

# How Will Turkey's Earthquake Affect the Current Election Cycle?

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Brief Analysis

**Once Ankara meets the initial challenge of determining an election date amid unimaginable human tragedy, it will face a campaign season dominated by debates over the conduct of relief efforts and the government's level of responsibility for the growing death toll.**

**T**he earthquake that struck ten southern Turkish provinces on February 6 will be remembered as the country's worst humanitarian disaster in modern history. In addition to numerous casualties in neighboring Syria, over 31,000 people have lost their lives in Turkey as of February 13, while at least 80,000 have been injured and millions may have been left homeless.

The country's most pressing challenge is to provide relief for the more than 13 million citizens who live in areas directly impacted by the tremors. Within the context of those efforts, however, Ankara will face a practical political challenge as well: determining whether and when to hold this year's presidential and parliamentary elections, which are legally required to take place on or before June 18 per the country's constitution. Will President Recep Tayyip Erdogan attempt to postpone the polls up to or beyond this deadline, and if so, what implications would this hold for Turkish sociopolitical dynamics?

## Logistical Challenges to Holding Elections

**O**n January 21, just two weeks before the earthquake, Erdogan [signaled \(https://apnews.com/article/politics-turkey-government-recep-tayyip-erdogan-f2a75ed9d0569459c8dade26c694422c\)](https://apnews.com/article/politics-turkey-government-recep-tayyip-erdogan-f2a75ed9d0569459c8dade26c694422c) that the dual parliamentary and presidential elections could be held on May 14. Yet the sheer size of the subsequent disaster would make it extremely challenging to prepare for a nationwide poll in less than ninety days, even aside from the personal and emotional obstacles to dealing with electoral matters amid such a tragedy.

Over 15 percent of Turkey's 85 million citizens live in the immediate earthquake zone, where around 7,000

buildings have collapsed and tens of thousands more have become inhabitable. Many survivors are moving to temporary shelters and tent/container cities and will eventually be relocated; many others are leaving the area indefinitely. All of this movement and chaos will create complications for electoral boards when issuing ballots, among other difficulties. The earthquake also demolished major infrastructure in numerous southern cities, especially Antakya and Kahramanmaras, making it unlikely that life will return to normal in these areas for months, if not years, to come.

## Postponement Scenarios

**A**ccording to the Turkish constitution, the next parliamentary and presidential elections have to be held no later than five years after the previous polls held in June 2018, resulting in this year's deadline of June 18. Given that Erdogan's proposed May 14 date was never formalized, and considering the amount of relief work and election preparations that need to be carried out in the south, political parties may agree to hold the elections as late as possible, meaning June 18 or just before. This would give the country nearly 120 days to prepare—though many of the obstacles described above would still be present.

Technically, the constitution permits the government to postpone elections for up to a year under one circumstance: if the country is at war. Yet this scenario seems utterly unlikely at the moment. Although Ankara's relations with some of its neighbors (particularly Greece) have been tense in recent years, the generous earthquake assistance that these nations have almost universally offered is shifting Turkish public perceptions dramatically. Even Armenia, which has no diplomatic ties with Ankara, supplied significant assistance.

Erdogan could conceivably attempt to postpone the elections beyond the deadline using his grip over key institutions such as the Supreme Election Council (YSK), the national board for supervising polls. In March 2019, he directed this council to annul Istanbul's mayoral election, which his candidate had lost. Amid much furor, the opposition candidate won the follow-up election that June, this time by an even wider margin. To be sure, the YSK is not constitutionally empowered to postpone the national polls beyond June 18, and Erdogan may now be hesitant to pursue this option aggressively given the fierce public opposition that emerged when a former ally of his [floated the idea \(https://twitter.com/bulent\\_arinc/status/1625178179689230339?s=12&t=loetzxdSsZJSINCPFd6zvg\)](https://twitter.com/bulent_arinc/status/1625178179689230339?s=12&t=loetzxdSsZJSINCPFd6zvg) on February 13. Even if he were to somehow bypass the constitution, the electorate may be angry enough about his anti-democratic moves to humble him again, as it did in June 2019.

