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Turkey

HDP election success: victory of the oppressed, a nightmare for the AKP

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Facing the risk of the establishment of a more authoritarian and openly autocratic regime under the presidency of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the appeal by the HDP (Democratic Party of the Peoples) to “broad humanity” was heard by millions of voters, allowing it to cross the 10% threshold necessary for entering parliament.

A gamble that paid off

It was a real challenge for the HDP, a unitary party but mainly linked to the Kurdish movement, to try to exceed all the political, national-ethnic and religious divisions and obtain at least 3.5% more than the 6.5% per cent that it scored in the parliamentary elections of 2011, although at the presidential elections of 2014 its candidate (and main leader) Selahattin Demirtaş had obtained 9.8%.

It was this result which impelled the HDP to participate in the parliamentary elections in the form of a party (and no longer as an individual candidate – a form under which the 10% threshold does not apply). However there was no guarantee that the HDP would score more than this exceptional achievement which owed much to the charismatic figure of Demirtaş, and the desire of secular voters to penalize the HPC (Kemalist-republican-centre-left) which had presented an openly conservative right wing candidate. So it was a gamble on the part of the HDP, but with the will and the patient propaganda work of thousands of activists and volunteers the gamble has paid off and the HDP finally doubled its vote in relation to 2011 and obtained an unheard of 13%, which corresponds to 80 members of parliament.

Votes of solidarity

According to estimates the HDP was supported by 3- 3.5% of voter from religious Kurds who had previously voted for the AKP. It is clear that with these elections there was competition for the Kurdish vote between the HDP and the AKP, whose vote greatly declined in Kurdistan (northern/Turkey). For example, in Diyarbakir the AKP elected six members of parliament and the HDP five in 2011, while today the AKP has one against ten for the HDP. There are several reasons for this.

First, the refusal of the AKP to take concrete steps that would satisfy in part the claims of the Kurdish people, and would be necessary for the progress of the negotiations with Abdullah Ocalan (leader of the PKK). On the other hand the behaviour of the AKP during the siege of Kobanî^a. “Kobanî^a is on the verge of falling”, Erdogan had said, and his generosity towards Islamic State had provoked a violent reaction among the Kurds of Turkey with the riots of October 6-7, 2014. Another reason lies in the nationalist turn of the AKP and President Erdogan in particular (denying even the existence of a “Kurdish question”) who tried thus to regain the votes (hostile to the process of negotiations with the PKK) that they were losing to the extreme right MHP party. On the other hand, the hundreds of attacks on the premises and the activists of the HDP during the election campaign, but especially the bomb attack at the meeting with Demirtaş in Diyarbakir two days before the election, which caused several deaths and a hundred injured, certainly contributed to the desertion of the AKP by a significant share of religious Kurds.

The HDP also benefited from 2-2.5% of votes coming from secular, republican, democratic Turks, the main electoral base of the CHP. Horror at Erdogan’s project to establish a presidential regime where he would decide everything,

like a sultan, from his gigantic palace (with 2,000 rooms!) and the fact that only the entry of the HDP into parliament could prevent the AKP from having the required number of member for a change of constitution that would allow the achievement of this fantasy were the main objects of motivation for this “transfer of votes” on the part of (especially young) Kemalist-republicans. But we must also recognize that, during its election campaign the HDP managed to truly adopt a discourse able to embrace the claims and aspirations of all these different social and cultural strata. This was not settled in advance.

The fact that Demirtaş (and therefore the HDP), was not at the beginning of his campaign clear on the relations that his party would have with the AKP in the event they would succeed in being represented in parliament (coalition, support for the project of constitutional reform and so on) led to some reticence from the secular sector which did not exclude the possibility of voting for the HDP. On this, the HDP leadership considering that their party could not expand its electoral base without being categorical on this issue, made an explicit statement to Demirtaş, who repeated three times in succession during a meeting in the parliament: “We will prevent your presidency!” And this worked! This sentence, summarizing in fact the real issue of these elections, became the motto of the HDP, but also of all those who were opposed to Erdoğan’s delusions of grandeur.

The CHP, while contributing, through the vote of solidarity of a part of its base, to the HDP being represented in parliament, maintained its 25%. The CHP is made up of two main poles, one with rather social democratic references (this party is a member of the Socialist International) and the other much more nationalistic. This second pole will surely seize the situation to attempt to overthrow the president Kemal Kilicdaroglu, considered close to the democratic wing. The MHP obtained a better result than in 2011 (13%), with 16.5%. As an irony of history, today the party from the Kurdish national movement (HDP) and the historical party of Turkish nationalism (MHP) each have 80 members of parliament. We should also stress another important fact concerning both the CHP and the MHP; none of the leaders of these two parties attacked the HDP during the campaign, concentrating all their criticisms on the AKP and Erdoğan.

The beginning of the end

The big defeat was of course that of the AKP, but even more that of Erdoğan, who throughout the campaign multiplied his rallies (whereas as president of the Republic he should be impartial) to explain that these elections were a referendum on the presidential system. Thus he did not hesitate to reduce Ahmet Davutoglu, president of the AKP and current prime minister, to a kind of figurehead, who does not even attempt to emerge from Erdoğan’s shadow. Erdoğan also benefited from all the means that the state provided him (means of transport, omnipresence in the media, obligation to be present at meetings for civil servants, teachers and so on).

The AKP remains much the most powerful party. But by regressing from 50% to 40.8%, it has not succeeded in obtaining the 330 members of parliament required to submit the constitutional reform to referendum, and worse, with its 258 members it does not have a majority i.e. the 276 votes needed to form a government alone, for the first time since 2002. It is obvious that a significant part of its electorate has sanctioned the AKP for its authoritarian tendencies, its discourse aimed at polarizing society, its corruption and so on. Another irony of history, but especially of the electoral system: the AKP came to power in 2002 with 34%, but must now leave it with 41%.

The victory of the HDP is an indisputable victory for all the oppressed people of Turkey, for women first and foremost, for workers, the LGBTI, ethnic and religious minorities, the young and so on. A reformist party of the left, advocating a “radical democracy”, the HDP has succeeded in forming a hegemonic pole for those wishing to oppose the autocratic regime of Erdoğan. However, it should be added that this political convergence at the electoral level would not be possible without the experience of the revolt of Gezi where citizens of different political horizons have seen the need to unite against a common enemy, and also that they were able to unite, to fight together, side by side. It was

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during this resistance that the seeds of this sympatheia – from the ancient Greek, Σᾶν (together) and pathos (passion) - have sprouted. We should also stress that the HDP opened its lists to the representatives of various revolutionary organizations, and the radical left has for the first time obtained more members of parliament (nearly twenty) than during the historic elections of 1965 when the Turkish Workers' Party (TIP) elected 15 members.

It is time now to observe, to analyze what coalition possibilities will emerge from the relationship of forces in parliament or whether early elections will be taking place. Where will the negotiation process go? Will the three opposition parties to the AKP be able to agree to abolish the 10% threshold inherited from the 1980 coup? Can the HDP consolidate this new database and retain its radical democratic position in the dark corridors of realpolitik? These are the new challenges. But the election-street dialectic continues to operate: the social movements, the popular anti-authoritarian consciousness, the Kurdish movement and the radical left who have contributed to the success of the HDP, are today more powerful, with a tremendous sense of hope. It is not by deserting the streets that we will enable the HDP, under the pressure of an institutionalization already underway, from holding firm. But in the meantime we can savour our victory: "We have prevented your presidency!"