



TURKEY'S ELECTIONS 2023: EVERYTHING COULD CHANGE BUT TURKEY'S STATUS IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

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Election overview

The presidential and parliamentary elections on May 14th, 2023, in Turkey, see President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan struggling to achieve a certain electoral victory after twenty years in government. The motley opposition coalition led by candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, united by the goal of ending Erdoğan's political power, is achieving very high ratings in polls and vote projections. In addition, Kılıçdaroğlu's Millet Ittifakı (National Coalition) gained tacit external support from the Kurdish-majority progressive party HDP (the country's third-largest party by votes) and the Turkish Workers' Party (TIP), the latter growing sharply in the polls, thanks to the vote of the young people.



The growing economic crisis and the management of the post-earthquake that devastated south-eastern Turkey helped increase the chances for the opposition to attract some of Erdoğan's voters. The latter can still count on a solid and loyal electoral base not affected by Turkey's tragedies and economic difficulties, which prefers to maintain the status quo rather than the instability brought by political change. With 20 years of government behind him, the possibility of the exchange of votes between the AKP government and the country's significant economic, cultural, and religious players should also not be underestimated.

Post-Election Scenarios

At the regional level, the dimension of Turkish politics will be strongly influenced by whether or not the election result is accepted. Acceptance does not refer only to the political sphere but also to the social one. The 2013 events in Gezi Parkı and the sincere popular street support for Erdoğan on the night of the attempted coup in 2016 demonstrate an effective capacity to mobilize mass protests spontaneously and/or by both political parts. A possible period of internal instability could have a destabilizing effect on Turkish regional politics. In case of victory by Erdoğan's coalition, the latter could continue his policy of building his own personal and Turkey's role as mediator of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Relations with Saudi Arabia and attempts at communication with Israel and Syria could be further strengthened.

Even though the doctrine of the "Blue Homeland" has currently been put on the back burner, the Mediterranean could represent the cause of greatest friction for the energy issue linked to Cyprus and security in the Aegean, where the AKP government has consistently shown that it does not want to engage in actual negotiation and/or confrontation with Athens. Turkey's activities in Libya could intensify after the elections. Erdoğan could try to successfully incorporate an Arab and strategically important country into the Turkish sphere after the failures in Egypt and Syria



since 2011. Relations with NATO and Sweden's accession to it could also continue to be shaped more by Turkey's internal governance needs rather than by Erdoğan's "Atlantic" agenda. In case of victory, the opposition will not radically change Turkish foreign and regional policy. The points of Turkish national security will remain the same. What will change is the approach.

Kılıçdaroğlu will try to renew relations by relaunching a less *ad personam* foreign policy, attempting to involve and consult domestic actors. Restoring relations with the European Union and Greece by focusing on lowering the tones and re-engaging the dialogue is a staple of the opposition on issues such as immigration, disputes in the Aegean and human rights. The opposition also stated their intention to comply with international law for the energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although the goodwill demonstrated, the feasibility of an international law arbitration with the Republic of Cyprus remains scarce due to the hostile relations between the two nations and the impossibility for Turkey to easily "give up" its energetic security.

Turkish withdrawal from Libya could be considered reasonable in the face of economic and political gains elsewhere to help a new government and counterbalance Ankara's exit from the scene. Even the fight against terrorism remains a strong point of the opposition. However, according to what has been declared would like to undertake a more transparent policy entrusted to the country's judicial bodies.

Conclusions

Whoever wins the elections will find himself in the challenging role of having to govern a country crossed by a deep economic crisis, the costs of reconstruction of the earthquake areas (it is estimated that 8% of Turkish GDP will be needed) and a deep social/political division within of the country. Turkish foreign policy, after elections, could remain without a clear path and instrumental to the needs of



domestic politics and internal consensus. What is undoubtedly clear is that even with a change of government in Ankara, Turkey will not easily relinquish its status as a major autonomous regional player devoted to maintaining the cornerstones of its security and national interests. Approaches in international politics could change but the Turkish way (Türk'ün Yolu) will not be abandoned.