

# Turkey Goes to the Polls:

## A Post-Mortem

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

On November 3, Turkey went to polls, and a party with an Islamist pedigree -- the Justice and Development Party (AKP) -- won a clear majority with 34 percent of the vote and 363 of the 550 seats in the parliament. The social-democratic Republican People's Party (CHP) was the only other party to win parliamentary representation, garnering 19 percent of the vote and 178 seats (the remaining 9 seats went to independent candidates). All three parties in the outgoing coalition government failed to meet the 10-percent threshold for participating in the legislature, as did the other opposition parties. With 363 seats, AKP is only 5 seats short of the two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution. Still, the party has enough ministers of parliament to form the next government on its own, putting an end to fifteen years of coalition governments in Turkey. This could bear positive results: Turkey has performed rather poorly under coalition governments (e.g., during the 1990s), but rather well under majority governments (e.g., during the Turgut Ozal years of the 1980s).

### SONER CAGAPTAY

CHP was not represented in Turkey's outgoing parliament, so the electorate could not blame it for the recent difficult years. Nevertheless, the party won less than 20 percent of the vote on Sunday. Given that social-democrat parties have traditionally received around one-third of the vote, CHP's showing can be considered dismal. In fact, CHP's support base shrank leading up to the elections. The party has been relegated to Turkish Thrace and a few coastal provinces along the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas; the rest of the country has turned in favor of AKP.

Why has AKP done so well? Since its inception last year, AKP has promoted itself as a conservative party not in opposition to secularism. Hence, the party attracted many centrist voters who have been appalled by the inefficient and corruption-ridden governments of the 1990s. Moderation has brought AKP to power, and it will keep the party in power. If AKP begins to challenge secularism, the party's majority moderate voters may bolt, punishing AKP for creating tension. Similarly, if AKP's leadership immediately takes on certain pressing issues for the Islamist

opposition that are of iconic quality in Turkey (e.g., the wearing of headscarves), and does so without building a consensus, the secularist block could view it as evidence that the party is attempting to take over political Islam. Yet, if AKP handles this sort of delicate situation carefully, it would be a positive test for Turkish democracy.

MARK PARRIS

This election cycle was characterized by deep and profound anger among the Turkish people. Without this anger, there would not have been someone like Cem Uzan, the leader of the Young Party, appealing to the masses by disparaging government economic plans that were backed by the International Monetary Fund. Such anger in Turkey has traditionally been concentrated at the lower ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. After the February 2001 economic meltdown, however, even people in the establishment became angry.

Moreover, this was an election in which Turkish liberals utterly failed. It was a failure not only for CHP, the main liberal party, but also for individuals like Ismail Cem (former minister of foreign affairs and the leader of the New Turkey Party [YTP]) and Kemal Dervis (a senior World Bank official who later became the Turkish minister for economic affairs). As recently as one year ago, Dervis was perceived as the savior of the Turkish people. As he moved from one potential set of backers to another, however, Turks became disenchanted with him and concluded that his calls for a unified left were not going to materialize. The failure to broker a CHP-YTP front left the pieces of the liberal spectrum working against one another. All of these factors added to a perception of cynicism of the part of many liberal supporters and discouraged voters from choosing them in the polls.

This election was also very much about the personality of AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan. A lot of people indirectly voted for him, regardless of his controversial pedigree or the legal obstacles he faced. As a result, the future is murky. The fact that Erdogan cannot step in and work with President Ahmet Necdet Sezer on becoming the next prime minister leaves a lot of questions hanging. Who will lead Turkey, and with whom will other countries deal during the days and years to come? If Erdogan remains the party chair, there is at least a technical possibility that AKP will be closed down, as soon as next month. If he steps down and someone else becomes prime minister, divisions will likely arise within AKP as to whether this is the right way to proceed. Of course, Erdogan could exercise a degree of influence behind the curtains even if he does not become the next prime minister.

BULENT ALI RIZA

AKP is certainly not the party that Erdogan initially established. It has brought individuals with widely varying views into the fold, including Erkan Mumcu of the Motherland Party (ANAP), Koksal Toptan of the True Path Party (DYP), and Kursat Tuzmen of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). Consequently, the real opposition to AKP is going to come from within its own ranks. Despite AKP's electoral success, the fact remains that two-thirds of the country did not vote for it. The party is now caught between the expectations of its supporters (who expect AKP to move on certain controversial issues immediately) and the sentiments of the other two-thirds of the electorate, who harbor suspicion, fear, and even hatred for AKP's core ideologies. It will be very difficult for the party to satisfy the former without further alienating the latter.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

One key question remains unanswered in the wake of the elections: did Erdogan truly have a change of heart regarding his Islamic ideals, or did he simply create a perfect, moderate formula by which he could get these ideals elected? Erdogan is a charismatic politician from a poor background. While just a student, he met Necmettin Erbakan, who became Turkey's first Islamist prime minister. Erdogan subsequently entered the Islamic movement himself, leading Erbakan's youth group and attending an Islamic high school. A publicly delivered pro-Islamist poem earned him a conviction in 1998 for inciting religious hatred. Currently, it is difficult to determine whether Erdogan has changed his worldview, in which Islam seems central. Nevertheless, he does seem to have changed his view of

politics, and this is what matters. Following the elections, Erdogan reaffirmed that AKP would not intervene in the lifestyles of the people. The Turks can now only wait to hope that this promise will be fulfilled.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ayca Ariyoruk.

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