

Turkey 2023

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



Zeynep Alemdar



Hürcan Aslı Aksoy



Edgar Şar

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 third issue, we shed light on why **Erdoğan's move to ally his bloc with the Kurdish-Islamist Free Cause Party (HÜDA-PAR)** comes as no surprise to women's rights defenders in Turkey. In addition, we take a look at the **final lists of parliamentary candidates** and the **crucial role the Kurds will play** in the upcoming elections.

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

On the Spot



@picture alliance / AA | Mustafa Kamacı

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan once again seems to have sacrificed women's rights to re-energise support from conservative brotherhoods before the May 14 elections. The fact that he has allied the Justice and Development Party (AKP) with the religious-conservative New Welfare Party (YRP) and HÜDA-PAR, a Sunni-Kurdish-Islamist party affiliated with Hezbollah, was not unexpected for women's rights defenders in Turkey.

In 2021, Erdoğan did not hesitate to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, that came under attack from religious conservative groups who claimed that it was "anti-family" and "pro-homosexuality", even though it was signed under his government in 2011. Memorably, the conservative Women and Democracy Foundation (KADEM), which was founded by Sümeyye Erdoğan Bayraktar, daughter of the Turkish president, also argued against withdrawing from the Convention.

In late March this year, Özlem Zengin, a close working partner of President Erdoğan as the AKP's Group Deputy Chairwoman, was left alone in the spotlight after defending Law No. 6284 on the Protection of the Family and Prevention of Violence Against Women, and then became a target of countless hateful messages and threats, especially from YRP supporters. On a TV show shortly thereafter, she expressed her disappointment and remorse over the "un-Islamic tone" in which the discussion on Law No. 6284 came about. Yet in response, there was complete silence from the women's branches of the AKP, and only a few pious women, now working in other AKP spin-off parties or engaged in civil society, retweeted clips of the TV show in solidarity.

These developments trigger some important questions. Most crucially, does the inaction of the women's branches of the AKP accurately reflect the mood of the AKP's female supporters as a whole?

Women who were influential in the AKP in its early years, and those who helped propel Erdoğan, then a Welfare Party candidate, to the Istanbul mayor's office in the 1994 local elections, have not been left behind for the first time. As the AKP consolidated its power, women who had worked hard for the party could not find their place in its higher ranks. Many left the party while those who stayed were given low-ranking positions. As early as 2008, with Erdoğan's call to women to bear at least three children, testimonies from women who voted for the AKP revealed that they felt that they were being sidelined, especially as their demand to be allowed to wear the headscarf while holding public office was not granted until 2013.

Interviews with various women within the AKP at local or national level of politics, reveal that many women fervently believe in Erdoğan's role in bringing them to the fore in politics. Still, those who remain within the party's inner circles decline to comment or brush off questions about Erdoğan's anti-women's stance. It would also be naive to think that these women have forgotten that Erdoğan's denouncement of the Istanbul Convention came after the AKP lost the country's three major cities to the secular opposition in local elections, at an iftar dinner during the holy month of Ramadan in August 2019, organised by one of the country's Islamist congregations, the "National Will Platform". Therefore, those who are still in the AKP ranks and have a personal interest in the AKP's victory, will see Erdoğan's embrace of the YRP and HÜDA-PAR as a political move to increase his and the AKP's voter base.

HÜDA-PAR, to which Erdoğan has opened the doors for cooperation, has a particular place in the memories of women's rights defenders. Konca Kuriş, a devotedly religious feminist who argued that men misinterpret the Quran's words on women, sects and sectarian politics, was kidnapped, tortured and killed by Hezbollah in 1998. While her views were controversial in Islamist circles, one would expect that Kuriş's brutal death would still be vividly remembered. Today, many ardently religious women's rights defenders who once worked for the party argue that this is a generational issue, and that younger women are unlikely to recall what took place.

Women who remain with the AKP usually do so not only for their own sake, but also for the sake of other lineages, such as their husband's and family's business relations, thus downgrading their own position for the greater good of the family as a whole. What is more, there are young women who joined the party thanks to these connections and have not yet experienced the tight-knit men's club at the most important layers. Only time and experiences such as what Özlem Zengin went through may convince them to step out of Erdoğan's shadow. (Zeynep Alemdar)

The Polls

On April 9, political parties in Turkey submitted their parliamentary candidate lists for the upcoming elections on May 14 to the Supreme Election Council (YSK).

