

Key Issues in Turkish Politics before the 2023 Elections

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ABSTRACT *In 2023, Türkiye will celebrate the centennial of the establishment of the republic and will also hold a crucial election. The 2023 elections are one of the most important in Türkiye's history. Four main topics will determine the fate of the elections: refugees, the economy, rising nationalism, and the Kurdish question. There are serious differences of opinion between the government and opposition blocs regarding the solution to these problems. Concerning refugee policies, Türkiye is still the country hosting the highest number of displaced persons under temporary protection in the world. While policies against immigrants are rising all over the world, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has adopted a humanitarian approach in terms of refugee policies. Erdoğan has also used his power of persuasion in society in terms of solving economic problems. In many parts of the world, the combination of refugees and economic problems manifested itself in the form of reactionary nationalism. Erdoğan, on the other hand, used nationalist rhetoric in an integrative way, blending the concepts of native (yerli) and national (milli). Although the opposition has not demonstrated a clear approach to these issues, it positioned itself directly opposite Erdoğan. Likewise, recently, a new approach has been adopted in terms of the solution to the Kurdish question, apart from the PKK. The 2023 elections will show which of the approaches of the government or the opposition wings coincide with Turkish society's expectations.*

Keywords: Justice and Development Party, 2023 Elections, Nation Alliance, People's Alliance, Refugees, Turkish Economy, Nationalism, the Kurdish Question

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Introduction

2023 marks the centennial of the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye. In this context, the year 2023 has a very important symbolic meaning for the Turkish people. Another factor that makes this year special for Türkiye is the presidential and parliamentary elections to be held this year. For many people, the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, to be held on May 14, are seen as one of the most important elections in Turkish political life. There are also reports in the Western press that the most important elections to be held in the world in 2023 will be the presidential elections in Türkiye.¹ One-fifth of the entire Republican period was governed by the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) governments led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The AK Party, which came to power with the elections held on November 3, 2002, has completed 20 years in government. Opinion polls conducted before the 2023 elections show that the AK Party will again be in first place among the parties that run in the elections. President Erdoğan is also the favorite candidate in the presidential election, which will be held on the same day as the general elections. Over the past 20 years, Erdoğan has continued to be the most powerful political actor in the country, a trend that is closely related to his good rapport with society.

In 2017, Türkiye amended its Constitution and adopted a new system of government called the “presidential government system” to replace the parliamentary system. In the elections held in 2018, AK Party Chairman Erdoğan was elected the first president of the new system. Following the introduction of the new system, the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İP), the latter founded by a group of deputies who left the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), decided to form an alliance. Over time, some smaller parties also joined this alliance. There are six members of this formation, which is currently called the Nation Alliance.² In addition, the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), known for its closeness to the PKK terrorist organization, is also an unofficial partner of this alliance. The opposition bloc, which is officially described as a Table of Six because it has six official members, draws a very fragmented image in itself.³ The parties that make up the opposition bloc have different approaches in many areas, especially immigration, economy, terrorism, and foreign policy. The common point is that they all oppose President Erdoğan. Apart from this, it is not possible to say that the opposition has developed a common perspective on the future of the country.

In response, the AK Party and the MHP decided to act together under the name People’s Alliance. This cooperation, which first started in the 2018 elections, continued in the 2019 local government elections. Although the MHP was not an active member of the government, it fully supported the AK Party’s policies. AK Party governments also paid attention to the sensitivities of the

MHP. Thus, relations between the two parties progressed smoothly. Cooperation continued before the 2023 elections, and the AK Party and the MHP announced Erdoğan as their joint candidate for the presidency in the 2023 elections months ago.⁴ As the election approached, both alliances began to articulate

concrete policy proposals for specific issues on the country's agenda. Before the elections, the political debates in Türkiye focused on four main axes: refugees, the economy, nationalism, and the Kurdish question. Approaches to these decisive issues demonstrate the political positions in Türkiye. It is possible to say that each bloc's approach to the aforementioned hot topics defines the differences between the government and the opposition.

