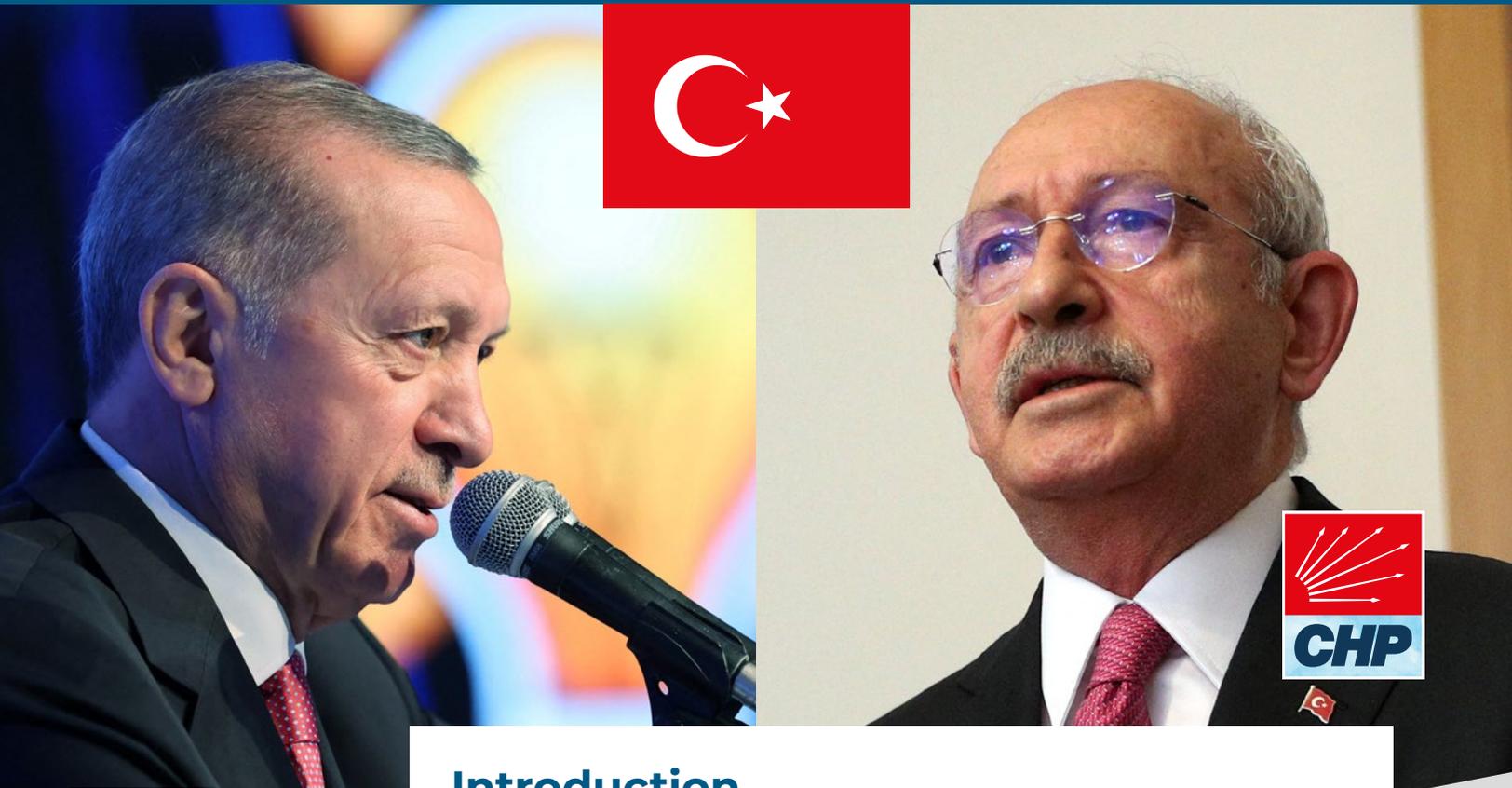




Turkey's Pivotal 2023 Elections

Issues, Potential Outcomes, and What Comes After

Edited by Soner Cagaptay



The presidential race pits two veteran politicians against each other: longtime incumbent Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu. A parliamentary vote will also take place on May 14.

Introduction

Soner Cagaptay

On May 14, Turkey's citizens will cast their ballots for both president and parliament in undoubtedly the most critical contests since the country's first free and fair elections in 1950. The outcome of possibly the country's last competitive vote under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will shape Turkey's domestic politics and foreign policy for years to come.

Opinion surveys show a neck-and-neck race between two main blocs: Erdoğan's People's Alliance—comprising his conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP), the allied ultra-Turkish-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and a number of smaller, mostly far-right parties—and the six-party opposition, led by the leftist, social democratic Republican

CONTENTS

Erdogan’s Multifaceted Election Strategy	3
Ragip Soylu	
The Opposition’s Strategy	8
Seren Selvin Korkmaz	
Potential Outcomes for the Kurdish Vote	12
Guney Yildiz	
The Foreign Policy Angle	16
Alper Coskun	
How Turkey Might Look After the Polls	20
Soner Cagaptay	
Conclusion: Defending the Vote and Turkish Democracy	22
Soner Cagaptay	

Abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party
CHP	Republican People’s Party
DEVA	Democracy and Progress Party
DP	Democrat Party
GP	Future Party (Gelecek)
HDP	Peoples’ Democratic Party
HUDA-PAR	Free Cause Party
IYI	Good Party
MHP	Nationalist Action Party
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party
SP	Felicity Party
YPG	People’s Defense Units
YRP	New Welfare Party
YSK	Supreme Election Council
YSP	Green Left Party

People’s Party (CHP) and its longtime leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu. The CHP is joined in the Nation’s Alliance by a diverse coalition, including the centrist Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), the center-right Democrat Party (DP), the nationalist, center-right Good Party (IYI)—the only other major faction besides the CHP—the conservative Future Party (Gelecek; GP), and the political Islamist Felicity Party (Saadet; FP). Also known as the “Table of Six,” the Nation’s Alliance poses the greatest challenge to Erdogan in nationwide elections since his AKP triumphed in November 2002. A third electoral bloc, led by the liberal, pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP)—and accompanied by leftist and far-leftist parties—is informally backing Kilicdaroglu in the presidential race, while separately competing for seats in parliament.

More than sixty million voters are qualified to cast ballots in the May elections, and turnout in Turkey usually ranges between 80 and 90 percent of registered voters. This means more than fifty million Turkish citizens will vote on May 14. While the parliament’s seat distribution will be finalized that day, if no presidential candidate wins 50 percent, a runoff between the top two candidates will be held two weeks later, on May 28. Elections in Turkey have been largely unfair since the switch to an executive-style presidential system in 2018, exacerbated by Erdogan’s growing control over media and Turkish institutions, but the vote does remain free. Moreover, elections matter in Turkey for the broader electorate—including Erdogan’s base—as a source of legitimacy rooted in decades of democracy and collective public memory of this tradition.

Regardless of the angle one takes, the May polls will be a watershed: either Erdogan will lose and step aside after two decades of rule, or he will remain at the helm so long as he is alive, folding the country’s remaining independent institutions under his control. An Erdogan win would likewise probably signal the end of competitive elections in the country, with the opposition losing any hope of voting him out and educated voters and elites potentially fleeing the country in droves—all with major ramifications for Turkey’s democracy and foreign policy orientation.

In the following set of essays, experts on Turkey scrutinize the forthcoming vote through various lenses. Ragip Soylu dissects Erdogan's electoral strategy (gentle but full of surprises), and Seren Selvin Korkmaz analyzes the opposition's strategy (trying to stay unified and avoid culture wars with Erdogan). Thereafter, Guney Yildiz sorts out the complex, evolving Kurdish vote (kingmaker of the elections), and Alper Coskun discusses Ankara's foreign policy trajectories under the opposition vis-à-vis more of Erdogan (transatlantic leaning vs. coldly transactional). The volume will end with this author's analysis on what elections hold for Turkey and the world, including policy suggestions for the U.S. government during and immediately after the elections.

