

The Coming of Erdoğan's Fourth War for Control: The AKP's Looming Showdown with Turkey's Nationalists

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Brief Analysis

Although his alliance with the MHP has kept him in power, Erdoğan increasingly views the nationalist party as a threat that needs to be dealt with.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has established his authoritarian regime by eliminating his rivals one by one throughout the last two decades. In his battles with the Kemalist generals, Gulenists, and Kurds, Erdoğan has come out victorious at every turn. But although his rule is incontestable today, he still shares the fruits of his victories with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)—his only remaining ally for the past five years. Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) needs this alliance to maintain its majority in the Turkish Parliament. Although the two parties posture as a holy alliance against internal and external enemies, a recent political assassination and the following developments have revealed that the AKP-MHP pact is not as strong as it seems.

The involvement of leading MHP figures in the killing of [Sinan Ates \(https://m.bianet.org/english/crisis/272494-suspect-accused-of-instigating-sinan-ates-murder-captured-in-istanbul\)](https://m.bianet.org/english/crisis/272494-suspect-accused-of-instigating-sinan-ates-murder-captured-in-istanbul), former leader of the Grey Wolves—an MHP-affiliated organization—had dominated the discussion in Turkish politics in the weeks leading up to the major earthquake that decimated much of southern Turkey. Ates was apparently shot dead by drug gangs on December 30 in Ankara, seemingly as a result of an intra-MHP struggle. The police have now [found \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/01/murder-former-grey-wolves-leader-divides-turkeys-nationalists\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/01/murder-former-grey-wolves-leader-divides-turkeys-nationalists) that Ates' murderers have MHP connections, and these leads may carry all the way up to the MHP leadership.

Allegedly, the investigation is being [carried out \(https://www.evrensel.net/yazi/92305/sinan-ates-suikasti-mit-raporu-ve-devlet-krizi\)](https://www.evrensel.net/yazi/92305/sinan-ates-suikasti-mit-raporu-ve-devlet-krizi) by police departments with close ties to Erdoğan, bypassing other departments dominated by MHP members. Moreover, Turkish intelligence prepared a report about the MHP connections and presented it to Erdoğan a week after the assassination. Some journalists have therefore argued that these revelations and the depth of the investigation are only possible with Erdoğan's [blessings \(https://www.evrensel.net/yazi/92305/sinan-ates-suikasti-mit-raporu-ve-devlet-krizi\)](https://www.evrensel.net/yazi/92305/sinan-ates-suikasti-mit-raporu-ve-devlet-krizi). According to reports, Erdoğan wanted his aides “to [push](#)

<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2232916>) it as far as it goes.”

Although he still needs the political support of MHP Chairman Devlet Bahçeli to ensure his control over Parliament, Erdoğan may be hoping to truncate the MHP’s influence over the bureaucracy if he succeeds again in the elections. In the past, the alliance with Bahçeli has been quite useful for Erdoğan, both in helping eliminate Erdoğan’s political rivals and introducing a presidential system. Besides, the recent earthquake disaster has put Erdoğan in a delicate situation right before the general elections—a situation which increases his reliance on the MHP. For its part, the MHP has reaped the benefits of a partnership with the AKP by extending its influence in the key positions of the Turkish bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, it would not be surprising if Erdoğan wants to further consolidate his power by taming the MHP and the Grey Wolves—a group which has considerable influence over the security bureaucracy in particular, along with an effective intra-party organization structure and a long history of paramilitary activity. If Erdoğan and the nationalists cannot agree on a new power sharing deal, the subsequent tensions may trigger a new political showdown in Turkish politics.

Divide and Rule

Erdoğan’s current alliance with the MHP is just the latest in a series of alliances he has used to consolidate his position, demonstrating a skillful navigation between the different power blocs of Turkish politics. Although his power as a prime minister was more limited by friends and foes back when he initially began his first term in 2003, he has always succeeded in isolating his rivals and building up coalitions against his targets. Whenever his allies gain more strength than Erdoğan intended for them to wield, he has demonstrated that he has no problem with turning against them, finding new allies to back him up in the process.

At the beginning of his rule, Erdoğan’s major adversary was the Turkish military and the judiciary, which had overthrown Erdoğan’s Islamist predecessor just years before. Seeing themselves as protectors of the republic’s Kemalist values, the generals and judges tried to [close down \(https://m.bianet.org/bianet/politics/108647-constitutional-court-takes-up-the-akp-closure-case\)](https://m.bianet.org/bianet/politics/108647-constitutional-court-takes-up-the-akp-closure-case) the AKP in 2008. In response, Erdoğan found allies among the liberals and Gulenists to establish controls over the military.

