

A New Era in Turkey?

May 8, 2023



Traveling anywhere in Turkey in recent weeks one is accosted by reminders of an election scheduled for May 14. The visages of smiling political leaders adorn billboards and banners everywhere. The most ubiquitous image, of course, is that of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose campaign motto is *Doğru Zaman, Doğru Adam*: “Right Time, Right Man.”

Though on the billboards he looks supremely confident, Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) are facing their biggest electoral challenge since coming to power in 2002. Polls suggest the AKP and its far-right partner the National Action Party (MHP) in the “People’s Alliance” are in serious trouble. While the AKP will remain the largest party in parliament, its support—and even more so that of the MHP—has been falling while the opposition National Alliance has surged. Were two minor competitors for the presidency to drop out of the race, it is likely main opposition candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu of the People’s Republican Party (CHP), would defeat Erdoğan in the first round.

Unlike the winner-take-all, first-past-the-post electoral systems in Anglophone countries, Turkey’s system of proportional representation—though far from a democratic ideal—means the left should have a presence in the government after the election. No less than twenty-six parties have submitted candidate lists, with half of those running in five alliances in an effort to reach a seven percent threshold to enter parliament. Led by the People’s Democracy Party (HDP), the leftist Labor and Freedom Alliance appears set to win between eleven and fourteen percent of the vote.

The defeat of Erdoğan and his rightwing alliance would be a major victory for freedom and democracy. Yet who exactly constitutes the Turkish opposition? And what would a post-Erdoğan Turkey—something long unimaginable—look like? Even in the best of scenarios, in which the People’s Alliance takes a drubbing (and peacefully concedes defeat—a very big if), Erdoğan loses the presidency, and the left makes a strong showing, any resurgent socialist movement in Turkey will face major obstacles to becoming a serious political presence—not least of which is the opposition National Alliance itself.

Making a Rightwing Coalition

While the AKP was politically invincible for about a decade after coming to power, since 2013 a

number of crises have whittled away its dominance. The emergence and suppression of the Gezi Movement of 2013, which developed after a brutal crackdown on environmental protesters occupying Gezi Park in downtown Istanbul, revealed the AKP's pretension to democratic norms to be a mere façade.

It was also in 2013 that the AKP attempted to incorporate Kurds—close to twenty percent of Turkey's population of eighty-five million—in part by initiating a peace process with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). However, the following year widespread protests erupted in the majority Kurdish southeast after the state failed to protect the people of Kobani from Islamic State attacks on the Turkey-Syria border. In 2015 the peace process with the PKK broke down, and in the same year the pro-Kurdish and leftwing HDP entered parliament with more than twelve percent of the vote, thereby depriving the AKP of its majority.

Unwilling to accept the results, a new election was run five months later with Erdoğan claiming the choice was between “me, or chaos.” In an atmosphere of violence and intimidation the AKP obtained the desired result by regaining its majority—as God, if not the people, intended. (Crucially, however, the HDP obtained enough votes to remain in government.)

With it suddenly okay to hate Kurds again, the AKP reached out to the ultranationalists in the MHP. Created by former army colonel Alparslan Türkeş in 1969, the MHP is driven by an ethnonationalist pan-Turkism hostile to basic democratic principles. The party, with its fascistic youth wing the Grey Wolves, has a history of street violence, assassinations, and massacres against leftists, Kurds, and Alevis. Its current leader, Devlet Bahçeli, does not hesitate to pose for photos with mafia leaders, and in December of 2022 former Grey Wolves leader Sinan Ateş was shot dead in Ankara for reasons that are unclear—though it does seem unwise to leave the far right for a career in academia.

With its nationalist and secular origins, the MHP was long suspicious of the AKP's religiosity and ostensible acceptance of cultural pluralism. Yet the AKP's rightward drift convinced party leaders of its fundamental hostility to liberals and the left, and MHP support was crucial for a disputed 2017 referendum (conducted during a state of emergency following a failed coup the previous year) making Turkey an executive rather than presidential system and granting Erdoğan broad dictatorial powers.

Though since its formal announcement in 2018 the People's Alliance has held together, its public support has deteriorated. An economic crisis beginning in the summer of 2018 that persists to the present, numerous corruption scandals, a botched response to the Covid-19 crisis, and the mismanagement of a devastating earthquake in February of 2023 are some of the reasons many have lost confidence in the AKP and its Great Leader.

The Alliance's growing desperation in recent months has been clear in its attempts to reach out to any and all minor parties. Most bizarre has been its embrace of HÜDA-PAR (Free Cause Party), a fundamentalist Kurdish party with ties to the Kurdish Hezbollah—a terrorist organization according to the Turkish state. The intellectual contortions MHP members must go through to justify aligning with an Islamist Kurdish group are fun to imagine. Bahçeli, for his part, has claimed in characteristically measured language that those who “fabricate a black campaign” against the non-terrorist HÜDA-PAR are “liars and political deviants who have lost their shame.”

But if the so-called People's Alliance is truly in danger, what is the alternative?

