

Coalition Building before 2023 Presidential Elections in Turkey: What Lies Ahead?

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Abstract

Although the presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey are scheduled for June 2023, the opposition still advocates for an early vote. This policy paper provides an analysis of the current alliance formations together with the several factors that are expected to affect the future of the elections and the political atmosphere of Turkey. Among examined factors are the role of the pro-Kurdish party HDP, the impact of the modified electoral system, and the emergence of the two new right-wing parties.

Introduction

In June 2023, when the Republic of Turkey will be celebrating its 100th anniversary, the country will witness very important presidential and parliamentary elections at the same time (unless there is an early vote, of course). The results of the vote will have a grave impact on the future political orientation of Turkey. In this election, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power since 2002, will compete in an alliance that has been formed together with the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Great Unity Party (BBP) under the name of *Cumhur İttifaki* (People's Alliance).

On the other hand, the Social Democratic-Republican People's Party (CHP), which has been the main opposition party since 2002, has formed a political bloc with the center-right IYI Party, Islamist Felicity Party (SP) and the Democrat Party (DP) under the name of *Millet İttifaki* (Nation Alliance). In addition, newly established parties such as former AKP member Ali Babacan's DEVA Party and former prime minister from AKP Ahmet

Davutoğlu's Future Party have declared their support for the Nation Alliance likely supporting its presidential candidate in the second round. Although the presidential candidate of the Nation Alliance is still point at issue, each alliance is expected to put forward their own candidates, President Erdoğan most likely being the candidate of the People's Alliance. The parties within the alliances shall also cooperate in the parliamentary election of 2023. In addition, it is expected the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which the Kurds in Turkey have voted for largely, will enter the elections as an independent party and will put forward its own presidential candidate in the first round.

This policy paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of coalition-building and the external support for the respective coalitions. Also, the position of the pro-Kurdish HDP party, which has a crucial role in the opposition, in the upcoming presidential election will be discussed. In addition, the impact of the current changes in the parliamentary electoral system on the party/bloc strategies will take its place in this policy paper.

People's Alliance Under Erdoğan Leadership

The AKP, an Islamist center-right party that has been ruling Turkey since 2002, has been one of the most successful political formations in the history of modern Turkey in terms of electoral performance. The AKP and its leader President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have won all of the eight national elections and three referendums.¹ However, it is expected that Erdoğan and his party are about to receive the lowest support ever in the upcoming elections.

There are two main actors in the decision-making in the People's Alliance: the MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli and the AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. These leaders also have a profound impact on the state administration. Both monopolize the decision-making often without including executive bodies or party structures in the process. Along with the public and their voters, it has been observed that sometimes even the party executives and members of the party

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organs learn about the issues Bahçeli and Erdoğan agree on behind the closed doors either through their statements or through the press.

Since the formation of the People's Alliance in 2018, the AKP-MHP coalition has experienced one referendum, one parliamentary election, one local election, and one presidential election, in which the MHP and the AKP has shown a significant loyalty and support for each other. Prior to the 2016 coup attempt, the MHP was one of the biggest critics of the AKP. The parties had strong disagreements until they have come together on the basis of the 'locality and nationality.'ⁱⁱ This rapid change of the relationship between the AKP and the MHP, therefore, requires a deeper analysis.

The developments leading to the formation of the alliance date back to the period after the coup attempt of 15 July 2016. Especially the AKP and the MHP were in full agreement on the declaration of the State of Emergency after the coup, which lasted nearly two years.ⁱⁱⁱ After the July 15 coup attempt, the AKP, the MHP and the CHP held a rally in Istanbul under the name "Democracy and Martyrs' Meeting" in order to show solidarity against the coup attempt. Following this rally, the process of political rapprochement between the AKP and the MHP accelerated. The manifestation of the statist and nationalist discourse in politics brought the two parties psychologically even closer.

