

# Turks Vote in Favor of Continuing the Erdoğan Era

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**ABSTRACT** *The political landscape in Türkiye has changed since the 2010s, setting the stage for the elections in 2023. The Nation Alliance and the People's Alliance were formed as a result of electoral alliances in the center. After the 2019 municipal elections, the Nation Alliance felt more confident, whilst the People's Alliance encountered difficulties because of socioeconomic problems and earthquakes. The Nation Alliance and the HDP collaborated covertly during the campaign in order to win the PKK's backing. They had internal conflicts and placed more emphasis on virtual platforms than on actual issues. President Erdoğan's ruling party demonstrated its capacity to keep its promises by taking action. They were able to gain the legislative majority and re-elect President Erdoğan thanks to their composure, quick reactions, technical foresight, and remoteness from terrorists. The CHP, İP, HDP, and YSP all saw losses as a result of the elections, while fringe groups within the Nation Alliance gained the most. Internal elections are to be held by CHP and İP to quell disagreements about the party's leaders. In this sense, short-term changes remain unlikely in any of the movements that pledged "change."*

**Keywords:** Türkiye's May Elections, Electoral Campaign and Strategies, Erdoğan's Presidency, Turkish Opposition

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**T**he 2023 elections were particularly significant for Turkish citizens since they took place on the centennial of the Republic's proclamation. Having formed Europe's last modern state in 1923, they decided how they were going to usher in the next century. The Turks focused on modernization in the nineteenth century and saw the twentieth century as the century of democratization. The next century, in turn, will ostensibly be the century of technology. The neoliberal system financialized the real economy to promote growth and increase consumption, which gives the impression that welfare has spread. In truth, however, the 'Century of Türkiye' will remain elusive in the absence of increased technological output.

Upon coming to power in 2002, Erdoğan created a local version of neoliberal politics. He sought to eliminate the military tutelage regime, which had executed Prime Minister Adnan Menderes in a traumatizing manner, by deriving power from civil society and the markets, which had been growing stronger since Turgut Özal's time. At the same time, the Turkish leader attempted to jumpstart the economy, which had hit rock bottom in the 2001 economic crisis. In the initial years of the new millennium (which were actually the final moments of the twentieth century), his government promoted social unity through Kurdish and Alevi initiatives as well as tried to integrate Türkiye into the global system through accession talks with the European Union.

## Taking Stock of Turkish Elections in the Last Two Decades

Having survived the 2007 coup attempt (also known as the e-memorandum) with the help of popular elections, Erdoğan encountered a new political rival, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, in the 2010 constitutional referendum and the 2011 general elections. The main opposition leader had replaced his predecessor in 2010 following a scandal. He oversaw a nearly 5-point increase in the CHP's popular support in his first election, as the AK Party's number of parliamentarians decreased despite that movement's electoral success. By 2015, Kılıçdaroğlu had come to terms with the impossibility of defeating the AK Party single-handedly and disregarded the slide of some CHP voters to the HDP to help an additional political party be represented at the Turkish Parliament.

At the same time, the AK Party terminated the reconciliation process in April 2015 as lethal riots erupted over the ISIS invasion of Kobani on October 6-8, 2014, and the PKK refused to lay down its arms at the recommendation of Turkish leftists. Another development that led to the derailment of talks was the attempt by the PKK –which seized control of a vast area with U.S. support in the guise of combating ISIS– to take advantage of the power vacuum in northern Syria to create a Kurdish statelet. Due to the frustration of nationalist and conservative voters, the AK Party experienced a significant drop in its popular support (approx-

imately 10 percent) in the June 2015 elections. That decline was arguably due to negotiations with Kurdish nationalists since the AK Party lost most votes to the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), a Turkish nationalist movement that controlled the least number of parliamentary seats at the time. Moreover, some disagreements over strategy between the party's true leader, Erdoğan, and Ahmet Davutoğlu, his replacement and an inexperienced leader despite not being an inexperienced politician, played some role in that outcome. Although Prime Minister Davutoğlu insisted on forming a grand coalition with the CHP after the June 2015 elections, President Erdoğan refused to agree to the terms of the main opposition party, which collaborated with HDP, and forced a repeat election. The PKK dug trenches and took over residential areas in Türkiye's South East during the summer of 2015. Terrorist elements were defeated and peace was restored in these areas thanks to a coordinated operation of the Turkish security services known as the "Trench Operations." Furthermore, President Erdoğan's resistance to separatism helped the AK Party win back voters who had supported MHP in the previous election, as well as Kurdish conservatives. Ultimately, the movement regained the parliamentary majority necessary to form another single-party government. It is possible to argue that MHP and HDP were the main losers in the November 2015 elections. The CHP, in turn, allowed its supporters to split up and keep all four parties in the Turkish Parliament. Yet it failed to

