



Turkey's Opposition vs. the AKP

Measuring Messaging

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Supporters of the Republican People's Party (CHP) gather around a bus adorned with an image of its leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu.

Photo: Reuters

The traditional left-right split in Turkish politics has grown muddled in recent years, with parties on both sides of the spectrum joining forces to challenge President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP).^{*} What is more, two new parties have been formed by former AKP senior officials since late 2019, signaling rising opposition to Erdogan. A total of six major parties are thus now vying for power to unseat the Turkish president. Key questions, therefore, involve how these factions will self-identify, and how they will position themselves politically vis-à-vis Erdogan's AKP and its current ally, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP).

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Erdogan's Slipping Fortunes

The AKP, together with the MHP, controls a majority of the seats in the Turkish legislature. Lately, however, polls show a slippage in Erdogan's and his party's popularity. This softening of support began in 2018, when Turkey's economy entered a recession for the first time since the AKP came to power in 2002.

Accordingly, Erdogan's party lost Istanbul, Ankara, and other major Turkish cities to opposing Republican People's Party (CHP) candidates in the 2019 local elections. Furthermore, as of late 2020, Turkey's economy is back in recession because of the coronavirus pandemic. With polls showing Erdogan's numbers sagging even further, opposition blocs see room to grow—at the expense of the AKP.¹ Indeed, former foreign minister and prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu and former finance minister Ali Babacan—previous Erdogan allies—founded, respectively, the Future Party (Gelecek) and the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA). Both Gelecek and DEVA have joined four other key opposition parties—the CHP, Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Good Party (IYI), and Felicity Party (SP, or Saadet)—in their challenge of Erdogan. (For a rundown of parties in Turkey, see the annex.)

Parties in Parliament

The most recent parliamentary elections in Turkey, held in 2018, produced a majority for President Erdogan's governing bloc. Because Gelecek and DEVA were established only within the past year, these parties did not run in 2018. At the moment, Erdogan's AKP has 289 seats in the Turkish parliament, and its ally, the MHP, has 48 seats, giving the pro-Erdogan bloc a 337-seat majority in the 600-member body. As for others, the three biggest opposition parties hold 138 seats (CHP), 56

seats (HDP), and 36 seats (IYI). Collectively, additional parties and independents hold 17 seats. A total of 9 seats are vacant due to a constitutional requirement for deputies to resign if they serve in the cabinet or as city mayors. Another 3 vacancies have resulted from deaths, while court censure against opposition deputies has produced 4 expulsions, leaving those seats empty.²

Currently, two electoral blocs—the Erdogan-linked People's Alliance (consisting of the AKP and MHP) and the opposition Nation's Alliance (CHP and IYI)—are vying for power in Turkey, with such alignments drawn up before elections. The HDP, a pro-Kurdish leftist party, has been left out of a formal alliance but informally supports the Nation's Alliance.

As new parties form with hopes of peeling away Erdogan voters, and with opposition having risen since the defeat of the president's faction in the 2019 local elections, the question remains of whether Erdogan's governing coalition can maintain its majority in the next parliamentary vote, scheduled for 2023 alongside the presidential vote. Some local reports suggest that Erdogan may opt for snap elections once the Turkish economy bounces back from its pandemic-related recession. Economies tend to grow strongly after suffering shrinkage attributable to natural disasters; such growth would help Erdogan both restore his legislative majority and stem the rising opposition.³

Will opposition factions manage to peel enough Erdogan voters away, whether or not early elections in Turkey are in the offing? That depends on (1) how the parties position themselves in relation to Erdogan's governing bloc, and (2) their stance on national and global issues.

Remembering the Past

This paper seeks to examine the political identities of six opposition parties (CHP, HDP, IYI, Saadet, Gelecek, and DEVA) against Erdogan's AKP and its

ally, the MHP, through an analysis of all eight parties' voter outreach through Twitter. Estimated figures show Turkish citizens to be among the highest Twitter users worldwide, at 12.7 million, ranking sixth in raw numbers behind only the United States, Japan, India, Brazil, and Britain. More specifically, Twitter is often used in Turkey for social and political debate, and therefore is an especially useful platform for gaining insight into Turkish politics, including how political parties project themselves to the electorate.

