

## Turkey 2024

A roundup of news and analysis on Turkey's upcoming March 31 municipal elections



Bekir Ağirdir



Jens Bastian



Maximiliane Schneider

Dear Readers,

Welcome to "Turkey 2024", the CATS Network's roundup of news, developments, and analysis in the run-up to Turkey's municipal elections on 31 March.

Our third issue looks at **Turkey's polarised political spectrum**, the **emergence of new political actors**, the government's **efforts to form a right-wing coalition** under Erdoğan's leadership, and the **implications for the ruling elites**. We also shed light on the **New Welfare Party** (Yeniden Refah Partisi, YRP), which is capitalising on dissatisfaction with the performance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and is **presenting itself as a conservative alternative**.

Should you have any questions or suggestions, please e-mail us at [cats@swp-berlin.org](mailto:cats@swp-berlin.org).

### On the Spot



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Despite the expectations that the "50 per cent plus one vote" required to win elections in the **Turkish presidential system would produce party consolidation**, the result was different. Even though alliances have been formed, **new actors have also proliferated**.

If one were to visualise **Turkey's socio-political landscape** in a **two-dimensional graph**, the **two variables shaping it would be socio-economic development and ethnic identity**. The AKP, the Republican People's Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and the People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM, formerly HDP) would be at the four extreme points of the graph, approximately representing **conservatives, secularists, Turks, and Kurds**.

Over the years, these parties have not been able to advance their political positions and **have been focused on identity politics, unaware of the sociological changes on the ground**. The result has been voter dissatisfaction. **As the four parties lost credibility, new ones emerged, with varying degrees of success**. For instance, the Good Party (İyi Parti) appears to be losing an opportunity it seemed to have when it first emerged in 2018, whereas the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and the Future Party (GP) have failed to realise their goals of filling the void in the centre-right, which the mainstream parties abandoned.

In the meantime, **fringe parties that are positioning themselves in the centre to gain the protest votes of Islamists, nationalists, secularists, and leftists have also emerged**. Among these, especially the New Welfare Party (YRP) and the Victory Party (Zafer Partisi) appear to have gained voters' sympathies. Especially since last year's parliamentary and presidential elections, it seems **they might be able to expand their power**.

#### Polarisation Turns into a New Political Alignment

Notwithstanding this atomisation of the political landscape, a new alignment can be detected among political actors ahead of local elections.

**For the last decade, party positions were determined by the political polarisation between those who stood for and against the AKP and its platform**. This was best exemplified by the emergence of three opposition alliances during the elections. Each positioned itself against the pro-government bloc. Seven months after the 2023 elections, the ruling bloc continues to maintain its unity. However, the **alliances among the opposition have all disintegrated**.

Against this backdrop, the **government is aiming to form a grand right-wing coalition under Erdoğan's leadership**. The goal is to bring together all the right-wing, nationalist, and conservative parties, leaving behind the CHP, Turkey's Labour Party (Türkiye İşçi Partisi, TIP), and DEM. To put it differently, **the aim is to set the "Turks" and "conservative" camps** (going back to the metaphor of the graph in the introduction) **against the "secularists" and "Kurds"**.

The government seems closer to achieving this. This situation is **nothing new for Turkey**; such levels of polarisation and confrontation have occurred in different moments in history. For example, it happened after the 1957 elections with the formation of the so-called Homeland Front (Vatan Cephesi) and again in the 1970s with the formation of the Nationalist Front (Milliyetçi Cephe) governments.

#### New Alignment: Supporting the Dominant Political Vision

**Turkey's ruling elites perceive such a right-wing coalition as a necessary move to further consolidate power and advance their worldview and political interests**. More importantly, they **see it as being possible**. The disorganisation and lack of strategic objectives among the opposition – and especially the disintegration and dispersion of the CHP – make it possible for all parties (except the CHP, TIP, and DEM, which are in the opposition) to turn towards the incumbent block.

**The ideological coalition that forms the government interprets the uncertainties and geopolitical shifts in the global arena as a risk to the survival and security of the state**. The government sees security (in the freedom–security dilemma) and welfare (in the democracy–welfare dilemma) as necessary elements for the survival of the state.

Considering this stance of the government, which is based on the survival of the state and concerns about security, it **can more easily form an alliance with the right-wing, conservative-nationalist actors of the opposition**.

**The widespread conflicts in the Middle East** and the terrorist attacks of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), ISIS, and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP/C) **strengthen the basis of the security approach**.

Erdoğan, on the other hand, is busy building consent for the grand right-wing coalition, with the comfort of being the central player. If he can achieve this at the party level, he can make the constitutional changes he desires in the parliament without the need for a referendum.

