



No country for (old-fashioned) opposition

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- Even if the “most important election of the century” happened just two months ago, Turkey is already preparing for another important electoral show-down: the municipal elections of March 2024.
- Since the May elections, the momentum has been with the government, in terms of its alliance, strategy, and programme for the term ahead.
- It is possible that Turkey will have no viable Opposition in the immediate future.
- It looks as if Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, CHP chairman since 2010, will continue as if “nothing has happened”.
- The CHP’s alignment with the extreme right (Zafer) makes a future collaboration with the HDP unlikely.
- The HDP will have a new leadership in November 2023 and might field its own candidates in the 2024 municipal elections.
- The three conservative parties in the Nation Alliance—Saadet, Deva and Gelecek—are facing a crisis of purpose: they are irrelevant independently, but a merger seems unlikely and they are unhappy within the current alliance.
- If the Opposition doesn’t act together, the AKP will most likely enjoy a landslide victory in the March 2024 municipal elections.

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The Turkish opposition is not doing well. After its unexpected and therefore shocking election defeat in May, it has been in intensive care. But with important municipal elections coming up as soon as March 2024, there is no time for licking wounds or passing the buck, for intra-party fights or division. The government is not in the best of states, either, despite the election victory. The AKP, which once raked in 50% of the votes, won just over 35% and is more dependent than ever on the smaller, extreme parties which made up for the AKP's losses. But the unity still exists: the governing (People's) alliance has one issue that unites them across all ideological divides: the fight against the LGBTQ community and the infiltration of Western values which are destroying 'honorable Turkish society.' This is not much, but it seems to be enough. The Opposition also had a theme that bridged all their divides: replacing Erdoğan and returning to the parliamentary system. That failed. If the opposition parties run independently against a united government alliance in the upcoming elections, the AKP will easily claim another victory in 2024, winning back the two major—Istanbul and Ankara—and numerous minor cities the united Opposition managed to win in 2019. If they run together once again, there will still be a few cities and villages in Turkey where the opposition rules, but otherwise Turkey will be a largely Opposition-free zone at both the national and local level.

Opposition(lessness) after depolitization

In Turkey, there is a danger of oppositionlessness. Not in a sense that no more opposition parties will exist, or that one-party rule will be introduced by banning other parties. More in a practical sense of an Opposition that cannot win elections and no longer believes in its ability to do so; the presence of an Opposition like that actually serves to legitimize the government, which can point to it and say Turkey is still democratic.

Two recent developments have paved the way for this situation:

1) As positive as it was that the Opposition—which included Kemalist, social democratic, nationalist, market liberal and religiously conservative parties—came together in an electoral alliance, the Nation Alliance or 'Table of 6', this also had the effect of depoliticizing both the Opposition and the political debate. Several issues could not be debated, due to the politicians involved. Meral Akşener criticized the government for talking to terrorists during the so-called Oslo talks in the early 2010s, but Ali Babacan was foreign minister at the time; Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu criticized the AKP's policy on Syria, but Ahmet Davutoğlu was its architect. The conservative-religious parties could not mention their contribution to the advancing of certain rights, because these were achieved against the CHP. As a result, the Opposition had to agree on a 'don't talk politics' agenda, focusing on replacing Erdoğan and hoping that the poor state of the economy and the fallout from the earthquakes after February 2023 would serve them up election victory on a golden platter.

2) The state of the Opposition after the elections.

A state of shock immediately after the elections is understandable. But two months after the elections and with just eight months to go before the next important show-down at the polls, and there are still few signs that the Opposition has recovered from defeat and is realigning itself in terms of both personnel and content. Far from it: Not a

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single leading politician has resigned. In essence, everyone is blaming everyone else, and the tendency is away from cooperation and toward everyone fighting on alone. In the current political system, however, this is tantamount to sinking into irrelevance. Mehmet Ocaktan, the former AKP MP for Bursa and now a *Karar* columnist, commented that the opposition [“has still not recovered and is in a state of collapse. It seems that at this rate they will not wake up until the local elections.”](#)

CHP: “as if nothing has happened”

The most important, and by far the largest (25.8% on 14 May), opposition party is the CHP. Its chairman was the Opposition’s presidential candidate, and it holds the mayorships of the three largest cities. It therefore also has the greatest responsibility for the present and future of the Opposition.