The last week of May 2020 witnessed four key Turkish anniversary commemorations: of the coup on May 27, 1960; the start of the Gezi Park rallies against Erdogan on May 28, 2013; the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul on May 29, 1453; and the *Mavi Marmara* clash with Israel on May 31, 2010. Thus, that timeframe is a useful analytical window for defining the views of Turkey's eight political parties, especially as they relate to issues such as governance, opposition to government, globalism, nationalism, Turkey's place in the world, and the country's and its citizens' ability to effect change.

1960 coup (May 27). Turkey experienced a number of coups in the twentieth century, starting with the 1960 military takeover against then prime minister Adnan Menderes and his Democrat Party (DP), an event that culminated in Menderes's execution. The coup saw the reinstatement of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's CHP to power in Ankara. This year's social media coverage of the commemoration gave political parties a chance to highlight, among other things, a victimization narrative that linked the historical coup to the later attempted coup in 2016, thereby casting Erdogan as the victim in need of sympathy.

Gezi Park rallies (May 28). The Gezi Park rallies have in recent years been cited as a turning point for popular resistance against Erdogan and his AKP. Broad swaths of the population united against government plans to build a shopping mall in a green space within Istanbul's central Taksim Square, and tensions escalated when police used tear gas and other violence on environmental protestors sitting-in at the park. What began as an environmental protest turned into a united front against attacks on Turkey's

traditional secular rule of law, as well as values such as free speech and gender equality.

Starting on May 28, the protests gradually intensified, spreading from Taksim Square to more than seventy Turkish cities, where they persisted through June. Seven protestors were killed during the ensuing police crackdown; in the years since, no police officers have been brought to justice for the killings.

Tweeting about the Gezi Park rallies allows Turkey's political parties to employ either victimization- or agency-centered rhetoric before a national audience. Whereas highlighting ways to incorporate changes implies agency, solely lamenting the losses—without continued action or rituals of commemoration—can fuel the victimization narrative.

Conquest of Istanbul (May 29). In late spring of 1453, Ottoman sultan Mehmet II captured Istanbul from the Byzantine Empire. The anniversary of Istanbul's conquest, or "Fetih," has been widely celebrated in modern Turkey since at least the mid-twentieth century. Yet this year's commemoration, marking the 567th anniversary, saw Turkey's political parties distinguish their respective identities by defining how they relate to Turkey's imperial past. An immense volume of rhetoric around Fetih reflects a sentiment one might call "Make Turkey Great Again"—that is, the notion that modern Turkey would do well to remember and perhaps even return to its grander, more Islamic past (while exerting a grander, imperial foreign policy, of course). Fetih celebrations also have the potential to inspire narratives of victimization centered on the memory of the imperialist partitioning of Turkey during the death throes of the Ottoman Empire.

***Mavi Marmara* clash with Israel (May 31).** A decade ago, on the last day of May, members of the Israeli navy boarded an Istanbul-origin flotilla delivering aid in defiance of an Israel- and Egypt-imposed blockade of the Gaza Strip. Ten Turkish citizens, including a Turkish-American dual citizen, were killed during the Israeli raid, prompting the lowest point in Turkey-Israel relations in decades. The *Mavi Marmara* anniversary is an opportunity for Turkey's

parties not only to proclaim nationalistic sentiments of grandeur and superiority with regard to Israel, but also to further the notion of victimization by portraying an attack by non-Muslims on Muslims and Turks.

Methodology

This paper’s assessment of political dynamics in Turkey was conducted on the following methodological bases.

Two Axes

Analysis of this paper’s key themes—opposition to the government, the role of globalism, nationalism, Turkey’s place in the world and relationship to its past, and Turkey’s and Turkish citizens’ ability to bring about change—can be mapped along two broad axes, with the goal of defining the political identity of Turkish parties.

Axis 1: Victimization vs. agency. Victimization rhetoric, measured on the vertical axis, has been widespread in Turkey historically, especially when it comes to the country’s often-contentious relationship with Europe and the West.

