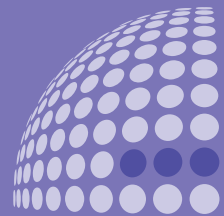


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Turkey's June 2011 Elections: Perspectives from the U.S.

Ömer Özbek

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TURKEY'S JUNE 2011 ELECTIONS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE U.S.

Ömer Özbek

ÖMER ÖZBEK

Ömer Özbek is continuing his doctoral studies in Management at University of Maryland with a focus on international policy making. He holds a Master's degree in Industrial and Systems Engineering from Auburn University, Alabama and a Bachelor's degree in the same field from Sabanci University in Istanbul. Before moving to Washington DC area, he worked at grassroots organizations in the Southeastern US and coordinated many projects with local universities and institutions. He also served on the community engagement councils of several federal and state agencies in Georgia and Florida.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On June 12, 2011 general elections for the parliament (Turkish Grand National Assembly) were held in Turkey. The Justice and Development Party (AK Party) won the general elections with 49 percent of the votes to run the office for a third term with a few seats short of supermajority in the parliament. The elections carry historic significance as an affirmation of the Turkish political system as a consolidated democracy with political stability and strong economic growth.

The elections received the highest coverage on an issue related to Turkey in the U.S. media and the think tank community. In a span of two weeks, more than 20 articles appeared in major newspapers and magazines and around 50 analyses were published by experts in think tanks in addition to commentaries at eight panel discussions held in Washington, D.C. This report provides a comparative analysis of perceptions on Turkey's June 2011 elections among U.S. opinion makers. Similar comments on these issues by the majority of the analysts are overviewed under a general perspective while the distinct perspectives are referenced to their authors. This report also examines the overlooked or misinterpreted parts of the picture and provides background information.

In general, four major issues dominated the commentaries on elections: Performance of political parties, the new constitution, the Kurdish issue and foreign policy. All commentators expected the AK Party to receive the highest vote among all parties and the discussions revolved around the distribution of votes and reconfiguration in parliament seats. Many analysts seemed uneasy about a supermajority by the AK Party in the parliament in light of discussions on drafting a new constitution. As the AK Party "failed" to get such a majority, most of these commentators seemed relieved. On the other hand, it seems that the Republican People's Party (CHP) with its new leadership captured some attention in the U.S. and was seen as a credible alternative to the AK Party by some analysts. Its performance in the elections was a disappointment for these analysts while some others –despite its anti-American rhetoric– welcomed the MHP's success in surpassing the 10 percent national threshold as it kept AK Party below a supermajority. Additionally, all of the commentators acknowledged the need for a new, civilian constitution in Turkey; however, most of the commentaries were limited to discussions on the possible establishment of presidential system in Turkey.

Turkey's long-standing Kurdish issue was also mentioned in the commentaries as a major issue that awaited a comprehensive solution. Most of the analysts commenting on this issue ran into the pitfall of identifying all the Kurdish electorate with the BDP and overlooked the support for

the AK Party among Kurds. Turkish foreign policy, an increasingly-discussed issue in Washington circles, was another major subject of these commentaries as the Middle East has been going through an unpredictable revolutionary process. Turkey's policies and relations with neighbors were depicted as going through a serious test as Turkey would have to come up with new policies in this dynamic process.

The rulings of Turkey's Supreme Election Board (YSK) on the candidacy of some controversial figures and detained members of the parliament, and the oath-taking crisis after the elections are both complicated issues hardly seen in other democracies. Limited comments and news articles were published on these issues in the U.S.; thus, a comprehensive analysis is provided at the end of this report to help readers grasp the background on these issues.

TURKEY'S JUNE 2011 ELECTIONS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE U.S.

INTRODUCTION

The historic significance of the June 2011 elections has to do with the consolidation of democracy, stability and economic growth in Turkey. It is also the first time a ruling party increases its votes in a third consecutive election, reaching a record in percentage of votes. Since the first multi-party elections as a republic in 1946, Turkey has experienced several economic and political crises and military interventions. This was Turkey's first non-early election in 34 years and civil-military relations were not an issue at the election campaigns after several decades. Voter turnout was 87.16 percent, which is the highest rate since 1987.

Out of 61 registered political parties, 15 parties and 203 independent candidates contested all 550 seats in the Parliament for a four-year term in the elections. A total of 43,785,665 votes were cast and the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) won the general elections with 49.83 percent of the valid votes, followed by the Republican People's Party (CHP) with 25.98 percent, and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) with 13.01 percent of the votes. The independent candidates received total of 6.57 percent of the votes including 5.85 percent for 64 candidates of the bloc acting in concert with the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). According to final distribution by Turkey's Supreme Election Board (YSK), the AK Party won 327 seats, the CHP 135 seats, the MHP 53 seats and the BDP's independents 35 seats.

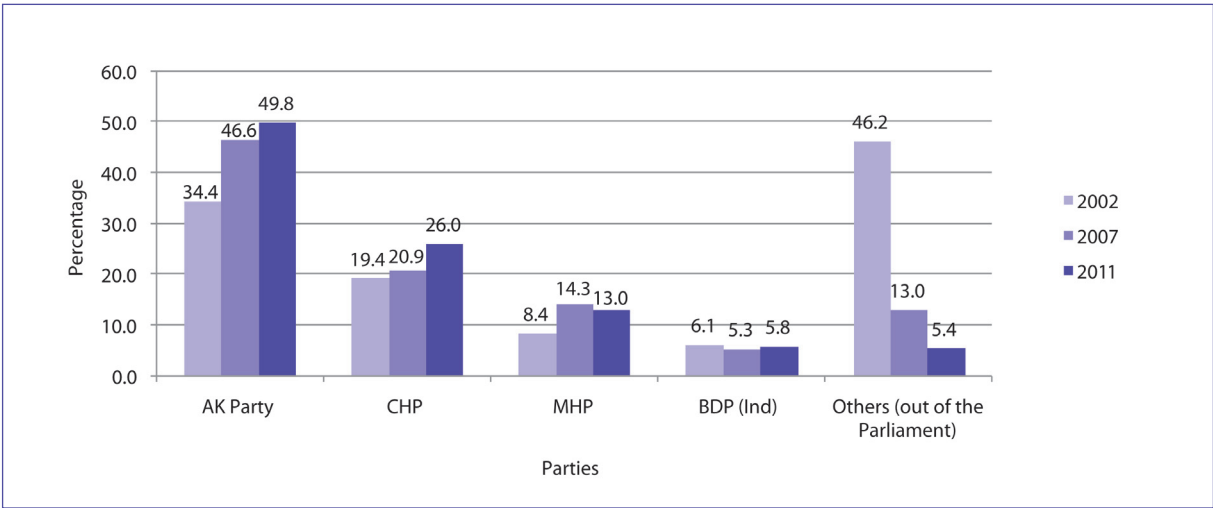
A significant aspect of the elections was the level of coverage of the Turkish elections in the U.S. More than 20 articles on Turkish elections appeared in major newspapers and magazines in two weeks around the elections and more than 50 analyses were published by experts in think tanks. In this period, eight panel discussions about Turkish elections were held in Washington, D.C. Also, on the day of the elections, Turkey's Directorate General of Press and Information (BYEGM) and Cihan News Agency established a press center in Washington, D.C. for live coverage of election results for domestic and foreign press members and political analysts. In light of all of these publications and events, long-time political observer Richard Falk noted that the elections received the highest interest on an event related to Turkey in the international arena.¹

PERSPECTIVES ON AK PARTY'S VICTORY

All commentators expected the AK Party to receive the highest vote among all parties; thus, the discussion in the U.S. was not about who would win the elections. Instead, it focused on how much the AK Party will outpace the other parties and what effect that would have. Many authors provided expected ranges for political parties and it appears the AK Party's votes in the elections were at the highest end of prediction ranges while the main opposition party, the CHP, got votes around the lowest end of the prediction ranges.