Even for well-disposed observers, the idea of brushing off a few party bylaws and selling this as a new approach is difficult to understand. Kılıçdaroğlu is 74 years old, and the election result could have been an occasion to step down with honor.

After the elections, the party has been primarily concerned with itself and finds itself at a crossroads on several fronts including its political orientation, leadership and potential future alliances. It is not that there is no debate about change, just that, rather than a serious discussion about people, content and programs, it has taken the form of a semantic debate between the Imamoğlu and [Kılıçdaroğlu camps](#) about the relative benefits of, respectively, ‘change’ and ‘renewal’. The latter, the CHP chairman since 2010, has gained much respect since 2018 as the architect of the 6-party opposition alliance. However, since the elections, he has been frittering this hard-earned reputation away by clinging to power. As Ocaktan notes: he has behaved [“as if nothing happened, saying ‘It’s not the end of the world.’ Of course, it is not the end of the world and life goes on, but if this trend continues, the future does not look very good.”](#) Even for well-disposed observers, the idea of brushing off a few party bylaws and selling this as a new approach is difficult to understand. Kılıçdaroğlu is 74 years old, and the election result could have been an occasion to step down with honor. On the other side, Imamoğlu’s understanding of change is focused first and foremost on a change in leadership and does not even touch upon more profound questions of programmatics and strategy. Imamoğlu, arguably the most popular CHP politician right now, has gone so far as to [launch a website](#) called “Change for power” and hold several controversial zoom meetings with party members. Some of these meetings were leaked, prompting veteran journalist Ismail Saymaz to note that [“The era of tape wars has begun at the CHP.”](#) At the same time, another era, albeit a short one, seems to be coming to an end. Istanbul Mayor Imamoğlu has been one of the losers within the CHP in recent months, and his chances of being put forward as the mayoral candidate for Istanbul once again are considered to be slim. Not only because of his court cases, but also because of his lack of backing within the CHP. However, his being dropped will accelerate the general weakening of the CHP and its appeal to broader voter groups.

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This is unfortunate, because for [Mesut Yeğen](#), it is decisive whether and how the CHP, which he calls the “locomotive” of the Opposition, evolves over the next few years.

Whether the Opposition fall apart or presents a united front, whether it is strong or weak, and whether it can be seen as an alternative to the AKP, depends above all on the CHP.

[Vahap Coşkun, professor of Law at Diyarbakır's Dicle University, sees three possibilities](#) for the CHP: the party can 1) return to its 'golden' Kemalist period, readopting the traditional secularist vision the CHP media seems to favor; 2) grasp that a pure Kemalist vision does not win elections but, fearing radical change, aim for slow and piecemeal change; 3) continue its strategy of opening up to new voter groups, whether they be conservative, religious or Kurdish.

The sole criterion for partnering up has been that the prospective partner is against the AKP.

Additionally, there is the question of how to deal with the now long-standing cooperation with centre-right and rightist parties, which have been ongoing since 2014, when the CHP put forward a joint presidential candidate with the MHP. After 2018, this cooperation became more institutionalized within the Nation Alliance of six parties, in which the CHP's five partners are all centre-right or right, or have roots in political Islam. What is more, the CHP also included former high-ranking AKP politicians like Abdüllatif Sener and Sadullah Ergin in its list, which caused discomfort among its base. The sole criterion for partnering up has been that the prospective partner is against the AKP. As Armağan Öztürk put it: "[In the past, being a CHP member meant embracing an Atatürkist, social democratic republicanism. Now, thanks to Kılıçdaroğlu's mistaken strategy, it is enough to be anti-AKP. This is our major defeat. A party without an ideology is doomed to disappear.](#)"

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However, the idea of cooperating with the right seems to have become even stronger since the first round of the presidential elections on 14 May. [On 24 May, Kılıçdaroğlu and the leader of the anti-immigration and hardcore nationalist Zafer Party, Ümit Özdağ, agreed on a 7-point plan](#) for Zafer Party's to support Kılıçdaroğlu in the second round of the elections. After the elections, [Özdağ even said that Kılıçdaroğlu had offered him three portfolios](#), including the ministry of the interior, and the head of the secret service.

