

Erdogan's dangerous numbers game

Blog post by Associate Adviser Thomas Gratowski, 09 May 2016

Flicking through the news channels in the last two weeks has revealed an image of Turkey sliding deeper into political turmoil. One of the reasons for this is President Erdogan's ambition to change the political system to an executive presidency, a path we can now say with near certainty he has chosen over economic reforms. The game he is playing is about numbers. His AKP has 317 seats in parliament which is not enough to change the constitution. Only 330 votes would allow him to unilaterally put constitutional changes to a referendum, and with 367 votes the AKP could do it alone. This simple arithmetic demonstrates that achieving an executive presidency would require extraordinary measures.

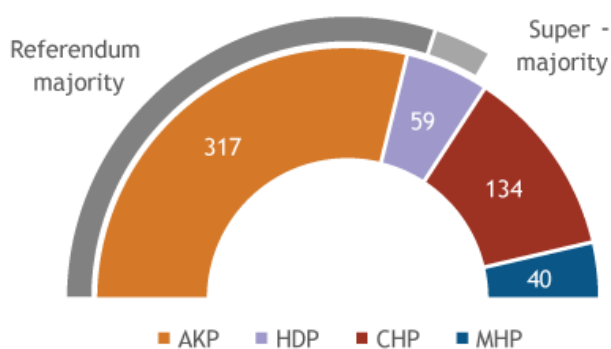


Fig: Distribution of seats in Turkey's current parliament

The resignation of Prime Minister Davutoglu on Thursday is the result of Erdogan's unwillingness to loosen his grip on party and government. The prime minister has held different opinions on economic policy and most importantly the need for an executive presidency. He has sought to re-assert the parliamentary system against a powerful president. The recent nomination of a compromise candidate as new central bank governor was a sign that the prime minister was more than Erdogan's puppet. Davutoglu's successes on the international level, in particular during negotiations with the EU, have increased his international standing. But

the prime minister's own success sealed his fate. Erdogan could simply not risk the consolidation of another power centre in the party that could ultimately convince some of the 317 AKP lawmakers to oppose a presidential system.

Secondly, the president wants to marginalise the pro-Kurdish HDP to increase AKP seats in parliament. The brawls in parliament's constitutional commission last week have shown how divided the lines are between both parties. The problem of relieving immunity from lawmakers is that most certainly HDP members - possibly more than 40 of 59 MPs who were accused by Erdogan personally of supporting terrorism- will be prosecuted and possibly imprisoned. This could increase AKP seats when by-elections are held in those constituencies and result in an AKP majority to change the constitution. However, previous steps to ban Kurdish parties from parliament, like the 1994 dissolution of the Democracy Party, have only led to escalating violence.

Erdogan's personal ambitions are starting to have visible costs for Turkey's economy with both lira and equity markets falling as a result. His aggressive push for an executive presidency risks throwing the country into a civil war and, if he has the numbers he needs, cementing an

authoritarian system. This will not only erode investor confidence but also put the EU into an even more problematic position.