

Turkey's Political Scene Post-Election (Part 1): The AKP-CHP Option

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Brief Analysis

A governing alliance bringing together the country's two largest parties could end an era of polarization, but would not be free of challenges.

On June 10, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Deniz Baykal, former chair of the country's main opposition, leftist Republican People's Party (CHP), to discuss Turkish politics in the aftermath of the June 7 elections, in which Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost its thirteen-year legislative majority.

Turkish analysts report that, during the meeting, Erdogan and Baykal discussed a potential AKP-CHP coalition government. Indeed, many other coalition options are now being discussed in Ankara, including one between the AKP and similarly right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP), an apparently more plausible option (the MHP scenario **is discussed in Part 2 of this PolicyWatch (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-2-the-akp-mhp-option>)**; Part 3 discusses **scenarios involving the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-3-the-akp-hdp-option>)**). But the AKP-CHP option deserves analysis as an intriguing case because it would bring the country's two largest parties together, potentially ending a protracted era of political polarization, as well as align Turkey's Syria policy closer with that of the United States. Here are some possible developments under this unusual partnership.

A Temporary Erdogan Retreat, a Possible Long-Term CHP Loss

Asine qua non for the CHP's entry into the coalition would be for President Erdogan to return to his constitutionally mandated powers. Since August 2014, Erdogan has often acted as an executive president,

although the Turkish system is a parliamentary democracy in which the chief executive is the prime minister and the president is head of state. Erdogan could agree to withdraw from running the country's day-to-day affairs for now, if the CHP promised not to follow through on December 2013 corruption charges pressed against him and his family members. As part of this deal, four AKP ministers also implicated in the December 2013 case could potentially be brought to justice.

Erdogan's long-term vision would still be of the presidency. Historically, junior liberal parties tend to lose support in coalition governments when folded under conservatives, as happened to the Liberal Democrats during their coalition with the Conservative Party in Britain, the Free Democrats with the Christian Democrats in Germany, and the CHP's predecessor Social Democratic Populist Party with the True Path Party in the 1990s. Erdogan's ultimate vision in entering a coalition with the CHP would be that a premature coalition collapse could prompt a loss in CHP support, allowing the AKP to emerge stronger from early elections, armed with a constitution-changing majority to make him an executive-style president.

Union for Turkey's Disparate Halves

The AKP and CHP represent Turkey's two largest political parties and, as such, the country's competing visions of Islamism and secularism. An AKP-CHP coalition, favored by Turkish businesses and the markets, would usher in a period of coexistence, however uneasy, between these two movements, whose relationship has thus far been characterized by a win-lose attitude. In the 1990s, the secularists ran Turkey and often persecuted and jailed the Islamists. The Islamist AKP, founded in 2001 by Erdogan, who served as its chair and Turkey's prime minister until August 2014, when he stepped down to run for the presidency -- then took charge and inflicted similar punishments on the secularists. An AKP-CHP government could signal an end to this two-decade feud.

Prominent Cabinet Positions for Women

Women have been increasingly marginalized in AKP cabinets, relegated to the single portfolio of "family affairs." The most dramatic change in the new cabinet would be that, after many years under the AKP, women politicians from the CHP would hold key seats. One such contender could be CHP deputy and party vice-chair Selin Sayek Boke, a renowned liberal economist, who could also be Turkey's first Christian-origin government minister since the end of the Ottoman Empire, if given a portfolio. Regarding the economy, an AKP-CHP coalition could also witness the return to Turkish politics of Kemal Dervis, the architect of Turkey's economic restructuring in 2001 and indirectly its economic growth since then, as a CHP cabinet member.

Strong Popular and Parliamentary Majority

On June 7, the AKP and the CHP received 40.7 and 25.1 percent of the vote, respectively. This gave the AKP 258 seats in the Turkish legislature, with the CHP getting 132 seats. Accordingly, an AKP-CHP coalition would represent 65.9 percent of the popular vote and hold 70.9 percent of the seats in the Turkish legislature, totaling to 390 seats. This would constitute a strong mandate for governing. Together, the AKP and CHP would have enough seats to make changes to the Turkish constitution. And while the Turkish constitution says that constitutional amendments approved with 367 votes need not be approved through a popular referendum, the AKP and CHP could revise Turkey's constitution to this effect should they desire to do so. This might occur if the two parties agree on a new social consensus that allows the AKP's and CHP's visions of Turkey to flourish simultaneously.

