

## Media Reviews

### Turkish General Elections in the Eyes of Columnists Via Twitter

Two general elections were held in Turkey in 2015; the first was on June 7 and the second on [November 1](#), since the first one produced a hung parliament. As a general fact, a large number of people in Turkey became particularly interested in the elections of 2015. The June 7 elections took the attention of the world media, and people kept a close eye on the results of this election. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which had governed Turkey since 2002, lost its parliamentary majority in the June election. After being asked to form a government by virtue of leading the largest party in Parliament, the AKP leader held talks with the leaders of the three opposition parties. However, when political parties failed to form a coalition following the June general election, [a snap election](#) was called by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on August 24, 2015 that paved the way for the general election on November 1, 2015. The November election resulted in the AKP regaining a parliamentary majority following a victory, having lost it five months earlier in the [June 2015 general election](#).

The elections of 2015 will be remembered as a milestone for the use of social media by journalists, columnists, and politicians. Almost all journalists, columnists, and politicians have Twitter accounts, which they use with varying degrees of effectiveness. Journalists may have millions of Twitter followers who turned to the microblogging site as an interactive communication platform. Twitter is a platform where people influence each other's opinions about world issues as well as many other subjects from entertainment to health, sports to current affairs. [Turkish Twitter users](#) grew massively over the last five years. More than 6.5 million Turkish Twitter users benefit from Twitter and most of them use it in order to follow personalities such as Turkish singers, television and film celebrities, sports persons, journalists, and politicians (Dogramaci & Radcliffe, 2017). Also there were more than 40 million Turkish social media users.

Moreover, Twitter is beneficial for news gathering, getting information, and arguing with other people in media. Followers use columnists' tweets primarily as a news source to keep up-to-date on key issues and politics. One reason for this is the guidance motive, meaning that followers depend on tweets from columnists to guide their decisions on how to vote and what position to take on an issue. Twitter is taken to be even more influential than columnists and political leaders have hoped it could be. The opposite might be true, if Twitter followers primarily have an entertainment motive, which suggests that they often use political tweets for fun and do not take them seriously (Parmelee & Bichard,

2012). Twitter places an emphasis on being a public medium by calling itself “a platform for you to influence what is being talked about around the world” (About Us, 2010). Tweets, which are sent by the journalist/columnist as newspaper coverage, can have a positive or negative impact on the message of an individual.

In this article,<sup>1</sup> some of the frames which were tweeted or posted by columnists about the last general election in Turkey are interpreted. This work builds on Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000) analysis of frames when investigating the use of common frames in Twitter in Turkey’s general election. This article will address some election-related topics which were discussed by Turkish columnists on Twitter during Turkey’s general election. One thousand two-hundred twenty-four tweets from October 23 to November 5 of 2015 or just before and after the election of November 1, 2015, are analyzed in this study.

It is important to look at how the media frame the national election, because those frames influence the public’s perception and impressions of the media organization. Framing is useful for identifying the strategic messages created by communicators, and frames are also useful in understanding how to shape public perceptions of political issues or institutions (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Various framing research describes how media portray election topics. Framing analysis focuses on the relationship between public issues in news and the public perception of those issues (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Researchers offer several different definitions of framing in relation to their function. Tuchman (1977) explicates that media use frames to construct social reality for audiences and thus give meaning to words and images. Entman (1993) states that “framing theory shows exactly how frames become embedded within and make themselves manifest in a text, or how framing influences thinking”, p. 51.

Communicators purposely or unwittingly make a frame in their message or news article with self-judgments that construct their belief systems. Media messages, which are manifested by undisclosed or explicit stock phrases, key words, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences, provide thematically reinforced clusters of facts or judgments (Entman, 1993). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) suggest that frames as “interpretative packages” give meaning to an issue. At the core of this package is “a central organizing idea, or frame, for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3). Another important thing is the receiver that gets frames as prior knowledge to help efficiently understand the meaning of messages (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

According to Chong and Druckman (2007), an individual’s attitude has a major influence on how one interprets media. For example, if people hear information about the positive side of a politician or political opinion but have a strong belief against it, the overall attitude will not be influenced by how the message was framed. Cappella and Jamieson (1997, p. 47) suggest that frames activate knowledge, stimulate “stocks of cultural morals and values, and create contexts” in social discourse and thinking. Frames are parts of political arguments, journalistic norms, and social movements’ discourse. They are alternative ways of defining issues, endogenous to the political and social world (de Vreese, 2005).

In Turkey, the most mentioned individuals in columnists’ tweets are the voters. Columnists called on the voters to action during the electoral period.

“Government” was the second most mentioned word in the columnists’ tweets. Columnists appealed to the Government and ruling party for fairness in the election process. Likewise, columnists called on the President of the Republic to be fair. The most criticized people and institutions were those in power during the electoral period.

The most common frame in columnists’ tweets was conflict. All parties, groups, and individuals have been criticizing each other in their tweets. Frames about feelings of outrage, empathy, caring, sympathy, or compassion are the second most common frame. The third most common frame was related to specific social prescriptions about how to behave. The fourth was related to tweets emphasizing how individuals and groups are affected by an issue during the elections. Columnists have also posted tweets in the form of emojis or other visual information about their feelings.

