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Turkey Says “No” to Presidential Government

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Introduction

The ruling party in Turkey for 13 years, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) failed to secure the 276 seats required to form a majority government in the last general election held on June 7 this year. The party had been losing popularity for some time due to its increasingly authoritarian style of governance, inability to revive the economy, and failure to negotiate a solution to the Kurdish problem. The pro-Kurdish HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party), which opted to run as a party in this election for the first time, managed to pass the 10-percent barrier, which reduced the number of seats in Parliament that would have otherwise gone to the AKP, thereby bringing back the possibility of a coalition government in the country after more than a decade. The AKP received 40.91 percent of the nationwide vote, the main opposition party CHP (Republican People's Party) 24.78 percent, and the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) 16.25 percent, while the HDP, which widened its appeal beyond its core Kurdish vote to centre-left and secularist segments disillusioned with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, obtained 13.42 percent. These percentages translated to 259 seats for the AKP, 132 for the CHP, 80 for the MHP and 80 for the HDP.

Since the AKP failed to get the required 276 seats to form a majority government, Turkey must form a coalition government within 45 days from June 7 to avoid a fresh election. At this stage, there appear to be three possible scenarios. One: a coalition between the AKP and the MHP; two: a minority government of the CHP and MHP with outside support during the vote of confidence from the HDP; or three: a “grand coalition” between the AKP and CHP. Although each of the three opposition parties has publicly ruled out the possibility of a coalition with the AKP, there are signs that the CHP

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or MHP may agree to work with the AKP if it agrees to certain conditions, such as constraining Erdogan to his constitutionally prescribed powers. Coalition-building efforts and inter-party dialogue will therefore define the coming weeks.

Elections results, however, have thwarted President Erdogan's plans to change the country's Constitution and transform Turkey's parliamentary system into a presidential one. A referendum in 2010 in Turkey allowed for direct Presidential elections. In August 2014 Erdogan, who till then had been Prime Minister and leader of the ruling AKP, became Turkey's first directly elected President. Erdogan had argued that the current Parliamentary system was ineffective and called for Turkey to move towards a strong Presidential form of government. Erdogan turned the recent ballot into a kind of referendum on his drive to rewrite the country's Constitution, abolish parliamentarianism and install a powerful new executive presidency occupied by himself. His failure to convince the electorate to help him do so had its roots in both Turkey's domestic and foreign policy.

Turkey in the Post-'Arab Spring' World

Since 2011, Turkish foreign policy doctrine has been challenged by political changes and growing instability in the Middle East. One of the flagship initiatives of the current government, the zero problem approach to its neighbours, no longer corresponds to the situation on the ground. Turkey has been forced to take sides. In his victory speech after the June 2011 elections, Erdogan promised to adapt Turkey's foreign policy to a changing regional environment and announced the country's support for democratic forces across the Middle East and North Africa. Ahmet Davutoglu, the then Foreign Minister (and now Prime Minister) argued that the political transitions in the Arab countries were natural and inevitable, and that the best course of action was to develop a sound understanding of the causes of this transformation and develop suitable strategies to cope with the changes.¹

Turkish foreign policy under the AKP articulated a vision for improving relations with all neighbours, particularly privileging the former Ottoman space in the Middle East where agreements were negotiated for a free trade zone and an eventual Middle Eastern Union. The growing economic and political engagement of Turkey with the Middle East led to significant realignment in the region.

To understand this, it is necessary to take note of not just Turkey's current strategy towards its neighbourhood but also its position within the broader global arena and particularly the issue of its accession to the European Union (EU), a process which has been mired in controversies over human rights, democracy, and Islam. Erdogan's recent moves have confirmed that in geopolitical terms Turkey is now primarily a Middle Eastern power intertwined in the maze of contradictory and rapidly changing relations across the region.² The Syrian conflict cooled Turkey's relations with Iran but boosted an alignment with the Gulf States. However, differences over Egypt and attitudes towards the Muslim Brotherhood complicated Turkish-Saudi relations. Following events in Iraq and Yemen and the succession in Saudi Arabia, which led to a re-appraisal of Saudi policy towards the Brotherhood, a new understanding with Riyadh appears to be underway. Turkish-Iranian relations though remain

complicated. While positions have differed over support to the al-Assad regime in Syria, the 2013 oil-for-gold scheme (when Turkish banks were found to have paid Iran in gold for gas and oil to circumvent the UN-imposed sanctions against the latter) revealed that economies and finances of the two countries are deeply intertwined and would ensure a continuity of relations. However, with the possibility of a realignment of Sunni powers in the Middle East and Turkish support for it, further adjustments could be underway.

