

Turkey's 2015 Elections: A New Beginning for Turkey's European Union Accession Goal, or the End of a Dream?

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For both internal and external observers of Turkish politics, the results of the Turkish general elections held on 7 June 2015 were highly surprising. The elections unexpectedly led to a significant alteration of political power in the country, as the party in power, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), ended up with 40.9 percent of the votes, a decline of almost 10 percent since the last general elections that were held in 2011. For the first time since it came to power in 2002, the AKP failed to form a single majority government. As a result, the single party rule of the AKP that had lasted for 13 years effectively came to an end. More importantly, the loss of a parliamentary majority halted Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's – the prime minister from 2003 to 2014 and the president since 2014 – aspirations for a presidential system.

Along with the decline in the AKP's votes, the elections resulted in increased electoral support for the opposition parties – the Republican People's Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the People's Democratic Party (HDP) – which altogether received around 60 percent of the vote. In particular, the HDP, representing the Kurdish and other minorities, was able to pass the 10 percent electoral threshold with 13.1 percent of the popular vote, carving a new space for itself in the Turkish political scene. For pundits, the elections results indicated that the AKP was seen to have become increasingly authoritarian since 2011, and to be the underlying cause for the sweeping wave of political polarisation in the country.

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This brief commentary aims to assess the possible impact the 2015 elections will have on Turkey's relations with the European Union. Specifically, a looming question is whether the new Turkish political landscape will revitalise or hamper the Turkish accession negotiations with the EU. This question is partly tied to the possibility of political instability, which might ensue if the newly formed government cannot steer the country and put together bills that can easily pass parliamentary approval. However, it is also linked to the process of democratisation in Turkey and whether a new momentum can be created in Turkey-EU relations. This is why this commentary proposes that the changing political landscape in Turkey has the potential to impact Turkey's relations with the European Union.

The AKP, Turkey and the EU

In 2005, Turkey began its accession negotiations with the European Union on a largely optimistic note. Yet despite a positive beginning the negotiations have largely stalled since 2008, coming to a standstill in 2011. There are multiple factors underlying this stall in the negotiations, both EU-driven and Turkey-specific. On the European Union front, enlargement is no longer a top priority, as reflected by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's declaration on 15 July 2014 that "In the next five years, no new members will be joining us in the European Union."¹ While the EU's own economic troubles

¹ Jean-Claude Juncker, *A New Start for Europe, Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session, Strasbourg, 15 July 2014*, p. 20, <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/jean->

with its eurozone crisis hamper the attractiveness of the EU for Turkey, it also makes the EU less likely to embark on an ambitious enlargement project. However, beyond the general slowing down of the enlargement process, there are also factors specific to Turkey. There are individual member states in the EU who have serious misgivings about Turkey and are able to use their veto power to block progress and the opening of chapters with Turkey. For example, France vetoes 4 chapters – even chapters where Turkey is deemed to meet the EU’s technical criteria – based on the argument that they would prejudice the outcome of the negotiations as accession. Cyprus, on the other hand, vetoes 6 chapters, including Chapters 23 and 24 on Fundamental Rights and the Judiciary. The main reasons behind the French and Cypriot vetoes are not tied to the Turkish political situation, and unless these vetoes are lifted, a revitalisation of the accession process is unlikely. This is, however, a situation independent of the Turkish electoral results.

What is to be expected is that as long as Turkey moves away from the EU’s democratic norms, those who look at Turkey’s accession with a more sympathetic eye have their hands tied. A new Turkey with new political actors, such as the HDP with its gender equality goals or a revamped CHP with strong reflexes for curtailing arbitrary rule, might strengthen the hands of Turkey’s friends inside the EU. In other words, a democratic Turkey committed to the EU accession goal would be seen as more credible from the EU’s point of view, and certain member states might no longer find it very comfortable to veto the opening of chapters or other similar advances in Turkish-EU relations. This depends on the EU’s perception of a Turkey committed to the EU accession goal, ready to take upon costly political reform with the capacity to transform Turkey into a fully democratic state. This, in turn, brings us to the political landscape in Turkey after the 2015 elections and the Turkish-specific factors in shaping its relations with the EU.

