



### Turkey's Election Scenario

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Turkey entered election mode and dramatic political consultations and debates ensued after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the opposition nationalist leader Devlet Bahçeli agreed to declare snap election on 24 June 2019, almost one and half years ahead of its scheduled time in August 2019. The election will pave the way for changing Turkey's seven-decade-old parliamentary system into a presidential system, limiting the role of parliament and making the presidential office the executive head of the government and of the state. Almost every opposition party except the nationalist Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP) has been opposing the presidential system and they had voted against it in the referendum on 16 April 2017 that the Yes camp of President Erdoğan had narrowly won. The opposition parties had been guessing an early declaration of the general election and were engaged in a serious political mobilisation since April 2017. The referendum vote was a clear indication that the ruling AK Party and its leader are not invincible. The presidential system and the continuance of the emergency laws have brought several opposition voices together. President Erdoğan, an adroit politician who is aware of opposition's weakness, had to fix many problems before going to an election. He has indeed overcome many of his problems, mainly by resetting Turkey-Russia relations and by restoring Turkey's role in Syria's future settlement by joining hands with Iran and Russia to start the Astana process. The opposition parties were perhaps unprepared for the election and had not even started finding a candidate to contest against Erdoğan, let alone having a joint strategy to unseat him. This election is going to reshape Turkey's power structure and the shape of the power struggle within a new system that will create a powerful presidential system and a parliament without an effective role in the government. But if an opposition candidates wins against Erdogan, the presidential system may see a gradual reversal as the opposition candidates agreed. That will require a parliament resolution or referendum. The power struggle within each party is what may shape the electorate's mood to vote and give a surprising mandate.

There are three key issues which make this election extremely important for Turkey's domestic political actors as well as its western allies and regional powers.

## Why these elections are important

### 1. *Strong Opposition*

The 16 April referendum had clearly shown the deep divide in Turkish public opinion over changing Turkey's parliamentary system. The ruling party has narrowly won the referendum which has emboldened the opposition parties, who for long have failed to challenge the AK Party's dominance. The referendum exposed a clear crack within the AK Party's traditional support base, constituted of conservatives and nationalists. The nationalist party led by Devlet Bahçeli split and a senior parliamentarian Meral Akşener along with five other deputies formed a new party Good Party (YI) in June 2017. As MHP has already entered a pre-poll alliance with AK Party, the YI would like to claim the nationalist constituency alone. The Islamist conservative base seems to have developed a degree of disenchantment over many issues, which include not only Erdoğan's personalized politics but also the prolonging of the Syrian crisis, Turkey's foreign policies and the growing political polarization in Turkey. The Felicity Party led by Tamel Karamollaoglu, an Islamist leader of cosmopolitan background, has been vocal against Erdoğan for a long time. In the April referendum too, he had campaigned against the AKP. He had even gone further to unite the opposition parties and convince them to agree on a joint candidate, a proposal that failed to attract both the CHP and YI leadership. He held a publicized meeting with former Prime Minister Abdullah Gül, who declined to be a candidate as the "opposition lacked consensus". In his meetings with CHP's Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and YI's Meral Akşener, he failed to get their support for Abdullah Gul. With the opposition's failure to have a joint strategy, Erdoğan and his AK Party are hoping for a less stormy election.

The old Kemalist party CHP, its recent flexibility towards Erdoğan's Islamist opponents notwithstanding, could not find in Abdullah Gül a real saviour. The CHP was the one who had blocked Abdullah Gul's first bid to be president in 2007 which had provoked the AK Party to seek a change in the constitution and introduce direct election to elect the president. Many in the CHP still do not differentiate between Abdullah Gül and Erdoğan. Moreover, the party still has to overcome historically ideological and political differences before entering an alliance with a party which they had been opposing so fundamentally.

For first-time contestant YI, the idea of a joint opposition candidate even for its own leader Meral Akşener was not politically unconvincing for two reasons. One, the winnability of the joint opposition candidate is questionable and it may end up even without a run-off. Second, for YI, the more realistic objective is to enter parliament which is possible only by projecting a leader, Meral Akşener, who can stand up to the most powerful candidate Erdoğan. In the formula of introducing a joint candidate, smaller parties like the Felicity Party whose vote share is as negligible as a half percent can claim more vote share. YI could not have been eligible to run for election if the CHP hadn't lent its fifteen deputies towards enabling the new party to meet the minimum conditions to contest the first election. For CHP, such a sacrifice was easily recoverable as the YI's popularity is mostly in central Turkey where the CHP has shown poor performance in last many elections.