When AKP-Gulen relations began to deteriorate from 2010 onwards, Erdoğan could now rely on an even wider spectrum of partners to help him overpower his new foe, including both [Kurdis \(https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/905918-yargidan-da-hesap-sorulmasi-lazim\)](https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/905918-yargidan-da-hesap-sorulmasi-lazim) and liberal political groups. After breaking ties with the Gulenists in late 2013, the AKP also made [overtures \(https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/yalcin-akdogandan-kumpas-aciklamasi-25471638\)](https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/yalcin-akdogandan-kumpas-aciklamasi-25471638) to the enemies of the new enemy, former Kemalist generals who became the suspects of deep state investigations between 2007 and 2013. After Erdoğan was sure of the demise of the Gulenists, some of those former generals were simply [arrested \(https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-58242442\)](https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-58242442) once more in 2021.

Pretty soon, Erdoğan’s disappointment with the Kurds led him to ally with the Turkish nationalists in 2015. More specifically, the Turkish-designated Kurdistan Workers’ party (PKK) and Kurdish political party People’s Democratic Party (HDP) did not meet some of Erdoğan’s expectations in domestic and foreign policy, despite the previous thaw in relations. Erdoğan had hoped the PKK would join his proxy war against the Assad regime in Syria and wanted the HDP to support his bid for presidency. These groups rejected both—a disagreement which blocked negotiations.

Yet, it was increasing Kurdish power that really concerned Erdoğan. In the June 2015 elections, the HDP crossed the election threshold and gained a critical position in Parliament just as the AKP [lost \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33042284\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33042284) its parliamentary majority. In the meantime, the PKK consolidated its position within Turkey and its affiliate, the People’s Defense Units (YPG), carved out a territory in

neighboring Syria in partnership with the United States. These changing dynamics were more than enough for Erdoğan to turn against the Kurds, and the Turkish nationalists were the ideal allies to balance against them.

Since then, Erdoğan's partnership with the MHP has grown day by day. Bahçeli helped Erdoğan to change the constitution and establish a **[new presidential system \(https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkeys-presidential-system-after-two-and-a-half-years\)](https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkeys-presidential-system-after-two-and-a-half-years)** in 2017. When the AKP lost parliamentary majority once more in the 2018 elections, the MHP's support enabled Erdoğan to control the legislation. In return, the nationalists have effectively become part of the governing coalition. They have gained **[strength \(https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/07/19/president-erdogans-alliance-with-the-far-right-pays-off\)](https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/07/19/president-erdogans-alliance-with-the-far-right-pays-off)** in the police, judiciary, and bureaucracy. And with the Gulenists purged from Turkey's bureaucracy after the 2016 coup attempt, the nationalists have filled the vacuum.

Considering the Turkish state's centralized structure, a political culture of consecrating the state, and the tradition of deep state practices, the MHP's influence in the bureaucracy is not simply an act of sharing perks but sharing the state power—which makes the MHP more than a coalition partner.

In his long road to a one-man regime, Erdoğan has consolidated his power by playing a delicate balancing act. He has never fought his wars alone. Instead, he has isolated his rivals and partnered with the enemies of the enemy. New partners, meanwhile, have reaped the benefits of being part of this rotating power coalition and have gained strength. Yet Erdoğan is a jealous politician. When the old enemies were defeated and new partners grew more powerful than Erdoğan could tolerate, he turned against his friends time and again.

A Gathering Storm?

On the eve of the general elections in Turkey, the AKP and the MHP still need each other to maintain their parliamentary majority. And of course, the continuation of this relationship is still desirable for the nationalists as they continue to consolidate their power in the bureaucracy and look to remain part of the governing coalition despite low voter support for the party—only **[around \(https://medyascope.tv/2022/09/02/metropoll-anketi-alti-masa-cumhur-ittifakini-gecti/\)](https://medyascope.tv/2022/09/02/metropoll-anketi-alti-masa-cumhur-ittifakini-gecti/)** 7 percent say they will vote for the MHP in the upcoming election. On top of that, falling afoul of Erdoğan would be too costly for the MHP.

For the AKP and Erdoğan, however, the cost of the alliance has been rising. The nationalists' growing power in the bureaucracy, their ideological extremism, and their potential role as a kingmaker in the formation of a post-Erdoğan government are three prospective issues that will test the limits of the AKP-MHP alliance in the coming period.

No authoritarian leader or party would want to see concentration of power in one actor besides itself. Thus, the nationalists' growing influence through the police, intelligence, judiciary, and military may be enough to estrange Erdoğan and the AKP. After all, this nationalist influence sometimes overwrites even the AKP's and Erdoğan's power. For example, Suleyman Soylu, the Ministry of Interior who is closer to **[Bahçeli \(https://medyascope.tv/2022/11/07/davutoglu-bahcelinin-sahip-cikmasiyla-birlikte-soylu-kendi-basina-davranma-yetkisine-sahip-tek-bakan-oldu/\)](https://medyascope.tv/2022/11/07/davutoglu-bahcelinin-sahip-cikmasiyla-birlikte-soylu-kendi-basina-davranma-yetkisine-sahip-tek-bakan-oldu/)** and the nationalists (**<https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/tolga-sardan-buyutec/soylu-ile-bahceli-arasinda-mekik-dokuyan-polis-mudurleri,34714>**), has demonstrated that he has the **[power \(https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/tan-oral/tan-oral-ciziyor,27049\)](https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/tan-oral/tan-oral-ciziyor,27049)** to remove bureaucrats close to Berat Albayrak, Erdoğan's son-in-law, and replace them with nationalist figures. Soylu's power struggle with Albayrak has been widely **[discussed \(https://ahvalnews.com/akp/conflict-between-rival-factions-damaging-turkeys-ruling-party-cumhuriyet-newspaper\)](https://ahvalnews.com/akp/conflict-between-rival-factions-damaging-turkeys-ruling-party-cumhuriyet-newspaper)** in Turkish news.