In its initial term, the AKP was deemed to be a political actor with both the capacity – its parliamentary majority – and the will to transform Turkey into a democratic country. It was under the AKP’s rule that negotiations commenced with the EU in 2005, as the AKP in its earlier years was a staunch defender of Turkey’s EU accession goal and its democratisation process. With electoral support of about 50 percent in the previous elections, the AKP was able to harness a majority of the seats in the Parliament; that is because of the 10 percent electoral threshold enables the largest parties to get a disproportionate amount of seats. Nonetheless, while the decline in the AKP’s votes in this election cannot actually be seen as a sharp electoral defeat, as they still received 40 percent of the vote, it does matter as it has led to the loss of parliamentary majority for the AKP. This is important because the AKP’s single



Ankara, 9 July 2015: Turkish President Erdoğan asks PM Ahmet Davutoğlu to form new government.

party rule and parliamentary majority enabled them to pass controversial bills and adopt political and legal reforms that their predecessors had difficulty with. The 2003 Labour Code, 2005 Penal Code, 2012 education bill and the 2013 security bill could be listed as some primary examples. While some of these reform packages initially enabled Turkey to meet the EU’s accession criteria, since 2011 they took Turkey in the opposite direction, away from political reforms.

Recent years in Turkish politics witnessed the AKP using its electoral hegemony² to socially engineer the country in line with its own wishes, and to push controversial legal changes that the opposition parties were unable to stop due to the AKP’s parliamentary majority. A turning point was reached in June 2013 with the Gezi Park popular protests against the AKP’s increasing authoritarianism. The AKP’s repressive stance on the protests, corruption scandal in December 2013, bans on social media outlets such as Twitter and Youtube, and increased control over the judiciary and security forces culminated in Turkey’s moving further away from the EU norms of democracy. As a result, the AKP was increasingly perceived as an authoritarian party, unable to muster a political consensus. Its former minister of culture, Ertuğrul Günay, summarised this view: “That imperious style, which rejected dialogue during the Gezi Park protests, abandoned democracy and drifted toward an authoritarian rule. Now Turkey is at a very grave threshold. We are drifting away from the rule of law toward an arbitrary rule.”³ This situation was compounded with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s election as president in August 2014; consequently, the polarisation of the country along political party lines as well as around the personality cult of Erdoğan intensified.

However, this backsliding into authoritarianism in Turkey since 2011 plays the most important role in shaping the EU’s views towards the country. In 2013, following the

² Meltem Müftüler-Baç and E. Fuat Keyman, “The Era of Dominant-Party Politics”, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 2012), p. 85-99. Ergun Özbudun, “AKP at the Crossroads: Erdoğan’s Majoritarian Drift”, in *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2014), p. 155-167.

³ Translation of an interview with Taraf, “Recently resigned minister says Turkey drifting from rule of law”, in *Al-Monitor*, 2 January 2014, <http://almon.co/1xws>.

Gezi Park protests and the corruption scandal, a reversal of political reforms in Turkey occurred. Specifically, the changes in the composition, election and powers of the judiciary, the increased powers of the security forces, and the blurring of separation of powers between the different branches of the government⁴ have been alarming for the Turkish ability to continue to meet the EU's political norms and criteria. While the EU has been vocal and critical about this backsliding, the Turkish government did not seem to heed these criticisms. "This is largely due to the government's perceptions that its own material interests are at stake, which is perceived to be more important, at least for the moment, than the EU accession – a far away goal in any case."⁵

This is why the 2015 elections might be a blessing in disguise in terms of reversing this trend. If the democratic reforms are set back on track, and the authoritarian tendencies in the system are checked both by the institutional mechanisms and by the new political actors, the negotiations process could be revitalised. This, however, is contingent on the political capability and will of the new government. As the Turkish government's political commitment to the EU accession goal matters significantly for the successful completion of negotiations, it remains to be seen whether the newly emerging political balances in the country will favour the EU accession goal. This emerges as a key concern especially for two political parties, the CHP and the MHP, as they have traditionally opposed the Turkish integration to the EU. Of these, the MHP, a likely coalition partner for the AKP, needs special mention, as it is staunchly nationalist and perceives the EU as a threat to Turkish national interests. On the other hand, the CHP as a self-proclaimed social democratic party does not have a good record of supporting the EU accession goal either. This leaves only the HDP – perceived by some to be a promoter of Kurdish minority's interests – as the party that leans and favours the EU process the most. However, the HDP received only 13 percent of the vote, enabling it to pass the electoral threshold but nonetheless remaining less powerful as a coalition partner or as a political player.