### 2. *Political Contexts*

This election is taking place in a complex domestic and regional political context. Previous general elections too have taken place in the backdrop of the Kurdish militancy, but that was used by the powerful military to impose a more nationalistic government, particularly the post-1981 coup vote, which had adopted a new constitution that restricted political and cultural participation of the Kurdish people. Over the years, all political parties have realized that the 1981

constitution is a roadblock to Turkey's civil and political liberties and only a constitutional change can bring a real change in politics. By the time a strong public opinion in favour of the constitutional change developed, in 2002, Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül broke away from their Islamic Felicity Party to form the AKP, a party that ended the era of coalition governments and provided nearly two decades of political stability. The 1981 constitution has been amended seventeen times. Since the AK Party came to power, it went for three referendums in 2007, 2010, and 2017. A major part of the constitution has already been amended.

A direct election of rather a ceremonial president in 2007 was itself an indicator that a popularly elected president will no longer remain ceremonial. The 2007 referendum that paved the way for the direct election of Abdullah Gül as the president was perhaps more a reaction against the Kemalist party's bid to block his candidacy for parliament.

By the time, the elected president Abdullah Gül should be able to exercise more executive powers, the internal politics of AKP had sidelined Abdullah Gül and ended his political career in 2014. Perhaps Abdullah Gül would have been more acceptable as executive president for Turkey's diverse political constituencies. Then came the exit of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in June 2016 who left behind an unresolved Turkey's predicament in Syria and the region. Many in the opposition thought that both Abdullah Gül and Ahmet Davutoglu could have together resisted Erdoğan's march to power but they did not realise that the two figures have not really taken the risk of presenting credible alternatives of Erdoğan's way of politics, inside the party or the outside.

The failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016 is perhaps the most defining moment of Turkey's ongoing political debate that has required every political actor to fall in line with the state's view on Fethullah Gulen, a US-based religious cult accused by Turkey of orchestrating the failed coup. More than the role of Fethullah Gulen, it was the role of the United States where Gulen is based and the US agencies are often seen to be complicit with him in facilitating his activities from his base in Pennsylvania. But mass arrests and expulsions of public servants from their services has gradually become an issue that affects the public opinion. The CHP and other political parties are criticising the government and asking for popular support to end the situation. Moreover, the election is going to take place under emergency laws which many observers including the European Parliament (PACE) think cannot be free and fair. But technically, no political party has so far boycotted the 16 April referendum or has intended to boycott the 24 June presidential election. In previous elections, Turkey had invited international election observers mainly the OSCE/ODIHR,<sup>[2]</sup> the principle observers of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe which has reported several problems in the last referendum. It has to be seen whether the OSCE observers are invited again to oversee the election process. Since the political parties are actively campaigning, it seems the election process is going to be accepted by most of the parties.

### **3. *Changing Regional Security***

With Operation Olive Branch and Operation Euphrates Shield, Turkey's Syria policy has become part of domestic policy whose success and failure will affect the political opinion. Except the HDP, all political parties including the Kemalist CHP and nationalist groups have fully endorsed these operations. The deepening crisis between Turkey and its NATO allies, mainly the US on the role of PKK linked militant groups in Turkey's Southern borders has already created an anti-West and anti-American opinion on which the ruling party and the opposition parties have little differences. Since the fall of Aleppo, Turkey has adopted a different trajectory for its Syria policy which aims to prevent the Kurdish militias from creating fait accompli, an independent state entity on its borders. The September 2017 Referendum of the Kurdistan Regional Government

(KRG) for declaring independence from Iraq brought Baghdad-Ankara and Tehran to act together to make the Kurds desist from such adventures. Erbil was brought to its knees and forced to rethink its decisions and a normalisation of relations on the basis of previously agreed agreements, which provided the Kurdish region significant autonomy. Since then, Turkey started working to stop the Syrian Kurds from such aspirations. Turkey's military operations in Syria, with partial support from both the US and Russia, have strengthened President Erdoğan's domestic political agenda and isolated the Kurdish political group HDP from entering an alliance with any other political party, mainly the CHP. As a result, the success of Afrin Operation was a perfect point of advantage for President Erdoğan to mobilise public opinion in its favour. The problem with the opposition parties is that their perspectives on Syria are not very clear and their occasional support to Bashar Al Assad rather goes south. At a time when many of Turkey's foreign policy choices matter a lot for its domestic politics, the opposition groups failed to reach out to Turkey's western and European partners to stop populist politics over Turkey. Again when Turkish political parties will go to campaign in many European countries for the votes of Turkish voters, the local government may again block the AKP leaders from campaigning, allowing the party to play this to isolate pro-west and pro-EU voters.

