

Turkey's Political Scene Post-Election (Part 2): The AKP-MHP Option

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

A coalition with the MHP could result in a socially conservative government that exacerbates rather than resolves the Kurdish problem, potentially impeding U.S.-Turkish efforts against ISIS in Syria.

On June 24, the Turkish parliament will hold its first session since the June 7 elections, in which the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost its thirteen-year majority. After electing a speaker, the deputies will disperse until a new government is formed; if this does not occur within forty-five days, the constitution mandates that new parliamentary elections be held.

Because none of the four parties in the legislature won a majority of the seats, any government that emerges in the next month-and-a-half will have to be a coalition, and Turkish analysts believe one plausible option is an alliance between the AKP and the similarly right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP) (the AKP-CHP option is discussed in [Part 1 of this PolicyWatch \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-1-the-akp-chp-option\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-1-the-akp-chp-option); the AKP-HDP option [is discussed in Part 3 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-3-the-akp-hdp-option\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-3-the-akp-hdp-option)). Here is what Turkey would look like under this partnership.

A STRONG MAJORITY, BUT NO EXECUTIVE-STYLE PRESIDENT

Controlling 338 of the parliament's 550 seats, an AKP-MHP coalition would have a solid majority and could pass legislation with ease. Yet it would be just eight seats over the required 330-seat supermajority necessary to amend the constitution, so fulfilling President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's dream of transforming Turkey's government

into a presidential system would be difficult if not impossible. Even if parliament passed the necessary amendments, they would still need to be approved by a popular referendum.

More important, the MHP is unlikely to enter such a coalition unless former AKP leader Erdogan agrees to remain a president with limited executive powers. It would be politically suicidal for the MHP to form a government and then support constitutional amendments or other plans that would allow Erdogan to override that government.

SOCIALLY CONSERVATIVE AND NATIONALIST POLICIES

An AKP-MHP coalition would represent a solid 57 percent of the popular vote, bringing nearly the entire spectrum of the political right together under one government for the first time in four decades. Enjoying a strong popular - albeit completely right-wing -- mandate, it would be reminiscent of the 1970s-era National Front (Milli Cephe) government formed by a coalition of center-right, Islamist, and nationalist parties. In particular, it would drive a socially conservative agenda on the role of women in society, Islam in government, and nationalism in foreign policy.

SOME PRESSURE ON CRIMEA, SYRIA, AND IRAQ

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has followed a foreign policy doctrine shaped by Islamic solidarity and autarkical Turkish nationalism. Typically, junior partners in Turkish coalition governments take the foreign affairs portfolio. If the MHP follows suit, its strong conservative-nationalist tendencies would likely keep it from posing a major challenge to the AKP's foreign policy.

As a nationalist party, however, the MHP has a deep interest in Turkish communities overseas. Thus it would likely insist on shaping policy in three notable cases, potentially creating problems for the AKP.

The first is the Turkmen community in Kirkuk, Iraq. Since the rise of the "Islamic State"/ISIS in June 2014, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has taken over this multiethnic city to stave off a jihadist takeover. Thus far, Ankara's strong economic ties with the KRG and Erdogan's warm relations with KRG president Masoud Barzani have helped temper Turkish nationalist reactions to this de facto Kurdish domination of the Iraqi Turkmens. In an AKP-MHP coalition, however, the MHP would take issue with Kurdish control of the city, potentially hurting Turkish-KRG ties.

The second case is Crimea, where Russian occupation has left the peninsula's Tatar community -- linguistic and historical kin of Anatolian Turks -- in harm's way. The MHP may not be able to force the AKP to dilute its intimate relationship with Russia, which involves deep energy and commercial ties as well as personal rapport between Erdogan and President Vladimir Putin. Nevertheless, the MHP's persistent focus on Tatar suffering under the Russians would likely create problems with Moscow that Erdogan would be forced to manage.

Third, the MHP could make things difficult for the AKP in Syria. Since the beginning of the civil war next door, Turkey has followed a singular objective: ousting Bashar al-Assad. This stance has rendered other concerns in Syria as secondary, including the rise of ISIS and other radical Islamist groups. More to the point, Ankara's preoccupation with Assad has eclipsed concerns over the fate of Syria's 250,000 Turkmens. An AKP-MHP government would dedicate much more significant resources to helping the Syrian Turkmens and building them up as a fighting force. In fact, the MHP would likely insist on prioritizing the Turkmen issue over other aspects of Syria policy, including the fight against the Assad regime and U.S.-Turkish cooperation against ISIS -- especially in cases where the party believes such efforts would disadvantage the Turkmens.

Moreover, the MHP would probably take strong issue with U.S.-Turkish assistance to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has been fighting ISIS in Syria and is connected to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey. Although Ankara and Washington both consider the PKK a terrorist organization, the Turkish government has been

conducting peace talks with the group since late 2012 in order to solve its domestic Kurdish problem. Yet the MHP staunchly opposes these talks, and it views the PKK and PYD as essentially the same group. Accordingly, continued assistance to or cooperation with the PYD -- even against ISIS -- could be a deal breaker for the MHP in the foreign policy arena.

MASSIVE KURDISH UNREST

As a sine qua non for entering the coalition, the MHP would demand a freeze on peace talks with the PKK. Coupled with a potential anti-PYD policy in Syria, this stance would draw the ire of Kurdish nationalists in Turkey, perhaps sparking massive unrest in the predominantly Kurdish southeast. In fact, if an AKP-MHP government were to fall before the next election cycle, Kurdish unrest would probably be the cause. Any such deterioration of the Kurdish situation at home could in turn damage Ankara's ties with the KRG, which has been a unique mainstay of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP and Erdogan.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-century's-first-muslim-power)

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