



The Elections in Turkey 2023 – The Beginning of the Post-Erdoğan Era?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey is approaching the centenary of its founding, a significant date not only for its past but also for its future. With the May 14 election approaching, polls and commentators are beginning to discuss the post-Erdoğan era. The upcoming elections are critical and may bring about a historic change in Turkish politics. As things currently stand, no electoral outcome is likely to result in a return to the “golden age” of relations between Israel and Turkey.

On May 14, 2023, general and presidential elections will be held in Turkey. The elections were brought forward by a month to avoid the pilgrimage (Hajj), university entrance exams, and the start of the summer vacation season, which begins in June. May 14 is a symbolic choice, as on that date in 1950 the Democratic Party defeated the Kemalist Party for the first time. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hopes to defeat the Kemalist Party (CHP), or, rather, the alliance led by the Kemalist Party, as he has done consistently for the past two decades.

The vote will be Erdoğan’s most difficult test in his 20 years in power. The results will determine not only who will lead Turkey but how it will be managed, where its economy is headed, and what role it might play in easing the war in Ukraine

and its relations with countries and leaders in the Middle East, the EU, NATO, and the US.

The alliance against Erdoğan includes six member parties and is therefore called the Table of Six. It should be noted that in Turkey there is no tradition of political alliances but rather of strong individual leaders. The change is the result of the transition to a presidential system that requires a 51% majority - none of the candidates can reach such high support numbers. The Supreme Electoral Council has determined that if none of the candidates receives more than 50% of the vote, a repeat presidential election will be held on May 28.

The Table of Six alliance is made up of parties with different political ideologies. Their connection stems mainly from their common ambition to remove Erdoğan from power. That ambition is driven by a need to address Turkey's immediate problems, such as the economic situation (inflation has reached 85%) and the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes in which Turkey lost about 47,000 citizens. In matters of foreign policy, it is likely that the Table of Six will have difficulty reaching decisions. Erdoğan is taking advantage of this, declaring that not only is Kemal Kiliçderoğlu unqualified to lead, but the loose opposition coalition that supports him "cannot rule Turkey". Erdoğan's alliance, by contrast, is much more natural, and consists of parties with a similar political outlook.

Nevertheless, according to the more reliable polls, Kiliçderoğlu is currently leading against Erdoğan, though not by much. Sources in Turkey indicate that 55% of the population did not vote for Erdoğan in previous elections, but this does not mean they will vote for Kiliçderoğlu. It remains to be seen whether Kiliçderoğlu will be able to capture those percentages who did not vote for Erdoğan.

The main issue in these elections is the leaders themselves. The question at hand is whether Turkey will continue Erdoğan's rule after two decades in power or turn the page on a new chapter with a new leader. The strength of 74-year-old Kiliçderoğlu, a retired civil servant who has been called a "serial loser" by many, is that he is neither another Erdoğan nor an anti-Erdoğan. He is not gifted with rhetorical skills and is not charismatic at all, but he is extremely well educated (it is sufficient to mention the question of Erdoğan's diploma from Marmara University), he is considered an honest politician, and he is seen as tolerant and

conciliatory. Kiliçderoğlu is often compared to Bülent Ecevit, the popular former prime minister who is said to have maintained Turkey's reputation as "the most secular Muslim country in the world".

Kiliçderoğlu's opposition allies focus on issues such as the economy, fighting corruption, building a new parliament, strengthening the legal system, abolishing Erdoğan's authoritarianism, returning to diplomatic talks rather than pursuing aggressive political activism, human rights, and more. Erdoğan does have charisma that Kiliçderoğlu lacks, but he creates rifts and divisions (HESAPLAŞMA). Kiliçderoğlu represents the complete opposite: forgiveness and reconciliation (HELALLEŞME), which Turkey needs in order to consolidate all parts of society.

