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Election Analysis

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The Elections with the Wrong Results

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The elections of June 7, 2015 had the effect of a political earthquake. Turkey's ruling AKP conceded a sharp drop of 9 percent (from 49.9 to 40.9 percent), losing, after 13 years in power the overall majority of seats. It was the first time the ruling party saw a dramatic fall in support. The AKP's losses seem even more dramatic considering the opposition parties' underrepresentation in media and the ruling party's abuse of public resources.

The major victor of June 7 was the leftist pro-Kurdish HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party). So far, in order to circumvent the 10 percent threshold, the Kurdish movement had fielded independent candidates who then once elected formed a group in parliament. Despite of the fact that Selahattin Demirtaş, the party's co-leader had achieved 9.7 percent in the presidential elections in August 2014, the decision still harboured many risks (Today's Zaman 17-01-2015).¹ Polls showed that the party would narrowly pass the 10 percent, necessary to enter parliament, but only a few observers expected a breakthrough of 13.1 percent. The HDP's rise can be attributed to the party's departure from ethnic based Kurdish political rhetoric, and re-branding and opening up to an electorate much beyond its Kurdish core constituency in the country's east, but this time also the 10 percent threshold played positive role for the HDP. Many people voted for the HDP because they feared that in case the party could not exceed the 10 percent, this would leave the Kurds out of parliament and open the door to a constitutional majority for the AKP. While the 10 percent threshold had been an instrument that bolstered the ruling parties' majority in parliament, this time it turned against the AKP.

Also the nationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) could increase its votes by 4 percent, gaining 16.3 percent. As opposed to this, the major opposition party CHP (Republican People's Party) had not been able to increase its votes and even lost one percent falling to 25.0 percent.

Seats in parliament are distributed as 258 for the AKP, 132 for the CHP and 80 for the MHP and 80 for the HDP. The result re-introduced Turkey with the

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¹ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected president in the first round with 51.79 percent.

concept of coalition governments.² The unexpected fact that the AKP did not only by far miss its set goal of gaining a two-third majority in order to transform the constitutional system into a tailor-made presidential one, but – with only 258 seats – it also missed the number of 276 seats, necessary to form a government on its own, turned the political game in Ankara on its head. As Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, a journalist with *Milliyet* daily held in a TV program, on June 8 Ankara woke up to a new political reality in which Erdoğan and the AKP are not the only game makers in town anymore. Although the political community had difficulties in adapting to it, a breeze of freedom started to flow through media. Even pro-government channels began to cautiously air criticism. President Erdoğan who had openly campaigned for the AKP did not appear in public and did not comment on the results. Erdoğan stayed off-air for more than three days and twenty two hours, considering his omnipresence in media an unprecedented length counted by an online ticking counter (*Hürriyet Daily* 11-06-2015). His silence opened a discursive space for oppositional voices.

However, it soon became clear the domination of the AKP was not easy to break. A coalition between the three oppositional parties, leaving the AKP out was immediately ruled out by the nationalists. The MHP went further and refused any cooperation with the HDP accusing them of being the long arm of the Kurdish guerrilla. The AKP's regaining of control became evident in the election of the speaker of parliament. While the CHP did not support the MHP's candidate (the two parties' joint candidate in the presidential elections), the MHP in turn refused to support anyone who would also get the votes of the HDP. The frictions within the oppositional camp re-widened President Erdoğan's scope of action. Erdoğan returned on the scene and began to circulate the idea of early elections. Ahmet Davutoğlu was only given the task of forming a government a month after the elections on July 9th. The constitution provides that if no government can be formed within 45 days early elections have to be called. AKP and CHP delegations met several times, but the leaders were only involved in the last stage. Once also preliminary talks with the MHP also failed all viable options were exhausted, as the AKP categorically ruled out any potential coalition with the HDP. Erdoğan did not hand over the task to Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu from the CHP, but called for early elections on November 1st.³

The electoral campaign

The elections of June 7 were the first general elections since Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's election into the post of President of the Republic in August 2014.⁴

² In its almost 70 years long history of multi-party politics, Turkey has experienced numerous coalition governments. Particularly, the 1970s and 1990s were characterized by alternating coalition governments.

³ Erdoğan declared that he would not give the task to anyone “who does not know the way to Beştepe”, Erdoğan's new presidential palace, referring to the opposition's refusal to participate in any receptions held in the new presidential palace.

