

MERIA

THE REAL WINNERS AND LOSERS OF TURKEY'S JULY 2007 ELECTIONS

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The July 2007 Turkish parliamentary elections were a major victory for the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), entrenching it in power. By the same token, the historic center-right parties virtually disappeared, the left stagnated, and the number of nationalist MHP and independent Kurdish members increased. This article lays out the reasons both for the AKP's success as well as the performance of other forces.

Following the Turkish Parliament's failure to select a new president in an April 27, 2007 session, the decision was made that early elections be held on July 22, 2007 (rather than in October). The governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) had named Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul as its candidate, rejecting proposals by the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) to choose a non-partisan, mutually accepted figure.

Following the decision of CHP and other parties to boycott the voting session, the issue was taken to the Turkish Constitutional Court. CHP leader Deniz Baykal argued that there had not been 367 members present to start the first round of voting. While the court agreed with Baykal, some charged that this was a political rather than judicial decision.¹

THE TEN PERCENT THRESHOLD

Prior to the decision to hold early elections, most polls suggested that the AKP would win with enough seats to continue a single-party government. Given this situation, the opposition parties of both the left and the right attempted to unite into two blocs to ensure that they would pass the ten percent minimum vote required in order to gain seats in parliament. On the left, this involved the CHP and the Democratic Left Party (DSP). While the

internal politics of both parties prevented unification, the DSP decided not to run as a party, though some of its members ran on the CHP ticket.

On the center-right, those involved included the True Path (DYP) and the Motherland (ANAP) Parties, which attempted to unite under the name "Democrat Party" (DP). This effort failed, however, due to factors explained below, with ANAP declaring it would not participate in the election.

The ten percent threshold needed in order to win seats in parliament also changed the strategy of some of the smaller parties. This was especially true for the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP): After concluding that the party would not be able to pass the threshold, 57 important DTP candidates decided to run as independents.² Some left-wing candidates also used the same strategy. As a result, the number of independent candidates increased to 726, as compared to 197 in the 2002 general elections.

JULY 22, 2007 ELECTION RESULTS

There were 42,799,303 voters registered, while 36,056,293 ballots were counted. At 84.25 percent, the voting participation rate was among the highest ever in Turkish history.³

Party	Number of Votes	Percentage	Number of Seats Won
AKP (Justice and Development Party)	16,327,291	46.58%	341
CHP (Republican Peoples Party)	7,317,808	20.88%	112
MHP (National Action Party)	5,001,869	14.47%	70
DP (Democrat Party)	1,898,873	5.42%	0
GP (Young Party)	1,064,871	3.04%	0
Independents	1,835,486	5.24%	26

Table 1: July 2007 Election Results⁴

The July 2007 election marked a clear victory for the AKP. The party earned 16,327,291 or 46.58 percent of the votes (see Table 1), an increase of approximately five million votes, or 40 percent, as compared to the 2002 elections (see Table 3). Despite the 40 percent increase in AKP votes, their seats in parliament decreased by 22 percent due to a third party—the National Action Party (MHP)—managing to pass the ten percent threshold.⁵ This margin was enough for the AKP to form a single-party government, but not enough to elect the president directly.

Even though the AKP won the majority of votes throughout Turkey, they were most successful in the eastern regions of the country, where the banned pro-Kurdish party DEHAP (the new DTP) had won a majority in the 2002 elections. Yet the AKP's moderate policies toward the Kurds had increased its support. In 2007, the AKP won 54.64 percent of the votes in the eastern Anatolia region and 53.14 percent of the votes in the southeastern Anatolia region. In other words, compared to the 2002 elections, AKP votes in the pro-Kurdish regions increased by approximately 24 percent.

