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## The Outlook for Turkish Democracy: 2023 and Beyond

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Since 2003, when Turkey's current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, became prime minister, the country's politics have been repeatedly reconfigured. Yet so far every reconfiguration has only strengthened Erdoğan's hold on power. Turkey's next presidential elections are scheduled for 2023. Some of Erdoğan's optimistic opponents have confidentially predicted early elections will force him out even sooner. At the same time, many optimistic supporters (and pessimistic opponents) believe Erdoğan will remain in power for at least another decade, and perhaps even hand off power to a chosen successor after that. This paper explores the political trends and personalities within Erdoğan's party and Turkey as a whole that will inform the future dynamics of Turkish politics.



## ERDOGAN'S RISE AND REMAKING OF THE AKP

Since the end of World War II, Turkey has experienced a unique mix of democratic and undemocratic political transitions, making its system of government difficult to characterize both historically and today. Starting in 1950, regular, competitive elections have coexisted with a series of coups, party closures, and other diverse restrictions on the Turkish people's democratic rights. Erdogan's success must be understood both in terms of how he mastered the country's tradition of civilian electoral politics and how he reshaped civil-military relations to dominate the state itself.

In the 1990s, before Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) arrived on the scene, Turkish politics was marked by sometimes chaotic competition among several mainstream right- and left-wing parties, with smaller Kurdish and Islamist parties marginalized by both the military and the political establishment.<sup>1</sup> When an Islamist party headed by Necmettin Erbakan came to power as part of a coalition government in 1996, it was soon forced out under heavy pressure from the military and secular civil society. This "soft coup," which ended with the banning of Erbakan's party, created the backdrop for the AKP's rise.

The AKP emerged in 2001 when its founders, most notably Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Abdullah Gul, and Bulent Arinc, split off from the latest incarnation of Erbakan's party. They stressed that their party would follow the model of Europe's Christian Democrats, promoting a less restrictive version of secularism rather than an Islamist agenda. In the AKP's early years, the party united a diverse coalition of traditional center-right voters, Islamists, and pro-European Union, anti-military liberals who hoped the party could be a vector for democratic reform.

And yet its rise created considerable alarm among the left-wing, secularist Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Turkish military, which feared that the AKP's religious orientation would undermine secularism in the country altogether.

In 2007, the military and secular opposition tried to block the AKP-dominated parliament from selecting Abdullah Gul as president. But the move backfired when the AKP capitalized on this to win a more decisive parliamentary majority. Then, with Gul as president and Erdogan as both prime minister and party leader, the AKP pressed its advantage. First, it amended the constitution so that the next president would be elected directly by the people rather than by parliament. Second, the AKP's allies in the judiciary, followers of the exiled cleric Fethullah Gulen, used manipulated and manufactured evidence to jail the leadership of the Turkish military on charges of plotting a coup.

Amid growing concern over his authoritarian behavior, Erdogan also consolidated his control first over the country's judiciary with a 2010 referendum, then over the AKP by selecting a slate of personally loyal candidates for the 2011 parliamentary elections. Yet Erdogan's personalization of power met with increasing resistance. In summer 2013, erstwhile supporters among the Turkish intelligentsia and international media enthusiastically rallied behind the anti-Erdogan, pro-democracy Gezi Park protests. With the military defanged following a series of trials, cracks emerged in Erdogan's alliance with the Gulen movement as well; Gulen-affiliated prosecutors then targeted members of Erdogan's family and cabinet in a quickly suppressed corruption investigation in December 2013.

Increasingly, Erdogan came to see his struggle to stay in power in existential terms—for himself, his family, and the country. In 2014, he became Turkey's first popularly elected president by a comfortable margin, with plans to increase the power of the previously more ceremonial position. The following summer,

he reversed a setback in parliamentary elections by rallying nationalist support amid renewed fighting with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). More dramatically, a failed coup attempt in summer 2016 contributed to an environment suffused with fear, one in which Erdogan could more easily deploy undemocratic measures—such as arresting critical reporters or opposition politicians—to stifle dissent.

Using the legal powers available to him in a postcoup state of emergency, as well as inflammatory, conspiracy-laden rhetoric depicting the country as besieged by foreign and domestic enemies, Erdogan secured victory in two more vital elections: first, a 2017 referendum to further enhance his powers for another term; second, a 2018 election to assume those powers for another term until 2023. As Turkey's war with the PKK spread into Syria and relations with the West worsened, Erdogan deepened a new alliance with the military as well as the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) against a growing host of rivals.

Yet Turkey's local elections in March 2019 revealed that Erdogan's power was by no means unlimited. Opposition candidates triumphed in a number of major cities, most notably Istanbul and Ankara. When Erdogan then forced a rerun of the Istanbul election on spurious grounds, CHP candidate Ekrem Imamoglu increased his margin considerably, securing the position of mayor and leading many to wonder if he was on track to become the country's next president.

