

## Election of the century in Turkey

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On 14 May Turkey will hold both presidential and parliamentary elections. Seeking to extend its 21-year rule is the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Their main rival is the opposition bloc dominated by the Republican People's Party (CHP), whose leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, is running for president. An opposition victory would mark the beginning of a tumultuous process of re-evaluation and reckoning for the AKP government, while an AKP victory would lead to the petrification of the status quo. The election comes against the backdrop of an economic crisis and social polarisation, as well as frustrations present in the population, which have been exacerbated by the earthquake and growing accusations of authoritarianism in Turkey. According to the polls, the chances of victory for these two groups are very even, making it hard to predict the outcome of the elections. In the current situation, the result of the elections is likely to be contested by the losing side which might lead to public protests. This state of social tensions would be prolonged in the very likely event of run-off of the presidential election (28 May).

### Turkey on the eve of elections

The elections are taking place against the backdrop of a growing crisis and strong social polarisation resulting from the continuous rule of the AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since 2002. This period has seen a profound overhaul of Turkey's political and socio-economic model and a fundamental shift in its position in the world.

For supporters of the ruling camp, the AKP epitomises the strengthening of the state internally and internationally, modernisation and economic development, massive social advancement and expansion of the state's elite, and also an appreciation of tradition (above all Islam and the Ottoman heritage). For opponents (according to polls, also about half of the electorate) and foreign observers, AKP rule – especially after the first decade – is seen as a steady consolidation of authoritarian tendencies. The Turkish government has been criticised for the use of the judiciary to fight the opposition (among other things, the removal of circles hostile to the ruling party in both state and private institutions after the failed putsch in 2016; the imprisonment of Kurdish opposition leaders). Restrictions on freedom of expression (Turkey ranks among the world leaders in terms of the number of imprisoned journalists every year),<sup>1</sup> violations of human rights (as indicated by

<sup>1</sup> 'JCP: Turkey is second worst jailer of journalists after China', *Bianet English*, 16 December 2020, [m.bianet.org](http://m.bianet.org).



numerous ECHR opinions),<sup>2</sup> control over media coverage and the usage of a network of lucrative business and personal connections to build its own financial and political base are also elements of criticism directed towards the ruling party. Additionally, controversy surrounding the state of democracy is part of the growing tensions between Turkey and the West. The objective increase in Turkey's international activity and ambitions generates tensions in its relations with the US and the EU, favouring an increase in the role of Ankara's other partners (including Russia) – all of which create a sense of institutional and civilisational alienation from the West in society.

Currently, the most pressing issue remains the economic crisis in Turkey. Its most basic component is the problem of the state's finances, caused, among other things, by

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the authorities' monetary policy (low interest rates) and the deficiency of foreign exchange reserves in the banking system. This results in an inability to sustain the value of the national currency and high inflation, which reached 85% in 2022 and 50% in March this year. The consequence is a steady increase in the cost of living, mitigated partially by increases in the minimum wage, introduction of subsidies on food products, price caps for rental housing, etc. In both the macroeconomic and social dimensions, the challenge remains to address the effects of the earthquake in south-eastern Turkey, which caused losses estimated at around \$100 billion.

Political polarisation as well as economic and social problems are compounded by identity tensions. In typical Turkish fashion, they focus on: attitudes to the Kemalist tradition and imperial heritage; secularism and Islam; political identity and the place of Turkish nationalism within it; the problems surrounding national minorities; and relations with the West. In the current situation the political debate is becoming more acute especially with regards to the Kurdish issue (the government's accusation of supposed opposition collaboration with the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party – PKK), tensions in nationalist circles (the dispute over how to adapt the Kemalist tradition to the challenges of the present day), and the problem of Syrian refugees (the challenges and costs of integrating nearly four million refugees). The increased importance of identity issues is influenced by the fact that the elections are taking place during the centenary celebrations of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey.

