
Turkey's Islamist AK Party Wins Third Term of Single-Party Rule: Time to Create a Liberal Secular State (ARI)

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Theme: The mildly Islamist Justice and Development party (AKP) of Recep Tayyip Erdogan won its third absolute victory in parliamentary elections, enabling it to press ahead, should it wish, on a host of issues including reviving the moribund EU accession negotiations and drafting a new constitution.

Summary: The AKP won 326 of the 550 seats, 14 fewer than in 2007, while the Republican People's Party (CHP), the traditional voice of secularism, captured 23 more seats for a total of 135. As a result, the AKP will have to negotiate a new constitution to replace the one drafted by the army in 1982 with the opposition parties, including the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, as it did not achieve the 330 seats needed to make amendments and submit them to a referendum.

Analysis:

Background

Turks went to the polls against a backdrop of heightened tensions between the staunchly secular establishment (a loose network mainly spanning parts of the judiciary, the armed forces and the media) and the mildly Islamist AKP, exemplified by the ongoing trials of retired and active military officers accused of plotting coup attempts in the 'Ergenekon' and 'Sledgehammer' cases.

Under the socially-conservative AKP, which first won power in November 2002, Turkey, an EU candidate country since 1999, a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council from 2008 to 2010, a G-20 founding member since 2008 and the holder of the post of the Secretary General of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) since 2005, has become the world's 17th biggest economy.

The country, the first Muslim nation to establish a secular republic (in 1923), is viewed as a source of inspiration for the 'Arab spring' countries in its turbulent backyard. Thousands of people from neighbouring Syria have fled into Turkey as a result of the violent crackdown against protestors by the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Turkey's growth in 2010 of almost 9% was faster than any other large economy except for China and India. Per capita GDP has more than doubled in the last decade and inflation has been held down. Not a single Turkish bank had to be rescued. The economy,

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however, is becoming overheated (the current account deficit is forecast to surpass 7% of GDP this year).

Its bid to become a full member of the EU has almost come to a halt. Support among Turks for EU membership is now as low as 30%, according to most experts, and continues to decline outside the country (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Turkey Joining the EU would be a Good Thing (%)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Turkey	73	63	54	40	42	48	41
US	43	37	35	40	32	41	38
EU (1)	29	22	21	22	21	20	23

(1) EU-7 for 2002-06 and EU-11 for 2007-10.

Source: Transatlantic Trends 2010, German Marshall Fund of the United States.

The country, which has been nearly five decades waiting in Europe's ante-room (it became an associate EEC member in 1963), has only opened 13 of the 35 'chapters' or areas of EU law and policy needed to complete the process since starting accession negotiations in October 2005. It has closed just one of them (science and research). About 18 chapters (the key ones) are blocked or frozen, by the EU as a whole, by France or by Cyprus.

In December 2006, the EU unanimously suspended eight chapters because Turkey refused to extend its customs union with the EU (in effect since 1996) and allow Greek-Cypriot vessels access to its ports and airports, thereby recognizing the state of Cyprus. Ankara says it will not budge until the European Council (EC) fulfils its promise to ease the economic isolation of the internationally unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).

As well as the eight chapters suspended by the EU and six by Cyprus, France is blocking five chapters (there are overlaps) related to economic and monetary union, on the grounds that this opens the door to full EU membership. The French and German governments say Turkey should have a privileged partnership with the EU, something that Ankara roundly rejects.

In the unlikely event that the current Hungarian Presidency of the EU, which ends on 30 June, opens another chapter (competition policy), this would leave just two chapters that could be opened, one of which is public procurement. Yet Ankara does not see why it should open its lucrative market to greater competition from European countries if there are no guarantees of joining the European club one day.

Also bogged down are the seemingly endless negotiations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots to reunify Cyprus, divided since 1974 after Turkey's invasion following intercommunal violence and an attempt to incorporate the island into Greece through a military coup.

The Election Results

The Justice and Development party (AKP) of Recep Tayyip Erdogan won 326 of the 500 seats in parliament, down from 340 in 2007 and short of the 330 seats needed to make amendments to the constitution that then have to be ratified in a referendum (see Figures 2 and 3). Had he won 367 seats, the AKP would have been able to unilaterally change the

constitution, still largely the same as that drafted by the army in 1982 after a military coup in 1980, without approval in a referendum.

Figure 2. Turkish Parliament Seats and Percentage of Votes, 2002-2011

Parties	2002	2007	2011
Justice and Development Party (AKP)	363 (34%)	340 (46.6%)	326 (49.9%)
Republican People's Party (CHP)	178 (19%)	112 (20.8%)	135 (25.9%)
Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)	–	71 (14.3%)	53 (12.9%)
Independents (1)	–	27 (5.2%)	36 (6.6%)
Voter turnout (%)	79.0	84.4	86.7

(1) From various political affiliations but mainly the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party.
Source: Supreme Electoral Board.

