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What's at Stake in Turkey's Elections on May 14, 2023

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Anzac Day, 25 April 2023

Historical significance of Turkey's Elections

Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections on May 14, 2023, are historic. They come 100 years after Kurdish leaders were betrayed after they supported Kemal Ataturk to establish the nation state of Turkey because they trusted he would fulfil his promise of giving Kurds' autonomy. General Ihsan Nuri Pasha was one of the Kurdish leaders supporting Ataturk at Lausanne. In the late 1920s he led a rebellion to establish the Republic of Ararat, under a flag like that used in the Kurdistan Regions of Iraq and Iran. But the rebellion and republic were brutally squashed, as was every Kurdish rebellion since 1923.

Elections in May also come eight years after HDP's¹ stunning electoral success in July 2015. Receiving 13 percent of the total vote HDP became the first pro-Kurdish party to enter Parliament. Erdoğan subsequently declared a state of emergency, brought an end to the peace process, militarily attacked Kurdish majority towns like Amed (Diyarbakir) and Cizre, and re-held elections in November.

The current elections also come five years after Erdoğan transformed Turkey's somewhat dysfunctional parliamentary democracy into a ultranationalist non-secular dictatorship. Hence, this election is hugely important, both symbolically and practically for Turkey, regionally and internationally.

Overview of Election Outcomes

For the presidential elections, the race is between current AKP² President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and CHP³ contender, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, although a second round of voting may occur because of the participation of CHP breakaway candidate, Muharrem İnce. For the parliamentary elections, it is unlikely that either the AKP or CHP will win outright. The next government will likely be a coalition government.

There are too many 'ifs' to make more definitive predictions. No-one knows what the rogue elephant in the room will do: what tricks Erdoğan will pull before the election, on election day, or afterwards. For instance, will the millions of survivors of the February 6 earthquakes be able

¹ People's Democratic Party

² Justice and Development Party

³ Republican People's Party



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to vote? Then there are possible military actions. On April 7, Turkey launched a drone attack on a US convoy arriving at Sulaimani Airport. The Commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Mazloum Abdi, and the Co-President of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), Îlham Ahmed, were in the convoy. Given the hate and misinformation Erdoğan's propaganda machine has inflamed towards Syrian Kurds and their achievements, it would have been an electoral boost for Erdoğan if these Syrian Kurdish leaders had been killed.

So, if there is no State-perpetuated violence, and the elections are free and fair – which has not been the case in recent history - then Kurds, women, seven million first time voters, and 15 percent of all voters who remain undecided, will likely determine the outcome. Polls indicate that these overlapping segments of the population are less likely to vote for Erdoğan and AKP. But the contest will be fierce.

It must be noted that there are less definitive scenarios to a presidential candidate and their party winning the elections. What happens if Erdoğan wins the presidency, but AKP loses to a CHP coalition in parliament, or there is a hung parliament? This could lead to a repeat of 2015: Erdoğan declaring a country-wide state of emergency and insisting on another election. Another scenario is if Erdoğan loses the presidency, but AKP leads a parliamentary coalition. This could lead to a stalemate, especially if Erdoğan refuses to step down.

Impact of February 6 Earthquakes on Turkey's Elections

One thing is certain, on May 14, the horrific February 6 earthquakes and their aftermath will be fresh in people's minds. For years, Erdoğan had waived building codes for construction in earthquake zones, and after the earthquakes, he took days to deploy rescue workers and army personnel, then wanted total control and credit for all rescues and humanitarian aid. This left people, especially a disproportionate number of Kurds, Armenians, and Arabs, the last mainly refugees from Syria, with no shelter, water, food, or electricity amid rubble where many thousands of corpses remain to this day. Witnesses say the smell is overpowering. The government, and international agencies in the area, have not published any statistics on the number of missing people. Many observers believe the state's estimate of 50,700 fatalities is a fabrication. Based on the number of collapsed buildings, the fatalities could number 200,000 or more, not counting all the seriously injured people.

Then there is the on-going state of emergency. There are shocking accounts of Kurdish volunteer rescuers and other civilians being brutalised, and even killed, by soldiers and police. But even worse is the government confirmation that thousands of Kurdish children were whisked away from the ruins, or from hospital beds, by 'special' government workers without any attempt to find their surviving relatives. The children's whereabouts are unknown, although government agencies assure everyone they are in good care!