Of the countries between Germany and India, Turkey has the oldest democracy and one of the largest economies. The results of the May elections will undoubtedly resonate beyond the country's borders, and the days surrounding the vote will be fateful, especially if the presidential contest goes to a runoff. Erdogan has distinguished himself as an innovator of nativist-populist politics in the twenty-first century, and he has remained an attentive student of this political trend globally. Should the race enter a runoff, Erdogan is sure to engage in polarizing tactics to broaden his base, recognizing the humiliation that a loss would entail. Yet the stakes are equally high for the opposition and the veteran Kilicdaroglu. A loss would certainly doom the CHP leader's political future and shatter any prospects for his six-party coalition.

Erdogan's Multifaceted Election Strategy

Ragip Soylu

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan is facing one of his toughest election fights since coming to power twenty years ago. In seeking his second term under the executive presidential system established in 2018, he is fending off the Nation's Alliance (aka "Table of Six"), a united bloc determined to defeat him. The challenges of incumbency include a deep economic crisis, with inflation reaching as high as 85 percent, and historic earthquakes that killed more than 50,000 Turkish residents.

But Erdogan has a game plan, and since August 2022 he and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have been busy creating and implementing a strategy. As a result, January 2023 polling indicated that his coalition's numbers had jumped by more than six percentage points since a survey taken the previous June.¹ The recent entry of Republican People's Party (CHP) defector Muharrem Ince into the race as a third-party candidate could further boost the incumbent.² While Erdogan's coalition will struggle to break the 45 percent barrier, let alone the 50 percent needed to win the presidency in round

one on May 14, Ince's rise could deny Kilicdaroglu an outright initial victory, forcing a runoff between Erdogan and Kilicdaroglu on May 28.

A Four-Pronged Strategy

Prior to the February earthquakes, Erdogan's strategy rested on three pillars, and he later added a fourth.

1. Use foreign policy to boost domestic popularity. In pursuit of this goal, Erdogan has repaired damaged relations with Arab heavyweights over the past couple of years. One result was that, in 2021, the United Arab Emirates agreed to a \$5 billion currency swap with Ankara and pledged to invest \$10 billion in Turkey's start-ups and high-tech industry.³ Dubai also purchased hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of drones from Ankara.⁴ Saudi Arabia deposited \$5 billion in the Turkish Central Bank in March 2023 after Erdogan dropped the court case over the 2018 Istanbul murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi,⁵ and Riyadh is poised to both make arms

purchases from Ankara and pursue investment opportunities.

Erdogan successfully secured a needed cash injection from Russia, amounting to nearly \$10 billion, through the Akkuyu nuclear power plant construction project.⁶ He has simultaneously kept the country open to Russians fleeing their country. Together with booming two-way trade with Russia, these steps have allowed likely billions of dollars to flow to Turkey.⁷

Such moves have helped finance the president's unorthodox policy centered on low interest rates and a controlled foreign exchange regime, whereby the Turkish Central Bank burns its reserves to stabilize the Turkish lira against the U.S. dollar and other currencies. The strategy so far has kept the lira under control, backing up Erdogan's economic claims, while also allowing him to conduct a populist spending spree (detailed below).

Simultaneously, Erdogan has been working on outreach to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad through Russian mediation since last August. Along with the economy, the anti-Syrian refugee sentiments of Turkish voters continue to be a top election issue.⁸ The president has been under fire for allowing nearly 4 million Syrian refugees into the country throughout his rule, and mindful of the opposition's promises "to send the refugees back by cutting a deal with Assad,"⁹ Erdogan started his own engagement with Damascus, first through intelligence channels, then through the Foreign Ministry. He has already said he would like to meet with Assad before the elections.¹⁰ The outreach itself has shown voters Erdogan's intention to match the opposition in pursuing a deal with Assad to send some refugees back to Syria.

2. Alleviate heavy price pressures through economic relief. Recognizing that more than 50 percent of the Turkish public earns the minimum wage, in January 2023 Erdogan doubled this rate for the private sector from the previous January, bringing it to US\$443 a month.¹¹ He implemented a similar raise for the public sector that affected around five million employees. In addition, the government

passed an early retirement package that allowed two million Turkish workers to retire immediately; launched a cheap mortgage loan scheme for citizens who do not own their own home; and provided tax debt relief to millions. Erdogan has secured permanent positions for nearly one-half million subcontractors in the public sector and created a new scheme to give a 30–50 percent raise to the country's 1.3 million health workers. Such moves likely contributed to the earlier-noted polling bump for Erdogan's bloc from summer 2022 to early 2023.

3. Focus on the future. To achieve his optimistic election strategy, Erdogan has tapped as campaign manager Ertan Aydin—a political scientist, pollster, and former AKP parliamentarian who correctly forecast the AKP's 2019 mayoral losses in Istanbul and Ankara. Aydin has been running a campaign focused on Turkey's centennial and has created the "Turkey century" concept; in turn, Erdogan has tactically called on the opposition to join him in producing creative ideas to build the republic's next hundred years.

Erdogan invited opposition representatives and his media critics to the event held to promote this concept, calling on them to acknowledge all his government has done in the service of Turkish society.¹² He then put his political challengers on the spot, asking them to present their own proposals. Ertan's team has focused on promoting the Turkey century concept by spotlighting Erdogan's national projects, with an emphasis on major projects such as highways, dams, factories, and a revived defense industry—military fighter jets and drones in particular.¹³

Erdogan also wants to individually spotlight other endeavors, such as the Turkish national electric car project (TOGG, *Turkiye'nin Otomobili Girişim Grubu*), whose first car is expected to be on the road before the elections. Turkish shipbuilders have already delivered the light aircraft carrier TCG *Anadolu*, which will be launched before the elections as well. Furthermore, the Turkish president plans to inaugurate a pipeline that will carry Turkey's own Black Sea gas to households in April, and he has

already inaugurated a factory that produces boron carbide, a mineral with multiple military-industrial uses, of which Turkey holds 70 percent of worldwide reserves.

In March, Erdogan also signaled a possible change in his unpopular and unorthodox monetary policy by inviting Mehmet Simsek, the respected former finance minister, back into the party as a parliamentary candidate for the elections. An AKP official said that Erdogan had assigned former finance minister Lutfi Elvan, known for his market-friendly monetary policy, to write the AKP's election manifesto.¹⁴ All these moves suggest Erdogan is also looking for ways to address the public disappointment and consternation reflected in global markets caused by his unorthodox economic policies.

Furthermore, he added the Islamist-oriented New Welfare Party (YRP) to his electoral alliance in March to boost his prospects. The YRP and other right-wing and far-right smaller parties that Erdogan has since welcomed, such as the Kurdish Islamist Free Cause Party (HUDA-PAR), could boost the People's Alliance by around 3 percent in the presidential and parliamentary races.¹⁵

4. Eschew divisiveness. Erdogan has not won successive elections over two decades by using soft-ball campaign tactics. But he recognizes this year, after the February earthquakes leveled cities and dispersed hundreds of thousands to tent cities, that he should limit harsh language and bitter attacks. One AKP official told the author that the campaign will aim to promote the sum of Erdogan's achievements over the past twenty years, and specifically those in the last year or so, to imply that the Table of Six cannot deliver the same results.¹⁶ The official expected that, from time to time, Erdogan would directly target opposition candidate Kilicdaroglu but that his main focus would be on his achievements and on the future. Another factor pointing to a relatively positive tone is Ramadan, which lasts until late April and generally does not lend itself to holding large rallies.

Wild Cards: Kurdish Votes and Crackdowns

While Erdogan has a clear election strategy, two variables could affect the outcome—the Kurdish vote and his own impulsiveness. In an effort to win votes from religious Kurds, Erdogan—as noted—added HUDA-PAR to his coalition in March, triggering considerable criticism from the opposition due to the party's past ties to “Turkish Hezbollah,”¹⁷ a now-inactive radical Sunni Islamist Kurdish group that carried out a bloody campaign in the 1990s. HUDA-PAR, however, has since disavowed violence. What is more, the party won just 0.3 percent in the 2018 elections. According to officials close to Erdogan who spoke on condition of anonymity, HUDA-PAR would play only a symbolic role in convincing religiously conservative Kurdish voters to remain within AKP ranks.¹⁸

Days before the 2019 mayoral elections, Erdogan successfully pressured Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), to call on Turkey's Kurdish community to boycott the vote, a development that would have dashed the opposition's hopes given the Kurdish population in big cities. Ocalan's willingness to work with Erdogan likely derived from his belief that he could negotiate a deal with the president on the Kurdish question. This strategy, however, failed to persuade supporters of Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)—the beneficiary of nearly half of Turkey's Kurdish votes¹⁹—largely because many realized that Ocalan had issued his call in response to government pressure. If Erdogan feels truly desperate, he may again try to use Ocalan to weaken the HDP and cause some Kurdish voters to abandon the opposition.

