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The July 2007 Elections in Turkey: A Test for Democracy

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On the Way to Crisis

On 24 April 2007, in a surprise move, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Gül as the AKP's candidate for the presidential elections. Erdoğan had decided to drop his candidacy, the possibility of which had brought severe criticism from secular forces that had been on the streets demonstrating against him, due to his previous Islamist political views. Gül has steered Turkey's European Union accession talks as foreign minister and is seen as less confrontational than Erdoğan, but secularists were still concerned that, if he was elected, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) would control the presidency, the government and parliament. The opposition accused the government of endangering the country's secularist traditions by proposing a presidential candidate whose wife wears a headscarf.

The crisis concerning the presidency did not take place only due to secular concerns. The Turkish political system does not have institutional checks and balances such as the existence of a Senate. Therefore, the 1982 Constitution created an implicit checks and balance system through the strengthened roles of the Constitutional Court and the presidency. However as some of the members of the Constitutional Court are appointed by the president, the resultant concentration of power was the concern of some democratic circles.

The secularist opposition decided to boycott the first round of elections in parliament on 28 April. The Turkish military had issued an e-memorandum shortly before, stating: 'The Turkish Armed Forces maintain their sound determination to carry out their duties stemming from laws to protect the unchangeable characteristics of the Republic of Turkey.' Representatives from various European organizations, including Council of Europe Secretary Terry Davis and EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn harshly criticized the intervention. However,

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while the memorandum gave the impression to the outside world that Turkey's Islamists are 'oppressed democrats' and its secularists are 'militarists', not all the secularists who have doubts about the rise of political Islam are anti-democratic and not all of Turkey's devout Muslims are democrats.

The Republican People's Party (CHP) took the matter to the Constitutional Court, which then invalidated the presidential election in parliament, ruling that the assembly had lacked a quorum. The decision prompted the government to call an early general election for 22 July and Gül to withdraw his candidacy after the second round of votes also failed in the parliament. The government submitted a constitutional reform package, which included the election of a president by popular vote for a five-year term with an opportunity to be re-elected, the reduction of parliament's tenure to four years instead of the current five and shifting the quorum in parliament from 367. The package was passed with the support of the opposition Motherland Party.

President Ahmet Necdet Sezer vetoed the bill saying it was against Turkey's parliamentary system and could cause instability. But when the government re-submitted the bill, he could not veto it the second time and asked the Constitutional Court for the annulment of the package before a referendum on it was held. CHP also applied to the court, arguing that the two-thirds majority needed for the bill to pass was also needed for individual articles of the package and the first article of the package received one vote short of two-thirds support. The court, however, did not annul the package, meaning that the nation will go to the voting booths again in October to vote in a referendum on constitutional amendment for the popular election of the president, the first referendum in Turkey for 20 years.

Rally for Turkish Secularism

Following the military's memorandum, Kemalist circles organized huge demonstrations to protest against the prospective president. The '14 April Republic Rally' in Ankara was considered a 'landmark' event. It had been organized by the Association of Atatürkist Thought (ADD), but the demonstration brought together members and supporters of many non-governmental organizations, many political parties, labour unions and professional groups. Turkey's constitutional standoff over the election of a new president deepened when the second 'Republican Meeting' planned by dozens of non-governmental organizations, took place in Istanbul's Caglayan Square on 29 April. 'No imams in the presidential palace', chanted the crowd in one of the largest rallies in Istanbul's history. Other rallies took place in cities such as Izmir on 14 May, the Black Sea port city Samsun on 21 May and Denizli on 28 May.

The new-born neo-nationalist movement was highly influential in organizing the rallies. These massive demonstrations seemed to be merely secularist in character, yet they were equally strongly nationalist, pro-military and anti-EU discourse. The main agenda of new neo-nationalist network included the opposition to Turkey's EU membership for sovereignty reasons, opposition to privatization and foreign investments, and opposition to USA and re-glorification of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. ADD, the main organizer of the rallies, is headed by a retired general who allegedly supported a coup when in office in 2004.