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stop the AK Party from coming to power single-handedly. It is important to underscore that CHP's main goal was to increase the number of political parties represented in Parliament to stop the AK Party from forming another single-party government – unless, of course, it could increase its share of the popular vote to come to power itself.

Having survived the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, which the Fetullah Terrorist Organization's (FETÖ) military and civilian components triggered thanks to the people's resistance, Erdoğan immediately amended the Constitution to adopt the presidential system of government. The April 2017 constitutional referendum passed, and Erdoğan was elected president for the first time under the new system of government in June 2018. As the CHP's popular support declined, the Good Party (İP) entered Parliament as a new Turkish nationalist movement.

The 2018 elections ushered in electoral alliances since the new system enabled them in Turkish politics.

## The electorate found the opposition's excessive pledges to increase revenues, overcome economic challenges, and heal the earthquake's wounds less persuasive than the government's performance

Whereas the AK Party and MHP (which had become closer in the wake of the constitutional referendum) formed the People's Alliance, the İP (which broke off from MHP) joined the CHP-led Nation Alliance together with the Islamist Felicity Party (SP). In this sense, the Parliament featured two Turkish nationalist parties and a Kurdish nationalist party, as well as mainstream conservative-democratic and social-democratic parties. The presidential system, which became operational in 2018, functioned seamlessly due to the People's Alliance's parliamentary majority and ability to cooperate without difficulty. Meanwhile, the opposition took steps to expand the Nation Alliance.

### Advantages and Disadvantages on the Campaign Trail

At the start of the 2023 election cycle, the opposition had significant advantages. Primarily, opposition parties began to form the Table of

Six ahead of the 2019 municipal elections, which had a positive impact on the election results. That preliminary bloc consisted of the CHP, the İP, and the SP. At the same time, Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoğlu, on the verge of breaking off from the AK Party, quietly supported the opposition as the HDP endorsed the emerging bloc more openly. Consequently, opposition candidates won mayoral races in metropolitan areas like İstanbul and Ankara, where the ruling party had been in charge for a long time.

The opposition's second advantage, which was linked to its achievements in the municipal elections, was those opposition voters who became confident that they were on the verge of winning. After all, they had seen that they could win elections by joining forces, which really encouraged them ahead of the 2023 elections.

Thirdly, the opposition expected the COVID-19 pandemic to drag Türkiye's already troubled economy into a hysterical crisis. It is possible to argue that the decline in the income and living standards of wage earners helped the opposition gain momentum. Furthermore, the opposition believed that the AK Party government, which already had trouble addressing pressing problems, could not recover from the devastating February 6 earthquakes that affected a massive area in the country's southern provinces and claimed the lives of approximately 50 thousand people.

From the government's perspective, there was hardly any reason for op-

timism as late as the fall of 2022. The above-mentioned earthquake certainly entailed much more serious trauma. Ahead of the 2023 elections, the government started by increasing the income of social groups that had experienced a loss of income and had been living under the threat of high inflation since December 2021. By making some legal changes in mid-2022, it also increased the non-taxable minimum wage and, by extension, offered a raise to pensioners and public-sector employees. Despite the earthquake's devastating impact and the potential financial burden of what happened, the government did not refrain from granting additional retirement-related rights to approximately two million employees. The unveiling of several megaprojects, which were completed over the last five years, also improved society's morale. Ultimately, the ruling party successfully presented itself as the only movement that could possibly address economic problems. Likewise, the electorate found the opposition's excessive pledges to increase revenues, overcome economic challenges, and heal the earthquake's wounds less persuasive than the government's performance.

At the same time, the opposition bloc's emphasis on internal negotiations perplexed the electorate and provided the ruling party with a significant advantage. Indeed, the Table of Six brought together representatives of various social groups who held excessively lengthy talks, which satisfied fringe groups yet fueled a backlash among supporters of major

parties. Furthermore, the arbitrary nature of the opposition candidate's selection undermined the voluntary union of the bloc's members. Likewise, the six opposition leaders negotiated terms for too long and failed to sync their election strategies, which aggravated the hopelessness of their supporters. With the exception of promoting the "Augmented Parliamentary System," whose content and timeline remained unclear, the opposition found it difficult to engage in positive politics. With the opposition failing to inspire hope, the ruling party continued to reassure voters with its strong performance.