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The Issue of Refugees

The important topic of discussion that has dominated the political agenda in Türkiye in recent years is the issue of migration. There have been increasing waves of migration throughout the world in the last 20 years. The inability of many states to cope with the turmoil in their lands, terrorism, civil war, and mass murders have caused people to flock to nations with relatively better living conditions. In this context, it can be said that the optimistic expectation after the Cold War that the world would be a safer place was in vain.⁵ Many new factors have been added to the traditional conflict processes arising from ideological differences and identity problems. In addition, at the end of the Cold War, the ambitious projects of Western states, especially the U.S., to end dictatorships in different geographies, especially the Middle East, and create a more democratic world caused an authority vacuum after the collapse of those political regimes. The space left by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes could not be filled by fragile and failed states. The resulting tribal wars, acts of terrorism, civil wars, and other issues that threaten security have resulted in massive waves of migration,⁶ with factors such as hunger, poverty, civil wars, terrorism, and the climate crisis considered *push factors* that cause people to leave their place of residence.⁷ In addition, people's belief that there are better alternatives to living in other parts of the world are *pull factors* for migration. In this respect, migration has become an increasingly unavoidable reality across the world.

The worldwide waves of migration had a different effect on Türkiye. After the beginning of the Syrian civil war, many Syrian citizens fleeing the conflict took refuge in Türkiye.⁸ The immigrant problem, which was initially thought

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Türkiye's open-door policy included three difficult elements: ensuring temporary protection, upholding the principle of nonrefoulement, and providing optimal humanitarian assistance.⁹ After 2013, with the effect of ISIS' territorial dominance in some regions in Syria, forced migration increased even more.¹⁰ According to data from January 2023, there are 3,585,447 Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye. Only 47,686 of them still stay in the seven migrant camps set up in five provinces.¹¹ As a result, the vast majority of Syrians under temporary protection are part of social life. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) 2021 annual report, Türkiye hosts the largest number of refugees in the world with 3.80 million people. This figure is double that of Colombia, which ranks second and hosts 1.80 million refugees.¹² Therefore, the phenomenon of migration continues to affect both society and politics in Türkiye. As a matter of fact, the world's 2015 migrant crisis was resolved with the initiative and responsibility of Türkiye, which made an agreement with Western countries.¹³

Migration is the main issue of political debates in Türkiye. From the very beginning, President Erdoğan has maintained a humane approach to refugees, while almost all opposition parties have a negative stance toward immigrants. The party that most prominently uses anti-refugee rhetoric is the Victory Party (ZP), founded by Ümit Özdağ, who resigned from the İP.¹⁴ However, almost all opposition parties, including the CHP and the İP, state that refugees from Syria will be sent back to their country if opposition parties take control of the government.¹⁵ In this context, it is noteworthy that the only political party that takes a position in favor of immigrant rights is the AK Party. Here, it can be said that Erdoğan's ability to persuade the public comes into play once again. Erdoğan prevented a strong reaction against Syrians and other immigrants in society. It is known that politicians in many parts of the world place immigration and refugees at the center of their political discourse. On

to be temporary, became permanent due to the prolongation of the war in Syria. Currently, Türkiye hosts the highest number of displaced persons under temporary protection in the world. In addition to those coming from Syria, many people from Afghanistan and some African countries immigrate to Türkiye. This situation has led to problems in migration administration that continue to put pressure on domestic politics.

When the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011, Türkiye initially followed an 'open-door' policy and started to settle immigrants, whom it described as 'guests,' in border provinces.

the other hand, Erdoğan tries to solve the refugee problem through a humanitarian perspective and has effectively persuaded society to support his solutions.

Migration management, which proceeds in line with a humanitarian perspective, is one of the most important pillars of Türkiye's push for a fairer international system. To put it more clearly, Türkiye's policy is the most obvious example of an ethical political approach toward asylum seekers. The prestige and reliability of Türkiye and President Erdoğan in the eyes of many societies in the world are closely related to his attitude that prioritizes ethical principles in the face of international problems. This principled attitude, in a way, became one of the elements of Türkiye's soft power. Türkiye is expanding its sphere of influence on a global scale through the humanitarian steps it has taken in migration management. The consistency of the policies has enabled Türkiye to gain and maintain a certain position in the international community. In this respect, it is possible to say that Türkiye has governed the massive wave of migration as successfully as possible.

