The Post-Elections Turkey: What Lies Ahead?

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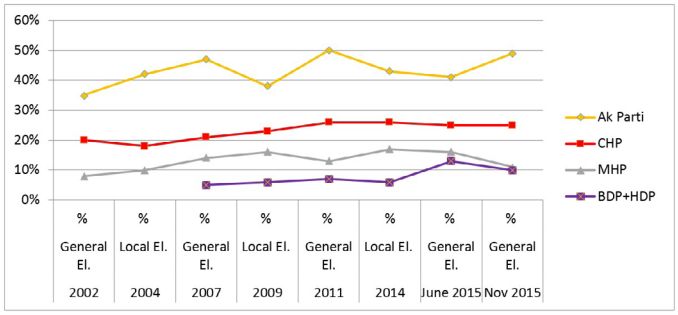
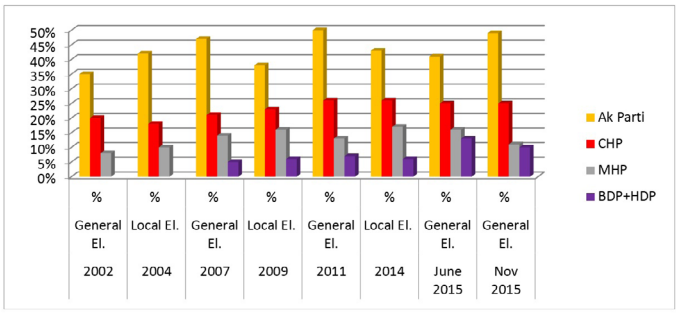
The Justice and Development (AK) Party's decisive comeback on 1 November 2015 in the general elections offers valuable insights into Turkey's domestic politics and its role as a pivotal actor in its region and the globe. Especially in light of the devastating Paris attacks, the international community's attention has tuned in to Turkey's immediate region, and how the new Turkish government will act in the fight against regional destabilisers like ISIL and the failed state of Syria and Iraq emerges as a pressing question.

Exceeding even its own predictions, the AK Party's securing 49.5 percent of the votes with 317 seats resulted in a landslide victory and pointed to the inherent problems of the opposition parties. With close to 90 percent voter turnout, the AK Party won a resounding victory and the mandate to govern Turkey for the next four years, if not longer. In a stark contrast to the AK Party votes in the 7th of June 2015 elections, which hovered around 40.8 percent, the impressive 9 percent increase in the support for the ruling party can be best explained by the instability and insecurity that followed from a reluctance on the part of opposition parties to form a coalition government. In fact, in the 7th of June elections, the Turkish people had given opposition parties not a chance but an evident mandate to form a coalition government to govern Turkey. Falling captive to internal party politics, the opposition parties clearly failed to use this mandate as Turkey rapidly descended into chaos and instability.

• Figure 1 | The AK Party's and major opposition parties' votes since the 2002 general elections



• Figure 2 | Histogram of political party votes since the 2002 general elections



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This failure of the opposition parties, mainly of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), coupled with the escalated violence, conflict, and terror that occurred immediately after election day, gave the AK Party and especially President Erdoğan the chance to take a risky and gamble-like decision to "repeat" the 7th of June elections. The election gamble paid off; while the AK Party won the election with a resounding victory, not only did the opposition parties lose, but they also left the domain of governance to the dominant party position of the strong majority government.

Most likely, Turkey will not have elections for another four years. The AK Party has an ample window of opportunity to steer the country out of election fatigue and the governance vacuum, which were exacerbated amid recent terrorist attacks and entrenched polarisation within Turkish society. While the election results confirm the reality of a "New Turkey" – a concept on which the AK Party, starting with President Erdoğan, bases its strategy and discourse about Turkey – and paved the way to a "New Constitution"-making process, there are still some questions that the AK Party will have to decide on vis-à-vis how it will govern Turkey in the next four years.

