

WHAT WILL TURKEY'S NEW GOVERNMENT PRIORITISE?

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Some 43 million Turks, an impressive 87 per cent of the electorate, went to the polls on 12 June to elect the new government. One in two voters cast a ballot for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), bringing it back to office for a third term with 49.9 per cent of the vote -- higher than the 47 per cent it received in 2007 and the 34 per cent in 2002. Returning to power with an increased support base has bolstered AKP's credibility both at home and abroad, making it easier to address challenges like constitutional reform, the Kurdish issue, and EU accession through the implementation of its pledge to open its ports to Cypriot traffic .

The elections produced an unusually representative parliament, despite a national electoral threshold of 10 per cent. After AKP's 326 seats in the 550-seat assembly, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) increased its seats from 112 to 135 with 26 per cent of the vote. The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) managed to secure 53 deputies with 13 per cent support, despite having lost ten candidates after the release of video recordings showing party members in compromising circumstances with their mistresses. The electoral bloc based on the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) raised the number of its independent deputies from 21 to 36, with 6.5 per cent of the vote.

Turkey's striking economic performance has been one of the main factors behind AKP's increased popularity, and apparently outweighed concerns about Prime Minister Erdoğan's intolerance to criticism and his confrontational style. The economy grew 6 per cent on average between 2002 and 2008, and after a contraction in 2009 due to the global crisis, surged nearly 9 per cent in 2010, surpassing both the EU and global recovery rates. Turkey's total GDP and per capita income tripled in nine years to reach \$736 billion and \$10,000 respectively, while inflation came down from 30 to just over 6 per cent.

The EU accession process and related reforms played a major role in this success story. Foreign direct investments increased twenty-fold between 2002 and 2007, peaking at \$22 billion. The figure has fallen since, hitting \$9 billion in 2010, partly because of the global recession, but partly because of stagnation in Turkey's EU-led reform process since 2005. Moving forward, AKP will have to steer around several bumps in the road: Unemployment rate is stubbornly stuck at above 11 per cent since AKP came to power; the current account deficit, over 6 per cent of GDP in 2010, has significantly worsened in the first months of 2011; and Turkey's close economic ties with Europe make it susceptible to the economic turmoil and market shrinkage in the Euro zone.

Other challenges are mounting up for the new government, with a pile of domestic and foreign policy issues swept under the rug before the elections are now waiting to be resolved – a new constitution, Kurdish reforms, relations

with the EU and the deadlock in the Cyprus reunification talks. Aside from these issues, over ten thousand refugees fleeing government crackdown in Syria have already crossed into southeastern Turkey as unrest in the Middle East continues to test the limits of Turkey's "zero problems with neighbours" foreign policy.

It is unclear which issues Prime Minister Erdoğan's new government will prioritise. Domestically, the parliamentary result dictates that AKP will need to achieve consensus with the opposition. Although it received a greater share of the vote in this election, recent population-based adjustments in deputy numbers of some provinces meant AKP actually lost seats in parliament. AKP's main election pledge is a new constitution, but with 326 deputies, it fell short of the majorities required either to write it unilaterally, or to put it to a referendum. In these circumstances, Prime Minister Erdoğan is unlikely to push forward his apparent goal of using the new constitution to create a French-style presidential system -- a divisive issue for most Turks.

Prime Minister Erdoğan will also need opposition support to make the constitutional and legislative changes needed to defuse the Kurdish problem. AKP's 2009 Kurdish initiative, also called the "democratic opening", was an encouraging step, but it has faltered and failed to produce tangible results so far. AKP must now work with the Kurdish nationalists elected to parliament on revitalizing this initiative, which has opened the door to finding peaceful ways to address Kurdish demands, including the right to bilingual education, strengthened local government, a change in laws to prevent Kurds from being prosecuted just for expressing opinions, lowering the 10 per cent national election threshold, and eliminating ethnically discriminatory language from the constitution and laws.

AKP's efforts to keep MHP out of parliament by using nationalist rhetoric during the election campaign cost it Kurdish votes and helped independent Kurdish candidates. But the Kurdish nationalist agenda has now proved itself a part of mainstream politics, and the election result potentially sends a signal to the Kurdish nationalist constituency that the political arena, not armed conflict, is where their problems should be addressed and solved. This was put at risk, however, by the Supreme Election Board's decision on 21 June to bar a Kurdish deputy from taking his parliamentary seat due to a previous conviction on links to an outlawed organisation. All 35 remaining BDP independents decided to boycott the parliament on 23 June until the issue is resolved.

This sudden parliamentary crisis risks leading Turkey down uncharted waters, but what the country needs now instead is a calm consensus to move ahead with the many tasks at hand. After an aggressive campaign, Prime Minister Erdoğan cooled down the rhetoric in a prudent speech on election night, and signalled he would be following an inclusive and conciliatory approach. Perhaps to hammer the point home, on 16 June he withdrew all court cases he had filed against journalists, writers and politicians who had insulted him.

On the foreign policy front, AKP should cash in its political capital to take bolder decisions, particularly with regard to its deadlocked EU process. EU was not high on anyone's election agenda. Now, vague post-election talk of revitalizing EU negotiations needs to be backed by broader and deeper commitments than the bureaucratic act of moving EU affairs, coordinated until recently by a state minister, under a new EU ministry.

One way to do this urgently is to implement the "Additional Protocol" -- i.e. fulfil a 2005 customs union commitment to open ports and airports to Greek Cypriot vessels. This will not only unblock at least eight of Turkey's EU negotiating chapters and breathe some life into its comatose EU process, but will also be an important step in normalising relations with Greek Cypriots. It is true that EU countries should also do more to encourage Turkey, but the fact that they are failing in their task should not stop Turkey from taking actions to remove obstacles in its path.