



TURKEY'S HOT SUMMER

By: Evangelos Areteos

Turkey in front of a dilemma: Nationalism vs Democratization

The advancement of the Syrian Kurds in northern Syria and the expansion of a continuous geographical area under their control, from the river Tigris to Kobani, are emerging as a major catalysts for the internal political balances in Ankara, where the efforts for a coalition government are still heavily overshadowed by the prospect of early elections.

The advancement of the Syrian Kurdish forces have come in a very delicate moment for Turkey, and brought Ankara in front of an overwhelming dilemma: Nationalism and introspection vs. opening to the Kurds and to wider democratization.

The Syrian Kurdish forces have replaced ISIS along the Turkish border creating a continuous line under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the strongest Kurdish party in Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava), politically and ideologically linked to the PKK.

The Syrian advancement has alarmed the Ankara security and political establishment; within these circles the dominant belief is that this development is strengthening the PKK and is creating the conditions for maximalistic demands from Turkey's Kurds. Ankara fears that ultimately, there will be a Kurdish corridor in Syria until the Mediterranean Sea and that will enforce the Kurdish regionalization to the disadvantage of Turkey.

With this in mind, two seem to be the most crucial factors in Ankara that will ultimately decide whether Turkey will go to a coalition government (and the kind of coalition government) or to early elections: The inner balances in AKP and the final assessment within the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the role it wants to have in Turkey. If the political parties cannot reach a deal to form a government until the end of August, early elections should be proclaimed within three months.

Today AKP is swinging on one hand between R.T.Erdogan and a more autonomous existence, early elections, and a coalition and on the other between a coalition with MHP and a coalition with the Republican People's Party (CHP).

R.T.Erdogan is not a man who will easily let go of his ambitions, and in Ankara there



seems to be a consensus that he is still aiming for the constitutional change and the instauration of a full presidential system. For the time being though, R.T.Erdogan is fighting to keep his place in active politics and not to be sidelined and confined in the current constitutional limits of the President.

R.T.Erdogan seems to be facing a very delicate dilemma: With early elections the probability for AKP to win enough seats in parliament to form a government on its own are not at all negligible. A study published last week shows that to the question of “which party would you have voted if you knew the result of the June 7th elections”, 45% replied AKP¹. In Turkey there is a feeling of growing fear of uncertainty and instability and that is a major factor to push more people to vote for AKP in the event of early elections.

On the other hand, there is a significant group of the veteran AKP politicians who could not run in that last elections because of the third term rule of the party but who are now seriously considering to return to politics and take a new active role in AKP and the next government. Early elections mean that the weight of the “founding fathers” of AKP will become important again and that could prove to be a major challenge for R.T.Erdogan.

It is not clear yet if today R.T.Erdogan is willing to take his chances and accept a coalition government for some time or if he is willing to have early elections until the end of the year. A coalition government will practically mean that for a certain period of time, the time the coalition government lasts, R.T.Erdogan will have to stay in the back seat and abstain from everyday politics. The length of this period will be crucial for R.T.Erdogan: The longer it is, the more dangerous it will be for him since he will risk to lose his grip of the party and his influence on daily politics.

In any case, it seems that the probabilities that R.T.Erdogan, and through him a significant part of AKP, enforce the nationalistic rhetoric are getting much higher.

The same study mentioned above, highlights also that 22% of the people who voted for HDP in June had voted for AKP in the elections of 2011 (the huge majority of them being conservative pious Kurds who shifted towards HDP mainly because of AKP's and R.T. Erdogan's policies perceived as against the Kurds.) At the same time 28% of the people who voted for MHP in June had voted for AKP in 2011. These are mainly nationalistic-driven Turks who became disappointed with AKP's and R.T.Erdogan's initiating the peace process with the Kurds.

These two groups will be R.T.Erdogan's main target groups to win back votes for AKP, but today it seems that getting back the Kurdish vote will be much more difficult than to win back the nationalistic vote. Under the circumstances, with the

¹ <http://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/ipsostan-cnn-turke-secim-sonrasi-arastirmasi?page=37>



advancement of PYD in northern Syria, it seems that R.T.Erdogan will try to exacerbate the nationalistic feelings, mainly around the Kurdish issue but also around an anti-West/anti-EU sentiment.

Within AKP there are important circles who see the coalition as an opportunity to keep R.T.Erdogan out of everyday politics and to allow the party to gain a new dynamic. But this stance is far from being the dominant position within the party. The role of former President and co-founder of AKP Abdullah Gul will play a very crucial role: If he decides to come back to politics that will change the dynamics within the party against R.T.Erdogan. Ahmet Davutoglu's role is equally crucial: Ultimately, he is the one who can decide to form a coalition and choose the party that will form the coalition. The other big dilemma AKP faces is the party with which they could form a coalition government: MHP or CHP.

AKP-MHP coalition could seem more probable today than an AKP-CHP coalition, but this is far from being a certainty. AKP could work to some extent with MHP as they share some common ideological ground, especially when it comes to religion. In the current atmosphere with nationalism becoming again the order of the day, these two parties could eventually find some more common ground. When it comes to voters, 67% of AKP voters favor a coalition with MHP whereas only 15% favor AKP-CHP².

Nevertheless, a coalition with MHP will definitively hurt AKP's already severed relations with the Kurds since one of the main conditions put forward by MHP for a coalition is the end of the peace process. It will also hurt what is left of the reformist dynamic of AKP and the circles of conservative reformists will feel even more alienated from the party. With an AKP-MHP coalition the risks for civil tensions, especially in the southeast, will increase and Turkey could face an extremely delicate situation with its own Kurds but also with the Kurds in northern Syria and N.Iraq.

There is no unanimity within AKP concerning a possible coalition with the nationalists and this escalates the tensions within the party.

Crucial to the formation or not of a coalition with MHP will also be Devlet Bahçeli's inner party balances: The leader of MHP has proven many times his cold bloodiness and his ultimate will to protect the State in the wider sense. D.Bahçeli has shown in the past his ability to adapt; in 2002 MHP under his leadership, the party voted for the abolition of the death penalty as per the EU's instructions and request, saving concurrently Abdullah Ocalan from execution.

² idem



As Barcin Yinanc writes³ D.Bahceli knows that he cannot stop the Kurdish peace process, but he is not willing to contribute to it either. Ultimately, MHP and its leader will have to decide if they will take the responsibility to find a middle way, or if they will stay in the margins of politics. There are already talks in Ankara about replacing the “peace process” with a “democratization for all” process. The developments in northern Syria and the subsequent nervousness within the security establishment in Ankara will play a crucial role in the final decisions of MHP.

AKP-CHP scenario is also probable and it is favored by the strong secular but also “Islamic” business circles and foreign diplomats as well as from the Democratic People’s Party (HDP). This scenario could bring symbolically and practically a historic conciliation between “kemalism” and “Islamism” and could also in practice allow Turkey to advance towards a renewed foreign policy with less tensions and a reorientation towards the EU.

Nevertheless, for AKP it would be a much more risky coalition than with MHP because it would not permit the party to regain any substantial Kurdish vote, while it would provoke further losses from the nationalistic flank, since CHP is adamant of going forward with the peace process, with the parliament becoming the center of the process instead of the intelligence service and the contacts with Abdullah Ocalan.

³ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/the-dilemmas-of-turkeys-nationalist-party.aspx?pageID=449&nID=84145&NewsCatID=412>