On the other hand, the increase in immigration to Türkiye is closely related to the country becoming a center of attraction. Due to its active policies, both Türkiye's visibility and influence in the international arena have increased.¹⁶ This situation results in many people from different countries looking for their future hopes in Türkiye. Undoubtedly, pull factors are as important as push factors for migration. Internal turmoil, terrorism, and economic and environmental problems in countries can be cited as the driving factors of migration. However, the pull factors that can be summarized as the ideal of the future offered by the country should not be ignored. In this respect, it can be said that pull factors come to the fore more and more in the migration wave to Türkiye. Therefore, increasing migration should be seen as an extension of Türkiye's rising international visibility. In this respect, the strengthening of Türkiye's claims on a global scale has brought about an increase in immigration.

It is clear that the anti-refugee dialogue of the opposition, sometimes crossing into chauvinism, will cause Türkiye to lose its footing in international society. Humanitarian policies have had positive effects on the expansion of Türkiye's diplomatic sphere of influence and the increase in its prestige, especially in the eyes of the societies that are the addressees of the refugee issue. In addition, the promise that all Syrian refugees and other asylum seekers will be sent out of the country in a short time is not possible. The opposition's approach to the repatriation of Syrians and other asylum seekers is not humanitarian and is incompatible with Türkiye's interests. Moreover, the rise of xenophobia may cause people who are more educated and whose socio-economic status is above the general average of asylum seekers to leave the country. From this point of view, it is necessary to evaluate the migration-related issues in Türkiye



Istanbul Airport and Çanakkale Bridge are among the biggest investments Türkiye has made under the administration of the AK Party government.

İGA / AA / Depositphotos

from a broad perspective, without confining them to current security problems. For Türkiye to transition from a regional to a global power, it must avoid the trap of daily politics and populist language in the administration of migration and maintain the approach it has followed with determination.

Economic Policies

One of the areas in which the AK Party was most successful during its government is economic matters. In the 1990s, Türkiye experienced a series of economic crises. In addition to high inflation, unemployment figures were constantly rising. The country's economy was largely under the control of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The AK Party has implemented a strict budget discipline and monetary policy since its first days in office. Inflation has been brought under control. The six zeros were dropped from the dominations of the Turkish lira. Economic indicators started to move quickly toward the positive. Health and social security systems, which came to the point of collapse in the 1990s, were reformed.¹⁷ One of the most important factors behind the victory of the AK Party in all elections since 2002 has been the success of its economic policy.

The AK Party's economic policies are based on the implementation of large public investments. Since 2002, many investments have been made, such as major highways, high-speed trains, a new bridge across İstanbul's Bosphorus, the Çanakkale Bridge, and an airport for major every city. For example, the U.S.' recovery from the great economic crisis in 1929 and its rapid growth was first possible with the expenditures during World War II. During this period, the defense sector greatly expanded the economy. Subsequently, the

economy was revived with major public investments such as the Hoover Dam, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Interstate Highway System.¹⁸ It is noteworthy that the AK Party government followed a similar development strategy. Recently, the basic infrastructure problems of the country have been solved to a great extent. Thus, the transition to a development strategy based on production was made. Investments in the defense sector, especially in unmanned aerial vehicle (drone) production and domestic automobile production, are the main parts of this strategy.¹⁹

In addition, the discovery of new oil and natural gas resources to reduce foreign dependency on energy and the construction of nuclear power plants are additional steps taken to strengthen the economy. Türkiye's current account deficit is largely due to energy expenditures. An increase in energy production from domestic sources will positively affect economic indicators.

On the other hand, the AK Party created a new social state model starting in the first days of its time in office. During this period, the market mechanism was not altered and privatization continued. However, wealth transfer policies were carefully managed, especially for low-income groups.²⁰ Welfare was distributed among different social segments. Most of the services provided by health institutions, even private hospitals for certain issues, were made free of charge. The Housing Development Administration of Türkiye (TOKİ) produced long-term, cheap housing that can be purchased with low installments for low-income citizens. Textbooks were distributed free of charge to students, and extensive social assistance was provided to disadvantaged groups. Social policies were strengthened through practices such as regular wages and home care services for the disabled and patients. It can be said that this approach is similar to Antony Giddens's 'third-way' theory in the 1990s.²¹ The alternative development project Giddens created was based on a relative improvement in the situation of women, students, and disadvantaged groups alongside the poor. In addition, the government implemented regulations regarding employee rights, such as the recruitment of contract workers in the public sector, raising the minimum wage, and exclusion from taxation.