Each party in the People's Alliance (PA) decided to compete with their own logos on the ballot paper and candidate lists, except for the Kurdish-Islamist HÜDA-PAR. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) agreed to nominate the current ministers in the cabinet and spokespersons, former ministers, standing mayors, and some known public figures. All this indicates that the AKP is worried about losing ground against the opposition in the parliamentary race and is trying to halt the slump in its vote share by nominating well-known party members. The latest opinion polls suggest that the AKP has over 33 percent of the vote and its PA somewhere between 41 and 42 percent.

The main opposition, the Republican People's Party (CHP), included 78 candidates in its candidate list from other political parties in its Nation Alliance (NA). The CHP was criticised by party members for skipping intraparty voting on potential parliamentary candidates and admitting candidates from its conservative partners in the most popular CHP constituencies in Istanbul and Ankara. Before this development, the polls had the CHP's vote share at 27 percent; however, questions remain as to how the nomination of conservative candidates will affect this.

The presidential race appears to be tight. The presidential candidate of the NA, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, is leading the polls with 42 percent of the votes, while Erdoğan has around 41 percent. polls. (Hürcan Aslı Aksoy)

Recommended Readings

Considering the case of Turkey, Ayşe Betül Çelik asks in an IAI Comment: "What Can Women's Groups Do to Rejuvenate Peace Processes?"

Kurdish voters will have a decisive role in next month's elections, claim Evangelos Areteos and Ekrem Eddy Güzelidere from ELIAMEP.

Hürcan Aslı Aksoy elaborates in The Parliament Magazine on how Brussels can avoid the politicisation of its post-earthquake aid in Turkey and Syria.

Three Questions for...



Güney Yıldız

Güney Yıldız is a journalist and researcher dividing his time between London, Berlin and Ankara. His work focuses on radicalisation and Turkey, the Kurdish issue and the broader Middle East. As a journalist with BBC News, he has broken numerous top UK and international stories.

The People's Democratic Party (HDP) and President Erdoğan's recent decision to ally his bloc with the Kurdish-Islamist Free Cause Party (HÜDA-PAR) reemphasised the decisive role of the Kurds. So, what role do you think the Kurds will play in the upcoming elections?

The Kurdish constituency, widely acknowledged to be one of the most politically conscious in the country, favour the HDP over HÜDA-PAR by a large margin. Yet, it's uncertain how exactly they'll vote between HÜDA-PAR-supported Erdoğan and the HDP-backed Kılıçdaroğlu. The anti-Kurdish rhetoric of the AKP and the fact that Kılıçdaroğlu hails from a predominantly Kurdish province make Kurds more likely to vote for him. Indeed, despite his Alevi background, Kurdish conservatives are unlikely to hesitate to vote for Kılıçdaroğlu, as evidenced by public opinion polls and HDP figures. Nevertheless, HÜDA-PAR's limited but active support in the region could still boost support for the AKP.

The regionalisation of the Kurdish issue has further complicated the chances of a solution in Turkey over the past decade. So, how do you think the post-election scenarios will affect these prospects?

In the non-Kurdish majority provinces of Turkey, the branches of the HDP find themselves subjected to incessant scrutiny and criminalisation, as they bear the brunt of the government's branding of them as agents of terror. Such constraining measures serve to curtail their activities in reaching out to the Turkish population. The prospect of an opposition victory is anticipated to lessen the securitisation of the Kurdish question, allowing Kurds to participate in Turkey's political, social, and cultural life. Grassroots solidarity between Kurdish and other electorates might lead to a more legitimate status for Kurds and a less hostile government formation.

The HDP does not seem to have any specific demands regarding a solution to the Kurdish question. So, what possibilities and limitations exist for a possible new government in dealing with this issue?

The Kurds anticipate that a Kılıçdaroğlu victory would lead to a new de facto opening for Kurdish politics and a reversal of the current government's seizure of HDP-supported municipalities. They expect a fresh start in the state's relationship with Kurds and a more institutionalised attempt to resolve the Kurdish question through parliament. Kılıçdaroğlu has declared multiple times that the solution to the Kurdish question lies in parliament, but with a largely nationalistic composition of the future Turkish parliament, it's difficult to imagine them addressing the issue adequately.

Interviewed by Edgar Şar

That's all until the next issue!

Kind regards,

The CATS Team