DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 12.05.2023 | Antonia Tilly

Countdown to Turkey's fateful elections

In Turkey, President Erdoğan is under pressure, polls see challenger Kılıçdaroğlu ahead. An onion could be the deciding factor

Elections will be held in Turkey on Sunday. Party stalls line the central squares in Istanbul, party pennants flutter in the wind and campaign slogans blast from the loudspeakers. Nevertheless, the mood ahead of the elections is low. The aftermath of the devastating earthquakes continues to weigh heavily on the people. And the tension is great: for many Turkish people, the elections on 14 May are a fateful choice for the future of their country.

The two presidential candidates, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Justice and Development Party, AKP) and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (Republican People's Party, CHP), show how different the possible paths to the future look, with their election campaigns being as fundamentally opposed as the two candidates themselves.

A candidate stand-off

President Erdoğan relies on impressive scenery and Turkish national pride. In April, he presented the first Turkish aircraft carrier. Together with Russian President Putin, he virtually opened the first Turkish nuclear power plant — built and operated with Russian support. And just in time for the election campaign kick-off, the first Turkish electric car rolls off the production line. With all this, Erdoğan is staging his vision of modernisation, prosperity and national greatness. As the incumbent, he can also score points with election gifts: in May, natural gas will be free for all households, the retirement age has been lowered and the minimum wage has been raised.

The closer the elections get, the more the experienced campaigner Erdoğan also attacks his opponents. Again and again, he places the six-party opposition alliance (The Nation Alliance) and its candidate Kılıçdaroğlu on a par with terrorist organisations. At a large rally in

Istanbul, Erdoğan announced in front of hundreds of thousands of people that the opposition alliance is dependent on the PKK (The Kurdistan Workers' Party), and he called Kılıçdaroğlu a 'drunkard'. He thereby relies on the tried and tested strategy of division and polarisation by playing identities off against each other and stoking fears.

While Erdoğan strongly tailors his election campaign to himself as a person and leader, Kılıçdaroğlu appears in his campaign video in line with the leaders of the six parties of his opposition alliance.

The man who is standing up to him runs his most successful election campaigns from the kitchen table – with an onion in his hand. In a video taken in his built-in kitchen, opposition candidate Kılıçdaroğlu uses the example of the price of onions to denounce inflation, which has made food in particular, more expensive in Turkey. In a matter-of-fact conversational tone, the former tax official addresses the material concerns of the people of Turkey: the price of food, the emigration of the young, qualified people abroad and the struggling economy. Another video in which he professes his Alevi faith has been viewed millions of times. It is a symbol for overcoming the social division along religious and cultural identities, something Kılıçdaroğlu strives for in his policy of reconciliation (*Helalleşme*).

While Erdoğan strongly tailors his election campaign to himself as a person and leader ('Right time, right man' is his election slogan), Kılıçdaroğlu appears in his campaign video in line with the leaders of the six parties of his opposition alliance. On many election posters, he is pictured together with the two mayors of Istanbul and Ankara, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, who were also considered promising candidates for the presidency. This demonstrated cohesion is an important signal: as recently as April, the six-party alliance threatened to fail when the second largest *İyi* party briefly withdrew from the alliance, initially refusing to support Kılıçdaroğlu as a candidate.

Since then, however, the six-party alliance has presented itself as a united front. Kılıçdaroğlu is considered the architect of the alliance; as leader of the largest opposition party, the CHP, he has worked continuously to build and expand it. The idea behind the coalition: to win the elections with a broad, democratic alliance and to return from a one-man presidential system to a strengthened parliamentary system. The alliance itself is broad-based and unites not only the social-democratic Kemalist CHP but also nationalist parties, including two AKP split-offs.

Whether the religious right slide of the ruling alliance will pay off in the elections is questionable. But the politics of division and polarisation will be further intensified.

As a presidential candidate, Kılıçdaroğlu is the antithesis of the incumbent Erdoğan. The six-party alliance, which relies on consensus-building instead of following a strong leader, stands for a new political style. This seems to appeal to many voters: current polls put Kılıçdaroğlu ahead of Erdoğan in the upcoming elections. The ruling alliance (People's Alliance) will lose its majority in parliament, according to the polls.

In a desperate attempt to broaden his alliance, Erdoğan has entered into a coalition with two small Islamist right-wing conservative parties. However, even in the AKP electorate, not everyone is likely to approve of this. The Kurdish-Islamist *Hüda Par* (Free Cause Party), for example, is said to have links to the Turkish Hezbollah. Both newcomers demand, among other things, the revocation of a law to prevent violence against women – an important legacy of the Istanbul Convention, from which Turkey withdrew in 2021, angering many AKP voters. Hence, whether the religious right slide of the ruling alliance will pay off in the elections is questionable. One thing is certain, however: the politics of division and polarisation will be further intensified.

