

## Turkey 2023

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



Sinem Adar



Emre Erdoğan



Hürcan Aslı Aksoy

Dear Readers,

Welcome to **"Turkey 2023"**, the CATS Network's roundup of news, developments and analysis on Turkey's general election.

In our sixth issue, we assess the **results of the elections on May 14**, look at the polls to **explain the rise of Sinan Oğan**, and learn **which campaign strategies worked and which did not**, and why.

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

### On the Spot



picture-alliance / AA | Murat Kula

With the total vote share of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and Sinan Oğan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's two contenders in the first round of the presidential election on May 14, adding up to 50.3 per cent, **the desire for change within Turkish society is undeniable**. However, **so too is the insistence on continuity**. Even though Erdoğan finished the first round 4.2 per cent ahead of Kılıçdaroğlu, he could not escape a run-off on May 28. And although his Justice and Development Party's (AKP) vote share declined in almost every city across the country, **the ruling People's Alliance gained a majority in parliament with 323 seats**. Despite the devastating economic situation and the tragic earthquake that exposed the weaknesses of the country's institutions, **the president continues to appeal to voters living in a polarised society** separated from one another by alternative realities. Thanks to a partisan distribution of economic benefits, nationalist and misogynist identity politics, systematic manipulation of the election system, and continuous suppression of rivals, Erdoğan was able to consolidate a voter coalition.

Yet, his popularity came at the cost of tilting the Turkish political landscape further to the right. Even though the boundaries between state institutions and the AKP have become increasingly blurred over the years, **Erdoğan has so far failed to establish a bureaucratized party state**. As a result, the president's political survival is not guaranteed without the support of an ever-changing group of actors. A case in point here is the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) that positioned itself as the central ally of Erdoğan in the aftermath of the June 2015 parliamentary election, when the AKP for the first time since its rise to power could not get enough votes to form a single-party government. Since then, **the MHP has been one of the most loyal supporters of Erdoğan**, even more so than some AKP members themselves. Thanks to the intra-alliance swing votes, the MHP was, contrary to expectations, able to gain 10.1 per cent of the vote.

Yet, the MHP's backing alone was not enough to consolidate electoral support. **Challenged by a loosely united opposition of nationalists, Islamists, and social democrats, Erdoğan appeared eager to expand his alliance**. The Islamist New Welfare Party (YRP) that joined the alliance by signing a protocol aiming to curtail the rights of women and the LGBTI+ community now has five seats in parliament. Another new member of the alliance, the Free Cause Party (HÜDA-PAR), which is directly affiliated with the radical Islamist paramilitary organisation Hizbullah, and which ran on the AKP lists, managed to win three seats.

Undoubtedly, **the prominence of Islamist and nationalist actors in Turkish politics predates the two decades of AKP rule**. Islamism and nationalism have been on the rise since the 1960s. The AKP, formed in 2001 from the reformist faction of the Islamist Virtue Party, is a product of this trend. It is no coincidence, for example, that the political socialisation of **many of the AKP's founders, including Erdoğan himself, can be traced back to the Turkish National Students' Union (Millî Türk Talebe Birliği)**, a youth organisation that intertwined nationalist and Islamist currents in the 1960s and 1970s.

It is true that **Erdoğan has failed to mould the population according to an ideological promise, as the simple majority voting against the continuation of his rule suggests**. Yet, he has over the years effectively co-opted, strengthened, and further cemented these decades-long networks with deep roots into society to consolidate his power.

This is arguably one reason behind the shift in the centre of gravity from the AKP to the president himself, as the election results demonstrate. **A militaristic, ultra-nationalist, misogynistic, and conspiratorial atmosphere has heavily undergirded Turkish politics since 2014/15, which masks Erdoğan's weakening of party politics**. The result is the radicalisation of the political landscape and the simultaneous fragmentation among nationalist and Islamist parties. Splinter parties from the AKP (i.e. Ali Babacan's Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and Ahmet Davutoğlu's Future Party (GP)), those from the MHP (i.e. Meral Akşener's Good Party (İYİ) and Ümit Özdağ's Victory Party (ZP)), and the conflict between the Felicity Party (SP) and the YRP over the true representation of the Islamist Nationalist Outlook movement are all examples of such division.

The results of the twin elections on May 14 demonstrate that beyond the cult of Erdoğan, **the core of the political competition in today's Turkey is between various forms of nationalism and Islamism matter**. (Sinem Adar)

### The Polls

The elections on May 14 in Turkey produced several surprises: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not lose his seat in the first round of the presidential election, and his party became the largest in parliament. Another surprising result is the rise of **Sinan Oğan, a nationalist who won 5 per cent of the total vote and announced on Monday that he will support Erdoğan in the presidential run-off**.

There are different explanations for the rise of Oğan, who was nominated by the former ATA Alliance as a candidate of Turkish nationalists. **Oğan is an experienced politician well known for his ultra-nationalist rhetoric**. He was one of the most prominent figures in the MHP who competed against the current leader Devlet Bahçeli for the party's leadership and subsequently had to leave the party. **Oğan has consistently linked the Kurdish political movement to terrorist activities**. With his nomination for the last election, he added solid anti-immigrant rhetoric to his campaign.

