

Research Briefing

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By Stefano Fella

# Turkey under Erdoğan: recent developments and the 2023 elections



## Summary

- 1 Background: Turkey under Erdoğan
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### **Contributing Authors**

Nigel Walker, election statistics, section 2.4 and 2.5

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## Summary

Presidential and parliamentary elections took place in Turkey<sup>1</sup> on 14 May 2023, followed by a second round of the presidential election on 28 May. Despite opinion polls suggesting a possible opposition win, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its allies won a majority in the parliamentary elections. President Erdoğan fell just short of an absolute majority in the first round, before winning re-election in the second-round run-off.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been president of Turkey since 2014, when the first direct elections for the presidency were held. He retained the presidency in 2018 following the first presidential election under the constitutional reform of 2017. Erdoğan was [sworn in to his third term as president](#) (and his second and final term under the current constitution) on 3 June 2023.

## The AKP in power

Since coming into power in 2002, Erdoğan and the AKP have dominated politics in Turkey and have shifted the country away from the secularism embedded in the early years of the Republic. Erdoğan's governments have also curbed the role of the military, which had previously intervened to remove civilian governments in Turkey, most recently in 1980.

Early reforms introduced by the government [reduced the military's role in civilian affairs](#). These were part of a package to prepare Turkey to meet the criteria for EU membership. However, in 2007, the military [warned it might intervene again to protect secularism in Turkey](#). Long running trials from 2008 to 2013 saw several former military officers prosecuted for leading a clandestine network with the aim of overthrowing the government. Journalists and opposition politicians were also charged. Some received life sentences, including the former chief of staff of the armed forces. However, the convictions were [later overturned by the constitutional court](#).

In 2008, the constitutional court ruled that the AKP was guilty of seeking to undermine secularism in Turkey and [imposed a fine](#), although the state prosecutor had sought a ban on the party and its leading political figures including Erdoğan. This followed attempts by the AKP to lift the ban on the

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<sup>1</sup> The Republic of Türkiye changed its official name from The Republic of Turkey in a [request submitted to the United Nations Secretary-General](#) on 26 May 2022. This briefing paper continues to use Turkey as the short form for the Republic of Türkiye, in line with the [current list of approved British English-language names for countries and territories](#) issued by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) [accessed 19 May 2023]

wearing of the hijab in universities. The Government [lifted the ban on the hijab across state institutions in 2013](#).

Initially the AKP pursued pro-market economic reforms and other reforms, including full abolition of the death penalty, to support Turkey's application to join the EU. EU accession [negotiations began in 2005](#) but made little progress and were eventually frozen in 2018 because of [EU concerns about the functioning of the democratic system](#) in Turkey, respect for fundamental rights and independence of the judiciary.

In recent years concerns have mounted, both domestically and internationally, about a [shift towards more authoritarian practices](#) under Erdoğan. Following an attempted coup against the Turkish government in July 2016, the government declared a state of emergency that suspended some of the normal functions of the constitution. Over [100,000 people were arrested and 130,000 state employees were dismissed](#), while thousands of educational institutions and nongovernmental organisations were shut down.

The government [blamed the attempted coup on the followers of the exiled Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen](#). The AKP initially worked closely with the Gülenists to move Turkey away from its previous secular establishment. The AKP [later blamed the Gülenists for instigating corruption allegations against it](#). The crackdown following the attempted coup was viewed as also targeting a range of opponents and critics who had no connection with the Gülenists.

Under constitutional reforms approved by referendum in 2017, the president took on a greater executive role and the role of prime minister was abolished. Turkey effectively transitioned from being a parliamentary democracy to a presidential model. The Council of Europe's advisory group on constitutional matters warned that the new presidential model [lacked the necessary checks and balances to prevent authoritarian rule](#).

## Conflict with Kurds

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) launched an insurgency against the Turkish state in 1984, with the resulting conflict costing nearly 40,000 lives. In his early years in power Erdoğan made some concessions towards Kurdish demands for greater cultural rights, and there have been periodic ceasefires. Following a resumption in hostilities, around 2,000 people were reportedly killed in the context of security operations in Kurdish areas of southeast Turkey in 2015 and 2016. A United Nations reports referred to an excessive use of force by state forces, [involving killings, enforced disappearances and torture](#). Turkey also launched military actions against Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria.

The emergency powers following the coup in 2016 were also used to target Kurdish groups and politicians. Several members of parliament, local mayors and the co-leaders of the main Kurdish political party, the People's

Democratic Party (HDP), were arrested. The constitutional court is currently considering a [case brought by the state prosecutor to close down the HDP](#).

## International concerns

International organisations have expressed concerns about developments in Turkey. In 2017, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) placed Turkey under a monitoring procedure until “[serious concerns](#)” about [respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law](#) were addressed. A report by the United Nations Human Rights High Commissioner in 2018 also expressed [concern about the deterioration of the human rights situation](#) and the erosion of the rule of law in Turkey.

Turkey was also criticised in 2021 by the Council of Europe, EU, USA for [withdrawing Turkey from the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention](#) on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

In December 2022, the EU criticised a prison sentence for the opposition mayor of Istanbul, as a “major setback for democracy in Turkey” and called on Turkey to “reverse the continuous backsliding on human rights and rule of law”. In March 2023, the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers (Foreign Ministers of the Member States) [reiterated calls for the release of former HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş, and activist Osman Kavala](#), following European Court of Human Rights’ judgments in their cases.

## Foreign policy

Turkey has developed a more assertive Turkey foreign policy under Erdoğan. This has [involved interventions in the Syrian civil war](#), support for Azerbaijan [in its dispute with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh](#), and support for government forces in Libya. There have also been [increased tensions with Greece](#) and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean, notably over drilling rights. Erdoğan has also backed Turkish Cypriot leaders in rejecting the UN-backed model of a unified federal Cyprus [in favour of a two-state solution](#).

Turkey has [sought to play a mediating role](#) since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. While it joined other NATO members in condemning the invasion and has provided military equipment to Ukraine, it has not imposed sanctions on Russia. In July 2022, Turkey brokered a deal allowing for Ukrainian and Russian grain and other agricultural exports across the Black Sea. In May 2023, Erdoğan said Turkey has a [special relationship with Russia and President Putin](#).

Turkey has held up Sweden’s application to join NATO, [claiming that it provides a safe haven for Kurdish terrorists](#).

## The 2023 elections

Opinion polls in the lead-up to the general elections in May 2023 indicated that [opposition challengers could defeat Erdoğan in the Presidential election](#). Turkey has suffered economic problems in recent years, with [inflation reaching 85% in 2022](#), and the government's popularity initially appeared to be impacted [following the devastating earthquakes](#) in southern Turkey in February 2023.

Six opposition parties joined forces for the parliamentary elections and united to back a single presidential candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, [pledging a return to a parliamentary system](#). The HDP also gave their backing to Kılıçdaroğlu.

Erdoğan gained ground during the election campaign, emphasising themes including national security, public investment and traditional conservative family values. He accused Kılıçdaroğlu of supporting Kurdish terror groups and being a [“puppet of the West”](#). Another campaign theme was [attacks on the opposition for being pro-LGBT](#) and “anti-family”.

Erdoğan and the governing parties benefitted from pro-government media coverage, with independent media outlets facing fines for criticising the government. On 13 April 2023, a group of international human rights and journalist organisations issued a joint statement calling on the regulator to stop these fines and said it was being [“weaponised by the governing parties”](#) to provide them with an unfair advantage in the elections.

The HDP accused Turkish authorities of trying to intimidate its supporters after [police raids on 25 April](#) which led to over 150 people detained.

In the parliamentary elections, the AKP and its allies in the far-right Nationalist Movement Party won 323 of the 600 seats. President Erdoğan received 49.5% of the vote in the presidential election, while Kılıçdaroğlu received 44.9%.

In the lead-up to the second round of the presidential election President Erdoğan received a further boost when, Sinan Oğan, a far-right candidate who came third with 5.2% of the vote in the first round of the election, [said he was endorsing Erdoğan](#). Kılıçdaroğlu sought to court nationalist voters by promising to expel Syrian refugees and [announcing a memorandum of understanding with the leader of another small far-right party](#). This involved a promise not to reinstate Kurdish mayors removed by the Turkish authorities.