## WHO'S WHO IN ERDOGAN'S WORLD

In consolidating power as president and personalizing his rule, Erdogan has relied on a number of allies, both new and old, formal and informal. Understanding this web of alliances is crucial to assessing

Erdogan's prospects for maintaining power and for envisioning who might replace him when he ultimately leaves office.

## ERDOGAN'S FAMILY

In running the country, Erdogan regularly turns to members of his family, granting them a unique degree of confidence but also confronting the limits of their abilities.

**Berat and Esra Albayrak.** After marrying Erdogan's daughter Esra in 2004, Berat Albayrak quickly emerged as a key figure in Erdogan's power network. As CEO of the company Calik Holding between 2007 and 2013, Berat helped consolidate Erdogan's media empire and turn the Calik-owned newspaper *Sabah* into its centerpiece. After serving as minister of energy for three years, he became minister of finance and treasury in 2018, thus taking a central role in managing the Turkish economy during a turbulent period. Although many observers once speculated that Erdogan was grooming Berat as his successor, his performance as minister, coupled with rumors about his marriage with Esra, has subsequently raised doubts.

**Serhat Albayrak.** When Berat served as CEO of Calik Holding, his brother Serhat was responsible for managing Calik's Turkuvas Media Group, which included not only *Sabah* but also the television channel ATV. This position gave Serhat a central role in implementing Erdogan's media strategy, both by crafting the government's narrative and by enforcing its redlines.

**Bilal Erdogan.** Despite being Erdogan's son, Bilal has remained in Berat's shadow as a potential successor. Bilal is a PhD candidate at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, as well as an archery enthusiast. His most prominent roles have been as board member of the national educational charity TURGEV and

as co-owner, with other Erdogan family members, of the shipping company BMZ Group. Bilal's role in BMZ has, ironically, led to his being attacked for facilitating Turkey's oil trade with both the Islamic State and Israel.

**Selcuk and Sumeyye Bayraktar.** Selcuk, married to Erdogan's daughter Sumeyye, has capitalized on his role as Erdogan's son-in-law to make his aeronautics company the symbol of Turkey's new push for an independent foreign and military policy. Indigenously produced Bayraktar drones have been prominently featured in government media coverage of Turkey's military operations in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Summeyye, in turn, has played a unique, largely behind-the-scenes role as an advisor and confidante to her father.

**Ziya Ilgen.** Erdogan's brother-in-law, Ilgen has remained largely out of the public spotlight, serving as shareholder and board member in several family companies alongside Bilal and Erdogan's brother Mustafa. Ilgen gained national attention in 2016 when Erdogan subsequently claimed that his brother-in-law had been the first to notify him of the July coup attempt.

## **CABINET MEMBERS**

In addition to being presidential advisors, a number of cabinet members play more formal roles in Erdogan's government.

**Fuat Oktay.** Serving as Turkey's vice president, Oktay has degrees in management and engineering from Wayne State University, and he would immediately take over as president for the first forty-five days if for any reason Erdogan vacated the position. Oktay has previously served in a number of bureaucratic roles, including running Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD).

**Suleyman Soylu.** Since belatedly joining the AKP in 2012 and becoming minister of the interior in 2016, Soylu, who boasts a center-right pedigree, has cultivated a reputation as an aggressive defender of the state and the Erdogan government. Among other positions, he has championed hardline policies such as the arrest of Kurdish politicians and the rerun of Istanbul's mayoral election.

**Mevlut Cavusoglu.** In his tenure as foreign minister, Cavusoglu has faithfully executed Erdogan's diplomatic agenda and proven himself loyal to Erdogan's foreign policy vision. His leadership of the Foreign Ministry also coincided with its loss of a great deal of institutional strength amid the personalization of foreign policy making in Erdogan's palace.

**Abdulhamit Gul.** As Turkey's justice minister since 2017, Gul (who is not related to former Turkish president Abdullah Gul) has been in charge of transforming Turkey's judiciary into an instrument for enforcing the president's will. Ironically, by relying on MHP-linked nationalists to do so, he has come under criticism from some traditional Erdogan loyalists.

**Ali Erbas.** The head of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs, Erbas plays a central role in shaping the country's domestic religious life and in deploying religion as a tool of Turkey's soft power abroad. Erbas's position gives him control over everything from hiring the country's imams and determining the content of their Friday sermons to arranging for the construction of Turkish-funded mosques in Europe and Africa.

## **PALACE ADVISORS**

The transition to an increasingly opaque and personalized system of presidential rule has elevated advisors who work in Erdogan's presidential palace and enjoy personal rapport with him.