The AK Party as the "Dominant Party" and "New Turkey"

The 1 November 2015 elections have several important implications. First, the AK Party is set to run Turkey with a "strong majority government." With 49.5 percent of the popular support and capturing 317 seats out of 550 in a four-party parliament, the AK Party not only received a mandate to govern Turkey as a "strong majority government," but it has also reinforced its "dominant party" position in Turkish politics. In the same vein, there are some projections that it would also win the 2019 elections. Coupled with the continuation of the weak opposition problem, the AK Party's dominant-party status will be not only the main factor, but also the main domain of future debates and studies on Turkey and its expected regional and global roles.

Second, we will hear more references to the idea of the "New Turkey." The AK Party's election victory will have significant consequences for the way in which we will discuss Turkish modernity, secularism, the new middle classes, lifestyles, and identities. Then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had already laid out the central tenets of the New Turkey in the aftermath of the 2011 general elections. He shared with the Turkish public a more elaborate vision of the New Turkey during his victory speech in the 2014 municipal elections. With Erdoğan's ascension to the highest echelon of the Turkish state as the first publicly-elected president, the implementation of the New Turkey has begun.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Istanbul, 18 October 2015. (Photo Bundesregierung)

The AK Party's victory in the recent election establishes the New Turkey not only as a point of reference in the future examinations of Turkish politics, but also as a powerful new domain that will set the discourse for many debates and studies to come. In this regard, the New Turkey discourse is revisited, heralding a new society rising on the pillars of rapid urbanisation and the shifting axes of "center" and "periphery." The new center is mainly conceived of a new entrepreneurial class, a new civil society rooted in Anatolia, and a new media as well as opinion leaders and public intellectuals. The social tenets of the New Turkey have the following trends of social governance: a postmodern and post-secular society, more visibility for religious expression in the public domain, and strong identity politics.

Third, and more important, the making of the "New Constitution" will gain traction, with an increased focus on the presidential system. In fact, the election results helped President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AK Party regain the much-needed "confidence" and "power" to potentially facilitate a serious debate on, and to push for, changing the political regime from parliamentary democracy to presidentialism.

Fourth, Turkey is back to the era of a strong government versus a weak opposition. When viewed especially from the opposition angle, the election results demonstrate that the opposition parties are likely to be taken hostage by their own internal politics. This has already started in MHP and CHP (Republican People's Party). Yet, despite its poor performance in the elections, the pro-Kurdish HDP (People's Democratic Party) emerged from the recent elections as a viable member of the opposition, being the third-biggest group in the Parliament. The Kurdish question in general, and the future of peace negotiations in particular, remain as key challenges with which the new AK Party government should deal effectively. Certainly, the PKK and its decision to escalate violence and conflict after the 7th of June elections was a profound mistake. Whether the PKK has drawn any lesson from its mistakes

will also determine the effectiveness and position of HDP in the new parliament.

Governing or Ruling; Leadership or Hegemony?

All these realities spiral into a big question mark regarding how the AK Party will behave in the next several years. Will the AK Party administration lead Turkey based on democratic and just principles of governance, or will it opt for a single-handed rule over the people? In this regard, will it choose leadership over hegemony that dominates a particular segment of the society? Furthermore, will we see an AK Party that is keen on ruling rather than governing? The answers to these questions are more important than the debate on presidentialism versus parliamentary democracy for the future of the New Turkey, as well as Turkey's role as a reliable rising power that can join the global community in overcoming today's challenges.

As much as processes and institutions, the choice of leaders matters. How President Erdoğan, Prime Minister Davutoğlu, and the AK Party will act is the key determinant to see not only how the New Turkey and the New Constitution-making process will develop, but also how effective and constructive Turkey will be in responding to regional challenges with serious global ramifications.

The Role of Post-Election Turkey in Responding to Global Challenges

In his address to the UN General Assembly on 28 September, US President Barack Obama's message to the international community was clear: the global challenges we are facing today have reached a dimension that no single nation – whether a great power or an emerging actor – can overcome on its own. "No nation," he said, "can insulate itself from the threat of terrorism, or the risk of financial contagion; the flow of migrants, or the danger of a warming planet […]. And if we cannot work together more effectively, we will all suffer the consequences."[1]

The dangers that Obama cited in his remarks constitute the "multiple crises of globalisation." The ripple effects of the 2008 financial crisis, metastasizing international armed conflicts, global climate change, and the lack of a just and inclusive global governance system create turmoil for our globalised world and place us all at a critical crossroads. The global tectonic plate shift caused by these multiple crises albeit has regional aftershocks. Today, the deteriorating security and sovereignty of certain Baltic states on the outer rim of the EU, the human suffering and tragedy unfolding due to the failed states of Syria and Iraq, the contest among regional actors like Iran and Saudi Arabia for the future of the Middle East, and Russia's rewiring of its hard power and flexing its muscles over Syria and Ukraine attest to the regional reverberations of the multiple crises of globalisation.

