TURKEY’S 2015 ELECTION PROSPECTS

TURKEY TASK FORCE

RETHINK PAPER 23
April 2015
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ISBN: 978-1-938300-31-8
Printed in the USA
Rethink Institute
750 First St., NE, Suite 1125
Washington, DC 20002
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This publication can be downloaded at no cost at
www.rethinkinstitute.org
CONTENTS

1 Summary
3 Introduction
4 The Contenders
   Major Political Parties
   AKP's List
   CHP's List
   MHP's List
   HDP's List
6 Past Election Results
7 Looking Forward: Polls and Simulations
11 Key Issues
   Presidential System
   Corruption Allegations
   Economic Stagnation
   Social Divisions
   Media Freedom
   The Kurdish Issue
17 Election Security
17 The Current Pre-Election Environment
19 Irregularities in 2014 Elections
   Manipulation of Demography
   Interference to the Voting Process
   Misreporting of Votes
22 Ankara's Long Election
24 Widespread Power Outages
25 Biased Reporting of the Election Results
26 Issues with the Election Boards and the YSK
27 Conclusions and Recommendations
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AKP</td>
<td>Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi</td>
<td>Justice and Development Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBP</td>
<td>Büyük Birlik Partisi</td>
<td>Great Union Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDP</td>
<td>Bağış ve Demokrasi Partisi</td>
<td>Peace and Democracy Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHP</td>
<td>Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi</td>
<td>Republican People’s Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDP</td>
<td>Halkların Demokratik Partisi</td>
<td>People’s Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHP</td>
<td>Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi</td>
<td>Nationalist Movement Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PKK</td>
<td>Partiya Karkeren Kurdistanı</td>
<td>Kurdistan Workers Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>Saadet Partisi</td>
<td>Felicity Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBMM</td>
<td>Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi</td>
<td>Grand National Assembly of Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YSK</td>
<td>Yüksek Seçim Kurulu</td>
<td>Supreme Election Board</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

On Sunday, June 7, 2015, Turkish citizens are headed to the polls once again. The elections will be nationwide general elections for 550 seats in the Turkish Parliament. The major issues that have permeated the electoral climate are the potential switch to presidentialism, trampled rights and freedoms, the economic downturn, and the Kurdish question. The prospects for free and fair elections are also frequently contested, given irregularities in the elections of 2014 and increasingly restricted media.

Takeaways

- Recent polls show that the pro-Kurdish HDP has swung to around 10%, while the pro-Turkish MHP has further increased its share, reaching 16% to 18%. The major opposition party (CHP) has a broader range, from 23% to 29%. Support for the ruling AKP, on the other hand, wavers around 39% to 44%.

- The possibility of increasing votes for the pro-Kurdish HDP and the Turkish nationalist MHP is the most intriguing feature of the June elections, as that could be a game changer by determining the number of AKP seats in the Parliament.

- Former prime minister and now President Erdoğan has repeated his desire to transform the regime into a presidential system. The ruling AKP, however, needs more seats to be able to change the Constitution in order to realize Erdoğan's vision.

- Turkey's economy is exposed to further risks, not only by increasing corruption at home, but also by Erdoğan's authoritarian policies aimed at crushing his opponents.

- Major historical fault lines—Sunni vs. Alevi, Turk vs. Kurd, and Islamic vs. Secular—are at play in this election, which invites not only mass fear and securitization at a turbulent time, but also strong patronage politics in everyday life.

- There are serious national and international concerns as to whether Turkey will have a truly free and fair general election in June 2015.

- There were numerous alleged and documented cases of irregularity and fraud during the voting process in the 2014 local elections. Given how critical the June 2015 general elections are to the future of the country and the tense political climate, a repeat of similar offenses could have devastating social and political consequences.
Turkey’s 2015 Election Prospects

Introduction

On Sunday, June 7, 2015, Turkish citizens are headed to the polls once again. These will be nationwide general elections for 550 seats in the Turkish Parliament. The major issues that have permeated the electoral climate are a potential switch to presidentialism, trampled rights and freedoms, economic stagnation, and the Kurdish question. The prospects for free and fair elections are also frequently contested, given irregularities in the elections of 2014 and increasingly restricted media.

In August 2014, then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won the first direct presidential elections with 51.8% of the popular vote. Before and after the elections, Erdoğan repeated his desire to transform the regime into a presidential system. Turkey is a parliamentary republic in which the president is merely the head of state, albeit with more powers than is conventional in parliamentary regimes. In presidential regimes, presidents are heads of both the executive branch and the state. The ruling AKP, however, needs more seats to be able to change the Constitution in order to realize President Erdoğan’s vision. That’s perhaps the most significant aspect of the 2015 general elections.

The elections will be held in a hot political climate in which corruption allegations, the economic downturn, press freedom, and the Kurdish question in relation to the unity of motherland are fervently debated. The AKP has faced serious corruption charges in recent years. A wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in summer 2013, known as the Gezi Park protests, led Erdoğan to take an increasingly divisive stance on the eve of the local elections last year. The intense election atmosphere resulted in a remarkable turnout of 89% and still another victory for the AKP despite its decreasing votes at that time.

The AKP is largely perceived as the leading party in the June elections. The opposition parties cannot compare to the AKP’s appeal as the mainstream center-right party. The main opposition party, the CHP, is the flagship secularist party; the other two are the Turkish nationalist and Kurdish nationalist parties. Since the introduction of the parliamentary system in the 1950s, the winners have (almost always) come from the center-right on the political spectrum. Although there have been a number of center-right mainstream parties, the consecutive victories of the AKP have gradually marginalized their share, and the 2011 general elections symbolized the monopolization of the center-right by the AKP. Hence, the main question is not whether the AKP will win the June elections, but rather whether the party will increase its share or witness a decline in votes. If the AKP wins a majority of less than 300 legislative seats, for example, the outcome will be interpreted as a major blow to Erdoğan’s regime, and therefore, may exacerbate internal disputes within the AKP.