⁴ A constitutional amendment made in 2007, approved by a plebiscite, provides for the election of president by popular vote for a five-year term with a chance to be re-elected. The amendment reduces the tenure of parliament to four years. In the first popular election of a Turkish president Tayyip Erdoğan was elected into the new office with 51.79 percent in the first round, while the joint candidate of the two major opposition parties Republican People's Party (CHP) and the

The Turkish constitution assigns the president the role of a non-partisan arbiter with relatively broad powers particularly in regard to the filling of higher public sector posts and the formation of government. Erdoğan, however, referring to the fact that he is the first and only president in Republican history, who was elected by popular vote (51 percent), claims a re-interpretation of the office as the supreme head of state and politics. Since assuming office he has pushed to the limits of the constitutional system. He did not stay aloof from day-to-day politics. Erdoğan convened several times the cabinet, publicly stated his opinion and ignored the principle of impartiality. Erdoğan repeatedly highlighted the ills of a “double headed” system. He toyed with the idea of a change of the current parliamentary system into a presidential one, strengthening the role of the president and reducing that of the PM, the government and the parliament. Erdoğan held that this change had become necessary as the presidency which was earlier defined as a guardian of the tutelary regime would now be the elected representative of the people. Erdoğan and the AKP have come to see a presidential system as the last cornerstone in the reconfiguration of the Kemalist state.

In the run-up to the elections, Erdoğan toured the country under the pretext of openings of infrastructure projects or “presidential visits”. In his speeches he mobilized for his political project. As the opposition fiercely defied his ambitions, Erdoğan called for 400 seats (a bit more than a two-third majority, required for constitutional amendments) for the ruling party. Erdoğan did not take on the role of a distanced statesman or of a neutral arbiter, but by acting as if he was still a party politician, he breached the constitution. His discourse mainly polarized against the HDP whose electoral success would prevent him from a “presidential majority”.

Erdoğan’s re-interpretation of the presidency politicized the office, made it more vulnerable. It challenged the constitutional order and further polarized society. As neither the constitutional court nor the supreme election board or any other independent institution put Erdoğan in his place, the elections became the only arena to defy him. In light of the president’s unbridled hunger for unlimited authority, Selahattin Demirtaş’s proclamation; “*we won’t let you become president!*” fell on a fertile ground. Demirtaş and the HDP’s campaign revived the Gezi spirit of summer 2013. The HDP’s anti-authoritarian liberal messages and Demirtaş’s cheeky and humorous responses to Erdoğan’s aggressive rhetoric appealed to a broad spectrum of Erdoğan critics much beyond the party’s Kurdish constituencies. The party’s campaign aimed at presenting the HDP not as a Kurdish party, but one that has also a Turkish focus. Consequently, the HDP addressed the Kurdish issue in the broader context of principles as human rights, minority rights and gender rights. It highlighted the Kurdish issue in the context of the ills of the authoritarian Turkish state, represented by the AKP. The HDP’s representation of the Kurds as the victims of the authoritarian state built a bridge to other minorities and groups discriminated against by the male authoritarian state such as women, LGBTs, leftists, trade unionists, workers, Alevis and others. The HDP’s

Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) won 38.44 percent and Selahattin Demirtaş of the Democracy Party of Peoples (HDP) garnered 9.78 percent.

inclusive message, its reference to diversity and equality and its sensitivity towards other “victims” in return increased the sense of solidarity and compassion with the Kurds. Besides liberal constituencies in the country’s western cities such as Istanbul, - where the HDP could win 12.43 percent - the party was also able to appeal to conservative Kurdish voters, who had earlier voted for the AKP but have become increasingly disappointed with the government’s handling of the Kobane crisis and the Roboski (Uludere) massacre when in December 2011 34 civilians were killed in a Turkish airstrike. The government blocked any investigation on the case and has ever since tried to sweep it under the carpet. In that regard, the HDP was able to capitalize on the peace process. The AKP’s decision to start negotiations with the Kurdish guerrilla had been a paradigmatic change that was accompanied the breach of many nationalist taboos. The HDP could build on this atmosphere.

While the AKP could hardly capitalize on the peace process – due to the above mentioned reasons- another party did; the nationalist MHP. While the HDP could address those who supported the peace process, the MHP’s messages addressed the fears and uncertainties connected with the process. To many voters, Turkish nationalism was the answer to the fear of the partition of the country. These fears were also rising as news about the absence of Turkish state authority over the eastern provinces began to circulate. Allegedly, the government in order not to disturb the peace process had turned a blind eye on the PKK’s establishment of parallel administrative structures in the region, including check points and courts.

