

Attempting to Map the Turkish Electorate: The Turkish Opposition and the Challenge of the Undecided Vote

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ATTEMPTING TO MAP THE TURKISH ELECTORATE

The Turkish Opposition and the Challenge of the Undecided Vote

In this second report on the Turkish electorate, Evangelos Areteos explains the relationship between the opposition and the undecided, and the reasons why disaffected voters steer away from the opposition.

The limits of Islamic instrumentalization and mobilization in Turkey are seriously strained by the dynamics of deep social and anthropological transformations of the Turkish society, steadily turned towards an effective secularization. As conservatives/Islamists are distancing themselves from AKP², an act mainly triggered by the bad state of the economy, empirical observations, analysis and data seem to indicate that the main opposition parties are not considered as an alternative for these disaffected voters. Not yet, at least.

The fear of losing economic and social acquisitions, as well as the fear of a revanchist behavior, ideological and structural distance between religious people and secularist parties, and a deep distrust concerning the actual capacities of the opposition to address Turkey's problems keep the significant number of disaffected AKP voters away from the opposition.

The Undecided and the Economy

Consequently, these disaffected AKP voters are gravitating amongst the undecided voters of the Turkish electorate, who are estimated at 25,9% in December 2021³, and seem more and more hesitant between voting again for AKP or voting for the opposition. These undecided voters are emerging, not only as the decisive factor of the next elections, but also as the real test for the

² <https://www.unic.ac.cy/da/2022/02/04/attempting-to-map-the-turkish-electorate-akp-s-challenge-of-religious-voters-disaffection/>

³ <https://t24.com.tr/haber/metropoll-anketi-kararsiz-secmenin-erdogan-a-bakisi-nasil,1006365>

opposition parties who are facing the challenge of finding ways to address and ease fears, anxieties, and uncertainties, as well as showing that they can effectively run the country.

According to Metropoll, voters who had previously voted for AKP accounted for 32,9% of those who said they were undecided in August 2020. Meanwhile in August 2021, they accounted for 37,2% of those who said they were undecided.⁴ AKP voters are more inclined to be undecided than the voters of all the other parties. This can be explained both from the economic circumstances and the deeper social changes that make society and especially the conservative/Islamist voters less receptive to Islamist mobilization.

As the economy has become the leading channel of conversion of these deeper mutations into political expression, and as soon as a positive feeling is created around the economy, a number of these disaffected voters seem inclined to go back to AKP. According to the latest polls of Toplumsal Etki Araştırmaları Merkezi (TEAM)⁵ and Türkiye Raporu⁶, in the beginning of January 2022, AKP recorded a noticeable increase while the number of undecided seemed to decrease and some of them to turn back to AKP. Moreover, according to TEAM, Comparing to November 2021, AKP increased its votes by 4,3%, to 32,1%, and about 1% of these votes came from MHP while the rest came largely from the undecided.

The measures taken by the Turkish government in December 2021 that stopped the fast devaluation of the Turkish Lira, as well as the 50% rise of the lower wage seem to be the main reason of this increase. This does not, however, appear to be strong enough to become a stable trend. Over the last years after 2016 and the coup attempt, it has been observed that following some initiative of the government, such as cross-border military operations, the conversion of Agia

⁴ <https://www.sondakika.com/politika/haber-secimin-kaderini-belirleyecekler-kararsiz-14400820/>

⁵ <https://twitter.com/etkiarastirma/status/1482634126754783235>

⁶ <https://www.turkiyeraporu.com>

Sophia museum into a mosque, and the retrieve from the Istanbul Convention, there has been a notable increase of the votes towards AKP. Nevertheless, these increases do not become stable trends since they weaken after some weeks or a few months.

Commenting on this last increase of votes, Ulaş Tol, Coordinator of TEAM, argues that taking into account the potential of the People's Alliance towards the undecided who have not yet turned towards the opposition and remain close to the AKP, this increase "is quite limited compared to the psychological effect created by the economic measures".⁷ When it comes to President Erdogan, the situation is not much better. According to Metropoll's data⁸, in December 2021, 8,3% of the undecided voters, who make up a quarter (25,9%) of the electorate, "like" Erdogan while 13,3% of them "dislike" him, 2,7% "neither like nor dislike" him and 1,6% said they "have no idea" or "don't have an answer".

