

Turkey after the elections: time for consensus and pragmatism

Amanda Paul

Some eight and half years since first coming to power, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) celebrated a third landslide victory, taking almost 50% of the vote at the 12th June Parliamentary elections. The magic 50% had only been reached by two politicians before: in 1950 and 1954 by Adnan Menderes, and in 1965 by Süleyman Demirel. The victory also puts Prime Minister Erdoğan on track to become Turkey's longest serving leader since the Republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. While the AKP received a greater percent of the vote than in the 2007 elections, adjustments concerning constituency seat numbers, implemented by the Supreme Electoral Board (YSK), resulted in it taking fewer seats.

Two other parties also entered Parliament. The Republican People's Party (CHP) took 26% which was less than supporters had hoped for and has opened the door for opponents of its leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, to begin internal fighting. The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) took 13% while 36 independent candidates, mostly backed by the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), also entered. While six of these 36 are presently being detained in prison on terrorism related charges, they are expected to be released shortly. The BDP's success, doubling its deputies, will place greater pressure on Erdoğan to address Kurdish demands for greater autonomy and recognition of their identity. For the first time in more than 25 years of conflict, the Kurds have become a part of mainstream politics and can no longer be sidelined. A record number of women also enter parliament (78) as well as some celebrities including former Turkish international footballer, Hakan Şükür.

The AKP delivered

The AKP's popularity has little to do with ideology and more to do with concrete results with a broad voter base spanning the entire country. While Erdoğan had been accused of becoming increasingly intolerant to criticism and pushing a conservative agenda, his success in building a wealthier and more developed Turkey has over-riden these fears. Turkey is stable, with improved infrastructure, a more effective social system and a booming economy, which has put more Lira into pockets. Whereas Eurozone members are queuing up for bailouts, Turkey's economy remains strong, growing at an annual average rate of 6%. Inflation has slowed to 7% and in 2013 Turkey will pay off its outstanding debt - acquired following the 2001 banking crisis - to the IMF. Unemployment continues to fall and small and medium sized enterprises (SME's) have become the backbone of the economy. Significant investment has also been made in many sectors including education, with all school children shortly to receive tablet pc's instead of books. However, there are some financial weaknesses, including a gaping current account deficit (expected to exceed 9% of GDP this year) that needs to be tackled.

The new government should be in place by early July with a number of new faces as some Ministers are likely to be replaced. Along with the recently established Ministry for the EU, 20 new Deputy Minister positions are also planned.

The new Constitution

The first priority is to start work on replacing the 1982 Constitution, imposed as a result of a military coup in 1980. The new Constitution should meet EU norms and standards ensuring the rights and freedoms for all, regardless of ethnicity religion or culture, and streamline administration. This will include placing the Chief of the Military Staff under the Minister of

Defence. Presently, Turkey is the only country in Europe where the Chief of Staff answers only to the Prime Minister. The new Constitution should also enable Turkey to meet most of the opening and closing benchmarks needed for EU related reforms that require change in the current Constitution.

Because the AKP, with 326 seats, fell short of the 367 seats required to re-write the Constitution unilaterally or the 330 to take it to referendum, Erdoğan must seek consensus. A “made by the AKP” Constitution would have lacked legitimacy in the eyes of half of the country so this is by far the preferred outcome although it does risk becoming a long and drawn out battle if parties are unable to work together, which has been the case in the past.

While Erdoğan has committed himself towards an “inclusive approach” consulting with opposition, media and academics, a consequence of this will be that he will probably have to drop his plan to transform Turkey’s political system from a parliamentary to a presidential one. A presidential style of governance has been interpreted by some as a step towards centralising power at the cost of democracy, while also being opposed by many of Turkey’s political elites including a number of Erdoğan’s close colleagues such as President Gül. Nevertheless, even without this change it seems Erdoğan still has his eye on becoming Turkey’s next President.

