

# The Turkish Repeat Elections of November 2015

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## Abstract

Following the failure of the parties to form a government based on the June 7 elections, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared on 24 August 2015 that the general elections were to be repeated. With the 1 November 2015 elections—the first repeat elections in the history of the Republic of Turkey—the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) has regained its parliamentary majority and guaranteed to rule the country for four more years.

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## Introduction

Until the elections on 7 June 2015, the AKP had won every single general election since 2002 with an outright majority of the seats in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*). Despite winning the June 7 elections with 258 seats, however, the AKP lost its majority in the assembly (Cop, 2016). As a result, for the first time in 13 years, the elections necessitated a coalition among the political parties. The three other parties that passed the electoral threshold to secure parliamentary representation were the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), and the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP). The AKP held coalition talks with these parties during the 45 days after Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu was assigned with the duty of forming a government.

Throughout the coalition talks, there were only two possible coalition alternatives on the table. Davutoğlu's meetings with the MHP and the CHP leaders were the obvious efforts by the governing AKP to form a coalition with either the MHP or the CHP. After Davutoğlu was assigned with the duty of forming the coalition, the first proposal was submitted to the CHP, the second largest party in the parliament. The meetings and discussions of five round talks that lasted totally 35 hours produced a negative outcome. The main issues of the talks where the parties' positions diverged were education, foreign policy, economy, a new constitution and social peace. Whereas the CHP defended to establish a government of restoration that would endure for four years, the AKP was in favour of forming a coalition government of election only for three months.

The AKP-MHP coalition talks were no different than the AKP-CHP talks with respect to its outcomes. After the talks were held between the AKP and the MHP, Davutoğlu stated that a common ground for a coalition government could not be established. The parties' views were non-concurrent in the sense that the MHP had put forward four conditions which were not negotiated during the coalition meeting. As these four conditions—namely preserving the first four articles of the Constitution, declaration of the termination of the resolution process for the Kurdish problem, reopening of the corruption investigations, and restriction of the Presidential authority to its limits—were not accepted by the AKP, an agreement could not be reached between the parties. These inconclusive efforts by the AKP exhausted all the options for a possible coalition government and the end of 45-day-period of coalition formation was accompanied by a decision for a snap election to be held on November 1. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan exercising his constitutional powers made a decision for the renewal of general elections. Following this decision, an interim government was formed and for the first time in its political history, general elections in Turkey was carried out while an interim government was in force. During the period between June 7 and November 1, the renewal of the conflict between the state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK)—a left-wing militant organization—became a prominent issue in domestic politics. Escalation of the tension

in the eastern, in particular south-eastern, parts of Turkey resulted in deadly incidents of the Kurdish insurgency. The rise of PKK's insurgency was retaliated by government's airstrikes on PKK's camps in Turkey and northern Iraq. Not only PKK but also the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) were one of the components of the terrorist attacks in Turkey. The suicide bombings taking place in Suruç, a town in şanlıurfa located in south-eastern border of Turkey with Syria, on July 20 resulting in 34 civilian death, and in Ankara on October 10, resulting in 102 civilian death were announced by government officials as the terrorist activities linked with ISIL organizations in Turkey. During the period between the two elections, the instability arising from terror attacks of PKK and ISIL caused the deaths of 242 civilians and 167 security forces (Zaman, 2015).

## Electoral system

The 550 members of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey are elected for a four-year term, based on a closed-list proportional representation electoral system. As a rule, provinces of Turkey are at the same time electoral districts. The only exceptions are the three largest cities in the country as Istanbul is divided into three while Ankara and Izmir have two districts each due to their large number of inhabitants, taking the total number of electoral districts to 85. The number of parliamentarians representing each district varies with district population, ranging between two and 31 (mean= 6.5, standard deviation= 5.9). The d'Hondt method is then used to allocate the seats to political parties.

Since 2014, Turkish citizens residing abroad are eligible to vote in the elections in Turkey (Umit, 2015). There are almost 3 million registered voters outside Turkey, and their turnout have been steadily increasing at every election held since the introduction of the right to vote in Turkish embassies and consulates abroad. To ensure that embassies and consulates can cope with the turnout and that votes are safely transferred to Turkey to be counted at a dedicated centre in Ankara, the pools abroad open and close weeks ahead of the actual Election Day. For this particular election, voting took place between 8 and 25 October 2015. The votes cast abroad for political parties are then proportionally distributed to the 85 electoral districts in Turkey according to the size of their electorate. However, this might change in the near future as there are proposals to define an electoral district for the voters abroad.