**Ibrahim Kalin.** Erdogan’s spokesperson, Kalin may also be the president’s best-known advisor among foreign audiences. He has an academic background including an ongoing affiliation with Georgetown University, and considerable experience in presenting Turkish foreign policy thinking to Western audiences.

**Fahrettin Altun.** Before becoming Erdogan’s communications director, Altun began his career with the pro-government think tank SETA (Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research). His current role involves managing Turkey’s image abroad, requiring him to seek positive press coverage for Erdogan and Turkey’s foreign policy in the face of mounting international opprobrium.

**Mustafa Varank.** Along with being Turkey’s minister of industry and technology, Varank launched the AKP’s social media team and has been a key figure in managing an army of pro-AKP Twitter users widely known as “AK Trolls.”

**Gulnur Aybet.** A relatively recent addition to Erdogan’s team of advisors, Aybet has worked to put a scholarly spin on Turkish foreign policy since the departure of foreign minister turned prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu in 2016.

**Ilnur Cevik.** A former advisor to Suleyman Soyly, Cevik emerged from a more traditional center-right background. On a handful of issues, from the Kurdish nationalist People’s Defense Units (YPG) in Syria to the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Cevik has appeared to be a quickly overruled advocate for compromise.

**Yigit Bulut.** Having begun his career as a journalist, Bulut has embraced unorthodox economic theories and particularly fanciful conspiracies, leading to widespread speculation over the extent to which Erdogan shares such views.

## PARLIAMENTARY AND OTHER GOVERNMENT FIGURES

Outside the cabinet, various figures with current or former political roles exercise influence that sometimes extends beyond their official positions.

**Devlet Bahceli.** As longtime head of the MHP, Bahceli was instrumental in transforming it from an opposition party to a crucial backer of the Erdogan government. This change has coincided with Erdogan’s reversion to a militarized and repressive approach to the fight against Kurdish separatism, as well as his giving members of the MHP significant roles in the remade government bureaucracy. Occasional tensions between Erdogan and Bahceli have led to speculation about whether Bahceli’s role in the relationship leaves him any meaningful leverage to influence policy.

**Bulent Arinc.** Along with Erdogan and Abdullah Gul, Arinc was a cofounder of the AKP and served as speaker of parliament during the party’s first term in power. Since 2013, Arinc has drawn attention for his willingness to criticize Erdogan policies, but he has nevertheless chosen to stay within the fold rather than formally break with the party.

**Binali Yildirim.** After running the Istanbul ferry service when Erdogan was the city’s mayor in the 1990s, and then rising to become minister of transportation after Erdogan took office as prime minister in 2003, Yildirim replaced Davutoglu as prime minister in 2016. His main responsibility in this role was securing support for Erdogan’s presidential system, thereby eliminating entirely the position of prime minister. After succeeding in this, Yildirim was put forward as the (unsuccessful) AKP mayoral candidate for Istanbul in 2019.

**Murat Uysal.** In July 2019, Uysal became head of Turkey’s Central Bank after Erdogan sacked his predecessor for refusing to “follow instructions”—



presumably meaning those given by Erdogan himself. Subsequently, Uysal demonstrated his willingness to continue cutting interest rates in keeping with Erdogan's unsupported conviction that this would help fight inflation.

## **MILITARY AND INTELLIGENCE**

Since the 2016 coup attempt, Erdogan has worked to purge and restructure the military in order to ensure its complete loyalty, while also calling on it to carry out a number of increasingly ambitious military campaigns in Syria.

**Hulusi Akar.** While serving as chief of the Turkish General Staff, Akar was held hostage by coup plotters on the night of July 15. By refusing their requests to join the coup, he secured Erdogan's confidence in its aftermath. This led to his subsequent rise to minister of defense in 2018. Amid ongoing fighting against the PKK and its affiliates in Syria, Akar, often sporting camouflage, has become the face of the post-coup military, rebuilding strong public support while also working to manage strained relations with Turkey's NATO partners.

**Hakan Fidan.** Like Akar, intelligence chief Fidan maintained Erdogan's confidence after the coup attempt, and he has continued to play a crucial, if less visible, role in Turkey's increasingly security centric foreign policy. Having held talks with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in an earlier era, Fidan helped transform Turkey's National Intelligence Agency (MIT) into a key component of the country's war with the group in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.

**Yasar Guler.** In July 2018, Guler replaced Akar as chief of the General Staff and has carried out his duties with quiet loyalty, maintaining close personal ties with both Akar and Erdogan.

**Cihat Yayci.** A rear admiral, Yayci has won praise from both Erdogan and Kemalist circles for two

unique innovations: In 2017, he created the "Fetometer," an algorithm that used a variety of personal and professional data to identify supposed Gulenists in the navy. And for years before that, he advocated the idea of signing a maritime deal with Libya to challenge Greece's Exclusive Economic Zone in the eastern Mediterranean, a strategy recently implemented by Erdogan.