2002 Elections	AKP	DEHAP	2007 Elections	AKP	DTP-IND*
Eastern Anatolia	32.23%	21.40%	Eastern Anatolia	54.64%	19.42%
Southeast Anatolia	27.73%	26.56%	Southeast Anatolia	53.14%	24.40%

Table 2: Eastern Region Votes: AKP and Pro-Kurdish Parties (DEHAP and DTP—the latter running as independents)⁶

The AKP was able to cast the election in terms of its economic successes rather than in terms of its Islamist links. While 78.3 percent of the voters cited the former factor as a reason for their vote, only 10.3 percent considered secularism in making their choice.⁷ In evaluating the 2002-2007 AKP government, 42.7 percent of the voters said that the economy had improved, compared to 30.1 percent who stated the opposite. Further,

54.1 percent of voters stated that the AKP had made important reforms while in office.⁸

Votes for the CHP increased by only 1.49 percent as compared to the 2002 elections (see Table 1 and Table 3). One reason for this minor increase was that in October 2004 the New Turkey Party (YTP), which had won 1.15 percent of the votes in 2002, joined the CHP. The DSP, which had taken 1.22 percent of the votes in 2002, also contributed some voters since it decided not to run in 2007.

Thirteen of the CHP list's successful candidates were DSP members. Finally, in the 2002 elections, the CHP had won the majority of the votes in ten cities, while in 2007 this number was cut in half.⁹ Altogether then, the CHP's showing was quite poor.

Another party with large losses was the DP. In the 2002 elections, the True Path Party

(DYP, the old name of the current DP) did not pass the ten percent threshold. Yet even after ANAP dropped out, DP votes decreased from 9.54 percent in 2002 to 5.42 percent in 2007 (see Table 1 and Table 3). Just after the elections the leader of the DP, Mehmet Agar, also resigned from his position as party head.

Party	Number of Votes	Percentage	Number of Seats in the Parliament
AKP (Justice and Development Party)	10,808,229	34.28%	363
CHP (Republican Peoples Party)	6,113,352	19.39%	178
MHP (National Action Party)	2,635,787	8.36%	0
DYP (True Path Party)	3,008,942	9.54%	0
GP (Young Party)	2,285,598	7.25%	0
Independents	314,251	1.00%	9

Table 3: October 2002 General Election Results¹⁰

The MHP fared relatively better, almost doubling its vote to 14.47 percent in 2007 (see Table 1). In the 2002 elections, the party had taken only 8.36 percent of the votes (see Table 3), an insufficient amount for passing the ten percent threshold. In the 2002 elections, some of the MHP voters voted for the Young Party (GP), which is also a nationalist, right-wing party. Yet in the 2007 election, the MHP managed to win back its votes,¹¹ manifest in the huge decrease of GP votes from 7.25 percent in 2002 to 3.04 percent in 2007 (see Table 1 and Table 3). A sign of the party's potential appeal is that 26 percent of CHP and 22 percent of AKP voters declared that the MHP was their second voting choice.¹²

Also, the number of independent members tripled from nine to 26. Among them was former ANAP leader Mesut Yilmaz, considered a potential unifying figure for the center-right. Also important was the success of 23 pro-Kurdish independent candidates who are to form a group, a possibly revolutionary development for Turkish politics.

In all, seven parties will be represented as a result of the 2007 general elections. In

addition to the AKP, CHP, and MHP, which all passed the threshold, 13 seats were reserved for the DSP; 20 for the DTP; one for the leader of the Grand Unity Party (BBP), Muhsin Yazicioglu, who won as an independent; and one seat for the leader of the Freedom and Solidarity Party (ODP), Ufuk Uras.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

The AKP's Victory

Several factors contributed to the AKP's victory. As economic issues play a significant role in Turkish voters' choices, it is necessary to review the AKP's reforms in this area. During the years preceding the 2002 elections, the economic programs of several coalition governments failed. Inflation was higher than 35 percent, and the Turkish lira sank in foreign exchanges. However, by 2007, there was a turnaround. Inflation decreased by 25 percent. Exports tripled to reach almost \$100 billion, while imports increased by only 17 percent.¹³ GDP per capita doubled, reaching almost \$5,500.¹⁴ The AKP can also be

credited for infrastructure development, with the construction of 6,600 kilometers of highways and 270,000 cooperative apartment housing units.

