



Volume 5, Number 12

June 26, 2011

Turkey's Elections: Erdoğan's Partial Mandate Duygu Atlas

Turkey's June 12th general elections produced a decisive victory for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP). Attaining nearly half of the more than 50 million votes cast (87 percent of those eligible, a record turnout), Erdoğan secured a third term in office. Assuming he serves a full four years, he will become the longest serving prime minister in the history of the Turkish Republic. At the same time, the other competing parties also had grounds to be satisfied with the results. The future will pose tests for each of them, including the AKP.

Erdoğan owed his success to a number of factors: the country's thriving economy, overall stability, and steady rise in the standard of living, coupled with a popular, and populist, foreign policy. Nonetheless, Erdoğan and his AK Party fell short of attaining the desired two-thirds supermajority in the Parliament (367 seats), which would have given the AKP the power to single-handedly fashion a new constitution without having to consult with the opposition. This would presumably include changing Turkey's political system to a presidential one, enabling Erdoğan to further consolidate his political hegemony as the country's head of state, as well as head of government. However, a significant portion of the Turkish public preferred other parties to the AKP, indicating their rejection of the AKP's sweeping plans and preference for compromise and dialogue between the AKP and other political actors in the upcoming constitutional revision process.

Although the main opposition party, the People's Republican Party (CHP) fell short of its target of 30 percent of the vote, the party nonetheless attained its best election result since the 1980 coup d'état. For many voters, the CHP provided a more appealing alternative than in previous elections. The party's new image, shaped under the leadership of pro-reform Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, partially paid off at the ballot box. Upon assuming the leadership of the CHP last year, Kılıçdaroğlu modified the party's traditional emphasis on the superiority of the military and judiciary over civilian

politics and democracy, which had served to legitimize undemocratic interventions in the name of preserving secularism and protecting the republic, and thus damaged the party's image and credibility in the public eye. He also took a positive and constructive approach on critical issues such as the new constitution and the Kurdish question; and led an assiduous election campaign championing social democratic values and refraining from militant anti-religious, pro-secularism statements. However, the inclusion on the candidacy list of detained suspects in the Ergenekon affair (see *Tel Aviv Notes*, Vol. 4 (7), May 13, 2010) cast a shadow on his campaign. Another reason for the CHP's limited success was the fact that Kılıçdaroğlu had led the party only for a year, limiting his ability to promote the party's new outlook. But the change, even if partial, did not go unnoticed and Kılıçdaroğlu was able to increase the CHP's vote total by 5 percent (3.5 million), from 20.88 percent in 2007 to 25.91 percent in 2011, winning 135 seats. The results demonstrated that building a robust opposition to the AKP required recognizing the need for change, supporting the genuine democratization of Turkish life, and developing concrete policies and projects to compete with those of Erdoğan. Immediately after the elections, however, the diehard defenders of the status quo within the CHP began to speak out on the alleged failure of Kılıçdaroğlu at the polls, calling for his resignation. Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership will be determined by his ability to reform the party's Kemalist vision without succumbing to the demands of the status quo defenders to move away from the reformist line — while maintaining its image as a worthy and constructive opposition party.

As for the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the attempts, generally attributed to the AKP, to keep them out of the Parliament through political mudslinging backfired. The party managed to stay above the 10 percent threshold, attaining nearly 13 percent of the votes. Its success indicated that their strong nationalist base is still alive. However, in the absence of concrete plans to address any of the country's important issues, the AKP may well take votes from it next time, as the party's relevance would be called into serious question. In the meantime, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli has shunned any prospect of reconciliation with either the AKP or the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), showing that his party's uncompromising attitude is not likely to change.

Without a doubt, the BDP emerged as a victor in the elections and its enhanced presence in the new Parliament (36 seats, up from 22) marks a crucial turning point in the country's festering conflict over Kurdish rights. In order to circumvent the 10 percent electoral threshold, BDP members ran as independents under the Labor, Democracy and Freedom Bloc, a conglomerate of various political identities. Their successful campaign drew heavily on the frustration of the Kurdish community resulting from Erdoğan's failed 'Kurdish opening.' The BDP now carries the responsibility of communicating Kurdish demands in the forthcoming constitutional process, possessing a strong and clear mandate to work within the political framework. Prior to the elections, imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan had threatened that the post-election period would be a time of either negotiations or of escalating violence. The latest signs coming from his cell in the İmralı Island prison are that the PKK will wait to see the direction that the talks in the Parliament will take, and decide its course of action accordingly.

The BDP's success comes at a time when hopes for a solution to the Kurdish question have dimmed and the chasm between Turks and Kurds has deepened. Successful drafting of a new and more inclusive constitution would provide a way to redress the breach. But this will require the BDP to act with democratic responsibility, refrain from using threatening overheated rhetoric and causing political deadlocks, and avoid sidelining Kurdish demands by reducing the Kurdish question to Öcalan's release from prison. Erdoğan, for his part, will be obligated not to undermine the BDP, but accept it as a legitimate political force. One limiting factor in that regard is that any overture to the BDP could spark a nationalist backlash against Erdoğan,

The election results reveal that the time of mere ideological affinities has passed in Turkey. The Turkish public now tends to opt for candidates with the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, achieve tangible improvements and deliver on their promises. The election results also indicate that the country's most sensitive issues, requiring a broad consensus for their successful treatment, must be discussed in a Parliament whose representative legitimacy has not been stained by the notorious 10 percent threshold. A substantial portion of the Turkish public appears to desire a political arena which emphasizes conciliation and dialogue. However decisive its victory, the AKP should not conclude that the strong mandate it received validates its previous circumvention of the system of checks and balances, which included the intimidation of opponents and the persecution of journalists, raising legitimate fears for the future of civil liberties in Turkey. Maintaining its image as a solid political actor capable of delivering the goods, which is what earned Erdoğan popular support in the first place, will require the party to return to a more consensual approach to politics.

Duygu Atlas is a research assistant of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University.

The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at www.dayan.org, under "Commentary."

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il, with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."