

Turkish election exposes deepening crisis of rule

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Turkey's parliamentary election on Sunday, June 7, takes place amid increasing social and political tensions on the national and international front that will intensify, whichever party wins.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is seeking an increased majority for his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), in order to push through constitutional changes for a presidential system of government, a move to more authoritarian forms of rule. But after winning three terms in office, the AKP now faces declining support, with polls predicting a reduced majority of 290-300 seats—far short of the 367 required for a constitutional amendment.

In addition, the AKP government's relations with its traditional allies in NATO and the Middle East became strained following the Arab Spring, when Ankara sought to position itself as the model for Sunni Islamists in the region. It initially opposed the NATO-led war to unseat Libya's Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. It was particularly vociferous against the Saudi-orchestrated and US-supported military coup against Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammed Mursi—with whom Ankara established close relations, in line with previous US policy.

Turkey's role in Syria's sectarian civil war, sponsoring Muslim Brotherhood-dominated opposition groups and financing and arming Islamic militias, including the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in an attempt to overthrow the regime of its former ally, President Bashar al-Assad, again brought it into conflict with Washington after its own recent turn against ISIS.

Turkey's choice of allies in the Syrian civil war was motivated by its refusal to lend any support to Syria's Kurds, who are allied to Turkey's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), against whom the Turkish state fought a bitter 30-year-long civil war. Syria's Kurds have carved up an autonomous state along Turkey's borders and are opposed to the Islamists.

In partnership with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, the Turkish government has deployed tens of thousands of troops to the Syrian border in preparation for a possible invasion. On Thursday, May 7, the secretary-general of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) told journalists that, according to a tip-off from a "very reliable source," Turkey would "launch a military operation into Syria tonight or Friday." Two days later, the army chief went on leave for two weeks, ostensibly due to health problems.

The AKP's aggressive and incoherent foreign policy is no more popular in Turkey than it is among the regime's US, European and regional allies.

Following years of economic growth of around eight to 10 percent, that benefited a relatively small layer of the population, growth fell to four percent in 2013 and only 2.9 percent last year. As a result of the recession in its major export markets and the fall in the value of the Turkish lira, the country's trade deficit grew to more than five percent of GDP last year.

Unemployment has risen above 20 percent, reaching 40 percent in the southeastern and predominantly agricultural and Kurdish region. This, along with rising prices, has led to a massive increase in household debt, with consumer credit ballooning eleven-fold.

According to the Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Report 2014, Turkey is among those countries with "very high inequality." The share of the top 10 percent of the nation's wealth was 77.7 percent, the second-highest percentage after Russia. Income disparity grew by 21 percent between 2000 and 2014.

Today, just 100 families monopolize around 30 percent of the total national income. There are 44 dollar billionaires with a combined fortune of \$50 billion, up from five in 2002.

These social and economic conditions were the driving force for the first indications of a movement against the

AKP government during the Gezi Park protests in June 2013. While that movement was a predominantly middle class protest, the industrial working class has begun to stir.

Three weeks ago, 20,000 metalworkers in various car plants, including workers at Renault, Tofaş and Ford Otosan, went out on strike over pay and conditions in defiance of their union, Türk-Metall. The wildcat strikes brought production in Turkey to a standstill, at a loss of \$70 million a day. Türk-Traktör, a factory near Ankara, is still on strike. On June 1, thousands of physicians and health professionals went on a one-day strike in Istanbul.

Tensions within Turkey's ruling elite are explosive. In late 2013, Erdoğan, who was prime minister at the time, faced off with his former Islamist allies, led by Fethullah Gülen, a US-based preacher, and his Hizmet movement, who are opposed to the AKP's overtures to the PKK, closing down their network of schools.

The Gülenists responded by instigating a major investigation into corruption involving AKP ministers and Erdoğan's own family in December 2013. Calling it a "foreign plot" and an "attempt to damage the government made by a parallel state nested within the state," Erdoğan ordered the removal and reassignment of police officers, prosecutors and judges involved in the investigation, and introduced laws outlawing Hizmet and banning the Gülenists from the police, the courts and government service, replacing them with AKP loyalists.

Erdoğan's fallout with the Gülenists has forced him to turn to his former political adversaries, the Turkish military and the security establishment, for support.

Since becoming president, Erdoğan and the AKP government, headed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, have become even more authoritarian and divisive. The government has clamped down on journalists, closed off critical websites and social media, and indicted more than 105 people for insulting the president.

In violation of the constitution, which accords the presidency a largely ceremonial function above politics, Erdoğan has retained the leadership of the AKP, held public meetings, criticised the opposition parties and called for an increased majority for the AKP in the parliamentary elections to enable the AKP to revise the constitution in favour of a presidential system.

The AKP not only uses the resources of the state to conduct its electoral campaign, but also employs the state institutions and the judiciary against the opposition parties, with pro-AKP judges, prosecutors and police chiefs hindering the electoral campaign of the opposition

in a number of cities.

Turkey's main opposition parties, the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which espouse equally right-wing economic policies favouring big business, have been unable to make any serious inroads into the AKP's support.

The predominantly Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) has sought to reposition itself as a "left party" along the lines of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. Most of the petty-bourgeois liberal left, which previously supported the AKP government, either openly or through the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the HDP's predecessor, are now calling on workers and youth to vote for the HDP. This time, their slogan is "Freedom from the AKP at all costs."

The HDP is for the first time fielding a national list, rather than independent candidates from the Kurdish region where the party is strongest. It is a risky strategy that means it must attract at least 10 percent of the vote to beat Turkey's prohibitively high national election threshold to win any seats in parliament. Not a few international commentators, including the right-wing business magazine the *Economist*, have called for a vote for the HDP to clip Erdoğan's wings.

Should the HDP win the 72 seats that polls are predicting, it could end the era of single-party AKP governments and a return to the previous norm of rule by shaky coalitions. Should the HDP fail to win the necessary votes, all its seats in the Kurdish regions would transfer to the AKP. A defeat will likely lead to claims of electoral fraud and the breakdown of the much stalled "peace process" with the PKK and the Kurds.



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