



Turkey's 2023 Election: Which Candidates Can Defeat Erdoğan at the Polls?

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- Turkey will go to the polls at the latest in June 2023 to elect both the President and the parliament. These elections could bring to an end the period in which the AKP has ruled by means of various unofficial coalitions.
- The 2019 municipal elections also showed that it was possible for the opposition to defeat authoritarian regimes through elections, thereby showing voters how essential it was for them to join forces.
- Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seems to be playing all his cards to win this election, which should come as no surprise, given that he is both a shrewd politician and an 'election machine'.
- Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has advantages, but also disadvantages that put him in the weakest position of all the current candidates. This has been confirmed by multiple polls.
- Ekrem Imamoglu's judicial conviction on 14 December 2022, and the fact that this verdict paves the way for his ban from politics, has completely changed his candidacy case.
- Mansur Yavaş's nationalist background, and the fact that he still uses former MHP cadres in the staff of the municipality, may cause the Kurdish political movement to maintain distance from him if he is a candidate.
- Turkey's 2023 election depends on what the opposition does to anticipate the moves Erdoğan makes to stay in power.

Introduction

If the elections aren't moved forward, Turkey will go to the polls [in June 2023](#) to elect both the President and the parliament. Although it may seem like a normal process when viewed from this perspective, certain dynamics in the country mean that these elections could bring to an end the period in which the AKP has ruled by means of various unofficial coalitions. This makes them crucial.

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Erdoğan's AKP has been in power for more than 20 years; starting in 2011¹, and then in the wake of the 2016 coup attempt², it has created an increasingly authoritarian political structure. Along with some of the country's Islamist and nationalist elements, it has exerted both legal and *de facto* pressure on almost every opposition group, including Kurds, Alevis, liberals, members of LGBTI groups and social democrats. On the one hand, as the political and social atmosphere gets heavier day by day, [the AKP's economic model](#), which is not based on production and added value, has come close to collapse due both to global crises and the Government's erroneous monetary policy. In this context, the [Inflation Research Group \(ENAG\)](#), which consists of academics, announced Turkey's annual inflation rate to be 181.37% as of August. Although [TURKSTAT](#), the state statistical institution, declares inflation to be a mere 80 percent, with the exception of a happy minority, every segment of society is facing financial difficulties. In parallel, the rise in femicide and child abuse, coupled with the government's silence on the rapidly rising rate of crime, seems to have exhausted the patience of Turkish society.

In fact, the major structural and administrative problems mentioned above are not new to Turkey. It is just that they are more prominent than they have been in the past. In this context, Turkish society actually gave the AKP government and its MHP allies in the People's Alliance their first warning in the [2019 local elections](#), when the country's two most important metropolitan cities, Ankara and Istanbul, fell to the Opposition following the merger of the CHP and İYİ Party. The 2019 local elections also showed that it was possible for the Opposition to defeat authoritarian regimes through elections, thereby showing voters how essential it was for them to join forces. It was in this context that the Nation Alliance was formed to oppose the People's Alliance, through the merger of the CHP, İYİ Party, Future Party, DEVA Party, Felicity Party and Democrat Party. Although the country's largest and most central political movement, the AKP itself, belongs to neither of these two structures, it would seem that the 2023 election will be fought between the Nation Alliance and the People's Alliances. In other words, the Opposition will take on Erdoğan by trying to beat the Nation Alliance candidate.

The Table of Six formed by the leaders of the Nation Alliance parties say that their main purpose is to replace the Erdoğan administration by beating him at the ballot box, and then to establish a [Strengthened Parliamentary System](#) in place of the [Presidential Government System](#). Although commissions have been established for this and a draft constitution has been drawn up, conceptually this system has no equivalent in the political science literature. On the other hand, for system change, it is not enough simply to win the Presidency; it is also necessary to obtain a majority in the parliament that is sufficient to change the system, or at least pave the way for the change to be put to a referendum. For this, it is imperative for the Nation Alliance to work collectively before, during and after the election.

For the first time, public opinion polls put Erdoğan behind almost all of his potential rivals. Realizing this, Erdoğan has started to implement [electoral economics in recent months](#) as the country enters the pre-election period, announcing investment and aid packages that will impact

¹ Baser, Bahar, and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk. *Authoritarian politics in Turkey: Elections, resistance and the AKP*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.