With the rise of AKP, the 'security barrier' erected by the former status quo powers to guard themselves against challenging elements has failed to function. Over the past four and half years, the ruling AKP has worked carefully to convince both the secularist and conservative elite of the country that, though it was coming from an Islamic background, it has 'changed and progressed' and become centrist.

However, the current political map of Turkey shows a sharp divide between AKP and the secularist opposition. The people supportive of the AKP, other Islamist or Islamist-nationalist groups, and those who may not support the AKP under normal conditions but consider the attitudes taken against the ruling party as anti-democratic have supported the AKP in the polls of 22 July. On the opposite side, the hard-core secularists, Kemalists, nationalists as well as those who feel that there is a fundamental threat to their way of secular living are supportive of the main opposition CHP, Democratic Party (DP), Young Party (GP) and the extreme rightist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). There is also a relatively smaller group either centre-left or centre-right, which may be described as liberal, and has no party affiliation. This group is composed of people who are not supportive of the AKP but having difficulty in associating themselves with the anti-AKP bloc and at the same time concerned with the recent polarization in the country.

Escalation of Terrorist Attacks

When the public was almost getting terrorism off its agenda, in spring 2007, funerals for terror victims became almost a daily ritual. The government was under pressure after the escalation of terrorist attacks. The mourners, echoing sentiment at military funerals went so far as to accuse the government of being a collaborator. 'Murderer PKK, collaborator AKP!' they shouted. 'Government out!' the mourners chanted as several senior ministers and members of the AKP arrived at one of the funerals. 'This government, Prime Minister Erdoğan is the most important obstacle in front of Turkey's fight against terrorism', CHP leader Deniz Baykal told reporters while MHP's Devlet Bahçeli argued in a written statement that Erdoğan blocks the path of the security forces noting, 'The architect of today's dark and bloody situation is Prime Minister Erdoğan'. Bahçeli's infamous speech in Erzurum, where he waved a rope – a hangman's noose, his preferred solution to the Kurdish insurgency in the south-east, was a clear indication of the re-igniting of the Kurdish conflict in the elections.

What lies behind the latest escalation of terrorist attacks? Many claim that the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Iraqi Kurds' taking the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK) under their wing play a crucial role. Turkish security forces know that PKK militants and peshmerga forces are no longer alone beyond the border. The flight zone violation by US forces on 24 May, which Americans claim was an 'accident', reminded everyone who is beyond the border. The date of the violation is significant because it occurred immediately after military operations in the border region and the demands of 'Let's enter Iraq' in retaliation to a bombing in Ankara on 22 May, while on 25 May, a freight train was attacked by the PKK in the province of Bingöl.

Turkey has been building up its military forces on the Iraqi border, amid debate over whether to launch a cross-border offensive to attack the PKK. The PKK have

been staging raids in south-east Turkey after crossing over from hide-outs in Iraq and have escalated bomb attacks in the west of the country. Barzani, head of the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) has warned that any Turkish intervention could meet with resistance, both in northern Iraq and in south-east Turkey.

The prime minister's clear opposition to a cross-border operation, his refusal to close the Habur border gate, inflicting an economic embargo on northern Iraq annoyed the public, asking the government to authorize the military to clean northern Iraq. Naturally, the opposition used this opportunity to batter AKP. However, for the ruling party the priority was to have the elections on time. An operation in northern Iraq would also harm the country's economy and AKP wanted to go to elections when the economy was in good shape. The relation between security and democracy was the topic of hot debates in the election campaign.

Campaign against Independents

On 19 June 2007, the Turkish Supreme Elections Board (YSK), an independent body that monitors the elections process, finalized the candidate lists for the election. According to the YSK, 7,535 candidates will run for the 550-seat parliament. Almost 10 per cent are independent candidates; a number that is four times more than the previous elections. The idea of independent candidates was promoted in an article by Professor Ahmet Insel on 1 April 2007, in the liberal daily *Radikal*. As the 10 per cent parliamentary threshold does not apply to independent candidates, Insel concluded that 'It is not hard to foresee that the initiative of independent leftist candidates has an opportunity to fill a hole in this election system, which causes the left to be marginalized in the political field'.

