

## ELECTIONS IN TURKEY – ANOTHER TRIUMPHAL SUCCESS FOR THE AKP

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For the third time in a row the Islamic Conservative Party for Justice and Development (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) gains an outstanding victory during the parliamentary elections in Turkey, for the third time in a row it was able to increase the votes and for a third time, despite the improved votes, the number of seats in Parliament were reduced. This seemingly contradictory situation is due to the Turkish voting system<sup>1</sup> and is an example for the complexity of the Turkish political reality.

The AKP was the triumphant winner, achieving a record result of 49.9 per cent<sup>2</sup> of votes during the parliamentary elections on the 12<sup>th</sup> June 2011. The party, ruling since 2002, has managed for a third time in a row to achieve the absolute majority and govern alone. Their chairman, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is by far the most popular Turkish politician. At present there are no serious contesters, neither in the opposition nor in his party. This gives him a large political leeway, but it also bears the danger of an increasing concentration of power. Critics point out that the head of government and his party assume an increasingly more authoritarian attitude. It is with scepticism that they observe the plans for changes in Turkey to be presidentially governed.

At present the AKP has, however, not yet achieved absolute power, despite the absolute majority of votes. In order



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- 1 | Main factors are the ten per cent hurdle and the uneven distribution of seats allotted to the electoral districts.
- 2 | This article was finished on the 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2011, before the officially confirmed end results were known.

to be able to change the political system by means of a change in the Constitution, they would need a two-third majority in parliament. They are far away from this with their current 326 seats (of altogether 550). It would not even be sufficient to have the new Constitution confirmed by a referendum. To this end the draft constitution would need to be passed by parliament with at least 330 votes. Only then could the president decide to hold a referendum.

The supposed triumphant election victory of the AKP in fact only is a part victory, as the distribution of seats in parliament forces the government party to seek the opposition's consent in all constitutionally relevant decisions. It is, however, not completely ruled out that the AKP will achieve their goals in the end single-handedly: the difference of four votes (to hold a referendum) can be overcome; the balance of powers may shift in the course of the legislative period. Changing party allegiance in Turkey is nothing unusual and even a voting without party whip of some members of parliament is possible.

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## **ELECTION RESULTS**

After a preliminary end result<sup>3</sup> the AKP achieved 49.92 per cent of the votes and receives 326 seats in the Great National Assembly. The result was no surprise and corresponds mainly with the election prognosis of opinion research institutes. The AKP was able to surpass their excellent election result of 2007 (46.58 per cent) by a further three per cent, although in comparison they receive less mandates (2007: 341 seats). During their first election victory in 2002, only one year after their formation, they achieved 34.43 per cent and with 365 seats, only just missed the two-third majority.<sup>4</sup>

The largest opposition party, the Secular-Kemalist Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) has clearly been left behind expectations with 25.94 per cent. Only a few days before the election most opinion polls

3 | Source: <http://cihan.com.tr/secim2011> (accessed June 14, 2011).

4 | In 2002, apart from the AKP only the CHP with 19.41 per cent made it into parliament.

predicted around 30 per cent for the CHP. The CHP did gain a further five per cent compared to 2007 (20.87 per cent) and with 135 seats obtained more seats (2007: 112 seats), but a party internal discussion about the political future of their candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, only elected party chairman and top candidate a year ago, is probably unavoidable. Comments in Turkish media are however uniform in their opinion that Kılıçdaroğlu, who is also called "Gandhi" due to his appearance and his quiet manner, has changed the CHP positively and left a good impression during his election campaign. But the reform and political new orientation offered by the CHP are obviously not yet sufficient to present a serious challenge to the AKP.

