

# The 2014 Local Elections in Turkey: A Victory for Identity Politics

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**ABSTRACT** *The context of and the meaning conferred upon the local elections led it to be fought in a referendum-like atmosphere. Prior to the March 30 local elections, various scenarios put forward both for the governing AK Party and the opposition parties, which largely remained unfulfilled on the elections day. As the local elections is over, a sound analysis of the election's context, results, and possible implications is warranted. Despite the rapid and dramatic transformation that Turkey has undergone over the last decade, particularly since 2007, no such dramatic shift in the voters' behaviors has occurred. This article argues that this is because of the dominance of the identity-politics, over all other issues, that shaped the content and context of the elections. It further claims insofar as this dominance continues to prevail over other concerns in the elections, no major change should be expected in the voters' inclinations and behaviors.*

**T**he 2014 local elections in Turkey marked a historic event with repercussions that went far beyond mayoral races and municipal assembly seats, as the vote closely resembled national elections and practically served as the first round of the upcoming presidential race in August 2014. Never in modern Turkish history had an election season been so prone to tensions and aggressive campaigns. Typically, the country's overly centralized administrative structure would result in an overall lack of interest in local elections, which primarily serve as large-scale projections for parliamentary elections. As such, local races hint at popular sentiments and political inclinations among voters. In recent decades, at least two local elections were particularly remarkable for signaling nationwide trends: the 1989 election results indicated that the Motherland Party (ANAP), which had been in government for six years, was beginning to lose some of its popular support; and the 1994 local elections which, in contrast, established that the Welfare Party (Refah) could appeal to an ever-larger group of voters. Just as the local ballots suggested, ANAP lost power in 1991 and Refah became a coalition partner in the 1995 parliamentary elections.<sup>1</sup>

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Despite such historical precedents, the 2014 local elections carried unique importance as a series of interrelated factors came into play. One of the main reasons why observers paid so much attention to the election results was the proximity of the presidential race in August and parliamentary elections scheduled for mid-2015. Since the two upcoming contests would have tremendous influence over Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's political future and, by extension, Turkey's roadmap, the local vote attracted unusual attention from political commentators and politicians among others.

Prior to the local elections, the overall sense was that the Prime Minister would make a much-anticipated bid for the presidency if his party could break the 40-percent mark, while failure to achieve this level of success would jeopardize

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such plans. Considering the AK Party's landslide victory in the 2011 parliamentary elections (where the party won 50 percent of the vote) and various polls which documented its continued appeal among voters, Erdoğan would ostensibly become the country's next president if he participated in the August 2014 race.<sup>2</sup>

In truth, the upcoming presidential election and the question of Erdoğan's candidacy had been at the top of the country's political agenda for quite some time. One of the main reasons behind this interest was his vocal support for equipping the presidency with greater political power and introducing a

presidential regime in Turkey. Following a 2007 standoff with the secularist establishment over the nomination of then-Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül for president, the AK Party government (which controlled enough seats in the legislative chamber to unilaterally vote the next president into office) organized a constitutional referendum that amended electoral laws to introduce direct presidential elections.<sup>3</sup> The constitutional referendum thus required the president to participate in popular elections for public office and allowed each president to serve up to two five-year terms. The adoption of proposed amendments immediately triggered public debate on the potential changes, including greater influence of the president over the political process, that direct presidential elections would entail. Noting that an elected president facing re-election after five years in office would inevitably have more political influence than previous heads of state who were elected by the Parliament for seven years, the ruling AK Party advocated the expansion of the president's constitutional mandate. In line with this thinking, the party officially proposed that the country replace its parliamentary regime with a presidential system during all-party talks on the drafting of a new constitution between 2011 and 2013.<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister Erdoğan, in his capacity as AK Party chair-

man, later announced that they would be willing to settle for semi-presidentialism or a party-affiliated presidency if the opposition parties were willing to cooperate with the ruling party on other issues.<sup>5</sup> Claiming that Erdoğan sought to transform the political system for his personal interests as future president, the opposition protested the plan and refused to negotiate on the matter.<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of an agreement between the AK Party and the opposition over proposed changes to the president's constitutional mandate, a number of public figures, including Parliament speaker Cemil Çiçek, warned that the existing institutional arrangement paved the way for future clashes between presidents and prime ministers over political power and would leave the political process vulnerable to frequent crises.<sup>7</sup> Despite such warnings, divisions continued as the AK Party called for a stronger presidency with party ties while the opposition vehemently opposed all reform efforts to keep Erdoğan from establishing complete control over the political process. Assuming that the Prime Minister would insist on expanding his power if elected president, the opposition simultaneously focused their attention on preventing an Erdoğan presidency.

