

GENERAL ELECTIONS IN TURKEY



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Introduction

On May 14, 2023, Turkish citizens go to the polls to elect their new president and legislative. Even though Turkish politics have been dominated by the increasing authoritarian rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Recep Tayyip Erdogan since 2002, this year's election appears to be the most unpredictable ballot that modern Turkey has faced. Despite significant efforts undertaken by incumbent President Tayyip Erdogan to solidify his party's power grip, the opposition has managed to establish a competitive platform, that unifies as many as six parties under the Nation Alliance, a political faction led by the Republican People's Party (CHP). The Nation's Alliance common candidate for the Presidency is Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of CHP, who promises to restore parliamentary democracy in Turkey and mend Ankara's ties to its traditional Western allies, reversing Erdogan's course towards autocracy. Twenty years in power, however, have provided Erdogan with the tools to influence the elections and eventually contest their results, putting Turkey's democratic credentials under question. Whether the Nation Alliance's plan to unseat Erdogan will materialize, unprecedentedly impacting Turkey, will be decided on May 14, in what may very well be the most consequential elections of 2023.

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Electoral System in Turkey

As a result of the constitutional changes of 2017, Turkey is currently a presidential republic. The President is the head of state and the head of government, exercising executive power along the Council of Ministers, which he appoints. The President's extended powers include the ability to issue presidential decrees and to veto legislative bills before they become law (subject to parliamentary override)¹. The Grand National Assembly serves as the legislative body, with 600 seats. The judiciary is independent from the Assembly and the executive. The 600 members of the Assembly are elected from party lists in 87 electoral districts, each electing a different number of officials, according to their population. Parties have to obtain at least 7% of the votes² in order to enter the Assembly. The President is directly elected, according to a two-round system, where the top two candidates enter the second round if none obtains 50%+1 of the votes in the first round³.

Parliamentary Elections

Although not the main political race in the upcoming elections, the parliamentary election has its own stake, as a majority in the Assembly remains a political asset even under the current presidential system. The incoming electoral struggle will take place between several electoral alliances, the most relevant ones being the ruling People's Alliance (the conservative, Islamist bloc), the Nation Alliance (the anti-Erdogan, Kemalist alliance) and the Labour and Freedom Alliance (the Leftist bloc). Other alliances and individual parties are polling way below the 7% threshold.

The People's Alliance is led by Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP is a right-wing, populist⁴, conservative party, with neo-Ottomanist tendencies in its assertive, and often unpredictable foreign policy⁵, and an economic interventionist approach⁶. The AKP took power in 2002, on a liberal, pro-European platform, although its shift towards a more conservative, Islamist agenda, has become all the more apparent in the last decade. In this context, the AKP managed Turkey's economy in an interventionist fashion, often opting for unorthodox policies – an approach labeled

¹ Duties and Powers", *Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye*, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/presidency/power/>.

² "Turkey lowers national threshold to 7% with new election law", *Daily Sabah*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/elections/turkey-lowers-national-threshold-to-7-with-new-election-law>.

³ Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye, 1982 (rev. 2017), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Turkey_2017?lang=en.

⁴ Burak Bilgehan Özpek & Nebahat Tanriverdi Yaşar (2018) Populism and foreign policy in Turkey under the AKP rule, *Turkish Studies*, 19:2, 198-216, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14683849.2017.1400912?journalCode=ftur20>.

⁵ Prasanna Aditya, "Neo-Ottomanism' in Turkish foreign policy", *Observer Research Foundation*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/neo-ottomanism-turkish-foreign-policy/>.

⁶ Jonathan Spicer, Marc Jones, Canan Sevgili, "Analysis: Turkey and its markets head for election crossroads", *Reuters*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-its-markets-head-election-crossroads-2023-01-18/>.

“Erdonomics” - that has greatly damaged the Turkish economy⁷. After the constitution changes of 2017 turned Turkey into a presidential republic, Turkey’s foreign policy became all the more unpredictable – balancing between Turkey’s traditional western allies and Russia – as the authority moved from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Presidential Palace. In the upcoming elections, the AKP is supported by three far-right parties: the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the Great Unity Party (BBP) and the New Welfare Party (YRP)⁸.

