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Research Report

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SWP Comment

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The Opposition Alliance in Turkey: A Viable Alternative to Erdoğan?

Berk Esen

In a remarkable development for Turkish politics, six opposition parties signed a joint manifesto at a public ceremony on 28 February. The document outlines plans to abolish the executive presidential system and restore rule of law and civil liberties under a “strengthened parliamentary system”. The successive concentration of power in President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s hands has culminated in a hyper-presidential system without meaningful institutional checks. The opposition parties are determined to reverse this process by offering the electorate an alternative political platform supported by a single presidential candidate. If their cooperation generates a pre-electoral alliance for the upcoming elections, the opposition camp dubbed the “Table of Six” has a reasonable chance of defeating Erdoğan and his governing bloc.

Despite his political hegemony, President Erdoğan’s electoral support was only slightly over half of the electorate even at the height of his popularity. In the 2014 and 2018 presidential elections, for instance, Erdoğan gained 51.8 and 52.6 percent of the vote, respectively. It is the inability of his opponents to work together and offer a viable alternative that has allowed Erdoğan and his party to remain in office since November 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) won its first parliamentary majority. Erdoğan’s electoral hegemony has permitted him to erode the institutional checks and balances, capture the media and the judiciary, and tilt the playing field against the opposition to remain in power – first as prime minister (2003–2014), then as president (2014–

today). The adoption of a presidential system with weak checks and balances, which was orchestrated by Erdoğan and his ally the National Action Party (MHP) in 2018, destroyed the last vestiges of electoral democracy in Turkey. Although elections are held regularly, they are neither free nor fair, with the opposition parties hampered by heavy government control over the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the media.

Erdoğan’s electoral decline

Increasing cooperation within the opposition camp signals bad news for President Erdoğan. The current economic crisis has seen Erdoğan’s approval decline by nearly

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three points in one month, to 41.5 percent in July. His promises of stability and prosperity after the switch to the presidential system have failed to materialise. Many voters now see the transition to a presidential system in 2018 as an important factor behind their economic misfortune. The government has failed to tame rapidly rising inflation, which has reached nearly 80 percent, and instead asks the public for patience. Instead the ruling AKP has experienced internal rifts, particularly after leading members left to establish new parties – specifically the Future Party (GP) of former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) of former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Babacan.

To bolster his popular support and retain control of parliament, Erdoğan formed the People's Alliance with the Turkish ultra-nationalist MHP on the eve of the 2018 general elections. This, however, has narrowed the AKP's room for manoeuvre, alienated Kurdish voters and confined Erdoğan's appeal to a shrinking Turkish ethno-religious base. Arrayed against the ruling bloc are opposition parties representing ideological positions across the political spectrum. As a result, this will be the first election campaign in which Erdoğan is not the clear favourite.

Previous attempts to coordinate opposition

In competitive authoritarian regimes like Turkey, opposition parties that form a pre-electoral alliance are more likely to defeat the incumbent. With this in mind, opposition parties in Turkey have formed various formal and informal alliances. The first instance was the 2014 presidential election, when the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the MHP (then still in opposition) supported a joint candidate with conservative leanings. Although Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu fell short of expectations with just 38.4 percent of the vote, the CHP continued to seek alliances with other

opposition parties. During the 2017 referendum campaign, the CHP ran a coordinated “No” campaign with MHP dissidents who broke with their party leader Devlet Bahçeli over his support for amendments proposed by the ruling AKP to establish a presidential system.

Accordingly, on the eve of the 2018 general elections, the CHP led the formation of the Nation's Alliance with three other opposition parties, namely the Good Party (İyiP) formed by MHP dissidents, the Islamist Felicity Party (SP) and the centre-right Democrat Party (DP). The opposition alliance succeeded in reducing the AKP's vote to a point where it required the MHP's support in parliament, but ultimately failed to defeat Erdoğan in the presidential elections. Building on this experience, the CHP and İyiP fielded joint candidates in twenty-seven provinces and twenty two metropolitan areas in the 2019 local elections, defeating pro-government candidates in cities including Istanbul, Ankara, Adana and Mersin. Despite attracting less than 25 percent of the vote itself, CHP metropolitan mayors currently govern some of the country's largest municipalities. This was a heavy blow for the AKP, which lost its control of the country's most populous cities, while the opposition bloc gained a platform to showcase its policies and challenge the ruling party's disproportionate access to public resources.