The possibility of increasing votes for the pro-Kurdish HDP and the Turkish nationalist MHP is the most intriguing feature of the June elections, as that could be a game changer by determining the number of AKP seats in the Parliament. Moreover, two small parties at the center-right, the Felicity Party (SP) and the Great Union Party (BBP), have merged into a coalition under Felicity. This coalition may draw some socially conservative votes away from the AKP’s base.
The Contenders

In Turkey, legislative power is vested in the unicameral Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM). The TBMM is composed of 550 deputies directly elected from 85 electoral districts. The members are elected for a four-year term by mitigated proportional representation. To be represented in the TBMM, a party must win at least 10% of the vote in a national parliamentary election. Additionally, a candidate may be seated only if his party is organized in one-third of the districts within each of half of the provinces, and has nominated two candidates for each seat in at least half of the provinces. Independent candidates may run and be elected in individual districts without being subject to the electoral threshold. The current distribution of parliamentary seats is presented below.

![Figure 1. Distribution of seats in the Turkish Parliament]

Major Political Parties

The AKP is a “conservative democratic” political party that places itself at the center of the political spectrum. According to official statements, the AKP situates itself as a meeting point for individuals who come from different political traditions on the basis of established values and principles. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül established the party with a group of friends on August 14, 2001. In 2002, the AKP won two-thirds of the seats in Parliament. The current chairman of the party, Ahmet Davutoğlu, was appointed as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009. After the presidential elections in August 2014, Davutoğlu was selected by the party convention to become the chairman of the AKP and, thus, prime minister.

The CHP, as the founding party of modern Turkey according to the party program (founded in 1923, reestablished in 1992), describes itself as “a modern social-democratic party, which is faithful to the founding principles and values of the Republic.” It highlights the primary party goals as “the universal values of contemporary social democracy, namely freedom, equality, solidarity, workers’ rights and democracy.” The current chairman, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, was elected to Parliament in November 2002. He has served as the chairman of the CHP since May 2010.

The MHP (founded in 1969, reestablished in 1992) defines the ideological tenets of the party as the “nine lights” doctrine. These principles are nationalism, idealism, morality,
Turkey’s 2015 Election Prospects

social-mindedness, scientific mentality, liberalism, populism, peasant care and developmentalism and industrialization. This ideology aims at raising Turkey to the peak of civilization and to a position as a leading country in the international arena. Devlet Bahceli was elected as chairman of the MHP in July 1997. Bahçeli served as Deputy Prime Minister in the coalition government (DSP, MHP and ANAP) of Bülent Ecevit from 1999 to 2002.

The HDP, founded in 2012, defines itself as a pro-minority leftist political party, acting as the fraternal party for the pro-Kurdish Democratic Regions Party (DBP), previously BDP. The HDP is also known as strong supporter of feminism and LGBT rights, having a 50% quota for women and a 10% quota for LGBT people in its electoral lists. The current co-chairs are Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yukselcdag. Demirtaş was a candidate in the 2014 presidential election and received 9.7% of the vote.

The AKP List

Having served three-terms as deputies, 72 AKP members were unable to run for reelection according to the party’s internal rules. In addition, more than a 100 deputies were not renominated. Thus, there will be a remarkable change in the party after the elections.

According to many commentators, the nomination list indicates that President Erdoğan will tighten his grip on the party, leaving no room for Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to establish his team. As Yavuz Baydar, an acute observer of Turkish politics, succinctly notes, “the most eligible posts in all the key districts are occupied by names known for sheer, absolute loyalty and 'unconditional service.' Other names include Erdoğan's son-in-law, his advisers, lawyers and some journalists, also known as ‘his majesty's stenographers.’” Some analysts suggest that Davutoglu will soon be eliminated as Erdoğan pushes hard for the presidential system alla turca.

The CHP List

After Erdoğan's electoral victories in 2014, the leadership of the pro-secular CHP, the Republican People's Party, came under fire for being too soft. The long-time tension between pragmatist doves and secularist hawks within the party has resurfaced, and a group of CHP deputies called on the party leadership to resign. Under pressure, the party decided to hold an extraordinary congress in September 2014 to vote on its chairman. Muharrem Ince ran against the leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and lost, receiving one-third of the vote. Ince’s major base is hawkish secularists within the party—those criticizing Kılıçdaroğlu for making too many concessions regarding CHP’s secular identity.


2 Steve Cook, “No Way Out” The American Interest April 7, 2015 [http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/04/07/no-way-out/].
The CHP candidate list indicates that Kilicdaroglu is on the winning side. Many independents who might oppose Kilicdaroglu’s leadership did not get nominated. The party is moving increasingly toward center-left through more inclusive language and pragmatic calculations, as Kilicdaroglu becomes an ever more Ecevit-style politician.

**The MHP List**

Two small parties on the right, the Felicity Party (SP) and the Great Union Party (BBP), approached the MHP about an election coalition only to be rebuffed, revealing the MHP’s stubborn ideological purity. The pro-Turkish MHP’s relevance will remain strong as long as the pro-Kurdish HDP “threatens” the country’s unity in the eyes of the conservative Anatolian constituency. Nomination of Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, a presidential hopeful who ran against Erdoğan in 2014, was received as a positive step toward the mainstream center-right; however, the overall list did not signal a significant change in the post-election period.

**The HDP List**

Perhaps the most intriguing list for the June elections is that of HDP. Their roster is wide-ranging and includes some well-known conservative religious names such as Dengir Mir Fırat, who formerly held a senior position in the AKP, as well as leftist social democrats such as Celal Doğan, who was mayor of Gaziantep. It clearly signals that the party would like to succeed in passing the 10% threshold, which could usher in a new era if the HDP continues its current peaceful language.

Last year, Abdullah Ocalan, founder of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), requested strengthening of the Kurds’ political alliance with the Turkish left. As a result, the pro-Kurdish alliance of the HDP and the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) split into two distinct groups: the Democratic Regions’ Party (DBP), which competes in local elections and represents the municipalities, and the HDP, which contests nationwide general elections. Within Kurdish politics, the HDP supports Türkiyelişme—the idea that Kurds should pursue a political future within Turkey’s legal system—over separatism. In the event of the HDP’s failure, the DBP would become the foremost legal Kurdish party, which would place special emphasis on self-determination in Kurdish-populated regions. This would lead the Turkish left to marginalize the Kurdish movement and increase the potential for violent separatism to reemerge.

