



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC
POLICY & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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ERDOGAN'S ENDURING POPULARITY

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A shorter version of this Op-ed in English and in French was originally published by L'Orient le Jour on June 1, 2023.

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This Op-ed is published by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy & International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut and is available on the following website: <http://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi>.

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ERDOGAN'S ENDURING POPULARITY

The Turkish presidential elections have been attracting much international attention and commentary. In its May 8 editorial, the Financial Times called it “a defining election” for Türkiye.¹ The Economist went further to state that the “opposition could sense success against Erdogan.”² Meanwhile, in an editorial in the Washington Post, Asli Aydintasbas, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, was making policy recommendations for the post-Erdogan era.³ Much of the prognoses for the success of the opposition lay in the state of the Turkish economy, which was witnessing its highest inflation rates since the late 1990's, as well as the massive damage caused by the earthquakes in Hatay and ten other provinces in Türkiye's southeastern region earlier this year.⁴

During the first round of elections on May 14, the voter turnout rate of close to 87% was among the highest in recent decades. In the parliamentary elections, the coalition of parties known as the People's Alliance (*Cumhur Ittifaki*), spearheaded by the Justice and Development Part (AKP), and consisting of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and other conservative parties, secured 323 parliamentary seats out of 600. The six-party Nation Alliance (*Millet Ittifaki*) comprised of the center-left Republican People's Party (CHP), the center-right and nationalist IYI Party, as well as parties catering to a smaller voting base obtained 212 seats. In the face of legal proceedings that could see the Peoples' Democracy Movement (HDP) being closed as a political party, the newly established Green Left Party won 61 seats in the Turkish Parliament. These seats represent voters from thirteen eastern

provinces in Türkiye with significant Kurdish populations.⁵ Thus, contrary to the analysis in the international media, the ruling coalition of parties represented by the People's Alliance maintained its majority in the Turkish Parliament.

The presidential race was among the candidates put forward by the three major coalitions – the People's Alliance, the National Alliance, and the nationalist Ancestral Alliance (*Ata Ittifaki*). The incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdogan secured 49.52% of the popular vote, while the opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu secured 44.88%. Consequently, the election was forced into a second round that took place on May 28. The leader of the nationalist Ancestral Alliance, Sinan Ogan, garnered 5.2% of the vote and became a “kingmaker,” to use the parlance of the international media. On May 22, he endorsed the People's Alliance headed by Erdogan for the second round based on security and national stability concerns. Meanwhile, his coalition partner, Umit Ozdag, endorsed the National Alliance in return for measures reversing and restricting immigrant flows to Türkiye.⁶ The turnout rate of 84% was lower in the run-off compared to the first round. Erdogan also won the second-round vote, obtaining around 52.18% compared to over 47.82% by his opponent Kemal Kilicdaroglu. From a purely electoral viewpoint, the lower turnout rate in cities where the opposition held power, as well as among pro-Kurdish voters who were disaffected by the support of the ultra-nationalist Umit Ozdag and his Zafer Party for the opposition bloc, were all viewed as factors having affected the results of the second round.

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/2eb04dd9-05cf-4d91-bb14-a93a8606848c>

²

<https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/06/02/turkey-s-opposition-scents-success-against-erdogan>

³

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/08/if-erdogan-is-defeated-upcoming-elections-west-must-help-turkey-succeed/>

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/10/recep-tayyip-erdogan-faces-real-chance-of-losing-as-turkey-gets-ready-to-vote>

⁵ <https://secim2023.cnnturk.com/14-mayis-2023-secimleri/milletvekili-genel-secim-sonuclari/>

⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/recep-tayyip-erdogan-sinan-ogan-wins-support-from-turkey-election-kingmaker/>

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This clearly begs the question: how did the international commentary fail to correctly anticipate the outcome of these elections? Washington D.C.-based security expert Omer Taspinar argues that it is Erdogan's ability to polarize the public that allowed him to score another win.⁷ By not fielding a candidate of its own and by supporting the candidacy of Kemal Kilicdaroglu, he argues that the actions of the pro-Kurdish party HDP may have helped Erdogan to play the nationalist card. Second, he cites the fact that the opposition may have overplayed the effects of the economic hardships currently facing the electorate. In this respect and despite the inflationary environment, the Turkish economy is not facing a recession and even grew by 5.6% in 2022.

Despite these factors, the international media may have simply missed the enduring popularity of President Erdogan among large masses of voters in Türkiye.

