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COMMENT

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Turkey's Islamic-Conservative State Project at a Crossroads > President Erdoğan did not get his “super presidency”, but Turkey will probably soon head to new elections.

The parliamentary elections held at the beginning of June turned out to be a major defence of Turkish democracy and its parliamentary system. Further, the elections witnessed the rise of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), which was able to exceed the ten per cent threshold and thus gain 80 seats in parliament.

Turkey's incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP), in power for 13 years, campaigned to attain a strong enough majority to transform the whole political system into a “super presidency” with very few checks and balances. The AKP campaign was strongly supported by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who thus violated the Constitution, which demands impartiality from the incumbent president.

The AKP's support, however, fell from nearly 50 per cent to approximately 40 per cent. The result creates a new situation for Turkey, but particularly for the ruling AKP. Instead of forming yet another majority government and freely pushing ahead with its highly controversial Islamist state project, the party is now forced to seek coalition partners.

The chances of a coalition government succeeding are very weak, however. First of all, there is little confidence in coalition governments of any description in Turkey. Further, the only ideologically workable coalition between the AKP and the third biggest party, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which possesses a similar kind of support base in the Islamic-conservative constituency and shares the same ideology based on the nationalist-conservative political tradition, was at least

initially rejected by MHP party leader Devlet Bahçeli. The same situation applies to the Kurdish party, the HDP, whose leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, has already refused to cooperate with the AKP, explicitly stating that with the election result, all polemics about establishing a presidential system should now cease.

In this situation, the only remaining coalition partner is the Republican People's Party (CHP), the main opposition party, which received its usual 25 per cent of the votes. However, an AKP-CHP coalition is unlikely and would in all probability be very short-lived – the CHP is, after all, the main bastion of the secularist-westernizing state ideology of the Republic, and thus represents the main “internal enemy” in the AKP's political narrative. In other words, it would be an odd situation if the AKP, whose constituency has been taught to perceive the whole Republican westernizing experience as a “historical mistake”, were to form a coalition government with the CHP.

Hence, in the short run, the election results will cause political instability and perhaps even chaos. Much now depends on President Erdoğan and his willingness to accept the election result and thus encourage Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu

to honestly seek cooperation with other parties or, alternatively, his refusal to admit that the Islamic-Conservative state project cannot be implemented the way he had planned. This latter option would mean an AKP minority government and probably early elections.

In the longer run, the election result will enable the recovery of the Turkish political system and its democratic potentials. Further, after establishing itself as the party of the “whole Turkey” and having been able to represent various minority groups and not only the ethnic Kurds, the pro-Kurdish HDP is now a major player in the Turkish political system. It is also very difficult now for anyone to seriously argue that the Kurdish problem could be solved in any other forum than parliament.

On the whole, from the perspective of Turkey's social and political development in the foreseeable future, the election results indicate that the AKP's and President Erdoğan's authoritarian Islamic-Conservative state project has at least been temporarily halted. Nevertheless, the AKP is still, with very clear margins, Turkey's most popular political movement, and it is unlikely that Erdoğan's massive popular support would now be lost. It is only that the more immediate

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attempt to radically transform the Turkish political system and socio-political order has now been prevented. When all this is taken together – Erdoğan’s popularity, the mission to build a “new Turkey” being very much internalized by the AKP constituency, and the election results demonstrating decreasing AKP support – one can conclude that the radical, authoritarian Islamic-Conservative state project is now in jeopardy if not yet completely exhausted. With regard to Turkish parliamentarism and democratic consolidation, this truly is a positive direction.

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