**Past Election Results**

There are more than 55 million registered voters in Turkey, and the voter turnout is generally around 80%. In the 2014 local elections the turnout was 89%, whereas the following presidential election in summer 2014 saw a relatively low rate of 73%. The current election climate in the country is reminiscent of the recent local elections, so we

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can expect a high turnout in the June elections. The 2014 local elections were also remarkable in terms of the high number of “invalid” votes compared to other elections in recent history.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011 General</th>
<th>2014 Local</th>
<th>2014 Presidential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Votes Cast</td>
<td>43,914,948</td>
<td>46,924,877</td>
<td>40,545,911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invalid Votes</td>
<td>973,185</td>
<td>2,058,431</td>
<td>737,716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter Turnout (%)</td>
<td>83.16</td>
<td>89.19</td>
<td>74.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Participation in most recent elections in Turkey

![Recent Turkish Elections](image)

Figure 3. Percentages of votes by parties in the most recent local and general elections.

Looking Forward: Polls and Simulations

Recent polls conducted by various companies indicate that the pro-Kurdish HDP has swung to around 10%, while the pro-Turkish MHP has further increased its share, reaching 16% to 18%. The major opposition party (CHP) has a broader range, from 23% to 29%. Support for the ruling AKP, on the other hand, continues to be in a declining trend, wavering around 39% to 44%.
In the upcoming June elections, all eyes are on the highly-debated AKP seat numbers, which is directly related to the question of whether the pro-Kurdish HDP will pass the minimum 10% threshold. For more than two decades, until the upcoming 2015 general elections, pro-Kurdish parties have resorted to running independents as a tactic for circumventing the threshold that a party needs to win seats in the Parliament. For a variety of reasons, including the peace process between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the HDP has decided to run as a party and take a great risk.

Failure of the HDP would result not only in lack of Kurdish representation in Parliament, but also in a big win for the AKP. In that case, all HDP seats would likely go to the AKP, and therefore, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan would be further empowered to change the Constitution unilaterally and realize his vision of a presidential system.

What follows are few scenarios that links percentage of votes and parliamentary seats.

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Simulation 1

Pro-government poll companies and “pool” media consistently portray the AKP as swinging to around 50%, claiming that the party has increased its votes since the 2014 local elections. According to a poll conducted by ORC, the votes will be shared as presented in the figure above. In this scenario, the HDP would fail to pass the threshold and the MHP and CHP would lose significantly. These results would be the most desirable outcome for President Erdoğan, because the AKP would exceed the two-thirds majority of 367 seats, which is the minimum to unilaterally draft a new constitutional amendment.

Simulation 2

The second-best outcome for President Erdoğan and the AKP is to secure 330 seats, the threshold for seeking a public referendum. In this case, the AKP could lead the country to

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5 For the term “pool” (havuz) and development of pro-government media, see Diminishing Press Freedom in Turkey (Rethink Institute: Washington, DC). As an example of exaggerated claims in pro-government media, see Ahmet Taşgetiren, “Listeler: Türkiye'yi Kapsamak,” Star April 9, 2015 http://haber.star.com.tr/yazar/listeler-turkiyeyi-kapsamak/yazi-1019132
hold a referendum on the presidential system. President Erdoğan recently declared that 335 deputies would be good for the AKP, changing his earlier call for 400 seats.\(^7\)

Such a scenario, however, would only be likely if the HDP failed to pass the threshold and MHP votes were stuck below 15%.

Regarding a referendum, opinion polls suggest that support for the presidential system is low. According to a Metropoll survey, 32% would say “yes” to Erdoğan’s new presidency regime while 55% would oppose such a system, finding it “too authoritarian.”\(^8\) Another poll agency, Gezici, found that voters oppose it by 23% to 77%.\(^9\)

**Simulation 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vote Share (%)</th>
<th>Number of Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AKP 42</td>
<td>AKP 261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHP 26</td>
<td>CHP 134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHP 18</td>
<td>MHP 93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDP 10</td>
<td>HDP 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the MHP, CHP, and HDP all increased their shares as suggested by some polls, and if the HDP passed the 10% threshold, AKP seats would drop below 300. There is even a possibility that AKP could not get 276 seats, the minimum for a one-party government. Perhaps the most surprising outcome would be that Turkey witnesses a coalition government after the elections.

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**Simulation 4**

The HDP could be a game changer if it passed the threshold. In such a scenario, addition of even a low percentage of MHP votes would be so critical that they might push the AKP below 276, and thus, pave the way for a coalition government.

Opinion polls indicate that the HDP increasingly appeals not only to the secular Turkish left but also to religious Kurdish voters. According to a recent poll conducted in Istanbul, the HDP nomination of Dengir Mir Mehmet Fırat noticeably boosted HDP votes (13.4%), stealing votes from the AKP. The same poll also revealed that President Erdoğan’s Kobane policy and recent nationalist remarks such as “there is no Kurdish issue” have resulted in Kurdish ethnic consciousness among religious Kurds as well as a surge of anti-AKP sentiment.

Comparative poll results by Metropoll agency also show that the HDP indeed has a potential to reach a larger constituency. The question “Would you like to see the HDP led by Selahattin Demirtaş pass the threshold in the upcoming elections?” was answered in the affirmative by 15.5% in November 2014. The rate increased to 19.6% in February 2015.

**Key Issues**

**Presidential System**

Currently, the Turkish Constitution is based on a parliamentary system in which the prime minister is the head of the government and the chief executive, whereas a president is the head of the state without any affiliation with a political party. Although the Constitution grants significant powers to the president, such as chairing the National Security Council and appointing judges to higher courts, an executive presidency would

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entail further amendments to the Constitution. If the AKP wins a two-thirds majority of Parliament in the June elections, that would suffice to enact such amendments without the need for a referendum. If 367 legislative votes (two-thirds majority) are not obtained, the best outcome for the AKP would be 330 votes, the minimum required to hold a referendum. But a referendum does not guarantee a positive outcome. Current polls do not show strong enthusiasm for presidential system in Turkish society.