Conspiracy theories abound in Turkey, usually to the point of denying Turkish citizens’ agency in global politics—and sometimes even in national politics. According to this view, an “invisible hand” of sorts works to manipulate the country and its people like puppets. Erdogan himself engages in rhetoric that amplifies the notion of Turkey as a victim on the world stage. He has done so to his domestic advantage, although not as effectively during economic downturns such as the current one. In this paper’s schema, each faction was awarded up to five points per event for the highest level of victimization messaging and up to five points (expressed negatively in the graphics) for the highest

level of agency messaging. Given the total of four events along the vertical axis, each party could score up to twenty points for victimization vs. agency.

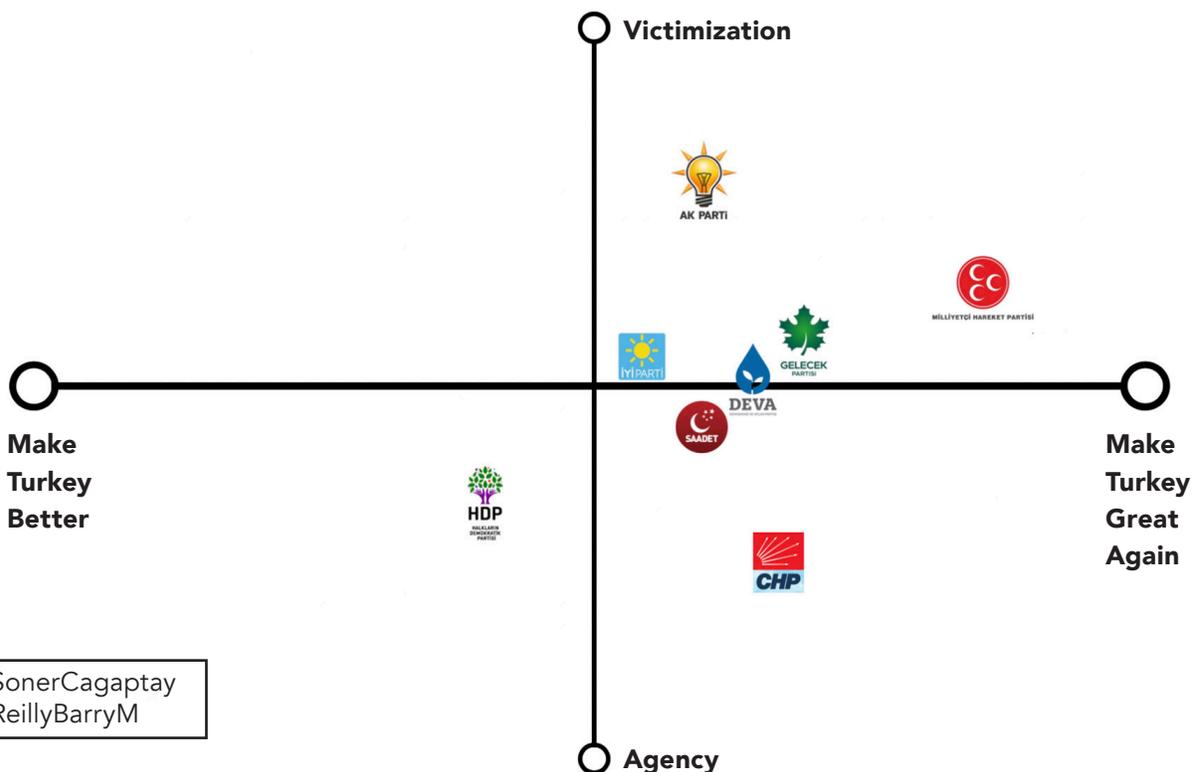
Axis 2: “Make Turkey Great Again” vs. “Make Turkey Better.” The Turkish president, together with other world leaders such as Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, pioneered the brand of nativist populism that has grown so pervasive in the twenty-first century. At home, this populist trend has only gained currency as Erdogan’s tenure has progressed.

The horizontal axis measures degrees of nationalist-populist rhetoric calling for Turkey’s return to a glorified Ottoman past. Parties that fall closer to “Make Turkey Better” either (1) do not employ language that yearns for imperial glory, effectively interpreting Turkey’s more recent Kemalist era as “greater” than the Ottoman years; or (2) simply focus more on the future than on the past. As on the vertical axis, five points were available per event, based on rhetoric focused on returning Turkey to Ottoman glory vs. embracing the country as it is or else looking to the future. Each party could thus score a total of 10 points for the measure of its “Make Turkey Great Again” vs. “Make Turkey Better” rhetoric (10 as opposed to 20 because only two events—Fetih and *Mavi Marmara*—rather than four are measured; see chart).

