

Jan Senkyr: Turkey after the Parliamentary Elections. Back to Normal?

With its clear victory in Turkey's parliamentary elections of July 22 this year, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has established a solid basis for continuing its work. These early elections, which enabled the AKP to increase its already high share in the vote even further, were triggered by the failure of the preceding presidential elections in which the foreign minister, Abdullah Gül, himself a member of the AKP, stood for office, causing vehement protest among laicist-minded Turks because of his close links with Islamism.

In purely arithmetical terms, there would have been nothing to oppose Mr Gül's election as the AKP with its 354 seats in parliament does have the majority required for its candidate to win. In case of such a victory, however, the defenders of Turkish laicism would have denounced the AKP for usurping power completely, especially as the president's powers are considerable: He may delay legislation by his veto, he plays a decisive role in appointments to high offices of state, and he is the commander-in-chief of the Turkish army. President Sezer, for one, has made use of his influence on appointments to key state positions several times to prevent the appointment of Islamist-minded persons by the AKP government.

However, the secular opposition was not alone in fighting Gül's candidacy for Turkey's highest office. On April 12, Yaşar Büyükanit, the chief of staff, announced that the person the military would accept as head of state would have to demonstrate his commitment to the values of the republic and to laicism 'not only in word but in deed'. Despite the resistance of the military, and despite diverse mass rallies organised by the opposition, Mr Gül was not willing to abandon his candidacy. On April 27, when the first ballot was held in parliament, he won an overwhelming majority – but only because the CHP and the Motherland Party had boycotted the election. While, in response to this, the CHP appealed to the constitutional court, trying to obtain an annulment by pointing out the lack of a quorum in the assembly, the general staff published a sharply-worded declaration on the same night in which it warned against anti-laicist tendencies within the country, thus nourishing the fear of an immediate military intervention.

When the constitutional court ruled in favour of the CHP on May 1, this was an out for both sides: The secular camp had kept Mr Gül from becoming president, and the AKP was able to beat a retreat without losing face.

The objective of the ruling party and the prime minister, Mr Erdoğan, now was to hold parliamentary elections soon, and they were duly scheduled for July 22. Supported by MPs of the ANAVATAN, the AKP decided in July to have the president elected directly by parliament, outvoting even the veto of the current incumbent.

The parliamentary election campaign, which was intended to show a way out of the crisis in constitutional law, largely resembled a fight between the secular and the religious camp. However, the lines of separation have grown fuzzier as a new middle class emerged and civil society became more active. Thus, for example, a Western, liberal, individualistic, and consumption-oriented middle class has formed in the secular camp, while in the AKP, a new 'Islamic middle class' with a cosmopolitan attitude is gaining influence.

Aware of the special importance of the parliamentary elections, more than 84 percent of the Turkish people entitled to vote cast their ballot on July 22: 46.58 percent voted for the AKP, which will send 341 MPs into parliament, while 20.88 percent voted for the CHP which, from now on, will control 112 seats. At 14.27 percent of the vote, the MHP holds 70 seats, and at 5.24 percent, the independents will send 26 MPs into parliament. The clear victory of the ruling party comes as a

surprise. While the result of the biggest opposition party, the CHP, is disappointing, the entrance of the nationalist MHP, which during the election campaign had attracted attention by its radical anti-Kurdish slogans, made people sit up. And, finally, the Kurdish DTP succeeded in entering parliament with 22 MPs, something which has never happened in Turkey before. The DTP skilfully skirted around the ten-percent hurdle by fielding independent candidates.

For the traditional middle-of-the-road parties, the DP and the ANAVATAN, formerly ANAP, the election result is a disaster. They had both announced their fusion to form the Democratic Party but the project failed because they were unable to solve the problem of whom to field as their candidate. For the Young Party led by the controversial entrepreneur Cem Uzan, the result is also discouraging, as it had intended to score with its promise to lower the price of diesel per litre but won only three percent of the vote.

The elections did not bring about any dramatic changes in the balance of power within Turkey's parliament. Due to its landslide victory, the AKP now has a strong political mandate and constitutes the leading force in the country. Yet it will have fewer MPs in the future, which gives the opposition a new importance. However, due to the presence of four political parties, parliament will develop a more pluralist and, consequently, more democratic character in the future.

Now, what are the causes for the clear victory of the ruling party? On the one hand, the record of the AKP's government work has so far been entirely positive. The key macro-economic data are sound, liberal economic reforms have established good conditions for investments, and the per-capita income more than doubled. Conversely, it seems that the opposition was not able to persuade the electorate that they are threatened by a creeping process of Islamisation.

And finally, the AKP succeeded in presenting itself as a reform party, which made it attractive to the centre. Mr Erdoğan, its leader, knew how to pursue a consistent policy of freezing out MPs who still adhere to old Islamist tendencies, promoting younger, well-educated and, not least, female MPs, and transforming the party into a centrist peoples' party.

Both parliament and government are now facing a whole series of tasks: The EU accession negotiations that are proceeding only slowly must be revived and a military escalation in Northern Iraq prevented. Once the parliamentarians have been sworn in and the prime minister has been elected, a new head of state must be chosen quickly. In theory, the path is clear for Abdullah Gül to stand again, especially as the MHP has signalled its willingness to refrain from boycotting the ballot. However, the leader of the AKP, Mr Erdoğan, should be very interested in keeping the conflict with the opposition and the military from flaring up again. Presenting a compromise candidate would certainly not be a bad idea.