To be sure, efforts to curb the Prime Minister's popularity and discourage him from pursuing the presidency date back to the 2011 parliamentary elections. A case in point was the 2013 Gezi Park protests<sup>8</sup> where an almost exclusive focus on Erdoğan was identified by opposition parties and political commentators as an attempt to derail the Prime Minister's presidential bid.<sup>9</sup> Six months later, as political parties slowly geared up for the upcoming local elections, the Gülen Movement launched a potentially devastating campaign against Prime Minister Erdoğan and his government and sought to dictate their terms to the political leadership. A surprisingly aggressive anti-government campaign, which dominated public debate between the initial breakout on December 17, 2013 and the local elections on March 30, 2014, rested on allegations that Erdoğan and his government had been involved in widespread corruption. To corroborate the Gülenist account of government misconduct, anonymous sources uploaded illegally acquired surveillance data and doctored video footage on social media outlets. The smear campaign sought to present Prime Minister Erdoğan as a corrupt, authoritarian politician who was no longer able to keep a lid on widespread discontent.

A series of operations since December 17 aimed to shed doubt on the AK Party's commitment to its decade-long agenda of fighting corruption, poverty and exclusion and garner support from other anti-government groups that sought to capitalize on the Gezi Park protests.<sup>10</sup> Statements from supporters of the anti-government campaign indicate that they attempted to link the AK Party with corrupt center-right parties of the past in order to discredit the govern-



Supporters of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party celebrate the Newroz, the new year, in Istanbul on March 21, 2010.  
AFP / Bülent Kılıç

ment. Implicating the Gülen Movement as the driving force behind the attacks was the timing of the operations (i.e., immediately after a public fallout between the government and the Gülenists over plans to shut down prep schools, a vital source of recruits and revenues for the movement) as well as repeated public statements from the Journalists and Writers Foundation (GYV), the movement's flagship institution where Fethullah Gülen himself serves as honorary president.<sup>11</sup> In light of the Gülen Movement's overt involvement in the affair, Turkish and international media outlets alike referred to the December 17 operation as a power struggle between the group and the country's government. Meanwhile, Gülenist news outlets reduced the campaign to a question of corruption in an attempt to alienate AK Party supporters from the political leadership. Similarly, Fethullah Gülen's public addresses indicated that the group primarily targeted the Prime Minister as opposed to his party. The idea, therefore, was to create necessary conditions for Erdoğan to take a hit in the local elections and deprive him of the political momentum necessary to win the presidential race in August 2014.

It was against the backdrop of the interplay of these extra-parliamentary forces that the 2014 local elections effectively turned into a vote of confidence for Prime Minister Erdoğan and his government. Traditionally, a number of factors including local divisions and the lack of an electoral threshold caused the AK Party to perform worse in local elections than national races; while the party won 42 percent and 38.8 percent of the vote in the 2004 and 2009 local elections, respectively, it dominated the parliamentary elections immediately

succeeding these races – 47 percent in 2007 and 50 percent in 2011. As such, a landslide victory for the ruling party in local ballots, paradoxically, gave Erdoğan the upper hand prior to the presidential election.

In this respect, the AK Party seems to have been the main beneficiary as the electorate increasingly perceived the local races as part of a nationwide political struggle. Similarly, the greater emphasis on the big picture caused many AK Party supporters to look beyond their disagreements with the party's candidates in their districts and motivated them to lend their support to the government's broader political agenda. In other words, it is safe to claim that AK Party supporters practically voted for the Prime Minister as opposed to local candidates.