Many ethnic Kurdish personalities from the Democratic Society Party (DTP), and many well-known personalities, including former Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz, Great Unity Party (BBP) leader Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, socialist leader of Freedom and Solidarity Party (ODP) Ufuk Uras and Baskın Oran, a prominent intellectual decided to run as independent candidates. The political parties appealed to the electorate not to vote for independents on grounds that votes that go to independents would be 'wasted'. The main opposition CHP was expected to be affected the most from the votes going to independents.

The ballot sheet system concerning the independents was changed just before the elections. In the previous elections, there were only the names of political parties on the ballot sheet. Citizens could vote for the independent candidates using a small paper with the name of the independent candidate on it. Under the new system, the names of independent candidates were present on the ballot sheet. Some claimed that the real aim was to make the voting more difficult for illiterate Kurds to find the name of the independent.

Struggle between the Establishment and the New Economic, Social and Political Forces

The current political crisis in Turkey, couched by Kemalist circles as a conflict between Islam and secularism, goes far beyond this; it is a struggle between the new

social and political forces represented by the AKP and the entrenched political and economic elite denoted by the 'Kemalists'. The conceptual framework that is most significantly used in analysing Turkish politics is the centre–periphery framework developed by Şerif Mardin in an article published in 1973. This framework is an interpretation of the socio-political history of Ottoman Turks as reflected in modern Turkish politics. According to this framework, Turkish politics is built around a strong and coherent state apparatus run by a distinct group of elites dominated by the military and bureaucracy. The 'centre' is confronted by a heterogeneous and often hostile 'periphery', composed mainly of peasantry, small farmers, and artisans.

Today, the 'centre' in Turkey is built around Kemalist secular principles, representing a state-run nationalist modernization programme. The Kemalist elite are embedded in the military, the bureaucracy, the legal system and the upper echelons of academia. They consider both democratic consolidation and the reform process for Turkey's eventual entry into the EU as threatening to their economic and political interests. This secular elite has long controlled state institutions and businesses, but over the past decade a growing religiously minded middle class has emerged in the cities in Anatolia and has been gaining economic dominance. This provincial bourgeoisie is comprised of entrepreneurs who do not depend on state incentives and are not afraid to compete in the international arena. Economic dynamism has shifted from the metropolitan centres to the provinces in Anatolia, and this new provincial business class is seeking a bigger say in politics and greater freedom to express its faith.

The military has projected itself as the guardian of Kemalist ideology that promotes a centralized unitary state, a conception of Turkish nationalism that does not have enough space for ethnic differences, and a definition of secularism that makes religion submissive to the state. Thus, on the political front there is sufficient evidence of the continuity of the centre–periphery cleavage. This has come to be signified by religion, the secularist versus pro-Islamist cleavage. The second dimension on the political front is the ethnic cleavage, setting the Turkish and Kurdish identities in opposition to one another.

Being aware of these major cleavages, one must note that the main defining characteristics of Turkish politics is that the majority of Turkish voters locate themselves at the centre of the ideological spectrum, left or right, although a noteworthy portion over time has shifted from the centre to the right. Therefore it has become important for the political parties to have candidates that will appeal to the voters at the centre. The two major parties on the right and left, AKP and CHP, made significant revisions to their election lists to move toward the centre. AKP tried to move centre-right and get rid of the 'fundamentalist party' image. Those with an 'Islamist or nationalist view' were not preferred while, on the contrary, liberals such as the former secretary-general of CHP, Ertuğrul Günay, were accepted. CHP on the other hand put İlhan Kesici, a leading figure from the centre-right on its list. In a joint press conference with Kesici, CHP leader Baykal said 'We come together to protect our unity and republic'.

