

Democracy and Civil Society in Turkey: Contesting Tutelage!

Ayhan Kaya*

STIFTUNG
MERCATOR

 **IAI**
Istituto Affari Internazionali

IPC | ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER
SABANCI UNIVERSITY
STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE

The general elections held in Turkey on 7 June 2015 perplexed the political system with a variety of coalition options, all of which are very difficult to bring about. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) won 258 out of 550 seats in the Parliament, 18 seats less than the simple majority required to establish single-party rule. Oppositional parties, on the other hand, won 60 percent of the vote. All of them had organised their electoral campaigns against the authoritarian, tutelary and Islamist attempts of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as well as against the undemocratic AKP and its bypassing of the democratic principle of separation of powers.

These elections have also underscored the role of the electoral processes in prompting civil society to raise their voice against the civilian tutelage of President Erdoğan, who was explicitly siding with the AKP during the electoral campaign despite the fact that, as president, he was supposed to uphold a neutral political stance. As opposed to earlier elections in which several cases of fraud were reported, many civil society organisations as well as oppositional political parties and social media networks mobilised thousands of active citizens to observe the ballot boxes and report any fraud attempts. In addition, several different social groups worked for the success of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in passing the 10 percent threshold so that it could be represented in the Turkish Grand National Assembly and ensure that the AKP could not establish another single-party rule. This mobilising of greater segments of civil society had already been practiced throughout the Gezi Park protests in the summer of 2013. Similar to the *Occupy Gezi* movement,

the latest elections have also created a state of optimism for many Turkish citizens, who had been feeling more and more pressured by the majoritarian and authoritarian rule of the AKP and President Erdoğan.

The last election was spectacular in the sense that it led to a more democratic Parliament even though the 10 percent threshold was still in place. Prior to the elections, it was understood that the HDP, a coalition of various Kurdish, left-wing, environmentalist and other groups, had a higher probability of going beyond the electoral threshold as a party rather than with independent candidates. Consequently, many of the conservative Kurdish-origin constituents of the AKP in southeast Anatolia and in the metropolitan cities shifted their support to the HDP. In addition, around 10 percent of the Republican People's Party (CHP) constituency decided to strategically vote for the HDP, which brought about 3 percent extra vote for the latter. As a result of these electoral shifts, the HDP won 13 percent of the vote in comparison to 6 percent in the 2011 elections. It now has 81 seats in the Parliament, which makes it the third-biggest party after the AKP and the CHP. Another winner of the latest elections is the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), with 18 percent of the vote in comparison to 11 percent in 2011. CHP, on the other hand, remained almost the same with 25 percent of the vote, though they reported with confidence that about 10 percent of their constituents voted for the HDP. Relatively speaking, the only loser of these elections has been the AKP, as they lost almost 9 percent of the vote in comparison to the 2011 elections. This time they received 41 percent, and without winning the majority of seats

* Ayhan Kaya is Professor and Director of the European Institute at the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence, Department of International Relations, Istanbul Bilgi University.

could not go on to establish another single-party rule.

In what follows, I will first demonstrate that Turkish civil society has displayed its resistance against the growing civilian tutelage of the President Erdoğan, who is believed to be undermining the separation of powers and democratic governance. Subsequently, I will underline the initiatives undertaken by various civil society organisations to prevent any kind of fraud in the ballot boxes. Lastly, the paper will discuss the success of the HDP in winning the consent of some of the liberal-minded voters as well as of the conservative Kurds in order to establish a social and political alliance following the legacy of the Gezi Park protests.

A Quest for Democracy: Popular Contestation Against Tutelage

There are several factors that are necessary to explain in order to understand the main reasons for the AKP's relative loss. On the one hand, the majority hold the view that President Erdoğan's active involvement in the electoral campaign – through using public resources to address the electorate in 37 cities prior to the elections – in fact backfired and partly caused the loss of the AKP. For instance, AKP votes decreased in 15 cities where he delivered public speeches. His dream of installing a presidential system in the aftermath of the elections, with the AKP winning 400 seats in the Parliament, has not come true. All of the anti-constitutional moves that he has made since he became president in summer 2014, his biased mode of governance, his ongoing condescending political discourse, and his intervention in the lifestyles of secular social groups are just some of the factors that have signaled his illegitimacy in the eyes of the majority of the public. This is really an interesting point to take into consideration in order to understand the impact of one single person on the ways in which a majority of Turkish citizens perceive democracy. In other words, it could be argued that a growing number of voters expressed their opposition to the civilian tutelage that Erdoğan was aiming to build up. This time his tutelary attempts backfired in a very similar fashion to the tutelary attempts of the military back in 2007.