Fears and Distance from the Opposition

Despite all this, deep fears concerning the way the opposition will run Turkey if Erdogan and AKP lose the power are still major obstacles for a decisive turn by the voters. At the same time, the opposition parties seem to be reaching their limits concerning their capacity to attract more voters. The opposition seems to be coming closer to a "glass ceiling" that cannot be broken, unless these parties manage to offer much more concrete proposals than that of "everything will be just fine as soon as Erdogan will go away".

For a significant proportion of AKP voters, social subsidies/aid and access to the healthcare system are crucial factors when it comes to elections and the prospect of a change of government. The fear that they will lose these aids and accesses is

⁷ <https://www.dw.com/tr/akp-oylarındaki-artış-kalıcı-mı/a-60453882>

⁸ <https://t24.com.tr/haber/metropoll-anketi-kararsiz-secmenin-erdogan-a-bakisi-nasil,1006365>

widespread amongst a very significant part of AKP voters. Similarly, the fears of a revanchist behavior from the opposition and also losing rights and freedoms that were gained through the AKP period, including losing rights of women wearing the headscarf, are also crucial.

These fears and anxieties of a significant part of the electorate are clearly evident in a survey by Türkiye Raporu, in December 2021⁹ on how people see their rights and freedoms after the elections and a change of power. 41% (against 59%) of respondents said that they think that their right to benefit from the health system will be put at risk; 40% (against 60%) think that the principle of 'equality before the law' will be put at risk; 40% (against 60%) think that their commercial and financial freedom will be put at risk; 38% (against 62%) think that their access to social media will be put at risk; 38% (against 62%) think that their freedom of expression will be put at risk; and finally, 36% (against 64%) think that their freedom of religion will be put at risk.

The percentages of the people who are afraid that their rights will be at risk after a change of power are very high. This also indicates that roughly 40% of the people (which lately coincides with the average estimations of different polls concerning AKP and MHP rates), are basically afraid that a change of government would have a very significant impact on their basic rights. The fact that the lowest rate of apprehension at 36% concerns the freedom of religion is revealing of the limits of the Islamist mobilization, as it has been detailed in past analysis.¹⁰

The fact that this fear is lower amongst younger generations of 18-24 year, and the way this figure starts to gradually rise with age, simultaneously confirms the abovementioned analysis that the youth has taken significant distances from the polarizing narratives. The fear level equally increases amongst the people with lower education, while it decreases amongst those with higher education,

⁹ <https://www.turkiyeraporu.com>

¹⁰ <https://www.unic.ac.cy/da/2022/02/04/attempting-to-map-the-turkish-electorate-akp-s-challenge-of-religious-voters-disaffection/>

pointing out that the opposition parties have not yet been able to address the fears of the less educated section of the population.

Additionally, when it comes to fears concerning religion, religious values, and identity, the distance between the conservatives and the opposition is still very big, despite the fact that the conservatives seem to have a rather balanced approach of the current AKP government. According to a survey conducted amongst the religious segments of the society by TEAM in November 2021¹¹, 55% believed that the AKP fully behaved in line with religious and spiritual values in recent years. Moreover, 25% believed that the AKP behaved somewhere in the middle, taking a more moderate stance, while 20% believed that it did not behave at all in line with religious and spiritual values.

Responding to the question “If the Nation Alliance comes to power, how much importance will it give to religious and spiritual values when governing the country?”, 58% replied that this would have no importance at all, 22% somewhere in the middle, and 20% stressed full importance. The perceived difference is still very important. Despite the fact that the opposition is clearly secularist, for religious and conservative voters, this poses a significant challenge, even if there is a wider dynamic of secularization amongst the conservatives¹² and that pious people take distances from institutionalized Islam.

