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Research Report

Post-2023 election scenarios in Turkey

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SWP Comment

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Post-2023 Election Scenarios in Turkey

Berk Esen

Millions of Turkish voters are geared up for the twin (parliamentary and presidential) elections that are scheduled to take place in June 2023 at the latest. After nearly 20 years in power, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule may seem unassailable to many observers of Turkish politics. However, owing to the economic downturn and rifts in his ruling party, this will be the first election in which Erdoğan is not the clear favourite. Six opposition parties of different ideological origins have come together to pick a joint presidential candidate to stand against Erdoğan and to offer a common platform for restoring parliamentary democracy. Although the opposition alliance has reasonable chances of defeating Erdoğan's ruling bloc, their victory would not guarantee a smooth process of transition to parliamentary democracy. If the opposition can defeat Erdoğan, the new government would need to undertake the arduous tasks of establishing a meritocratic bureaucracy, restructuring Turkey's diplomatic course and economic policy, and switching back to parliamentary rule. Due to the opposition alliance's diverse composition, accomplishing these goals may be as difficult as winning the elections.

Due to Turkey's growing economic crisis, which has resulted in high inflation and unemployment rates, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has experienced a sharp fall in opinion polls over the past year. Even with support from the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which is part of the People's Alliance with the AKP, Erdoğan seems to have difficulty reaching the 50 per cent of the vote share necessary for winning the presidential elections. By contrast, potential contenders among the opposition camp have begun to surpass Erdoğan in a one-to-one match, according to most opinion polls. More importantly, the opposition camp, led by the centre-left Republican People's Party

(CHP), is more united than at any point under Erdoğan's rule. The two splinter parties that broke off from the AKP – 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 – are acting together with the Nation Alliance, which is composed of the Turkish nationalist Good Party (İyiP), the Islamist Felicity Party (SP), and the centre-right Democrat Party (DP).

Obviously, Erdoğan would not go down without a fight. Due to his control of a large portion of the media, the opposition parties should be ready for a highly polarising contest. The ruling bloc already has access to a disproportionate level of

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resources and uses bureaucracy as a partisan auxiliary force. To gain support from nationalist voters in the opposition ranks, Erdoğan could resort to a new wave of repression against Kurdish groups, including a ban of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) by the Constitutional Court, and initiate a cross-border military campaign in Syria to rally public opinion behind his candidacy.

Unpopular leaders are likely to initiate diversionary conflicts. Following the AKP's loss of its parliamentary majority in the June 2015 elections, for instance, the so-called solution process with the pro-Kurdish forces broke down and armed conflict ensued in the Kurdish-populated areas. The steep rise in terror attacks on the eve of the November 2015 elections stoked nationalist public opinion and contributed to the AKP's electoral comeback. Some fear the possibility of a similar wave of attacks on the eve of the 2023 elections by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is listed as a terrorist organisation by the European Union (EU) and the United States (US). Such attacks run the risk of shifting the public's attention from economy to terror, thereby triggering a nationalist backlash that would play into the hands of the ruling bloc. Considering the current poor state of the Turkish economy, however, these developments might stanch the decline in support for Erdoğan, but they would not be sufficient to offset the opposition's rise. Some commentators are worried at the prospect of an external conflict in the eastern Mediterranean or Syria postponing elections for a year. This is not a likely scenario since war would be even costlier for Erdoğan, whose regime has largely depleted its foreign currency reserves.

Will the elections be free and fair?

Although the opposition bloc has risen in opinion polls, many analysts are worried that Erdoğan may actively manipulate or contest the results on election night. Despite Turkey having a long record of

holding reasonably free and fair elections since its transition to a multiparty democracy in 1950, centralisation of power at Erdoğan's hands, particularly since the failed coup in 2016, has tilted the playing field against the opposition parties. International observers have already documented electoral irregularities in previous elections that placed the ruling bloc at an advantage over its rivals. In cases where the government lost the election despite such favourable conditions, it relied on partisan decisions of the Supreme Electoral Council (YSK) to reverse the electoral outcomes, as was the case in the repeat of the 2019 Istanbul mayoral race after the pro-government candidate's surprising defeat.

Due to heavy government control over the bureaucracy, judiciary, and the media, the opposition parties will face a skewed playing field against Erdoğan. In such cases, a smooth transfer of power is hardly guaranteed. For Erdoğan, resorting to outright electoral manipulation, which can be easily detected by opposition parties and outside observers, would be a risky, though not unfeasible, strategy. In contrast to authoritarian states such as Venezuela, Russia, and Iran, Turkey lacks sizeable reserves of natural commodities, whose windfall would help Erdoğan weather a post-election storm. Electoral fraud would risk further excluding Turkey from Western markets and deepening the economic downturn, which would hit Erdoğan's base severely. Turkey is already confronted with a major currency and debt crisis that was exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. Nominal GDP fell to \$815 billion in 2021, from its peak of \$958 billion in 2013. The economic downturn has limited the regime's ability to finance social assistance programmes for the urban poor — its voter base — and funnel resources to its business allies.