Likewise, the police's ideological orientation seems closer to the MHP than the AKP, as the brutal crackdown on the Furkan Foundation showed most recently. Although the Furkan is disliked by the AKP because of its opposition to the government, the police's excessive use of force against the group **[disturbed \(https://tele1.com.tr/furkan-](https://tele1.com.tr/furkan-)**

vakfina-yapilan-sert-mudahaleye-akpli-vekillerden-tepki-vahset-587141/) some AKP leaders. But Bahçeli gave his full **blessings (<https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-60843058>)** to the police, a contrast which may indicate that the security bureaucracy is run more by the MHP than the AKP. On top of that, the MHP's influence also extends outside of government, with deep connections to the Turkish **mafia (<https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/siyaset/alaattin-cakici-mhp-genel-merkezinde-bahceli-ile-bas-basa-gorusme-1975014>)** and a long history of paramilitary activity. Hence, it would not be a surprise if Erdoğan and the AKP see, at some point, the increasing power of their nationalist allies as a threat.

The MHP's ideological rigidity is another liability for Erdoğan both in foreign and domestic politics. In the last few years, Erdoğan has found shelter in Turkish nationalism against the growing popular discontent with economic woes and misgovernment. In a shift from earlier pan-Islamic imagery, he has increasingly used a nationalist discourse and aggressive foreign policy expansionism to capitalize on extant Turkish nationalist sentiments. But if he ever needs to re-initiate negotiations with the Kurds or pursue a dramatic policy change that could disappoint the Turkish nationalists, Erdoğan will not want to see an uncontrolled actor that can be more nationalist than him. This would be a political *deja-vu* for Turkey—in 1944, the one-party regime of the early republic crushed ultra-nationalists with political trials in order to **'eliminate (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24585883>)** all competing interpretations of Turkish national identity' as domestic and international political conditions changed radically in the post-war world.

Last but not least, the post-Erdoğan succession plans are another potential friction point between the AKP and the MHP. With their influence in the security bureaucracy, judiciary, government, and the parliament, the nationalists hold key positions that can shape the new Turkey after Erdoğan. Most likely, Erdoğan's family members and his Islamist aides, like Hakan Fidan and Ibrahim Kalin—likely contenders to succeed Erdoğan—would want Erdoğan to weaken the MHP while he still has power to do it.

In this respect, the AKP-MHP alliance has significant challenges in the coming period. Given Erdoğan's history with previous allies, an AKP-MHP fallout is not outside the realm of possibility. Although the MHP seems pleased with the current power share, Bahçeli is known for his dramatic twists in Turkish politics.

For example, Bahçeli startled everyone when he made an unexpected call to his coalition partners to hold early elections in 2002. After 2015, he did not hesitate to cut a deal with Erdoğan—the person who Bahçeli had promised to judge for his corruption. Given this willingness to pivot, Bahçeli is very capable of abandoning the AKP if he ever senses weakness on Erdoğan's side. The MHP could theoretically join with Turkey's other political actors, with the exception of Kurdish groups. After all, the rival nationalist leader, Meral Aksener—whose ideological orientation is hardly distinguishable from Bahçeli—is within the opposition bloc. In short, if Erdoğan ever stumbles, including in the upcoming elections, the nationalists will likely once again become kingmakers for a new Turkish power.

Granted, it is not entirely possible to verify the reports about the rivalry between Soylu and Albayrak or the tensions between the AKP and the nationalists. The current state of Turkish democracy does not leave much space for independent journalism. But even if all reports regarding the AKP-MHP friction are ignored, the balance of power and Erdoğan's previous dealings with his allies still provide notable evidence of an impending showdown.

Of course, an all-out war is not a likely option for now and even after the elections. A head-on collision at this point would be too costly for both sides. However, even if Erdoğan seeks to trim the nationalists' power and bring them under his full control—using them to balance or discipline future rogue actors within bureaucracy and politics—Bahçeli and his aides face giving up some of the monumental gains that they have made in the last few years and may respond accordingly. Moreover, they cannot know for certain how far Erdoğan's trimming will go.

If Erdoğan succeeds in bringing the MHP under his control once again, he will have full control of the bureaucracy,

he will be the only champion of Turkish nationalism, and he will secure his family's and fellow Islamists' place in the future of Turkish politics. As such, AKP-MHP relations will be one of the critical issues to watch in the lead-up to and aftermath of the elections. ❖

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