

“The June Earthquake”: Why Did the AKP Lose Many Votes at the June Elections?

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News

After the elections on June the 7th, the AKP (Justice and Development Party), the governing party in Turkey, lost its majority in the parliament. As the AKP cannot form a government by itself, it has to go into a coalition with another party.

Summary

The article analyzes the reasons behind why the governing party the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - Justice and Development Party) lost 9 percent of its votes at the June the 7th elections. The focus is on the 5 percent involving AKP's former Kurdish supporters who this time voted for the pro-Kurdish party HDP (Halkın Demokratik Partisi - People's Democratic Party). The second largest group, who abandoned the AKP, is the disillusioned Turks and Kurds who have in the last years become increasingly apprehensive of the AKP's and especially President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's growing authoritarian and belligerent policies and rhetoric. Erdogan attempted to turn the parliamentary elections into a referendum on his vision of a presidency with enhanced executive powers, and by all appearances lost the gamble.

Key words

Turkey, elections, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Ahmet Davutoglu, AKP, HDP.

Analysis:

The elections on June the 7th can be seen as the most important rupture in the AKP’s nearly total dominance of Turkish parliamentary politics and its ability to form single party governments uninterrupted since its election victory in October 2002. Ali Bayramoglu, a prominent political analyst writing in the pro-AKP newspaper *Yeni Safak*, described the result as “The June Earthquake” (Bayramoglu 2015).

The AKP’s share of votes fell from 49, 90 pct. at the elections on June 12th, 2011 to 40.87 percent at the elections on June 7th, 2015. In spite of the dramatic fall, the AKP came out still as the biggest party, 16 points above the second largest, the CHP (Republican People’s Party).

The key questions to ask in order to understand this outcome are: Where the lost 9 percent of the electorate vote and why did they decide to vote away from the AKP or boycott the ballot box? Polls suggest that 5 percent of this portion of the electorate voted for the pro-Kurdish HDP (Peoples’ Democratic Party), generally seen as the political wing of the outlawed armed movement, the PKK (Kurdistan’s Workers’ Party) (Coskun 2015 a,b). While there is a consensus on this 5 percent loss to the Kurdish party, there is an ongoing debate on who the remaining 4 percent voted for. Some claim that while approximately 2 percent of the former AKP supporters voted this time for the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), the remaining 2 percent are the former AKP supporters, who boycotted the ballot box (KONDA 2015). On the other hand, some other analysts claim that the distribution of the votes is rather 1 percent to the MHP and 3 percent to the group of people who did not cast their votes. However, the arguments and the statistical calculations presented by the latter group of analysts seem more convincing (Mahcupyan 2015).

The Kurdish votes

Let’s begin with the biggest group, the Kurds. Before starting to analyze the possible reasons behind the Kurdish voters’ political migration from the AKP to the HDP, it has to be kept in mind that around half of the Kurds have traditionally voted for the AKP since 2002 (Yetkin 2015). The other half used to vote for the running Kurdish party of the time, and the other two major opposition parties, the Kemalist republican CHP and the nationalist MHP, had very small existence in the Kurdish areas due to their nationalist stance regarding the Kurdish question.

Opinion polls suggest that the Kurdish AKP voters who have moved to the HDP camp can be divided into two subgroups. The first group involves people, who expected that AKP would definitely get enough votes to form the government, and therefore wanted to ensure that the HDP crossed over the threshold of ten percent (Göktürk 2015a). Ironically, this inordinately high threshold was decreed in 1983 by the military junta of the time to block the entrance of Islamist and Kurdish parties into the parliament. Although AKP criticized and promised to abolish this unjustifiable and discriminatory threshold, it did basically nothing to get it cancelled by the parliament, which it effectively dominated since 2002. The AKP hoped that, in case of

HDP’s polling under the magical 10 percent, it could get all the seats in the Kurdish areas and boost its standing in the parliament, but this problematic tactic turned out to be risky and in effect hit the AKP as a boomerang. Many Kurds who would not otherwise vote for the HDP voted nevertheless for it. Moreover, the fact that some prominent AKP leaders’ statements such as “It would be fantastic, if the HDP stays under the threshold” (IHA 2015), have apparently offended some Kurds thus mobilizing their ethnic identity and self-respect.

Doubts about the peace process

The second group consists of Kurdish AKP voters, who have been worried about the ominous signs of change in AKP’s policy towards Kurds in general and the peace process with the PKK in particular during the election campaign. There is every indication that the AKP leadership and especially President Recep Tayyip Erdogan got alarmed by opinion polls prior to the elections, which suggested a voter migration towards the nationalist MHP, who has from the onset attacked the peace process calling it “The process of Treason” and accusing the AKP for high treason for negotiating with the PKK. Without even consulting and reaching an agreement with the government, President Erdogan surprised everybody by declaring that, “There is no more a Kurdish problem in Turkey” and that, “There is no negotiating table with the PKK” shortly after an optimistic meeting with high government officials and three prominent HDP politicians in the historical Dolmabahce Palace. Instead of defending the peace process against nationalist attacks and underlining its most important gain, the termination of bloodshed in skirmishes between the security forces and the PKK guerillas in the last three years, Erdogan and some AKP leaders falling immediately into line with him sounded more and more belligerent towards the HDP and the PKK. This sudden and obviously opportunistic U-turn gave the impression to many Kurds that the AKP was no more the guarantor of the peace process and added to the fear that AKP was not serious and honest in the negotiations with PKK’s symbolic leader, Abdullah Öcalan, and the HDP. Moreover, Erdogan and other prominent AKP leaders began to involve religion into the election campaign and question the Muslim identity of the Kurdish politicians. Erdogan claimed that some of the HDP leaders were Zoroastrians (Karabatak 2015, Muhalefet 2015), i.e. followers of a pre-Islamic belief system, and some AKP politicians claimed that the HDP’s demand that *Diyamet* (Department of religious Affairs) be abolished and that mandatory religious education in the schools becomes elective reveals its atheistic character (Arslan 2015). In an attempt to win back the pious Kurds, Erdogan gave speeches in a couple of Kurdish cities, holding a Kurdish copy of the Koran in his hand. Using religion in political campaigns apparently backfired among the Kurds and disturbed liberal democrats of both Turkish and Kurdish origin, who otherwise support the AKP (Göktürk 2015b, c; Kamer 2015).

