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Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

# Elections in Turkey: Contexts, Issues, and Scenarios

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Al-Bayan Center Studies Series

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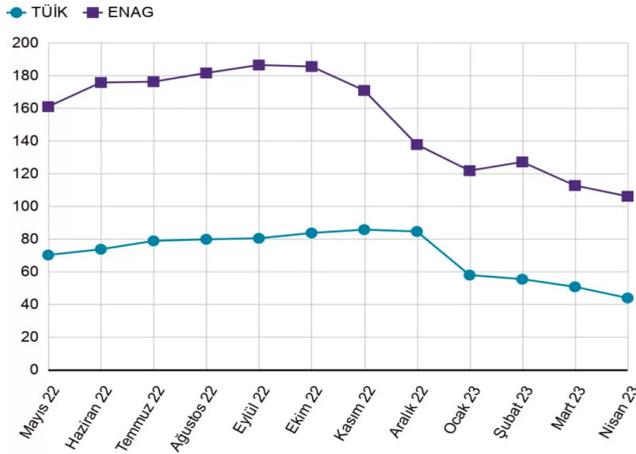
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# Elections in Turkey: Contexts, Issues, and Scenarios

Peyman Eshaghi\*

Turkey's upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections will begin on May 14. The significance of this election is heightened by the fact that it will take place in the centennial year of the Republic of Turkey's founding and that the country has been experiencing a deteriorating social and economic situation over the past few years; both make it a momentous occasion. The everyday lives of the Turkish people have been hampered by the actual inflation rate being over 200% in the preceding year. Considering the regional and international position of Turkey, that's why many think the impending Turkish elections in 2023 are the most crucial ones anywhere in the globe.



\* Researcher.

The difference in the rate of inflation in Turkey last year, according to the Turkish Statistics Organization (TÜİK), which is a government institution, and the “Inflation Research Group” (Enflasyon Araştırma Grubu), which is a private institution.

Similarly to the early years of the Republic of Turkey, Turkey is known by reference to its leader both inside and outside of Turkey, and this is true in the political, economic, and cultural realms. The Justice and Development Party has significantly shaped Turkey in these areas for over two decades. Since 2002, under Erdogan’s leadership, his Party has dominated municipal and national elections, positioning Turkey prominently at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, between the Black and Mediterranean Seas. Since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, Turkey has been beset by several challenges. These include the influx of millions of immigrants from neighboring countries, the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the breakdown of negotiations between the Turkish government and its Kurdish political groups, the failed coup attempt in 2014, and the government’s poor economic decisions. Despite the country’s many decades of political disorder, the nation has had a measure of political stability in the five years since the last presidential and legislative elections. Still, the polls on May 14 this year are the start of a new and extended period of instability.

## Processes and settings

After the Ottoman Empire fell in 1922, the Republic of Turkey was founded. Since then, it has been plagued by political strife. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been a rare bright spot in modern Turkish politics, having normalized the people's social life, decreased polarization, and fostered consensus-based growth while simultaneously transforming the country's economy.

However, things in Turkey began to shift gradually after the failed coup attempt in 2014. When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) put forward its proposal to amend the constitution in a referendum, it received slightly more than 50% of the vote, transforming Turkey's parliamentary system into a presidential one and laying the groundwork for Erdogan's consolidation of power. Since then, Turkey's economic conditions have deteriorated in a manner never seen before in the previous two decades; as of September 2022, Turkey's annual inflation rate reached around 200%, in the shadow of the Turkish government's unconventional economic policies, especially the insistence on lowering the bank interest rate, and the problems caused by the Corona epidemic and the Russia-Ukraine war.

Erdogan and his Party took control of the Turkish government in parliamentary elections in 2018. However, in the following year's municipal elections, the joint opposition candidate retook control of the mayorships of the most significant Turkish cities, including

Istanbul and Ankara. On the other side, Erdogan's detractors have banded together unprecedentedly, notwithstanding their differences. In an effort to bring down Erdogan in the upcoming elections and pave the way for Turkey's return to a "Strengthened parliamentary democracy," the six main opposition parties—the secular Republican People's Party, the nationalist Good Party, the conservative Saadat Party (heir of Necmettin Erbakan and the Islamist-political movement called Millî Görüş), the Democratic Party, and two different parties from the Justice and Development Party—formed Table of Six. After much debate, the parties formed the Nation Alliance around Republican People's Party secretary general Kemal Kilicdaroglu as their sole presidential candidate, rejecting the presidential coalition formed by the Justice and Development Party and the Nationalist Movement Party. In turn, Kemal Kilicdarglu announced that he would introduce the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul as his deputies in addition to the heads of the parties in his coalition. Through that, they developed an unprecedented alliance to gain a parliamentary majority and ultimately bring down Erdogan.



