

CRS Insights

Turkey After June 2015 Elections: Erdogan and the AKP Fall Short

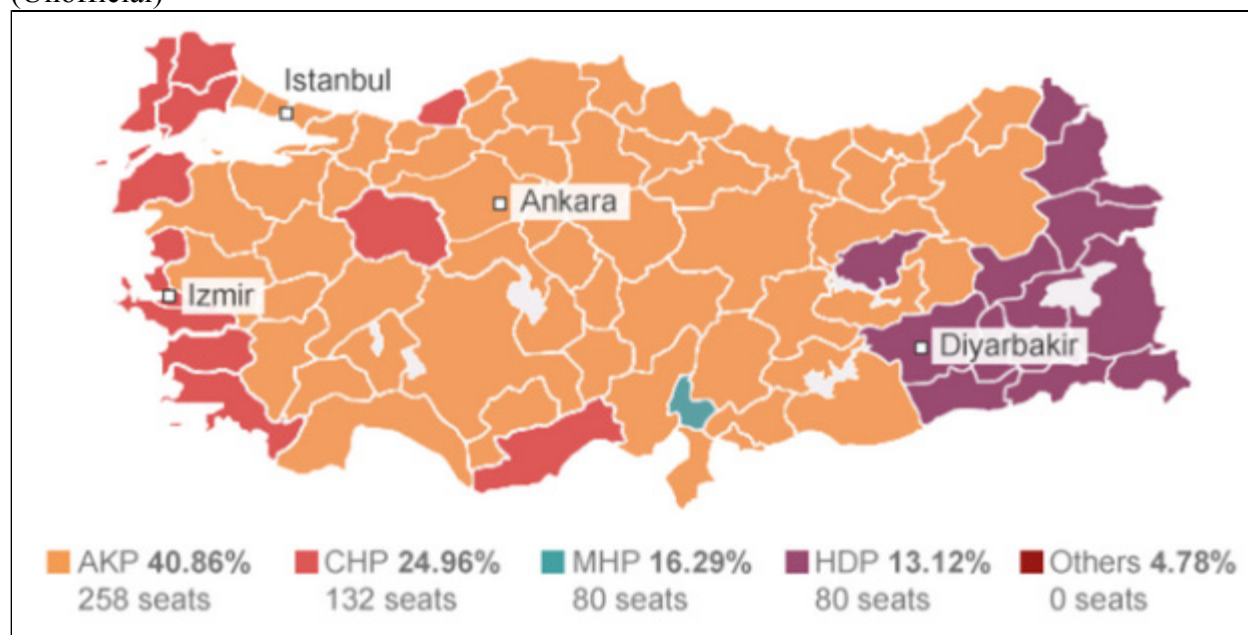
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Although Turkey's Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) won the most seats in parliamentary elections held on June 7, 2015, it lost the governing majority it had enjoyed since 2002—probably ending President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's (*air-doe-wan*) hopes for constitutional change to increase his formal powers. Many domestic and international observers have heralded the election results as a long overdue check on what they characterize as Erdogan's authoritarian and possibly Islamist ambitions.

Figure 1. Turkish Parliamentary Election Results, June 2015

(Unofficial)



Sources: Anadolu Agency and BBC

Overview and Assessment

The AKP fell short of a parliamentary majority, let alone the supermajority that would have enabled it to hold a popular referendum on a "presidential system" configured to increase the overall power of the office and its current occupant (Erdogan). Some of the seats the AKP had counted on went to the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)—a party rooted in the Kurdish nationalist movement—when the HDP crossed Turkey's 10% minimum electoral threshold in the elections. HDP leader Selahattin Demirtas's (*day-meer-tosh*) strategy involved reaching out beyond the HDP's Kurdish base to liberal and secular Turks and other voters wary or weary of Erdogan. Many conservative and religious Kurds who are largely concentrated in southeastern Turkey and had supported the AKP in previous elections [apparently turned to the HDP](#). Some observers also assert that the AKP lost support because voters were increasingly experiencing the effects of Turkey's recently slowed economy and weakened currency.

