



BULLETIN

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Distant “Restoration”: Scenarios for Turkey’s Next Government

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A month after their failure to win an outright majority in Turkey’s 7 June parliamentary elections, the president and AKP’s wounds are already healing. The AKP has won the key post of speaker of parliament, while the president is involved in shaping the next government and might be eyeing snap elections. The political parties are between a rock and a hard place. The need to prevent snap elections and ensure a sustainable coalition requires the parties to engage in risky coalitions and make compromises. The shape of the next government will have important implications, including on mega infrastructure projects, the PKK peace process, and the Turkish response to pressing challenges in its neighbourhood.

The 7 June parliamentary elections ended 13 years of majority government by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and prevented President Recep Tayyip Erdogan from turning Turkey’s parliamentary democracy into what critics described as an authoritarian presidential system. Now, AKP must form a minority government or enter a coalition with one or more of the three other parties—the Republican People’s Party (CHP), Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), or the Peoples’ Democracy Party (HDP)—or those parties could form a coalition or a minority government in some combination. If a new government is not formed in 45 days, though, Turkey will face snap elections.

Building a Coalition. While Erdogan’s active campaigning despite formally being an impartial president was one of the major reasons for the AKP’s failure in the general elections, this hasn’t curbed Erdogan’s political appetite. By more subtle yet strategic moves, Erdogan is making the best out of a bad hand and playing for time. A month after the elections and contrary to usual practice, he still hasn’t allowed coalition talks to begin but has requested the parliament speaker be elected first and, holds personal meetings with the political parties. A coalition partner would limit his use of power, and it would be no surprise if he is aiming for snap elections.

At first sight, the three opposition parties, which had similar electoral agendas, seemed potential partners to form a coalition (and exclude AKP). All three focused on the need to restore Turkey’s domestic and foreign policies in terms of the rule of law and democracy. All three parties want further investigations into alleged corruption by AKP members and have asked the president to leave the new presidential palace, unlawfully built on protected land, to return to acting within his constitutional limits, and to stop intervening in the government. Moreover, partnering with AKP under the current circumstances is risky for any potential coalition party. AKP’s popularity has been declining due to the slowing economy, the president’s involvement in party politics, and a number of graft scandals.

However, a coalition of the three opposition parties has already been ruled out by MHP. The nationalist MHP questions the legitimacy of the Kurdish-led HDP and of the peace process with the outlawed PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) and therefore refrains from any initiatives that may advance the process.

On the other hand, the HDP’s position is ambivalent because of a leadership problem. While HDP said it was open to coalition talks, the PKK asked HDP not to join any coalition. The Kurdish political movement has not freed its civilian wing from its militant side, and thus HDP remains tied to the outlawed armed branch.

CHP, which won the second-highest number of seats in the election, has shown itself to be open to coalition talks but has also made a list of 14 principles that openly challenge the president’s influence on the AKP and also given hints on the

ministries it would like to control as part of a coalition (including foreign affairs and justice). It is therefore difficult for the AKP to accept these terms.

As it now holds the position of parliament speaker, AKP has gained an important weight on the future government. However it is itself under external patronage—the president's preferences certainly count in the formation of any new Turkish government. At the same time, other founders of AKP, including former President Abdullah Gul Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc, have sent signals to the party to reform itself, interpreted as signs of divisions within AKP.

Domestic and International Challenges. The change in government after 13 years of single-party majority rule will have considerable implications on the legislative and executive branches of power, as well as on the bureaucracy and media, which have been under the influence of AKP during its dominance of government. The public procurement law, for example, has been amended 120 times, and several important projects (such as a Russian-built nuclear power plant) were initiated outside of procedural standards. These sorts of mega infrastructure and security projects might be affected by a new government as they will be subject to more scrutiny if it lacks a majority. This is particularly relevant to Turkey's plans to purchase a Chinese anti-missile system and to build the "Turkish Stream" gas pipeline with Russia. With economic growth slowing, Turkey also needs to ensure the trust of foreign investors, since its economy is highly dependent on foreign direct investment.

Maintaining the ceasefire with PKK is particularly important in view of developments in Syria. There have already been attempts to derail the peace process as seen by recent violence in Turkey's southeast. The advances by ISIS, the Damascus regime and another outlawed group, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), on the Turkish border with Syria, and another million refugees expected to arrive by the end of the year are worrying developments that require effective answers. At the same time, the current peace talks in Cyprus do represent an opportunity to resolve the 40-year-old conflict and to unlock East Mediterranean energy resources and Turkey's EU accession negotiations.

The Quicker the Better. Forming a sustainable government on Turkey's highly divided political scene is difficult also because any coalition scenario will require Erdogan to return his constitutional limits and be impartial in government policy, which is hardly conceivable. Instead, he uses his influence on the process, delays the formation of the government and may further delay it by forcing snap elections. Such a scenario would likely be a waste of time, though, since it will neither guarantee an AKP majority government nor help Turkey tackle its pressing challenges.

Many business circles and liberals have called for a "grand coalition" of AKP and CHP. The total number of seats they hold exceeds the majority required to amend the constitution to address the country's structural problems. In addition, with these two together, though holding opposing ideologies, the new government may diminish Turkey's domestic polarisation, proceed with the peace process, and have a positive impact on its foreign policy by changing its tone to one less ideological. However, Turkey's alignment with EU foreign policy may still remain limited as long as Turkey's accession negotiations are stalled.

AKP and MHP share similar roots, so a coalition between them is another option that may also be favoured by the president. The nationalist MHP, however, may interrupt the PKK peace process. The current momentum in the Cyprus peace talks may also be affected. MHP can be more engaged in support of the Crimean Tatars, which would have an impact on Turkey's relations with Russia. Both parties advocate creating a buffer zone inside Syria to slow the refugee flow, to prevent gains from ISIS and limit the PYD-controlled zone. Such a coalition would elevate Turkey's relations with the West, in particular those based on support for Turkish sensibilities over the PYD presence in Syria. However, such a coalition may cause further damage to AKP's popularity among liberals and among the Kurdish electorate. On the other hand, the PKK says that a government with the nationalist MHP would mean a return to war. The HDP's electoral success should strengthen the party and allow it to become a decisive player within the Kurdish political spectrum and in the peace talks, and prevent PKK's intervention in the democratic process.

It is in the EU's interests that a coalition be formed quickly without snap elections so that the Turkish political scene does not use its security challenges, both internal and external, as cards in domestic politics. With the wars and instability of the Middle East, some 1.5 million refugees now living in Turkey, and the country's decreasing economic performance, a stable and legitimate government is an urgent necessity, without which European security interests may be threatened. Turkey will not contribute directly to EU neighbourhood policy, as it wants its candidacy for EU membership to be distinct. However, its economy, stability and democracy have an impact on several regions in its neighbourhood. Therefore, the EU should deepen economic relations with Turkey by enacting reforms in the Customs Union and strengthening civil society support. Unfreezing chapters 23 and 24 in the EU negotiations, which have a direct bearing on Turkey's EU candidacy, and inviting Turkish leaders to EU summits, will be positive developments in supporting Turkey's democratisation and in increasing its contribution to EU foreign policy.