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A Turkish playbook for fighting populism

While President Erdoğan pursues a fear-based strategy of polarisation, Turkey's opposition parties forged an alliance with a message of reconciliation

As Turkey prepares for national elections in 2023, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is losing ground because of the unfolding economic crisis and opposition parties' effective strategies. Under Erdoğan, Turkey has become a model of populist authoritarianism in the past decade. But six opposition parties recently forged an opposition alliance bound together by a shared democratisation agenda. Their efforts deserve to be added to a growing playbook of tactics for competing against autocratic populists.

Over the years, Erdoğan has channeled raw majoritarianism into authoritarian governance. He positioned himself and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) as the country's sole representative, dismissed the legitimacy of all opposition groups, and imprisoned some of their members. Using its parliamentary majority and referenda, the AKP deepened Turkey's political and social polarisation while consolidating control over the executive.

The party's power grab culminated in 2018, when Erdoğan engineered the transformation of Turkey's parliamentary system into a hyper-presidential system devoid of checks and balances. By abolishing the office of prime minister, rendering the parliament dysfunctional, and transferring key powers to the president, Erdoğan subordinated the opposition's ability to organise and mobilise voters to arbitrary one-man rule.

The opposition's new-found unity

But, despite the government's efforts to intimidate, silence, divide, exclude, and criminalise its opponents, Turkey remains democratically resilient. Recent polls indicate that growing support for opposition parties poses a major threat to Erdoğan, the AKP, and its current coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The

opposition, it seems clear, has learned from its past mistakes.

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Like democratic forces that have ousted populist incumbents elsewhere, Turkey's opposition has recognised the importance of unity. In the country's 2018 national elections, the opposition parties cooperated to win parliamentary seats but fielded their own presidential candidates against Erdoğan. Unsurprisingly, it was a losing strategy.

In 2019, the opposition parties agreed to nominate joint candidates in the local elections. And some parties outside of official opposition coalitions, such as the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), implicitly supported the joint candidates by not contesting some metropolitan constituencies. As a result, the AKP lost control of important cities, including Istanbul and the capital, Ankara, shattering Erdoğan's reputation as an unbeatable leader. Although opposition parties occasionally succumbed to the pitfalls of polarisation, their positive strategy of 'radical love' was successful.

A democratic post-election vision

And now Erdoğan faces an unintended consequence of his establishment of a presidential political system. Winning national elections now requires securing 50 per cent-plus-one of the vote, and Erdoğan can no longer count on a fragmented and divided opposition, which has finally realised that cooperation rather than competition is the key to defeating him.

This cooperation has evolved into a strong alliance since the 2019 local elections. Six opposition parties – the secularist Republican People's Party (CHP), the Good Party (which broke away from the MHP), the Islamist Felicity Party, the right-wing Democratic Party (DP), and two AKP offshoots, the Democracy and Progress Party and the Future Party – put aside their differences and began to work together. Unlike in 2018, they plan to nominate a joint presidential candidate and, if they win the election, to ensure a democratic transition by implementing a new parliamentary system with strong checks and balances.

While Erdoğan attempts to instil fear and persuade his supporters that 'if I lose, you will lose,' the

This marks the first time in Turkish history that opposition parties representing diverse sociopolitical interests and ideologies have presented a collective post-election vision – a further indication of the emergence of an

opposition aims to send a very different message.

inclusive, convincing, and effective narrative against the Erdoğan government's polarising policies. In addition, leftist parties are coming together to launch another electoral alliance led by the HDP.

While Erdoğan attempts to instil fear and persuade his supporters that 'if I lose, you will lose,' the opposition aims to send a very different message. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP leader who could be the opposition's joint presidential candidate, recently said that, if the opposition comes to power, he would pursue 'reconciliation' (*helalleşme*) for all people and groups who have suffered from state violence, repression, and exclusion. Of course, the opposition's ability to promote inclusivity without getting into a polarising fight with Erdoğan will face its sternest test in the immediate run-up to the vote.

Bread-and-butter issues

With Turkey's clientelist economy fuelling extremely high annual inflation (the official rate is currently at 80 per cent) and rising inequality, the opposition has focused on bread-and-butter issues instead of the identity politics favored by Erdoğan. By proposing convincing solutions to everyday concerns, the opposition is forcing Erdoğan to adopt some of their proposals, such as raising the minimum wage and cancelling interest on student loans.

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The opposition's experience of running major cities and meeting people's daily needs despite the central government's restrictions has proved that it is capable of governing the country. (Erdoğan, like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has stripped local governments of funding and powers in an attempt to undermine opposition rule.) Recent polls show that Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara, respectively, have emerged as potentially viable rivals to Erdoğan in the presidential election, alongside Kılıçdaroğlu.

The strong alliance and a positive campaign forged by Turkey's opposition parties suggests that Erdoğan's strategy of polarisation and division may no longer work. If Turkey's democratic forces defeat Erdoğan next year, like-minded parties seeking to unseat populist autocrats elsewhere will certainly register how they did it.

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