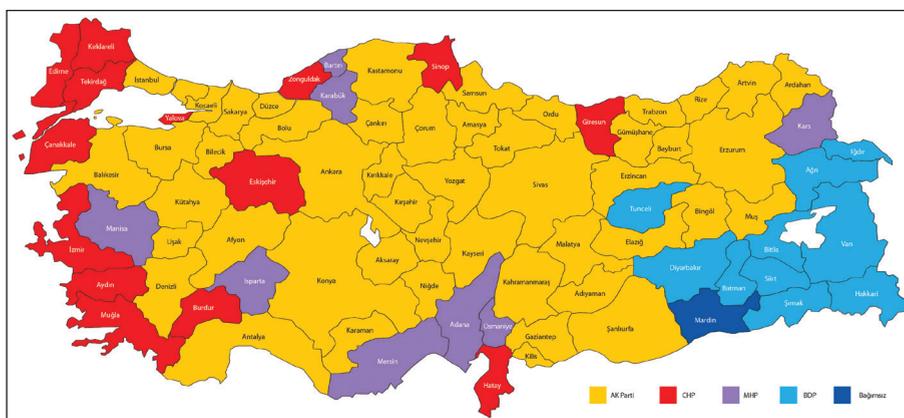
### Mapping the Election Outcomes

In the 2014 local elections, the ruling AK Party won 43,13 percent of the vote with the main opposition, the Republican People's Party (CHP), trailing at 26,45 percent. While the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) received 17,76 percent, the Kurdish political movement, represented by the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), won 6.19 percent of the vote.<sup>12</sup> Out of the country's 30 metropolitan municipalities, whose total population constitutes 77 percent of all voters, 18 districts went to the ruling AK Party while the CHP won another six races. The MHP and the BDP each won three municipalities. Similarly, the AK Party won 30 out of the remaining 51 municipalities, enjoying a comfortable lead over the CHP (seven municipalities), the BDP (seven municipalities) and the MHP (five municipalities). At the sub-provincial (*ilçe*) level, the ruling party won 670 out of 970 mayoral races.

The most notable aspect of the 2014 local elections was the turnout rate. Although voter turnout in Turkey has traditionally been above the international average, there has been a steady rise in citizens' participation in elections since the 2007 parliamentary vote. While voter turnout remained at 76.4 percent and 74.1 percent in the 2002 parliamentary elections and the 2004 local elections, respectively, the turnout rate has been over 80 percent for the past seven years. While 81.6 percent of all voters participated in the 2007 parliamentary elections, the number rose to 83.2 percent in 2009, 87 percent in 2011 and 89.4 in the most recent local elections.<sup>13</sup> These figures indicate that the ongoing power struggle between the elected government and the bureaucratic establishment since 2007 has surpassed the limits of an elite affairs and largely mobilized the masses. Consequently, the popular bases of both the ruling AK Party and the opposition parties have become actively involved in a broader political struggle.

Another key outcome of the 2014 local elections was the continuation of a trend that has favored larger political parties over their competitors. In the 2002 parliamentary elections, when the AK Party first rose to power, 32 percent of voters were deprived of parliamentary representation as their parties of choice had failed to reach the 10-percent national threshold. Since then, three local races and two parliamentary elections have witnessed a steady decline in unrepresented voters; while political parties with no seats at the legislative chamber won 24 percent of the vote in 2004, their share dropped to 13 percent by 2007, followed by a 3-point increase to 16 percent in the 2009 local elections. In 2011 and 2014, the share of voters who opted for movements other than the four major parties amounted to a mere 5 percent.<sup>14</sup> This long-term analysis reveals that the four political parties currently represented in the Parliament have consolidated their voters at the expense of their competitors. Similarly, the data establishes that the four parties have succeeded in representing the demands of a vast majority of the population.

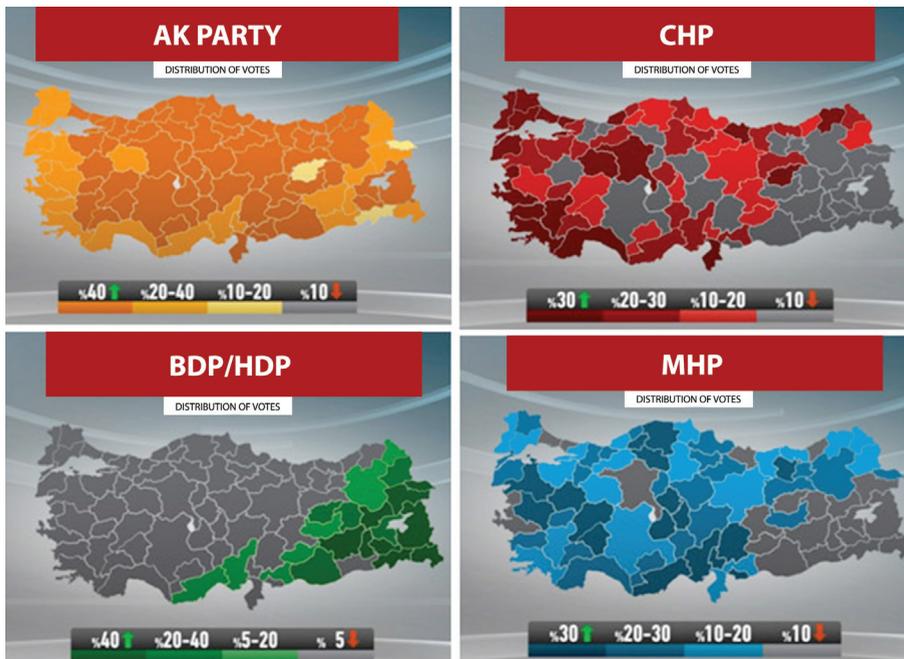
Furthermore, the most recent local elections have confirmed that the country's political landscape has remained largely unaltered since the 2007 parliamentary elections. The election results indicate that opposition parties enjoy support from certain parts of the country while the ruling AK Party appears to be the only political party with nationwide appeal. The geographical distribution of electoral support would suggest that the CHP relies heavily on voters from Istanbul, Thrace and the Western coastline. Meanwhile, the southern shores, Western Anatolia, Central Anatolia and the Northwest contribute to the MHP's success. The BDP's voter base, in contrast, resides almost exclusively in the Kurdish-plurality East and Southeast.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the figures indicate that none of the opposition parties are able to compete with the AK Party at the national level. Instead, the ruling party appears to simultaneously compete with the CHP over the Aegean provinces and Thrace, while fighting