The other defining characteristic is the high volatility; nearly 20–23 per cent of the electorate since the 1980s has changed its preferences from one party to another

in successive elections. Therefore it is important to find the relevant factors that shape the party constituencies in the election. It is estimated that AKP gets more votes from those relatively more conservative, from Islamists, and from the business community believing in the credibility of AKP economic policies, from those of the middle class who look with disfavour on the extreme right parties that promote anti-European Union sentiments, and from liberal intellectuals. AKP has also become a more attractive option for Turkey's Christians, who in the past have often voted for secular parties such as CHP. 'The AKP is more moderate and less nationalistic in its dealings with minorities. The Erdoğan government listens to us – we will vote for the AKP in the next elections', Patriarch Mesrob II, the Istanbul-based spiritual leader of Turkey's Armenians told the German magazine *Der Spiegel* in an interview (1 June 2007).

The CHP is more likely to attract voters from the opposing camp with higher commitment to secularist principles and adverse economic prospects. Nationalism, patriotism and xenophobia are more likely to be relevant for the MHP constituency. The CHP has the support of its traditional electorate group, the Alevites, a distinct branch of Islam that is known for its history of centuries of liberal views. However, MHP and the AKP are also trying to attract some provincial Alevi votes.

The Parties' Election Manifestos

As the main topics of the election campaign have been the presidential race, secularism, terror, and funerals of soldiers, the election manifestos of the political parties are limited both in substance and the number of issues covered.

The three rival parties, AKP, CHP and MHP, found a common denominator in their election manifestos concerning the university entrance examination. The CHP and MHP promised that the examination would be abolished, while the AKP declared that the system would be restructured. They also promised that vocational schools would better run. Moreover, these three parties made similar promises on health care. The northern Iraq issue is gaining significance in Turkey's foreign policy and this is also reflected in the election manifestos of political parties. The AKP, CHP, MHP and DP promised voters to prevent the PKK from using northern Iraq as a base for terrorism.

When one looks to the individual agendas of the political parties, the major driver of the AKP agenda is threefold: democratic consolidation, economic liberalization and Turkish accession to the EU. The AKP's advocacy of Turkish accession to the EU resulted in part from its attempt to consolidate democracy in Turkey by using the Copenhagen criteria to force the military to cease intervening in politics and in part, as a response to interests of the new provincial bourgeoisie, the financial backbone of AKP.

The election promises of AKP included a new constitution, management of the economy from a single centre, simplification of tax regulations and the amendment of the law on the duties and responsibilities of the Constitutional Court. Safeguarding the independence of the judiciary, restructuring the Higher Education Board and giving autonomy to the universities are also issues on the agenda. CHP

made promises for better education, health and increased prosperity throughout the country, while MHP promised there would be no income tax on the minimum wage, and forecast 7 per cent economic growth every year, allowing the government to create 3.5 million new jobs.

Political parties in Turkey (although not only there) think twice before mentioning EU. The EU is included only in foreign policy sections of the party election programmes. The AKP is still the only party with a positive approach to the EU. A common stance in the majority of party programmes is, 'we don't need the EU; we can do it by ourselves'. This is in line with the decreasing public support for EU membership, especially after the decision in December 2006 to put the accession talks partially on hold. A public opinion poll by the *International Strategic Research Organization* (ISRO) on 7 November 2006 showed that Turkish public support for accession fell from 75 per cent in 2004 to 50 per cent in November 2006. A large majority of Turkish citizens (81 per cent) thinks the EU does not treat their country fairly and only 8 per cent still believes that Turkey will be a member in the next ten years.

The CHP had adopted an anti-EU stance during 2005–06 and does not approve all adaptation to the EU requirements, but is selective. MHP is a party known for its nationalistic policies and Euroscepticism. According to the MHP, Turkey's full membership drive can continue as long as it does not challenge Turkey's internal and external security. The MHP covers EU relations in the section on foreign affairs in the last three pages of its programme. For most parties, Turkey's security problems are of more concern than its commitment to the EU.

