

Erdoğan's Snap Election Gamble: Too Little, Too Late?

by Sinan Ekim

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced on 18 April that Turkey's elections would be pushed forward by eighteen months. With the date set for 24 June, the vote will include both parliamentary and presidential elections, a first in the history of the Turkish Republic.

The vote will also complete Turkey's political transition underway since the constitutional referendum of April 2017, which sanctioned several amendments to Turkey's constitution. These will effectively institutionalize a populist, one-man system of government that jeopardizes legislative and judicial independence and consolidates powers in the office of the president.¹ The new system would have entered into force in November 2019, but will now effectively take shape after the elections a few weeks from now.

¹ Sinan Ekim and Kemal Kirişçi, "The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained", in *Order from Chaos*, 13 April 2017, <http://brook.gs/2o21N7y>.

This rush to usher in the new system is in many ways a telling sign of weakness on behalf of the Turkish president. If Erdoğan had waited, the vote might not have worked in his favour. Yet, recent developments show that fast-forwarding the elections may not yield the expected results either.

After rising to power in 2002, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) tripled the Turkey's GDP by 2011, winning successive national elections with an increased vote-share ever since. Indeed, a more robust economy and nationwide improvements in welfare standards were hallmarks of the party's earlier years in power.

Today, Turkish finances are again coming under severe strain. Government liquidity is barely enough to keep the economy afloat for another four months.² Turkey's economy is

² "Gezici: AK Parti ve MHP meclisteki çoğunluğunu yitirecek" (Gezici: AKP and MHP)

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tittering into a crisis, which risks snowballing into a full-blown recession.

Erdoğan is therefore seeking a speedy transition to the new constitutional order, solidifying his authority *before* the looming crisis erupts with full strength. Yet, his efforts may be too little, too late.

The downward economic trend is already taking its toll: unemployment is growing, government spending remains high, a 300 billion dollar foreign debt is raising concern and very little investment is flowing into the country. According to data compiled by the New World Wealth research group, 12 per cent of the millionaire population (that is, people whose personal assets top 1 million dollars in net worth) emigrated from Turkey in 2017, the largest exodus of its kind in a single country.³

Financial markets have also lost confidence in Erdoğan's leadership, which has effectively chipped away at the independence of Turkey's central bank. Markets had rallied when early elections were called in April, welcoming the possibility of a shake-up at the top. They languished again after Erdoğan announced that he would tighten his grip on monetary policy after the vote, signalling that more of the same would be in store should he remain at the helm.⁴ Against

to lose majority in parliament), in *Deutsche Welle Türkçe*, 9 May 2018, <http://p.dw.com/p/2xOxl>.

³ Ruchir Sharma, "The Millionaires Are Fleeing. Maybe You Should, Too", in *The New York Times*, 2 June 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2LViNd8>.

⁴ Laura Pitel, "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Turkey's strongman grapples with the markets", in *Financial Times*, 25 May 2018.

a strengthening dollar and a widening current account deficit, the Turkish lira is now in a free-fall.⁵

The government is exploring ways to improve the economic situation. Pledges for a restructured system of taxation, more tax-breaks, as well as lower inflation, interest rates and a current account deficit – as outlined in the AKP's campaign manifesto⁶ – are wide off the mark, however. Turkey needs a fundamental shift in economic and monetary policy, including higher interest rates, which will not be forthcoming if the president's meddling continues.

Without these changes, it is not clear how Erdoğan plans to ward off the impending financial meltdown and scale back the already growing discontent among his electorate. Pushing the elections forward is unlikely to pay off.

The move was also meant to blindside the opposition. Yet, Erdoğan's efforts have backfired. For the first time since 2002, the opposition is pushing back.

Six presidential candidates are running in the election, but none are expected to reach an outright majority. The top two candidates will advance into a second round that will take place on 8 July.

⁵ Onur Ant, "How Markets Won: Erdoğan Concedes a Hated Rate Hike to Save the Lira", in *Bloomberg*, 24 May 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-24/how-markets-won-erdogan-concedes-a-hated-rate-hike-to-save-lira>.

⁶ AKP, *President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Election Manifesto for 24 June 2018*, May 2018, p. 24, <http://www.akparti.org.tr/upload/documents/ingilizcema.pdf>.

This run-off will likely see Erdoğan compete against either Meral Akşener of the Good Party (İyi Parti), an offshoot of the ultra-nationalist, far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), or Muharrem İnce of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Turkey's largest opposition and a long-standing secular rival to the AKP.

Both Akşener and İnce are effectively targeting key constituencies that have shifted away from the AKP – foremost, the urban conservatives and the Kurds, representing 5 per cent and 18 per cent of the electorate respectively. Given these numbers, the actions (or even inactions) of these constituencies could make or break Erdoğan's electoral chances, especially if they rally behind an opposition candidate in the event of a run-off.

Akşener is not a new figure in Turkey's political scene, but her Good Party is. Founded in October 2017, the party is a direct political competitor to the AKP and the MHP. Like Erdoğan and MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, Akşener is rooted in Turkey's conservative milieu, placing her in the centre-right of Turkey's political spectrum. This is precisely what makes her more appealing. Indeed, for a demographic that has lost its penchant for Erdoğan or Bahçeli but still share their political and ideological persuasions, she stands out as a refreshing newcomer.

