

TURKIYE'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2023

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Turkiye held its Presidential election on 14 May 2023. Recep Tayyip Erdogan received 49.52 per cent votes, while his opponents Kemal Kilicdaroglu and Sinan Ogan received 44.88 per cent and 5.17 per cent votes, respectively.¹ Since more than 50 per cent votes are mandatory to win the presidential election in Turkiye, a runoff election took place between Erdogan and Kilicdaroglu on 28 May 2023. In the runoff, Erdogan won the presidential election, receiving 52.18 per cent votes, defeating Kilicdaroglu, who could get 47.82 per cent of the votes.² Given that none of the presidential candidates managed to secure more than 50 per cent of the votes in the first round, the role of Sinan Ogan became decisive in Erdogan's win because of Ogan's endorsement for Erdogan in the runoff election.³

Erdogan led the People's Alliance, which includes the Justice and Development (AK) Party, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Great Unity Party (BBP) and New Welfare Party (YRP). Erdogan's campaign strategy encompassed several key elements. Firstly, he emphasised on continuity, presenting himself as a leader who can maintain stability and build on past achievements. This messaging aimed to appeal to voters who value a sense of consistency and progress under Erdogan's leadership. Additionally, Erdogan highlighted the potential for instability if the opposition coalition were to win because of the ideological diversity within the opposition and suggested that their differences could hinder effective governance and decision-making.

This narrative sought to create doubts about the ability of the opposition to provide stable and efficient leadership, thereby positioning Erdogan as a safer choice. Identity issues also played a significant role in Erdogan's campaigns. He tapped into religious and nationalist sentiments, appealing to conservative voters who identify strongly with Turkiye's Islamic and cultural heritage. This approach helped him garner support from segments of the population that prioritise identity-related issues and view Erdogan as a defender of their values and interests. By combining these elements—continuity, the potential for opposition instability, and identity-based appeals,⁴ Erdogan succeeded in solidifying his support base and attracting voters who prioritise stability, effective governance, and Turkish cultural and religious identity.

Defining true nationalism and "Century of Turkiye"⁵ to the voters, Erdogan asserted that nationalism could not be achieved through mere displays of power but rather through protecting Turkiye's national symbols, such as the red flag with the crescent and star, and highlighted the significance of standing in solidarity with Azerbaijan and the liberation of Karabakh. Erdogan also stressed the establishment of the Organization of Turkish States and the realisation of long-held dreams. According to him, true nationalism was demonstrated by the ability to produce domestic weapons, vehicles and make independent decisions. Erdogan further contended that nationalism involved combating domestic and international terrorist organisations. He presented the People's Alliance as having achieved these goals through unity and proudly representing the nation without compromising its sovereignty. He proposed the "Century of Turkiye" aiming to make the 100th anniversary of the Republic a starting point for a powerful Turkiye built upon the foundations established over the past 21 years.⁶

During the election campaign, Erdogan made several promises in various policy areas. Regarding earthquake relief, he announced plans to construct 6,50,000 new flats in south-

eastern Türkiye, with a commitment to deliver 3,19,000 of them within a year. As the Turkish economy is going through a difficult phase, Erdogan pledged to reduce inflation to 20 per cent by 2023 and below 10 per cent by 2024 while also emphasising his intention to continue decreasing interest rates. With regard to housing, he vowed to introduce additional regulations to protect citizens from excessive rent and sale price hikes.

On the issue of refugees, Erdogan pledged to facilitate more “voluntary” returns of Syrian refugees to their country, citing improving dialogue with Syria mediated by Russia. In foreign policy, Erdogan aimed to normalise Ankara's relations in the wider Arab region and sought to establish an “axis” centred around Türkiye. He expressed a commitment to crack down on “terror” groups such as the Gulen movement and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). However, regarding LGBTQ+ rights, Erdogan took a conservative stance, promising to actively combat what he referred to as “deviant tendencies” that threaten the traditional family structure. He also accused the opposition of being “pro-LGBT”.[7](#)

