Turkey’s 2015 Elections: Results and Implications

By Park Jae Sun

- Turkey’s political environment has changed significantly as HDP, a new Kurdish minority party broke the leading AKP’s dominance by winning 80 of the 550 seats in parliament.
- Possible coalitions are currently being debated, leaving Erdoğan with the option of allying with a newly emergent Kurdish party or allying with the conservative MHP party.
- Turkey’s position in security affairs in the region has grown more complicated as it stands with the US in fighting ISIS in Syria.

Following the parliamentary elections of 7 June 2015, Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan lost its majority. The Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP) won 79 seats in Parliament after winning 13 percent of the national popular vote. The emergence of the HDP was historic, as no previous Kurdish party had ever won seats in the Turkish Parliament due to the 10 percent threshold needed to qualify a party for seats.

PRIOR STATUS QUO and FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES

The AKP won its first parliamentary majority in 2002 and maintained this majority over two subsequent elections. It recently started to lose popularity as Erdoğan became more outspoken, making Islamist statements regarding women, and committing serious errors in dealing with the Kurds both in and outside of Turkey. The AKP had dominated the past 13 years as an Islamist party. In addition, corruption and scandals involving leading AKP members, an inability to extend fundamental rights and freedoms to minority ethnic groups and an unwillingness to recognize judicial independence has all served to weaken its previous appeal.
The end of the old status quo raises the new question of who will ultimately govern Turkey, as a hung parliament without a clear majority government would make decision-making on key issues difficult, likely resulting in impasses. The key issue remains how the four parties — the majority party AKP, and the minority parties CHP (Republican Peoples’ Party), MHP (National Movement Party), and HDP — can form a government and avoid a hung parliament. Each party must either consider joining a governing coalition as a means of advancing its own agenda and avoiding gridlock, or face the prospect of new elections.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ELECTION

Until the election, when confronted with the Kurdish demands for cultural and political rights Erdoğan’s approach had been to focus upon defeating the domestic Kurdish opposition, whose most influential manifestation was the PKK, or Kurdish Worker’s party. The emergence of a Kurdish minority party within the Turkish Parliament but not linked to the PKK is thus a particularly significant event, as it gives a voice and legitimacy to this previously frustrated minority. Against the old Erdoğan approach, this representation should moderate future infringements. Even more interestingly, the HDP could play a larger role in parliament if it can find occasional common ground with other parties.

TURKEY’S THREE KEY MINORITY PARTIES

CHP (Republican Peoples’ Party)

The CHP is Turkey’s oldest party, founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. The party is primarily socialist-democratic and secular, popular with middle and upper class voters, bureaucrats, college students, scholars, retired generals, successful entrepreneurs and trade unions. The CHP remains the next most popular political party after the AKP, winning 132 seats in parliament, but it did lose votes to both the HDP and MHP in the 2015 elections. However, given the growth of younger voters, it will continue to challenge AKP’s domination.

MHP (National Movement Party) 80 seats

The MHP holds 80 of the 550 seats and is an ultra right-wing party promoting Turkish-Islamic synthesis based on the thoughts of far-right scholars, nationalists, and Islamists. The party has been known for assassination of liberals and Kurdish leaders and party members. Associated with violent militia and extremists, it is seen as neo-fascist. The party was disbanded and its members jailed after the military coup in 1980, but it has recently attracted mainstream voters by moderating its causes under the guise of a pro-democratic agenda led by Devlet Bahçeli.

HDP (Kurdish Democratic Party): foundations for success 80 seats

The rise of the HDP after winning 79 seats (rounded up to 80) is a positive development for Turkey’s political environment. The HDP distinguishes itself from the PKK (Kurdish Workers’ Party, which is separatist) by aiming to bridge the Turkish-Kurdish divide and standing for people of all ethnic and religious associations while safeguarding their civil liberties. As opposed to older Kurdish parties that were banned for promoting an autonomous Kurdistan inside Turkey, the HDP seeks a wider base to grow its
position and popularity, and does not seek an autonomous Kurdistan. Though most of its constituents reside in southeast Turkey, the party has also gained support in the interior provinces, where its support comes largely from non-Kurdish voters.

