The New Kingmakers of Turkey: The "Conservative Moderns"

Mehmet Ümit Necef

News

The current governing party AKP's votes increased nine points to 50% at the elections on 1 November 2015. The party has now achieved an absolute majority in the parliament and can form a single party government.

Summary

This increase of nine points from 41% at the elections on 7 June 2015 corresponds to a gain of 4.5 million voters. The election analyses show clearly that the AKP attracted voters from all other parties. However, the most important achievement of the party seems to have been convincing the former AKP voters, who had abstained at the June elections, to vote for the party again in November. The article discusses how the AKP attained this and presents an analysis of the abstainers. It would appear that there has emerged a new group of people in Turkey defined by terms such as "new conservative moderns" and "democratic conservatives", which will in the near future by all accounts have a great impact on who will sit in the government.

Key Words

Turkey, elections, the "new conservative moderns".

About the Author

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Analysis:

At the elections on 7 June 2015, the AKP had dropped nine points in relation to the previous elections held in 2011. 4.5 points of this had gone to the pro-Kurdish HDP, which constitute the AKP's greatest loss. Two points migrated to the ultra-nationalist MHP, and the remaining 2.5 points were the former AKP-voters, who did not go to the ballots. This suggests that approximately 4% of the AKP's total electorate had abstained from voting in June (Mahcupyan 2015e; KONDA 2015).

Turning our attention now to voter movements in the opposite direction at the elections on 1 November, we can see that only a half percentage point of the Kurdish voters lost in June returned to the AKP in November. The AKP took apparently 2.5 points from the nationalist MHP, more than it had lost to it in June. It took also 1 point from the Kemalist CHP. This can be observed concretely in a number of districts in the greater Istanbul area. Moreover, 2 points came from two minor right-wing parties. These voter movements mean that the AKP took 6 points from the other parties. The remaining 2.5 points are the AKP voters who had abstained in June elections, but who this time chose not to withhold their votes from their party. This group corresponds to 4% of the total number of AKP voters. Thus, the AKP took back 8.5 points, but the noteworthy aspect of this increase is that the inner composition of the coming votes suggests a new and remarkable voter coalition.

The popular explanation among the ranks of the opposition for the increase in the AKP's votes is that the party coerced the people to vote for it by frightening them with the prospect of increasing and uncontrollable PKK violence. Some opposition politicians and pundits even claimed that the AKP consciously broke the truce and unleashed a war on the PKK at the end of June to achieve success at the November elections (Baydar 2015; Gürsel 2015a). For example, the co-chairman of the pro-Kurdish HDP claimed before the elections that his party would increase its deputies from eighty to one hundred in the parliament. His argument was that the conflict would serve to solidify the Kurdish backing for his party, and many ethnic Turks would vote for the HDP due to opposition to the government's "blackmailing policies" (Aslan 2015). However, following the decrease in the number of the HDP deputies from eighty to fifty nine, the party leaders have now begun to claim that the conflict with the PKK had in reality benefited the AKP, and the government continued the war against the PKK solely to increase its popularity (Gürsel 2015b). A careful assessment would therefore be that there is confusion in the opposition ranks regarding the extent to which the atmosphere of violence has increased the AKP's votes, and whether the decision to go to war with the PKK was aimed exclusively at increasing votes.

Without rejecting totally the proposition that a wish to return to normalcy and stability has played a role in the unexpectedly large voter movement to the AKP, it would probably be wiser to look for other more fundamental reasons for the AKP's success on 1 November (Gergerlioglu 2015). An overall analysis of voter behavior in Turkey is a good departure point.

The four fundamental political movements

There are four fundamental political movements in Turkey, each garnering a group of core voters: The cultural conservative Sunni Islamism represented by the AKP; the secular-nationalism represented by the republican CHP, which has been traditionally supported by large segments of the Alevi community; the conservative peripheral nationalism of the MHP and the secular Kurdish movement represented by the HDP, which is supported by small Turkish left-wing groups (Agirdir 2015; Mahcupyan 2015e; Özaltinli 2015).

Voter analyses show that around 70% of the Turkish electorate has ensconced itself within identity politics and vote traditionally for the same parties, which they think represent their ethnic, religious and cultural identities (Mahcupyan 2015b; Agirdir 2015). The remaining approximately 30% is seemingly a flexible and mobile group, which votes or abstains according to the performance of the parties. Since most of this group belong culturally to the conservative and pious section of the society, their decisions at the elections are often contingent upon the performance of the AKP, to which they feel cultural affiliation. It has to be added that this group is not ethnically homogeneous, and pious and conservative Kurds are also to be found in this group.

The core voters seem to identify with their parties to such an extent that they seem to vote for them notwithstanding the fluctuations in their policies. This circumstance renders "doing politics" in the country relatively easy. However, the core voters constitute only two thirds of the total (Mahcupyan 2015d), and this means that there exists a third portion, which cannot be mobilized by identity politics, no matter how much one appeals to "Islamic solidarity", "Atatürk's eternal legacy" or to Turkish or Kurdish nationalism. The reason behind the continuous increase in the AKP's votes since 2002 is its success in mobilizing two thirds of this 30% (Dalan 2015; Özaltinli 2015; Kanat 2015). Thus, the AKP since its establishment in 2001 moved away from identity politics and became gradually the only mass party in the country. As a mass party should do to survive, it has to address itself to a coalition of voters with different agendas, and it was its deviation from its reformist agenda and a return to old-time pro-Sunni Turkish identity

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politics which led to its being punished at the ballot box at the June elections. In the election campaign leading up to the June elections the party fell in line with President Erdogan's focus on holding its grip on the Turkish Sunnis with the help of an authoritarian and patriarchal discourse and lost a large portion of its former voters, who were pushed away by the party's polarizing line. Erdogan's declaration that there would be no more peace negotiations with the PKK and his critique of the government's "soft line" towards the PKK played a big role in this group's decision to abstain from voting at all. Erdogan's attempt to render the elections a referendum on his push for an executive presidency added more reason for dissatisfaction.

