

The Reasons Behind the AK Party's November 1st Victory

İBRAHİM USLU*

ABSTRACT *In June 2015, Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AK Party) lost its parliamentary majority after thirteen consecutive years in power. When a series of coalition talks proved inconclusive, however, it made a historic comeback in the repeat election by learning from mistakes, promoting dialogue and focusing on everyday issues.*

A Record-Breaking Election

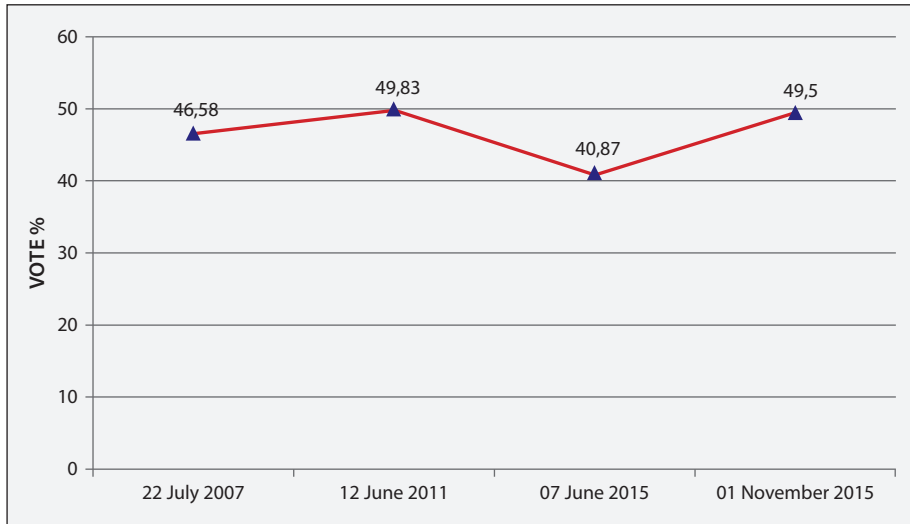
In the weeks leading up to the November 2015 parliamentary election, few thought that the AK Party, could reverse their losses and reclaim the parliamentary majority which they had just lost in June, after thirteen consecutive years in power. On election day, even more seasoned experts were caught by surprise as the party received 49.5 percent of the vote to score a stunning electoral comeback. And this was not the only extraordinary aspect of the November 2015 elections either.

The November 2015 election, however, was already a historic event

before the results started coming in. For the first time in the Republic's history, the Turkish people went to the polls for a repeat election due to the failure of major political parties to strike a deal by the constitutionally-mandated deadline. The contest, furthermore, went down in history as a record-breaking election season: by securing another four years in power, the AK Party became the first political party to single-handedly govern the country for four consecutive terms. The party, moreover, shattered the record for the highest number of votes received in an electoral contest with 22,959,394 supporters. While in June elections the AK Party received 50.4 percent of the vote from the Turkish

* President of ANAR, Turkey

Insight Turkey
Vol. 17 / No. 4 /
2015, pp. 39-46

Figure I: The AK Party's Performance in Parliamentary Elections, 2007-2015

citizens living outside the country, in November the turnout rate broke the 40-percent mark for the first time and the AK Party became the most popular party among Turks abroad with 56.38 percent of the vote. In total the party received 647,028 votes abroad to set a new record for the highest number of international votes received.

When the AK Party delivered a surprisingly strong performance on November 1, experts and commentators started looking for ways to account for the comeback. A closer analysis of electoral data, however, reveals that the June election, not the November contest, represented an exception.

Figure I indicates that the AK Party delivered similar performances in 2007, 2011 and November 2015 as the party's level of popular support remains relatively stable over an eight-year period. The June 2015 election, in contrast, marked a devia-

tion from the trend line. Asking questions about the November 1 election, therefore, does not offer a complete picture about voter behavior and the performances of individual political parties. Instead, we must first question why the AK Party experienced an eight-point drop on June 7.

