# IS and Russia Could Exploit Turkey's Political Divisions

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Brief Analysis

## Unfortunate civil unrest could emerge if the jihadist group continues targeting anti-government Turks and Moscow keeps its sights set on Erdogan and his party.

*In January 2016, The Washington Institute sponsored a daylong workshop on the challenges to U.S. policy in the Middle East posed by new trends in political ideology. This PolicyWatch is part of a* ***series of written contributions by participants. (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/27683)***

Following its November 1, 2015, victory in parliamentary elections with 49.5 percent of the vote, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has established itself as the leader in a dominant-party system echoing African National Congress (ANC) rule in South Africa since 1994. Yet unlike the ANC, which continues to garner more than 60 percent popular support, the AKP has just half the Turkish population lined up behind it, with the other half vehemently opposing its agenda and that of its leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Perceiving the divide between the pro- and anti-AKP camps, the Islamic State (IS) is already acting to exploit Turkey's population from the right while Russia does so from the left. This dynamic creates challenges for Turkey's domestic stability and will require deft navigation by U.S. policymakers.

## Background: Rise of the AKP

Turkey first became a multiparty democracy with free and fair elections in 1950 and, until the last decade, the system comprised four main political pillars: a center-right party usually in government, a center-left nationalist party usually in the opposition, and two smaller parties, representing the conservative-nationalist and Islamist poles, that often allied with the center-right bloc.

In this alignment, the center-right bloc traditionally advocated a free-market economy, pro-Western foreign policy,

and soft separation of religion and politics, while the center-left bloc, honoring the legacy of secular Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, traditionally stood for strict separation between religion and politics, and a policy of nonintervention in Middle East affairs.

Of the smaller blocs, the conservative-nationalists advocated a soft separation of religion from politics. During the Cold War, they allied with the United States against the Turks' historic enemy, Russia. But since the end of the Cold War, the conservative-nationalists have become avowedly anti-U.S. and anti-Western.

For its part, the Islamist bloc promoted an anti-Western foreign policy, suggesting that Turkey, instead of being folded within the West, should become a standalone Muslim power, drawing strength from its Ottoman antecedents. On the political side, the Islamists have traditionally sought a greater role for Sunni Islam in politics, foreign policy, and education.

In 2001-2002, the traditional center-right parties imploded amid the country's worst economic crisis in modern history. Emerging in the aftermath was the AKP, which successfully banded together the Islamist and larger center-right blocs. The AKP came to power with 34.3 percent of the vote in 2002, nearly doubling the votes of its Islamist predecessor, the Refah (Welfare) Party.

## Understanding the AKP's Continued Success

This alignment between center-right and Islamist constituencies helps explain the AKP's continued electoral strength. Erdogan has won four successive elections since 2002 using this formula: in the absence of a center-right party that can compete with the AKP, Turkey's center-right voters have gravitated to the right and, namely, to the AKP. In 2007, for example, the AKP's votes increased to 46.6 percent, and in 2011 to 49.8 percent, stabilizing at 49.5 percent in the snap elections noted earlier, despite a slip to 40.9 percent on June 7. Assuming no other viable center-right party emerges to challenge it, the AKP will remain a significant player on the political scene.

Continued AKP success has been fueled by good governance and growth. One marker of Turkey's success is the fall in infant mortality rates. When the party came to power in 2002, the rate was 28 of 1,000, comparable to prewar Syria; today, the rate is 12 of 1,000, comparable to Spain. The AKP and its founding leader, Erdogan, keep winning elections because the economy continues to grow and citizens' living standards to increase. Although the economy has slowed a bit lately, Turkish citizens continue to have access to better health and education services than they did in pre-AKP years, helping sustain the party's popularity.

## AKP vs. Dominant Parties Abroad

When the current four-year parliamentary term ends, the AKP will have governed Turkey for seventeen years, the longest period for a democratically elected party in the country's history. Erdogan's leadership -- first as prime minister and now as president -- will have outlasted that of Ataturk, Turkey's founding president, who led between 1923 and 1938. More important, the recent AKP victory signals the solidifying of a dominant-party system in Turkey, similar to that of the ANC in South Africa, as noted; the Kuomintang (KMT) in Taiwan throughout much of the Cold War; and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico from the 1920s to the 1980s. These three parties all came to power following revolutionary developments, garnering strong popular support. Thereafter, they promoted their vision to transform their respective societies, interpreting their persistent popular mandate as cause to rule in a majoritarian fashion.

Although they have political differences, the ANC, KMT, and PRI can all be classified as majoritarian dominant parties in post-revolutionary societies. Likewise, since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has eliminated Kemalist institutions of statecraft, pivoting away from Europe and eliminating the barriers between religion, education, and politics established by Ataturk in the 1920s and 1930s. In December 2014, Turkey's Council of Higher Education, a government-regulated body, issued a policy recommendation suggesting that public school courses on Sunni Islam

be taught to all students as young as age six. Such recommendations reflect the revolutionary instincts of the AKP in the mold of a majoritarian dominant party. The AKP's reign since 2002 can best be described as a slow and quiet revolution constantly in progress.

However, the Turkish case differs from the other dominant-party examples in one crucial respect. The movements in South Africa, Mexico, and Taiwan all captured at least 60 percent of the vote, and usually much higher proportions. Moreover, at least in the third example, the elections were not always free and fair. As for the tallies, in South Africa the ANC has regularly captured 60 to 70 percent of the vote since 1994, while in Mexico the PRI consistently took from 70 to 98 percent between 1929 and 1982 and Taiwan's KMT garnered 60 to 90 percent between 1969 and 1989.