Furthermore, foreign investment contributed to greater economic stability and also helped the government pay national debts. Although the current account deficit increased, the Turkish lira became significantly more valuable, increasing by 55 percent after the April 2002 economic crisis.¹⁵ The energy sector also played an important role in the AKP's victory. Although oil prices increased by 36 percent in 2007,¹⁶ Turkey was still using the cheapest natural gas in Europe. In 2002, natural gas had only been provided in nine major cities; in 2007 the number increased to 44 cities. Turkey became a transit country for natural gas; the AKP government doubled natural gas pipeline infrastructures all over Turkey.

For five years under the AKP government, electricity prices did not increase and production rose by 40 percent. In addition, the Ministry of Energy distributed 600,000 tons of coal to the poor. Another development was the establishment of the National Ore Research Institute, which helped to increase production. As one journalist not particularly sympathetic to any Islamist orientation enthused: "The AKP government fit Turkey into the global capitalist world system but while doing this helped the poor people using external market forces and infrastructure."¹⁷

Still, the integration of Turkey in the global market and the AKP's liberal economic program made rich people richer and poor people poorer. Most of the developments were made on the macroeconomic level, while agricultural workers and artisans suffered. So why did people whose income had decreased vote for the AKP? The answer is simple: the social benefits provided to them by the AKP.

After 1991, when political Islam began to rise in Turkish politics, the movement filled a huge gap for religious people who had migrated from Anatolia to Istanbul and other big cities by providing packages of food, coal, money for religious holidays, clothes, and shoes. Not only were they provided with such

material necessities, but also with religious education and social life through the mosques.

The AKP's social strategy was to continue this tradition. According to the party, this included: free coal to 1.2 million families at 500 kilograms per family for a total of 4.3 million tons; \$260 million to send poor families on holidays; and the distribution of food to 70,000 people a day.¹⁸ Huseyin Tanriverdi, a member of the Central Decision Board of Party Management, explained that this group acted as a non-governmental organization: "To reach people we used our youth and women's organizations, handicapped coordination centers, social work and public relations offices."¹⁹ In 2007, the AKP had almost 3 million members, including 850,000 women.²⁰

The AKP used right-wing economic policies and aimed at increasing the accumulation of capital while at the same time following a social democratic approach by helping the poor and unemployed who suffered as a result.²¹ AKP officials use the term center-right moderate and conservative to describe the party's ideology. Polls show that 54 percent of the people describe the AKP as reformist and think that important reforms were made under its government.²² In accordance with the European Union (EU) integration reforms, the AKP has made many changes to laws on local governance, in the health sector, and to the penal code.

As a result, the AKP can pose, depending on the audience, as conservative or liberal, left-wing or right-wing, preserving the status quo or being Islamic-oriented. The election showed how credible voters found the AKP's self-description as the "party of all Turkey."²³

A key element in the AKP's success was its ability to defeat the pro-Kurdish party's independent members in the eastern region of Turkey. In other words, Kurdish people in this region showed they thought the AKP was a viable alternative to a Kurdish-oriented grouping.

The last significant aspect of the AKP's victory was the perceived intervention of the military in the presidential elections. A memorandum on the military's website

deemed critical of the AKP provoked a reaction among voters who saw the party as a “victim” and among others who considered that supporting the AKP was a way to defend democracy against a military intervention. There is a pattern to this in Turkish politics. For example, after the September 12, 1980, military intervention, Turgut Ozal won the election, defeating Turgut Sunalp, who was supported by Chief of Staff General Kenan Evren.²⁴ The same thing had happened after the 1971 intervention. The AKP played heavily on this theme in its campaign.

The CHP's Failure

Given the fact that many Turks were worried about the perceived Islamist, or at least non-secular, orientation of the AKP, why did the CHP not do better?