The Nation Alliance is led by the Kemalist, center-left⁹ Republican People’s Party (CHP), the oldest political party in Turkey. It was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish state. During AKP’s reign, the CHP has been the main opposition party, but due to poor electoral strategy and ideological isolation¹⁰, it had limited tools to contest Erdogan’s domination. The CHP has capitalized on the internal tensions within AKP partners MHP: the CHP has supported several prominent members of MHP that seceded and formed a separate party, the Good Party (IYI), that currently serves as their main alliance partner. Formed in 2017, the more right-leaning IYI shares the CHP’s Kemalist vision and, inherently, its opposition to Erdogan¹¹. Besides these, the Nation Alliance also consists in the Future Party (GP), the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), the Felicity Party (SAADET) and the Democrat Party (DP).

The Labour and Freedom Alliance represents the Turkish left, and is led by the pro-minority Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). The HDP is associated with representing pro-Kurdish interests, and is therefore based on a primarily Kurdish electorate. However, the ruling AKP supports the idea that the HDP is linked with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is considered a terrorist organization in Turkey, the European Union and the United States. These alleged links with PKK brought the HDP under the threat of closure, as the party is currently facing an indictment, supposing that it “committed crimes against the state and the unity of the country and its people”, according to the chief prosecutor of the Supreme Court¹². In order to avoid this threat, the HDP candidates have registered on the lists of their alliance partner, the Party of Greens and the Left Future (YSGP). Other notable members of this coalition are: Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP), Labour Party (EMEP), Labourist Movement Party (EHP), Social Freedom Party (TÖP) and Federation of Socialist Assemblies (SMF)¹³.

⁷ “Erdonomics: The inside story of Turkey’s strange economic system”, *Adamah Media*, February 18, 2022, <https://adamah.media/erdomomics/>.

⁸ Tuba Altunkaya, “Turkey opinion poll tracker: Erdoğan vs Kılıçdaroğlu”, *Euronews*, April 19, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/03/14/turkey-opinion-poll-tracker-erdogan-vs-kilicdaroglu>.

⁹ Wolfram Nordsieck, “Parties and Elections in Europe”, accessed May 8, 2023, <http://parties-and-elections.eu/turkey.html>.

¹⁰ Ali Çarkoğlu, “A New Electoral Victory for the ‘Pro-Islamists’ or the ‘New Centre-Right’? The Justice and Development Party Phenomenon in the July 2007 Parliamentary Elections in Turkey”, *South European Society and Politics*, 12:4, 501-519, October 20, 2009 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13608740701731457>.

¹¹ Wolfram Nordsieck, “Parties and Elections in Europe”, accessed May 8, 2023, <http://parties-and-elections.eu/turkey.html>.

¹² Hamdi Firat Buyuk, “Pro-Kurdish Turkish Party Won’t Defend Itself in Court Closure Case”, *Balkan Insight*, April 6, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/06/pro-kurdish-turkish-party-wont-defend-itself-in-court-closure-case/>.

¹³ “Emek ve Özgürlük İttifakı kuruluyor!”, *evrensel.net* 25 August 2022, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/468837/emek-ve-ozgurluk-ittifaki-kuruluyor>.

Latest polls estimate the People's Alliance between 41% and 48% of the vote, while the Nation Alliance scored between 33.4% and 44.4%. Ultimately, the score of the Labour and Freedom Alliance alternates between 10.8% and 12.2%¹⁴.

Even though the Parliament no longer plays the prominent role in Turkish politics, the parliamentary vote holds an important significance, with more than a parliamentary majority at play. As the AKP and its allies are polling better than the opposition in most surveys, a parliamentary victory would allow Erdogan to pose as the "stability candidate" in an ensuing second round of the presidential election¹⁵.

Presidential Elections

On June 9, 2022, incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced his intention to run again for the presidential seat¹⁶. At the time, he was facing a divided opposition that had not yet settled on a common candidate. It was only in March 2023 that the Nation Alliance selected a candidate, in the shape of Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of CHP¹⁷. Kilicdaroglu also enjoys the support of the pro-minority HDP, a key asset in securing the Kurdish vote¹⁸. Another candidate of significance is Muharrem Ince, the candidate endorsed by CHP back in 2018, who left the party and formed the Homeland Party¹⁹. Politico's Poll of Polls²⁰ places Kilicdaroglu in the lead, with 49%, while Erdogan trails at 45%. Ince is as low as 2%, but his potential as a "kingmaker" still exists, with some polls showing higher chances for the ex-CHP candidate. Projections for the second round, however, show the two main contenders evenly matched at 50%. Latest individual polls all show Kilicdaroglu just above 50% in the first round, securing a swift victory, while Erdogan trails between 5 and 7 digits²¹. That is a worse