Such overwhelming wins have not occurred in Turkey, where the voting is generally believed to be free and fair. The AKP has, as noted before, garnered between 34.3 and 49.8 percent of the vote in the four parliamentary elections held from 2002 to 2015. In the brightest AKP scenario, then, this reflects the earlier-discussed split between party supporters and opponents. Given its limited electoral dominance as compared to the ANC, KMT, or PRI, Turkey's AKP might better be seen to resemble another set of dominant parties in "split" societies, including Sweden's Social Democratic Party (SAP) and Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). In Sweden, as the dominant party from 1932 to 1973, the SAP received 30 to 50 percent of the general vote, peaking at 53.8 percent in 1940. Similarly, the LDP maintained around 36 to 50 percent support from 1958 to 1993, reaching its apex of 56 percent in 1963. The SAP and the LDP both ruled through consensus building, taking into account the split nature of their societies. By contrast, the AKP, although operating in a similarly split society, tends to eschew consensus for majoritarian assertion of power.

## IS and Russian Efforts at Manipulation

Given Turkey's increasingly contentious relationship with the Islamic State and Russia, the unique configuration of AKP-dominated Turkish politics opens the country to further polarization, and potential violence, along the pro- and anti-AKP lines -- in camps supported by IS and Russia, respectively.

In fact, the Islamic State is already exploiting this fault line, most notably in four suicide attacks: on June 5, 2015, in Diyarbakir; July 20, 2015, in Suruc; October 10, 2015, in Ankara; and, most recently, January 12 of this year, in Istanbul's Sultanahmet Square. In the first three attacks, IS exclusively targeted opposition rallies held by anti-government Kurds, peace activists, and leftists, as well as Alevis -- the last group belonging to a liberal branch of Islam. In these attacks, which killed 139 and injured more than 600, IS has shown a strategic focus on anti-government rallies and citizens, intent on damaging the anti-AKP camp. Of the 102 people killed by IS twin suicide bombers in the Ankara attack, for instance, at least 86 were Alevis, who constitute just 10-15 percent of Turkey's entire population. Even in the Sultanahmet attacks, IS seemingly demonstrated strategic awareness, targeting an area -- the old city -- filled with mosques, shops, and restaurants, but with relatively few Turks and many tourists. Indeed, all eleven of the January casualties were German tourists.

If the IS strategy of targeting anti-AKP groups holds, Turkey could potentially see future unfortunate attacks against foreigners, Alevis, Kurds, leftists, socialists, and liberals. Such selectivity could reinforce the perception of a group that exempts the pro-AKP half of Turkey -- and, by implication, its government. One consequence of this trend will be intensified anger among anti-government Turks toward the AKP and its policies, sharper attempts to expose their vulnerability, and deepening of national polarization.

Whereas the Islamic State could well continue striking non-AKP-allied targets, the Russians will do the opposite -- setting their sights explicitly on AKP symbols and assets. This has been Kremlin policy since the November 24 shoot-down of a Russian jet violating Turkish airspace. On November 28, for example, Moscow alleged involvement

by Erdogan's son in oil trade with IS. Such allegations have caught on with the domestic anti-AKP camp, with most opposition voices adopting Putin's charges as fact. The opposition's apparent sympathy for Russia -- and against the Erdogan government -- is evident, for example, in the accusation by Eren Erdem, a parliamentarian from the left-leaning Republican People's Party (CHP), that the AKP is aiding IS delivery of chemical weapons into Syria. Erdem aired this claim in a December 14 interview with the Russian-government-owned Russia Today (RT) network.

At the same time, Russia has reached out to Turkey's internal Kurdish opposition, inviting Selahattin Demirtas, who leads the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), to Moscow on December 23. During his visit, Demirtas criticized the Turkish government for shooting down the Russian plane. On the Syrian side, Russia has started to provide weapons to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) ally that controls Syrian territory across the Turkish border, threatening a backdoor foray into Turkish politics.

## What This Means for Washington

Today's left-right divide in Turkey has frightening echoes in the 1970s, when a near civil war between Soviet-backed hard leftists and hard right-wing nationalist factions killed thousands in street fighting. With IS targeting anti-government Turks, and Russia throwing its support behind these oppositionists, the current IS and Russian efforts to exploit Turkey's divisions could potentially spark unfortunate civil unrest, this time between a hard right, dominated by Islamists and radicalized by IS, and a hard left, dominated by the PKK and its allies -- even if the unrest does not reach 1970s levels.

As for the AKP's foreign policy vision, even against the dual challenges posed by the Assad regime -- which Ankara has been trying to oust since 2012 -- and a brutal IS presence across its borders in Syria and Iraq, the party continues to envision Turkey as a standalone regional power, working with or breaking with the West as necessary.

Indeed, the AKP will blend, as it sees fit, the center-right tendency toward cooperation with the West with the Islamist resistance to such cooperation. Turkey is a key U.S. partner in the Middle East, especially in the context of the U.S. war against the Islamic State. Accordingly, the current trend in Turkish politics presents Washington with a unique dilemma. With Turkish society split down the middle, significant tensions will emerge even as the dominant-party system becomes entrenched. Washington should focus on alleviating these tensions to help promote stability in a key ally.

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