President Erdoğan won the second-round run-off on 28 May, with 52.2% of the vote. Kılıçdaroğlu received 47.8% of the vote.

A [joint election observation mission](#) statement from the OSCE and PACE following the run-off referred to continuing media bias, with the public broadcaster and private outlets significantly favouring Erdoğan, use of public resources to favour the ruling parties, and ongoing restrictions to freedom of expression, including trials and arrests of journalists ahead of the run-off.



# 1 Background: Turkey under Erdoğan

## 1.1 Historical background

### The Turkish Republic

Turkey was established as a republic in 1923 following the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. It became a secular state in the 1920s, with religious schools and Muslim brotherhoods closed down.<sup>2</sup> Islamic law was replaced with European civil codes.<sup>3</sup> Turkey until 1950 has been described as a single-party state, dominated by the Republican People's Party (CHP) which was founded by Turkey's First President Mustafa Kemal.<sup>4</sup> The first three decades of the republic were characterised by authoritarian rule, emphasising modernisation and secularism.<sup>5</sup>

Turkey aligned itself with Western countries at the beginning of the cold war, joining NATO in 1952. It received support from the US Marshall Plan and moved towards a multi-party democratic model.<sup>6</sup>

A new electoral law, guaranteeing free and fair elections, was approved in 1950. At the subsequent elections the Democratic Party (DP) defeated the CHP.<sup>7</sup> Democratic politics in Turkey has subsequently been interrupted by several military interventions. A military coup removed the government in 1960, with the prime minister and other leading ministers subsequently executed.<sup>8</sup> Democratic elections resumed under a new constitution in 1961.<sup>9</sup> The military intervened again in 1971 to force the resignation of the government, with democratic politics then resuming from 1973.<sup>10</sup> Martial law was imposed in 1978 following waves of political violence between right-wing and left-wing groups, and there was a further military coup in 1980.<sup>11</sup>

A new restrictive constitution was approved by referendum on 7 November 1982. Civilian rule was restored in 1983 with elections to the 400-seat

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<sup>2</sup> Kerem Oktem, *Angry Nation – Turkey since 1989*, Zed books, London, 2011, pages 27-29.

<sup>3</sup> Al Jazeera, [Is Turkish secularism under threat?](#), 3 June 2018

<sup>4</sup> See Erik Cornell, *Turkey in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, chapter 3; and Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History. The Turkish Republic](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>5</sup> Kerem Oktem, *Angry Nation – Turkey since 1989*, page 39.

<sup>6</sup> NATO, [Türkiye and NATO](#) [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>7</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History. Turkey under the DP](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>8</sup> Kerem Oktem, *Angry Nation – Turkey since 1989*, page 46.

<sup>9</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History. The 1960 Coup](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>10</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History. Military domination of politics](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>11</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History. Martial Law](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

unicameral Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (TGNA—Turkish Grand National Assembly). However, several political parties remained banned.<sup>12</sup> Free elections took place again in 1987, following a referendum to repeal bans on over 200 politicians.<sup>13</sup>

Democratic elections continued after 1987, although the military has continued to make interventions, ostensibly to maintain secularism<sup>14</sup> (see below).

## Islamist parties and the rise of the AKP

The Islamist Welfare Party (RP) increased its electoral strength in the 1990s. It was the leading party in parliamentary elections at the end of 1995, with 21.4% of the vote. The RP won 158 seats in the TGNA (by then enlarged to 550 seats) and joined a coalition government in July 1996, with its leader Necmettin Erbakan becoming prime minister.<sup>15</sup>

In February 1997, Erbakan reluctantly signed a memorandum to protect secularism in Turkey following pressure from the military-dominated National Security Council.<sup>16</sup> He resigned later in the year and a new government was formed without the RP, stressing its commitment to secularism.<sup>17</sup>

In January 1998, RP was banned by the constitutional court on the grounds that it had conspired against the secular order. Most former RP deputies then joined the new Virtue Party (FP—Virtue Party), which became the largest party in the TGNA.<sup>18</sup> The FP itself was banned in June 2001 on the grounds that it had become the focus of anti-secular activities which breached the Constitution.<sup>19</sup>

Around half of former FP members formed a new Islamist party while others joined the new Justice and Development Party (AKP) founded in August 2001 by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The AKP was viewed as a more reformist Islamist party, and emerged as the stronger successor to FP.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, Civilian rule returns under Özal](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>13</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, Further steps towards Democracy](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>14</sup> Al Jazeera, [Timeline: A history of Turkish coups](#), 16 July 2016

<sup>15</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, The Islamists enter government](#), [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>16</sup> Kerem Oktem, *Angry Nation – Turkey since 1989*, pages 106-107.

<sup>17</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, Yılmaz Replaces Erbakan](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>18</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, Domestic difficulties persist](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>19</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, Banning of the FP—Other Party Developments, 2001–02](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>20</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, Banning of the FP—Other Party Developments, 2001–02](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

Erdoğan, then of the RP, had been elected mayor of Istanbul in 1994.<sup>21</sup> He remained in office until 1998, when he was stripped of his position, banned from public office and sentenced to ten months in prison (though released after four months) for [reciting an Islamic poem](#) at a public rally.<sup>22</sup> The constitutional court ruled in January 2002 that Erdoğan's conviction had disqualified him from politics and banned him from standing in the next general election.<sup>23</sup>

In November 2002, Erdoğan's AKP won a majority of seats in the TGNA, with 34.3% of the votes and 363 of the 550 seats. The AKP's deputy leader, Abdullah Gül, became prime minister for a brief period. Constitutional amendments were then adopted that enabled Erdoğan to be elected to the TGNA in a by-election and then installed as prime minister in March 2003.<sup>24</sup>

## 1.2

### The AKP in power since 2002

Since coming to power in 2002, Erdoğan and the AKP have dominated politics in Turkey and have shifted the country away from the secularism embedded in the early years of the Republic. After coming to power, the AKP were described as “Muslim democrats” or “post-Islamists” advocating a moderate Islamic and conservative democracy.<sup>25</sup> The AKP initially worked closely with the followers of the exiled Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen to move Turkey away from its previous secular establishment. As discussed below, this also involved curbing the military's role in Turkey's political life.

The Gülenists had developed a vast network of educational institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), businesses and media organisations in Turkey.<sup>26</sup> They were believed to have millions of followers in Turkey, and held influential positions in state institutions, including the police, secret services and judiciary.<sup>27</sup> However, the AKP later turned against the Gülenists and then blamed them for the failed military coup in July 2016.

Erdoğan's initial electoral success has been partly attributed to the record of economic development under his governments.<sup>28</sup> The AKP governments at first pursued pro-market economic reforms, involving privatisation of state-owned enterprises and fiscal discipline, while also backing large public

<sup>21</sup> BBC News, [Turkey's charismatic pro-Islamic leader](#), 4 November 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Los Angeles Times, [Turks Rally for Islamist Mayor After Sentence Is Upheld](#), 25 September 1998

<sup>23</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History. Banning of the FP—Other Party Developments. 2001–02](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>24</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History. 2002 Parliamentary Elections—Erdoğan Becomes Prime Minister](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>25</sup> Kerem Oktem, *Angry Nation – Turkey since 1989*, pages 122-124

<sup>26</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History. A New Domestic Power Struggle](#) [accessed 11 May 2023]

<sup>27</sup> BBC News, [Turkey coup: What is Gulen movement and what does it want?](#), 21 July 2016

<sup>28</sup> Reuters, [Analysis: When Erdogan's Turkish economic miracle began failing](#), 15 July 2021

infrastructure projects.<sup>29</sup> In its first decade in power, the AKP presided over a period of rapid economic growth, with GDP per capita almost tripling between 2002 and 2012 and previously high inflation reduced.<sup>30</sup> Some commentators have pointed to a change in direction of the economy since 2013, with foreign investment and economic openness declining. This has coincided with the authoritarian turn by the government beginning with the crackdown on protestors in 2013.<sup>31</sup> Turkey has been hit with high inflation since 2018, reaching a high of 85% in October 2022, while Erdoğan insisted on keeping interest rates low until 2023.<sup>32</sup>