Why did the AK Party Suffer on June 7?

When the AK Party's popular support dipped in June 2015, experts and close followers of Turkish politics came up with a number of explanations. A popular argument, especially among AK Party members, was that the disappointing results were closely related to the choice of candidates. Many observers argued that the party picked the wrong contenders in predominantly-Kurdish districts across eastern and southeastern Turkey. The list of the candidates is the main fac-

tor of the declining vote rate in the national level as well.

Others blamed the hollow victory on unimpressive campaign pledges. At a time when opposition leaders made some wild and irresponsible economic promises to voters, the incumbents focused on structural reforms and long-term challenges. Taking the nation's economy to the next level was important, critics argued, but the pledges simply didn't help the AK Party win the battle over hearts and minds.

A series of controversial developments, some observers maintained, had left many voters on the fence about mobilizing behind the AK Party. The Dolmabahçe declaration, a lengthy debate over central bank independence, intelligence chief Hakan Fidan's decision to run for public office and ostensible differences of opinion between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, among others, were oft-cited examples. Moreover, the Kurdish political party's accomplishments in northern Syria and the siege of Kobani fueled nationalist fervor among Turkey's Kurds to deal a heavy blow to the AK Party's popularity in the southeast and other predominantly Kurdish electoral districts. Finally, another important point is related to growing economic challenges triggered by global developments. Although this article isn't intended to engage each argument in detail, it is important to identify the main reasons behind the AK Party's rude awakening on June 7. First and foremost, the June 2015 parlamenta-

Although opposition leaders were quick to celebrate the end of an era, the repeat election established that the June 2015 election had only temporarily created a new balance of power

ry election coincided with the most vulnerable period of the AK Party. In August 2014, less than a year before the race, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the party's founder and charismatic leader, had stepped down as chairman to assume the presidency. He was replaced by then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who had little time to connect with the voters.

In the months that followed a challenging leadership reshuffle, another key development took place at the provincial level: due to the legal obligation, a large number of party administrators, including women's and youth branches, were replaced. Although optimists viewed this major overhaul as a fresh start, others were quick to realize that running a campaign with relatively inexperienced provincial party officials created serious challenges for the AK Party.

The second important reason is related to the AK Party's self-imposed "three-term limit" rule, which rendered the popular political actors with years of experience ineligible to run for office. The result of the rule



Ahmet Davutoğlu,
the leader of the
AK Party, greets the
party supporters,
celebrating
November 1st
general elections.

AA PHOTO /
HALİL SAĞIRKAYA

broke the balance of power in key electoral districts and caused the AK Party to fight an uphill battle where it used to win comfortably.

The third factor is related to a boost of self-confidence. Ahead of the June 2015 vote, many AK Party members believed that they could overcome future challenges with relative ease. After all, the party had capitalized on experienced politicians among their ranks to receive a record number of votes in the March 2014 municipal election amid a defamation campaign led by the Gülen Movement. Five months later, then-AK Party chairman Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had won a first-round victory in the presidential race, where he defeated former OIC Secretary-General Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu who was endorsed by more than ten opposition parties. The excessive self-confidence, however, resulted not to identify the new social and political atmosphere challenging the AK Party.

The last reason is the increasing political polarization proved harmful to the AK Party, which had reaped the benefits of this trend since the 2007 parliamentary election. At a time when the military was keen on overthrowing the democratically-elected government and the opposition parties organized Republican demonstrations in the name of secularism, the electorate had stood in solidarity with the AK Party leadership. After having spent the past couple of years dealing with major challenges such as the Gezi Park protests and the Gülenist defamation campaign, voters got tired of political struggles.

