



## **Autocratization vs. democratization:**

The new framework for understanding political competition in Turkey in view of the elections and beyond



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#### Summary

- The traditional “Kemalist vs. Islamist” divide is being replaced by autocratization vs. democratization.
- The antagonism between autocratization and democratization will decide the future of the country.
- The current Opposition reflects the profound social need for change and democratization.
- AKP and MHP voters have far more hard-line nationalist and less democratic attitudes than supporters of the opposition parties.

THE WIDE DIVERGENCES ON NATIONALISM and democracy between the AKP and the opposition parties give a different pulse to Turkey's upcoming elections, thus highlighting that the electoral contest is now between supporters of autocratization on the one hand and supporters of democratization on the other.

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This axis of confrontation has entirely replaced the traditional axis of "Kemalism" versus "Islamism" (and/or "the centre" versus "the periphery"), which is now obsolete both politically, as exemplified by the composition of the National Alliance, in which secularist, "Islamist" and "post-Islamist" parties have come together, and sociologically, with de facto secularization now a key sociological and anthropological dynamic in Turkish society<sup>1</sup>.

### An ominously new Opposition

Although this new framework in which autocratization is opposed to democratization does not necessarily mean the Turkish opposition will succeed in putting the country on a democratization track, this new antagonism, which has been documented both qualitatively and quantitatively, is indicative of the current atmosphere in Turkey, but also and mainly of the expectations of the majority in society and the dynamics favoring change within the opposition parties.

The political and social zeitgeist seems to have changed fundamentally in Turkey, and to both demand and expect democracy  
As Gonul Tol argues<sup>2</sup>:

*Erdoğan's authoritarian bargain has collapsed. Turkey's opposition promises a new contract with society — one that restores parliamentary democracy, pursues a peaceful, pro-western foreign policy and promotes shared prosperity.*

Asserting that "in a way, the Turkish opposition is a huge success", Murat Somer<sup>3</sup> emphasizes the fact that,

*Parties that never came together before, because of ideological and historical reasons, they have now come together and sat around the same table. And they have actually signed agreements on what they want to do. Most importantly, switching to a strengthened parliamentary system. They have basically agreed on a model of democratic transition.*

Diversity and change are the main characteristics of the opposition forces, de facto orienting them towards a significant propensity to inclusive democracy. This inclusivity is manifested in the presence within the Nation Alliance of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu himself, an Alevi, which is not an identity most of Turkey's Sunni majority would recognize without reluctance

He leads the Republican People's Party (CHP), Turkey's so-called "Kemalist dinosaur" by critics, but a party that has realized it will have to adapt to survive.

<sup>1</sup> <https://greeknewsagenda.gr/interviews/reading-greece/7012-“turkey-the-train-of-the-great-modernisation”-interview-with-george-angeletopoulos-and-evangelos-aretaios-on-hybrid-identities-and-subverting-the-clichés>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/fd31eff7-b5e2-4424-82ed-215a93837c27>

<sup>3</sup> <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2022/07/11/in-a-way-the-turkish-opposition-is-a-huge-success-murat-somer/>

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*Actually, the CHP has proved remarkably flexible, opening a window to the Kurds, strengthening the liberal leftists within its ranks, and trying to distance itself from its inherent dynamics of nationalism and authoritarianism.*

Moreover, academics have been debating the concept and dynamics of “post-Kemalism” for years,<sup>4</sup> making the very idea of a “Kemalist dinosaur” somewhat obsolete in itself.

Actually, the CHP has proved remarkably flexible, opening a window to the Kurds, strengthening the liberal leftists within its ranks, and trying to distance itself from its inherent dynamics of nationalism and authoritarianism<sup>5</sup>.

As Angeletopoulos and Areteos argue<sup>6</sup>:

“The CHP is trying to implement a deep re-positioning (yeni rota), following the dominant internal current flows along a social democratic riverbed, and becoming much more pragmatic and closer to society’s needs and realities”.

Meral Aksener of the Good Party (İYİ), an offshoot of Devlet Bahçeli's ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), is trying to orient her party towards the centre-right, while for İYİ, nationalism constitutes the field of the main transitional cleavage—since the party could be considered as a splinter from MHP—and its leadership aspires to shape the concept in a more inclusive form<sup>7</sup>. The inner struggle within the party is far from being over, and its ultra-nationalists are still a major obstacle both to moving the party more to the centre-right and—mainly—to achieving any understanding with the Kurds. However, the process of change is undoubtedly significant.

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Temel Karamollahoglu is the leader of the conservative Islamist party of felicity (Saadet). He was the mayor of Sivas when the "Sivas massacre" took place in 1993, with a mob of radical Sunni Islamists burning 37 Alevi intellectuals alive.

DEVA's Ali Babacan is Erdoğan's former economic czar and leads a party analysts describe as "post-Islamic"<sup>8</sup> (i.e., a hybrid between Islamism and liberalism).

Ahmet Davutoglu, a former Turkish foreign policy guru under Erdoğan and a former prime minister, leads Gelecek, a neo-Islamist party (i.e. an attempt to combine Islamism with modernity, along the lines of the AKP of old).