Despite his advisors' strategy of maintaining calm during the election campaign, Erdogan might ultimately follow his less temperate instincts and run a polarizing campaign, especially after Ramadan ends on April 23. Along these lines, some pro-Erdogan media outlets and social media accounts have already started making thinly veiled attacks against Kilicdaroglu, suggesting he is not a good Muslim.²⁰ As part of a preelection turn, Erdogan might crack down harder on social media platforms, where

the opposition has a free hand to shape the public agenda.

Last, Erdogan will likely focus on continued post-earthquake reconstruction and associated services for constituents in the coming years. He is confident that emergency conditions can help him consolidate his image as a capable leader. Thus, he will continue to employ campaign slogans that showcase his promises to rebuild houses, hospitals, schools, and industrial sites within a year, he and will frequently visit disaster zones to solidify his standing.

AKP Game Plan for Election Rounds One and Two

People close to Erdogan expect that the presidential election results will be very close, perhaps within one or two percentage points.²¹ The opposition appears united—with the exception of failed 2018 CHP presidential candidate Muharrem Ince, whose independent candidacy will likely siphon votes from the Nation's Alliance. Ince, who has polled at around 5–10 percent,²² is likely to prevent Kilicdaroglu from reaching the 50 percent threshold required to win in the first round. Not surprisingly, some pro-Erdogan media networks have given ample attention to Ince, granting him more coverage than Kilicdaroglu and helping boost his poll numbers.²³

Should the presidential vote go to a May 28 runoff, Erdogan will contour his strategy based on the parliamentary results. If the AKP holds on to its majority position, Erdogan will campaign on the virtues of a united, experienced national leadership; if his party loses its majority, he will argue that an AKP presidency can balance an opposition-led parliament. Party officials, for their part, believe Erdogan can successfully appeal to voters in a second round in either case.

If a runoff occurs, Erdogan may use a harsher style and a campaign strategy that targets Kilicdaroglu in personal terms, painting him as weak or immoral. He would likely present the elections as a binary choice between himself, a strong leader with a track record of running the country, and Kilicdaroglu, a politician who lacks any such experience. Erdogan can here draw on his foreign policy and security credentials to make his case.

Conveniently, the AKP has changed the election laws, theoretically allowing the party to win more legislative seats than it typically would based on raw vote share, considering an ideologically divided opposition.²⁴ The opposition, however, has overcome this hurdle at least in part by crafting—case by case—either separate or joint lists for different election districts across the country to maximize its gains at the ballot box.

Erdogan, together with his ally the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), has the steady support of roughly 42–45 percent of the electorate thanks to the strategies described here. The earlier-noted entry of Muharrem Ince into the race has produced another boon. But the incumbent still faces an uphill battle to exceed 45 percent or even win the presidency in the first round. Erdogan's lieutenants take comfort in their view that the opposition will struggle to stay united, given the cracks that appeared during the Table of Six meeting on March 2, when party leaders initially failed to pick a joint candidate.²⁵ The president, ever a shrewd campaigner, will no doubt keep looking to sow discord within the opposition, even if he does so quietly.

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The Opposition’s Strategy

Seren Selvin Korkmaz

Polling suggests that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) could lose in the May 2023 elections, resulting in a seismic political shift in Turkey.¹ A weak economy, sky-high inflation, and poorly functioning state institutions, as evidenced by the response to the February earthquakes, have provided an opening for the six-party opposition known as the Nation’s Alliance, which is united under Republican People’s Party (CHP) head Kemal Kilicdaroglu.

By building on its past successes and learning from its failures, the opposition has honed a strategy that delivered victories against Erdogan’s candidates in the 2019 local elections. This approach, rooted in a strong alliance model, includes a joint candidate and a vision platform as well as a plan for countering Erdogan’s polarizing politics.

This essay will examine the strategy espoused by the opposition Nation’s Alliance—aka “Table of Six”—and its prospects in the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, the outcome of which will determine whether Turkey heads

toward more-entrenched autocracy or more-open democracy. If the opposition wins, it will pursue redemocratization, potentially offering a playbook for actors opposing similar types of populists elsewhere around the world.

A Unified Bloc

In a competitive authoritarian government such as Turkey’s, a unified opposition poses a real threat to the incumbent. Typical of populist authoritarians, Erdogan has benefited from fragmented politics and intense polarization. Yet since the 2017 referendum transformed Turkey into an executive presidential system, the opposition has worked hard to build a broad coalition and implemented numerous strategies to counter Erdogan’s divisive rhetoric.

The opposition’s victories in the 2019 local elections, taking major cities such as Istanbul and Ankara from the AKP, has instilled hope in Turkey’s voters committed to democracy and laid the groundwork for larger coalitions. While divisions have sometimes

appeared in a diverse opposition encompassing Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, secularists, and political Islamists, among others, the singular goal of defeating Erdogan has given them cause for unity, considering the 50 percent plus 1 needed to win the presidency. To this end, the six parties in the Nation's Alliance have set aside their differences and banded together behind longtime Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu.

After meeting with Kilicdaroglu, the Labor and Freedom Alliance—formed by pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and other leftist parties and platforms—announced that it would not field its own presidential candidate, signaling implicit support for the CHP leader.² With its potential to win 10%–13% of the vote, the Labor and Freedom Alliance move could have a significant impact on the election outcomes. In the presidential contest, it could help Kilicdaroglu win in the first round. Despite the AKP's identity-based attempts at polarization, the Labor and Freedom Alliance decision also could signal a broader sociopolitical alliance for the future.

Team of Six vs. President

The opposition Nation's Alliance is playing a team game. Two popular mayors—Istanbul's Ekrem Imamoglu and Ankara's Mansur Yavas—will be appointed as vice presidents if the opposition wins. Ali Babacan, who chairs the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and formerly was a foreign affairs and economy minister in Erdogan's governments, would prospectively preside over the economy as another vice president, wielding his strong international reputation for financial management. The other Nation's Alliance leaders would hold vice presidential posts as well in the event of a win.

After much internal debate, leaders agreed on Kilicdaroglu's candidacy on March 6, 2023. Despite his low tallies in two-way matchups with Erdogan relative to other front-runner prospects, including Imamoglu and Yavas, Kilicdaroglu has—for the most part—gained the trust of most fellow coalition party elites. Even Turkey's opposition is not immune to the

nation's trend toward polarization, and the political veteran Kilicdaroglu has a unique ability to communicate with and unify different blocs. His success in persuading the Labor and Freedom Alliance is a case in point.

Vision Platform

The six opposition parties, in addition to agreeing on a common candidate, have coalesced around a proactive, positive shared agenda—the “Vision Platform”—which includes a commitment to restore the country's former parliamentary system and advance democratic freedoms. To this end, the parties have drafted three “vision” documents: (1) an agreement for a strengthened parliamentary system, (2) a constitutional amendment package seeking this outcome, and (3) a memorandum of understanding outlining common policies.³ Those texts demonstrate that despite significant ideological differences, the opposition parties are embracing the country's diverse reality, along with the need for dialogue, negotiations, and reconciliation—rather than polarization.

Unlike Erdogan's presidential system, which has enabled personalized power and the hollowing out of institutions, the opposition's “strengthened parliamentary system” would seek to reinforce and stabilize policymaking in Turkey. New safeguards, including a series of checks and balances, would be designed to prevent the rise of a “new Erdogan.” The presidency, in the proposed model, would revert to a more symbolic-diplomatic role characterized by stability, transparency, and accountability. The legislature would be structured as a more efficient, participatory body. The judiciary would be impartial and independent.