An estimated 2.7 million people have been displaced by the earthquakes. They have no fixed address, and many have lost identity documents. There are no media reports on what the



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government is doing to ensure these earthquake survivors can vote. It is highly likely that many are disenfranchised. The earthquake zone is multi-ethnic. Of course, this will impact election outcomes.

Impact of Kurds on Turkey's Elections

Kurds have suffered persecution since the establishment of modern Turkey: the denial that Kurds exist, laws making it illegal to speak or write Kurdish or even say the word 'Kurd', discriminations and indoctrination in schools, the media, the armed forces and public spaces, the banning of Kurdish political and cultural organisations, the impoverishment of Kurdish-majority areas and the state's military responses to Kurdish uprisings. It is a rare decade since 1923 when there has not been a Kurdish rebellion. The State's response is always massacres, disappearances, imprisonments, torture, beatings, and the destruction of villages. For instance, the state destroyed 4,000 Kurdish villages in the 1990s after PKK⁴ energised a new wave of resistance. The last cycle was in 2015 – 2016, although one could argue it is ongoing.

With this history, it amazed everyone when Erdoğan began addressing Kurdish cultural rights in 2011 and embarked on unofficial talks with the PKK between 2013 and 2015. But events since 2015 reveal this was a calculated strategy to win political support. After the July 2015 elections saw the pro-Kurdish HDP become the first pro-Kurdish party ever to enter Turkey's Grand National Assembly (parliament), Erdoğan realized he had unleashed a tornado. This tornado prevented his AKP from forming government without a coalition partner. Erdoğan declared a state of emergency, ended unofficial peace talks, re-started a war with 'PKK' and announced a re-run of parliamentary elections in November. In November, AKP again failed to gain enough votes to form government. The AKP chose to partner with the ultranationalist MHP rather than the more popular HDP.

Eight months after that election, there was a highly controversial 'coup' resulting in more than 100,000 people being arrested and imprisoned. Fourteen HDP parliamentarians lost parliamentary immunity and were imprisoned, including former HDP co-chair and presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş. Despite the European Court of Human Rights demanding his release in 2018 and 2020, Demirtaş has spent the last seven years behind bars. Over 100 HDP mayors (from the 2014 and 2018 municipal elections) have likewise been removed from office, and spent time in prison. They were replaced by government appointees. Then there are Turkey's military attacks, invasions, and occupations of Rojava (northern Syria), and the Yezidi district of Shingal, as well as Bashur (the Kurdistan Region) and Kirkuk in northern Iraq in the name of 'neutralising' the PKK but in fact displacing hundreds of thousands of Kurds, Assyrians and others, and subjecting those who remain to kidnap, imprisonment, abuse, and the stealing of their houses, businesses, and farms in Syria and to the militarisation, evacuation of 500 villages and the destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods in northern Iraq.

⁴ Kurdistan Workers' Party



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In 2023, the pro-Kurdish HDP continues to be a victim of its own success and resilience with ongoing mass arrests, trials and imprisonments of party members, attacks on HDP offices, and seven years of being labelled PKK. To stop HDP participating in the upcoming elections, Erdoğan had Turkey's Constitutional Court freeze HDP's campaign funds from January until March, then announce that a decision to ban the party was pending in April, a month before the elections. If banned HDP would join seven other pro-Kurdish parties that have been banned, or self-dissolved before suspension, since 1990. But in 2023, HDP outmanoeuvred the State by deciding not to field a HDP presidential candidate, and by allowing its multi-ethnic candidates to stand for election in the name of the Green Left Party or *Yesil Sol Parti* (YSP). YSP's campaign has attracted large crowds.

Domestic, Regional and International Implications of these Elections

Turkey is a major crossroad between Europe, Russia, the Turkic 'Stans', the Middle East, and north Africa. Hence, the outcome of these elections will impact Turkey's relations with NATO and the EU, and particular countries extending from Sweden, Germany, and the Balkans to Central Asia, north Africa, and the USA, and in particular, Turkey's neighbours: Greece, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

If Erdoğan wins

If Erdoğan wins the presidency and AKP leads a coalition government, Turkey will be sucked into ever deeper economic, legal, political, and foreign policy quagmires manufactured by Erdoğan. He will likely order mass arrests and imprisonments of Opposition party members and supporters, and other dissenters. Erdoğan's family and cronies will likely profit from reconstruction in the earthquake zone. Turkish society will be fractured.