## Election Strategies

On the campaign trail, the ruling party constantly reminded voters that the opposition had partnered with the HDP, a separatist party, to win the election. Although the HDP was not officially part of the Nation Alliance, that movement's close relations with Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who received the endorsement of former HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş as well as the PKK's representatives, led many voters to think that the opposition's potential victory would weaken the nation's defenses against terrorists. Had HDP fielded its own presidential candidate independently of the Table of Six, its collaboration with the opposition would have been less obvious. Yet the opposition was alarmed by the fact that President Erdoğan won first-round victories in 2014 and 2018, falsely concluding that the sheer number of opposition

voters reflected sociological unity. In other words, the opposition could have received more than 50 percent if it had stayed calm and aimed to force the second round –since each party would have campaigned freely.

By contrast, part of the electorate could not trust Kılıçdaroğlu due to his endorsement by Demirtaş, who instigated the October 6-8, riots, and by the terrorist organization PKK (which sought to cozy up to the potential winner) as well as his refusal to condemn such statements of support. Unable to distance itself from terrorists, HDP's partnership with the opposition worked in the 2019 municipal elections because it was hidden. However, PKK's senior leaders embraced and endorsed Kılıçdaroğlu as the likely winner –just as they have a tendency to claim responsibility for attacks that they did not carry out—and those developments took a serious toll on the opposition.

Believing that Sinan Oğan, a nationalist politician, won approximately 5 percent of the vote in the first round due to the opposition bloc's perceived collaboration with terrorists, Kılıçdaroğlu panicked and signed a memorandum with Ümit Özdağ, the more radical Turkish nationalist chairman of the Victory Party, which threatened to send all refugees, particularly Syrians, back to their home countries. Ironically, that pledge to forcibly repatriate refugees ruined the main opposition leader's reputation in democratic countries. In this sense, the CHP stopped acting like a social democratic party and revealed

a discriminatory and alienating kind of nationalism associated with far-right movements.

A closer look at campaign strategies reveals that the ruling party focused on the grassroots while the opposition concentrated on the virtual domain –another major difference between them. Whereas the former highlighted the importance of being visible on the ground, the latter assumed that it could connect with voters through online posts. It is important to note that the opposition, which was already popular among urbanites and educated citizens, could not receive additional support from the countryside with that strategy. Ultimately, the campaign strategists who misled the opposition based on the quantitative strength of their posts were promptly laid off after the first round. In this sense, the opposition acted without due consideration in a political universe that increasingly resembles post-truth and disregards reality, mistaking the process of detachment from reality for reality itself. It is possible to argue that the opposition may have implemented a strategy based on social media, which might be more meaningful in five years, somewhat prematurely. In the end, it was impossible for the opposition to connect with voters online as strongly as the ruling party's connection with the grassroots and Erdoğan's connection with the Turkish people.

Judging by the political psychology of its election strategy, the opposition appears to have gone beyond the virtual. Whereas opposition leaders

identified themselves as ‘mommy,’ ‘son,’ and ‘grandpa’ in an attempt to endear themselves to the electorate, they implicitly contributed to the portrayal of Erdoğan as ‘the father’ figure that must be defeated.

However, the Turkish president foiled the opposition’s political-psychological strategy by staying calm and using comfortable facial gestures instead of acting ‘mad’ as expected.

At the same time, Erdoğan refrained from using discriminatory language when the opposition’s nationalist wing attempted to flag Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s ‘Alevi’ identity. In the end, it was the opposition candidate himself, who desperately brought up his own sectarian identity in an attempt to elicit discrimination. Meanwhile, Ahmet Davutoğlu unwittingly brought up long-forgotten social tensions by mistaking Kılıçdaroğlu’s attempt to signal victimhood as an exercise in co-existence in a sociological sense.