**Adnan Tanriverdi.** A former general, Tanriverdi served in Erdogan's cabinet as chief military advisor from 2016 until he stepped down in early 2020 following controversial comments about the imminent return of the Mahdi. He is also the founder of SADAT, a defense contractor that trained pro-Turkish fighters in Syria and was accused by Erdogan's opponents of training pro-AKP militias.

## **BUSINESS ASSOCIATES**

Erdogan's success in creating a loyal business community has been crucial to his consolidation of power. Many of Turkey's most prominent holding groups are simultaneously active in diverse sectors such as television, transport, and construction thereby making them crucial to building an integrated network of financial, political, and media support.

**Yildirim Demiroren / Demiroren Group.** The Demiroren Group has played a central role in establishing Erdogan's control over the Turkish media landscape. After first acquiring the mainstream dailies *Vatan* and *Milliyet* in 2011, the group subsequently acquired *Hurriyet* and the news channel CNN Turk in 2018, ensuring that two of the country's mainstream and respected independent news outlets would toe the government line. Earlier in 2019, Demiroren's daughter married the son of the founder of the Kalyon Group (discussed later), with Erdogan and his wife participating as witnesses.

**Dogan Group.** Founded by Aydin Dogan and now run by his daughter Arzuhan Dogan Yalcindag, the

Dogan Group demonstrates Erdogan's success in taming Turkey's once-oppositional secular business community. Where Dogan-owned papers had initially been intensely critical of Erdogan, in 2009 a \$2.5 billion tax fine helped temper their editorial position. The Dogan Group was also U.S. president Donald Trump's partner in the Trump Towers Istanbul project, while Mehmet Ali Yalcindag (Arzuhan's husband and Aydin's son-in-law) has regularly served as the family's—and sometimes Erdogan's—emissary to the Trump administration, including the president's own son-in-law, Jared Kushner.

**Erman Ilicak / Ronesans Group.** The Ronesans Group has been active in the hotel, real estate, and construction industries, particularly in Russia and post-Soviet countries. In 2016, unconfirmed rumors circulated that Ilicak had been a key figure in coordinating Turkey-Russia rapprochement following the shoot-down of a Russian fighter jet over northern Syria.

**Kalyon Group.** In 2013, Kalyon purchased the Turkuaz Media Group from Calik Holding, making it a major player in the pro-Erdogan media landscape. Kalyon is known for its role in the construction of Istanbul's new airport, as well as for high-profile projects such as the new stadium for the Besiktas soccer club and the Ottoman-barracks-turned-shopping-mall project, whose proposed construction in Taksim Square prompted the 2013 Gezi Park protests against Erdogan. In the construction sector, Kalyon has cooperated closely with a number of "siblings"—i.e., pro-Erdogan businesses—winning joint tenders for projects like the airport alongside other reliably pro-government companies such as Limak Holding, Cengiz Holding, Kolin, and MNG.

## **GOVERNMENT-ALIGNED MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

In securing his financial and legal control of the

media, Erdogan has relied on a number of prominent media figures, who have in turn developed their own considerable power. In addition to the channels and newspapers discussed already, several other individuals and entities deserve mention, particularly because they have drawn the attention of foreign observers.

**The Pelikan Group.** In May 2016, an online attack on then prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu, published anonymously on a blog called *The Pelican Brief*, was quickly followed by Davutoglu's dismissal. This attack gained new notoriety for the clique of pro-government journalists presumed to be behind it, including Suheyb Ogut, chairman of the public relations firm Bosphorus Global, and his wife, the Sabah columnist Hilal Kaplan. Following the AKP's defeat in the 2019 Istanbul election, members of the Pelikan Group were widely seen to be pushing for a rerun.

**SETA.** Known in English as the Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research, SETA now serves as one of the government's most prominent think tanks. Beginning as a moderately independent organization that conducted research on foreign and domestic political issues, it has subsequently become something closer to a public relations outfit, promoting government policies in both Turkish and English.

**Ibrahim Karagul.** Having risen to prominence as editor-in-chief of the pro-government *Yeni Safak*, Karagul remains at the paper as a columnist, reporter, and regular guest on Erdogan's presidential plane during foreign visits. His conspiratorial and dramatically written columns have laid out a vision of Turkey and the AKP besieged by foreign and domestic enemies against which they are waging a historic battle.

