

## **PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN TURKEY-2023<sup>2</sup>**

### **PREFACE**

2023 Turkish presidential and parliamentary elections will be a turning point for the country. The upcoming elections have already attracted considerable attention both inside and outside the country. According to expert assessments, a fierce struggle is expected between the ruling party and the opposition. Although the vote was initially scheduled to take place on 18 June, in January 2022, the President of Turkey R. T. Erdogan announced that the presidential and parliamentary elections will be held on May 14. Let's remember that Erdogan has exceptional political longevity in Turkey: since 2003, first holding the post of Prime Minister. He was the first prime minister who changed the constitution later, becoming the President in 2014.

The 2023 elections will be a serious test for President R. T. Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power since 2002. For many years, the AKP has dominated Turkish politics and implemented various reforms with the aim of modernizing the country and strengthening its position on the world stage. Nevertheless, in recent years, the ruling party has been facing growing discontent with the public and various political forces. Critics accuse Erdogan of being authoritarian and repressing the political opposition. The devastating earthquake in Turkey in February has become yet another new challenge for the competing political forces, as no matter who wins the election, the winner will inherit a heavy legacy.

In addition to the unfavorable internal situation, Turkey has also found itself at the center of various regional conflicts (*the Syrian crisis, the ongoing tension with Greece, the military operations of the Turkish military in Northern Iraq, etc.*).

### **ERDOGHAN'S COMPETITORS AND PRE-ELECTION PROGRAMS**

The main rival of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and forming with him coalition the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), is the Republican

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People's Party (CHP), which intends to run in the elections with a united front consisting of six major parties. The largest is the "Republican People's Party" led by Kemal Kilichdaroghlu, then the "Good" party founded by Meral Akshener in 2017, the third – "Future" party founded by former Prime minister and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoghlu in 2019, then the "Democracy and Progress" party founded by Ali Babajan in 2020, Temel Karamollaoghlu's "Happiness" and Gultekin Uysal's "Democratic" parties.

It is noteworthy that the ideological palette of this alliance is extremely diverse. There are both Kemalists and leftists here, and even parties with extreme right-wing views. It is obvious that the parties representing the alliance have put aside their ideological differences and united around one goal: that is, to put an end to Erdogan's one-man rule.

On January 30, the opposition publicized its pre-election program, the "Memorandum of Understanding on Joint Policies". The program includes more than 2,000 action plans related to the country's domestic and foreign policy, security (including cyber security), digital transformation, economy, energy, science and education, science and technology, judiciary and all spheres of society.

Considering the economic promises contained in the program, Turkish experts describe it as a "Liberal Economic Program". As for the social policy, the points in the program are characterized as populist promises. In contrary with Erdogan, the opposition also promises in case of victory to cancel a number of mega-projects, including the construction of the "Istanbul Canal"<sup>3</sup>.

The following steps are planned to be implemented in the foreign and security policies:

### **1. Relations with the strategic instruments (structures) of Turkey's foreign policy**

Strengthen the Organization of Turkic States, expand Turkey's role with the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Islamic Organization and Economic Cooperation structures, increase the role of the "D-8" organization or the so-called "Islamic Eight" or "Developing Eight" in international relations<sup>4</sup>. Taking into account that from the point of view of Turkey's national security, NATO is a deterrent to continue contributing to the activity of this structure. The opposition is going to continue the policy of full EU membership, planning targeted steps in that direction.

### **2. Interstate relations**

▪ **Armenia – Turkey.** *"They are resolutely going to continue the steps towards the settlement of the existing problems between Turkey and Armenia."*

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<sup>3</sup> Ortak Politikalar Mutabakat Metni.(2023). <https://chp.org.tr/yayin/ortak-politikalar-mutabakat-metni/Open> (download date: 18.02.2023).

<sup>4</sup> The members of the organization are Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt and Nigeria.

- **Turkey – Azerbaijan.** *"They will continue to develop relations with fraternal Azerbaijan on the basis of mutual trust. The steps aimed at maintaining the ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia will continue, which, according to the opposition, will lead to peace."*

- **Turkey – Russia.** *"To strengthen relations through constructive dialogue as equal states with the Russian Federation."*

- **Turkey – USA.** Considering that Turkish-American alliance relations have been going through serious tests in recent years, they will pursue so that *"relations with the USA develop on the principle of equality and mutual trust and on the basis of alliance"*. Taking into account that in response to Ankara's purchase of Russian C400 air defense systems, the Americans suspended Turkey's participation in the international production program of the 5th generation F-35 fighters, *"steps will be taken to re-engage in it."*

In the context of interstate relations, the opposition also plans to regulate relations with Greece, to protect the rights of the Turks living in the Turkish-occupied part of the Republic of Cyprus, considering it as a national issue, and within the framework of the UN resolutions, to find a *"Permanent solution to the Israel–Palestine conflict"* through the direct mediation of Turkey.