Turkey is a key rising power and a regional actor whose role is indispensable for a lasting solution to these problems on both regional and global levels. Thanks to its growing economy, democratic institutions, burgeoning civil society, EU membership prospects, and engagement with the rest of the world – especially with the conflict-affected "least developed countries" – on the principles of humanitarian diplomacy, Turkey is singled out as the only reliable source of peace and stability in its neighborhood. In his seminal work *Strategic Vision*,[2] which heralded several years ago the necessity of US cooperation with regional actors to overcome the challenges voiced in the US President's UN address, Zbigniew Brzezinski hails Turkey as a necessary partner of the global liberal order that the United States and its allies want to see in the world.

Whether Turkey will continue its ascent and maintain its rising-power status depends on its ability to respond to a number of regional challenges with global repercussions. A few destabilising factors unfolding on Turkey's borders not only pose vital security and stability risks for the greater international community, but they also incapacitate one of its most pivotal partners by exacerbating political and economic problems this country has been facing recently. The following several sources of regional crisis and human tragedy have dire consequence not just for Turkey, but the entire global community.

The Refugee Crisis

In a span of five years, Bashar al-Assad's crackdown on Syrian protestors for a democratic regime has turned into the bloodiest civil war of this millennium. According to UNHCR estimates,[3] 4.5 million refugees left their country to escape the atrocities caused by the Assad regime, the infighting between regime forces and armed opposition groups, and, more important, the ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) menace that indiscriminately annihilates anyone standing on its way. While the refugees outside Syria are dispersed to neighboring countries, Turkey hosts the largest group; the official numbers point to 2.2 million – with an additional million expected to arrive some time next year. While nearly 300,000 refugees are registered and staying in camps, more than 1.7 million are roaming outside the camps, migrating within the country and constantly seeking either better economic conditions, job opportunities, or a "safe" passage to Europe. Turkey stretches its resources to the limit to provide education, health, and housing services for the Syrian refugees.

1 Remarks by President Obama to the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 28 September 2015, http://go.wh.gov/VwKV6Y.

2 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision. America and the Crisis of Global Power*, New York, Basic Books, 2012.

3 UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response Portal*, http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php.

For example, the officials from the Turkish Red Crescent (*Kızılay*) confirm that more than 450,000 Syrian students are enrolled in elementary and higher education schools in the 2015-2016 school term. As Turkey's economic forecasts signal caution, a growing concern precipitates over the sustainability of Turkey's aid to Syrian refugees.

To support Turkey's efforts to respond to the refugee crisis, the EU, through the German leadership, comprised an action plan to establish cooperation areas, which include cost-sharing, information-sharing, and strengthening Turkey's capacity to fight smuggling and protecting its borders.[4] German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Istanbul[5] – shortly after the suicide attack that claimed 100 lives at a peace rally in Ankara – has provided the much-needed political clout for the action plan.

The ISIL Problem

In the aftermath of the tragic Paris attacks that claimed over 100 innocent lives on 14 November, the international community's resolve to permanently eliminate ISIL has increased. Many nations declared solidarity with France and signaled increased military operations, while others have increased their attention on influential regional actors such as Turkey. In this regard, the new Turkish government's increased participation and level of commitment are highly anticipated, as ISIL continues to increase and consolidate its influence in the region. ISIL's physical and psychological warfare now provides this nonstate actor with an effective media campaign of its atrocities and control of oil fields as a major revenue source. As such, ISIL stands for more than a terrorist organisation; its goal is to build an Islamic state and control territory mainly in Iraq and Syria. Although Russia has seemingly entered the anti-ISIL coalition, its recent indiscriminate bombing of anti-Assad coalition cast doubt over its real intentions. Similarly, Turkey has granted American jets access to launch attacks on ISIL from the Incirlik Airbase. Although these two developments may be interpreted as short-term measures to debilitate ISIL, their long-term effectiveness in eliminating ISIL once and for all is still suspect.

