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Turkey

Erdo?an's Victory by Violence

- Features -

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The right-wing Justice and Development Party (AKP) is back in power, having easily won a clear majority of members of parliament (MPs) in the Turkish elections. While President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's party did not reach the necessary number of MPs to change the constitution and push through his desired presidential system, the AKP, their talking heads, and their media (just recently expanded through the seizure of more opposition media outlets) will put the issue back on the agenda. Indeed, they have already begun: one of Erdo?an's senior advisors, Yi?it Bulut, said in his statement celebrating the AKP's electoral victory, "Welcome, presidential system!"

However: this was not a normal election as much of the Western media seems to be pretending it was, accepting the results and only pointing out some minor Election Day incidents as a side note. The Turkish liberal media is not much different, buckling before the restored power of the forces of reaction before the official results came in.

So what's a more accurate picture of yesterday's election and the Turkish political landscape more broadly? And after the electoral defeat of Erdo?an and the AKP and the great triumph of the leftist pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in the June 7 elections, how was the AKP able to turn defeat into victory?

Taking the Initiative

It's first important to note that the official results are not yet in and that the words "electoral fraud" are being thrown around. There were plenty of incidents in the western, predominately Turkish part of the country. But in the Kurdish regions, accusations of electoral mischief abounded: reports of the army stationed at voting sites; threats and active attempts to block people from voting; ballot boxes moved with voting in process; electricity going out in a couple of very critical voting areas; observers kicked out of polling places, some even arrested.

Regardless, [the general picture is clear](#) : the AKP increased their vote by drawing from the pool of people who stayed home on June 7 and, even more importantly, by gaining many votes from the extreme right, anti-Kurdish Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The HDP lost about a million votes (though they did pass the 10 percent parliamentary threshold), presumably from conservative Kurdish voters who returned to the AKP and from Turkish protest voters who shied away from the Kurdish movement in an atmosphere of renewed war.

The AKP accomplished this by regaining the initiative it had completely lost. The low-intensity warfare against the Kurdish movement that was already taking place before the June 7 elections was escalated into an open war in Kurdistan against the militant Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Kurdish youth forces, the YDG-H. At the same time, state terror and (presumably) ISIS terror escalated in the west of the country. All this, of course, while the AKP was technically not in power and leading coalition talks, which "surprise, surprise" ended without any tangible results, thus enabling Erdo?an to call for snap elections.

On July 20, an ISIS suicide bomber blew himself up in Suru? amid a group of young socialists on their way to KobanÃª, killing thirty-three. Immediately after the Suru? massacre, the government launched [massive operations](#) across the whole country, targeting the HDP, the Kurdish movement, and the revolutionary left.

According to the Human Rights Association (?HD), in the month following the attack, 2,544 people were detained; of those, only 136 were associated with ISIS "the rest were mainly from the organized left and the Kurdish

movement. A few airstrikes against ISIS in Syria constituted the entirety of the Turkish state's contribution to the struggle against ISIS.

Only four days after the Suru? massacre, the government began airstrikes against the PKK, thus launching an open war. In the course of less than a week, the AKP completely changed the political dynamic of the country.

The war in Kurdistan also continued. Yet it seemed the majority of people saw these warmongering tactics for what they were: the cheap use of human life for political currency in the snap elections. While AKP politicians sought to use the funerals of soldiers and police killed in battle with the PKK for political gain, they often were chased away by furious family members and friends.

After anger against the Kurdish movement failed to ignite as expected, Erdo?an and leading AKP cadres used a PKK attack in Da?i?ca to unleash an openly fascist mob of MHP supporters, the Ottoman Hearths (Osmanl? Ocaklar?) close to the AKP, and presumably some state forces (i.e. intelligence agencies) on September 8. Hundreds of HDP buildings were attacked " and in some cases burned " all over Turkey, and Kurdish civilians (or people who "looked Kurdish") [were targeted](#) .

But the worst was still to come.

Ankara and the Aftermath

The last and bloodiest chapter of Turkey's summer of violence came in Ankara on October 10, when two suicide bombers [blew themselves up](#) in a massive rally organized by different unions and leftist organizations for "Labor, Peace and Democracy." Over one hundred people " from the HDP, socialist organizations, and even from the mainstream Republican People's Party (CHP) " lost their lives, and several hundred were injured.

The massacre marked the first time such massive violence had taken place in broad daylight outside of Kurdistan and outside of the regions bordering the war in Syria. The message was clear: even non-Kurdish progressive and revolutionary forces, should they provoke the ire of the AKP, would suffer the same fate as the Kurdish movement.

The official culprit was a Turkish sub-group of ISIS. However, ISIS never officially took credit for the attack, and the actions of state apparatuses and the statements by leading AKP politicians were more than suspicious. It immediately became clear that the suicide bombers were very well known to security forces and were under close surveillance by the secret services. Indeed, a couple days before the attack, one of the suicide bombers was taken into custody and released immediately.