[Considerable uncertainty](#) abides regarding how the results will translate into political outcomes. Erdogan has discretion in assigning the task of [forming a government](#) to a political party leader, and if a government cannot be formed within 45 days after the results are certified, or if it collapses sometime thereafter, Erdogan can call for new elections. Erdogan may favor this outcome in the likely event that other parties demand, in return for helping the AKP govern Turkey, to [curb his future political influence or resume corruption investigations he quashed](#). Erdogan may seek to convince voters to rally back to the AKP by arguing that other parties' insistence on

concessions [undermines continuity in government](#).

The AKP and its nominal leader, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu (*dah-voot-oh-loo*), might [lead a new government](#), either in a formal coalition with or by receiving "[outside support](#)" from one of the other parties—the HDP, the Republican People's Party (CHP, leans left), or the Nationalist Action Party (MHP, leans right). Resistance by the other parties to Erdogan's priorities could provide opportunities for AKP leaders to develop agendas and political identities more independent of Erdogan. If the AKP cannot form a government, a [coalition or minority arrangement among the three non-AKP parties is possible](#) if Erdogan gives them the opportunity and they can overcome traditional Turkish-Kurdish ethnic nationalist cleavages.

It is unclear how tenable and durable inter-party consensus might be on matters such as budgeting, foreign military deployments on Turkish territory, and general political and economic reform. Erdogan and the AKP have often contrasted the relative stability and prosperity Turkey experienced under their single-party stewardship with the frequent stalemate, unrest, and economic crisis Turks experienced in earlier eras under coalition governments. [Some analysts view this as a legitimate concern](#), while [others say it is overblown](#). Moody's characterized the election results as [credit negative](#) for Turkey, but Turkish voters may have determined that countering Erdogan's efforts to permanently change the constitutional system was [worth risking some uncertainty](#).

Broader Implications

It is unclear what the return of parliamentary politics after 13 years of single-party rule will mean for Turkey's future and, in turn, for U.S. interests regarding Turkey. Key factors include:

U.S. Relations and Foreign Policy. The elections' effects on Turkey's foreign policy, including its relations with the United States, are difficult to predict. Turkey's reluctance to involve itself more directly in U.S.-led coalition efforts against the Islamic State organization (IS, ISIL, or ISIS) in Syria seems to stem largely from concerns expressed across the political spectrum regarding threats direct action may pose to Turkish security and economic interests. Challenges could include IS retaliation or the unintentional bolstering of actors that many Turks appear to perceive as ethnic, sectarian, or geopolitical rivals—namely the Iran-backed Assad regime and various Kurdish groups. The dilemmas Turkish leaders face in safeguarding core Turkish interests, while also maintaining NATO relationships and security guarantees, have echoes in a number of past Middle East and Cold War crises. Faced with greater parliamentary accountability following the elections, the caution that Erdogan and his political allies have shown regarding the anti-IS coalition [may extend to greater constraints](#) on risk-taking with regard to [assistance for anti-Assad groups](#) or sectarian/ideological preferences for Muslim Brotherhood-type movements (including Hamas).

Erdogan's Personal Power. It will take time to know the extent to which Erdogan's power may be checked, and whether any such checks are more likely to stoke authoritarian ambitions among other individuals or groups in Turkey, or lead to greater overall pluralism and rule of law. Absent another round of elections with a different result, Erdogan is unlikely to be able to formally expand his powers. However, he may seek to maximize the [constitutional prerogatives](#) he already has—for example, powers to appoint judges and key bureaucrats, various controls on legislation, and the commander-in-chief role—by leveraging his popularity and his patronage networks (such as in Turkey's national intelligence agency and the media).

Kurdish Question. It is unclear how the electoral empowerment of the HDP and its ripple effects might affect the negotiating process—begun under Erdogan—aimed at ending the decades-long, on-and-off insurgency by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, a U.S.-designated terrorist group) and addressing demands of Turkey's Kurdish citizens. Will Turkish Kurds feel encouraged to trust the efficacy of [political activism over armed resistance](#)? How will they perceive and use the leverage they may have gained with the Turkish government? How will developments affecting Kurds in Syria and Iraq influence their calculations? Domestic political and larger regional developments appear to have driven some ethnic nationalist retrenchment among both Turks ([including Erdogan](#)) and Kurds. Who will control the government's approach to the Kurds, and what changes could that augur?