**Note 1:** Above Turkey's map was taken from NTV Seçim 2014 (NTV Election 2014) section.

off the MHP in Southern Anatolia. In the Southeast, local races are decided between the AK Party and the BDP. The geographical distribution of votes, as such, leaves the ruling party in a unique position with nationwide appeal as regionalized competition trumps national contests. In other words, national politics is replaced by partisan ghettos with an emphasis on ethnic and sectarian differences as well as concerns over secularism.<sup>16</sup>

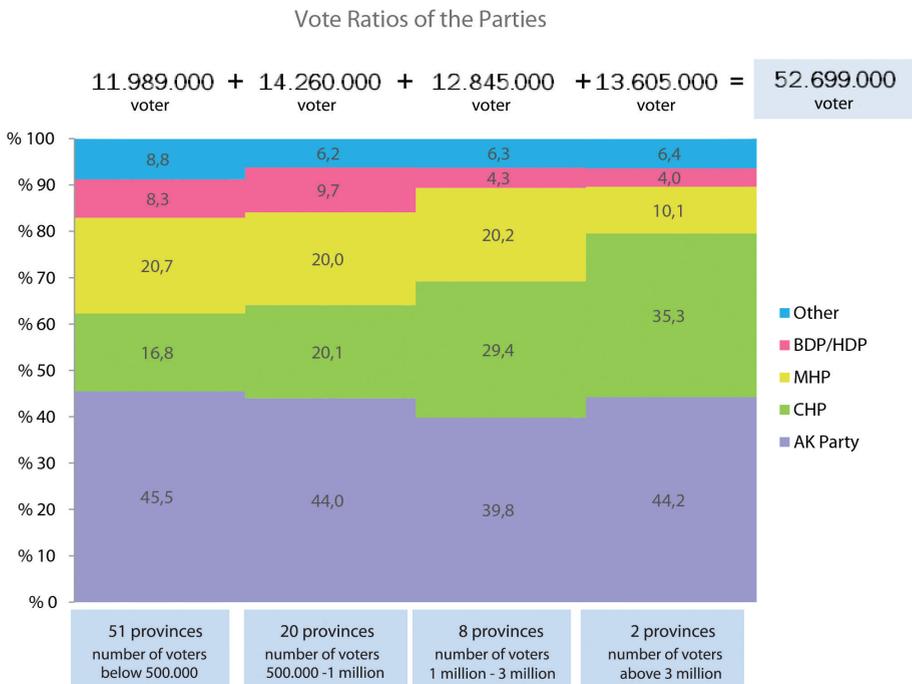
A closer look into the distribution of votes for the CHP, which serves as the country's main opposition party by merit of its second place in popular elections, would indicate that the party received less than 10 percent of the vote in one-third of the country and less than 20 percent in a quarter of all provinces. While Istanbul residents accounted for 27 percent of the CHP's total votes, the main opposition party's popularity in Central Anatolia and the Southeast went as low as 1.2 percent and 2.3 percent, respectively.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the CHP won only 13 out of 81 municipalities across the country. The AK Party, in contrast, won over 40 percent of the vote in approximately 70 percent of all electoral districts, while receiving over 20 percent of the vote in another 27 percent of races. The ruling party failed to break the 10-percent mark in three districts across the nation. An interesting outcome of the 2014 local elections was that the AK Party not only derived support from across the country, but also received a similar share of the vote in all parts of the country. For instance, 19.6 percent of all voters in Istanbul – residents constitute roughly 19



Note 2: Above maps were taken from NTV Seçim 2014 (NTV Election 2014) section.

percent of the country’s entire population – opted for the ruling party in the local elections. Along the Mediterranean coast, where the local results deviate more from the national mean than elsewhere in the country, the AK Party received 10.3 percent of the vote in an area where 12.6 percent of all voters reside.<sup>18</sup>