The CHP will continue along this path if Kılıçdaroğlu remains at the helm. A change in leadership at the upcoming party congress, which will be held after 15 October when the provincial congresses are all held, seems highly unlikely. Since the chairperson is elected by delegates who are chosen by the party leader and depend on him, there is usually no chance for a challenger, even if that person is more popular among the party members and the wider public. Even though Kılıçdaroğlu is also the architect of a policy of reaching out to the Kurds with a policy of reconciliation, the CHP cannot cooperate with the extreme right (Zafer) and expect to receive the support of the pro-Kurdish HDP. Since formal agreements are already in place with Zafer, that decision seems to have been made already; it looks as if the focus on the right has reduced the spectrum of partners the CHP can work with.

Meral Akşener was confirmed as party chairwoman; as the only candidate, she received 1127 of the 1151 delegate votes.

IYI Parti

The second largest party (9.9% on 14 May) in the Nation Alliance, the secular urban nationalist IYI (Good) Party, was the first to hold a party congress after the elections. Meral Akşener was confirmed as party chairwoman; as the only candidate, she received 1127 of the 1151 delegate votes, with 24 invalid votes. In her speech, which lasted a good hour, she attacked inner-party critics and overturned the 'table of 6' for a second time: "[Good bye and all the best for the future!](#)"

After Kılıçdaroğlu's visit to Akşener on 13 July, which was officially sold as a courtesy visit to congratulate Akşener on her re-election, there were rumors that the two leaders also talked about possible cooperation in the local elections.

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However, less than a month later, the party was sounding more conciliatory. After [Kılıçdaroğlu's visit to Akşener](#) on 13 July, which was officially sold as a courtesy visit to congratulate Akşener on her re-election, there were rumors that the two leaders also talked about possible cooperation in the local elections. This was reinforced a week later, when [Iyi Party functionaries were quoted as saying a deal might be possible](#) if IYI Party could field candidates in cities like Adana, Mersin and Manisa and have the CHP back them. The [CHP TV channel, Halk](#), has also begun to look more positively on potential cooperation between the two parties. However, during the 2023 election campaign, the IYI Party was the most unstable of the 6 partners. [Akşener left the Table of Xix in early March](#), wanting another presidential candidate. After the elections, the Zafer Party chairman Özdağ claimed on the [YouTube channel of the popular TV host Fatih Altaylı that, according to internal surveys, Iyi Party voters voted for Sinan Ogan in the first round and abstained in the second round](#), which means they never voted for Kılıçdaroğlu at all. These revelations won't make a new IYI party collaboration within the Opposition easier.

Unlike the other four partners, the Iyi Party ran under their own name with separate lists and demonstrated a powerful desire to act independently. Unlike the situation with the HDP, however, a CHP collaboration with both Zafer and Iyi would be possible from an ideological point of view.

Deva, Gelecek, Saadet

The small religious-conservative parties benefited significantly from their participation in the Nation Alliance. Saadet and Gelecek each gained 10 deputies, Deva even managed 15. Nevertheless, the parties must be worried about their future, because their approval ratings with the electorate are heading for zero. The AKP splinter parties Deva and Gelecek in particular, which set out to take votes away from the AKP, must be considered a failure. Saadet, which is considered a textbook representative of political Islam, is after all just a microparty. In the few polls conducted after the elections, the three parties were not even listed individually. The percentage of respondents who said they would vote for "other parties" in the upcoming Istanbul municipal election was [2.8% in the ASAL poll](#), [3.2% in the HBS](#) and [1.3% in the Argetus poll](#). In the latter, Saadet was mentioned by name with 0.3% of the vote.