The most controversial aspect of the electoral system for parliamentary elections in Turkey, which has survived several such proposals for change, is the electoral threshold. Political parties have to earn a minimum share of 10 per cent of the overall vote to secure any seat in the assembly. This poses a massive challenge for smaller parties such as the parties of the pro-Kurdish movements, which often used to bypass the threshold by standing as independent candidates in the previous elections. However, just like in the June 7 elections, the HDP stood with a party list in the November 1 elections. As it became clear on June 7 that the party had

enough support to guarantee any representation in the assembly, the threshold was less of a talking point this time around.

## Parties and the campaign

The parties which had the potential to gain seats in the assembly were the same four parties. The AKP being the governing party for the last thirteen years held the parliamentary majority as well. Despite being labelled as 'Islamist', the party defines itself as a conservative democratic party and in the economic field it pursues liberal oriented policies. The CHP remains as the main opposition party since the 2002 elections. Being the first political party of the Republic of Turkey, CHP's ideology lays on a Kemalist, social liberal and social democratic basis. The party follows the founding principles of the Republic of Turkey. In this context, the electorate of CHP consists mainly of secular voters, and voters residing in big cities in coastal regions of Aegean and Thrace. Another opposition party is the MHP which has a nationalist line with a combination of conservatism. MHP's nationalism emphasizes the unitary structure of the Republic of Turkey and defies the negotiations with the Kurdish politicians in the framework of peace process. On the other hand, the HDP grew as a political party that represents not only Kurdish people but also all the ethnic groups in Turkey and acted as the defender of participatory democracy, minority rights and egalitarianism. The HDP, founded in 2012, took active role on behalf of the PKK in negotiations with the Turkish Government for the peace process. The HDP is often accused of having direct links with the terrorist organization the PKK.

During the campaigns, one of the discourses of the parties was focused on the security of elections on the grounds that the tensions rose in some cities of south-eastern region where curfew was imposed. The Ankara attacks on October 10 became a milestone in the campaigns. CHP and HDP suspended their rallies following the attacks. The Prime Minister and AKP leader Ahmet Davutoğlu reduced the number of his rallies. In comparison with June 7 elections, the public appearance of the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was absent in the rallies. Instead, he preferred to host and address to the village headmen in the presidential palace. MHP restricted its rallies with the three big cities—İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir—and Amasya where it could not have sufficient vote for an MP by a narrow margin.

Media was a more effective means for the party leaders prior to the November 1 elections. As the rallies were posing threats to the crowds due to an insecure environment with the rise of terrorism, the leaders used media by being guests in television programs' special edition for elections.

The AKP started the campaign for the June 7 elections with the agenda the party followed throughout its government period. However, for the November 1 elections the AKP revised

its promises especially in economic terms with respect to the opposition parties' economic promises which were effective according to the results of June 7 elections. The AKP realizing the voters' need for economic improvement targeted enhancing the economic status of minimum wage holders, the retired, the youth, the farmers and the policemen. The manifesto envisaged supporting the young entrepreneurs with incentives, covering the health insurance of newly graduates. AKP's main themes in their electoral manifesto were security, peace and stability. Their manifesto pointed out a new constitution, assigning legal status to djemevis, and fight against terrorism until public order, law and brotherhood were installed in the region. In the context of Kurdish question, the resolution process was still included in AKP's manifesto.

CHP's campaign for the November 1 elections did not have major differences from the June 7 campaign. In both election programs, the CHP put emphasis on social state, social justice, the principle of separation of powers, and the peace process. CHP's program promised to enhance social state by doubling the welfare benefits, increasing minimum wages and the salaries of the retired. The CHP defended the principle of separation of powers stressing that legislative, executive and judiciary powers will not interfere with each other and thus an effective parliamentary democracy will function. Depending on the criticisms in the June 7 elections, the CHP included the youth in its program prior to November 1. Considering the young citizens to vote for the first time in November 1 elections, the CHP promised to support the young citizens with unemployment pay, career education and scholarships for higher education. Since terrorism became a prominent issue in internal politics, the CHP developed its previous item on the Kurdish problem adding that three institutions (Social Consensus Commission, Shared Wisdom Committee, and Investigation of Truth Commission) under the roof of the parliament will be established. In the sphere of foreign policy, the CHP contended reestablishment of the relations with Syrian regime while continuing the dialogue with the opposition groups. For the Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East, the CHP proposed mutual accreditation of the ambassadors with Egypt, Israel and Syria.

The MHP detailed its economic promises written for the June 7 elections in the November 1 electoral manifesto by including more titles for the youth. Together with the economic issues, the MHP incorporated security issues more elaborately because of the rise in terrorist activities. Similar to previous manifesto, fight against terrorism was explained with an emphasis on ending the resolution process in Kurdish question and proposals for the use of effective mechanisms to fight against internal and external factors supporting terrorism. MHP's theme in the electoral manifesto was a "future in peace and security". While the nationalist discourse was solid in their manifesto, the MHP kept its doors open for the parties accepting its main four principles except from the HDP for a possible coalition.