The AK Party won its third consecutive general elections despite the fraying nature of being in the office for two terms totaling 9 years. It is the first time in the history of Turkish democracy that a governing party increased its votes in three consecutive elections and the second time a single party has won the majority of the seats in the parliament in three consecutive terms. The party increased its votes from 34.30 percent in 2002 to 46.66 percent in 2007 and 49.83 percent in 2011. The performance of the AK Party and the main opposition parties can be seen on Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: PERFORMANCE OF MAJOR PARTIES IN THE LAST 3 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS



For some commentators, the AK Party's success in the 2002 parliamentary elections was due to financial meltdown in 2001 and Erdoğan's unfair treatment by the courts in late 1990s. In the 2007 elections, some argued that the AK Party's success was due to presidential election crisis and civil-military polarization. The 2011 elections show that it is no longer possible to attribute the AK Party's success to a sense of crisis in the public or victimhood of the AK Party. For most commentators, the election results represented a landslide victory for the AK Party due to a combination of reasons including growing prosperity, better socio-economic services, confident foreign policy, effective campaign strategies, the hard work of party members, and Erdoğan's charisma. Turkey's impressive economic performance and improved standard of living were acknowledged by many commentators and the election results were interpreted for further economic development and stability. For instance, the *Wall Street Journal* articles published right after elections reported that markets welcomed the election results² and voters made a wise choice of giving the AK Party just enough power to continue stewardship of economy.³

Some commentators were uneasy with the growing support for the AK Party and preferred to highlight the votes against the AK Party. These interpreted the election results along ideological lines and combined all of the non-AK Party votes under one political attitude. For instance, Robert Finn argued that more than half of the electorate voted

2. Marc Champion, "Markets Welcome Turkish Vote Outcome," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303714704576383143770658866.html>.
3. Matthew Kaminski, "Review & Outlook: The Wisdom of the Turks," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303714704576382001614364260.html>.

against the AK Party⁴ and Soner Cagaptay commented that secular, liberal Turks comprise at least half of Turkey's population.⁵ On the other hand, while acknowledging the AK Party's success, Michael Werz et al. argued that the opposition consolidated its position in this election.⁶ George Friedman made a similar comment in his report after the elections that the fragmented opposition gives not overwhelmingly popular AK Party disproportional power.⁷ Furthermore, some others went to the extremes with their disappointments with election results such as Daniel Pipes commenting on the day of the election that this would be the last fair and free election in Turkey.⁸ Similarly, Michael Rubin saw it as a disastrous election, suggesting it may represent the "final nail in the coffin of Turkish democracy".⁹ Rubin argued that the "Islamists" control the Turkish security forces and the government is committed to continuing relations with Iran and developing relations with China.¹⁰ To warn the U.S. administration about the ongoing negotiations on F-35 joint strike fighter sales to Turkey, Rubin told the question is not whether Turkey will give Tehran or Beijing the American military secrets if the U.S. sells F-35 planes to Turkey, it is rather whether it would provide the planes themselves.

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Another ideological approach to the AK Party is seen in Soner Cagaptay's *Wall Street Journal* article as he portrayed the AK Party as an "Islamist" party in an effort to extract messages for the Arab Spring. Cagaptay argued that the AK Party has a radical agenda and Erdoğan interpreted the AK Party's second victory in 2007 as a "green light to limit freedoms and harass his opponents".¹¹ Though the AK Party never defines itself as an "Islamist" party and analysts clearly find Turkish political experience different than the others in the Middle East, he went on to making generalizations that popular support leads "Islamist" parties to re-embrace their authoritarian antecedents. For him, the AK Party's success was helped by the weakness of the opposition, thus opposition to rising controversial parties in the Middle East should be well supported. With democracy showing up on the horizon for some Middle Eastern countries, Cagaptay warned policymakers that Islamist parties can moderate the platforms in the Middle East only "if elections are free, if media is independent and if there is a strong liberal party that counters the Islamists' desire to equate democracy with unchecked power."

While many commentators struggle to compare Turkey with its neighbors, Joshua Walker pointed out similarities between Turkey and Japan. He underlined that just like Japan one party rule does not necessarily weaken democracy

4. Robert Finn, "The Turkish National Election, A Little Something for Everyone," *Princeton University LSID Commentary*, http://www.princeton.edu/lisd/archived/commentary_june2011.pdf.

5. Soner Cagaptay, "Turkey's First Christian," *CNN Global Public Square*, July 6, 2011, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/07/06/turkey%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%99Cfirst-christian%E2%80%99D>.

6. Michael Werz et al., "After Turkey's June Elections: A Review of Avenues for U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy Cooperation in the Wake of Turkey's Parliamentary Elections," Center for American Progress, June 23, 2011, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/06/turkey.html>.

7. George Friedman, "Turkey's Elections and Strained U.S. Relations," *Stratfor Global Intelligence Policy Brief*, June 14, 2011. <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110613-turkeys-elections-and-strained-us-relations>.

8. Daniel Pipes, "Turkey's Last Free Election," *Personal Blog of Daniel Pipes*, June 12, 2011, <http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/2011/06/turkey-last-free-election>.

9. Michael Rubin, "Turkey's Disastrous Elections," *Commentary Magazine*, June 13, 2011, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/06/13/turkeys-disastrous-elections>.

10. Michael Rubin, "Will Turkey Give China Our Military Secrets?," *Commentary Magazine*, June 14, 2011, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/06/14/turkey-china-our-military-secrets>.

11. Soner Cagaptay, "Turkish Lessons for the Arab Spring," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 14, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303714704576383363787058314.html>.

and can often be a formula for consensus-building, economic success and stability.¹² A productive predominant party system in Turkey similar to those in Japan, India or Sweden was also suggested by Ersin Kalaycıoğlu¹³ and Mohammed Ayoob.¹⁴ According to Ayoob, “strong single-party governments that can stand up to extra-constitutional bullying are even more essential in countries like Turkey with a history of overt and covert military intervention.”