The result of the right-wing national party, the Nationalist Movement (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), was the largest source of suspense during these elections. The in part very nationalist guided election campaign by Tayyip Erdoğan indicated that motivating the nationally minded voters was an important part of the AKP election strategy. On the other hand a blackmail scandal with sex videos rocked the MHP leadership and thus the reputation of the party, shortly before the elections. In order to force the MHP leadership, including its party chairman to resign, unknown persons published several video recordings of MHP politicians showing compromising intimate situations in the internet. Ten leadership members had to resign from their posts and withdrew from the election candidacy and the MHP was in danger not to manage the ten per cent hurdle, required to enter parliament. Then the AKP would have had a real chance to achieve a two-third majority in the House of Representatives. The election result for the MHP of 12.99 per cent (53 seats) shows, however, that the scandal did not or if at all only had a small effect on the election preferences. Some observers even think that this may have led to more solidarity in the nationalist thinking camp. Compared to 2007 (14.27 per cent, 70 seats) the MHP had to accept losses, which may lead to demands for replacing the leadership around the party chairman Devlet Bahçeli.

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The fourth party entering the Turkish Parliament will be the pro-Kurds Party of Peace and Democracy (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi, BDP), although with 6.6 per cent throughout the country, it stays well below the ten per cent limit. In the Kurdish populated provinces in the Southeast and East, where the BDP gained more than half of the votes in parts, it opted for the strategy of supporting independent candidates. Of these altogether 36 made it into parliament. With 36 members of parliament, the BDP can now form a strong fraction (minimum number of MPs in a fraction is 20). Its predecessor, the Democratic Society (DTP), prohibited by the Constitutional Court in 2009, went for this strategy in 2007 and obtained 20 seats.

Of all the other political parties that were allowed for the elections, only the Islamic Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi, SD) obtained one per cent of the votes. The rest achieved only a fraction of percentages and remains politically unimportant. 15 parties and 203 independent candidates altogether applied for mandates. In spite of an extraordinarily high threshold clause of ten per cent, the "representation" of the new parliament is relatively high, with 81.6 per cent.<sup>5</sup> This refers to the part of valid votes that are represented in parliament by a mandate. It remains however indisputable that the ten per cent hurdle is democratically seen a deficit in the Turkish voting system.

Table 1

**Election Results 2011**

Party	Valid Votes	in %	Nbr. of MPs	Compared to 2007
AKP	21,392,195	49.92	326	+ 3.36%
CHP	11,116,396	25.94	135	+ 5.07%
MHP	5,566,616	12.99	53	- 1.27%
BDP	2,825,567	6.59	36	+ 1.36%
Other	1,953,588	4.56		

Source: <http://cihan.com.tr/secim2011> (accessed June 14, 2011).

5 | Cf. "Turkish elections see highest voter turnout in years," *Todays Zaman*, June 14, 2011.

A positive fact is that the number of women with 78 female members of parliament in the Turkish parliament has distinctly increased.<sup>6</sup> The increase statistically seen is 62 per cent compared to 2007, where only 48 women managed to get into parliament. Altogether the part of women in the Turkish house of representatives is 14 per cent, the European average is however 24 per cent (32 per cent in the Deutsche Bundestag). Turkish Women's organisations were pleased with the result although their expectations had been higher. The association for the promotion of women as candidates, KA-DER, called in a publically effective campaign for women to take 278 seats in parliament. The AKP sends the largest group of women with 45 female members of parliament, 19 female parliamentarians come from the CHP, three from the MHP and 11 elected women stood independently, supported by the BDP. The highest number of female candidates however came from the CHP with 109 (the AKP had only 78).<sup>7</sup>

For the first time in 50 years, there will be a Christian member of parliament. The Syriac Erol Dora was elected in Mardin in the South East of Turkey as an independent candidate, supported by the BDP. Mardin has the largest Syriac Orthodox community in Turkey.

Only 188 members of the old parliament returned, which means that of 550 members, 362 new members will enter parliament. It thus is fair to talk of a new beginning in parliament. There are eleven MPs amongst the newly elected members of parliament that are under arrest in prison for current court cases.

Two MPs, nominated by the CHP, are being investigated within the scope of the so-called "Ergenekon"-case<sup>8</sup>, an ex-general elected for the MHP has been accused of taking part in the so-called "Sledgehammer"-complot<sup>9</sup> and

6 | According to the preliminary end result.

