

In line for the throne: preparing for a transfer of power in Turkey

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In recent months, debate over the transfer of power after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has intensified in Turkey. Under the current constitution, the incumbent head of state cannot seek another term if elections are held in 2028, in accordance with the constitutional timetable. Instead of Erdoğan, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is expected to put forward a successor of his choosing. In this context, the names most frequently mentioned are the president's son, Bilal Erdoğan, his son-in-law and defence industry magnate, Selçuk Bayraktar, and Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan. Tensions between rival factions are increasingly spilling into public domain through the media.

The forthcoming transition of power in Turkey represents a fundamental challenge to the stability of the state and the survival of the AKP. Given the extreme centralisation of the political system around Erdoğan, his unexpected departure would plunge the country into institutional chaos and exacerbate divisions within the ruling camp. The absence of an obvious successor stems from years of Erdoğan's efforts to consolidate power within both the state and the party and to marginalise potential rivals. The most likely interim solution to these dilemmas would be to delay the succession process and enable Erdoğan to run again in the presidential election. The constitution allows for such a move, providing for the right to stand again, as an exception, if early elections are called.

Erdoğan as the linchpin of the system

The latest wave of media speculation about succession in Turkey began after the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023. According to the law, Erdoğan's current term should be his last; indeed, he has declared that he does not intend to stand in the next election. In 2025, tensions within the ruling camp over the transition of power began to spill into public domain. In September, a recording made during the president's visit to the White House caused a significant stir, as it showed the Washington correspondent of a pro-government television channel reporting on a conflict within the Turkish delegation and outlining three opposing camps – those of Bilal Erdoğan, Bayraktar, and Fidan. At a subsequent press conference, Fidan reinforced claims of tensions within the ruling elite by stating that production of the indigenous KAAN fighter jet would not be possible without the lifting of US sanctions. These words were widely interpreted as an attempt to undermine Bayraktar, who is closely associated with the national technology movement.

The absence of an obvious successor to the president poses the main challenge in the succession process. Fearing potential rivals, Erdoğan has gradually sidelined his closest associates over the course of his political career. Many of those who co-founded the AKP are now either outside politics or have left the party, including former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and former president Abdullah Gül. Former ministers who acquired considerable political clout, such as Süleyman Soylu and Hulusi Akar, have been pushed into secondary roles. This personnel policy has made it difficult for a successor to emerge from within the party. Moreover, during Erdoğan's years in power, the model of governance in Turkey has become increasingly personalised. The presidential system introduced in 2018 grants the head of state far-reaching powers. This centralisation also extends to the AKP itself, which Erdoğan has led for 25 years, with brief interruptions. The president also plays a key role in foreign policy, which has long relied on his personal relationships with foreign leaders. The succession process in Turkey is further shaped by a mechanism observed in many other authoritarian states: as the opposition threatens to hold him accountable for his rule, Erdoğan has reason to be concerned about his own future and that of his family, and is therefore seeking to ensure their security.

Keeping it in the family?

According to current speculation, the president's son, **Bilal Erdoğan**, 44, appears to be the most likely candidate. Although he presents himself as a businessman not involved in politics, in practice he draws on an extensive organisational base through a network of AKP-linked foundations. The most prominent of these is the Turkey Youth Foundation (TÜGVA), whose members are reported to hold key positions in several ministries. In recent months, a range of efforts has been undertaken to enhance Bilal's public profile. Despite holding no official position in the government, he has increasingly accompanied his father on foreign visits, including those to Indonesia, Pakistan, and Qatar. Media coverage of him and his family has also increased markedly, particularly in pro-government outlets. Moreover, there have been reports suggesting that he could formally enter politics, for example by assuming the leadership of the AKP or by standing in early parliamentary elections.