Gultekin Uysal leads the Democrat Party (DP), a party of conservative liberalism and a remnant of the Turkish centre-right.

Despite, or maybe thanks to, the ideological and historical diversity of its six parties, the Nation Alliance produced a detailed Roadmap of the Transition Process to a Strengthened Parliamentary System<sup>9</sup> along, still more importantly, with a Memorandum of Understanding on Common Policies<sup>10</sup>.

Seren Selvin Korkmaz argues<sup>11</sup> that these documents:

<sup>4</sup> Aytürk, İlker, and Berk Esen, eds. *Post-Post-Kemalizm Türkiye Çalışmalarında Yeni Arayışlar*. (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Policy-paper-71-Areteos-and-Angeletopoulos.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Policy-paper-71-Areteos-and-Angeletopoulos.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Policy-paper-71-Areteos-and-Angeletopoulos.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Policy-paper-71-Areteos-and-Angeletopoulos.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://businesssturkeytoday.com/election-in-turkey-opposition-announces-roadmap-of-transition-to-strengthened-parliamentary-system.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://en.chp.org.tr/haberler/memorandum-of-understanding-on-common-policies-january-30-2023>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkeys-visionary-opposition-proposal-new-government-and-policy-making-structures>

*Kılıçdaroğlu's "Ben Aleviyim" [I am Alevi] video "has almost 70 million views and counting. Regardless of the outcome of this election, this video will remain a video symbol of Turkish politics for years to come. Even if when it changes nothing, it changes everything".*

suggest that if the opposition were to win, one important consequence would be re-institutionalization, or returning power to policymaking and administrative institutions and ending the current system of personalized politics. This would herald significant political reform, particularly in the vital areas of strengthening the rule of law, stabilizing the economy, and increasing reliability in foreign policy.

Parallel to the Nation Alliance and its internal dynamics and struggles, the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP), which is now under the Green Left Party (YSP), is part of the Labour and Freedom Alliance, which includes alongside YSP the Workers Party of Turkey (TIP), the Labour Party (EMEP), the Labour Movement Party (EHP), the Social Freedom Party (TOP), and the Federation of Socialist Assemblies (SMF).

Political and deep sociological change in Kurdish society has obliged the HDP/YSP to adopt a more realistic leftist and progressive stance and ideology<sup>12</sup>, thus making the Kurds potential kingmakers in the upcoming elections, but mainly after them, within the Turkish parliament<sup>13</sup>.

### Reis vs Bay Kemal

The fundamentally different perceptions, values and narratives of the People Alliance and the Nation Alliance are highlighted by the contrasting styles which Tayyip Erdoğan (Reis, 'the chief', for his followers) and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (Bay Kemal for his supporters<sup>14</sup>) have adopted during the election campaign.

As Erdoğan promises free gas, advertises the "Anadolu" warship and provides loans at low interest rates in an attempt to keep the narrative of a great "New Turkey" alive as the pro-government media systematically fuels polarization, Kılıçdaroğlu pursues his own electoral strategy aimed at mitigating the polarization based on the opposition's central narrative of democratization and the elimination of divisions in society.

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's declaration that he is an Alevi in a video message to young people<sup>15</sup> marks a historic turning point in Turkey's modern history.

Evren Balta commented that Kılıçdaroğlu's "Ben Aleviyim" [I am Alevi] video "has almost 70 million views and counting. Regardless of the outcome of this election, this video will remain a video symbol of Turkish politics for years to come. Even if when it changes nothing, it changes everything"<sup>16</sup>

Some analysts have drawn parallels between the upcoming elections in Turkey and the US elections in 2009, when Barack Obama was first elected President. Omer Terzi argues<sup>17</sup> that:

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/publication/οι-κούρδοι-της-τουρκίας-καθοριστικός/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/publication/οι-κούρδοι-της-τουρκίας-καθοριστικός/>

<sup>14</sup> It started as an ironic comment by Tayyip Erdogan against Kemal Kilicdaroglu showing his Kemalists disconnect from the people that Kilicdaroglu turned it into a positive slogan.

<sup>15</sup> <https://t.co/C9Pd1ZaKoN>

<sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/evreki/status/1649097355755651073?s=46&t=nG2xWANUzkMcxHmlCXFyTA>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.politikyol.com/kemal-kilicdaroglu-ve-barack-obama/>

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"Kılıçdaroğlu's victory will be the greatest gift he leaves the political history of the country, to young people, to society and to the future (...) we will stop judging each other based on our national identity, religious beliefs and appearance and talk about building a democracy that will lead us to the future."

In contrast with Kılıçdaroğlu's language, Vahap Coskun argues<sup>18</sup> that:

"Erdoğan's language today is reminiscent of his language before the June 7 elections (2015). But that campaign did not bring Erdoğan success. For the first time, he lost the opportunity to rule alone. (...) This aggressive, exclusionary campaign is highly likely to create a negative picture of Erdoğan. He ran a similar campaign before June 7 (2015) and before the 2019 local elections, but failed to achieve what he expected in both."