¹⁴ Asal Araştırma, May 3 2023, <https://twitter.com/AsalArastirma/status/1653641514080251905>; İvem Araştırma, May 3, 2023, https://twitter.com/ivem_arastirma/status/1653670237424762880; Özdemir Araştırma, May 4, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CrzREbkIYMM/>; AR-G Araştırma, May 5, 2023, <https://twitter.com/ArastirmaG/status/1654470659899097089>; Kamuoyu Analizi, May 7, 2023, <https://twitter.com/KamuoyuAnalizi/status/1655295344085794816>;

Avrasya Anket, May 7, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ok5MmnlZSU8>.

¹⁵ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, "Turkey's Weakened Erdogan Seeks to Engineer Presidential Run-Off", *Balkan insight*, April 7, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/07/turkeys-weakened-erdogan-seeks-to-engineer-presidential-run-off/>.

¹⁶ Selcan Hacaoglu, "Turkey's Erdogan Declares His Bid for President in 2023 Election", *Bloomberg News*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-09/turkey-s-erdogan-declares-his-bid-for-president-in-2023-election?leadSource=verify%20wall>.

¹⁷ Robert Greenall, "Turkey opposition names Kilicdaroglu as joint challenger to Erdogan", *BBC News*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64867467>.

¹⁸ "Turkey's pro-Kurdish party backs Erdogan's rival for president", *Al Jazeera*, April 28, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/28/turkeys-pro-kurdish-party-backs-erdogans-rival-for-president>.

¹⁹ "Former CHP presidential candidate announces another election bid", *Turkish Minute*, March 13, 2023, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2023/03/13/former-chp-presidential-candidate-announce-another-election/>.

²⁰ "Turkey — 2023 presidential and general election", Politico, accessed on May 8, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/#turkey-2023>.

²¹ TAG Araştırma, May 7, 2023, <https://twitter.com/tagarastirma/status/1655256660720377858>,

Avrasya Anket, May 7, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ok5MmnlZSU8>, MAK Danışmanlık, May 7, 2023, <https://twitter.com/malikulat/status/1655291520533123079>.

performance for the incumbent than at the end of April, when a poll estimated a victory in the first round for Erdogan, with scores between 47.5% and 49.1%²².

Recep Tayyip Erdogan is Turkey's current and longest serving ruler, after ascending to power in 2003. Erdogan has been a follower of political Islam since his early years, having been part of Welfare Party, a pro-Islamist party banned in 1998. That same year, while serving as Mayor of Istanbul, Erdogan was sentenced 10 months in prison for reciting a religious poem. He then returned to politics and formed the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to win the elections in 2002. He served as Prime Minister since 2003, and was then elected President in 2014 and remains in power to this day²³. Erdogan played the pro-Western card at the beginning of his reign, supporting Turkey's accession to the EU. However, Turkey's efforts to join the EU have been an ideal pretext to remove the influence of the Army over the Turkish state apparatus. After achieving the withdrawal of the Army from politics, Erdogan and the AKP turned towards more conservative, Islamic policies²⁴.



Figure 1. AKP rally Photograph by Random, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ak_parti_miting3.jpg

²² İvem Araştırma, May 3, 2023, https://twitter.com/ivem_arastirma/status/1653670237424762880?s=20, Sonar, May 3, 2023, <https://twitter.com/ahakanbayrakci/status/1653864312593580032?s=20>, Asal Araştırma, May 3, 2023, <https://twitter.com/AsalArastirma/status/1653641026341416961?s=20>, HBS Araştırma, May 3, 2023, https://twitter.com/Hbs_arastirma/status/1653841763243552775?s=20.

²³ "Recep Tayyip Erdogan | Biography & Facts", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, May 5, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Recep-Tayyip-Erdogan>.

²⁴ Burak Bilgehan Özpek and Nebahat Tanriverdi Yaşar, "Populism and Foreign Policy in Turkey under the AKP Rule," *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 2 (March 15, 2018): 198–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2017.1400912>.