One can conclude that the supporters of the peace process as well its critics were lured away from the two major political parties; the AKP and the Republican People’s Party (CHP). Despite a face lifting and a reframing of its electoral program – the CHP tried to present itself as a viable and serious social democrat alternative, emphasizing mainly social issues – the HDP proved to be the better and fresher liberal leftist alternative. Demirtaş’s humorous responses to President Erdoğan’s attacks made him into the most popular oppositional leader. Although, Demirtaş’s charisma radiated away into the CHP and sympathies for him flew high, to many CHP voters with a nationalist leaning, the HDP still remained unelectable due to its relations with the PKK.

The AKP’s campaign in turn, tried to picture the party as the only representative of the real people. The AKP campaign referred to the party’s “*Yeni Türkiye*” – New Turkey project, transporting imaginaries of economic development and social advancement, but it was mainly devoted to Erdoğan’s presidential system. The presidential system was presented as a remedy to the ills of the country. The AKP’s campaign did not claim the peace process it had initiated. Instead, the party seemed to turn away from the peace process. Erdoğan’s attacks on the HDP targeted the rising Turkish nationalist votes.

Erdoğan’s partisan attitude and active campaigning for the AKP overshadowed the run-up to the elections. Erdoğan was not only partisan, but he acted as if he was still the head of government and leader of the AKP. While the PM and the cabinet became reduced to the executive of decisions taken in *Beştepe*,

Erdoğan's new presidential palace. His public appearances dwarfed PM Ahmet Davutoğlu and other leading party figures. He was overrepresented in media and the abuse of state resources was massive. Erdoğan's authoritarian attitude fuelled fears of manipulations of the electoral results. This in turn stimulated an unprecedented number of people to register with newly constituted NGOs such as *oy ve ötesi* (vote and beyond) for voluntary election monitoring.

The AKP's new ideology: Erdoganism

The June 7 elections provided Erdoğan and the people around him the opportunity to get rid of inconvenient persons within the party. Particularly, people accounted as being close to former President Abdullah Gül posed potential obstacles to the AKP's transformation into a de-ideologized party machine and majority provider for Erdoğan's ambitions. Levent Gültekin an independent journalist wrote in the online news platform Diken that Erdoğan played a major role in choosing the candidates for the elections. Gültekin highlights that many ideologues and old companions became replaced with yes-men, who owe their status and position to Erdoğan and who are absolutely loyal to him (Diken 31-05-2015). Erdoğan's interventions made Davutoğlu look like his trustee. This had a negative effect on their relationship. Tensions between the palace (*saray*) on the one hand and Davutoğlu, the government and leading party figures on the other hand grew. Three major events revealed the growing frictions between the palace (*saray*) and the Davutoğlu government:

The first one was President Erdoğan's public fall out with the governor of the central bank. Erdoğan attacked the governor of pursuing a wrong interest rate policy. The crisis was seen as a reflection of the growing tensions between Yiğit Bulut, a former TV comentator and the president's major advisor on economy and Ali Babacan, the minister of economy a mentor of the governor and a defender of the institution's independence.

The second event was the so called "Fidan case". Hakan Fidan, the chief of the Turkish national intelligence organization (MIT) often described as Erdoğan's black box is considered to be a major cornerstone of his personal power system. In the run-up to the elections Fidan resigned after consulting the PM from his post and put his candidature for parliament on the AKP list. Fidan was fancied as the country's future foreign minister. Erdoğan openly stated his disappointment about Fidan's resignation without asking for permission:

We brought [Fidan] to such a position. I am the one who brought him there. If so, when departing, he should have stayed and not left there if he was not being allowed to do so," "[...] There is of course a disappointment if a candidacy is in question even though we have expressed our opinions (Hürriyet Daily News 04-03-2015).

Shortly after, Fidan withdrew his candidacy and returned to his post as chief of MIT.

The third major event that made the growing tensions within the AKP visible was the president's fall out with the government over the "peace process" and

the turbulences this caused among leading party figures. Erdoğan publicly disagreed with the government on the so called “Dolmabahçe declaration” in which the government and a Kurdish delegation jointly declared to have agreed on the formation of an observational committee. Deputy Prime Minister and the government’s spokesperson Bülent Arınç, a founding member of the party and a long standing political companion of Tayyip Erdoğan, responded the next day by stating that it is still the government that rules the country and politically responsible and that the president’s statements were inappropriate. Arınç’s statement in return was commented by Melih Gökçek the mayor of Ankara with a tweet. Gökçek accused of having ties with the Gülen Movement⁵. Arınç’s response came prompt accusing the mayor of Ankara of extensive corruption and of having himself “sat in Gülen’s lap” (Hürriyet Daily News 23-03-2015). Arınç also announced to “reveal the mayor’s wrongdoings” after the June 7 elections (Hürriyet Daily News 23-03-2015). Meanwhile Arınç did not reveal any of his allegations, the prosecutor did not become active and no file was opened. The dispute brought the conflict within the party to the fore.