Having failed to receive as many votes as expected in the first round, Kılıçdaroğlu tried to tap into the electorate’s fear of (and hatred toward) the incumbent instead of communicating his views in a positive sense. Accordingly, the opposition candidate attempted to portray the second round as a kind of referendum and asked voters, who wanted Erdoğan to lose despite appreciating his opponents’ shortcomings, for their support. Although the opposition was expected to inspire hope from the standpoint of political psychology, its decision to fuel hate did not translate

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into more popular support. By contrast, Erdoğan distinguished himself by reassuring voters and promising stability while criticizing the opposition for failing to distance itself from the terrorist organization PKK.

It is possible to argue that the opposition’s obsession with a first-round victory as part of its campaign strategy caused it to make mistakes in the home stretch. The first tactical mistake was the overdue and arbitrary endorsement of a joint candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who overruled Meral Akşener’s (leader of İP) objections with the help of fringe parties. Having identified the CHP chairman as ‘unelectable’ since the very beginning, the İP’s chairwoman risked leaving the Table of Six but failed to use that momentum due to her political inexperience. Following Akşener’s decision to leave the opposition bloc, Kılıçdaroğlu promptly cozied up to the HDP, which arguably cost him the Kemalist nationalist vote. Seeking to make the İP Türkiye’s most popular opposition movement, Akşener could only stop her ‘lynching’ on social media by the Kemalist nationalists by rejoining the bloc. In this

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sense, forcing the İP's chairwoman to reverse her decision was the single greatest thing that CHP supporters achieved with the help of social media. Yet Akşener's party thus gave up on its goals of becoming more popular and replacing the CHP as the main opposition party.

The opposition bloc's failure to distance itself from terrorists encouraged some members of Akşener's party to support Sinan Oğan in the presidential election, as some of CHP's Kemalist nationalist supporters sided with Akşener at the expense of Kılıçdaroğlu whom they did not trust. That is why the İP's chairwoman lost half of her potential supporters by leaving the opposition bloc yet nonetheless received two-thirds of the expected votes on election day to keep her movement's popular support steady. At this time, it is virtually impossible to tell whether the İP has an actual popular base without Meral Akşener. Still, it is obvious that the movement would lose some of its popular support under the leadership

of a different politician. Indeed, the İP would probably have a hard time receiving at least three percent of the national vote –which is needed to receive financial support from the Treasury– without its founding leader. Since Akşener remains aware of the lack of competition over party leadership, she was among the first politicians to call for a party congress after losing the 2023 elections.

Several fringe parties, which were part of the opposition bloc, had different considerations. The Felicity Party (SP) was part of the same alliance as the CHP in the previous election cycle, and its supporters were primarily motivated by their anger toward President Erdoğan. Yet that party's senior leaders failed to pass down that anger to younger voters, who overwhelmingly supported the New Welfare Party (YRP) in 2023 due to that party's more consistently conservative platform. Many observers seem to ignore the fact that young people demand change as well as care about consistency, honesty, and trust. Having disregarded the importance of reassuring young voters with consistent messaging, SP found it difficult to explain why it partnered with CHP. Although that party had motivated its supporters with CHP's emphasis on 'waste' in the 2019 municipal elections, it could not persuade Islamist and conservative voters to support Kılıçdaroğlu and CHP in the latest general elections due to their emphasis on policy. Nonetheless, SP was the only fringe party whose organization remained fired up ahead of the second round.



It is important to note that DEVA, the Future Party (GP), and the Democratic Party (DP) concentrated primarily on the 2028 elections. In this sense, their priority was to create a popular base that could remain intact for five years. Yet those parties had to settle for several dozen parliamentary seats (of questionable legitimacy) because they lost touch with their grassroots by collaborating with CHP. What made DEVA and GP valuable for the opposition bloc despite their limited popularity was their potential impact on the AK Party's legitimacy. Although hardly anyone thought that the Democratic Party (whose name remains its sole asset) would make any meaningful contribution, the remaining parties were seriously expected to make their mark.

Meanwhile, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu assumed that he could single-handedly

connect with conservative voters by pledging to “make amends” after receiving the opposition bloc's endorsement. That is why he did not intend to offer much to the above-mentioned fringe parties, whose candidates would run for office on the CHP ticket, until he mistakenly stepped on a prayer rug with his shoes – a cultural accident. In the end, Kılıçdaroğlu fielded more parliamentary candidates from those movements – more than the CHP organization cared to stomach – to address the concerns of conservative voters.