The existence of the voters who do not vote in adherence to an identity, but decide as they assess and judge the performance of the parties, brings to the forefront a new circumstance of modern Turkish politics: At the elections a party would survive by basically doing its traditional identity politics, but if it wants power, it should transcend its core voters and reach out to groups who do not share the norms and values of a specific identity (Mahcupyan 2015d).

Elections analyses suggest that these voters are not a homogeneous group, but have similar political agendas and sensitivities. This group, which to all appearances determines the AKP's electoral outcome, seems to be immune to populistic discourses, but appreciative of a principled line with a long-term structural vision. It seems this group in question opts for punishing the party if, by contributing to polarization, the party deviates from normalizing the social and political fundament of the society, from democratization of the judicial and institutional structures, and from building up a system which provides rational and socially just services. On the other hand, these voters reward the party if they believe in the sincerity of the party's promises of correcting itself and learning from its mistakes. In an obvious attempt to satisfy this group's demands and sensibilies, Erdogan's visibility in the November election campaign was strongly reduced and his interventions were observably much less antagonizing, creating more space for the consensus-seeking Davutoglu to come to the forefront. Moreover, to win the hearts of the Kurds back, he stated that the peace negotiations were not dead, but merely put temporarily into a deep-freezer to be taken out again. In this respect, the Prime Minister Davutoglu's humble and self-critical attitude under the election campaign for the November elections played a major role. Already in the evening of the electoral setback on 7 June he said: "We've gotten your message; the AKP needs to renew itself. We will review and rectify ourselves" (Yetkin 2015).

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A portrait of the AKP voters

When the AKP got a surprisingly high 34% in the first elections it entered in 2002, the political and cultural mentality of its voters seemed relatively homogenous. Its social basis was basically composed of two groups: Men, who live in the periphery of the big cities, generally with short educational background and with middle or low level incomes, belonging to the Sunni branch of Islam and with Turkish nationalist tendencies. The second group consisted of the new bourgeoisie of medium-size cities. These two groups are more or less equal in size and amount to around 30% of the whole Turkish society (Mahcupyan 2015a). In the years since, the party has succeeded in including new groups within its social base and steadily increased its votes from 34% in 2002 to 50% in 2011, thus widening its spectrum of representivity. In fact, analysts and polling companies add the AKP's potential vote up to 55% (Cilek Agaci 2015; Mahcupyan 2015a; Berktay 2015; Dalay 2015). The question is which segments of the society constitute this remaining 25%? A closer look reveals that this group is composed of voters with four different identities. 8 points have traditionally come from the Kurds, but this fell to 3 points in the June 2015 elections and not many Kurds returned to the AKP in the November elections. They can potentially return to the AKP, if the party demonstrates that it is ready to concede to the Kurds all the rights an ethnic minority should have according to the European Convention on Human Rights. Moreover, the party should demonstrate that it is determined to return to the negotiating table at some point and achieve the dissolution of the PKK as an armed group. The second group is the roughly 5% conservative nationalists who vacillate between the AKP and the MHP (Yetkin 2015).

The remaining 12% would appear to be the most important group if the AKP wants to retain its grip on the power it has achieved on 1 November (Yetkin 2015; Yaprak 2015; Bayramoglu 2015; Bayromaglu 2015; Cilek Agaci 2015). This group is thought to be divided in half: The first half consists of urban, well-educated, middle and upper-middle class and white collar conservative families. The other half is composed of what may be called, for want of a better expression, "liberal democrats", that is, individualized intellectuals with non-religious affinities (Mahcupyan 2015f; Berktay 2015). These last two groups have different values concerning especially issues such as women's behavior and clothing in the public sphere, alcohol consumption and premarital sexuality. However, they still have a common vision that politics in Turkey should be based on rationality, legitimacy and ethics, not on ideological or religious zealotry and people should be judged according to their competencies and performances, not according to their loyalty to a certain religious or ethnic identity or a political party.

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The emergence of the "new conservatives"

The most important lesson of the five months between June and November appears to be that a new group of voters has emerged in Turkish politics, which has and will probably have a great impact on who will form the government in Turkey. In this group there are members of various ethnic groups, but these people do not vote contingent on their ethnic identities. This is a positive sign for the future of the solution of the Kurdish question, since the road to power for the AKP or any other party will not be passing through the quagmire of either Turkish or Kurdish nationalism. Furthermore, this group carries to a great extent the traits of what a number of Turkish analysts call "the new conservative modernism" such as an individualized religiosity, hybridized mental structures, a quest for new visons of a society mixing global and local norms and values, pursuit of rationality and reason, and a sensitivity for sharing the public space with others who do not share one's views and values (Ertit 2014, 2015; Mahcupyan 2015f; Özaltinli 2015; Berktay 2015). This development can also be described as the local Turkish version of what a number of scholars have coined "multiple modernities" and "multiple secularization" (Berger 2014; Eisenstadt 2000). In the context of Turkey, the emergence of this new group has probably already rendered the traditional Islamist positon too archaic for the society, and therefore "going back to Sunni Islamic roots" will not open the gates of power for the AKP.

As the Turkish-Armenian intellectual Etyen Mahcupyan has commented about the role of the "new conservative moderns" at the November elections: "Those who think Erdogan has had his way are wholly mistaken. What has really happened is that this third of the society has had its way" (Mahcupyan 2015b).

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