Turkey’s elections held on June 7th, which some observers argued to be the most important since the inception of democratic elections, resulted in political uncertainty. However, even that climate of uncertainty, with no actor able to form a government alone, was better than the escalating tensions that the country had experienced recently. The elections left the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) with 258 seats. That is eighteen short of what is needed for a vote of confidence in the 550-seat parliament. The result effectively saw the end of thirteen years of uninterrupted AKP parliamentary hegemony.

Moreover, the number of seats the AKP secured is much less than what President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan needed for a constitutional change to an executive presidency, which he could have achieved only with an AKP super-majority of 367 votes. Even a majority that is needed to take such a constitutional change to a referendum, i.e. 330 seats, is not there for Mr. Erdoğan and the AKP. While the main opposition, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) has secured 132 seats, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and People’s Democratic Party (HDP) each ended up with 80 seats. With the need for a coalition looming tall on the horizon, the long-term implications of the elections are left rather under-evaluated.

The elections apparently displayed the unjustifiable nature of the 10% election threshold. Ironically the threshold that served to give the AKP 66% of the parliamentary seats with only 34.28% of the votes in 2002 has left the Party having to settle for only 46.9% of the seats despite receiving 6.5% more votes this time. The injustice of the system is all the more discernable when displayed in terms of numbers. In the 2015 elections the AKP received eight million plus more votes than it did in 2002. This figure corresponds to almost double the 2002 amount. Despite this, the HDP’s success in wrecking the threshold meant as many as 55 fewer seats in parliament for the AKP. Historically too, the plain fact is that the threshold has hurt all political parties in Turkey at one time or another. There are no ideological positions that did not suffer its consequences, either by getting left out of parliament or in the form of unfair representation. Therefore it is hard to explain the inertia of political parties vis-à-vis the threshold.

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Ostensibly conceived as a way of establishing a two-party system that would lead to “stability” after the coup of 1980, the threshold proves to be a major source of political instability today. Perhaps, aside from none of the parties desiring to risk posing as underdogs afraid of being left below the threshold, it would not be wrong to assume that it has been upheld since then keep the Kurds out, the strong dominant and the elites engaged. These are three functions none of which serves today. Indeed, according to some observers one of the positive outcomes of the June 7th election is leading to a considerably more representative parliament with only 4.76% of the votes left without a voice in parliament. However, this can also be interpreted as the Turkish electorate ascending the learning curve of casting strategic votes, an art form that they have excelled in thanks to the crudity of the threshold. In fact, such a deduction seems to corroborate better with the observation of many voters casting their votes for Condorcet winners. This becomes an act of preclusive voting where voters cast their ballots according to whom they don’t want in government rather than whom they do. In actuality, this strategic pattern of voting was an important catalyst for the HDP’s success. The system also leads to awkward political alignments influencing voters’ choices and/or expectations.

Under the circumstances there are two alternative paths for Turkey’s political future. That is, of course, if the country is going to have a government. Either the parties will come together, building some form of consensus, or hold early elections. In today’s fragmented socio-political environment, and considering the crushing political weight of Mr. Erdoğan on the AKP, a coalition is hard, though not impossible, to structure. Furthermore, the long-term sustainability of any coalition is questionable. Even an AKP - CHP coalition, delivering a 390-seat supermajority and enabling direct parliamentary change of the constitution may not present a long-term solution. A grand coalition of that sort, established in 1961, lasted only about seven months. Ironically, a minority government of the same era lasted about twice that time. In short, there is every reason to think that the 25th Parliament of the Turkish Republic will be a short one. Hence, the most important question in store for Turkey’s political future today might be settlement of the ground rules that will govern the next election.

Yet the shape of things to come is still unclear. In the context of the current political climate in Turkey, the threshold itself, which is the highest in Europe at 10%, has metamorphosed into a bargaining chip in itself. Consequently, it will possibly prove to be the most important part of the grand bargain before the next election. In this regard the idea of introducing a “narrow district system” becomes critical. Under a single-round narrow district system, where the party with the most votes in a smaller electoral district wins the respective parliamentary seat, there is a probability for the AKP to secure a majority, even a supermajority. The bargain here is pitting the introduction of narrow districting against lowering the threshold. The idea is for the AKP to say yes to lowering the threshold. The AKP’s counterparts should consent to a new electoral map based on single-round narrow districting. Opponents of narrow districting contend that such a system would be even more destabilizing for the country’s political system and would invite an even graver crisis of representation. There are substantive worries behind the concern. First, historical experience based on previous elections, especially the three elections held during the 1950s, proves that the narrow district system hinders representational legitimacy by generating equally distorted outcomes, just like a high threshold. Second, the system is more susceptible to gerrymandering than the existing electoral districting practice.

A narrow district system is not categorically distortive though. Such a system may bring renewed enthusiasm for, and therefore increased participation in, politics as it would potentially put more of a premium on local politics, and empower individual parliamentarians. However, unless the national threshold is annulled, or held to a minimum, achieving those positive outcomes and ensuring maximum representational legitimacy will be
difficult. Accordingly, if a narrow district system is in-stated, it should only be done under a two-round ar-rangement with the threshold at minimum or, prefera-bly, totally abandoned. In all probability, Turkey’s de-mocracy would be better off if it rids itself of the burden of the threshold.

The real problem for the AKP today is mainly about the crucial issue of distinguishing between the party’s po-litical future and Mr. Erdoğan’s agenda. Actually, based on the parliamentary majority it had before the elec-tions, the AKP could have comfortably legislated for a narrow district system while preserving a threshold. Probably such a move would have created even graver consequences for the credibility of the representativeness of the Turkish electoral system. Yet, it would have ena-bled the AKP to sustain a governing majority. It seems the main reason why the AKP refrained from creating such a change was because of Mr. Erdoğan’s ambitions to create an executive presidency. Such an approach based on leveraging the threshold would have worked if the HDP were left below 10% and, consequently, the ma-jority of its seats were given to the AKP. Under the cir-cumstances though, not accomplishing such a change has cost the party its parliamentary domination.

Transformation of the Turkish political system requires a more representative framework. Creating such a framework is dependent not only on changing the elec-tion system. A more comprehensive attitude is needed. Provisions of the Political Parties Law, itself a remnant of the coup of 1980, alongside an array of other laws, rules and regulations that limit freedom of speech and association, including the AKP’s recently enacted Do-mestic Security Law, should be overhauled in order to create a political system based on liberties. This is es-sential for mending the divisions of Turkey’s deeply fractured and polarized society. It is also a precondition for providing the much-needed impetus to create the social space that would provide an opportunity for re-newing Turkey’s ailing social contract among its eth-nicities, denominations and political identities.

Aside from clearly being in the best interest of the country’s political future and stability, taking the initia-tive for such a transformation might actually prove to be a pragmatic move for the AKP for its own institutional identity and political future. This is because, judging from the election results, the AKP’s voter base is shrinking, its votes amongst first-time voters and university students are lower in percentage points than other age groups, and as political mobilization increas-es, reflecting itself in the form of high turnout rates, the AKP’s share of the votes decreases. Arguably, under such circumstances it is better for the AKP to try and lead the change rather than trying to hold on to power by struggling to hold on to a status quo that is bound to end, and a leader whose popularity – despite still being the most popular politician in the country – is at an all-time low. In all probability, renewed elections, that seem bound to happen, will not bring much needed political stability to Turkey. However, such a transformation of the political system might do the job.