First, although the CHP is nominally a left-wing social democratic party and is a member of the Socialist International left, its position during the AKP government was right-wing nationalist. The CHP criticized AKP politics on the Kurdish issue and concerning the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The CHP leader, Deniz Baykal, complained about Prime Minister Erdogan's moderate position toward the Kurds and the PKK, saying he had sold the country out. The same sentence was used by Baykal on the Cyprus issue when the AKP decided to renew negotiations by opening a Turkish harbor for trade as a compromise with EU demands. Although the CHP stance was very pro-European and reformist before 2002, Baykal criticized the AKP, arguing that the EU was enslaving the AKP government.

All these developments estranged the CHP from its left-wing position and alienated potential voters, especially among Kurds in Turkey's eastern region. The party was also unable to take advantage of the problems created for poorer people by the AKP's economic policies. The 2007 election polls show that the poorer classes voted for the AKP while the wealthier individuals voted for the CHP.²⁵ The CHP was seen as being a party of the state, the past, and the status quo and against some of the popular reforms made by

the AKP, albeit at EU urging.²⁶ Those who might otherwise have been attracted by the CHP's line chose to vote for the other opposition party, the MHP, which more consistently represented such positions.²⁷

Second, after the April 27, 2007 memorandum, the CHP didn't condemn the military for “interfering” in the election process, a point used by the AKP to criticize its rival as being anti-democratic.²⁸ Only those voters who truly felt that secularism was in danger voted for the CHP. According to the polls, 65 percent of those who said that they were voting for CHP attributed this to their fear of increasing Islamism in Turkey.²⁹ Furthermore, the CHP didn't provide a comprehensive economic program, focusing on secularism and upholding Ataturk's ideology.

The MHP and the DTP

While the MHP, had gained only 8.5 percent of the vote in the 2002 elections and was thus unable to pass the ten percent threshold, it received nearly 14.5 percent more votes in 2007. Despite this success, it did not capture such cities in the central region of Turkey as Yozgat, Tokat, and Kirikkale, traditionally MHP strongholds.³⁰ In some cases, the MHP vote declined in cities compared to its part base of support.³¹ This was also true in Turkey's eastern region.³² As a result, the MHP was the leading party in only two cities, Osmaniye and Mersin.

Part of the problem may be related to the MHP's campaign. Its publicity budget was relatively low, and the party did not hold many rallies. Despite this fact, the MHP benefited from the CHP's attacks on the government from a nationalist perspective.³³ It also gained from antagonism toward Europe during the negotiation phase of Turkey's application for EU membership, since many Turks view the EU as dictatorial and are frustrated by the long, difficult accession process.³⁴

The only two regions where the MHP increased its votes were Marmara and the Aegean. In the Marmara region, especially in

Istanbul, where 13 percent of the population is Kurdish, this led to a certain rise in the kind of nationalism the MHP has espoused as a reaction to the Kurdish presence.³⁵ In the Aegean region, the MHP gained some traditional CHP voters. Also significant is that Devlet Bahçeli, the party's leader, was perceived as being a force for democracy and reconciliation regarding the presidential elections.³⁶ Bahçeli had worked to moderate the party's historic image and connections with violence by expelling some extremist elements. He even shook hands with the Kurdish independents before the oath-taking ceremony for the new parliament, a conciliatory gesture that made visible his efforts to move toward the center.

Although 20 Kurdish members are expected to serve in the assembly, considering this party as a winner is questionable. Many Kurds turned to the AKP instead of the DTP, undermining the appeal of an explicitly Kurdish party.

The DP

DP leader Mehmet Agar resigned as soon as it was clear his party had not passed the ten percent threshold. The old power of the DYP and ANAP seems to have vanished, due to their inability to unify and even more so due to the AKP's success at occupying the center-right of the political spectrum. Voters also remembered both parties' failures in the coalition governments of the 1992-2002 era in which Turkey faced many economic and political crises.³⁷ The DP simply had no credible program distinguishing it from the AKP. With so many center and center-right voters ready to accept the AKP's credentials and their willingness to ignore the idea of an Islamist threat stemming from that party, the DYP and ANAP no longer had any role to play.