Ultimately, the fringe parties did not help the CHP win over any additional voters and also hurt their own interests vis-à-vis the 2028 elections. It is possible to argue that the nomination of parliamentary candidates, who were affiliated with other political parties, undermined morale among

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other People's Alliance leaders addressed the nation from outside the Presidential Palace, after the second round of the Presidential election, May 28, 2023.

HALİL SAĞIRKAYA / AA

CHP members and aggravated the problem at hand. At the same time, the newly-formed fringe parties could not create a political legacy since they did not use their own names and logos on the ballot. Whether they will be able to build that legacy in Parliament remains at the mercy of the People's Alliance. In this sense, the relevant parties might be able to gain disproportionate representation in the public arena if their support is needed in constitutional reform efforts. Yet those movements will be completely forgotten if the CHP or the İP agree to work with the People's Alliance on a constitutional reform bill. The bottom line is that the fringe parties have no choice but to appear more enthusiastic about constitutional amendments than the People's Alliance itself to preserve their power and legitimize their political existence by disagreeing with the opposition bloc or forming an alliance within the Nation Alliance.

## The Election

The most striking aspect of the 2023 elections in Türkiye was the extraordinarily high turnout rate. Although the Turkish people did not break any records this time around, the turnout rate was 87 percent and 84 percent in the first and second rounds respectively, which reflected a strong democratic tradition. It is important to note that the Turkish people have placed their faith in the ballot box since the first free elections in 1950. They could even remove putschists from power through elections in the aftermath of military coups. Likewise, govern-

ments that were deprived of their legitimacy or otherwise weakened resorted to early elections to ease tensions. In the wake of the Republican Rallies of 2007 (which called for a military coup), the Gezi Park riots in June 2013, and the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, the ballot box served to end political crises and strengthen the nation's democratic consciousness.

As expected, the first argument on election night related to 'election security.' Having lost against the AK Party for two decades, the CHP instantly made allegations about election security (despite the absence of any concrete and legal objections) for the sake of preventing its supporters from questioning its leadership. That move, which works every single time, does not prevent the party's defeat, yet the party chair keeps their seat once the political dust settles and other senior leaders are replaced. Generally speaking, the movement's leader makes the case that their loss was not as bad as it looked with reference to some statistics showing some kind of success. At the same time, the main opposition party tends to claim that early elections will take place in the following spring or fall in an attempt to keep voters on their toes. The same developments have taken place ahead of the May 14 elections. One might argue that the opposition will soon claim that Türkiye will hold early elections next fall.

## The Outcome

The first definitive result of the election was already out there on May

15, 2023. Accordingly, the People's Alliance preserved its parliamentary majority despite the opposition's pre-election momentum. Although the Nation Alliance attempted to bring together various opposition parties, it ended up forming the minority. The most recent election showed that mathematical calculations did not necessarily generate sociological unity. Whereas the AK Party's popular support notably declined, those losses did not cause that movement to lose as many seats due to the electoral system's rules. At the same time, the majority of voters who turned away from the AK Party voted for other members of the People's Alliance, like the MHP or YRP.

Although many observers expected MHP to lose a significant share of its popular support ahead of the 2023 parliamentary election, that party ranked third in terms of the number of parliamentary seats claimed. It is possible to argue that the public debate on national survival and terrorism caused some voters to look for political reassurance and consolidated the nationalist vote. Meanwhile, some conservative AK Party supporters continued to side with President Erdoğan in the presidential race despite turning to the YRP in the parliamentary election. That enabled the YRP to make a significant achievement by claiming five parliamentary seats.

The AK Party leadership viewed the election results as satisfactory since it maintained control of parliamentary commissions and the parliamentary

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majority despite receiving fewer votes than before. MHP, in turn, 'won' at a time when the general population assumed that it was losing. Last but not least, YRP reaped more benefits than any other member of the People's Alliance and emerged as an important contender in the 2028 elections. In this sense, that movement took a risk that fringe parties within the Nation Alliance deemed too great: to contest the election with its own name and logo. Accordingly, the YRP showed that it could potentially replace the SP, its counterpart within the opposition bloc. Although the SP claimed more parliamentary seats by sending its candidates to another political party, the YRP enjoys greater political legitimacy in Parliament.

HÜDA-PAR implemented an effective communication strategy. Appealing to conservative Kurdish voters, that movement proved more persuasive than the HDP, the secularist Kurdish party, by rejecting terrorism and pledging to promote its agenda nationwide. Furthermore,

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HÜDA-PAR's representatives benefited from public order and improved election security in predominantly Kurdish parts of the country. The decreased frequency of mass voting for the HDP, too, reflected those improvements.