A secondary data analysis gives some insight into party vote transitions and voters' presidential preferences. According to a report by Türkiye Raporu, **95 per cent of AKP voters and 93 per cent of MHP voters opted for Erdoğan**, whereas the opposition's top candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, received 96 per cent of votes of the People's Party (CHP) and 97 per cent of those of the Green Left Party (YSP). The same report shows that **only 81 per cent of Good Party (İYİ) voters preferred Kılıçdaroğlu as their presidential candidate**.

Focusing on the sources of Oğan's support, the report estimates that **Oğan attracted 830,000 votes from the Good Party (İYİ) and 794,000 votes from the AKP**. Of note, 400,000 CHP voters chose Oğan, whereas the remaining 200,000 came from other parties. These figures show that Oğan garnered dissatisfied voters from the right wing of the political spectrum. (Emre Erdoğan)

### Recommended Readings

*Aurélien Denizeau* from our network partner IFRl casts light on the [nature of and motivation behind Turkey's political coalitions](#) that were formed in the run-up to the 2023 elections.

A return to a parliamentary democracy system is highly unlikely if Erdoğan remains in power. *Marc Pierini* and *Francesco Siccardi* from our CATS Network partner Carnegie Europe explain [why this would be bad news for Turkey's Western allies](#).

Ahead of the elections, CATS associate *Sinem Adar* argues that the [presidential election on May 14 would be a de facto referendum on Erdoğan's rule](#) and further discusses whether Turkey's ruling alliance is omnipotent or frail.

### Three Questions for...



*Mesut Yeğen* works on voters' behaviour at Reform Institute in Istanbul. His research and publications focus on nationalism, nation-building, citizenship, Turkish politics and the Kurdish question in Turkey and the Middle East.

**The interim results of the parliamentary and presidential elections sent two main candidates to the second round and secured a safe majority for the ruling People's Alliance. Which strategies paid off for the People's Alliance?**

The key to the People's Alliance's success in the presidential election was two-fold. First, Erdoğan succeeded in selling the Peoples' Democratic Party's (HDP) declaration of support for Kılıçdaroğlu to the masses as a form of endorsement from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), i.e. by 'terrorists', who he alleges are backed by the West, aiming to destabilise Turkey. Second, Erdoğan ensured that security concerns rather than issues of economic hardship prevailed in the last few weeks of the election campaign. Having managed to present Kılıçdaroğlu's probable presidency as a security issue that could result in awarding autonomy to the Kurds in Turkey, Erdoğan seems to have convinced a chunk of secular-nationalists in Turkey to support either Erdoğan himself or Ince and ultra-nationalist Oğan.

**The oppositional parties of the Nation's Alliance (NA) and the Labor and Freedom Alliance (LFA) have received fewer votes than expected. Why did their electoral strategies fail?**

The failure of the two main members of the NA, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İYİ Party), should be accounted for separately. The İYİ Party received fewer votes than expected probably due to two main reasons. First, Akşener's last-minute withdrawal from and immediate return to the NA might have weakened party commitment among the İYİ Party supporters, swaying some of their potential voters to withdraw their support. Second, the İYİ Party seems to have lost some of its potential voters to the ultra-nationalist Zafer Partisi (Victory Party), whose appeal increased after Oğan became a presidential candidate. Turning to the CHP, its three conservative allies, the DEVA, the Future Party (Gelecek Partisi), and the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi), were unable to match the electoral supports gleaned by the NA, revealing that the AKP-sceptic conservatives did not buy the idea of merging with the CHP.

There are a few reasons behind the LFA's failure. Among other things, Kılıçdaroğlu's embracing rhetoric and the HDP's support for him increased the appeal of the CHP among Kurds, who represent a sizable chunk of former HDP voters who supported the CHP. Moreover, the fact that the Workers' Party of Turkey (TIP), a member of the LFA, fielded its own candidates in the parliamentary election led not only to the loss of a few seats in parliament but also the diminishing of trust and commitment toward the LFA among its voters.

**With the newly elected parliament made up of a largely nationalistic composition, the CHP shifted its electoral campaign towards a more nationalist approach. How will this move affect Kurdish voters?**

This may reduce the already low rates of electoral participation in Kurdish cities. Kılıçdaroğlu will amplify the nationalist tone in his campaign for the second round to secure the support of nationalist voters, so some Kurdish voters who supported him in the first round may decide not to go to the ballots in the second round, while others who refrained from voting in the first round may vote for Erdoğan this time. However, given that the Kurds' desire to replace Erdoğan remains as strong as ever, Kılıçdaroğlu will most likely be supported by an overwhelming majority of the Kurds in the second round, too.

Interviewed by *Hürcan Aslı Aksoy*

That's all until the next issue!

Kind regards,

The CATS Team