

Turkey's Watershed Elections: A Matter of Leadership

by Alessia Chiriatti

It has been said numerous times in the last months that the upcoming 14 May elections in Turkey will be a historical watershed for the country. A crunch point that has not yet been widely explored in these months, though, is that of leadership mechanisms and the consequences of a possible change at the helm of the country, for both its democratic transition and the trust that regional allies (EU and NATO countries above all) can place in the country. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's erratic leadership appears to be on a tightrope, challenged by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the head of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), the largest opposition party leading the Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*). Due to the osmotic relationship between domestic (related to social cleavages) and regional (mainly securitised) dynamics, what the new leadership of Turkey will be, will also affect the future posture of the country and the willingness (or lack thereof) of other States to establish a trusting relationship with it.

A landmark election

One hundred years after the birth of the Turkish Republic founded by Atatürk in 1923 and after more than twenty years of uninterrupted Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government, Turkey is about to hold the second presidential election in its history, the first after the 2017 constitutional referendum that transformed it from a former parliamentary republic into a presidential system. With the first round approaching on 14 May, Erdoğan's leadership will face an unprecedented test due to the compounding of domestic (namely, the social divisions and the economic crisis) and regional/international (the Russian aggression on Ukraine, above all) factors.

Domestically, around 64 million Turkish citizens will be called to the polls, including 3.4 million living abroad and 5 million first-time voters,¹ the majority

¹ Servet Yanatma, "What Role Might Turkish Voters in Europe Play in May's Presidential

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of whom were born and grew up under the AKP era. The economic crisis that broke out in 2018 and the consequent staggering inflation rate (standing at 85.5 per cent in October 2022, and still at 50.1 per cent in April 2023),² combined with the terrible earthquake that hit the southeastern part of the country on 6 February, are endogenous factors reminiscent of those that affected the period from 1999 to 2002 (when the AKP eventually obtained a majority in the Grand National Assembly): in 1999, two major earthquakes struck northwestern Turkey, leading to corruption allegations against the then Ecevit government (from the Democratic Left Party) and public anger, while in 2001 an unprecedented financial crisis exploded.

Moreover, secularism seems to be at stake again in this election, challenged by twenty years of a "predominant party system" under the AKP rule. Historically, the Turkish political system has been characterised by the so-called "three maladies": fragmentation, volatility and polarisation.³ Taking a look back at

the twenty-one general elections held since 1946 (when the one-party rule ended), Turkey went through at least four different phases: the *transition period* between 1946–1960, from the multiparty system to the military intervention; a period of *fragmentation and proliferation of political parties* (1961–1980) that displayed certain features of an extreme system, that is, a polarised pluralism characterised by the presence of relevant antisystem parties, bilateral oppositions, and one party or a group of centrist parties at the centre;⁴ the *return of coalitions* from 1983 to 2002, with the centrality of the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) under Turgut Özal in the 1980s, and the introduction of the 10 per cent national electoral threshold (now reformed at 7 per cent) by the military regime in 1983; and finally, the *single-party government*, dominated by the AKP, since the 2002 parliamentary election.

The 2023 Turkish elections, which are expected to be unfair (mainly because Erdoğan controls 90 per cent of the media in the country and retains a substantial economic power), but real and competitive, are shaping up to be a head-to-head between Kılıçdaroğlu and Erdoğan. The incumbent President already suffered a significant blow in the 2019 local election and is now guiding a coalition composed of the AKP and the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), along with three small parties, two of which have Islamist leanings. The three

Election?", in *Euronews*, 21 April 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/04/21/what-role-might-turkish-voters-in-europe-play-in-mays-presidential-election>; "Türkiye Elections: Here's What You Need to Know About Diaspora Voting", in *TRT World*, 28 April 2023, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-elections-heres-what-you-need-to-know-about-diaspora-voting-12990458>; "Türkiye Elections: How Turkish Youth Is Shaping Politics and Governance", in *TRT World*, 11 May 2023, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-elections-how-turkish-youth-is-shaping-politics-and-governance-13185100>.

² International Monetary Fund (IMF) website: *Republic of Türkiye*, <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/TUR>.

³ Ergun Özbudun, *Party Politics and Social Cleavages in Turkey*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2013.

⁴ Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

cleavages that run through Turkish society (that is, the secular-religious, the Turkish-Kurdish, and the Sunni-Alevi ones)⁵ are likely to play a major role in these elections: the AKP is firmly entrenched in the conservative and religious milieu, while the CHP is on the ultra-secularist side; the MHP (strongly committed to Turkish nationalism and statism) leverages the ethnic cleavage, while the Sunni-Alevi division has been put back to the centre of the public debate after Kılıçdaroğlu's "Alevi declaration", in which the CHP leader stated in a video "I'm an Alevi", receiving over 360,000 likes. With his speech, Kılıçdaroğlu took a crucial step forward, because Alevi have often tried to hide their identity within the country, and the memory of the 1993 Sivas massacre (when 33 Alevi were killed) is still an open wound.⁶

The "Turkish Gandhi" versus the "greying Erdoğan"

Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu represent not only the opposite ends of Turkey's political system (the former conservative, the latter ultra-secularist), but also two completely

divergent visions of leadership: Erdoğan has personified for years the strongman, convinced to be able to break with the traditional idea of Kemalism. Kılıçdaroğlu, instead, who was born into an Alevi family of nine in an isolated mountain village in the Tunceli Province, has been head of the opposition since 2010 and was previously defeated at the general elections in 2011, 2015 and 2018. As his nickname "the Gandhi Kemal" suggests, he represents a soft-spoken and calm type of leader, who has constantly called for reconciliation between Turkey's various political, ethnic and religious groups (as his support for the women's right to wear the headscarf in state institutions also testifies). The fundament of the CHP strategy is a publication by Ateş İlyas Başsoy entitled *Radikal Sevgi Kitabı* (Radical Love Book).⁷ Başsoy is a Turkish writer, publicist and communication expert, already famous for his election advertisements against the AKP and his bestseller *AKP Neden Kazanır? CHP Neden Kaybeder?* (Why will the AKP win? Why will the CHP lose?), published in 2011. His strategy has been adopted since the 2019 municipal elections to counter Erdoğan's "kibir" ("arrogance"), manifest in his highly divisive, polarising discourse. The new CHP narrative appears inclusive and respectful of minority and individual rights, building on a process that

⁵ Alevis are a minority (about 20 per cent of the Turkish population) following a heterodox Muslim tradition; thus, the Sunni-Alevi cleavage is better understood as a sectarian division between Sunni and Alevi sectarianism. Unlike the ethnic cleavage, with Kurdish parties on the extreme left, the Sunni-Alevi cleavage cannot be properly understood along a left-right axis. On the three cleavages see Yasushi Hazama, "Electoral Volatility in Turkey. Cleavages vs. the Economy", in *I.D.E. Occasional Papers Series*, No. 41 (2007).

⁶ Ezgi Akin, "Turkey's Kılıçdaroğlu Garner Record Attention in Alevi Video", in *Al-Monitor*, 20 April 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/node/56785>.

⁷ CHP, *Radikal Sevgi Kitabı*, 2019, <https://chp.org.tr/yayin/chp-radikal-sevgi-kitabi>; Melvyn Ingleby and F. Michael Wuthrich, "The Pushback Against Populism: Running on 'Radical Love' in Turkey", in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (April 2020), p. 24-40, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-pushback-against-populism-running-on-radical-love-in-turkey>.

began in 2010 with Kılıçdaroğlu's ascent to opposition leadership and the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations. Thirteen years ago, Kılıçdaroğlu started a quiet revolution within his party, long considered close to the military, trying to make peace with the Islamists and dropping the CHP's old militarist codes. A step change towards a decentralisation of the hitherto authoritarian governance of the AKP lies behind Kılıçdaroğlu's choice of his governing team: in the event that he wins the presidency, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, mayors of Istanbul and Ankara respectively, both truly charismatic figures according to several surveys,⁸ will be appointed as vice-presidents along with the leaders of the other political parties in the National Alliance.

Now, the AKP seems to be at the end of its tether: after having dismantled the old regime (which comprised the military, the bureaucracy and the judiciary) since 2002, it now resembles an old-fashioned incumbent party, steeped in nationalism, bent on cracking down on dissent and arresting thousands of opponents. It is the CHP, instead, that seems now to be able to intercept the true religious, societal and economic needs and concerns spanning across

⁸ Marie Jégo, "Ekrem Imamoglu, the Man Who Could Put an End to the Recep Tayyip Erdogan Era", in *Le Monde*, 13 May 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/05/13/ekrem-imamoglu-the-man-who-could-put-an-end-to-the-recep-tayyip-erdogan-era_5983294_4.html; "Opposition Mayors Yavaş and İmamoğlu Most Beloved Politicians in Turkey", in *Duvar English*, 4 January 2022, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/opposition-mayors-yavas-and-imamoglu-most-beloved-politicians-in-turkey-news-60059>.

the Turkish population, from right to left.

The future of Turkish leadership: trust or risks?

In an ever more unstable international context, in which Turkey continues to pretend to act as a pivot, a change in leadership could have some important implications in terms of trust with respect to regional relations too. Recently, Erdoğan has been trying to normalise relationships with its neighbourhood in the MENA region; however, considering for example relations with Damascus, as long as Turkish troops remain in northern Syria in order to prevent the formation of an autonomous Kurdish region on the southeastern border, normalisation will remain far from reality.

For his part, Kılıçdaroğlu stated that he wants to give space to the "States' diplomacy" and international dialogue, stopping the diplomacy of the leader so much pursued by Erdoğan. This means that the CHP leader wants to end recent excesses in Turkish activism as well as restarting the EU accession process and demonstrating greater convergence with NATO. Moreover, if elected, Kılıçdaroğlu has promised to restore confidence in the government and to offer new investment opportunities to the outside world. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the upcoming election will lead to a drastic and sudden change of course in the short term, at least as far as the commitments taken by Ankara with the EU (for example on the migration, security and energy issues) and its deep economic ties with Moscow are concerned.

After the elections, regional and international actors will be called again to choose between trusting the future Turkish leadership – whatever this will be – as a crucial Western ally or rather to continue to approach it on a case-by-case basis, bearing in mind that, even under a president other than Erdoğan, there will be limits to Turkey's pivot to the West.

11 May 2023

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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