Challenges on Domestic Issues

The biggest differences between the two parties would center on domestic politics, including education policy, where the CHP is keen to revive Turkey's secular education system created by Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Turkish republic. The AKP, in turn, would insist on keeping its own Islamizing changes to the education system,

including a recent decision to teach Sunni Islamic practices to all schoolchildren beginning at age six in publicly funded schools. Control of the Ministry of Education would be hotly contested during government negotiations, as would control of the Ministry of Justice, another area where AKP and CHP visions would clash. If the AKP-CHP government were to fall prematurely, differences over domestic politics would probably be the cause.

Continuation of the Kurdish Process

While they would disagree on many other domestic issues, the two parties would continue peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and could also push for further cultural rights for Kurds. This strategy would align with a potential AKP outreach campaign aimed at bringing back conservative Kurdish voters who have migrated to the HDP. The CHP would likewise follow this strategy, reflecting its pivot to become a social democratic party that appeals to the country's liberals -- a pivot that includes advocating broader rights for Kurds.

A Freer Media

In the past decade, the AKP has increasingly tightened its grip over the media through fines issued by the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTUK), a regulatory watchdog that has become an instrument of censorship. Similarly, the governing party has turned the so-called Presidency of Telecommunication and Communication (TIB), which is supposed to regulate the Internet, into a censorship board that often bans websites including Twitter and YouTube. The AKP's domination of these two bodies over the past thirteen years derives from the appointment of members according to a party's parliamentary representation. Now, for the first time since 2002, the AKP will not appoint a majority of RTUK or TIB members. This suggests that the party's ability to intimidate the media and ban websites will be curbed.

Potentially Closer U.S.-Turkey Alignment on Syria

The CHP has long taken issue with the AKP's active support of various rebels in the Syrian war, including some radical groups, against the Bashar al-Assad government. Typically in Turkish coalition governments, the junior partner gets the Foreign Ministry portfolio. Thus empowered, the CHP would downgrade Turkey's involvement in Syria and support to the rebels, bringing the country's policy closer to that of the United States. Turkey's support to anti-Assad rebels in northwestern Syria would come under scrutiny -- including closer journalistic scrutiny due to a relaxed media environment -- but not end, since in the short term Ankara cannot entirely cut itself off from Syria. This is largely because Turkey is now hosting nearly two million Syrian refugees. What is more, Turkey's five-year open-door policy for the rebels has exposed the country to threats from Syria, including elements connected to the Assad regime, al-Qaeda-related groups, and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Under the CHP, the Turkish Foreign Ministry might also open communication channels with the Assad regime.

CHP Pivot to Europe and NATO

Under a CHP foreign minister, Turkey would try to pivot back to its traditional foreign policy partners, including NATO and the European Union. Kemal Kirisci of the Brookings Institution likens Turkey's potential shift to a giant tanker slowly changing course. Given an AKP-led Turkey's total preoccupation with the Middle East since 2002, a reorientation to Europe and NATO would be gradual and would require support from Turkey's allies in Brussels and Washington.

Continued Turkish Agnosticism on Washington's Russia Policy

Perhaps the most unlikely foreign policy reversal for an AKP-CHP coalition would regard ties with Russia. Turkey-Russia relations, which have blossomed under Erdogan, are in many respects more real than the AKP's Middle

East policy, which has left the country without allies, proxies, or friends in a volatile region. Beyond the AKP, Turkish politicians of various persuasions, including those in the CHP, see Russia as a historic enemy against which the Turks are yet to win a battle. Accordingly, Turkey will remain wary of provoking Russia in the Black Sea and will shy away from too closely identifying with Washington's punitive Russia policy. Furthermore, energy-hungry Turkey imports half of its gas consumption from Russia, and "Turkish Stream" -- a proposed pipeline carrying gas from Russia to Turkey under the Black Sea -- will keep Turkey relatively close to Russia.

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