

Turkey: Nationalism and War Mongering Won the Election

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The mood was tense as the election results came in to the local office of the progressive People's Democratic Party (HDP) in the town of Erzurum in eastern Turkey. This is a very conservative region on the invisible border between nationalist Turkish Anatolia and the Kurdish region. The HDP's office was filled with leaflets and banners that party activists did not dare to distribute due to fear of reprisals and violence. The party lost its single deputy from the area and saw a small nationwide decrease in votes. But after a nerve wracking evening of vote counting, it was clear that the party had just got above the ten percent threshold required to enter the Turkish parliament.

It did not improve the mood of the left-wing activists to see the Justice and Development Party (AKP) obtaining forty-nine percent of the votes and an absolute majority in the parliament, giving it the ability to run a single-party majority government. This was exactly the mandate the omnipresent President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wanted with this snap election, which basically is a re-run of the inconclusive elections in June. Erdoğan's AKP got the majority needed to begin down the path of introducing a presidential system, which will make the post of president much more powerful de jure, something Erdoğan has already accomplished de facto. While the AKP does not have enough seats on its own to call a constitutional referendum (which would have required 330 seats), let alone pass constitutional changes to adopt a presidential system directly (which would have required 367 seats, or two thirds of the 550 seat parliament), securing a majority gets them closer. Indeed, one of Erdoğan's first responses to the electoral result was to call on the other parties to join the AKP on the path to constitutional revision.

Return to Civil War

Several factors can explain the impressive victory of the AKP, contradicting opinion polls, which all forecast a result very similar to that of June. As I spent election day traveling around Erzurum province and visiting polling stations, it became clear that this was not a fair election or a fair campaign. In many ways, Turkey's situation has deteriorated dramatically in the few months since the last election. The peace process between the Turkish state and the PKK has collapsed, and the Kurdish-dominated southeast of the country has seen a return of the too familiar scenes of civil war that raged through the region throughout the 1990's. Scores of civilians have been killed during day-long curfews in Kurdish towns and "anti-terror" bomb raids in the Southeast.

Erdoğan as Safe Bet in Chaotic Times

Left-wing and Kurdish forces, in particular the HDP, have been subject to violent attacks throughout the country. A common trait from the many attacks on HDP offices and businesses belonging to Kurds or leftists is that the authorities hardly ever intervened to stop the mobs. The HDP's Erzurum office was filled with election materials, as the party had decided it would be too dangerous to distribute them. This wave of violence culminated with double suicide bombs that killed over one hundred participants in a peace rally called by the HDP and trade unions in Ankara on 10 October. No perpetrators have been caught, and among Kurdish and left-wing activists, most people believe that the state is involved in these murderous acts. The AKP has used this atmosphere to stir up nationalist sentiment and demonize the HDP. It seems that Erdoğan won his gamble of appearing as the strong man, and the safe bet, in times of war and uncertainty. The hardened nationalist rhetoric of the AKP attracted many votes from the far right Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which saw its vote share decline from sixteen percent to twelve percent. Analysts and Turkish opposition figures accuse Erdoğan of purposefully creating a situation of conflict and instability specifically to be able to make the case for a strong leader—himself.

Arrests and Threats

The attacks on the HDP and the pressure exerted against their supporters have been harsh. Many of the party's leading members and activists have been arrested in the run-up to the election. In Erzurum, one of their six candidates is imprisoned on charges of supporting a terrorist organization. Twenty-two HDP mayors have been removed from office and another twenty have been arrested this year.

The HDP office in Erzurum was hectic in the early morning of election day. Many of the party's election officials called to cancel, and party officials called members who had not shown up at the polling stations they were assigned to. It turned out that people simply did not dare to show up as election officials representing the HDP. Many had been threatened with violence and others reported that they feared losing their jobs in the public sector.

Reports of Election Irregularities

Reports of problems and irregularities came in throughout election day, where police and military were heavily present in Kurdish dominated areas. Danish politician and election observer Serdal Benli was told by police that he would get arrested if he did not immediately stop observing the election process. I myself was expelled from the vote count, which officially is open to the public, in a remote Kurdish village. The chairperson of the polling station said that military police had been there and had told her not to let outsiders in, and she simply did not dare not to comply. Mysteriously, this village went from being purely HDP in June to purely AKP this time. The local HDP candidate, Zahir Uzun, was watching the count and confirmed in disbelief that all votes indeed had gone to the AKP. He reckons that it either is a matter of vote-buying or that the villagers had been threatened. Election officials, who preferred to remain unnamed, in another nearby village were also flabbergasted by a huge drift in votes from the HDP to the AKP. Despite not having any hard proof, they were convinced that the AKP had bought the votes.

In another HDP stronghold, the Beşiri district of Batman province, the official results announced that the AKP had received fifty-nine percent of the votes. But photos posted on Twitter of the results of the vote count in the district showed a clear victory to the HDP.

Many irregularities have been reported from election day. But so far, reports of large-scale vote rigging are limited. This is despite fears that were confirmed by a number of Tweets from notorious AKP whistle-blower Fuat Avni, who exposed detailed AKP plans to rig the election.

Movement of All Progressive Forces Gives Hope

In terms of fairness, the biggest problems probably relate to the campaign, rather than the election itself. "This campaign was unfair and characterized by too much violence and fear," said Andreas Gross, the head of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's [OSCE] elections observer mission. In its preliminary findings from the election, the OSCE lists a number of problems related to violence, arrests, and media freedom. The co-leaders of the HDP have said that the election campaign was not fair, as they were unable to lead a campaign due to the ongoing violence.

The big question is what is next in Turkish politics. What will the effects of the elections be for Turkish democracy, for the stalled peace process, and for the country's minorities?

A BBC analysis suggests that the AKP might use its comfortable majority to steer the country towards a more stable path and try to revive the peace process with the Kurds. This would, however, require the party to break with its populist rhetoric, which has stirred up nationalist sentiment in broad parts of the Turkish population. The immediate signals from Erdoğan were hardly conciliatory. The pro-government Daily Sabah quoted him as saying that the election sent a message to the PKK that "violence, threats, and bloodshed cannot coexist with democracy and the rule of law." With this short statement, the president managed both to imply that the PKK was taking part in the elections and that they bear principal responsibility for recent bloodshed.

This election is another confirmation that Turkey, with its controversial president at its head, remains a deeply polarized nation, divided in two equally big camps. With the HDP's repeated success in surpassing the high ten-percent threshold, a legacy from the 1982 military coup, the party might be able to establish itself as a stable force in Turkish politics. The difference from previous pro-Kurdish parties is that the HDP manages to unite with left-wing progressive forces, feminists, LGBT activists, and others on the left. If the HDP can continue to build a movement uniting the different peoples of Turkey and translating this into successful parliamentary politics, then there might be a hope for a better Turkey.

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P.S.

* Jadaliyya. Nov 04 2015:

http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23097/turkey_nationalism-and-war-mongering-won-the-elect