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Extraordinarily dramatic, even by Turkish standards

Erdoğan is known for putting on a show. The new opposition candidate is the opposite – precisely what could make Kılıçdaroğlu his toughest competitor

There's never a dull moment in Turkish politics. Slanging matches, sometimes even physical altercations in parliament and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's famous foreign policy U-turn inevitably captivate not only those with an interest in politics. And yet, the events in Ankara since 2 March have been extraordinarily dramatic, even by Turkish standards. Voters couldn't believe their eyes as the biggest opposition alliance settled on a joint candidate, only for one party to later pull back its support and then, once more, unite behind him – all within just four days. This entertaining spectacle did end up producing a political roadmap, with the leader of the social democratic *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, nominated as the alliance's top candidate, after believing he had lost his last chance of running for president just three days earlier.

For 20 years now, Turkey has been governed by Erdoğan – initially as Prime Minister, then, since 2014, as President of the Republic with expanding powers following a 2017 constitutional amendment. With an aura of invincibility around him for years, this shield began to fade in 2015. This year, his *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) lost its majority in parliament for the first time, only regaining it after re-running an election under questionable circumstances. He suffered his most painful defeat in 2019, when the AKP lost municipal councils in Turkey's most important cities, including Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, to the opposition. This happened due to a four-party alliance, the *Millet İttifakı* (Nation Alliance). Beyond the tangible successes, opposition forces in Turkey drew hope from these experiences. Despite progressively sliding into autocracy, there was a growing belief that change through elections would be possible even at a national level *if* the opposition managed to unite and maintain a professional front.

The style of the Table of

Kılıçdaroğlu, recognised this opportunity and worked consistently towards building up a

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united, democratic opposition alliance, especially in time for the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in the summer of 2023. In addition to its existing allies – the nationalist *İyi Parti*, the Islamist *Saadet Partisi* and the liberal-nationalist *Demokrat Parti* – he managed to bring the AKP factions *DEVAPartisi* and *Gelecek Partisi* on board the Nation Alliance. The alliance, christened the 'Table of Six' by the media, was founded on 12 February 2022 and has since presented itself as an alternative to the Turkish President and his style of leadership in every respect. The stuffy photos of the meetings between the six party leaders – five men and *İyi*'s female chair Meral Akşener – sitting around an unadorned table offered plenty of meme material for the internet. It became a joke amongst the Turkish public — used to its president trying to put on a show. He resides in castle-like properties, commissioned the gigantic presidential palace in Ankara and even advertises his own book in New York's Times Square. Erdoğan has been projecting the image of a strong leader since his term began. While the six others, haven't produced much more than paper; a policy paper calling for a move away from the presidential system towards a strengthened parliament, which was followed in January by a 240-page election manifesto – a kind of coalition agreement ahead of its time. Such a thing had never existed in Turkey, and not even experienced observers of Turkish politics were sure whether this course of action was good or bad, a sign of desperation or a clever tactic.

The style of the Table of Six made it difficult for President Erdoğan to play on his greatest strength: creating controversy and division. To the surprise of many, his numerous attempts to drive a wedge between this diverse alliance have missed the mark, rebounding on the Table of Six's unspectacular façade. In particular, the *İyi* party – a spin-off of the ultra-nationalist AKP coalition partner *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP) – has resisted Erdoğan's advances. Its charismatic leader Meral Akşener stuck to the alliance's line: to put Turkey back on the path of the rule of law and to reform the constitution together. Only if this is successful would

the alliance partners become political opponents again.

Internal divisions

However, things weren't quite as rosy within the alliance as they seemed on the outside, as was demonstrated on multiple occasions. Akşener repeatedly indicated that she wanted to play a key role in selecting a joint presidential candidate and would not respect the majority decision. Despite her vital contribution to forming the alliance, she refused to support Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as a candidate. The scepticism she expressed is shared by swathes of the Turkish public: Kılıçdaroğlu is too bland, not charismatic enough and unable to stand up to an opponent like Erdoğan on stage.