Selçuk Bayraktar, 46, chairman of Baykar and, in private life, the husband of the president's youngest daughter, Sümeyye, has also been mentioned as a potential candidate. In recent years, the company he runs together with his brother Haluk has become a success story within Turkey's defence sector. Its flagship products include unmanned systems sold worldwide. Domestically, Bayraktar has gained widespread recognition through the Teknofest festival, which showcases Turkey's most significant technological achievements, primarily in the military domain. Teknofest has been held in various Turkish cities since 2018. According to the organisers, its most recent edition in Istanbul attracted more than one million participants. Bayraktar has become the public face of a shift in Turkish policy often described as technonationalism, which combines technological advancement with sovereignty-focused rhetoric. Another factor working in his favour is that his wife is widely regarded as the president's favourite daughter. Operating at the intersection of politics and philanthropy, Sümeyye is linked to numerous public-benefit organisations that provide substantial human and financial resources. Bayraktar himself has been reluctant to comment on speculation about his potential presidential bid.

Another potential contender is Foreign Minister **Hakan Fidan**, aged 57. Before taking up his current post in 2023, he served for many years as the head of Turkey's intelligence and counterintelligence service (MIT). Fidan is a popular politician, regarded by the public as decisive and effective in representing the country on the international stage. His ratings tend to rise during international crises, such as the ongoing conflict in the Gulf. He also enjoys support within the state administration and the security apparatus. However, Fidan's prospects may be hindered by his lack of family ties to the president and by his limited political charisma, which is particularly evident in his interactions with voters. Little is known about his private life. Fidan is most likely of ethnic Kurdish descent, although he has never publicly commented on this matter. Rivals within the party could seek to exploit these rumours.

Other figures mentioned as potential presidential contenders include Berat Albayrak, the husband of the president's eldest daughter, Esra, and a former finance minister who resigned amid controversy and accusations of incompetence; Süleyman Soylu, a former interior minister particularly popular in nationalist circles; and Numan Kurtulmuş, the speaker of parliament. All of them currently remain outside the mainstream of the debate on potential successors. However, their standing could rise sharply should Erdoğan fail to manage the succession in a controlled manner. This would also pose a significant threat to the cohesion of the AKP.

A deferred change

The most likely scenario is that Erdoğan will postpone the succession and stand in the next presidential election himself. The Turkish constitution allows for this: if early elections are called, a president serving a second term is eligible to stand again. AKP politicians have unofficially acknowledged that early elections could take place in the autumn of 2027 (rather than in the spring of 2028), when the Turkish economy is expected to recover and voters will no longer feel the negative effects of fiscal reforms (see: '[Turbulent stabilisation: Turkey's economy under Şimşek's supervision](#)'). However, the ongoing war in the Gulf, which is destabilising the Turkish economy, could disrupt these plans. It is also uncertain whether the AKP will be able to secure the three-fifths majority in parliament required to bring elections forward.

Another scenario would involve adopting a new constitution as part of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process (see: '[One step forward, one step back – a year of the Turkish–Kurdish peace process](#)'), thereby 'resetting' the president's term limits and securing Kurdish support. However, this appears increasingly difficult to achieve, given the slow pace of negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party and the significant risks associated with holding a referendum, which could turn into a plebiscite for or against the government.

The ongoing debate on succession in Turkey highlights the extent to which the state apparatus is subordinated to Erdoğan. In the event of the sudden death or incapacitation of the 72-year-old president, his duties would be assumed – until early elections are called – by Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz, who lacks an independent political base. During this interim period, the country, deprived of a central decision-making authority, would most likely descend into political chaos, with various factions within the party establishment turning against one another.

As Erdoğan's popularity wanes and his physical condition deteriorates, the conflict over succession will increasingly spill into the public domain. However, plans for a managed transfer of power may encounter resistance from a significant portion of Turkish society, which, despite the country's anti-democratic trajectory, remains accustomed to a republican system and political competition. Polls indicate that most AKP voters prefer Fidan as Erdoğan's successor. At the same time, candidates from the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), such as Ankara Mayor Mansur Yavaş and the imprisoned Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, enjoy higher levels of public support nationwide than any of the potential contenders from the AKP.