Prospects of electoral fraud

Electoral fraud might — and can — occur in Turkey, where the opposition camp includes a diverse mix of political actors rang-

ing from moderate Islamists and secular parties to Turkish and Kurdish nationalists. Should the opposition leaders decide to contest the election results, they can appeal to a sizeable portion of the society with strong mobilisational capacity. Some fear that, in response to opposition protests, Erdoğan could mobilise his own base, as he had done against the putschist forces during the coup attempt in 2016. Should Erdoğan adopt this strategy, the ruling bloc could tap into groups that are affiliated with the regime. The AKP has millions of party members across the country and enjoys strong ties with other popular groups, such as the Ottoman Hearths and a military contractor company (SADAT) established by retired conservative officers. SADAT, which is accused of training paramilitary groups in Libya and Syria, could be used against opposition protestors.

Erdoğan has recently taken steps to diversify Turkey's diplomatic portfolio and improve relations with both Russia and China. The new international environment created by Russia's attack on Ukraine has pronounced Turkey's geopolitical importance. Using this opportunity, Erdoğan has increased his cooperation with the Putin government without severing ties to the West. Putin could offer Erdoğan a discount on Russian gas and divert some funds to Turkey to evade international sanctions, which would economically strengthen the authoritarian regime in Turkey. Although the two countries have divergent interests in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars as well as the Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, Putin would still prefer Erdoğan over the uncertainty of a victory by the opposition. This has led to some analysts openly questioning whether Putin will offer Erdoğan crucial financial support in the lead-up to the election.

It is not certain that Erdoğan enjoys the full support of the security apparatus, whose unquestioned loyalty would be vital to put down popular protests in the aftermath of the election. The police forces, whose ranks have expanded dramatically over the past decade, are seen as a partisan

body and are tightly controlled by the Minister of Interior, Süleyman Soylu. Faced with allegations of close ties to organised crime groups, Soylu has a strong incentive to oppose a government turnover, which could pave the way for his prosecution. Meanwhile, the military's compliance in the event of a massive crackdown is not guaranteed. While post-coup purges have brought the armed forces under tighter civilian control, the Turkish military, as a conscription force, may refrain from clashing directly with citizens. Any public confrontation involving the armed forces would highlight the importance of the positioning of the Minister of Defence and former Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar, who has retained his autonomy under the current regime.

Post-election scenarios

There are several scenarios for the post-election period. Due to the current economic downturn, there is a good chance that the ruling bloc will lose its parliamentary majority. Even some pro-government analysts have begun to openly admit the possibility that Erdoğan may win the presidency but face a parliament dominated by opposition parties. Under the current presidential system, the president does not need parliamentary approval to form a cabinet and could govern the country without strong checks from the legislature. Should Erdoğan win the presidency, he could co-opt MPs from conservative parties that are currently part of the opposition bloc to hinder the effective functioning of the parliament. Under a continued Erdoğan presidency, the two splinter parties that broke off from the AKP would run the risk of keeping their cadres intact. In the event of an opposition victory in the presidential elections, some MPs from the AKP and the MHP may likewise decide to switch sides. Under both scenarios, the parliamentary arithmetic is expected to change in the post-election period depending on who wins the presidency.

The composition of the parliament is difficult to predict based on opinion polls. The ruling People's Alliance and the opposition-led Nation Alliance are locked in a fierce electoral competition. In a close election, the number of seats allocated to these alliances would be determined by the decision of alliance parties to prepare joint lists under the two main parties in the alliance – namely the CHP and İYİP – or contest the elections on their own. Another factor that will influence the parliamentary composition is the presence of other alliances that can offer viable alternatives. The pro-Kurdish HDP is currently locked in negotiations to establish a third alliance with several minor far-left parties such as the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP). The HDP, which gained 11.7 per cent of the vote share in the 2018 parliamentary elections, is maintaining its electoral support, according to most opinion polls. With the help of this leftist alliance, the HDP could thus emerge as the key party that holds the balance among the two large blocs in a hung parliament. Also, against the backdrop of rising anti-refugee sentiment, the far-right populist Victory Party (ZP) would spoil the opposition vote if it attracts support of opposition voters but fails to muster the 7 per cent necessary to cross the parliamentary threshold.

