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Turkey's Election: Quit – Reset – Game Over

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

In Turkey's November 1 election, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP), the former party of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reestablished single party government in Turkey by winning 49.48 percent of the vote. After six months of political uncertainty and instability that was characterized by the inability of the AKP and the main opposition parties to form a coalition government, a deteriorating economy, and a cycle of attacks and reprisals between Ankara and the IS (Islamic State) and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party - *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* – PKK), the AKP's decisive victory was a surprise.

The six months between the June and November 2015 elections was already being described as the "longest six months" in Turkish political history, thanks to the proliferation of conspiracy theories and political gossip. Certainly the IS's attack in Suruç on July 20, which claimed the lives of 32 Turkish citizens, mostly of Kurdish origin, during the climax of the governing coalition negotiations, will be remembered as a watershed moment. Members of the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* – HDP) and many on social media accused the government of ignoring the IS's activities in Turkey and thus held the state indirectly responsible for the Suruç bombing. In the shadow of these accusations, the PKK carried out revenge attacks against the state's security forces. In response, Prime Minister Davutoğlu decided to retaliate against both the IS and the PKK. Yet the broad military campaign was focused mostly on the PKK rather than the IS, and put an end to the peace process between the AKP and the PKK that was informally launched in Oslo in 2009.

The government's military campaign and the end of the peace process were strongly criticized by the opposition camp. The AKP was accused of playing populist politics to win the support of the Turkish nationalists as the coalition negotiations continued. If this was in fact the AKP's strategy, it worked: the

images of Turkish soldiers' coffins and the growing instability in the southeast and eastern parts of the country were very much on the minds of Turkish voters, as was the country's overall economic stagnation due to the continuing political uncertainty and new security concerns following the IS's brutal October 10 attack in the heart of Ankara, which claimed 102 lives.

In addition, the Nationalist Movement Party's (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – MHP) unwillingness to participate in a coalition government with the AKP or with the secularist Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* – CHP), which had to rely on external support from the Kurdish HDP, combined with Erdoğan's implicit opposition to a AKP-CHP coalition created a political deadlock. Despite the CHP's willingness to participate in a coalition with all parties, especially the other opposition parties, it became the main victim when the MHP and AKP were not able to find a formula for a coalition government during the summer.

These developments led Erdoğan and Davutoğlu to push the 'quit game' button and call for a reset in the form of snap elections in November. In retrospect, this political gamble paid off.

The November results amazed even the AKP's supporters. The party reclaimed its absolute majority in parliament by increasing its seats by 59, reaching 317 parliamentary seats out of 550, thus enabling it to govern without coalition partners. The Turkish public voted for stability in the face of political uncertainty. The inflexibility of opposition leaders, who do not have the term "resignation" in their vocabularies, and the uncompromising political agendas of the opposition parties, paved the way for the AKP's victory.

The increased support for the AKP apparently came at the expense of the nationalist MHP, in line with the AKP's strategy. In addition, the HDP's harsh accusations that held the government indirectly responsible for the IS bombings that killed 134, also played into the AKP's hands.

However, the AKP's success can't be explained solely as a function of nationalist support or by the political right's mobilization. Ironically, the party also won the support of conservative Kurds despite the government's military campaign against the PKK. These Kurds, who traditionally voted for the AKP, had punished the party and voted for the HDP in the June elections. The AKP's decision to close Turkey's border with Kobanî during the IS siege in late 2014 had been the reason for the shift away from the AKP in the June 2015 election. In its aftermath, however, the HDP did not consolidate the support of these voters. The core reason was that these Kurds held the PKK responsible for the cycle of violence that was destroying their region's welfare. As a result, the HDP, which has close

relations with the PKK, was negatively affected. The conservative Kurds also regarded the single party government of the AKP as the best option to resume the peace process that would bring peace and stability to the region. Moreover, the HDP's ideological shift from a strictly Kurdish party to a national leftist party for all of Turkey may have also alienated these conservative Kurds.¹

The November elections will have important ramifications at home. While stability appears to be the primary outcome of the election results, growing authoritarianism and pressure on the media were the primary cost. Indeed the detainment² and arrest³ of the anti-government *Nokta* magazine's chief editor and editor just one day after the elections can be seen as a concrete evidence of this trend.

In addition to the AKP's opponents in the media, former president Abdullah Gül, who has consistently criticized the AKP and Erdoğan's harsh policies, was another important loser in these elections. According to many analysts, Gül was seeking an AKP defeat in the elections, which would create a pretext for splitting the party and reconstituting the party leadership in his favor. However due to the AKP's great success, it looks as though Gül will have to postpone his power play. Not surprisingly, Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet Movement can also be considered victims of the AKP victory. The new government's anti-Hizmet policy is likely to become stronger.

Although all of the opposition parties should also be viewed as losers in this election, the HDP managed to pass the minimum parliamentary threshold again, despite losing support and winning a lower number of parliamentary seats, proving its success in the June elections was not a fluke. Selahattin Demirtaş, the HDP leader, played a crucial role in delivering this achievement. According to Adil Gür, who conducted a survey on election day, Demirtaş' 13.8 percent support among his constituency, made him the most charismatic political party leader in comparison to the AKP's Davutoğlu (10.5%), CHP's Kılıçdaroğlu (8.5%), and MHP's Bahçeli (10.1%). Despite these figures, it should be noted that President Erdoğan is still the most charismatic figure in Turkish politics: 37.3 percent of AKP's votes came thanks to Erdoğan.⁴ Therefore, it is no surprise that AKP officials are still interested in turning Turkey's government into a

¹ "[Seçmen neden yeniden AKP dedi?](#)" [Why did they vote for the AKP again?], *BBC*, November 3, 2015.

² "[Nokta dergisinin genel yayın yönetmeni göz altına alındı](#)" [The editor in chief of Nokta magazine was detained], *Hürriyet*, November 2, 2015.

³ "[Nokta Dergisi Genel Yayın Yönetmeni ile Sorumlu Yazı İşleri Müdürü tutuklama talebiyle mahkemeye sevk edildi](#)" [The editor in chief and editor of Nokta Magazine were sent to court for their arrest], *Hürriyet*, November 3, 2015.

⁴ "[Neden AK Parti sorusuna yanıt: Hizmet ve Erdoğan](#)" [The answer to the question "Why AKP?": Service and Erdoğan], *Milliyet*, November 6, 2015.

presidential system. Yet in order to change the Turkish constitution, the party would need 13 more seats to take the issue to a public referendum, which it doesn't have. This gap creates the possibility that the AKP will seek a deal with other political actors in return for cooperating with Erdoğan's ambition to change the system.

Despite the important influence of the elections on domestic politics in Turkey, it is unlikely that it will lead to a drastic change in Turkey's foreign policy. In this regard, the Syrian opposition, Hamas, and the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq will continue to enjoy Ankara's support.

In the November 1 elections, the Turkish people chose economic stability and security over what was perceived as chaos, with concerns about the AKP's growing authoritarianism taking a backseat. The opposition leaders' inability to form a governing coalition following the June elections, and offer a real alternative to the AKP, was perhaps the AKP's biggest asset on November 1. Thus by quitting the coalition talks and winning the new elections, the Erdoğan-Davutoğlu duo proved the game was over for the Turkish opposition. Time will tell whether the opposition leaders will be able to internalize this message.

[Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak](#) is a doctoral candidate in the [Zvi Yavetz Graduate School of History](#) and a Junior Researcher at the [Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies \(MDC\)](#), [Tel Aviv University](#).

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