



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 5 April 2023

Elections in Turkey: Electoral Alliances and the AKP's Challenges

Unit for Political Studies

Elections in Turkey: Electoral Alliances and the AKP's Challenges

Series: **Situation Assessment**

5 April 2023

Unit for Political Studies

The Unit for Political Studies is the Center's department dedicated to the study of the region's most pressing current affairs. An integral and vital part of the ACRPS' activities, it offers academically rigorous analysis on issues that are relevant and useful to the public, academics and policy-makers of the Arab region and beyond. The Unit for Political Studie draws on the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars based within and outside the ACRPS. It produces three of the Center's publication series: Assessment Report, Policy Analysis, and Case Analysis reports. .

Copyright © 2023 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Electoral Alliances	1
Challenges Facing the AKP	3
1 – The Economy	3
2 – Opposition “Unity”	3
3 – Conservative Cover for the Secular Opposition	3
4 – Kurdish Voters	4
5 – Declining Support for the Ruling Alliance	4
6 – A New Generation of Voters	5
7 – The Challenge of the Second Round	5
8 – The Earthquake	5
9 – The Refugee Question	6
10 – Foreign Relations	6
Conclusion	6

On May 14, Turks will go to the polls to elect a president and 600 members of the National Assembly, the second such polls under the 2017 constitution which transformed the country's parliamentary system to a presidential one. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has ruled since 2002, faces major challenges this time around, especially as opposition forces have agreed on a single candidate to back against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The vote is a major event not just for Turkey but for the region and beyond, given the country's clout and the ways the elections could impact its policies both domestically and internationally.

Table 1: The Election in Numbers

Parliamentary Election	No. 28	Presidential Election	No. 13	Parliamentary Electoral System	D'Hondt method (Proportional Representation)
Voting age	18	Date of Polling	14 May, 2023	Number of Parliamentary Seats	600
Number of Voters	64 million	Number of First-Time Voters	Six Million	Term Length	Five years
Number of Parties	36 ¹	Number of Presidential Candidates	Four	Electoral Threshold	Seven percent

Electoral Alliances

Turkey shifted from a parliamentary to a presidential system after a constitutional referendum in 2017 which slid over the line with 51.4 percent of the vote. This appears to have brought an end to single parties winning elections alone, ushering in an era of electoral alliances. This was the case in June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections. The scenario was repeated in 2019 municipal elections, in which the Nation Alliance drew indirect support from other parties including the Felicity Party and the Kurdish-dominated Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). Building on this success, six opposition parties have formed a bloc for this year's polls known as the Table of Six, as well as reaching an understanding with the PDP.

¹ "YSK: 14 Mayıs seçimlerine 36 siyasi parti katılacak," *BBC News Türkçe*, 11/3/2023, accessed on 4/3/2023, at: <https://bbc.in/3nHF8Cf>

Table 2: 2023 Electoral Alliances, Members and Presidential Candidates

Alliance	People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı)	Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı)	Labour and Freedom Alliance (Emek ve Özgürlük İttifakı)	Ancestral Alliance (Ata İttifakı)	Separate
	Justice and Development Party (AKP)	Republican People's Party (CHP)	Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) (may run under the name Green Left Future Party) ²	Victory Party (ZP)	Homeland Party (Memleket Partisi)
Members	Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)	Good Party (İYİP)	Labour Party (EMEP)	Turkish Alliance Party	
	Great Unity Party (BBP)	Felicity Party (SP)	Labourist Movement Party (EHP)	Justice Party (AP)	
	New Welfare Party (YRP)	Future Party (GP)	Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP)	My Country Party (UP)	
	Free Cause Party (HÜDA PAR)	Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA)	Union of Socialist Forces (SGB)		
		Democrat Party (DP)	Social Freedom Party (TÖP)		
Presidential Candidate	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu		Sinan Oğan	Muharrem İnce

(Compiled by the Political Studies Unit of ACRPS)

Parties with blocs of at least 20 seats in parliament, or which won at least five percent of the vote at previous elections, can automatically put forward a presidential candidate. Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu are standing on this basis. Those who do not meet these criteria can still put forward a candidate if they can present 100,000 voters' signatures to the electoral board. The only two candidates to meet these criteria for the coming polls were 2018 presidential candidate and Homeland Party chief Muharrem İnce, and Sinan Oğan of the extreme nationalist Ata coalition.³

² The PDP announced that it would run under the Green Left Future label as it is facing potential closure after Ankara appeal court prosecutors brought a case against it. The constitutional court had previously refused to delay the case until after the elections, and it is expected to be heard on 11 April.