A more worrisome scenario for Erdoğan would be to lose the presidency to a candidate endorsed by the Nation Alliance. If current opinion polls are to be trusted, Erdoğan is expected to lose against all three of the opposition's potential joint candidates, namely CHP Chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, and Ankara mayor Mansur Yavaş. Losing the presidency would be a huge blow for Erdoğan, who would be deprived of access to public resources to run the AKP machine. Given his frail health and advanced age, Erdoğan might not be able to muster the strength to lead his party in opposition for long. Although his party has commanded strong electoral support, even at the height of the economic crisis, its future after Erdoğan is uncertain. The ruling party has recently become a personalistic movement

with very weak institutions. Although predictions of its demise are premature, the AKP would have a difficult time keeping its base intact in opposition.

Challenges for a post-Erdoğan government

If Erdoğan is defeated in the upcoming elections, his successor will face a set of severe challenges. The opposition bloc has campaigned on a democratisation platform that envisions a speedy return to the parliamentary system and the restoration of the rule of law. Although the details have not yet been fully formulated, the six parties have pledged to transfer the extensive powers of the presidency to the parliament. Whoever is picked as their joint candidate will be expected to sign this pledge and refrain from fully exercising his or her powers, if elected.

Addressing the economic crisis

However, the new government's most pressing problem will be to pull Turkey out of its current economic predicament and put the country on a trajectory of sustainable development. The six opposition parties have already announced their commitment to macroeconomic stability, Central Bank independence, and tight monetary policy. Each of these parties has an impressive lineup of economists who could form a strong recovery team. Among them, İYİP recruited Bilge Yılmaz, professor of finance from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, who recently unveiled a comprehensive economic package that includes detailed measures on public finance, tax systems, industrial policy, and international trade. DEVA has sought to capitalise on the strong performance of its leader, Ali Babacan, under whose term as Minister of Economy Turkey experienced high growth.

The looming question is to decide which party gets the economics portfolio under the new government. Announcing their economic programmes early, İYİP and DEVA seem to be in open competition to attract

voters hard hit by the crisis and want to get the political credit for pulling Turkey out of it. Surprisingly, the CHP has taken a back seat in these debates. Although the “Table of Six” laid out the steps to address the currency and budgetary crisis, this weak performance by the CHP – as the only leftist party in the alliance – risks weakening the ability of the new government to adopt redistributive and anti-poverty measures.

The need for a new foreign policy

Another challenge for the new government will be restoring Turkey’s foreign policy. Erdoğan’s revisionist agenda has led to frequent clashes with the EU, brought into question Turkey’s position within NATO, and strained ties with various countries in the region. Although Erdoğan has recently sought rapprochement with Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, Turkey’s international standing has been shaken severely over the past decade. The new government is expected to strengthen Turkey’s position within NATO and reset EU-Turkey relations. Opposition leaders have repeatedly criticised the Erdoğan administration’s decision to purchase the Russian S-400 missile defence systems and its tendency to create tensions with various EU member states.

After years of continuous tensions in EU-Turkish relations, Erdoğan’s departure from power would generate some goodwill among European governments, but the improvement of bilateral relations would take a long time. In particular, the status of Cyprus, maritime borders with Greece, and the migration deal will continue to plague bilateral relations with the EU. As part of a wider discussion to revitalise ties with the US, the new government may consider “sending its Russian-made S-400 missile defense systems to Ukraine to help it fight invading Russian forces”, as was recently suggested by a US diplomatic official. But the potential risks of blowback from the Putin administration would be severe in this scenario. The opposition does not have a new vision for recalibrating Turkey’s relations with either Russia or Iran, both of which

have determined their diplomatic policy on Turkey based on personal ties to Erdoğan.

The complicated triangle between Turkey, Russia, and Iran would also affect Turkey-Syria relations in a post-Erdoğan era. Both the CHP and İYİP have indicated their willingness to talk with the al-Assad regime. Surely, Bashar al-Assad would welcome government change in Turkey. For years, the AKP government has provided military assistance and safe haven for insurgent groups against the Assad regime and carried out military operations in Syria since 2016. Due to its high price tag, the new government would have an incentive to negotiate a military pullout in exchange for the return of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, but gaining concrete concessions from the Syrian government would not be easy.