When it comes to the perception of dignity of religious people, 40% think that AKP is responsible for its decrease, with 38% thinking it is not responsible, while 22% are on the fence. However, to a similar question concerning the dignity of religiosity and the impact it would have on it if the opposition came to power, 60% think it will decrease, 16% say it will increase, and another 24% are on the fence.

¹¹ http://www.teamarastirma.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/TEAMDindarSecmenler_Rapor.pdf

¹² <https://www.unic.ac.cy/da/2022/02/04/attempting-to-map-the-turkish-electorate-akp-s-challenge-of-religious-voters-disaffection/>

The latest TEAM survey¹³ indicates that while 44% of religious people believe that corruption increased during the last period of AKP (against 34% who believe that corruption did not increase and 22% who are on the fence). However, 54% of religious people believe that corruption will increase if the Nation Alliance comes to power (against 23% who do not believe that corruption will increase and 23% who are on the fence). The same trend is recorded for Erdogan. While 46% of the conservatives believe that Erdogan is doing his job well, 65% believe that if he decides to quit politics, things will take a turn for the worse.

While conservatives/Islamists are becoming more critical in terms of significance to the government and to Erdogan personally, when it comes to the opposition running the country, their trust is still very low. Various surveys show that Erdogan while the majority of AKP voters think that the economy is badly managed, they still do not think that the opposition is up to govern the country. According to a Metropoll survey published in November 2021¹⁴, 61,4% of AKP voters believe that the economy is badly managed.

However, according to another Metropoll survey published in January 2022¹⁵, 76,6% of AKP voters do not believe that the opposition is ready to run the country. The opposition has not yet managed to persuade the undecided that it can manage the economy better than the current government, while the economic crisis is dominating the everyday lives of people. Even in matters like the war on drugs, debates revolving around the national arms industry, and combatting terrorism, the rate of the opposition's prospect of being successful are extremely low, at around 16%.

¹³ TEAM, *idem*

¹⁴ <https://www.diken.com.tr/carsi-pazar-anketi-10-akpliden-altisina-gore-ekonomi-kotu-yonetiliyor/>

¹⁵ <https://www.paraanaliz.com/2022/ekonomi/metropoll-muhalefet-ulkeyi-yonetmeye-hazirmi-g-23249/>

CHP seems to face a great challenge in approaching the more religious Sunni Turk voters since only 25% of them think that CHP is a better party comparing to the 90s (where CHP's stance towards Islam was authoritarian). 48% think that CHP is worst and 27% are on the fence. However, due to the dynamic of deep transformations within the CHP¹⁶, 35% (against 31%) of religious Kurds think that CHP is a better party comparing to the 90s.

Will the Opposition Win or Will AKP and Erdogan Lose?

While the number of disaffected AKP voters appears to be on the rise, the capacities of the opposition to appeal to them and to capitalize on the distance they take from AKP and Erdogan seems to be inadequate to ease their fears and anxieties.

The uncertainty emerging from the bleak economic situation, the fears that with the opposition in power they will risk to lose all the freedoms, rights, and benefits they acquired during the AKP years, toppled with the anxiety of an ideological and cultural alienation and the profound worry of revanchist behaviors, are all major challenges for the opposition parties, on the one hand, and powerful advantages for AKP and Erdogan, on the other.

The opposition's nomination of a candidate for the next Presidential elections will most likely play a crucial role for a significant number of the disaffected and undecided voters. According to a Metropoll survey conducted in January 2022¹⁷ 29,3% of the respondents say that their decision between voting for Erdogan and for his opponent will depend on who the opponent will be.

At the end of the day, with the economy being the most crucial factor for the political expression of the disaffection and dissatisfaction from AKP, the

¹⁶ <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/publication/αλλάζουν-οι-καιροί-τρία-κόμματα-της-τ/>

¹⁷ <https://serbestiyet.com/haberler/metropoll-arastirmanin-kurucusu-ozel-sencar-erdoganin-rakibi-kim-olsa-kazanir-varsayimi-dogru-degil-83225/>

undecided voters might, at some extreme point, make a decisive turn away from AKP.

Even so, the real question will be whether the opposition will be the one to win the elections or if it will be AKP and Erdogan who will lose them.