The difference between the AK Party and the opposition parties in terms of the geographical distribution of their votes also applies to demographics. According to a recent KONDA study, the ruling party enjoys almost equal support from four groups of provinces ranked according to their population size. While the CHP performed considerably better in areas with high population density, the BDP received greater support in low-density provinces. Meanwhile, the MHP’s performance resembles the distribution of the AK Party votes if we take the two most populated cities out of the equation. In this sense, the ruling party’s performance remained immune to geography, socioeconomic development and population size in the most recent local elections. In other words, the AK Party was almost equally popular among different types of constituencies while each of its competitors garnered disproportionate support from isolated strongholds.<sup>19</sup>



**Note 3:** The graph was taken from the KONDA’s study of the local elections entitled 30 Mart: Yerel Seçimler Sonrası Sandık ve Seçmen Analizi (March 30: An analysis of voters and ballot box in the aftermath of the local elections).

Another important aspect of the local election results related to the continued balance of power between the ruling party and the opposition. In line with three preceding elections, the March 30 vote reinforced the opposition's sense of disempowerment, while establishing that there was no serious risk of the AK Party losing power. Furthermore, the distribution of votes remained largely the same among opposition parties.

Political Parties	2007 General E.	2009 Local E.	2011 General E.	2014 Local E.
AK Party	46,58	38,8	49,83	45,6
CHP	20,87	23,1	25,98	27,8
MHP	14,27	16,1	13,01	15,2
DTP/BDP/HDP	5,23	5,7	6,57	6,1
Others	13,20	16,3	4,61	5,3

**Note 4:** This chart was drawn based on the official results announced by the Turkey's High Election Board (YSK).

## The Picture Revealed by the 2014 Local Elections

In addition to a detailed assessment of the local election results, several implications of the situation on the country's broader political agenda are worth entertaining. The persistence of partisan divisions since the 2007 parliamentary elections, coupled with the emergence of political ghettos as well as an unchanging balance of power between the ruling AK Party and the opposition parties, represent a major challenge for Turkish politics and various political parties operating within the country's political system. Clearly, the opposition's failure to develop a political platform with nationwide appeal has serious consequences including the rapid erosion of a middle ground between parties and, by extension, the increasing difficulty of resolving chronic problems. The fact that opposition parties rely on a handful of geographically isolated strongholds inevitably results in their indifference toward the problems of social groups outside their sphere of influence, which leaves the AK Party, the only political party with nationwide support, alone in its attempts to develop comprehensive efforts to tackle pressing issues. A case in point is the opposition's unwillingness to lend their support to the Kurdish peace process<sup>20</sup>, and subsequent problems with AK Party-led initiatives and delays in the peaceful resolution of the country's Kurdish question. Similarly, the four political parties in the national legislature have attempted to draft a new constitution to no avail and had to disband the parliamentary commission that was formed to design all-party talks on the matter.

The persistent balance of power between the ruling party and the opposition, coupled with a lack of incentives to promote dialogue between various political parties, effectively leads a part of Turkish society to develop an un-

healthy distrust of the political process and instead seek remedies through extra-parliamentary means. The failure of legitimate political channels to address problems and the lack of hope among opponents regarding success in future elections collectively pushes various chunks of society away from the political process and results in the manifestation of political tensions through unconventional forms of opposition.<sup>21</sup>

## Contributing Factors to Voter Behavior and Future Projections

A number of assessments that this study presented above point to a serious underlying problem with Turkish politics. In simple terms, it is possible to describe this phenomenon as an unchanging balance between the ruling party and the opposition. The main question that Turkey needs to tackle, therefore, is why the 2014 local elections yielded the previously mentioned results in the face of major developments that worked against the AK Party's interests and to the opposition's advantage.

Political commentators have mostly emphasized contemporary developments, political polarization and leaders' performances in their assessments of this phenomenon. The situation at hand, however, calls for a deeper analysis as these trends have been persistent for seven years. From 2007 onwards, the country has witnessed a radical transformation of its politics, society, culture and economy. During the course of such rapid changes, the political center has been almost entirely redefined as elected officials prevailed over the military and the high judiciary in terms of political power. Meanwhile, the Turkish government took steps to ensure the free expression of political identities and facilitated major progress toward a peaceful resolution of past grievances. Despite such major transformations, however, party preferences have almost remained the same over the years.

Similarly, a number of surprising developments which took place during the lead-up to the 2014 local elections in Turkey worked to the ruling AK Party's disadvantage and in favor of the opposition parties. With election day fast approaching, the country was troubled by the rising costs of the Syrian Civil War. As the Gezi Park protests energized the political opposition, street demonstrations threatened stability for the first time since the late 1970s. To make matters worse, the AK Party government had to fight off an intense and mighty attack against its rule featuring corruption allegations which surfaced with police raids on December 17, 2013, as well as charges of authoritarianism that created a united front against the ruling party. Despite such historic developments, however, the local elections showed that the AK Party remained vastly popular and offered no evidence that observers could interpret as a victory for the opposition. In other words, supporters of both the ruling party and the

opposition parties acted as if the country had not just been through a rough couple of months.