The HDP has had specific discourses peculiar to its leftist and Kurdish nationalist roots. In both of its electoral manifesto, the party promised economic welfare, democracy, and peace. The improvement of social welfare by increasing minimum wages, supporting the farmers, providing basic services free of charge, and supporting the students with social benefits were among the

other important aspects of their campaign. The HDP proposed to enhance the authorities of the local governments implying that they favoured democratic autonomy. This is a key point which they interpret as a way to solve the Kurdish problem. The HDP insists on the continuation of the peace process by taking part in the negotiations as an equal party vis-à-vis the state. In their manifesto, the HDP was critical of the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the grounds that he was responsible for dragging the country into a war and chaos because he was weary of the consequences of democratic change. Similar to the AKP, the HDP defended the need for a new constitution with the exception that they would not let a shift to presidential system. On the contrary, they expressed that the presidential powers should be limited.

President Erdoğan kept a low-key profile during the campaign period. Although Turkish presidents normally play a largely ceremonial role in the parliamentary system, Erdoğan has been playing an ‘active role’ in politics (Umit, 2015). Figure 1 plots the weekly number of occasions where Erdoğan addressed citizens outside Ankara—which the Presidency calls ‘visits’—in the first 11 months of 2015. Opposition parties argue that these visits were in fact day-to-day partisan politics, an accusation that Erdoğan denies. The figure shows that the build-up in the number of these visits suddenly drops after the June 7 elections and never again to rise in the rest of the year.

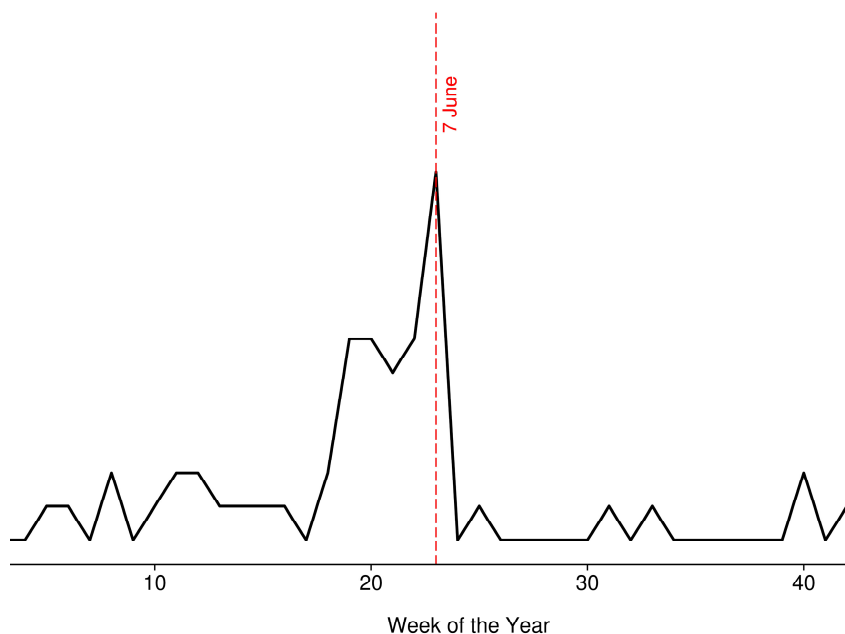


Figure 1: Weekly number of events, where President Erdogan addressed citizens, January-December 2015. Source: Presidency of the Republic of Turkey (<http://www.tccb.gov.tr>).

## Results

Table 1 presents the main results in comparison with the previous elections. For many, the question to be answered on 1 November 2015 was not who would win the election but whether

the AKP would continue governing the country on their own by winning more than 275 seats in the assembly. Within hours after the closure of the polls, it became clear that the answer was a ‘yes’: almost one in two valid votes cast went to the AKP, who earned 317 seats in the assembly with 49.5 per cent of the votes. This means 59 more seats and 8.63 percentage points more votes compared to the previous elections, owing to just under 5 million new AKP voters since June 7. In other words, the AKP was also the winner of the decision to repeat the June 7 elections.

Table 1: Votes and seats won in the parliamentary elections in Turkey, 1 November 2015

Parties	N	%	Seats	N	%	Seats
AKP	23,681,926	49.5	317	4,814,515	8.63	59
CHP	12,111,812	25.32	134	593,673	0.37	2
MHP	5,694,136	11.90	40	-1,825,870	-4.39	-40
HDP	5,148,085	10.76	59	-910,404	-2.36	-21
Other parties <sup>a</sup>	1,153,234	2.41	0	-557,738	-1.3	0
Independents <sup>b</sup>	51,038	0.11	0	-437,188	-0.95	0
Electorate	56,949,009			340,192		
Turnout	48,537,695	85.23		1,030,228	1.31	
Invalid Votes	697,464	1.22		-646,760	-1.15	

*Notes:* <sup>a</sup> The number of competing parties was 16 in 1 November, compared to 20 in 7 June elections. Other parties are the parties that competed but failed to win a parliamentary seat in the elections.

