

Choice of the Century: Türkiye at Crossroads

written by Shahin Jafarli Şahin Cəfərli

Türkiye's presidential and parliamentary elections to be held on May 14 will see one of the most important political shifts that have unfolded across the world by the end of 2023. These elections have historical significance and are crossroads in terms of determining the path of development in the second century of Türkiye, which is preparing to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Republic: will Türkiye move toward establishing a laic-secular, democratic and social state governed by the rule of law as enshrined in articles 1 and 2 of its constitution, or, conversely, move from its current model of competitive (selective) authoritarianism to a closed and rigid Islamist autocracy by distancing itself even more from these values and principles? This article explores Türkiye's socio-political landscape on the eve of elections, which will answer this question.

From Table of Six to Nation Alliance

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) under incumbent president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has entered the election campaign with trepidation for the first time in its 20 years in power: opinion polls show a likelihood of political change in the country. For the first time, six opposition parties have united into one bloc: this political bloc, called the Nation Alliance, or simply Alliance, has confirmed its joint presidential candidate to face Erdoğan and his alliance. This candidate is supported not only by the Alliance, but also other political forces.

The Nation Alliance is a political bloc built around the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İYİP), which joined forces in the 2018 parliamentary elections but ran in the presidential elections separately. Ideologically,

this alliance can be considered a mosaic of Türkiye: the main opposition social democratic CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*), nationalist İYİP, the liberal-conservative DEVA (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi*), the conservative Happiness Party (*Saadet Partisi*), the conservative Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*) and the national-conservative Democratic Party (*Demokrat Parti*) are represented in the bloc. Representatives of these parties began [consultations](#) in September 2021, but at that time the aim was not to create an alliance and nominate a single candidate, but rather to identify a common position on the transition to a parliamentary method of government and democratization. The [first leaders' summit](#) took place on 12 February 2022. From that date, the format of the leaders began to be presented in the media as a Table of Six. On 28 February, the six table members of the political parties signed a memorandum of understanding by issuing a joint [declaration](#) for Türkiye's transition into a so-called "Strengthened Parliamentary System." According to the joint manifesto, the current system gives the president overly broad and uncontrollable powers, subordinating to him the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, resulting in authoritarian rule, whereas a strengthened parliamentary system would have democratic, pluralistic governance based on the separation of powers and ensuring rights and freedoms.

Gradually, different commissions were formed as part of the Table of Six – the [Commission](#) for Constitutional and Legal Reform; the [Commission](#) for Institutional Reform; the [Commission](#) for Election Security; the [Commission](#) for Communications and the Working [Group](#) for Fundamental Politics. The 10-point [agreement](#) on "basic principles and goals" at the 29 May leaders' meeting, the 6 June [report](#) on election confidence, and the 13 June [report](#) on institutional reform were publicized. According to the final [statement](#) issued after the meeting on 3 July 2022, the 13th President of Türkiye will be a presidential candidate who advocates a strengthened parliamentary system and democracy," and for the first time,

these parties would nominate a joint presidential candidate. And the final [statement](#) at the end of the regular meeting on 21 August contains more specific words: "From now on too, we want to reiterate that we are determined to continue along this path together with our understanding, which attaches great importance to consultation in all upcoming stages, including the pre-election period, election day and post-election period. Assure our nation that: our joint presidential candidate will be both the 13th President of the Republic of Türkiye and the president of everyone, not just those who vote for the parties gathered around this table."