The difficulties and emotions accompanying the jubilee coincide with the fundamental question of the democratic legitimacy of the electoral process in Turkey today. Over the years this has become a highly debated topic particularly in the context of emerging accusations of state authoritarianism and the problem of uncompetitive elections (linked to the authorities' use of the bureaucracy and its media dominance) and it has been raised especially by foreign observers. These concerns have not been dispelled by the lack of evidence of electoral fraud nor the victory of opposition candidates in the 2019 local elections (prestigious centres like Istanbul or Ankara). Additionally, the current election campaign is playing out in the wake of political violence that over the last few weeks has resulted in a series of attacks on opposition group offices.

## Turkey's political system and elections

According to the 2017 amendment of the constitution, which changed Turkey's parliamentary system to that of a super-presidential one, in the upcoming elections citizens will elect both the head of state and the parliament for a five-year term.<sup>3</sup> The most significant prize will be winning the presidency. This has to do with the fact that the office of the president contains the most essential instruments required for running the state administration, allowing influence over the functioning of the country,

<sup>2</sup> *Amnesty International Report 2022/23*, Amnesty International, 2023, [amnesty.org](https://www.amnesty.org).

<sup>3</sup> M. Chudziak, 'Constitutional reform in Turkey: the President takes it all', OSW, 25 January 2017, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

thus effectively reducing the tripartite division of power. The parliament in this structure only complements the role of the president and serves to legitimise the actions of the head of state, however it is not a body required for the governance of the country (for more details see Appendix).

In the outgoing parliament, the ruling coalition consists of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which won 344 seats in the 2018 elections. The opposition is made up of two groups: the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İYİ), with a total of 189 MPs. Alongside them, there is also the so-called Kurdish opposition in the meclis (the Turkish parliament), i.e. the People's Democratic Party (HDP), which won 67 seats in the previous elections.

In order to enter parliament, all parties and coalitions must cross the 7% electoral threshold. Under the current electoral law, votes will be counted using the D'Hondt method, and in the presidential election, one candidate will have to obtain 50% of the vote, making it likely that the president will be elected in a run-off, given the current polling trends (28 May).

## Anatomy of the ruling camp

The ruling camp is heading into the parliamentary elections under the name of the People's Alliance. The bloc comprises four parties and is led by the AKP, the party of President Erdoğan, who has been selected as the uncontested candidate for the coalition in the presidential elections.

The AKP is a conservative-Islamist party that has fundamentally transformed Turkey over the past 20 years. Between 2002 and 2011, it helped democratise and liberalise the authoritarian regime of the Kemalist state and radically modernised the country (especially the provinces). Between 2003 and 2008 it contributed to stabilising the Turkish economy, leading to two-and-a-half-fold economic growth in the time period. During its early years of rule, the AKP – portraying itself as a force bringing Turkey closer to the EU and Western values – received the support of both liberal circles and a broad religious electorate which included the Kurds and other ethnic minorities.

In the second decade of its rule – and especially after the failed coup in 2016 – authoritarian tendencies have intensified within the party and were reflected, among other

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things, by the massive purges of cadres, state institutions and the private sector as part of a crackdown on AKP opponents (50,000 people were arrested and 160,000 lost their jobs on charges of collaborating with the putschists).<sup>4</sup> Along with this, Erdoğan's personal ambitions to become the unchallenged spokesperson of the sovereign will of the nation became the political compass of the ruling team. This development had a negative impact on the transparency of decision-making and led to a further arbitrariness of power. Although the party's identity today is still based on a strong base of conservative Muslims, its electorate has broadened over the years. Today's AKP brings together a predominantly deeply religious and ultranationalist electorate, which is still dominant in the Anatolian provinces, but which is also visible in big cities (from the beginning of its rule until 2019 the AKP ruled within large cities, such as Istanbul and Ankara). In foreign policy, Erdoğan's party has, without much success, attempted to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the West (e.g. conducting EU accession negotiations, seeking recognition of Turkish interests in the Middle East, etc.), which has generated frustration in Ankara and a search for at least tactical alternatives to address the current security and economic cooperation issues. This has resulted in Turkey's rapprochement with Russia, selected Middle Eastern states and China (among others).

<sup>4</sup> A. Ghazal, J. Hanssen, *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle Eastern and North African History*, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 687.