If the AKP cannot win 330 parliamentary seats, however, the distribution of power under the current system will require that President Erdogan not interfere in government affairs as he presently does. Erdogan now leads cabinet meetings and his bureaucratic team of advisers acts as a shadow government on a day-to-day basis. For Erdogan loyalists, such intervention is a natural outcome of the fact that Erdogan is a popularly elected leader, which was not the case for previous presidents in modern Turkish history. For some of the AKP elite, however, such hybrid parliamentary-presidential governance is not viable in the long run. Recently, the deputy prime minister and cofounder of the AKP, Bulent Arinc, publicly reminded Erdogan to mind his own business, and Arinc was reprimanded by Prime Minister Davutoğlu for his remarks. Earlier, Davutoğlu and Erdogan had a public dispute about Hakan Fidan, the chief of the National Intelligence Agency (MIT).

Thus, AKP leadership faces a bumpy road after the June elections. Erdogan’s predecessors Turgut Ozal and Suleyman Demiral—leaders of two strong center-right parties in the 1990s who abandoned their party posts to become president—faced similar challenges when they tried to rule through loyalist premiers. Unlike Ozal and Demirel, however, Erdogan may not give up and may push the boundaries through his loyalist bureaucrats, even if the AKP cannot introduce a new presidential system. Such ambitious politics, however, may further exacerbate internal disputes and put the integrity of the AKP at risk.

**Corruption Allegations**

On December 17, 2013, as a part of a major corruption investigation led by Istanbul district prosecutors, the police launched raids at the houses of 50 suspects, including the sons of three cabinet ministers. The main suspect was Reza Zarrab, a businessman of Iranian descent, who allegedly laundered $120 billion from Iran between 2009 and 2012—at a time when sanctions against Iran were in place.

The AKP government claimed that the Gezi protests, and later the graft probe, were a global plot to overthrow the government orchestrated by “external” and “internal” enemies. On Dec 25, three ministers whose sons were implicated in the investigation abruptly resigned. On his way out the door, Minister for Environment and Urban Planning Erdoğan Bayraktar called on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to resign. Bayraktar said that he was forced to resign, but that what he had done was known and approved by the prime minister himself. The following day, public prosecutor Muammer Akkaş, who had been overseeing the corruption investigation, was removed from the case. On February 15, the Parliament, in a 20-hour session that involved a bloody fistfight, approved a bill that tightened the government’s grip on the judiciary. After winning the local elections, the AKP government drafted a new law that would expand the power of the National Intelligence Agency (MIT), which took effect on April 26, 2014. Within a few months,
thousands of police officers and many public prosecutors were removed from their posts, i.e., relocated or fired.

On August 10, 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became Turkey's president, elected by popular vote for the first time in modern Turkish history. Soon after, on September 1, the graft investigation was officially dismissed. Since the outbreak of the corruption scandal, former prime minister and now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government have been relentlessly and particularly targeting the Hizmet (Gülen) movement. According to Erdoğan and his lieutenants, the charges brought forward by Istanbul prosecutors on December 17 and 25, 2013, were in fact insidious attempts to topple the AKP government that were orchestrated by Hizmet sympathizers and affiliates in the Turkish state and bureaucracy, including judiciary and police forces. The Hizmet movement, which suddenly found itself on the defensive, has been vehemently denying these allegations, calling them baseless accusations serving to cover up the corruption charges. Most recently, an indictment was handed down by the Ankara 2nd High Criminal Court in which the prosecutor claimed that the alleged suspects belong to a “Fethullah terrorist organization,” signaling the AKP government’s future plans after the June elections.

**Economic Stagnation**

Economic stagnation is perhaps the single greatest challenge for the AKP government. According to IMF reports, Turkey’s GDP is expected to grow only 3% in 2015 and 2016, reinforcing the downturn pattern. The growth rate was at 4.2% in 2013 and 2.9% in 2014. Furthermore, Turkish lira has lost 20% of its value since the summer of 2014.

A combination of global and domestic factors plays a role in the current stagnation. A leading factor is excessive dependence on foreign investment. “Turkey’s excessive dependence on capital inflows from abroad, as well as its persistently high current account deficit,” notes Cenk Sidar, “has left it deeply vulnerable to external shocks.”

Moreover, Turkey’s main trade partners in Europe and the Middle East have faced economic and security dilemmas in recent years. Sidar adds that “The end of the U.S. Federal Reserve’s quantitative easing program could cause the flow of ‘hot money’ to dry up. Many expect Turkey’s current account deficit to remain in the unsustainable 5% territory, despite the positive effects of the global drop in oil prices.”

Turkey’s economy has been put at further risk, not only by increasing corruption at home, but also by President Erdoğan’s authoritarian policies aimed at crushing his opponents. For example, as a result of Erdoğan’s conflict with the Gülen movement, Turkey’s banking watchdog seized a stake in the major Islamic lender Bank Asya over alleged irregularities. Drawing severe criticism even from AKP circles, Erdoğan has repeatedly pressured the chairman of the Central Bank, Erdem Basci, to cut interest rates.

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**Social Divisions**

“AKP voters do not fear autocracy,” claims a senior Turkey observer, “they fear social chaos . . . Turks live in a zone of vulnerability.” Among major historical fault lines are Sunni vs. Alevi, Turk vs. Kurd, and Islamic vs. Secular. These social divisions invite not only mass fear and secularization in a turbulent time, but also strong patronage politics in everyday life.

What makes Berkin Elvan, a young boy who was hospitalized and died of injuries caused by a tear gas canister fired by police during the Gezi protests, a target of Erdoğan’s repeated remarks is his Alevi identity. This is a minority group often associated with Gezi protestors among the conservative AKP constituency. The recent murder of the public prosecutor who oversaw the Berkin Elvan case exacerbated tensions in the country.