Getting the November 2015 Election Right

Although opposition leaders were quick to celebrate the end of an era, the repeat election established that the June 2015 election had only tem-

At a time when the AK Party fielded political heavyweights and came up with a new set of campaign pledges, neither the CHP nor the MHP made any notable alterations to their platforms

porarily created a new balance of power. In other words, the electorate favored a return to the post-2007 status quo. As Prime Minister Davutoğlu mentioned in his victory speech on election day, the AK Party leadership successfully analyzed the electorate's message and took necessary steps to address problems. A key component of the new AK Party's strategy was to reduce the level of political polarization by engaging in a series of coalition talks with opposition leaders – negotiations in which, the public believed, the AK Party chairman acted in good faith. By publicly declaring that he would meet with opposition leaders without preconditions nor prejudice, he was able to present himself as a constructive player in Turkish politics. Even after the coalition talks proved inconclusive, Mr. Davutoğlu strengthened his position as a coalition builder by actively trying to include opposition MPs in the constitutionally-mandated interim government.

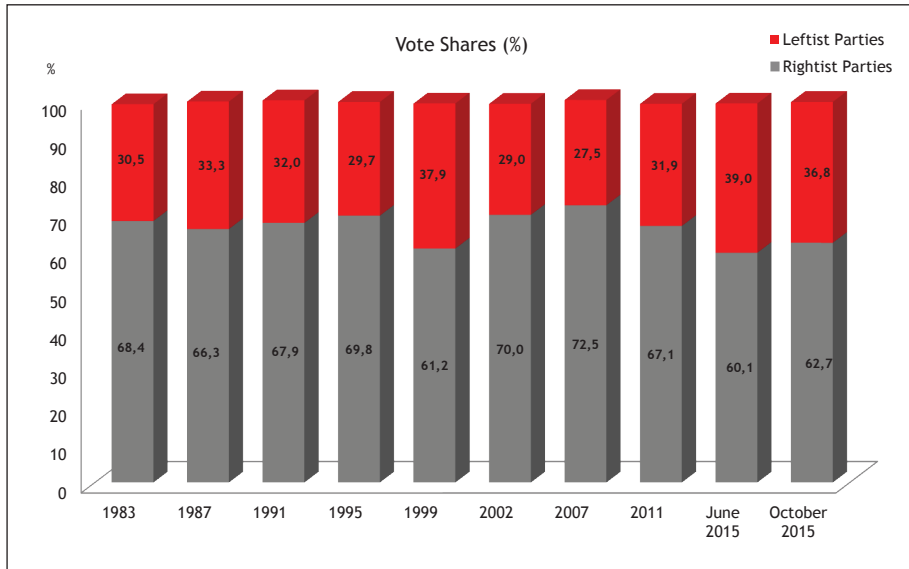
Furthermore, the AK Party leadership responded to widespread criticism by sacking a large number of unpopular candidates, whom they had endorsed in June 2015, and shifted the campaign's focus from long-term projects to everyday problems. Finally, the Prime Minister spent a considerable amount of time on the campaign trail to emphasize the importance of national unity, compromise and courtesy to march the AK Party to a historic victory.

The Opposition's Shortcomings

Although the AK Party leadership took important steps to bounce back, what really made the difference between the June 2015 election and the repeat election was the opposition's ineffective strategy. Having failed to respond to the AK Party's maneuvers, they suffered a humiliating defeat on election day.

The election results, first and foremost, reflected a set of historical and sociological factors. Since the Tanzimat period (the supreme edict of Ottoman Empire), the competition between advocates of Westernization and the nation's conservatives has been a key issue in Turkish politics. Consequently, the balance of power between the Left and the Right has traditionally been biased toward the latter. Figure II shows the distribution of votes between left-leaning and right-leaning political parties since 1983.

The distribution of votes between leftist and right-wing political par-

Figure II: Left vs Right in Parliamentary Elections, 1983-2015¹

ties over the past 32 years clearly establishes a long-term trend: while approximately two-thirds (66.6 percent) of the electorate consistently support the Right, the rest (32.8 percent) votes for leftist contenders. In recent years, the demise of numerous right-wing parties led the AK Party and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) to compete over more than sixty percent of the vote. At this point, this phenomenon alone makes it possible for the AK Party to maintain its parliamentary majority while denying the opposition parties an opportunity to expand their bases.