Analysis

The analytical system used in this study produces a graph with eight plot points representing the Turkish political parties. They range from the AKP and the MHP in the upper-right quadrant, where the “Make Turkey Great Again” and victimization axes converge most strongly, to the bottom-left, which contains only one party—the HDP—characterized by non-nationalist rhetoric and greater agency in tackling political and economic challenges.

HOW TURKISH PARTIES TWEET ABOUT THE PAST*



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*Based on an analysis of tweets from May 2020 commemorations—of the 1960 coup (May 27); the start of the Gezi Park demonstrations (May 28); the conquest of Istanbul (May 29); the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul (May 30); and the *Mavi Marmara* clash (May 31).

VICTIMIZATION VS. AGENCY

| | AKP | MHP | IYI | CHP | HDP | Gelecek | DEVA | Saadet |
|---------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|---------|------|--------|
| 1960 coup | 5 | -1 | 2 | -2 | 1 | 3 | -1 | -1 |
| Gezi | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Fetih | 1 | 4 | -1 | -5 | -3 | 4 | 1 | -1 |
| <i>Mavi Marmara</i> | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | -5 | 0 | 0 |

Key: 5 = Highest victimization; 0 = No tweets; -5 = Highest agency

MAKING TURKEY GREAT AGAIN VS. MAKING TURKEY BETTER

| | AKP | MHP | IYI | CHP | HDP | Gelecek | DEVA | Saadet |
|---------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|---------|------|--------|
| Fetih | 2 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| <i>Mavi Marmara</i> | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |

Key: 5 = Make Turkey great; 0 = No tweets; -5 = Turkey ok as is/looking to future

Nationalist-Populist Allies

Two parties stand out in the upper-right quadrant of the graph: Erdogan’s AKP and its ally, the MHP—which together make up the People’s Alliance in the Turkish parliament, often united by nationalist, populist, and conservative rhetoric.

AKP. Although parties across the board condemn the coup of May 27, 1960, the AKP—on the coup’s sixtieth anniversary—employed a high degree of victimization rhetoric compared to other parties. The AKP’s official Twitter account strongly linked the 1960 coup to the attempted putsch in 2016; this aligns with Erdogan’s rhetoric, giving the impression that his party is constantly under threat of attack. The party remained silent, however, on the anniversary of the 2013 Gezi Park rallies. This was unsurprising considering that Erdogan’s leadership was a central target of the protestors.

On the anniversary of Istanbul’s conquest—Fetih—the AKP promoted some of the mega-construction projects currently sponsored by Erdogan, garnering points for “Make Turkey Great Again.” More important, the AKP boosted Erdogan’s call in late May to convert the Hagia Sophia site, which Atatürk designated as a museum in 1934, into a mosque. The decision was realized on July 10, 2020, and promoted with the hashtag #AyasofyadaFetih. The conversion further connected the AKP’s Fetih celebration and construction projects to the memory of Istanbul’s conquest, as is evident in Erdogan’s messaging on the use of Hagia Sophia as a museum: “How dare they, the [Kemalist] secularists, deny us, pious Muslims, the ‘liberty’ to pray at Hagia Sophia?”⁴ Overall, the AKP’s Twitter account depicts a contemporary victimization narrative, whether the issue at hand is in the past or present.

MHP. For the AKP, Turkey may still be great under its current leadership, without a complete return to its Ottoman past. For the MHP, however, returning to the Ottoman past is often a sine qua non for Turkey’s greatness. Led by Devlet Bahçeli, this ultranationalist

faction falls in the upper-right quadrant of the graph, but stands out for its extreme position on “Make Turkey Great Again”—even when compared to Erdogan’s AKP.

Simultaneously, as depicted in the graph, the MHP tends to portray itself as a victim of those who attempt to describe Istanbul’s conquest as “persecution.”⁵ Indeed, the MHP hails the late medieval Fetih as an undeniable victory over the West. By its sheer number of tweets concerning Fetih alone, the MHP is much more preoccupied with returning to Turkey’s grand past than is the AKP.