DISCUSSIONS ON CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

In light of debates over the new constitution leading up to the election, concerns about a potential AK Party supermajority in the parliament were often expressed in the commentaries. However, among all reforms that could be proposed with a new constitution, a potential presidential system dominated the discussions in the U.S. Erdoğan promised to limit parliamentary service to three terms for his party members, including himself. On the other hand, he has spoken in favor of a presidential system in Turkey in some television interviews since 2004. As Turkey will hold presidential elections in 2014 and Erdoğan is expected to run for president, commentators concluded that the AK Party will lead a transition from the current parliamentary system to a presidential system that will make Erdoğan a more powerful president. Many commentators welcomed the election results as the AK Party “failed” to get a strong majority to unilaterally propose such a change in the constitution. The AK Party won 327 seats in the parliament which is four seats short of the three-fifths “qualitative” majority (330) required to propose constitutional changes through a referendum. It is also 41 seats short of the two-thirds supermajority (367) needed to amend the country’s constitution unilaterally.

The AK Party’s 160-page election manifesto declaring its plans and promises for the next term did not include a discussion on the presidential system. A new constitution was number one on its list of promises; however, Ersin Kalaycıoğlu was the only one to acknowledge that a presidential system was never mentioned in the manifesto.¹⁵ Also, neither Erdoğan nor any other party official spoke about it during election rallies. All of the discussion about a potential presidential system stems from Erdoğan’s comments in TV interviews that he would like to see a discussion about a presidential system in Turkey and personally finds it better fitting for Turkish politics. On the other hand, as Muhammed Ayoob noted, the statements of different party ranks during the election period show that there is not a consensus in the AK Party regarding the presidential system.¹⁶ However, all of the analysts commenting on new constitution seemed to be too focused on a potential presidential system, overlooking other aspects of the constitutional debate. The CSIS report went further to argue that it would not be an exaggeration to characterize the elections as a referendum on Erdoğan’s project to redesign the Turkish political system.¹⁷

The presidential systems in the U.S. and France are generally referred to as some of the best examples of democracy but when it comes to Turkey, a presidential system is discussed in the context of “authoritarianism” by some commentators. These have promoted fears of the AK Party getting a supermajority to unilaterally change the constitution and put the party’s “authoritarian tendencies” into action. For instance, Sally McNamara and Ariel Cohen’s report prior to the elections argued that the AK Party’s intolerant politics are gradually leading to religious-based authoritarianism in Turkey.¹⁸ Beyond the presidential system discussions, some authors—such as Yigal Schleifer—thought that the AK Party has raised alarm with an intolerant attitude and there was potential of democratic backsliding.¹⁹ The arrests

12. Joshua W. Walker, “How Turkey’s democracy might resemble Japan’s,” *German Marshall Fund Blog*, June 15, 2011, <http://blog.gmfus.org/2011/06/how-turkey%E2%80%99s-democracy-might-resemble-japan%E2%80%99s>.

13. Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, “Turkish Elections of June 12, 2011: Now What?,” *German Marshall Fund Analysis*, June 16, 2011, http://www.gmfus.org/publications/publication_view?publication.id=1796.

14. Mohammed Ayoob, “Misplaced fears about the upcoming Turkish election,” *Foreign Policy Blog*, June 7, 2011, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/06/07/misplaced_fears_about_the_upcoming_turkish_election.

15. Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, “Looking Beyond the June 12 Elections,” *German Marshall Fund Analysis*, May 26, 2011, http://www.gmfus.org/publications/publication_view?publication.id=1694.

16. Ibid, 2.

17. Bulent Aliriza and Deni Koenhemsj, “Turkey’s June 12 Elections: Will Erdogan Maintain His Ascendancy?,” *CSIS Turkey Update*, June 2, 2011, http://www.csis.org/files/publication/110602_TurkeysJuneElections.pdf.

18. Sally McNamara and Ariel Cohen, “Turkey after the Elections: Implications for U.S. foreign policy,” *The Heritage Foundation Policy Brief*, June 8, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/06/turkey-after-the-elections-implications-for-us-foreign-policy>.

19. Yigal Schleifer, “Shifting the Focus: Consolidating Democracy in Post-Election Turkey,” *Project On Middle East Democracy Policy Brief*, June

of some political figures and media members in the ongoing coup-plot and terror investigations, implementation of previously condoned tax penalties on some media corporations and internet filtering against abusive content were noted in these discussions. Also, the AK Party's efforts to eliminate the privileged positions of the military, the judiciary and the bureaucracy over elected officials were interpreted as establishing its own dictate on the others.

Many commentators suggested a consensus for a healthy constitutional reform process. They viewed as promising Erdoğan's statement in his victory speech that he will seek consensus for a new constitution. In looking at the AK Party's record in office, amendments to 55 articles of the 1982 constitution were enacted under 11 packages. Among the 11 packages, nine were enacted in the parliament with a supermajority whereas two were taken to referendums in 2007 and 2010 with the votes of AK Party deputies only. This indicates that the AK Party has managed to reach a consensus with opposition parties on many constitutional changes while failing to reach consensus on some others. For the disputed amendments, the results of the referendums show that the changes proposed by the AK Party were supported by the majority of the Turkish public. The consensus on various packages and the referendum results were hardly mentioned in the critique of AK Party's handling of constitutional reforms. Also, while the extent of Erdoğan's efforts to reach a consensus with the opposition was questioned, the opposition's uncompromising attitude during those periods was generally overlooked. For instance the efforts to establish a consensus building committee in the previous parliament repeatedly failed as all parties but the CHP appointed delegates. On the other hand, the contents of the constitutional changes are generally overlooked, while the process of enactment is discussed. The Stratfor report is one of the few to mention that the "AKP's stated goal of making Turkey more democratic and in line with the EU's liberal principles" would entail expanding the changes proposed in the September 2010 referendum.²⁰ Steven Cook referred to some of the rarely mentioned constitutional reforms of the AK Party such as "limiting the military's ability to influence politics, giving relatively greater cultural leeway for the Kurdish minority, [and] making it more difficult to shutter political parties."²¹

Despite variations in their perspectives towards the AK Party, analysts showed uniform discontent for the 1982 constitution and supported a new constitution in Turkey. Some of them such as Soner Cagaptay acknowledged that majority of the Turkish society agree that the country needs to update the constitution.²² Ersin Kalaycıoğlu added that Turkey has become a "delegative democracy" and there is no going back to any lower standards; however, without a new civil constitution "it will be difficult to assume that the Turkish democracy is fully consolidated."²³ On the other hand, Michael Werz et al. stressed that "regardless of the outcome of constitutional reform Turkey will be an important factor shaping the future of its region."²⁴ Besides their support for a new constitution, majority of the commentators welcomed the election results and the concerned ones seemed somewhat relieved as the inevitable winner AK Party failed to have a supermajority.

PERFORMANCE OF THE TWO MAJOR OPPOSITION PARTIES

For some commentators, the major reason for the AK Party's success was due to lack of a credible alternative and underperforming opposition parties. They generally expressed a positive expectation of the CHP's new leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who had been "redefining the vision and mission of the party" since his unanimous election to leadership in the extraordinary convention on May 22, 2010. According to Sinan Ülgen the most interesting aspect of Turkish politics was the transformation of the CHP, which failed to aspire large parts of the society in the past, relying

17, 2011, http://www.pomed.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/.../Policy-Brief_Schleifer.pdf.

