

Is the wind in Turkey turning in favour of the opposition?

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On 14 May, Turkey faces crucial parliamentary and presidential elections, with the stakes being whether the rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) will continue. Opinion polls show a very close contest between the ruling and opposition parties for both the parliamentary and presidential elections. This analysis will examine the factors that favour each of the two blocs.

Factors favourable to the opposition bloc

First, after more than a year of negotiations, the opposition alliance, known as "The Table of Six" managed to nominate a common presidential candidate - the chairman of the main opposition party - the Republican People's Party (CHP) - Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. This gave the opposition a momentum.

Second, because of his moderate stance on the Kurdish issue, the nomination of Kılıçdaroğlu was welcomed by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), a pro-Kurdish formation that is the second largest opposition group and the third largest in the Turkish Meclis. After a meeting on 22 March 2023 between Kılıçdaroğlu and the two co-chairs of the HDP (by the party statute they must be a man and a woman), [the formation announced that it would not run a presidential candidate](#). This decision will in all likelihood contribute the majority of the votes of the HDP supporters (11-13% of the voters) to go to Kılıçdaroğlu - a key support at a time when the the race between the current president and his main opponent is neck to neck.

[In order to increase its support among Kurdish voters, the CHP has taken a series of steps in the past few years](#). First, the party began talking about public reconciliation, acknowledging the mistakes of state policy on the Kurdish issue and criticizing cases such as the killing of 34 smugglers by mistake in the village of Roboski and others. Second, the CHP formed so called "Eastern Bureau" (Doğu Masası), headed by the party's deputy chairman, Oğuz Kaan Salıcı, and coordinated by Devrim Barış Çelik, which is responsible for all 24 eastern provinces of the country. Third, senior CHP politicians regularly visit the predominantly Kurdish-populated provinces. Fourthly, the formation has managed to persuade influential people among the local tribes (aşiretler), who previously worked with different centre-right parties, to join CHP. Such examples include former AKP MP from Hakkari Rustem Zeydan; former AKP MP Abdullah Atik was elected chairman of the CHP branch in Diyarbakır; and Iskander Ertuş, a leader of the influential local aşiret Ertuşî. In the past, the tribe has declared its allegiance to the True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi), then to the main Kurdish party at the time, and in recent years to the AKP; the leader of the Izol clan in Urfa district, Cengiz Izol, a founding member of the AKP in Urfa and chairman of the AKP party organisation in the city. The lawyer Türkyan Elçi, wife of the murdered Diyarbakır lawyer Tahir Elçi and head of the foundation under his name, [also joined CHP](#). In about a year and a half, the membership of the CHP in these provinces is reported to have increased by between 150-300%, albeit from an extremely low starting point. In June 2022, Rawest, a research agency from Diyarbakır, conducted a survey in Diyarbakır, Mardin,

Urfa and Van provinces. While in 2018 support for the CHP was only 2.7%, today it reaches 9.8%, an almost fourfold increase. Overall, for all parties in the opposition coalition, support in Kurdish areas is around 15-18%. [At the same time, votes for the AKP in the same region dropped from 34.7% to 23.8%.](#)

Thirdly, for the first time, the opposition's high chances translates into a lack of active interest of representatives of big business to participate in the elections as candidates for MPs from the AKP. On 20 March, Mehmet Şimşek, the former deputy prime minister in charge of the economy, announced that he had met with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, but would [not return to active politics](#) due to commitments to international financial institutions he already has. The UK-educated Shimshek is considered a technocrat who is trusted by international investors and it was believed that his return to the team of the Turkish head of state would be a strong signal to both domestic and international audiences that the management of the economy would be entrusted to competent people and that a predictable and orthodox economic policy would be pursued. However, on 6 April, in a television interview, President [R. T. Erdogan announced that Şimşek would be involved in formulating the AKP's economic policy.](#)

Meanwhile, opposition journalist and former CHP MP Barış Yarkadaş stated that there are [twice as many people willing to be CHP candidates this year compared to the 2018 elections.](#) Also, [the opposition in Turkey is spreading the word that there is turmoil among the bureaucracy.](#) Perhaps these reports do not entirely correspond to the truth, and they aim to create an uncertainty among senior officials and to encourage defection to the side of the opposition.