Alevi voters have constituted the bedrock of secular leftist parties for decades, and currently, the CHP gets the most Alevi support, partly due to the fact that the party leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, is himself an Alevi.

![Ethnic Identity (%)](image1)

![Religious Identity (%)](image2)

*Figure 5. Ethnic and religious identity in Turkey according to various polls (Turkish government agencies do not collect ethnic or religious data)*

Pitting one group against another—especially on the basis of ethnic and religious background—is part of the Turkish political reality. Mysterious murders during the Kobane protests in fall 2014, for example, were an outcome of the long antagonism

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between the Kurdish Islamic Hizbullah and the secularist PKK, but both groups pointed out dark intelligence operations that benefited from the mayhem.¹⁶

**Media Freedom**

One of the most remarkable ways in which economic patronage ties were employed was the creation of pro-Erdoğan media through controlling the structure of the media sector. That is why pro-government media in Turkey is often referred as “pool” media. There are no restrictions in Turkey on cross-ownership, and the media sector is dominated by large media holdings with significant non-media investments. These holdings are dependent on government contracts and regulations, and thus, are susceptible to government pressure to tone down criticism and dismiss critical journalists. In addition, many media outlets came under indirect government control after the 2001 banking crisis.

Another mechanism has been to hand over some of these media outlets to loyal businessmen who had won several government tenders during AKP administrations and significantly grown their businesses. The voice of dissent is not totally absent in the Turkish media. There are a few liberal media outlets that continue to express critical views, such as Taraf and t24; a few left-leaning secularist newspapers such as Sozcu and Cumhuriyet; and Zaman and Bugun, which are associated with the Gulen/Hizmet movement. However, it seems that they are all singing to their own choirs. The arguments presented in these media outlets, however strong, find almost no coverage in other media. For instance, the tax evasion fines imposed on Taraf in 2014 did not show up in Hurriyet or Hurriyet Daily News, although they had experienced similar tax penalties in 2009.

![Press Freedom in Turkey](image)

*Figure 6. Freedom House Annual Reports. Ranking above 60 rated “Not Free.”*

Criticism of Erdoğan and the AKP government in the media has become a risky business in Turkey. Hundreds of journalists have been dismissed from their jobs. Enormous tax

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evasion fines by arbitrary raids have been levied against the media outlets that dare to remain critical. Erdoğan has repeatedly called for boycotting certain media outlets, attacked some journalists publicly, and excluded critical journalists during his foreign trips. In fighting against Twitter and YouTube, Turkey has at times found itself in league with China and Iran.

The Kurdish Issue

Another major controversy that shapes pre-election debates is the AKP government’s negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) to disarm the group. The peace talks between the AKP government and the PKK go back to secret Oslo meetings in 2009, then popularly known as the “Oslo Process.” The meetings included PKK representatives, some members of the Kurdish diaspora, and Turkish officials. The process did not last long, and both the AKP and the PKK blamed each other for the collapse in mid-2011, when the meetings were revealed to public. The outcome was bloody. The year 2012 was recorded as the most violent year in the fighting between the Turkish state and the PKK since 1999.17

The AKP government initiated a new campaign by reaching out to jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Kurdish Newroz (New Year celebrations) in March 2013 marked the beginning of a new era of yet another ceasefire, often referred as the “Solution Process” or the “Peace Process.” It was unprecedented this time, however, in the sense that a Turkish government openly declared official negotiations with a group that is officially designated as “terrorist.”18 Understanding emotional resentment among the Turkish public at large, then prime minister Erdoğan had always denied the Oslo talks, and had even stated that those who claimed the existence of negotiations between the AKP and the PKK were “despicable,” (şerefsiz) and “mean slanders.”

As President Erdoğan and the AKP government have increasingly exhibited authoritarian tendencies, both pro-Kurdish organizations and Turkish nationalist parties have made harsh accusations that the peace process is a trick to deceive the public in order to win the elections and secure the path for Erdoğan’s dream of presidentialism. Recently, pro-Kurdish party leader Selahattin Demirtaş stated that it is not realistic to expect conflict resolution with current AKP leadership, even if negotiations go on for 50 years.19 Frustrated with the obstacles in the process as well as the growing challenge by the Turkish nationalist MHP for the June elections, President Erdoğan most recently declared

that there is no Kurdish question in Turkey, reminiscent of the modern Turkish state’s long policy of denial.20

Election Security

In democracies, authority of governments derives from the will of the people, and this popular will is expressed directly during elections. Free and fair elections are essential for a healthy democracy. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), an intergovernmental organization that also observes elections in member countries including Turkey, truly free and fair elections are defined as “elections [that] require not only transparent and well-managed election day polling, but also a society that encourages full citizen participation, political parties to operate freely, independent media to flourish, and which builds a judiciary system capable of exercising independent and impartial authority.” Unfortunately, there are serious national and international concerns as to whether Turkey will have a truly free and fair general election in June 2015.

The Current Pre-election Environment

Turkish elections have usually been uneventful, if not perfect, since the 1950s. The local elections of March 2014, however, were perhaps the most controversial in the democratic history of Turkey. The elections took place amidst corruption allegations against cabinet members with shocking revelations emerging on a daily basis, and were marked by the extremely bitter campaign rhetoric adopted by the AKP. In addition, in the months preceding the elections, the government resorted to some controversial acts that effectively suspended the rule of law and trampled on rights and freedoms, especially freedoms of speech and the press. As a result, the elections, which were supposed to be merely about electing local officials, turned into a referendum on the legitimacy of the AKP government.

Such high stakes created perhaps the most uneven electoral playfield in recent history, whereby government agencies, pro-AKP newspapers and TV stations, public and private, and polling companies were effectively employed to manipulate public opinion and relentlessly promote AKP candidates on a 24/7 basis. The unusual climate before the elections continued on election day, too. Various allegations of fraud, as well as many well-documented cases of disfranchisement, ballot stuffing, and tampering with results, marked the local elections. Consequently, the AKP still won the elections with a great margin, albeit with widespread public distrust in the electoral process.

