



POLICY PAPER

No. 33 (135), October 2015 © PISM

Editors: Wojciech Lorenz (Managing Editor)

Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk • Dariusz Kała
Piotr Kościński • Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Marcin Terlikowski

AKP Snap Election Tactics: Turmoil in Turkey

Dylan O'Driscoll

Following the 2015 national election in Turkey the AKP, for the first time since coming to power in 2002, failed to win enough votes to form a majority government. Since the election the AKP has given the impression that it is attempting to form a coalition government, but in reality the party has been employing a number of tactics in order to increase its share of the vote in preparation for a snap election. These tactics have mainly revolved around increasing the nationalist vote and damaging the main Kurdish party. However, these manoeuvres have increased polarisation in Turkey and have resulted in an escalation of the conflict with the Kurds. Worryingly, it has become evident that the AKP aims to win power in the next election at all costs.

Since 2002 the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) has been in power in Turkey, and has been steadily increasing the number of votes it receives. However, in the 2015 national election this changed. For the first time since 2002 the AKP did not manage to gain a majority in parliament. Although it is still Turkey's most popular party, the AKP's share of the vote decreased from 49.83% in 2011 to 40.87% in 2015. That said, the party still won more votes than in the 2002 and 2007 elections, and the main opposition, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), a Kemalist centre-left party, has not seen an increase in its share of the vote.¹ So why does the AKP no longer have a parliamentary majority? The main reason is that, for the first time, a Kurdish-led party—the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP)—has reached the threshold of 10% of votes cast, which is required in order to gain seats in parliament. Some see the results as the voters punishing the AKP for its growing authoritarianism and attempt to create a presidential system, which would see the president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, vastly increase the capacities of his powers.²

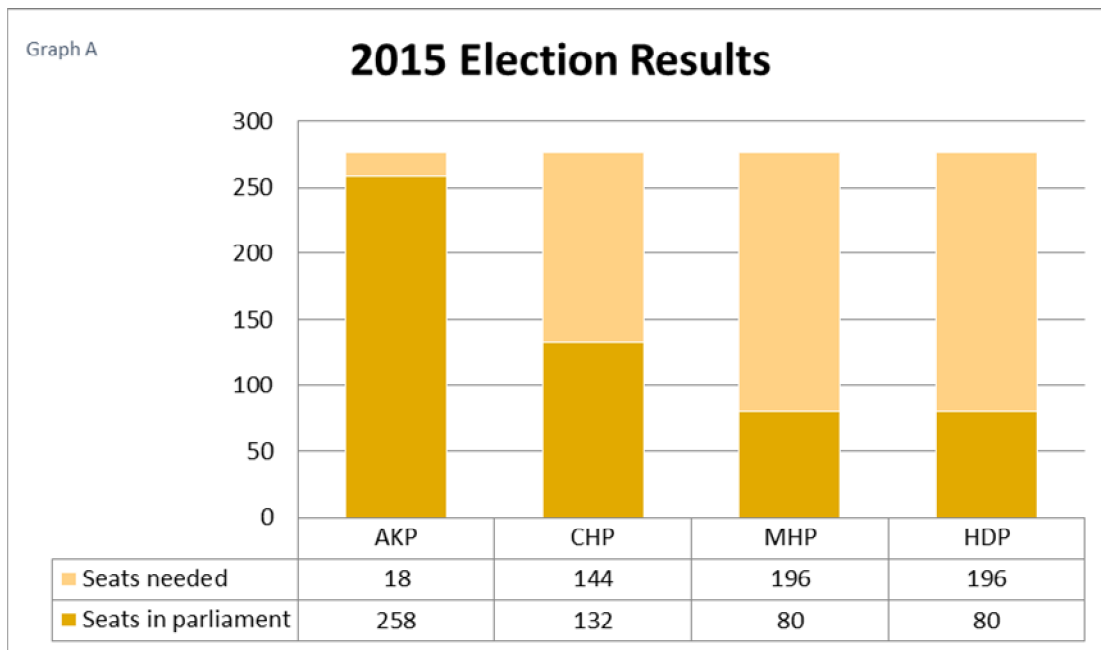
As demonstrated in Graph A, by reaching the 10% threshold the HDP gained 80 seats, which would have otherwise been redistributed in such a manner that the AKP would gain a majority. The threshold in Turkey is the highest in the world, which has, up to now, prevented minority and leftist parties from being represented in parliament.³ By breaching the threshold, the HDP has changed the dynamics of Turkish

¹ A. Nardelli, "Turkey election results: what you need to know," *The Guardian*, 8 June 2015, www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2015/jun/08/turkey-election-results-what-you-need-to-know.