Fourthly, the demographic change is in favor of the opposition. Nearly 61 million Turkish citizens will be eligible to vote in the upcoming elections, according to the Turkish Supreme Election Board (YSK). This is an increase of about 5 million people compared to the 2018 elections. Most polls show that the decisive role will be played by the young and undecided voters, who are currently around 15 percent. "Young people aged 18-25 make up about a third of that 15-point pie," Derya Kömürcü, a Turkish pollster [said for Al-Monitor.](#) According to another pollster, Erdal Akaltun, president of Bupar Research and Consultancy, [eight out of 10 young people will vote for candidates from outside the AKP-led People's Alliance.](#)

Fifth, the electoral reserves of President R. T. Erdoğan seem to be very limited. For the past 20 years, R. T. Erdogan has already been in alliance with various societal groups and by now has exhausted all his options for possible allies. During his first term (2002-2007), Erdogan was allied with liberal intellectuals and other pro-democracy circles due to the pro-European reforms, but these groups were disappointed and pushed away after around 2011-2013. Subsequently, the AKP began a process of reconciliation with the Kurdish movement, but this failed in 2015 and since then the AKP's turn towards Turkish nationalism and an alliance with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) took shape.

To strengthen its conservative base, in recent months the AKP has turned to the Islamic New Welfare Party (Yeniden Refah Partisi). The Turkish media reported that the party has [set 30 conditions to join the AKP-led alliance.](#) Although the party's leader Fatih Erbakan announced on March 20 that he would be an independent presidential candidate, a reversal followed and four days later the party announced that it would join the ruling People's alliance (Cumhur İttifakı).

Fatih Erbakan is the son of the first leader of the Islamist political movement in Turkey and a mentor of R. T. Erdoğan himself, Necmettin Erbakan. The formation enjoys the highest support among Turkey's pro-Islamist parties, excluding AKP, with polling agencies estimating its potential at around 1.5-2% of the vote - percentages that could prove crucial in the current situation where every vote counts. Attracting the New Welfare Party comes at the cost of ceding seats to it and compromising with its more orthodox views on religious issues and the making concessions on the protection of women's rights. This illustrates the difficult situation in which the AKP finds itself, forced for no more than 2% additional support to seek support from some of the most religious factions in Turkish society.

The president also brought in the his coalition the Free Cause Party (Hür Dava Partisi, abbreviated and popularly known as Hürda Par), which has only regional influence and is mainly supported by conservative older Kurds. Its genesis was in the 1990s as the political wing of the Kurdish Hizbullah (no relation to the Lebanese Shiite organisation with the same name), an extreme Sunni organisation that fought against the secular left-wing Kurdistan Workers` Party (PKK). Although it has been accused of being tolerated by the authorities for its activities against the PKK, Hizbullah also turned its guns on state officials until it was dismantled in late 2000.

Until now, the main advantage of the ruling alliance has been its homogeneity. However, with the attraction of the Kurdish Hürda Par, this quality has been somewhat compromised, as many Turkish nationalists find the party's participation in the alliance problematic, both because of its Kurdish character and because of its past links with terrorism. One of President Erdogan's main 'trump cards' against the pro-Kurdish HDP is the accusations against it of links with the PKK, a declared terrorist organisation by Turkey, the US and the EU. Despite attempts to deny this, interaction with Hürda Par puts the government in a similar situation - seeking support from a political party that was linked to terrorism in the 1990s.

The small Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Partisi), a shadow of its former self during the leadership of Bülent Ecevit, also announced support for the electoral alliance led by President Erdoğan, but this caused a shake-up in the formation and three of its [vice-presidents resigned](#).

In spite of the collaboration with these formations, it is noticeable that there are no opportunities for a significant expansion of the coalition supporting President Erdogan.

Sixth, the nationalist vote will be unprecedentedly divided in these elections, with the AKP's ally, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), not even representing the dominant part of it.

Since 2018, the party has supported the AKP and President Erdogan, but has not officially participated in the government. This lead to the result that party has suffer from the negatives of poor government performance. The formation is also experiencing problems in connection with public suspicions of the involvement of people from its leadership in the assassination of an important figure in Turkish ultra-nationalist circles, [the former leader of the so-called "Grey Wolves", Sinan Ates](#), on 30 December 2022 in Ankara. Therefore, the support of the MHP currently gravitates around 7% - the treshhold for entry into the Meclis.