Critique from the AKPS’s own ranks

This new line confused not only Kurds, but many ethnic Turkish supporters of the AKP. Shortly after the elections, Besir Atalay, the former Minister of Interior Affairs and the coordinator of

the peace process between 2011 and 2014, openly criticized Erdogan and claimed that Erdogan’s turning on the tables on the peace process shortly before the elections has been harmful and was the main reason why so many former Kurdish AKP voters shifted their sympathy in favor of the HDP (Rota Haber 2015).

Notwithstanding one accepts the observation that the nationalist MHP took one or two percent of the former AKP supporters, it is clear that Erdogan’s and his followers’ panic about the MHP attracting large numbers of voters from the AKP was apparently based on exaggerated concerns. By adopting a U-turn concerning the Kurdish question and forcing it blatantly on the AKP, scolding publicly the government’s Kurdish policies for being lenient, Erdogan neither succeeded in stopping the one percent migration of votes to the MHP nor could he keep the Kurds in the fold. It is actually surprising that a shrewd and an experienced politician as Erdogan could not foresee that he would lose his Kurdish supporters, and that the loss to the nationalist party would not be as big as some opinion polls suggested.

The disillusioned voters

The second largest source of voter loss after the Kurds seems to be the AKP voters, who did not go to ballot boxes, but who neither voted for other parties. What may be the reasons of their dissatisfaction with AKP?

First of all, it has to be underlined that the Kurdish question was probably not the sole reason, why so many AKP voters abandoned the party. Many Kurds and Turks voted for other parties or did not vote at all for many other reasons, the most important apparently being President Erdogan’s enormous pressure on the AKP to turn the election campaign into a referendum on increasing his executive powers and changing the parliamentary system in Turkey into something he vaguely called “A Turkish-style presidential system”. Other reasons seem to be AKP’s decision not to deliver the four ministers accused of corruption since December 2013 to the High Court and President Erdogan’s and AKP’s aggressive and polarizing discourse against their political opponents (Bayramoglu 2015). In the last few years, the AKP began to take more and more anti-democratic measures against its opponents such as closing temporarily Twitter and Facebook down and directing harsh verbal attacks on select journalists. Imitating Atatürk, Erdogan began to develop a cult of personality around himself and began to amass political executive powers in his hands attacking anybody publicly who did not fall into line. One of the worst examples of his aggressive rhetoric was calling the head of the Turkish Central bank no more no less than a “traitor” only because he rejected to decrease the loan rents as the all-knowing President demanded. The independence of the Central Bank in any democratic country was just a minor detail in Erdogan’s great vision.

There are strong indications that the main reason behind Erdogan’s and AKP’s U-turn about the Kurdish question and the aggressive discourse especially against the HDP was Erdogan’s ambition of winning 330 seats in the parliament necessary to take the presidential system to a referendum (Göktürk 2015a, Karabatak 2015). So much negative energy and aggressive rhetoric

ical power were therefore invested in pushing the HDP under the ten percent threshold so that AKP could get the seats in the Kurdish areas. Any means to achieve the magical number 330 was seen as legitimate.

Conspiracy theories or self-criticism

After the dust of the political turmoil caused by the elections has settled down an important question effecting the future of political stability in Turkey will be hanging in the air: Which wing in the AKP will win the day, those explaining the election defeat as the result of external and internal conspiracies against its allegedly perfectly correct political line and against its great leader Erdogan, or those, who think it is of utmost importance to turn the arrows of critique at the party itself and carry out a proper soul-searching. Shortly after the election one can read articles elaborating on how some circles in the US, Europe and Israel have made plans to topple Erdogan and the AKP government (for an overtly hostile and equally conspirative analysis see for example Idiz 2015). However, there are also many articles analyzing the loss of so many votes with direct reference to the mistakes and blunders the AKP has made. The critique focuses mainly on the problematic handling of the Kurdish question in the last months of the election campaign and especially President Erdogan’s authoritarianism. On the positive side, one can point to the long meeting Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu recently held with a number of liberal democratic and secular intellectuals, known to be both supportive and critical of the AKP (Berktaý 2015).

The election results show that AKP has become its main enemy, and that the party should begin to redirect its route towards more democracy and legitimate methods in its fight with its opponents instead of blaming external and internal circles for its own failures.

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