left-wing Kurdish nationalist militant organization has, since 1984, waged an armed struggle against the Turkish state for cultural and political rights and self-determination for the Kurds. The PKK was declared illegal in Turkey and is blacklisted as a terrorist organization in Turkey, the United States, the European Union, and NATO. PKK leaders were as angry and disappointed as the AKP when Kurdish HDP politicians succeeded in the elections of 7 June, winning no fewer than 80 seats (almost 15 per cent) in the 550-seat Turkish parliament.

**Alliance**

So why this unholy alliance against Kurdish politics by the PKK and the AKP, who are seen as arch enemies?

Although Erdoğan and the pro-AKP media portray the HDP as the “mouthpiece of the PKK terrorists,” it was actually a kind of new-left coalition of Kurdish nationalists, liberals, democrats, and modern leftists who campaigned for equal rights, not only for the Kurdish minority but for all minorities and women. Erdoğan was infuriated when HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş said “Sayın Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, asla Başkan olamayacaksın” (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will never be [a Turkish-style]
Many of those who voted for the HDP approved of this popular slogan.

PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who was imprisoned in 1999, disagreed with Demirtaş. Öcalan addressed visiting Kurdish politicians on Imrali Island, where he is serving a life sentence, saying, “We can agree with Erdoğan on his desired presidential system,” the daily *Milliyet* reported in February 2013 in its scoop in which it printed the minutes of the meeting.

This seemed to reflect the attitude of many in the Kurdish movement that is dominated by the KCK (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, *Union of Communities in Kurdistan*), an umbrella organization that acts as the urban wing of the PKK. They probably wouldn’t object if Turkey became a more authoritarian regime, because this could work in their favour in convincing more Kurds to campaign for autonomy. As the KCK states in its documents, it opposes liberal democracy. Turkish analyst Taha Akyol pointed out that the structure of the KCK is “not democratic but totalitarian.” “In the constitution it has published, under the name of the ‘KCK Convention,’ it openly rejects the idea of ‘Western democracy’ and instead favours ‘communal democracy’ of a kind that considers individual freedoms to be degenerate. It is essentially a totalitarian system that is a mixture of forms like the Stalin-type ‘people’s democracy’ or Gaddafi-style ‘communities’ models.”

Although the pro-Kurdish HDP was faced with this powerful coalition of the PKK and the AKP, they were unlikely to succeed in pushing Kurdish politics again under the election threshold of ten per cent. Why would the Kurds, who traditionally vote for ethnic Kurdish parties (six per cent) turn their backs on the HDP? Because of the AKP propaganda and their renewed war on the “terrorist” PKK? What about the additional seven per cent who voted for the HDP? One percent were young, new-left urban voters, who participated in or were sympathetic to the Gezi park protests in 2013 against the Erdoğan government. The other six percent were conservative Kurds who had voted AKP in previous elections but were angry that Erdoğan refused for so long to help the Syrian Kurds in Kobani in their struggle against the extremist Islamic State and that Erdoğan has, in their view, never been serious about the on-again, off-again peace talks to end the three-decade insurgency.

Consider the results in the 12 mainly Kurdish provinces of Turkey in which the HDP won the election of 7 June: Tunceli (61 per cent), Diyarbakir (79), Mardin (73), Batman (73), Siirt (66), Bitlis (60), Şırnak (85), Hakkari (86), Van (75), Muş (71), Ağrı (78), and Kars (44). In all those provinces, the Turkish army has killed hundreds of Kurdish militants between July and September 2015. Erdoğan and his media tried to convince the voters to give his party an absolute majority in parliament again on 1 November to form a strong and stable government to “kill all the terrorists.” Many Kurds, however, saw this intensified “war on terror” mainly as a political ploy for more votes.

A horrendous suicide attack in Ankara on 10 October, which targeted leftist Kurds and Turks and killed nearly one hundred people, was seen by anti-government activists as well as pro-AKP politicians and media as a provocation meant to influence the outcome of the elections.

Prior to the November elections, the AKP insisted that Turkey needs a strong one-party government to fight against terrorism. In the polls, it competed against the opposition parties, which claimed that the AKP should lose votes to ensure that democracy will survive.

**Round 2: 1 November 2015**
Turkey votes for stability

The Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, Justice and Development Party) made a strong comeback in the Turkish snap election of 1 November 2015, winning a stunning landslide victory. Just five months after the election of 7 June, the AKP regained a decisive majority in parliament. Voters were convinced that these were crucial elections and showed up in record numbers at the polls: the voter turnout was the highest ever, at 85.18 per cent.

In June 2015 most voters wanted change. They showed the AKP a yellow card, warning them to change. AKP lost nine per cent of the vote and won 53 fewer seats in parliament. They still were the largest party, with 41 per cent of the vote, but, for the first time since 2002, the party had lost its majority. This resulted in a hung parliament, and, as the parties were unable to form a coalition government, President Erdoğan called for snap elections. Surprising everybody, the AKP won 49.3 per cent of the vote and 317 of the 550 seats.

The elections were held under the shadow of deadly violence from Turkish members of the Islamic State (IS) and renewed clashes between the army and militants from the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Kurdish, Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) in predominantly Kurdish eastern and southeastern Turkey. More than 140 soldiers and policemen lost their lives in these clashes.

On 20 July, a Turkish IS suicide bomber killed 33 leftist Kurdish and Turkish activists in the town of Suruç, 10 kilometres north of Kobani, in Syria. After being under siege for many months by IS, the activists had travelled to Suruç to participate in the rebuilding of Kobani.

Three weeks before the election, the capital Ankara was the scene of the deadliest terrorist attack in Turkey’s modern history: two Turkish IS suicide bombers killed 102 leftist Turkish and Kurdish activists.