20. Stratfor Report, "The AKP's Victory and Challenges Ahead for Turkey," June 12, 2011, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110613-turkeys-elections-and-strained-us-relations>.

21. Steven Cook, "Constitutional Stakes in Turkey's Election," Council on Foreign Relations, June 10, 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/turkey/constitutional-stakes-turkeys-election/p25249>.

22. Soner Cagaptay, "Turkey's June 12 Elections," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy - Policy Watch*, June 9, 2011, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3364>.

23. Ibid., 3.

24. Ibid., 9.

on its secularist rhetoric and support from within the army and the Turkish judiciary to counter the AK Party.²⁵ For him, the structural deficiencies of the CHP held it back in the race and "Turkish democracy suffered from this lack of a close and imminent threat to the AKP's rule."

The CHP's rejoining the political discussion in Washington, D.C. before the elections and getting rid of people like Elekdag and Oymen who were resisting to current Turkish foreign policy was mentioned by some analysts such as Michael Werz et al.²⁶ Also, Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı argued that with Kılıçdaroğlu, the gap between the AK Party and the CHP has narrowed on issues such as national identity, civil-military relations, basic rights and freedom. He suggested that a consensus between the two parties could facilitate a new constitution.²⁷ Also, Bulent Aliriza²⁸ and Soner Cagaptay²⁹ found Kılıçdaroğlu's new CHP a credible alternative to the AK Party. However, many commentators were disappointed with the CHP's performance and some analysts such as Keyman and Barkey clearly declared the CHP among the losers of the election. Barkey argued that the CHP running candidates tied to the Ergenekon coup-plot investigations "alienated potential voters and some its own rank and file."³⁰ Meanwhile, Michael Werz et al. and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu predicted intra-party struggles after the elections as Kılıçdaroğlu's performance and new vision would be questioned. Although some commentators were aware of the CHP's problematic candidacy of some detainees, no one projected an oath-taking crisis. Many of them predicted summer as a period for cooling off for Turkish domestic politics after a hard fought election.

The second largest opposition party, the nationalist MHP (National Action Party), was rarely mentioned in the commentaries, despite receiving 13 percent of the vote and despite the release of compromising tapes of leading party members. Although the MHP espouses anti-American rhetoric, its performance was appreciated by some analysts due to its critical role in keeping the AK Party below a supermajority by passing the 10 percent threshold. Other than the two major opposition parties, the parties running in the elections did not receive any attention from commentators as they did not possess any chance of making it into parliament.

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THE POLITICAL CHOICE OF THE KURDISH ELECTORATE

In election reviews, analysts acknowledged the need for comprehensive reform on Turkey's long-standing Kurdish issue. However, the political choice of the Kurdish electorate is misrepresented. Support for Kurdish-nationalist candidates acting in concert with the BDP was well documented, while greater support for the AK Party among Kurds was overlooked.

25. Sinan Ülgen, "How to Read the Outcome of Turkey's Elections," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Middle East Center, June 10, 2011, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=44536>.

26. Ibid, 8.

27. Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, "A new constitution for Turkey: Can the 'Grand Master' do it?," German Marshall Fund Blog, June 14, 2011, <http://blog.gmfus.org/2011/06/a-new-constitution-for-turkey-can-the-%E2%80%9Cgrand-master%E2%80%9D-do-it-2>.

28. Bulent Aliriza, "Turkey's June 12 Elections | Center for Strategic and International Studies," Center For Strategic And International Studies, June 12, 2011, <http://csis.org/publication/turkeys-june-12-elections>.

29. Soner Cagaptay, "Why Turkey Will Not Become Italy," *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 28, 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=why-turkey-will-not-become-italy-2011-06-28>.

30. Henry J. Barkey, "Winners and Losers in Turkey's Election," Carnegie Endowment For International Peace Middle East Center, June 13, 2011, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=44592&lang=en>.

After losing the general elections as a political party in 2002 with 6.1 percent of the votes, the Kurdish-nationalist politicians got 5.3 percent of votes in 2007 elections for their bloc of 59 candidates and won 22 seats in the parliament. In 2011, they got 5.85 percent of votes with 64 candidates and won 36 seats of which one was declared ineligible to become an MP by the YSK after elections. The performance of Kurdish-nationalist candidates shows that they have continuing support of some but not all Kurds—the total Kurdish population of Turkey is estimated at about 15 percent.³¹ Except for Fuat Keyman, who observed the elections from within Turkey and pointed out that more Kurds voted for the AK Party than for the BDP candidates,³² most commentators overlooked the AK Party's support from within the Kurdish electorate. Also, most of the commentators writing about the Kurdish issue focused their attention on southeastern Turkey which misleads audiences both about the population distribution of Kurds in Turkey and about Kurdish voting patterns. It is important to note that Istanbul, as a city, has the largest Kurdish population in the world and 14.8 percent of the population in Istanbul is ethnically Kurdish.³³ However, the ratio of total votes of the BDP candidates in Istanbul is 4.79 percent. Similarly, significant numbers of Kurdish citizens reside in metropolitan areas such as Izmir and Ankara, but the ratios of total votes for the BDP candidates in these cities are 1.90 percent and 0.15 percent. These figures indicate that support for the BDP is not based solely on ethnicity. The BDP's ideology and organizational success to control and coerce the Kurdish voters are the key factors for its performance in some southeastern provinces.

Some examples of the BDP's portrayal as the only representative of Kurdish people include İlder Turan's reference to the BDP as the "spokesman of Kurdish aspirations"³⁴ and Henry Barkey's argument that with the election results the BDP earned the right to claim that the party is the main representative of Turkish Kurds.³⁵ On the other hand, Ömer Taşpınar commented that "most Turkish Kurds romanticize with PKK."³⁶ Although the Associated Press and USA Today reported the BDP supporters' coercion of voters,³⁷ the issue of organized pressure on Kurdish people by members of the BDP was overlooked in election analyses. Even the BDP's loose connection to the PKK and lack of condemnation of violence against Turkish security forces was rarely mentioned by the analysts commenting on Kurdish issue.

Another distinct perspective on the Kurdish issue was presented by Gonul Tol as she focused all of her elections comments on this issue. Tol commented on the increase in the votes for BDP candidates as "the most unexpected, under-reported and encouraging aspect of this election."³⁸ She found the promises of the AK Party and the CHP on the Kurdish issue limited to individual rights rather than collective rights. Tol is among the very few who are aware that the candidates of the bloc got 5.85 percent votes in total, not all of the independent votes of 6.57 percent. Turkish and American audiences are generally misled on this issue due to YSK's reporting system that combines votes of all independent candidates under one title, making it very difficult to determine votes of individual candidates.

The proposed solutions to the Kurdish issue offered by the AK Party and the CHP—and the promises of these parties regarding other ethnic and religious groups—were also generally overlooked. Among the commentators, Richard Falk is the only one to refer to Turkey's other minorities such as Zaza, Circassian, Laz, Arab, Romany and Alevi groups.³⁹ Similarly, commentary on the AK Party's "democratic opening" for minority rights was generally limited to discussion of the Kurds despite major steps being taken regarding Alevi and Romany groups as well.