The June 7 elections clearly bolstered Erdoğan’s grip on the party, also because many of the “heavy weights” among the ideologues, such as Arınç himself, were not able to stand in the elections due to the party’s self-imposed three term limitation for any party functions.

One can conclude that Erdoğan’s omnipresence has undermined the party’s political mission and identity. Ideology has become replaced by Erdoğanism, where allegiance to the leader is a major requirement. This has further fostered the personalization and informalization of relations and opened the door to palace intrigues. The election results of June 7 thwarted Erdoğan’s plans. The solution of the “system error” was seen in a reset; early elections.

Inciting the Kurdish question

On July 20, 34 people, mainly young Kurdish activists, were killed in a major bomb attack in the town of Suruç, close to the Syrian border. The attack was allegedly committed by the IS (Islamic State). The next day, as retaliation for the attack, two policemen were shot dead by the PKK. These events signalled the beginning of a spiral of violence. While in the first days the government declared to fight terrorism of all sorts, it soon became clear that this was the beginning of a new war against the PKK. The oppositional newspaper Sözcü commented the government’s U-turn from the peace process with the following headline; “votes gone - peace process gone” (Sözcü 25-07-2015). Indeed, to many observers it has not been clear why the government’s policy towards the peace process has changed that radically. The government’s escalation strategy seems to have nationalist votes in mind. Critics suspect President Erdoğan of having consciously incited conflict in order to be able to present himself as a

⁵ The Gülen Movement, a former ally, has turned into Erdoğan’s major internal enemy. The movement accused of having infiltrated the judiciary and the security apparatus, has been associated with the bugging of the PM and ministers and the allegations brought forward against Erdoğan and his son. Ever since, the Gülen movement has been a red rag to Erdoğan. Ties with Gülen have now become a liability and a subject of political pressure and blackmailing within the ruling party.

guarantor of stability and national unity. His repeated claims for a two-third majority in parliament as a guarantor for stability; “if we would have gained 400 seats, the situation would have been different” (Diken 06-09-2015) seem to confirm these suspicions. Debates on whether the resurgence of the conflict was staged have been also fuelled by the tweets of whistle-blower Fuat Avni, who claims to be a part of Erdoğan’s inner circle. Avni has tweeted several events in advance. In any case, the government’s willingness to return to a military conflict resonated with the position of elements within the PKK who seemed also disturbed by Selahattin Demirtaş’s and the HDP’s rise and its universalist messages.

The news on fallen soldiers have incited feelings of revenge and invoked nationalist responses. The killing of 16 soldiers in Hakkari Dağlica on September 4, fuelled public anger. In the following days, in a concerted action, nationalist groups, including young AKP supporters, went into the streets. HDP bureaus, shops that were allegedly owned by Kurds as well as oppositional media institutions such as the offices of the *Hürriyet* newspaper were attacked and some of them set on fire. At the same time PKK attacks on the Turkish state have continued. The town of Cizre, a PKK stronghold, was under curfew for a couple of days. The security situation in the eastern provinces has deteriorated. Debates whether elections can be held on November 1st became aired.

The political discourse has been defined by nationalist themes. Under these circumstances conciliatory voices have been silenced or not heard. But, at the same time it seems that the mood has also turned against the AKP and President Erdoğan. The resurgence of the conflict with the PKK has not alleviated the polarization within society. On the contrary, critical voices against the government have increasingly turned into angry voices. On several occasions, the funerals of fallen soldiers have turned into protests against the government. The outcry of a lieutenant colonel at his brother’s funeral, a soldier who had fallen in the fight against the PKK was synonymous. His words; “why do those who called for peace now call for war?” (Zaman 24-08-2015).

Despite of the dramatic changes that occurred since June 7, polls point at no radical changes for the outcome of the November 1st elections. It seems that the AKP will not be able to capitalize on its politics of escalation and re-gain an overall majority, if it will not be able to lure away some of the nationalist votes it lost to the MHP, Turkey will again stand where it stood on June 7, however in the meantime even more polarized, divided into ethnic camps, desperate, disillusioned and economically weakened.