

Opinion – Turkey’s May Elections Are about Regime Change

Written by Toni Alaranta

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TONI ALARANTA, MAY 4 2023

Turkey is gearing up for its presidential and parliamentary elections, which are set to take place on May 14th. Marking the 100th anniversary year of the Republic, these elections are of great significance, holding both symbolic value and concrete implications for Turkey’s future. The opposition’s primary candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, represents the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) which established the Republic on October 29th, 1923. The CHP leads a coalition of six opposition parties, all of whom are eager to make history by ending President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s 20-year rule and by abolishing the strongly authoritarian-inclined presidential system established in 2018.

Indeed, the elections are a battle between three coalitions. The opposition bloc is an ideologically heterogeneous group. This ‘table of six’ led by CHP includes the small liberal-democratic Democracy and Progress Party (*Deva*) and Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*), as well as the Islamist Felicity Party (*Saadet Parti*) and the ‘soft-Islamist’ Future Party (*Gelecek Parti*), headed by former AKP foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. CHP’s main partner, however, is the nationalist Good Party (*Iyi Parti*), a splinter of the far-right MHP headed by the charismatic nationalist leader Meral Akşener. Akşener is the only female party leader aside from the Kurdish HDP’s dual leadership where the other leader is always a woman.

Regardless of the election outcome, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu must be congratulated for modernizing the CHP, which has traditionally been a nationalist and somewhat elitist party. Under Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP has embraced inclusive rhetoric towards ideologically more conservative circles and taken a role as a bridge-builder. It has also taken a more conciliatory tone towards the Kurds. Another noteworthy achievement is the success in keeping the diverse opposition coalition intact, despite a near-breakup in March 2023 due to a dispute over Kılıçdaroğlu’s nomination for the opposition’s joint presidential candidate. Despite this relatively skilful coalition-building strategy of the opposition, it remains to be seen whether it will be enough to sway the outcome.

In an attempt to gather nationalist and conservative forces against this ‘reform coalition’, Erdoğan has put together what is likely to be the most conservative and Islamist coalition ever in Turkish political history. In addition to Erdoğan’s own Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), the coalition includes the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), a long-time supporter of the regime, led by the veteran far-right leader Devlet Bahçeli, who in recent years has essentially abandoned his own agenda in favor of following the *reis* (leader).

AKP and MHP are now complemented by the Islamist New Welfare Party (*Yeniden Refah*), a small ultra-conservative party led by Fatih Erbakan, the son of Turkey’s long-time political Islamist pioneer Necmettin Erbakan. Erdoğan’s ultra-conservative coalition also includes the Free Cause Party (*Hür Dava Partisi*, Hürda Par), a Kurdish Islamist party with strong linkages to Turkish Hizbullah, a terrorist organization infamous for murdering both left-wing Kurds and Turkish police officers. Notably, Hürda Par’s programme advocates Kurdish-language teaching in public schools and de-centralized governing structure, both anathema to MHP which perceives such aims as Kurdish separatism and a threat to the unitary Turkish state. This quarrelling nationalist-Islamist band is also joined by a small Democratic Left Party (*Democratic Sol Parti*), whose current leadership is blindly throwing their lot with what they

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presume is the winning side.

The third and final election coalition is headed by the Peoples’ Democracy Party (*Halkların Demokrat Partisi*, HDP), the main political party representing the Kurdish population, along with several small left-wing parties. The HDP’s most consequential decision was not to nominate its own presidential candidate and signal its support for Kılıçdaroğlu instead. It is widely agreed that the next president needs the main bulk of Kurdish votes to beat his contender in the highly anticipated second round that would take place on May 28th.

Indeed, these are unprecedented elections. For one, if Erdoğan loses the presidential ballot, he would become the first president to vacate his seat since the establishment of the authoritarian-inclined system of government in 2018. In the 2019 municipal elections, the High Election Board (YSK) cancelled the election victory of the opposition’s Ekrem İmamoğlu in Istanbul following the AKP’s appeals, thus forcing repeat elections. The opposition won with an even larger margin, and Erdoğan ultimately accepted the result of the repeat elections. However, in the forthcoming presidential election, a change in leadership would entail a genuine regime transformation rather than just a new person at the helm as the opposition parties have pledged to restore the parliamentary system. With the race for the presidency expected to be close and none of the four candidates likely to secure over 50% of the vote, the second round is likely to change the game entirely. It is difficult to predict how Erdoğan would respond to a defeat, as there are no historical role models to follow. We can only make educated guesses based on his character and previous actions, which suggest that he would do anything to stay in power.

President Erdoğan’s anticipated insistence on staying at the helm is thus likely to put heavy pressure on key institutions such as the YSK. In this sense, it is a genuine question of to what extent there are still state institutions not directly or indirectly under Erdoğan’s rule. Based on the recent comments by its president, Zühtü Arslan, who in the presence of Erdoğan underscored the court’s independence by stating that the judges fear no one but God, the Constitutional Court seems to be one such institution that functions independently from the current president.

Regardless of his influence on the election institutions, Erdoğan relies on two main strategies in his campaign. First, he highlights his administration’s achievements, such as domestic infrastructure development and Turkey’s increasing prominence in global politics. Second, he and his cabinet, along with pro-government media, accuse Kılıçdaroğlu and the opposition parties of having ties with Turkey’s enemies, including the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Gülen movement, which was held responsible for the 2016 coup attempt. By doing so, Erdoğan positions himself as the only candidate capable of fighting both internal and external threats to Turkey.

While Erdoğan’s campaign focuses on highlighting his administration’s achievements and accusing the opposition of having ties with enemies of the state, Kılıçdaroğlu is breaking many taboos and unspoken public secrets. As a member of Turkey’s large Alevi minority sect (comprising around 15-20% of the population), Kılıçdaroğlu openly acknowledges his background while rejecting identity politics. He emphasizes that what Turkish society needs are good and decent people, regardless of their sect or ethnic background. This message directly opposes the Sunni-majoritarian narrative espoused by Erdoğan and his AKP party, who have alluded that Kılıçdaroğlu’s Alevi background makes him suspicious.

It goes without saying that Turkey’s political future, particularly its subsequent regime type and foreign policy, is of great interest to other states, not least to the country’s NATO allies and the EU member states. In terms of Russia, it is believed that Putin wants to see Erdoğan stay in power and thus secure the current president-centric cooperation between the countries. However, foreign policy is intentionally left out of the opposition bloc’s electoral campaign as it focuses on domestic issues and on re-establishing the parliamentary political system. Erdoğan, on the other hand, mainly aims to depict himself as the sole guarantor of Turkey’s new, allegedly more independent, and influential status in world politics.

From these premises, it is not wrong to assert that the elections serve as a referendum on Erdoğan’s leadership. Both coalitions lack significant ideological coherence, so the determining factor, ultimately, is the acceptance or rejection of Erdoğan. Crucially, however, it is important to note that Erdoğan’s authoritarian regime is bolstered by an

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ideological cadre grounded on a crony capitalist economic model that provides the regime loyalists with powerful material incentives to ensure its continuation.

Overall, the stakes are high in this historic election. In the case of an opposition candidate winning the presidency, will Erdoğan gracefully concede defeat, or will his loyalists resist the outcome? How will the military respond to a contested result or a potential period of domestic uncertainty? If Erdoğan wins, is there any hope for a return to liberal democracy in Turkey? As we look to the future, one thing is certain: we must be prepared for all scenarios, including a turbulent era of transformation.

About the author:

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