



COMMENTARY

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The Turkish Grand National Assembly Elections

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The July 22 parliamentary elections will not only determine the composition of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) and the government for the next five years but also the future of the country's democratic system.

The elections were mandated after the TGNA, dominated by the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP), failed to elect a replacement for outgoing President Sezer by the May 15 deadline. The presidential election process had witnessed rising tensions, symbolized by mass demonstrations by secularists against the election of a candidate from the ranks of the JDP, which has its origins in the Islamist movement, and had culminated with a barely disguised hint of a coup by the Turkish military, which had overthrown four elected Turkish governments in the past fifty years, and with a decisive intervention by the Constitutional Court.

Most polls suggest that three political parties – the JDP, the Republican People's Party (RPP), and the Nationalist Action Party (NAP) – will pass the 10 percent national threshold necessary for representation in the TGNA. The general consensus is that the JDP will receive around 40 percent, the RPP around 20 percent, and the NAP around 15 percent. In the last elections in November 2002, only the JDP and the RPP had passed the threshold with the JDP gaining 34.3 percent of the vote and the RPP 19.4 percent. While the JDP is projected to have enough seats in the 550 seat TGNA to form the next government, it seems likely that it could exceed its percentage of votes in the last elections and still have fewer seats if three parties ultimately get into the TGNA.

The campaign has fortunately not been characterized by an escalation of the tensions which were evident during the abortive presidential elections. However, the renewal of the JDP's mandate, which would constitute a major triumph for Prime Minister Erdogan and his party, could almost certainly raise questions about the ability of the JDP to eradicate areas of serious disagreement between itself and the staunchly secular military establishment regarding the role of religion and manifestations of religious observance in Turkish society and politics. At the same time, the government established after the elections will have to grapple with important foreign and security policy questions such as difficulties in the long-standing alliance with the United States, particularly since the Iraq war, the threat posed by increased PKK terrorism directed at Turkey from northern Iraq, and growing doubts over eventual Turkish accession into the European Union.

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