<sup>b</sup> There were 21 independent candidates in the November 1 elections. This figure was 165 in 7 June elections.

Source: Supreme Election Council ([www.ysk.gov.tr](http://www.ysk.gov.tr)).

What surprised almost everyone, including the leadership of the AKP, however, was AKP’s high vote. This is why many argued that the polling companies were ‘the biggest losers of the election process’ (Today’s Zaman, 2015). Majority of the opinion polls predicted low 40s as the vote share of AKP. Despite their reservations in the run up to the elections, international observers reported a ‘generally peaceful’ election day (International Election Observation Mission, 2015, p. 12). This was confirmed in the eagerly-anticipated verdict by Vote and Beyond (Hürriyet Daily News, 2015), an independent civil society platform heavily criticised by the AKP before the elections. They found ‘ultimately inconsequential’ mismatches between the official results and the reports from their 60,000 observers at the polling stations.

The CHP came second with 25.32 per cent of the votes, a bare increase of 0.37 percentage points compared to the June 7 elections. Indeed, compared to the other parties, repeating the elections affected the CHP the least. Nevertheless, two extra CHP candidates secured election to the assembly, taking the total number of CHP seats to 134. These results mean that the CHP is to remain exactly where they have been since 2002: the main opposition party.

Both the MHP and the HDP suffered losses in the repeat elections. Because their voter base is concentrated in districts with high Kurdish population, the HDP won more seats (59) in the assembly than the MHP (40) with fewer votes in the ballot box. Unlike 7 June, 1 November was a nervous night for the HDP, and it became certain only at the later stages of the counting process that they passed the election threshold, in the end with 10.76 per cent of the votes. The sense of defeat was heavier for the MHP, who lost exactly half of its MPs with the new elections. With 40 MPs in the new term, they became the smallest party in the assembly.

The situation of uncertainty after the June 7 elections created an environment of instability especially in terms of security. The rise of insurgency and deadly terrorist attacks led the nationalist voters and the conservative Kurds to revise their political options and to decide on voting for the AKP. The reason for the shift of some votes from the MHP and the HDP is, the hard line nationalists who are also conservatives opting for AKP government's stability as well as reacting to the failure of the MHP to be a part of the coalition government. As for the HDP, some of its voters are conservative Kurdish people whom the AKP relied on in eastern parts of Turkey in the previous elections. The conservative Kurdish voters did not foresee a prospect with the HDP due to rise of terrorism in the region. Since the peace process was deadlocked and frozen as a result of these political developments, conservative Kurdish voters shifted back to the AKP with an expectation of the continuation of peace process.

The turnout was 85.23 per cent, a further 1.31 per cent increase on top of what was already a relatively high turnout in the previous elections. There were fewer other parties and drastically fewer independent candidates competing for seats in the November 1 elections as the results of the June 7 elections made it clear that they had no realistic chance to be elected. Indeed, a large majority of the votes are cast for the big four parties, which means 97.48 per cent of the votes are represented in the assembly—an unexpectedly high figure for a country with 10 per cent threshold. A final point to note about the results is the decrease in the invalid votes, from 2.37 on June 7 to 1.22 on November 1

## **Aftermath**

Five months after the June 7 elections, the Turkish political scene went back to business as usual: the AKP returned to power with outright majority. On 30 November 2015, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey voted in confidence of the 64th government formed by the AKP leader Davutoğlu. The tension and violence following the June 7 elections seem to have relatively calmed down in the immediate aftermath of the new elections. Nevertheless, it is not completely over. Clashes between rebels and security forces continue in the southern-eastern party of the country albeit at a somehow reduced level. In the week preceding the vote of confidence for the government, a prominent pro-Kurdish lawyer was killed in one of these clashes. Besides, in the same week, Turkey downed a Russian warplane in the Turkey-Syria border, causing a massive



row with Russia. Therefore, it is safe to say that government had a tough start in office. A considerable number of challenging items in domestic and foreign politics are waiting ahead to test the new government's capability for providing stability in the country.

The leaders of the three opposition parties remain in their seat. There were calls for especially the MHP leader Bahçeli to resign after the heavy loss, which, for many, was a result of his utter refusal of any coalition scenarios before the elections. However, resigning from an office is a rare occasion in Turkey, and politics is certainly not an exception.

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