The six opposition parties have vastly different agendas that would complicate efforts to develop a consistent diplomatic course. The CHP’s foreign policy portfolio is currently run by Ünal Çeviköz, a former diplomat with moderate Western leanings who advocates for a return to Turkey’s traditional foreign policy agenda. But on controversial issues, such as the S-400 missile defence systems and the Eastern Mediterranean dispute, Çeviköz has met with strong nationalist pressure from the CHP base. Both İYİP and DEVA are worried about Russia’s aggression in the region and propose closer ties to NATO but differ on their positions on the Kurdish question. Unlike DEVA, İYİP views Syrian Kurdish insurgent groups to be directly linked with the PKK, opposes any diplomatic talks with Kurdish groups in Syria, and even criticised Erdoğan for not being tougher with Finland and Sweden for allegedly supporting the PKK. The chief architect of the AKP’s interventionist foreign policy after the Arab Uprisings, former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, is currently in the opposition camp as leader of the GP. Although the likelihood of Davutoğlu returning to his old post is low, his presence in the opposition camp may complicate efforts of the new government to break from the AKP’s failed policies that are directly associated with him.

Migration policy

In a country that hosts more than six million refugees and irregular migrants, the status of this growing community would be another major challenge for the new government. Due to civil wars in the region, Turkey has recently emerged as the top host country for refugees in the world, with approximately four million from Syria alone. Although Turkish society was initially welcoming towards refugees from Muslim-majority countries such as Syria, the sharp rise in their numbers against the backdrop of an economic crisis has increased anti-refugee sentiment and even resulted in sporadic pogroms. The majority of voters in all major parties are currently opposed to the long-term settlement of Syrians in Turkey.

CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu has consistently criticised the open-door policy for Syrians and opposed Turkey's military intervention in the Syrian Civil War. He recently became more vocal with these criticisms, pledging to send Syrians back to their country voluntarily in two years through increased dialogue with the Assad regime and financial assistance from the EU for infrastructure development in Syria. İyiP advocates a similar agenda that includes the expulsion of illegal immigrants and a quota system for the settlement of Syrians in urban neighbourhoods. However, neither party has turned the Syrians into a main campaign issue. Although this strategy can be seen as a "responsible" measure, it nonetheless has created favourable conditions for an anti-refugee party to thrive in recent months. Founded in 2021 by Ümit Özdağ, who was a far-right member of parliament from the ultra-nationalist MHP and, briefly, from İyiP, the ZP quickly increased its popularity as a single-issue party focussed on expelling refugees back to their country. Despite not being part of a formal alliance, it has generated strong interest on social media and currently polls around 1 to 4 per cent.

While openly admitting that the open-door policy is unsustainable, the two splinter parties — DEVA and the GP — have until recently not publicly advocated for

the return of Syrian refugees. As the chief architect of the 2016 EU-Turkey migration deal, for instance, Davutoğlu's GP is calling for a return to the agreement's framework and wants to limit the settlement of Syrian refugees to designated areas. Meanwhile, DEVA leader Babacan openly questioned the feasibility and legality of returning Syrians back to their country earlier this year. In response to growing anti-refugee sentiment, however, both parties have changed their positions on this issue and joined other opposition parties by declaring their commitment for the return of Syrians, albeit voluntarily.

Advocating for the voluntary return of Syrians is a convenient solution for these opposition parties, which want to shift the public focus towards economic problems but also fear losing votes to anti-refugee parties such as the ZP. Unless it is backed up by a strong political commitment and a diplomatic agreement with Syria, however, voluntary return is destined to remain at low levels. After living in Turkey for a decade, few Syrians want to return to Syria willingly. It is unlikely that the Assad government would welcome these refugees, many of whom are treated as opponents of the regime due to their Sunni Muslim faith. Meanwhile, the costly policy of settling a large number of Syrians in Turkish-controlled parts of Syria would not be a long-term solution unless the region could attract high levels of investment to generate employment opportunities. Therefore, the new government would need to consider other instruments in addressing the refugee crisis, including resettlement in third countries, repatriation, and integration.

Civil service reform

Another important issue to tackle for the new government would be the replacement of partisans in the civil service, the military, and the judiciary. Especially since the failed 2016 coup, the Erdoğan administration has purged tens of thousands of public officials and replaced them with sycophants who became complicit in the partisan and re-

pressive measures adopted by the ruling bloc. If these cadres were to keep their positions, the new government would encounter resistance against its political agenda, experience bureaucratic obstruction, and even run the risk of military insubordination.

Although the six opposition parties acknowledge the need for change, they disagree on how and with whom to replace these posts. Naturally, the main opposition CHP expects the lion's share in bureaucratic appointments. Due to the exclusion of social democratic cadres under AKP rule, the CHP does not have a sizeable pool of recruits. Therefore, major metropolitan municipalities in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, where CHP mayors are in charge, could emerge as the centre-left party's primary source of recruitment in a post-Erdoğan era. Faced with limited financial sources and government obstruction, the opposition cadres in these cities have gained invaluable experience in undertaking large infrastructure projects, providing social assistance, and running integration programmes for migrants, among others.