31. KONDA Report, "Who Are We? Social Structure Survey," September 2006, <http://www.konda.com.tr/en/reports.php?tb=3>.

32. Fuat Keyman, "Assessing the Outcomes of Turkey's Election," Brookings Institute Panel, June 17, 2011.

33. Tarhan Erdem, "BDP seçime parti olarak girerse barajı geçer," *Radikal*, March 17, 2011, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalYazar&ArticleID=1043170>.

34. İlder Turan, "Critical Elections Behind, Critical Problems Ahead," *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, June 16, 2011, http://www.gmfus.org/publications/publication_view?publication.id=1794.

35. Ibid.

36. Ömer Taşpınar, "Third One is the Charm: Will AKP's Victory Finally Lead to a New Constitution in Turkey?,"

37. Christopher Torchia, "Turkey's ruling party wins election," *Associated Press*, June 12, 2011, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2011-06-12-Turkey-election_n.htm.

38. Gonul Tol, "New Hope for Turkey's Kurds," *Foreign Policy Blog*, June 15, 2011, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/06/15/new_hope_for_turkeys_kurds.

39. Richard Falk and Hilal Elver, "Interpreting the AKP Victory in Turkey," *Foreign Policy Journal*, June 15, 2011, <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2011/06/15/interpreting-the-akp-victory-in-turkey>.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

Many analysts noted that discussions on foreign policy were “conspicuously” absent during the elections. This was interpreted as the Turkish public being satisfied with current government’s “more independent and self-confident” policies. Also, the electoral victory of the AK Party was generally seen as a “vindication of the more assertive and ambitious foreign policy.”⁴⁰ Piotr Zalewski mentioned that until recently Turkey had an orientation in international affairs rather than a foreign policy.⁴¹ He argued this is “what analysts have in mind when they speak of ‘Turkey’s turn from the West’ or ‘Turkey’s shift eastward.’” As Turkey develops an independent, dynamic foreign policy some commentators are having hard time to comprehend and adjust to Turkey’s new outlook. Discussions of “who lost Turkey?” and worries about an “axis shift” have dominated Washington circles until recently but these phrases did not appear in Turkish election reviews, as developments in region demonstrated that Turkey has a dynamic foreign policy neither tied to an axis nor fixed in a direction.

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Erdoğan’s victory speech captured significant attention from commentators, especially the line stating “the hopes of the victims and the oppressed in the region have won.” His coupling of capitals of neighboring countries with Turkish cities and statement that it was a victory for both was a clear indication of Turkish foreign policy in the coming years. One of the *New York Times* articles on the June elections pointed to the increasing interaction between political and business groups from Turkey and various Middle East countries as the Turkish model of democratization and economic reforms attracts the region.⁴² However, for many commentators, the AK Party’s “Zero Problem with Neighbors” policy came under a “harsh test” during the Arab Spring. Turkey’s relations with Syria in the last decade were generally considered the most significant test case. Though some analysts found former Turkish policies successful and portray Foreign Minister Davutoğlu as a Turkish Henry Kissinger, Henri Barkey and others argued that the policy could more accurately be called “Zero Problems with Regimes” — not with their peoples.⁴³ For Steven Cook, both the U.S. and Turkey are experiencing a kind of “cognitive dissonance” as they watch the region rewire itself and “Turkey’s genius” in the Arab world was wrapped up in authoritarian regimes.⁴⁴ However, the Turkish government and Erdoğan have been accused of neo-Ottomanism and populism in the discussions prior to the Arab Spring when they addressed publics of Middle Eastern countries. Moreover, some analysts interpreted the Arab Spring as both a blessing and a curse for Turkey since it brings leadership and influence opportunities as an exemplary democracy for the changing regimes while testing Turkey’s position and policies towards resisting authoritarian regimes.

Just like some commentators attributed the AK Party government’s domestic success to the failure of rivals, some others attributed Turkey’s diplomatic success in its region to the failure of prior powers. George Friedman commented

40. Sinan Ülgen, “Recovery From the Age of Discovery: The Next Four Years of Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Policy Outlook*, July 27, 2011, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/turkey_election_for_pol.pdf.

41. Piotr Zalewski, “Turkish Populism Goes to the Polls,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 10, 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67887/piotr-zalewski/turkish-populism-goes-to-the-polls>.

42. Susanne Güsten, “Mandate for a New Turkish Era,” *The New York Times*, June 15, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/16/world/europe/16iht-M16-TURKEY-POLICY.html>.

43. Ibid.

44. Steve Cook, “Turkey’s June 2011 Elections: What’s Next?,” *The SETA Foundation at Washington, D.C.*, June 14, 2011.

that Turkey's "growing influence was rooted in American failure rather than Turkish design."⁴⁵ Alternatively, Taşpınar argued that Turkey's emerging leadership in the Arab world was due mostly to dismal failure of the Egyptian leadership.⁴⁶ For him, Egypt is emerging as a relevant model for the Middle East after the revolution and Cairo is showing its advantages in cases like brokering reconciliation between Palestinian groups. He agreed with Hugh Pope that "if there is one thing that makes Turkey stand out in the troubled Middle East, it is the country's convergence with Europe" which can be an advantage for strategic leadership in the new Middle East. On the contrary, Richard Falk argued that "Turkey offers an attractive alternative to anxieties and memories associated with American and European interventions and alignments in the region."⁴⁷

In the AK Party government's third term, U.S.-Turkey relations are generally expected to continue along pragmatic lines while being strained on specific issues involving other countries, particularly Iran and Israel. Turkey's cooperation with the U.S. in Iraq, active involvement in NATO's security and development efforts in Afghanistan are seen as examples of long term partnerships. At the same time, Turkey's recent involvement in the Libya operation and the missile defense system with concerns and alternative perspectives are seen as examples of Turkey's new position as an independent actor. Michael Werz et al. mentioned that in 90 percent of the cases, U.S. and Turkish strategic interests overlap; however, the two governments look at the world from quite different perspectives.⁴⁸ Turkey's relations with Iran and efforts to broker a nuclear deal rather than simply supporting American-initiated sanctions were discussed by commentators as part of the aforementioned "axis shift". As it becomes clear that Turkey and Iran have conflicting policies towards some other Middle Eastern countries—particularly Syria—Turkey's independent and dynamic foreign policy gets better recognition. Some commentators also urge Turkey to repair relations with Israel, which have become increasingly strained since the flotilla incident, but there is no expectation for improved relations between the two countries in the near term.