“Those who say that persecution started in 1453, and those who aim to set Istanbul on fire and play with it, those who set up ambushes centered on Istanbul with plans [for] humiliation, will be paralyzed in their own image. Muslim Turkish children will defeat children of the Byzantines at every front and level.”

Statement from MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, posted on the party’s official Twitter account, @MHP_Bilgi, May 29, 2020.

Moderates Seeking a Place at the Table

Toward the center of the graph, four parties are clustered almost together: Saadet, Gelecek, IYI, and DEVA.

Saadet. The Saadet faction tweeted sparingly with regard to the four events under discussion, often using nonchauvinistic language when it did. For instance, instead of framing Istanbul's conquest with nativist language, as did MHP chair Bahçeli, Saadet's official Twitter account merely remarked as follows: "Conquest; it is spirit, meaning, love and perseverance."⁶ Saadet's temperate approach to speaking out on these events and avoidance of overtly nativist or nationalistic sentiment move it toward the middle of the graph. Similarly, the party commemorated the 1960 coup by expressing hopes that Turkey will operate fully according to the rule of law,⁷ and by remembering politicians who were executed after the coup—a far cry from the AKP and MHP's victimization rhetoric surrounding the coup.

Saadet's center-oriented position is among the most novel and interesting findings of this study. The party formally descends from Turkey's nativist and anti-Western school of political Islam—as embodied in the politically Islamist National Outlook network active in the twentieth century. When Erdogan formally broke from this grouping in 2001 to

establish the AKP, many expected his faction would moderate, thereby moving away from the National Outlook philosophy. Ironically, nearly two decades later, it appears that the original Saadet—not the “moderating AKP”—has abandoned many nativist elements of the National Outlook.

Gelecek. The Gelecek party was established in 2019, whereas IYI and DEVA were formed in 2017 and 2020, respectively. Given their newness to the Turkish scene, the blocs have been compelled to differentiate themselves and pursue novel communications strategies through social media in order to attract potential voters.

In this vein, former AKP prime minister Davutoğlu, founder of Gelecek, took a rather different approach in talking about Fetih. His messaging on Istanbul's conquest underlined a nationalist theme, while highlighting for a more liberal audience aspects of Ottoman rule that were perceived to be tolerant. Such an approach addresses Davutoğlu's need to attract both traditional AKP and non-AKP voters.

Gelecek has also innovatively used language on its social media platforms to differentiate between Fetih (the conquest) and “İşgal” (the occupation). For instance, the party's official Twitter account (@GelecekPartiTR) posted the following on May 29, 2020: “Happy 567th anniversary #IstanbulConquest.



Credit:

Twitter post by @GelecekPartiTR,
May 29, 2020, 9:28 a.m.,
<https://twitter.com/GelecekParti-TR/status/1266360827071746049>.

For those who do not know, those who forget, and those who are confused: What is conquest? What is occupation?”⁸ The eleven-tweet thread continued, highlighting misunderstandings of and explaining the differences between the two, as in this post: “What is conquest: It is regulating and protecting the religious law of people with different beliefs. What is occupation: It is setting up inquisition, changing religion by force, and killing those who do not convert.”⁹ The series added that “Conquest is to embrace the city you rule in every aspect. Occupation is to demolish all the temples and demolish the city architecture.”¹⁰

Gelecek tallied some “Make Turkey Great Again” points for highlighting the momentous nature of Istanbul’s conquest. Similarly, the party collected some victimization points for portraying the legacy of the conquest as misremembered by those “trying to stain its memory by calling it occupation.”¹¹

Furthermore, Gelecek stands out as the only party in 2020 to recognize the *Mavi Marmara* clash of 2010. Remembering the event as an attack against Muslims and Turks garnered the party a fair number of victimization points compared to its peers. That the faction was alone in discussing the incident is not surprising, given that Davutoglu was then Turkey’s foreign minister and supported the flotilla attempt to break down the Israeli blockade of Gaza. Other parties seem to find no benefit in discussing the *Mavi Marmara* clash.