The most negative tone of the columnists was directed toward the government and terrorist groups. Although the total numbers of tweets, which are related to the democratic situation in Turkey, are low, the government, ruling party, voters, and government supporters were being held responsible for the situation. The economic condition is also the subject of some debate among columnists who argued that Turkey’s growth has slumped in recent years. Although the total numbers of tweets related to the economic condition in Turkey is low, the [Turkish Lira fell](#) by about 17% against the dollar after the June general elections in 2015.

Some of the columnists have held the government to account rather than the problematical groups. During the period of elections, polarization in Turkey intensified while terrorist attacks increased. These are among the various other factors that could affect elections.

Press freedom has been another contentious issue with a perception that the ruling party became more and more intolerant of its critics. Social media played a key role in keeping people informed during the election period. A lot of times, columnists posted that many people in Turkey view the social media restrictions as a sign of the government’s intolerance to opposition voices.

A lot of columnists’ expectations were positive about internal peace in Turkey before the June 7, 2015 elections. Public opinion favored the idea that the Kurdish problem would be solved in a democratic way. The People’s Democratic Party, largely representing the Kurdish people but also encompassing left-wing liberals, surpassed the steep [10% threshold](#) for entering parliament. There were columnists who expressed that all people, institutions, and groups which have sovereignty in Turkey have been responsible for internal conflict in Turkey, including terrorist groups that were accountable for terrorist actions.

The Turkish elections in November 2015 provided the latest example of how powerful Internet tools such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are also changing the way media are produced, distributed, and consumed. In the face of increasingly restricted conventional media in Turkey, people were turning to social media. The most ardent critics of the existing order, columnists, and others are heavily using outlets such as Twitter and Facebook.

The most criticized topic during the elections was state-owned media and progovernment [private media](#) that considerably disregarded the opposition. The election was preceded by the deadliest terrorist attack in Turkey. Several terror

attacks prevented the opposition parties from staging any demonstrations or public meetings. However, the ruling party was widely criticized both nationally and internationally for its attacks on freedom of speech, in particular with regard to protests and journalists. Despite different ideological leanings, there were issues shared by columnists such as tweets that are related to internal conflict, terrorism, failing coalition, and media freedom. Discussions, which are related to those topics, involved columnists criticizing each other and politicians. Offering specific social prescriptions on how to behave is a kind of “morality frame” that was also highlighted by the columnists. Some columnists called on voters to rise in opposition to existing order in Turkey while others posted tweets providing guidance on how to vote for a democratic system of the country.

Generally, columnists have posted tweets for fair elections. Turkey’s economy was exposed to further risks at the time, not only by the increasing corruption rumors in the country but also by some authoritarian policies, and these were given attention by columnists in their posted tweets. After the November elections, columnists posted few tweets about the result of the election. They did not expect that AKP would have increased their votes to 49% nor did they expect the AKP to achieve a landslide victory. Earlier, almost all opinion polls suggested that the AKP would either form a single-party government with a slight majority or be forced to be part of a coalition government, having fallen slightly short of obtaining a majority.

Right after the November elections, one of the most conspicuous practices was that columnists tried to avoid naming individuals, groups, politicians, and parties in their posts. Moreover, they did not write different messages in their tweets from what were found in their papers they were affiliated with. It can be assumed that some columnists, particularly in mainstream media, did not want to post their ideas about the results of the election because they were concerned about their corporate identity and for the future of their profession.

The columnists’ stance in the November elections is somewhat similar to their practice just after the June 7 election, when political parties came together to discuss potential coalitions, after no party was able to win enough votes to form a single-party government. Despite the fact that the topic of a failed coalition remained on the media agenda, this did not appear as the columnists’ agenda. The coalitions talks were held amid the waves of terrorists’ attacks in Turkey. In this atmosphere, columnists did not want to give any message about coalition possibilities.

One of the most important insights of this research is that many columnists have nondestructive but also implicit beliefs about the ruling party and government during the electoral period. Consequently, when the columnists tweeted their ideas on some topics, sometimes they posted their opinion implicitly, sometimes they tweeted hesitantly. These attitudes of columnists reflect a lot of recent developments in the country, including the decline of the democratic situation of Turkey, freedom of the press, and acts of terrorism.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>This review is based on a paper presented at the First International Conference on Social and Political Issues, Bali, Indonesia, organized by the Universitas Indonesia, October 19–20, 2016.

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## Putting Southeast Asian Media Into Context

In the year 2016, the world witnessed three popular votes that are bound to have global impact: Great Britain leaving the European Union and the elections of Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte as Presidents of the United States and the Philippines, respectively. All three have in common the phenomenon of an increased use of populist mechanisms by the victorious, such as massive use of unconventional media outlets to spread “alternative facts.”

While all three events share many characteristics, they took place on different continents and within different sociopolitical contexts. Knowledge about each specific situation and context thus becomes all the more important. When dealing with Southeast Asian media, it has to be borne in mind that news is very much a social construct, as every journalist subjectively creates his or her stories, which are “firmly rooted in a particular time, place, culture, and set of political circumstances” (Wolfsfeld, 2011, p. 2).

Hence, contextual knowledge about sociohistoric developments is essential with regard to understanding the interconnection between media and politics. Special characteristics of the Southeast Asian media are their historical experiences and, especially for the press, their roles in the national struggles for independence against colonial rule. Almost all Southeast Asian countries, Thailand being the exception, share a colonial history that lasted for centuries (Stockwell, 2007).

Most countries only emerged as sovereign nation-states after World War II, during the third wave of decolonization. In many of these countries, the press