

# “Bir Daha” The 2011 Elections in Turkey

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The article presents some data and a brief analysis of the Turkish parliamentary elections held on June 12, 2011. In putting the elections into historical and political context, it argues that the third term in office for Prime Minister Erdoğan will be determining for the future course of Turkey’s democracy.

The AKP's election campaign song "once more" became true. With 49.8 percent of the votes by a turn-out of 86.7 percent, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan received a very strong mandate for his third and last period in office. According to a regulation of the AKP, party members can only hold a seat in parliament during three consecutive terms which implies that 73 senior officials of the AKP, including the prime minister, will not be able to get re-elected. In the new Turkish Parliament the AKP holds a comfortable majority of 326 out of 550 seats, missing a two-third majority only by a tiny margin. The strongest opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP) once founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, received 25.9 percent (135 seats) while the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) came in third with 13 percent (53 seats). Given the high threshold of 10 percent, the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) would not have been able to pass the national threshold and therefore supported independent candidates that will comprise 36 deputies in the new parliament.

In terms of votes, with the exception of the MHP that had received 14.26 percent in the 2007 elections, all parties had gained. In particular the CHP improved by five percent and achieved its best election result since the military coup of September 12, 1980. In terms of seats, however, only the CHP and the independent candidates are stronger in the new parliament, while the AKP has lost 15 seats, due to changes in the electorates and the lower number of votes for parties that were not able to meet the threshold. Amongst those parties below the threshold, the Islamist alternative to the AKP, the Felicity Party (SD) – until his death in February 2011 headed by Turkey's veteran politician of the religious right, Necmettin Erbakan – scored highest with 1.25 percent, yet down from 2.34 percent in the 2007 elections. The Democratic Party (DP), a merger of the True Path Party (DYP) of former Prime Minister and President Süleyman Demirel with the Motherland Party (ANAP) once ruling the country under Turgut Özal, was rendered oblivious with only 0.65 percent of the total vote.

A closer look at the distribution of votes shows that the CHP and the BDP remain "regional parties". With the exception of Tunceli in eastern Anatolia, the CHP only could win provinces at the Aegean coast and in Thrace, whereas the BDP's electoral successes are restricted to the south-eastern corner of the country. There is still not a very strong representation of women in parliament, although the number increased from 50 to 78 female deputies. Yet comprising 14.1 percent of the total number of seats, this is the strongest representation of women in the history of the Turkish Assembly. One of the female deputies, Leyla Zana, a prominent Kurdish activist was elected in Diyarbakır as independent representative. She returns to parliament after 20 years, being the first female

Kurdish parliamentarian in 1991. From 1994 to 2004 Leyla Zana was in prison for her alleged support of the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); a charge Zana always denied. With Erol Dora, the BDP also sends the first Syriac Christian deputy ever to the Turkish Parliament.

With its electoral victory on June 12, 2011, the AKP was the first party in Turkish history that could win three consecutive elections by increasing its electoral support in each of these elections. Before Recep Tayyip Erdoğan only Adnan Menderes was able to win three elections in track (1950, 1954 and 1957), however, with a decreasing number of votes. Menderes was deposed by a military coup in May 1960 and executed by the military junta in September 1961 (posthumously pardoned in 1990). The comparison between Erdoğan and Menderes makes clear the degree to which Turkish politics has changed. Today, the military has lost its previous control over politics, capital punishment was abolished, and Ahmet Kutalmış Türkeş, the son of Alparslan Türkeş one of the leaders of the military junta responsible for Menders' death, even represents the AKP in parliament. In light of this historical change in Turkish politics, Prime Minister Erdoğan was right in his balcony speech on the eve of the elections that the world was watching Turkey with interest. This international attention for Turkey's election, as well as Ankara's increasing importance in international politics, was demonstrated by the numerous congratulations the Turkish Prime Minister received from so unusual "political bed fellows" such as U.S. President Obama, the Chairman of the EU Commission Jose Manuel Barroso, the Iranian President Ahmadinejad or the leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

There is no doubt, this election has shown the democratic credentials which Turkey has achieved over the past decade. In the context of Turkey's candidacy for EU membership the AKP has conducted drastic reforms and brought the country forward toward democracy and market economy. Even more important, in giving the AKP a strong third mandate slightly short of a two-third majority in parliament the Turkish electorate compels the new government to push forward the drafting of a new constitution by consensus. Probably this is one of the most significant outcomes of this election as it might be able to limit the single-handed attitude with which Prime Minister Erdoğan has conducted his policies in the more recent past. In his victory address to the Turkish people, Erdoğan promised to work together with the opposition in drafting a constitution embracing the ethnic and religious diversity of the country in the name of unity and solidarity. The main leader of the opposition, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu responded positively to this offer, however, indicating that the AKP will face a stronger CHP in the new parliament. Both party leaders will be measured according to this standard they themselves have set in commenting the election results.

Whether the drafting of the new Turkish constitution will be the vehicle to transcend the uncompromising attitudes of Turkey's polarized political camps remains to be seen. Without ending this polarization, however, the prospects of Turkish democracy might soon look bleak. Both the Prime Minister's inclination to omnipotent fantasies and the lack of a viable political alternative to the AKP are the major challenges with which Turkey's democratization has to cope. Moreover, all parties including the BDP must be willing to compromise in order to solve the Kurdish problem that so far only has been half-heartedly addressed and frequently became a hostage of the polarization between the AKP and the Kemalist block. Despite the undeniable achievements on the path to democracy and market economy, it still seems too early to make the past ten years of the Turkish experience a model for other societies aspiring for democratic transformation. From now on, the international audience will closely watch the political performance of Prime Minister Erdoğan in his third term of office. If he wants to secure Turkey's newly achieved international posture, he should be aware that this new role in international politics will not last without further reforms at home.