



**Dimensions**  
for Strategic Studies

**Analytical Report**



## **Turkey's post-election political scene Future Challenges**

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## Introduction

The recent presidential and legislative elections in Turkey received unprecedented regional and international attention for many reasons, foremost of which was that it was a referendum on the continuation of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in power on the one hand and on the presidential system that began in 2018 on the other. In addition, there are the circumstances and challenges that overshadowed the electoral scene, foremost of which was the economy and the earthquake, as well as the new system of alliances that enhanced the opposition's chances of winning the rule of the country for the first time in two decades.

Contrary to many predictions made by the majority of polling centers and observers, the ruling public alliance led by Erdogan maintained the majority of seats in parliament, and then Erdogan won an additional presidential term in the run-off. This double victory in the presidency and parliament means that there has been no major change in the system of government in the country. Moreover, the coming phase- from a certain perspective- will be a continuation of the pre-election era. However, this does not mean that there are not going to be changes at all. Elections, alliances, results, IMF messages, and other factors are triggering the expectation of some changes in the domestic political landscape on the one hand, and Ankara's foreign policy on the other.

## First: The Inside Track

### A. Pre-election polarization:

There was a state of severe political polarization in Turkey, whose features began to transpire since the referendum on the presidential system in 2017. Such a polarization intensified after the issuance of the electoral alliances law with parliamentary legislation ; as the new legislation included a clause that considered that all members of the coalition exceed the electoral threshold if one of the coalition parties succeeded in achieving the threshold<sup>(1)</sup>.

In the 2018 presidential and legislative elections, four opposition parties - the Republican People's Party, the Good People's Party, the Happiness Party, and the Democratic Party - formed the People's Alliance to challenge the People's Alliance which is made up of the Justice and Development Party and the Nationalist Movement Party.

Although electoral alliances are usually contextual and temporary, polarization around the presidential system has given the alliances continuity and contributed to their expansion; especially as the opposition has had an unprecedented opportunity to compete with Erdogan, and his Justice and Development<sup>(2)</sup>.

Later, the Future Party headed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, and Democracy and Progress headed by Ali Babacan, joined the Quadruple Alliance. The two parties emerged from the womb of Justice and Development. They turned the alliance into a "Six-Party Table" that raised the slogan of bringing the country back to the parliamentary system<sup>(3)</sup>.

(1) Turkey's ruling coalition submits new election bill to parliament These are its most prominent articles, Al- 'Arabi al-Jadid, 14 March 2023, <https://bit.ly/3paSyYE>

(2) Saeed al-Hajj, Turkish Elections: Hot Campaigns and Close Opportunities, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 10 May 2023, (accessed: 7 June 2023): <https://rb.gy/5iefp>

(3) Siyasi parti liderleri paylaştı! Dikkat çeken 6'lı masa videosu. Sâzcu, 27 Mayıs 2022. <https://cutt.us/FZ9Z8>



Thus, ideology is no longer the focus of polarization, as the six-party table included parties with multiple political and ideological backgrounds like the secular, nationalist, Islamist, conservative and liberal. According to what is apparent, the political system in the country was the focus of polarization, but in practice this meant polarization around Erdogan and the continuation of his rule<sup>(4)</sup>.

What added to the importance and sensitivity of the recent elections are the conditions under which they were held; as they were largely favorable to the opposition. The economic file, the most important on the electoral table, witnessed a decline in the rise in inflation, high prices and the decline in the value of the Turkish lira. Furthermore; the Syrians in Turkey turned into an electoral card in the hands of the opposition<sup>(5)</sup>, which raised the slogan of returning them to Syria within two years of its coming to power<sup>(6)</sup>. In addition to that there was the adoption of political parties speech against them. This increased pressure on the ruling party and prompted it to respond with internal measures to frame the foreign presence in Turkey, as well as announcing a voluntary return project for one million Syrians<sup>(7)</sup>.