One of the AK Party's steps for the economy was the transformation of capital within the country. 'Anatolian capital'²² was hit hard, especially in the February 28 Process,²³ due to the pressures on it, including criminalization of capital accumulation processes through legal actions, police, and financial investigations, systematic exposure of illegal actions of Islamic companies, boycotts, and campaigns supported by the media. A wide variety of methods

After 2002, there was a new revival for the Anatolian capital. The AK Party has provided Anatolian capital with fair conditions of competition so it can compete with its major rivals

and strategies have been adopted.²⁴ During this period, both the activities and the number of members of the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MÜSİAD) decreased significantly.²⁵ After 2002, there was a new revival for the Anatolian capital. The AK Party has provided Anatolian capital with fair conditions of competition so it can compete with its major rivals.²⁶ In addition, efforts were made to strengthen small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). A similar transformation took place in the media industry. In the past, the national press and television channels in Türkiye were in the hands of a few large capital groups. The ownership of media groups diversified during the AK Party period.²⁷ While some of the old actors withdrew from the media, some new capital groups invested in the press sector. Thus, polyphony emerged in the media sector. As a result, different political groups and approaches were able to express themselves in the press.

With recent global developments, the Turkish economy has also faced some problems. With the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries' economies have started to shrink.²⁸ In the same period, inflation increased and many people lost their jobs. Türkiye was also affected by these developments on a global scale. The rapid rise in the dollar harmed macroeconomic balances. In this process, contrary to the general trend, Erdoğan did not want interest rates to increase to prevent the rise of the dollar, pointing out:

I see the rate cut the central bank delivered as a crucial turning point. But this is not enough, interest rates should be lowered gradually until the end of the year ... I had long argued that the 24 percent interest rate is way too high. I have, for many years, voiced my discontent with high rates. But we could not get my views through to then-central bank governors. Whenever we spoke our minds, certain circles argued that a dramatic decline in interest rates would hurt the economy.²⁹

Erdoğan's persistent attitude has produced positive results. Indeed, both the dollar and the rate of increase in inflation decreased in a short time. On the other hand, the Turkish economy continued to grow with the investments made. Here, it is necessary to underline once again Erdoğan's power of influence on society. Erdoğan prevented the turmoil experienced during the period of the rapid increase in foreign exchange prices and inflation from turning into public panic. President Erdoğan convinced the public that the economic problem would be solved by him and that the method he proposed was correct.

It can be said that before the upcoming 2023 elections, economic problems are the most important arguments to be used by the opposition. On the other hand, it is seen that the parties in the opposition bloc have diverging economic programs. In this respect, opposition parties and their economic policies have a largely populist discourse. The economic proposals in the road map an-

nounced by the Nation Alliance on January 30, 2023, are mostly aimed at increasing social assistance.³⁰ The parties in the opposition bloc have different perspectives in terms of macroeconomic policies. However, in the pre-election process, another fact should be underlined at this point: In a period of economic problems, the opposition has been unable to use this situation to its advantage. In other words, the opposition parties could not convince the public they have a more effective solution to the problem than the current government.

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The New Form of Nationalism

After the Cold War, it was thought that nationalist movements around the world would weaken and a more universalist perspective would strengthen. One of the most important institutional examples of this approach was the European Union project, which ultimately aimed to gather all member states under a single roof.³¹ However, this optimistic expectation soon turned out to be untrue. Rising nationalist movements led to numerous civil wars in different parts of the world. Micro-nationalisms turned into separatist movements. Members of the European Union have also adopted an approach that protects their national interests when confronted with different international problems. The recent COVID-19 pandemic also led countries to go into isolation. Türkiye was also heavily affected by this worldwide trend. Thus, due to the effect of the pandemic, the strengthening of nation-states was seen.³² Even Fukuyama, who argued that the end of history had come after the Cold War, wrote an article explaining that a liberal democratic order needed nations.³³

