

THE 2023 ELECTIONS IN TURKEY

// Can the Opposition Challenge Erdoğan and the AKP?

Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections on June 18, 2023, will be a notable juncture point. These elections will determine the country's future and direction, and are therefore not only significant for domestic politics, but also at the international level as regards Turkey's capacity to serve as a global actor. During these elections, the opposition will take on the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to gain political power after two decades of AKP rule. They will only have a chance of success if they propose a strong candidate to challenge Erdoğan.



Election banners signifying different political parties in Istanbul (Photo: © Aris Gionis, flickr, CC BY-NC 2.0).

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In 2002, following the long period of political rule by the strictly secular Kemalist¹ state in Turkey, the AKP emerged as a new political party with an Islamic background.² This new party described itself as a “conservative democrat” party and denied “having an Islamic agenda”.³ The AKP promised democratization and carried out several reforms in the areas of human rights, minority rights, the judiciary, the economy, and foreign policy. The EU membership process also fell in this reform period (2002–2007). However,

from their second legislative period (2007–2011), the AKP and Erdoğan began to gradually show authoritarian tendencies: Turkey experienced several juncture points, which resulted in fundamental amendments to the constitution, a change of the political system from parliamentary to presidential, effectuating one-man rule, and a purge of critical civil society voices and opposition politicians. The forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023 will determine Turkey's future and direction. The elections are pivotal when it comes to pressing domestic issues such as the state of democracy, the financial crisis, and immigration. They also have an impact on Turkey's role in international politics. Turkey's diplomatic mediation between Russia and Ukraine regarding grain shipments and its initial veto of Finland and Sweden's membership of NATO, for instance, show the country's influential role in international politics.

The Political Blocs and Where They Stand

There are three main blocs that will compete in the 2023 elections: the AKP and its ally, the small, nationalist MHP party, form the People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*). The main opposition bloc, the Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*), consists of six parties with different backgrounds, from social democrats (CHP), nationalists (İYİ), and conservative liberals (DEVA and GP) to religious Muslims (SP). The third bloc is the Democracy Alliance (*Demokrasi İttifakı*), which is led by the pro-minority rights/pro-Kurdish party HDP. The Democracy Alliance seeks to include various relatively small left-wing political parties.

Birth of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)

In keeping with the strong Kemalist ideology, the religious institutions were under the control of the state. Accordingly, the Islamic parties faced strong scrutiny and, in each case, they were closed down and banned due to their anti-secular agenda. On the other hand, in the 1970s, Necmettin Erbakan entered politics with the *Milli Görüş* (National View) movement, which promoted traditional values, a “Muslim way of life” and an anti-Westernization approach. Erbakan went on to found several parties following this political direction, including *Milli Nizam Partisi* (National Order Party) in 1970 and *Milli Selamet Partisi* (National Salvation Party) in 1972, both of which were also banned by the Turkish Constitutional Court. These parties were succeeded by *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party) in 1983. The party won the 1995 parliamentary elections and Erbakan became the first Prime Minister of Turkey to adhere to Islamist ideology.

After the Welfare Party was closed down in 1998, it was replaced by *Fazilet Partisi* (Virtue Party) in the same year, but the latter was also banned in 2001 for the same reason. Subsequently, the members of parliament representing the Virtue Party split and moved in two directions: 1. traditionalists, who founded *Saadet Partisi* (Felicity Party) and 2. reformists, who have been represented by the AKP since 2001. Both of these parties are able to continue functioning because of amendments to the constitution, which, due to EU reforms, made it difficult to ban political parties in Turkey.⁴