² Taş, Hakkı. "The 15 July abortive coup and post-truth politics in Turkey." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 1-19.

directly on households. On the other hand, in parallel with trying to end the tensions he has maintained for years with countries like [Saudi Arabia and Egypt](#) with a view to improving Turkey's economic indicators to a certain extent, he is also starting to toughen up his discourse on countries such as [Greece](#), which could rally nationalist elements behind him. Erdoğan has also shown his willingness of late to use the notion of "loyalty" emotionally in this election, calling on his voters to vote for him "[one last time](#)". In short, Erdoğan seems to be playing all his cards to win this election, which should come as no surprise, given that he is both a professional politician and an 'election machine'.

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On the other hand, the Opposition seems, in a sense, to have lost the momentum that gave it such a boost in the summer months. In fact, considering Turkey's economic and social situation, Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu seems to have had made a very good point when he said: '[The government cannot win the election under these conditions, but the Opposition can lose](#)'. At this point, the presidential candidate to be produced by the Table of Six becomes important. Even though Turkey's public bodies are unanimous in declaring it very late in the day to be announcing its candidate, the Table of Six say that the election manifesto and coordination are more important than the candidate. However, this does not ring true, when we consider the Turkish electorate over the last two decades. In a country that has been ruled by a leader-centered movement for 20 years, Erdoğan's opponent and their characteristics are the factors that will impact on the outcome of the elections most directly.

In this context, this short study aims to paint portraits of the three candidates who are most prominent in public opinion and the polls. These candidates are Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, Chairman of the main opposition CHP party; Ekrem İmamoğlu, Mayor of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality; and Mansur Yavaş, Mayor of Ankara Metropolitan Municipality.

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu: a willing but weak candidate

Since Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, Chairman of the Republican People's Party, is both the leader of the main opposition party and the representative of the party with the highest vote in the Table of Six, it is natural that it should be he who faces off against Erdoğan. Although he said party leaders should not be candidates in what was then the new system in the 2018 presidential elections, and his party appointed [Yalova Deputy Muharrem İnce](#) as its candidate instead of him, he wants to go down in history as the man who defeated Erdoğan, now that the veteran politician is at his weakest. Although he says it does not matter who the candidate is, and that the important thing is changing the system, he has shown himself to be very eager to run with the 'self' centered language he has been using recently and with his actions. However, at this point, Kılıçdaroğlu has disadvantages as well as advantages, which puts him in the weakest position of all the current candidates. This is confirmed by many election polls.

Kılıçdaroğlu joined the process of forming a more active Opposition after the [Justice March](#) he held in 2017. In this context, the short videos he published, the fact that the institutions responsible for these events came to his door after the events, and his agenda-setting rhetoric could all be plus points for him. Likewise, the fact that he played a role in the İYİ Party entering parliament and that he brought together six parties with different views can also be read as plus points in his favour. As a result of these, he achieved a significant victory in winning the metropolitan cities in the 2019 local elections by fielding the right candidates.

However, Kılıçdaroğlu has disadvantages that outweigh his advantages. First and foremost, his CHP party has proved unable to significantly increase its share of the vote since he became its leader, and has not won any victories against Erdoğan. Secondly, from past election campaigns, it is clear that the chance of Kılıçdaroğlu making mistakes and blunders during the campaign is very

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high. Moreover, Kılıçdaroğlu, who does not fit the profile of a charismatic leader in Turkish politics, which has become a more evident requirement during the Erdoğan era, does not seem to excite the masses.

Over and above these disadvantages, the fact that Kılıçdaroğlu is an Alevi is a problem still in Turkey in 2023, especially since he would be facing an AKP government which uses religious structures and arguments to make political gains in a country with a Sunni majority. At the same time, a big question mark hangs over whether a 73-year-old politician will have the stamina required during a period in which Turkey needs reform. However, both Kılıçdaroğlu and his team seem very eager for the candidacy; it would therefore seem difficult for him to withdraw on his own.

Ekrem İmamoğlu: a candidate who could win

Since Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu won the Istanbul elections for the second time, whether he will be a candidate or not has been one of the most debated issues in Turkish public discourse. Although he tries to rein in his own ambitions, given the eagerness of the chairman of his party to run for president, he showed that he is ready for the candidacy, should the need arise with the [Black Sea trip](#) he made a few months ago and with some of his rhetoric. Moreover, according to many experts, İmamoğlu also has the profile of a winner, given his way of doing politics, the good relations he has established with different sectors of the public, and the fact that he has already won two victories against Erdoğan. However, crucially, his conviction by the judiciary on December 14 [2022](#), and the fact that this verdict paves the way for his being banned from politics, has completely changed the situation regarding İmamoğlu. And this situation could well alter the fate of Turkey.