Since then, in terms of legal and practical guarantees and protection of freedom and fairness, the prospects for a truly democratic election in Turkey have gone from bad to worse. There has been no serious legislative or judicial action to address irregularities in

the elections of 2014. A couple of cases were seen by the courts, but many others were thrown out. Appeals to the Constitutional Court were rejected on the basis of lack of jurisdiction. In addition, since fall 2014, higher courts that would take up electoral cases were have been packed with pro-government judges and prosecutors. Local election boards have all been shuffled in order to show more partisan colors. Local officials, who have great leverage in the voter registration process, are regularly briefed by the office of President Erdogan, who himself is openly acting in favor the AKP despite contrary constitutional provisions.

Independent media, which is a pillar of a healthy democracy and a requirement for free and fair elections, has suffered major blows in recent years in Turkey. A majority of media outlets are now effectively under the control of the AKP government. Those that are not directly controlled by the state or corporations friendly to the government are intimidated and subdued. The remaining few that dare to report objectively are under immense pressure and frequent gag orders by the government. Pro-government TV stations dominate the airwaves, frequently featuring President Erdogan and government officials and using official events, inaugurations, and state visits as platforms to boost the AKP’s election campaign. Speeches are carried in live broadcasts on more than a dozen national networks. In the meantime, the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTUK), a legal monitoring body, has turned into a partisan tool that punishes independent and critical TV and radio. While the RTUK is silent on pro-AKP partisan propaganda, it is very quick to impose hefty fines and shut down critical networks for violating impartiality. Overall, the majority of the Turkish people has very limited access to information or news critical of the government, AKP officials and candidates.

![TV Coverage of 2014 Presidential Candidates](image)

**Figure 7. Uneven coverage of presidential candidates**

In the face of increasingly restricted conventional media, people are turning to social media. The most ardent critics of the AKP government, whistleblowers and others are heavily using outlets such as Twitter and Facebook. However, social media is also targeted by the government in various ways. During the 2014 local elections, Twitter and YouTube were banned for several days before and after the elections, depriving many of a critical tool of communication throughout election day and its aftermath. Thanks to an internet law passed in 2014, some critical tweets are obscured immediately. Occasionally, all social media is banned or slowed down for hours due to critical content.

Manipulation of opinion polls has raised serious concerns in the last couple of years. Some specific polling companies have made a habit of inflating the numbers for the ruling party. These poll results are repeatedly featured in the pro-government media and have helped create a false perception in the society as to the ruling party’s popularity. Some of those polling companies are owned by individuals or groups who are very close to AKP
circles. A couple are rumored to be owned by Erdogan’s advisors. Such controversial poll results were especially instrumental during the presidential election in August 2014. Polls conducted by companies close to the government persistently showed then prime minister and candidate Erdogan’s numbers at around 55% to 58%. The actual result was 51.8%. The difference between the poll numbers and actual results is attributed to the relationship between polling companies and the ruling party.

Irregularities in the 2014 Elections

There were numerous alleged and as well as documented cases of irregularity and fraud during the voting process in the 2014 local elections. Given how critical the June 2015 general elections are for the future of the country and the tense political climate, a repeat of similar offenses would have devastating social and political consequences. Unfortunately, there are many reports in the Turkish press and social media about plans and potential initiatives to be employed in the upcoming elections. The following sections illustrate some of the most dramatic examples of electoral fraud, which might have had a cumulative effect of between 10% and 15% on the election results, according to analysts.

Manipulation of Demography

In Turkish local elections, voters need to register in specific districts in order to vote. However, the composition of an electorate may be (illegally) controlled. This method allows authorities to artificially alter the composition of an electorate so as to create a desirable outcome in election results. Two specific types of this method of electoral fraud were used in the 2014 local elections. First, local authorities created a virtual address and registered voters as if they resided at that address. Second, local authorities registered voters at a specific address and, as a result, replaced those who were already residing at that address. In this case, the disfranchised voters may realize the fraud before the election (if they are careful) or at the polling station. There have been hundreds of reported cases of manipulation of demography. Some striking examples are as follows:

- The Beylikduzu district in Istanbul, which has over 172,000 registered voters, featured 5,000 additional voters registered for empty lots and nonexistent addresses.

- An employer working at the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality placed 34 imaginary buildings, and thus 10,000 new voters, in the computerized elector registration system in the Sariyer district of Istanbul.

- A meticulous voter who discovered about 40 imaginary voters in his building informed the authorities, but his appeal was rejected.

- Citizens complained about hundreds of voter registration cards addressed to imaginary voters mailed to their addresses in the Sisli district of Istanbul.

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Interference in the Voting Process

Many kinds of interference were employed during the 2014 local elections. Some votes were declared invalid for no apparent reason. Invalid votes (ballots bearing no stamp) were discovered in ballot boxes but still added to the tally. Some ballots were already marked. In various districts across the country, ballots were torn, burned, or discarded.

Misreporting of Votes

In many places, especially Ankara and Istanbul, there were serious discrepancies between the results announced by polling stations and the official results of the Supreme Election

Figure 8. In the Yenimahalle district of Ankara, the sign-in sheet at the polling station showed a 29th apartment with the names of two individuals. (The building has 28 apartments.)

Figure 9. A scene from the Umraniye district of Istanbul: Marked ballots were burned and dumped into the toilets.
Turkey’s 2015 Election Prospects

There are about 1,400 written witness accounts detailing misreporting of votes and tampering with result sheets from individual ballot boxes.

There were major discrepancies in Istanbul districts. In the Uskudar race for mayor, İhsan Özkes of the CHP lost to Hilmi Turkmen of the AKP by about 9,000 votes out of 342,000 votes cast. This result was a remarkable success for the CHP, as Uskudar had been solidly pro-AKP since 2002. But Özkes claimed that 10,000 of a total of 16,000 invalid votes were in his favor. He also argued that 10,000 additional ballots were discovered in 400 ballot boxes. In addition, two schools that functioned as polling stations were vacated for 15 minutes due to bomb threats. Nobody knew what happened during that time. Özkes also argued that his staff witnessed open ballot sacks during the transfer to provincial election councils.22

There have been 37 legal investigations into election fraud involving thousands of votes in Istanbul’s Kagithane district. Twenty-nine were launched as legal cases in Istanbul Penal Court. The court ended up accepting eight cases. According to the official results, the AKP candidate for mayor won decisively (with a margin of 55,000 votes out of 250,000). However, there have been very interesting revelations and confessions throughout the hearings. For example, the original version of one of the result sheets reported that the AKP received 112 votes, the CHP 71, and the MHP 33. In the tampered version, however, the AKP received 198, the CHP 1, and the MHP 21.23 Those cases still continue as of this writing.