Moreover, the MHP, due to its political and ideological standpoint, gave full support to the AKP regarding several military operations against pro-Kurdish rebel groups in Northern Syria after 2016. This coincided with the collapsed government's talks aiming at resolving the conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party by late 2015.

In addition, one of the factors that affected the MHP's rapprochement with the AKP was the fluctuations that the MHP has experienced within the party after the 1 November 2015 elections. The MHP, which went through a challenging period due

to an emergence of the opposition within the party, came closer to the AKP with a sharp policy change in addition to the coup attempt. Bahçeli associated the problems experienced within the party with the Gülen Movement and chose to act together with the AKP. Gülen Movement, whose leader is Fethullah Gülen, who has been living in the United States for decades, is recognized by Turkey as a terrorist organization and the movement is accused of attempting the coup in 2016. This Islamic community had long been operating freely in Turkey until the disagreements arose between the state and the organization. Lastly, it was a necessary decision for Erdoğan to build such an alliance in order to get a certain number of votes that was required for him to achieve his goals such as the change of system.

The Opposition Bloc: Nation Alliance

The Nation Alliance, led by the main opposition party the CHP, is preparing for the 2023 Presidential elections with much more self-confidence and assertiveness than in the pre-2018 period. The CHP under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu since 2010, adopted a more inclusive approach towards different political groups (including Islamists, centre-right-, and right-wing parties). Unlike in the past elections, the CHP boosted its cooperation with these actors. An example is the inclusion of the SP, Islamist Felicity Party, which has been a part of the Nation Alliance in the past elections.

Additionally, the steady rise of the IYI Party, founded by Meral Akşener, who was before leaving a key figure in the far-right the MHP, has been a significant turning point for the Nation Alliance. The IYI Party managed to bring in more rightist-nationalist votes to the Nation Alliance.^{iv} In the parliamentary elections in 2018 and local elections in 2019, Akşener's party achieved getting over 9% of the votes, despite having participated in the elections for the first time.^v Moreover, recent polls estimate the IYI Party's support to be over 15% in the upcoming parliamentary elections.



At the same time, as a result of the bloc's strategy adopted by the CHP's Kılıçdaroğlu, there has been significant cooperation with the former AKP members such as Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoğlu, who have recently established their own right-wing parties after leaving the AKP. Although these parties have not yet reached significant support, it is expected that they might get the support of certain groups among the AKP voters. Ideological affinity with the AKP supporters, the successful image of Babacan as a former Minister of Finance, and a wave of opposition breakdown that Davutoğlu has created within the AKP are some of the reasons that might encourage the AKP voters to support these two parties. Both Davutoğlu and Babacan may potentially attract those AKP voters who are dissatisfied with the recent Erdoğan administration and still prefer to vote for the people that come from the AKP tradition. Despite the fact that these two newly established parties have not officially joined the Nation Alliance yet, they have declared their support together with the members of the Nation Alliance for returning to the “Strengthened parliamentary system.”^{vi}

The opposition Nation Alliance bloc has clearly shown their dissatisfaction regarding the benefits of the new ‘Turkish Style’ presidential government system. The main difference between the presidential system and the presidential government system is the separation of powers. While the separation of power is fully implemented in the normal presidential system, the power of the president have is increased and the power of the parliament is reduced in the presidential government system, thus the principle of separation of powers has been removed from practice. With this system, the office of the prime minister has been abolished and the president became the head of the executive. Moreover, it also allows the president to be head of a party while performing duties, which is the case of Erdoğan as he has been both president and the leader of the AKP.

After all, the Nation Alliance is an alliance model that has the aim of cooperation in the election. The ideological and political positions of these parties in the political spectrum are also some examples of their differences among themselves. As a matter of fact, this difference manifests itself in various daily political preferences and discourses.

The political parties of the Nation Alliance often adopt different positions on certain issues. So far, for instance in case of Istanbul Convention, which is an international convention adopted within the scope of combating violence against women and has been terminated in Turkey last year by a presidential decree, the Islamist Felicity party has taken a different position than all the other members of the alliance. Another example of this division among the parties in this alliance can be the issue of cross-border military operations that has taken place against Kurdish groups in the northern Syria and the PKK in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Regarding the opinions on the cross-border military operations, it has been observed that the IYI Party has taken completely positive approach while the CHP criticized these operations.