³ Jaber Omar, "Introducing the Four Candidates for Presidential Elections in Turkey," Al-Arabi Al-Jadid, 31/3/2023, accessed on 3/4/2023, (in Arabic): <https://bit.ly/3GdjV9w>

Challenges Facing the AKP

Erdoğan's party faces several formidable challenges that will determine its fate in the coming polls.

1 – The Economy

Turkey's economy has markedly deteriorated in recent years, with the lira crashing from \$0.55 to \$0.05 over the last decade. Inflation had surged past 80 percent by late 2022, although it pulled back to 55 percent in February. The government is also grappling with the devastation caused by a massive earthquake in early February. Economic woes are likely to play a major role in voters' decisions as they face a cost of living crisis and the collapse of their purchasing power. It is not clear to what extent the electorate's trust has been restored by a government plan to tackle the economic crisis. The government has announced major plans to build affordable housing, raised public sector salaries, hired more civil servants, raised pensions and cancelled debts for students and other vulnerable groups. It has also laid out plans to tackle inflation and rebuild trust in Turkey's economy. In the coming weeks, Erdoğan is set to announce further programmes aimed at restoring public trust in the AKP's economic management.

2 – Opposition “Unity”

For the first time since it took power in 2002, the AKP is facing a unified opposition including groups from across the political spectrum: leftists, nationalists, conservatives and liberals, as well as parties and figures that splintered from AKP itself. All agree on two goals: removing AKP and its leader from power and restoring the parliamentary system. So far, seven parties have agreed on the broad outlines of a programme, and are hoping to finally bring about the change that has eluded them for more than two decades. The opposition gained increased self-confidence following its 2019 municipality elections victory, including in the major municipalities of Ankara and Istanbul. The AKP is aiming to counter this by broadening its own alliance (which currently includes the MHP and the BBP) to bring in the Kurdish-dominated HÜDA PAR and the YRP.⁴

3 – Conservative Cover for the Secular Opposition

Over the past two decades, the AKP has succeeded in winning over the majority of Turkey's conservative voters, pitting them against an opposition widely seen as opposed to religious and conservative mores. However, in recent years, the opposition has managed to change this and drum up more support from the Turkish public. It received a boost when it was joined by the Future

⁴ “İttifaklar genişleme peşinde: Hangi ittifak hangi partiyle görüşüyor?” *NTV*, 13/2023/3/, accessed on 4/2023/3/, at: <https://bit.ly/40VRqoY>



Party (GP), led by former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and the Felicity Party (SP) of Temel Karamollaoğlu, both of them conservatives.

While the AKP has sought to sow doubts about the opposition's credibility, it faces a threat it cannot afford to ignore as the latter gains popularity and allies with forces that give voice to popular concerns. In Turkey's electoral system, a difference of three percent of the vote can make all the difference. This has pushed the AKP into difficult negotiations with the YRP in order to peel off voters from the Felicity Party, which has allied with the secular opposition.⁵

4 – Kurdish Voters

With the exception of Kurdish nationalist parties, AKP used to reap the highest share of Kurdish votes in Turkey. However, Kurds were put off by the party's alliance with the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the 2015 collapse of a two-year Erdoğan-led peace process that had sparked, then dashed, hopes of resolving the Kurdish issue. Yet the opposition proved unable to exploit this failure, largely due to the CHP's inability to find common ground with the Kurdish opposition (particularly the PDP, whose supporters make up some 10 percent of the electorate). However, this situation has changed. There are now signs that the two parties have reached a compromise that would pose a major challenge to the AKP. The latter is now trying to weaken this nascent alliance through various means: associating the PDP with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), listed by Ankara as a terrorist group, and building its own alliance with the Free Cause Party, a small Kurdish Islamist grouping estimated to command between 1.5-2 percent of the vote. The AKP is also putting influential Kurdish figures up for election to parliament in order to improve its score among Kurdish voters.⁶

5 – Declining Support for the Ruling Alliance

Opinion polls indicate that support for the AKP in parliamentary elections has fallen to around a third of voters, down from 49 percent in 2015 polls and 42 percent in 2018 elections. Erdoğan wants to present a carefully selected list of candidates, including 11 ministers who played prominent roles in the government's response to February's earthquake.

