

Six Takeaways From the Turkish Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

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Erdoğan might have triumphed in the Turkish elections, but there are still glimmers of hope amid the despotism and repression.

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The elections last Sunday in Turkey — both parliamentary and presidential — ended in what appeared to be a resounding triumph for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the increasingly despotic leader. While at times it seemed that the opposition had a serious chance, in the end the results were clear. Erdoğan won the presidential election in the first round, and the People's Alliance, the electoral pact of Erdoğan's Party for Justice and Development (AKP) and the fascistic National Movement Party (MHP), captured the majority of seats in parliament.

According to preliminary results, Erdoğan won the presidential race with 52.6 percent of the vote, while his main rival, Muharrem İnce, the candidate for the centrist Republican People's Party (CHP), was able to muster 30.6 percent. In the parliamentary election the People's Alliance garnered 53.7 percent, while the Nation Alliance (comprised of the CHP, the nationalist Good Party, and the religious-conservative Felicity Party) captured 33.9 percent. The People's Alliance will have 344 out of the 600 seats in parliament, an absolute majority, while the Nation Alliance will have just 189 seats. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), an unaligned pro-Kurdish leftist party, won 11.6 percent of the vote and will get 67 seats in parliament.

Those are the raw numbers. But what does it all mean? Here are six takeaways from the elections.

1. The election was illegitimate.

All parties and presidential candidates swiftly accepted the results. While the CHP's presidential candidate and spokesperson railed against the early tabulations as wildly inaccurate, within hours they backpedaled completely. Akşener, the Good Party candidate, made no speech at all. We can only speculate if there was an agreement behind the scenes or whether everybody simply saw the results as more or less valid.

Regardless, there were numerous irregularities on election day. In the southeastern, Kurdish province of Urfa, for instance, opposition party observers were forcibly removed from voting sites,

and people were caught trying to smuggle in thousands of votes. In the same province, four people were killed ten days before the election when an AKP candidate and his bodyguards attacked pro-HDP shopkeepers with arms. Most of the reported irregularities on election day were concentrated in the Kurdish provinces, where there were few international observers and many local observers were kicked out.

Turkey is still under the state of emergency that Erdoğan imposed after a failed coup against him in July 2016. Under the pretext of fighting coup supporters, Erdoğan and his AKP — in alliance with the fascistic MHP — have engaged in a full-fledged war against oppositional voices, imprisoning tens of thousands of politicians and activists, gradually taking over the judiciary, and establishing nearly full control over an almost totally centralized media. The opposition parties and presidential candidates — from those on the right to the leftist HDP and its imprisoned former co-chair and presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş — received no media coverage in the lead-up to the election.

What is clear — and much more important than any individual irregularities — is the overall illegitimacy of the election itself. It was held under a state of emergency, involved massive repression of the opposition (particularly the socialist and Kurdish opposition), and witnessed the use of all means of the state apparatuses to secure an electoral triumph for Erdoğan's bloc.

2. The fascistic MHP has become a central player.

If there is a clear winner, it is the Sunni-Turkish nationalist bloc consisting of the AKP, the MHP, and the Good Party. Although the latter positions itself as an oppositional force in the current climate, it does not significantly differ from the other two in terms of its political project and vision. The share of the vote of this bloc amounts to about 64 percent. Their success has to be understood in the context of a permanent hyper-nationalistic mobilization in the public sphere, as well as the narrative of the war against terrorism in general and the war waged against the Kurds in particular.

It is worth looking at the numbers for the AKP and the MHP in some detail. While Erdoğan appears to be the winner of Sunday's election, and is certainly being portrayed as such, it is not so straightforward. Erdoğan himself knows that his party took some hard hits, and they don't seem especially happy about the results. The AKP won around two million votes fewer than in the November 2015 elections — a 7 percentage point drop. It failed to capture the 301 seats needed to secure a parliamentary majority. It is only with the MHP's help that Erdoğan has been able to take a majority.

This means, in turn, that the MHP's hand has been strengthened. The party had a surprisingly strong showing in the elections. Despite splitting in half and the other faction (the Good Party) earning over 10 percent of the vote, the MHP was able to retain its share, around 11 percent. And they did it while mounting basically no public campaign ahead of the election — MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli held a total of two or three rallies, compared to İnce's 107. The MHP was able to gain significant increases in the vote, mostly in the Kurdish-dominated regions, even while it lost votes in many of their relative strongholds (such as southern cities like Osmaniye, Adana, and Mersin). If there was major fraud, it favored the MHP in the Kurdish regions.

The MHP is well aware of its position. Bahçeli declared after the election that his party has become "a key party in parliament." The MHP will be able to impose itself in a more confident and resolute way, especially with respect to the Kurdish question. It is very likely that the AKP-MHP alliance will pursue an even more openly fascistic course in the coming months.