**Abdulkadir Selvi.** Following the Demiroren Group's takeover of the newspaper *Hurriyet*, Selvi

# OPPOSITION FIGURES IN TURKEY

Among Erdogan's main political opponents are the following figures:

**Selahattin Demirtas.** Running for president in 2014, then making his Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) the third largest bloc in the Turkish parliament in 2015, Demirtas achieved more mainstream success than any previous Kurdish nationalist politician in Turkey. In fall of 2016, Demirtas—along with his co-chair Figen Yuksekdag and a number of parliamentarians—was jailed on terrorism charges. Demirtas remains in jail today despite a European Court of Human Rights decision calling for his release.

**Ekrem Imamoglu.** As the Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate for Istanbul mayor in 2019, Imamoglu rose from relative obscurity to international fame. His Black Sea roots and religious background—coupled with an ability to forge an alliance with Kurdish nationalist voters—enabled him to expand his appeal beyond that of traditional CHP politicians. Imamoglu remained confident and self-assured but not unduly combative when Erdogan demanded a rerun after his first victory, leading to immediate speculation that he could be a 2023 presidential candidate.

**Canan Kaftancioglu.** As the CHP's Istanbul head, Kaftancioglu represents a new generation of opposition politicians with a more explicitly progressive orientation born of the Gezi Park protests. In the face of widespread

concerns over fraud, she successfully led the campaign to monitor ballot boxes in both rounds of the Istanbul mayoral election. Now, she faces nine years in jail, charged with posting anti-Erdogan and anti-government tweets between 2012 and 2017.

**Meral Aksener.** In 2017, Aksener broke with Devlet Bahceli and the MHP to form a new center-right/nationalist party opposing Erdogan. Aksener's IYI, or Good Party, represents a home for anti-Erdogan nationalists who objected to the MHP's alliance with the AKP. The IYI Party has established itself as a key player in Turkish politics, on par with the MHP but on the opposite side of the aisle. Aksener's courage in confronting Erdogan has won her praise from many of his opponents, but her views and background, particularly her stint as interior minister in 1996–97, have caused continued concern among some Kurdish and liberal voters.

**Ahmet Davutoglu.** As Erdogan's foreign policy guru and later foreign minister, Davutoglu promoted an expansive vision of Turkey's regional role, particularly after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. As prime minister from 2014 to 2016, he went along with the government's increasing crackdown on civil rights, as well as with Turkey's intensified war against the PKK. But since founding his own





opposition party (the Future Party, or GP), he has become an outspoken critic of Erdogan's authoritarianism and turn toward nationalism, seeking to woo voters nostalgic for an earlier era of AKP rule in the 2000s.

**Ali Babacan.** Like Davutoglu, Babacan is a former AKP member who broke away to start his own political party—the recently announced Democracy and Progress Party. Babacan served as minister of economic affairs during the country's boom years, as well as chief negotiator for EU accession, allowing him to appeal to a more technocratic, less Islamist constituency than that of Davutoglu. Babacan is widely recognized as the wunderkind responsible for Turkey's dramatic economic transformation in the 2000s. Yet he has also been tamer in his criticism of Erdogan, a position mirroring that of his unofficial partner Abdullah Gul.

**Abdullah Gul.** An AKP founder and the former president, Gul was long seen as one of the true party heavyweights who could credibly challenge Erdogan. Yet despite those expectations and his regular, if often veiled, criticism of the country's direction, Gul has always been too cautious to take on his former ally directly. Instead, he now appears to have quietly thrown his support behind Babacan's party.

was brought over from *Yeni Safak* to provide a respectable pro-government voice in *Hurriyet's* pages. Selvi's columns offer a mix of orchestrated leaks, trial balloons, and often-optimistic prognostications from sources close to the president.

## INDEPENDENT MEDIA

While Erdogan has ensured that pro-government channels and newspapers dominate the country and that mainstream opposition outlets are neutered or shuttered, critical reporting survives in smaller, often Internet-based outlets. These include newspapers such as the vehemently secularnationalist *Sozcu*, which continues to criticize the government despite legal persecution, and the Turkish affiliate of Fox News, which, because it is foreign owned, has maintained a more independent political line than many other TV networks. Smaller Turkish web portals and newspapers, generally with a strong liberal bent, include *Gazete Duvar*, *Diken*, *BirGun*, and the independent platform P24. Complementing these printed sources are low-budget online broadcasters such as Rusen Cakir's *Medyascope*, a popular outlet that uses the *Periscope.tv* service to provide viewers uncensored news and political discussions.

A growing number of internationally sponsored Turkish-language publications have continued to operate with much greater freedom than their Turkish counterparts. These include the BBC, Russia's *Sputnik*, the German government's *Deutsche Welle*, and the Saudi-backed *Independent*. While these outlets can be outspoken in their criticism of the Turkish government, some suffer from a lack of editorial independence and have lost credibility by serving as mouthpieces for their country sponsors.