The opposition memorandum, which covers foreign as well as domestic policy, calls for institutionalizing relations with the United States and returning to work on the F-35 project. (Following Turkey's acquisition of Russia's S-400 system, the Trump administration removed Turkey from the F-35 program in July 2019.⁴) The alliance generally elevates

institutional roles over personalities in foreign policy, and seeks stronger ties with Europe and America in the context of the war in Ukraine. It also commits to maintaining coequal relations with Russia, wherein dialogue should be balanced and constructive at the institutional level.

Inclusive Rhetoric

Historically, Erdogan has sought to divide the opposition along historical and ideological fault lines, thus ensuring that the ruling alliance gets the most votes. For the opposition, delivering a message centered on inclusivity amounts to a high-wire act—they must satisfy their own voters while winning defectors from Erdogan’s bloc—but this approach worked decisively in the 2019 local elections. As a result, the Nation’s Alliance has stuck with an inclusive tone and sought to avoid polarizing rhetoric.

Kilicdaroglu has added forgiveness and reconciliation—*“helallesme”*—to the notion of inclusivity, with the aim of healing the country’s past wrongs, committed against citizens since the founding of the Turkish republic in 1923, mostly targeting devout Muslims and Kurds. In practical terms, the opposition has taken a pragmatic approach to problems such as the struggling economy, thus steering away from identity politics and simultaneously compelling Erdogan to coopt his opponents’ proposals on urgent economic issues.

Campaign in the Shadow of Ruin

The devastation of the February earthquakes has engendered a subdued tone from both sides in the campaign. President Erdogan has focused primarily on immediate reconstruction projects to present the image that he will ensure their continuity. His government drew heavy criticism, however, for failing to quickly mobilize rescue teams, coordinate humanitarian aid, and repair critical infrastructure. The opposition, for its part, has homed in on weakened state institutions to explain the government’s post-earthquake failures, in turn emphasizing its

own vision of strong, transparent, and capable institutions that can address the daily problems of displaced and otherwise affected residents.

Playing Field Tilts Toward Erdogan

As the opposition rallies behind Kilicdaroglu, Erdogan will seek to regain advantage by using his control of state resources and the media. Election security likewise poses a challenge—especially in earthquake-hit areas, where one-sixth of voters have had to register and will cast ballots under emergency conditions,⁵ requiring the opposition to both shoot for a safe 4–5 point margin and mobilize all available resources to secure the vote. Yet another challenge is the politically motivated effort to shut down the HDP.⁶ Seeking to evade this risk, the HDP has decided to run under the banner of the Green Left Party (YSP) and will not nominate politicians who could face a ban in parliament.⁷ Still, all in all, Erdogan enjoys an uneven playing field, and will continue to deftly manage expectations, intensify suppression of dissenters, and employ a fear-based strategy that portends “If I lose, you lose.” This is why he should not be underestimated.

Postelection Scenarios for the Opposition

To be sure, the return to a Turkish parliamentary system would go more smoothly if the opposition won the presidency as well as the parliament with a three-fifths majority—a prerequisite for a constitutional amendment necessary to restore the country’s former political system. But recent election law changes make such a landslide victory unlikely. At the time of writing, Kilicdaroglu was leading the presidential race in the first round and predicted to win a runoff, while the race for the parliament appeared to be a toss-up. Two scenarios could therefore emerge in May: (1) Given the wide executive powers of the presidency under Turkey’s new political system, Erdogan’s loss of his position would be a huge blow for his party and base. Hence, Erdogan may agree to negotiate with the incoming

leadership about reverting to a parliamentary system in return for immunity from any charges against him, his family members, and key people in his administration. (2) Erdogan could also be preparing to lose the presidency and, in doing so, to ensure “parliamentary immunity” from potential charges for his ministers. This scenario would appear to be supported by recent developments, with Erdogan having declared that fifteen of his current ministers will run for the parliament. Erdogan could be planning to cultivate a powerful opposition while in the minority—a scenario applicable if he were to also lose the parliament—composed of well-connected former ministers, in hopes that he can exploit a potentially unstable governing alliance, hobbled by economic- and earthquake-related struggles, to return to power.

A final scenario must be considered: one in which the opposition bloc loses both the presidency and parliament. Such an outcome could well lead to deep, enduring authoritarianism in Turkey, punctuated in

the short term by profound disappointment among backers of the opposition, when victory seemed in reach. An exodus from the country could then ensue, resulting in significant brain drain and other societal consequences.

Given the election concerns discussed earlier, the opposition will work hard to notch a clear victory, but if such a triumph proves elusive, Erdogan could prematurely declare himself the victor. In response, international actors should refuse to validate such an outcome.

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Potential Outcomes for the Kurdish Vote

Guney Yildiz

Turkey's Kurdish community, accounting for 15–20 percent of the country's population, is segmented into three distinct political blocs. The largest, representing a little more than half of the demographic, mostly leans left, supporting the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). The second-largest, comprising 20–30 percent, gravitates toward social conservatism, backing President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). And the smallest, about one-sixth of Kurdish voters, opts for the left-leaning secular Republican People's Party (CHP) or other factions.¹ Based on surveys conducted by Rawest Research,² a polling firm that focuses on Turkey's Kurds, the main opposition party—the CHP—is experiencing a robust upswing in Kurdish support and could secure around 20 percent of its vote in the 2023 elections. The AKP's share of Kurdish voters may remain marginally higher, but the incumbent is trending downward while the challenger rises.

In the last Turkish parliamentary elections, held in 2018, the HDP earned 11.7 percent of the parliamentary vote and 7 percent for its (incarcerated) presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtas, who has been party chair since 2014. Early in his term, Demirtas presided over a substantial increase in support for the HDP, which doubled its vote share in 2015 to 13.1 percent, from 6.6 percent in 2011.

The HDP embraced a liberal platform, running a gender-balanced list for the parliamentary elections in 2015 and including representatives from the country's religious minorities, such as Armenians. This strategy broadened the party's appeal, forging a liberal-Kurdish alliance and making the HDP the third-largest bloc in the legislature, following the AKP and CHP. In November 2016, however, Demirtas was imprisoned on charges of inciting violent attacks, encouraging citizens to protest, affiliating with an armed terrorist organization, and disseminating terrorist propaganda. Since then, the government has jailed many other HDP officials, including elected deputies and mayors. The party has maintained its

voter base despite government attacks thanks to its devoted supporters, Demirtas's political charisma, and Erdogan's hard Turkish-nationalist pivot since 2015, which has alienated some conservative Kurdish AKP voters and driven more than a few toward the HDP.

The HDP, having recently announced it would not run its own presidential candidate, has practically asked its voters to support CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu.³ With neither the opposition leader nor Erdogan likely to surpass 50 percent on May 14 absent strong Kurdish support, the HDP will be instrumental in determining the outcome. The party's kingmaker role was exemplified in the 2019 local elections, in which the Kurdish vote was crucial in securing opposition victories in major Turkish cities, including Istanbul.⁴

In previous elections, the HDP made informal alliances with opposition parties, never supporting President Erdogan. In fact, during the 2015 election campaign, the party leadership focused almost exclusively on preventing Erdogan from becoming president and reserved most of its hostility for his party, the result of ideological incompatibility as well as a lack of trust.⁵ In 2011 and 2013, the Erdogan government initiated peace processes with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—the militant wing of the Kurdish movement in Turkey, deemed a terrorist entity by Ankara and Turkey's NATO allies—but after the last round of talks collapsed in 2015, Erdogan booted from the AKP some prominent Kurdish members who had played a major role in the talks.⁶ Today's AKP criminalizes any attempt to engage with the PKK or even with HDP representatives.

Kurdish voting could follow several possible paths in the forthcoming elections:

Informal support for the opposition bloc. Given the HDP's decision not to field a presidential candidate and to instead direct supporters to vote against Erdogan, this is the most likely scenario. Kilicdaroglu

is known for his social democratic views and comes from a predominantly Kurdish town. The HDP's base regards him as an ideal candidate, and party leaders appreciated his parliament visit on March 20, 2023, after which the party officially announced that it would not field a candidate in the elections. If no presidential candidate earns more than 50 percent in the first round, a second round of voting will occur on May 28. The HDP has expressed a wish to see Erdogan defeated in the first round.