Finally, the devastating earthquake, with its heavy human, economic and social impact, seemed a challenge that could have a significant political price for Erdogan, and the Justice and Development Party. It contributed to raising the level of the opposition's discourse and holding the government responsible for what happened. However, the government faced these challenges with several measures to withdraw the rug from under the feet of the opposition, such as increasing government spending on the various segments of Turkish society and providing financial assistance to those affected by the earthquake<sup>(8)</sup>, in addition to opening channels of communication with the Syrian regime and openly announcing that its aim is to facilitate the return of refugees, which contributed to the decline in the strength of these cards in the hands of the opposition and reduce their impact on the mood of voters<sup>(9)</sup>.

(4) Saeed al-Hajj, Turkish Elections: Alliances of Necessity in a Decisive Confrontation, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 1 May 2023, (accessed 7 June 2023): <https://rb.gy/4bj5q>

(5) Suriyelilerin ve ekonominin Türkiye seçimlerine etkisi. Independent Türkçe. 20 Temmuz 2021. <https://cutt.us/vSkBb>

(6) Kılıçdaroğlu: 2 yıl içinde Suriyeli kardeşlerimizi ülkelerine uğurlayacağız. TRT Haber. 1 Mayıs 2023. <https://cutt.us/fw6nO>

(7) Erdogan: We are preparing a project to allow the voluntary return of one million Syrians, Anadolu Agency, May 2022 ,3, (date of entry: June 2023 ,7): <https://bit.ly/3UI5EYx>

(8) Erdoğan: Konutlarda doğalgaz bir ay boyunca ücretsiz olacak Kaynak: Erdoğan: Konutlarda doğalgaz bir ay boyunca ücretsiz olacak. Enerji Günlüğü. 20 Nisan 2023. <https://cutt.us/Ql25G>

(9) Cavusoglu: We want to return Syrians safely to regime areas as well, Anadolu Agency, May 2023 ,27, <https://cutt.us/gX1yP>

## B- Consequences of the elections on the internal political scene:

Given the political scene before the elections, and then the results of both the presidential elections and the composition of the parliament, the latter will have several consequences in the internal political equations, the most important of which are:

- **The end of the parliamentary system project:** The change of the political system promised by the opposition required it to win a two-thirds majority of the parliament to pass directly or at least 60% of its seats (360 deputies) to present the change to a popular referendum. The result of the parliament implied a new referendum in favor of the presidential system, and the ruling coalition's maintenance of the majority of parliament means that the idea will not be put forward for the next five years at the minimum<sup>(10)</sup>.
- **The future of Kılıçdaroğlu:** The loss of elections in Turkey rarely has direct political consequences within the parties, but the large stakes that accompanied the recent elections made it possible this time, as the head of the Republican People's Party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, added an additional defeat to his record of defeats against Erdogan and the Justice and Development party. This is despite the fact that he achieved an unprecedented result for any opposition. The most important thing is that the man was imposing his candidacy for the presidency on his party and the Six-Party Table alliance despite the opposition of important parties, especially the Good Party, the second in the alliance<sup>(11)</sup>.  
As a result of that, there were voices calling for his resignation from the presidency of the party and the need to change all its leadership. That was done through demonstrations of supporters of the party in front of its headquarters the night the results were announced; and then by some politicians, led by the mayor of Greater Istanbul Akram Imamoglu, who promised change, and announced his "readiness to assume his responsibilities" in this regard<sup>(12)</sup>.

(10) Results of the Turkish general elections in 2023, Turkish newspaper Yeni Şafak, 17 May 2023, <https://cutt.us/UxzVc>

(11) Meral Akşener 6'lı masadan kalktı: 'Dayatmaya boyun eğmeyeceğiz. Ntv. 3MARS2023. <https://cutt.us/amtCA>

(12) Ekrem İmamoğlu: Değişimi en hızlı şekilde talep eder durumdayım. Haberturk. 7HAZİRAN2023 <https://cutt.us/m6TxF>



Replacing the head of a party through elections is not an easy task in Turkey, as the parties law gives the president wide powers, but the challenge faced by Kılıçdaroğlu this time is unprecedented and will witness great competition at the next general conference of his party.