In light of the most recent election results in Turkey, it is necessary to raise the question why, despite such major developments, the electoral map and voter preferences had not changed. Studies on electoral behavior in Turkey would suggest that 70-75 percent of the population tends to vote in accordance with their political and ideological preferences, while the remaining voters choose between political parties based on their daily needs and expectations.<sup>22</sup> In other words, a vast majority of the electorate consists of loyal supporters while only a quarter of all voters indicate that they might consider shifting their allegiances.<sup>23</sup> The numbers, which safeguard the country's political stability, create a highly resilient status quo.

The influence of identity politics over voter behavior would account for the emergence of such a large body of loyal voters with political and ideological priorities, as identity politics motivates individual voters to turn a blind eye to contemporary developments and instead make their decisions based on a broader historical context. Religion and ethnicity emerge as leading dynamics under such circumstances as these sources of identity have endured prolonged attacks from the Republican elites, who sought to impose cultural transformation on the population. As such, the opposition's insistence on secularist policies keep alive widespread concerns over religious identity, while their emphasis on Turkish nationalism boosts the influence of ethnic identity over voters.

In this respect, the fundamental division among Turkey's voters represents their support for or resistance toward the Kemalist nation-building project. The lack of major changes in the country's electoral map since the 2007 parliamentary elections, coupled with the failure of opposition parties to enjoy nationwide appeal, would attest to this split.

The nation-building agenda, which the Kemalist founding elites implemented with an emphasis on secularism and nationalism, had tremendous influence over the country's electoral map. Throughout the Republic's history, sentiments in favor or in protest of the nation-building project determined the ways in which peripheral forces sought greater representation to challenge the establishment. These encounters divided the population into four main voter blocs based on competing attitudes toward secularism and nationalism.



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While members of these four constituencies tended to split among various parties and unite behind others in different periods, secularism and nationalism remained the main determinants of electoral behavior in Turkey. The contrast between right and left politics, which commentators frequently employed until the 2000s, operated within the broader context of popular sentiments about secularism. During the initial decades of Turkey's multi-party democracy, right-wing parties mobilized religious Turks and Kurds, while secularist members of these communities rallied behind left parties. During the 1970s and again in the 1990s, the search for a new kind of politics amidst radical social transformation diversified social identities as new political parties emerged out of popular reactions against (and in defense of) secularism and nationalism. The past decade, in contrast, witnessed a consolidation of these four main streams of politics under the banner of four competing political parties.

In this context, constituencies whose primary concerns related to secularism opted for either the AK Party or the CHP. Meanwhile, voters with strong feelings about nationalism and ethnic identities split between the MHP and the BDP. As such, the popularity of each front within the general population and each political party's ability to adequately represent these sentiments in national politics have determined the framework of Turkey's existing electoral map. In other words, the popular appeal of competing ethnic and religious identities seems to determine the limits and potential of political parties in the country. While the AK Party enjoys nationwide support due to its ability to attract religious Turks and Kurds, the CHP's emphasis on secularism, the

MHP's Turkish nationalist platform and the BDP's ability to reach out to secular Kurds<sup>24</sup> results in the regionalization of their voter bases.

In this sense, the BDP fundamentally relies on Eastern Anatolia and the Southeast, where the Kurds constitute the majority of the local

population, as well as certain metropolitan areas in the West with large Kurdish immigrant communities. The CHP and the MHP, in contrast, compete over the Aegean and the Mediterranean shoreline where voters have been mobilized in reaction to emerging anti-establishment movements, including the Islamic movement and the Kurdish political movement from the 1990s onwards.<sup>25</sup>

Over the past quarter century, Turkish politics has experienced a transformation based on greater participation by, among others, religious conservatives and the Kurds. Currently, the AK Party and the BDP maintain their position as the primary representatives of such popular demands, which faced staunch opposition up until the early 2000s, in parliamentary politics. Speaking for

## This long-term analysis reveals that the four political parties currently represented in the Parliament have consolidated their voters



Supporters of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) wave Turkish flags during a campaign meeting.

