

# **ELECTION WATCH**

**No. 01**

**Sunday, 12 June 2011**

## Turkish Elections, June 2011

Turkey goes to poll on 12 June 2011 to elect its Parliament for the 24<sup>th</sup> term.<sup>1</sup> The recent uprisings in the Middle East have brought the issues of democracy, participation and popular aspirations to the fore. The developments in the region have also highlighted the predicament and what many call double standards of the international community in general and the United States and the west in particular. The Turkish example has been oft cited as a possible model for the predominantly Muslim countries of the Middle East. With a Parliamentary and multiparty electoral system Turkey certainly is more democratic than most of the Middle Eastern and North African countries.

The likely victory of Justice and Development Party or AKP led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has many western observers worried. *The Economist*, for example, exhorted the Turkish electorates to vote against the ruling AKP and endorse the main opposition group, the Republican Peoples Party or CHP.<sup>2</sup> A similar analysis appeared in an editorial of *The Financial Times*.<sup>3</sup> As this election is being considered one of the most important one in the democratic history of Turkey it would be fitting to the occasion to appraise the Turkish electoral system, actors and issues.

### Electoral System

The Grand National Assembly of Turkey (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*) is a unicameral body with 550 members who are elected through proportional representation system to serve five-year

<sup>1</sup>“24th Term of Parliament Will Begin After June 12 Elections”, *Turkish Weekly*, 7 June 2011, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/115742/24th-term-of-parliament-will-begin-after-june-12-elections.html>

<sup>2</sup>“One for the opposition”, *The Economist*, 2 June 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/18774786>

<sup>3</sup>“Turkey’s electoral balancing act”, *Financial Times*, 7 June 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5e746a6c-914c-11e0-b1ea-00144feab49a.html#axzz1Og2FBvXk>

terms.<sup>4</sup> Each one of Turkey's 81 provinces gets a seat each prior to the allocation of the remaining seats among the provinces in proportion to their populations.

Political parties must receive a threshold of ten percent votes to be eligible for allocation of seats in the parliament which are apportioned according to the largest average method of proportional representation conceived by the Belgian mathematician Victor D'Hondt in 1899.<sup>5</sup> The political parties must be organised in at least half of the provinces and at least in a third of the districts in these provinces.

The ten percent threshold remains an important feature of Turkish electoral system despite criticism and longstanding debates on lowering it.<sup>6</sup> The electoral system has come under attack for its lack of representativeness and in 2008 the European Court of Human rights stopped short of calling it undemocratic.<sup>7</sup> The smaller parties have no chance of winning parliamentary seats and hence a large number of electorate remains unrepresented in this system.

### Principal Players

The important players are the incumbent Justice and Development Party or *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP), Republican People's Party or *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP), Nationalist Movement Party or *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP) and independents supported by the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party or *Bariş ve Demokrasi Partisi* (BDP) to circumvent the ten percent threshold. The Speaker of the outgoing Parliament Mehmet Ali Şahin predicted that the elections would result in a parliament comprising of these four groups.<sup>8</sup>

Since its first electoral victory in 2002 the AKP has been the dominant player in Turkish politics, taking on the military and the secular-Kemalist elites who have controlled and guided the political process in Turkey for a very long time. In the last elections held in 2007, with 46.4 percent votes, the AKP had won 341 seats.<sup>9</sup> With the victory in the September 2010 referendum the AKP seems to be riding on a popular wave and pegged as the clear favourite for a third time in a row. The credentials of AKP are bolstered by the success of its government in tackling the

---

<sup>4</sup> Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (2011), "The Constitutional Tradition And Parliamentary Life", [http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/english/about\\_tgna.htm](http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/english/about_tgna.htm)

<sup>5</sup> "Turkey", *Election Resources on the Internet*, <http://electionresources.org/tr/#RESOURCES>

<sup>6</sup> Ercan, Yavuz, "10 pct election threshold to be reduced", *Today's Zaman*, 20 September 2008 [http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=153761](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=153761)

<sup>7</sup> Anna Jenkinson, "Turkish Election System Has Weaknesses, Not Illegal, Court Says", *Bloomberg*, 30 January 2007, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=asQTIEPnIOi0>