Figure 3. Political Islam in Turkey: % of Vote and Seats in Parliament Held by Islamist parties, 1977-2011

Party	1977		1987		1991		1995		1999		2002		2007		2011	
	V	S	V	S	V	S	V	S	V	S	V	S	V	S	V	S
Nat. Salv.	8.6	24	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Welfare	–	–	7.2	0	16.9	62	21.4	158	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Virtue	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	15.4	111	–	–	–	–	–	–
AKP	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	34.0	363	46.4	340	49.9	326

V = votes; S = seats.

Source: Supreme Electoral Board.

Although the AKP increased its share of the vote from 47% in 2007 to 50%, it won fewer seats because of the unusually high 10% threshold to win any seats at all. This did not produce the same bizarre result as in 2002 when only the AKP (with 34% of the vote) and the fiercely secular Republican People's Party (CHP, with 19%) got into parliament, but it did deprive the AKP of more seats. The CHP, the party of Kemal Mustafa Atatürk, who founded the Turkish republic in 1923 from the Anatolian remnants of the defeated Ottoman empire, captured 135 seats, 23 more than in 2007; the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) reduced its number of seats by 18 to 53 (ten of its leading candidates had to stand down when their extra-marital affairs were exposed in secretly filmed videos) and the mainly Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), which got around the 10% hurdle by running as independents, won 36 seats with 6% of the vote, up from 27.

Erdogan, an increasingly polarising and authoritarian figure repeatedly telling people how many children to have, which newspapers to read and to consume grapes rather than wine, won a resounding victory. But the results mean that he will have to seek a consensus with the opposition parties over changes to the constitution, something that should reduce almost a decade of tensions in Turkish political life between the Kemalist military and judicial establishment and the AKP. The AKP's reduced number of seats is likely to curtail Erdogan's ambition to create a more powerful US-style presidency, a post he would like to hold after the current President, Abdullah Gül, ends his term. The Prime Minister is barred by political convention from running for a fourth term in 2015. Gül, Erdogan's closest ally in founding AKP, was elected by parliament in 2007 for a single seven-year term, a move that the army tried to block through its so-called 'e-coup.'¹ This move backfired as the Erdogan called a snap election and won a larger share of the vote.²

¹ See the author's analysis at

http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_eng/Content?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/europe/ari+51-2007.

² See the author's analysis at <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/ARI2007/ARI86->

The increased presence of Kurdish politicians in the parliament, a significant turning point, could go some way toward addressing the demands of this ethnic community estimated to number around 14 million (18% of the population), most of whom live in the impoverished south-east. Kurdish nationalists widened their appeal by backing candidates outside the ranks of their militants.

Among those elected as an independent for the BDP was Leyla Zana, who entered parliament in 1991 as the first Kurdish woman MP. While taking the oath of loyalty in parliament, she added a phrase in the Kurdish language, promising to struggle for greater democracy. For that she was prosecuted and jailed for 15 years. In prison she was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, and awarded the Andrei Sakharov prize for human rights. Her conviction was overturned in 2004.

The AKP has reached out to the Kurdish community by granting respect to Kurdish culture through its taboo-breaking 'Democratic Opening' but its policy looked like one step forward and two steps back. More than 2,000 Kurdish activists have been jailed since 2009. BDP want the new constitution to re-define Turkish citizenship and devolve power to autonomous regions –aims which Erdogan is reluctant to concede–.

The larger number of seats won by the CHP was a personal victory for the party's new leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, an ethnic Kurd from the heterodox Alevi sect (Erdogan is from the dominant Sunni sect). He dropped the 'secularism is in danger' litany and the party's support for continued military tutelage and began to make the CHP less belligerent toward the AKP and more pro-Europe in its public discourse. He weeded out the ultranationalist hardliners, who almost got the CHP suspended from the Socialist International. If he proceeds on this path, the CHP would become a credible democratic force.

The Issues Ahead

Erdogan has a full agenda. The most pressing domestic issue, other than measures to cool down the economy, is to reform a constitution, which gives far too much weight to the state and not enough freedom to individuals. In the words of Osman Baydemir, Mayor of Diyarbakir and a BDP member, Turkey is a 'democracy of the ruling party, in which rights are not shared by all. From the day it was founded, the republic has been informed by a belief that "the people do not know what is best for them, but we do". This top-down approach to democracy has simply been passed down from the republican elites to the AKP'.³

Erdogan, when Mayor of Istanbul, was imprisoned in 1998 for reciting a poem in a public address that was deemed inflammatory, and yet Turkey today has 50-60 journalists in jail, most of them accused of plotting to overthrow the government (many of the cases are tenuous), around 10,000 lawsuits are pending against writers and broadcasters and Turkey has fallen to 138th place in the press-freedom ranking of Reporters Without Borders, a lobby group, behind Iraq and only just ahead of Russia.⁴

[2007 Chislett Turkey Elections Islamists Seculars.pdf](#).