Turkey's stalled EU accession process is also mentioned in the commentaries, especially the need for revitalizing it. For some of the analysts, Turkey's EU candidacy has been the engine of past reforms and significant developments have been achieved. They have a positive outlook on the new government as the AK Party reserved two pages of its election manifesto to EU relations and promised that a new ministry for EU relations will be established after the elections. However, some others maintained skepticism of the government's intentions and willingness to pursue EU membership. For instance, Sally McNamara and Ariel Cohen argued that the government "cherry picked" EU reforms to undermine the military and bureaucracy which are the sole pillars of secular regime.⁴⁹ Besides discussions on Turkey's approach, Judy Dempsey⁵⁰ and Sinan Ülgen⁵¹ analyzed how EU leaders respond to opportunities to engage Turkey and questioned whether Brussels is the loser in Turkey's elections.

The comments on Turkish foreign policy were mostly focused on relations with the U.S., the EU and the Middle East. In the new term, Turkey's diplomatic efforts in other areas, including sub-Saharan Africa, former Soviet republics and the Balkans, are expected to receive more attention as Turkish foreign policy becomes multi-dimensional. Regardless of how commentators view the role Turkey might play in its region, they seemed to agree that Turkey is following an independent foreign policy that is becoming more involved with regional issues. Steven Cook underlined that Turkey has transitioned from a client state to an independent actor.⁵² Also, Robert Wexler commented that as Turkish democracy evolves "it will increasingly represent the views of Turkish people rather than the U.S. interests."⁵³ He

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., 2.

49. Sally McNamara and Ariel Cohen, "Turkey after the Elections: Implications for U.S. foreign policy," The Heritage Foundation Policy Brief, June 8, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/06/turkey-after-the-elections-implications-for-us-foreign-policy>.

50. Judy Dempsey, "Turkish Vote Result Seen as Opportunity for E.U.," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/15/world/europe/15iht-turkey15.html>.

51. Sinan Ülgen, "Is Brussels the Loser in Turkey's Elections?," *European Voice*, June 15, 2011, <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/2011/june/is-brussels-the-loser-in-turkey-s-elections-/71335.aspx>.

52. Steven A. Cook, "Constitutional Stakes in Turkey's Election," Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, June 10, 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/turkey/constitutional-stakes-turkeys-election/p25249>.

53. Robert Wexler, "The AKP's Turkey: Asset or Liability for the United States?," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 10, 2011.

suggested NATO move its headquarters or missile defense system to Turkey to ensure Ankara's commitment to the West. Moreover, George Friedman stated that rising powers make older powers uneasy; thus, Turkey should not be surprised at fear about and opposition to its independent foreign policy.⁵⁴

PANEL DISCUSSIONS ON THE ELECTIONS

During the two weeks around the Turkish elections, eight public events were held in Washington D.C. all of which went full-house. The events were generally themed as election reviews except for WINEP's panel prior to the elections entitled, "The AKP's Turkey: Asset or Liability for the U.S." The crowd at these events and the media attention are clear signs that American intellectuals and the public are increasingly interested in Turkey. The commentators at these events also published their views in articles, which are analyzed in this report. What follows is the schedule of events in Washington, D.C. on Turkish elections in June 2011:

June 9, 2011 - The Heritage Foundation, Panel: Sally McNamara, Ariel Cohen, Carol Migdalovitz, Steven Cook.

June 10, 2011 - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Panel: Robert Wexler, Soner Cagaptay.

June 14, 2011 - The SETA Foundation, Panel: Nuh Yilmaz, Steven Cook, Burhanettin Duran.

June 15, 2011 - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Panel: Henri Barkey, Steven Cook, Ömer Taşpınar.

June 16, 2011 - Rumi Forum, Panel: Ali Aslan, Joshua Walker, Gönül Tol, Matthew Duss.

June 16, 2011 - Woodrow Wilson Center, Speaker: Fuat Keyman.

June 17, 2011 - Brookings Institute, Panel: Fiona Hill, Fuat Keyman, Ömer Taşpınar, Nuh Yilmaz.

June 23, 2011 - Middle East Institute, Panel at the Annual Conference on Turkey: Barış Ornalı, Henri Barkey, Doğu Ergil, Carol Migdalovitz, Murat Somer.

It is important to note that conservative institutions such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation published articles and organized events before the election but remained silent after the results were announced. It is also important to note that the Hudson Institute has remained silent about the elections though they were very much involved with Turkey's domestic and international issues in the last five years.

REPRESENTATION IN THE PARLIAMENT

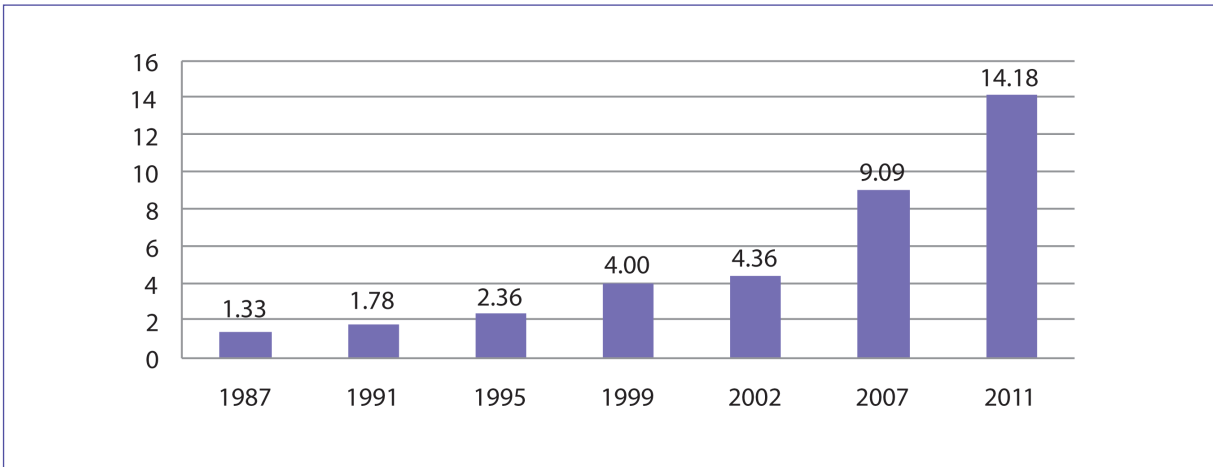
An overlooked issue in the election reviews is the better representation of the Turkish electorate in the newly elected parliament. Some articles mentioned the historic participation rate of 87 percent as an indicator of involvement of all segments of society in the elections. Another historic aspect of these elections is that 95.6 percent of the votes are represented in the parliament whereas only 53.8 percent was represented after 2002 elections and 87 percent was represented after 2007 elections. Though all four parties that got seats in the parliament assumed themselves successful, the votes for other parties significantly shrunk as they share a total of 4.6 percent of all votes. Once very popular, long-term established parties such as ANAP, DYP and DSP are virtually eliminated after losing the third consecutive elections. The low representation rates in the parliament after the past two elections were mentioned in election reviews but the historically high representation of votes in the new parliament was rarely mentioned.