Other reforms and policies were also initially implemented to support Turkey's application to join the EU. This included the full abolition of the death penalty and support for the United Nations peace plan in Cyprus.<sup>33</sup> EU accession negotiations began in 2005, following the granting of EU accession candidate status to Turkey in 1999.<sup>34</sup> The negotiations with the EU made slow progress and were frozen in 2018 because of EU concerns about the functioning of the democratic system in Turkey, respect for fundamental rights and independence of the judiciary.<sup>35</sup>

Over the last decade concerns have mounted, both domestically and internationally, about a shift towards more authoritarian practices under Erdoğan, notably since the failed coup in 2016.<sup>36</sup> In 2018, the Freedom House non-government organisation which ranks countries according to access to political rights and civil liberties, downgraded Turkey from “partly free” to “not free”.<sup>37</sup>

## Curbs on the influence of the military

In 2003, the government introduced reforms to the previously military-dominated National Security Council (the government agency responsible for national security and foreign policy (NSC)) as part of a package to prepare Turkey to meet the [political criteria for EU membership](#). The reform removed some of the NSC's powers and the right of the military chief of general staff to convene meetings, turning it into an advisory body under civilian control. It provided for a civilian appointee to head the NSC and to be appointed by the prime minister and approved by the president.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>29</sup> BBC News, [Erdoğan: Turkey's all-powerful leader of 20 years](#), 28 May 2023

<sup>30</sup> Insight Turkey, [The Turkish Economy During the Justice and Development Party Decade](#), 1 October 2013

<sup>31</sup> Reuters, [Analysis: When Erdoğan's Turkish economic miracle began failing](#), 15 July 2021

<sup>32</sup> CNN, [Turkey economy: Erdoğan vows to keep cutting rates to bring inflation down](#), 19 May 2023

<sup>33</sup> Kerem Oktem, *Angry Nation – Turkey since 1989*, pages 125

<sup>34</sup> Council of the EU, EU enlargement policy, [Türkiye](#) [accessed 11 May 2023]

<sup>35</sup> European Commission, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, [Türkiye](#) [accessed 11 May 2023]

<sup>36</sup> BBC News, [Turkey's Erdoğan fighting to stay in power after 20 years](#), 21 July 2016

<sup>37</sup> Freedom House, [Turkey: Freedom in the World 2018 Country Report](#), 2018

<sup>38</sup> See Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Secretariat-General for EU affairs, [Political reforms in Turkey](#), Ankara 2007, pages 17-18 (PDF); and Middle East Institute, [The New Civil-Military Relations in Turkey](#), 18 October 2022

When Abdullah Gül was nominated as the AKP candidate for the Presidency at the 2007 election, the Turkish army suggested that it might intervene to protect secularism in Turkey.<sup>39</sup> Among the objections of the military was that Gül's wife ([like Erdoğan's](#)) wore a headscarf.<sup>40</sup> The parliamentary vote to elect the president was boycotted by the opposition CHP, leading to a constitutional court ruling to annul the vote on the grounds it had been inquorate. The government responded by bringing forward parliamentary elections to July 2007.<sup>41</sup> The AKP increased its vote share in the election, and the new parliament elected Gül as president in August 2007. In October 2007, a national referendum approved the introduction of direct elections to the Presidency, and the reduction of the presidential term from seven to five years. This would take effect from 2014.<sup>42</sup>

### Ergenekon and related investigations

Shortly after the 2007 warning from the military, an investigation into the so-called 'Ergenekon' organisation was launched. Suspects were accused of being part of a clandestine terrorist network which was plotting to overthrow the government. A trial began in October 2008 of suspected members of the organisation in 2008, including several leading military figures.<sup>43</sup>

Further arrests, and trials related to alleged coup plots took place in 2009 and 2010.<sup>44</sup> In 2011, several journalists who were critical of the government and expressed concern that the police were fabricating evidence in relation to Ergenekon were also arrested.<sup>45</sup>

In 2012, 330 former military officers were convicted for their involvement in the so-called "operation sledgehammer" coup plot to overthrow the AKP government. Three former army generals were given life sentences, later reduced to 20 years imprisonment.<sup>46</sup> In August 2013, the Ergenekon trial concluded with over 250 suspects being convicted of various conspiracy charges, with 19 given life sentences.<sup>47</sup> Most of those receiving life sentences were former military officers, including General Ilker Basbug, the former chief of staff of the Turkish armed forces (freed the next year after the Turkish constitutional court overturned his sentence on a legal technicality).<sup>48</sup> Others

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<sup>39</sup> DW, [Secular Tensions in Turkey](#), 28 April 2007

<sup>40</sup> Reuters, [Turkey's Gul defends wife's headscarf](#), 15 August 2007

<sup>41</sup> The Guardian, [EU warns army in Turkey dispute](#), 3 May 2007

<sup>42</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History. The 2007 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections. \[accessed 11 May 2023\]](#)

<sup>43</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History. Ergenekon Trial and Arrests of AKP Opponents. \[accessed 11 May 2023\]](#)

<sup>44</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). The 'Ergenekon' Investigation \[accessed 11 May 2023\]](#)

<sup>45</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\) | Recent History. Renewed Concerns over Freedom of Expression, \[accessed 11 May 2023\]](#)

<sup>46</sup> BBC News, [Turkey trial: Three army generals jailed for coup plot, 21 September 2012](#)

<sup>47</sup> Al Jazeera, [Analysis: Turkey's divisive Ergenekon trial](#), 12 August 2013

<sup>48</sup> BBC News, [Turkish ex-military chief Ilker Basbug freed from jail](#), 7 March 2014

convicted included academics, lawyers, journalist and opposition politicians.<sup>49</sup>

The trials initially won wide public support as part of a process of reining in the military and bringing it under control.<sup>50</sup> However, as the trials progressed there were protests in Turkey about the treatment of some suspects and what was perceived as a shift in an authoritarian direction by the government, with some political opponents being arrested without much evidence.<sup>51</sup>

The operation sledgehammer verdicts were overturned in a ruling by the Turkish constitutional court in June 2014. An attempted retrial ended in March 2015 when the prosecutor said some of the files were inadmissible as evidence. Expert reports also said that some of the evidence had been fabricated.<sup>52</sup>

In April 2016, Turkey's appeals court overturned all the 2013 verdicts in the Ergenekon trial. The court said there had been no "Ergenekon terror group", and that evidence had been collected illegally.<sup>53</sup>

The two investigations were widely believed to have been driven by supporters of Fethullah Gülen. At the time, this was viewed as helpful to the government, although the government later distanced itself from the trials. Following the overturning of the verdicts, the government suggested the defendants had been unfairly treated and blamed Gülen's followers for instigating the saga.<sup>54</sup>

## Attempts to ban AKP and changing approach to secularism

In 2008, the chief public prosecutor in Turkey brought a case to the constitutional court to ban the AKP, and also ban Erdoğan and other leading AKP figures from holding public office, on the grounds that they were attempting to eradicate secularism. Although the Court did then rule that the AKP was guilty of seeking to undermine secularism, it decided to impose a fine rather than shutting it down.<sup>55</sup>

The Court ruling came shortly after an attempt by the government to end the ban on the headscarf in universities, which secured parliamentary approval but was then annulled by the constitutional court. The wearing of the headscarf had been banned in state institutions since the 1980s, although the ban on wearing it in universities had only been strictly enforced since the military memorandum on secularism in 1997. In 2010, the ban came to a de

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<sup>49</sup> Hurriyet daily news, [19 sentenced to life in Turkey's Ergenekon coup plot trial, including ex-military chief](#), 6 August 2013

<sup>50</sup> BBC News, [Ergenekon: The court case that changed Turkey, 5 August 2013](#)

<sup>51</sup> Reuters, [Turkish police clash with protesters at conspiracy trial](#), 8 April 2013

<sup>52</sup> BBC News, [Turkish 'Sledgehammer' coup plot trial collapses](#), 31 March 2015

<sup>53</sup> Reuters, [Turkish appeals court overturns 'Ergenekon' coup plot convictions](#), 21 April 2016

<sup>54</sup> Reuters, [Turkish appeals court overturns 'Ergenekon' coup plot convictions](#), 21 April 2016

<sup>55</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History, Post-election Politics—Bid to Close the AKP](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

facto end when the government said it would support anyone expelled or disciplined for wearing the headscarf in universities.<sup>56</sup> In 2013, the government formally lifted the ban on the wearing of the headscarf across state institutions.<sup>57</sup>