The State Problem, Regional Power Games, and the Lack of Leadership in the Region

The "failed state" problems of Syria and Iraq, as well as of Libya, Sudan, and Somalia, constitute critical stability challenges that both the international community and Turkey should address collectively and individually. Although Turkey continues its humanitarian engagement with the latter, the ongoing violence and conflict in the failed states require a more integrated cooperative approach between global and regional partners. In addition, the war in Yemen, the normalisation of relations between Iran and the international community via a breakthrough in nuclear talks, and the proxy wars between Tehran and Riyadh in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen for the control of the Middle East, exacerbate the fierce regional competition between the Shia and Sunni axes and further complicate Turkey's approach to this region.

In the same vein, the United States' and the EU's reluctance to get involved in Syria, Yemen, and other entrenched conflicts in the region manifest a leadership crisis. Without a commitment from hegemonic actors, key regional actors like Turkey are equally deterred from shouldering the entire burden of these conflicts. Especially in light of Russia's entry into the Syrian theater, and its impressing both sides of the Atlantic with the scope and efficiency of its airstrikes, all actors are headed back to the drawing board to deliberate on new strategies.

The Lack of Institutions and the Problem of Sectarianism in Troubled Regions

In the meantime, these problems do not appear to be disappearing anytime soon. The requisites for a stable Middle East and Levant are still missing. First, in all of these fragile and broken states, civil society is still weak and powerless. A strong idea or concept of citizenship does not exist as a common language among identities. The rentier-state mentality, and corruption as a derivative of this sort of thinking, is still entrenched in most of these societies. Furthermore, poverty and economic instability still linger, while the resurgence of sectarianism and clientelism makes all of these problems even worse.

What Lies Ahead for Turkey and the World

The 1 November 2015 elections produced two winners in Turkey: President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Davutoğlu. Both leaders are the rightful owners of the AK Party's impressive performance at the polls. However, eyes are now fixed on the two leaders to see how their relationship is going to evolve in light of this shared victory. Will it be one of harmony or rivalry? As the prime minister, Davutoğlu won a clear victory and consolidated his position in the party and Turkish politics. The most interesting deliberations and bargains with respect to the presidentalism debate will take place between these two victors of the elections. Heightened attention will be given to how the relationship and interactions between these two powerful actors are going to evolve. Given the "dominant party-weak opposition" equation, the interactions between the president and the prime minister will be the main focus of attention.

4 European Commission, *EU-Turkey joint action plan*, 15 October 2015, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-5860_en.htm.

5 German Federal Government, *Addressing the refugee issue together*, 18 October 2015, http://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/Content/EN/Reiseberichte/2015/2015-10-18-tuerkei-montag_en.html.

More important, both domestic stakeholders and the international community will watch closely to see how the AK Party is going to pull Turkey out of the election fatigue, the instability and insecurity caused by the resurgence of terrorism, and the governance vacuum. The uninterrupted four years ahead gives the AK Party government a rare and precious opening to fill the governance vacuum. To achieve this, the government should reinvigorate on the inside the frozen "peace process" for the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue. It should also address certain uncertainties that have stifled the rigorous economic growth in Turkey in the last two years.

The constructive steps taken domestically will also bolster the government's capacity to effectively address the threats radiating from the failed states of Iraq and Syria on Turkey's borders. Recovering from the election fatigue, Turkey is now well-positioned to exert its leadership in the fight against the self-professed Islamic State and its violent extremism in the neighboring failed states and on its borders. Furthermore, with the AK Party's commitment to the plight of Syrian refuges, Turkey's primacy in offering safety and support for the victims of the Syrian civil war is well on track. Nonetheless, Turkey also ought to resuscitate its bid for EU membership in the aftermath of the election results and anchor its leadership in the region to its EU-candidate status. By the same token, the EU should accurately consider the implications of these elections for the EU, their impact on Turkey's stability, and Turkey's growing leadership as a game-changer as well as a reliable actor for regional and global stability.