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How Erdogan Wins

by [Soner Cagaptay](#)

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey will formally begin a new era in June, with the president becoming the ultimate head of state, government, police, army, and the ruling party.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey has called for [snap elections](#) on June 24, almost a year and a half before the scheduled date in November 2019. He is expected to win because he has, once again, managed to stack the odds—militant nationalism, strong economic growth, a post-coup state of emergency that allows him to deploy security forces to crush his opposition and almost complete control of the Turkish media—in his favor.

The Turkish economy [grew](#) at 7.4 percent last year. Mr. Erdogan is seizing the moment to take credit for the strong economic performance before the economy shows signs of overheating. And there are worries stirred by a credit boom: The annual inflation rate [peaked](#) at 13 percent in November, the highest in 14 years. The current account deficit swelled to 4.7 percent of the gross domestic product in December, and the lira [tumbled](#) to a historic low in April.

Mr. Erdogan is enjoying popular support because of a surge of [Turkish nationalism](#) after his victory in the Afrin area of northern Syria, which the Turkish Army and its affiliates took from the Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG. The YPG is linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the terrorist group that Turkey has been fighting for decades.

But there are concerns about the elections being held while the state of emergency, imposed in the aftermath of the [failed 2016 coup](#), remains in place. The state of emergency gives the police, controlled by the central government, the right to arrest anyone without a court order and gives the government administration the [mandate](#)

to curb freedoms of expression, assembly and association.

The Turkish government has used these extraordinary powers not just to clamp down on coup plotters but also to crack down on the opposition parties and activists. Selahattin Demirtas, the leader of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party, or HDP—one of three parties in the nation's Parliament that oppose President Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP—has been imprisoned, along with eight other HDP lawmakers. Eleven of the party's 59 lawmakers have been expelled from Parliament.

Turkey's deputy prime minister labeled Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of the Republican People's Party, or CHP, the main opposition party, a "national security issue." Enis Berberoglu, a prominent CHP lawmaker, was sentenced to five years in prison after being accused of leaking a video to *Cumhuriyet*, an opposition newspaper, purportedly showing Turkish intelligence personnel sending weapons to Syria.

It is not a fair playing field for Mr. Erdogan's opponents. Turks get their news mostly from television. Nowadays news networks in Turkey almost exclusively broadcast Mr. Erdogan's message. According to a study that analyzes live news coverage in Turkey's 17 largest networks, last March—before the April 2017 referendum on constitutional amendments for and against an executive presidency—the president's party received 470 hours of airtime, the CHP 45 hours, the MHP 15 hours, and the HDP zero minutes. With the sale of the Dogan Media Company, the largest Turkish media group, in March to Demiroren Holding, a pro-government conglomerate, 90 percent of the Turkish media is now controlled by pro-Erdogan businesses.

Recent changes to Turkey's election system may also tilt the playing field in Mr. Erdogan's favor. Turkey has a paper-based voting system. A new law mandates that the chairman of the election monitoring board in every district of the country be a government official. Previously, the chairman had been elected by majority vote by the board, which included representatives of all political parties. The change raises fears that these officials might not be honest during the vote count.

Traditionally, the paper ballots were placed in official envelopes after being stamped by ballot-box officials to prevent voter fraud. The new law stipulates that even ballots missing the stamp of the polling officials will be considered valid, raising fears of ballot stuffing.

Mr. Erdogan has also moved to neutralize two key challengers: Meral Aksener, a center-right nationalist politician who recently founded the Good Party, and Selahattin Demirtas, the imprisoned leader of the pro-Kurdish HDP. Ms. Aksener is Mr. Erdogan's only right-wing challenger in Turkey, where right-wing parties have formed the government for all but 17 months since 1950. She split from the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party last year over differences with the party leader's decision to support Mr. Erdogan during last April's referendum on an executive presidency. If she manages to significantly increase her votes, she could hurt Mr. Erdogan.

Ms. Aksener's Good Party could be disqualified from contesting the election because of a shrewd move by Mr. Erdogan in choosing the election date. Turkish electoral law requires a political party to hold its party congress six months before contesting an election. The Good Party misses the June 24 deadline by four days.

Turkey has a high electoral threshold, requiring parties to win 10 percent of the national tally before they can gain representation in the legislature. The party is currently polling just under 10 percent. Mr. Erdogan has left Ms. Aksener with little time or space to build her nascent faction into a formidable oppositional force.

Mr. Erdogan's other challenger is the imprisoned HDP leader Mr. Demirtas. He is charismatic like Mr. Erdogan and relatable. During the June 2015 elections, he broadened the HDP's traditionally narrow Kurdish nationalist base by reaching out to liberal Turkish voters. It was the first time a pro-Kurdish party crossed the 10 percent electoral threshold and entered the Turkish Parliament.

Mr. Demirtas's victory denied a parliamentary majority to Mr. Erdogan's AKP. After the breakdown of the peace talks and [renewed conflict](#) between the Turkish military and the PKK in the summer of 2015, Mr. Demirtas failed to distance himself and his party from the PKK. Centrist Kurdish and liberal Turkish voters abandoned the HDP.

Mr. Demirtas was [detained](#) in November 2016 for not appearing in court to testify in continuing PKK-related investigations. Without his leadership and after losing the new voters, the HDP might find it difficult to cross the 10 percent threshold.

The new Turkish Parliament is most likely to be dominated by Mr. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party; the Republican People's Party, an insipid force that still won 130 out of 550 seats in the last election; and the hard-right MHP, which is allied with Mr. Erdogan and will contest in coalition with his AKP.

The AKP will have a solid majority in the new Parliament. June 24—the polling day—will be a historic day in Turkey. Mr. Erdogan narrowly won a [referendum](#) in April 2017 to change the Turkish political system from the parliamentary to the presidential system. The executive presidency, which would repose great powers in Mr. Erdogan, will kick in after June 24, and Turkey will formally switch to a new era where the president will be the ultimate head of state, government, police, army and the ruling party.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey](#). ❖

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