



# WHAT NEXT FOR TÜRKİYE?

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On May 14, 2023, the citizens of Türkiye will head to the polls in both the presidential and parliamentary elections, which promise to be the most critical and contentious since the country's first free and fair elections in 1950. The outcome of possible change will shape the country domestic and foreign policies for the coming years, in a troubled international landscape.

Polls show a very close run between two main blocs: Erdogan's People's Alliance—which include his own Justice and Development Party (AKP) (conservative), the allied ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and a number of smaller, mostly far-right parties—and the National Alliance, the six-party opposition, led by the leftist, social democratic Republican People's Party (CHP) and its long-time leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the legacy of the Kemalist parties.

In the coalition, together with CHP, there is the centrist Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), the center-right Democrat Party (DP), the nationalist, center-right Good Party (İYİ)—the only other major faction besides the CHP— and two small groups, the conservative Future Party (Gelecek; GP), and the political Islamist Felicity Party (Saadet; FP). Also known as the "Table of Six," the Nation's Alliance poses the greatest challenge to Erdogan in nationwide vote since his AKP triumphed in November 2002 (and in the ongoing elections).

A third electoral bloc, led by the liberal, pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)—and accompanied by an array of leftist and far-leftist parties—is informally backing Kilicdaroglu in the presidential race, though competing for seats in the parliamentary vote.

This clear political landscape changed with the recent entry of the former Republican People's Party (CHP) high ranking Muharrem Ince as the third candidate for the presidency could further boost the incumbent and reduce the margin of victory for Kilicdaroglu. While the coalition supporting Erdogan will struggle to break the 45 percent barrier, let alone the 50 percent necessary to win the presidential seat in the first round on May 14th, Ince's rise could block Kilicdaroglu primary victory, forcing him to a second electoral vote on May 28th.

At the center of the political, but also institutional, economic, cultural aspects of the challenge is the incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his model which has impacted the country since the beginning of the 1980s, when he first entered political life.

The main aim of the National Alliance (and associates) is to dismantle the institutional architecture and the related aspects progressively installed by Erdogan. They look to use the next presidential and

parliamentarian mandate as transition time, and to re-build the Kemalist (as well as post-Kemalist) outlook for Türkiye—namely, political leadership for the prime minister; reduction of the role of the president; re-establishment of the prominence of parliament in the legislative mechanism; laicization of the laws and society, reintegration of the country in the international system; reassessment of the country relations with its allies and partners, prominence of generally accepted principles of law in the justice system, with the banning of opinion crimes; protection of individual liberties; rights of minorities and groups. What appear to have vanished from their project of Turkish society is the guarantor role of the country's secularism played by the armed forces, already progressively erased in Erdogan's tenure. So, in case of victory the National Alliance will work to bring an old/new architecture and posture for the country.

But Erdogan is an experimented and determined political leader and will fight to the least breath to remain the undisputed leader of the country and, for the electoral campaign, without bringing new elements, he will emphasize some of the institutional points of his policy. However, some external factors will pose a severe challenge. The most visible being the economic recession (with inflation reaching as high as 85%) and the disastrous earthquake which hit Türkiye in February (causing around 50.000 deaths) and which affected his image because of the alleged ties between some of the controversial real estate business and the President's party. Also, the inefficiencies of the rescue operations and rebuilding activities have hurt him (this is unavoidable considering the extent and gravity of the earthquake).

Erdogan's strategy, as mentioned, is based on three pillars, and he later added a fourth, after the February earthquake.

The first pillar is the use of foreign policy to boost domestic popularity. In pursuit of this goal, Erdogan, for a couple of years now, normalized the relations with his Arab neighbourhood, affected by the impact of the Syrian war and the related changes of Ankara's stance; and, thus, early this year, brought a large inflow of financial resources, estimated at 20 billion of dollars from GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries. As well, despite a controversial history of relations with Moscow, Erdogan successfully secured a much-needed cash injection from Russia, amounting to nearly \$10 billion, through the Akkuyu nuclear power plant construction project (till now Russia was very prudent in sharing her nuclear technology with third countries and even with a long-standing ally, like Algeria, an agreement on this issue has not been reached). This approach allowed Ankara to keep a control over the health of the local currency, limiting the negative impact of the economic fluctuation.

