

TURKEY'S NOVEMBER 2015 ELECTION: WINNERS AND LOSERS

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After 5 turbulent months and contrary to expectations that it will again fall short of winning the majority vote, the Justice and Development party secured 49.4% of the vote and 317 seats in the 550-seat Turkish parliament, thus securing a generous majority but not the 367 seats that would pave the road for the government to proceed to the transition to a presidential system, or the 330 seats that would allow a referendum, in line with President Erdoğan's aspirations. The Republican People's party, which is the main opposition, did not succeed substantial improvement, whereas the nationalistic MHP and the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) saw their votes dropping sharply.

The election result came as a surprise to most people, since there was a common belief that it would be similar to the June 7 outcome, which would require the formation of a coalition government. This was also a major test for PM and leader of the AKP Ahmet Davutoğlu, under whose leadership the AKP lost the majority vote in June for the first time since 2002 and after having won three consecutive elections, (2002, 2007, 2011). The president's authoritarianism, the failed peace process with the PKK and the economy issues being the major challenges.

The pre-election period was dominated by security issues and political instability, from the AKP's side, whereas the main opposition parties blamed the AKP's authoritarian rule for the rising tensions. Additionally, the CHP focused on the economy slowdown and promised reforms to undo AKP's injustices. The MHP pledged to end the already collapsed peace process on the Kurdish issue, in order to retrieve nationalist votes and further consolidate its power within the Parliament, while showing a pre-election will for cooperation, both with the AKP and the CHP. Finally, HDP aimed at a political solution for the Kurdish issue and blamed President Erdoğan for the failure of the peace process and the ethnic tension between Kurds and Turks.

Erdoğan, accused of an increasingly authoritarian and divisive style, has invoked diversionary tactics to turn things around, after the June election, including holding a series of large public rallies during which he made little secret of his preference for single-party rule by the AKP, despite constitutional clauses which required him to be impartial. Thus, polarisation has dominated the pre-election period and a number of security incidents, such as the bombings in Suruç on 20 July and in Ankara on 10 October have enhanced the fear of insecurity and the feeling of uncertainty, upon which the AKP run its campaign. President Erdoğan and the AKP leadership have been under heavy criticism, involving accusations on intelligence

failings and complicity in order to stir up nationalist, anti-Kurdish sentiments. They rejected all accusations, blaming the attacks on the I.S.I.S.

Erdoğan's risk seemed to have paid off since the AKP managed to secure two million votes from the MHP and a million votes from the HDP. The failed peace process and the renewed airstrikes against the PKK in addition to MHP supporters' growing resentment towards party leader Bahçeli are the main reasons for the nationalists' losses. As far as the HDP is concerned, the rising ethnic tensions that caused a series of arson attacks against Kurdish property and HDP offices and the bomb attacks, led the pro-Kurdish party to suspend its rallies due to security fears and further ethnic related violence. A significant number of HDP voters leaned towards Erdoğan's plea for a strong, single party AKP government that would restore security. The EU's role was also rather influential according to many analysts, as Brussels shunted the publication of a highly critical report on Turkey, seeking a deal to stem the refugee flow towards Europe.

In the aftermath of the November snap election, the AKP is the only winner. Despite falling short of the necessary votes to safely proceed with the constitutional changes that will establish a presidential system, Erdoğan, on a 4 November statement, projected an image of strength and optimism as he placed the transition to a presidential system on the top spot of his agenda of the newly elected legislature. He also vowed to continue the war on PKK on every level and ruled out any resumption of the peace process, thus triggering the suspension of PKK's unilateral ceasefire and fanning fears of a return to an all-out war.

Turkey has seen serious changes in the last 13 years, but it seems to remain under a paternalistic leadership that may manipulate the democratic institutions at will. The once Kemalist deep state has been replaced by an authoritarian pro-Islamist leader. The president's authoritarianism will remain and he will continue to rule on a "*de facto*" presidential system, until he turns it to "*de jure*". A Kurdish issue solution seems quite distant, while the Syrian war together with the ongoing instability in the Middle East will continue to play their part on the West's handling of Turkey's political leadership.