³ See the chapter by Osman Baydemir in *What does Turkey Think?* (European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2011, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR35_TURKEY_AW.pdf).

⁴ *The Economist's* editorial in the issue of 4/VI/2011 paid tribute to Erdogan's successes in modernising the country, but urged a vote for the Turkish opposition on the grounds that that the two-thirds majority that he was seeking would allow him to push through constitutional changes that might weaken Turkish democracy. Erdogan lambasted the magazine on the campaign trail and accused it of working on behalf of Israel. As Gideon Rachman, the chief foreign affairs columnist of the *Financial Times*, pointed out in his blog, 'Ironically, of course, the AKP's intemperate reaction is the perfect illustration of its intolerance of criticism that The

The European Parliament sharply criticised Turkey's press situation in a report approved in March.⁵

Equally dire is the level of domestic violence in Turkey, despite the AKP-approved reforms to protect women since it came to power. The laws, however, are not vigorously implemented and single women, divorcees and wives taken in illegal Islamic marriages are not covered. A recent report by Human Rights Watch, an advocacy group, said the situation was getting worse.⁶ In 2010 Turkey was ranked 126th out of 131 countries in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report.

EU-oriented reforms over the past decade have changed about one-third of the constitution, but there is still a long way to go. The 26 amendments to the constitution were approved last September by 58% of voters on a turnout of 78%, showing that there is widespread support for a more liberal society.⁷

The 10% threshold is by far the highest among the 47 member states of the Council of Europe (double that of Spain) and needs to be lowered in the interests of creating a parliament that more truly reflects Turkey's diversity. Ironically, it worked against the AKP.

A new constitution would also help to revive the moribund EU accession negotiations, though it is not the main obstacle. Now that he has won a third term and an absolute majority, Erdogan can afford to fix the Cyprus problem without looking over his shoulder at how the army and ultra nationalists might react to anything that could be construed as a concession. Hugh Pope of the International Crisis Group says an easy first step would be to implement the additional protocol, which Ankara signed in 2005 as a condition for starting EU negotiations, and open Turkey's ports and airports to Greek-Cypriot traffic. Such a move would automatically unlock eight chapters suspended by the EU since December 2006. The EU could have helped by allowing direct, preferential trade to Turkish Cypriots, but it did not. 'Turkey's best interest is now to help itself', says Pope.

Erdogan also has a freer hand in the negotiations with Greek-Cypriots to reunify Cyprus (see Figure 4). The United Nations has become increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress.⁸ The AKP's electoral programme made no mention of resolving the problem and limited itself to 'protection of the interests of the Turkish-Cypriot people and the creation of stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. We will press ahead with our efforts in order to safeguard the security and welfare of the Turkish Cypriot people and increase the international status and influence of the TRNC.'⁹ Reunification of Cyprus is not a condition for joining the EU, but it would create a lot of goodwill in the International community.

Economist was complaining about'.

⁵ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2011-0090+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

⁶ <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2011/05/04/he-loves-you-he-beats-you>.

⁷ See the author's analysis at

http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_eng/Content?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/europe/ari136-2010.

⁸ See the author's analysis at

http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_eng/Content?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/europe/ari168-2010.

⁹ The United Nations does not recognize the Turkish Cypriots as a people but only as a community.

Figure 4. Cyprus



Source: BBC.

The normalisation of relations with neighbouring Armenia are also locked in a stalemate. Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1993 in support of its ally Azerbaijan, which was in conflict with Armenia over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. The protocols signed by the two countries in 2009 have floundered on Ankara's insistence that Armenia first withdraw from at least some Azerbaijani territory occupied around Nagorno-Karabakh.

Conclusion: The AKP's reformist spirit flagged during its second term in office and there were worrying signs of increasingly authoritarian behaviour by Prime Minister Erdogan. The AKP needs to temper its social conservatism, which is construed in staunchly secular circles as opening a slippery path to an illiberal Islamist state, and the CHP needs to become a European-style social democratic party. The country that Atatürk created 78 years ago is very different today and the country's laws need to reflect this.¹⁰ The more democratic Turkey becomes, the stronger the beacon it will create for the 'Arab spring' countries.

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¹⁰ See the recent intellectual biography of Atatürk by M. Sükrü Hanioglu (Princeton University Press).