



## **The Secret of Erdoğan's Success**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Despite Turkey's serious economic issues, massive inflation, and currency decline, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected to a third term as president, bringing his total tenure in office to 25 years. Erdoğan narrowly defeated opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the second round on May 28. Numerous factors explain Erdoğan's success, including repressing the opposition, instilling fear, and dispersing economic benefits despite the challenging economic climate. Erdoğan's personality is also a factor, as are social processes in Turkey. Still, none of these elements will be powerful enough to keep him in power if economic reserves continue to diminish.

After the second round of presidential elections in Turkey, when the parliamentary elections had already proven the success of the AKP party, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan defeated opponent Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu with a 52% majority and entered the third decade of his leadership.

It is difficult to put one's finger on a single reason for the continued success of Erdoğan, who once again managed to defeat the polls' predictions. His success depends on multiple factors that are not necessarily related to each other and are indeed not necessarily related to Erdoğan himself.

In order to understand the phenomenon of "Erdoğanism", it is important to recognize processes Turkish society is undergoing. As discussed in BESA Perspective No. 1,904, over the past decade and a half, the Turkish electorate has become very nationalist. The far-right party MHP, Erdoğan's ally, received 10% of

the vote despite the fact that the nationalist votes were split among Erdoğan's party (AKP), MHP, İyi Parti, and others. This is quite a number. Turkish society is going through a period of radicalization based on religious nationalism but also secularism, and we will see the results of this process in a few years.

Other reasons for the success of Erdoğan and his party were discussed in BESA Perspective number 2,194: Erdoğan's and the AKP party's control over the media, social networks, demonstrations, campaigns, and the flow (or otherwise) of budget money, as well as their intimidation of opponents through legal cases and incarceration and use of state resources to appeal to voters while thwarting opponents' attempts to convey their message. In April, for example, Erdoğan received 32 hours of airtime on state television while Kılıçdaroğlu only received 32 minutes. Kılıçdaroğlu was also denied the opportunity to send text messages to citizens while AKP ministers did so freely. This almost total control over access to the public hurt the opposition in general and Kılıçdaroğlu in particular by allowing Erdoğan and the AKP to portray the opposition as collaborators with terrorists and separatists (Kurds) as well as supporters and promoters of the "LGBT agenda", a particularly potent campaign message for Erdoğan.

In his victory speech in the Istanbul district of Üsküdar, Erdoğan claimed that the opposition promotes LGBT rights in a bid to strengthen the bond with the religious-conservative faction in Turkish society. "In our culture," Erdoğan said, "the family is sacred. No one can interfere. We will strangle anyone who dares to touch it." During his election campaign, he claimed that "protecting the institution of the family is our top priority. We cannot agree to the imposition of deviant lifestyles such as LGBT in the name of freedom" and presented the opposition as "pro-LGBT".

This association between the opposition and the "enemies of Turkey" on the inside (according to Erdoğan, every voice for the opposition is an enemy of Turkey) created a dissonance between the "good guys" (Erdoğan's supporters) and the bad guys (his opponents). Erdoğan's ability to present complex issues in black and white helps him to convey his messages very simply for all listeners and puts citizens in the position of voting for "good" or "bad", according to Erdoğan. Erdoğan's verbal and rhetorical ability is a great asset in this regard. It was this talent that got him votes even in regions that had been struck by the earthquake in February 2023. Many of the residents of those areas were persuaded by Erdoğan's speeches in which he claimed that those responsible for below-standard building

construction would be punished while those affected by the disaster would receive housing and employment.

Erdoğan managed to cash in on the earthquakes even before the elections. He increased the minimum wage, promised to cancel mortgage and property tax payments, and was even seen handing out cash to voters on election day. The financial benefits doled out to voters during the campaign and on election day were viewed by analysts who predicted Erdoğan's fall as insufficient to make up for the country's failed economic management and rampant corruption. They were wrong. Millions of Turks who rely on government assistance feared they might lose state benefits if Kılıçdaroğlu came to power - a message Erdoğan's campaign was sure to emphasize.

Another major factor in Erdoğan's success was the support he received (even if not 100%) from the religious sector. The religious-cultural issue, as in Erdoğan's previous election campaigns, was an important driver of votes, but it is not only a religious matter. This elite contingent continues to reward him for the transformation he carried out in Turkey that allowed the religious sector easy access to modernity and paths to economic and political power in the face of the historical anxiety rooted in the loss of public status that they had experienced for decades. Members of this sector have no desire to give up the power they have long enjoyed, so they remain loyal to Erdoğan.

Erdoğan is a populist leader with a great talent for connecting with his voters. He knows how to feed the people collective memories of the disadvantaged eras that preceded him, which were marked by social distress and cultural sacrifices. His ability to translate all this, as well as collective symbols like the head covering and the fight against the Kurds and LGBT people, into political support is a major part of his continued success.

Absurdly, Erdoğan presents himself as the only person who can save Turkish society from the very problems he has created. He takes advantage of existential anxieties (the economy, housing) and security anxieties for which he is responsible. In a state of uncertainty, many people prefer a strong or even authoritarian figure, because such a person's ability to take control allows things to move quickly.

Turkish institutions such as the judiciary, the army, and so on continue to lose independence and be staffed by AKP supporters. The opposition - especially the CHP party, which has proven that even when it joins allies together with different and conflicting ideologies, it cannot win hearts - is now divided and weakened. The incompetence of the confused opposition and lack of a leader of similar stature to Erdoğan were significant factors in the election results.

With that said, if the government's economic reserves run out and financial aid is not provided as it has been so far, Erdoğan's popularity will drop.

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