AKP's new manifesto emphasizes economic matters, Considering the terrible economic record of Erdogan's past term, his campaign is naturally focused on restoring economic credibility. The AKP pledged to reduce inflation to single digit levels and, according to the manifesto, "improve the investment further with a structure based on a free-market economy integrated with the world". These changes will take shape under the leadership of Mehmet Simsek, an ethnic Kurd, former finance minister, that Erdogan labelled as well respected by international investors. Simsek eventually refused to rejoin Erdogan's team²⁵. However, the manifesto itself does not mention specific policies signaling a return to orthodoxy²⁶.

Erdogan's future foreign policy will concentrate on building what he defines as an "axis of Turkey", through repairing Ankara's relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria. Regarding the war in Ukraine, Erdogan mentioned that "We can negotiate with both sides in the Russia-Ukraine war, make concrete progress such as the grain corridor and prisoner exchange, and we can still speak of the possibility of peace"²⁷. The manifesto outlines Turkey's plan to create three main strategic belts. The first is focused on transforming Turkey's neighborhood into a belt of peace, stability, and prosperity. The second is centered around establishing formalized continental connections. Turkey aims to develop its "Asia Anew Initiative" launched in 2019, which seeks to strengthen partnerships with the Muslim world "without getting permission from anyone" to strengthen its model partnership with the African continent. Lastly, the third belt involves leading the way in creating a more just global order. The manifesto also outlines the necessity of maintaining a large defense budget to increase Turkey's hard power²⁸. A victory for Erdogan would cement Turkey's path towards authoritarianism, as well as maintain its ambiguity in foreign policy formulation. Turkey will remain a difficult partner for the West, oriented towards a certain kind of "opportunistic neutrality" – matters such as Sweden's accession to NATO, or the status of Syrian refugees, will remain the subject of negotiations with Ankara.

The contender of the united opposition is **Kemal Kilicdaroglu**, the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP). Kilicdaroglu is a former bureaucrat, who built a career in the Turkish administration, eventually becoming the director of the social security authority, the SSK. After retiring in 1999, he pursued a career in politics and joined the CHP. He became a prominent figure of the party, and ran for the mayoral office in Istanbul in 2009, but he was defeated by the AKP candidate²⁹. Personality-wise, he is viewed as lacking Erdogan's charisma, being instead a very calm figure³⁰. In fact, he is an unexpected candidate for the opposition, as other popular figures such

²⁵ Selcan Hacaoglu, Firat Kozok, „Erdogan's Week of Setbacks Worsens as Elections Approach", *Bloomberg News*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-21/erdogan-s-week-of-setbacks-worsens-as-crucial-elections-approach?leadSource=uverify%20wall>.

²⁶ Ece Toksabay, Ebru Tuncay, "Erdogan launches election campaign with pledge to slash Turkey inflation", *Reuters*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-launches-election-campaign-with-pledge-slash-turkey-inflation-2023-04-11/>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Muhittin Ataman, "Right steps for Century of Türkiye: AK Party's election manifesto", *Daily Sabah*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/right-steps-for-century-of-turkiye-ak-partys-election-manifesto>.

²⁹ Gulsen Solaker, Burak Ünveren, "Who is Erdogan challenger Kilicdaroglu?", *Deutsche Welle*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/who-is-erdogan-challenger-kemal-kilicdaroglu/a-64910166>.

³⁰ Ibid.

as the Mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, or the Mayor of Ankara, Mansur Yavaş, were the expected main contenders. An important detail is that Kilicdaroglu has also been publicly endorsed by the pro-Kurdish HDP, a party which has been polling between 8 and 11% of the vote in 2023. HDP support may give Kilicdaroglu the very edge he needs to defeat the incumbent.

Kilicdaroglu's campaign promised a reverse of Erdogan's economic policies, that have badly damaged the Turkish economy, and returning the country to a parliamentary system. It has been reported that Ali Babacan, a former member of AKP that led the Turkish economy under Erdogan, but defected due to differences, will be put in charge of the economic reform. The economic plan of the opposition consists in the reversal of "non-market" practices, such as central bank exchange rate controls, unorthodox monetary policy, loan restrictions and a variety of policies that damaged the market³¹.



Figure 2. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in Gaziantep. Photograph by Leventelyas, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kemal_K%C4%B1%C4%B1%C3%A7dar%C4%9Fflu_in_Gaziantep.jpg

³¹ Orhan Coskun, "Turkish opposition alliance plans to put Babacan in charge of economy -sources", *Reuters*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-opposition-alliance-plans-put-babacan-charge-economy-sources-2023-03-10/>; "Turkey's critical elections", The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/turkey-elections-2023/>.