Yet, she also strikes a chord with traditional conservative voters that had shifted over to the CHP because there was simply nobody to vote for in Turkey's centre-right. Akşener might be pious, yet she does not wear the

Islamic headscarf and may therefore be an ideal representative for these constituencies. Turkish pollster Gezici has projected that 70 per cent of MHP voters and 10 per cent of AKP voters, along with 30 per cent of CHP voters, may migrate to the Good Party.⁷

In contrast, Kurdish voters are likely to represent a greater challenge for Akşener. Her track record vis-à-vis the Kurds, during her brief stint as minister of the interior in 1996-1997, is not exactly pristine, as this period coincided with some of the worst state-sponsored human rights violations against Kurdish communities in Turkey's recent history.⁸

To her credit, however, she has adopted a rather conciliatory tone for nationalist standards. During the campaign, she called for the release of Selahattin Demirtaş, the jailed leader of the Kurdish-dominated Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Yet, she also remained silent on more pressing issues, such as how to resolve the country's decades-old Kurdish question, possibly fearing a backlash from her nationalist base. Nevertheless, her defence of socially conservative values suggests she may still collect Kurdish votes in a possible run-off with Erdoğan come 8 July.

İnce has displayed an almost complete disregard for the CHP's political playbook – which may in fact work to

⁷ "Gezici: AK Parti ve MHP meclisteki çoğunluğunu yitirecek", cit.

⁸ Kareem Shaheen and Gokce Saracoglu, "Turkey's iron lady: 'It's time for the men in power to feel fear'", in *The Guardian*, 3 May 2018, <https://gu.com/p/8gjtq>.

his benefit. Despite his party's legacy of hard-line secularism, he has been able to connect with religious voters. Born into a conservative family, İnce supports the right of female civil servants to wear the Islamic headscarf, prays regularly and has even delivered public statements following Friday prayers, invoking such rhetoric as "we Sunnis".⁹

İnce has also engaged in what may prove to be a successful outreach to Turkey's Kurds, unprecedented in CHP praxis. He has criticized the lifting of Kurdish lawmakers' immunity from prosecution; referred to the Kurds as "children of this nation"; and pledged his commitment to solving the country's decades-old Kurdish question.

Polls do not reveal strong backing for İnce from the Kurdish community,¹⁰ but according to Zübeyir Aydar, the *de jure* leader of the outlawed Kurdish-nationalist Kurdistan Peoples' Party (PKK), he is likely to enjoy substantial support in the event of a run-off.¹¹

The AKP's hold over parliament is not likely to be smooth either. CHP's party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has spearheaded a so-called "Nation Alliance" coalition in parliament, which unites CHP with Akşener's Good Party and the Islamist Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi).

⁹ Kadri Gürsel, "Sectarian game spoiled with Muharrem İnce", in *Cumhuriyet*, 8 May 2018, <http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/english/971454>.

¹⁰ "Gezici: AK Parti ve MHP meclisteki çoğunluğunu yitirecek", cit.

¹¹ Amberin Zaman, "Muharrem İnce'nin ilk karnesi" (Muharrem İnce's first report card), in *Diken*, 18 May 2018, <http://www.diken.com.tr/?p=569406>.

As per Turkey's new electoral law, the 10 per cent threshold to enter parliament is discarded for parties on a coalition ticket,¹² allowing the opposition to appoint more parliamentarians. Furthermore, it will represent a blend of centre-right, centre-left, Islamist and nationalist factions, and will therefore be able to collect votes from a much larger percentage of the population. In fact, polls predict the coalition could dominate parliament by 40-50 seats.

If this is indeed the case, the opposition could become a real stumbling block for the AKP even if Erdoğan is re-elected as the country's president. Although the new constitution accords substantial powers to the executive, the president still needs an absolute majority in the legislature to become all-powerful. With a parliamentary majority, the opposition will be able to pass laws that override presidential decrees, and can thereby significantly weaken or even hollow out the presidency.¹³

Yet, a major problem remains: apart from their determination to prevent the onset of another Erdoğan era, not much unites these opposition parties. In fact, the coalition's ideological composition even distances the parties from their traditional trajectories. Nevertheless, that is precisely the driving force behind this alliance.

¹² "AKP ve MHP'nin seçim ittifakı düzenlemesi ne getiriyor" (What changes do the AKP and MHP's new coalition regulations bring?), in *BBC News Türkçe*, 13 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-43385547>.

¹³ Alan Makovsky, "Erdoğan's Proposal for an Empowered Presidency", in *Center for American Progress Reports*, 22 March 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/03/22/428908>.

Far from laying down the groundwork for a permanent partnership, it is billed as a temporary arrangement that is meant to stop Turkey's downward spiral towards a one-man regime.

According to Turkey's new electoral laws, security forces will be placed closer to polling stations, the electoral board is authorized to relocate ballot boxes almost arbitrarily and unsealed ballots will be considered valid.¹⁴ Against the backdrop of the current "state of emergency", extended for the seventh-time this April,¹⁵ there is plenty of reason to be concerned about ballot-stuffing, large-scale fraud and all sorts of last-minute "complications" that may disrupt the voting in areas friendlier to the opposition.

Such interventions may skew the results, proving pre-election analyses and pollsters wrong. At least for now, however, Erdoğan's re-election and the consolidation of AKP authority in parliament are not foregone conclusions.

The economy and the impressive surge of the opposition have generated headwinds, making the race more energetic and more unpredictable. Pending last-minute developments, it appears that the results may not reflect

what Erdoğan had in mind when he rushed to call snap elections last April.

11 June 2018

¹⁴ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR), *Turkey, Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, 24 June 2018: Needs Assessment Mission Report*, 16 May 2018, p. 5, <https://www.osce.org/node/381421>.

¹⁵ "Turkey's state of emergency extended for seventh time", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 18 April 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/state-of-emergency-in-turkey-extended-for-seventh-time-130539>.

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