

Turkish elections: Why Turkey's opposition should remain hopeful despite Erdoğan's victory

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03/11/2015

Turkey held a parliamentary election on 1 November, with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) founded by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan winning back the absolute majority of seats in parliament that it had lost in elections earlier this year. [Firat Cengiz](#) writes that while the results appear a substantial blow for the Turkish opposition, there remain reasons for optimism, with the opposition People's Democratic Party (HDP) and Republican People's Party (CHP) retaining a solid parliamentary presence, and a highly engaged civil society now campaigning for greater democracy within Turkey.



The result of Turkey's 1 November [election](#) shows that the country's walk towards democracy and peace will be longer and more winding than previously envisaged. According to the preliminary results released on 2 November, the governing [Justice and Development Party](#) (AKP) seems to have regained its absolute majority in parliament with 49 per cent of the vote.

The AKP will rule again in a single party government for the next five years barring an unforeseeable early election. The AKP had previously lost its absolute majority in the June 2015 [elections](#), meaning that for the first time since 2002 it was unable to form a single party government.

The decline of the HDP

For Turkish citizens supporting the opposition, it is particularly disappointing to see the decrease in vote share for the Kurdish [People's Democratic Party](#) (HDP). In the June 2015 elections, the HDP had attracted over 13 per cent of the vote and singlehandedly prevented the prospect of a single party AKP government.

In previous years, Turkey's educated, middle class and left-wing voters in the country's west had perceived the HDP to be the political arm of the Kurdish guerrilla organisation, the [PKK](#). They had therefore cast their vote for more conventional left-wing parties instead, most notably the social democrat [Republican People's Party](#) (CHP). However the June elections heralded a change in Turkey's political landscape, with the HDP establishing itself as a central opposition party, attracting a significant amount of votes outside of the Kurdish region to beat Turkey's 10 per cent national election threshold.

This success stemmed from the HDP's progressive party programme, which is similar to the programmes of European green parties. The HDP has expressed an inclusive political discourse that promotes not only Kurdish minority rights but also women's, LGBT and workers' rights, as well as advocating a sustainable environmentally friendly economy. This has made the party increasingly popular with young and first-time left-wing voters, who were not attracted to the conventional discourses of the Turkish centre-left.



Pro-secular Turks rallied against Erdogan back in 2007. Credit: Miguel Carminati / Wikimedia Commons

Moreover, against the backdrop of increasing government-led violence spreading from the Kurdish region to the rest of the country, particularly since the 2013 Gezi movement, 'white' Turks in the west have built a closer relationship with Kurdish citizens who have been the targets of this violence for many decades. Thus, the decrease in the HDP vote share in the November elections, slipping to just over 10 per cent, is disappointing for both Kurdish and Turkish voters supportive of the opposition.

The future of democracy in Turkey

There are, nevertheless, serious reasons for hope with regard to the future of democracy in Turkey, as well as reasons to question the legitimacy of the election results. First, this election was unnecessary. President Erdoğan and his AKP imposed the election on the country. It was possible for the political parties represented in the parliament after the June elections to form a broad coalition government and to collectively work on measures, such as a new democratic constitution based on an inclusive understanding of citizenship, to ameliorate the issues polarising Turkey's diverse society.

However, Erdoğan and the AKP, who have long desired to draft the new constitution singlehandedly with a view to establishing a semi-presidential regime, did not entertain this idea. On the contrary, they tactically played with the stigma attached to coalition governments in Turkey, [arguing](#) that anything other than a single party government would result in political and economic instability.

To make the case for a single party government, Erdoğan and the AKP articulated a hostile and polarising discourse in reaction to increasing violence and terrorist attacks that have left several hundred citizens dead in the four months between the two elections. Erdoğan and the AKP have [blamed](#) both the [Suruç](#) and the [Ankara](#) attacks on the opposition, although the party was in power when these attacks happened.

The AKP government has received criticism in particular for not taking effective security measures against the alleged ISIS attack in Ankara on 10 October, despite intelligence being received by state agencies before the attack. The AKP was also heavily [criticised](#) for its domestic and foreign policies, which have been viewed as being supportive of ISIS against both the Assad regime and Kurdish authorities in Syria.

Using the Ankara attack as a pretext, the AKP government initiated [security operations](#) in which mostly members of underground left-wing organisations and the Kurdish PKK were arrested. Many citizens were subjected to violence in these operations, including 25 year old [Dilek Doğan](#), who was shot dead in her home by a police officer because she asked him to take his shoes off before entering the house.

Second, this election was not a competition between equals. The AKP has relied on the budget and other resources of the Turkish state in their election rallies and activities. Opposition parties, on the other hand, struggled to get any substantial airtime on Turkish media and television channels, which are increasingly under pressure from the government. The HDP in particular relied almost entirely on social media in their communications with the electorate. Most recently the television channels [Kanaltürk](#) and [Bugün TV](#) were shut down without any legal justification. Similarly, the headquarters of [Cumhuriyet](#), arguably the most popular opposition newspaper in Turkey, has been surrounded by heavily armed counter-terrorism officers.

Third, opposition voters have questioned the legitimacy of the election results by citing several serious fraud allegations. The election results were made public and the AKP declared its victory in the early afternoon of 1 November. This unusually early counting of the vote, before the closing of election posts in many constituencies, took citizens by surprise. There has even been [evidence](#) cited of heavily armed security officers and AKP members ambushing election posts in the Kurdish populated southeast Turkey.

The election results would also puzzle even experienced electoral politics specialists with the greatest data analysis skills: compared with the June 2015 election results the HDP seems to have lost around 600 thousand voters; the extreme right wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP) seems to have lost around a million voters; the CHP seems to

have gained three million new voters; and the AKP seems to have gained nearly 10 million new voters. Considering that the turnout figures in the June and November elections were almost the same (86 per cent and 84 per cent respectively) and considering that among the opposition voters MHP voters are most likely to switch to the AKP, it is very difficult to figure out how the AKP's votes increased by nearly 10 million from one election to the other.

Fourth, particularly in the face the hostility they faced and the problems they encountered in finding any space for their views in the national media, the left-wing opposition parties – the CHP and HDP – did extremely well in the elections. The HDP still beat the 10 per cent electoral threshold and will be represented in the parliament with 61 members. This places the party in second position among opposition parties, after the CHP, which will be represented by 134 members and before the extreme right MHP, which has 40 members.

The HDP overtaking the MHP to become the third largest party in parliament is highly promising for the future of democracy and progressive politics in Turkey. It also illustrates that despite the recently increasing violence, and despite [claims](#) to the contrary, Turkey will not go back to the 1990s, where the Kurdish issue was considered a political taboo in national discourse and was perceived only as a separatist conflict between the Turkish army and the PKK. Additionally, the CHP and HDP, with their nearly two hundred combined members, have a very good basis for effective left-wing opposition in the parliament, especially if they manage to follow compromise-based inclusionary politics and act together.

Finally, particularly since the 2013 Gezi movement we have witnessed the emergence of an extremely strong, active and fearless civil society and a critical national political sphere in Turkey that does not exist in western democracies. Civil society has taken a very active stance between the two elections, voicing democratic demands despite the continuous threat of state-led and terrorist violence.

On the election day, a great number of citizens volunteered to work as observers for opposition parties in election posts to guard against potential electoral fraud. This civil society will most probably stay active and provide an alternative platform for opposition, supplementing and supporting the parliamentary opposition. As a result, despite Erdoğan and the AKP's increasing grip over power and their disrespect for the rule of law and democratic political processes, Turkey will not turn into a Middle Eastern dictatorship.

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