

## What Can We Expect from Turkey's 2023 Elections?

Jenny White

### Summary

Turkey will hold elections for parliament and president on May 14, 2023, the outcome of which will radically shape Turkey's future and relations with the rest of the world. Two main blocs of political parties have formed, one around the ruling AKP and current president, Tayyip Erdoğan, and the other around the opposition CHP and its leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. A win by Erdoğan will consolidate Turkey as an autocracy facing away from the West, while the opposition plans to return the country to parliamentary rule and broadly restore good relations with the West. Votes within the alliances will be pooled and polls currently show them almost equal for both elections, giving the excluded pro-Kurdish HDP, which polls at around 10%, the role of kingmaker. Both alliances must overcome their nationalist tendencies to woo the Kurds. If the opposition wins, the West must act quickly to help stabilize the country for what will be a fragile return to democracy.

### The Issue

Turkey is facing a nail-biting election of great importance for its future -- simultaneous elections for president and parliament on May 14, 2023. Will Turkey continue to be ruled by President Tayyip Erdoğan? His twenty years in power have seen the country's institutions hollowed out, its social fabric and economy shredded, grand corruption, indiscriminate arrests without due process, saber rattling abroad, and the consolidation of power not only by one party, but by one man. Or will the government be run by the opposition, a diverse group of six political parties that call themselves the Table of 6 or more formally the Nation Alliance? It is led by the Republican People's Party (CHP), headed by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The opposition plans to revert the government back from the super-charged presidential system that Erdoğan called into existence via referendum in 2017 to a modified version of the original parliamentary

system with a figurehead president. What is at stake in this election and what will it mean for the West?

### Analysis

#### *When and How?*

In recent weeks, scholars debated under what special circumstances the Turkish Constitution would permit an election earlier than the official date in June and whether or not President Erdoğan was eligible to run at all for a forbidden third term. Then Erdogan simply selected an early election date, May 14, 2023, and announced his candidacy. All discussions of legality became futile. This demonstrates several important qualities of the Turkish political system -- the gathering in of power by one man that undermines the rule of law when it suits him. It also shows that, despite this, elections continue to be worth fighting over. The incumbent AKP will do all it can to win,

by hook or by crook. The playing field is heavily mined -- the government largely controls the media and what voters will hear and see, only a sliver of which will be anything positive about the opposition. Given previous election experience, we can expect creative attempts to fix the votes by meddling with the voting, the ballots, the counting, and the reporting, and imprisonment of potential rivals. The opposition will have teams in place across the country to identify and try to stop any fraud.

## Who?

The polls show that, despite the sorry state of the nation, Erdoğan still has a good following, but not enough for him to win the first round of the presidential election, which requires a majority. If no candidate gains a majority, the top two will face off. In the second round, the polls show Erdoğan at a distinct disadvantage. As of this writing, the Table of 6 hasn't announced a candidate, though most expect it to be the mild-mannered, 74-year-old CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, about whom it has been said that he would be a bad presidential candidate, but a good president, and whom the polls show is least likely of the three leading opposition candidates to win against Erdoğan in round two. In a hierarchical system, the veteran politician Kılıçdaroğlu feels that it is his turn. The alliance partners also fear that young, energetic Imamoğlu might settle into a strong presidency and not go along with the plan to transfer presidential powers back to parliament.

The opposition's most promising presidential candidate, Ekrem Imamoğlu, CHP mayor of Istanbul, has been hauled to court on various dubious charges, all of which would not only jail him, but ban him from politics. He will appeal, but given the coopted nature of the judiciary, no one expects him to be exonerated. Ironically, he was sentenced to more than two years in prison for describing as idiots the officials who cancelled the results of the 2019 mayoral election that he won, only to have him win again in the rerun by an even greater margin. The blatant attack on the popular and capable mayor has gained him even more popularity, making him a politician to watch. A third potential presidential candidate is the reclusive Ankara mayor, Mansur Yavaş. Little is known about his ideas because he rarely offers them to the public, but his nationalist background is likely to put off Kurdish voters.