Informal backing of Erdogan's bloc. This scenario appears to be nearly impossible. The HDP's leadership would consider negotiations with Erdogan only if the government tackled a range of matters the leadership deems crucial, such as Turkey's stance on the Kurdish-led autonomous administration in northern Syria, the replacement of HDP officials with state-appointed officials in municipalities where HDP candidates won, the release of jailed HDP officials, and a comprehensive agreement with the PKK that includes permitting Abdullah Ocalan, its founder and imprisoned leader, to serve his sentence at home.

Within the Kurdish movement—the dominant trend for Kurds in Turkey, although not representing the whole ethnic group—the PKK's approach to Erdogan has been more pragmatic than that of the HDP. This is the case even though the PKK has historically pursued its goals through violence, including attacks on civilians, and has regarded itself since 1984 to be at war with the Turkish army. PKK leader Ocalan has previously participated in negotiations with Turkish security officials and the ruling party, while the HDP leadership has maintained a hostile attitude toward the AKP. In addition, the PKK recently declared a unilateral ceasefire with Turkey in response to the February earthquakes, the result—according to Kurdish sources—of requests made by U.S. officials through the group's allies in northern Syria.⁷

Despite unconfirmed rumors that Hakan Fidan, Turkey's intelligence chief, will be appointed deputy president—a possible harbinger of renewed talks with Kurdish militants, given his past work overseeing peace process activities—President Erdogan is highly unlikely to offer a fresh opening to the group.⁸ The Nationalist Action Party (MHP),

Erdogan's ally, is strongly anti-Kurdish and would oppose any such steps.

No support for either side. This scenario could play out only if the Turkish military undertook an operation against the Syria-based People's Defense Units (YPG)—a PKK offshoot—a move the opposition would be forced to back, leading to a split with the HDP. This is also an unlikely scenario, since there is no indication that Turkey will follow through on its threats to launch such an operation before the elections. A more plausible scenario considering recent developments—such as the reported Turkish attempt to kill YPG commander Mazloum Kobane Abdi in Iraq on April 7—is a successful Turkish assassination attempt targeting a YPG or PKK leader in Iraq or Syria, whether preceding the first vote or during the runoff stage.⁹ Such a development could splinter the opposition in the presidential race, with Turkish nationalist members of the Nation's Alliance, such as the IYI Party, likely lining up behind the attack and the pro-Kurdish HDP opposing it.

Dissolution of the HDP by the Turkish Constitutional Court. This scenario became less likely following the HDP's decision to field candidates under the Green Left Party (YSP) banner, a move premised on the March 2021 filing of a court case against the HDP following persistent calls to this end by the MHP and its leader, Devlet Bahçeli.¹⁰ The prosecution in the case, which could lead to the dissolution of the HDP, alleges that the party is the successor to previously dissolved illegal parties; that it has links to the PKK; and that party leader Selahattin Demirtas was involved in mobilizing people to commit violence.

The court recently postponed its hearing on the dissolution until April 11. Mixed signals from the court have heightened worries that the HDP could face dissolution following the April 9 deadline for submitting candidate lists, prompting the party's leadership to seek participation in the May elections under the YSP. The court lacks sufficient time to ban the YSP before the May elections. If it moved to do so, the pro-HDP electorate would still likely back Kilicdaroglu in the presidential race, but the YSP might lose some votes for parliamentary representation owing to voter confusion.

Can the HDP Maintain an Informal Alliance with the Opposition?

The Nation's Alliance, or "Table of Six," as the opposition is known, is a grand coalition of diverse parties comprising political Islamists, Turkish nationalists, social democrats, secularists, and liberals, all united in their opposition to Erdogan. The coalition has proven more resilient than initially anticipated by the Turkish president due to strong anti-Erdogan sentiments across the political spectrum—and the view that Turkey can progress only if Erdogan is removed from power through democratic means. Furthermore, Kilicdaroglu has served as a unifying force and has helped maintain cohesion among the various parties.

In September 2021, the HDP outlined its political road map, which includes a call to return to a parliamentary system and largely aligns with the opposition's program. Notable differences appear concerning the Kurdish question, however, such as support for mother tongue education, including in Kurdish, and for significant local government autonomy.¹¹ In March 2023, HDP leader Demirtas engaged in a critical debate with the Turkish nationalist Good Party (IYI), the second-largest member of the Table of Six,¹² but he has refrained from criticizing the CHP or Kilicdaroglu, and the HDP leadership has avoided leveling significant criticism against the opposition. Tensions between the HDP and IYI may persist throughout the election period, potentially providing an opportunity for Kilicdaroglu to dampen the IYI's influence over the alliance, or for Erdogan, who could exploit the tensions to disrupt the informal alliance between the Table of Six and the HDP.

The Erdogan government has at its disposal various tactics to prevent the Kurdish population from voting for the Table of Six. These include attempting to polarize society over the Kurdish question in order to splinter the opposition-HDP alliance—a possible path in the event of a successful Turkish assassination attempt against a YPG or PKK leader;¹³ using the government's control over the media and state institutions to suppress the Kurdish and HDP vote; and directly appealing to the Kurds via a new "opening" that potentially includes Abdullah Ocalan. The

diametrically opposed nature of the assassination versus "Ocalan peace" paths shows Erdogan's utter malleability on the Kurdish issue. At the same time, Erdogan may attempt to polarize the electorate based on religious, ethnic, or ideological divisions. These include Islamic sensitivities; Alevi or Kurdish issues (Erdogan's main challenger, Kilicdaroglu, is of Alevi and Kurdish origin); and Turkey's secularist history and past injustices against devout citizens.

The AKP, to regain support from conservative Kurds who defected after the party aligned with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and used anti-Kurdish rhetoric, is now working with the Free Cause Party (HUDA-PAR), a Sunni Kurdish far-right group whose predecessor "Turkish Hezbollah" terrorized pro-Kurdish civilians and also conservatives out of step with the group's austere version of Islam.¹⁴ The Kurdish electorate decisively has favored the HDP over HUDA-PAR, but the latter could flip a few votes to Erdogan in areas where it operates.

The government could also appeal cynically to HDP voters by claiming that there is little difference between the AKP and the opposition on the Kurdish issue. As evidence, they could point to occasional anti-Kurdish remarks by IYI officials, such as Yavuz Agiralioglu, who questioned the "humanity" of non-Muslim Kurds and later resigned from the party, attributing his departure to the HDP's de facto backing of the opposition.¹⁵

The HDP envisions that a Kilicdaroglu triumph might herald a less security-based approach to Turkey's Kurdish issue and a relaxation of political constraints on the HDP and its elected representatives. If the opposition bloc comes to power, the result would likely be a better government relationship with the Kurdish community. Such a shift would further empower the diverse coalition and spotlight the grassroots solidarity among its supporters, including Kurds.¹⁶

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The Foreign Policy Angle

Alper Coskun

In many ways, Turkey's foreign policy under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has resembled a puzzle whose pieces do not fit together. Turkey naturally pursues diverse and, at times, competing sets of interests. But by casting doubt over its identity as a NATO ally anchored in the Western security architecture, Erdogan has weakened Turkey's standing in the eyes of its friends and foes alike.

Turkey is regarded today by many as a disruptive power with a muddled strategic orientation.¹ Dreams of toppling neighboring regimes, such as in Syria, or building a regional sphere of influence by supporting ideologically preferred political forces, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have not served Turkey well.² Nor has the opportunistic practice of playing Ankara's relations with Moscow against its traditional allies and partners in the West.³

This approach has narrowed Turkey's circle of friends, increased its isolation, and weakened its diplomatic clout, even though Ankara has at times compensated for inadequate political leverage with hard power, such as by deploying its drones as far away as Libya, where it managed to protect the North African country's internationally recognized government against the forces of Gen. Khalifa Haftar and Russia's Wagner Group. The forthcoming elections will give Turkey's prospective leadership an opportunity for self-reflection on these matters. And irrespective of the results, a certain degree of change lies ahead in Turkey's foreign policy trajectory.