The AKP also has an extensively developed network of business and personal relations connections derived from the new Islamic elites, who have earned considerable capital during its rule. They now account for over 20% of GDP.<sup>5</sup> As a result, a large part of the Turkish economy has become dependent on them providing the financial base and political support for Erdoğan in return. Business circles close to power also control approximately 90% of Turkey's media scene, which gives the AKP the ability to influence news coverage and impose political agendas (in part because of this, the government has managed to avoid wider media criticism of its handling of the aftermath of the recent earthquake).<sup>6</sup>

The other major force within the People's Alliance is the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which has been under the leadership of Devlet Bahçeli, an ultra-nationalist

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who has been leading this party since 1997. The central themes of the party's programme remain centred around absolute loyalty to the Turkish state and nation, fusing Kemalist statism with Islam as a quintessence of Turkishness. Following the announcement of elections scheduled for May this year, two right-wing Islamist parties, the Great Unity Party (BBP) and the New Welfare Party (YRP), joined the ruling AKP-MHP coalition in March. These groupings have miniscule support and are linked to former political parties/movements from which the current AKP originated.

The ruling coalition's formal election campaign did not begin until a month before the elections. The campaign's primary goal is to present the AKP as an instrumental agent responsible over the course of its rule for bringing the country undeniable successes. In support of this, the party in recent weeks, showcased Turkey's first aircraft carrier, its first electric car (the TOGG), it commissioned the first reactor of the new nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, placed Turkey's first satellite in orbit around the Earth, unveiled a prototype of the domestically produced Altay tank, inaugurated the exploitation of Turkish gas deposits in the Black Sea to bring free gas to citizens (for the election months). The government is presenting all this as part of a vision of 'Turkey's Centenary', intended to demonstrate that the country has modernised profoundly due to the leadership and leading role of the AKP. Alongside this, the ruling camp is trying to present an image of itself as a disciplined political formation with no alternative, capable of meeting the challenges of the economic crisis which began in 2018.<sup>7</sup> In the face of the earthquake – and the resulting humanitarian disaster in the east of Turkey – the AKP is presenting itself as the only agent competent not only in dealing with the effects of the disaster but also able to bear the burden of the cost of helping those affected, making credible promises to rebuild cities swiftly.

Although Erdoğan's party is struggling with a loss of votes – resulting from the economic crisis and fatigue with AKP rule – support for the party remains high and still fluctuates between 31.1–42.5%, while support for the president in the first round is hovering around 38.4–42.4%. The MHP can currently count on 5.1–11.1% of the vote amongst the electorate.<sup>8</sup>

## “Table of six” and the rest of the opposition

The alternative to the ruling camp is the opposition known as the National Alliance and referred to in the media as the 'table of six'. It comprises of six parties led by the Republican People's Party (CHP), founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This coalition, after more than a year of discussion and

<sup>5</sup> D. Büyüktanır, 'Public Diplomacy Activities of TUSIAD and MUSIAD During the AK Party Era', Akademik Bakış, 28 March 2018, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> 'Media Freedom In Turkey', Resource Centre on Media Freedom in Europe, 31 January 2019, rcmediafreedom.eu.

<sup>7</sup> M. Chudziak, *Marsz linoskoczka: polityka gospodarcza Turcji w obliczu kryzysu*, OSW, Warszawa 2021, osw.waw.pl.

<sup>8</sup> The statistics were compiled on the basis of surveys by independent polling agencies (Metropol, Orc Araştırma and Aksoy Araştırma) from April this year.

programme tensions, selected a common presidential candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. He is the long-standing leader of the CHP and has become known as a skilled politician, who consolidated a broad opposition front also winning significant sympathy amongst the electorate.

The Republican People's Party is a centrist party, traditionally representing Turkish republicanism – i.e. nationalism, secularism – that postulates social democratic demands and has a strong base in the republican social and economic elite. It also remains the oldest political party in Turkey, currently celebrating its centenary. Since the AKP took power, the CHP has struggled to define its political agenda, limiting itself to discredited slogans of defending the foundational values of the state. However, in the wave of the growing authoritarianism of Erdoğan's rule, the economic crisis and public fatigue with two decades of AKP rule, the CHP under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is undergoing a political metamorphosis.

