

Turkey 2023

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



Günter Seufert



Sinem Adar



Jens Bastian

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 first issue, we look at the **drive for change in Turkish society**, shed some light on **voter sentiment** two months before the election, and assess the **situation after the recent earthquake**, which devastated much of the eastern part of the country.

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

On the Spot



@picture alliance / abaca

It appears that **Turkey is facing a political transition**, namely the end of the 21-year reign of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). Despite many warnings, before the catastrophic earthquake, few in Turkey's political class had wanted to recognize the tremendous pressure that had built up beneath the fault lines. So, **are politicians now underestimating the drive for change** in Turkish society as well?

It is **certainly true for Meral Akşener**, the head of the right-wing nationalist İYİ (Good) Party. Akşener, whose party is the second-strongest force in the alliance of the opposition parties, has missed few opportunities in recent years to emphasize how much the Turkish populace longs for a change of the country's head of state and an end to Erdoğan's de facto autocracy. Nevertheless, on March 11, just two months before the election date, **she backed out from the opposition alliance**, accusing the remaining five parties of "not heeding the will of the nation." Just two days later, she returned more or less remorseful. Horrified by her maneuver, which seemed to destroy the opposition's electoral chances, **members of her party duly dropped out in large numbers, and some officials even resigned from their posts**. Stunned, opinion leaders, entrepreneurs, and artists also reacted critically. Akşener had underestimated the desire for change, the foundation of her own political policy.

It was the intention of the other five parties in the **opposition alliance to nominate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), as their joint candidate for president** that had triggered the dispute. He could not win the race, Akşener claimed, insisting on nominating either Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu or the Mayor of Ankara Mansur Yavaş. Indeed, both are arguably more likely to appeal to right-wing conservative Turkish voters, as Kılıçdaroğlu, who is of Kurdish origin and belongs to the religious Alevi minority, may well face difficulties when addressing this spectrum. Indeed, it is a truism in Turkey that **60 percent of voters are Turkish national conservatives**, and their cultural orientation determines who they vote for. Another commonplace is that whoever addresses the Kurdish issue loses on the center-right.

This is why voters of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) did not play a role in Akşener's considerations, even though the party will certainly win at least 10 percent of the votes; nevertheless, **without the Kurdish support neither the opposition nor the government can win the election**. In the opposition alliance, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu engaged the most in dialogue with the pro-Kurdish party, one reason why he would not be electable for many, Meral Akşener believed. Additionally, the past of Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP, which branded conservative Muslims as a threat to the secular order as recently as the 2000s, also seems to make Kılıçdaroğlu's success improbable.

In spite of this, the first polls after Kılıçdaroğlu's nomination paint a very different picture. **The CHP chairman had apologized several times to the religious segments of the population for his party's earlier intolerant attitude**. For four years now, he has sought cooperation with right-wing conservative parties based on a comprehensive democratization program, thus he is considered the real architect of the opposition alliance. For instance, even during the most recent crisis triggered by Akşener, he refrained from opening up ideological rifts.

Just as important will be the attitude of the pro-Kurdish party, the HDP. Even after returning to the alliance, **Akşener refuses to enter into any dialogue with the HDP and warns against making political promises to the Kurds**. However, there may have been nothing to fear as the HDP immediately renounced any interest in being awarded ministerial posts and clearly limits its political expectation to general democratic demands.

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu presents himself as the antithesis of President Erdoğan, and if he is eventually elected, it would be more than a change of government: it would be a sign of a fundamental change in the dynamics of Turkish politics. (*Günter Seufert*)

The Polls

Tired of corruption, rising economic inequalities, and political suppression, there is a general sense of exhaustion within Turkish society after two decades of AKP rule. "Anyone but Tayyip" is not an uncommon statement when people are randomly asked during street interviews who they would vote for in the upcoming 2023 presidential election. According to the most recent surveys, **Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the recently announced presidential candidate of the Nation's Alliance (NA), is ahead of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan by 10-12 percent**.

Those who still have confidence in President Erdoğan believe that what he has done up until now (referring to the building of highways, the manufacturing of drones, and the construction of hospitals) is proof of what he will continue to do if re-elected. Meanwhile, when confronted with questions about the ruling alliance's late, partisan, and corrupt response to the recent earthquake, most pro-Erdoğanists **deny any inadequacy**.

In between are the **so-called hesitant voters**, who, despite their frustration with the ruling alliance, **seem not to regard the opposition as a viable alternative**. Yet, the NA's ability to stay united after enduring an internal crisis concerning its presidential candidate might change such views in the coming months, especially given the earthquake's devastating economic, political, and social repercussions. Notwithstanding, the **NA will still face challenges** posed by the leader of the opposition Homeland Party (MP) Muharrem İnce's now confirmed candidacy who appears to have gained popularity, particularly among the youth. (*Sinem Adar*)

Recommended Readings

Considering a possible opposition victory in the upcoming election, Edgar Şar elaborates in a SWP Comment on the [opportunities and limitations of the Turkish opposition alliance](#).

In this comprehensive Policy Brief by CATS Network Partner Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies (SUITS), Jenny White casts light on the question ["What Can We Expect from Turkey's 2023 Elections?"](#).

Ahead of the EU-led Donors' Conference on 20 March in Brussels, Marc Perini stresses why [Western governments must tread a fine line between human solidarity and rough politics](#).

Three Questions for...



Kadri Taştan

Kadri Taştan is a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund based in Brussels. His research focuses on Turkey, the Middle East, Turkey-EU relations, Turkey's relationship with transatlantic partners, European integration, trade, energy and climate change.

Given the magnitude of the destruction caused by the twin earthquake, what are the first cost assessments for the recovery and reconstruction efforts?

Although the damage assessment undertaken by the Ministry of Environment and Urbanisation is not yet finalised, initial estimates reveal the high costs of this earthquake. According to World Bank estimates, the direct physical damage caused by the earthquake is over \$34 billion, equivalent to 4 percent of Turkey's GDP in 2021. This figure does not take into consideration the recovery, clean-up, reconstruction and the secondary effects on the Turkish economy. Other estimates that take these factors into account reach estimates of up to \$50 billion, or 5 percent of the country's annual GDP.

Donor conferences are being organized to help mobilize the international community to assist with the aftermath of the earthquake. What does this imply in terms of coordination with the Turkish government?

The donor conference co-organized by the European Commission and the Swedish Presidency for the second half of March will bring together financial institutions, bilateral donor countries and the Turkish government. Thanks to the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey, Turkey and the EU have experience in coordinating their efforts to address humanitarian crises. While Turkey repeatedly expressed frustration with the speed and manner in which the EU allocated and spent the funds under the Facility for Refugees, this has been a learning experience for both sides, particularly Turkey.

Has the earthquake also shattered Turkey's economic development model?

The earthquake hit the country at one of its most difficult times financially, economically and politically: the Turkish lira has substantially depreciated over the years against the US dollar and euro and the country is struggling with high inflation, thus eroding the purchasing power of its citizens. This is all taking place as Turkey is preparing for a crucial election. In addition, it should be noted that the cities devastated by the earthquake, Gaziantep and Maras, are industrial centres in a relatively undeveloped region of Turkey, which is also home to a large number of Syrian refugees. While the share of the 11 earthquake-affected provinces in total national income is 9.3 percent, this rate rises to 14.3 percent in agriculture. Paradoxically, this disaster will lock the country into a long-criticized construction-based economic model for many years to come.

Interviewed by Jens Bastian

OK, that's all until the next issue!

Kind regards,

The CATS Team