## ASPIRANTS TO POWER IN A SHIFTING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The year 2019 saw a number of longstanding political, economic, and regional trends intensify without ever reaching the clear culmination that many observers expected. Turkey's economy, for example, has been facing a much-prophesied crash since at least 2016, a crash that appears to edge ever closer as the lira weakens and Turkey's debts mount. Already, rising prices and unemployment have fueled voter dissatisfaction, leading to continued speculation about what a true crisis would mean for Erdogan's support. Relations between Turkey and the United States and the EU have also steadily worsened without ever coming to a breaking point. Amid tensions over the purchase of Russian S-400 missiles, Erdogan has successfully banked on his relationship with Trump to stave off sanctions. But as Erdogan discovered when Trump imposed sanctions to secure the release of an American pastor in summer 2018, if this relationship breaks down, one tweet from the White House can send the lira tumbling.

In 2019, perpetual reports of mounting dissent within Erdogan's own party spilled out into the open, with former members of the AKP such as Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoglu announcing the formation of new parties.<sup>2</sup> Erdogan has also acknowledged the existence of fatigue and frustration even among party loyalists, while repeatedly promising a renewal of the party. As political power becomes ever more concentrated in Erdogan's inner circle, rumors about the factions and personalities around him have grown accordingly.<sup>3</sup> But opinions differ on whether the existence of rival cliques represents a weakness or a key component of Erdogan's rule. On top of all this, speculation continues about the future form of Erdogan's alliance with the MHP, particularly

if Bahçeli's health were to fail. MHP support was crucial to Erdogan's last presidential win, while its influence on the AKP has been specifically criticized by AKP dissidents.

At an ideological and social level, nationalist sentiment remains stronger than ever, and it has been a consistent source of support for Erdogan in the face of perceived foreign threats. Yet, as shown by the intense popular anger toward Syrian refugees, nationalism does not always work in the government's favor. Erdogan continues to capitalize on his image as a defender of pious Muslims in Turkey and abroad. But despite this image, the Islamist bloc within which he began his career, the Felicity Party (SP, aka Saadet), has now moved into the opposition camp.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, indications that a new generation of Turkish youth is less pious than its predecessors have raised concern among Erdogan's supporters—but not necessarily dampened the younger generation's enthusiasm for Erdogan.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, changes within Erdogan's governing coalition have also reshaped opposition politics. For years, Erdogan accused his opponents of conspiring against him. But it was only with the local elections of 2019 that his opponents actually proved able to effectively work together, securing a dramatic victory for Ekrem Imamoglu in Istanbul's mayoral race.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, the government intensified its crack-down on the HDP, a pro-Kurdish party that helped secure Imamoglu's win but that remains widely hated by at least some of Imamoglu's Turkish-nationalist supporters. This move has the potential to reopen fissures within the opposition alliance and perhaps reconsolidate Erdogan's nationalist backing. At the same time, Turkish courts have continued to jail Erdogan's opponents on nakedly political charges, while also releasing a handful of prominent prisoners of conscience. If nothing else, Erdogan appears to be recalibrating his deployment of state power, offering a new dispensation of leniency and persecution in a bid to maintain his grip on the country.

## EARLY ELECTIONS, 2023, AND BEYOND

The impact of these diverse dynamics will depend on when Turkish voters next go to the polls to select a new president. Currently, presidential elections are scheduled for the end of Erdogan's term in 2023. The many challenges facing Erdogan would certainly take on newfound importance if Turkey were to hold early elections. And yet these same challenges help explain why Erdogan might be eager to avoid this scenario.

### EARLY ELECTIONS

As president, Erdogan could call a new presidential and parliamentary election at any time. The sheer number of elections in recent years (five between 2014 and 2019, or on average one a year) has made it hard for some political commentators to envision four years passing without one.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Erdogan has repeatedly and successfully used electoral contests in order to renew his mandate and consolidate his rule. As shown by the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election, in which Erdogan forced a rerun only to lose again by a yet larger margin, he is certainly capable of miscalculating. But particularly after this experience, calling for a new presidential election would represent a dramatic and unnecessary risk for Erdogan, one he would be unlikely to take without compelling reason to think he would win.

Three-fifths of the parliament could also force an early vote, in which both Erdogan and the deputies themselves would stand for reelection. However, to achieve a three-fifths majority as the parliament now stands would require not just the entire opposition voting for new elections but also the full MHP and

more than fifty AKP parliamentarians abandoning Erdogan and joining them. Past elections have given Erdogan the opportunity to ensure that his own party's parliamentarians owe their loyalty to him directly. Similarly, were the MHP to break with Erdogan and try to force him from power, Erdogan would have the tools at his disposal to potentially poach a number of MHP deputies, who would fear losing their seats—or worse—if a bid to unseat Erdogan went awry.