Turkey's six-party opposition alliance has an ambitious foreign policy agenda that rests on reformulating policy structures and reimagining the Turkish role in the world.⁴ The alliance enjoys advantages relative to the incumbent AKP, which has held power for twenty years. For one thing, the opposition would represent a clean slate and enjoy the benefit of the doubt with its Western interlocutors. For another,

it could enact democratic and economic reforms to improve Turkey's image and generate additional goodwill with a constructive, consistent foreign policy outlook. This would strengthen Turkey's hand in its engagement with the United States, the European Union, and other Western states in a way the AKP can no longer do, given the confidence deficit it has accrued. The skeptical onlooker, in this case, will be Russia, which is more than happy with Turkey's troubled relations with the West under Erdogan, a leader once referred to in the *Moscow Times* as "our man in NATO."⁵

Of course, Erdogan will also make certain calculations if he wins the elections. Despite his innate tendency to reject failure, he does not shy away from dramatic policy changes when he regards them as necessary. He proved this in late 2020 when he toned down his combative rhetoric toward the West and concurrently moved to end Turkey's regional isolation by mending fences with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel.⁶ He took this reckoning to a new level in Syria,⁷ where the idea of a handshake with Bashar al-Assad—once Ankara's target for regime change—suddenly became plausible. Realpolitik had dictated a need for change, and Erdogan obliged.

The Turkish president will continue these efforts if he remains in power after the May elections and simultaneously conduct his own Western charm offensive, despite his visceral aversion to doing so. The poor condition of the Turkish economy,⁸ further aggravated by the recent earthquakes—which caused damage exceeding \$100 billion, alongside grievous casualties—has forced the president to welcome a steady flow of foreign aid and external financing, narrowing his options. Realpolitik will once again dictate his actions.

In areas where problems have ossified or become matters of national security, such as disputes with Greece in the Aegean Sea or over Cyprus, neither

Erdogan's AKP nor the opposition will budge easily. The same holds for prioritizing Turkey's ongoing fight against terrorist groups, including the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) or its Syria-based affiliate, the People's Defense Units (YPG). But in other areas, changes will differ by shades depending on the electoral winner, as outlined below:

Policy formulation. Contrary to promises made when Turkey adopted its executive presidential system in 2017, the new system has not exemplified good governance. Moreover, the country's foreign policy has progressively become tainted by domestic politics. Perversely, the centralization of power has siloed line ministries and other institutions at the lower levels. With all eyes on the presidential office, these mid- and lower-level institutions have demonstrated little ability to maintain a culture of cooperation and coordination among themselves.

The political opposition is therefore campaigning to revive Turkey's parliamentary system of governance—with some modifications to streamline decisionmaking. On the foreign policy front, it aims to reinstate the central role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in formulating and implementing policy. This will be consequential in at least two ways—by disentangling policy decisions from domestic political motives and by harmonizing foreign policy messaging, thereby bringing clarity to Turkey's positions.

Turkey-U.S. relations. The belief that the United States is indifferent, if not harmful, to Turkey's core interests amounts to conventional wisdom among many Turkish elites and voters alike, and this will weigh heavily on any incoming Turkish government. Matters will only worsen if Turkey's request to purchase U.S. F-16s is declined.⁹

Little daylight separates the AKP from the opposition in this area, but the opposition—should it triumph—will engage in a bold effort to reset the relationship, thus forcing Washington's hand.¹⁰ Here, the opposition will enjoy three advantages: a lack of baggage in U.S. eyes, relative to the AKP; (2) a demonstrated intent to articulate Turkey's strategic stance as a

NATO ally; and (3) a stance guided by disapproval of Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400 system and a corresponding desire to resolve the matter. The challenge there will lie in finding a compromise that will not be perceived by the Turkish public as a humiliating capitulation to American demands while simultaneously avoiding a total rupture with Russia. The most likely scenario would be to mothball the system in Turkey under a subtle, inspection scheme mutually palatable to Ankara and Washington.

Erdogan would likewise continue trying to reset Turkey's relationship with the United States, but he would struggle to be genuinely forthcoming in a manner equal to his opponents. More important, he will be constrained by his entanglement with Vladimir Putin's Russia. Erdogan's strongest card will continue to be Turkey's geopolitical significance, and he will try to leverage this at every opportunity, foremost in the context of the war in Ukraine. Under these circumstances, moving away from a transactional bilateral relationship with the United States will be difficult.

Turkey and NATO. In its quest to ascertain Turkey's strategic orientation, the opposition will focus on better harmonizing the country's foreign, defense, and security policies with its NATO membership requirements. It will refrain from bringing up bilateral issues in an alliance setting. Meanwhile, under opposition leadership, Sweden's chances of joining NATO before the planned July Summit will increase significantly.¹¹

By comparison, Erdogan's commitment to Turkey's NATO membership will be halfhearted at best. He has grown accustomed to playing brinkmanship games in the alliance context and will do the same with Sweden's NATO accession. Moreover, his free-lance engagement with actors like Russia and China will come up, further tarnishing Turkey's image as a NATO ally.

Turkey, Russia, and China. The opposition will tread carefully between Turkey's NATO membership requirements and its interests in maintaining a nonconfrontational relationship with Russia and China. Even as it aims to consolidate Turkey's place

in NATO, it will strive to preclude misunderstandings in Russia and China of its benign intent. That said, Turkey will be inclined to call out Russia for its violations of international law and be more vocal about offenses against China's Muslim Uyghur community. The opposition's steps to resolve challenges associated with the Russian S-400 missile defense system will be a leading factor in relations with Russia, and could become a source of friction. Turkey made a single two-battery procurement of the S-400s in late 2017 and has since activated the systems only once, for testing purposes, storing them in a warehouse since. Moreover, there are signs that Turkey's interest in the S-400 may be waning as it moves closer to fielding its own systems.¹²

Turkey, Putin, and the Ukraine war. Erdogan will not easily relinquish his close, if previously sometimes uneasy, relationship with Putin. The more Russia is sanctioned and Putin is isolated on the international stage, the stronger Erdogan's hand will be in the relationship, making the rapport easier to manage. On the other hand, while ill-conceived dreams of deepening defense industry cooperation with Russia have subsided, bilateral cooperation on other initiatives, including the nuclear reactor now being built by Russia, will continue.¹³ Western sanctions on Russia may upset these developments, and here Erdogan will be inclined to push limits but not cross the line. By staying out of the sanctions regime, Turkey has been able to attract Russian wealth and increase bilateral trade, only to scale back in the face of Western unease. Erdogan would continue this juggling act.¹⁴ The opposition would likely remain outside the sanctions regime as well but be more vigilant about preventing Turkey from being seen as a sanctions refuge by its Western allies and partners. Turkey's energy-related reliance on Russia, which has grown again recently, is another area where the opposition will look to rebalance.¹⁵

Engaging Damascus. Facilitating the voluntary return of Syrians to their homeland has become a political priority in Turkey. This will push Ankara toward seeking some form of compromise with the Syrian regime. While doing so, the AKP and the opposition will see merit in retaining a working relationship with Russia and Iran, although the

opposition will be more skeptical of such ties. As Assad gradually emerges from his international isolation, he has shown himself to be in no rush with Turkey and, specifically, careful not to strengthen Erdogan's hand before the May elections. The bad blood with Erdogan suggests Assad would prefer to talk about normalization with the Turkish opposition. In any case, Assad's precondition that Turkey withdraw from Syria will be a sticking point.¹⁶ This demand is something on which the opposition may be predisposed to deliver, but only after Turkey's security concerns relating to YPG activities in northern Syria are met satisfactorily. This, in turn, represents a challenge for Assad, especially given the continuing U.S. military presence in northeast Syria and American support for the YPG.¹⁷

Turkey and the European Union. European-led relief and aid efforts after the February earthquakes were well received in Ankara and breathed positive energy into an otherwise strained relationship with the European Union. Moreover, recent positive exchanges with Greece have increased hopes of greater stability ahead. Erdogan needs this tranquility more than ever for economic and political reasons, and he can be expected to refrain from escalatory behavior in the postelection period. His hope would be to start modernizing Turkey's customs union with the EU—by broadening its scope, as well as adding services to already-covered industrial goods—and to enhance Turkey's role in Europe's supply chain as a reliable manufacturing base. His long record, however, will inevitably be cause for European skepticism. The opposition would pursue the same goals with the EU and enjoy the advantage of being a preferred interlocutor. Signs already suggest that political change could prompt a surge in foreign investor interest.¹⁸ An opposition-led government could consolidate this trend by quickly establishing macroeconomic stability and rebuilding trust in the rule of law and the country's investment ecosystem.