AA / Ekber Türkoğlu

Turkish nationalists and secularists who trace their origins to the Kemalist nation-building project itself, the CHP and the MHP continue to resist this seemingly irreversible trend toward greater representation. Considering that this *politics of resistance* enjoys support from roughly 40 percent of the population, the two opposition parties find themselves able to qualify for a significant number of seats in the Turkish Parliament after general elections even though this level of support falls short of providing them with the opportunity to govern the country. In contrast, approximately 60 percent of the people consistently vote for political parties that pledge to challenge the Kemalist nation-building project. Demanding equality with the Republic's favorite citizens, these former outcasts rally behind the AK Party and the BDP. In light of the current distribution of votes, the opposition's ongoing resistance against peripheral forces keeps political debate fixated on identity politics and therefore largely immune to contemporary developments.

As such, the political map of the country that emerged out of the 2007 parliamentary elections shows no signs of change. A comparative study of the 2007 and 2011 parliamentary elections as well as the local elections in 2009 and 2014 would provide ample evidence in support of this claim, as the distribution of votes has remained unaltered with a few exceptions.<sup>26</sup> In light of empirical data, it is safe to claim that future elections will yield similar results in the absence of a shift away from the Kemalist nation-building project in Turkey and a subsequent change in the nature of political debate. The downside of the status quo, of course, will be greater political tensions and polarization as



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan making “Rabia” sign while greeting the Ak Parti supporters at the meeting.  
AA / Kayhan Özer

the opposition parties gradually lose faith in the political process due to their inability to win elections.

While it is possible to alter the country’s electoral map, the CHP and the MHP, rather than the AK Party or the BDP, hold the key to a change of this magnitude. By focusing their ongoing efforts on secularism and nationalism, the two parties effectively keep these issues at the heart of voter behavior. Similarly, the persistence of these manifestations of the Kemalist nation-building project in Turkey despite numerous democratization efforts by the government over the past decade stems from the CHP and the MHP, which approach Islamist and Kurdish demands for recognition as a threat against the Republic. By seeking to capitalize on reactionary votes in the face of reforms, these political parties paradoxically keep ethnic and religious identities as the focal point of parliamentary politics. Although CHP Chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu managed to at least partially revisit the party’s traditional convictions about identity politics since his rise to power in 2010, the main opposition party nonetheless continues to fuel concerns among its voter base regarding religious Muslims among others.

While the CHP and the MHP thus secure the loyalty of a large enough base to remain part of the country’s national political scene, the emphasis on secularism and nationalism, in turn, makes it impossible for the opposition parties to reach out to new voter blocs and improve their electoral performances. Currently, the MHP leadership – much like the CHP under former

chairman Deniz Baykal – seems content with the status quo as the party continues to prioritize its advocacy of the Kemalist nation-building project over popular appeal. Perhaps the most striking case in point were Baykal's post-election speeches where he emphasized the CHP's historic mission in Turkish politics to demonstrate that election defeat did not necessarily mean a loss for the Republicans. CHP supporters, instead, ought to evaluate the organization's performance with reference to its loyalty to its legacy. While the CHP shifted its emphasis to an aggressive outreach campaign under chairman Kılıçdaroğlu, the party's continued commitment to the Kemalist nation-building project represents one of the key factors that contribute to its repeated election defeats and lack of a coherent roadmap after four years since a much-anticipated change in leadership. In contrast, the CHP leadership must concentrate its efforts to eliminate the dominance of secularist concerns over its political platform in order to lure away voters from its competitors. Considering that there is little room for change in Turkey's electoral map as long as secularism and nationalism set the tone for public debate, this is the only way out of the ongoing deadlock.

This balance of power, as opposed to the changing content of political rhetoric, accounts for the rise of political tensions in Turkey over the past years. The election results confirmed the view that the opposition parties were largely unable to reach out to new voter blocs in the absence of a determined shift in their policies toward the formulation of a new social contract that accommodates ethnic and religious identities in Turkey. The resulting election defeats, paradoxically, reproduce the opposition's anxiety about elections and thereby results in greater political tensions in the country. Especially among CHP supporters, successive losses continue to evoke distrust toward elections and create the illusion that extra-parliamentary means, such as the Gezi Park protests and the December 17 operation represent, a shortcut to political power.

As such, the fundamental reason why the AK Party managed to secure another landslide victory despite significant disadvantages and the opposition parties failed to capitalize on the ruling party's troubles is the ongoing dominance of ethnic and religious identities over national politics, as opposition parties cling onto secularist and nationalist concerns in an attempt to consolidate their position within the political system.



**The election results indicate that opposition parties enjoy support from certain parts of the country while the ruling AK Party appears to be the only political party with nationwide appeal**

## Studies on electoral behavior in Turkey would suggest that 70-75 percent of the population tends to vote in accordance with their political and ideological preferences

Popular sentiments about secularism and nationalism, while important, are hardly the sole factors behind voter behavior. Roughly speaking, ideological concerns determine the party allegiance of three quarters of the electorate, leaving a significant number of voters willing to reconsider their past choices up for grabs. These unaffiliated voters, in other words, constitutes a large enough group to relegate the ruling party to the opposition or provide the opposition parties with the prospect of governing the country.

