

Turkey votes Snap elections – Turkey at yet another crossroads

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On 24 June, Turkey will hold snap presidential and parliamentary elections, almost 17 months earlier than planned. Their outcome is bound to fundamentally transform Turkish politics from a parliamentary system to a presidential governance model, which gives the president sweeping powers.

President Erdoğan announced early elections with the expectation that it would boost his and the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) chances of winning, while also taking the opposition by surprise. However, Turkey's historically fragmented opposition has swiftly mobilised. For the first time, it has united. Political parties from different backgrounds and ideologies are coming together with one common aim – to defeat Erdoğan and restore a parliamentary system. Still, the ongoing state of emergency, new controversial election laws and an AKP-dominated media will pose a serious challenge to the opposition.

Why snap elections?

Three main issues explain why Erdoğan has favoured snap elections. First, Turkey's economic situation is worsening. According to an April 2018 survey by independent pollsters Gezici 48.6% of respondents said the economy was Turkey's biggest problem. Waiting until November 2019 would have been risky. Without structural reforms, the economy seems set to deteriorate further, which could cost votes. Second, Erdoğan does not want to take the risk of a poor result in the March 2019 municipal elections for fear of an adverse knock-on effect on the outcome of the national vote. The AKP traditionally gets fewer votes in local polls. There is also a particular concern in the AKP-run cities of Ankara and Istanbul. If the large "no" vote that prevailed there in the 2017 Constitutional referendum recurs, an AKP defeat could undermine voters' confidence in the party. Finally, the AKP with their ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), did not want the newly formed Good (İYİ) Party of Meral Akşener to run. However, with the stakes so high, an unprecedented move by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), foiled this plan. He lent the İYİ party 15 MPs to allow the party to cross the Turkish Parliament's 20-seat threshold and enter the election race.

Main players and the opposition's now or never moment

The AKP, the MHP, which has backed the AKP since the April 2017 Constitutional referendum, and Mustafa Destici's fringe Islamist Nationalist Great Unity Party (BBP) make up the 'People's Alliance'. If not for the alliance, neither the MHP nor the BBP would cross the 10% threshold to enter parliament.

The centre-left CHP, the centre-right İYİ Party, Temel Karamollaoğlu's Islamist Felicity (Saadet) Party and the small but historically and symbolically significant centre-right Democrat (Demokrat) Party make up the opposing 'Nation's alliance'. It brings together different political ideologies around common goals such as democratisation, the protection of civil and individual liberties, the rule of law and a return to a strengthened parliamentary system. The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) is not part of these two major electoral alliances.

While Turkey's fragmented opposition has long benefitted the AKP, over the past 12 months, it has upped its game. Narrowly losing the April 2017 Constitutional referendum gave the opposition a huge confidence boost. Since the elections were called, the opposition parties have demonstrated an unprecedented level of solidarity and a readiness to make sacrifices.

When the AKP and the MHP conspired to make changes in the electoral system to allow electoral alliances, they were seeking to secure their own victory. However, now the opposition has used this strategy against them. This unlikely alliance was unexpected, and it could thwart the AKP's game plan. According to some polls, the People's Alliance may struggle to secure a majority in parliament.

In the presidential election, Erdoğan will represent the People's Alliance. The Nation's Alliance discussed the option of nominating one candidate against Erdoğan. Former President, Abdullah Gül's candidacy was discussed but it did not happen due to the opposition from İYİ Party and many CHP members. Every party will, therefore, have its own candidate: Muharrem İnce of CHP, along with Akşener of the İYİ Party, and Karamollaoğlu of Saadet. The HDP will be represented by its imprisoned former leader, Selahattin Demirtaş. The small pro-Russia left-nationalist Patriotic Party (VP) leader Doğu Perinçek, will also compete.

Karamollaoğlu, an increasingly popular leader with his surprising pro-democracy discourse, could potentially have a crucial role. Small Saadet is the sole representative of the strong Islamist movement Milli Görüş. While it has supported the AKP for a long time, it has recently changed sides. Despite the AKP's best efforts to include Saadet in the People's Alliance, which could have secured their victory, Saadet declined, saying that the AKP had moved too far away from its founding principles and values. Karamollaoğlu will try to attract disgruntled AKP voters.

With such influential names joining forces, the combined votes for the opposition parties could prevent Erdoğan from passing the 50% bar in the first round of the presidential elections. A runoff between the top two candidates would thus take place on 8 July. The opposition parties have agreed to support whichever candidate runs against Erdoğan. Such unity is unprecedented in Turkey's history.

Either Akşener or İnce will probably come second in the first round. Akşener could draw enough CHP, nationalist, Islamist and disgruntled AKP votes to represent a real challenge to Erdoğan in the second round, although the lack of support from the Kurds remains a serious hurdle. While İnce can attract voters beyond the CHP's traditional base, the conservatives' attitude towards CHP could become a major impediment.

In the event of a second round, Kurdish voters will prove critical. For Erdoğan, it will be difficult to rally their votes, not least in light of the jailing of elected Kurdish lawmakers, including Demirtaş. In the end, even though HDP has been excluded from the electoral alliances, its message could determine the final outcome of the election with the 10% it could garner in the first round.

The ongoing state of emergency, new controversial election laws and an AKP-dominated media will present a significant challenge to the opposition. For example, the parliament recently passed a bill allowing election officials to accept unsealed ballots as valid, which raises concerns over electoral fraud. New regulations to further control domestic access to international publications and curb local independent broadcasters, including the blocking of websites, are also problematic. These restrictions give Erdoğan and his party an advantage both in the election campaign and in the reporting of the election results. In a 24 April statement, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe states that it "is deeply concerned that this adverse context will impede the conduct and organisation of genuinely democratic elections."

While it is fashionable to call each election in Turkey 'historical', the 24 June elections deserve this adjective. They will determine the country's direction both domestically and internationally in a highly volatile and dangerous geopolitical environment. If a united opposition succeeds, they can take steps to solve many pressing issues, including the polarisation of Turkish society, and return to a parliamentary system.

Conversely, if Erdoğan wins again, he could finally realise his political plans in line with the new presidential system. The results could also be less straightforward. For example, Erdoğan could be elected president while the opposition parties win the majority in the parliament. Although the new system gives unprecedented powers to the president, the parliament may block his political plans in no small measure. In that case, Erdoğan would need to establish a new dialogue with the opposition. But he could also choose to call for new snap elections. There are many uncertainties and open questions. But one thing is clear: Turkey is once again at a crossroads, and the result of the elections will have far-reaching consequences for the country and its partners.

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