<sup>8</sup> Göksel Bozkurt, "Four-group Parliament awaits Turkey on June 13, says Speaker Şahin", *Hürriyet Daily News*, Karabük, 7 June 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=four-group-parliament-awaits-turkey-on-june-13-says-parliament-speaker-2011-06-07>

<sup>9</sup> Election Resources on the Internet, Elections to the Turkish Grand National Assembly 2007, <http://electionresources.org/tr/assembly.php?election=2007>

economic issues, better handling of the Kurdish issue, charting of an independent and assertive role for Turkey in international politics and its struggle against the old guards of the Kemalist elites in the military and judiciary. While for many sections its Islamist past might be a cause of consternation, it gives AKP an edge in a predominantly Muslim country where religion had been long controlled by the state and its secular Kemalist elites.

The main opposition party, the CHP, which had won 112 seats in the last elections with a vote share of 20.9 percent<sup>10</sup> is a changed outfit and is on its way to redefine itself as a social democratic party. Though not in a position to upstage the AKP in the elections, the CHP is headed to improve its vote shares and seats in comparison to the last elections if the latest poll predictions are to be believed.<sup>11</sup>

The Kurdish factor, an anathema in Turkish politics for a long-long time, is still important. Notwithstanding the reforms aimed at the EU membership political participation of Kurds, who represent 15 percent of the population, is still difficult. In 2008 Kurdish leaders appealed the European court of Human Rights against the 10 percent threshold rule. Though the court accepted that the threshold, highest in Europe, is one of the lacunae in the Turkish electoral system but ruled that the system was not undemocratic and it was up to the Turkish political leadership to devise the best electoral system.<sup>12</sup> In the ongoing electoral process the disqualification of many Kurdish candidates in the run-up to the election resulted in protests and election boycott warning by the BDP.<sup>13</sup> The BDP in its previous avatar as the Peace and Democracy Party (DTP) had a share of 5.2 percent votes and 20 seats through the independents supported by it.

Both Prime Minister Erdogan and CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu are trying to woo the Kurdish voters.<sup>14</sup> Erdogan's appeal to the Kurds is strengthened by the steps his government took to improve the situation of Kurds in 2009 such as the abolition of Martial law in the southeast and the loosening of ban on the Kurdish language media. The performance of BDP in the Kurdish southeast could affect the AKP's prospects of gaining two-thirds majority in parliament.

---

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Turkey polls show ruling AKP support near 50%, *Sabah*, 1 June 2011,

<http://english.sabah.com.tr/National/2011/06/01/turkey-poll-shows-ruling-akp-support-at-486>

<sup>12</sup> Anna Jenkinson, "Turkish Election System Has Weaknesses, Not Illegal, Court Says", *Bloomberg*, 30 January 2007, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=asQTIEPnIOi0>

<sup>13</sup> Champion, "Mark and Ayla Albayrak (2011), Kurds Threaten Boycott of Turkey Poll", *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 April 2011

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703922504576272852459120450.html>

<sup>14</sup> Erdoğan, Kılıçdaroğlu woo Kurds at Diyarbakır rallies, *The Daily Zaman*, 5 June 2011, [http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?load=detay&newsId=246200&link=246200](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&newsId=246200&link=246200)

The MHP, another important player, is in disarray following a sex tape scandal that resulted in the resignation of ten senior leaders during the run-up to the elections.<sup>15</sup> If the MHP fails to cross the ten percent threshold, it is the AKP which stands to gain the most. Thus MHP's performance is going to be a crucial factor in these polls. In 2007 with 14.3 percent votes, the MHP secured 70 seats, thus emerging as the third largest party in parliamentary.<sup>16</sup> The AKP with an eye on the MHP's votes has adopted a more nationalist stand in recent days.

## Issues

The main issues at stake are the constitutional reforms, the Kurdish issue, and issue of unemployment. On the constitutional reforms the AKP and CHP agree principally but given the strong position of the AKP there is a degree of mistrust. The 1982 Constitution which was a result of military coup and gave the military a decisive role in politics is an anachronism in present day and a change in it would pave the way for a new chapter in Turkish democracy. However, the opposition is wary of AKP's intent and vision for a new constitution and does not want the AKP to reach the magic number of two-third majority which would allow it to change the constitution without having to heed the dissenting views.