Meanwhile, Arab regimes that managed to ride out the Arab Spring were increasingly annoyed with Erdogan for his advocacy of the Muslim Brotherhood, which they saw as a threat to themselves. Boiling democracy down to the results of the ballot box and injecting an Islamist element into Turkey's foreign policy eventually undermined the support that Erdogan may have enjoyed in the West and the Middle East, albeit for different reasons. Erdogan's continued advocacy of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood resulted in a loss of Ankara's influence in the Middle East, where it once hoped to be a major player. It was seen as an unwanted interloper in the affairs of Arab countries. (No doubt, there have been some recent efforts to reset ties with regional countries, most notably with Saudi Arabia.) During the same period, Ankara's abandoning of its traditional non-sectarian position in favour of blatantly pro-Sunni policies from Iraq to Yemen also clouded its ties with Shi'ite-majority Iran. In the West, Erdogan's Islamist orientation and strong anti-West positions resulted in Turkey alienating its traditional Western allies.

The AKP government has tried to put a positive spin on this state of affairs to strengthen its hold over its grassroots supporters. It claims it is pursuing an “ethical” foreign policy, even if this has resulted in what it refers to as “precious loneliness.” The connotation is that if Turkey is isolated today it is only for the right reasons, as it has taken a moral stance on international issues that do not suit the taste of regional and global powers. This may appear a good stance for AKP supporters. There is, however, little that is “precious” about this isolation that has left Ankara with little say in regional developments, even where these have had serious fallout effects on Turkey. This is clearly seen from the fact that radical groups like the Islamic State (IS) or Jabhat al-Nusra are at Turkey's doorstep today, while the massive influx of refugees from Syria continues to pose serious social problems for Turkey. Recently, thousands of civilians from the northern Raqqa countryside fled their homes because of the ongoing clashes in the area and gathered on the Turkish border.³ Moreover, this regional turbulence and transformation on a global scale happening alongside mounting opposition to Erdogan's domestic policies have magnified the challenges faced by the AKP.

Gezi Park and its Aftermath

Turkey's foreign policy adjustments came at a time of considerable flux not only in the region but in the country's domestic politics. Conflicts in the neighbourhood have affected communities within Turkey like the Nusayri Alevi who constitute the majority in parts of southeastern Turkey bordering Syria. In addition to the sectarian rhetoric in the political arena, the influx of large numbers of refugees in the region has led to ethnic and religious tensions. Most recently the Alevi were upset

when the government announced that the third bridge over the Bosphorus, the construction of which is already underway, would be named after Sultan Selim I or Yavuz “the Grim”. From the Alevi perspective, it was unacceptable that the government would name the bridge after a sultan whose legacy is divisive and associated with large-scale massacres.

In late May 2013, a sense of frustration with the government's reactions to a range of issues and to its style of governance, as well as anger at the disproportionate use of force and the failure of mainstream Turkish media to cover it, erupted in what came to be known as the Gezi Park protests. In the aftermath of the protests, new definitions of the 'margin' were created, with the state making a sharp differentiation between supporters of the AKP and its opponents. Erdogan claimed to be governing only for that 50 percent of the population who have repeatedly voted for his party, thereby marginalising the rest who are frustrated with the government's stand on various issues—ranging from property development and media rights to the role of religion and access to alcohol— all of which they view as attempts to impose conservative values on a secular society.

With 'belonging' defined in terms of ideological convergence, being 'marginal' has acquired political overtones. This majoritarian notion of democracy, which venerates the ballot but disregards civil liberties and press freedom, has proved to be problematic, and the latest election results are reflective of this. A number of political analyses in the immediate period following Gezi Park have stressed that what the protesters wanted was a guarantee that the Turkish government would respect the differences among its citizens and there would be no AKP-inspired behavioural norms enforced on Turkish citizens. Similarly, the government's handling of the Soma mining disaster, which left 300 dead, was unacceptable to many. Still, Turkey is represented as a 'model' for the post-Arab Spring world.