The insufficient global reactions to the July 15 coup attempt turned foreign public opinion against Türkiye. The same is true for the reactions from abroad to the fight against terrorism. Especially after the July 15 coup attempt, a significant change in discourse was observed. Western countries clarified their stance against the AK Party government after the Gezi Park Protests in 2013³⁴ and the December 17-25 operations.³⁵ The attitude of Western countries, which adopted a neutral stance between the putschists and the legitimate government after the coup attempt carried out by the Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ) on July 15, 2016, further reinforced Erdoğan's convictions. After that, the emphasis on being 'native and national' became stronger in the field of politics, just as in the industrial sector. In the same period, the strained relations

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with the European Union and the apparent deadlock in the membership process further reinforced this attitude. It is not a coincidence that relations with the Turkic states were developed in the same period. In 2021, the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, established in 2009, was transformed into the ‘Organization of Turkic States.’³⁶

The strengthening of the nationalist language is also closely related to the rise of Islamophobia and xenophobia in Western countries in the last decade. In the Western world, the rising negative attitude toward foreigners and refugees, especially Muslims, has strengthened a polarizing political climate.³⁷ Moreover, the approach in question, unlike in the past, was not limited to marginal groups but was increasingly expressed by politicians at the center. In this way, xenophobia increased. Increasing populist political approaches in different parts of the world use a discourse that aims to seriously restrict the rights and freedoms of religious or ethnic minority groups within the country. Muslims are the most adversely affected by this situation. Attributing terrorist acts in different countries to Islam strengthens the prejudice toward the members of this religion in societies and leads to their exclusion. The criminalization of Muslims by Western politicians or the direct association of foreigners with rising economic problems and unemployment naturally cause a reaction in Islamic countries. The result of this is the rise of anti-Westernism. Therefore, the developments in these countries and the change in the way they do politics have a great impact on the hardening of Erdoğan’s rhetoric toward the West.³⁸

It can be said that Erdoğan has a nationalist perspective that synthesizes Türkiye’s national and religious identities. This synthesis is seen as an extension of Türkiye’s strategic, historical, economic, and cultural coordinates.³⁹ The concept of ‘native and national,’ which Erdoğan frequently uses, is actually a summary of such an understanding of nationalism.⁴⁰ Here, a clear reference is made to the cultural codes of society. It is noteworthy that Erdoğan’s understanding of nationalism did not change his approach toward Muslim states and societies. In this respect, it can be said that Türkiye has assumed a protective position for ‘oppressed peoples,’ especially Muslims. Erdoğan, in a way, used the phenomenon of migration as one of the elements of Türkiye’s soft power strategy.⁴¹ Migration has also been one of the strategic moves used in Türkiye’s relations with the Western world, especially the European Union.⁴² In this respect, Erdoğan has an inclusive language and his nationalist perspective has an integrative quality. As a matter of fact, the opposition was unable to object to the concept of nativeness and nationality.

On the other hand, it can be said that the nationalist perspective of the opposition parties draws on public discontent with regard to refugees. The opposition tried to use nationalism as an instrument on the axis of anti-refugee sentiment. The issue of refugees was used as a tool to mobilize dissatisfied social segments. While the opposition used language for the return of refugees, especially those from Syria, it did not put forward a realistic strategy on how to do this.

Future of the Kurdish Question

Since the first days of his rule, President Erdoğan has made great efforts to solve the Kurdish problem. Erdoğan and the AK Party's approach to the Kurdish question progressed simultaneously with a broad democratization program. Certain cultural demands of the Kurds were answered. In this context, obstacles to the use of the Kurdish language in the public sphere have been removed. TRT opened a TV channel broadcasting in the Kurdish dialect of Kurmanji and in Zazaki.⁴³ The most comprehensive project in terms of solving the problem was described as the 'Solution Process.'⁴⁴ President Erdoğan convinced the Turkish society to support a process that would work largely through democratic means. In the process, the PKK terrorist group was expected to lay down its arms after the reforms to be made by the government in the political and cultural fields. However, the PKK ignored the government's offers. Various meetings were held with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and HDP representatives throughout the process. Instead, the terrorist group launched simultaneous acts of violence in many cities of Türkiye between October 6-8, 2014. The PKK dug trenches and set up barricades in some neighborhoods of cities in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions of Türkiye. However, the police and soldiers largely cleared the PKK's urban structure through their operations.⁴⁵ In the same period, the organization was rendered powerless in rural areas, a task greatly aided by domestically produced unmanned aerial vehicle technology.⁴⁶