A significant aspect of the 2011 elections was the involvement of women as candidates and elected members of parliament. There were a total of 256 female candidates on the lists and 78 of these made it to the parliament. With 44 female deputies, the AK Party ranks seated the most, followed by the CHP with 20 female Members of Parliament, the BDP's independents with 11 female MPs and the MHP with three female MPs. The percentage of women in the Turkish parliament since 1987 is shown on Figure 2. The percentage of women in the new parliament—14 percent—

54. Ibid.

is the highest in Turkish electoral history. One would expect this to be very significant for American analysts; however, this positive development was mentioned in only four articles out of 51 published about the elections. Although freedom and civil rights for various sections of the society were mentioned in many articles, only Richard Falk mentioned the need for improving religious freedom of the majority and the rights of headscarved women⁵⁵ that constitute around two thirds of all women in Turkey.

FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN THE TURKISH PARLIAMENT



Turkey also witnessed the involvement of younger generations in the 2011 elections. The age for parliamentary eligibility was reduced from 30 to 25 with the recent changes in the election law. Youth’s involvement in the elections was mentioned in a *New York Times* article on June 8th which noted that more than half of Turkey’s population is under the age of thirty.⁵⁶ Four percent of the AK Party’s candidates and 4.5 percent of the CHP’s candidates were under 30 but only two such candidates from the AK Party made it to the Parliament: M. Bilal Macit (27) and Mehmet Mus (29). Though the U.S. media and think tanks have focused specifically on the Arab Spring and the youth’s role in it, some significant developments were overlooked by most of them: Several youth groups from the Middle East visited Turkey to witness the democratic election process and the involvement of youth chapters of political parties. For instance, a delegation of 56 Egyptian activists had a five-day trip to Turkey during the elections and met with President Gül and members of the AK Party and the CHP. While the commentators discuss whether Turkey can be a model or an influential player in the region, it seems there are already developments in this direction due to Turkey’s matured democracy, complete with better representation in the parliament and higher involvement of youth in politics.

INDEPENDENTS, JUDICIAL DISCREPANCIES AND THE OATH CRISIS

The rulings of Turkey’s Supreme Election Board (YSK) on the candidacy of some controversial figures, detained members of parliament and the oath-taking crisis after the elections are complicated issues hardly seen in other democracies. These issues received only limited coverage in the U.S. media. The following is a comprehensive analysis of these issues to help the reader grasp the background.

The 1982 constitution includes a 10 percent national threshold for political parties to win seats in parliament. Supporters note the threshold’s success in stabilizing the political system—in which dozens of national parties

55. Ibid.

56. Susanne Güsten, “Youths Play New Roles in Turkish Elections”, *The New York Times*, June 8, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/09/world/europe/09iht-M09-TURK-VOTE.html>.

run—by enabling only a half-dozen at most to be seated in parliament. On the other hand, it's critics have labeled the process undemocratic, causing distortion in voters' choice, giving disproportionate power to winners and resulting in fragile coalition governments. While many parties were challenged by this threshold, some parties have been running independent candidates to overcome this obstacle since the 1983 elections. Once elected, an independent MP can join a political party and a party can get a parliamentary group status to have representatives in parliamentary committees if it has at least 20 members. Also, the option of running as independent candidate has provided many locally influential figures a chance to get elected without a party affiliation. The June 2011 elections had total 203 independent candidates with various political perspectives. All of the independent and party-affiliated candidates have to be approved by local election committees and Turkey's Supreme Election Board (YSK). Being a jailed suspect in an ongoing investigation is not an obstacle to run as a candidate; however, the person must not have been convicted of major crimes. For instance, any terrorism-related conviction carrying a sentence of more than a year makes the convicted ineligible for parliament.

These candidates from the bloc were vetoed because of being convicted in the past and not obtaining clearance from the local courts that reinstates their right to run. For most of these candidates, the decision was scandalous since they were convicted in 1990s and got their rights automatically reinstated by an amendment to Turkish Penal Code (TCK) in 2005.

To avoid the nationwide threshold, the Kurdish-nationalist Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) established Labor, Democracy and Freedom Bloc with a few other socialist parties and announced 66 independent candidates in 43 cities. This was the second time the Kurdish-nationalists ran as independents since they lost the elections in 2002 as a party with 6.1 percent of the votes and stayed out of the parliament. Just like the other candidates, the bloc's candidates went through approval of local and nationwide election committees.

One of the candidates in Ağrı was rejected by local election office, as he was found ineligible to run as a candidate though he ran as a candidate in 2009 mayoral election. Turkey's Supreme Election Board (YSK) has a long history of vetoing candidates. In the 2002 elections, Erdoğan's application and dozens of others' were vetoed, and in the 2007 elections 33 independents and 132 political party candidates were vetoed. For the June 2011 elections, a total of 12 candidates were vetoed by YSK including 7 independent candidates from BDP's bloc.

These candidates from the bloc were vetoed because of being convicted in the past and not obtaining clearance from the local courts that reinstates their right to run. For most of these candidates, the decision was scandalous since they were convicted in 1990s and got their rights automatically reinstated by an amendment to Turkish Penal Code (TCK) in 2005. They were told by local courts that they do not need a clearance document because they already have their rights. Moreover, two of the vetoed candidates were already elected MPs and they did not have this problem in 2007 when they were running as candidates. The decision was followed by furious statements by the BDP and other parties and violent demonstrations on the streets. After 3 days, these candidates, other than one recently convicted, got the required documents and appealed YSK's veto. YSK's final decision approved the candidacy of six vetoed candidates from the bloc and one other independent candidate who had a similar case.

Other than the vetoed candidates, the BDP bloc included five candidates who were jailed as suspects of membership in the KCK—the urban counterpart to the PKK terrorist organization—and as parties to the ongoing investigation. As mentioned above, unless convicted, being a jailed suspect of an ongoing investigation is not an obstacle to run as a candidate or to win a seat; however, the judges in the related cases may deny release of accused candidates as risks

to flee the country or to obscure evidence related to the case. These candidates got enough votes in their districts to get elected, but just like the jailed suspects from the CHP and MHP, the courts did not allow them to be released.

The most controversial candidate in BDP's bloc is Hatip Dicle who was among the six candidates who were first vetoed then approved by YSK before the elections. Just like the other five candidates from the bloc, he had a conviction in 1990's but had his electoral rights reinstated with the 2005 amendment. However, there was a court decision in 2009 that sentenced him for 20 months for terrorist propaganda, which was appealed to Supreme Court of Appeals (Yargıtay). While the YSK approved his candidacy in its final decision on April 11th, the final appeal to Dicle's sentencing was rejected on May 11th, and his approved conviction was reported to YSK on June 9th, just three days before the election.

The process through which YSK reviewed the court report and asked Dicle for a defense took two weeks, during which time he entered the elections as a legally approved independent candidate and got more than 77 thousand votes, enough to get elected. He was even provided with the deputyship certificate by the local election committee. However, YSK's decision on June 22 revoked Dicle's right to assume office. According to election law, his seat was given to the next candidate on the list of the party with the most votes in the district, the AK Party.

Although the government has no leverage on YSK and the AK Party itself has been a victim of such controversial rulings, the BDP members have accused the AK Party of orchestrating Dicle's disqualification, instead of focusing on the judicial ruling.