Most importantly, however, the opposition aims at undoing Erdogan's constitutional changes and return Turkey to a parliamentary system, where the executive power of the President is limited substantially. The opposition presented a draft for a new constitution in November 2022, and remains one of the keystones of their campaign³².

In terms of foreign policy, Kilicdaroglu has clearly stated that he desires to reset Turkey's relations with its traditional Western allies, and to also reinvigorate Turkey's bid to become an EU member. It is unclear, however, how much foreign policy change will Kilicdaroglu's election really bring. One of the questions that could be quickly solved is the accession of Sweden to NATO, as the opposition has made it clear that it will remove Erdogan's veto. Kilicdaroglu's plans to continue Turkey's integration process into the EU seem optimistic. According to two European ambassadors, Kilicdaroglu promised EU diplomats that Turkey will attempt to accomplish all the reforms demanded by the Union, even though the bloc does not accept Turkey as a member. He also promised a visa-liberalization deal with Brussels that would allow entrance for Turkish citizens in the Schengen area within the first three months of his tenure. A Kilicdaroglu government would also attempt to strengthen defense ties with Europe, the UK and Israel, while also normalizing relations with Egypt and Israel³³.

Other foreign policy plans may run into issues. For instance, Kilicdaroglu plans to bring Turkey back into the F-35 program, but that would require Ankara to renounce to its S-400 systems, a purchase supported by Kilicdaroglu. Such a move is highly unlikely, considering the fact that the opposition is not underestimating the importance of a strong relationship with Moscow. For this very reason, it is hard to believe that the opposition plans to bring Turkey in line with the Western sanction regime against Russia³⁴; Kilicdaroglu promised to implement only those sanctions that are adopted at UNSC level³⁵. There are several other aspects that will maintain tensions between the West and Turkey. For instance, the Nation Alliance is in favor of normalizing Turkey's relations with Bashar Al-Assad's regime, as well as of deporting millions of Syrian refugees back to their war-torn country³⁶. The campaign platform also declares that the alliance "will pursue the objectives of protecting the acquired rights of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus," a country only recognized by Turkey that represents one of the main sources of tension between Ankara and the EU. Altering the Montreux

³² Serkan Alan, "Six opposition parties propose new constitution draft for 'strengthened parliamentary system'", *duvaR.english*, November 28, 2022, <https://www.duvaenglish.com/six-opposition-parties-propose-new-constitution-draft-for-strengthened-parliamentary-system-news-61578>.

³³ Ragip Soyulu, "Turkey elections: All you need to know about the opposition's foreign policy", *Middle East Eye*, April 21, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-elections-opposition-foreign-policy-everything-need-know>.

³⁴ Bobby Ghosh, "Turkey's Election Won't Make the West's Dreams Come True", *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/05/03/turkey-s-election-won-t-make-the-west-s-dreams-come-true/4575abda-e972-11ed-869e-986dd5713bc8_story.html.

³⁵ Aydın Sezer, "Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan Rusya mesajları", *Medya Günlüğü*, March 19, 2023, <https://medyagunlugu.com/kilicdaroglundan-rusya-mesajlari/>.

³⁶ Bobby Ghosh, "Turkey's Election Won't Make the West's Dreams Come True", *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/05/03/turkey-s-election-won-t-make-the-west-s-dreams-come-true/4575abda-e972-11ed-869e-986dd5713bc8_story.html.

Convention will remain out of question under Kilicdaroglu's tenure³⁷. It is also of note that the platform does not discuss Turkey's relationship with the United States³⁸.

Turkey's policy towards Russia is also unlikely to change in the event of a change of power in Ankara. The opposition shares Erdogan's current policy to a significant extent. For instance, it has vowed not to close the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, Turkey's first nuclear power plant, operated by Russia. One of the drives is the belief that Russia is more open in sharing technology than the West³⁹. The opposition is also highly content with the current administration's diplomatic success in securing the passage of grain in the Black Sea, and promised to continue playing the role of a mediator. Nonetheless, they recognized that Turkey is overdependent on Russia and that this reality should not be reinforced by future policies. Regarding the war in Ukraine, opposition officials have stated that "Russia needs a respectable defeat and Ukraine needs a considerable victory," which might not include Crimea, and that a future European security architecture should incorporate Russia as well⁴⁰. In other words, the current Turkish policy which aims at balancing between supporting Kyiv and not antagonizing Moscow will be continued by a victorious coalition.