According to the official results in Avcilar, another Istanbul district, the CHP candidate won the election with a margin of 7,000 votes out of 288,000 cast. Interestingly, however, the Avcilar election was called in favor of the AKP by pro-AKP media on the night of the election. CHP candidate Handan Toprak Benli had to take the case to the provincial election council and fought for 20 hours, comparing authentic result sheets and official reports to claim her win. She said she owed this success to a team of 3,000 (three individuals for every ballot box) polling staffers that supervised the ballot boxes at all times. 24

Ankara’s Long Election

The mayoral election in Ankara was no doubt the highlight of controversies in the 2014 local elections. Being the capital and having the same mayor, Melih Gökçek, for 20 years, Ankara has always been one of the biggest prizes in local elections, the others being Istanbul and Izmir. Traditionally, the ruling parties have elected mayors of at least two of these cities. In 2014, the CHP nominated Mansur Yavaş to compete against Gökçek, who
was running for the AKP. On the night of the election, Yavas declared that he was in the lead by 27,000 votes, the remaining precincts were among those favorable to him, and he was confident he would win. However, by the morning hours, official results from the YSK showed Gokcek in the lead by 30,000 votes. Apparently, events that unfolded late at night shifted 50,000 votes between the candidates. Days of recounts did not change the results, and Gokcek was officially declared the winner. Yavas’s appeals to the YSK and the Constitutional Court were rejected. Exhausting national recourses for litigation to no avail, he eventually filed a complaint at the European Court of Human Rights.

According to a report prepared by the Yavas team, there were mistakes and irregularities in half of the ballot boxes in Ankara (6,240 result sheets of total of 12,334). Accordingly, a quarter of the result sheets bore no stamp, and were thus technically invalid according to law. Another 3,608 result sheets mentioned large numbers of invalid votes without declaring the reason. Others had inconsistent tallies. These problematic result sheets contained information about 1 million votes out of 3,160,821 votes cast. Also, according to the YSK, there were 124,054 invalid ballots—a significant number, given that Gokcek officially won the election by 31,000 votes. The strange thing is that in YSK data, there is a negative correlation between invalid ballots and CHP votes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stamped Sheets</th>
<th>AKP</th>
<th>CHP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,067,808</td>
<td>1,110,532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstamped Sheets</td>
<td>348,730</td>
<td>273,820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,416,538</td>
<td>1,384,352</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 11. Breakdown of Ankara Vote by Stamped/Unstamped Result Sheets*

Ankara’s Votes (Ankara’nın Oyları), an independent non partisan platform with 3,000 volunteers, published an election diary that provided stark details about election day irregularities in the Ankara election:26

- In some cases, volunteers bearing observer IDs were not allowed to observe the process during voting or counting.
- In Akyurt, an officer repeatedly entered the voting booth with voters.
- In Kecioren, some women were seen approaching voters and distributing ballots already stamped in favor the AKP to be exchanged for blank ballots in return for 50-100 Turkish lira.
- One regulation that caused confusion across the country was the one that forbids placing ballots for city councilmen, town and metropolitan mayors (who are nominated by political parties) with those of neighborhood headmen (muhtar) (who have no party affiliation). Misplacing ballots would render them invalid. However, in most cases, as Ankara’s Votes observers witnessed, polling

officers used their discretion to validate or invalidate ballots without applying a certain standard.

- In Altindag, some voters realized that their names already showed signatures on sign-in sheets.

**Widespread Power Outages**

Rumors of potential power outages were widely shared in social media before the 2014 local elections. Even Minister of Energy Taner Yildiz had to reassure the public five days before the elections:

We organize our work so as not to allow any manipulation. What’s going to happen? While ballots are counted, power will be lost and the AK Party is going to gather some votes here. The AK Party does not need such a thing. The AK Party has been running this country for 12 years with lawful votes. There can be many rumors in the local elections, but citizens should ignore them. We do not foresee any power- or energy-related interruptions. Time-off requests from all our engineer, worker and technician brothers have been canceled.\(^\text{27}\)

Despite the minister's statement, the 2014 local elections were marked by widespread power outages across the nation. The final hours of voting, and then the vote counting process, were adversely affected. In many precincts, power outages during the counting of the votes led to panic and tension and at times halted the process. In other places, polling staffers continued to count votes by candlelight. Many believed that this was an organized effort staged conveniently at the time of the vote counting to change the results. In fact, there were reports of such changes following the power outages. This time, Minister Yildiz admitted the outages but blamed cats:

There were 10- or 15-minute cuts in some provinces and districts. Let us not hide behind electric lampposts . . . I am not joking, dear friends. A cat went into a transformer . . . Things like this have happened before the elections. It is wrong to connect this to the elections.\(^\text{28}\)

Later, in response to a parliamentary inquiry, the Ministry of Energy blamed bad weather and strong winds for the power outages.\(^\text{29}\). These controversial statements added to the belief that serious electoral fraud might have been committed during the elections.


Similar power outages are expected to occur during the June elections. On March 31, 2015, exactly a year after the last widespread power outages, most of the country was plunged into darkness for hours. The government has not yet provided a satisfactory explanation for the outages. Some believe the whole thing is preparation for an outage to be staged on June 7, 2015.

Recently, the YSK said in a press statement that they have taken precautions against potential power outages during the June 7 elections by ordering the government to supply power generators to all polling stations. The statement was interpreted by the media as “a precaution against cats.” Later, YSK Chairman Sadi Guven quipped that they had collected all the cats that might cause trouble.

