



## Democratic-values against authoritarianism?

In the end it will be [again] the economy, stupid!

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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#### Summary

- Opposition parties around the world (e.g., in Hungary, Poland, Brazil and Turkey) have started to form alliances against authoritarian and illiberal leaders.
- The introduction of a presidential system in Turkey in 2018 made political parties join forces, since 50+1% would be needed to win the presidential elections.
- Since May 2018, first four and now six opposition parties have formed the so-called “Millet [Nation] Alliance”; almost all the polls place the Alliance well ahead of the government AKP-MHP alliance.
- In 2019, Millet Alliance candidates were able to win the municipal elections in Istanbul and Ankara
- In May 2022, the Millet Alliance published ten clear, value-based principles, ranging from non-discrimination to freedom of the press, religion and thought through to the independence of the judiciary.
- The parties of the Millet Alliance are not remembered for defending democratic values in the past, but will they now?
- On topics like the Kurdish issue or refugees, the Millet Alliance is often harsher and more exclusionary than the government.
- However, the economic situation and the candidate put forward by the Millet Alliance More will be more decisive for the elections than a debate over values.
- Turkey does not have a choice between black and white, but rather between different shades of gray.

ON 28 JUNE 2022, the fourth episode of the [ELIAMEP-MEDYASCOPE MEDIA SERIES \(ELIMED\)](#), entitled “[Value-based opposition against authoritarianism](#)”, was broadcast. Around the world, we have witnessed the rise of a growing number of authoritarian and illiberal leaders since the 1990s. Their rule usually follows a playbook which is very similar around the world: bringing the judiciary under control; banning critical media; controlling mainstream and social media; cracking down on criticism; banning critical organisations; firing critical academics; putting pressure on civil society, making foreign funding hard or impossible; etc. And in some countries, which include Turkey and Hungary, Poland and Brazil, opposition parties have joined forces, often forging broad Left-Right alliances which include former adversaries, and campaigning on an explicitly pro-democracy agenda in order to beat an authoritarian leader. In Hungary, this strategy was unsuccessful, as Victor Orbán and his Fidesz party won a clear election victory in April 2022 against a joint opposition. Sezin Öney, a journalist and analyst who has lived in Hungary for many years, explained during the webinar that the problem was that “the joint opposition candidate said something not so different--family and conservative values, Christianity--in very similar to Orbán. In that sense there wasn’t a new package waiting for the electorate... and there wasn’t a big rush from the opposition voters. They weren’t really motivated.” Will the Turkish opposition generate greater voter motivation?

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In Turkey, a new era in party politics began with the [introduction of the presidential system in 2018](#), especially in relation to the presidential elections. A single party would not be enough to win the necessary absolute majority, so electoral alliances of at least two parties became a necessity. This is what happened in Turkey ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2018. The governing [AKP joined forces with the MHP in February 2018 to form the People’s Alliance \(Cumhur Ittifaki\)](#); then, in [early May 2018, four opposition parties--the CHP, Good \(İYİ\), Felicity \(Saadet\) and Democrat \(Demokrat\) parties--agreed to run in the parliamentary elections together as the Millet Alliance](#). This policy has prevented the Turkish party system from being transformed from a multi-party to a US-style two-party system. At least for now.

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However, in 2018, this joining together of opposition forces proved unsuccessful, as the AKP-MHP alliance [won both the presidential \(President Erdoğan\) and parliamentary elections with an absolute majority](#). Nonetheless, the Millet Alliance did not fall apart and agreed to also run together in the municipal elections of 2019, fielding joint candidates. The results were spectacular: for the first time since 1994, [Turkey’s two major cities of Istanbul and Ankara elected CHP mayors](#) backed by the Millet Alliance and the tacit approval of the HDP, which did not field their own candidates, either. As a result, the opposition was able to win five of the six largest cities. During the webinar, Özge Mumcu Aybars, the co-founder and coordinator of the Uğur Mumcu Investigative Journalism Foundation and an advisor to the CHP’s foreign affairs spokesperson, MP Ünal Çeviköz, commented that “the local elections in 2019 changed the atmosphere; that there might be a chance to win.”

In 2022, the four party alliance became the [“table of six”, when the AKP splinter parties Deva and Gelecek joined](#). Osman Sert, research director at the Ankara Institute, commented during the webinar on the composition of this larger alliance: “They are representing almost all political currents in Turkey except the Kurdish politics. Islamist, Kemalist, nationalist, all are coming together.” For Sert, the reason the parties with roots in political Islam felt the need for such an alliance was because the Islamists had seen the limits on governing without consultation, without agreement with the other, being Kemalist and Secularist parties. “It moved them to the centre of the political spectrum.

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Another dynamic is that these Islamists and conservative politicians are not the same as 20 years ago, and the same is true for the Kemalists. ... if they [still] had their positions from 20 years ago, it wouldn't be possible."