Regionally and internationally, Turkey will continue a path of military aggression, political interference, and destabilisation. Turkey will use all means to undermine Kurdish military and political achievements in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, and will also undermine the stability of national governments in Syria and Iraq, unless the international community devises strong, coordinated levers to influence Turkey's actions. In the absence of international action, Erdoğan's Turkey will continue to create a fascist Islamist statelet in northern Syria that could one day threaten Europe, as its Syrian militants have been used in Syria, Libya, and Azerbaijan. Turkey will continue to block representatives from the Kurd-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the SDF from being part of the failed UN negotiations over the future of Syria, and other attempts at finding ways end the civil war in Syria. Turkey will also need pressure applied to re-open the oil pipeline between the KRI and Kirkuk to Ceyhan after a recent international arbitration case ruled against Turkey. The closure is crippling the KRI's economy. But Turkey plays a hard game. No amount of NATO pressure stopped Turkey buying Russia's S-400 mobile surface-to-air missile system or has so far convinced Turkey to allow Sweden to join NATO. Levers need to be designed accordingly.



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Under, Erdoğan and his ultranationalist and fascist Islamist partners, Turkey will remain antagonistic towards the West, preferring investment from Russia and the Gulf States as it works towards establishing a twenty first century empire, the offspring of an Ottoman (Islamist) mother and mythic Turkic father. If this future eventuates, Erdoğan could meet the same fate as Saddam Hussein, and Turkey could become too dangerous to exist in its current form.

If Kılıçdaroğlu wins

Given the people of Turkey are living through extreme inflation, unemployment, poverty, corruption, nepotism, wrongful imprisonments, war, and earthquakes, if there are no surprises and the elections are free and fair, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has a reasonable chance of becoming the next president, and CHP may lead a coalition government. What happens after that, depends on whether Erdoğan leaves his palace peacefully and goes quietly into the night, or not. Tensions are running high. Turkey could explode, especially when ex-President Erdoğan faces criminal charges for war crimes and corruption.

If the Kemalist Alevi Kurd from Dersim becomes president, and CHP leads a coalition government, Kurdish leaders will have a sense of déjà vu in facing the same dilemmas Kurdish leaders faced when supporting Kemal Atatürk at Lausanne in 1923. No matter his heritage and experience, his knowledge of the Dersim massacre and his personal intentions, Kılıçdaroğlu is a Kemalist, albeit a moderate one, but one who must deal with more extreme Kemalists like Ince, and ultranationalists like Akşener, MHP and others in and outside parliament.

Domestically, Kılıçdaroğlu will likely have enough support to (1) return Turkey to a parliamentary system (given Erdoğan's mismanagement of the economy and earthquake response); (2) ensure political parties cannot be banned for no good reason; (3) legislate that elected officials can only be removed from office by another election; and (4) use diplomacy rather than aggression and blackmail in the interests of Turkey. This is despite CHP voting to lift parliamentary immunity and the consequent imprisonment of elected HDP parliamentarians and mayors during the current AKP-MHP⁵ government.

Regionally and internationally, Kılıçdaroğlu may also have a window of opportunity to use diplomacy rather than military aggression to promote Turkey's economic and political interests in the Mediterranean and Black Seas, in Libya, and the Azerbaijani – Armenia conflict, until diplomacy fails to deliver.

What Kılıçdaroğlu may not have enough support for is a rebalance of Turkey's relations between Russia and the West, such as pursuing membership of the European Union, becoming a more cooperative member of NATO, and taking a more conciliatory approach to neighbouring countries and the 'Kurdish Question' in and outside Turkey. The İYİ Party, and other ultranationalist members of parliament could become an anchor around Kılıçdaroğlu's neck in rebalancing relations. They support Turkey's rhetoric of non-alignment which has led to closer

⁵ Nationalist Movement Party



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relations and increased trade with Russia (in petroleum, nuclear technology, armaments, iron, steel, and wheat), and a wish for stronger ties with the Turkic 'Stans'. They object to Turkey becoming more conciliatory towards the 'Kurdish Question', especially in Syria and Iraq. For instance, in 2021, the CHP voted against ongoing military interventions in the name of targeting PKK in these countries, but Akşener's iYi Party and other ultranationalists support these military 'solutions'. Even if Turkey withdraws all its forces and officials and reconciles with the governments of Syria and Iraq, the terms of any agreement may not benefit Kurds.