The Table of Six alliance wishes to bring together citizens of all backgrounds, ethnic origins, and political views. According to Kiliçderoğlu, also known as the "Turkish Gandhi", the alliance's supreme goal is to bring prosperity and peace to Turkey. He claims that if the alliance wins the elections, Turkey will become a happier place. It is interesting to note that over the years and especially during the current election campaign, Kiliçderoğlu's rhetoric has become more emotional and popular, which indicates, perhaps, the degree to which Erdoğan's rhetorical style has been widely adopted. Because of this, among other things, Erdoğan's ability to shape and control the current discourse in Turkey is limited and even reduced compared to the past.

The fact that Erdoğan has unlimited power in Turkey and that he relies heavily on campaign promises he might not be able to fulfill, for example to bring inflation back below 10%, continue improving relations with neighboring countries and regional players, and restore the disaster areas at record speed, could create a problem for him. This is one of the reasons why Erdoğan uses the tactic of splitting and dividing Turkish society. Doing so helps him weaken the opposition and undermine its attempt to solve problems and unify society.

Turks largely perceive the elections as free but unfair because the process leading up to the elections is not fair. The AKP government has almost total control over the media, which gives it a great advantage over the opposition. The government uses all means and facilities of the state to increase its chances of winning. The

elections themselves are free, and if the opposition supervises them properly, it will be difficult to fake the results.

Apparently, the AKP government has no interest in falsifying the elections, as it needs international investment to meet the country's economic needs and the phenomenon of election fraud has alienated Turkey from Western markets in the past. If it happens again, it will lead to a decrease in cooperation with Western countries and could even sabotage Turkey's last attempt to enter the EU. However, many interviewed in the Turkish media express a fear of rigged elections. Such a scenario could occur through earthquake survivors. The AKP government organized new temporary housing for the survivors, mainly in western Turkey, in hotels and hostels. The survivors can vote in either those new locations or their original place of residence. There is no guarantee that no one will vote twice.

The February 2023 earthquake is a central issue in the election campaign. While Erdoğan is basing his election campaign on promises to rebuild the devastated districts in an attempt to convince voters that only his government - which was behind a construction boom that drove economic growth - can help restore the areas, the opposition is pointing an accusing finger at him and his government, claiming that the buildings that collapsed were built by contractors who won in fraudulent tenders and that there is no assurance that the new buildings that Erdoğan is promising to build will be any safer.

However, the most important point in the elections is the reduction of Erdoğan's influence and power as the sole leader of Turkey. Even if Erdoğan wins, which seems very likely to this writer, then his power will be dimmed. If he does not win, he will be forced to take the opposition into account and his position as sole ruler will be undermined.

For Israel, both scenarios could be negative. If Erdoğan wins, he will likely continue Ankara's rapprochement with regional players, including Israel. Ankara, which has begun normalization efforts with Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, Syria, and even Greece after the earthquake, may continue its rapprochement efforts even after Erdoğan's election in hopes of easing the economic situation in Turkey.

With regard to Europe, we can expect continuity in the offensive rhetoric, although we could hear a softer voice than before due to the need for foreign investment after the earthquake and the desire to be admitted to the EU. Israel and the world are used to Erdoğan's character, so no big surprises are expected.

If Kılıçderoğlu wins, we may see a more stable Turkey, but this does not mean relations with the West or with Israel will be more smooth though they will probably be calmer and the rhetoric more relaxed. A problem that may surface in the event that Kılıçderoğlu comes to power is his opposition, as he revealed in June 2022, to Erdoğan's policy of rapprochement. Kılıçderoğlu promised that he would oblige Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Greece to take responsibility for measures taken against Turkey in recent years. According to Kılıçderoğlu, "there is a price for turning our citizens into martyrs in international waters".

He also said that as far as Turkey is concerned, the issue of the Mavi Marmara is not closed. A few weeks ago, Kılıçderoğlu said Turkey must always be on Palestine's side, as to do otherwise would be a betrayal of Islam. It is possible that these statements are another example of Kılıçderoğlu's adopting Erdoğan's rhetorical manner, but the higher probability is that as a leader he would continue to side with the Palestinians at the expense of Israel. Israel's interest is to try and restore the relationship with Turkey to the "golden age" that predated the Erdogan era. However, this ambition is not reasonable, and Israel must coordinate its expectations and calculate its steps accordingly.

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