If we do not take the lawsuit decision into account, we can say that two of İmamoğlu's biggest advantages over Erdoğan are his popularity and his young age. And this popularity extends abroad. Another advantage is that he can produce arguments that are both effective during the campaign and that can free Erdoğan's hand when necessary. Although he was up against former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım in the Istanbul elections, it was actually Erdoğan he was running against, and he showed that he could manage a successful campaign. At the same time, İmamoğlu has the political language and understanding required to win votes from Kurdish, Sunni, Alevi, Turkish and other voter groups. He is able to achieve this thanks to the team he has established in Istanbul. At the same time, having a political story from Istanbul makes his story similar to Erdoğan's, which is also an advantage.

On top of all these advantages, İmamoğlu also has a new one: specifically, the political ban placed on him. Over and above approval or disapproval of the decision, the Turkish judiciary has somehow made Ekrem İmamoğlu into a hero and drawn comparisons with Erdoğan's own political story. In this context, the Turkish president has increased the chances of İmamoğlu being made a candidate with his own hand. If the Erdoğan-controlled judiciary imposed a political ban, which means he cannot run in the elections, Ekrem İmamoğlu will have been revealed as a major actor in Turkey's future.

Before the lawsuit, İmamoğlu had one more disadvantage, though it is still unclear how this will pan out after the court case. İmamoğlu's disadvantage is not something he brought down on himself directly: it is that he is known not to have been on good terms with his party since his candidacy came to the fore. If he is nominated, this situation will change; for now, though, we can say that he lacks major organizational support. In this context, his candidacy actually depends on his own and the CHP's insistence on İmamoğlu rather than Kılıçdaroğlu. Of course, the verdict of the court and its consequences could change everything.

Mansur Yavaş: a risky candidate

Yavaş's nationalist background, and the fact that he still uses former MHP cadres in the staff of the municipality, may cause the Kurdish political movement to keep its distance from him.

Ankara Metropolitan [Mayor Mansur Yavaş](#), who has always been presented in the polls as the candidate who can win easily against Erdoğan, is a little more cautious than Kılıçdaroğlu and İmamoğlu regarding his candidacy. The main reason for this may be that İmamoğlu, who was not actually that cautious, learned a lesson from his relative isolation. Moreover, by doing so, Yavaş is also able to convey that, if the Table of Six does choose him as their candidate, it will be a unanimous decision, and that he will act in accordance with their decisions. It is unclear what will happen to İmamoğlu after his sentence.

Yavaş's biggest advantage is that he is seen as a reliable candidate by the Turkish public, who consider him to be honest and transparent. It is also to his advantage that he has administered Ankara's public works and the tendering process in a transparent manner. However, this is also a disadvantage, as we do not know what Yavaş has to say about Turkey as a whole and world politics—and what he would do on the national and international stage. Also, we do not really know what sort of political staff Yavaş will have behind him. Yavaş has two other disadvantages: the first is that there have to be questions about his ability to run a presidential campaign against an opponent like Erdoğan, a campaign that will be very tough in every field. A big question mark hangs over whether he has the political ability to sustain it. Finally, another factor that will determine the result of the election is the attitude of the country's Kurdish political movement. Here, Yavaş's nationalist background, and the fact that he still uses former MHP cadres in the staff of the municipality, may cause the Kurdish political movement to keep its distance from him.

Conclusion

Turkey's 2023 election depends on what the Opposition does in anticipation of the moves Erdoğan makes to stay in power.

On the one hand, Erdoğan is approaching the most difficult election he has ever fought; on the other hand, Turkey is heading towards one of the most critical elections in its history. Whether Erdoğan or the candidate who runs against him wins will determine whether Turkey continues as an authoritarian state or embarks on a process of reform. At this point, Ekrem İmamoğlu seems to be the luckiest candidate. However, the possibility that Erdoğan will instrumentalize the law prior to the election to disable a candidate who could defeat him is a problem. At this point, the most logical thing for the Table of Six to do is to announce its candidate as soon as possible, and for this candidate to be selected rationally in the light of current conditions. However, should Erdoğan somehow push İmamoğlu out of the system before the election, they still need to find a backup candidate who will not split the votes and who will agree to withdraw from the election if necessary. In short, Turkey's 2023 election depends on what the Opposition does in anticipation of the moves Erdoğan makes to stay in power.