7 | Cf. "Number of female deputies sees 60 per cent increase," *Todays Zaman*, June 14, 2011.

8 | Case against alleged members of an ultranational secret organisation called "Ergenekon", being responsible allegedly for political murders, terrorist attacks and plans for a coup against the AKP government. At present, about 300 accused persons are being detained.

9 | "Sledgehammer" is the designation for a military exercise that was carried out in 2003 with the alleged aim of a state coup.

eight independent candidates, supported by the BDP, are accused of being members in the KCK, a Kurdish umbrella organisation that is linked to the terrorist Kurdistan workers' party (PKK). Even though members of parliament enjoy immunity in Turkey, this does not apply to accusations of "anti state" or "terrorist activities". The relevant courts will now have to decide whether the MPs are set free and can resume their mandate.

International observers during the election classified the election as peaceful and properly carried out. The reports about the election by the media were criticised as having been in favour of the government; smaller parties were sometimes not even considered. Altogether more than 70 international observers, amongst them 61 MPs from more than 30 countries, were present during the election, coming from the scope of delegations of parliamentary assemblies of the OSZE and the European Council (PACE).

The election participation was surprisingly high. Almost 87 per cent of the over 51 million Turks eligible to vote went to the polling stations on the 12<sup>th</sup> June, the highest number since 1987. As comparison: 84.5 per cent of voters took part in the early election of 2007 that took place in a politically critical time and thus was of great significance. The election turnout of the so-called foreign Turks however was very low: of the well over 2.4 million Turkish citizens living abroad that are eligible to vote only about 121,000 voted; the reason being that voting was only possible at one of the 25 Turkish border crossings.

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This decision was taken by the Supreme Election Board (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu Başkanlığı, YSK) in March 2011. The AKP-government had pleaded to let the Turks living abroad give their vote to one of the Turkish representations abroad (embassies, general consulates) in their relevant guest country. In 2008, a bill that would have allowed Turks living abroad to vote by letter or electronically via e-mail was stopped by the Constitutional Court. The AKP complained that through this they may have lost a considerable amount of votes as Turks living abroad are mainly judged to be conservative. Of the votes given at the border crossing, 62 per cent went to the AKP.

Another decision made by the YSK met with criticism. At the beginning of this year, the distribution of seats allotted to the electoral districts was changed. By taking into consideration the demographic development – according to the YSK reasoning – in 24 of the total 85 electoral districts<sup>10</sup> the parliamentary seats were reduced, while the number of seats was increased in 14 districts. The increase in mandates affected mainly districts in the South East and East of Turkey, where the BDP opposition is strong. By this action the AKP had been discriminated, some media close to the government are complaining. Government voices have already mentioned that the YSK is going to be reformed with regard its competencies and personnel structure.

### **CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE ELECTION RESULTS**

Although the election campaign had sometimes been carried out with rude methods, personal attacks and aggressive rhetoric in a polarised political atmosphere, one can generally speak of a democratic and pluralistic competition. The AKP used all its available resources and led – as had been done during the past elections – an utterly efficient and professional election campaign.

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It had considerable finances available (partly from regular state subsidies, partly from donations) and an experienced election campaign team.

The AKP's election victory is mainly due to their undisputed positive results of their now nine years in government. When they gained power in 2002, Turkey had just overcome its most difficult financial and economic crisis in their recent history. Since then the country is on an economic success road with average growth rates of six to seven per cent, which remained stable during the global financial and

10 | Constituencies in Turkey are the 81 governor's provinces. So that each province is represented in the 550-head parliament, one mandate for each province is given. The total population is then divided by the remaining 469 mandates thus obtaining the members per province to be elected. Up to 18 members of parliament the electoral district corresponds to the border of a province, from 19 to 35 mandates the province is divided into two and from 36 onwards into three electoral districts.

economic crisis of 2009. Last year the Turkish economy grew again by about 9 per cent. The gross domestic product per head has tripled in the meantime, the inflation rate has shrunk to a single figure percentage and even the unemployment rate lies currently just below 10 per cent. The economic success is mainly due to the market economic reforms that had partly been introduced by the previous government and was carried on by the AKP during their first few years. The political stability and not least the status of Turkey as a candidate for EU accession, play an important role, too. Both are successes achieved by the AKP. AKP voters however appreciate in particular the improved state supply within the social and health sectors. Also the improvements within the education sector, public transport and the housing sector play an important role. Especially the extensive state promoted social housing construction, that made it possible for hundreds of thousands to obtain inexpensive properties, added many loyal voters to the AKP.