### The deep partisan cleavage centred on nationalism and democracy

This new frame of political competition between supporters of autocratization and supporters of democratization has deep roots in society, and the rift between the two is recorded around two main axes: nationalism and democracy.

Essentially, the political parties of the opposition reflect this rift and are constantly trying to adapt to the overall expectations of their potential supporters in terms of democracy, the rule of law and social peace; expectations they hope eventually to deliver.

In the recent period, surveys and analyses have clearly documented the fact that AKP and MHP voters hold far more hard-line nationalist and less democratic attitudes than supporters of the opposition parties, whose voters are characterized by moderation and democratic reflexes.

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According to the results of ELIAMEP's Research Programme on the Bilateral Relations between Greece and Turkey<sup>19</sup>:

"The highest levels of nationalism are recorded in the ruling alliance of the AKP and the MHP. The government alliance is followed, albeit at notable lower levels, by the CHP and the İYİ, while the levels of nationalism of the DEVA and Gelecek are a little lower, and of the HDP particularly low".

The report also notes that, "looking at the criterion of reconciliation with respect to party preference, a clear difference was captured between the supporters of the government alliance and supporters of the CHP-İYİ alliance, with the supporters of the government coalition less oriented towards reconciliation than the supporters of the CHP and the İYİ. DEVA and Gelecek supporters are oriented still more towards reconciliation, with HDP supporters being most in favour".

A survey by Evren Balta and Hatem Ete for the Ankara Enstitüsü<sup>20</sup> records the same trends, with AKP and MHP voters clearly more nationalistic than voters for the opposition parties.

<sup>18</sup> <https://serbestiyet.com/secim2023/secim-2023-vahap-coskun-erdogan-bugunku-dilinin-benzerini-kullandigi-7-haziran-secimlerinde-bekledigini-bulamamisti-126424/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/publication/εθνικισμός-εχθρότητα-και-συμφιλίωση/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://ankaraenstitusu.org/turkiyede-toplum-siyaset-devlet-iliskisine-bakmak/>

*“Nationalism in Turkey is now expressed much less in ethnic terms and more in terms of constitutional and emotional belonging, such as citizenship, love of country, love of city and loyalty to institutions and rules”.*

Remarkably, IYI voters are clearly less nationalistic than those who support the MHP, which is where most of them came from originally, but slightly more nationalistic than the supporters of the CHP.

As far as nationalism is concerned, Balta and Ete argue that the concept of nationalism in Turkey has evolved a considerable distance away from classical Turkish nationalism:

“Nationalism in Turkey is now expressed much less in ethnic terms and more in terms of constitutional and emotional belonging, such as citizenship, love of country, love of city and loyalty to institutions and rules”.

These trends could eventually bring the concept closer to an expression of constitutional patriotism; this is indicative of the profundity of the changes within the CHP and the IYI, when it comes to elaborating and representing a new perception of nationalism.

Also of especial interest is the survey’s finding that government supporters have less democratic reflexes than those of the opposition, reinforcing the view that the opposition and its electoral base are looking ahead to a democratisation of the country.

According to Balta and Ete’s survey, for example, while 67.3% of AKP and 80% of MHP voters would agree to the “banning of political parties if necessary”, only 24.5% of CHP and 34.7% of IYI supporters would be in agreement with such a move.

Similarly, while 86.4% of CHP and 77.6% of IYI supporters agree with the statement “democracy is respect for the rights of minorities and the opposition”, that proportion falls to 66.7% for AKP supporters.

*...a profound social need for change and democratization, as recorded in the rifts between government and opposition supporters over nationalism and democracy.*

In addition, while 32.4% of AKP supporters accept that the legal order could be transcended in order to overcome the country's problems, only 13.5% of CHP and 7.9% of IYI supporters agree with this.

Also of note and indicative of the major changes that have taken place in the Opposition is the difference between the AKP and the opposition in terms of the perception that the security of the state takes precedence over the rights of its citizens. Here, while 67.2% of AKP voters agree with this statist and authoritarian perception, strikingly even supporters of the nationalist MHP manifest less support for this concept, at 66.1%. In contrast, only 26.2% of CHP and 25.7% of IYI supporters share this perception.

## Conclusion

Despite criticism from both within Turkey and abroad that the Turkish Opposition is failing to rise to the occasion and put in place the right strategies to win the elections, it seems that the opposition parties and leaders have actually taken historical steps in the Turkish context to come together and produce a common vision.

Still more importantly, the dynamic that has brought such a diverse group of parties together is not restricted to the common denominator that “Erdoğan has to leave”, but also stems from a profound social need for change and democratization, as recorded in the rifts between government and opposition supporters over nationalism and democracy.

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In this sense, the Turkish opposition is both the vehicle and the mouthpiece for the deeper social transformations while are simultaneously shaping it.

The upcoming elections have therefore emerged as a turning point in Turkey's modern history; a point at which the antagonism between autocratization and democratization will decide the country's future.