The HDP and its progressive agenda

Under the leadership of Selahattin Demirtaş, the HDP shares leadership with a female representative Figen Yüksekdağ and has backed legislation advancing the rights of women and other marginalised social groups. Demirtaş, as the primary leader and face of the HDP continues to garner support from non-Kurdish voters who see it as a progressive party by denouncing anti-gay policies, combatting social inequality via anti-capitalist rhetoric, supporting full inclusion of all ethnic groups in Turkey and opposing policies that reinforce traditional gender roles for women. In order to differentiate the HDP from the PKK, Demirtaş has already made public statements promoting reconciliation with the AKP and warning his constituents not to desecrate national symbols or the Turkish flag.

**Possible Coalitions**

Currently, with no single party holding a stand-alone parliamentary majority, the AKP must build a coalition government to drive its policy agenda. With only 18 seats separating it from a majority, any of the other three parties could theoretically join the AKP in a governing coalition.

If the next most powerful CHP should ally with the AKP, it would likely demand from the AKP new laws enabling smaller parties to enter Parliament by lowering the 10 percent vote requirement. It would also push a reform agenda to govern the ethics of lawmakers and politicians. But whether a Kemalist secular party can work with AKP is still up to question given the considerable differences between a secular and an Islamist worldview.

The AKP and MHP appear the most likely coalition pairing; their beliefs and agendas have become more aligned in the recent years as the MHP has toned down its rhetoric and militancy. It also appears that the MHP would only consider an alliance with the AKP rather than the other smaller parties. Outgoing AKP leader Ahmet Davutoğlu has also announced his support for an AKP/MHP alliance. However, this would mean alienating the CHP and HDP (who both favor a Kurdish peace process), which Erdoğan cannot afford.

The other three parties could also theoretically combine all their seats. CHP’s leader Kılıçdaroğlu has called for the three minority parties – CHP, MHP and HDP – to stand together to challenge the AKP. However, MHP’s leader Devlet Bahçeli has already publicly disavowed considering such an alliance.

**Conclusion**

Ataturk founded modern Turkey with the clear aims of defeating Islamism and building a new society able to compete with the industrial leaders of modern Europe. Turkey’s progress towards democracy and modernity was led by this man’s strong vision of how his country would enter the 21st century as a state separating Islamic law from secular law, promoting the equality of women in civil society and building the requisite educational infrastructure to help educate and modernize the population.

After winning a majority in the last three elections, it appears that the AKP has lost its appeal partly through Erdoğan’s turning away from this secular, modernist vision. Further issues around party corruption and regional leadership have created an opportunity for other parties — be it the CHP with a
chance to participate in power-sharing for the first time since the 1970s, or the HDP, which for the first time in history gives voice to a Kurdish minority from within the parliament, after crossing the vital 10 percent threshold.

The challenges ahead seem to be whether the CHP can extract sufficient concessions to feel able to enter a coalition government, and if the HDP can use its new platform to further the interests not only of the Kurds, but of modern, secular Turks. In either case, Erdoğan must also engage in a degree of soul-searching, as his aggressive consolidation of power and influence and his attempt to remake the presidency as semi-permanent office has been met with a strong rebuke on the part of the country’s voters.

Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Year in Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AKP (Justice and Development Party)</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>Islamist</td>
<td>Erdoğan</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHP (National Movement Party)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Islamist</td>
<td>Devlet Bahçeli</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHP (Republican Peooples’ Party)</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>Kemalist</td>
<td>Kemal Kilicdaroglu</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDP (Kurdish Democratic Party)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Kurdish</td>
<td>Selahattin Demirtas</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>550</td>
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