The new opposition alliance: “Table of Six”

The chief architect of this opposition alliance is Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the main opposition party, the CHP. The CHP was founded by Turkey's first president in 1923, and is the country's oldest party. Since the 1990s, however, the centre-left CHP has experienced electoral stagnation due to its failure to reach out to low-income Sunni voters and its insistence on prioritizing the defence of a traditional nation-state model (against the rising Kurdish and Islamist movements) over pressing

socio-economic issues. Under the leadership of Deniz Baykal (1992 – 1999, 2001 – 2010), the CHP diverged from the principles of social democracy, concentrated its support among secular urban and Alevi voters, and collaborated with extra-parliamentary actors like the military to obstruct the AKP’s agenda. This strategy led the CHP to a series of electoral defeats since 2002 and expedited the capture of the state apparatus by the AKP leadership in the early 2010s.

After becoming CHP leader in 2010, Kılıçdaroğlu changed the party’s strategy by recruiting new candidates and toning down the party’s intolerant positions on the Kurdish question and the headscarf ban. However, this new dynamism was not sufficient to achieve immediate electoral success, so Kılıçdaroğlu has increasingly sought closer cooperation with other political parties. His moves began to bear fruit after a change to the country’s electoral system in 2018 permitted electoral alliances.

The political leaders of the six opposition parties first met in October 2021 with the goal of preparing a joint manifesto to initiate a transition to a parliamentary system after the elections scheduled for June 2023. As well as the four parties of the Nation’s Alliance, the Six include two splinter parties that recently split from the AKP, Davutoğlu’s Future Party and Babacan’s DEVA. Davutoğlu and Babacan had both been demoted by Erdoğan in recent years and each decided to form their own party when it became clear that opposition was not tolerated within the AKP. Their resignation from the AKP initially generated strong interest, given that elite defections can significantly weaken an authoritarian regime, but according to the opinion polls this has yet to translate into significant electoral support for either of the two parties.

The pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) is missing from the inter-party talks, on account of accusations from the AKP government that it is linked to the banned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) – which the European Union lists as a terrorist organization. Minor leftist parties, the

recently established neo-Kemalist Homeland Party (MP) and the far-right populist Victory Party (ZP) were not been offered a seat at the table either. Their exclusion may lead to the formation of alternative opposition pre-electoral coalitions. The high electoral threshold (recently lowered from 10 to 7 percent) gives minor parties a strong incentive to form pre-electoral alliances.

The pro-Kurdish HDP is currently holding talks with a number of far-left parties, such as the Workers’ Party of Turkey (TİP), while the ZP and the MP may consider forming a nationalist alliance.

Representatives from the six opposition parties met for several months to agree a common political platform on a “strengthened parliamentary system”. Their published manifesto signed by all six leaders represents the most comprehensive opposition platform since Turkey’s transition to multi-party democracy in 1950. In it, the six opposition parties (the Table of Six) pledge to introduce democratic reforms and push for a return to a parliamentary system after the next parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2023.

The six leaders have already met six times since March 2022, with each meeting hosted at the national headquarters of one of the parties. At these monthly meetings, which are unprecedented in republican history, the leaders reviewed their reform proposals, shared views on recent political developments, and discussed the possibility of turning their collaboration into a formal alliance. They agreed to establish a number of commissions to lay the groundwork for a pre-electoral alliance that could potentially last beyond the election. The election security commission will coordinate efforts to ensure free and fair elections, while commissions on “constitutional and legal reforms” and “institutional reforms” will concretise the roadmap for the post-election period. Another commission will oversee a joint communication strategy.