If a coalition government is formed between the AKP and the MHP, then this would ultimately be bad news for Turkish-EU relations, as the MHP is very much against Turkey's EU accession goal. The party with the highest level of support for Turkey's EU accession goal is the HDP,

4 Senem Aydın-Düzgüt and Yaprak Gürsoy, "The Rule of Law and Judicial Reforms in Turkey between 2002 and 2013," in Boğaç Erozan, Nihal İncioğlu, and Pinar Uyan-Semerçi (eds.), *Siyasetin Bilimi. İtler Turan'a Armağan* (The Science of Politics. Essays in Honor of İtler Turan), İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2015, p. 327-341, <http://www.yaprakgursoy.com/Gursoy-SiyasetinBilimi>; Meltem Müftüler-Baç and E. Fuat Keyman, "Turkey's Unconsolidated Democracy: The Nexus between Democratisation and Majoritarianism", in *Global Turkey in Europe Policy Briefs*, No. 19 (January 2015), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/2996>.

5 Personal interview with the Political Counselor section, EU Delegation in Ankara, 30 March 2015.

but it is not going to be a coalition partner so its impact is likely to be low. There are currently a few potential coalition constellations, AKP-MHP or AKP-CHP, and of these AKP-MHP is the most likely to be formed. This type of coalition government would be particularly bad news for Turkish democracy, as it would on the one hand reinforce the rising authoritarianism and, on the other hand, hinder the peace process. The other possibility is a minority government formed by the AKP and supported by the MHP. Both constellations would hamper the Turkish-EU process, which would no longer constitute a top priority for the government. The slowing down or shelving of the Kurdish peace process would also be a major problem in advancing democratic rights in the country. The election results indicate increased visibility of nationalist discourse in the country all across the political spectrum, and given the enhanced nationalist, and in a related fashion eurosceptical, rhetoric, this does not fare well for Turkey's EU goals.

This ultimately indicates that despite its decline in electoral strength, the AKP still holds the key to Turkish-EU relations. However, the AKP is no longer the unified actor it was when it was adopting the political reforms in 2004-2006. It is now divided internally between various sub-actors, and there is confusion as to who actually is the leader of the party. Erdoğan acts as if he is still the chairman and the executive head, but he is the president, with constitutional restrictions on what he is able to do. What is more, Erdoğan has recently attempted to consolidate his power further by asking for a constitutional amendment to transform Turkey into a "presidential system" from a "parliamentary system." Since the AKP could not get the parliamentary majority for a constitutional amendment, this could mean the end of such a scheme. This is reflected by Alexander Graf Lambsdorff, the European Parliament's Vice President, saying that "voters had rejected Erdoğan's presidential omnipotence fantasies."⁶ Yet this is in fact far from certain, as the AKP could join forces with the MHP to do precisely that. Without doubt, such a move would distance Turkey further from the EU.

Nonetheless, the most pressing need in Turkey is to reverse the legal changes that were adopted after June 2013 with clear violation of the EU criteria. The elections indicated the resilience of Turkish democracy, which is a plus in its dealing with the EU. What remains to be done to steer Turkey back to the EU course is an acceleration of political and legal reforms. The revitalisation of the Turkish-EU relations is subject to the normalisation of the political system and the reversal of bills that restrict freedoms of expression, media, and association as well as the restoration of the independence of the judiciary. Whether this will be possible in the new Turkish political landscape remains to be seen.

6 "EU welcomes Turkey's election, calls it 'clear sign of democracy'", in *Today's Zaman*, 8 June 2015, http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_eu-welcomes-turkish-election-calls-it-clear-sign-of-democracy_383671.html.