Its main strengths today are: its dominance on the opposition side of the political scene and its role as the only alternative to AKP rule; its ideological moderation compared to other parties; a willingness to partially address the problems of religious and national minorities, especially the Alevis (around 10% of the country's population) and partly the Kurds (between 15–20% of the country's population). Finally, the party has strong local structures and a steady urban electorate, which allowed its candidates to win the 2019 municipal elections in Istanbul and Ankara.

The economic base of the CHP is primarily the business elite, who have been present in Turkey since the 1950s. These include, the coun-

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try's most powerful Turkish Industry and Business Association (TUSIAD). Although the organisation itself does not officially take sides on the political fissures in the Turkish political scene, it remains highly critical of the AKP's financial policy and its failure to undertake structural reforms in the economy to tame the current economic crisis. In the media, the Turkish opposition remains marginalised, with its message reaching voters mainly through social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook) and a handful of dailies such as 'Cumhuriyet' and 'Sözcü', as well as the TV stations like Halk TV.

The most important parties in the National Alliance – apart from the CHP – include the extreme nationalist İYİ, which split from the MHP in 2017 in protest against the constitutional referendum and Erdoğan's further rule. There are also four other groups in the opposition coalition: the economic-liberal Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), the conservative-Islamic Future Party (GP), the Felicity Party (SP) and the centre-right Democrat Party (DP). The leaders of DEVA and GP are former AKP members who served in ministerial positions (and, in the case of the GP leader, even as prime minister) under Erdoğan. In the upcoming elections, these four groups will enter the electoral race from CHP lists.

Despite large differences in the political backgrounds of these various parties, the National Alliance's manifesto remains relatively simple and clear. It portrays Erdoğan's rule as the root cause of all the nation's problems. As part of the overhaul of Turkey's economy, the coalition proposes that people competent to manage the current crisis be appointed to state positions, and pledges to reconstitute an independent central bank. The opposition also intends to carry out numerous reforms to the political system, including a return to a parliamentary system.<sup>9</sup> Additionally it also signals a desire to lower the electoral threshold from 7% to 3%, an important demand of the small parties belonging to the 'table of six'. In foreign policy, however, the National Alliance largely declares a continuation of the policies pursued by the current government, including maintaining relations with Russia on

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<sup>9</sup> Text of Agreement for a Strengthened Parliamentary System, 28 February 2022, [chp.azureedge.net](http://chp.azureedge.net).

the basis of recognition of the two countries' equal status.<sup>10</sup> However, it also points to the need to correct the direction of Turkey's foreign policy, including improving relations with the EU in order to resume discussions on EU membership, as well as restoring proper relations with the US, including rejoining the F-35 programme.

According to opinion polls, the National Alliance enjoys similar support to that of the People's

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Alliance. Some surveys suggest that the CHP can count on 22.6–30.6% of the vote, while the İYİ alone could win 9.6–15.1%. The remaining four parties of in the National Alliance have a combined support hovering around 2–3%. Their joint presidential candidate in the first round can count on around 42.6–49.3% of the vote.<sup>11</sup>

Outside the structure of the 'table of six', there is also the Kurdish-left opposition known as the Democratic People's Party (HDP), which, due to potentially becoming banned from the Turkish political scene is running in the upcoming elections from the Green Left Party (YSP) electoral lists. It can currently count on around 10% support (its leader has been in custody for more than six years on charges of links to the terrorist PKK). Nevertheless, significant differences between the HDP and the National Alliance remain. Given that the chairs of the HDP have however declared that they will not put forward their own presidential candidate in the election, they are thus informally supporting the candidacy of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The Kurds today are leaning more towards supporting the CHP than the ruling coalition. It is their votes that could prove decisive for the opposition and at the same time determine Erdoğan's defeat.

In the parliamentary elections a total of 26 parties are registered to compete in the upcoming general election, most of which have marginal support of less than 1% and have no chance of crossing the electoral threshold. Typically, these niche parties also define themselves as the opposition, however, they remain outside the united opposition.

An important role might be played out in the presidential election by Muharrem İnce, leader of the Fatherland Party (MP). He was the CHP's presidential candidate in the 2018 elections, and created his own political movement after failing to win the electoral race. He has no real chance of gaining significant amounts of support in the presidential election, however he is still set to receive around 6–9% of the vote, which could take away some of the first-round votes from the current CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu.