In addition to the tragic human toll, the massacre devastated the HDP's campaign. For a significant period after the bombing, the HDP abandoned their electoral campaign entirely, focusing all their efforts on identifying the dead, regrouping their forces in an attempt to boost morale, and attending funerals for the fallen.

We still don't know if the government was directly involved in the attack, and we will never find out so long as the AKP is in power. What is apparent, however, is that the state has no intention of protecting the political activity of everyone in Turkey; indeed, it gains strength from the terror attacks that aim to crush the opposition.

After the Ankara massacre, Prime Minister Ahmet Davuto?lu [admitted](#) that the government has a list of ISIS-linked suicide bombers, but said the state cannot take legal action until they put their plans into action (a due process not afforded to the country's journalists, regularly arrested on trumped-up charges). He also took the opportunity to attack

the HDP and boast of the AKP's gains in country-wide opinion polls.

This behavior is not a new development. It is deeply inscribed into the anti-democratic Turkish state. It is why the history of the Turkish Republic is riddled with massacres against minorities (Alevis, Kurds, etc.): authoritarianism and the politics of fear have been used to lethal effect.

After June 7, the AKP laid out the stakes in similarly repressive terms. President Erdo?an's senior advisor Burhan Kuzu said the election results showed that people had opted for chaos rather than stability, and would have to deal with the consequences. Deputy Prime Minister Yalç?n Akdo?an [accused](#) the HDP of abandoning the peace process for entering the parliament with eighty members. And just days before Sunday's election, Davuto?lu [warned](#) that the state would return to disappearing Kurds, as it did in the 1990s, if the AKP's showing wasn't satisfactory.

A majority of the population, including many Kurds, seem to have bowed in the face of these threats. In the media, and among a major part of the population, the AKP are being accepted as saviors from the chaos of the inter-election period " ignoring that the AKP itself created this chaos.

For their part, the HDP, who dominated the debate in the leadup to the June 7 elections and forced the AKP into an ever more desperate and defensive position, was neither able to shape the political discourse nor formulate an appropriate response to the AKP's provocations and violence following the June 7 elections.

Part of the HDP's weaker showing in this election was the paradoxical result of the party's emphasis on electoral campaigning over the past two years, such that its extra-parliamentary mobilization was significantly weakened during this period. The HDP has allowed itself to be pushed on the defensive by the AKP's war and terror politics " so much so that party co-chair Selahattin Demirta? once even called on both the state and PKK to silence their guns, as if the violence wasn't purely the result of the AKP's power politics.

The HDP, as a unification of various progressive elements in Turkey, draws its primary appeal and strength from movements and organizations active in the street, such as the LGBTQ movement, the Kurdish liberation movement, and various socialist parties. The co-chairs of the party, Figen Y?ksekd? and Demirta?, [reemphasized](#) this in their speeches as preliminary results came in, stating that the struggle was to be carried on in workplaces, in the squares, all across the country. And they're right: the fight against the brutal repression and violence of the state cannot be conducted on a purely parliamentary level.

However, HDP's political praxis of late has been one of retreat: in the face of war and terror, in a country where parliament isn't even working according to minimal liberal-democratic standards, the party has restricted itself to parliamentary action. If the HDP's approach does not change swiftly and take the battle to the streets, chances are high it will lose its democratic mass potential as a result of ultra-nationalist pressure from the outside, and liberalism and defeatism from the inside.

What Is to Come?

The AKP will very likely intensify its white terror. And as it stands, they have the advantage over a fragmented, uncombative opposition. In this environment, blaming the PKK for the HDP's electoral defeat rather than the weakness of the opposition " as some leftists in the opposition are doing " only aids the violent state and the far right.

Going forward, what is needed is broad organization and mobilization, particularly among the poor and the working

class.

The Turkish-Sunni bloc in Turkey constitutes a clear majority, and the AKP effectively mobilizes this portion of the population through its use of the "Turkish-Islam Synthesis." However, it is possible and necessary to forge a politics of democratization that appeals to broad swaths of the population "even social conservatives in the west" by articulating solutions to the socioeconomic concerns of the majority. In short, redoubled efforts on class and street politics in the west of the country could well provide the key to uniting the oppressed masses against the Turkish state and its divisive, bloodthirsty politics.

The task ahead for the revolutionary forces is thus quite clear. Yes, there is a good chance that Erdo?an will use his restored power to take revenge and further weaken the left opposition with police operations and further repression of any oppositional media. Times will be rough. But there is no way forward other than radicalizing the struggle across society "in the streets, in the workplaces, in the schools and universities.

The AKP will seek to solidify their position with repression and by carrying on the war against the Kurdish movement. Yet they will also have to manage an increasingly dire economic situation; the war and the established polarization serve to divert the focus from the social question. This, then, is the task that lies ahead: to bring the social question to the fore, and to unite the Kurdish people, religious minorities, and all oppressed and marginalized groups together in struggle.