

Assessing the New AKP Cabinet

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Brief Analysis

Turkey's incoming government reflects the regionalization of political power, outsize influence from religious schools, and the sidelining of Kurds and women, as well as pointing to the emergence of an exclusive governing-party system.

Following the May 5 resignation of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, delegates of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) elected Binali Yildirim, the former transportation minister and one of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's closest political allies, as AKP chair and prime minister. On May 24, following Erdogan's approval, Yildirim announced Turkey's sixty-fifth government. The new cabinet includes twenty-seven ministers, including the prime minister and five deputy prime ministers. Twelve ministers have been reassigned, and eight new members have been added. The cabinet's composition reveals important, and troubling, trends for Turkish politics and the AKP, among them the regionalization of political power and the near exclusion of Kurds and women.

An Unrepresentative government

In forming its eighth consecutive government since 2002, the AKP has assembled a leadership apparently far less representative of Turkey than the previous lineups. Broadly speaking, the new government does not reflect Turkey's diverse geographical regions and ethno-religious composition. In particular, it includes no Alevis, liberal Muslims who constitute 10-20 percent of the Turkish population. Nor does it appear to mirror the AKP's voter base, as elaborated below, instead resembling a clique put together for its members' close association with and similar backgrounds to the all-powerful Erdogan and his ally Yildirim. The new government's attributes, and absences, are

as follows:

East Black Sea domination. Turkey is divided into eighty-one provinces and seven geographic regions, the latter being Marmara, Aegean, Mediterranean, Black Sea -- subdivided into East and West Black Sea -- Central Anatolia, East Anatolia, and Southeast Anatolia. Although not political units, these regions are often used for purposes of comparative social, political, and economic analysis.

One of the new cabinet's most striking elements is the preponderance of ministers from the East Black Sea region, from which President Erdogan hails. Indeed, ten of twenty-seven, or 37 percent, of the ministers hail from this region, which represents only about 5 percent of Turkey's population. Throughout his rule, Erdogan, who is from Rize province, has built a network of businessmen, bureaucrats, and politicians from this area. Notable such cabinet members include Deputy Prime Ministers Nurettin Canikli and Numan Kurtulmus, from Giresun and Ordu provinces, respectively. Suleyman Soylu and the Istanbul-born energy minister, Berat Albayrak -- Erdogan's son-in-law -- come from Trabzon families, and the family of German-born sports minister Akif Cagatay Kilicborn is from Samsun, also in this region. To be sure, no other region is as significantly represented in the cabinet.

At first glance, the large East Black Sea representation might be explained by the AKP's electoral strength in this area. In the most recent elections, in November 2015, the AKP received 65 percent of the vote there, well above its national tally of 49.5 percent. However, Central Anatolia, where the AKP performed almost as well, receiving 61 percent of the vote, is not nearly as well represented in the cabinet. While Central Anatolian provinces constitute 16 percent of the Turkish population, they have only two representatives (7 percent) in the new cabinet.

This imbalance can be seen in other regions with varying levels of AKP support, suggesting that rather than party popularity, East Black Sea regionalism, linked to Erdogan's origins, helps explain the new cabinet. Comparable levels of cabinet imparity apply for the Mediterranean region, in which the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) compete against AKP domination; the Aegean region, where the CHP and AKP are in a virtual tie; and the Marmara region, which includes Istanbul and where the AKP dominates. Despite having more than 55 percent of Turkey's population, these three regions have representation equal to the East Black Sea -- just 10 members, or 37 percent. Especially poorly represented is the secular-leaning Aegean region, home to 13 percent of Turkey's population, with just two ministers, a figure it has not exceeded in any AKP government since 2002.

East Anatolia, which constitutes 8 percent of the country's population, is the only other region represented disproportionately in the new government. Four members, or 15 percent, come from this region, which includes Prime Minister Yildirim's hometown of Erzincan.

Kurdish exclusion. The new cabinet has only two known ethnic Kurdish members -- the lowest figure in recent governments -- including Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Simsek, who hails from predominantly Kurdish Southeast Anatolia. Previous AKP governments, such as the sixty-first cabinet, formed in 2011, had as many as six Kurdish members, then constituting 23 percent of the government. The small number in the new cabinet demonstrates the AKP government's policy shift regarding the Kurdish issue, including Erdogan's tightened embrace of Turkish nationalism to broaden his voting base (see PolicyWatch 2620, "[Erdogan's Nationalist Path to a Full Presidential System](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/erdogans-nationalist-path-to-a-full-presidential-system)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/erdogans-nationalist-path-to-a-full-presidential-system>)).

Religious school domination. Another telling fact about the new government regards educational background. Ten ministers, along with Erdogan himself, were educated in Imam-Hatip schools. Established by the Turkish state in 1951, Imam-Hatip schools are parochial institutions that were initially designed to train government-employed imams, but later, under conservative governments such as the AKP, they turned into publicly funded religious-

focused alternatives to the traditional public secular schools. Historically, the Imam-Hatip schools educated less than 5 percent of Turkey's student population, but this figure has jumped to more than 10 percent under AKP rule. The high Imam-Hatip representation in the Yildirim cabinet reflects the government's political antecedents in blending religion, government, and education. A case can also be made that Turkey's Imam-Hatip system has been too successful for its own good, raising the cadres that have torn down the country's secular political system.

Lack of women. Turkey's twenty-seven-seat cabinet includes only one woman, a worrisome tally for a country aspiring to be a liberal democracy. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not new with the AKP; none of the eight AKP cabinets since 2002 had more than two women.

Merchant marines. The new cabinet, interestingly, boasts three ministers with degrees from Istanbul Technical University's School of Maritime Sciences, including Prime Minister Yildirim. The other two are incoming transportation minister Ahmet Arslan and education minister Ismet Yilmaz. Arslan and Yilmaz worked together at the Ministry of Transportation under Yildirim before ascending to their current positions, indicating a minor Yildirim clique in the new cabinet, itself an Erdogan clique.

Conclusion

The new AKP government is regionalist -- dominated as it is by members from the East Black Sea region -- draws heavily from Turkey's small group of religious school graduates, nearly excludes Kurds, and continues to suffer from male domination. These trends point to the exclusion of large segments of the Turkish population from political power under the country's sixty-fifth and, to date, most powerful government in the democratic system.

Having started in 2002 as a broad alliance of the political right and center, representing various constituencies, the party is now simultaneously consolidating power over the Turkish state through President Erdogan while itself becoming an institution unrepresentative of Turkey's political diversity. This reverse trend suggests the emergence of an exclusive governing-party system in Turkey, in which an authoritarian party insists on narrow and total control over all political resources. Washington should monitor this development, which has implications for Turkey's political stability.

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