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PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN TURKEY – SETBACK FOR THE AKP

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The parliamentary elections in Turkey on 7 June 2015 brought about a clear setback for the governing party AKP, which lost the absolute majority it had gained in 2002. The main reasons for this outcome were Erdogan's autocratic style and his ceaseless overstepping of the presidential competences. A further concentration of his powers is rejected by the population. The intended presidential system has retreated into the far distance. The Kurdish party HDP achieved a surprise electoral success by managing to enter into parliament for the first time. The formation of a coalition between the AKP and another political entity will be difficult. First of all, it remains to be seen whether Erdogan will soften his authoritarian style. In the foreign political field the new government will face the necessity to readjust its relations with its neighbouring countries. The EU ought to encourage Turkey to resume the course of reforms and liberalisation initiated in 2002.

The parliamentary elections in Turkey on 7 June 2015 turned out a clear disappointment for the AKP (Justice and Development Party). It lost its absolute majority, which it had successively built up since 2002, and gained only 40.9 (2011: 49.8) percent of the votes or 258 (2011: 327) of the in total 550 seats in parliament. The CHP (Republican People's Party) achieved 24.9 (2011: 25.9) percent and 132 (2011: 135) seats, while the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) obtained 16.3 (2011: 13.1) percent of the votes and 80 (2011: 53) mandates. The Kurdish HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) participated in elections as a political party for the first time

and passed the 10-percent limit required for entering into the Turkish parliament by achieving 13.1 percent and 80 MPs. So far, the HDP had fielded independent candidates to circumvent the 10-percent limit and obtained 35 seats in 2011. The voter turnout rose to 86 (2011: 83) percent. Out of the approx. three million Turkish nationals living abroad some 36 percent made use of their right to vote.

Election campaign

The election campaign was marked with violent altercations, repeated acts of violence,

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especially against the HDP, and a substantial lack of style, adopting, in part, even grotesque features – such as alleged conspiracies to murder levelled against Erdogan, supposed conspiracy on the part of the HDP together with the followers of Fetullah Gülen, the Armenian lobby and Israel, the controversy over the costs of the presidential palace, etc. Factual topics played a minor role, with the exception of unrealistic CHP promises as regards the economic sector. Erdogan was ever-present throughout the campaign and lobbied massively on behalf of the AKP, thereby violating the president's duty to remain neutral. In order not to let that support become exceedingly obvious, he was not present at AKP events; even so, he toured extensively through the provinces, was present at inaugurations of buildings, schools and factories, and convened “meetings with the people”. Without naming the AKP explicitly, he underlined the government's economic achievements and dealt sweeping blows to government opponents and critical journalists. What is more, his campaign turned increasingly religious, in such a manner that in several appearances he held the Quran in his hands. Erdogan paid little attention to the opposition parties CHP and MHP, concentrating his attacks on the HDP, so as to prevent its accession to parliament.

The AKP's goal in the election was – in addition to re-attaining absolute majority – to reach the minimum number of mandates required for introducing the presidential system aimed at by Erdogan, i.e. 367 (two thirds) or at least 330 seats (60 percent), with the latter number still requiring approval by way of a referendum on the respective constitutional amendment. Erdogan massively promoted his plan by declaring that this was indispensable for maintaining the stability and guaranteeing a further economic upturn. It was clear that in the event of the HDP's entry into parliament this would not be feasible and, thus, the AKP would have strongly profited from the HDP's failure.

In the opinion polls, which are notoriously unreliable and usually party-politically tinged in Turkey, the HDP hovered around the magical 10-percent threshold. The Kurdish party's performance was the central and most-discussed question of the electoral campaign and it was eagerly awaited. Thus, the parliamentary election at the same time had turned into a referendum on the presidential system.

Causes for the election outcome

The election result, received with satisfaction and triumph by the government-critical press, was a clear defeat not only for the AKP, but also for Erdogan, who had achieved 52 percent in the 2014 presidential elections. The main reasons for this were his incessant transgressions of the constitutional competences, his involvement in daily politics and, in particular, his insistence on the presidential system, which in accordance with experts does not correspond with Turkey's political culture. Obviously, Erdogan had erroneously judged the mood in the country. The loss in prestige is considerable for the politician, who is used to winning. The former trump of the government party, namely the economic upturn in the over 12 years of AKP leadership, having resulted in the tripling of the per capita income, had lost in appeal due to the decrease in economic growth, an unemployment rate of again over 10 percent and the increase in inflation to eight percent. Most of all, the voters, among them probably even a number of AKP supporters, wanted to prevent an excessive concentration of power in the hands of the AKP and, particularly, of Erdogan. In this way, evidently also potential voters of the CHP voted for HDP, so that the latter could enter into parliament and, hence, weaken the AKP. This explains why the CHP did not receive any influx from AKP-critical voters and even suffered slight losses. The president's increasingly autocratic style and the looming danger of an even more authoritarian regime being established certainly

contributed to the AKP's failure. Moreover, Erdogan's so far successful tactic of polarising in campaigns proved to be a disadvantage on this occasion. Also the fight against Gülen's movement, whose potential AKP voters this time voted for other parties, had an adverse effect.