The PKK planned to take advantage of the lack of authority amid the Syrian civil war.⁴⁷ For this purpose, the PKK used its Syrian extension, the PYD/YPG. PYD/YPG started to dominate the areas adjacent to the Turkish border in Syria. The aim was to create a terror corridor that stretches along the border lines between Türkiye and Syria and opens to the Mediterranean. However, Türkiye quickly consolidated its military power after the coup attempt on July 15, 2016. Although many FETÖ members were expelled from the army, there was no weakness in military strength. In this way, large-scale military operations were conducted in Syria against the regions dominated by both ISIS and the PYD/YPG.⁴⁸ Türkiye launched Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016 and Operation Olive Branch in 2018 to secure its borders and to stop the advance

of ISIS and prevent the PYD/YPG from controlling Ayn al-Arab and Afrin.⁴⁹ In addition, the terror corridor that the PYD/YPG tried to establish in Syria was disbanded.⁵⁰ Erdoğan summarized this situation, saying: “We are determined to shatter the terror corridor East of the Euphrates, no matter how the negotiations go with the U.S. to establish a safe zone along the Syrian borders.”⁵¹

The solution process was actually a concrete effort by the government to find an answer to the Kurdish question through a democratic context. However, the PKK and the HDP prevented the process from ending democratically. After the elections held in June 2015, the PKK martyred two police officers working in the Ceylanpınar district of Şanlıurfa while they were sleeping in their homes.⁵² With this action, the PKK showed that it would not lay down its arms and would not stop committing acts of violence. Thereupon, President Erdoğan made a statement that “they put the solution process in the fridge.”⁵³ Since this well-intentioned initiative by the government did not receive a positive response from the PKK or the HDP, the public fully supported the necessary security policies later. Indeed, security operations, both within the country and across the border, have garnered a great deal of support from Turkish citizens, including the Kurds. A major blow was dealt to the PKK terrorist organization through the operations. The PKK has now largely lost its influence and mobility within Türkiye. In addition, the PKK is failing in its efforts to recruit new militants. According to the data of the Ministry of Interior, participation in the organization has fallen to the lowest levels in history.⁵⁴ This is largely related to the success of anti-radicalization activities. When the PKK lost its influence in Türkiye, it shifted its militants to areas under the control of PYD/YPG in Syria.⁵⁵ Therefore, Türkiye carried out operations against the PKK presence in Syria through cross-border operations in which military elements participated. However, the insistence of Western countries, especially the U.S., to support the PYD/YPG enabled the PKK to maintain its presence in Northern Syria.

Both the method and tools used in the effective fight against terrorism increased the influence of the government on society. As a matter of fact, Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) Chairman Ali Babacan’s, one of the members of the opposition’s Table of Six, criticism of the drone manufacturer Bayraktar received a widespread reaction from all segments of society.⁵⁶ So much so that some of the other opposition parties had to express that they did not agree with Babacan on this issue. Factors such as the success of the Bayraktar brand’s domestically produced armed and unarmed unmanned aerial vehicles in the fight against terrorism and their role in the operations reinforced the public’s confidence in the government. The use of high technology in many fields, especially in the defense industry, raises the self-confidence of the country and its society. Stating that Türkiye owes its ability to carry out counter-terrorism operations comfortably to the progress in the defense industry, Erdoğan

underlined that the recent success in the defense industry is closely related to locality and nationality.⁵⁷

The elimination of the PKK's capacity to use weapons will be one of the most important thresholds for resolving the Kurdish issue. Since its establishment in 1978, the PKK has exerted great pressure on people living in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions.⁵⁸ The terrorist organization has killed Kurdish opinion leaders and politicians who have been against it since the day it was founded.⁵⁹ It has kidnapped many Kurdish children from their families and made them militants. Getting rid of the PKK's tutelage will remove the obstacles that prevent Turkish citizens of Kurdish descent from exercising their free will. It has been seen in previous periods that Erdoğan will respond to demands within the democratic scope, and it is possible to expect the same kind of steps to be taken in the next period. However, it is clear that Türkiye will continue its security operations.

