

The Day After Turkey's Snap Elections

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Brief Analysis

Hours after Turkish voters delivered a stunning victory to President Erdogan's party in snap parliamentary elections, three of America's leading experts on Turkish politics shared an in-depth discussion of the vote and what it means for Turkey's future.

On November 2, Soner Cagaptay, Alan Makovsky, and Henri Barkey addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at the Institute. Barkey is director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and author of Turkey's Syria Predicament (2014). Makovsky is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and a former Middle East advisor on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SONER CAGAPTAY

The overwhelming Justice and Development Party (AKP) victory in Turkey's November 1 parliamentary revote came as a surprise, since no polls had anticipated such results. Two factors help explain the outcome.

First, five months of political and economic instability followed the June 7 elections, which produced a hung parliament with no effective government. As voters witnessed an economic slowdown, a tumbling lira, increased violence by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and dramatic ISIS attacks in Ankara that killed over 100 people, many of them shifted to the AKP, viewing it as the faction most likely to usher in a single-party government and therefore a return to stability. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, still the party's de facto head, presented himself as the "strongman who can protect you," and the strategy worked -- voters chose security over freedoms. Ironically, two very different constituencies flocked together to vote for the AKP in droves: Turkish nationalist voters, who feared the resurgence of PKK terrorist attacks, and Kurdish voters, who feared the return of full-scale war against the group.

Second, since the right wing is the dominant pillar in Turkish politics, the AKP took advantage of right-left polarization to further consolidate its votes. After the ISIS bombings in Ankara, the left -- led by Selahattin Demirtas, co-chair of Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) -- blamed the government for the attack, while the government blamed the left. This deepened the country's polarization, leading some right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP) supporters to back the AKP.

Besides Erdogan and the AKP, the PKK came out a winner in this election by once again making violence the language of the Kurdish movement. The movement's political wing had sought to become more than just a narrow Kurdish nationalist faction by uniting with leftists under the HDP, but its efforts were stymied for now by PKK attacks and its own failure to distance itself from the violence. The HDP lost support among conservatives and liberal-leftists alike -- two constituencies it needs to win over if it hopes to gain national appeal.

In terms of U.S. policy, the bad news is that the hollowing out of Turkey's democracy and the government crackdown on the opposition will likely continue. Elections will remain free but less fair, making it more difficult to vote the AKP out. The good news is that the United States once again has a predictable interlocutor in Ankara, which will no doubt come as a relief to many decisionmakers in Washington. In the long term, the main check on the AKP's power is Turkey's diverse and vibrant civil society -- which, ironically, was born out of the strong middle class that Erdogan's economic success has helped solidify.

ALAN MAKOVSKY

Erdogan is now back on his game, despite seemingly losing his Midas touch after the Gezi Park protests, the June electoral setback, and a failed bid to implement a presidential system. The fallout from the previous vote showed him that people did not want a coalition government, and that the AKP could still prevail by appealing to their desire for stability. Despite Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's intentions to build a coalition after the party lost its parliamentary majority in June, Erdogan pushed for a revote from the start, and his strategy worked.

Yet while the latest results were a vote for stability, it is difficult to convincingly argue that they will bring stability. Erdogan will interpret the outcome as a mandate for more of the same, and continue snuffing out the opposition via one of the ugliest crackdowns in Turkish history. He will also likely continue hitting the PKK hard, at least initially. Erdogan believes that the Kurds have done well in recent years thanks to him, so the recent unrest has convinced him that they are ungrateful.

As for the HDP, the party's loss of votes in the snap elections has created an internal dilemma. Is it an ethnic nationalist party for Kurds, or a party trying to integrate Kurds into Turkey? While most observers in Washington blamed Erdogan for the recent escalation of violence, many Kurds in southeastern Turkey blamed the PKK and were therefore unwilling to vote for the HDP. In fact, if Ankara were to resume the long-stalled peace talks with the PKK, its main interlocutor would likely be the group's cofounder Abdullah Ocalan (who remains in jail in Turkey) rather

than the HDP or the active PKK military leadership in Iraq's Qandil Mountains, since resentment toward the latter two actors is high right now.

The election results are probably a positive for U.S. foreign policy, specifically on Syria. Turkey will remain a (tepid) partner in the coalition against ISIS and will allow the United States to continue using Incirlik Air Base. Yet tensions between the two governments on Syria will continue given their different priorities there. These tensions might even worsen as Washington increases its cooperation with the People's Defense Units (YPG), the military branch of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of bilateral relations because Erdogan and the Turkish military strongly believe that the PYD and PKK are one in the same. For their part, the wider Syrian opposition must be thrilled with the election results, since they still see Erdogan as the main champion of their anti-Assad cause.

HENRI BARKEY

Although the AKP went far in attempting to resolve Turkey's Kurdish problems, it was also responsible for a big rupture in October 2014, when Erdogan wanted ISIS to win and the PYD to lose in Kobane. Afterward, conservative Kurds who had historically voted for the AKP shifted to the HDP, forming a Kurdish alliance under the left-wing party's banner. No one, including the PKK, believed these conservative Kurds would move back to the AKP after June 7, but apparently the glue holding this Kurdish coalition together was weak.

Ultimately, the PKK is one of the big losers here, making a major strategic mistake by resorting to violence after the previous elections. That gamble failed -- the emerging middle class in the southeast had enjoyed the two years of ceasefire that resulted from peace talks, and they do not want further violence. The Kurdish movement had an opportunity to take big strides when liberals and conservatives came together under the HDP, but the PKK essentially destroyed that coalition. The silver lining is that despite facing major campaign obstacles and losing votes, the HDP is now much stronger against the PKK, and it still passed the 10 percent electoral threshold required for entry into parliament, so party leader Demirtas has been validated.

Going forward, the new government will pursue a hardline stance against the PKK at first. Yet Erdogan will eventually have to realize that a strategy of peace and reconciliation is in his favor. Stability requires more than just a single-party government; Erdogan will have to switch tracks and restart talks with PKK leader Ocalan.

In political terms, the AKP will not have to worry about its standing anytime soon unless significant changes are made in the leadership of opposition parties. The Turkish people have to understand that real change will not come through political parties, but through civil society. It remains to be seen whether a Gezi Park 2.0 will emerge or not.

As for Syria policy, the biggest question is whether Erdogan will try to prevent further deepening of U.S.-PYD relations. Turkey has allowed the United States to use three bases on top of Incirlik for airstrikes against ISIS, and Erdogan can use this trump card to hamper U.S. cooperation with the Syrian Kurds.

This summary was prepared by Cem Yolbulan.



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