The two most popular opposition politicians in the country are deemed to be more suitable: Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and his counterpart in Ankara, Mansur Yavaş. While polls support this view, the CHP and the other members of the Table of Six made strong arguments against both of these alternative candidates. On 14 December 2022, İmamoğlu was convicted in the first instance of 'insulting the High Electoral Council', facing a ban from politics for several years. Yavaş, a former member of the ultra-nationalist MHP, is like a rag to a bull for the pro-Kurdish HDP and would hardly be able to count on their support in a run-off election. If the election is as tight as expected, this could significantly reduce his chances of winning.

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The dispute seemed to have come to an end by 2 March. The six party leaders, including Akşener, presented a signed document to the media, announcing that all parties had agreed on a joint candidate – without mentioning his name. But while Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was putting the finishing touches to his nomination speech, Akşener delivered one last desperate blow. On 3 March, she announced to great uproar that she would be leaving the Table of Six because it refused to back İmamoğlu and Yavaş as she wanted it to. She did indeed leave the alliance and didn't attend its next meeting. It didn't help that both İmamoğlu and Yavaş publicly declared that they were not able to accept a presidential candidacy. The opposition alliance had tripped at the final hurdle, seemingly blowing any realistic chance of a democratic change of power.

But the drama in Turkey took yet another turn. Three days after splitting from the alliance, Akşener returned to the table, to the astonishment of the public and the other party leaders. Then, in a brief but impressive demonstration of unity, the party leaders proclaimed Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as their joint presidential candidate that same evening, in front of a cheering audience.

A new roadmap for Turkish politics

Kılıçdaroğlu is no stranger to the Turkish public. The 74-year-old Alevi has been the leader of the CHP, the party of the state's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, since 2010. Kılıçdaroğlu draws on his legacy, but has also recognised that building his identity on Kemalism alone is no longer enough to win political majorities. Instead, he emphasises the social democratic identity of the CHP and its competence in key policy fields. It stands for *Helalleşme*, broadly translated as 'policy of reconciliation'. Kılıçdaroğlu wants to overcome social divisions and steer the debate away from religious and cultural identity issues. 'Our greatest goal is to bring prosperity, peace and joy to Turkey,' Kılıçdaroğlu called out to his supporters after announcing he was running for president.

He is expected to bring a new style to Turkish politics, as also illustrated by the Twelve-Point Roadmap agreed upon by the Table of Six in the wake of announcing its candidate. In addition to strengthening the parliamentary system, he advocates governing the country by consensus between all parties until the constitutional amendment has been adopted. The President of the Republic would be assisted by the five other party leaders acting as Vice Presidents, later joined by the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara – a clear concession to Akşener.

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The cards are now on the table, and the election campaign can begin. President Erdoğan has formally confirmed 14 May as the date of the election. Now, more than ever, it is vital for the opposition to be united and consolidated. Akşener's antics resulted in a huge setback for the opposition alliance just before announcing its candidate. Not that a fair election campaign is in the cards anyway. The government controls a considerable part of the media and the opposition thus finds it hard to get its messages across. The Turkish judiciary has already dashed the hopes of the most promising opposition candidate, the Mayor of Istanbul, İmamoğlu,

entering the race. And a pending ban against the pro-Kurdish HDP could throw everything into disarray again right before the election.

It's astonishing, given these tumultuous circumstances, that the opposition is clearly in the lead in practically every poll. But this can be easily explained by the economic situation. After years of socio-economic stagnation and inflation officially standing at 85 per cent, more and more Turks are slipping down from the middle class and the poverty rate is rising. The devastating earthquake on the Turkish-Syrian border area only made things worse. The World Bank estimates damage to residential buildings alone at more than € 34 bn. What's more, there have been complaints about the sometimes chaotic coordination of rescuers in the first few days after the earthquake. Erdoğan's ingredients for success - religion and identity - don't work as well as they did in the past, and his blustering political style increasingly appears to have fallen behind the times.

Even if the more sedate Kılıçdaroğlu isn't able to excite the Turkish people, he as a reconciler is the toughest opponent yet for populist Erdoğan.



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