The discontent of the majority of the electorate against the civilian tutelage of President Erdoğan and the possibility of a presidential system as proposed by President Erdoğan were also coupled with the public's lack of trust in the functioning of democratic elections due to the fraud allegedly experienced in the previous general elections in 2011 and local elections in 2014. Consequently, in the latest elections, several different voluntary associations as well as individuals tried to ensure that there would be no election fraud. All of the political parties organised their own volunteers to observe the ballot boxes. Another



Supporters of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) hold pictures of Abdullah Ocalan (L), jailed leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey, during celebrations in Istanbul on June 8, 2015. (Photo Ozan Kose/AFP/Getty Images)

successful operation was held by a volunteer civil society organisation called *Oy ve Ötesi* (Vote and Beyond).¹ *Oy ve Ötesi* observed 62 percent of the votes in the entire country, observing 45 cities and 162 districts. Such voluntary activities initiated by different civil society organisations, insurgent citizens, political parties and social media networks seem to be the offspring, or outcome, of the Gezi Park demonstrations, which had mobilised millions of people across the country, as well as the world.

The HDP and Selahattin Demirtaş' Charismatic Leadership

Probably one of the foremost outcomes of the Gezi Park protests was the learned experience of some of the Turkish citizens to form societal and political alliances across different ethnicities, cultures, religions, social classes, and gender. The HDP has become attractive for many Turkish citizens as it has formed an alliance with different social and political groups under the leadership of Selahattin Demirtaş, who had already passed through a presidential election campaign in 2014. His charismatic personality, humane character, sense of humour and modesty has attracted a great number of people not only from among the conservative Kurdish constituencies of the AKP in the southeast and the metropolitan cities such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, but also from among the Turks, Assyrians, Armenians, left-wing groups, LGBTI groups, feminists and environmentalists as well as some organised political groups like the Freedom and Solidarity Party (ÖDP), the Labour Party (EMEP) and the Turkish Communist Party (TKP). HDP's promises about gender equality, environmental issues, and democracy and its intention of becoming a catch-all party that will address the problems of the nation as a whole has attracted many

¹ See the organisation website (in Turkish): <http://oyveotesi.org>.

left-wing and liberal-minded people, as well as young people. In other words, the HDP voters were determined to support their party to go beyond the 10 percent threshold in order to make sure that the AKP would not have the majority of the seats in the Parliament and establish another single-party rule. They were successful in doing so. Similar to the Gezi Park protests in June 2013, the flags of Kemal Atatürk, Abdullah Öcalan and LGBTI groups were present at the HDP rally held on 8 June 2015 to celebrate its victory in the aftermath of the elections in Bakırköy, a stronghold of the HDP in Istanbul. However, it seems that they still have a lot to do in order to calm down the Turkish nationalists, Kemalists and statist groups from different political parties. For instance, the MHP is still very persistent in opting out of any plan to set up a political alliance with the Kurds or with the HDP.

Conclusion

To conclude, I believe that one of the most essential problems of contemporary Turkey is that the state has always monopolised the right to define and shape the principal components of the public space. In this sense, the *Occupy Gezi* movement is a revolt by active citizens, or the inhabitants of Istanbul and of other cities, against the repressive hegemony of the state and its restricting of the right of individuals to shape their public space. Historically speaking, the *Occupy Gezi* movement was similar to the preceding movements such as the headscarf movement, the Alevi movement and the Kurdish movement, which have all challenged the repressive hegemony of the state in monopolising the formation of the public space.

However, what made the Gezi Park movement different from the other social movements was its capacity to reassemble the social across ethnic, religious, class, cultural and gender identities on the basis of an ideology of change. Furthermore, the *Occupy Gezi* movement was unlike the others in that it was not televised but tweeted. This use of social media was very decisive in disseminating the messages of the movement across the globe. It is also a clear vindication of the intolerance of the Turkish citizens of any kind of tutelage, no matter where it comes from.

Certainly, the last general election has been another episode in which the Turkish electorate did not tolerate President Erdoğan's idea of establishing his authoritarian civilian tutelage under the rubric of a presidential system. These elections will likely be remembered historically as the result of societal and political alliances made by active, insurgent citizens trying to struggle against the authoritarian attempts of President Erdoğan on the one hand, and against the Islamisation of the state and society on the other. What we observed throughout the election period was the puissance, or power, of organised civil society groups in making sure that the representative electoral democracy is still working despite the efforts by the ruling AKP government and by President Erdoğan to derail it. The growing power of civil society in Turkey is partly attributable to the processes of globalisation and partly to the Europeanisation processes, which have deepened since the Helsinki Summit in 1999. With moderate optimism, a revival of more dynamic Turkey-EU relations can be expected for the future, thus turning the vicious circle once again into a virtuous circle.