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How Turkey Might Look After the Polls

Soner Cagaptay

The potential outcomes of Turkey’s May elections—a presidential-parliamentary sweep for the opposition, a sweep for Erdogan’s bloc, or a split decision—will lead Turkey in meaningfully different directions, both in the short and the long term.

When it comes to Turkey’s foreign policy, an opposition triumph will prompt an Atlanticist turn, including on the Ukraine war, while an Erdogan win will cement the country’s existing transactional approach. Domestically, an opposition victory will revive adherence to the rule of law—the new government will release wrongfully jailed figures such as the HDP’s imprisoned leader, Selahattin Demirtas, and the philanthropist Osman Kavala, and lift restrictions on key freedoms covering media, assembly, and expression. Such a pivot will improve the country’s investment environment and invite large cash inflows, ironically resuscitating a dynamic from the early Erdogan years. Markets will likely rally, and the lira will eventually stabilize.

An emphasis on democratic freedoms will warm relations with Turkey’s largest trade and investment partner—the European Union, a body Turkey seeks to join—while heralding short-term economic stability and growth. Ties with the United States will

strengthen as well, given the opposition’s willingness to end the drama over the (Russia-supplied) S-400, even as differences will remain on other issues, such as U.S. support for the Syria-based Kurdish People’s Defense Units (YPG). Turkey’s deep economic bonds with Russia will likewise prevent it from aligning completely with U.S.-led economic sanctions targeting Moscow.

In the case of an uncontested Erdogan win, the president could conceivably ease his general crackdown on rights and liberties, even as he proceeds with his model of “stable autocracy.” One can expect an altogether harsher reality if the results are contested. On the economic front, Erdogan could embrace the more conventional economic policies that led to boom times during his first decade in power, recognizing the failure of his more recent reliance on unorthodox views. Even a reversion on economic policy would not entirely mitigate the negative effects of eroded rule of law and institutions and the associated damage to the national economy. Erdogan will therefore have to navigate continued instability, leaning on infusions from Russia and the Gulf monarchies to sustain the lira day-to-day. A key economic challenge for Turkey will be dealing with the exodus of educated middle- and upper-class citizens who have

lost hope amid a sweep by Erdogan's bloc. The cost in talent will be significant, stunting the country's aspirations to become an advanced, wealthy society.

In the short term, to summarize, Turkey will look more stable economically and politically in the event of an opposition win, and less so—especially economically—if Erdogan's bloc wins both the presidency and parliament. But to understand long-term scenarios for the opposition Nation's Alliance, or "Table of Six," one needs to peruse Turkish political history, wherein no coalition government has ever finished its full term. Moreover, all thirteen coalition governments since the early 1970s have ended in both political and economic crisis. Given the ideologically disparate nature of the Nation's Alliance, as well as its tenuous relationship with the HDP, political differences will almost inevitably surface among its component parties, undermining its resilience.

Moreover, proposed reforms, institutional restoration, and the establishment of checks and balances will likely be slowed by high-ranking Erdogan loyalists, while his media acolytes keep fanning polarization. A "Netanyahu outcome" could therefore eventually befall Turkey, with the opposition splintering and Erdogan allying with far-right groups to rebound in possible snap elections following political or economic crises.

The Putin Factor

Russian president Vladimir Putin could insinuate himself into Turkish politics at various future events to help Erdogan. The Russian president's overall goal would be to hinder a potential Atlanticist mandate for the opposition and either deny the opposition a victory or help bring Erdogan back to power.

For starters, Putin could initiate new lump-sum financial transfers to Turkey, as he did in 2022, providing Erdogan with an economic lifeline. Putin may also interfere in Turkey's elections, including by launching information operations—including fake news—to undermine opposition unity and manipulate social media to benefit third-party presidential candidates

such as Muharrem Ince. The Russian leader here would aim to deny Kilicdaroglu an outright win on May 14, even if the latter somehow triumphs on May 28, aided by vote-switchers from Ince as well as abstentions.

Faced with a Kilicdaroglu presidency, Putin may seek to catalyze economic troubles for Turkey through de facto embargos on trade and Russian tourist visits. Russia is Turkey's number-one source of tourists, and a June boycott could cost the Turkish economy billions of dollars for the summer season. Should the opposition win, Putin also would likely demand immediate payment of Ankara's delayed energy bills or even impose new higher prices on gas exports to Turkey, this time burdening the economy with hefty bills in winter. Such penalties could offset Turkey's short-term financial gains from Western investment flows.

Putin, furthermore, could delay further natural gas deliveries, undermining Ankara's military positions in Libya, Syria, and the South Caucasus, where Russian troops and proxies oppose Turkish and Turkish-linked forces. Such moves, combined with economic troubles and coalition infighting, could render the opposition feeble and ineffective in the eyes of the Turkish electorate. Erdogan could then pitch his restoration as a return to stability and security.

Prospect of Split Government

While the path to presidential victory is direct—crossing 50 percent for a candidate in the first round or, if no one does so, winning a two-person runoff on May 28—the route to a parliamentary triumph is quite convoluted, owing to a system of electoral alliances, as well as a 2022 change to the election law that favors Erdogan.

In 2022, Erdogan passed a new electoral law through the parliament,¹ replacing an existing law that apportioned seats based on aggregate votes and favored stronger electoral alliances. Predicting that the opposition Nation's Alliance would be stronger than his People's Alliance, Erdogan supplanted the law with one that favors stronger parties—in this case, his own AKP.

Accordingly, on May 14, Erdogan’s AKP, together with its allies, could win a legislative majority even if these parties collectively fail to reach 50 percent of the vote. In fact, some simulations show Erdogan’s bloc winning a majority with as little as 45 percent support thanks to the new electoral law.²

A split-government outcome in the May elections—with Erdogan’s bloc winning the parliament and

the opposition taking the presidency—appears to be the most likely scenario at the time of writing. This outcome could result in early elections as well, this time precipitated by an even quicker political crisis—triggered by the Erdogan majority bloc and Erdogan-appointed bureaucrats sabotaging reform efforts, with Putin playing the spoiler. Amid the ensuing government impasse, snap elections could be held within the next couple of years.

NOTES

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Conclusion: Defending the Vote and Turkish Democracy

Soner Cagaptay

Ultimately, Turkey’s nearly 61 million voters will determine the country’s future direction on May 14, casting one ballot each for president and parliament—and possibly in a May 28 presidential runoff.¹ The outcome of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s most serious challenge in twenty years will have long-term ramifications both within Turkey and outside its borders. For the United States, Turkey is an important NATO ally, including in the context of the Ukraine war. It also figures prominently in the alliance’s Nordic expansion and in the great power competition pitting Washington against Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran. Setting aside its milestone status since Turkey’s first free and fair vote in 1950, the contest could also be the most consequential on the world stage in 2023, given Turkey’s global role.

A Longer Tradition of Free Elections than Spain

A peaceful election season, which as of now remains most likely, is important for Turkey’s stability. This hopeful prospect owes in part to Turkey’s deep democratic traditions—it has held elections longer than has Spain—and its record of generally smooth handovers. Finally, Turkey’s citizens have shown a love of voting. In the 2019 nationwide local elections, for example, turnout was at 86 percent.² Citizens often return to polling places after they have voted to observe and assist the count. They are, in this sense, a safety valve for Turkish democracy.