**For Erdoğan, the issue is to get the public to agree to this newly expanded right-wing coalition** and then utilise this to align the actors. When we look at election results since the 1950 general elections, it is noteworthy that the vote totals for the right-wing, nationalist, Islamist, and conservative parties for each election are in the range of 60–65 per cent. With this in mind, Erdoğan now sees an opportunity, and the upcoming local elections will be an important step towards realising this goal. (*Bekir Ağirdir*)

*This is a shortened and translated version of the text 'Büyük sağ koalisyon: kutuplaşma yeni bir paradigmaya dönüşüyor', which was re-published on the T24 website on 12 February 2024.*

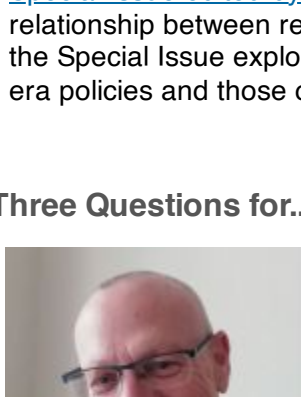
### Recommended Readings

This [SWP Research Paper](#) by [Günter Seufert](#) and [Sinem Adar](#) evaluates Turkey's presidential system after two and a half years while highlighting its failure to meet promised goals, resulting in weakened institutions, economic woes, and authoritarian practices.

From a political economy perspective, [Berk Esen](#) and [Sebnem Gumuscu](#) examine how Turkey has descended into an authoritarian, competitive regime under AKP rule, which has led to the erosion of Turkish democracy.

In this noteworthy contribution to the European Journal of Turkish Studies [Special Issue](#) edited by [Sinem Adar](#), [Salim Cevik](#) analyses the nature of the relationship between religion and the state in the AKP era. Other articles in the Special Issue explore the similarities and differences between the AKP era policies and those of earlier periods.

### Three Questions for...



*Günter Seufert is a sociologist and was head of the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin from 2019 to May 2023.*

**The Yeniden Refah Partisi (YRP) is an Islamist party that won five seats in the Turkish parliament in last year's parliamentary and presidential elections through the AKP's electoral lists. In the upcoming municipal elections, the YRP is fielding its own candidates. What are the motives behind this move, and to what extent is the party able to challenge the AKP's consolidation of power?**

The AKP and its media are exerting enormous pressure on the YRP to revise its decision and to again join with the ruling coalition. However, the new party appears to be very self-confident, and this is the first reason that the YRP is fielding its own candidates. The YRP bills itself as "Turkey's fastest-growing political party" and points to a steady flow of new members. Nationwide, the party gained 2.28 per cent in the parliamentary election last May, but it received 4.6 per cent in some conservative election districts in the Black Sea region. Spokesmen for the party even claim a vote potential of up to 7 per cent. Even half of this amount would be enough to thwart an AKP win in Istanbul, where the incumbent mayor from the opposition CHP and the AKP's candidate are neck-and-neck, according to the polls. For supporting the AKP in last year's parliamentary election, AKP-chief Erdoğan pledged to the YRP to push for even more conservative policy concerning women and sexual minorities. Because Erdoğan has not lived up to his promises, the YRP now has a second reason to go on its own this time.

**Turkish society is in flux. Electoral motives are changing. Can you explain the reasons behind the YRP's ability to expand its voter base in recent years?**

What has changed are not electoral motives, but the performance and outlook of the AKP and its ruling coalition. In its election campaign, the YRP promises to introduce a "just order" – a slogan it inherited from the old Welfare Party (RP). After 22 years in power, the AKP has turned Turkey into a state where the party and bureaucracy increasingly overlap, and corruption and nepotism saturate even the local administrations. While the AKP still pretends to have a clean slate, the image of the ruling party appears to be severely stained. The state of the economy and impoverishment form other weak points of the AKP. Admittedly, the secular opposition is also attacking the AKP on economic and social grounds, but by voting for the YRP, disgruntled religious conservatives can cast their protest vote against the government without supporting the secular opposition.

**In terms of campaign goals and electoral strategies, how does the YRP position itself in major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir in the run-up to the local elections?**

The strategies in rural areas and in big cities do not differ much. In all venues, cadres and sympathisers of the YRP are very persistent. Interestingly, two other small parties that are poised to garner conservative votes are showing no progress at all. In sharp contrast to Ahmet Davutoglu's Party Gelecek and Ali Babacan's DEVA, the YRP is not only critical of the AKP but sharply attacking secular lifestyles and culture. Differentiating one's image from an enemy culturally helps in developing a strong profile.

*Interviewed by Jens Bastian and Maximiliane Schneider*

That's all until the next issue!

Kind regards,

The CATS Team