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By early July 2022, the table of six has met five times to agree on certain principles and issues of importance for the upcoming elections, which will most likely be held in the summer of 2023. In February 2022, at the second meeting, the parties agreed on a [return to a "strengthened" parliamentary system](#). For Osman Sert: "the strengthened parliamentary system is more than the proposal of a new system. It is like a mini-constitutional amendment. It is promising something for women, it is promising some democratic steps for the Kurds, it is promising a much more pluralistic country."

At the presentation of the parliamentary system, the CHP's Muharrem Erkek spoke of a "historical plan", adding that: "The presidential government system led to individuality and arbitrariness in management. It created an authoritarian government, by giving the President very broad and uncontrolled powers that enabled him to control the legislative, executive and judiciary. We oppose this system, which is contrary to the understanding of a constitutional state, undermines the democratic state of law, and personalizes sovereignty. The parliament is dysfunctional under the current system." In the new system, the president would only be able to serve one term of seven years. In addition, the threshold to enter parliament would be lowered to three percent.

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At the fourth meeting, the Millet Alliance became, at least on paper, an alliance based on democratic values, since it [declared on 29 May 2022](#) that it would work "for the establishment of a free, democratic order, based on human rights in our country."

At this meeting, the six parties agreed on a [10-point declaration of principles](#). For the topic of the webinar and this policy brief, the most important principles are the first six.

- 1) A strengthened parliamentary system based on the principle of the separation of powers
- 2) Broad public freedoms
- 3) Pluralist, participatory and free democracy that will end all forms of discrimination
- 4) Freedom of thought, expression and the Press
- 5) Freedom of religion and conscience
- 6) Social peace and accountability before an impartial/independent judiciary

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The six parties wrote about the "pluralist democracy" in more detail:

"Defending the universal principles of democratic rights and freedoms, we believe that a political order based on human rights must be established. By eliminating all obstacles that lead to discrimination among our citizens, we will build together a pluralistic and participatory democracy in which no member of our nation is excluded because of their ethnic, confessional and religious identity, philosophical and political views."

This sounds wonderful, of course, a playbook for a pluralist democracy fighting all sorts of discrimination with broad freedoms for all its citizens—which is something Turkey has never seen to date. However, why would the parties and politicians of the Millet Alliance, who certainly hadn't made a name for themselves in the past as defenders of these values support them now? For Osman Sert: "The importance of democracy is understood in its absence. The past five to ten years have been a bit exceptional... one-man rule applied by democratic means. Yes, there are elections, there is a parliament,

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there are political parties, but they hardly mean anything. I think the attitude of the opposition is credible. We should give it credit, unless we see that it is unsuccessful. We have one more year until the elections, and they are coming together, and they are not bargaining over seats, they are not haggling over ministries, they are not bargaining over state institutions, but they are bargaining over values. When they are tweeting or talking on social media, they are addressing the others’ concerns. And that’s why I think it is important.” But Sert is also pragmatic: “We shouldn’t be too romantic. These are political parties, they are not coming together because of values alone, but for practical obligations...the obligation of numbers.”

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Still, the most burning issue for the democratization of Turkey is the Kurdish one. In 2019, the Kurdish votes were the king-makers. Where the HDP did not enter its own candidates, the Millet Alliance won (e.g., in Istanbul, Ankara, Adana and Mersin). However, where they did field a candidate of their own (e.g., in Balıkesir, where the HDP ran against the İYİ Party candidate), the AKP won. What can the Kurds, who are not represented at the table of six, expect from the Millet Alliance? Osman Sert is realistic: “If you start with the issue where you have the biggest disagreements, the table will disperse. The Kurdish issue is the most difficult issue, not only for the table of six, but for all political parties. If we want the HDP and İYİP to sit at the same table, this means we don’t want the table of six to survive. However, the Kurds would have some partners within the new system. First Gelecek then Deva added mother-tongue education to their party manifestos. For rightist parties, this is an important step. But as long as İYİ Party continues to be part of the alliance, we can’t expect too much.”

Because of this, for Özge Mumcu Aybars, the degree to which the majority of Kurds will support the Millet Alliance “will very much depend on the candidate.” Thus, the Kurds would vote for Millet Alliance candidates if they were moderates, but not if for an outright Turkish nationalist candidate.

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Since the war in Syria began in 2011, Turkey has become home to millions of refugees from Syria, but also other neighbouring countries, Afghanistan and African nations. The Migration Directorate speaks of [5.5 million refugees](#). Whereas this was not a big issue for a long time, and there was a national consensus to host and help them, the atmosphere has been changing for some years. In the 2019 elections, the refugee factor seemed to play an important role in the victory of the opposition in the main cities, where many refugees had ended up. On this issue, which is connected to democratic values, human rights and dignity, the opposition often seems more aggressive, negative and exclusionary than the government. As Sezin Öney explained: “The perception is very negative, cutting across all segments of society. And perhaps there is no other way at this moment. It is really difficult to make an argument, even for activists to say something mildly positive about refugees. It is really the red line for most of the electorate. I don’t see a way out of this.”