“Table of Six” signing the agreement to return to “strengthened parliamentary democracy”

### **One Kurdish Party, four alliances, and four candidates**

In this election, one alliance will back Erdogan in the forthcoming elections, while three others will create a front against him. The People’s Alliance (Turkish: *Cumhur İttifakı*) and the Nation Alliance (Turkish: *Millet İttifakı*) are the two largest coalitions as the first supports Erdogan and the latter confronts him. However, the Kurdish–leftist Labour and Freedom Alliance (Turkish: *Emek ve özgürlük İttifakı*), comprised of the Peoples’ Democratic Party and some minor parties, has come out in favor of Kamal Klichdaroglu’s campaign. The far–right Ancestral Alliance (in Turkish: *Ata İttifakı*) has presented its candidate (Sinan Oğan), and Muharram Ince has joined the election through his Party.

The main opposition party's track record on the issue of the hijab is a significant worry for a sizable portion of Turkish voters, who will go to the polls in the coming days to pick the president and parliament members of that nation. The People's Republican Party (Atatürk's Party) is working hard to change the public's perception of his Party as anti-religious, even though his Party's general secretary is a candidate for a wide variety of secular, conservative, and nationalist opponents of Erdogan. For decades, tension has existed between the people and the ruling Party over the issue of whether or not the hijab should be allowed in public places like schools and universities; this is one reason why some people, especially old and middle age citizens, believe the "mentality of the People's Republican Party" will be revealed one day.

### **An Alevi Citizen as the candidate of the opposition**

Meanwhile, Kamal Kilicdaroglu's affiliation with the Alevi sect of Islam is one of this campaign's most pivotal social factors. There had always been a sense of humiliation toward the Alevis, and now, their prayer places are under attack by radical Sunnis. There are between ten and twenty million Alevis Muslims in Turkey. As they endured much hardship and marginalization under the Ottomans, these people have always been strong supporters of secular Turkey and its republic, and they have a deep admiration for Atatürk and the People's Republican Party.

In recent years, as Islamism and conservatism have gained ground

in Turkish politics and society, the Alevi people, primarily located in the country's inner regions and major cities like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, have increasingly considered themselves to be on the defensive. During the election of the opposition candidate to line up against Erdogan, the opposition front, which includes a range of parties and groups with secular to Islamist identities, had a difference in choosing him due to Kılıçdaroğlu being an Alevi. The extent one of the senior members of the Good Party openly stated that Kılıçdaroğlu's being an Alevi is a big obstacle for the majority of Turkish voters, and for this reason, the opposition should nominate another person as a candidate. Although this person was forced to withdraw due to such statements, such comments reveal the challenges of introducing and selecting a non-Sunni person as president in a country that was not only historically a Sunni Muslim empire but, in the last two decades, has been increasingly recognized as a conservative and religious country inside and outside the country.



The vast use of veiled women’s photos in Kılıçdaroğlu’s campaign aims to reconcile with the conservative strata of Turkish society.

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has identified himself as an Alevi for the first time in recent years. Considering centuries of political and social pressure on the Alevis by Turkey’s Sunni majority, bringing all kinds of accusations and spreading countless cases of rumors against this community, and in a situation where even some of Erdoğan’s staunchest opponents were also hesitant to introduce Kılıçdaroğlu as the opposition candidate, Kılıçdaroğlu, almost three weeks before the elections, in an unprecedented move, addressed to Turkey’s first voters, clearly stated that he is an Alevi and that religious prejudices should be put aside in Turkey while focusing on building a prosperous country for the future. In sections of this tweeted video, he claims, “I

am Alevi; I grew up believing in Truth (Allah), Muhammad, and Ali. I am a genuine Muslim. God gave me life. I never violate people's rights. I don't become involved in illegal (haram) or evil activities. I was born in a remote place, inside a poor home in this land that Atatürk handed to us. I educated, got a job, and started a family in the shadow of the chances provided by the republic..." This tweet has been seen around 115 million times and has gained significant positive attention from Turkish society.<sup>1</sup>



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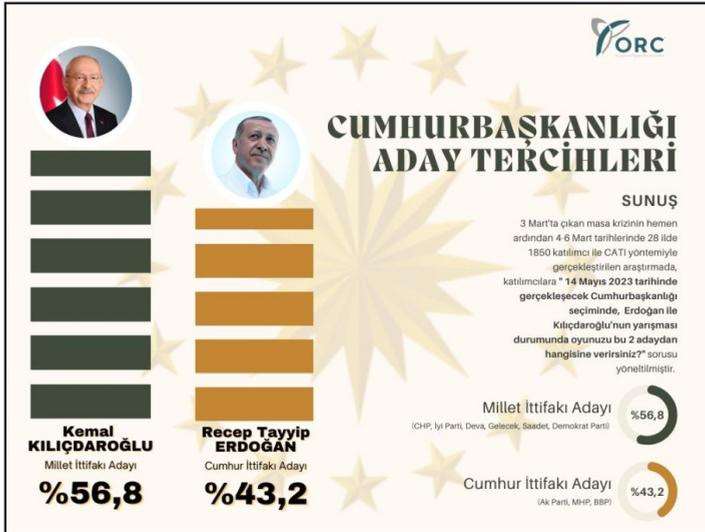
1. <https://twitter.com/kilicdarogluk/status/1648755862905708551>