That is why participation in the Nation Alliance poses a dilemma for all three. They are unhappy within it, because of the ideological differences, but they are doomed to political irrelevance outside of it. During the election campaign, they complained that they could only appear in CHP-affiliated media, where they were required to engage in self-criticism and spread AKP gossip, rather than present their policies. Deva, in particular, complained that as a result of this, it was perceived as just one of the anti-AKP parties and not as a liberal party.¹

Immediately after the elections, the three parties began to discuss the possibility of forming a parliamentary group, which could also lead to a complete merging of the parties. However, it quickly became clear that [only Saadet and Gelecek could reach an agreement and thus form a joint parliamentary group](#) under the name Saadet; with the minimum of 20 deputies, it became the 6th parliamentary group in the current parliament.

¹ Several conversations the author had with DEVA MPs and functionaries after the elections, in both Turkey and Europe.

On 12 July, Saadet and Gelecek had their first parliamentary group meeting. During the opening, the chairman of Saadet, Temel Karamollaoğlu, said: [“This parliamentary group is the headquarters of Milli Görüş \(National Vision\) politics in the parliament, ... of the ideals of the just state that our teacher Erbakan internalized and targeted. Those who mistake the National Vision for a shirt cannot understand and comprehend us.”](#) This may explain why Deva did not want to participate, since it views itself not as part of political Islam, but as a party with a much broader outlook.

Even if Deva argued that there were “deep, insurmountable and irreconcilable” differences, his view was not shared by the voters. “In short, these parties were stillborn, in a way.”

However, after the decision not to join the parliamentary group, an article by Vahap Coşkun published on 26 June entitled [“An arrogance that finds no ‘cure’”](#) (‘deva’ also meaning cure/remedy in Turkish) triggered a debate questioning Deva’s positioning since its founding. According to Coşkun, Ahmet Davutoğlu wanted a single party to become the home of disenfranchised AKP voters, but Babacan and his colleagues did not want to play along: “Through this, two parties (Gelecek and Deva) have emerged.” While Davutoğlu has always spoken of the possibility of merging the parties, Babacan has always been less receptive to the idea. Even if Deva argued that there were “deep, insurmountable and irreconcilable” differences, his view was not shared by the voters. “In short, these parties were stillborn, in a way.” For Coşkun, the insistence on these differences has tainted DEVA in the public eyes with an “incurable arrogance.”

Mehmet Emin Ekmen, a former AKP MP, founding member of DEVA and since May one of the party’s MPs, answered Coşkun. [“I think it is a serious injustice to our party to declare DEVA responsible for all the processes,”](#) Emin argued in response to a piece Coşkun published in his column on Serbestiyet, saying his analysis was flawed, due to a lack of internal information. Ekmen argued that “It seems that if there had been more open communication about the processes, and if our arguments had been discussed more vigorously in public, we might not be facing some of these accusations today.” According to Ekmen, it was Davutoğlu who founded his party quickly when Babacan’s team was still in the process of developing a program and statute. And for Ekmen, there is a programmatic difference, because Deva is neither ethnically- nor religiously-based and avoids rhetoric about being part of a cause: “I don’t think such a divergence should be underestimated as a difference.” Also, concerning cooperation in parliament or a possible merger, Ekmen wrote that the proposed model, with a co- or rotating presidency, was not a good fit for conservative voters.

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The three parties will continue to face this dilemma: they are irrelevant independently, while a merger seems difficult and there is no guarantee it will end their political irrelevance, and they are unhappy in the alliance with the Kemalist CHP, in which they are forced to play the role of AKP bashers.

