

# The AKP's Underwhelming Victory: How the Election Will Change Turkish Politics

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## In a positive development for Turkey's fragile democracy, the ruling AKP fell short of retaining its parliamentary supermajority.

In this month's Turkish parliamentary elections, the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) won almost 50 percent of the popular vote, up from 46.5 in the previous elections. The success was thanks in part to Turkey's strong performance under the conservative AKP; since 2002, Turkey's economic growth has been behind only that of China and India. Still, the AKP fell short by three seats of retaining the supermajority -- control of 330 out of 550 parliamentary seats, which gives a single party the ability to amend the constitution -- that the party has enjoyed since 2002, when it first came to power. (Although the AKP increased its vote share this year, the secular, social democratic Republican Peoples Party [CHP] and Kurdish nationalist Peace and Democracy Party [BDP] registered higher gains, therefore stealing some AKP seats.) This is a positive development for Turkey's fragile democracy, which has become dangerously polarized between the conservatives and the secular liberals. For the first time in nearly a decade, the AKP will be forced to seek consensus to govern, especially in regions where its electoral performance was weak: the country's liberal Aegean coast, Thrace, and the middle-class neighborhoods of Istanbul and other large cities.

The new balance in Turkey's government presents both historic challenges and historic opportunities. Since Turkey became a multiparty democracy in 1946, the country has never had a constitution crafted by civilians, instead making do with a series of charters developed by military-led parliaments. Recently, driven by almost a decade of economic and political development, majorities in both the liberal and conservative parties have come to support drafting a new constitution. The fate of such an effort depended on the outcome of the elections. If the AKP's victory had been large enough, it could have gone it alone, creating a document that would have likely enshrined social conservatism. Since the vote was split, the drafting process will have to be more consensual.

This is very good news: Turkey's first civilian constitution should be broad based, satisfying the demands of conservative, Islamist, nationalist, and liberal Turks alike. The constitution will also have to address the concerns of the country's nationalist Kurdish population, whose BDP almost doubled its representation in parliament this year, to 35 seats. As it is written now, the constitution reads like a list of prohibited freedoms. Turks cannot speak, publish, or associate freely. What is more, the constitution fails to prohibit ruling parties from banning or curbing the power of opposition parties. A consensus constitution will have to start with the protection of all citizens' rights. In terms of religious practice, for example, the new constitution will need to maintain Turkey's separation of mosque and state but allow for expressions of faith in public life. Laws should protect the rights of people who practice Islam and those who do not. Such a rights-based constitution in the region would be unprecedented and suggest that the Middle East's only Muslim-majority democracy can continue to thrive and stand as a source of inspiration for others.

Of course, the AKP could yet decline to work with the other parties. It is just shy of a supermajority and could choose to buy a few seats to reach that threshold. Before the AKP won a supermajority through the ballot box in 2002, politicians of all stripes routinely created them after elections by paying off deputies from other parties with cash or lucrative positions and cabinet seats. If old political habits resurface and the AKP buys three more votes, it could technically draft and adopt Turkey's new constitution on its own (although the party would still need to put the document to a referendum vote). Even if the half of the country that voted for the AKP approved the new constitution, it would surely lack legitimacy in the eyes of the half that did not -- including large businesses, Kurdish nationalists, liberal and secular Turks, and many educated women who fear the party's social conservatism. Turkey would then be back where it started, with a constitution imposed from above, lacking broad popular support.

The AKP must realize that secular, liberal Turkey, which includes at least half of the country's population, is too big to ignore. And the secular liberals have to realize that, unlike a decade ago, Turkey has a large, established Islamist conservative elite and a conservative political party with widespread support. Both halves of the country must work together toward a new constitution, lest Turkey's politics split, potentially violently, in the middle. That would be bad for both the country -- the only experiment in the world that brings together Islam and democracy -- and those watching it.

In terms of foreign policy, the AKP will interpret the outcome of the elections as a vindication and maintain some of its current policies. Under AKP rule, Ankara's view of its role in the world has changed. Ankara wants to be a regional leader; the government believes that it knows what is best for the Middle East and should be consulted before the United States takes any action in the region. And whereas Turkish policymakers historically saw their country as a Muslim

nation rooted firmly in the West, they now see it as a Muslim country that can engage with the West but is not itself Western. The AKP's recalibration of Turkey's foreign policy was music to the ears of many Turks, who saw it as a rightful restoration of Turkey's Ottoman-era influence. And since foreign policymaking in Turkey does not require a supermajority, even if the AKP has to seek consensus to write a new charter for the country, it does not need to work with the opposition to conduct foreign policy.

