



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Turkey's Generation Z: A Youth Challenge to Erdoğan

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** More than seven million Turks born around the millennium—Generation Z—will vote in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023. By age group, they will be the next kingmakers. Studies show they remain distant toward politics in general and Erdoğan in particular.

Political scientists call them “Generation Z.” They are young Turks born around the turn of the millennium—technically, those who were born in 1995 and later. They have never known any leader other than Turkey’s Islamist president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who came to power in 2002.

More than seven million of these young people will vote for the first time in presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023. Recent studies show they could prove to be a challenge to Erdoğan’s uninterrupted rule.

Murat Gezici, a pollster, [said](#) young voters are “more environmentally friendly, empathetic, sensitive, and thoughtful” than previous generations. That is not good news for Erdoğan, whose ideology is isolationist, divisive, and based on polarization. Generation Z hit the headlines recently when it “warned” the president that they could be Turkey’s next kingmakers by age group.

When Erdoğan, at the end of June, took to YouTube for a “Meet the Kids” event one day before the annual university entrance exams, young Turks were quick to show their anger—and brave, because they [protested](#) the president of a country that has jailed hundreds of journalists, academics, and politicians for opposing the ruling elite. Thousands blasted Erdoğan, taunting him with unpleasant real-time comments. Nearly 300,000 of them [disliked](#) Erdoğan’s event and only 66,000 “liked” it.

Muharrem İnce, an opposition politician, [said](#) in a tweet: “Kids, don’t ‘dislike’ in masses ... Or they (the government) will switch off the Internet.” Hundreds of thousands of others must have avoided hitting “dislike” for fear of legal proceedings. Disliking the president is a *de facto*, if not *de jure*, offense in Turkey. But Turkish kids are not afraid for the most part, and they do not like politics or politicians. They are a brand new profile in Turkish politics.

Gezici [said](#): “This generation will be a decisive factor in the 2023 elections.” Seven million new voters will surely be a pivotal demographic in an election political scientists expect will end in a very narrow victory for the winner. Young Turks will make up 12% of the electorate in 2023. Surveys have also found that Generation Z has some influence over the way their parents vote.

Another decisive group will be “housewives”—jobless conservative women who traditionally vote for Erdoğan. They will account for 18.5% of the electorate in 2023. That means a third of the electorate will consist of Generation Z and housewives.

“Our research shows both groups remain distant to AKP (Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party),” said Gezici.

Gezici also [found](#) that in the 18-34 age group, more than 60% think AKP’s social, economic, education, and employment policies are unsuccessful.

Recep Güven, an academic studying youth attitudes, says his studies have found that 42.6% of Generation Z are “not interested” in politics. Of those who say they do not have a political view, 47.3% said it is because “they do not like politics,” while 35.4% said “they do not trust politicians.”

What kind of leader does Generation Z want? Güven’s survey found that 35.7% of younger Turks want an “authoritarian” leader; 45.4% would prefer a “nationalist” leader; and 35.5% would vote for a “Kemalist” politician. Kemalism became Turkey’s secular state ideology after the death in 1938 of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. Erdoğan’s Islamism is widely viewed as “counter-Kemalism.”

Konda, another pollster, [found](#) in 2019 that Turkish youths were less likely than the wider population to call themselves “religious conservative.” They were also less likely to fast, pray regularly, or, if female, cover their hair.

All that data is worrying for Erdoğan, particularly at a time when the [unemployment rate](#) of Turkey’s youth (aged 15-24) is at 24.4%. Youth unemployment will rise even higher in the post-coronavirus recession, economists say.

It would be an ironic twist of fate if it turns out to be Generation Z who ousts Erdoğan in 2023—the leader who has stated his aim to be the raising of “conservative, religiously devout” generations.

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