Source: Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (19 January 2020). Photograph by the Presidential Executive Office of Russia (Kremlin.ru), licensed under CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

³⁷ Ragip Soylu, Turkey elections: What is the opposition's Russia policy?“, *Middle East Eye*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-elections-what-opposition-russia-policy>.

³⁸ Steven A. Cook, "What if Kemal Kilicdaroglu Wins Turkey's Election?“, *Foreign Policy*, April 14, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/14/turkey-election-kemal-kilicdaroglu-chp-platform-erdogan/>.

³⁹ "Kılıçdaroğlu: Savaşta Ukrayna'nın yanında yer almamız gerektiğini düşünüyoruz“, *Sol TV*, October 12, 2022, <https://haber.sol.org.tr/haber/kilicdaroglu-savasta-ukraynanin-yaninda-yer-almamiz-gerektigini-dusunuyoruz-351525>.

⁴⁰ Ragip Soylu, Turkey elections: What is the opposition's Russia policy?“, *Middle East Eye*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-elections-what-opposition-russia-policy>.

As the race between Tayyip Erdogan and Kemal Kilicdaroglu appears to be peculiarly tight, various scenarios have been a matter of speculation. All of these revolve around the idea that Erdogan will make full use of the autocratic instruments he has managed to build during his reign. Some speculate that an eventual loss would put Erdogan in a dangerous position, as a vengeful opposition could compromise his political career and even his liberty. In this context, it becomes important to discuss what are Erdogan's tools in decisively influencing the elections. And, most dangerously, if Erdogan cannot ensure victory at the ballots, the question of whether he would give up power peacefully overcomplicates the analyst's calculus.

One of the electoral tactics that Erdogan and the AKP could make full use of is trying to divide the opposition vote. Erdogan has already taken important steps in boosting the chances of a third candidate, Muharrem Ince. Ince was the presidential candidate of the CHP in 2018, when he obtained only 30.6% of the votes. He eventually left the CHP to form his own party, the Homeland Party. Ince stands no chance to win the election, but he can force the presidential race into a run-off, which is more likely to benefit the incumbent rather than Kilicdaroglu: an AKP victory in the parliamentary elections on May 14 would allow Tayyip Erdogan to pose as the "stability" candidate in the second round of the elections⁴¹.

Erosion of democratic institutions in Turkey during Erdogan's tenure has allowed the executive to extend its power over the judiciary⁴². Erdogan purged the judiciary after the 2016 failed military coup, and changed the selection criteria for Supreme Election Council (YSK) judges, to lottery rather than seniority, which increases the chances for young AKP candidates to obtain positions. Even the new chair of the YSK has family connections with President Erdogan. According to a Reuters investigation in 2020, 45% of Turkey's 21,000 judges had three or less years of experience⁴³. In these conditions, it is more likely that any election-related cases will be handled by judges appointed by the AKP. There have been several rulings in favor of the AKP in the recent past. For instance, the YSK allowed several AKP government ministers to continue their ministerial duties despite actively campaigning for parliamentary positions⁴⁴.

Erdogan has not shied away from imprisoning his main political rivals. For instance, since the peace talks between the PKK and the Turkish state have stopped in 2015, many prominent members of the pro-Kurdish HDP, including some holding mayoral positions, have been imprisoned or removed from office⁴⁵. The popular Mayor of Istanbul, member of CHP, Ekrem İmamoğlu, has also been sentenced to jail and

⁴¹ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, "Turkey's Weakened Erdogan Seeks to Engineer Presidential Run-Off", *Balkan Insight*, April 7, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/07/turkeys-weakened-erdogan-seeks-to-engineer-presidential-run-off/>.

⁴² Nate Schenkkan, "Turkey's Elections Won't Be Free or Fair", *Foreign Policy*, May 3, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/03/turkey-elections-erdogan-kilicdaroglu-vote-manipulation-suppression-media/>.

⁴³ "How Turkey's courts turned on Erdogan's foes", *Reuters*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-judges/>.