Obviously, we are witnessing the transformation of the Table of Six not into a short-term political alliance, which over time decided to join forces solely for the sake of systemic change, but into a coalition, which, once in power, claims to govern the country equally, to implement radical reforms in all areas, and to prepare specific documents on this. Usually, in countries with a democratic parliamentary system, the formation of a coalition cabinet becomes a necessity (or obligation) when no party can form a majority on its own based on the election results: after the elections the parties start negotiations on this topic, and if agreement is reached, a government program that reflects the common vision of these parties is developed. The Turkish opposition, having formed a coalition several months before the elections, [has decided](#) to prepare in advance the program of the government it would create after the elections and to make it public as a common commitment in the election campaign. On 28 November, a [draft](#) of constitutional amendments under the slogan "Now is the time for democracy" was made public. The draft of 84 articles regulating the transition to a parliamentary method of government contains proposals ensuring the separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary and the expansion of civil rights and freedoms. At their 5 January 2023 [meeting](#), the six opposition leaders agreed to develop options for cooperation in the parliamentary elections as well and to get

a constitutional majority in the Great National Assembly. On 26 January 2023, after its 11th meeting, the Table of Six officially [defined](#) itself as the “Nation Alliance” for the first time, and shared [its Common Policies Memorandum of Understanding](#) with the public on 30 January. It is a seminal document consisting of 9 sections, 75 subheadings, 2.300 pledges, and is essentially a government program.

Collapsing-merging opposition and Gandhi Kemal

The Table of Six or Nation Alliance has been publicly introduced to the people as a political bloc formed not around one person, but on the basis of values and principles, unlike its rival, the People’s Alliance. The unification of 6 political parties with different ideologies and programs in order to ensure the transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic parliamentary system and to reconcile their positions through mutual compromise is an indicator of political culture, an unprecedented phenomenon in Turkish political history. In the history of Turkish democracy there are many examples of temporary alliances and coalition governments, but for the first time before the elections, parties reached a grand political consensus that goes beyond an electoral alliance, suggesting a radical reconstruction and democratization of the system as a whole. If their objectives are achieved, there is no doubt that this experience will be studied not only in Türkiye, but also in Western universities and research centers.

However, it has not been easy for the Turkish opposition to maintain this alliance. At the 2 March meeting, before which the alliance had seen no great conflicts, to discuss the Nation Alliance’s candidate, a crisis erupted when İYİP leader Meral Akşener disagreed with CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s candidacy. The opposition, as one Turkish columnist [put](#) it, acted “European” when drafting important texts, such as the constitutional amendment, the government program, and Oriental when it came to the name of the candidate. However, the crisis

did not last long, and at the 6 March meeting Akşener that Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu should be the joint nominee of the Nation Alliance, and a road map for the transition to a parliamentary system was approved. According to the roadmap, if Kılıçdaroğlu wins the presidential election, the 5 party leaders—Meral Akşener, Ali Babacan, Ahmed Davudoglu, Temel Karamolloğlu, Gültekin Uysal—as well as CHP Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and CHP Ankara Mayor Mansur Yavaş, will be appointed as vice-presidents during the transition period.

The political career of former accountant Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who will turn 75 this year, can be compared to a runner who starts the first kilometers of a marathon race slowly, accelerates in the last legs and finishes in first place. Kılıçdaroğlu, who was elected CHP leader in 2010, was unable to create much difference in Turkish politics until the 2019 municipal elections: before him, CHP was the second largest party in the elections after AKP, and the same situation persisted during his tenure. For this reason, Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership was contested both within the party and in the media and public. Starting with the [Justice March](#) in June 2017, which was comparable to the famous Salt March, the major nonviolent protest action in India led by Mohandas Mahatma Gandhi in March-April 1930, Kılıçdaroğlu seems to have been on an upward trend. The Justice March was in protest against the widespread repression after the attempted military coup in June 2016, resolutions to govern the country by executive order under a state of emergency, restrictions on human rights and freedoms and the 25-year imprisonment of, journalist Enis Barbaroğlu, a CHP deputy. Over 25 days, the marchers walked 420 km from Ankara to Istanbul, where Kılıçdaroğlu ended the march with a big [rally](#).

Kılıçdaroğlu's strategy for the 2019 municipal elections brought serious success to the party. The CHP nominated a joint candidate together with the İYİP in many major cities, but also garnered unofficial support from HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi), the party with the strongest support from

the Kurds, Türkiye's largest ethnic minority. As a result, 25 years later, CHP won elections in 11 major cities, including the capital Ankara and Istanbul. 45% of Türkiye's population lives in these cities, and 59% of the country's GDP is produced in these cities. As a result of the 2019 municipal elections, CHP and the Nation Alliance actually had a voice in local government.