**Biased Reporting of Election Results**

There have been significant issues with regard to publicly reporting the election results on the night of election day. During the last decade, Cihan News Agency has built a reputation for reporting the most accurate results right after the polls close, thanks to an army of reporters observing voting and conducting exit polls across the nation. For the 2014 local elections, the government decided to boost the government-funded news agency, Anadolu Agency (AA). On election night, these two agencies reported different results, prompting most TV stations to continuously inform their audiences about which source they used. The problem was that AA’s data were always in favor of the AKP, showing a wide gap in favor of the ruling party across the nation. Eventually, by the early morning hours, the data from both agencies was reconciled. Many analysts argued that AA’s early hype about the share of the AKP was an act of manipulation aiming to suppress the aspirations of the opposition parties and make their frustrated poll observers leave

their stations with feelings of resignation, which arguably facilitated the above-mentioned irregularities. Also, AA Chairman Kemal Ozturk supposedly visited the AKP headquarters on election night. In addition, the website of Cihan News Agency was subjected to a cyberattack for 174 hours, which did not prevent the agency from transmitting data to subscribers, but obstructed public view of the early data.\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{Issues with the Election Boards and the YSK}

In Turkey, the general conduct, supervision and inspection of elections are carried out by election boards that are governed by judges. Election boards are structured in three levels; the Supreme Election Board (YSK) is the highest national body above provincial and city election boards. The YSK is the final decision-making authority with regard to issues in elections, i.e., its decisions are not subject to judicial review. The YSK’s seven principal and four substitute members are selected from the high courts. Since the government’s influence on senior judiciary and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), which manages appointments, promotions and disciplinary procedures, has increased significantly since a series of controversial acts and legislation in 2014, YSK judges are susceptible to government pressure.

In the 2014 local elections, the YSK proved to be inadequate in addressing significant irregularities and process complaints launched against them. Many complaints went unresolved or unanswered. Since the YSK is a not a transparent body and its meetings are not open to media scrutiny or citizen participation, some of its decisions were protested by the parties involved. The opposition parties brought some YSK decisions before the Constitutional Court by invoking the right to bring individual petitions against breaches of fundamental rights. But the Constitutional Court rejected these appeals, citing the finality of YSK decisions. Another worry that is frequently voiced is about the computerized electoral recording system (SECSIS) used by the YSK. SECSIS was introduced in 2007 and since then the debate about its dependability and impartiality has not subsided. In addition, SECSIS uses the same platform as that of the minister of justice, which is of course a breach of the autonomy of the board. In 2014, there were many discrepancies between the numbers recorded at polling stations and those of SECSIS.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The June 7 elections will reshape power configurations in Turkey, and thus critical for a variety of reasons.

First, depending on the ruling AKP’s share of votes, President Erdogan’s aspiration to establish presidentialism will gain further ground or simply wither away. Similarly, the election outcome will also redefine Erdogan’s position vis-à-vis the next prime minister and the cabinet.

Second, pressing issues such as increasing authoritarianism, curbed freedoms, and economic stagnation may enter a new phase. It should be noted that this is the third election in a very tense political climate that has been ongoing since 2013. If the AKP keeps its majority in Parliament, these issues may continue to occupy the country’s agenda. If a coalition government emerges out of the elections, some relief may be expected in the short term.

Third, the election will be decisive in the future of the Kurdish question and the peace talks with the PKK. As President Erdoğan and the AKP government have increasingly revealed authoritarian tendencies, both pro-Kurdish organizations and Turkish nationalist parties have made harsh accusations that the peace process is a trick to deceive the public in order to win the elections and secure the path for Erdoğan’s dream of presidentialism. Within Kurdish politics, the HDP supports the idea that Kurds should pursue a political future within Turkey’s legal system over separatism. In the event of an HDP failure, the Kurdish movement may be marginalized, and this will increase the potential for violent separatism to reemerge.

Fourth, there were numerous alleged and documented cases of irregularities and fraud during the local elections in 2014. Given how critical the June 2015 general elections are to the future of the country and the tense political climate, a repeat of similar offenses could have devastating social and political consequences.

In the face of these challenges, there are responsibilities that fall upon the current and next government of Turkey and the international community.

The current government, first and foremost, must take all the necessary precautions to ensure a free and fair election in June 2015. This includes avoiding divisive rhetoric, upholding the rule of law, respecting the Constitution, and refraining from radical actions that may be unfairly binding for the next government. Second, the current government must ensure a clean election on June 7, 2015, untainted by irregularities, interference, and power outages. The YSK must be provided with the necessary autonomy, resources, and tools to fulfill its mission in a democratic election.

The next government, on the other hand, must first address the polarized, tense political climate of the last couple of years, which have been marked by corruption, divisive rhetoric, and exclusion. Second, the next government must make it a priority to reestablish the rule of law and sense of normalcy that have been lost for some time. The politicized judiciary, security forces, and bureaucracy need to be rehabilitated. Third, the process of constitutional redrafting that had been taken over by presidentialism needs to
be resuscitated. Turkey still needs a new, democratic constitution informed by a social compact that appropriately reflects its politically pluralist, multi-ethnic, multi-faith society.

The International community must recognize that in geostrategic, political, social, economic, and religious terms, Turkey is and will continue to be an important country. Turkey has greatly benefited from democracy; it is imperative that it remains a democracy characterized by constitutionalism, the rule of law, fundamental rights and freedoms, and free and fair elections. The international community must remind Turkish leaders that a democratic Turkey is not only a boost to the region and the world, but also the most effective way to serve this proud nation in the future.

The international community must also help the Turkish people hold free and fair elections. In addition to the staff provided by the political parties, there were many civil groups and initiatives, such as Oy ve Otesi and Ankara’nın Oyları, which rigorously defended the sanctity of votes in the 2014 elections. Unfortunately, they were not able to prevent the irregularities that occurred during those elections. As Turkey braces for a new and critical election in a very tense climate, election security may be at stake. International governmental and nongovernmental organizations must not only closely observe the elections but also provide support and training to local groups and organizations.