⁴⁴ "Turkey's election board says ministers don't have to resign to be deputy candidates", *duvaR.english*, April 19, 2023, <https://www.duvaenglish.com/turkeys-election-board-says-ministers-dont-have-to-resign-to-be-deputy-candidates-news-62235>.

⁴⁵ "Turkey: Crackdown on Kurdish Opposition", *Human Rights Watch*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/20/turkey-crackdown-kurdish-opposition>.

banned from politics for “insulting a public official” last December, and is now waiting for a final decision⁴⁶. On April 25, 126 people were arrested, including several top members of the HDP, Kurdish journalists, lawyers and artists. According to the HDP, many of the detained people were set to volunteer as election observers⁴⁷.

These actions have been complemented by other measures designed to silence the voice of the opposition. The traditional broadcast and print media are under the control of the AKP government, which means that the coverage received by opposition narratives has been limited. Under these conditions, it was mainly through social media that the opposition managed to make itself heard⁴⁸. However, in October 2022, the ruling coalition has passed a vague law that criminalizes online “disinformation”. The way it was designed allows the government to block or stop the spread of information promoted by the opposition, as well as other forms of dissent⁴⁹. In order to control the main public narratives, the government banned Twitter for twelve hours, following the February earthquakes, on the grounds that the waves of disinformation must be stopped⁵⁰. Such feats may be replicated in the future, shall the AKP consider it necessary.

It is unclear how successful will these tools and strategies be for Erdogan to maintain power. Nurettin Kalkan, a doctor of Political Science and a senior fellow at the Freedom Research Association, declared for *Balkan Insight* that he was “not sure” if the AKP-MHP government could manipulate the vote in such a measure that could actually flip the result of the vote. The main concerns revolve around the regions hit by the earthquakes, where irregularities could happen. Political scientist Ozgun Emre Koc stated that the situation depends on how well can the opposition replicate its 2019 success in Istanbul. For him, if the opposition and civil groups, “organise the same structure that they created in 2019 nationwide there will be no major problems⁵¹.”

The question of whether Erdogan will accept to relinquish power in case of defeat remains on the table. In fact, Turkish history gives many examples of presidents dying in office or being forcefully removed by the military. Turkey’s presidents used to have behind them either the political influence of the military, or a popular political party. Erdogan’s case, however, is different: he is the only president to have been directly elected by the people, who has a very powerful party to support him, in a context in

⁴⁶ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, “Istanbul Mayor and Erdogan Rival Jailed, Banned from Politics”, *Balkan Insight*, December 14, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/12/14/istanbul-mayor-and-erdogan-rival-jailed-banned-from-politics/>.

⁴⁷ “Turkey detains 126 pro-Kurdish suspects ahead of vote”, *France24*, April 25, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230425-turkey-detains-126-pro-kurdish-suspects-ahead-of-vote>.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Spicer, “Insiders reveal how Erdogan tamed Turkey’s newsrooms”, *Reuters*, August 31, 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-media/>.

⁴⁹ European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission), « Urgent Joint Opinion of the Venice Commission and the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (Dgi) of The Council of Europe on the Draft Amendments to the Penal Code Regarding the Provision on “False or Misleading Information” », 21 October 2022, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2022\)034-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2022)034-e).

⁵⁰ Daren Butler, Orhan Coskun, “Anger over Turkey’s temporary Twitter block during quake rescue”, *Reuters*, February 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/anger-over-turkeys-temporary-twitter-block-during-quake-rescue-2023-02-09/>.

⁵¹ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, “Turkey’s Weakened Erdogan Seeks to Engineer Presidential Run-Off”, *Balkan Insight*, April 7, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/03/turkey-elections-erdogan-kilicdaroglu-vote-manipulation-suppression-media/>.

which the military's political influence is greatly reduced and the judiciary is under his relative control⁵². This puts President Erdogan in a very strong position to refuse the result of the elections and forcefully maintain power, and inherently, that would open the gate to a very dangerous scenario in which the opposition narrowly wins the elections and Erdogan contests it, leading to an unprecedented, unpredictable direct conflict between him and the opposition. It is of note that the Erdogan camp already promotes a "plot" narrative, maintaining that foreign interference aims at destabilizing Turkey by rigging the election, serving as a pretext for a potential contestation of the electoral result.