● **The future of the opposition People's Alliance:** Electoral alliances in Turkey are usually ad hoc and temporary, but the state of polarization and the proximity of municipal elections are supposed to push for the cohesion and continuation of the six-party table. Despite that, this formula does not seem to be able to continue the same way; because of the turmoil within the Republican peoples party, the largest among them; the loss of its most prominent motive, which is the restoration of the parliamentary system; and the state of blame between its parties for the loss after the results were out.

The leaders of the six parties came out after the elections with separate press conferences presenting separate party evaluations and some inter-coalition alliances within the coalition; especially between the conservative parties that presented a joint candidate for the presidency of the parliament without coordination with the CHP. All these are clear signs of the breakup of the coalition in practice; although this has not been officially announced<sup>(13)</sup>.

● **Justice and Development:** The ruling party came first in the last elections again, but with a decline of 7 points from the previous elections, which also witnessed a decline of more than 7 points from the previous one, and therefore we are facing a protest vote that the party will have to re-evaluate and identify its causes and try to address them, otherwise the decline is likely to continue and worsen<sup>(14)</sup>.

## C. Internal Future Challenges

The next phase poses several challenges for the Turkish president, his ruling party and Turkey in general. In the foreseeable future, the economy will remain the most prominent challenge facing the next government.

(13) Meclis başkanlığı için 7 isim yarışacak! İşte aday olan isimler. Yeni Şafak. 7 Haziran 2023. <https://cutt.us/hMs3h>

(14) Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 21 May 2023, (accessed 7 June 2023): <https://rb.gy/9yzat>

Erdogan realizes that one of the most important reasons for the decline of the Justice and Development party in the recent elections and its inability to resolve the electoral race from the first round is the economic situation. Therefore, he made clear promises during the election campaign in this regard. He then chose former minister Mohammed Simsek, who is reputable internally and externally to lead the economy. It is clear from the minister's first statements that he obtained a mandate from the president to implement his vision; or he might have reached a compromise with him. He acknowledges publicly, however, the difficulty of his mission and his need for time<sup>(15)</sup>.

The messages delivered by the votes and evaluation of the results may force Erdogan to reshape the leadership bodies of his party in the framework of holding those responsible accountable for those results, as well as preparations for the upcoming municipal elections, which increases the possibility of reshaping the bodies, selecting some party figures for positions in parliament, government and the presidency. Implementing the aforementioned is considered one of the future challenges.

During the coming year, and in March in particular, the municipal elections represent an important challenge for the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which lost the presidency of important and symbolic municipalities, especially Ankara and Istanbul, during the 2019 elections. The task will not be easy in light of the economic conditions referred to, as well as Kılıçdaroğlu's winning over Erdogan - with the votes of opposition alliances - in a number of major cities, especially Istanbul and Ankara again<sup>(16)</sup>.

In the long run, the need to draft a new civil constitution for the country remains a constant challenge that all parties agree on its necessity but differ on its details. The People's Alliance does not have a majority to approve a new constitution or present it to a popular referendum, but it can rely on the support of some opposition parties, especially the deputies of conservative parties. If this is agreed upon, constitutional amendments can be drafted, including reforming the presidential and social system. Finally, the recent elections have raised the question of Erdogan's succession more clearly and substantially; as this is his last constitutional presidential term, and his party will go into the 2028 elections without him for the first time; therefore, it is an unprecedented challenge. The first signs indicate the presence of former intelligence chief Hakan Fidan as a potential candidate after his appearance on the political scene at the head of Turkish diplomacy, but the scene is not yet fully clear.

