

Turkish Political Physics, or Why the AKP Might Stay in Charge for a Long Time

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Articles & Testimony

The electoral threshold intended to keep Kurdish nationalists out of the Turkish parliament now excludes almost everyone else from the legislature.

In the past decade, developments in Turkish politics that correspond to the three laws of physics have altered the structure of the country's political system beyond recognition.

First, the law of unintended consequences: an electoral threshold barring parties that receive less than 10 percent of the vote from entering Parliament has indelibly impacted Turkish politics. This threshold assigns the smaller parties' seats mainly to the party receiving the most votes, which in turn dominates Parliament. The more parties that fail to cross the threshold, the more seats the first party gets, and the more artificially powerful it becomes. This threshold could influence the upcoming June 2011 Turkish elections -- be prepared for surprises that could affect both Turkey's and the Justice and Development Party, or AKP's, future.

Many multi-party democracies have electoral thresholds, usually at around 5 percent, that ensure that a multiplicity of parties will not paralyze parliament by impeding a majority to form government. However, in Turkey the threshold was instituted at a high 10 percent in 1987 to exclude hard-line Kurdish nationalists from Parliament.

Second, politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum: In 2001, as Turkey was going through its worst economic crisis in modern times, traditional center-right parties that have run the country for decades imploded, leaving behind a vacuum. The AKP stepped in after abandoning its roots in the Islamist Welfare Party to re-invent itself as, you guessed it, a center-right movement.

The threshold barred the newly imploded center-right (and center-left) parties from Parliament in the ensuing 2002 elections, allocating 66 percent of the seats in the legislature to the AKP despite having won only 34 percent of the vote, giving the AKP a supermajority. Nevertheless, Kurdish nationalist deputies were individually elected to Parliament, successfully bypassing the threshold and thereby proving its lack of utility.

Although the AKP had campaigned on abandoning the illiberal ways and means of the Welfare Party, the artificial and inflated political power that the threshold granted the AKP inhibited the party's moderation, emboldening the AKP to embrace its authoritarian instincts. After all, it was not accountable for almost half of the seats it received. The AKP then turned sour on its erstwhile allies, such as the liberals and the business community.

The law of unintended consequences has, in fact, corroded the AKP's founding esprit de corps: its unnatural strength has been bad for the party. The AKP interpreted its legislative supermajority, unrepresentative as it might be, as a popular mandate to trample over checks and balances, such as the courts and the media. This marked the beginning of the end for those who thought that the AKP's illiberal pedigree would dissipate should the party integrate into the democratic process.

The AKP not only became more authoritarian at home, but also found its bearing on foreign policy in 2003 in the run up to the Iraq War. At that time, the secular Turkish military, intent on forcing the AKP to make the politically costly decision on whether or not to support the United States in the war, remained unusually absent from the debate.

Third, power not exercised is power forfeited; the AKP decided without the military and refused to support the United States, alienating Washington. But then, quickly making up for this damage, the AKP partnered with America by providing cooperation in Iraq, and in doing so gradually consolidated all foreign policy decision-making in its hands. Exit the Turkish military from the foreign policy process, and enter the AKP's vision for international affairs, which is as different from earlier Turkish foreign policy as day is from night.

The threshold once again impacted the 2007 elections; with 46 percent of the vote, the AKP received 62 percent of the seats in the legislature. This made the party more authoritarian and more dismissive of democratic checks and balances. The result: many of the party's opponents started to end up in jail.

And now, the June 2011 elections: while opinion polls show that the main opposition, the Republican Peoples' Party, or CHP, will do well, the AKP appears to lead and the fact remains that the high threshold will, once again, bar many small parties from the legislature and grant the AKP yet another "supermajority on

steroids," further boosting the party's authoritarian instincts.

In balance, it might be a day too late and buck too short for Turkey's political system to restore itself, barring an elimination of the high threshold. But then, the AKP holds the parliamentary majority necessary to make that change, so it is unlikely that it will amend a system that grants it nearly indefinite power. Only if the AKP worried about the nature of its politics, a byproduct of the high threshold, would there be hope for redress. But this is unlikely as each election grants the party more seats in the legislature than the number of people who support it.

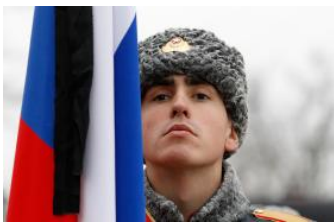
The electoral threshold intended to keep the bete noire of Turkish politics, Kurdish nationalists, out of Parliament, now excludes almost everyone else from the legislature. This may not only be the end of the wish that the AKP represents a conservative democratic movement, but of Turkey's multi-party democracy and even the beginning of indefinite single party rule. Beware the law of unintended consequences, or Turkish political physics, in 2011.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the [*Turkish Research Program*](#) ([*templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms*](#))

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