### **What do the surveys indicate?**

Many of Turkey's polling institutions have strong affiliations with various political parties and organizations; consequently, their published findings are often skewed. Some credible polling organizations limit access to their results to paying members, who include political organizations and significant businesses. However, a quick look at the effects of credible polling organizations published openly shows three things: the opposition candidate Kemal Kilicdaroglu has gained ground on Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The election will go into a second round since no candidate has received more than 50% of the vote. To conclude, Kamal Kilicdaroglu has a short way to go before reaching 50%. Thus, according to most surveys, the elections will go to a runoff when Kemal Klichdaroglu is elected president. However, the coming days until the first round of the election and the two weeks between the first and second weeks would be much more unpredictable if they remained in the second round.



The survey of the prestigious ORC survey institute was conducted on April 29 to March 1 with a statistical sample of 3950 in 41 provinces of Turkey.



The survey of the same institution about the result of the presidential election in Turkey, if it is extended to the second round

## **What can we expect from now till the election?**

On the morning of Sunday, May 14, 2023, elections will be conducted throughout Turkey and in several Turkish political positions overseas. The polls will be open from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, and the results will be released directly to the public through the media, with the Ministry of the Interior's approval, about four hours after the close of voting. By 10:00 PM, most of the votes will have been tallied, and the election outcome will likely be evident. If no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote, the top two finishers will face off again on Sunday, May 28.

Tensions and confrontations will likely rise in the last days leading up to the elections as the campaigns heat up. We may see violence at election rallies after the shootings at party headquarters that happened in recent weeks. Outside of Turkey, where voting has already begun, reports of violence have also surfaced.<sup>2</sup> In the last days before the elections, the administration and the opposition are making the most of every opportunity to highlight the other's flaws and bolster their standing. Kemal Kilicdaroglu, along with his would-be aids, namely the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara, and the other party leaders in the National Alliance, all spend most of their time on the road. They've kind of divided up the labor, and the conservatives spend most of their time on the road in Turkey's traditionally conservative center areas, where they attempt to present themselves as clones of Erdogan.

2. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/05/02/brawls-break-out-as-turks-vote-in-pivotal-election-overseas>

Kilicdarogu is very well welcomed in many cities, especially in the districts where Kurdish citizens are the majority.<sup>3</sup> He, and his aides, are mainly repeating, “Let’s finish it in the first round.”<sup>4</sup>

As President Erdogan is well aware that he is behind his rival, he has been making efforts to project an authoritative image by, among other things, lowering energy prices in the past month, keeping the exchange rate stable by injecting dollars into the market indignantly and promising to improve the economic situation by hiring better financial experts, the lack of whom has led to the current problems of the economy.

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3. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/reklam-engelleyici>

4. <https://chp.org.tr/video/lk-turda-bitirelim-haydi>



Erdogan’s election discourse is focused on presenting a powerful, decisive, and conservative image of him.

It should be noted that regardless of the outcome of this election, the Justice and Development Party will be represented in the Turkish Parliament, even if in the minority, and its Secretary General, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, will be the leader of the government’s opposition in the Parliament even if he loses the election. However, the parties this Party has included in its coalition to gain support for Erdogan’s presidency, such as the Kurdish Hezbollah-affiliated The Free Cause Party and The New Welfare Party, will turn the Justice and Development Party into an even more conservative party in the coming years.

On the other hand, regardless of the election result, Turkey will stay relatively similar to prior years in many internal and global cases and problems in the following years, and it will take years for their decades-long influence to fade away. The social changes that have occurred in Turkey in recent years, which have reduced the popularity of the Justice and Development Party, will accelerate in the coming years, and the young Turkish society, which does not think like their parents in many areas, will change the face of this country. In this circumstance, only a party can secure its existence in power while aligning itself with ingrained conservatism, social changes in society, particularly among the young, regional challenges, and worldwide risks. Whatever the case, the elections on May 14 this year will mark the start of a new and protracted era of political instability in that nation, with rising tensions, polarization, and politico-social confrontations.

### **About the author**

Peyman Eshaghi is a Gerda Henkel Ph.D. fellow at the Berlin Graduate School of Muslim Cultures and Societies (BGSMS), Free University of Berlin, Germany. Before that, he studied at the University of Chicago, the University of Ankara, and the University of Tehran in anthropology and sociology of religion. His writings have appeared in the Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication, Iranian Studies, Jadaliya and Politics Today.