Finally, Article 106 of the Turkish Constitution specifies that if, for any reason, the Office of the Presidency is vacated, new elections shall be held within forty-five days.<sup>8</sup> Until then, the position is to be filled by the vice president (currently Fuat Oktay). In the chaos that would almost certainly follow Erdogan's sudden departure from politics, many voters would undoubtedly be eager for a consensus candidate, and yet they would be equally unlikely to agree on who that candidate should be. There are no obvious successors within the AKP and certainly none with Erdogan's charisma. Whoever emerged with a majority from the two-stage presidential election would face the challenge of managing a divided, suspicious, and in some cases hostile country with potentially the weakest of mandates. Regardless, this scenario also appears distinctly unlikely, because Erdogan shows no inclination to resign and, despite persistent rumors of his ill health, no sign that health issues will prevent him from carrying out his duties.

### ELECTION 2023

Pro-Erdogan columnist Abdulkadir Selvi recently alleged that the president's opponents had begun plotting for the country's 2023 elections. "The project is clear," he wrote ominously. "It's a plan to get rid of Erdogan..."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it seems entirely likely that Erdogan's opponents see the country's presidential election as an opportunity for the country to choose a new president. However the government's repeated

tendency to conflate democratic and undemocratic forms of opposition has also led to suspicion about whether Erdogan would allow someone to succeed him in 2023.

Following the AKP's narrow and unexpected loss in Istanbul's March 2019 mayoral elections—which Ibrahim Karagul memorably called “a ballot box coup”—Erdogan pressured the country's Supreme Electoral Board to rerun the election.<sup>10</sup> The board's willingness to do so, based on the flimsiest accusations of irregularity, destroyed much of the country's remaining faith in its independence. Moreover, many members of the AKP were clearly uncomfortable with the rerun, yet few spoke out vocally against it. Still, when the rerun occurred and the opposition candidate won with a far more substantial margin (800,000 votes vs. 13,000), the AKP was quick to accept defeat. Despite widespread fears at the time, there is no evidence that party officials considered a systematic effort to rig or suppress the vote. The outcome, in other words, could be taken as evidence either of Erdogan's power to rewrite the rules in his favor or of the limits of his powers to do so.

Writing in the aftermath of the first Istanbul election, analyst Selim Koru identified the fundamental contradiction of Erdogan's politics: “He wants to dominate the political space and transform the country, but he isn't quite willing to engage in the scale of repression that would require...”<sup>11</sup> Eventually, Koru predicted, Erdogan would have to either intensify the degree of repression or see the political edifice he constructed collapse. The first question, looking toward 2023, is whether Erdogan can continue avoiding this contradiction. The second question is what he would do if forced to choose between such stark options.

Certainly, any discussion of the 2023 election today is highly speculative, because much could change in three years: there is time for existing trends to

spiral or to be reversed, perhaps even both. While unexpected crises could further undermine Erdogan's standing, overcoming them might actually strengthen his position. Several important factors work in Erdogan's favor, though perhaps not enough to offset the enduring obstacles he faces.

First, his challengers from within the AKP so far seem to have little purchase. Initial polling puts support for Babacan around 1 percent and support for Davutoglu only half a point higher. In a highly politicized environment, both men proved too loyal to Erdogan to win the support of his opponents and too disloyal to Erdogan to win over his loyalists. And this is before the kind of state-backed defamation campaign that Erdogan would certainly launch if either figure emerged as a true threat.<sup>12</sup>

Second, factional battles continue playing out within the AKP, but their electoral impact remains uncertain. Amid a great deal of rumor and speculation, observers have consistently discussed tensions between a faction centered on Berat Albayrak and another more nationalist faction, including Minister of the Interior Suleyman Soylu and Minister of Justice Abdulhamit Gul. Yet playing rivals against each other sometimes appears less a weakness than a feature of Erdogan's rule, especially given that both factions remain fundamentally dependent on Erdogan for their political power. And in the case of the 2019 Istanbul election, both groups appeared happy to support Erdogan in pushing for a rerun.<sup>13</sup>

Third, the economy could get worse as its management becomes increasingly politicized. Widespread frustration over the economy appears to have cost the AKP support in the country's 2019 local elections, but not as much as many analysts predicted.<sup>14</sup> Polls and interviews suggest that whatever cause Erdogan's supporters cite for the country's economic woes, they remain convinced that Erdogan is the best person to solve them.