After nearly two decades of AKP rule, few government critics have any significant experience in public office, with the exception of some members of the two Islamist splinter parties. Owing to the fact that they were established by former AKP members, the leadership of both parties still enjoy ties to the state bureaucracy and may also advocate for the reinstatement of former AKP-era cadres who were purged by Erdoğan over the years. İyİP may also have an ideological advantage that could appeal to certain segments of the bureaucracy, particularly those in the security apparatus. Due to the AKP's alliance with the ultranationalist MHP, state ranks have recently been filled by nationalist recruits who may gravitate towards the İP after a government turnover.

Faced with these challenges, the Table of Six has not yet offered a comprehensive policy platform. On matters of economic policy, judicial reform, and refugee management, the six parties have recently begun to converge their positions. However, there are no easy solutions left in these policy

areas. Even if these parties were to settle on common positions, recovery would require tough decisions in the post-election period. On the other hand, the six parties are divided on matters of foreign affairs, political and bureaucratic appointments, and the Kurdish question, among others. These rifts may intensify if the six parties begin to compete against each other following Erdoğan's defeat. While tackling these problems, the six parties would also need to amend the constitution to restore the parliamentary system. This would be a tough task to accomplish, considering that the record of coalition governments in Turkey is not very strong. No coalition government has managed to complete its full term since Turkey's transition to a multi-party democracy in 1950.

The EU's task ahead in a post-Erdoğan era

The outcome of the upcoming elections will have immense importance for the future of EU-Turkey relations. In the event of an opposition victory against Erdoğan, the new government will surely reset EU-Turkey relations and improve Turkey's ties with its Western allies. The new government will refrain from provoking crises with EU member states and seek to restart accession talks. In turn, the EU could play a constructive role during this transition process. Most importantly, the EU should closely monitor developments on election night to document any electoral irregularities. Should Erdoğan refuse to step down that night despite losing, strong diplomatic pressure should be exerted on Turkey by EU member states to ensure a smooth transfer of power. Accordingly, the OSCE should send Turkey a large team of election observers to raise the costs for Erdoğan if he engages in electoral fraud.

Following Russia's attack on Ukraine, Turkey's geostrategic importance has become more pronounced. With its sizeable population, Turkey could become an economic powerhouse in its region and generate vast trade and investment opportuni-

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ties for the EU. In many issue areas, such as trade, security, migration, and climate action, the two sides could find mutual benefits. But an improvement in bilateral relations would require goodwill on both sides. Should the opposition defeat Erdoğan, the new government will need political and financial support from its Western allies to undertake the colossal task of resolving the economic crisis as well as the refugee problem and restoring parliamentary democracy. Accordingly, the EU might improve trade volumes with Turkey by modernising the Customs Union, cultivating stronger cultural and education ties, and starting a political dialogue with various stakeholders, including municipal governments and civil society. Talks on visa liberalisation can be speeded up to increase people-to-people contacts between Turkey and the EU. Currently, Turkish citizens are being put through a humiliatingly long visa application process that costs substantial sums of money and time. And yet, rejection rates on visa applications from Turkey have increased substantially in recent months.

As Turkey's accession process came to a halt, EU policymakers developed a rather transactional relationship with the Erdoğan administration on key policy issues, such as the 2016 EU-Turkey deal. In a post-Erdoğan era, the EU would need to make a special effort to place bilateral relations with Turkey within a rules-based, institutional framework. An important cornerstone of this engagement would be the revitalisation of Turkey's EU relations along with an update of the Customs Union agreement and/or the Association Agreement, namely the Ankara Treaty. The two sides could intensify their cooperation on matters of climate change, irregular migration, and trade. Turkey's Customs Union Agreement, which went into effect in late 1995, needs to be modernised to address the requirements of a digitalised economy.

The opposition's rise to power would result in substantial improvements in

certain areas of foreign policy. But the EU should also not make the mistake of assuming that the new government will automatically capitulate on Cyprus, the Eastern Mediterranean dispute, or the refugee question. Relations between Turkey, Greece, and the Republic of Cyprus are plagued by serious disagreements over maritime boundaries and the status of Cyprus. The new government could surely reduce tensions in the region. But this reconciliation would probably not produce a quick diplomatic breakthrough in any of these substantive areas. Therefore, the EU should encourage Turkey and Greece to hold diplomatic talks while focussing on concrete policy areas for deepening cooperation in the short run.

Dr Berk Esen was IPC-Stiftung Mercator Fellow at the Centre for Applied Turkish Studies (CATS) at SWP.

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