Taking a closer look at individual races, it is possible to observe the concrete results of this imbalance: while right-wing parties won nine out of ten parliamentary elections since the early 1980s, only once did a leftist party become the most pop-

ular party in the country by receiving 22.2 percent of the vote. Out of 19 governments formed since 1983, ten were single-party governments by right-leaning parties –six AK Party governments and four Motherland Party (ANAP) governments. Leftists parties, in turn, could not form any single-party governments over the past 32 years. Furthermore, there were only two coalition governments in which a leftist party served at the helm.

Another reason behind the opposition's failure has been an unproductive mindset which I like to call "making do with what we have." At a time when the AK Party fielded political heavyweights and came up with a new set of campaign pledges, neither the Republican People's Party (CHP) nor the MHP made any notable alterations to their platforms. The

Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) made small changes to their nominee lists but eventually refused to run a campaign citing terror attacks. In light of the above, it would appear that the AK Party was the only political party with an actual interest in running the country. Their competitors, in turn, seemed happy where they were –which naturally made it impossible for them to continue expanding their electoral base. In the end, the AK Party was the only party able to perform better in the repeat election.

Finally, the public's overall level of satisfaction was a key factor behind the opposition's failure to make gains. Although opposition leaders often describe Turkey as a broken country, studies show that ordinary citizens feel content. According to a 2014 study by the Turkish Statistical Institute, 56.3 percent of participants indicated they were happy –compared to 11.7 percent who stated that they were unhappy. Generally speaking, Turkish citizens said they were happy with public services: while 71.8 percent approved transportation services, 71.2 percent were content with public healthcare. Compared to 65.6 percent of participants who were happy with the education system, 58.4 percent had a positive opinion of the Social Security Administration. Moreover, 50.8 percent of the people said they were content with the judicial system. Finally, 73.7 percent of participants said they were hopeful about their future. Considering the people's level of satisfaction with Turkey's current state of affairs, it is safe

Having governed the country for thirteen consecutive years, the AK Party secured another four-year term in power to effectively transform Turkey's multi-party system into a dominant party system

to assume that many voters disagreed with the opposition's criticisms and campaign pledges.

The November 2015 Election and the AK Party's Accomplishments

Making a historic comeback on November 1, the AK Party made the following accomplishments: The AK Party outclassed its rivals in terms of popular support and the number of parliamentary seats controlled. The incumbents led others in 63 out of 81 provinces and received the highest number of votes in all seven regions. Only in three districts did AK Party candidates fail to get elected. As the only party with nationwide support, the AK Party received more than 39 percent of the vote even in its worst-performing region. Ultimately, they succeeded in maintaining a certain level of popularity across the country. Besides, the AK Party became the most popular political party in eastern and southeastern Turkey, where the PKK's recent return to violence has created major challenges. While the Kurdish nationalist HDP

won twenty seats with 35.6 percent of the vote in eastern Anatolia, 27 AK Party candidates won local races. The party's overall level of support reached 47.9 percent in the region. The southeast produced similar results: while the HDP won 42.1 percent of the vote to claim 27 seats, the AK Party received 45.7 percent to control 29 seats. In light of the most recent election results, the HDP leadership's claim that they had become "the main representative of Turkey's Kurds" proved inaccurate. Furthermore, having gone through a potentially destructive leadership change in August 2014, the AK Party became the first center-right party in Turkish

political history to maintain a high level of support. Although political parties such as ANAP and the Right Path Party (DYP) failed to survive similar situations, the AK Party reversed the trend. Lastly, having governed the country for thirteen consecutive years, the AK Party secured another four-year term in power to effectively transform Turkey's multi-party system into a dominant party system. ■

Endnote

1. Keeping in mind that multiple political parties participated in each election over the past three decades, the data relies on self-identification by each party.