



Volume 9, Special Edition No. 1

June 4, 2015

Elections in Turkey: The Kurdish Ace in the Hole

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On June 7, 2015, Turkey will hold one of its most important elections in decades. These elections will likely decide whether Turkey remains democratic or veers towards an authoritarian system. The outcome depends on whether President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's party wins enough parliamentary seats to be able to revise Turkey's constitution and introduce a presidential system. Such a system might turn Erdoğan into a more fully-fledged authoritarian ruler and further polarize Turkish society. In short, the elections contain the potential to either unleash chaos in Turkey or offer a democratic solution to the country's growing social divide.¹

There are twenty party lists registered for these elections, and the most important is Erdoğan's Justice and Development (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) Party, which has been in power for more than a decade. The Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), which is the old Kemalist party, and the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), which is the ultranationalist party, are also among the most well-established parties. However, the party which is said to be holding the key to these elections as the potential "kingmaker" is a new and relatively small party, the predominantly Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP).

Of the 20 parties running in the elections, the HDP is the most dynamic and revolutionary of all. There are those who likened it to "Syriza" in Greece and "Podemos" in Spain. When and how did HDP emerge and how might it affect Turkish politics?

¹ I would like to thank Meike Behrends for collecting material on the elections.

The upcoming elections represent a four-dimensional revolution for Kurds in Turkey. First, it was not long ago that the Kurds were considered to be a completely disenfranchised and marginalized group, and now they have reached center stage in Turkish politics. Second, during past election cycles Kurdish candidates appealed mainly to Kurdish voters, but now the HDP is attempting to appeal to the Turkish general public as well, including Turkish liberals, leftists, and members of minority groups like the Alevis and Armenians. It should be noted that a central pillar of this party is democracy because only in a genuine representative democracy can the Kurds hope to have a fair share in power. In fact, democracy has been an important tenet of all Kurdish parties, and since their establishment in 1991, they have made the word “democracy” part of the party's name and turned it into a central ideological principle. Third, while past Kurdish candidates have run as individuals so as to overcome the draconian 10 percent minimum parliamentary threshold, the Kurds are now fielding a joint list of candidates with a likeminded liberal socialist group. This move has brought the Kurds full circle. In the 1970s, the Kurds coalesced under the banner of a leftist party in order to be able to enter the parliament, only to leave that party early on because it failed to recognize Kurdish national demands. Fourth, another quiet revolution is the fact that 50 percent of HDP's candidates are women; there are 268 female HDP candidates compared to 90 from AKP, for example. By the same token, the HDP is jointly led by a man and woman: the co-chairs, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. These changes are bound to shakeup the male-oriented political system in Turkey.

Why is the HDP's role so crucial in the upcoming elections? Whether or not it succeeds, its ability to pass the 10 percent threshold is likely to have great influence on the evolution of three major issues: the future political system in Turkey, the Turkish–Kurdish domestic peace process, and Turkey's relations with Kurdistan of Iraq and Kurdistan of Syria (Rojava). If the HDP passes the threshold and enters parliament, it will severely damage Erdoğan's chances of becoming a president with unprecedented powers, a super-president, because the AKP will not have the 330 votes it needs to carry out a constitutional referendum for such a change. The HDP's potential threat to Erdoğan's ambitions was already felt during the 2014 presidential elections, when HDP's co-chair Demirtaş managed to win 9.7 percent of the votes. As a young and charismatic leader, Demirtaş is likely to take votes away from the AKP in these elections as well. Indeed, a recent report stated that some Kurdish tribes in southeastern Turkey shifted their support from the AKP to the HDP.²

² *Today's Zaman*, May 8, 2015.

Alarmed by the HDP's potential power, Erdoğan and the AKP are doing everything in their power to prevent the HDP from crossing the 10 percent threshold. If the AKP succeeds, it will have killed two birds with one stone. Not only will the pro-Kurdish HDP fail to enter parliament, but its votes will automatically be redistributed to the AKP, thus facilitating the referendum and the change from the parliamentary to the presidential system in Turkey. Such a scenario would likely deal a damaging blow to Turkey's already fragile democracy.

With the stakes so high, the AKP has devised several mechanisms to undermine the HDP's chances. The first is to take steps to arouse Turkish nationalists' anti-Kurdish sentiments. In the Turkish government's view, the Kurdish threat has shifted from the security to the political arena. In the past, the government could use PKK violence as an instrument for mobilizing mass support and tarnishing the image of Kurdish parties, but now it has to face the Kurdish question in the political arena. And while the HDP and the PKK are doing their utmost to prevent armed clashes in order not to play into the hands of the AKP, pro-government elements are covertly trying as hard as they can to provoke them.³ According to a human rights organization, of 126 attacks during the last few months, 114 targeted the HDP.⁴ But to the AKP's dismay the PKK has not responded to these provocations.