² K. Genç, "Turkish Voters Have Punished the Ruling Party for Bullying Minorities," *Time Magazine*, 8 June 2015, <http://time.com/3912248/turkey-elections-analysis>.

³ D. Louter, K. Lyons, "The world's most unfair election system—how would your parliament fare?," *The Guardian*, 1 June 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/01/turkey-the-worlds-most-unfair-election-system.

politics and the AKP has to change its tactics as a result. The AKP wants a majority government, and in order for this to happen the party prevented a coalition government from being formed before the deadline of 28 August, thus triggering a snap election, which will take place on 1 November.⁴



Having a snap election is basically a win-win situation for the AKP. The worst that can happen is that the party will lose some votes but remain the most popular in Turkey and still have to attempt to form a coalition. However, on the other hand, if the AKP can gain 18 or more seats, it will be able to form a majority government. Therefore, the party has changed its strategies and developed a number of tactics to try to increase its share of the vote.

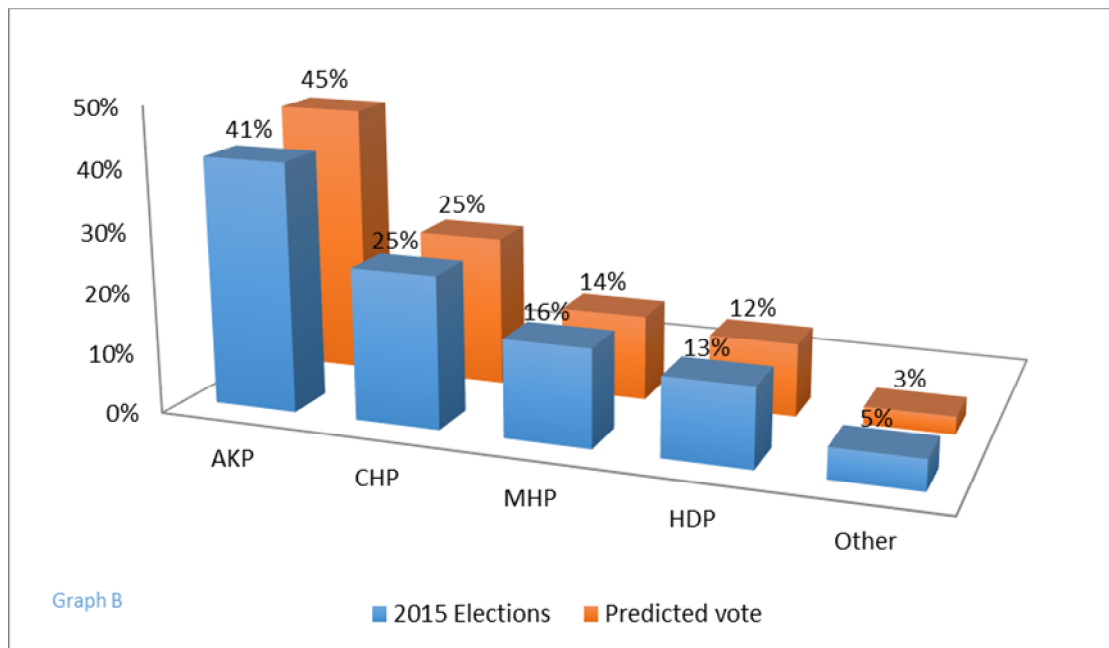
Playing the Numbers Game

The results of an opinion poll carried out straight after the election suggested that, if there were to be another election straight away, the AKP would receive 45% of the vote. According to IPSOS—the research company that carried out the survey—the AKP would gain 2% of the vote from the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), a nationalist right-wing party, 1% of the HDP's vote and 2% from the independents (see Graph B⁵).⁶

⁴ E. MacAskill, C. Letsch, "Turkey urged at NATO meeting not to abandon Kurdish peace process," *The Guardian*, 28 July 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/28/turkey-urged-nato-meeting-not-abandon-kurdish-peace-process.

⁵ Percentages have been rounded off to the nearest digit in this graph.

⁶ T24, "İPSOS'un araştırmasına göre, erken seçim olursa AKP'nin oyları artıyor," T24, 10 June 2015, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/ipsosun-arastirmasina-gore-erken-secim-olursa-akpnin-oylari-artiyor,299295>.



