

Turkey 2023

A roundup of news and analysis on Turkey's upcoming general election



Çetin Demirci



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to "Turkey 2023", the CATS Network's roundup of news, developments and analysis in the run-up to Turkey's general election.

In our fifth issue, the last before the elections, we assess **the role of identity politics** for the two main political alliances, look at the **polls to predict the chances of success** for the main presidential candidates, and learn about **the concerns and expectations of the more than five million young people** who will be eligible to vote for the first time.

Should you have any questions or suggestions, then please e-mail us at cats@swp-berlin.org.

On the Spot



picture alliance / AA | Burak Akbulut

When the opposition's top candidate, **Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu**, **posted a video on Twitter entitled "Alevi"**, he received much encouragement as well as fierce criticism. In the clip, the 74-year-old acknowledges his own belonging to the Alevi confessional minority and stresses that he welcomes all ethnic and religious groups in Turkey. **He particularly cautions first-time voters not to become the subject of divide and rule policies** that pit different religious, ethnic and cultural groups against one another.

But the mere mention of his identity has provided a point of attack for his opponents. By saying he was an Alevi, the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP) was trying to split Turkish society, they said. The Interior Minister of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), Süleyman Soylu, claimed that **Kılıçdaroğlu was trying to portray himself as a victim**, adding that there were Alevi provincial governors, police chiefs and directorate generals and that discrimination on cultural grounds does not exist in Turkey.

Undoubtedly, **Turkey's voters' attitude towards religion, secularism and nationalism plays a decisive role** in the parliamentary and presidential elections. Among nationalists alone, there are left-wing and right-wing, secular and religious segments. In a Sunni-majority society, **Kılıçdaroğlu's Alevi heritage poses a challenge**, or even a dilemma. With his aforementioned video, he tried to turn this into an advantage by calling on voters to resist the AKP government's instrumentalisation of identity politics to keep its electorate on board by polarising society.

The elections on May 14 are a **race between those who would like to maintain the presidential system, that grants excessive powers to the president, and those who want to abolish it** and argue for a change to the parliamentary system to strengthen democracy. But both competing camps are made up of different ideological groups, with sometimes opposing interests.

In order to win all the nationalist-conservative votes in the upcoming elections, **President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Islamic-conservative AKP expanded its alliance** with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Islamist-nationalist Great Unity Party (BBP) to include the Islamist New Welfare Party (YRP) and the Sunni-Kurdish Islamist Free Cause Party (HÜDA-PAR). **Both of the latter parties defend extreme religious positions on women's rights and gender equality.** But anyone who assumes that the integration of Islamist actors into the AKP-led People's Alliance (PA) will cost the AKP crucial votes should not underestimate the loyalty of female AKP voters.

The AKP-led PA is being challenged by the Nation's Alliance (NA), the opposition coalition led by the CHP and made up of political parties with different cultural leanings, including the secularist CHP, the nationalist Good Party (İYİ), the conservative Democratic Party (DP) and the Islamist Felicity Party (SP). Furthermore, the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and the Future Party (GP) are also part of the alliance, both of which split from Erdoğan's AKP. The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) is not part of the alliance but endorses the candidacy of Kılıçdaroğlu. **Such a broad coalition is unprecedented in Turkey**, and reflects a new understanding of politics.

The ideologically more homogeneous AKP-led PA proves the vigour of identity politics, bundling together identities with common denominators such as Sunni Islam, conservative morality, and an authoritarian understanding of state-society relations. **The NA parties, on the other hand, reflect the great religious and ethnic diversity of Turkish society** as well as the different lifestyles of their members, and stand for the attempt to achieve a state of politics that transcends cultural belonging.

Kılıçdaroğlu presents himself as a committed democrat, emphasising a return to pluralism and the rule of law, goals with which the most diverse groups can identify. At the same time, this is the biggest challenge for the opposition if it wins the elections. **Would such a government be able to deal with this extent of cultural diversity** and create a common political basis to give space for the peaceful negotiation of perennial conflicts - be it between Turkish and Kurdish identities, or between secular and Islamist worldviews?

When the AKP came to power in 2002, it took steps to democratise and liberalise the country. **Erdoğan's positioning against the secular urban elite made him extremely popular with the religious rural population.** Under his rule, a marginalised conservative majority gained a louder voice. Erdoğan, who was even voted "European of the Year" in 2004, presented himself as a reformer, reached out to the Kurds, liberals and other democratic actors.