While the AKP can no longer rely on actual violence initiated by the PKK to tarnish the HDP's image, it is playing on voters' fears with rhetoric, associating the HDP with terrorism and emphasizing its symbiotic relations with the PKK. In this way the AKP attempts to dissuade potential Turkish voters from voting for the HDP. Worse still, the AKP keeps warning that if the HDP crosses the 10 percent threshold it will lead to the end of the peace process with the Kurds. On May 21, Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan said that "We should especially tell this to the people who will vote for the HDP: If the AKP government loses power as a result of the HDP passing the threshold, then there will no longer be a peace process."⁵

Herein lies the inherent contradictions in the AKP's tactics. It was the AKP that initiated the peace process with the PKK, on two separate occasions— in 2008 covertly in Oslo, and in 2013 openly in Turkey. At the same time, the AKP continues to characterize the PKK as a terrorist organization. The peace process has not made

³ Figen Yüksekdağ, HDP co-chair, has said 42 election centers used by party-members during the party's election campaign have been attacked, implying a link between attacks and the ruling party.

Today's Zaman, May 8, 2015.

⁴ *Today's Zaman*, May 21, 2015.

⁵ *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 21, 2015

any important progress since it was restarted in early 2013; the government would not even agree to the Kurdish demand for lowering the parliamentary threshold below 10 percent. Moreover, Erdoğan, who was behind the peace process, seems to have shifted his strategy as of late. In addition to his attacks on the PKK and HDP, he also declared that there was no Kurdish problem in Turkey and refused to recognize the HDP as an interlocutor in the peace process: "Who do you think you are, claiming to be an interlocutor?", he said. "There is a state in this country. There is not a table that is being sat around. If there were, it would mean the collapse of the state."⁶ In its earlier stage, Erdoğan used the peace process as a means to weaken the Turkish military and win the Kurdish vote. And while Erdoğan has done his best to empty the peace process of meaning in recent years, it has turned out to be a double-edged sword for the AKP because it has legitimized and empowered the Kurdish party.

What then is the Kurdish leadership in Turkey planning? There are many conspiracy theories with regard to HDP's intentions if it enters the parliament, the most common of which is that there is a secret agreement with the AKP to support Erdoğan's plans for a presidential system. The three-pronged Kurdish leadership in Turkey is quite convoluted and difficult to comprehend. PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who is imprisoned by the government on Imrali Island, may be considered the most forthcoming Kurdish leader toward the AKP government. This was demonstrated by his March 21, 2015 call to convene a PKK congress to discuss laying down its arms.⁷ On the opposite end of the spectrum is the PKK leadership operating from the Qandil Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan, led by Cemil Bayık. This leadership espouses a much more radical and confrontational position than Öcalan. Somewhere in the middle is the HDP leadership, which represents the Kurdish civilian sector. For all the differences between them it seems quite unlikely that any of them will support a presidential system, because doing so would be shooting themselves in the foot. First, they would lose the support of the Turkish liberals and leftists who voted for them. Second, a presidential system will damage what they call the "democratic autonomy" project for the Kurds. Third, a stronger Erdoğan might wish to crush this new political wild-card.

What will happen if the HDP fails to cross the 10 percent threshold? Will the Kurds take up arms against the government, especially if it was demonstrated that the AKP engaged in fraudulent vote-rigging during the elections? Three considerations might forestall a resort to arms, at least in the short term. The Kurds have proven

⁶ *Today's Zaman*, April 30, 2015.

⁷ *Hurriyet Daily News*, March 21, 2015.

themselves to be a political player and they would not be eager to lose this hard-earned status. Second, despite the political rivalry between the PKK and Kurdistan in Iraq, the PKK recognizes that their fortunes are linked, and would therefore prefer to avoid a renewed armed conflict with the Turkish state that might endanger the strong relationship between Turkey and Kurdistan in Iraq or threaten the fragile Kurdish autonomy that has emerged in Syria. Finally, a renewed domestic conflict between the government and the Kurds might bring the Turkish military back into Turkish politics, which the Kurds would prefer to avoid because it was the military that historically fought the Kurds in Turkey. To sum up, whether the HDP manages to cross the parliamentary threshold or not, the Kurds have attained a central role in the Turkish political system and it will be difficult for any government to roll-back their achievements.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

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