This has given the AKP the confidence that, if it avoids major policy errors, it can win the snap election. As part of this tactic, the party, despite wanting to form a majority government, had to be seen to be trying to form a coalition before the 28 August deadline in order to avoid appearing power hungry and losing voters. The CHP leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, has opined that the AKP was never trying to form a proper government with his party, but rather a short-term caretaker government with an early election in mind.⁷

Moreover, part of playing the numbers game consists of not implementing any policies that are viewed as negative. Therefore, due to the public outcry after the Islamic State (IS) bombed Suruç, in Turkey, killing 32 people and injuring more than 100, the AKP was forced to change its tactics against IS.⁸ Although Turkey had previously avoided joining the fight against IS, and had continuously highlighted the fact that it saw the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) and the Assad regime as a bigger threat to Turkey, as public opinion shifted the AKP was forced to take at least some action against IS. Thus, Ankara joined the coalition forces in fighting IS in Syria, allowed Turkish bases to be used, and arrested IS suspects in Turkey.⁹ However, this aggressive stance towards IS is minor when compared to the simultaneous actions that have been targeted towards the Kurds and the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK).

Appeal to the Nationalists

When Turkey launched its campaign against IS, it simultaneously went on the offensive against the PKK and some elements of the Turkish left. During the mass arrests of those suspected of having links to IS, others suspected of having links to the PKK were also taken into custody. However, far more Kurds than suspected IS supporters were arrested. Additionally, in the bombing campaign that Turkey launched, far

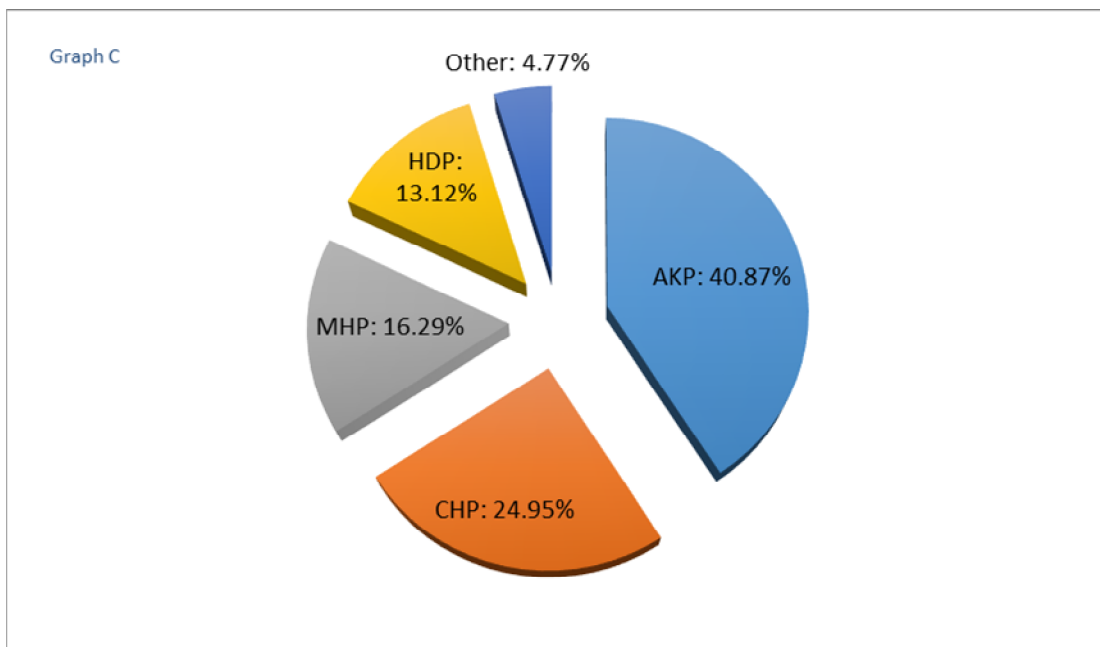
⁷ "Turkey faces snap election as coalition talks fail," *Al Jazeera*, 13 August 2015, www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/turkey-coalition-government-150813123140443.html.

⁸ "Protests rage across Turkey over deadly Suruç bombing," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 22 July 2015, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/protests-rage-across-turkey-over-deadly-suruc-bombing.aspx?PageID=238&NID=85752&NewsCatID=341.