Opposition parties, however, have largely failed to win over these floating voters in popular contests since 2007 – a shortcoming that severely restricted their hopes of winning elections. With this fact in mind, it is possible to repeat the question: Why was

the opposition unable to lure away these ideologically-unaffiliated voters despite various disadvantages affecting the ruling AK Party?

First and foremost, the opposition parties paid the price for incorporating the local elections into national politics by approaching local races as a vote of confidence for the Prime Minister and his government. The opposition campaign thus opted to take the local elections out of context instead of conveniently exploiting voters' willingness to prioritize individual candidates over political parties in local races. As municipal elections evolved into a national affair, voter behavior increasingly resembled parliamentary elections, where party affiliation and ideology tend to be more prominent than in local elections.

The second and more important reason relates to the CHP's peculiar brand of politics, which suffers from the legacy of its historic support for military interventions in civilian politics and overall disregard for the legitimacy and legality of political competition. The main opposition's predisposition for extra-parliamentary forms of political opposition reproduces negative perceptions of the party among the electorate and effectively makes it impossible for its outreach strategy to succeed. Both the Gezi Park protests and the December 17 operation would attest to the harm that the opposition strategy did to mainstream politics in Turkey.

While the largest group of opponents took to the streets during the Gezi Park protests last summer, the December 17 operation went down in history as the most significant attack that the AK Party government had to endure in its 12-year tenure. In retrospect, it is necessary to explain why neither development weakened the ruling party and question how come the opposition parties failed to seize these opportunities. The answer lies with the opposition's

brand of politics and, more specifically, its disregard for the legitimacy and decisiveness of the political process. Against the backdrop of the aforementioned challenges to the AK Party government, the CHP heavily invested into the possibility of overthrowing the government through street demonstrations and leaks instead of rejecting such forms of opposition. The problem with this approach was the perception that the elected government was under attack from extra-parliamentary forms of opposition – an idea that led voters to stand with the AK Party as a matter of principle. Had the CHP and its broader social base properly distinguished between overthrowing the government and voting officials out through popular elections, some voters would have likely parted ways with the ruling party and the opposition may have increased its popular appeal. The opposition's decision to opt for a shortcut to power instead of an undeniable commitment to democracy and transparency added to the country's polarization.

In this respect, another reason for the opposition's failure to capitalize on pre-election developments and persuade roughly a quarter of voters with little or no ideological predispositions to join its ranks was the widespread perception that the opposition parties were willing to join forces extra-parliamentary forces for political gain. To be clear, the opposition would have been able to make the AK Party government look weak and give its supporters a sign of hope if outreach efforts had paid off in the 2014 local elections. The opposition's unwillingness to invest in the political process, however, ostensibly alienated a significant chunk of the electorate, which, considering that the vast majority of votes are distributed in line with religious and ethnic identities, proved a fatal mistake for the opposition's campaign.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the structural balance of power in Turkish politics has prevented contemporary developments from influencing voter behavior, jeopardized the opposition's plans to capitalize on its notable advantages and allowed immense polarization to hijack the political process. In light of this situation, challenging the status quo will inevitably depend more on the opposition's willingness to reconsider their fundamental stance toward the political process than a change in the AK Party government's policies and rhetoric. Weakening the influence of ethnic and religious identities over the country's politics and widespread polarization that works to the opposition's disadvantage will require a deliberate move by the opposition parties away from the Kemalist nation-building project. ■

## Endnotes

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13. For official results and participation rates of elections: [www.ysk.gov.tr](http://www.ysk.gov.tr)
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16. The maps were originally prepared by NTV election team.
17. KONDA, *30 Mart Yerel Seçimler Sonrası Sandık ve Seçmen Analizi*, (April 2014), p. 65.
18. *ibid*, p. 64.
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24. When I use the term "secular Kurds", I do not deny the existence of a large chunk of the religious Kurds, who vote for the BDP. Instead, what I mean is that in their political inclinations they prioritize the secular theme of the ethnic identity politics over their conservative or religious considerations. Thus, one can argue the term "politically secular" might be a better replacement for just "secular" in denoting the BDP's voters.
25. While the rapid and radical transformation of the traditionally center-right Southern and Western provinces into secularist strongholds represents an important development, this repercussion of the contestation between the Kemalist center and peripheral forces including the Kurds and the Islamists in the 1990s remains outside the scope of this study.
26. The maps were taken from *ntvmsnbc* web page: 'Seçim haritası 4 yılda böyle değişti', *ntvmsnbc*, June 12, 2011, <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25222532>