Joint presidential candidate

The most challenging task will be the selection of a joint presidential candidate. Failure to reach a consensus on this point might even call into question the whole pre-electoral alliance. As a result, the selection process has been postponed, with opposition leaders repeatedly announcing their intention to not pick a candidate until Erdoğan has set the election date. Instead, they have merely identified a set of criteria for choosing the candidate. Some fear that announcing the joint candidate prematurely would simply give the pro-government media more time to discredit him or her.

There may be other reasons for the postponement, however. Given that the president holds vast power in the Turkish system, choosing a joint candidate will be extremely difficult. In particular, the smaller parties in the alliance are worried about being marginalised after the next election. They are understandably hesitant to hand so much power to one individual and would instead prefer to establish a collective leadership structure within the cabinet. These leaders seek to concentrate attention more on the alliance than the candidate.

They face a dilemma, however. The opposition camp will be running against Erdoğan, who remains a popular and charismatic leader. Failure to pick a candidate capable of matching Erdoğan on the campaign trail could limit the opposition's ability to attract AKP voters. On the other hand, a popular candidate who defeats Erdoğan might refuse to limit presidential powers or pursue a quick transition to a parliamentary regime. The six leaders therefore need to find a candidate who could both win the presidential election and agree to hand back most of his or her powers back to the parliament.

The most likely candidate is Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, due to his role in establishing the Table of Six which puts him in the best position to keep the opposition alliance intact. As leader of the main opposition party, Kılıçdaroğlu enjoys strong support from CHP cadres who fear that choosing a

different candidate from their own party could lead to major changes among their ranks. Others see his harmonious personality and focus on unity — which contrast sharply with Erdoğan's leadership style — as an asset for a democratic transition. Additionally, Kılıçdaroğlu's limited popular appeal outside the CHP reduces his chances of consolidating his authority under the current presidential system. Other opposition leaders calculate that Kılıçdaroğlu would need their support to govern the country effectively. Lastly, Kılıçdaroğlu has repeatedly announced his intention to hand power back to parliament. The presidency would likely be the final political post for Kılıçdaroğlu, who will soon turn seventy-five.

Nevertheless, many voters have strong reservations about Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy. The qualities that make Kılıçdaroğlu preferable to other opposition leaders also weaken his electoral prospects against Erdoğan. As CHP leader since 2010, Kılıçdaroğlu led his party to defeats in the 2011, 2015 and 2018 parliamentary elections as well as the 2014 and 2018 presidential elections. Many voters are afraid that his candidacy would hurt the opposition's chances of success in the upcoming elections. In opinion polls, Kılıçdaroğlu trails the popular mayors of Ankara and İstanbul and even the İYİ leader Meral Akşener. After twelve years at the helm of the main opposition party, Kılıçdaroğlu struggles to excite voters. Kılıçdaroğlu's Alevi roots may also reduce his ability to reach out to pious Sunni voters, who remain Erdoğan's loyal base. Erdoğan has, in the past, exploited Kılıçdaroğlu's religious background to galvanize conservative voters against the CHP. Furthermore, Kılıçdaroğlu has never held a position in government, he has failed to put together a comprehensive policy agenda or a strong policy team, and he lacks expertise in the areas of economics, foreign policy and law that will be crucial for the opposition's plans to transform the political system.

Some analysts still see İYİ leader Meral Akşener as a possible candidate, even though she herself ruled out this scenario

in September 2021. Instead of taking on the presidency, which the opposition bloc pledges to turn into a symbolic position in a few years, Akşener declared her intention to become prime minister after the transition to a parliamentary system. This may be a strategic move on her part. Given that the İYİ trails the CHP in the opinion polls, it would have been difficult for the main opposition party's electorate to accept her candidacy anyway. By refusing that prize, Akşener can make herself kingmaker and possibly even negotiate her way into a powerful vice-presidential post. Kılıçda-roğlu will need to seek Akşener's approval for his candidacy.