The MHP retains support in the central Anatolian provinces, but the choice of secular nationalists in the bigger cities is the Good Party (İYİ Parti), led by Meral Akşener, which is part

of the opposition alliance “The Table of Six”. Meral Akşener split from MHP in 2017. In this election M. Akshener is competing against two of the other presidential candidates, Muharrem İnce and Sinan Oğan for this electorate of secular relatively better-off urban nationalists. İnce, a polemical and energetic speaker, is popular among young people and receives support of around 5 per cent. Sinan Oğan is also a familiar name in nationalist circles and a former member of the MHP. He received his PhD in Moscow, and has been involved in the establishment of several research centres with nationalist leaning. Behind his candidacy is a coalition including the extreme anti-immigrant Victory Party (Zafer Partisi) of Ümit Özdağ, another well-known name among nationalist intellectual circles.

The fragmentation of the nationalist vote means that even if President Erdoğan adopts moves to mobilise it, this will not automatically guarantee an increase in support for the AKP-MHP alliance.

Seventh, popular mayors of Ankara and Istanbul Mansur Yavaş and Ekrem İmamoğlu are playing an important role in Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's campaign. Both of them participate in rallies where they agitate for the opposition candidate, appear with him in video messages, use their influence on social media. Mansur Yavaş, whose political career started in the nationalist movement in Turkey, has proven himself to be a competent and capable mayor of Ankara. The tenure of the charismatic Ekrem İmamoğlu can also be used as an example of successful opposition governance of the biggest city in Turkey. The mayor of Istanbul is uniquely placed to influence public opinion across the whole Turkey because of the nature of the megalopolis he governs. Istanbul is a hub of emigration from all parts of the country and because of the kinship and trade ties, through the people of the city, the achievements or political messages of the Istanbul mayor can reach the residents of the Black Sea, Central Anatolian, Southern and Southeastern regions of the country. In the event of a success for Kılıçdaroğlu, the two politicians will be appointed vice-presidents - this was the promise Good Party leader Meral Akşener received to return to the ranks of the united opposition.

On the eighth place, as factors that could negatively affect President Erdoğan's chances for re-election, observers most often cite the economic difficulties, the devaluation of the Turkish lira against the leading currencies since 2020 and high inflation, as well as the consequences of the devastating earthquake ([over 50,000 dead, at least 230,000 buildings destroyed or severely damaged](#)). However, the impact of these factors must be assessed in the light of the realities in Turkey. The strong polarisation in Turkish politics means that disappointed voters of the ruling alliance most often do not switch to the opposition, but to the camp of [undecided or disgruntled voters, who may not vote](#). Although dissatisfied with the current state of the economy, many of them prefer to stick with the familiar, fearing that in the event of an opposition victory, the changes would not be more favourable and they might even lose the social benefits they currently have.

Factors favourable to the government

In response to the negative trends in the economy, since late last year and early this year President Erdoğan made moves to bolster his support base.

First, a couple of social measures packages were announced, including an increase of the [minimum pension](#), [minimum wage](#), and [civil servants' pay](#); it was announced that the state would begin construction of [250,000 homes as well as 50,000 workplaces](#); [student's loan amnesties](#); and [an increase in scholarships for the school students](#). At the ceremony marking the start of natural gas extraction from Turkey's Black Sea fields, President Erdogan announced that households would not have to pay natural gas bills in April, [and for one year 25 cubic metres of natural gas per month would be free](#) of charge. The President announced that the Norwegian experience will be used and that the money from natural resources will be used to invest in future generations and their successful start in life. At the moment the authorities have managed to keep the exchange rate stable, in the first months of 2023 the increase in inflation has slowed down, energy prices on world markets are not as high as last year. This means that the country is not entering the election period in the acute phase of economic crisis.