Factors outside parliament will also impact Kılıçdaroğlu's intentions to change Turkey's trajectory, such as the vested interests of government departments like MİT⁶, Defence, and the Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs), as well as the vested interests of business monopolies in construction, trade, and the like. After all, following the 2016 'coup', Turkey's military forces were purged of their pro-NATO commanders.

As for the 'Kurdish Question' inside Turkey, Kılıçdaroğlu and CHP have yet to reveal what is meant by 'reconciliation'. Any agreements made with HDP co-chairs, Pervin Buldan and Mithat Sancar, in March 2023 have not been made public. Let the games begin.

Many people are pessimistic about Kemalists returning to power, but there are glimmers of hope. Kılıçdaroğlu was tested by Akşener's short-lived defection. He called her bluff. In April, Kılıçdaroğlu published a video 'I am Alevi', which went viral. People waiting for Part II 'I am Kurd' will likely be disappointed. Perhaps Kılıçdaroğlu hopes viewers of his Alevi video will generalise his message of respecting the goodness in people no matter their religion. But after 100 years of propaganda and daily repetition at school about the glory of being a Turk, ultranationalists in Turkey are numerous and fiercely opposed to any negotiated solution. This is despite Kurds numbering an estimated 30 percent of the population. The ultranationalists do not distinguish HDP, and other pro-Kurdish organisations or any Kurd proud of their ancestry from PKK. And they remain adamant that PKK is a terrorist organisation. Yet PKK must be party to negotiations if there is to be an end to ten decades of military 'solutions', the last four decades involving PKK's armed struggle for self-determination.

Answers to the 'Kurdish Question'

Whoever wins these elections, Kurds need to prioritise what will benefit them, and what is winnable. What is winnable is what is supported by international law. A top priority should be the freedom of Selahattin Demirtaş, other HDP parliamentarians, 100+ mayors, 108 politicians currently on trial in the Kobani Case, and all the other wrongfully imprisoned HDP members, and HDP and non-HDP lawyers, journalists, activists, teachers, soldiers, artists, and others.

Then there is the need for the Kurdish language to be accepted as an official language of Turkey, or at least a language of tuition and culture; for provincial governors to be elected rather than appointed, for different ethnicities and religions to be respected in the constitution, legislation,

⁶ National Intelligence Organisation



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and codes of conduct for all police, prison guards, army and other branches of the security forces; and for cultural exchanges to begin a process of healing.

As soon as possible, the Turkish state (including a cross section of representatives from the parliament, security forces and judiciary) and the PKK, and other Kurdish organisations and leaders, need to embark on negotiations begin a step-by-step journey to a permanent ceasefire. To build a foundation for this process, Abdullah Öcalan's 24 years of isolation in prison must end and his mental and physical health must be tested (for example, to ensure he is not suffering from Stockholm Syndrome given Erdoğan's penchant for quoting him when it suits Erdoğan's political purpose), and the results made public. Another critical foundation for negotiations is an independent review, ideally with international oversight, of the assumptions and evidence that convicted Ocalan to death, which was commuted to life imprisonment, and an independent review of the evidence of all crimes allegedly perpetrated by the PKK in view of the findings of three Belgium courts.

To comprehensively resolve the 'Kurdish Question' Turkey would need to stop all military aggression and occupation of Kurdish-majority areas in all countries. Turkey claims it is only targeting PKK but it constantly attacks and destroys water, electricity and other infrastructure, and kills, displaces and subjugates whole populations.

Even with the best of intentions, it will take a massive effort in and outside the Turkish parliament to overcome the challenges. International monitoring and a coordinated use of incentives and disincentives are required. For example, Kılıçdaroğlu's wish to pursue relations with the EU provides the EU with some powerful political and economic levers.

Conclusion

If Turkey's elections transform Turkey from a dictatorship into a parliamentary democracy it will be a rare phenomenon, if not a precedent in history. For a democratic Turkey to benefit from its rich multi-ethnic heritage, geopolitical position, sheer natural beauty and wealth in natural resources, the country needs to be re-educated. Significant changes are required in school education, the media, security forces, police, standards of investigation and submissible evidence, the judiciary, the prison system, what the state dictates imams to say in Friday prayers all over the world, and so on. To achieve these changes, many Kurds, including PKK, advocate a federal system of government. This would at least scale reform, so it is more manageable and less threatening to a status quo that has been 100 years in the making. Regardless of the outcomes, these elections will have significant internal, regional and international ramifications.