For Öney, this negative attitude towards refugees has improved the standing of the Kurds, who have become “this more native part of local society, autochthon, that has always been there... The real nationalist issue in Turkey right now is the refugee issue. Attitudes towards the Kurds are becoming softer, but if you ask about Arabs now, it would be the contrary. And new parties like Ümit Özdağ’s Zafer Party are making a bigger issue out of it. They could push the whole discussion further towards the Far Right. That is almost inevitable.”

Özge Mumcu Aybars added: “90% don’t want refugees and want them to return. Politics has to act accordingly. When I share something about refugees, saying something



*The real nationalist issue in Turkey right now is the refugee issue. [...] “90% don’t want refugees and want them to return. Politics has to act accordingly.”*

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positive about them, I am criticized all the time on social media. If there is a new coalition government, the international law should be implemented. The CHP is saying that Turkey must meet with Damascus.” However, while the parties do not speak openly about integration and services for refugees, this is also happening in parallel: “There are the EU-funded PIKTES schools in Turkey, in thirteen provinces, education for Syrian migrants. Integration is also going on with EU support. These schools are integrated into the Ministry of Education (MEB).”

Osman Sert complained that: “Unfortunately, none of the parties is sincere. Not to the refugees, not to the Turkish public. Nobody can send them back to their countries and they know this. All the parties know that. I talked to experts whom the parties consulted. But the parties reply that whenever they write something about sending the refugees back, they get the most positive feedback from the people, and that’s why they will continue to do this. It’s like the British saying that goes “If it bleeds, it leads.” And the government has no concrete plan on the issue either and has left it to float free. They are not sincere either.”

There have been large numbers of refugees in Turkey since at least 2012. For Sert: “Since 2017, the number of refugees has been the same. Why is it such an issue now? Because of the economic crisis. People are looking for a scapegoat for this, and they are putting the blame on the refugees.”

Since 24 February 2022, one striking difference when traveling from Europe to Turkey is the media coverage. Opening a newspaper, a news site, a major TV channel in, for example Germany, the number one issue has been the war in Ukraine. In Turkey, over the same period, the war has been a secondary, if not tertiary, issue. The main issue here is the economy, inflation, the rising cost of living. Therefore, the economy will also be a-- if not the--decisive factor in the upcoming elections. Prior to that, the economic performance after 2002 had been to the advantage of the AKP, which could score points with high growth rates, major infrastructural projects, and the modernization of the country. However, over roughly the last two years, the economy has become a burden, aggravated by the Corona pandemic. On this, Sezin Öney commented that: “If there had not been an economic crisis, we maybe wouldn’t have seen the opposition rising so much. The electorate is seeing the opposition with new eyes.” Osman Sert agreed, adding that: “If the economy were good and Erdoğan was performing well economically, the next elections would be won by Erdoğan again. Why people are not leaving the governing party, with all its injustices and the pressure it is putting on legal affairs, is a good question. The people are voting for the table of six not because of their values, but because of the economic crisis.”

So, will it, in the end, be the economy, stupid? With almost one year to go, a degree of consolidation is still possible for the economy post-Covid and perhaps following the end of the war, or at least heavy fighting, in Ukraine. Then things could start to look more optimistic for Erdoğan and the AKP, which are currently in [well behind the opposition in almost all the polls](#). Nevertheless, the chances of the opposition winning have not been higher since 2002. But should they actually win, what kind of country would Turkey become? For Osman Sert: “Turkey won’t be choosing between black and white, but rather between a darker grey and a lighter grey, regarding the economy, regarding democracy. But it will be a much lighter grey, compared with what’s happening today. And that is the main motivation for people to vote for the opposition.”

As the webinar showed, in the end, the values debate is only of secondary importance to the way people will vote. The Millet Alliance is not that credible, in any case. When it

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comes to the Kurdish question and refugees, it is hardly any difference from the AKP. Therefore, the elections will probably be decided by two factors in the main: 1) the economic situation, and 2) the candidate fielded by the Millet Alliance, and whether he or she will succeed in rallying the Kurdish votes behind them.

We'll have to wait and see whether Turkey appears a lighter shade of gray after an opposition victory. The most hopeful aspect of a broad coalition government is that things will develop positively in relation to the issues of freedom of expression, pressures on civil society, the judiciary and corruption, since the duties of government will no longer be in the hands of one person but shouldered by many. On sensitive issues like the Kurdish question, refugees, minorities and even foreign policy, the changes will be more in the style, less in the content. Which means that a real conversation about democratic values, the Kurdish question, minorities, the integration of refugees into a plural, modern society must be started once an opposition government has consolidated its power. This is the best-case scenario, and the reason why many voters in Turkey are hoping for a change of government. Because, if everything stays the same, things can only continue in a dark (or darker) shade of gray.

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