The Centrist Opposition

The largest political party in Turkey after the AKP is the People's Republican Party (CHP), founded

by Mustafa Kemal and the nation's oldest. Though initially an authoritarian party of militant secular nationalism, the CHP took a left turn in the turbulent 1960s and remains nominally social democratic today. (A primary reason for the creation of the MHP was this leftward shift in the party of Atatürk.) Yet the CHP remains divided between traditional Kemalists and liberals—a division only hatred of Erdoğan and the AKP has been able to bridge.

The MHP's pivot to the AKP naturally alienated members who loathe Erdoğan. With the MHP's support for the 2017 referendum many members left and established the "Good" (İYİ) Party. As the fortunes of the MHP have declined those of the İYİ Party have risen, with polling suggesting support from between ten and fifteen percent. The CHP-İYİ bloc in the recently-established National Alliance has surpassed that of the AKP-MHP in parliamentary projections. The National Alliance is also comprised of a number of smaller parties, some of whom are led by neoliberal former members of the AKP uncomfortable with Erdoğan's authoritarian turn.

At the beginning of 2023 the National Alliance issued a manifesto of seventy-five items and more than 2,300 pages. The main features of the tome include the reintroduction of a parliamentary system, measures to bring back judicial independence (a casualty of the 2017 referendum), lowering the parliamentary election threshold to three percent, ensuring press freedom, and combating corruption.

While the Alliance's promise to secure elementary democratic norms are unobjectionable, the manifesto is far from progressive in terms of rights for oppressed peoples. Kılıçdaroğlu has pandered to pervasive xenophobia by vowing to deport Turkey's (mostly-Syrian) refugees should the National Alliance come to power. The HDP was glaringly excluded from any discussion as the Alliance took shape; unsurprisingly it has had nothing significant to say about Kurdish rights.

Economically the mainstream opposition is neoliberal. It has expressed concerns over the plummeting Turkish lira and inflation, but has said nothing about amending the deeply anti-labor Turkish constitution and the AKP's frequent practice of banning strikes. In mid-April Kılıçdaroğlu announced fifteen economic development projects he would implement should he be elected. These include the creation of "special economic zones" for production, trade, and finance in an effort to stimulate growth and make Turkey globally competitive. While for the most part vague, the central message is clear: Turkey will be open for business in the interests of capital.

As a coalition of liberals and right-leaning secular nationalists, the National Alliance promises a return to (or creation of) a "normal" parliamentary democracy. Its efforts to resituate Turkey as part of a "civilized" and secular West in contrast to the AKP's orientalist despotism are, if usually implicit, undeniable. For the working class, the poor, and the unemployed, it is an uninspiring vision.

A Left Alternative?

In March of 2021 the Court of Cassations' state prosecutor filed a lawsuit before the Turkish Constitutional Court demanding the closure of the HDP for alleged ties to the PKK. No one in Turkey was surprised: closing pro-Kurdish parties has been a pastime of the Turkish state for decades. On top of the party's likely closure, former HDP co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ are among thirty-six members currently imprisoned and threatened with life imprisonment for the 2014 Kobani protests.

Operating under constant duress and snubbed by the National Alliance, in early 2022 the HDP called for an alliance of left parties, and in the summer the Labor and Freedom Alliance was announced. In addition to the HDP alliance members include the Workers' Party of Turkey (TIP), the Labor Party, the Workers' Movement Party, the Social Freedom Party, and the Federation of Socialist Assemblies.

Its founding declaration calls for, in addition to basic democratic rights and freedoms, improving the majority's living and working conditions, a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue, equal rights for oppressed groups (women, youth, the LGBTQ+ community, and the disabled), and protection for the environment and the nation's cultural assets.

The leftist alliance had declined to field a candidate for the presidency, only declaring its support for Kılıçdaroğlu at the end of April. In an additional strategic move, in March the HDP announced that it would participate under the banner of the Green Left Party to circumvent the risk of its pre-election closure. A minor division in the leftist alliance has emerged, involving TIP's decision to field candidates separately in some provinces—a result of the party's growing popularity. HDP leaders warned that TIP's attempt to field candidates independently of the alliance was a risk that could end up effectively wasting votes.

Though, as noted above, the left's presence in parliament will be a positive development, the Labor and Freedom Alliance's impact will be limited. Outside of the HDP and TIP no alliance members have any representation in parliament. And while trade unions have expressed support for the alliance the labor movement itself is weak, having endured decades of neoliberal assault and declining union density. The bulk of support for the Labor and Freedom Alliance will come from the HDP and its mostly Kurdish voters.

No Shortcuts to Socialism

Given the intimidation and machinations that have plagued Turkish elections in recent years, many question whether May 14 will be free and fair. Opposition party offices have been attacked with increasing frequency over the last two months, and on April 25 police carried out raids in 21 cities across the country, detaining over 120 journalists, politicians, lawyers, and artists associated with Kurdish rights. On April 27, Interior Minister and rapid homophobe Süleyman Soylu claimed the West was attempting an electoral coup—a bad sign for those hoping for a peaceful transfer of power.

If the People's Alliance does indeed lose and a new government led by the National Alliance emerges, the left should waste no time in celebration. If the CHP-IYI coalition is truly committed to a free and democratic society, movements for major constitutional and economic reforms developed outside the halls of parliament will be necessary. In addition to holding the National Alliance to account for progressive campaign promises, the new government must be pushed further. A neoliberal Third Way will be no better for the working majority in Turkey than in the US or UK.