In 2022, Erdoğan suggested a referendum could be held in Turkey on a constitutional change to guarantee the right to wear a headscarf in the civil service, schools, and universities.<sup>58</sup>

## Constitutional reforms in 2010

In September 2010, a set of constitutional reforms proposed by the government was approved in a referendum with 58% of voters in favour. Amendments included a restructuring of judicial bodies, including the constitutional court, which provided for greater government control over their activities, and gave parliament and the president enhanced powers to appoint judges. The amendments also included measures to allow the trial of military personnel in civilian courts, limit the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians and remove immunity from prosecution for the instigators of the 1980 military coup. Other measures included allowing for collective bargaining for civil servants and removal of barriers for the introduction of positive gender discrimination.<sup>59</sup>

The reforms to the judiciary were particularly controversial. Opposition parties viewed the changes as politicising the judiciary and subordinating it to the government.<sup>60</sup> The government said the changes were necessary to tame “dangerously activist judicial bodies” that had undermined the decisions of Parliament and the executive.<sup>61</sup>

## Further election wins and mass protests, 2011 to 2015

In the 2011 parliamentary elections, the AKP increased its vote share to 49.8% of the vote and 327 seats. Erdoğan then stood for president in 2014, winning the first direct elections in the first round with 51.8% of the valid votes cast.<sup>62</sup> The AKP then nominated Ahmed Davutoglu, previously foreign minister, to be prime minister.<sup>63</sup> Erdoğan later began to chair cabinet meetings and issue orders to individual ministers, bypassing the prime minister.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> BBC News, [Quiet end to Turkey's college headscarf ban](#), 31 December 2010

<sup>57</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey lifts decades-old ban on headscarves](#), 8 October 2013

<sup>58</sup> Euronews, [Turkey's Erdogan proposes a referendum on right to wear headscarf](#), 23 October 2022

<sup>59</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History, Tension over Constitutional Reform](#) [accessed 11 May 2023]

<sup>60</sup> BBC News, [Q&A: Turkey's constitutional referendum](#), 12 September 2010

<sup>61</sup> New York Times, [Turks Approve Changes in Constitution](#), 12 September 2010

<sup>62</sup> The Guardian, [Erdogan emerges victorious in Turkish presidential elections amid low turnout](#), 10 August 2014

<sup>63</sup> BBC News, [Ahmed Davutoglu named as new Turkish Prime Minister](#), 21 August 2014

<sup>64</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History, The AKP Loses and Regains its Parliamentary Majority](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

In 2013, a mass protest movement developed against the government. This began with an environmental protest over the government's plans to redevelop the Gezi Park area in the centre of Istanbul with a new shopping mall and mosque complex. Images of excessive force used by police against protesters led to wider national protests with an estimated 3 million citizens protesting in September. Eight protesters were killed and more than 7,000 were injured, and the government eventually abandoned the redevelopment plan.<sup>65</sup>

In parliamentary elections in June 2015, the AKP lost its parliamentary majority while remaining the leading party with 40.9% of the vote. After talks with opposition parties on forming a coalition government broke down, another election was called for November 2015. The AKP regained its majority at the November 2015 elections and increased its vote share to 49.5%.<sup>66</sup>

Davutoğlu resigned in May 2016 after relations with Erdoğan deteriorated.<sup>67</sup> One point of disagreement related to Erdoğan's calls for constitutional changes to introduce a presidential system. Davutoğlu was replaced as prime minister by Binali Yıldırım, who said that a government priority would be to introduce a presidential system.<sup>68</sup> A referendum on constitutional amendments to introduce an executive presidency was held in April 2017, with Erdoğan then winning the first election under the new system in 2018 (see below).

## 1.3

### The failed coup in 2016 and its aftermath

Late on 15 July 2016 a group of army officers attempted to stage a coup to overthrow the government. Tanks were deployed on the streets and fighter jets bombed the parliament building in Ankara and other strategic sites.<sup>69</sup> A military helicopter was also shot down, the Turkish military chief taken hostage and protestors shot at. The army faction announced on the state broadcaster that it had seized power to protect democracy from President Erdoğan, and that a curfew and martial law had been imposed and a new constitution would be prepared.<sup>70</sup>

Loyalist soldiers and police forces were deployed to resist the coup. The president was on holiday on the coast but called on his supporters to take to the streets, with thousands doing so. Opposition parties also condemned the coup. The coup did not have widespread support in the military, with the vast

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<sup>65</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History, Conservative Authoritarianism and the Gezi Park Protests](#) [accessed 11 May 2023]

<sup>66</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History, The AKP Loses and Regains its Parliamentary Majority](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>67</sup> The Guardian, [Turkish PM Davutoğlu resigns as President Erdoğan tightens grip](#), 5 May 2016

<sup>68</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History, The AKP Loses and Regains its Parliamentary Majority](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>69</sup> Al Jazeera, [What was Turkey's failed coup about - and what's happened since?](#), 15 July 2022

<sup>70</sup> BBC News, [Turkey's coup attempt: What you need to know](#), 17 July 2016



majority remaining loyal to the government.<sup>71</sup> Despite Turkey's history of military coups, this was the first attempted coup to be resisted by the public and by the majority of the security forces.<sup>72</sup> There were violent clashes throughout the night, and the coup was defeated within hours.<sup>73</sup> At least 251 people were killed during the night of violence (mostly civilians), according to official figures, with more than 2,100 injured.<sup>74</sup>

The government blamed the coup on followers of Fethullah Gülen, previously allies of the AKP.<sup>75</sup> Erdoğan had turned against Gülen and his followers since 2013 when pro-Gülen prosecutors had ordered the arrest of several pro-AKP business people on suspicion of involvement in corruption.<sup>76</sup> In early 2014, Erdoğan accused Gülen's followers of trying to defame the AKP after the release of recordings of phone calls apparently showing Erdoğan and his close associates fixing government contracts and manipulating judicial processes. The government had then begun purging sympathisers from the police and judiciary.<sup>77</sup> Gülenist schools were also closed down.<sup>78</sup> In May 2016, the Turkish National Security Council branded the Gülen movement a terrorist organisation.<sup>79</sup>

Gülen denied involvement in the attempted coup. Following the coup attempt, the Turkish government repeatedly requested that the US authorities extradite Gülen. However, US officials said there was not sufficient evidence to do so. In response Erdoğan said that Turkey would cease extraditions to the USA.<sup>80</sup>

A report by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee in March 2017 said that there was “a relative lack of hard, publicly-available evidence” to prove that the Gülenists as an organisation were responsible for the coup attempt, although some individual Gülenists appeared to be involved.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> BBC News, [Turkey's coup attempt: What you need to know](#), 17 July 2016

<sup>72</sup> [House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, The UK's relations with Turkey, Tenth Report of Session 2016–17](#), HC615, 25 March 2017

<sup>73</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), The Failed Coup Attempt of July 2016 and Proposed Constitutional Change](#) [accessed 3 May 2023]

<sup>74</sup> Euronews, [Turkey's Erdogan hails 'victory for democracy' five years after attempted coup](#), 4 October 2021

<sup>75</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\): The Failed Coup Attempt of July 2016 and Proposed Constitutional Change](#) [accessed 16 November 2022]

<sup>76</sup> [House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, The UK's relations with Turkey, Tenth Report of Session 2016–17](#), HC615, 25 March 2017, paragraphs 76 to 84 (PDF)

<sup>77</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, A New Domestic Power Struggle](#) [accessed 11 May 2023]

<sup>78</sup> BBC News, [Turkey to close down 'Gülen' preparatory schools](#), 1 March 2014

<sup>79</sup> [House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, The UK's relations with Turkey, Tenth Report of Session 2016–17](#), HC615, 25 March 2017, paragraph 85 (PDF)

<sup>80</sup> Reuters, [Turkey to end extraditions to U.S. unless cleric is turned over, Erdogan says](#), 11 January 2018

<sup>81</sup> House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, [The UK's relations with Turkey, Tenth Report of Session 2016–17](#), HC615, 25 March 2017 (PDF)

## State of emergency and human rights crackdown

After the coup, President Erdoğan declared a three-month state of emergency that would be renewed seven times until July 2018. The state of emergency suspended some of the normal functions of the constitution, allowing the government to bypass the TGNA and rule by decree.<sup>82</sup> It also derogated from provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>83</sup>

