

# Turkey's Political Scene Post-Election (Part 3): The AKP-HDP Option

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Brief Analysis

**Forming a coalition with the HDP would challenge the AKP's conservative policies at home while improving its ties with Kurds abroad, though it is uncertain whether the armed or political wing of Turkey's Kurdish nationalist movement would benefit most.**

Turkey's June 7 elections have produced a hung parliament in which no party has the majority needed to form the next government. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) won 258 seats, followed by the Republican People's Party (CHP) with 132 seats and two other factions with 80 seats each: the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), an alliance of Kurdish nationalists and liberals. Barring new elections, the AKP will need to establish a coalition with one of the other parties in order to form a government. This three-part PolicyWatch previously explored [the AKP-CHP coalition option \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-1-the-akp-chp-option\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-1-the-akp-chp-option) and [the AKP-MHP option \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-2-the-akp-mhp-option\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-2-the-akp-mhp-option). With the MHP and HDP having ruled out a coalition with each other (thus eliminating the possibility of a CHP-MHP-HDP alliance), this leaves a final plausible alternative: an alliance between the AKP and HDP. Although the HDP has previously rejected the idea, it is worth exploring what Turkey would look like under this unlikely partnership.

## NO EXECUTIVE-STYLE PRESIDENT; OCALAN MOVED TO HOUSE ARREST

In the run-up to the elections, HDP leader Selahattin Demirtas repeatedly stated that his party would block President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's plans to change Turkey from a parliamentary democracy to a presidential

system. As part of a coalition deal, Erdogan would therefore agree not to press forward with efforts to change the constitution toward that end, at least for the time being. In return, the HDP would promise not to pursue longstanding corruption allegations implicating him and his family members. Moreover, Demirtas would likely ask for a commitment to lower the 10 percent electoral threshold necessary for parties to enter the parliament; that way, if the HDP loses its liberal support for allying with Erdogan, it would still be able to win a place in the legislature when the next elections come around.

To seal a deal with the HDP, Erdogan would also promise to change the status of Abdullah Ocalan, the founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which Turkey fought for decades before entering peace talks with the group in 2012. Turkey captured Ocalan with U.S. assistance in 1999 and brought him to trial the same year, sentencing him to life in prison. The United States and Turkey both consider the PKK a terrorist group, though the ongoing peace talks could eventually change that status. For now, the group is the armed and therefore dominant wing of Turkey's Kurdish nationalist movement, so any coalition deal with the movement's political wing, the HDP, would be affected by that reality. In all likelihood, Erdogan would offer to release Ocalan from prison and place him under house arrest, hinting at his eventual freedom and thereby appealing to the HDP's base. This would clinch a deal with the Kurdish nationalists.

## **A DIVIDED LIBERAL-CONSERVATIVE CABINET**

**T**he HDP's core cadres are leftist Kurdish nationalists, often with socialist or even Marxist pedigrees. During the elections, the party ran on a decidedly liberal platform to broaden its appeal and boost its votes beyond the 10 percent threshold. This strategy worked -- the HDP entered the legislature with 13 percent support. Yet the liberal pivot brought a number of diverse names into the party, including Christians, Alevis, and activists for women's rights, gay rights, and broader human rights.

If the AKP and HDP form a coalition, these new and old HDP politicians would join a cabinet populated by AKP ministers from the conservative right, including some Islamists. Obviously, a cabinet with such a heterogeneous mix of very liberal and very conservative members is bound to experience frequent tremors over social issues, including education, cultural policy, women's role in society, and demands for equal rights by Alevis, Christians, Jews, and other non-Muslims. If an AKP-HDP government were to fall prematurely, differences over such issues would probably be one of the main culprits.

## **BETTER RELATIONS WITH TURKISH, IRAQI, AND SYRIAN KURDS**

**D**ialogue with the HDP would help the AKP defuse tensions at home. Prior to the elections, some analysts had warned about a potential "Kurdish uprising" if the HDP failed to cross the threshold, suggesting that the PKK would once again take up arms to undermine the Turkish state and the HDP's democratic path. An AKP-HDP coalition would prevent such an eventuality, strengthening the HDP by catapulting it into government while offering nationalist Kurds real political power in Turkey. For the first time, the Kurdish movement's local political wing would have a chance to gain supremacy over the armed wing.

In addition, such a development would further improve Ankara's relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. Turkish-KRG ties already have a life of their own, including massive trade volume, energy deals, and personal rapport between Erdogan and KRG president Masoud Barzani. Increased Kurdish political power in Turkey would bring Ankara and Erbil even closer.

An ascendant HDP would also help Turkey with the Syrian Kurds. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant faction among Syria's Kurds, is a franchise of the PKK. The party has recently managed to wrest territories from the

"Islamic State"/ISIS to conjoin its two enclaves in northern and northeastern Syria as one contiguous zone extending nearly 250 miles. This Kurdish border region, dubbed Rojava, could serve as Turkey's cordon sanitaire against ISIS.

## FIGHTING ISIS AND ASSAD; IMPROVING U.S.-TURKISH TIES

For the AKP, Turkey's chief enemy in Syria is the Assad regime, whereas the PYD's chief adversary is ISIS, which has been attacking the Kurds. If the HDP enters government, it would focus on helping the Syrian Kurds expand their recent gains against ISIS. This would run counter to the AKP's policy of ousting Assad without necessarily fighting ISIS.

The resultant tensions on Syria policy would be exacerbated if the HDP is placed in charge of the Foreign Ministry, a portfolio that typically goes to junior partners in Turkish coalition governments. An HDP foreign minister would strongly embrace the European Union's liberal values and support U.S. policy against ISIS. Although this would significantly improve U.S.-Turkish ties, discrepancies on Syria could contribute to the premature fall of an AKP-HDP government.

## PKK OR HDP COULD BECOME A KEY POLITICAL PLAYER

Accessing power through a coalition government would strengthen the HDP, whether temporarily or for the long term. Unlike in Ireland, where the armed wing of the main nationalist movement, the Irish Republican Army, was born out of and remains subservient to the political wing, Sinn Fein, the opposite is true for the Kurdish movement in Turkey -- the HDP was born out of the armed PKK and has been subservient to it. Yet by entering a coalition government and offering Kurdish nationalists a taste of ministerial portfolios and other elements of real political power, the HDP could rise to the PKK's detriment.

Ocalan could spoil this process, however, particularly if Erdogan releases him from prison immediately. Such a move would allow Ocalan and his former cadres in the armed wing to become the dominant Kurdish political actors in Turkey, further subsuming the HDP under the PKK. The country might then have a dual armed-political Kurdish movement represented in the parliament. Ocalan's quick resurgence could severely undermine the stability of an AKP-HDP government. In contrast, if his entry into politics is delayed, the HDP could even grow into Turkey's main opposition faction -- though this would require HDP leader Demirtas to maintain the party's liberal appeal (to reach middle-class Turks) and conservative appeal (to reach pro-AKP Kurds), while ensuring that the likely elimination of the 10 percent electoral threshold does not lure him into practicing narrow Kurdish politics again.

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*(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-century's-first-muslim-power>). ❖*

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