On the other hand, the Kurdish problem is certainly not only related to the internal dynamics of the country. Different countries supported the PKK in different ways, both as part of their overall Middle East policy and to suppress Türkiye. Recently, it has been observed that this support continues, especially in Syria with the U.S. support of the PYD/YPG.⁶⁰ Despite Türkiye's best efforts, the U.S. refused to officially recognize the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organization. In fact, the U.S. provided heavy weapons and ammunition support to the PYD/YPG and also provided military advice.⁶¹ Therefore, it is not correct to associate PKK terrorism only with the Kurdish problem. It now resembles a tool used in proxy wars. President Erdoğan has emphasized that the Western world is unwilling and failing to cooperate to eliminate terrorist organizations, like the PKK and FETÖ. Erdoğan also said, "We also know there are countries who are inserting special funds in their budget to be given to the terror organization," referring to the U.S. support for the PYD/YPG in Syria.⁶²

It can be said that opposition parties refrain from taking an open stance when it comes to the Kurdish question because the HDP is the secret partner of the Table of Six.⁶³ However, it is noteworthy that the opposition did not offer another alternative proposal for the solution to the Kurdish problem. This situation largely ties the future of the issue to Erdoğan's approach. In the upcoming period, it can be expected that the approach to a solution will exclude the PKK. However, the PKK's influence in Syria and Iraq as well as in Türkiye must be eliminated for this situation. In this context, it can be said that Türkiye has ad-

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The incompatibility within the Nation Alliance itself prevented a monolithic voice in terms of transitioning to normal life after the earthquake, as in many other issues

opted a perspective that distinguishes its Kurdish citizens from PKK terrorism. In this context, a new phase for the solution to the Kurdish problem is linked to the elimination of the PKK.

Effects of the February 6 Earthquakes on Elections

Finally, it is necessary to mention in a few paragraphs the political effects of the earthquakes that Türkiye experienced in the first hours of February 6, 2023. The earthquake that took place at 4:17 a.m. on February 6 affected 11 provinces and their districts. According to official figures, approximately 50,000 people lost their lives due to the earthquakes, and more than 200,000 buildings became unusable. The Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Presidency of Strategy and Budget announced that the economic cost of the earthquakes was approximately \$103.6 billion.⁶⁴ It can be said that crisis management was applied correctly from the first moments of the earthquakes. From the very first moment, the government told the public that the biggest natural disaster in the country's history had just occurred. Erdoğan has not allowed the opposition parties to use the effects of the earthquakes to agitate society. He kept a level head from the start and underlined that his government has the potential to repair the damage caused by the earthquakes. In this context, the construction of new houses has already started for the people who lost their homes in the earthquakes. Erdoğan promised that a large number of houses would be completed and given to earthquake victims a year later. From the first day, all relevant ministers and senior public officials worked actively in the earthquake zone. Plans for the future were made quickly. Here it can be said that the government inspires confidence. Erdoğan convinced the public that his administration would solve the crisis. During this period, he did not engage in temporary political discussions and focused on post-earthquake reconstruction efforts.

In contrast, the Nation Alliance was trying to nominate its presidential candidate during the same period. The nomination process also caused the İP to leave the bloc; however, İP Chair Akşener returned to the table a few days later. As a result, CHP Chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was declared the presidential candidate of the Nation Alliance, albeit quite controversially. However, the political problems of the Nation Alliance are not limited to this. It is understood



from the CHP lists of the smaller parties within the alliance that they will run in the parliamentary elections. It is a very strong possibility that new crises will occur during the determination of the candidate lists. In addition, it is seen that there will be problems in terms of sharing ministries after a possible election victory. The main problem is the tension between the İP and the HDP, the invisible partner of the alliance. Although the İP tacitly consents to the HDP's participation in the Nation Alliance, it can be said that most of the voters do not agree.