Although measures under the state of emergency were presented as targeting members and supporters of the Gülen Movement, Erdoğan was viewed as using the state of emergency to target a range of opponents and critics, many of whom had had no connection with the Gülen Movement.<sup>84</sup>

In the two years of the state of emergency, over 130,000 state employees were dismissed and over 100,000 people were arrested on charges of involvement in the coup. There were also allegations of torture and physical abuse of suspects.<sup>85</sup> Thousands of private schools, universities and NGOs were also shut down.<sup>86</sup> Media outlets and journalists were also targeted. This was described by human rights organisation Amnesty International as a “crackdown of exceptional proportions”.<sup>87</sup> Amnesty International also referred to violations of human rights by security forces “with impunity”, especially in the predominantly Kurdish southeast of the country, where urban populations were held under 24-hour curfew.<sup>88</sup>

The state of emergency was finally lifted in July 2018, and replaced with new legislation. However, this contained several measures that were similar to the extraordinary powers introduced under the state of emergency. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2018 [profile](#) of Turkey reported that these measures included:

widening already broad powers of appointed provincial governors to restrict assemblies and movement; executive authority for three years to dismiss public officials, including judges, by administrative decision; and increased police powers including custody periods extendable for up to 12 days.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\) The State of Emergency and Erdoğan's Purges](#), [accessed 3 May 2023]

<sup>83</sup> Amnesty International, [Amnesty International Report 2016/17 - Turkey](#), 22 February 2017

<sup>84</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\) The State of Emergency and Erdoğan's Purges](#), [accessed 3 May 2023]

<sup>85</sup> Amnesty International, [Turkey's crackdown on human rights](#), 18 May 2020

<sup>86</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\) The State of Emergency and Erdoğan's Purges](#), [accessed 3 May 2023]

<sup>87</sup> Amnesty International, [Turkey's crackdown on human rights](#), 18 May 2020

<sup>88</sup> Amnesty International, [Amnesty International Report 2016/17 - Turkey](#), 22 February 2017

<sup>89</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Turkey: Events of 2018](#), 2019

## International concerns about developments in Turkey

A March 2018 [report](#) from the UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights, warned that the state of emergency facilitated the deterioration of the human rights situation and the erosion of the rule of law in Turkey.<sup>90</sup>

In April 2017, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) decided to place Turkey under a monitoring procedure until “serious concerns” about respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law “are addressed in a satisfactory manner”.<sup>91</sup> A report by the PACE monitoring committee published in September 2022 expressed concerns about several aspects of human rights protections and the rule of law in Turkey. These included the independence of the judiciary, restrictions on freedom of expression and of the media and the “overly-broad interpretation of anti-terror legislation”.<sup>92</sup>

The US State Department report on human rights in Turkey in 2022, published in March 2023, referred to significant human rights issues, including:

credible reports of: arbitrary killings; suspicious deaths of persons in custody; forced disappearances; torture; arbitrary arrest and continued detention of tens of thousands of persons, including opposition politicians and former members of parliament, lawyers, journalists, human rights activists, and an employee of the U.S. Mission, for purported ties to “terrorist” groups or peaceful legitimate speech.<sup>93</sup>

It also referred to closure of media outlets, and arrests or criminal prosecution of journalists and others for criticising the government, and “serious government harassment of domestic human rights organizations”.<sup>94</sup>

## 1.4

## Conflict with Kurds

### Background: the conflict with the PKK

There are around thirty million Kurds living in the Middle East, mainly in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. They are estimated to make up around 18% of Turkey’s population of 85 million.<sup>95</sup> The Kurdistan People’s Congress (formerly the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, PKK), has waged an insurgency since 1984 against

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<sup>90</sup> UK Human Rights Office, [Turkey: UN report details extensive human rights violations during protracted state of emergency](#), 20 March 2018

<sup>91</sup> PACE, [PACE reopens monitoring procedure in respect of Turkey](#), 25 April 2017

<sup>92</sup> PACE, Report of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee), [The honouring of obligations and commitments by Türkiye Report](#), 26 September 2022 (pdf)

<sup>93</sup> United States Department of State, [2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Turkey \(Türkiye\)](#), 20 March 2023

<sup>94</sup> United States Department of State, [2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Turkey \(Türkiye\)](#), 20 March 2023

<sup>95</sup> Washington Kurdish Institute, [The Kurdish Dilemma in Turkey](#), January 2023

the Turkish state, seeking greater cultural and political rights and an autonomous or independent Kurdish state. The conflict has resulted in nearly [forty thousand](#) deaths.<sup>96</sup> The PKK is proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the UK, USA and the [EU](#).<sup>97</sup>

The PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured in 1999 and sentenced to life imprisonment (he originally received a death sentence but this was commuted when Turkey abolished the death penalty). Following his arrest, the PKK announced a ceasefire which lasted until June 2004.<sup>98</sup>

In June 2004, the PKK abandoned its ceasefire and resumed attacks, using the autonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq as a base. This caused tensions between Turkey and the USA given US support for the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq.<sup>99</sup> This also led to Turkish attacks on PKK bases in Iraq.<sup>100</sup>

The AKP has won support from some conservative Kurdish voters, although many Kurds back pro-autonomy parties (see below).<sup>101</sup> After coming to power in 2002 and partly to meet the political criteria to launch EU accession negotiations, Erdoğan's government introduced reforms giving Kurds in Turkey more cultural and language rights and courted Kurdish support.<sup>102</sup> In 2009, Erdoğan launched a "Kurdish opening" which would involve further concessions on cultural rights, investment in Kurdish areas of southeast Turkey and attempts to end hostilities with the Kurds. However, violence in Kurdish areas continued and there was also opposition from Turkish nationalists to further concessions.<sup>103</sup>

## Hostilities since 2015

Hostilities between the Turkish authorities and the Kurds in South-East Turkey intensified in 2011 and 2012 before the PKK declared another ceasefire in 2013.<sup>104</sup> The Turkish government initiated peace talks with the PKK in 2012, but these talks ended in 2015 with Erdoğan and the AKP moving to a more

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<sup>96</sup> Council on Global Relations, [Conflict Between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups](#), updated 25 April 2023

<sup>97</sup> House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, [Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK](#), HC 518, 11 February 2018 (pdf)

<sup>98</sup> Council on Global Relations, [Timeline: The Kurds' Long Struggle With Statelessness](#) [accessed 12 May 2023]

<sup>99</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, PKK Violence and Official Retaliation \[accessed 12 May 2023\]](#)

<sup>100</sup> CNN, [Kurdish People Fast Facts](#), updated 12 April 2023

<sup>101</sup> Financial Times, [Erdogan battles to win Kurdish hearts in Turkey referendum](#), 6 April 2017

<sup>102</sup> See Reuters, [Timeline: Kurdish militant group PKK's three-decade war with Turkey](#), 21 March 2013; and CNN, [Kurdish People Fast Facts](#), updated 12 April 2023

<sup>103</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey to allow Kurdish lessons in schools](#), 12 June 2012. See also Middle East Research and Information Project, [Turkish Opposition Parties Grapple with the Kurdish Question](#), 21 September 2022.