Kılıçdaroğlu has enlisted HDP's support in both the municipal elections and the 14 May presidential elections without forming an official alliance with this party or making specific commitments to it. HDP and the Labor and Freedom Union formed by it, which is supported by about 10% of the vote in Türkiye, will support Kılıçdaroğlu without participating in the presidential elections with its candidate. Kılıçdaroğlu, who played an important role in building an opposition alliance against authoritarianism, has proven through his political actions that he has strategic intelligence, transforming himself from a politician whose leadership qualities are challenged into a unifying figure.

Among Kılıçdaroğlu's other successes, we can point to his transformation of the CHP. Before Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP was considered the party of the secular elitist minority and representative of the Kemalist system in politics in Türkiye. Even when the CHP was not in power, it was blamed and held electorally responsible for the negative aspects of Türkiye's Kemalist state. Kılıçdaroğlu distanced the party from the concept of extreme étatist politics, bringing it closer to the line of popularism, similar to that during Bülent Ecevit's leadership in 1972-79. Under Kılıçdaroğlu, it would be wrong to say that the CHP abandoned the policies that envisioned a radical transformation of Turkish society in line with Atatürk's principles and reforms (*Atatürk ilke ve inkılapları*). In laic-secular circles close to CHP, there are those who criticize Kılıçdaroğlu's more moderate approach to Kemalism's insistent secularism, even those who distance themselves from CHP for this reason. But without this

approach, it would have been more difficult for Kılıçdaroğlu to open the party to other voters. Likewise, without these changes, he could not have created a strong alternative to the regime together with the 5 right-wing parties for the upcoming election.

Kılıçdaroğlu had another obstacle to overcome: Türkiye's sectarian divisions. The CHP leader's religious affiliation is Alevi, not Hanafi Sunni, the dominant Islamic sect in Türkiye. Since Ottoman times, from the beginning of the 16th century to the establishment of the republic, Anatolian Alevis had been subjected to persecution marked by attempts at forced assimilation. Although persecution ceased with the establishment of the secular republic, which brought the principle of equal citizenship, stereotypes about Alawism did not disappear, hidden discrimination continued and [continues](#) today. Although many of those who objected to Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy tried to justify it for various reasons, there were those who [acknowledged](#) that his religious affiliation played a role. But Kılıçdaroğlu also managed to overcome these stereotypes and become a joint presidential candidate from a broad opposition alliance.

Strong and weak Erdoğan

For Erdoğan's ruling AKP, which has held power since 2002, the 14 May elections will be a tough test. The escalating challenges of the country present more of a political danger than the united opposition. In the 24 June 2018 presidential election, Erdoğan won in the first round with 52,6 percent of the vote. He garnered support from the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the second mainstream party within the People's Alliance. The AKP and the MHP together, however, won a majority in the Grand National Assembly: the AKP won 42,6% of the vote in parliamentary polls, while the MHP garnered 11,1% of the vote. Since then, the socio-economic situation and the welfare level of the population in Türkiye have gone downhill. High inflation, a sharp rise in prices on basic necessities

and everyday goods and a significant decrease in the purchasing power of the national currency are the main problems that worries the population.

For comparison, in June during the 2018 election period, the annual inflation rate was 15,39%, [data](#) from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) showed. On the last working day of the election week (22 June 2018), 1 U.S. dollar [was worth](#) 4,7370 TL and 1 euro 5,5100 TL. According to official data for February 2023, the annual inflation rate was 55,18%, but independent experts at Inflation Research Group, ENAG, say Türkiye's actual annual inflation for December [was](#) 82,81%. Currently, one dollar can be bought for more than 19 TL, and 1 euro for more than 20,3 TL. In February, the budget [deficit](#) totaled 170,6 billion TL, and the short-term public [debt](#) to be repaid in the next year or less amounted to 196 billion dollars. These are very high figures. The 6 February 2023 earthquake that caused devastation in 11 provinces has also caused additional problems. The earthquake and its aftershocks caused an estimated \$103,6 billion in damages across the country, according to a [report](#) prepared by the Strategy and Budget Department of the Presidential Office.

