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PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN TURKEY - AKP REGAINS ITS ABSOLUTE MAJORITY

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The AKP, having lost its absolute majority in June, succeeded in winning it back in the snap elections of 1 November 2015, which had been necessitated by the failed coalition negotiations. In a time marked by IS terror and the relaunched war against the PKK, the voters clearly expressed their desire for stability. The AKP credibly delivered the message that only a one-party government would be able to do so. The Kurdish party HDP again managed to enter parliament. The future government's principal task should be to overcome the deep polarisation in the country. One priority will continue to be a constitutional change with the aim of establishing a presidential system. Moreover, negotiations with the Kurds should be resumed and the relationship with Turkey's neighbours redressed. The European Union should encourage Ankara to return to the course of reforms and liberalisation.

The parliamentary snap elections of 1 November 2015 ended with quite a surprise, against all prognoses. The AKP (Justice and Development Party), which had lost its absolute majority after 13 years of one-party government in the elections of 7 June 2015, succeeded in regaining an absolute majority. It reached 49.48 percent of the votes and 317 of the in total 550 seats in parliament (June 2015: 40.9 percent and 258 seats). The CHP (Republican People's Party) obtained 25.31 percent and 134 seats (June 2015: 24.31 percent and 132 seats), the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) managed 11.90 percent and 40 seats (June 2015: 16.29 percent and 80 seats). The Kurdish HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party), which had taken the 10 percent hurdle in June and entered parliament for the first time, obtained 10.75 percent and 59 seats (June 2015: 13.12 percent and 80 seats). The voter turnout was 87.32 percent (June 2015: 86 percent).

Initial situation

The elections became necessary when neither the AKP managed to establish a coalition government with another party nor any other government could be formed that did not include the AKP. Presumably, President Erdogan was not really interested in a coalition government from the start and, therefore, banked on re-elections, hoping that he could regain the absolute majority this way. This strategy paid off completely. The MHP, by losing some 2 million votes and half their seats, clearly lost the elections; so did the HDP, which, although it lost approximately 1 million votes, managed to re-enter parliament.

Comparing the elections of June and November, the main difference is the following: In June, expectations focused on whether the HDP would be able

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to enter parliament at its first attempt and, in so doing, prevent an AKP majority, which would allow it to effect constitutional amendments and introduce a presidential system (see below). The elections practically had been turned into a referendum on Erdogan's planned boost in power. The main question this time was whether the AKP would succeed in regaining the absolute majority, while the HDP was generally expected to enter parliament again. The subject of these elections therefore was the choice between a one-party government or a coalition government. Curiously enough, the expected election results for the CHP and the MHP hardly sparked any interest.

Elections under different conditions

The new elections took place under completely different conditions than those in June. On the one hand, the armed conflict with the PKK flared up again. On 20 June, 33 Kurdish activists were killed in the course of a terrorist attack attributed to the Islamic State (IS). As revenge, PKK terrorists killed two Turkish police officers. This was sufficient ground for Erdogan to declare an end to the peace process begun with the PKK in March 2013. He had obviously concluded that this process had cost him votes in June, and this measure was clearly directed at attracting nationalist voters to the AKP. Since then, the Turkish Armed Forces have been conducting air raids and ground operations against positions of the organisation in the south-east of the country and in northern Iraq. PKK counter-attacks practically cause daily casualties among the police and the armed forces. Erdogan was criticised by his opponents, but also internationally, for restarting the conflict with the PKK simply to increase his chances in the elections, accepting, at least indirectly, these victims. It has to be noted, however, that the PKK readily accepted Erdogan's challenge. The success of the HDP in June and the growing popularity of its leader

Demirtas reduces the PKK's role among the Turkish Kurds. Lasting de-escalation would marginalise the terrorist organisation.

On the other hand, on 10 October, an attack, evidently committed by IS, against a peace march organised by Kurdish and leftist activists in Ankara, caused 102 victims and created an atmosphere of uncertainty throughout the country. Erdogan and Prime Minister Davutoglu insisted that the attack had been jointly planned by the PKK and the Syrian Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party). This claim seems highly improbable, simply because the PKK would not engage in an attack on an event mainly attended by Kurds and, moreover, the PYD fiercely opposes ISIS in Syria. Opponents of the AKP blame the government party for facilitating the attack by not taking sufficient security measures. A suspicion was even aired that the attack had indirectly suited Erdogan quite well, in order to create a climate of fear and re-enforce the desire for a strong leader.

Election campaign

In comparison with June, the election campaign was less intensive. Erdogan's restraint was remarkable, since he had much fewer public appearances this time. He had obviously realised that his constant campaigning on behalf of the AKP, which violated the president's duty to remain neutral, was a factor in the defeat in the June elections. What is more, the planned introduction of the presidential system, which is apparently not popular with Turkish citizens, obviously did not play a role in the campaign this time. The main opponent of the AKP's election campaign was the HDP, whose entry into parliament had prevented the governing party's absolute majority in June. Both Erdogan and Davutoglu made an effort to present the HDP as an instrument of the PKK. The OSCE observers criticised that the elections were severely hampered by repeated acts of violence against HDP

events (after the attack in Ankara, the party called off all meetings for security reasons), the unbalanced coverage favouring the AKP in the state-owned TV stations, and the intimidation of critical journalists. The claim of far-reaching election fraud raised by the opposition could not be confirmed.