Second, the Turkish leader announced multidimensional support for the victims of the devastating earthquake of 6 February in southern Turkey, [including material assistance and deferment of payments on their debts](#). The President also promised the rubble of the destroyed buildings to be cleared quickly and the [construction of new residential buildings in their place to start immediately](#). Conducting comprehensive polls in the affected areas is difficult, so it is not easy to assess whether the earthquake will bring a radical change in the mood of the people there.

Thirdly, the President Erdoğan resorted to one of his favorite electoral weapons - symbolic ceremonies to inaugurate major infrastructure projects or announce industrial successes, which strengthen the national pride of the Turks. The flagship of the Turkish navy “TCG Anadolu” was commissioned, and at the ceremony President Erdoğan said that it was [the world's first battleship to carry drones](#). The first test flights were carried out by the Turkish unmanned fighter jet "Kizilirmaci", the first serially-produced Turkish electric vehicle TOGG were shown, the first journey was carried out by the Turkish electric locomotive, E500, the first Turkish national surveillance satellite IMECE [was launched into space](#). At a ceremony on 27 April 2023, the first batch of nuclear fuel was delivered to “Akkuyu” Nuclear Power Plant and [nuclear status was given to it](#) – an unprecedented achievement in Turkish history.

Fourthly, the highly contested race also focuses attention on votes from abroad, which also could be decisive. Some 3.3 million Turkish citizens are eligible to vote elsewhere, and the advantage is on the incumbent president's side. In most Western European countries, support for President R. T. Erdoğan is in the range of 50-60%. This is due to the fact that it was during the AKP's rule that voting opportunities for Turks abroad were gradually expanded and the all-encompassing diaspora policies of the Turkish state, aimed at preserving the language, religious and cultural heritage of the Turks abroad, including construction of cultural centers, mosques, sending imams, etc. A somewhat negative factor for the ruling party is that it cannot hold mass public events or rallies with the participation of high-ranking Turkish officials abroad. The main reason for this is the reluctance of the authorities in Western European countries to allow such events after the tensions that were created in the run-up to the referendum on the transition to a presidential republic in 2017.

Fifth, in its campaign, the AKP is relying on several key messages. One of them is the famous slogan that "if it is done, the AKP does it" (Yaparsa, AK Parti yapar!). Second, the message of stability that is possible only under a strong and experienced leader like R. T. Erdoğan and, pointing out the lack of homogeneity of the opposition and recalling the historical fact that in Turkish history no coalition government has completed a full term.

Conclusion

At the moment, the vast majority of opinion polls in Turkey report a lead for the opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and predict that there will be no winner in the first round of the presidential elections, as none of the candidates will get the required 50% + 1 vote, and a second round will be held on 28 May. This is not least due to the votes that the other two contenders in the presidential race, M. Ince and S. Oğan - will attract, although at the moment the trend for Ince is downwards, while the support for Oğan's is relatively modest, but stable.

Four factors, [summarised by Turkish sociologist Burhanettin Duran](#), will be decisive for the candidates' eventual success or failure in the second round:

1. Which of the candidates - R. T. Erdoğan or K. Kılıçdaroğlu - will have more votes in the first round;
2. The results of the parliamentary elections - it is widely believed among the observers that the candidate whose alliance has a relative majority will have an advantage. This candidate will be able to insist that the stability necessitates the parliament and the president to be of one "color". Conversely, the trailing candidate will agitate for a balance between the president and the legislature, insisting that the cohabitation is the better option, rather than concentration of powers, but this is sloppy ground;
3. Which of the two candidates will M. Ince and S. Oğan support;
4. The campaign of the candidates between the two rounds. We can note that due to the short time until the run-off and the tight race between the leading candidates, any mistake by them could have severe consequences.

Opinion polls report that after the alliance of the ruling AKP and their partners from the MHP reached its lowest point in the middle of last year, a recovery trend started, which was also due to the opposition's inability to agree on a common presidential candidate. This regaining of ground lasted until around January, but then peaked and entered a plateau. This was probably also due to the aftermath of the devastating earthquake that struck Turkey on 6 February. Thus, support for President Erdoğan and his People`s Alliance is at around 42-44%, which for the moment represents a glass ceiling for them.

It seems that no such barrier stands in front of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and if he finishes his campaign in a convincing manner, he will have the opportunity to capitalize on the above-mentioned advantages of the opposition.