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NOTES

¹ "Hukukcular ne Diyor?" ["What Are the Lawyers Saying?"], *Hurriyet*, May 1 2007; see section on Hikmet Sami Turk (former Minister of Justice).

² <http://www.haberler.com/dtp-bagimsiz-65-adayini-tanitti-haberi/>, July 6, 2007.

³ YSK (High Election Commission), <http://www.ysk.gov.tr/ysk/index.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Hurriyet*, July 23, 2007.

⁶ Data retrieved from NTV and from YSK (High Election Commission) websites.

⁷ Bekir Agirdir, "Sandigin Icindekini ne Belirledi?" ["What Determined the Voters' Preferences?"], Konda Company Analysis of the July 22, 2007 Election Results, *Radikal*, July 25-28, 2007.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Data retrieved from NTV and from YSK (High Election Commission) websites.

¹⁰ YSK (High Election Commission).

¹¹ *Radikal*, July 23, 2007.

¹² Agirdir, "Sandigin Icindekini ne Belirledi?" ["What Determined the Voters' Preferences?"].

¹³ Yaman Toruner, "Secim Sonu Ekonomideki Gorunus" ["The Economic Situation after the Election"], *Milliyet*, July 31, 2007.

¹⁴ Muhsin Ozturk and Fatih Ugur, "AKP Fenomeni" ["AKP Phenomena"], *Aksiyon Dergisi* August 6, 2007.

¹⁵ Toruner, "Secim Sonu Ekonomideki Gorunus."

¹⁶ Yaman Toruner, "Secim Basarisinin Tilsimi" ["The Charm of Election Victory"], *Milliyet*, July 30, 2007.

¹⁷ Nese Duzel, *Radikal*, July 30, 2007.

¹⁸ Ozdemir Ince, "AKP'nin Musluman Kardesler Demokrasisi" [AKP's Muslim Brothers' Democracy], *Hurriyet*, July 13, 2007.

¹⁹ Ozturk and Ugur, "AKP Fenomeni."

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Emre Akoz, "AKP Nasil Kaybeder?" [How AKP Loses?], *Sabah*, July 31, 2007.

²² Agirdir, "Sandigin Icindekini ne Belirledi?"

²³ Hasan Bulent Kahraman, “Secimleri Okumak 1: Iktidar” [Reading Elections 1: The Government], *Sabah*, July 24, 2007.

²⁴ Ergun Babahan, “Mudahale ve Sandik” [Intervention and the Elections], *Sabah*, August 1, 2007.

²⁵ Rahmi Turan, “Zengin ve Fakirin Tercihleri” [The Preferences of Poor and Rich Voters], *Hurriyet*, August 5, 2007.

²⁶ Ibrahim Dogan, “CHP Neden Kaybetti?” [Why Did the CHP Lose?], *Aksiyon Dergisi*, July 30, 2007.

²⁷ Fuat Keyman, “Merkez Sag Doldu Sira Merkez Solda” [“Center Right Is Established, Now Its Center Left’s Turn”], *Radikal*, July 23, 2007.

²⁸ “Suclu Bulundu” [“The Guilty Have Been Caught”], *Radikal Gazetesi*, July 24, 2007.

²⁹ Hasan Bulent Kahraman, “Secimleri Okumak 3: CHP” [Reading Elections 3: CHP], *Sabah*, July 31, 2007.

³⁰ Nursel Dilek, “MHP Neden Kazandi?” [Why Did the MHP Win?], *Aksiyon Dergisi*, July 30, 2007.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Hasan Bulent Kahraman, “Secimi Okumak 2: Muhalefet” [Reading the Elections 2: Opposition], *Sabah*, July 26, 2007.

³⁴ Nursel Dilek, “Interview with Assoc. Prof. Birol Akgun,” *Aksiyon Dergisi*, July 30, 2007.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Avni Ozgurel, “TSK’nin Katkilarıyla” [With the Contribution of the Turkish Military], *Radikal*, July 23, 2007.

³⁷ Kahraman, “Secimi Okumak 2.”