IYI and DEVA. These parties, together with Saadet, are clustered nearly together; indeed, they commented similarly on the historic events of the last week of May. All condemned the 1960 coup and in some way recognized the anniversary of Istanbul’s conquest, but gave no attention to either the Gezi Park rallies or the *Mavi Marmara* clash. For example, DEVA retweeted its founder and leader Babacan, who, in recognition of the Fetih, invoked the “tolerant, respectful, and intelligent administration” of Mehmet II;¹² and IYI posted a noncontroversial quote by Sultan Mehmet II reading, “Either I will take Istanbul or Istanbul me,” noting nothing else on the subject.¹³

Opposite-Side Outliers: Eschewing the Ottoman Past

The outliers in the bottom-right and bottom-left quadrants of the graph are, respectively, the CHP—Turkey’s first political party and its main opposition secularist-leftist bloc—and the liberal Kurdish-nationalist alliance HDP. Despite their similarity as outliers, these two parties differ in their approach to commemorating Turkey’s historical events.

CHP. The CHP combines agency with “Make Turkey Great Again” rhetoric, landing it in the bottom-right quadrant of the graph. The party has incorporated Istanbul’s conquest into its own image, retweeting party leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, who said, “I gratefully commemorate Mehmet the Conqueror, who left this ancient city to us, and Gazi Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who saved Istanbul from occupation.”¹⁴ In making this connection, the party assumes agency by tying Turkey’s sovereignty not to Fetih or the defunct Ottomans, who captured it from the Byzantines, but to Ataturk. As the CHP’s founder, Ataturk upheld Turkish sovereignty over the land following the post–World War I collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Connecting the sultan’s conquest to Ataturk’s legacy thus focuses the reader on an earlier twentieth-century, more secular version of Turkey—as opposed to the Muslim imperial conquest of six centuries ago. Despite its points for “Make Turkey Great Again,” the CHP’s stance on *how* the country should achieve that greatness differs distinctly from that of the AKP and MHP.

HDP. Positioned in the bottom-left quadrant, the HDP distinguishes itself with language advocating a better future, echoing the principles promoted at the Gezi Park rallies, rather than devoting attention to glorifying of past victories. In fact, the HDP is the only party that did not tweet in commemoration of Istanbul’s conquest, signaling a more liberal bent focused on the present and the future, and distancing itself from any rhetoric calling to “Make Turkey Great Again.” Indeed, the HDP references the Gezi Park rallies to unite all Turkish society against political bribes,

judicial corruption, toxic language, and a so-called blind regime. It thus earns points for agency by suggesting policies for change, a stance diametrically opposed to strategies employed by the AKP and MHP to attract voters.

Conclusion

In establishing their relationship to Turkey's past, the political parties discussed in this paper make intentional choices in their use of language—particularly, when using social media. Turning again to the graph depicting the findings, one discovers that parties in the top-right quadrant are directly aligned with Turkey's most established conservative parties whose leaders often explain history as the work of an invisible hand operating against Turks and Muslims. In direct contrast is the party in the bottom-left—the HDP—investing more agency in its outreach to the populace.

In the 2023 general election, Generation Z, Turkey's youngest voting cohort (b. ca. 1996–), along with Generation Y (b. ca. 1981–1996), will hold much power in determining the outcome, assuming the vote is free and fair.¹⁵ Citizens ages fifteen to thirty, who grew up under Erdogan's socially conservative rule, currently make up nearly a quarter of the country's population, having accounted for almost 20 million voters in 2018. Surveys show this demographic to have an overwhelming commitment to liberal democratic values, perhaps in reaction to the president's governance style.¹⁶ And in seeking to engage these voters, opposition parties will employ social media strategies that mirror their larger electoral approach and attempts at pushback against Erdogan. This effort gains further meaning, as well

as complication, given new repressive measures authorized by the president, including the restrictive social media law that went into effect October 1, 2020.¹⁷

The Twitter activity of Turkish political parties reveals how they cultivate their respective images when commemorating Turkey's recent and Ottoman past, as well as how new parties take shape. Historic events are thus a useful barometer with which to define how Turkish parties view issues such as opposition to globalism, nationalism, Turkey's place in the world, Turkey's relationship to its past, and the country and its citizens' ability to effect change. A comparative analysis of how the eight main Turkish political parties relate to voters, taking into account their messaging on Twitter, has provided both a snapshot of their strategies in potential snap elections and a useful way to assess their public outreach.