The issue of membership of the European Union is not a prominent issue in this election although it finds a place in the election manifestos of both the AKP and CHP. The AKP has been instrumental in keeping the idea of membership afloat through measures such as electoral reforms and minority rights, yet the long wait has made the nationalists within the AKP restless. Under the AKP one can observe a shift in the orientation of Turkish foreign policy from the West to the East. Foreign policy issues do not find prominent place in domestic election campaigns, but in the late stage of campaign issues like Mavi *Marmara* incident and relations with Israel found their way in the election speeches.<sup>17</sup> Both the AKP and CHP accused each other of not criticising Israeli actions sufficiently.

On the Kurdish issue both the AKP and CHP seem to be in favour of negotiations and gradual relaxation but again the popular consideration prevents them from walking that extra mile. Nevertheless, both the parties are keen to woo the Kurdish electorate in the southeast of the country. Importantly, the BDP and other Kurdish actors would like to press for adequate representation of the Kurds in the political system and recognition of their distinct national identity in the definition of Turkish citizenship in any future constitution.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> "MHP sex tape scandal still hot issue for Turkey's politicians", *Sundays' Zaman*, Istanbul, 23 May 2011, [http://www.sundayszaman.com/sunday/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=244819](http://www.sundayszaman.com/sunday/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=244819)

<sup>16</sup> "Elections to the Turkish Grand National Assembly 2007", Election Resources on the Internet <http://electionresources.org/tr/assembly.php?election=2007>

<sup>17</sup> Sami Kohen, "Foreign policy during elections", *Hurriyet*, 8 June 2011

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=foreign-policy-during-elections-2011-06-08>

<sup>18</sup> Akyol Mustafa, "Not all quiet on the eastern front", *Hurriyet*, 17 May 2011,

The sex tape issue has made the ultra-nationalist MHP weak but this has not become a major issue in this election. On the economic front the high un-employment is an important issue as the official unemployment rate stands at 12 percent.<sup>19</sup>

### Predictions and predicaments

The AKP is expected to win comfortably.<sup>20</sup> The extent of AKP's victory is the most eagerly awaited aspect of this election. The AKP is looking at the magic figure of 367 seats, the two-third majority mark required for changing the constitution without the need for a referendum. For some analysts a "supermajority" to the AKP would result in the erosion of democracy in Turkey.<sup>21</sup> The far reaching constitutional changes that can be brought about by the AKP if it gets a two-third majority is causing consternation among those who see authoritarian tendencies in Prime Minister Erdoğan. The move towards a presidential system, something Erdogan has advocated on many occasions, would not augur well for a Turkey which needs to strengthen its democratic essentials. Many believe that Erdoğan himself would like to become the President once the current incumbent Abdullah Gul's term ends in 2012 as according to the law Erdoğan cannot become Prime Minister in 2015. Among all these speculations one idea that is unanimously accepted is that the result of this election is crucial for Turkey as the AKP has led Turkey on a more assertive path internationally, its relations with Israel have soured and it has sought to redefine its relations with the US. Simultaneously it has sought to play an important role in its neighbourhood as is evident in its attempts to suggest a third way on the Iranian front. Turkey under AKP has sought to play a more active role in the Middle East and also focused on its Islamic identity and heritage. The results that strengthen the AKP would certainly cause some anxiousness domestically, regionally and internationally.

**Compiled By Anjani Kumar Singh**

---

Anjani Kumar Singh is a Doctoral candidate in the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Email: [aks1511@gmail.com](mailto:aks1511@gmail.com)

---

**As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy**

---

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=not-all-quiet-in-the-eastern-front-2011-05-17>

<sup>19</sup> "High Unemployment Expected to Dominate Turkey Elections", *Voice of America*, 8 June 2011,

<http://www.voanews.com/english/news/europe/High-Unemployment-Expected-to-Dominate-Turkey-Elections-123482054.html>

<sup>20</sup> "Turkey polls show ruling AKP support near 50%", *Sabah*, 1 June 2011,

<http://english.sabah.com.tr/National/2011/06/01/turkey-poll-shows-ruling-akp-support-at-486>

<sup>21</sup> Katinka Barysch, "Turkey's choice", *The New York Times*, 2 June 2011

[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/03/opinion/03iht-edbarysch03.html?\\_r=1&scp=4&sq=Turkey&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/03/opinion/03iht-edbarysch03.html?_r=1&scp=4&sq=Turkey&st=cse)