Despite forecast losses in AKP votes, the loss of even the absolute majority (276 MPs) comes quite as a surprise. Evidently, the party has lost its character as a people's party and forfeited the contact with its base, and it has become part of the establishment, however with specific steps backwards towards Kemalist traits. Also its economic competence is perceived as having waned. The aftereffects of the Gezi protests of 2013 played a role as well and the critical civil society in Turkey has become stronger. Plus, the progressing Islamisation is rejected by a growing part of the population.

Success of the Kurdish party HDP

Unexpected in its scope is also the achievement of the HDP, which succeeded in capturing the entire southeast of the country and in scoring in the west as well. Conservative Kurds turned away from the AKP, which in previous polls had obtained good results in Kurdish areas, and turned to the HDP, which in addition managed to open up to non-Kurdish voters. The party certainly has profited from the – albeit – brittle ceasefire agreed between the government and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), i.e. Öcalan, in March 2013, which has attributed to the HDP a certain legitimacy as a political factor in the course of the set-in solution process. What is more, for the young generation the terrorism practiced by PKK fighters has become a part of history. Also the hesitant approach of the AKP government towards the siege of the Kurdish city of Kobani in northern Syria by the Islamic State in autumn 2014 is supposed to have played a role. For party leader Selahattin Demirtaş, who had taken a great risk by run-

ning in the election as party in view of the 10-percent limit for parliament (see above) and the poll ratings, the election result was a personal triumph. The HDP as a political entity obviously did not intend to continue hiding. A failure of the HDP would have incurred the danger of unrest and the resurgence of PKK terrorism.

Options of forming a coalition

The election result and Erdogan's reined-in skyrocketing were largely perceived with relief on the international level and rated as an evidence of the still intact democracy in Turkey. Also the diverse press commentaries are positive. In addition to the fact that Erdogan's intended presidential system has receded into the far distance, now the question has arisen which impact the political landslide of 7 June will have on Turkey. Except for the possibility of a hardly viable AKP minority government, for the first time since assuming power the party needs a partner for a coalition. The bringing into existence of such a coalition, however, will be very difficult. In so doing, diverse combinations are possible. The most probable one is considered that between the AKP and the MHP, which show certain parallels in the nationalist and the religious fields. Moreover, the MHP, after a partial generation change, has become less radical than it used to be. The adherents of both parties are supposedly in favour of the coalition. However, since the MHP rejects the solution process with the Kurds, this process would be in doubt. A different option is a "grand" AKP-CHP coalition. This would mitigate the strong polarisation in the country and could facilitate planned constitutional amendments, the needed course change in foreign politics (see below) and the solution process. Yet, this variant is deemed to have little support within the AKP. A union of the AKP with the HDP has been strictly rejected so far by the latter's leader Demirtaş, although the last word supposedly has not been spoken yet in that respect. Both political entities share

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the interest in resolving the Kurdish issue. Rather unlikely is a CHP-MHP coalition with the support of the HDP. Turkish dialogue partners expect that a government will be able to be formed within the legal period of 45 days. Otherwise, the president would have to call for new elections. It cannot be ruled out that the AKP and Erdogan aim at this so as to regain the absolute majority. Some commenters, however, state that in such a case voters might punish the AKP even harder.

As a result of the election outcome the question arises whether or how far Erdogan has learned from his defeat, softens his authoritarian style and cuts back on his blatant violations of the presidential competences. As described above, his total claim to power was the cause for the AKP's defeat. He would have perceived a clear victory in the elections as the confirmation of his politics, and this would have entailed the danger of an aggravation of the situation at hand by way of suppression of opponents of the regime, the further limitation of freedom of press and freedom of opinion as well as the continued ongoing Islamisation of the country.

Within the AKP there is the question as to the possible replacement of Davutoglu by a more popular prime minister, since in the past months differences in opinion increasingly occurred between him and Erdogan, especially with regard to the issue of the presidential system. There are rumours, time and again, regarding the splitting-off of the less doctrinaire wing of the AKP and the founding of a new party under former president Abdullah Gül.

Consequences for foreign politics and the future relationship between Turkey and the EU

Whatever government there will be, it will have to face the need for a change of course in foreign politics, which has led Turkey into

a certain isolation in the last years. Especially its relations with most of its neighbouring countries need to be mended. As far as the civil war in Syria is concerned experts expect Turkey to come to approach Washington's line, which means continued support of Assad's moderate opponents, however not of Jihadist groups. Overall, it is expected that in foreign politics there will be a decline in the strong Islamic component, the "Ottoman megalomania" and the anti-Western rhetoric.

Turkey's future relationship with the EU will depend on the politics of the future government coalition. In the event of Erdogan's electoral victory and an accentuation of the authoritarian course there would have been the danger of a deteriorating relationship – also with the U.S. The, in essence, correct conduct of the elections is partly considered as a signal to Brussels. The E.U. should do everything that is possible to encourage Turkey to return to its reform course, which it had pursued until 2011, in order to overcome the current standstill in the mutual relations. Moreover, the EU should appeal to all parties to support the Kurdish solution process. A leading German political scientist stated that the EU in its relationship with Turkey should not only be fixated on the issue of accession, but view Ankara in particular as a significant partner in political and security affairs in an unsettled region.

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Ambassador (ret) Dr. Marius Calligaris has been working as an associated researcher for the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management since 2010. Law studies, graduated from the Diplomatic Academy Vienna. 1968 entry into the Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Deployed abroad in Italy, Israel, Romania, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and South Caucasus. He retired at the end of 2009.

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