The People’s Alliance, led by the AKP, aims to “continue serving the nation by renewing trust”,⁵ and the group’s presidential candidate has (as expected) already been announced as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The AKP’s declared goal is to preserve its political power and hegemony, pursuing the long-term vision for the country of “building up the New Turkey.”⁶ This is a reference to the changes implemented during the AKP period, and if successful, the “New Turkey” ideal might signify the end of a long-lasting struggle between the secular Kemalists and religious political actors. The neo-Ottomanist foreign policy ideal has also been an integral part of building the New Turkey. This view envisioned the country as a strong, global actor embracing its power in the form of the historical Ottoman territories. Should it succeed, the presidential system is expected to amount to “the rule of one person”,⁷ in which the separation of legislative,

executive, and judicial branches is blurred. Under the rule of the AKP and Erdoğan, relations between Turkey and the EU have been complex. The accession process – already a challenge – reached the point of no return when the decision made by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), in favor of human rights activist and businessperson Osman Kavala and against Turkey, was not applied by the Turkish state.

The main opposition bloc, the Nation Alliance, is an interesting case because of the possible cooperation between the diverse groups it includes. Its impetus has been to defeat the rule of the AKP. This focus on a single issue explains how such a diverse alliance can unite. Despite their differences, the leaders of the six parties prepared and signed the “Reinforced Parliamentary System Agreement” as their platform concept. In the event of an election victory, they promise to dissolve the presidential system and reestablish the parliamentary one. The alliance stresses the importance of a separation of powers. The group does not suggest returning to the pre-AKP Turkish state, which also contained antidemocratic elements. Instead, they propose a new system, which will be a pluralist, participatory democracy. The alliance emphasizes the need to ensure peace and equal citizenship in Turkey. However, the Kurdish issue is not mentioned specifically in the platform concept. Moreover, the document underscores the importance of the ECHR, which hints at the group’s aim of establishing better relations with the EU. This opposition bloc also plans to propose a joint candidate, though they are yet to announce who that will be.

The other opposition bloc is the Democracy Alliance, which seeks to offer an alternative to the existing alliances. Its positioning can be interpreted as cautious, even toward the Nation Alliance. This can be mainly attributed to the nationalist IYI Party being a member of the Nation Alliance. However, the group is open to discussing possible support for a joint presidential candidate, and the HDP therefore published a position paper pointing out its expectations of the presidential candidate.⁸ In this document, the HDP emphasizes the importance of pluralist democracy and transforming the system from a presidential to a parliamentary one. The Kurdish issue and peace are also underlined as “Turkey’s most essential problem”⁹ in the position paper. The party also states the necessity of abiding by the resolutions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

Does the Opposition Have a Chance?

Turkey has been experiencing turbulent times, both economically and politically. In April 2022, the infla-

tion rate reached almost 70 percent. Prices are twice as high as in 2021.¹⁰ This situation has created strong dissatisfaction in society. Alongside the deteriorating economic situation, Turkey has seen an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment and nationalism. Accordingly, the political discourse has shifted toward the right wing.¹¹ Some analysts argue that such nationalist discourse is beneficial to Erdoğan and harmful to the opposition, because it might force the main opposition party, the CHP, to be silent on various topics, such as the lawsuit against the pro-Kurdish/pro-minority party, the HDP.¹²

Another challenge arose after Turkey's diplomatic mediation between Russia and Ukraine generated positive media coverage both in Turkey and abroad. The head of UNCTAD, for instance, stated that Turkey played an "indispensable" role¹³ and Erdoğan's diplomacy is praised as a "lesson for diplomacy" in *Le Monde*.¹⁴ Such positive comments were shared

and cited by the Turkish state's official news agency, TRT,¹⁵ which is subordinated to President Erdoğan's office. Overall, it "raised Ankara's standing on the world stage, as well as that of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan".¹⁶ Seyla Benhabib argues that "as a regional mediator and peacemaker, Erdoğan has found the political cover".¹⁷ Indeed, this positive perception may be helpful to Erdoğan and the AKP in the forthcoming elections.

However, the financial situation provides opportunities for the opposition parties as well. Political scientist Emre Çalışkan points out that the current economic situation is similar to that which made the AKP's victory possible in 2002,¹⁸ following the 2001 financial crisis in Turkey. The dire financial situation may play a significant role in how the electorate decide to vote and lead to a change of government. Indeed, the polls show that the AKP's prospects are favorable.