Since the People's Alliance maintained its parliamentary majority, the presidential system essentially received a third vote of confidence after the 2017 constitutional referendum and the 2018 elections. By contrast, the opposition's main plan –restoring the augmented parliamentary system– did not receive the Turkish people's blessing. Over the next five years, the Parliament will presumably work on constitutional amendments to further rationalize the presidential system. In this sense, one might expect Türkiye to make additional changes to its constitution by building on five years of experience under presidentialism to institutionalize this new system of government.

The opposition may have been disappointed on May 15, but it did not wake up to the devastation. It is pos-

sible to argue that the main beneficiaries within the Nation Alliance were the four fringe parties that claimed more parliamentary seats than they could have controlled based on the size of their popular base. Ahmet Davutoğlu posed for a picture with several members of his party who were not officially parliamentarians yet, and Ali Babacan's remarks on potential cooperation between his party and the ruling alliance regarding constitutional reform both signaled that both politicians stopped paying attention as soon as the first round ended. By contrast, the İP was frustrated by the loss of the popular support that it had maintained since 2018. In line with Meral Akşener's dream of serving as prime minister, the İP aimed to receive over twenty percent of the popular vote yet ended up with a slightly smaller share than in the 2018 elections, becoming the fourth largest party in the Parliament. Meanwhile, CHP –the alliance's main component– not only failed to increase its share of the vote but also was compelled to hand over some of its parliamentary seats to several fringe parties. Furthermore, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's defeat in the second round demoralized the party organization because their chairman had taken serious risks just to win the presidential race.

The Nation Alliance's main problem in the first round was that the voters, whose support it lost on the campaign trail, overwhelmingly left the alliance altogether. Indeed, the number of votes that Sinan Oğan and the Victory Party (ZP) received in the way

of a first-round victory. Although it was obvious that President Erdoğan would win the second round comfortably due to the absence of a third candidate, he nonetheless missed a simple majority in the first round by 0.5 percentage points.

After the first round, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's most serious mistake was to assume that the third alliance's leaders could simply tell their supporters whom to support in the second round. Whereas Erdoğan persuaded one of those leaders without negotiating terms in any way, Kılıçdaroğlu signed an agreement with the third alliance's other leader that frustrated his partners around the table and on the ground, whereby that politician was offered multiple cabinet seats.

One of the biggest losers was arguably the HDP, which contested the election as the YSP. That movement experienced a three-point drop in its popular support compared to the previous election and a six-point drop compared to the 2015 parliamentary elections. With the share of its potential voters plummeting from 14 percent to 8 percent, the party's losses amounted to 40 percent. In other words, four out of ten voters have stopped supporting HDP since 2015. Some of those voters returned to the AK Party due to the PKK's 'trench' attacks, while others (whom HDP 'borrowed' from CHP) went back to supporting the main opposition party since clearing the national threshold ceased to be an issue after the introduction of electoral alliances. Finally,

some voters ended up supporting the Turkish Workers Party (TİP), a member of the same alliance.

It is possible to argue that the HDP used the 10-percent national threshold as leverage, and the introduction of the 7-percent national threshold was among several factors that contributed to the decline in the YSP's popular support. If that trend continues and the national threshold drops to three percent, that the movement might become a fringe party with approximately five percent of the national vote.

It was established that the movement, which moved from HDP's nationwide appeal policy to globalist populist leftism and renamed itself YSP, did not have a popular platform. With the radical leftist TİP's popularity among young middle-class urbanites contesting the election separately and Demirtaş's unique approach forcing YSP to integrate into the global system. In the end, that party might end up limiting itself to a specific region and the terrorist organization PKK. As voters in the region believe the YSP represents their rights to some extent in the Turkish Parliament, that movement could find its radical leftist wing less useful due to its declining urban support.

Having ceased to be a crucial partner for the opposition due to its loss of popular support in the May 14 elections, the YDP should expect a new debate with the potential to remove radical leftists from its organization. The policy of nationwide appeal un-

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der Selahattin Demirtaş was hindered by the same politician's negative discourse –“We won't let you become president”– at the recommendation of radical leftists. Since the conservative HÜDA-PAR has already taken over that policy of nationwide appeal, the YSP, which no longer can swing the presidential election with the simple majority requirement, was among the biggest losers.