Ignoring the possibility of a complete victory for AKP and Erdogan, whose impact on Turkish politics would be very limited, leaves us with three relevant scenarios:

1) Erdogan wins the Presidential race, but loses majority in the Assembly

Although such a scenario appears to limit Erdogan's grip on power, it actually leaves him enough room for maneuver. He would retain the possibility of dissolving the parliament at a favorable moment, or exploit the ideological differences within the Nation Alliance to eventually break it. Erdogan's executive power would allow him to override any attempt of the Nation Alliance to challenge his economic or foreign policy⁵³. All in all, such a scenario would mostly have short-term impacts: increased political tensions in Turkey and continued unpredictability in foreign policy.

2) Kilicdaroglu becomes President, but AKP and its allies maintain parliamentary majority

Such a scenario would present Kilicdaroglu with a significant dilemma: his electoral promise of reforming Turkey into a parliamentary democracy would strip him of his only political leverage: expanded executive power. Kilicdaroglu could use this power to override AKP-led initiatives in the Assembly, but would still face difficulties, as he would be confronted with a government, bureaucracy, judiciary and legislature shaped by the past 20 years of AKP rule. Tensions between the AKP-led legislature and the CHP-led executive would hinder progress on much-needed economic reforms, enhancing the possibility for prolonged economic uncertainty and instability. Foreign policy-wise, it is unlikely that Kilicdaroglu would focus his first term on shifting Turkish policy towards the West in significant ways and would concentrate on domestic affairs instead, attempting to undo AKP efforts to dominate Turkish politics. Progress on minor issues, such as withdrawing Erdogan's veto on Sweden's NATO accession remains possible. Ultimately, the priority of the People's Alliance would be to prematurely remove Kilicdaroglu from power and re-install Erdogan as President.

3) Kilicdaroglu wins presidency, CHP-led coalition dominates the Assembly

⁵² Reuben Silverman, "What Happens When a Turkish President Loses an Election? No One Knows.", *Foreign Policy*, April 22, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/22/turkey-presidential-election-erdogan-akp-personality-cults-military-earthquake-economy/>.

⁵³ Andrew Birch, Jessica Leyland, "Political scenarios for Turkey's presidential and general elections", *S&P Global Market Intelligence*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/mi/research-analysis/political-scenarios-for-turkeys-presidential-and-general-elect.html>.

Although this scenario provides the largest possibility for reform, AKP-dominated judiciary and bureaucracy can hinder progress. It is very probable that the CHP replaces the governor of the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey in order to restore monetary policy orthodoxy⁵⁴, provoking painful short-term economic instability. Kilicdaroglu would try to reapproach the European Union and restart accession talks, although tensions with Greece and Cyprus would limit the potential for fruitful discussions. The main lines of Turkish foreign policy will remain untouched, such as keeping a balanced approach towards the war in Ukraine, maintaining good relations with Moscow and attempting to normalize relations with Syria.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that this election will prove to be decisive for the future of Turkey, dictated by the possibility of an economic rebound and the future of its democratic experiment. However, that is not the only reason why the upcoming elections are seen as this year's most important elections in the world: it is redefining Turkey's role as a prominent regional power that concerns Western observers.

Although the West hopes for a significant transformation of Turkish foreign policy in the case of an opposition victory, it is unclear how many changes will the demise of Erdogan bring about. In fact, most main pillars of Turkish foreign policy are agreed upon by the two main political forces. The shifting structural configuration of the international system creates certain strategic imperatives for a Turkish state that aspires to play a prominent role, both in its region and globally. Therefore, it is only natural that Turkey seeks to reaffirm its position in the Middle East, and, more importantly, capitalize on the geopolitical tectonic shocks generated by the re-emergence of a multipolar world – such realities are understood, although in different term, by both camps.

Nonetheless, certain cultural and ideological nuances generate discrepancies between the two camps, that may prove decisive in today's uncertain geopolitical climate. It is these details that are at stake in this struggle between a Kemalist “peace at home, peace in the world” vision and a pan-Islamic, neo-Ottomanist worldview, that mirrors the internal debates about religious matters and secularism. The two most relevant candidates – Tayyip Erdogan and Kemal Kilicdaroglu – are, in this context, the embodiment of these worldviews, in a race that is much too close to call.

⁵⁴ Andrew Birch, Jessica Leyland, “Political scenarios for Turkey's presidential and general elections”, *S&P Global Market Intelligence*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/mi/research-analysis/political-scenarios-for-turkeys-presidential-and-general-elect.html>.