## Election stakes and post-election scenarios

Currently, the electoral race remains evenly matched, with the differences in the opinion polls for the competing political blocs and candidates oscillating within statistical error. Should the ruling camp win again, or at least retain the presidency, Erdoğan will reaffirm his absolute dominance of the Turkish political scene while confirming the lack of a viable alternative to his vision of Turkey. In practice, this would entail the strengthening of the current authoritarian tendencies in domestic politics, as well as an increase in assertiveness towards the West in terms of foreign policy. The effect of this scenario would probably lead to the breakdown of the opposition camp. The CHP would lose its prestige as a party capable of forming a broad coalition front and would simultaneously undermine Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's position within this structure.

<sup>10</sup> S. Korkmaz, 'Turkey's Visionary Opposition: A Proposal for New Government and Policymaking Structures', German Marshall Fund of the United States, 29 March 2023, gmfus.org.

<sup>11</sup> The statistics were compiled on the basis of surveys by independent polling agencies (Metropoll, Orc Araştırma and Aksoy Araştırma) from April this year.



On the other hand, a full electoral victory for the opposition would bring with it the prospect of the dismantling of the current political system, an attempt to hold the current leadership to account (probably with strong backlash from the AKP's electorate), and with far-reaching personnel changes in the administration and state structures. Given the constitutional circumstances and the personal experience of the incumbent president, a scenario of cohabitation – with Erdoğan as president and the opposition taking parliament – would make it much more difficult to achieve the opposition's political objectives and to maintain their cohesion in the long term.

Given the evenly matched pre-election polls, the outcome of the election cannot be predetermined at the given moment. At the end of the campaign, the instruments held by the ruling camp (the media and the associated ability to impose a political agenda) may gain in importance. It must be taken into account that the second round of the presidential elections will be boosted by the camp that scores victory in the parliamentary elections. Regardless of the outcome, uncertainty, political and social tension in Turkey are likely to persist until at least 28 May.

Both the stakes of the election and the strong emotions surrounding all sides of the political dispute suggest that formal questioning and street protests regarding the election result by the losing side are to be expected. Such a scenario would likely be seen on both the opposition and the ruling camp sides – analogous to the repeated Istanbul local elections in 2019 which the AKP candidate still finally lost. In an extremely negative outcome where violent post-election protests take place and are followed by a harsh reaction from the state security apparatus, Turkey would stand on the brink of a serious crisis threatening the stability and governability of the entire state, and would stoke further tensions – above all with the West. This scenario would also be a test for the political neutrality of the army, which in the modern history of the Turkish Republic has a tradition of political-military interventions and upheavals (e.g. 1960, 1980, 1997).

## APPENDIX

### The President and Parliament<sup>12</sup>

The President of Turkey acts as both head of government and of the armed forces. His powers include the appointment and dismissal of ministers, the appointment of senior officials in all ministries and the nomination of members of state institutions (i.e. the State Control Council, the General Secretariat of the National Security Council, the Defence Industry Agency, the National Intelligence Organisation). The president has legislative powers and can also issue executive decrees, such as establishing the state budget and declaring a state of emergency for up to six months. The head of state also has a strong influence on the judiciary through the ability to nominate the majority of members of the judiciary's disciplinary body – that is the Council of Judges and Prosecutors – and the judges of the Constitutional Court.

In the Turkish political system, the powers of the parliament (the official name is the Grand National Assembly or meclis for short) consisting of 600 members, are limited. Among other things, the parliament approves the state budget and international agreements, appoints government officials; in practice, though, most of these powers are also held by the president. Laws in the meclis are adopted by a simple majority with a quorum of 200. Bringing an application to the Constitutional Court to revoke a presidential decree requires the support of 20% of the total number of members of the two parties holding the largest number of seats in the meclis, making this procedure effectively impossible under current conditions.

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<sup>12</sup> 'Duties and Powers', Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, [tccb.gov.tr](http://tccb.gov.tr); S. Adar, G. Seufert, *Turkey's Presidential System after Two and a Half Years*, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies, April 2021, [swp-berlin.org](http://swp-berlin.org).