<sup>104</sup> Reuters, [Timeline: Kurdish militant group PKK's three-decade war with Turkey](#), 21 March 2013

militaristic and nationalist approach.<sup>105</sup> The ceasefire ended in July 2015, following an Islamic State attack which killed 32 Kurds near the border with Syria. The PKK accused the Turkish security forces of complicity in the attack. After two police officers were then killed, allegedly by PKK supporters, the Turkish government launched hundreds of air strikes against the PKK in northern Iraq. The PKK then resumed attacks in Turkish territory.<sup>106</sup> In August 2016, Turkey also launched military operations against US-backed Kurdish forces in northern Syria, while also backing rebel forces against the Syrian government.<sup>107</sup>

A 2017 report by the United Nations' [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR) on [the human rights situation in South-East Turkey](#) from July 2015 to December 2016 said that around 2,000 people were reportedly killed in the context of security operations in the region. This included around 800 members of the security forces and around 1,200 local residents of which "an unspecified number may have been involved in violent or non-violent actions against the State". The report documented "numerous cases of excessive use of force; killings; enforced disappearances; torture; destruction of housing and cultural heritage" and "prevention of access to emergency medical care, food, water and livelihoods". The report also acknowledged violent attacks and terrorism on the part of the PKK.<sup>108</sup>

The OCHR report noted that measures appeared "to have largely targeted dissent in general and political parties of the opposition in particular, disproportionately affecting citizens of Kurdish origin".<sup>109</sup> It referred to the "massive scale of dismissals of public officials", especially of school teachers; and "the mass arrest of members of parliament belonging to the People's Democratic Party (HDP) and of municipal mayors in majority Kurdish areas". It also referred to the closure of almost all Kurdish language local and national media outlets and the arrests of their journalists.<sup>110</sup>

## Kurdish political parties

The Turkish authorities have allowed pro-Kurdish parties to develop since the 1990s. However, several have subsequently been banned for violating the constitution in support of separatism or because of alleged links to terrorism and/or the PKK.<sup>111</sup> These include the People's Democracy Party (HADEP) and

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<sup>105</sup> See Middle East Research and Information Project, [Turkish Opposition Parties Grapple with the Kurdish Question](#), 21 September 2022; and Middle East Institute, [Can Erdoğan Survive Without the Kurdish Question?](#), 11 October 2022

<sup>106</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, Fading Kurdish Hopes, Rising Tensions](#) [accessed 12 May 2023]

<sup>107</sup> Council on Global Relations, [Conflict Between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups](#), updated 25 April 2023. See also BBC News, [Turkey v Syria's Kurds: The short, medium and long story](#), 23 October 2019

<sup>108</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Report on the human rights situation in South-East Turkey July 2015 to December 2016](#), February 2017 (PDF)

<sup>109</sup> As above

<sup>110</sup> As above

<sup>111</sup> HDP Europe, [History of Kurdish political parties in Turkey](#) [accessed 12 May 2023]

Democratic Society party (DTP) which were banned in 2003 and 2009 respectively for links to the PKK.<sup>112</sup>

Over the last decade, the leading pro-Kurdish party in Turkey has been the People's Democratic Party (HDP), which operates in alliance with the Democratic Regions Party (DBP). The DBP general focuses its activities at the local level whereas the HDP operates nationally. The HDP entered parliament for the first time at the parliamentary election of June 2015, with 13.1% of the vote and 80 seats.<sup>113</sup> It was reduced to 59 seats, with 10.8% of the vote at the November 2015 election, and then increased to 67 seats with 11.7% at the June 2018 parliamentary election.

Following the renewal of hostilities in the Kurdish-majority southeast of Turkey in 2015, thousands of HDP members and supporters were arrested. A large proportion of these arrests took place prior to the failed military coup of July 2016. According to the HDP, by the end of December 2016, 8,711 of its members had been detained, with just over a half (4,457) coming after the failed coup.<sup>114</sup>

In May 2016, the TGNA had also adopted a law that removed immunity from prosecution from 138 parliamentarians. This included 50 of the 59 HDP members as well as 51 members of the main opposition party, the CHP. The government said these members were facing terrorism-related charges.<sup>115</sup>

The Turkish authorities used the new emergency powers adopted after July 2016 to target Kurdish representatives further. By July 2018, 12 HDP parliamentary deputies had been arrested and imprisoned on terrorism charges, including the party's co-chairs, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ.<sup>116</sup> Hundreds of local officials from the HDP and the DBP were also arrested, and the government used emergency powers to take control of 94 of the 102 DBP-controlled local authorities, replacing elected officials with state-appointed trustees.<sup>117</sup>

In December 2020, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that former HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş had been detained in the absence of evidence to support a reasonable suspicion he had committed an offence and that his arrest and pre-trial detention pursued an ulterior purpose, namely,

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<sup>112</sup> Reuters, [Factbox: Turkey's history of banning parties](#), 3 May 2010

<sup>113</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History, The AKP Loses and Regains its Parliamentary Majority](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>114</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Report on the human rights situation in South-East Turkey July 2015 to December 2016](#), February 2017 (PDF)

<sup>115</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Report on the human rights situation in South-East Turkey July 2015 to December 2016](#), February 2017 (PDF)

<sup>116</sup> The Guardian, [Turkey arrests pro-Kurdish party leaders amid internet shutdown](#), 4 November 2016. See also Human Rights Watch, [Turkey: Opposition Politicians Detained for Four Years](#), 19 November 2020

<sup>117</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History, Fading Kurdish Hopes, Rising Tensions](#) [accessed 12 May 2023]

“to stifle pluralism and limit the freedom of political debate”.<sup>118</sup> The Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers (Foreign Ministers of the Member States) reiterated calls for his release, in line with the ECHR judgment, in March 2023.<sup>119</sup>

The Human Rights Watch report on developments in Turkey in 2022 notes that “scores of former HDP members of parliament and mayors” remain on remand in prison, or are serving sentences “after being convicted of terrorism offenses because of their legitimate non-violent political activities, speeches, and social media postings”.<sup>120</sup>

## Constitutional Court case to shut down HDP

In June 2021, the constitutional court accepted an indictment filed by the Court of Cassation chief prosecutor to permanently shut down the HDP and impose a five-year ban from political activity on 451 politicians and party officials. The indictment claims an organic link between the activities of the HDP and the PKK because they both support separatism, which is a violation of the Turkish constitution’s reference to the “the indivisible integrity of the State”.<sup>121</sup>

In January 2023, the constitutional court agreed to a request by the chief prosecutor for an interim measure to freeze the party’s bank accounts that contain state support for political parties represented in parliament.<sup>122</sup> However, on 11 March, the Court lifted the bank account freeze.<sup>123</sup>

A resolution by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in April 2021 said that the initiation of legal proceedings against the HDP “combined with continuous harassment and arrests of its members, elected representatives and leaders” was an alarming signal which “seriously undermines the functioning of democratic institutions and political pluralism at national and local levels”.<sup>124</sup>

Similarly, a European Parliament resolution in July 2021 expressed deep concern about attacks on opposition parties in Turkey. It condemned the repression against the HDP and the attempt to close it down.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> PACE, Report of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee), [The honouring of obligations and commitments by Türkiye Report](#), 26 September 2022 (pdf)

<sup>119</sup> Council of Europe, [Türkiye: the Committee of Ministers reiterates calls for the immediate release of Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş](#), 10 March 2023

<sup>120</sup> Human Rights Watch, [World Report 2023: Turkey](#) [accessed 12 May 2023]

<sup>121</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Turkey: Closure Case against Political Party Looms](#), 10 January 2023

<sup>122</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Turkey: Closure Case against Political Party Looms](#), 10 January 2023

<sup>123</sup> Duvara, [Turkish far-right MHP leader Bahçeli deems Constitutional Court 'backyard of terrorist organization'](#), 11 March 2023

<sup>124</sup> PACE, Resolution 2376 (2021), [The functioning of democratic institutions in Turkey](#), 22 April 2021

<sup>125</sup> European Parliament, [The repression of the opposition in Turkey, specifically the Peoples' Democratic Party \(HDP\) \(2021/2788\(RSP\)\)](#), 8 July 2021

## 1.5

## Constitutional changes in 2017

Government proposals for sweeping reforms of the constitution were approved by the TGNA on 21 January 2017, and then put to a national referendum on 16 April 2017, with 51.4% of voters in favour of the changes.<sup>126</sup>

The reforms gave the president wide-ranging executive powers, effectively changing Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential republic. The changes, described by the Brookings Institute in Washington DC as “the most drastic shake-up of the country’s politics and system of governance in its 94-year-long history”,<sup>127</sup> included the following:

- The president became head of the government as well as head of state. The role of prime minister was scrapped, as was the council of ministers (cabinet).<sup>128</sup>
- The president can appoint one or multiple vice presidents (an office that did not previously exist under the 1982 constitution). The president would also have the power to establish and abolish ministries and appoint ministers and other senior officials. Ministers are accountable only to the president not parliament.<sup>129</sup>
- The president no longer had to be ostensibly neutral, above politics and representing the whole nation (as under the previous constitutional provisions, although Erdoğan had been widely viewed as flouting these<sup>130</sup>) and can be aligned with a political party.<sup>131</sup>
- Parliament’s role is reduced. It is no longer tasked with overseeing the government. Members of parliament can no longer put oral questions to the government and can only put “written submissions” to the vice-presidents and the ministers, and not to the president. According to the Brookings Institute, this puts the president “above legislative scrutiny”.<sup>132</sup>
- Parliament would need an absolute majority of its entire membership to re-pass a bill that the president has sent back to the parliament for reconsideration. Previously, parliament could do this by a simple majority of those voting.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>126</sup> BBC News, [Turkey referendum grants President Erdogan sweeping new powers](#), 16 April 2017

<sup>127</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017. For an English language version of the full revised constitution, see Constitute Project, [Turkey's Constitution of 1982 with Amendments through 2017](#), 27 April 2022 (PDF)

<sup>128</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>129</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>130</sup> Politico, [Erdoğan's power grab](#), 31 March 2017.