⁹ M. Lowen, "Turkey—from reluctant observer to full player in IS fight," *BBC News*, 25 July 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33664269.

greater emphasis was placed on bombing the PKK in Turkey and northern Iraq than on bombing IS in Syria.¹⁰

Because Turkey has such a high election threshold, many Kurds had previously voted for the AKP. However, now that the HDP has passed this threshold it is more likely that Kurds will back this party instead, as votes will not be seen as “wasted.” This means that there is not much to gain for the AKP from attempting to appeal to the Kurdish voters, thus allowing the party to take a far harsher stance towards the PKK and Kurds in general. The renewed battle against the PKK has led to the end of the peace process, but at the same time it is likely to win more support from nationalist voters.¹¹ As illustrated in Graph C, the MHP won 16.29% of the votes, and by targeting the PKK the AKP will be looking to win a sizeable chunk of these. The MHP voters are seen as highly nationalist Turks. They would therefore be worried about the rise of the HDP, and be more likely to vote for the AKP in the snap election in order to allow the party to create a majority government. Targeting the PKK is part of a tactic to further entice the nationalist voter. Although the AKP only needs to gain just over 4% of the vote, if the party can take the MHP’s share below 10%, which is one of the key objectives, the party can gain further seats in the vote redistribution, thus bringing it closer to having the power¹² to enact constitutional changes.¹³



¹⁰ “Report: 390 PKK killed in Turkish air raids, 400 wounded,” *Rudaw*, 9 August 2015, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/090820152>.

¹¹ “PKK leader: Turkey is protecting IS by attacking Kurds,” *BBC News*, 10 August 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33818282.

¹² Winning 330 seats allows the party to call a referendum on constitutional changes, whereas 367 seats would allow the changes to be made without a referendum.

¹³ “Fighting on two fronts,” *The Economist*, 10 August 2015, www.economist.com/news/europe/21660585-caretaker-government-attacks-kurds-abroad-and-home-fighting-two-fronts.

Vilify the HDP

The final tactic enacted by the AKP in order to increase its share of the vote involves trying to demonstrate that the PKK and the HDP are one and the same. This strategy has two main objectives. Firstly, the AKP wants to try to discourage those Turks who voted for the Kurdish-led HDP from voting for them again. In this tactic the PKK has helped the AKP, as by ending the ceasefire it is easier for the AKP to portray the PKK as the enemy. Although the HDP and the PKK are not the same organisation and the HDP firmly supports a ceasefire, its links to the PKK make it easy for the AKP to create the necessary doubt that will in turn lead to people not voting for the HDP. Graph B supports the hypothesis that, due to the instability caused following the election, some voters will abandon the HDP for the AKP. By further vilifying the HDP, the AKP would hope to take a larger percentage of this vote, which in turn could counter the fact that more Kurds are likely to vote for the HDP now that the party have passed the threshold.

The second objective behind this tactic is to attempt to destabilise the HDP prior to the snap election, removing the party's capacity to reach the 10% threshold, thus leading to the redistribution of its seats. As part of this tactic the AKP is trying to take away the HDP parliamentarians' immunity from prosecution, thus enabling the latter to be arrested under Turkey's overly broad terrorism laws. By stripping the parliamentarians of their immunity and claiming they are part of the PKK, or are inciting violence, the AKP can prevent the HDP from putting many candidates forward for the snap election. Furthermore, it could potentially also lead to the HDP being banned as a terrorist organisation, a tactic that has been used against Kurdish political parties in the past. However, arresting HDP candidates or banning the organisation would most likely be left until closer to the election, in order to avoid giving the HDP time to reorganise and to prevent the party from putting all its resources into an election campaign. All these tactics are enacted so that the AKP can gain votes, increase its share of the vote, and bring the party closer to the majority it desires.¹⁴

Out of Control?

Although the AKP, or at least Erdoğan, has chosen tactics that are likely to increase its share of the vote, in targeting the PKK the party has underestimated its rival. Ideally, Erdoğan would have liked to bomb PKK targets and have them retreat across the borders into neighbouring countries, thus giving him a quick political victory. However, the PKK struck back harder than expected, and has inflicted substantial losses on many military and police targets. The resulting deaths and overall escalation of the conflict has seen many accuse the AKP of using war as a political tool.¹⁵ The fact that the PKK cannot be defeated through military means, as the past 30 years have proven, cements the view that the AKP has alternative, electoral motives. Moreover, the AKP has further polarised Turkey, and as a result Kurds, Kurdish businesses and HDP offices are increasingly being attacked. The actions against the PKK in the Kurdish majority town of Cizre have been widely criticised, as a curfew was imposed, the population was denied basic services, and more than 20 civilians were killed.¹⁶ Many among the opposition have accused the AKP of driving Turkey towards civil war, and the HDP leader, Selahattin Demirtas, has also accused the AKP of making fair elections impossible in the Kurdish majority southeast of the country.¹⁷ Ironically, Erdoğan was pushing for a peace process with the PKK, much against many of his supporters' wishes, yet now he is trying to escalate

¹⁴ G. Solaker, E. Toksabay, "Erdogan taking Turkey to war to avenge Kurdish gains—opposition," *Reuters*, 30 July 2015, <http://uk.mobile.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUKKCN0Q416120150730>.

