

Who Wins in a Two-Party System in Turkey?

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

Jan 10, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



Articles & Testimony

As Turkey approaches elections in June 2011, a consolidation of political parties appears to be in the making, under the auspices of the governing Justice and Development Party, or AKP.

Like other Mediterranean democracies, Turkey is known for a crowded political field with many parties. Yet, in the 1970s, the country experienced a brief period of party consolidation into a quasi two-party system. Faced with the rise of the leftist Republican People's Party, or CHP, right-wing parties, namely the Islamist, nationalist and center-right movements, merged to form the National Front, or MC. Today, as Turkey approaches elections in June 2011, a similar consolidation appears to be in the making, this time under the auspices of the governing Justice and Development Party, or AKP, a self-proclaimed conservative force rooted in the country's Islamist movement.

Turkey is a country of mostly right-wing voters. Between 1950, when the first free and fair elections were held, and 2002, when the AKP came to power, almost all democratically elected governments were dominated by center-right parties. A multi-party democracy for six decades, Turkey has almost never voted the left into power for a full term; even during the heyday of the Turkish left in the late 1970s, the MC was able to maintain a rightwing coalition, with brief and abortive left-wing governments in between in 1977 and 1978-1979.

Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose. Although the Turkish party system has fragmented since the 1970s, there are signs of a second right-wing consolidation process and the re-emergence of a quasi two-party system. During the recent Sept. 12 referendum on amendments to the Turkish Constitution, the AKP worked to rally nationalist, Islamist and center-right forces against the CHP's opposition campaign. In the end, the percentage of Turks who voted "no" with the CHP was 42 percent, the same amount garnered by the CHP in the 1977 elections.

With signs that party consolidation along the right-left axis might be repeating itself, the question is: How will the Turkish left respond? Recently, the CHP has elected a new leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, whose humble, politically clean, common man image greatly resembles another giant of the Turkish left, Bulent Ecevit. His success has raised speculation that the CHP may emerge as a credible alternative to the AKP.

Even so, Mr. Kilicdaroglu's ability to challenge the AKP is far from certain. While a new right-wing coalition is consolidating under the incumbent AKP, the allegiance of the center-right remains in doubt. Although a plurality of the Turkish voters is of center-right persuasion, the collapse of traditional center-right political parties as a result of voter dissatisfaction following the 2001 economic crisis has left a gaping void in the Turkish political landscape. The AKP, after abandoning its roots in the Islamist Welfare Party, or RP, stepped in to fill that void, billing itself a center-right movement. In sharp contrast to the MC in the 1970s, when center-right parties formed the keystone of the right wing coalition, today the Islamist-cum-conservative AKP dominates the Turkish right, arguably pulling the country away from the center.

In the run up to the June 2011 polls, expect the AKP to deploy rhetoric policies aimed at securing the center-right while maintaining its nationalist and Islamist base. Hence, expect tough talk from the party regarding Turkey's ties with the European Union (The AKP leadership is already suggesting that "Turkey will be just fine without Europe") and the United States in an attempt to steal voters from the Nationalist Movement Party, or MHP.

The party will also use Israel as a punching bag to prevent its Islamist base from sliding to the hard-line Islamist Felicity Party, or SP, like it did during the Sept. 12 referendum.

It is also likely that the AKP will make negative references to the liberal Alevi Muslim origins of Mr. Kilicdaroglu, as it did during the referendum process. AKP leader and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had jumpstarted the referendum campaign by suggesting that voting "yes" in the referendum and therefore giving the AKP the power to appoint judges to the high courts was a way to "stop the courts from taking orders from Alevi *dedes* [prayer leaders]."

This leaves Mr. Kilicdaroglu with two strategies to challenge 2011's version of the MC, while avoiding the factors which led to the CHP's electoral failures in the 1970s. First, he can capitalize on his personal charisma to boost the CHP's performance to match that of the AKP, towards 40 percent, a historic high for Turkish left. But, as in the 1970s, that alone might not be enough. Therefore, expect Mr. Kilicdaroglu to further diversify and broaden the CHP's electoral base.

There are signs this is already happening. Recently, Mr. Kilicdaroglu convinced the CHP delegates to vote for a new party board that includes a record number

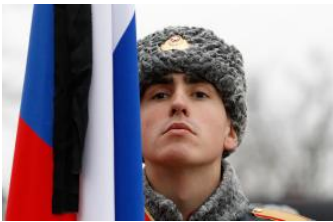
of women, including a woman as his deputy -- a first for the CHP -- in order to make the CHP a party more representative of 21st century progressive social democracy. The assembly also includes business and union leaders, opening the CHP to Turkey's traditionally secular large businesses, while rejuvenating the party's moribund ties to unions. Mr. Kilicdaroglu also included a prominent Kurdish human rights activist in the assembly, signaling that he would like to reach out to Kurdish voters who have been alienated from the CHP for decades now.

However, the notable surprise and biggest strength of Mr. Kilicdaroglu's strategy is the inclusion of an imam and an Islamic theologian in the new assembly. It is important that Mr. Kilicdaroglu's election campaign demonstrates that these names are not mere *devsirme* [politically subservient] additions to the CHP, but that their inclusion in the party assembly represents the CHP's embrace of religious, center-right voters. Indeed, if Mr. Kilicdaroglu is able to gain the support of center-right voters who are uncomfortable with the AKP's current trajectory, but unsure of the CHP's priorities, it will represent a seismic shift in Turkish politics. This demographic is the golden prize of 2011 -- whoever wins the center-right is likely to emerge victorious.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the [Turkish Research Program \(/template102.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#) at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

Hurriyet Daily News

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Jay Solomon

[\(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Turkey (/policy-
analysis/turkey)