The government has also used many fiscal tools at its disposal to shore up its support. On the eve of elections, the government provided significant increases in the minimum wage, pensions, salaries of public sector employees, rental support for bureaucrats in large cities, and other support measures. In the earthquake stricken southeastern regions, once the government overcame its initial weak response, measures to create new housing, rebuilding hospitals and other infrastructure, and providing basic living support for earthquake victims were rapidly put in place. This led to election victories for the AKP in 10 out of 11 provinces affected by the earthquakes in this region. Other commentators have argued

that the government promoted achievements in technologically advanced sectors such as the national defense industry as a way of generating nationalist sentiment, even as the living standards of ordinary people had fallen.⁸

Despite these factors, the international media may have simply missed the enduring popularity of President Erdogan among large masses of voters in Türkiye. While media control has been cited as an important reason for the continued grip of Erdogan and his party on Turkish polity, some of the international community may have underestimated the improvement in economic and social conditions for large sections of Türkiye's population. During Erdogan's rule between 2002 to date, Türkiye's GDP per capita, measured in purchasing power parity terms (in constant 2017 international dollars) increased from USD 14,839 to USD 31,467, putting Türkiye in the category of middle-income countries. More importantly however, the groups benefiting from Erdogan's rule the most in the past 20 years have been the lower-income and sociologically disadvantaged and hitherto, disenfranchised groups in the vast peripheries of Türkiye's large cities like Istanbul and Ankara and its previously neglected provincial centers in Anatolia. Together with growing incomes nationwide, many social assistance programs were put in place during this period, targeting the elderly, those with chronic illnesses, housewives and women who do not work.⁹ Even Türkiye's infrastructure building program benefitted many small cities and hard-to-reach areas in Anatolia that boast a conservative voter base.

So, what awaits Türkiye in the coming years? One of the key issues will be whether Türkiye continues to adopt the unconventional monetary policies it has been pursuing in recent years. The reasoning behind these

⁷ <https://thearabweekly.com/erdogans-winning-formula>

⁸ <https://asiatimes.com/2023/05/erdogan-stumping-on-a-tech-champ-ticket-in-turkey/>

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https://www.aile.gov.tr/SYGM/PDF/Turkeys_integrated_social_assistance_system.pdf

policies is that lower interest rates will reduce inflation and increase exports by boosting the competitiveness of small firms, thereby helping lower Türkiye's perennial current account deficit problem. However, it has been well documented that the uncertainty induced by an episode of a major decline in the Central Bank of Türkiye's policy rate by December 2021 led to an increase in turbulence in Türkiye's financial markets and a jump in the cost of insuring its sovereign debt.¹⁰ The issue of "hot money" capital flows into emerging economies, possibly instigated by high interest rates, has been blamed in the economics literature for "credit booms and rising output" and hence, inflation. Yet, in Türkiye's case, the decline in interest rates has come at the expense of a large increase in Türkiye's cost of living and a deterioration in the balance sheets of firms that borrow in foreign currency.¹¹ There are now reports of discussions in Erdogan's party on a post-election economic policy to be followed: those who favor a new policy of gradual interest rate hikes and targeted lending, versus those who favor keeping the current program of interest rate cuts to boost exports and economic growth supported by heavily managed debt, foreign-exchange and credit markets.¹²

Taking a more geopolitical perspective, Türkiye is now the 19th largest economy in the world with a GDP of USD 905.5 billion, and a growing political and economic power in the region. It is a member of the G20 and held the G20 presidency in 2015. It has sought to play a mediating role between Russia and Ukraine and pursues its interests

in Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as more far-flung regions such as the Balkans and the Caucasus. Its current and future foreign policy stance has been the topic of much discussion and even questioned by officials of major western countries. That nationalist sentiment is strong among large segments of the Turkish polity came as a surprise to many commentators, hoping for a return of Turkish foreign policy in closer alignment with the stance of major western countries and groupings such as NATO.

Notwithstanding its defeat, the opposition represented by Kemal Kilicdaroglu and his bloc did manage to garner nearly 50% of the popular vote, witnessing vigorous support in all major cities and the most developed areas in Türkiye, as well as in the eastern provinces. Nevertheless, Erdogan's skillful amalgamation of his track record, with a re-imagined form of nationalism – or *post-Kemalism* as French professor of Ottoman history Olivier Bouquet described it – remains a potent force in Turkish politics for large masses of the citizenry who seek a better life without having to give up their national sovereignty or cultural beliefs.¹³ The way in which the dynamics of policy choices and political alignments in Türkiye will evolve in the immediate aftermath of the elections will continue to shape international discourse. Given Türkiye's key role in its region, the election results will also have major implications for regional developments, as well as on Türkiye's relations with major global powers.

¹⁰ See Yeşiltaş, Sevcan; Şen, Anil; Arslan, Beyza; and Altug, Sumru (2022). "A Twitter-based Economic Policy Uncertainty Index: Expert Opinion and Financial Market Dynamics in an Emerging Market Economy," *Frontiers in Physics: Social Physics*10, Article 864207, published May 30 <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fphy.2022.864207/full>

¹¹ Giles, C. (2021). Why Erdogan's unorthodox Turkish economic experiment is not working. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/4a7303dc-9bf6-4a70-8078-13f98edc30b4>

¹² [Exclusive: Erdogan party split on economic plan as Turkey runoff looms, sources say | Reuters](https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-exclusive-erdogan-party-split-economic-plan-turkey-runoff-looms-sources-say-2023-05-24/)

¹³ https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2023/05/24/turkey-elections-erdogan-has-gained-more-ground-through-nationalism-rather-than-islamism_6027814_23.html



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