¹⁵ See: B. Başer, A. Öztürk, "Escalating violence mars traces of hopes for peace," *Today's Zaman*, 8 September 2015, www.todayszaman.com/op-ed_escalating-violence-mars-traces-of-hopes-for-peace_398576.html.

¹⁶ For more on the escalation of the conflict see: C. Gunes, "How Turkey began the slide towards civil war," *The Conversation*, 16 September 2015, <https://theconversation.com/how-turkey-began-the-slide-towards-civil-war-47389>.

¹⁷ "Turkey's Demirtas warns leaders heading towards civil war," *BBC*, 9 September 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34195807.

the conflict in order to maintain power.¹⁸ It remains to be seen what he can do to bring the damaged peace process back on track if the AKP manages to form a majority following the snap election.

The AKP is desperate to hang on to power, and has even stated that the current conflict with the Kurds would not be happening if it had reached its 400 seat electoral target. As a consequence of this many are blaming the AKP for the unnecessary loss of lives, and the party is losing key voters to the CHP.¹⁹ However, the loss of these voters is offset by the gain of nationalist and far right voters. Nevertheless, according to the latest opinion poll, the AKP has gained votes from the MHP and the independents but still falls short of the votes necessary to form a majority, and this is because of votes lost to the CHP.²⁰ The AKP has therefore not played the numbers game well. This is worrying, as the party's desperation to maintain power—as evident in the AKP's rhetoric that it *will* win the November election at all costs—could result in the escalating conflict being used as a pretext for military action in southeast Turkey, which would prevent Kurds from voting there and thus stop the HDP from reaching the 10% threshold.²¹

Ensuring Fair Elections

The AKP needs to respect the political process. If the majority of the population does not vote for the party, it must accept the mandate given by the people to form a coalition government. Moreover, the AKP must guarantee fair and free elections (and freedom of the press) in Turkey, and both the EU and NATO should use their influence to ensure this.²² When Turkey invoked Article 4 and called for a NATO meeting, it won support for its fight against terrorism. However, in private, many members urged a “proportionate response” against the PKK and called for the maintenance of the peace process.²³ The AKP has ignored these calls and the peace process is currently in tatters. In addition, Turkey has barely targeted IS, instead attacking mainly the PKK. Moreover, it has become increasingly apparent that the AKP aims to win the snap election *at all costs*. Despite private concerns, in supporting Turkey following the Article 4 meeting, NATO—by not raising these concerns officially—has effectively supported the current escalation of conflict, which has seen Kurds and the Turkish left attacked by both the state and its supporters. NATO cannot allow the AKP to take power in the November election if it is against the will of the people. Therefore, NATO must use its alliance with Turkey to ensure fair elections and to limit the rise of ethnic conflict in Turkey. The divisions the AKP is creating in Turkish society are far too great a price to pay for the party's victory. If the AKP does manage to win a majority, by whatever means, it will be interesting to see whether and how it goes about healing the wounds it has created, or whether it will forsake democratic unity for authoritarianism.

¹⁸ A. Ozerdem, “Is Turkey's president profiting from escalating violence?,” *The Conversation*, 11 August 2015, <https://theconversation.com/is-turkeys-president-profiting-from-escalating-violence-45921>.

¹⁹ B. Başer, A. Öztürk, *op. cit.*

²⁰ U. Bektas, “Turkish poll shows AK Party falling short of majority,” *Reuters*, 15 September 2015, www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/15/us-turkey-politics-poll-idUSKCN0RF0JF20150915.

²¹ A. Kayserilioğlu, G. Işıkara, M. Zirngast, “Erdoğan's Violent Last Resort,” *Jacobin*, 13 September 2015, www.jacobinmag.com/2015/09/erdogan-akp-hdp-isis-suruc-gezi.

²² The HDP leader, Dermirtas, has called for EU states to increase pressure on Ankara to ease its conflict with the Kurds and warns that if the conflict continues it could trigger a mass departure of Kurds from Turkey to Europe.

²³ A. Barker, G. Dyer, D. O'Byrne, “Turkey urged to show restraint in attacks on Kurdish militants,” *Financial Times*, 28 July 2015, www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4a9cd402-3503-11e5-bdbb-35e55cbae175.html#axzz3mSnFKlog.