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The second, equally important factor is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself. An opinion poll conducted by Ipsos<sup>11</sup> immediately after the election said that 47 per cent of the AKP voters elected the party because of Erdoğan.

Up to a certain extent this person relatedness goes for other parties, too; 36 per cent of CHP voters voted the party because of Kılıçdaroğlu and even with the MHP the party chairman played a role. Indisputably, however, Erdoğan is by far the most popular Turkish politician, possessing the charisma of a people's tribune. The Turks are proud of their Prime Minister and consider themselves well represented.

However, the visionary large building projects, presented with great efforts by the media, that Erdoğan had announced ahead of the elections, did not considerably influence the voting behaviour.<sup>12</sup> The construction of a second canal between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean to relieve the Bosphorus, building a third bridge across the Bosphorus and the construction of two earthquake safe quarters in the city of Istanbul, little impressed the voters.

11 | Survey by Ipsos, cf. "Stability, leaders main factors that influence Turkish voters," *Today's Zaman*, June 16, 2011.

12 | Ibid.



Erdoğan's nationalist note in some election speeches was judged contra productive. In case the strategy was to entice nationalist thinking voters away from the MHP to push the party below the ten per cent hurdle, then this went wrong without doubt. The Prime Minister during his campaign said that the AKP would have hanged the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan after his arrest in 1999 had they been in power at the time.<sup>13</sup> He also said that the BDP voters were no real Muslims. These statements only added further Kurd votes to the BDP in the end. Even the scandal about the sex videos of MHP politicians has not damaged the MHP much. The questions about the people in the background and the motives for the affair remain unsolved. The MHP-chairman Bahçeli blamed the Islamic Fetullah-Gülen-community, close to the AKP, to be the initiator. There does not, however, exist any evidence.

The CHP with its top candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has obviously exploited their present potential of voters. They did manage to improve their voting result compared to 2007 by five per cent and gain more than 3 million voters; and they did have a difficult starting position. Kılıçdaroğlu had only been elected party chairman the year before, when his predecessor Deniz Baykal unexpectedly fell in May 2010 – also because of sex videos. It was only after their party assembly in December 2010 that the new chairman could start to reform his party and readjust them politically. Under Baykal the CHP became a niche party with its staunch "Kemalism". In order to change the party profile effectively to reach new voters until the election, there was not enough time. Remarkably positive were the appearances of Kılıçdaroğlu in the Kurdish populated provinces in the South East, where so far the CHP had not received any votes. Contrary to Erdoğan the CHP chairman met the Kurds half way with constructive offers: According to this he was for Kurdish language lessons at state schools and reinforcing the local government (local autonomy). It is interesting that the CHP is particularly popular with women; the proportion of female votes for the CHP was around 65 per cent.<sup>14</sup> The structure of the

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13 | The MHP was part of the government coalition at the time, in 2002 the death penalty in Turkey was abandoned.

14 | Survey by Ipsos, n. 11.

Turkish population is at present, however, more religious-conservative, and therefore the secular CHP will be no real challenge for the AKP in the foreseeable future.

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It was also a good decision to obtain a distanced position to the terrorist organisation PKK and instead enter into alliances with other Kurdish parties (KADEP, HAK-PAR).

Finally the diversity of the candidate list was an advantage, as seen by the example of Mardin.