Turning Points in Turkish Politics

2013: The Gezi protest began in May in Istanbul in response to increasing authoritarian practices. The police used violence against the protesters.

July 2015: Parliamentary elections. Pro-minority/pro-Kurdish party, the HDP, enters into parliament, and the AKP loses the absolute majority for the first time.

November 2015: Early elections in Turkey. The AKP regains absolute majority.

July 15, 2016: Attempted coup in Turkey

July 20, 2016–July 18, 2018: State of emergency in Turkey. During this period, fundamental rights, such as the right of assembly, were restricted. There were waves of purges, which not only targeted the supporters of the Gülen movement, but also the critical AKP voices in general: e.g., journalists, academics, and politicians were detained or suspended. Many civil servants and academics were dismissed.

April 2017: Constitutional referendum on changing the system from parliamentary to presidential (51 percent in favor and 49 percent against the amendments).

June 24, 2018: Parliamentary and presidential elections. Erdoğan is elected president (52.59 percent of the vote). For the parliamentary elections, alliances were built. The AKP and MHP's People Alliance won the elections (the AKP received 42.56 percent of the vote, and the MHP 11.10 percent making a total of 53.66 percent).

March 31, 2019: Local elections in Turkey. Landslide victory for the candidates of the main opposition party, the CHP, in three metropolitan cities (Istanbul, Ankara, and İzmir).

About the Author

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The Leading Figure is Important

So, the alliances appear to have a chance, but who is selected to oppose Erdoğan in the presidential election will be of the essence. Indeed, the parties of the Nation Alliance aim to propose a joint nominee to challenge Erdoğan. Four names emerge as possible challengers within the Nation Alliance: Mansur Yavaş (CHP), Ekrem İmamoğlu (CHP), Meral Akşener (İYİ), and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (CHP). The imprisoned HDP politician, Selahattin Demirtaş, is seen as a possible candidate for the Democracy Alliance. If Demirtaş is not declared the candidate and/or does not get through to the second round, the joint nominee of the Nation Alliance will have a good chance in the second round. The joint nominee's success depends on the HDP's positioning during these elections. In this sense, the joint nominee's background and political stance are essential for attracting HDP votes. Bearing Yavaş and Akşener's past in the nationalist MHP in mind, the HDP electorate might be less willing to vote for these candidates. On the other hand, İmamoğlu, the current Mayor of Istanbul, or Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the CHP, would be attractive to HDP voters. İmamoğlu has been described as a political figure who could be "a dangerous challenger"¹⁹ to Erdoğan. Indeed, the 2019 municipal elections were a big success for İmamoğlu and his party, the CHP. Many analysts interpreted this change as a sign of increasing dissatisfaction with the AKP.²⁰ Kılıçdaroğlu has also declared his interest in facing Erdoğan. In fact, the HDP commented in February 2022 that the party aimed to coordinate with the Nation Alliance to find

a mutual nominee for the presidential elections and would support a left-wing nominee. However, if the Nation Alliance decides to nominate somebody from the right of the political spectrum, the HDP would propose its own nominee for the first round.²¹

A leading political figure is important, and a candidate supported by both opposition alliances has the potential to be a strong challenger for Erdoğan. This requires accepting the HDP of the Democracy Alliance as a force to be reckoned with. Indeed, HDP votes can influence the results. In this sense, whether and how the nationalist actors, such as the İYİ Party, accept the HDP as a legitimate actor in Turkey is of crucial importance. The group should be addressed as a possible partner on core topics, such as the change from the presidential to parliamentary system. This aligns with the Nation Alliance's promise in the "Reinforced Parliamentary System Agreement" to initiate a democratic turn based on pluralism.

References and further reading:
hsfk.de/spotlight1022-fn



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