Fourth, the opposition may have some difficulty uniting at a national level, and this difficulty could grow if conditions in the country worsen. As noted earlier, the CHP was able to secure a narrow lead in the Istanbul mayoral election by bridging the divide between the party's often Turkish-nationalist voter base and members of the Kurdish-nationalist HDP. This feat might be more difficult in a nationwide election, where matters of foreign policy and national security are explicitly on the table. Moreover, intensified conflict with the PKK, in Turkey or in Syria, could make this significantly more challenging. These tensions could, in an extreme case, threaten the CHP's alliance with the İYİ Party, which split with the MHP out of opposition to Erdogan but remains close to it ideologically.

Finally, there are always more ways for Erdogan to rewrite rules in his favor. For the 2018 presidential election, he instituted an alliance system that allowed his party to benefit electorally from its relationship with the MHP. If he wanted to radically restructure the system again in 2023, he has the power to do so. Currently, for example, if no candidate gets a majority in the first round of the presidential elections, the top two candidates enter a second round, where the winner becomes president. Yet Erdogan recently speculated about changing the system so that a candidate who received a 40 percent plurality in the first round would become president.<sup>15</sup>

Set against all of this, however, is the reality of Erdogan's narrow margins, creating a situation in which a small erosion of support could suddenly spiral and take on a life of its own. Observers continue to assume that if Erdogan's hold on power truly appeared to be coming to an end, allies would begin to rapidly desert him, and his hold on the country's institutions could quickly crumble. To date, none of Erdogan's setbacks have created this response, but it remains a distinct possibility. This situation, in turn, could allow an opposition

candidate to line up support from key institutions in advance of the 2023 election, in order to ensure that these institutions would respect a democratic outcome.

## **AND BEYOND?**

If Erdogan does emerge as president following 2023, he will be positioned to start thinking more systematically about his political legacy and how to ensure that his self-created regime outlives his own term in office. Speculation about how Erdogan might go about this focuses on two potential avenues: first, reshaping the Turkish electoral landscape, and second, grooming an individual successor.

Even in Erdogan's best-case scenario, both of these approaches would face serious obstacles, raising difficult questions about what might be in store for Turkey in a post-Erdogan era. Erdogan's long-term political vision seemingly reflects his faith in consolidating a pious and patriotic majority—one that can dominate the electoral landscape in the face of a minority faction doomed to perpetual opposition by its unpatriotic and irreligious character.<sup>16</sup> As with many populist leaders, Erdogan undoubtedly believes that the will of the people, if expressed without any interference, manipulation, or pressure, would reflect his own vision for the country. That is, when Turkey's foreign and domestic enemies are finally defeated and the nation achieves the peace, prosperity, and power it is due, the electoral challenges currently facing Erdogan and his party will subside.

The issue, of course, will be what happens if this sustainable majority never materializes. Should Erdogan emerge victorious in 2023, he might well have weathered the worst of Turkey's economic crisis, and perhaps he will have restored a more functional relationship with Turkey's erstwhile Western allies. Yet this prospective outcome is unlikely to reverse the



current trend of growing dissatisfaction and accumulated frustrations with his government. As a result, maintaining Erdogan's political regime would require passing off the repressive apparatus that sustained it to a new leader.

This raises the question of who might serve as a designated successor. Where some observers imagine a figure like Albayrak continuing Erdogan's rule in the spirit of dynastic succession, others have imagined succession in terms of the continuity of state power.<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, a figure with nationalist or military credentials could ultimately prove a more compelling choice for Erdogan. Paradoxically, though, any such figure could also pose a threat to Erdogan's rule, making the prospect of grooming them for a smooth succession particularly challenging.

Even in less dramatic circumstances, previous Turkish leaders who built powerful political parties around their own personas have watched these parties evaporate when they were no longer in a position to run them. During the 1990s, both Turgut Ozal and Suleyman Demirel discovered that even upon becoming president they began to lose control of their parties. Ozal's Motherland Party was never more than a minority partner in any government

after his death, while Demirel's True Path Party suffered the same fate after Demirel left politics.<sup>18</sup> Erdogan has certainly kept control of the party as president, but as a result, it has now become so closely associated with him that it is difficult to imagine it surviving his departure in any enduring form.

More broadly, the issue of succession speaks to a wider analytical debate over whether the ideological forces that have come to the fore in Turkey during the past decade will continue to dominate politics under any future government. While many analysts still hold out hope for a post-Erdogan pivot back to a more liberal and pro-Western orientation, others fear that the current trend toward increased nationalism and isolation will continue regardless of who is in power.

If Erdogan remains president after 2023, it will become increasingly difficult to imagine a political transition that dramatically resets Turkey's ideological trajectory. Indeed, if Erdogan fails in his efforts to designate a successor, this will make it all the more likely that those trying to claim his mantle will fall back on his ideological and rhetorical arsenal in their effort to do so. Thus, a contested succession scenario risks further exacerbating Turkey's deeper geopolitical shift.

## NOTES

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