### **MORE DEMANDS FOR CROSS PARTY CONSENT FOR SOLVING IMPORTANT PROBLEMS**

The election result means first and foremost a clear political confirmation for Erdoğan and his AKP. Furthermore it created a situation where the AKP has to approach the opposition. The most important task for the new government seems to be the introduction of a new Constitution. Currently this cannot be achieved by the AKP alone.

Erdoğan announced already during the election night to be prepared to work together with the opposition and all social groups, including non-government organisations, to draw up a new Constitution. There were, however, similar announcements four years ago, when the AKP achieved an outstanding victory during early elections in July 2007. An independent group of experts had been engaged to draw up a draft for a new Constitution, which then disappeared very quickly in the drawers of the AKP gremium and was not discussed again. Political observers agree: A new civilian and democratic Constitution must replace the present version that was introduced in 1982 by the then military regime, so that Turkey can fulfil the democratic standards to their full extent.

The Turkish media speculated whether with drawing up a new constitution the political system of Turkey could also be changed. Repeatedly Prime Minister Erdoğan publicly spoke in favour of a presidential system as practised in

the U.S. He is also said to have ambitions to become a president. But beforehand, the term for the present incumbent Abdullah Gül must be clarified. Gül was elected in 2007 for one period of seven years. Shortly after that the Constitution was changed and the direct election of a president with a (twice) five-year term had been introduced. Whether this applies to Gül retroactively must be decided by parliament. With a view to the election results, it seems, however, rather unlikely at present that Erdoğan will find support for the introduction of a presidential system. President Gül has already spoken against it.

A further, urgent problem that the new government faces is to find a solution to the Kurdish issue or at least to defuse it. The situation in the Kurdish populated areas is tense. This became again apparent when in April, due to the election ban for some Kurdish candidates by the Supreme Election Board, unrests and sometimes violent demonstrations started in several Kurdish towns. The situation settled down only after the YSK reversed its decision. Despite a present armistice, fights are flaring up again and again between the terrorist PKK and the Turkish military. The most important Kurdish demands are a new definition of the Turkish citizenship in the Constitution, considering the ethnic identity, permitting the Kurdish language in school education, political participation and a local autonomy of the Kurdish settlement areas. In order to fulfil all this, the Constitution must be re-written. This can only happen within the frame of a broad social consent and therefore the AKP must work together with the opposition and the most important social groups.

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The AKP government undertook a first careful step end of 2009 to solve the Kurdish problem, when the initiative of "democratic" (originally: Kurdish) opening was launched. Some relief was introduced for the Kurdish language education, introducing a Kurdish-speaking station within the state television and radio, reinstate Kurdish town names etc. After a short while, however, this initiative came to a halt. The prerequisites for a cross party consent are not bad at present, as the CHP has given up their early blocking attitude and signalled to be ready for a dialogue.

There are a number of further urgent tasks for which a political consent is important. The Cyprus question is one of them, as well as normalising the relationship with Armenia, improving the freedom for press and speech, minority rights, women's rights, religious freedom and last but not least continuing the reforms in the scope of the EU-accession procedure.

The new parliament will be constituted by the end of June and then Erdoğan can set up his government. Even before the elections he had announced to reduce his cabinet from 27 to 24 ministries. Instead an additional position for a deputy minister is to be introduced. Among the new ministries there is going to be a ministry for matters of the European Union. Whether this is, however, a signal for reviving the stagnating accession negotiations needs to be seen. In the past twelve months during the Belgian and Hungarian EU presidency not a single new negotiating chapter has been opened. Only 13 of the 35 chapters of the set of EU rules have been opened yet, one chapter (Science and Research) has been provisionally concluded. A clear political will and concrete reform efforts on the part of the new Turkish government are needed to prevent a possible collapse of the accession negotiations.

Due to the election results Germany and Europe are going to have an already known and politically predictable negotiating partner and interlocutor for the next four years. As regards foreign policy, Turkey will act as a self-confident regional power and offer itself as an intermediary in regional conflicts. After the processes of change in Northern Africa and the Middle East Turkey's influence in the region has increased considerably.