The other two potential candidates are the popular CHP mayors of İstanbul and Ankara, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş. Both are moderate politicians who defeated pro-government candidates in the 2019 local elections with inclusive rhetoric and promises of social assistance. In sharp contrast to other CHP politicians, they have had huge success in reaching out to conservative voters. And they quickly expanded their popular appeal after their election, especially through their effective management of municipal services during the pandemic.

While both candidates generate excitement among opposition voters, they have followed different political strategies to appeal to the electorate. Yavaş has, for the most part, refrained from commenting on contentious issues and kept himself above the political fray. As a former member of the ultra-nationalist MHP, he enjoys strong support among Turkish nationalist voters and, unsurprisingly, has kept his distance from the pro-Kurdish HDP. Despite the partisan nature of the bureaucracy under AKP rule, which regularly obstructs services provided by opposition-controlled municipalities, Yavaş has refrained from adopting a confrontational approach. While these aspects have endeared him to right-wing voters, including some AKP and MHP supporters, the HDP leadership has announced that it will not support him should he be chosen as the opposition's joint candidate.

According to opinion polls, Yavaş remains more popular than İmamoğlu. But this might change once the campaign has begun, when Yavaş would be expected to declare his position on major issues.

Many regard İmamoğlu as the candidate most likely to defeat Erdoğan. Like Erdoğan, he comes from the Black Sea region and made his way into national politics as mayor of İstanbul. Before his election in 2019, he was the mayor of the sprawling district of Beylikdüzü on the outskirts of the city, but almost unknown at the national level. With nearly 20 million inhabitants, İstanbul is the most economically advanced and populous province and has a diverse electorate. Erdoğan once asserted that "whoever wins İstanbul will win Turkey". As the Nation Alliance's joint candidate in the 2019 local elections, İmamoğlu twice defeated the pro-government candidate, former prime minister Binali Yıldırım. First time round İmamoğlu won by a small margin, but increased this to nearly 55 percent of the vote when the election was rerun after a dubious decision by the High Election Tribunal.

Unlike Yavaş, İmamoğlu comes across as a moderate social democratic mayor with strong appeal among both Turkish and Kurdish voters, and among all age groups and both sexes. Under İmamoğlu, despite national government efforts to block its funding, the İstanbul municipal government has dramatically increased funding for public transportation and infrastructure projects (ten subway projects are in progress), opened public libraries and kindergartens, and prioritised meritocratic practices and gender equality in hiring processes.

İmamoğlu is not without critics, however. Some see his personal ambitions as a threat to the opposition's plans to revert to a parliamentary system. If elected, they argue, İmamoğlu may prefer to exercise the vast powers of the presidency. While many see İmamoğlu as candidate with the best chances of election, his prospects of being chosen by the six opposition leaders are poor. With his enormous charisma and

youth, İmamoğlu's candidacy would represent a major blow to the status quo, not to mention Kılıçdaroğlu's own presidential aspirations.

Challenges for the opposition alliance

While the Table of Six has already made substantial progress, the six parties still face major challenges. First, the final composition of the alliance and its durability are not yet clear. Four of the six parties were already part of the Nation's Alliance and are likely to work together in the next elections. There is, however, still some uncertainty as to whether the splinter parties, namely the Future Party and DEVA, will join the Nation's Alliance or some other grouping. Figures from the Future Party and the Felicity Party, both of which have Islamist origins, have floated the idea of forming a conservative party alliance to contest parliamentary elections with a joint list while remaining part of the six-party opposition alliance.

Second, other scenarios are also being discussed for the parliamentary elections. The smaller parties in the Table of Six are anxious to gain parliamentary representation and may consider contesting the next elections on parliamentary lists of the two main parties in the alliance, namely CHP and İYİ. Nor have the party leaders clarified whether they intend to continue the alliance beyond the next elections. Some of the conservative parties may opt to negotiate with the AKP after Erdoğan's probable defeat in the next election.