## Erdogan May Extend—Even Expand—the State of Emergency

**O**n February 7, the government [declared \(https://www.cnbc.com/2023/02/07/turkeys-president-erdogan-declares-state-of-emergency-for-earthquake-hit-regions.html\)](https://www.cnbc.com/2023/02/07/turkeys-president-erdogan-declares-state-of-emergency-for-earthquake-hit-regions.html) a state of emergency (SOE) in the ten earthquake provinces, suspending many rights and liberties in order to facilitate rescue/relief efforts and empower law enforcement agencies to combat looting. The SOE will expire on May 7, before potential June elections. Yet developments in the coming days may encourage Erdogan to extend it.

Current reports suggest that tens of thousands more victims may be buried under the rubble. To put the numbers in perspective, the final death toll is likely to far surpass that of Turkey's war for independence a century ago, when over 37,000 people lost their lives. Once rescue efforts officially or essentially end in the next few days, the count will rise dramatically, leaving the Turkish public and wider international community with the grave task of digesting the disaster's full repercussions.

At that point, Erdogan will come under much greater scrutiny for his government's [slow and uncoordinated \(https://apnews.com/article/politics-turkey-government-business-earthquakes-](https://apnews.com/article/politics-turkey-government-business-earthquakes-)

[0f7d4fb77ea45c94b7b5ecd637a930c7](https://www.bbc.com/news/64568826)) response to the earthquake. He will also face criticism over the national construction boom that has marked his long tenure in power. Numerous troubling images have emerged from the southeast since the disaster, such as intact buildings standing next to completely collapsed apartment blocks. Such images will no doubt lead many of Turkey's citizens to raise questions about widespread reports of [building code](https://www.bbc.com/news/64568826) (<https://www.bbc.com/news/64568826>) and [urban zoning violations](https://www.ft.com/content/6113a9d2-25d4-4329-bb6a-0a50b1cff30c) (<https://www.ft.com/content/6113a9d2-25d4-4329-bb6a-0a50b1cff30c>) linked to corruption, as well as [suspicious government connections](https://pomed.org/publication/snapshot-cronies-in-crisis-economic-woes-clientelism-and-elections-in-turkey/) (<https://pomed.org/publication/snapshot-cronies-in-crisis-economic-woes-clientelism-and-elections-in-turkey/>) with construction companies.

In response to such pressure, Erdogan will likely resort to a “force majeure” narrative, using his control over an estimated 90 percent of Turkey's media to convince citizens that the high death toll was unavoidable given the scale of the earthquake. Alternatively—or in addition—he may attempt to put the blame on small construction firms, emphasizing individual negligence to absolve his government of major responsibility. On February 12, for example, police [arrested](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-steps-up-collapsed-buildings-investigation-orders-113-arrested-2023-02-12/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-steps-up-collapsed-buildings-investigation-orders-113-arrested-2023-02-12/>) numerous suspects “identified as responsible for the collapse of some of the thousands of buildings.”

Erdogan may also find it expedient to extend the SOE in quake-hit provinces through the election period, significantly curbing freedoms of assembly, association, expression, and media for nearly one-sixth of the country's population. In addition to the nationwide restrictions on liberty that his government had already instituted before the disaster, an SOE would render the campaign distinctly unfree and unfair in those ten provinces, giving him an advantage at the ballot box. In previous weeks, polls were showing the “Table of Six” opposition bloc running neck and neck with Erdogan's alliance, so he may be sorely tempted to tilt the balance with an SOE. And if unrest or protests break out nationally, he might even expand the SOE to cover the entire country.

## Turkey Is Entering Terra Incognita

**F**or now, it is too early to assess Turkey's likely political trajectory post-earthquake, since the full scope and consequences of the destruction will not become clear for some time. Yet if the announced death toll increases substantially in the coming days, it could upend domestic dynamics and move the country into unknown political territory. Thus far, Erdogan has failed to publicly acknowledge this risk, instead using many of his post-earthquake speeches to chide citizens for spreading “[fake news and distortions](https://www.youtube.com/shorts/9b72ZJg7Qt4)” (<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/9b72ZJg7Qt4>). In contrast, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), has doubled down, recognizing the calamity as a national disaster and promising to [end the corruption](https://twitter.com/kilicdaroglu/status/1624528727941185537) (<https://twitter.com/kilicdaroglu/status/1624528727941185537>) that has resulted in so many casualties. The run-up to the elections is therefore likely to be dominated by debates over the conduct of earthquake relief efforts, a precise account of the destruction and death toll, and the government's level of responsibility for these losses—with Erdogan pushing back forcefully against any criticism.

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