

Opinion – Disappointments and Expectations in Turkey

Written by Tayfun Mertan

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TAYFUN MERTAN, MAY 30 2023

Having been in power for 21 years, the AKP governments led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have built an authoritarian ruling that put heavy pressure on dissident segments of society. Some other nationalist and conservative segments of the political spectrum in the country have supported this ruling in the last decade. Before the first round of the 2023 election, hopes were high that Kılıçdaroğlu, the candidate of the opposition bloc, would win the election in the first round. Yet, Erdogan has triumphed having won the second round of the 2023 presidential election. How did Erdogan win, and what awaits Turkey?

Until the first round of the recent elections, the opposition bloc (the Table of Six) followed a positive and calm campaign that aims to reveal the government's corrupt acts and its erroneous economic policies, and to ease the social conflict created by Erdoğan's polarization strategy. In the parliamentary elections held on the same date as the first round of the presidential elections, the People's Alliance led by Erdoğan, secured the majority in the parliament (323 of 600 seats). The opposition voters hoping to dethrone Erdogan in the first round, were deeply disappointed at the outcome. Moreover, the success of the YRP (New Welfare Party) and HUDA PAR (Free Cause Party), who are famous for their reactionary policies especially on women's rights, in acquiring 9 seats in the parliament thanks to the AKP's support, enraged the opposition voters.

Kılıçdaroğlu hardened his rhetoric on immigrants and terrorism after the first round. He aimed at attracting the voters who did not vote in the first round, the far right, and even some of the voters who voted for Erdogan. He openly embraced the far-right's anti-refugee sentiment and began to harshly criticize Erdoğan, highlighting the relationship between Hezbollah and HUDA PAR, which perpetrated horrific massacres in the 1990s. He also tried to remind the nationalist and conservative voters that Erdoğan supported the Gülen movement until the end of 2013.

Things have not gone well for Erdogan and the AKP since 2018. Some key party members' and Erdogan's name were involved in corruption. Unable to reduce unemployment below 10 percent, the government could not find a solution to the ongoing currency crisis and high inflation. Finally, the government's recent failure to respond to the earthquake in February revealed the weakening of state capacity.

Despite all these worsening political and economic conditions, why do the majority of voters support the AKP and Erdoğan? There are at least two answers to this question. The first is Erdogan's polarization strategy, which includes suppressing any opposition, controlling the media, and spreading false information about Kılıçdaroğlu, such as the PKK supports him. He constantly oppressed opposition social movement activists and political leaders with long trials, detentions, and imprisonment by the politicized judiciary and police force. Opposition actors and organizations have lost their power to even exist in the public sphere to a large extent. In addition, Erdoğan's famous nationalist and conservative rhetoric, as well as the effect of making working-class voters dependent on public and private sector resources, which the AKP distributes in a clientelist manner, showed itself especially in metropolitan cities.

However, it would be misleading to consider this as a result of the opposition or the government's policies in recent years. After the September 12, 1980 coup, the junta ruling destroyed the power of leftist organizations. It imposed nationalist and conservative values on society. Successive governments continued the process of neoliberalization of the relations of production. Conservative neoliberal discourse, economic crises, and state repression have atomized workers and pushed labor relations out of the realm of politics.

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Second, the errors in the opposition's electoral strategy. The opposition criticized the problems with the presidential system in effect since 2018, Erdogan's use of public resources in favor of his pro-capitalist factions, the pressure on democracy and food inflation by using a calm language. Many researchers criticized this strategy as too intangible for ordinary people. Kılıçdaroğlu did not adopt the class politics that could defeat Erdogan's strategy that combines clientelism, patronage, nationalism, and conservatism. All members of the opposition bloc preferred to be active on social media and hold rallies in city squares instead of interacting directly with the voters in working class neighborhoods. Kılıçdaroğlu's request for support from far-right parties and adopting a nationalist language, two weeks before the second round of the elections, did not have an effect that would change it. The runoff results show this strategy's failure.

As a result, compared to the previous elections five years ago, although the number of voters has increased by nearly 5 million, Erdogan's personal vote increased only by 1.5 million. Moreover, Erdogan's AKP lost %7 of votes. Now, Erdogan regains executive power with a majority in parliament. However, the alliance he led in the parliament is more fragmented than in the previous period. In addition to the nationalist conservative MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), he needs to keep two ultra-conservative parties (YRP and HUDA PAR) under his rule. He will try to achieve this by intensifying nationalist and conservative discourse and practices at the expense of the moderate conservatives within the AKP.

There are some examples that bear the traces of this trend. A man responsible for Hezbollah's massacres was released from prison before the elections, with Erdogan's pardon, in a way reminiscent of the release of imprisoned mafia leaders close to Erdogan's nationalist partners. Throughout the election process, Erdogan and his alliance partners tried to discredit the opposition bloc by calling them "LGBT" supporters. With the reactionary HUDA PAR and YRP on his side, we can expect that Erdogan will put pressure on organizations fighting for LGBTI+ rights and will further restrict their right to exist freely with legal regulations and physical attacks. In force since 2012, Law no. 6284 to Protect Family and Prevent Violence against Women has created division within the AKP for the last three years. Today, the law is targeted by the YRP and HUDA PAR because of its provisions that protect women and children against domestic violence. In the coming days, Erdogan may amend or repeal the law to increase conservative authoritarianism.

HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş, who played a major role in Erdoğan's loss of parliamentary majority in June 2015, has been in prison since 2016 despite the decisions of the Constitutional Court and the ECtHR. It is possible that the same pressure will be made on Ekrem Imamoglu, who is currently the mayor of Istanbul and is expected to be the leader of the main opposition CHP (People's Republic Party) as Erdogan's rival. The Court of Cassation may approve the judicial decision that imposes a political ban on Imamoglu before the local elections that will be held in March 2024, or after Imamoglu becomes CHP leader. All these will narrow the living space of the oppositional segments of the society, which are already under pressure. The opposition bloc must be prepared against the authoritarian oppression and polarization that will continue to deepen by feeding each other. There is no doubt that partisan police and judicial forces will continue to maintain their loyalty to Erdogan. The already weak organizational strength of the working classes, and social and environmental rights activists will be further weakened by these forces.

The realm of the relations of production, on the other hand, has its own crises. In response to the expectations that the growth rates of the Turkish economy will remain low for several years, the government will increase its authoritarian-neoliberal attack on labor and nature in the coming period. It started even before the elections by removing the debris created by the earthquake in February with hasty methods harmful to nature and human health, and giving tenders to companies affiliated with the AKP in the process of rebuilding the cities.

Despite the risk of wage-price spiral, the AKP government increased the minimum wage from 1600₺ in 2019 to 8500₺ by almost 5 times. However, this increase has not solved any problems, particularly in the metropolitan areas. Because the real reasons behind the currency crisis stems from Erdogan's so-called "unorthodox" economic policies, and his use of supervisory and regulatory economic institutions as instruments for his political interests.

In the face of annual inflation at the level of 105 percent and house rents exceeding the minimum wage, making the

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ends meet is even more difficult for the working class. Moreover, the civil organization under Erdoğan's leadership, which will be strengthened by the experienced organizational ability of his new partners, will interact with more voters. Erdogan now will be in a more advantageous position to ensure the spread of conservative ideology among the workers and the concealment of the neoliberal exploitation. More economic and political crises await Turkey. But perhaps worse, these crises will not harm Erdogan if the opposition does not adopt the right policy framework.

About the author:

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