However, all the parties agree on the need for protecting and further developing the relations between Turkey and the EU in the economic sphere. The question is how to achieve this goal in the absence of a relevant political framework?

People Vote for Democracy

On 22 July, 14 parties and 700 independent candidates competed over a total of 42.5 million eligible voters. Voting is compulsory in Turkey, though fines for failing to vote are rarely imposed. The turnout was claimed to be more than 80 per cent. Media reports said more than a quarter of Turkey's 42 million registered voters travelled across the country, cutting their vacations short to return to their electoral districts in time to cast their ballots.

The ruling AKP won a landslide victory in the elections, leaving its nationalist rivals far behind as it secured 46.6 per cent of the vote, comfortably ensuring that it will again form a single-party government. The AKP's vote share was the largest for any single party since 1969 and translates into 341 seats in the 550-seat parliament. What is also important is that no party other than the AKP seemed to appeal to so many voters from different geographic areas of Turkey. Newspapers hailed the outcome as a victory for democracy. 'This [result] is the people's memorandum', said daily *Radikal*, in a reference to the army memorandum of April. 'The controversy which we witnessed about secularism versus Islam has not materialized', Sami Kohen, a columnist for daily

Milliyet, told *Reuters*. 'The message given by the electorate is that we are happy with economic progress and European [Union] policy.' (23 July 2007).

Some claimed that the unwarranted military intervention has not only harmed Turkey's fragile democracy, but it has also clearly backfired. However, it is not that simple. Turkish people did not only vote to reward the victim and show their dissatisfaction with the military intervention in politics but voted for the ruling party that combined economy and security and had a positive outlook for the future. The AKP has merged free market economic policies with generous social benefits for the poor. The political turmoil at the centre-right that ended without unification and the clear support of liberal democrats for the AKP should also be counted as other main reasons for AKP's success. It is also important to note that AKP have polled more votes from the Kurds in the regions where the independent candidates were elected.

Foreign investors and analysts declared the results of the election as the most positive outcome for financial markets, since it means the continuation of the economic and structural reforms pursued by the government. In his first speech on the night of the election Prime Minister Erdoğan vowed to continue reforms and efforts to join the EU.

The main opposition CHP finished the election with 20.9 per cent of vote and 112 seats. The right-wing MHP was third with 14.3 per cent and 71 seats. No other party passed the 10 per cent national threshold needed to enter parliament, but 26 independent candidates won seats, mostly Kurds who were supported by DTP; the first in the 550-seat assembly since the early 1990s. The ex-prime minister and an EU supporter Mesut Yılmaz, extreme nationalist leader Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu and socialist leader Ufuk Uras also became the independent deputies in the parliament. Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the 22 July general elections was the independent parliamentary candidates. Due to Kurdish independents, DTP will be able to form a parliamentary group despite the 10 per cent threshold. Independent candidates will also be important in AKP's pursuit of economic and political reforms.

Another important result of the election is the increase in the number of women deputies in the parliament: 50 women have been elected as deputies, doubling the ratio of women deputies to almost 9.1 per cent. Nur Serter and Necla Arat, two women academics who took an active role in organizing the republican rallies, entered the parliament from the CHP list.

The failure of the centre-right DP to enter parliament resulted in the stepping down of the party leader Mehmet Ağar. Pressure is expected to mount on the main opposition CHP leader Deniz Baykal to follow suit.

The first task before the new parliament is to conclude the unfinished job and elect a new president to replace President Sezer, whose term expired in May. Under the Constitutional Court ruling, at least 367 deputies should attend the vote on the new president, something that is not possible without AKP winning the consent of at least one of the other parties. Erdoğan earlier signalled that he would seek consensus from other parties over the next presidential candidate. Erdoğan's attitude on the presidential election issue will define the new power balance in the AKP as well. Although he has already declared that he would seek national unity and respect Turkey's secular constitution, analysts expect a highly charged political atmosphere in the post-election era.