The increasing violence and political tension created the perfect climate for the main slogan of the AKP: “Vote for stability and security.” The nine per cent swing voters that left the AKP in June all
returned, and the party of President Erdoğan won a stunning victory. According to a survey by Ipsos Türkiye for CNN Türk, ten per cent of AKP voters decided to vote for AKP after the Ankara bombings, as well as five per cent of HDP voters. Fear seemed to have been the main determining factor in the decisions of the swing voters.

The size of the victory surprised friend and foe. All polling organizations had predicted that voter behaviour would differ little from that in the June elections: AKP would win a couple of percentage points but barely enough to regain the majority. Nobody expected that many conservative religious Kurds who had voted for the pro-Kurdish Peuples’ Democratic Party (Turkish, Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) would return to the AKP, but they did. They hated the return of violence, funerals, and curfews after a two-and-a-half-year period of peace and economic development in the poorest region of the country. They seemed to be convinced by the election propaganda of Prime Minister Davutoğlu and President Erdoğan, that the HDP was partly to blame for the attacks of PKK and its urban militants. With their renewed campaign of violence, the PKK showed that the belief that guns prevail over politics is still alive in Turkey. The men in the mountains call the shots, not the HDP. The leftist HDP barely passed the ten per cent election threshold, winning 10.7 per cent and losing 2.4 per cent compared to June.

Another big loser was the Nationalist Movement Party (Turkish, Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP). They lost 4.39 per cent and 40 seats in the Turkish parliament. They were punished by nationalist voters, because their leader, Devlet Bahçeli, had no proposals to solve Turkish political and economic problems. He became known as “Mr No,” because he had no constructive response to any suggestion of cooperation with the AKP in a possible coalition.

The main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (Turkish, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), got stuck with a quarter of the votes again, winning just 25.3 per cent. It increased its vote only marginally, by 0.38 per cent. The party has no vision for the future, lacks a charismatic leader, and has no modern and effective party organization.

The overwhelming concern of half of the electorate seemed to be stability and security. They were less worried by the harmful attacks on democratic rights, pressure on and intimidation of media and journalists critical of the government, politicization of the justice system, and the ongoing witch-hunt against judges, prosecutors, policemen, teachers, and businessmen and business organizations linked to the Gülen movement. Turks who are inspired by this religious and social movement led by Turkish Islamic scholar and preacher Fethullah Gülen are accused of infiltrating state institutions with the aim of establishing a parallel state. Prosecutors, the AKP government, and pro-AKP media refer to their erstwhile ally as the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization (FETO).

The only aim in which the AKP did not succeed was pushing the HDP below the election threshold of ten per cent. Had that happened, the AKP would have had a two-thirds majority, sufficient to change the constitution without the input of any other party. Now they need a three-fifths majority (330 seats) to take to a referendum their proposal for a new civilian constitution, to replace that written in 1982 by the military junta.

A Second Chance for the AKP

Basically, Erdoğan and the AKP got a second chance from the voters. Prime Minister Davutoğlu seemed to get that message. In his victory speech he promised reconciliation with all parts of society and promised that his government would protect the rights of all 78 million people in Turkey.

It is more likely, however, that the politics of polarization, hate speech, and revenge against those who disagree or oppose the AKP will continue. Only days after the election, 46 civil servants and
police officers were detained in Izmir on suspicion of being members of the “parallel state.” Dozens of journalists and other employees were dismissed from pro-Gülen media outlets that had been taken over by a pro-government caretaker panel. Their TV channels were removed from cable provider Digiturk. Several people were arrested for allegedly “insulting” Erdoğan. Police officers in Ankara searched the offices of business groups belonging to the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (Turkish, Türkiye İşadamları ve Sanayiciler Konfederasyonu, TUSKON), known for its links to the Gülne movement. Pro-government journalists called for the dismissal of several critical columnists of the Doğan Media Group. Kemal Köklü, the chairman of the main opposition party, CHP, asked why the government “fears free media…. These demands (for the dismissal of journalists) are a blow to democracy. It shows that the ‘Goebbels’ process has begun.” During a security summit on 4 November, Prime Minister Davutoğlu ordered the continuation of major operations against the PKK “without interruption in winter conditions.”

In a speech on the same day, however, President Erdoğan, addressing village heads, signalled that he wants to restart negotiations with imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, although under a new title, the “national unity and fraternity process.”

AKP promised the voters stability and security. Half of the electorate gave the party a renewed mandate to fulfil this promise. Political stability and economic progress is possible only with an improvement in democracy and with an independent judiciary. Otherwise, investors will go to other emerging markets with their capital and know-how. There is no time to lose, according to Ali Babacan, the architect of AKP’s economic policy. The new government has a window of opportunity of 90 days to begin new structural reforms to get the Turkish economy out of the middle-income trap. “We must take action rapidly on reforms about subjects such as labour markets, product markets, fighting corruption, competition and transparency or else we will have to wait for the 2019 elections.”

Turkish politicians have lost two years because of four elections between 2013 and 2015 and because of political infighting between the Islamic movement and the Gülen movement. Credit-rating company Fitch stated that political risk persists in Turkey. “Reduced uncertainty over elections and the composition of the government does not necessarily translate into reduced political risk. Domestic political tension will remain high if Recep Tayyip Erdoğan resumes his efforts to extend the power of the presidency.”

Within days of its election victory the AKP reopened the debate about changing Turkey's parliamentary system into a presidential system, under a proposed new constitution. Erdoğan wants to rule as an executive president with few or no checks and balances. The fight over a new constitution and Erdoğan’s perceived ambition to rule as a postmodern sultan promise to produce enough explosive material for continued political tension inside and outside the parliament.

www.fanack.com