Kılıçdaroğlu's six-party alliance is also unlikely to win an absolute majority in parliament. This means that the third opposition alliance (Labour and Freedom Alliance), which unites Kurdish, left-wing and socialist parties, could play the role of majority procurer. Thus, even after the elections, it could be a matter of organising majorities and finding compromises in parliament. In the presidential election, the left-wing coalition supports Kılıçdaroğlu. However, it is uncertain whether this will enable him to win more than half of the votes in the first round.

Three decisive election issues

While the opposition has a realistic chance of sending incumbent Erdoğan into political retirement on 14 May, the decision is likely to be a close one. Three factors could decide the outcome – though still unclear in which direction: the aftermath of the earthquakes, the voting behaviour of young voters as well as the resignation of presidential candidate Muharrem İnce shortly before the election.

The devastating February earthquakes of affected many people in Turkey directly or indirectly. More than 50,000 people were killed. A large part of the areas affected by the earthquake had formerly supported the AKP. But the government's crisis management was met with much criticism; in

the first three days after the quake, aid reached many regions too late – or not at all. Local authorities and construction companies are now accused of corruption and non-compliance with building regulations. President Erdoğan is trying to make up for lost ground: reconstruction in the region began as early as March, and the president intends to have more than 300,000 homes built within a year. However, there are no polls showing a clear impact of the earthquake on the elections, and it is unclear how and how many people from the region will vote on election day. Only a fraction of the more than three million people who have left the area have registered to vote in their new place of residence. The rest will have to travel back to the destroyed areas to cast their votes. The Council of Europe Election Observation Mission has pointed to both the challenges of logistically organising the elections in the earthquake-affected areas and the limited possibilities for political parties to campaign under the state of emergency prevailing in these provinces. In any case, the conditions are anything but fair: in the largely government-controlled media, the opposition received only a fraction of the airtime. Countless laws restrict media freedom or result in self-censorship.

Another factor that could decide the outcome of the elections is the votes of the younger people. Turkey is a very young country, with one in three voters under the age of 33. First-time voters play a special role here – almost every tenth person in Turkey is casting their vote for the first time in these elections. Those who can win over young people therefore have a good chance of also winning the elections.

The economic concerns of the people, behind which identity issues take a back seat, are the Achilles' heel for President Erdoğan.

So far, it seems that the two major parties, AKP and CHP, have not been particularly successful in addressing this group. Free gigabyte packages, which both alliances advertised in the same manner as mobile phone providers, do not do justice to the reality of young people in Turkey. According to surveys, the majority of first-time voters do not want to vote for the current president.

These people are less and less in line with Erdoğan's vision of youth anyway: young voters are less conservative and less religious compared to other groups. But whether this will benefit the opposition candidate Kılıçdaroğlu is just as uncertain. On the contrary, the two outsiders in the presidential election, former CHP member Muharrem İnce of the Homeland Party and Sinan Oğan, who is supported by the ultra-right ATA alliance (Ancestral Alliance), enjoy high approval ratings among young people. This could prevent an election victory in the first round of the presidential elections – which requires more than half of all votes –

and lead to a run-off between the two strongest candidates.

The two other candidates have long seen a victory in the first round of the presidential election, requiring more than half of all votes, as improbable. But Turkey would not be Turkey if everything did not change once again three days before the election. On Thursday, Muharrem İnce announced his withdrawal from the presidential candidacy. İnce had lost to Erdoğan in the 2018 presidential election as the CHP candidate. His candidacy in the current round of elections had angered the opposition in particular, as they feared a loss of votes would split the opposition against Erdoğan. Even though İnce was only predicted a single-digit result in polls, these percentage points could have led to a run-off between the two strongest candidates. Whether the votes will fall to the opposition after İnce's resignation, however, is not a foregone conclusion. His voter base includes young people as well as protest voters. Technically, a resignation so close to the election is no longer possible - this means that İnce appears on the ballot as the third candidate and can still be elected.

In a run-off, Kılıçdaroğlu might still have good chances of winning over young voters especially with a part of the İnce's voter base. Because even though the Turkish economy is still growing, prosperity is no longer reaching most people. On the contrary, last year in particular, people suffered from horrendous inflation and food has become expensive. In addition to the inflation of currently more than 40 per cent (according to official figures – independent institutes calculate more than 100 per cent), the Turkish lira has plummeted. Since the beginning of 2021, the value of the national currency has more than halved. Many people have noticeably become less prosperous in the past two years. And young people in particular are suffering from the increased costs of living, education and rent.

The economic concerns of the people, behind which identity issues take a back seat, are the Achilles' heel of President Erdoğan, who has been able to secure his high approval ratings with rising prosperity, economic growth and modernisation for many years.

So, in the end, the onion could decide the election campaign after all.



Antonia Tilly

Antonia Tilly is the deputy head of the Turkey office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, based in Istanbul. Previously, she worked for the FES in Central America and Berlin.