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Upcoming Turkish Elections: Issues and Winners

By [Soner Cagaptay](#)

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On June 19, the Turkish Supreme Elections Board, an independent body that monitors the elections process, finalized the candidate lists for the July 22 early parliamentary polls. The outcome at the polls should be easier to estimate now that the electorate can judge the parties as well as their candidates. Will the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) win? How will the other major parties fare? And what issues will dominate, among them the Constitutional Court's decision yesterday to overturn President Ahmet Sezer's veto of the AKP's proposal for direct presidential elections?

Battle for the Center-Right: A Likely Winning Field for the AKP

Turkey is an essentially conservative country. Traditionally, about two-thirds of the populace cast their votes for parties on the right. The political landscape is so dominated by the right that left-wing parties have ruled for only two years since Turkey switched to a full, multiparty democracy fifty-seven years ago. It is plausible that whichever party woos the majority of right-wing voters will win this month's elections.

In the 1990s, five to seven major parties (including those of the fragmented center-right) ran in each Turkish election. Their failure to work with each other paved the way to political instability and the economic crisis of 2001-2002, when the Turkish economy shrank by around 9.5 percent.

The AKP, rooted in the Islamist Welfare Party (RP), came to power during those developments in 2002. First, the party reached out to nationalists and the center-right, building an election coalition. Second, it took advantage of corruption in the secular parties (the AKP's name is "Ak Parti" in Turkish, with the word ak denoting purity), casting vote-winning images of itself as the "clean because Islamist" and "clean even if Islamist" party. In the elections, the AKP took advantage of the secular parties' fragmentation, as well as a 10 percent electoral threshold, to gain a supermajority in the legislature. With the exception of the Republican People's Party (CHP), the fragmented secular parties -- representing more than 40 percent of the vote -- failed to reach the threshold, and only the CHP and AKP were permitted to enter the legislature. In other words, even though the AKP was supported by only one-third of the populace, it received two-thirds of the legislative seats.

The dynamics that brought the AKP to power seem to have changed little. The 10 percent threshold is still in place, and the secular opposition remains divided. Although recent attempts to unite the left have been successful -- an election coalition between the CHP and the smaller Democratic Left Party (DSP) has been formed to this end -- the center-right has failed to consolidate. In particular, the True Path Party (DYP) and Motherland Party (ANAP) have not united, leaving the center-right up for grabs. Recognizing this fact, the AKP has appointed center-right candidates (and even a few center-left) to appeal to voters.

A Self-Serving Image: 'Party for a Religious President'

Even though other parties, including the CHP, have also fielded center-right candidates, the AKP might have a better shot at winning those votes. The party is aided by its follow-up rhetoric on the recent, botched

presidential election. The upcoming parliamentary elections were called after a political stalemate in May, when rallies by millions of secular Turks, intervention by the Constitutional Court, and a military declaration forced the AKP to abandon its plans of electing its foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, to the presidency using its parliamentary majority. The AKP now seems to be using the politically savvy message -- effective especially in rural areas -- that Gul's election was blocked "because he is religious," and that this "injustice can be undone" by giving the AKP a parliamentary majority.

After the Constitutional Court's decision yesterday, a referendum is now likely on this issue in October, although the next president will be chosen under the old system (by parliament) in August. Still, the AKP's rhetoric on the presidential election fiasco seems to be creating party sympathy among conservative center-right voters.

Unemployment: A Neutral Factor

Despite the Turkish economy's performance in terms of macroeconomic indicators -- it grew by 6.8 percent in the first quarter of 2007 -- many Turks are not benefiting. With an unemployment rate that hovers around 11.7 percent, life remains hard on the microeconomic level, especially for the unemployed, many of whom live in the lower middle class districts (varos) of the large cities. Thanks to its grassroots machinery in the varos, the AKP seems to be doing the best job of reaching out and attracting those constituencies through the free distribution of food and coal -- in June, for example, residents in an Istanbul district were given a ton of free coal per family, well ahead of the winter, but in time for this month's elections. Unless the opposition parties find ways of connecting to the varos, the unemployment issue may not necessarily cost the AKP in the polls.

Factors Likely to Help the Opposition

Although the AKP is poised to do well in the upcoming elections, a number of issues could dampen its success:

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The AKP has not been successful in combating the PKK. According to the U.S. State Department's most recent Country Reports on Terrorism, the PKK killed about 600 Turks in 2006 alone. If the AKP were to take credit for any steps against the group, such as the arrest and extradition to Turkey of PKK leaders in northern Iraq, it would most likely win the parliamentary elections.

Thus far, however, the party's failure to secure Turkey seems to be benefiting the opposition, especially the populist Young Party (GP) in the large cities, and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) in the Anatolian heartland (a trapezoid-shaped area stretching from Kutahya and Konya in the west to Erzurum and Malatya in the east). In the past, the AKP would have already lost many votes to the MHP in the Anatolian heartland. Now, however, the AKP's rhetoric on electing "a religious president" seems to be balancing out the negative impact of the PKK problem (a nationalist issue) on the party's popularity in this conservative-nationalist area.

Corruption. This issue is the biggest wild card of the elections. So far, no major corruption cases -- long endemic to Turkish politics -- involving the AKP have appeared in the media, but such stories could shatter the party's popularity and make it lose the vote-grabbing ak label.

Crime. Turkey has long enjoyed a reputation as a safe country. But a variety of factors have caused a significant jump in crime recently. Although crime rates are still low compared to Western countries, the fact that Turkey has gone from very safe to occasionally unsafe in only a few years no doubt comes as a shock to the public. Any party that best portrays itself as a "crime-buster" will boost its popularity in the large cities.

Voter turnout. While the AKP's efforts to fill the void in the center-right should help the party at the polls, a higher voter turnout might hurt it. Traditionally, voter apathy has been strong among secular constituencies in Turkey, while Islamist-leaning voters tend to turn out in large numbers because Islamist parties organize and mobilize them better than the secular parties. Subsequently, Islamist parties do well in the polls when voter

participation drops, while secular parties perform well when voter participation increases.

For instance, in the 1991 elections, when voter turnout was a high 84 percent, the Islamist RP won 17 percent of the vote. In 2002, however, when electoral participation dropped to 79 percent, the AKP did well, winning 34 percent of the vote. Secular political mobilization over the past months -- including anti-AKP rallies in Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir, attended by millions of people -- might be a sign that political apathy among secular voters is subsiding. A larger turnout of secular voters would likely benefit the CHP, which helped organize the aforementioned rallies. Hence, even if the AKP were to boost its support base, the party's overall performance on July 22 might be dampened by higher voter turnout, among other factors.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

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