For the AKP to win parliament, it too needs to bundle party votes. It is in a tight clutch (as the People's Alliance) with the far-right, ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and another small nationalist party. As a result, the AKP has been captured by a party with extremist views and a declining number of followers.

### 2023 Turkish Parliamentary Election Poll (KONDA December 2022)

Party	Percent	Leader
AKP	36.6	Erdoğan
CHP	22.8	Kılıçdaroğlu
IYIP	19.3	Akşener
HDP	10.0	Demirtaş
MHP	7.0	Bahçeli
Other Parties 4.3		
Pooled votes: People's Alliance 43.6		
Nation Alliance 42.1		

Luckily for Erdoğan, his nationalist views align somewhat with the MHP, particularly in projecting threats by outside and inside enemies of Turkey that have been bread and butter of every administration since the founding of the Republic in 1923, creating a continual crisis atmosphere. The specific identity of the enemy has changed over time, but hatred and fear are aroused generally against non-Sunni-Muslim citizens, non-Muslim Westerners, Kurds and Jews, though Arabs too were held at arm's length. The difference under Erdoğan is that foreign Sunni Muslims have been rehabilitated and embraced, at least by the government, which is propping up the economy with mysterious inflows of money, presumably from UAE and Saudi Arabia, that Erdoğan is using to flood voters with social expenditures to mitigate the effect of the economic crisis at least until the election. The Turkish population, on the other hand, wants the Syrian refugees that many see as economic competitors gone.

## Kurds as Kingmakers

Since both alliances poll equally well (or badly) for the parliamentary election, and the potential presidential candidates are neck to neck, it may be the Kurds who will be kingmakers. The progressive, pro-Kurdish HDP under its urbane, charismatic, and imprisoned leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, polls at about 10% of the vote. The Table of 6 has stayed away from the HDP because of objections by one of its most prominent members, the İyi (Good) Party led by Meral Akşener. İyi split off from the MHP as a less extreme, though still nationalist party. Akşener is a savvy politician, slated to be the prime minister under a new opposition government. The AKP is constrained from reaching out to the Kurds by the MHP, instead throwing up the PKK as the enemy and decimating the HDP by smearing it with accusations of terrorism. The government has arrested not only Demirtaş, but almost all the elected HDP mayors in the country and replaced them with AKP trustees. Now it has cut official party funding for HDP and begun proceedings to close it. However, this

will not stop Kurdish voters from being potential king-makers in this close election battle. The irony is that both alliances are hostage to their most nationalist member, which creates obstacles to courting the Kurdish vote. The HDP is part of the Labor and Freedom Alliance along with five small leftist parties that, like the CHP-led Table of 6, aims to give voters a “democratic option”. The HDP has indicated that it would urge its voters to support the Nation Alliance but has just announced that it will field its own presidential candidate, a threat designed to get the Table of 6 to negotiate with them about the distribution of power and the fate of the Kurds under a new regime.

The opposition has learned from previous elections to overcome fragmentation and competition to work together. It uses conciliatory language to sidestep, if not overcome, the country’s severe polarization and crisis atmosphere. To be credible uniters, rather than dividers, though, the opposition’s reluctance to bring the Kurds into the tent will have to be overcome and ethnic nationalist fears must be managed, rather than pandered to.

<b>People’s Alliance Erdoğan et al.</b>	<b>Nation Alliance Opposition’s “Table of 6”</b>
Justice and Development Party (AKP) Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) Great Unity Party (BBP)	Republican People’s Party (CHP) Good Party (İyi P) Felicity Party (SP) Democratic Party (DP) Future Party (Gelecek P) Democracy and Progress Party (Deva)
	<b>Labor and Freedom Alliance Progressive, Pro-Kurdish</b>
	Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) and 5 small leftist parties

## Implications

What can we expect? With the help of the Kurdish vote, it appears possible for the opposition to narrowly win both parliament and the presidency. The new government will face enormous challenges to clean up the economic mess and reform degraded bureaucracy and coopted institutions, not to mention curb the tens of thousands of complicit and obstructionist AKP loyalists that populate them. There are no quick and easy solutions. There is no guarantee that the coalition will remain united and that the process of returning to a parliamentary system will succeed. If AKP retains control of parliament, it could stall any proposed changes. A peaceful shift to an opposition government would be a crucial step for Turkish democracy after many years of autocratic consolidation. The West

should step up immediately with investments, expertise, outreach and cooperation to help stabilize the new government and recreate bonds that have snapped under the AKP regime. If Erdoğan does not step down, foreign governments should be prepared for potentially violent political unrest with repercussions in Turkish minority populations abroad.