Kilicdaroglu led the Nation Alliance, the coalition of six parties, which has also been termed as “Table of Six”, including the Republican People's Party (CHP), Good Party, Democracy and Progress Party, Future Party, Felicity Party and Democrat Party. In terms of governance, the Nation Alliance aimed to abolish the executive presidential system brought by Erdogan in 2017 and reinstate a robust parliamentary system to strengthen democracy in the country. Kilicdaroglu contended that Erdogan's authoritarian tendencies have deepened over the past decade or more, requiring a radical institutional change. He appealed to those who believe that a more balanced power distribution between the legislative and executive branches is crucial for democratic governance. In addition to advocating for institutional change, he promised a different governing approach that is quieter and less paternalistic. It implied a departure from Erdogan's assertive and dominant leadership style, with Kilicdaroglu aiming to present a more collaborative and inclusive approach to governance. By championing a return to a parliamentary system, Kilicdaroglu sought to appeal to voters disillusioned with the current political climate and looking for a change in the existing system of government and the leadership style.

The HDP's (People's Democratic Party) endorsement of Kilicdaroglu led to significant support for him in eastern Türkiye, having a substantial Kurdish population. It indicates a noteworthy shift in political dynamics and a potential realignment within the country's political sphere. The HDP's backing of Kilicdaroglu seems to have resonated with Kurdish voters seeking an alternative to the ruling party, bolstering his electoral appeal in the region. In contrast, Erdogan has strategically framed Kilicdaroglu's ties to the HDP as a means to undermine his credibility, linking the HDP to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an armed group that has been engaged in a long-standing conflict with the Turkish state since 1984. By associating Kilicdaroglu with “terrorists”, Erdogan aimed to cast doubt on his leadership abilities and appealed to nationalist sentiments within the country. This tactic delegitimised the HDP's support for Kilicdaroglu to reinforce the perception that any alliance with the HDP is tantamount to supporting terrorism.

During his campaign, Kilicdaroglu made several policy pledges in various areas. In terms of earthquake relief, he vowed to construct houses for victims free of charge and implement a ban on property sales to foreigners until the housing crisis was resolved for Turkish citizens. Regarding the economy, Kilicdaroglu pledged to reintroduce more traditional economic policies, aiming to reduce inflation and criticised Erdogan's low-interest-rate policy. He also expressed the intention to rebuild the confidence of foreign investors and transform Türkiye into a high-value product manufacturing country. Kilicdaroglu further outlined plans to quadruple the social housing inventory within five years and cap social housing lease costs at 20 per cent of the minimum wage.

Concerning refugees, Kilicdaroglu stated his intention to work with the Syrian government to

facilitate the return of Syrian refugees to their home country. In terms of foreign policy, he emphasised dialogue with all international actors and repair Türkiye's relations with the West. He specifically mentioned his aim to establish visa-free travel for Turkish citizens to the European Union's Schengen area within months of assuming power.⁸ It may be argued that despite the involvement of all state institutions in favour of Erdogan's campaign, Kilicdaroglu garnered 47.82 per cent votes, signifying a remarkable achievement indicating the popular support base in Türkiye for the latter. However, in the electoral campaign, the opposition could not strategically leverage the popular discontent, economic downfall, the government's lethargic response in the aftermath of the earthquake and its excessive media control, resulting in its ultimate defeat.

The election took place in a challenging economic context pertaining to the currency crisis, high inflation rates, surging living costs and the massive task of infrastructure building in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake. The Turkish lira has experienced significant devaluation against the dollar, losing nearly 95 per cent of its value in the past 15 years. It indicates the need for strong economic policies and management to address the persistent inflation, which remains high at over 40 per cent.⁹ In the 2018 Turkish Presidential Election, Erdogan garnered 52.59 per cent votes.¹⁰ Securing 52.18 per cent votes in 2023 evidently shows that Erdogan has not been able to increase his vote share. However, it can be argued that despite all the pre-election hype of substantial popular support for the opposition, Erdogan has been successful in conserving his traditional votes. His five years tenure is likely to see similar domestic policies and slightly assertive foreign policy in the foreseeable future. It remains to be seen how Erdogan will govern the country in the face of simmering challenges due to economic hardships and fulfil the promise of bringing "Century of Türkiye", encompassing the entire nation with the welfare of children, youth and women.

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