(15) Uzmanlar yorumladı: Türk ekonomisi için gereklerle yüzleşme zamanı. Diken.31 MAİS2023.  
<https://cutt.us/ikowz>

(16) The results of the second round of the Turkish presidential elections show the progress of the opposition candidate over Erdogan in Ankara and Istanbul, Yeni Shafak, 28 May 2023,  
<https://cutt.us/umiW1>



## Second: Foreign Policy

### A. Overview of Foreign Policy Variables

Turkish foreign policy has undergone several changes in the period of AK rule, as the idea of joining the European Union prevailed in the first years; then a proactive foreign policy engaged in the issues of the region with the Arab revolutions. That was followed by a shift to a “local national” policy since 2015<sup>(17)</sup>.

Several challenges and internal and external problems, culminating in the failed coup attempt in 2016, have been behind important changes in Turkish foreign policy recently. Such policies have become more dependent on the coarse force of military operations and bases outside the country and the idea of maximizing self-power such as the development of the defence industry<sup>(18)</sup>.

In 2016, Turkey raised the slogan "increasing the number of friends and reducing the number of foes<sup>(19)</sup>," but the regional parties delayed their response to the Turkish trends until the last two years, driven by the trends of the new US administration, which pushed the regional powers to converge and search for solutions to their problems, in addition to a number of regional challenges and internal entitlements. The past two years have witnessed an improvement in Turkey's relations with a number of forces that stood on opposite sides during the past decade, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Israel, in addition to some steps to communicate with the Syrian regime<sup>(20)</sup>.

(17) AKP and the Codes of Ideological Transformation, Center for Political, Economic and Social Studies (Sita), March 2018, 19, <https://bit.ly/3wUZ6cN>

(18) Türkiye'nin Yurt Dışındaki Üsleri ve Askeri Varlığı. KÜRESEL SİYASET Merkezi. 9 Mayıs, 2021. <https://cutt.us/rJ1aj>

(19) Why Turkey Changed its Policy in the Middle East, Free, August 2016, 26, (accessed: June 2023, 7): <https://arbne.ws/3gdEUgu>

(20) Motives for the Change of Turkish Foreign Policy Towards Calm, Future Center, 25 March 2023, <https://cutt.us/6mxsM>

## B. Consequences of elections on foreign

Foreign policy was one of the most important contentious issues between Erdogan and the opposition, as the latter repeatedly criticized the tension in Turkey's relations with its surroundings and some world powers, so the government's steps to improve its regional relations can be considered within the policy of nullifying the Opposition pretext.

The opposition's victory would have meant a significant change in some foreign policy trajectories, especially regarding the relationship with the West and the Syrian file. Erdogan's victory, and that of his coalition's in parliament, however, meant to a large extent a continuation of previous policies<sup>(21)</sup>.

Erdogan chose the slogan "Century of Turkey" for his election campaign. He focused on this idea in his inaugural speech to dozens of officials from regional and international countries. His appointment of Hakan Fidan as Foreign Minister is in the direction of preserving previous policies, as the man is experienced in the foreign policy of his country and was one of its makers during the past years. Fidan directly supervised the development of his country's relations with a number of countries in the region in addition to his active participation in several files and issues, especially Libya and Syria.

### Continuity in foreign policy will be present in two main tracks:

- The pacification and development of relations with the countries of the region was not an electoral tactic that ends with holding these elections. It is rather a conviction of the decision-maker of its necessity and usefulness, and the priority of the economy in the internal scene refers to the need for pacification, cooperation and easing tension in relations to attract foreign investments.
- There is the relative balance between Russia and the West. Turkey is still a member of NATO and the second military force<sup>(22)</sup> in it; and the files of disagreement and competition with Russia still exist. Ankara; however, has sought over the past years to balance a policy to a large extent between them, especially with the "Russian-Ukrainian" war to avoid slipping into direct conflict<sup>(23)</sup>.

