

The AKP's New Face: Assessing the September Board Vote Ahead of November's Elections

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Brief Analysis

The new governing board has fewer young members, fewer women, and more old-guard members with close ties to President Erdogan, who is betting that this alignment will help the party regain its legislative majority next month.

On September 12, 1,445 delegates of Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) gathered at their annual convention to reelect Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu as chairman. They also voted for the 50-seat Central Decision and Administration Committee (MKYK), the party's governing board, resulting in 31 new members -- a massive 62% turnover rate, and the first time in the AKP's history that a majority of its board members were revamped.

The MKYK is the party's highest permanent decisionmaking body, responsible for determining AKP positions on political issues, implementing policies, and shaping election strategy. The party lost its thirteen-year parliamentary majority in the June 7 polls, with its vote share dropping by 20% from the previous election. As Turkey prepares for snap elections on November 1, the MKYK reshuffle signals a new face for the AKP. The incoming board is older and more male dominated; it also has more members who joined the party in the earlier stages of its rise to power, and more loyalists to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the former AKP chairman who still exudes considerable sway

over the party. Will this realignment help the AKP regain its legislative majority next month?

OUTGOING BOARD

Analysis of the outgoing MKYK's membership reveals key patterns in the AKP's makeup before the September 12 revamp (to view detailed information on each member of the outgoing board, [download the data table \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/AKP-Board-MKYK-Before-Sept2015.pdf\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/AKP-Board-MKYK-Before-Sept2015.pdf)).

Political Background

- *National Outlook:* Turkey's Islamist parties descend from the Welfare Party (RP), which promoted an ideology called "National Outlook" (Milli Gorus), a diluted version of the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamist dogma. In 1998, the Turkish Supreme Court shut down the RP for conducting Islamist activities in violation of the constitution. RP cadres then set up the Virtue Party (FP), but the court shut down that faction as well in 2001. Subsequently, the Islamist movement split in two, producing Erdogan's AKP and the smaller, hardline Felicity Party (SP). Prior to last month's board election, 14 of the MKYK's members (28%) had "National Outlook" affiliation, i.e., past membership in the RP/FP.
- *Center and center-right:* Individuals who had past affiliation with the centrist Motherland Party (ANAP) or center-right movements such as the True Path Party (DYP) held 4 seats on the outgoing MKYK (8%). Previously the pillars of Turkey's dominant political center, these two parties imploded following the 2002 elections that brought the AKP to power. Since then, many ANAP and DYP voters have folded under the AKP.
- *Original members:* Half of the outgoing MKYK consisted of founding AKP members, local/youth leaders who entered politics with the party in 2001, or members who joined during the first two AKP governments (2002-2011).
- *Fresh faces:* Seven members of the outgoing board (14%) had no record of prior AKP affiliation when they were elected at the 2012 party convention.

Relationship with Erdogan

Ten members of the board (20%) had direct connections with the president. These included Erdogan's business associates (e.g., Oznur Calik and Omer Bolat), family friends (e.g., Nihat Zeybekci), and former classmates (e.g., Mehmet Muezzinoglu), as well as a longtime friend and ally from Istanbul, Mehmet Ali Sahin.

Relationship with Gul

Six members (12%) were affiliated with former Turkish president Abdullah Gul. After joining forces with Erdogan to establish the AKP in 2001, Gul was later elected president in 2007, but he fell out with Erdogan at the end of his term in 2014 and left the AKP.

Youth

Ten members (20%) were below the age of forty, and 26 members (52%) were under fifty.

Gender

The outgoing board included 14 women, or 28% of the membership.

Foreign Languages and Education

Twelve members (24%) held graduate degrees from outside Turkey. Of these, 9 attended schools in Britain or the United States, 2 in Germany, and 1 in Switzerland. Thirty-seven members (74%) spoke at least one foreign language: 33 spoke English, 8 German, 8 Arabic, and 1 each for French, Greek, and Kurdish. Notably, Prime Minister Davutoglu speaks four languages: English, German, Arabic, and Malay.

INCOMING BOARD

analysis of the new MKYK's composition offers insight into the AKP's potential mindset and strategies heading **A** into next month's parliamentary elections ([download the data table \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/AKP-Board-MKYK-After-Sept2015.pdf\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/AKP-Board-MKYK-After-Sept2015.pdf) for incoming board members).