HDP

The HDP was among the clearest losers of the recent elections, with a [weak result of just 8.8 percent, down from almost 12 percent in 2018. There were several reasons for this loss of 3 % of the electorate and 5 MPs; they have just 62 now](#), while 100 MPs was the initial goal. It starts with the name. Due to ongoing legal proceedings to ban the party, it has decided to run under the umbrella of the small [Green Left Party \(YSP\)](#); in the end, however, this made it more difficult for its core voters to identify with the party. In addition, the HDP/YSP didn’t run alone, but in an [alliance with several small leftist parties](#). In particular the (lack of) collaboration and coordination with the [TIP \(Turkish Workers’ Party\)](#), which ran on its own lists in half of the provinces, prevented a better result and cost the HDP several MPs. The lack of a proper election campaign, and local

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candidates who were perceived as weak, also contributed to this poor result, with the voters confronted with a cacophony of actors: the HDP plus the DBP, DTK, YSP and the small parties in the alliance. Beyond these campaign issues, there seem to have been more deep-seated problems, too. Since the 2015 elections, the HDP's political agenda has not really evolved beyond being anti-AKP and labelling Erdoğan's rule a dictatorship. Finally, the long-time criticisms centred on a lack of democracy within the party and a lack of emancipation from the PKK also remain unsolved.

This led to a loss in votes, but also to a change in how the party is perceived. However, unlike the leaderships of the other parties, [the current HDP co-leadership of Pervin Buldan and Mithat Sancar announced back in early June that they would not be candidates at the upcoming party congress](#) scheduled for November.

However, this won't be the only change. The Kurds seem to have lost out under the presidential system, which forced the parties to form into two big alliances, one led by the AKP the other by the CHP. Formally unaligned, the HDP opted to support the CHP-led alliance, which had played an important role in the CHP winning the mayorships in Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Adana and Mersin in 2019. [In 2023, the party did not present its own presidential candidate, either, but declared its support for Kılıçdaroğlu](#). This strategy gained the HDP little. They remain the "ugly duck" of the political system with whom nobody wants to play, their elected mayors were replaced by state trustees (*kayyum*), the arrests of its functionaries continue, and leading HDP politicians such as Demirtaş, Kışanak and Yüksekdağ remain in prison. As a consequence, now ex-co-chairwoman Buldan said on 1 July: ["We will continue our efforts to achieve great success in the \[municipal\] elections in order to prove our existence in this struggle by nominating our candidates everywhere in all our provinces, especially in metropolitan cities."](#) This "third-way strategy" will not be limited to the municipal elections. There will be an overall assessment of the party's support for the CHP and its alliance. This is because, first, during the election campaign, the [IYI Party approached the HDP in the same way as the government, and second because, after the first round of presidential elections the CHP signed an agreement with Ümit Özdağ's Zafer Party, by which Kılıçdaroğlu indirectly accepted the state's trustee policy towards the HDP](#). If the HDP/YSP fields candidates outside their core constituencies, this will have an important impact on the arithmetic in Istanbul and Ankara, but also in cities like Adana, Mersin or Antalya where there is a significant Kurdish community. This would definitely cool relations between the HDP and the CHP, but could lead to a new rapprochement with the AKP. The new cabinet once again includes some AKP politicians who are known to be liberals as well as some Kurds, and the new minister of foreign affairs is probably the state functionary who is best acquainted with the Kurdish political movement. In such an atmosphere, even the imprisoned founder of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, could return to the political stage. Since he did not express any views during the election campaign, of all the politicians in Kurdish political movement, he has emerged the least damaged by the political strategies of recent months. Öcalan could therefore play a more prominent role once again, which could also include a repeat of his demand that the PKK lay down its arms. If the AKP behaves in a less authoritarian way in response and abandons the trustee policy, why should the HDP stick with a CHP-led ever more nationalistic alliance, which is courting the extreme right?

Conclusion: Towards the 2024 Municipal Elections

There is a saying in German soccer that after the match is before the match. For Turkey in 2023/2024, this means that after the national elections is before the municipal

These elections will determine whether the AKP can rule for four years with virtually no opposition to speak of, or whether a corrective will exist.