Although the government has no leverage on YSK and the AK Party itself has been a victim of such controversial rulings, the BDP members have accused the AK Party of orchestrating Dicle's disqualification, instead of focusing on the judicial ruling. Furthermore, one of the judges deciding on Hatip Dicle's sentencing in the Supreme Court of Appeals (Yargıtay) also sat on the YSK. As the committee made its final decision to reject Dicle's appeal on May 11, it was clear that he was not eligible to run as a candidate. Yet both the YSK and Dicle's attorneys allowed the legal procedures to be delayed, enabling Dicle's candidacy and the subsequent popular disappointment social unrest.

Other than BDP's candidates, two major opposition parties included jailed suspects of ongoing prosecutions as candidates on their lists. The CHP had two candidates Mehmet Haberal, a doctor and former university president, and Mustafa Balbay, a columnist at a nationwide newspaper. Both have been in jail as high profile suspects of the Ergenekon coup-plot investigation. The MHP had retired special forces general Engin Alan, who is a jailed suspect in the Sledgehammer coup-plot investigation. These parties got enough votes in the related districts to get all three of these candidates elected as members of parliament. However, as was the case with BDP's candidates, the judges in the related cases denied their release for risks of fleeing the country or obscuring evidence related to the case.

Some other controversial candidates included Ret. Gen. Çetin Doğan, the suspected leader of the Sledgehammer coup-plot, and two other Ergenekon suspects who decided to run as independent as they were not included in any party's list: Tuncay Özkan, a journalist and former TV station owner, and Doğu Perinçek, the former Labor Party leader. These three independent candidates failed to get sufficient votes to get elected, Özkan getting the highest number of votes with 32,630 while at least 60,000 votes are required to win election in their districts. While millions of votes were cast in these districts, the very low number of votes received by these candidates was a clear indication that they do not have public support.

The CHP decided to protest the continued jailing of two elected candidates by not taking the oath of office in parliament. Similarly, the BDP's independents did not take oath, thus only members of the AK Party and the MHP took the oath in parliament's first session on June 28, 2011. The CHP members were present during the oath ceremony but remained unresponsive when their turn to take the oath arrived. Conversely, the BDP's independents boycotted

the parliament session and convened in Diyarbakır. Though the reasons for protests were judicial decisions, both parties expected the AK Party to take charge and meet their expectations. As days passed, members of the CHP continued to join parliament sessions without taking the oath and the BDP's independents continued their boycott. The boycott helped Kılıçdaroğlu avoid an early party convention, as his opponents were poised to get enough signatures to challenge his leadership. The CHP united to defend the odd boycott and abandoned the discussions on its leader's election performance. Bilateral meetings of party delegates were then held to end the oath-taking standoff. After a few meetings, the CHP and AK Party representatives agreed on a joint statement that suggested respecting the judicial system, sought solutions in the parliament and committed to drafting a new constitution that broadens freedoms. After the release of the joint statement, members of the CHP took the oath on July 11th—13 days after the first session of the parliamentary term. The meetings between the AK Party and BDP representatives also made progress, but no concrete agreement was reached before the parliament went on recess in July. The bloc's independents took their oaths on October 1, 2011—the first day parliament reconvened after recess—and officially joined the BDP to form a parliamentary group.

CONCLUSION

The articles published on Turkey's June 2011 elections indicate that there is an increasing interest in the U.S. towards Turkey's domestic and international politics. Turkey's handling of constitutional reform, the Kurdish issue and foreign policy will be closely watched and widely discussed in the U.S. The developments in Turkey's political system require in-depth analysis, as Turkey becomes a powerful and consolidated democracy in a turbulent region. Analysts generally focus their attention on major issues that receive broad media coverage; however, daily discussions should not keep them away from considering other important aspects of Turkey's political system.

An overview of commentaries during the elections period shows that the American opinion-makers strongly support a new, civil constitution in Turkey despite their varied perspectives on the AK Party. Since discussions about transitioning to a presidential system discussions were abandoned in Turkey after the elections, other important aspects of constitutional reform are expected to be covered by the analysts. A healthy constitutional reform process will make Turkey an advanced democracy and a better example to other nations not only in the Middle East but around the world. At the same time, Turkey's image abroad—particularly in the U.S.—and diplomatic efforts will be hindered without a permanent solution to its long standing Kurdish issue. In the election reviews, a comprehensive solution to the Kurdish issue is seen as the most challenging task awaiting the new Turkish government. Constitutional rights for the Kurdish minority and methods to end the terror and violence in southeastern Turkey will certainly be part of the discussions in the new term. Also, the political choice of the Kurdish electorate and their opinions on various issues need to be better analyzed and reflected in the U.S.

The elections reviews clearly indicate that Turkey's foreign policy and involvement in international matters are increasingly covered in the U.S. Turkey stands out with its relative political and economic stability as the Middle East experiences democratization and the European Union goes through the hardest financial crisis in its history. Turkey's policies toward, and relations with, its neighbors are viewed as an ongoing test which will eventually determine Turkey's role in the new regional order. The previous discussions such as Turkey's alleged "axis shift" and the question of "who lost Turkey?" will be abandoned as analysts become aware of Turkey's independent, multidimensional foreign policy that aligns with the policies of other powers in the region on some issues and diverges on some others. We can expect that U.S.-Turkey relations will continue as a generally pragmatic cooperation with points of disagreement on a few issues.

The opinion-makers should carefully analyze not only how Turkey develops its policies but also why some of these policies differ from American policies. Also, rhetoric and reality should be distinguished on issues related to Turkey as the line in between blurs often. Despite any differences, the Turkish government and all of the major political parties in Turkey should establish effective communication channels with the American audience to better explain their policies and avoid misconceptions.

On June 12, 2011 general elections for the parliament (Turkish Grand National Assembly) were held in Turkey. The Justice and Development Party (AK Party) won the general elections with 49 percent of the votes to run the office for a third term with a few seats short of supermajority in the parliament. The elections carry historic significance as an affirmation of the Turkish political system as a consolidated democracy with political stability and strong economic growth.

The articles published on Turkey's June 2011 elections indicate that there is an increasing interest in the U.S. towards Turkey's domestic and international politics. In a span of two weeks, more than 20 articles appeared in major newspapers and magazines and around 50 analyses were published by experts in think tanks in addition to commentaries at eight panel discussions held in Washington, D.C. In general, four major issues dominated the commentaries on elections: Performance of political parties, the new constitution, the Kurdish issue and foreign policy. This report provides a comparative analysis of perceptions on Turkey's June 2011 elections among U.S. opinion makers. It also examines the overlooked or misinterpreted parts of the picture and provides background information.

SETA | SİYASET, EKONOMİ VE TOPLUM ARAŞTIRMALARI VAKFI

Nenehatun Caddesi No: 66
GOP Çankaya 06700 Ankara TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 312.551 21 00 | Faks: +90 312.551 21 90
www.setav.org | info@setav.org

SETA | Washington D.C. Office

1025 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 1106
Washington, D.C., 20036
Tel: 202-223-9885 | Faks: 202-223-6099
www.setadc.org | info@setadc.org