In terms of foreign policy, ties to Europe and the US would undoubtedly improve, the NATO roadblock would likely be lifted, and tensions reduced. Turkey may seek to restart the EU accession process, for which there is popular support. Given the opposition’s strong nationalist component, some issues, such as Cyprus, Greece, the Eastern Mediterranean, and refugees, will require diplomacy and concrete cooperation to resolve, but this will involve give and take within a rules-based, institutional framework, a far cry from Erdoğan’s transactionalism and shoot-from-the-hip diplomacy. The opposition has committed to trying to restart negotiations to resolve the Kurdish issue, this time within a parliamentary framework, that might reduce at least some PKK-related tensions abroad.

Three months is a long time in Turkish politics and Erdoğan undoubtedly has more tricks up his sleeve to raise his ratings. The NATO standoff continues to resonate positively with a Turkish public primed by inflammatory media to fear PKK terror and to resent Europe’s turning a blind eye. Photo ops of foreign leaders coming to Ankara buff Erdoğan’s big-man image.

If Erdoğan wins the presidency, we can expect authoritarianism to be consolidated as outright autocracy. He will pursue his vision of Turkey as a regional power, member of a new club of countries, including China and Russia, that perceives itself as an independent power bloc, an alternative to West and East, with its own foreign policy agenda and global territories to colonize, in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere, by soft and hard power.

## Further Reading

Berk Esen, “Post-2023 election scenarios in Turkey,” *SWP Comment*, No. 55, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (2022), Berlin, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2022C55>

Murat Somer, “Understanding Turkey’s Democratic Breakdown: Old vs. New and Indigenous vs. Global Authoritarianism,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 481-503, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2016.1246548



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## Takeaways

- » The outcome of the May 14, 2023, election is unclear and at this writing depends heavily on the Kurdish vote but will have vast repercussions for Europe and the US.
- » If the opposition wins the presidency, Europe and the US will have a government they can talk to.
- » If Erdoğan wins the presidency, Turkey is likely to move to full-blown autocracy, its foreign policy goals increasingly diverging from the West.
- » Western governments should be mindful that their actions may hand Erdoğan foreign policy wins.
- » After an opposition win, it is crucial that Western governments act immediately to help stabilize and consolidate the new government.

## Rekommendationer – Svenska

- » Utgången av valet den 14 maj är oklar och ser ut att kunna avgöras av kurdiska väljare. Utfallet kommer att ha stor betydelse för Europa och USA.
- » Om oppositionen vinner kommer EU och USA att ha en motpart i Ankara som man lättare kan tala med.
- » Om Erdoğan vinner kommer Turkiet sannolikt röra sig mot en konsoliderad autokrati vars utrikespolitiska intressen alltmer avviker från Väst.
- » Västerländska regeringar bör vara medvetna om att deras Turkietpolitik kan användas av Erdoğan för inrikespolitiska ändamål.
- » Om oppositionen vinner bör en ny regering få omedelbart stöd i syfte att säkra ett fredligt och demokratiskt maktskifte.

### **About the SUITS policy brief**

This policy brief aims contribute to a broad and well-researched understanding of Turkey and Turkish affairs through presenting a variety of voices on current issues and the foundational moments that impact today. The aim is to provide policy makers and others the tools to make informed decisions.

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### **About the author**

Jenny White has written numerous books and articles on Turkey and lectures internationally on topics ranging from political Islam and Turkish politics to ethnic identity and gender issues. She has been following events in Turkey since the mid-1970s. She has received numerous grants and fellowships from, among others, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, the Social Science Research Council, the MacArthur Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and Fulbright-Hays. She is currently professor emerita at Stockholm University.

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