### What the Election Tells Observers

The second round clearly delivered the message that the Turkish people voted in favor of keeping Erdoğan in power. Despite receiving the endorsement of Ümit Özdağ, a nationalist politician with a discriminatory tone, after the first round and asking his original supporters to hang on tight, Kılıçdaroğlu lost yet another election.

The main opposition leader falsely assumed that the electorate would act emotionally as opposed to rationally after losing the parliamentary majority. Kılıçdaroğlu now faces serious

challenges. Yet there is no reason to think that he might be easily toppled since he repeatedly proved his indispensability after each election loss. After all, what enabled Kılıçdaroğlu's rise to the top was a power struggle between powerful groups within the CHP. Those groups, however, continue to lack enough power to seize power single-handedly, which is why they back Kılıçdaroğlu as a weak leader. In other words, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has been using his political weakness to run the main opposition party. In the wake of his most recent defeat, the CHP chairman has replaced the movement's senior members instead of tendering his resignation.

Although the situation won't become clear until the party congress, Kılıçdaroğlu's new term as CHP chairman may have already begun. It is important to note that his replacement must be someone willing to bow to pressure from intra-party interest groups as opposed to a strong leader with the potential to lead the movement. That is why Kılıçdaroğlu will likely get re-elected in the party congress unless anyone except İstanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu –who can barely dare to run for chairman at Kılıçdaroğlu's moment of utter weakness and cannot help another group– joins the race.

To argue that nationalism is on the rise, solely judging by the increasing number of votes that nationalist parties have received in the most recent elections, would be an overstatement. After all, many voters who recently

supported nationalist movements yearn for order and oppose change. In other words, they do not subscribe to a version of ethnic nationalism that is ideologically exclusive. Specifically, MHP won over nationalist voters in Central Anatolia (who previously supported the AK Party), yet it does not target refugees. Likewise, Kemalist nationalists who ended up voting for the İP were mainly frustrated by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's complicated relationship with the HDP. To sum up, Turkish voters look for reassurance and order as opposed to ethnic nationalism.

### **Why Erdoğan Won and Kılıçdaroğlu Lost**

The most important factor that contributed to President Erdoğan's victory has been the popular appreciation of his deeds and performances. Such public services may have been crushed by the discourse of "waste" in the 2019 municipal elections, yet they proved to be mindblowing and persuasive this time around. Despite the earthquakes, Erdoğan unveiled new works and projects on a daily basis during the campaign to preserve his performative reliability.

The second point is that the Turkish people looked for a safe choice amid the turbulence caused by extraordinary developments in the international system, which has been affected by long-standing and increasingly frequent crises. That factor, which one might describe as the pursuit of order, benefited candidates offering

stability at the expense of their opponents who promoted change.

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's incoherent messaging, which was informed by his desire to win over as many voters as possible, was another factor that contributed to Erdoğan's victory. On the campaign trail, the incumbent accused his opponent of failing to distance himself from terrorists (with reference to the latter's engagement with HDP). It was political suicide for Kılıçdaroğlu to keep silent in the face of such serious allegations. The main opposition leader realized that mistake after the first round, yet it was no longer possible for him to win the race. At that point, Kılıçdaroğlu hoped to receive enough votes to keep serving as CHP chairman. (The idea of "defeat without humiliation" is familiar to the Turkish people, who have been defeated by modernity). What enabled Kılıçdaroğlu to remain on his feet, too, was the sense that he was not humiliated by his opponent.

Yet the single most important reason behind Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's defeat was the limited nature of his leadership. Specifically, the CHP chairman was both the most reasonable and the least electable candidate that the opposition bloc could have fielded. Had the Table of Six been able to make a rational decision in line with its political structures, it might have nominated a liberal politician specializing in the economy (which has been a challenge for voters) that could connect with all components of the opposition bloc. Yet it would have been

very difficult to sell the CHP organization on a liberal candidate due to their traumatic experiences with right-wing candidates. At the same time, the CHP would have been the only member of the opposition bloc to endorse a social democrat or a Islamist –except Kılıçdaroğlu. Furthermore, it was necessary for the oppo-

sition candidate to reassure the HDP, and Kılıçdaroğlu was most likely to get that job done due to his ethnic background. Therefore, Kılıçdaroğlu was one of the main reasons behind the opposition's defeat, yet it would have been impossible for any other politician to run for president in his place. ■