The main reason of these divergence is simply related to the fact that the Nation Alliance includes a wide array of political actors from the center-left to the far right of the political spectrum,^{vii} and it creates difficulties to reach a consensus on certain major issues. Some of the issues, in addition to what has been mentioned above, include the disagreement between the CHP and the IYI Party on the case of lifting the immunity of some HDP MPs, differences in the parties’ perspective on the jailed former HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş, and the potential refugee policies of the parties involved in the alliance. However, these divergences do not cause any problems in the alliance, because all these political preferences and debates do not affect the aim of the alliance, which is to defeat Erdoğan and the AKP. The parties are well aware of these distinctions.



Nevertheless, as it can be seen in the table below, current polls estimate that the Nation Alliance of the CHP-IYI Party is ahead of the AKP-MHP alliance by nearly 4%. The latest polls^{viii} also demonstrate that the voting preferences of the small newly established parties such as the DEVA and the Future Party along with the pro-Kurdish HDP will have a crucial role in the elections. Their voters' behavior will likely play a crucial role in the second round of presidential elections as it is unlikely that Erdoğan or any other candidate will receive over 50% in the first round.

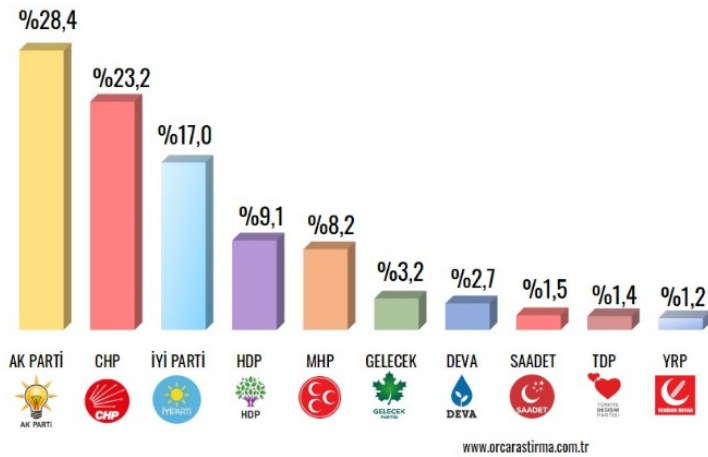


Table 1: Latest election polls from April 2022 by ORC. ORC was the most successful survey company in terms of forecasting results in the last elections. Source: <https://orcarastirma.com.tr/>

Modified Electoral System

The “Law on the Amendment of the Election Law” prepared by the AKP and the MHP has been adopted by the Parliament of Turkey on March 31.^{ix} The CHP has opposed the amendment and criticized the government for “changing the rules of the game” right before the elections. By the new law, the country's electoral threshold has been reduced to 7% from 10%. According to the new regulation, if the total number of votes received by the alliance exceeds the threshold, the calculation and distribution of deputies in the electoral districts will be made by taking into account the number of votes received by each party in the alliance. In that regard, the number of deputies to be issued by each of the political parties forming the alliance will be determined by the general D'Hondt practice, based

on the number of votes obtained within the alliance in each constituency.

The modified electoral law will have its most important impact on the small parties, particularly the ones that are already in an alliance. First of all, the modified law has the aim of making the alliance for the parties that have low amount of vote useless. According to new law, the parties with low votes within the alliance will not be able to make a positive contribution to the number of deputies that the entire alliance will have. Therefore, it has been made more difficult for parties with low votes to elect deputies from the alliance, which has now forced the small parties within the Nation Alliance to consider alternative options.