3. The CHP is cracking.

The CHP and its presidential candidate, Muharrem İnce, were fairly confident that they would at least push the election to a second round. İnce ran a spirited campaign that promised restoration and mobilized millions of demoralized people.

The results, however, suggest the birth of a new crisis within the party. The CHP was 3 percentage points off from its November 2015 election results — a very disappointing finish for its supporters. İnce — who ran 8 percentage points ahead of his party and became the first CHP presidential candidate since 1977 to receive over 30 percent of the vote — implied earlier this week that he will either push to take over the party, or establish a new formation and immediately start preparing for future elections. Incumbent party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu responded not by congratulating Erdoğan, which İnce had done, but by talking aggressively about careerism within the party. (The fact that Kılıçdaroğlu has been the party leader in nine elections, which all ended disappointingly for the CHP, yet he still refuses to resign, makes the grumbling about people clinging to their posts and careerism rather strange.)

İnce, on the other hand, has announced that he will tour the country, holding meetings in all eighty-one provinces to thank people for supporting him. Needless to say, this is the action of a party leader. A crisis — one that could even spark a party split — seems imminent.

4. The HDP defied the odds.

Another winner in the elections was the HDP. Despite the repression, despite the exiling and imprisonment of so many political cadres (again, including its own presidential candidate), despite the violence and threats on election day (particularly in the Kurdish provinces), the HDP once again consolidated itself and entered parliament, passing the (highly undemocratic) 10 percent threshold. This is another clear indication that a strong pro-Kurdish party has become an undeniable reality in Turkish politics.

In addition, despite some tendencies of liberalization, the HDP has sought to incorporate other socialist organizations and representatives of popular forces. Outright revolutionary socialists like Erkan Baş from the Workers' Party of Turkey, (TİP), Oya Ersoy from Halkevleri (People's Houses), Musa Piroğlu from the Revolutionary Party (DP), and Murat Çepni from the Socialist Party of the Oppressed (ESP) will all be in parliament, constantly thundering against dictatorship and capital. The HDP is the only party in parliament, and thus the only major party in Turkish politics, that stands firmly against the patriarchal Turkish-Sunni (i.e. nationalist and Islamist) alliance.

It remains to be seen what will happen with the CHP, but the HDP needs to take the initiative and help strengthen popular movements. The Kurdish liberation movement in particular is one of the most important axes of resistance to the status quo.

5. The view from below isn't all bad.

Turkey's despotic state has its roots in the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the Turkish capitalist class. While this relation of forces has undergone major transformations and is now temporarily stabilized around the AKP and the MHP, the popular dynamics that stand against the state and have little or no expectations from the state have been a constant factor in recent Turkish politics, particularly since the Gezi Uprising in 2013.

The forces unleashed by Gezi and Rojava (the autonomous Kurdish region in Northern Syria) still scare the AKP and Erdoğan more than inner-state rivalries or coup attempts. Women, Alevis, Kurds, workers, and many more have no hopes for this regime, and many are ready to break with the state as such.

For popular movements, the election results, though somewhat demoralizing, are not cause for complete disappointment. While most would have loved to see Erdoğan finally go, the social relations of power remain largely intact — admittedly, with some power gained for Erdoğan and the AKP/MHP bloc — and the positive election campaign, based on solidarity across the popular camps, should provide some hope for the future.

6. Erdoğan hasn't won just yet.

Sunday's elections indicate that despite everything, the social and political system in Turkey is still at a relative impasse. The balance of power has moved slightly to the Erdoğan-AKP/MHP bloc, with the elections strengthening the already dictatorial presidential system. Yet it was no decisive victory. A large chunk of the country is still against the dominant bloc, as they have been since 2013.

On the other hand, the rise of İnce (of the CHP) and Akşener's Good Party — who just declared that they are not “playing children's games” and accept the HDP as the “representative of the Kurdish political movement” — clearly suggests that the differing views within the state and elite circles are manifesting themselves as fractions with political representation. Even if the Erdoğan-AKP/MHP bloc remains dominant, it's not as if Erdoğan controls everything or everybody is bowing to him. We should expect a power struggle within the Erdoğan-AKP/MHP bloc since the MHP fared much better than anybody expected (that is, if there was no agreement on systematic fraud in favor of the MHP). That power struggle would threaten the AKP's strength if it hit amid a crisis. And there is indeed an economic crisis waiting at the door.

The depth and management of this crisis, the stance of the opposition, and, crucially, mass activity on the streets, will determine whether Erdoğan will be able to institutionalize his authoritarian rule — or whether cracks will continue to form.

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P.S.

* Jacobin, 06.29.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/06/turkey-elections-erdogan-akp-mhp-chp>

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