<sup>131</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>132</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>133</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.



- The president would be able to issue decrees on political, social, and economic issues that would carry the force of law. There would be limitations to this as a decree could not contradict the fundamental rights and responsibilities enshrined in the constitution, and could not overturn existing laws or make law in an area where law by the parliament is required.<sup>134</sup> The president will also be able to impose a state of emergency.<sup>135</sup>
- Presidential and parliamentary elections will be held on the same day every five years. The president will be limited to two terms.<sup>136</sup>
- The president can dissolve parliament, although this would technically lead to the presidential term being dissolved as well and lead to both early parliamentary and presidential elections. The parliament can also dissolve itself (by a three-fifths majority), but if it did so in the president's second term this could allow the president to stand for a third term (the president cannot stand for a third time if it is the president that has dissolved parliament).<sup>137</sup>
- The number of members of parliament would increase from 550 to 600.<sup>138</sup>
- The process of impeachment of the president was also made more difficult. Parliament would need a three-fifths majority (rather than a simple majority as before) to move forward with an investigation into an alleged crime. A 15-member commission would then be appointed to produce a report, and there would then need to be a two-thirds majority in parliament to send the report to the supreme court for trial.<sup>139</sup>
- The membership of the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors, which appoints judges and prosecutors and oversees promotions, was reduced to 13. Six of the members (which will include the minister of justice and the minister's deputy) will be appointed by the president, and seven by Parliament. Previously the president appointed four out of 22 members. The president will also appoint 12 of the 14 members of the constitutional court (the other three selected by Parliament by a three-fifths majority).<sup>140</sup>
- Military courts are scrapped other than for offences by military personnel related to their duties during a state of war.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>135</sup> BBC News, [Turkey referendum grants President Erdogan sweeping new powers](#), 16 April 2017

<sup>136</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>137</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>138</sup> BBC News, [Turkey referendum grants President Erdogan sweeping new powers](#), 16 April 2017

<sup>139</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>140</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>141</sup> Venice Commission, [Turkey - Opinion on the amendments to the Constitution adopted by the Grand National Assembly on 21 January 2017 and to be submitted to a National Referendum on 16 April 2017, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 110th Plenary Session \(Venice, 10-11 March 2017\)](#), paragraph 112

The constitutional reforms were criticised by the Venice Commission, [the Council of Europe's advisory body on constitutional matters](#). Although President Erdoğan had sought to allay fears that the system would lead to authoritarianism by referring to the presidential system in the USA, the Venice Commission said there was very little resemblance between the proposed Turkish system and that of the USA.<sup>142</sup>

The Venice Commission said the Turkish constitutional amendments “would confer substantially more power on the president, and include substantially fewer checks and balances between the executive, legislature, and judiciary, than the US constitutional system”.<sup>143</sup> It noted that the new president “would exercise executive power alone, with an unsupervised power to appoint and dismiss ministers, who do not form a collegiate government” and would have the power “to dissolve parliament on any grounds whatsoever, which is fundamentally alien to democratic presidential systems”.<sup>144</sup> It warned that the amendments would introduce “a presidential regime which lacks the necessary checks and balances required to safeguard against becoming an authoritarian one”.<sup>145</sup>

Following the vote, the main opposition CHP party complained that a large number of unstamped ballot papers had been counted in the vote and that the Supreme Election Council (YSK) had given its approval to the count.<sup>146</sup> A report by a joint observation mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) noted that the referendum “took place on an unlevel playing field and the two sides of the campaign did not have equal opportunities”. It said voters had not been provided with impartial information about key aspects of the reform, and civil society organisations had not able to participate in the campaign under the state of emergency imposed the previous year. It also said campaign rhetoric was tarnished by senior officials equating ‘No’ supporters with terrorist sympathizers, and that in numerous cases, ‘No’ supporters “faced police interventions and violent scuffles at their events”.<sup>147</sup> On decisions by the YSK, it noted that the law did not guarantee effective redress for electoral board decisions, and they were not subject to judicial review.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Politico, [Erdoğan's power grab](#), 31 March 2017

<sup>143</sup> Venice Commission, [Turkey - Opinion on the amendments to the Constitution adopted by the Grand National Assembly on 21 January 2017 and to be submitted to a National Referendum on 16 April 2017, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 110th Plenary Session \(Venice, 10-11 March 2017\)](#), paragraph 45

<sup>144</sup> As above, paragraph 127

<sup>145</sup> As above, paragraph 130

<sup>146</sup> Al Jazeera, [CHP blasts election board after referendum result](#), 17 April 2017

<sup>147</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)/Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), [International Referendum Observation Mission: Republic of Turkey – Constitutional Referendum, 16 April 2017](#) (PDF)

<sup>148</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)/Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), [International Referendum Observation Mission: Republic of Turkey – Constitutional Referendum, 16 April 2017](#) (PDF)

## 1.6

## Presidential and parliamentary elections, June 2018

The 2017 referendum had set a date of 3 November 2019 for the first presidential and parliamentary elections to take place under the new system and bring it fully into force. However, the TGNA could set an earlier date. In April 2018 Erdoğan announced the elections would be held on 24 June 2018. This followed an agreement between Erdoğan and Devlet Bahçeli, the head of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) party, to bring the elections forward.<sup>149</sup> The support of the MHP, which has been described as ultranationalist<sup>150</sup> or far-right<sup>151</sup> and opposes Kurdish autonomy<sup>152</sup>, had helped to get the 2017 referendum proposal approved by Parliament. The AKP and MHP then formed an alliance for the 2018 election, with the MHP backing Erdoğan in the presidential election.<sup>153</sup>

Erdoğan won the 2018 presidential election at the first-round, securing a second term with 52.6% of the vote, Muharrem İnce of the CHP came second with 30.6%. Selahattin Demirtaş of the Kurdish HDP, in prison since November 2016, came third with 8.4% of the vote.<sup>154</sup>

In the parliamentary election, AKP won 42.6% of the vote and 295 seats. This was not enough to form a majority in the TGNA, which had expanded to 600 members under the constitutional reform. However, the AKP formed an informal coalition with the MHP, which won 49 seats with 11.1% of the vote.<sup>155</sup>

The 2018 elections were run while the state of emergency continued following the failed coup against the government in 2016. This allowed government officials to impose restrictions on opposition campaigns. A report by of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) election observation mission following the election said that the incumbent president and his party had “enjoyed a notable advantage in the campaign, which was also reflected in excessive coverage by public and government-affiliated private media”.<sup>156</sup> İnce had complained that the state broadcaster had ignored him and his rallies during the election.<sup>157</sup> The ODIHR report also

<sup>149</sup> BBC News, [Turkey's President Erdogan calls snap election in June](#), 18 April 2018

<sup>150</sup> LSE Europp blog, [Turkey's missing swing voters: Understanding the results of the 2018 Turkish elections](#), 13 July 2018

<sup>151</sup> PolitPro, [Turkey: Parties at a glance](#) [accessed 28 April 2023]

<sup>152</sup> Middle East Research and Information Project, [Turkish Opposition Parties Grapple with the Kurdish Question](#), 21 September 2022

<sup>153</sup> LSE Europp blog, [Turkey's missing swing voters: Understanding the results of the 2018 Turkish elections](#), 13 July 2018

<sup>154</sup> BBC News, [Turkey election: Erdogan wins re-election as president](#), 25 June 2018

<sup>155</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History, The 2018 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections](#) [accessed 26 April 2023]