Twenty years on, there is not much of that left. **Election day could indicate whether Turkey's voters can rise above identity politics.** Whether politicians can do the same is quite another matter. (*Çetin Demirci*)

The Polls

If the polls are to be trusted, less than a week before the election of the state president, **four out of the five main nationwide polls published since May 1 foresee the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, as the winner.**

And yet the outcome of the election is by no means certain. Kılıçdaroğlu's lead over the current president is very narrow in all polls, ranging between 3.4 and 5.5 percent. Meanwhile, according to some studies, **around 10 percent of voters remain undecided.**

Are there any other indicators to help predict the election results? Perhaps crucially, **70 percent of voters say their money won't last them until the end of the month.** Moreover, about the same proportion do not believe that the country's economic situation will improve.

Are so-called rational reasons going to be decisive in the voting, or will voters primarily follow their emotions? President Erdoğan leaves some voters cold. For a majority, his name triggers negative feelings: concern, rejection, and even anger. On the other hand, voters perceive Kılıçdaroğlu more positively and mention a feeling of trust.

Finally, what do voters think the future holds? **A clear majority expect and want change.** And that includes a large group of voters of the AKP-led People's Alliance as well as a not insignificant number of undecided voterswaters. (*Günter Seufert*)

Recommended Readings

[Evangelos Areteos](#), affiliated with CATS Network partner ELIAMEP, explores [how younger generations can shape Turkey through the upcoming Turkish elections](#).

In this SUITS Policy Brief, [Ike Toygür](#) offers valuable policy recommendations on [how to revive EU and US relations with Turkey](#) in the event of an opposition victory.

As part of the Ankara Institute's CATS Network Project on the political system debate, [Vahap Coşkun](#) [elaborates on the Turkish presidential system](#) in this last report of a 10-part academic paper series.

[Is extensive election fraud possible in Turkey's fiercest elections?](#) In this SWP Point of View, [Hürkan Aslı Aksoy](#) and [Salim Çevik](#) explain why this is unlikely.

Three Questions for...



Seren Selvin Korkmaz is the co-founder and executive director of the IstanbulPol Institute. She is a researcher at the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies, a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Institute and a Marshall Memorial Fellow at GMF. Her research interests include political parties, voter perception, populism and electoral strategies.

More than five million young people are eligible to vote for the first time in this year's twin elections. What are their main concerns and expectations, and will they go to the polls?

They have diverse political preferences but share common concerns. These include precarious work conditions, unemployment, nepotism, and an authoritarian-conservative assault on their civil liberties. The youth demand solutions to their everyday problems and a stable socio-political system that values their education and ensures civil and political liberties. They seek a different approach to politics, one that is not polarising and identity-based, and one that brings change. I anticipate a higher turnout of youth in the elections as protest votes tend to turn into support for specific candidates. The youth's expectations are for a better future and a more inclusive political system.

To what extent have political parties managed to address first-time voters' expectations in their election campaigns?

Recognising the impact of the youth vote, parties began addressing youth concerns after the local elections of 2019. While initially facing distrust, some parties such as the CHP, the İYİ Party and the DEVA have managed to provide more concrete solutions, emphasising the need for a more inclusive and progressive political system. Populist discourse from certain left-wing and right-wing parties e.g. the TIP, the Homeland Party, and the Victory Party has also appealed to young voters seeking an anti-establishment stance. The ruling AKP also attempted to provide some young voters. However, none of them have come close to capturing a participatory political space for the youth in the upcoming election.

Which presidential candidates will most probably profit from the vote of the younger population and which seem to have more difficulties in attracting first-time voters?

Mr. Ince, who has appealed to young protest voters, and Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu are more likely to gain the youth's vote. However, as Kılıçdaroğlu's popularity increases, he subsequently gains more and more of Ince's voters. Kılıçdaroğlu has increased his support by directly addressing the youth in his most popular online videos and using social media platforms like TikTok. The dynamic and inclusive campaigns of popular mayors İmamoğlu and Yavaş have also contributed to his support among young voters. On the other hand, President Erdoğan seems to have difficulties in attracting first-time voters. Despite his efforts to address the youth, his campaign has focused more on other voter groups. It is evident that the youth is a challenging group for President Erdoğan to attract, and this awareness is present within his party.

Interviewed by Maximiliane Schneider

That's all until the next issue!

Kind regards,

The CATS Team