After the elections, continued U.S.-Turkish cooperation will be easiest in Iraq and Afghanistan, because in both countries U.S. and Turkish interests still overlap. In Iraq, for example, Washington and Ankara both want to balance against Iranian influence. Ankara also wants to check Kurdish independence in the north of the country -- something the United States would like to prevent as well -- and maintain its soft power in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Turkey is welcome in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and working to generate durable soft power in both. Trusted by both Islamabad and Washington, Ankara acts as a crucial bridge between them.

Differences will be harder to overcome, but still manageable, on policies for Libya, Syria, and the other Arab countries experiencing uprisings. From the beginning, the AKP has criticized U.S. involvement in these areas, driven by a fear of Western imperialism and initial sympathy for its ally, Syria. The AKP will expect the White House to listen to its concerns and will take issue with any new NATO involvement in Muslim-majority countries.

Yet although Ankara's cooperation will not be automatic in these cases, it will be attainable if the AKP feels that Turkish concerns have been given a fair hearing, or if the AKP, which is as averse to regional instability as Washington, feels like a crisis is imminent. Libya is one case in point: Although the AKP initially objected to a NATO mission there, it reversed course after U.S. President Barack Obama made frequent phone calls to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to ask for his opinion and cooperation. Syria is another: Despite the AKP's strong ties with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the threat of an exodus of Syrian refugees into Turkey and the gruesome nature of Assad's crackdown pushed Ankara to ally with Washington and call for him to reform.

Turkey will probably only ever partially cooperate with the United States on Iran -- supporting UN sanctions against the country, for example, but not unilateral U.S. or European ones. Even so, the crisis in Syria may precipitate the first Tehran-Ankara split since 2003, when Iran and Turkey's mutual objections to the Iraq war and the AKP's friendliness to Tehran brought them together. After Turkey indicated its switch to the American position on Syria earlier this spring, Tehran harshly criticized the regime. Tehran is now reportedly advising Assad, but Turkey has stood firm in calling his acts against the demonstrators "savagery" and could call for his departure at any minute.

Finally, there are some potentially unbridgeable differences, including over Israel and EU accession. In terms of Turkish-Israeli relations, the AKP appears to believe that there is no Israeli-Palestinian problem, but rather that Israel itself is the problem. For its part, Washington would like Turkey to patch up its relationship with Israel, especially after the 2010 flotilla incident turned their cold behavior toward each other even colder. The AKP has signaled its willingness to reach out to Israel and successfully convinced the Turkish organizers of this year's flotilla to pull out of the mission. Moreover, the AKP may be more hesitant to confront Washington openly on Israeli policy while the two cooperate on Syria and Libya. Still, the fundamental problem -- the AKP's view of the Israeli government -- persists.

Although Washington has made Turkey joining the European Union a priority, the AKP has neither fully embraced the reform process needed for EU accession, nor focused the country's energy on completing it or pursuing better foreign policy ties with Europe. No country has ever entered the union without prioritizing doing so. And given the AKP's weak commitment to liberal democratic values -- evidenced by Turkey's backsliding since 2005 on media and Internet freedoms, gender equality, and its support of autocratic neighbors -- it is not likely to commit to EU accession anytime soon.

After the elections, Turkey under the AKP will continue to be a democracy that Washington can cherish but also a country whose cooperation with the United States will be somewhat difficult to attain. With continuing cooperation in Iraq and Afghanistan, increased cooperation in Syria and Libya, and ongoing efforts to resuscitate Turkish-Israeli ties, Washington and Ankara will get through a happy summer. Whether that turns to a happy fall will depend as much on the Obama administration's ability to placate the AKP's sensitivities and massage the Turks' post-Ottoman pride, as it will on the AKP's desire to remain friends with the Obama administration.

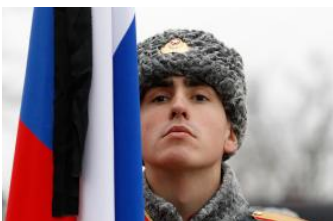
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