### Who is who?

Turkey's political landscape has been dominated by three trends; the Leftist-Kemalist groups who exercise an extreme secular interpretation which not only denied the rights of religious people but also imposed on them restrictions that excluded them from public institutions including universities and offices. The CHP and other community groups have indeed softened their stance and have even reached out to conservative voters who traditionally supported Islamic or nationalist parties.

Party	Party Leader	Vote Share in 2015 Parliament elections	No of Deputies in 550	Presidential candidate
AKP Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	49.49	316	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
CHP Republican People's Party Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi	Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu	25.32	116	Muharrem İnce
MHP Nationalist Movement Party Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi	Devlet Bahçeli	11.90	35	

HDP Peoples' Democratic Party Halkların Demokratik Partisi	Sezai Temelli, Pervin Buldan	10.76	48	Selahattin Demirtas
<b>Parties Below 10% threshold</b>				
SP Sadet Partisi	Temel Karamollaoğlu	0.68		Temel Karamollaoğlu
BBP Büyük Birlik Partisi	Mustafa Destici	0.54		
DP Democratic Part	Gültekin Uysal	0.14		
HAK Partisi		0.23		
Vatan Partisi	Dogue Perincek	0.25		Dogue Perincek
IYI Good Party	Meral Akşener			Meral Akşener

The AK Party is not without internal feuds and competition. Several founding leaders of the party including former President Abdullah Gul, former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and former minister Bulent Arince are said to have been isolated within the party. The traditional Islamic base which the AKP carefully persevered with itself by advancing conservative politics, is also drifting away gradually, if not rapidly. In its first election, the party had secured significant support from the Kurdish provinces which had gradually declined. In the last two elections when the Kurdish party HDP has emerged victorious in Kurdish majority constituencies, the AKP adopted more nationalist discourse. As a result, the party and its leaders have started looking for new support base mostly towards nationalists and secularists. By starting his election campaign from Izmir, a secular bastion where the secular CHP has always been a dominant party, Erdoğan has called for secular politics, sending signals that his party is ready to accommodate more secular voices. The AKP' traditional support has come from a burgeoning middle class which has been badly hit in the recent economic downturn. On issues related to foreign policy, the AKP still plays pro-EU and pro-NATO politics which a large number of Turks still favour strongly. However, the party's internal feuds and the marginalisation of many key leaders may transfer its vote to Felicity Party resulting in an increase in the Felicity Party's vote share.

Since the victory of the AK Party in 2002, the CHP has maintained its support base intact without losing or gaining over it. The party's main challenge is to break this prolonged status quo. Demographically too, the CHP still remains limited within urban and affluent constituencies of southern provinces like Hatay, Mersin, Antalya, Mugla, Izmir, Cannekele, and the provinces from the European sides have remained strongholds of the party even after fifteen years of AK Party's rule. But it failed to regain its influence in the central provinces, where the AK Party still controls the higher share of votes. In its bid to break this trend, in recent months, the CHP leadership has

resisted their approach towards conservative voters by visiting them more often and displaying more women with scarves in their rallies. Similarly, they tried to maintain a balance between the Kurdish issues and nationalist perspective in hope that the moderate Kurds and anti-PKK Kurd votes may transfer to them. Given the historical animosity between Islamists and the secularists, the gap between the two is unlikely to shrink in near future. The recent efforts by the Felicity Party leader to find a common understanding with CHP may help CHP more than it can help the Felicity Party itself. On issues related to foreign policy, the CHP has recently advocated directly engaging with Bashar al Assad, whom the AKP loathes immensely. On certain occasions, the party has even chastised the NATO and EU leadership over their provocative actions against Turkey such as barring ruling party leaders from addressing their political events in European cities. Traditionally, the CHP has been a product of cold war politics in which it kept Turkey a passive player which is dependent on its western allies. The changing geostrategic realities are not much reflected in their present foreign policy discourses in which the ruling party and the MHP have created a self-confident and pro-active role for Turkey. It is also unthinkable that the CHP may reverse the AK Party's foreign policy priorities if they are economically sustainable. On economic aspects, the CHP cannot immediately offer any remedy that will shorten Turkey's long wait for EU membership. Nor it can allow the US to play a role that necessarily hurts Turkey's core security interests in Syria. The CHP's clarity on these aspects may enhance its chances to play populist politics on which the ruling party has successfully relied and gained.