Socioeconomic factors will undoubtedly influence voting behavior. But that does not mean that President Erdoğan and the alliance supporting him do not stand a chance. The 69-year-old Erdoğan is far from his former popularity, yet he is an experienced political engineer who has concentrated all power in his hands and managed to recruit a critical mass of supporters. Over time, an emotional attachment develops between this type of charismatic leader and his active supporters, and the quick changes in the political landscape do not deter these masses from their leader. It is for this reason that, although Erdoğan and his party have experienced some drop in their ratings due to socioeconomic problems in the country, Erdoğan has not lost substantial support. As in the last election campaign, the AKP is going into the elections in alliance with two conservative nationalist

parties—the Nationalist Movement (MHP) and the Great Unity Party (BBP). *The New Welfare Party* of Fatih Erbakan, the son of Necmettin Erbakan (the famous leader of Turkish Islamists, the founder of the ideological concept of *Milli Görüş* or *National Outlook*, and former Turkish prime minister), joined the People's Alliance at the last minute. The [Free Cause Party](#) (HÜDA-PAR), which mainly draws support from Shariah supporters of Kurdish background in Türkiye's southeastern and eastern regions as well as many religious [sects](#), have also expressed support for Erdoğan. The candidates of HÜDA-PAR were included in the AKP lists in the parliamentary elections.

Thus, the Nation Alliance, consisting of 5 right-wing and 1 left-wing social-democratic parties, is facing the ultra-conservative, radical right-wing People's Alliance.

Other candidates

The fight for the presidency will be between Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu, but there are other candidates for president: Muharrem İnce and Sinan Oğan.

İnce, 59, ran in the 2018 election as the CHP candidate and received 30,6 percent of the vote. Having started the fight for CHP's leadership after the elections, İnce failed to achieve this goal. After announcing his resignation from CHP and starting his own political project, the politician established the [Homeland](#) Party (Memleket Partisi). He claimed CHP deviated from the principles of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and abandoned its original values. İnce and his party is expected to get the votes of CHP members and supporters who show a similar prudence, which could lower the percentage of votes for both Kılıçdaroğlu and CHP. İnce believes that he will get votes not only from CHP, but also from the AKP, and launched the campaign with [28%](#) of the vote at the start. He is especially popular among *Generation Z* (young adults aged 18-25 years old), who are active in social networks. Six million [young adults](#) for the first time will vote in the election, and

their choice will be one of the factors influencing the results.

Oğan, 56, is a former MHP deputy, and although he also vied for leadership in the party, he was [expelled](#) from the MHP as a result of his decision to contest the leadership. Oğan, who was nominated for president by ATA Alliance, formed by a group of marginal nationalist parties and led by the Victory Party (*Zafer Partisi*), [hopes](#) to advance to the 2nd round with the support of nationalist voters who do not want to vote for either the People's or Nation alliances.

However, Turkish society is largely polarized around the two large alliances. Voters are more likely to concentrate around these polarizations by the end of the election campaign, so that their votes don't get *wasted*.

Conclusion

In the introductory part of the article, we noted that Türkiye will mark the 100-year anniversary of its foundation later this year. At the end of this first century, Türkiye has come to a crossroads. The 14 May 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections have ceased to be routine elections and have become a de facto referendum on the country's immediate future:

1. Democratic parliamentary system or autocratic institution of the presidency?
2. Laic-secular republic, or semi-theocratic hybrid regime?
3. Euro-Atlanticism or Eurasianism?

Türkiye's citizens ballots will also reveal answers to these important questions. These answers will have an important impact not only on Türkiye's fate, but also on regional and global geopolitics.