

Kurds Shaping Turkey's Political Map

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Brief Analysis

A pro-Kurdish party is pushing for enough votes to enter parliament in Turkey's upcoming elections, and its success or failure may hold the key to President Erdogan's political fortunes.

Since 2002, successive electoral wins by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have dominated Turkish politics, and polls indicate that the party will continue this dominance in the June 7 parliamentary elections. Yet the fate of a seemingly minor actor -- the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) -- could play a major role in determining whether the next AKP government can fulfill its ambition of fundamentally altering the country's political system. If the HDP achieves the minimum number of votes needed to enter the parliament, the AKP would enjoy only a slim majority in the new legislature, resulting in a fourth-term AKP government led by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. But if the HDP fails to cross the threshold, the AKP's seat total would rise, likely giving it enough of a majority to initiate a public referendum on amending the constitution. In that case, the party could push for a U.S.-style executive system led by current president Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

BACKGROUND

Over the past few years, the AKP has transformed itself from a pro-European Islamist party to a personality cult around Erdogan. Although the public is evenly split between those who support him and those who disapprove of him, Erdogan remains omnipresent in the day-to-day affairs of the Turkish people, with news networks interrupting their programming to broadcast his near-daily speeches.

And while the presidency is currently a nonpartisan post, Erdogan has been heavily involved in government affairs since his election last August. He has also made no secret that he views the upcoming election as a prelude to "The New Turkey" -- that is, a major overhaul of the parliamentary system toward what he calls a "Turkish-style

presidency" that would give him sweeping executive powers.

THE HDP GAME CHANGER

Ironically, both Erdogan's vision and Turkey's future political map depend not so much on his hand-picked AKP successor, Prime Minister Davutoglu, nor on the main opposition faction, the Republican People's Party (CHP), but rather on the performance of a small Kurdish nationalist party. Previously known as the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), Turkey's main pro-Kurdish faction has rebranded itself as a larger coalition of feminists, socialists, leftists, Alevis, and minorities under the HDP banner, largely in order to pass the 10% national vote threshold required for parties to enter the parliament. Instituted after the 1980 military coup, the threshold was precisely designed to keep Kurdish representation down and remains the highest barrier of its kind in the world.

This is why Turkish commentators have been obsessing about the HDP's prospects in the run-up to the elections. If the party is able to enter parliament, it would significantly reduce the AKP's seat total, effectively making it impossible for Erdogan to achieve his goal of a super-presidency. And if the HDP fails to meet the threshold, Turkey's domestic stability could be at further risk. The prospect of the pro-Kurdish party being left out of parliament could spark massive unrest in the Kurdish regions, potentially derailing the ongoing peace negotiations with the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which shares the HDP's core Kurdish nationalist agenda.

CAN THEY MAKE IT?

Traditionally, Turkey's pro-Kurdish party has scored as much as 60-65% of the vote in key Kurdish cities in the east, but only around 6.5% nationwide -- significantly below the 10% threshold. Members of the BDP and other Kurdish parties have partially circumvented this barrier by running as "independent" candidates instead of on the party list. Although this mechanism allowed Kurdish nationalist deputies to enter the parliament, it gave their parties control over 20-35 seats at most -- proportionally lower than the actual votes cast by Kurdish constituencies. If the HDP crosses the 10% threshold in June, however, it could receive as many as 50-70 of the legislature's 550 seats, effectively becoming a kingmaker.

That is precisely the HDP's selling point in the current campaign. The latest polls show the party hovering just around 10%; for a more comfortable margin, it needs the backing of secular Turks, as well as conservative Kurds who have been leaning toward the AKP over the past decade.

The peace process between Ankara and the outlawed PKK has legitimized the HDP among parts of the Turkish public and mainstream Kurds, who have long been alienated by the PKK's radical methods. The pro-Kurdish party also received a big hike in support after the Gezi Park protests of 2013, with the HDP positioning itself as the new bastion of anti-AKP sentiment among Turkish liberals and dissidents.

DEMIRTAS: A TOUGH CRITIC

The steady increase in HDP votes is due in no small part to the popularity of its young leader, Selahattin Demirtas. A forty-two-year-old former human rights lawyer, Demirtas has emerged as a powerful critic of Erdogan. In last summer's presidential election, he ran against Erdogan and scored an unexpected 9.8% (Erdogan received 51%). Now with a larger coalition, half of which is composed of women candidates, the HDP is eyeing a minimum of 56 seats, according to senior party officials.

In a March parliamentary speech, Demirtas vowed, "We will never allow you [Erdogan] to become an executive president," spurring applause from liberals and secular commentators. Indeed, polls indicate that a majority of Turks do not support a presidential system. Yet the statement was enough for Erdogan to effectively pause negotiations with imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, signaling his intent to put pressure on Kurdish interests if the HDP undermines his constitutional ambitions.

SEAT TALLIES WILL BE CRUCIAL

To be sure, there is little doubt that the AKP will emerge as the top vote-getter in June. In the local elections of March 2014, the party scored 43.5%, and it has not fallen much below that despite the current economic downturn. The AKP continues to deliver public services, including near-universal healthcare and massive upgrades to transportation and urban infrastructure. It has also built a clientelist economy around conservative Sunni political allegiances and loyalty to Erdogan.

Nevertheless, the real issue for the AKP on election night will be how many seats it can win. If the HDP passes the 10% barrier, it will cost the AKP roughly 40 seats, giving the ruling party a total of only 270-310 seats -- a tight margin given that the new government will need 276 seats for a vote of confidence. This would not only eliminate Erdogan's chances of achieving a super-presidency, but also shake his decade-long hegemony over Turkish politics. And if the pro-Kurdish faction is able to win 12% of the vote, the AKP would likely be forced to form a coalition government with one of the opposition parties.

In contrast, an HDP stumble in June would likely give the AKP a comfortable margin to push for a public referendum on amending the constitution and overhauling the parliamentary system. The party needs 330 votes in the legislature to proceed with such a referendum; the challenge for Erdogan would be convincing/strong-arming Davutoglu into making that vote happen, then convincing 51% of the public to approve the referendum. Although public support for the presidential system Erdogan envisions is only around 30-40%, he will likely use his personal popularity and control over the media to make a case for it in the coming months. As mentioned above, however, denying the HDP entry into parliament could push Turkey into a period of instability, perhaps including street protests led by Kurdish nationalists. It would also embolden those who have been calling for a regional Kurdish parliament and autonomy. The balance therefore hangs on the HDP's success or failure.

Asli Aydinbas is a columnist with the Turkish daily Milliyet. ❖

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