But Unfair Races of Late

Nevertheless, election campaigns in Turkey—especially since the switch to an executive-style presidential system in 2018—have become increasingly unfair. This is because President Erdogan has expanded his grip over the media, courts, and independent bodies such as the national Supreme Election Council (YSK), thereby undermining their integrity. More and more, these institutions take their cue from him, endangering election security. The unfair climate actually predated the change to a presidential system. In 2014, for example, Erdogan's candidate for Ankara mayor, Melih Gokcek, trailed his rival by 27,000 votes on election night, March 30, 2014, only to be declared winner by 31,000 votes following an “overnight recount.”³ Five years later, on May 6, 2019, the YSK annulled the results of the March 2019 elections in Istanbul, which had delivered a loss to Erdogan's party.⁴ Notably, YSK officials had remained mum for five weeks on the matter, only announcing their decision after Erdogan claimed the vote had been rigged.⁵

Some key bureaucrats, too, have started openly supporting the government, blurring the party-state distinction, as well as making state resources unfairly available to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its chair—none other than Erdogan himself. For instance, AKP officials frequently hold joint press conferences with governors—the top bureaucrats in Turkey's eighty-one provinces—often at the governors' offices, suggesting the steady but sad erosion of the party-state firewall.⁶ Together with Erdogan's complete control of the police, a national force reporting to his interior minister, these dynamics will help Erdogan at the ballot box, while also providing his camp with a competitive advantage to potentially overpower the opposition bloc if the vote is contested or if the presidential race goes to a runoff on May 28. Another threat to the opposition has emerged lately in the third-party candidacy of populist CHP defector Muharrem Ince, who is getting outsize attention in pro-Erdogan media outlets and social media platforms and could, accordingly, pull enough votes from the CHP-led coalition to force a presidential runoff.⁷

Democratic Resilience and Likely a Free Vote

A broadly free vote could help counter the unsettling prospect of coercive AKP behavior. Moreover, elections in Turkey still matter as a source of legitimacy, including for President Erdogan's base. The ultimate outcome of the 2019 Istanbul mayoral vote offers a case in point. In that race, Erdogan's candidate—Binali Yildirim—had fallen short by 13,000 votes to Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate Ekrem Imamoglu in March, only to be trounced by 800,000 votes in the June redo. The president had wrongly believed his sway over Turkey's bureaucracy, institutions, and media would help him reverse the outcome. The huge margin for the CHP reflected many vote-switchers and participation by others who had stayed home for the initial vote. The message was clear: *Even losers have to respect the outcome.* Also bitter for Erdogan was Gokcek's loss of the Ankara mayoralty—won in the rigged 2014 contest—to Mansur Yavas. To emphasize its messaging on democracy, the opposition is running both Imamoglu and Yavas as vice presidential candidates this year. *This is democracy*, the party is proclaiming. *Embrace it.*

In the forthcoming elections, large-scale rigging is unlikely. As in 2014 and 2019, however, Erdogan's advisors could counsel refusing to recognize the outcome in narrowly contested districts—separated by perhaps 1–2 percent for president, or a seat or two for parliament—claiming fraud as they did for Istanbul in March 2019. Still stinging from that ultimate outcome, though, Erdogan may actually reject such a tack. Further, if election security were under threat, Turkey's civil society could push back successfully to protect the country's democracy, as it did four years ago in Istanbul.⁸

The Central Role of Information Flow

Even then, the U.S. government can take note of the following areas where Turkey's citizens will work hardest to keep the vote free and the country stable.

Information flow to the OSCE mission. Turkey has a long tradition of transparent vote-counting, reinforced by a broad middle class and strong civil society groups focused on election monitoring and security. These civil society groups, which include *Oy ve Otesi* (Vote and Beyond), *Türkiye Gonulluleri* (Volunteers of Turkey), and *Secim Guvenligi Platformu* (Platform for Election Security),⁹ have long worked with European bodies such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE), which will be sending an election-monitoring mission to Turkey. Citizens will take the OSCE findings seriously, given Turkey's historic relationship with Europe. For its part, Washington can help ensure the rapid flow of election results from Turkish civil society to the European body and from there to global audiences—and once again, vetted and emphatic, back to Turkey.

Openness of social media platforms. Another way for pro-democracy actors to facilitate the free flow of information is by empowering responsible social media channels. In reaction to what is essentially a government monopoly on Turkish conventional media—with pro-Erdogan businesses controlling nearly 90 percent of such outlets—citizens have migrated to social media platforms in even larger numbers than the rest of the world. With at least 18.6 million Turkish users on Twitter alone,¹⁰ for instance, Turkey is the world's seventh-largest user of the service, vis-à-vis a global population ranking of eighteenth.¹¹

Simply put, social media has become *the* media in Turkey. Erdogan's response has been to impose blackouts, content bans, and—finally—access restrictions, as he did on February 8, only two days after the earthquakes, when he visited the country's disaster-stricken provinces.¹² To prevent criticism over the uncoordinated nature of earthquake relief efforts, the president's advisors narrowed access bandwidth for Twitter, making communication over the platform all but impossible for hours.

Turkey's citizens are resourceful and have become technology savvy to bypass internet bans. The U.S. government, in turn, could consider working

with social media platforms to devise strategies and technologies to ensure Ankara does not throttle social media access and hamper the flow of information. A Turkish social media law passed in 2020 forces global platforms to open offices in the country, exposing them to sanctions and fines, and their staff to imprisonment, if the firms fail to respond to government directives to ban or limit content.¹³ This will be Washington's biggest hurdle as it encourages social media companies not to give in to censorship.

The Need for Common Transatlantic Messaging on Turkey's Economic Ties to the West

To deliver its messaging on the Turkish elections most effectively, Washington should coordinate with its European allies. Notwithstanding Erdogan's (partially) successful efforts to shift Turkey's identity—at home, from secular to Islamic; internationally, from European to Middle Eastern—the country remains economically part of Europe and the West. Since 1995, Turkey and the EU have shared a customs union, and as a resource-poor country, Turkey needs Western financial inflows in order to grow.¹⁴ The EU alone furnishes around 70 percent of foreign direct investment in Turkey,¹⁵ and Turkey and the EU are part of each other's supply chains, so entwined is their relationship.

Erdogan would struggle to ignore a unified U.S.-Europe message on election security and integrity, especially given its links to Turkey's long-term economic prospects. To be sure, the president has embraced a transactional view of foreign policy and he may threaten retaliatory measures, such as further delaying Sweden's NATO accession. In this regard, Britain—which is trusted by Erdogan and Turkey's security elites, among other reasons, for having quickly reached out after the failed 2016 coup attempt—can play messenger and goodwill ambassador for the West.

Possible Offer from the Opposition

In the unlikely scenario in which Erdogan signals his intent to reject the vote outcome, the opposition—to secure its own interests as well as a democratic transition—would almost certainly need to promise not to prosecute the president, his family members, or key figures in his administration. Recognizing the various pressures facing the opposition, including a fragile economy and possible snap elections that could conceivably return Erdogan to power (explained in the previous section, on Turkey's outlook after the polls), Erdogan may take up this offer.

Beware of Russian Meddling

If Britain is America's best partner when it comes to Turkey policy, Russia is its worst adversary. By transferring significant funds to Turkey before the elections—and helping boost Erdogan's popularity—Russia's President Vladimir Putin has already picked sides.¹⁶ As noted, Putin could potentially send more money, as

well as engage in information operations aimed manipulating social media content and interfering in the elections. Putin's likely motives to interfere in Turkey's democratic process will spike if the presidential vote goes to a runoff. An Erdogan win would give the Russian president cause for hope as the war in Ukraine drags on with little for him to celebrate.

Behold Turkey's Democratic Memory

None of the mechanisms suggested here to defend the vote in Turkey could work were it not for the country's resilient democratic tradition. This could be reason for optimism as Turkish voters prepare to go to the polls in May. If a core lesson of America's interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan is that it takes much time and effort to build a democracy, then the Erdogan era dictates that tearing down a democracy also requires a lot of work. Free elections in Turkey still matter, and the vote in May will likely be free and peaceful. Less certain is what future elections will look like if Erdogan wins.

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AFTERWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I edited this set of essays over March and April 2023 with the aim of understanding the complex drivers that will determine the outcome of the vote in Turkey, from an unfair campaign season to a likely free vote on May 14, along with potentially consequential changes such as the entry of Muharrem Ince and the seemingly obscure role of actors like the Free Cause Party (HUDA-PAR). The political scene is very dynamic in Turkey, and future developments could foil the various predictions offered here. Whatever happens from now on, I hope these essays offer a useful snapshot of Turkey at this moment of political uncertainty. I'd like to thank all my contributors for their deft analysis as well as editors Jason Warshof and Miriam Himmelfarb and research assistant Sude Akgundogdu. Final thanks go to designer Daniel Kohan.

—Soner Cagaptay, April 2023

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