The AKP's far-right ally, the MHP, won 16 percent of the vote in 2015 and it currently hovers at around eight percent in opinion polls, placing it close to the electoral threshold, which the ruling alliance lowered last year from 10 to seven percent, precisely to boost the MHP. The main factor in the latter's declining popularity is the rise of the breakaway Good Party, which managed to take a good portion of the MHP's base with it and could win support as much as 12 percent of the vote. The ruling alliance

⁵ Burhanettin Duran, "Kılıçdaroğlu Algisını Yeniden Kurmak," SETA, 14/3/2023, accessed on 4/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3nEn0ZV>

⁶ "Son dakika: HÜDA-Par'dan Cumhuriyetçi Millî Görüş'e destek," Sabah, 11/3/2023, accessed on 4/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/40SSHNA>

also pushed through a new elections law that distributes seats to coalitions within regions rather than across the whole country, a move calculated to favour the MHP.⁷

6 – A New Generation of Voters

About 13 million of Turkey's 64 million voters belong to "Generation Z", meaning they were born in 1997 or later. Some six million will vote for the first time in this year's elections. These young voters, who have never lived under any government except that of Erdoğan and the AKP, have a general desire for change. Their concerns differ from those of older voters, they have grown up with social media and they barely knew Turkey before the massive changes AKP brought after taking power in 2002. The party has made major efforts to reach them, but it has been hard to measure the impact this has had so far on their voting choices, especially given the widespread presence of fake news and misinformation campaigns on social media.

7 – The Challenge of the Second Round

While all sides will be hoping for a first-round victory in the presidential election, that seems unlikely given the number of candidates. Moreover, the results of parliamentary elections, whose results will be announced two weeks prior to a likely second round of presidential polls, will affect the latter's outcome. Two key metrics will be turnout and voter's reactions to the results of the parliamentary election. Some who do not support a particular party may vote in favour of balance, i.e. backing the presidential candidate of the losing side in the parliamentary polls. Conversely, others may seek stability by giving their ballot to the winning side's presidential candidate, even if they did not originally back his colleagues for parliament. It is also worth noting that many voters in Turkey are undecided.

8 – The Earthquake

The earthquake that hit southern and central Turkey on 6 February, which killed some 50,000 people and caused widespread devastation, is likely to have a major impact on May's elections. While opinion polls indicate that the public do not, by and large, blame the government for the disaster, the authorities' response to it has been widely discussed. The opposition has tried to capitalize on this, pointing out the government's shortcomings in the hours and days following the tragedy. For its part, the AKP tried to turn the disaster into an opportunity, announcing a major programme to compensate the victims through direct cash aid or programmes to rebuild lost infrastructure.⁸ The

7 Okan Yücel, "Meclis'te kabul edilen yeni seçim yasası hangi değişiklikleri getiriyor?" *Medyascope*, 1/3/2022, accessed on 4/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3KpRnwa>

8 Evren Balta, "Deprem oy verme tercihlerini değiştirir mi?" *Yetkin Report*, 1/3/2023, accessed on 28/12/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3GbA3IE>



party has not been damaged, but strengthened, by the quake. Victims have received government aid which faltered at first but later turned into a major and successful effort, both in terms of aid and rapid planning for reconstruction.

9 – The Refugee Question

The issue of the many refugees in Turkey has taken a back seat in light of the earthquake, but the opposition has exploited it extensively over the past few years and successfully placed the blame on the AKP. Moreover, opposition parties have succeeded in linking the presence of refugees to the Turkish public's economic hardships. This is likely to become an important electoral issue as the polls approach and the economy continues to deteriorate.

10 – Foreign Relations

Despite the fact Turkey has fixed ties with several of its neighbours in the past two years, the opposition is trying to convince voters that there is a problem in the country's foreign relations, that the AKP is to blame, and that if the opposition reaches power it will mend fences with the United States and the EU in particular, as well as with Turkey's immediate neighbours. This, the opposition argues, will improve trade ties and help boost the average Turk's economic situation.

Conclusion

As elections approach, pollsters are making many claims about the intentions of Turkish voters, despite the doubts that hang over the agendas of polling firms themselves. However, serious polls indicate that the two main camps are neck and neck, each clocking up between 42 - 46 percent support. This makes it hard to predict the outcome. Despite the AKP's decline in popularity for the reasons mentioned above, much will depend on how well the opposition coalition can hold together. It must pass a number of tough tests before polling day arrives, not least the challenge of agreeing on parliamentary lists.