At this stage, with the exception of the MHP, all key Turkish factions appear to have positioned themselves to the left of Erdogan's AKP, suggesting a centrist trend in the country's politics. Since 2002, Erdogan has entered into a number of alliances with various constituencies, ranging from liberals to Kurdish nationalists to right-wing Turkish nationalists, to navigate internal and external challenges. Each of these alliances has shaped Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy. With Erdogan's popularity sliding at home due to the economic crisis, and with a new U.S. administration taking office in Washington, will Erdogan shape-shift again, embracing a more pluralistic agenda—if tactically—to maintain his rule and appeal to global audiences? Or, alternatively, will he double down on his current religious-nationalist agenda? Barring a major political shift by Turkey's president, this study's current findings point to the latter scenario. ❖

ANNEX: Turkish Political Parties in Brief

Following is a short description of each of the main Turkish political parties (arranged alphabetically).



Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA)

Ali Babacan, Erdogan's finance minister from 2002 to 2007 and often seen as the wunderkind behind the country's economic miracle over that decade, formed Turkey's newest party, DEVA, in March 2020. Babacan has espoused a liberal platform not unlike that of the AKP in its founding years. DEVA has one representative in Turkey's parliament—a defector from the AKP bloc.



Felicity Party (SP, or Saadet)

The SP (often known by its Turkish name, Saadet) is the latest incarnation in a line of Turkish political Islamist factions. Saadet and its predecessors, which embraced the notion of Milli Gorus (National Outlook), have aimed to break down the Kemalist firewalls between religion, politics, and the education system.

Predecessor parties have faced censure by Turkey's Constitutional Court throughout the twentieth century, with Saadet descending specifically from the National Order Party (MNP), founded in 1970 and closed down a year later by the Constitutional Court for violating the country's secularist charter, and then the National Salvation Party (MSP), founded in 1972. Following Turkey's coup of 1980, the country's military brass outlawed the MSP, together with all political factions. Then, in 1983, the party reinvented itself as the Welfare Party (RP, more commonly known as Refah), which briefly came to the fore in 1996 as a partner in the coalition government. But after warnings in 1997 by the secularist Turkish military—known as the “soft coup”—Refah lost power and was subsequently banned in 1998 by the Constitutional Court. In 1997, the party reemerged—before its predecessor's official closure—as the Virtue Party (FP, or Fazilet), but in 2001 the court shut down the FP too, after which the movement reestablished itself as the SP.

Erdogan had led a moderate breakaway movement from the FP and associated National Outlook movement, ultimately establishing his AKP in 2001. This has rendered Saadet a limited force on the Turkish political spectrum. The party currently has one seat in parliament. Often informally supporting the Nation's Alliance, it provides religiously conservative bona fides to this Erdogan-opposing bloc.



Future Party (Gelecek)

Ahmet Davutoglu, who served under Erdogan as foreign minister (2009–14) and then prime minister (2014–16), formed Turkey's second-newest party, Gelecek, in December 2019. Davutoglu promises to return to a gentler version of the AKP, but so far the party has not participated in elections and thus has no parliamentary representation.



Good Party (İYİ)

One of the newer parties on the Turkish scene, the İYİ splintered from the Turkish-nationalist MHP in 2017 due to infighting between MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli and member Meral Akşener, a former Turkish interior minister. Seeking to attract anti-Erdogan MHP voters unhappy with their party's cooperation with the AKP, the İYİ sought an alliance with the CHP in the 2018 elections. Its founder and leader, Akşener, is an outspoken critic of both Erdogan and the new presidential system. In the most recent election, Akşener's party received just shy of 10 percent of the vote, giving it 43 seats and making it the fifth-largest bloc in the legislature, though recent polls show İYİ's popularity rising.