Since the West–Syria and West–Iran relations are currently very tense, and the main opposition force of Turkey, the "Republican People's Party" professes the main principles of the Western ideology (democracy, secularism, etc.), so the principles of the political position of the party regarding Iran and Syria are not clear covered in the pre-election program in order not to lose the votes of the electorate in the upcoming elections.

It can be said that from the point of view of foreign political orientation, the program is strongly pro-Western. Ali Babajan, the leader of the "Democracy and Progress" party, which formed a coalition with the opposition, does not hide that *"the program is suitable for Europe."*

Based on this, Turkish experts, especially the defenders of Erdogan's foreign policy course, criticized the opposition, finding that in case of victory, the opposition will *"conduct a foreign policy coordinated with the West"*<sup>5</sup>.

Along with all this, however, the alliance's first pre-election test will be the issue of choosing a unified candidate. For a long time, there has been talk about the tense relations between K. Kilichdaroghlu and the leader of the "Good" party Meral Akshener. Will the opposition unite in this pre-election and post-disaster period, and will they come to a general consensus regarding the election of a united candidate, will become clear in the near future.

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<sup>5</sup> Duran B. (2023). Muhalefetin Batı'ya uyumlu dış politikası. Sabah. (03.02.2023). <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/duran/2023/02/03/muhalefetin-batiya-uyumlu-dis-politikasi> (download date: 16.02.2023).

In any case, considering K. Kilichdaroghlu's authority and popularity in the opposition political alliance, as evidenced by the polls conducted in Turkey, he will be the most likely candidate of the opposition.

As for the pre-election program of the "Justice and Development" party, it has not been published yet. Anyway, in 2022 at the end of October it became known that the "Justice and Development" party has prepared a pre-election "manifesto" consisting of 23 headings entitled "Turkey's Century", where the main goals of the party are presented. It includes the fields of military industry, technology, healthcare and economy.

It should be noted that both the opposition and the ruling party pre-election programs were released before the devastating earthquake. Therefore, it is likely that the programs and projects related to the socio-economic sphere included in them will be revised in the future. Currently, it is difficult to predict what kind of impact the devastating earthquake, which left a deep mark on various spheres of public life, will have on the voters' positions.

However, let's note that on the one hand, natural disasters can lead to public consolidation around the current government, because it is the current regime that is the main actor in responding to the disaster and providing aid to the affected regions. On the other hand, natural disasters can also reveal and further exacerbate existing social problems and political tensions in the country.

## **MAIN FACTORS AFFECTING THE ELECTIONS**

The 2023 elections in Turkey are likely to be influenced by several key factors: the state of the economy, the security environment, as well as the problems caused by human rights violations.

The state of the economy is going to be a key factor in the elections, as Turkey has faced a number of challenges in recent years (inflation, high levels of unemployment, devaluation of the Turkish lira, decline in foreign investment, etc.). The continuation of these trends may affect the outcome of the elections. In the current situation, the ruling party may lose the support of the public masses. It's not a coincidence that the problems related to the economy were and still remain one of the most central issues of the dispute between the ruling party and the opposition.

Taking into account the negative trends recorded in the economic sphere in recent years and the difficult socio-economic situation caused by the catastrophic earthquake, a lot will depend on what kind of visions and plans for the restoration of the country will be presented by the candidates participating in the elections.

Security issues are also of key importance, which will most likely be an important factor in the election campaign. Ankara has faced a number of security challenges, both in domestic and international levels. Turkey's relations with the European Union and the United States, the disagreements, it has with its partners on various issues within the framework of NATO may also play a role in these elections. We

have an opinion that these are also important issues for a significant number of voters. Therefore, an advantage in the elections will have the presidential candidate, who, on the one hand, will appeal to the public with a more realistic economic and security vision, and on the other hand, will be considered a force that manages foreign policy effectively.

It can be assumed that the candidate's campaign strategy, including the use of social media and the ability to convey their message to voters, the popularity of the candidates, their political and public administration experience, will also play a decisive role.