The second pillar is related to Syria, involved in a bloody civil war since 2001. Thanks to Russian mediation, starting in August 2022, Erdogan has been working on returning as soon as possible the four million Syrian refugees, a source of growing discontent among the Turkish people.

In this light, and to promote national pride, came the launch, in April, of the first locally made Turkish aircraft carrier (though of Spanish design). The Anadolou will have the capacity to carry the naval version of the US/international built fighter F-35 Lightning II, in its array of deadly UAVs of domestic manufacture. There are plans to build a second such carrier, the Traki. These vessels counter the embargo slapped on by the US to punish Ankara for its purchase of the Russian-made SAM system S-400 Triumph.

The third pillar, related to the recent cash in-flow, is the increase in wages and social benefits for the population, affected, not only by the economic crisis, but after February also by the earthquake (economic growth and the increase of purchasing power of each household has long been a dogma of the Erdogan doctrine, one at times contested by various economists who pointed to the intrinsic fragility of the projects. as well with a massive recruitment campaign in the enlarged public services sector. In this regard, Erdogan (and his party, the AKP) encourage every initiative that promotes a national endeavour in the economy, science, R&D, and tourism.

As mentioned, the earthquake is a tragic new element in the country's political landscape, and this introduced the fourth pillar in the campaign of the President's party, which is now focused on recalling the achievements of the past, not only the past economic growth but also the profile that the country obtained in the international and regional scene with the firm, influential and assertive stance of Erdogan in dealing with crises and countries (e.g., in Ukraine, the unique stance with Russia and the grain agreement with UN), NATO (for the addition of Sweden and Finland to the Alliance), Greece (for the delimitation of border waters and aerospace, the Cyprus issue, the exploitation of hydrocarbon in the Mediterranean basin), EU (the management of migrants), US (the refurbishment and modernization of the current fleet of F-16s).

But for Erdogan's coalition (and for the opposition even more), there is the pending unresolved issue, which has run through the country's history since the foundation of the republic (and as well before), and that is the management of the Kurdish issue, which is not only an identity and domestic question but also a serious regional and international one, given the co-presence of divergent interests, such as the support of Washington of the Syrian-Kurdish forces, which Ankara consider allied to the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party), labelled as a terrorist movement and responsible for a tough armed and

popular resistance in the Turkish eastern regions. Now, the Kurdish presence, though not formally, in the anti-Erdogan coalition of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) is a serious political problem, given the hostility of the vast percentage of the electorate against the idea of concession of any sort of autonomy (cultural and even less administrative) for those areas. According to the polls, such concession would be crucial in defeating the Erdogan' coalition, and this is an easy win for Erdogan who simply have to reject concession. Certainly, this will mean that they will not get the Kurdish vote, but there are also no strong reasons to actually given concessions.

According to plans of the National Alliance, the return to a Turkish parliamentary system would go more smoothly if they won the presidency as well as the parliament with a three-fifths majority—a prerequisite for a constitutional amendment necessary to restore the country's former political system. However, the most recent election law changes make such a scenario difficult to achieve it. Two scenarios could therefore emerge in May. First, given the wide executive powers of the presidency under Turkey's new political architecture, Erdogan's loss of position would be a huge blow for his party and its popular base. Hence, Erdogan could negotiate an agreement to divide leadership for personal and political guarantees. In case of defeat, Erdogan could be planning to build a powerful opposition exploiting an unstable governing alliance facing not only institutional changes but also the heavy legacy of economic reconstruction and earthquake-related struggles. Also, it should be noted that the opposition could lose both races (presidential and parliamentarian) thus assuring the grip of the AKP on Turkish society.

It is interesting to observe that in neighbouring Greece, the elections are planned one week after the Turkish ones, and inevitably their outcome will influence the vote in the country. But it is clear that Türkiye remains a pivotal country in the Euro-Atlantic security system, not only for the addition of Sweden and Finland (the latter is now added, while the former, it is widely believed, will be finalized after the election and before the NATO Summit of Vilnius, planned for July 11-12, 2023, along with policies for the neighbouring countries, given the fragile situations in Iran, Iraq, Armenia, Azerbaijan (and the Nagorno-Karabach conflict).

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Enrico Magnani, PhD is a retired UN officer who specializes in military history, politico-military affairs, peacekeeping and stability operations. (The opinions expressed by the author do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations). This paper was presented at the 53rd Conference of the Consortium of the

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