Reasons for the result

The outcome of the elections was a clear vote in favour of stability. In view of IS terror and the re-started war against the PKK, the desire for security resulted in strong (re-)gains in votes for the AKP. Their leaders succeeded in credibly delivering the message that only a one-party government would be able to restore peace and stability. Erdogan declared that, should the AKP obtain an absolute majority, there would be no IS and PKK terrorism. The Ankara attack may well have had a considerable impact on the voters' behaviour. Other factors are the deterioration of the economic situation due to a clear decline in economic growth, together with increasing inflation and unemployment. The AKP message, saying that the return of peace and political stability are a precondition for recovery, was heard by the voters. In this respect the party enjoys the population's confidence. The election result also shows a clear preference for a one-party government, as Turkey in the past has made bad experiences with short-term coalitions, which were often marked by internal disputes and mutual deadlocks.

Another cause for the AKP's victory is the poor performance of the opposition parties CHP and MHP. In the past 13 years the CHP did not even get close to being able to compete with the AKP in terms of personalities and programme. The MHP, in turn, was severely punished for its negative approach, with its party leader Bahçeli being nicknamed „Mr. No“. What is more, Erdogan's estimation that the resumption of the military operations against the PKK would attract voters from the MHP

camp clearly worked. The HDP's poorer performance as compared to the June elections can also be attributed to the fact that in June many votes had been borrowed from other parties and constituencies, which made it possible for the HDP to clear the 10 percent hurdle and enter parliament, and in this way to prevent the AKP and Erdogan from acquiring more power. These voters, by following their desire for stability, returned to the AKP. Moreover, conservative and religious Kurds supported the government's hard anti-PKK course. In the eyes of many voters the HDP did not succeed in credibly distancing itself from PKK terrorism.

Ramifications for Turkey's policies and its relationship with the EU

- Overcoming the deep polarisation in the country should be the future government's most urgent task. The AKP's opponents and supporters, as well as religious and secular groups oppose each other more fiercely than ever. Yet, only bridging the rifts will bring lasting stability in the country. Whether or how far this will be possible in view of Erdogan's tendency to consciously engage in confrontation remains to be seen.
- How far the election outcome and the - in contrast to Erdogan's character - less confrontational personality of Davutoğlu will improve the situation with regard to freedom of press and opinion, as well as the right to demonstrate peacefully against the government will have to be shown. The harsh actions against critical media before the elections and a massive wave of arrests among opponents of the regime and (purported) followers of the preacher Fetullah Gülen on the day after the elections on the grounds of having planned a coup d'état do not bode well. It also remains to be seen whether and in how far the new government will continue the creeping Islamisation of the country.

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- The clear majority, however, puts the government into the position to resume the peace process with the PKK, free from the imperatives of tactical considerations linked to elections. Some time will still have to pass until the wounds of the past months will heal in both camps. The HDP argued for a continuation of the solution process already before the elections.
- Davutoglu, after the elections, declared that the government's priority will be to amend the constitution and establish a presidential system. If, and when, the government will be able to realise its plans still remains to be seen. Already when he headed the government, Erdogan worked towards that goal and has again clearly spoken out in favour of it. Currently, an agreement on this issue with the other parties seems highly unlikely. A parliamentary majority of 330 delegates with a subsequent referendum on the reform is needed, while with a two-thirds-majority the amendment may be passed without public referendum. The AKP is short of 13 delegates in order to go for the first possibility. Moreover, it must be taken into account that also within the party, and supposedly also on the part of Davutoglu, there are concerns regarding the presidential system.
- In foreign policy the line of the past years will have to be changed, as it has visibly led Turkey into isolation. Amending the relationships with a number of neighbouring states, which clearly deteriorated in the last years, is also urgently called for.
- Davutoglu, who largely campaigned himself, emerged from the elections strengthened. Now he is not only the appointed, but also the elected Prime Minister. He will have to prove if he can put a mark of his own on the government, and whether and how far he is willing and in a position to go beyond the role

prescribed to him by Erdogan up to now, namely being an implementer of the president's political line. Since Erdogan is expected to continue his present course as president and de facto head of government, a conflict between the two politicians and frictions within the AKP cannot be ruled out.

- The EU, in its relations with Turkey, now has a government as a partner again that is capable of action. In the talks on the refugees issue, which is the most pressing problem at the moment, Erdogan may well act more self-assuredly after the AKP's electoral victory and will hardly decrease Turkish demands vis-à-vis the West. For the purpose of cooperation, the Union will have to find a balance between exceedingly accentuated criticism of the violation of fundamental rights in Turkey, and the maintenance of positions of principle. The delay in the publication of the - by now published - progress report provoked a wary attitude already before the elections. Overall, the EU should try to convince Turkey to resume its reform-centred course and, as far as possible, encourage and promote the negotiations with the Kurds. Moreover, the Union should remember Turkey not only in times of „distress“, but should view Ankara as a significant partner in political and security affairs in an unsettled region.

Personal Data:

Ambassador (ret) Dr. Marius Calligaris has been working as an associated researcher for the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management since 2010. Law studies, graduated from the Diplomatic Academy Vienna. 1968 entry into the Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Deployed abroad in Italy, Israel, Romania, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and South Caucasus. He retired at the end of 2009.

Note: This contribution exclusively represents the author's own opinion.

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