Milli Hereket Partisi, the ultranationalist party, has almost become a B team of the ruling party, a role that many of its senior leaders have disliked and have challenged the leader Davet Bacheli, to the extent that Meral Aksener had to break away and form her own party the Good Party of the IYI. In the run-up election of November 2015, the party had lost more seats and vote share from 16 percent to 11.90 percent because of vote transfer to either AK party or the CHP. In previous few years, the ultra-nationalist party has consistently supported the AK party on almost every national issue. The call for a snap election, ahead of schedule was primarily taken by the leader of the MHP Devet Bacheli which was immediately accepted by the AKP. This means that anti-AK party sentiments and anti-incumbency factors will also be directed at the MHP, diluting its chances to gain unless the party fights jointly with the AKP. In that sense, the IYI of Meral Akşener is likely to replace the MHP as the main nationalist party in the next election.

The IYI party, despite being a new party, has been joined by MHP's five deputies who spearheaded a failed campaign to unseat the MHP Chief Devlet Bahçeli. The group was opposed to the party chief's decision to support the AKP's Presidential referendum. Since then, the party launched an effective campaign against presidential rule and targeted President Erdoğan frequently. Her being a powerful woman, a former interior minister and a seasoned politician, her charisma has made headlines and attracted huge gatherings in her rallies. She has been an extremely careful strategist in her political decision making in order to create an alternative block in Turkey's politics, and not just to win some seats. In her decision not to be a joint candidate or to support any other joint candidate, Aksener has instead sought an alliance among the smaller parties of religious and conservative backdrops, Felicity Party and the BBP. Her vote share in the presidential race will be important for the runner-up candidate. Her goal is not to win the presidential race but to secure her party's entry in parliament, a move supported by all opposition groups.

HDP is the only political party started as an inclusive movement that would reconcile the Kurdish and Turkish electorates. As a result, the party had in its first election received even non-Kurdish votes. But the Syrian crisis and the over-ambitious role of the Syrian Kurdish militants,

many supported by the PKK, put the HDP in a difficult choice forcing it to choose between the extreme anti-Turkey sentiments of the PYD militants and the need to maintain its inclusive political agenda. The party eventually fell into the trap of militancy and many of its leaders openly supported the militant groups and their acts of violence, a move that landed them in several legal battles. The party today has been untouchable for all opposition groups for a pre-poll alliance, but post-election politics can bring them to taking a common stance. The party seems to have been trapped by the conflict between Turkey and the Syrian Kurdish groups. Its inability to distance itself from the PKK has cost it a lot in terms of non-Kurdish voters in Turkey, which many believe had helped the HDP win seats more than the proportion of actual Kurdish votes. The party leader Salahattin Demirtas, who is languishing in jail for more than a year, has been declared as the candidate against Erdoğan. To get Kurds' votes, Erdoğan also has softened his rhetoric and party leaders have started an intensive campaign in all Kurdish majority constituencies.

The smaller parties, the Islamist Felicity Party and the BBD party had secured only one percent vote in the last election. Their election presence may not be important but their intellectual and ideological influences remain important for all political parties. For many years, these parties have been cooperating with the AK party on many issues. But this election has drawn a clear line of battle between AKP and the Felicity Party. The Felicity Party wanted to see its presence felt and wanted to bring back her cadre out from AK Party's support base. The current leadership has chosen a bold and visible confrontation with the AKP. But how much this confrontation is going to shake the conservative support base is very difficult to predict. The reason that the Felicity Party's anti-Erdoğan may not play out very well is that the party has to take clearly distinguishable positions with the AKP on all major political issues, not just domestic politics. Though the support base of the Felicity Party and its social movement Milli Görüş is very large, they have been supporting and voting for the AK Party for a long time. The Felicity Party's attempt to field a joint candidate against Erdoğan failed precisely because the other parties do not differentiate between the two parties.

As the possibility of having a joint candidate for the first round has ended, the four principal parties, CHP, SP, IYI and DP, have agreed to support the runner candidate if the election results enters for second round on 8 July. But their main alliance is for parliament election for which each party's vote will be counted as one party, which means that any party that gets only 3 percent vote for example, will be able to get at least 10 seats in the parliament. In previous elections, the votes of the parties that failed to reach the threshold, were distributed among the parties above the threshold. This agreement on seat sharing will present the greatest challenge to the AK Party's fifteen years dominance in the house if the party fails to get the more than fifty percent.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>[1]</sup> Hurriyet Daily News, 28 April 2018, “Former Turkish President Gül will not run for presidency” <http://www.hurriyetaailynews.com/former-turkish-president-gul-will-not-run-for-presidency-131022>,

<sup>[2]</sup> <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/303681>