The earthquakes did not change the election date previously announced by the government. Presidential and parliamentary general elections will be held on May 14, 2023. It is understood that the election campaign process will go at a slow pace. As a matter of fact, at the meeting where Erdoğan announced his election date decision, he said that the People's Alliance would not use music during the election campaign.⁶⁵ Erdoğan also said that the election campaign will be mostly in the form of face-to-face communication. This means that, unlike in the past, rallies with large numbers of people will be held less frequently. At the same meeting, Erdoğan said that they would complete the election process as soon as possible and continue their work. On the other hand, the opposition parties did not present a plan for the future after the earthquake.

The earthquakes did not harm the government. Although the opposition initially tried to use the negative effects of the earthquake against the government,

The foundation of permanent residences being laid by the Housing Development Administration (TOKİ) in the İslahiye district of Gaziantep. The region experienced widespread destruction as a result of the major earthquakes on February 6, 2023. ADSIZ GÜNEBAKAN / AA

Policies on refugees, economy, and perspectives on nationalism, and the Kurdish question are the main differences in approach between the government and the opposition

the opposition still lacks a new plan after the disaster, it is clear that the government, which has worked to instill confidence in society, has the advantage.

Conclusion

As we enter the centennial of the republic, President Erdoğan continues to set the political agenda in Türkiye. The president has received the support of nearly half of the society for more than 20 years. This situation is closely related to Erdoğan's power of persuasion and the confidence he gives to others. As mentioned above, although Türkiye is the country hosting the highest number of refugees in the world, anti-immigrant sentiment lagged far behind the examples in the West. Most of society has accepted that refugees have a certain role in the present and even in the future of the country, even if they do not fully internalize that fact. Erdoğan approached the refugee issue from a humanitarian perspective, preventing society from drifting into an anti-immigrant frenzy. On the other hand, the refugee issue was also used by the AK Party government as one of Türkiye's trump cards in the field of diplomacy. In this respect, the opposition's rhetoric about the urgent return of asylum-seekers is neither realistic nor in line with Türkiye's national interests.

Erdoğan's ability to persuade opinions was also evident in economic issues. In the first months of 2021, the economic problems that started with the rapid rise of the dollar and the rise of inflation did not turn into a large-scale crisis. The Turkish economy continued to grow, with no decrease in employment. This is closely related to Erdoğan's correct message to society that everything is under control. Erdoğan did not give up on the solution he proposed from the very beginning and followed a consistent policy. More importantly, it prevented society from losing hope for the future. This kept the economic problems at a manageable level. The country's completion of many large public investments reduced the effects of the problem. It can be expected that the increase in domestic production will have a positive impact on economic indicators in the upcoming period.

In addition, it can be said that Erdoğan's AK Party admires the rising nationalist tendencies in the world within the framework of the concept of native and national, without escaping to extremism. It is known that there has been an increase in nationalist tendencies almost all over the world in recent years. When the problems caused by refugees are combined with the contraction in the economy, nationalism in Western countries can cause an aggressive stance against refugees. The concept of native and national, which Erdoğan put forward, enabled the nationalist attitude to be shaped in an integrative framework. This concept was also functional in terms of instilling self-confidence in the public.

Erdoğan's influence on society plays a central role in the resolution of the Kurdish issue. It is noteworthy that efforts to combat terrorism have increased recently. It seems that this situation is associated with the rescue of the Kurds under the tutelage of the PKK. The loss of the capacity of terrorist organizations, especially the PKK, to act within the country has increased the public's support for the government's security policies. On the other hand, the HDP's consolidation of its votes above a certain rate raises question marks for the future.

The 2023 elections will, in a way, test the effects of the abovementioned four parameters on society. Policies on refugees, economy, and perspectives on nationalism, and the Kurdish question are the main differences in approach between the government and the opposition. It is seen that the perspectives of the ruling and opposition blocs on these issues differ greatly. It is possible to say that the outcome of President Erdoğan and the AK Party in the 2023 elections will be closely related to their administrative skills in these four areas. ■

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QATARI FOREIGN POLICY

IN A PRECARIOUS DECADE

From the Arab Spring
to the Gulf Reconciliation (2011-2021)

ALI ABO REZEG

