



# BULLETIN

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## Turkey's "Super Election Year" 2014: Winner Still Takes All?

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*A political system that marginalises smaller parties has allowed Turkey's AKP government to centralise power while simultaneously promoting a consensual, reformist image. The Gezi protests were a direct result of this, expressing a sense of political disenfranchisement as well as a genuine effort to overcome the divisions in Turkish society. However, the country's democratic system has not yet been reformed to take account of this. As Turkish political discourse heats up with the 2014 local and presidential elections, the focus of EU activity should therefore be on strengthening Turkey's democratic institutions and fostering party political reform.*

**An Imperfect Political System.** Since 1983, Turkey's electoral system has been based on proportional representation with a 10% threshold. This has had clear effects on the makeup of parliament. In the 2011 general election, for instance, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) received 34% of votes cast. Having accounted for the threshold, however, its proportion of the eligible votes rose to 50% and it received 60% of the seats in parliament. The high threshold thus hampers fair parliamentary representation by precluding smaller parties such as the Democrat or Labour parties from gaining a seat while favouring the incumbents.

As a result, state institutions have seemingly begun to assimilate the ruling party's ideology.<sup>1</sup> A particularly egregious example was a law passed in 2010 which placed the judiciary further under the influence of the legislature, and thus of the ruling party. Critics say the decisions and recruitment processes of Turkey's executive judiciary are now heavily dominated by one of the AKP's core clientele, the Gülen movement, which, through its influence within the national police and the main media groups, strengthens government control of the media and freedom of speech.

Many now point out that the original rationale for the high threshold has outlived its usefulness. The narrow aim of the threshold established by the army was to exclude the "extremist" religious and nationalist parties, or any potential regional or ethnic parties that could give rise to secessionist tendencies, from gaining seats. The broader aim was to strengthen stability by reducing the likelihood of coalitions and excluding smaller, one-issue parties. Yet the system neither prevents the ethnic parties such as the pro-Kurdish party from gaining seats, nor guarantees political stability, as recent events demonstrate.

**A System of Compromise.** The high threshold rather forces the electorate to vote pragmatically—not for their preferred party but for the one that has the greatest chance of getting into parliament. And it is the AKP that has appealed most successfully to a range of electoral segments including conservative, liberal democrat and underprivileged groups. Founded in 2001 after previous Islamist parties were banned for violating the constitution, the party declared itself attached to modern, secular and democratic values, and to EU integration. However, the pick-and-mix nature of Turkish democracy means that voters are prepared to put up with serious deviations from this stance if their own core agenda is met.

For this reason, the key group in the AKP's electorate has until now been the liberal democrats, because they have played a useful role in legitimising a full range of AKP policies. In so doing, though, they have sometimes overlooked

<sup>1</sup> P. Elman, "Turkey at a Tipping Point: Why the EU Should Use Gezi to Rebalance Ankara's Foreign Policy," *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 17 (65), July 2013, <http://www.pism.pl/Publications/PISM-Policy-Paper-no-65>.

unlawful practices and the centralisation of power due to their focus on issues such as minority rights and the demilitarisation of politics. Liberal democrats have, for instance, welcomed the recent trial of journalists, academics, activists and members of the military accused of an attempted coup, even though the trial has come at the expense of procedural standards in the judiciary.

The AKP's popular support, moreover, is only skin-deep. Indeed, according to a survey conducted in August, around 50% voters of each main party felt they were not truly represented by any party. The main opposition party, the Republican Party (CHP) attracts the bulk of the secular vote, yet its stance on other issues such as nationalism is unpopular even among its own electorate. The third biggest parliamentary party, the Nationalist Party (MHP) despite publicly voicing its opposition, has simply aligned itself with the ruling party several times. And the pro-Kurdish BDP party, whose members stand as independent candidates to overcome the parliamentary threshold, received 6–7% of the vote, although Turkey's Kurds are estimated to make up 15–20% of the overall population.

**The Gezi Effect.** Turkey is currently preparing for local elections in March 2014, and a presidential election in August of the same year, as well as a general election in 2015. Of the three, the local elections are of unusual importance, and not just because they precede the other two; the prime minister and many other AKP members cannot stand in the general election due to AKP's internal regulations which limit service to three consecutive terms, and so are focusing on the earlier contest. In this race, the AKP remains ahead despite a decrease in popularity due to discontent with the economy (the stock market is 27% down compared to the end of May 2013), authoritarianism, and foreign policy. The Gezi protests which vented this discontent have, however, had little effect on the political system.

Despite the public "resistance forums" organised in several districts and the online formulation of common demands, the Gezi movement has no distinct leadership structures. In the three months since the protests began, there has therefore been no reform of the threshold problem, or changes to address the high numbers of unrepresented votes, the abstention of more than eight million people in the 2011 elections, or the widespread discontent with those parties that did receive votes. Moreover, with the exception of some political leaders, there has been little effort by the AKP to accommodate a movement which revealed a new political culture that bridged divisions over secularism, conservatism and nationalism.

This is no surprise. The AKP has been the greatest beneficiary not just of the threshold rules but of such divisions, promoting itself as the voice of conservatives and of the underprivileged, as distinct from the "elites" who apparently disrespect religious values. Moreover, the division between the AKP and the liberals and other conservative groups has actually deepened after the protests. Rather than reform, the AKP has therefore preferred to consolidate its most conservative electorate. It is making analogies between the Gezi protests and the military coup in Egypt, presenting itself as the victim of a foreign conspiracy and the protestors as traitors and terrorists. It has also introduced mechanisms allowing citizens to report on their protesting neighbours and pressuring the media.

**Conclusion.** Although a large part of the electorate remains a political minority (around 66% of overall voters in the last elections), the current system suits the AKP, and the democratisation package the government is currently working on does not address its principal flaws. The current system allows the government and various non-state players to exploit state institutions and the media to firm-up their power base. This situation is increasingly problematic for the EU, since it allows the winning party to favour its party interests over national interests, to the detriment of Turkey's domestic stability and of its traditional alliances. It is in the EU's interests to address these questions of effective democratic institutions, fair parliamentary representation, and participatory democracy.

At this stage, though, only a less-politicised and rather technical Europeanization process can give the EU the leverage it needs in Ankara. This would thus require the EU to open new negotiations in November, for which Ankara has fulfilled the technical criteria. Within the framework, the EU should address the main handicaps of Turkey's democracy, focusing on questions of judicial independence, law enforcement, electoral reform and media freedom, as well as drawing attention to this new political culture which was expressed over the summer. European party families, including Polish parties, can increase their dialogue with Turkey's political players. Indeed, since the government has significantly downgraded its EU accession bid, this broader engagement is needed.