Another controversial aspect of the amendment has been the regulation made within the framework of “compliance with the presidential government system,” the president was exempted from “election bans.” Accordingly, the president will be able to use office and official vehicles, hold opening ceremonies, hold official banquets, participate in welcoming and farewell ceremonies held with state facilities, from the start of the election propaganda to the day following the election day. However, ministers, deputies and heads of political parties will have to comply with these prohibitions. With the regulation made within the framework of “compliance with the presidential government system,” the president was exempted from “election bans.”

For political parties, forming a group in the Parliament of Turkey will not be one of the sufficient conditions for participating in the elections. In order for a political party to qualify to participate in the elections, it will need to be organized in at least half of the provinces. A political party that fails to hold its district, provincial and grand congress two times in a row within the periods stipulated in the Political Parties Law and its statute will lose its eligibility to participate in the elections. However, it is important to mention that the modified electoral law will not be implemented in the case of early elections.



What might be Erdoğan's Aim of Modifying the System?

The government defended the regulation on the grounds that the injustice caused by the votes should be eliminated and justice should be ensured in representation. However, according to the opposition and political analysts, the primary goal of the government was to prevent the expansion of the Nation Alliance by making it meaningless for parties with low votes to remain in the alliance.^x In this way, it was aimed to prevent the SP, the DEVA and the Future Party in the conservative right bloc from entering the elections within the Nation Alliance, and to preserve the parliamentary majority in the parliament even if the Presidency is lost. According to the constitution, the amendments to the electoral law can enter into force after one year after the approval of the amendments. Therefore, it can be estimated that the People's Alliance under the Erdoğan leadership has thrown off the idea of an early election. The AKP and the MHP officials also stated in their statements that they ended the early election discussions with the submission of the law proposal to the Turkish Parliament.

The People's Alliance, in particular President Erdoğan, is quite uncomfortable with the conservative right parties taking part in the Nation Alliance with the CHP. The current situation (before the amendment of the law) gives parties such as the SP, the Future and the DEVA the chance to elect deputies under their own names, even if they were in an alliance. The last modification completely eliminates this situation. It obliges the smaller parties to join the main parties of the alliance. The People's Alliance might aim that mandatory cooperation of conservative parties with the CHP or IYI Party to create a break in the DEVA, the Future and the SP voters.

The Kurdish political movement, meaning the HDP, generally acted independently until the elections of June 7 in 2015. However, the HDP party cooperated and sided with the AKP after the June 2015

elections. The HDP was the only opposition party that has accepted to form a coalition with the AKP in order to establish an interim election government.^{xi} Yet, the situation changed after the 2015 elections and developments regarding the peace process that had been going on between the state and the PKK. After the developments, the HDP has clearly taken a position against the AKP and Erdoğan leadership. Naturally, the pressure on the party has also increased. Despite all the obstacles, the HDP exceeded the 10% threshold in every election since June 2015. The election threshold, in a sense, connected the HDP and the anti-AKP opposition with an invisible bond. With this move regarding the decrease of the election threshold to 7%, the AKP might also be aiming to bring the support for the Kurdish movement to a neutral point like before June 2015 and this could work out to decrease the votes of the HDP as it is believed that a number of the CHP voters supported the HDP to allow the party to exceed the thresholds and take its place in the parliament.

HDP Question

Although the HDP was not a part of the Nation Alliance in the previous elections, there has been a significant impact of the HDP's support in the opposition. Despite the fact that the HDP was not a part of the alliance officially, the party decided to support the opposition candidates in the second round of the last election. With the support of the HDP, the Nation Alliance succeeded in getting ahead of the People's Alliance (the AKP and the MHP) in metropolitan cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Adana and Antalya. After this support, the HDP votes have always been the subject of discussion.^{xii}

