

TURKEY'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: ERDOGAN'S AKP WINS AGAIN

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Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) won a consecutive third term in the elections of 12 June 2011 securing 50 percent of the national vote and a comfortable majority of 326 members in the 550-seat Turkish parliament. Erdogan and his party have good reason to be jubilant: in every election to parliament since 2002, the AKP increased its share of the national vote and gained 5 million new voters in the latest contest. The party's victory was never in doubt: every opinion poll had predicted its re-election with a comfortable majority. On the other hand, Erdogan's party could not get the super-majority of 367 seats that would have allowed it to re-write Turkey's constitution without requiring the endorsement of the parliamentary opposition. The party also fell short of getting 330 seats that would have enabled it to draft a constitution unilaterally and then submit it to a national referendum. Consequently, the AKP will have no choice but to seek support from the ranks of the opposition. In his victory speech immediately after the election, Erdogan struck a conciliatory tone and promised to work with the opposition parties in order to achieve a national consensus on constitutional reforms.

To the opposition parties, however, Erdogan's promises ring hollow. They recall his expressions of humility and offers of cooperation following the AKP's 2007 election victory that belied his fiercely partisan record. In any case, they see no incentive in helping the AKP achieve a major policy goal. Many Turks agree with the AKP that the current constitution that was adopted by the military two years after the 1980 coup should be replaced with a civilian one. Erdogan has promised a 'civilian, free constitution that embraces all parties of the society', but beyond that his party has been short on specifics on what it is contemplating introducing in a new constitution. However, this has not stopped the opposition parties from declaring their respective -and conflicting- red lines. All the opposition parties claim to want a new constitution, but the AKP fully expects fierce debates and resistance when parliament begins to deliberate on the matter. The party with the least interest in altering the existing constitution is the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP), the second largest opposition party, which won 13 percent of the vote and elected 53 members, 17 fewer than in the last parliament. The MHP's well-known opposition to granting collective Kurdish rights does not bode well for the government's bid to solve the Kurdish problem while the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) will pull the AKP in the opposite direction by insisting on enshrining Kurdish rights in a new constitution. Most observers of the Turkish elections consider the BDP as much of a winner as the AKP. The party ran candidates registered as independents in order to overcome the 10 percent threshold, increased its share of the vote in the Kurdish south-east, and also increased its parliamentary strength from 20 to 36. Emboldened by

the increased support it has received from Kurdish voters, it has taken an increasingly assertive stance on constitutional guarantees for Kurds.

Nor would the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP) be disposed to help Erdogan. The CHP is smarting from its poor showing in the elections. It barely won 26 percent of the national vote and even lost ground to the AKP in some of its traditional coastal strongholds, namely in Izmir and Antalya. Kemal Kilicdaroglu, its new leader, projected a new progressive image for this party, abandoning his predecessor's barely concealed support of the military and opposition to expanding Kurdish rights. In the aftermath of his party's disappointing performance, the CHP leader has had to contend with damaging in-fighting within his party as questions about his capacity to achieve electoral victory are voiced by critics.

The AKP sees a new constitution as the principal means through which to help resolve the Kurdish issue. How to reconcile the demands of nationalist Kurds and end the violence of the Kurdistan Workers Party (The PKK) is undoubtedly the greatest challenge facing Turkey today. Since the AKP came to power in 2002, most restrictions on the expression of Kurdish culture have been removed, more resources have been made available to the poverty-stricken Kurdish south-east, and Kurdish politicians are freer to promote the rights of their people. AKP can thus boast that it has done more than other governments to improve life for Turkey's Kurds. However, from the viewpoint of many Kurds, the AKP's record is woefully inadequate: it has not secured constitutional recognition of Kurdish language and culture, state-funded schooling in Kurdish, and not the least, self-government in the Kurdish region. Erdogan is in an unenviable predicament: if he gives in to Kurdish nationalist demands to provide state-funded Kurdish education and alter Turkey's unitary structure by granting the Kurdish provinces greater powers, he will unleash a fierce national debate and put his government into conflict with Turkish nationalists and the Kemalist establishment. The BDP has demanded that Erdogan's government accept the PKK and its imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan as negotiating partners to resolve the Kurdish issue. Predictably, the AKP has refused to accede to the latter demand for fear that it would be condemned for negotiating with 'terrorists', but it may have little choice but to fashion some way of talking to Kurdish nationalist leaders to solve the Kurdish problem.

To no one's surprise, the election campaign barely featured foreign policy issues. Erdogan has been obliged to adjust his 'zero problems with neighbours' policy due to the peoples' uprisings in neighbouring Arab countries, particularly in response to the brutal suppression of peaceful protests in Syria that prompted thousands of Syrians to take refuge in Turkey. Otherwise, Turkey's foreign policy will feature continuity. Relations with the United States, although occasionally testy, are stable. On the other hand, owing to Turkey's stalled EU accession course, relations with Europe continue to be prickly. In view of the poor prospects for a breakthrough in the on-going Cyprus negotiations, the continued German and French resistance to Turkey's membership and the economic crisis that has gripped EU countries, the AKP sees no urgency to

accede to EU demands to advance its accession course, including those that call for the opening of Turkish ports and airports to Greek Cypriot vessels and aircraft.

Under the AKP, Turkey has become more stable, prosperous, and internationally respected than under its predecessors: its economy has grown threefold in nine years, its emerging democracy has improved, and its regional standing greatly enhanced. In spite of these achievements, making real progress on the Kurdish issue has eluded Erdogan. As he begins his third term, writing a new constitution and resolving the Kurdish issue will top his party's agenda. If he can somehow bridge the divide between his party and the Kurdish nationalists, and by so doing bring Kurds into the country's cultural and political life as equal citizens, he will secure his place in Turkey's history as one of its most successful leaders.