Political Background

- *National Outlook:* A key change in the board's political composition is that fewer members are affiliated with the National Outlook movement. Members with an RP/FP background decreased from 14 to 10; those failing to win reelection include prominent AKP veterans and former ministers such as Sadullah Ergin and Bulent Arinc, the previous speaker of the Turkish parliament and one of the AKP's founding leaders.
- *Left-wing or center-right:* Three of the new board's members (6%) have a left-wing or center-right pedigree, down from 4. This includes Aysenur Bahcekapili, who served as head of the Istanbul branch of the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP), a leftist faction that later joined Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) in 1995.
- *Nationalist-right:* One new member, Selcuk Ozdag, is affiliated with two right-wing nationalist factions, the Great Union Party (BBP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP).
- *Original members:* Another key change is that 31 of the new board's members are founding AKP cadres or joined the party before 2011. This group now holds 62% of the seats -- a 24% increase from the previous board.
- *Fresh faces:* The incoming board has 5 members (10%) who joined the party in the past three years, down from 7.

Relationship with Erdogan

The incoming board has more members with close political, personal, or business ties to Erdogan: a total of 17 (34%), up from 10. These include his chief advisor Burhan Kuzu, personal lawyer Hayati Yazici, and son-in-law Berat Albayrak. The number of "original members" with close ties to the president rose even more significantly, from 4 to 11. These include Omer Celik, Erdogan's personal advisor since the party's founding days; Yalcin Akdogan, his first AKP speechwriter; and Mehdi Eker, a member of his executive team since the 1990s, when Erdogan served as Istanbul's mayor.

The Turkish constitution stipulates that the presidency is a nonpartisan position, and Erdogan is not supposed to have formal ties with the AKP. Yet the sharp increase in the number of MKYK members with close links to him will allow him to maintain influence over the party.

Relationship with Gul

The number of board members loyal to former president Gul decreased from 6 to 1, suggesting the end of the "Gul caucus" in the AKP. Leading party veterans known for their association with him -- such as Bulent Arinc, Besir Atalay, and Salih Kapusuz -- failed to win seats. While some analysts have suggested that Gul could be a potential challenger to Erdogan, the MKYK voting results will likely curb his influence inside the party.

Youth

The incoming board is older on average than the previous one: the number of members below age 40 decreased from 10 to 8, and the number below age 50 fell from 26 to 24. Some of the younger names not included in the new MKYK include up-and-coming AKP figures such as Zelkif Kazdal and Mustafa Akis.

Gender

The new board is even more male dominated than the outgoing board: the number of women decreased by a whopping 35%, from 14 to 9. Women now constitute only 18% of the board.

Foreign Languages and Education

Thirteen board members hold graduate degrees from outside Turkey, up from 12. All of these degrees were obtained from U.S. or British institutions. One positive change is the increase in members who speak at least one foreign language, now up to 41 (82%). English led the way with 37 speakers (up from 32), and the number of Arabic speakers rose from 8 to 11. The board also has 6 German speakers, 2 French, 2 Kurdish, 1 Greek, and 1 Persian.

CONCLUSION

Compared to the outgoing AKP board, the new MKYK has fewer young members, fewer women, and more members with close ties to Erdogan. And despite boasting more "original" AKP members, the board seems to be moving away from the party's Islamist ideological antecedents, with fewer members from the "National Outlook" tradition.

Overall, the AKP appears to be morphing into a movement run by older male politicians who are loyal to Erdogan (who is now 61 years old).

This could be a weakness for the party. Turkey has become a more politically and socially diverse country in the past decade thanks to the economic growth that Erdogan delivered. Currently, he seems to believe that the declining economy and deteriorating domestic security situation will spur voters to favor an older, male-dominated, Erdogan-centric structure as a safety valve against threats such as the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). To regain its legislative majority, the AKP needs to increase its 41% tally from the June elections to 45-46%, and the president likely hopes that reshuffling the MKYK will help close that gap. Over the next four weeks, Washington should watch for political developments in Turkey that could turn the new board's main disadvantage -- political uniformity -- into an advantage, with likely repercussions on the November election results.

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(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>) (Potomac Books), named by the Foreign Policy Association as one of the ten most important books of 2014. Cem Yolbulan is a Yvonne Silverman Research Assistant at the Institute, and Angelica Kilinc is a Turkish program intern. ❖

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