A second priority will be fresh efforts to end the decades-old Kurdish problem. Much depends on the negotiations between the government and the BDP (which has strong ties to the PKK, a listed terrorist organisation) over rights, identity and greater autonomy. The fact that the PKK has apparently agreed to extend the ceasefire (which was due to end on 15 June) is a positive signal but much will depend on whether or not Erdoğan can find broad support, in particular from the CHP (the MHP will continue to refuse to discuss the issue).

Turkey-EU relations

While Erdoğan is apparently planning a Brussels visit early on (his first foreign trip is expected to be to Azerbaijan), it is unlikely the election result will reverse the negative trend in Turkey’s EU membership negotiations. It has been almost one year since a negotiating chapter was opened; with eighteen frozen due to vetoes by Cyprus, France, Germany or the European Council as a whole, with only three difficult chapters remaining. For political reasons, France blocks a handful and Germany one, while the rest are blocked by Cyprus because of Turkey’s failure to fully meet its Customs Union (additional protocol) obligations and open its harbours and airspace to the Republic of Cyprus’ vessels. Turkey has always linked this to the EU delivering on commitments it made to Turkish Cypriots following the 2004 UN Annan Plan Referendum for the reunification of Cyprus, when Turkish Cypriots voted “yes” while Greek Cypriots voted “no”. As a goodwill gesture the EU offered the Turkish Cypriots an economic package which included a Direct Trade Regulation. However, the Regulation has never materialised due to Greek Cypriot opposition.

It has been suggested that with such a strong mandate, Erdoğan should take steps to extend the additional protocol. While this may inject new impetus into the negotiations it seems unlikely to happen. While the Greek Cypriots state they would immediately unblock eight chapters, there is concern they may renege and demand some “extras” including demanding that Ankara stop “illegally” using Ercan airport and the Port of Famagusta in the North. Furthermore, while such a step may gain Turkey credibility, unless there are reciprocal measures taken by the EU regarding the Turkish Cypriots, it is doubtful that the newly empowered and self-confident Erdoğan will do this.

The only exit from this Turkey-Cyprus-EU triangle is a solution to the decades old Cyprus problem. Unfortunately ongoing UN mediated negotiations between the Turkish and Greek Cypriot leaders do not seem to be heading in the right direction. Given that Cyprus and its problem have been exploited by some anti-Turkish accession leaders, failure to progress will be no great tragedy to some.

Furthermore, while there has been much talk of “relaunching” the EU negotiation process, it seems there is little political will from the EU to do this with enlargement fatigue, the euro-crisis and visionless leaders hobbling the process. However, while the talks may remain in limbo, relations will continue to “tick along”. Turkey needs the EU anchor to help push through reforms related to the new Constitution, and help maintain a stable economy, while the EU will continue to view Turkey as a crucial partner in key areas such as foreign policy, energy, illegal immigration, etc.

Other foreign policy priorities will include pushing for stability and increased democracy in the Middle East, including reaching out to the peoples of the region, something Erdoğan stressed in his victory speech and finding a way to reset relations with Israel. While a fresh opportunity to reopen rapprochement with Armenia, which broke down a year ago, would also be optimal, Turkey will need to be far more creative as well as sensitive to Azerbaijani concerns than previously. Furthermore, now that the Speakers in the US House of Representatives and the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Congress have changed to personalities that do not support the Armenian genocide bill, Turkey may feel less pressure to progress this.

Challenging days lie ahead. The new Turkish Parliament (which is the most representative in history with 96% of votes reflected) will only be effective if all parties are able to work together and produce compromises that reflect the opinions of a broad majority of Turkish society. Finding a way to balance foreign policy priorities with the domestic challenges of finally putting an end to the Kurdish problem and writing the new constitution will not be easy. With both these later issues risking “deadlock” Erdoğan will have to demonstrate masterful diplomacy, vision and compromise.

Amanda Paul is a Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre.