President Erdoğan and the head of far-right MHP have frequently emphasized the relationship of the HDP with the PKK and claimed that the Nation Alliance is in cooperation with this party due to their crucial support in the elections. The leaders of these parties have been constantly accusing the CHP and the IYI Party of "supporting terrorism." However,



the IYI Party leader Meral Akşener has strongly avoided direct contact with the HDP and rejected the HDP to take a part in the Nation Alliance. The main reasons behind the ‘demonization’ of the HDP are related to its ideology, political demands, and links with the PKK. Since the demands of the HDP in the case of discussions regarding the autonomy/local governance, education in the mother tongue, and the inclusion of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in the solution of the Kurdish question show significant alignment with the PKK’s demands, the HDP party has been functioning in a politically sensitive environment in which it’s been very hard to officially cooperate with the other political groups. Therefore, the other opposition parties appear to be uncertain with regard to a possible alliance with the HDP as they fail to estimate the impact of this cooperation in the Turkish society and its effect on their election results.

The HDP, similar to the Nation Alliance and the other opposition parties, prioritizes the change of the current presidential system back to the parliamentary structure. Moreover, the co-chairs Pervin Buldan and Mithat Sancar declared the main principles for the upcoming election including a democratic solution to the Kurdish question, peaceful foreign policy, freedom and equality for women, and economical justice, establishing a new democratic constitution and independent judiciary.

Another development that has been perceived as an election strategy of Erdoğan against the HDP was the case of closure of the HDP. Turkey's Constitutional Court accepted the indictment regarding the HDP closure case. The indictment includes accusations against the HDP that "party buildings have been turned into terror cells," it is "not criticizing the PKK," or "propagandizing for a terrorist organization," and so on. The possible closure of the HDP seems to be benefiting the nationalist MHP most as the far-right party aims to gain an ideological advantage over Kurdish nationalism. Moreover, it is obvious that the AKP does not want the HDP, which has 9-13% of the

vote share, to cooperate with the opposition. Therefore, one of the strategies could be to limit the support of the HDP voters for the opposition by closing the party.

The search for the “3rd Way,” which was an initiative by the HDP with regards to the possibility of forming another alliance different from than People's and Nation Alliances, started at the beginning of this year with the call of the HDP.^{xiii} It is very likely that the HDP will form another alliance together with the other left-wing parties as they have cooperated similarly in the previous elections. Again, upon the call of the HDP, eight left, and socialist groups held their second meeting in February 2022 and a decision was made to act on the basis of a common struggle. While no decision regarding the alliance has yet been taken on the 3rd Way, it is estimated that as in the previous elections, the other left-wing parties consider the option of allowing their candidates to be elected from the HDP lists. However, as happened in the previous elections, the HDP party will most likely support the opposition candidate in the possible second round of the presidential election. As the opposition of Nation Alliance is also aware of the importance of the votes from the HDP supporters, there might be an attempt to get closer with the HDP voters in the second round as well.

Conclusion

The presidential elections of 2023 in Turkey have vital importance for the political and socioeconomic future of the country. Perhaps for the first time during the AKP governance, the polls predict a significant decrease in the support for the AKP and estimate the loss of the People’s Alliance. The victory of the opposition in the main largest cities in Turkey in the last municipal election of 2019 has been another sign of the decrease in the support for the AKP regime. The recent changes in the electoral law can also be understood as the last cards played by the Erdoğan and the AKP to curb the support for the opposition.



On the other hand, the Nation Alliance consisting primarily of the CHP and the IYI Party has been trying to extend the scale of the alliance by establishing a relationship with the newly formed right-wing parties. However, the relationship of the Nation Alliance with the pro-Kurdish HDP is still unclear. Especially the IYI Party is concerned about openly working with the HDP as it would risk losing its nationalist voters. The HDP is consider having ties with the PKK and the party that does not recognize the PKK as a terrorist organization unlike all the other parties in the country.

The candidate selection also plays a crucial role in the strategies of the two alliances. President Erdoğan still has not declared his candidacy for the elections and in the opposition, there is still an invisible dispute over the candidate selection as the parties in the coalition differ ideologically. As it is known, the support of the HDP also depends on the profile of the Nation Alliance's candidate. It is estimated that the level of support might be low from the HDP side in case there is a candidate with a nationalist background.

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