Third, another potential rift stems from the different levels of electoral support the six parties enjoy and their relative influence within the alliance. While cooperating against the ruling alliance, they are also in competition with each other for popular support and influence. The CHP appeals largely to secular and left-wing constituencies, and has benefited from an alliance with five right-wing parties that allows it to reach new constituencies. As the largest

right-wing party in the alliance, the İYİ worries that granting minor right-wing parties disproportionate influence and media coverage may come at its own expense. In particular, there appears to be tension between the İYİ and the DEVA, which both compete for moderate right-wing voters but disagree on major issues like Syrian migrants and the Kurdish question.

Given the stark ideological differences, the inter-party alliance is a delicate political balance. It remains to be seen whether the six parties will manage to agree a comprehensive policy agenda for the post-Erdoğan era. Compromise on any major issue would require leaders not only to reconcile the differences between their parties but also to persuade their voters. Ideologically committed voters will not be expected to balk at accepting concessions made by their party leaders. To limit internal challenges, the leaders have expanded their control over party cadres and expelled internal opponents. For instance, Felicity Party leader Temel Karamollaoğlu fended off a challenge from Oğuzhan Asiltürk, a senior party member who advocated closer ideological ties with President Erdoğan. Meanwhile Muharrem İnce, the CHP candidate for the 2018 presidential elections who was sidelined after the campaign, resigned to establish another splinter party. Similarly, Ümit Özdağ, who was a rival of İYİ leader Akşener and opposed closer integration with the CHP, resigned to establish his own party with a strong anti-migrant platform.

Fourth, the opposition needs the pro-Kurdish HDP's support to win the presidential elections and enact democratic reforms in parliament. The HDP's decision to support CHP candidates in the major metropolitan areas in the 2019 local elections was a major factor contributing to their electoral victory. The nationalist İYİ has thus far refused to have any contact with the HDP. In response, the HDP has stated that its support for the alliance is not unconditional. Indeed, the HDP leadership refuses to support a presidential candidacy of Yavaş or Akşener, and insists on any talks with the opposition parties being held in public. The

latter demand will complicate the CHP's efforts to communicate with the HDP without alienating İYİ voters.

This issue may become a major problem for the opposition camp in the upcoming months, since the Constitutional Court accepted an indictment seeking a ban on the HDP for its alleged ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is included on the EU's list of persons, groups and entities involved in acts of terrorism. In the event of the HDP being banned by the Constitutional Court, İYİ's (even implicit) support for such a ruling could split the opposition camp and alienate Kurdish voters. Erdoğan could also launch another military operation in northern Syria to expand Turkey's sphere of influence and to repatriate Syrian refugees. A successful military operation on the eve of the presidential elections could offer a huge electoral windfall for Erdoğan, who may also boost his popularity by addressing the migration crisis.

Cautious optimism for the EU

For the European Union, the formation of an opposition alliance against the ruling bloc led by Erdoğan should be welcome news because it signifies the vitality of the democratic forces in Turkey. The migration crisis and Russia's war on Ukraine have left the EU with limited leverage over Erdoğan, and it has failed to oppose the autocratization process under his rule. Many international analysts are pessimistic about the possibility of a return to democratic rule in Turkey. Despite the uneven playing field, the opposition parties have a reasonable chance of defeating Erdoğan in the 2023 general elections and could facilitate democratic transition through the ballot box.

A democratic post-Erdoğan Turkey would be a more constructive partner for its Western allies. In the event of an opposition victory in the 2023 election, the new government in Ankara would certainly try to reset

Turkey's relationship with the EU. Obviously, the EU should refrain from creating the impression that it is conspiring with the opposition parties. But it should be ready to reset its relations with Turkey in the event of a change of government after the 2023 general elections. Due to the diversity of the opposition alliance, it is too soon to predict the new government's positions on major foreign policy issues. However, engaging the opposition alliance will give the EU better information and broader access in the new era.

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