## **POSSIBLE SCENARIOS**

In what possible scenario will the elections take place and what can be expected in case of victory or defeat of any of the candidates of the competing forces?

Considering that the "Justice and Development" party led by Erdogan has been in power for almost two decades and during that time has formed a strong political base in the country, it is not excluded that he will be re-elected with the support of that base. However, feeling the breath of defeat, Erdogan can resort to any extreme measures (falsification of election results in his favor, distribution of election bribes, various intimidation, etc.) to keep the power.

In Erdogan's pre-election speeches, it is difficult to find prerequisites that after his victory, Turkey will change its aggressive and dangerous attitude, especially towards those neighbors with whom it has strained relations.

At the same time, according to the party's program Turkey claims to assume the role of "conciliator" and "mediator" in the settlement of various near-regional problems and conflicts. However, it should not be ruled out that in the name of ensuring security in the region around it, Ankara may use harsh force and pursue a militarized foreign policy.

It can also be assumed that under the guise of ensuring democracy and security, restrictions on the rights and freedom of mass media, other public actors, national minorities will continue, pressures on opposition groups and parties will be an inseparable part of internal politics.

What to expect in case of Erdogan's defeat? Considering his age and possible defeat in the presidential elections, "AKP" can nominate one of Erdogan's relatives and sympathizers for the position of leader. It is not excluded that Erdogan will nominate his son-in-law, Selcuk Bayraktar, or any of the party members with political and management experience. In case of a different development of events, it is possible that disagreements will appear in "AKP", as a result of which many of the party members will leave, creating new political entities, according to the recent trend in the country.

The opposition parties also made significant gains in the last local government elections in 2019 and can pose a significant challenge to the ruling party. If the

united presidential candidate representing the opposition alliance loses to Erdogan with a majority of votes, as a scenario, we do not exclude that the opposition, not coming to terms with the results recorded in the elections, will accuse the authorities of falsifying them and, in the presence of a critical mass, will try to implement a change of power with anti-government demonstrations.

In case of failure in the elections, the collapse of the alliance is possible in the short term. As a result, it is possible that new parties will emerge in Turkey's political landscape that can challenge the traditional political structures.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the political force that won as a result of the elections will, in fact, determine the main course of Turkey's economic development, foreign and security policy in the coming years. The winning side will clarify its position on various challenges of regional and geopolitical significance. Therefore, in the medium term, we should wait for a situation that will allow us to better see the processes taking place in Turkey's domestic political life, the further strategic steps of official Ankara and, in general, the geostrategic importance of that country at the regional and global levels.

## **RA: POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES**

In this context, we consider it important to make some observations regarding RA–Turkey relations. The settlement of the mentioned relations, as before, will be connected with the resolution of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, continuing the political discourse on the preconditions. At the same time, it can be assumed that Ankara will also present other preconditions to Yerevan (provision of the so-called "Zangezur Corridor", renunciation of Artsakh and disclaimer from the recognition of the Armenian Genocide, etc.) and will strive to meet these demands.

As for the security sector, the Armenian expert-analytical and academic community has more than once spoken about the dangers and risks that may appear in the event of the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. In particular, in the case of lifting the blockade of Armenia, the experts single out economic and political expansion, the change in the demographic picture, as well as possible threats to national security, such as Turkey's incitement of terrorist acts and social conflicts in Armenia, as the main challenges from the point of view of the country's national security<sup>6,7</sup>.

It can be assumed that regardless of the results of the elections, external security risks for RA will not decrease whatever political forces lead Turkey, be they

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<sup>6</sup> Pakhlyan A., Aghajanyan S., Vardanyan T., Mikaelyan T., Harutyunyan A. (2022). Opportunities and challenges for the Turkish Lifting of the Blockade of Armenia (in Arm.), "AMBERD" series, 57, p. 132. DOI: 10.52174/978-9939-61-255-3.

<sup>7</sup> Atoyan V., Pakhlyan A., Aghadzhanyan S., Vardanyan T. (2022). Risks and opportunities for the establishment of Armenian-Turkish relations in the context of new regional realities (in Arm.), "Region and the World" (Регион и мир), 13(6), pp. 13-14.

Islamists, nationalists or liberals, the policy towards RA and Armenians will not change. The forms and mechanisms of pressure will change, depending on the situation, both "hard" and "soft power" policies will be implemented.

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