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ELECTIONS IN TURKEY: what is at stake?

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The results of the June 7th general elections will determine not only who governs Turkey and how, but whether the country will be given a new constitution that puts a presidential system in place. Or – and what is the same thing – how much power Erdoğan will have in coming years and how tense his relations will be with the opposition. The elections will also condition the progress of the peace talks with the PKK and, in a wider sense, the type and level of accommodation given to the claims of Kurdish nationalism.

On June 7th an intense electoral cycle that began with the municipal elections on March 30th 2014 comes to a close in Turkey. Those elections had an extremely high level of participation (close to 90%), were characterised by political polarisation, and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) received 42% of the vote but came close to losing the mayorship of the capital, Ankara. One of the low points of these elections came with the accusations of fraud made by the opposition. As a result, an initiative called “Oy ve Ötesi” (“Vote and Beyond”) will now mobilise tens of thousands of volunteers to observe the conduct of the general elections and, above all, the counting of the votes.

In August 2014 the first **presidential elections** were held by direct vote. The then prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, won an overwhelming victory with more than 51% of the vote, making a second round unnecessary. This result can be explained by a level of participation (74.3%) that was significantly lower than in the local elections a few months before. While Erdoğan’s supporters turned out at the ballot boxes en masse, some of the voters of opposition parties such as the CHP (Republican People’s Party) and the MHP (Nationalist Action Party) gave up on the elections as a lost cause. But Erdoğan was not the only winner of the presidential elections. Selahattin Demirtaş, leader of the People’s Democratic Party (HDP), emerged as the revelation candidate. Created in 2012, this party’s roots are in Kurdish nationalism but in just over two years it has managed to construct a left-wing political project that is open to all kinds of vulnerable minority and community and receives support from all over the country, including areas where Kurdish parties had never previously penetrated. In the presidential elections Demirtaş received almost four million votes, an impressive 9.76%.

Now it is time to choose the parliament. Nobody doubts that the AKP, with the current prime minister, architect of the “new Turkish foreign policy”, Ahmet Davutoğlu, as its candidate, will be the largest party. What is unknown is how

many parties will enter parliament and with how large a majority the AKP will govern the country over the coming years. Many factors will affect this, but the two most important are whether the HDP manages to overcome the 10% threshold and whether the AKP continues its upward trajectory relative to other legislative elections.

Encouraged by its good presidential elections results, the HDP has decided to stand as a formal political party. In previous legislative elections its candidates stood as independents, only afterwards forming a parliamentary group. This was the only way to avoid the 10% threshold imposed in 1983 to prevent parliamentary fragmentation which, in passing, reduced the likelihood of Kurdish nationalism being represented. In 2015, with its electoral expectations around exactly that 10% mark, the HDP has decided to take the plunge. If it gets over that barrier, it could get 60 or more of the 550 seats in the Grand National Assembly. But it could also, by just a handful of votes, be kept out altogether. If Kurdish nationalism ends up without political representation in parliament, especially if it is by such a tight margin, it will not be easy to channel the frustration of its voters and, indirectly, the peace process with the PKK could end up compromised.

Furthermore, in the current electoral system, the vast majority of the seats won by the HDP would then go to the AKP as the other party with substantial support in the districts where the HDP is the leading political force. The HDP ending up without representation is therefore a necessary condition for the AKP to achieve its goal – a majority that is large enough not just to govern with tranquillity, but also to act alone to reform the constitution and take it to a referendum (for which it needs the support of at least 330 members of parliament). That is why a tactic vote dynamic has arisen among those who are especially critical of Erdoğan and the AKP. They are prepared to vote for the HDP not so much out of support for their political programme but in order to impede its rivals from governing comfortably. Likewise, *The Economist* – a priori nowhere near the left-wing ideas of the HDP – has recommended voting for them as the best way of guaranteeing that Erdoğan abandon his plan for an executive presidency and breathing new life into the peace process with the Kurds.

At the start of 2015, Erdoğan asked his voters for an exceptional majority of **400 seats** (367 are necessary to reform the constitution without a referendum) to build a “New Turkey”. In more recent declarations his expectations have fallen and he has said that he is content with **335**. For this to happen, it would not only be necessary for the HDP to remain outside parliament but also for the AKP to continue breaking its popular support records. Since 2002, it has followed an upward trajectory: that year it got 34% of the votes (more than 11 million); in 2007, 46% (16 million) and in 2011 nearly 50% with more than 21 million votes, a similar figure to the number Erdoğan received for the presidency in August 2014.

If Erdoğan reaches this figure, he will continue with his road map: a presidential constitution and accumulation of power. He will ignore the critics both inside Turkey and abroad, arguing that he has popular support. Not only will he ignore them but his disdain for anything that threatens his plans will be made clear. In this scenario Erdoğan would end up strengthened, but the political and social breaches could be widened. If the AKP falls beneath 330 seats but has a large enough majority to govern alone, tensions could break out in the heart of the party as some factions disapprove of the presidentialist project of Erdoğan. And if, for the first time in 13 years, no party is capable of governing alone, a new political cycle full of unknowns would open up, not only about what the next parliamentary majority would be but about the relation between the government and presidency of the republic.