This representation of Turkey as a model of democracy within Islam is not new.⁴ The Bush administration presented Turkey as a model within the framework of the Greater Middle East initiative. This image was supported by the AKP which portrays itself as a 'conservative democratic' party which is politically and economically liberal while being sensitive to certain societal values and traditions. There has been a tendency to read the current experiment in Turkey as the successful political integration of an Islamic movement within democracy. This has, however, raised questions about whether the AKP's denial of its Islamic connection is simply a compromise between the state and the AKP, or whether it indicates the ability of the Turkish system to transform political Islam.⁵

The political opposition within Turkey disputes the success of the integration. There has been debate about the 'moderation' of the AKP regime, particularly after the arrest and implication of a large number of individuals in what has been called the 'Ergenekon' affair.⁶ Following five years of legal proceedings, the court delivered life sentences to 17 formerly prominent figures of the military establishment along with politicians, academics and journalists, raising concerns about freedom of speech and of the media and the independence of the judiciary.⁷ Similarly, in the aftermath of the Gezi

Park events there were reports of adverse action against a number of journalists who had reported on them.⁸ This brought into question Turkey's commitment to democratic ideals.

Similarly, reconsideration of Turkish support for the Kurdish agenda in the neighbourhood has impacted the domestic scenario, particularly minority politics. Erdogan had emphasised that the 'national will' would find its voice in a 'new Turkey', in which all citizens would be embraced irrespective of their ethnicity or creed; the formulation of a new Constitution would be prioritised.

The AKP had launched its election campaign for a second term with the slogan, “Vote for AK Party. Write your own Constitution” (*Oyunu AK Partiyever, kendi Anayasani yap!*)—a clear reference to the AKP agenda for a new Constitution to replace the one that came into force in 1982 during a period of military rule and which has been widely criticised for limiting individual rights. Critics, however, note that the opening that the AKP government offered to various sections of minorities like the Kurds or the Alevis and the reforms that have been set in motion were propelled by the need to create space for Islamic identity within the state rather than any commitment to cultural plurality. In an interview in the late 1990s, former President Abdullah Gul had spoken about “a convergence between the aspiration of the Kurds and us (the Islamic movement)”—hinting at a basic antagonism towards the founding ideology of the republic, with its emphasis on secular Turkish nationalism.⁹ Yet it is also true that the two sides remained rivals. While the AKP government was encouraging Kurdish democratic opening, the actual extent of this accommodation was unclear. It is an undoubted fact that a large part of the 'democratic opening' was impelled by the EU accession process. There was apprehension that the recent disillusion with the process could mean a slowdown of many of the measures that had been underway, bringing back the question of the viability of the 'Turkish Model'. There is also little hope of a partial solution to the Kurdish problem, i.e. cultural autonomy.

The general elections of 7 June 2015 were Turkey's last scheduled elections till 2019. Coming at a time when the country and its neighbourhood are on the brink of profound transformation, and given the increasing complexity of the socio-political situation in the Middle East, manifested in the progressive fragmentation of ties between ethnic groups, the elections results may well re-define the direction of West Asian politics for some time to come. This is not only because of the pro-Kurdish HDP crossing the 10-percent threshold and the possible redefinition of the future of the Kurdish issue in the region, but also because of the possibility of a coalition government providing a modified stance to Turkey's policies in the Middle East. A clear perspective on either possibility is critical for India to decide its position on the shifting dynamics of West Asian politics.

Given its long borders with Syria, and India's concerns about developments in the Syrian civil war—the humanitarian crisis as well as the possibility of this affecting the Indian community in the region—developments in Turkey and its neighbourhood need to be considered. Syria and Iraq, the two countries where the Islamic State is the biggest threat, are on the 'periphery' of core Indian interests. An understanding of this new extremist Islam in Turkey's neighbourhood, as also a re-reading of Islam within Turkey itself, are crucial given the possibility of the extension of this radicalism to

India's neighbourhood. Beyond localised terrorist threats, a more general threat looms, the spectre of extremist groups, which act as proxies of hostile regimes, and pose very real threats to domestic peace and order.¹⁰ The transnational character of extremist groups is itself a factor that calls for enhanced cooperation in counter-terrorism. India's policy of engagement throughout the Gulf and the wider Middle East rests on issues such as labour access, counter-terrorism co-operation and above all, energy security. This engagement includes states like Oman, with which India has expanded naval cooperation, as well as Iran. India is the second-largest buyer of Iranian oil and has investments in the Chabahar port. After the framework agreement to limit Iran's nuclear programme and amid the ongoing, Saudi-led war against Houthi rebels in Yemen, India needs to keep in mind both the prospect of detente and the threat of rising instability, and it is here that diversified partnerships in the Middle East will assume salience.

Endnotes:

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