The economy is unlikely to improve significantly before March 2024, and inflation and prices will remain high, but this will not decide the elections.

In contrast, with its new cabinet, its rapprochement with the EU (at the level of rhetoric, at least), debates on a potential large-scale amnesty to mark the 100th anniversary of the Republic, Turkey's role within NATO and in the war in Ukraine, the government can both distract from the day-to-day problems and pose as an important player on the international stage.

elections. On 31 March 2024, another very important election will take place. These elections will determine whether the AKP can rule for four years with virtually no opposition to speak of, or whether a corrective will exist. Should the AKP win back Istanbul and Ankara, the Opposition strongholds would shrink to Eastern Thrace (CHP), parts of the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts (CHP/IYI) and the Kurdish-majority provinces in the Southeast (HDP).

In order to hold and win important cities, the opposition needs a message to motivate its voters and convince the undecided. In the May elections, the opposition thought it would win “automatically” because of the dire economic situation. The economy is unlikely to improve significantly before March 2024, and inflation and prices will remain high, but this will not decide the elections.

The elections will be decided by the unity of the alliances and their programmatic offerings. And in both of these, the Opposition clearly lags behind the government at present. While the unity of the governing alliance is certain, it is more than questionable for the Opposition. The CHP alliance is faced with three major issues: 1) rivalry with the IYI Party, which could result in both parties fielding candidates in the same cities. 2) the three religio-conservative parties and 3) relations with the HDP, which could also field its own candidates.

The task facing the CHP is nothing short of squaring the circle. As Mesut Yeğen puts it: [“the CHP leadership must find a way to bring secularists, nationalists, conservatives and Kurds together not only in an institutional alliance but also around a common vision.”](#) This is not realistic, because such a broad alliance could never be political.

Therefore Vahap Coşkun believes that such an alliance is no longer possible: [“there is no climate that would make it possible for the CHP and these parties to stand side by side in the 2024 elections. Because the voters of these parties have not warmed to the union, while the CHP's base and media have not accepted it, either.”](#) But for Coşkun, the CHP is currently too preoccupied with itself and unable to focus on the local elections. “Preoccupied with its own internal affairs, the CHP cannot spare time for society, cannot listen to the demands of society, does not develop policies to address it, and naturally loses the elections.” That is why “unless there is a change in the current state of affairs, which is very unlikely, Turkey will witness the CHP's next fateful defeat in 2024.” Ahmet Sözer largely agrees that, if no new motivation can be found, [“the AKP will be handed a second victory “on a golden platter” in the local elections after the general elections.”](#)

Since the May elections, the momentum has been with the government: the opposition parties have been focused on their own internal affairs and the alliance idea seems somewhat distant at present. In contrast, with its new cabinet, its rapprochement with the EU (at the level of rhetoric, at least), debates on a potential large-scale amnesty to mark the 100th anniversary of the Republic, Turkey's role within NATO and in the war in Ukraine, the government can both distract from the day-to-day problems and pose as an important player on the international stage.

For Fuat Keyman, the director of the IPC think tank, the government is now making the right moves and the Opposition—particularly Kılıçdaroğlu and the CHP—the wrong ones, with the party [“giving the appearance of having a course of action that does not care about those who voted for it, and most importantly and negatively, leaving the governance of Turkey entirely in the hands of President Erdoğan and the government. The risk of a ‘Turkey without opposition’, which we have experienced in previous periods, is increasing.”](#) In the mid-term, all these developments could lead to a situation

similar to that in Russia, where there is only a *cosmetic* opposition, much of which serves to legitimize the government and some of which cooperates with it. This would not reflect the political preferences of the Turkish population at all; indeed, 48% would no longer be represented. As Erdi Öztürk put it: “[In a normatively divided society, such a situation would make Turkey unlivable for one part of society.](#)” This is not yet the case, but a course has been set in that direction.

The best hope for the Opposition is that there are still eight months to go before the municipal elections, which is an eternity in politics. So things can still change, of course, but they are unlikely to.

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