(21) The Possible Impact of the Presidential Elections on Turkish Foreign Policy, Researcher Mehmet Raqiboğlu/ABAAD Center for Strategic Studies, 9 May 2023, <https://cutt.us/sMoSt>

(22) Turkey sends special forces battalion to Kosovo, TRT Arabi, 3 June 2023, <https://cutt.us/aNlfU>

(23) Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'dan açıklamalar. Haberturk. 12MAYIS2023. <https://cutt.us/Oxonr>



Despite Western pressure in general and American pressure in particular, Ankara has maintained a distinct stance on NATO; especially in terms of not adopting economic sanctions on Russia and the relationship with Putin and the file of Sweden's membership in NATO.

### C. Future Challenges

In the short run, the Russian-Ukrainian war remains a real challenge for Turkish foreign policy, not only in terms of attempts to mediate between the two sides - although the chances are less likely than before - but also in terms of the desire to avoid being dragged to it. Field and political developments indicate the depth and complexity of the war and the possibility of its expansion, which increases Western pressure on Ankara to change its position to a more tough one in the face of Moscow.

In tandem, Turkey will soon have to decide on Sweden's membership of NATO after it agreed in March to Finland's membership, and in light of Western statements that Stockholm has fulfilled its obligations<sup>(24)</sup>. One of the priorities of the new Turkish foreign minister will be to establish a state of calm and cooperation with regional powers, including exchanging ambassadors with Egypt<sup>(25)</sup>, attracting investments from Gulf countries, and seeking to break up the Greek-led coalition in the eastern Mediterranean.

In the long run, the Syrian file surfaces again with new complexities related to the path of rapprochement with the regime, with its entitlements related to the Syrian north and the Turkish military presence there. One of the regime's conditions for rapprochement with Turkey is the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Syrian territory and disengagement from the Syrian armed opposition; while Turkey requires cooperation in combating the PKK and its Syrian extensions and securing the return of refugees and the success of the political process. The difficulty of the requirements on both sides and the development of the steps between them make it likely that these conditions will turn into negotiating files that may not prevent the transition to subsequent steps after reaching compromises.

(24) Stoltenberg to Erdogan: Sweden 'met its obligations' to join NATO, Al Jazeera Mubasher, 4 June 2023 <https://rb.gy/60b90>

(25) Erdogan and Sisi agree to upgrade diplomatic relations and exchange ambassadors, France 24, May 30, 2023 <https://rb.gy/zi0d4>

Relations with the United States also remain a key challenge for Turkish foreign policy. The disagreement between the two sides, foremost of which is Washington's support for the Syrian Democratic Forces and the lack of cooperation in the Gulen group's file, the armament file and the "Turkish-Russian" rapprochement, are not solvable soon. Many of these issues are linked to their respective perceptions of national security matters. However; it is indispensable to try to develop understanding and alleviate the intensity of disputes. This may require negotiation to try to conclude an integrated deal to solve all outstanding problems or separate the tracks from each other and resolve as many of them as possible in the long term. Turkey's expected approval of Sweden's accession to NATO may be a good entry point for that in this context.

Finally, the path of calm and cooperation in the region may open the door to the possibility of cooperation in many files, foremost of which is the Libyan file, where Turkish-Egyptian cooperation can prepare the ground for a possible, sustainable and acceptable solution from various parties, as indicated by the field and military developments in Libya after the steps of rapprochement between Ankara and Cairo.



# Conclusion

The recent Turkish elections did not bear anything new at the election results level, as they renewed the legitimacy of the Turkish president and the majority of his ruling coalition in parliament, but the bets that accompanied them and the intensity of polarization and electoral files as well as - and most importantly - the results of the detailed elections will have direct and indirect impacts on Turkey internally and externally.

Turkey has completed the toughest election for the president and his party since the first election in 2002. The country has not completely emerged from the election atmosphere, as the upcoming municipal elections in March 2024 are reflected in most statements and policies in recent weeks. This means that near-term challenges, particularly the internal economic profile, trade cooperation and foreign investment, will be prioritized for their importance in the next municipalities elections, while some longer-term issues will be postponed.



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