Justice and Development Party (AKP)

The AKP broke from Turkey's National Outlook school in 2001, when Erdogan founded it as a movement that formally rejected political Islam, following court censure against Fazilet. The AKP started as a broad coalition of right-wing and centrist forces, attracting many more voters than did its informal predecessor, the Welfare Party, which was more strictly rooted in political Islam (i.e., the National Outlook). As a new party, the AKP earned a victory in the November 2002 parliamentary elections, with 34 percent of the vote; indeed, it won nearly two-thirds of the seats in parliament, thanks to a unique "glitch" in Turkey's electoral system that disproportionately allocates seats to the largest party, and even makes it the dominant party in the legislature, if fewer than three parties succeed in crossing the electoral threshold (i.e., winning more than 10% of the vote nationally, which qualifies parties for seats in parliament). Following this twist, however, and after delivering strong economic growth, Erdogan's faction increased its support to 46 percent in the 2007 elections, and to 49 percent according to 2011 results.

Over the years, Erdogan has gradually jettisoned the centrist forces that were key to establishing his party and launching its success. Faced with decreasing party support in the June 2015 elections, in which AKP backing dropped to just under 41 percent, Erdogan decided to form an electoral bloc with the MHP: the People's Alliance.

In 2017, the AKP and MHP called a referendum in Turkey for abolishing the parliamentary system of government in favor of an executive presidential system, with Erdogan at the helm. The vote passed by a thin margin (51%–49%), and the change went into effect after the June 2018 parliamentary election. The AKP received 42 percent in this vote, giving it 295 seats in the legislature. As of late 2020, the party remains in a formal coalition with the MHP, and the two factions together hold 337 seats in the 600-member Turkish parliament.



Nationalist Action Party (MHP)

The MHP, founded in 1969, existed only as a small, but highly militant, Turkish nationalist right-wing faction in the 1970s. Its strong anticommunist identity during the Cold War positioned it as a pro-U.S. force on the Turkish political spectrum. In the

post–Cold War period, the party has dropped its pro-American messaging and often embraced xenophobic forms of nationalism. The MHP entered the 2018 parliamentary elections as part of the People’s Alliance with Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s AKP. This alliance garnered 53 percent of the vote, with the MHP taking 11 percent. With 48 representatives in the Turkish parliament, the MHP is currently the fourth-largest bloc after the AKP, CHP, and HDP.



Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP)

The HDP is the current Kurdish nationalist faction, with several of its predecessors having been shut down by the Constitutional Court, only to reinvent themselves under new names. Starting with the People’s Labor Party (HEP) in 1990, nearly a dozen Kurdish nationalist parties have challenged the official notion of “Turkishness” in the country, which in return refuses to recognize the Kurds as a distinct nationality. These Kurdish parties generally received around 4 to 7 percent of the popular vote, failing to cross the 10 percent threshold necessary to gain representation in parliament.

Selahattin Demirtas, who became the HDP’s cochair in 2014, managed to overcome this obstacle by establishing an alliance between the HDP and leftist-liberal voters concerned about the environment, gender equality, LGBT rights, and human rights. This strategy more than doubled the HDP’s support over the previous election, in 2011; in the June 2015 parliamentary vote, the party received 13 percent, winning 80 seats to become the third-largest bloc.

Running on a platform of blocking Erdogan’s presidential ambitions, Demirtas was jailed in 2016, having been accused of spreading propaganda for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is designated by Turkey as a terrorist entity. In 2018, with its charismatic leader in prison, the HDP saw a slight drop in its support, receiving 11 percent of the parliamentary vote. Informally supporting the Nation’s Alliance, the party today has 56 seats, making it the third-largest bloc in the Turkish legislature.



Republican People’s Party (CHP)

The CHP, established in 1923 by modern Turkey’s founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, ruled the country as a single party until 1950. Defeated that year by the Democrat Party (DP) in Turkey’s first free and fair elections, the CHP returned to power briefly after the 1960 military coup against the DP—modern Turkey’s first military takeover—and again in the 1970s under its charismatic leader, Bulent Ecevit.

The CHP remains the traditional secularist party in Turkey, maintaining Ataturk’s legacy of creating a firewall between religion, politics, and the education system. In the 2018 legislative elections, the CHP formed the Nation’s Alliance with the Good Party (IYI) to run against the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). This alliance captured 34 percent of the vote. The CHP’s share, 23 percent, gave it 146 seats in Turkey’s 600-member legislature, making it the body’s second-largest bloc.

NOTES

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