<sup>156</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), [Turkey, Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, 24 June 2018: Final Report](#), 21 September 2018

<sup>157</sup> DW, [OSCE claims Turkish elections were 'unfair'](#), 25 June 2018

referred to the restrictive legal framework and powers granted under the state of emergency, which “limited fundamental freedoms of assembly and expression essential to a genuine democratic process”.<sup>158</sup>

## 1.7

## Developments since the 2018 election

### Local elections in 2019

Erdoğan and the AKP suffered a setback in local elections on 31 March 2019, losing control of several major cities including Istanbul and Ankara. This was attributed to popular disenchantment with the Erdoğan Government connected to a sustained economic downturn and the continued presence of over 3 million Syrian refugees in Turkey.<sup>159</sup> Turkey’s Supreme Election Council ordered a re-run of the election in Istanbul. This followed complaints from Erdoğan and the AKP about irregularities. This decision was denounced by the CHP as an act of “plain dictatorship”.<sup>160</sup> Concerns were also raised by EU officials and EU governments.<sup>161</sup> However, the opposition candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu of the CHP, then won the re-run on 23 June 2019. This was the first loss for AKP or its predecessors in Istanbul for over 25 years, and viewed as the largest electoral defeat for the AKP since it assumed power in 2002.<sup>162</sup>

İmamoğlu was later charged with insulting senior public officials in a speech he made after the mayoral election in 2019 (he had described the annulling of the initial result of the election as an act of foolishness).<sup>163</sup> In December 2022, a court sentenced İmamoğlu to two years and seven months in prison and a ban from political office. However, the sentence did not take effect immediately pending an appeal.<sup>164</sup> An EU statement described the sentence as a “major setback for democracy in Turkey”, confirming the “undue political pressure on judges and prosecutors in Turkey” and called on Turkey to “reverse the continuous backsliding on human rights and rule of law”.<sup>165</sup>

### Splits in AKP

Opinion polls suggested that the AKP was declining in popularity in 2019. Leading figures also left the party. In December 2019, former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu founded the new Future Party (GP). In March 2020 former

<sup>158</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), [Turkey, Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, 24 June 2018: Final Report](#), 21 September 2018.

<sup>159</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, The 2019 Local Elections](#) [accessed 18 May 2023]

<sup>160</sup> Politico, [Turkish authorities cancel Istanbul mayoral election](#), 6 May 2019

<sup>161</sup> BBC News, [International outcry over Istanbul election re-run, 7 May 2019](#)

<sup>162</sup> The Guardian, [Erdoğan party defeated in controversial rerun of Istanbul mayoral poll](#), 23 June 2023

<sup>163</sup> AP News, [Turkish court gives Istanbul mayor prison term, politics ban](#), 14 December 2022

<sup>164</sup> Al Jazeera, [Why has Istanbul mayor Imamoglu been sentenced to prison?](#), 15 December 2022

<sup>165</sup> EU External Action Service, [Turkey: Statement by the Spokesperson on sentencing of Mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu](#), 15 December 2022

deputy prime minister Ali Babacan found the Democracy and Economy Party (DEVA), with the backing of former president Abdullah Gül.<sup>166</sup>

## Economic problems

Turkey has been hit with high inflation since 2018. It has been above 11% since 2017 and increased sharply in 2021.<sup>167</sup> President Erdoğan pushed a policy of low interest rates to promote growth as inflationary pressures began to mount in 2021, leading to the inflation rate hitting a high of 85% in October 2022, before falling to 44% by April 2023.<sup>168</sup> Erdoğan said he believed that high interest rates were a cause of inflation, contrary to an orthodox view that low interest rates cause inflation and high interest rates are needed to bring inflation down.<sup>169</sup> Erdoğan dismissed three central bank governors over policy differences in a two-year period from 2019 to 2021.<sup>170</sup> The value of the Turkish lira also rapidly declined, losing 80% in value against the US dollar from 2018 to 2023.<sup>171</sup> The marked increase in the cost of living since 2021 appeared to lead to a decline for Erdoğan and the AKP in opinion polls.<sup>172</sup>

## Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic also impacted on the Turkish economy in 2020 and 2021. The government introduced restrictive measures in March 2021 and then eased them from early May. Restrictions were reintroduced later in the year after a surge in cases and criticisms that the earlier lifting of restrictions was premature. A national vaccination campaign was launched in January 2021, but a full national lockdown was imposed in April and May after a further surge in cases.<sup>173</sup> Most restrictions had been lifted by April 2022. According to the World Health Organization statistics there had been just over 100,000 Covid-19 related deaths in Turkey by May 2023.<sup>174</sup>

## Withdrawal from Istanbul convention

In March 2021, President Erdoğan issued a decree withdrawing Turkey from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (known as the Istanbul Convention, as it opened for signature there in 2011).<sup>175</sup> The AKP had previously indicated it

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<sup>166</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Recent History. Dissent within the AKP](#) [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>167</sup> World Bank, [Inflation, consumer prices \(annual %\) - Türkiye](#) [accessed 23 May 2023]

<sup>168</sup> CNN, [Turkey economy: Erdogan vows to keep cutting rates to bring inflation down](#), 19 May 2023

<sup>169</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center, [Why is Turkey's President Cutting Interest Rates, Spurring Inflation and Lowering the Value of the Lira?](#), 2 December 2021

<sup>170</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey: Erdogan central bank firing clears way for more rate cuts](#), 14 October 2021

<sup>171</sup> The Conversation, [Erdoğan has wrecked Turkey's economy – so what next?](#), 12 May 2023

<sup>172</sup> France 24, [Turkish inflation soars to 36% as financial turmoil continues](#), 4 January 2022

<sup>173</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Military Action in Syria and COVID-19 Outbreak](#) [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>174</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\). Military Action in Syria and COVID-19 Outbreak](#) [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>175</sup> Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, [What lies behind Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention?](#), 29 March 2021

may withdraw from the convention following a campaign by religious conservatives against it.<sup>176</sup> They claimed that the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in the Convention undermined family values and promoted homosexuality.<sup>177</sup>

The decision by Turkey was criticised by the Council of Europe, EU, USA and some EU governments.<sup>178</sup> In a letter to Turkish government ministers, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatovic expressed concern about a rise in homophobic narratives by some officials and stressed that the Convention reinforced families by combating violence, which is “the main cause of destruction of families”.<sup>179</sup> The decision also led to protests by thousands of people, mainly women, in several Turkish cities.<sup>180</sup>

## Kavala ruling

On 2 February 2022, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (the Council of Europe’s governing body, made up of the foreign ministers of member governments) decided to bring infringement proceedings against Turkey over its failure to implement the European Court of Human Rights ruling regarding Osman Kavala. This is a rare procedure which had only been triggered once before (against Azerbaijan).<sup>181</sup> Under the procedure, the Committee of Ministers asked the Court to determine whether Turkey had failed to fulfil its obligation to implement the [Court’s judgment](#) in this case.<sup>182</sup> In December 2019, the Court had urged the Turkish authorities to release Kavala, having found his pre-trial detention unlawful and pursuing an ulterior purpose – “namely to silence him and dissuade other human rights defenders”.<sup>183</sup>

Kavala, a businessman and philanthropist, was initially arrested in 2017 and charged with orchestrating and financing the nationwide anti-government protests in 2013. The charges were later widened to include involvement in the failed coup of 2016. Kavala was released in 2020 but then immediately charged again in relation to the failed coup attempt. In April 2022, a court sentenced Kavala to life imprisonment in relation to both charges.<sup>184</sup>

In October 2021, Erdoğan said that ambassadors to Turkey from ten countries, including the USA, Germany and France, would be declared “persona non

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<sup>176</sup> Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, [What lies behind Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention?](#), 29 March 2021

<sup>177</sup> BBC News, [Domestic violence: Turkey pulls out of Istanbul convention](#), 20 March 2021

<sup>178</sup> Euractiv, [US, Europe press Turkey to rethink ditching of Istanbul Convention](#), 22 March 2021

<sup>179</sup> LSE, [Does Turkey’s economic crisis spell the end for Erdogan?](#), 11 January 2022

<sup>180</sup> Reuters, [Women protest as Turkey quits violence-on-women treaty](#), 1 July 2021

<sup>181</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Landmark Judgment Against Turkey for Ignoring European Ruling | Human Rights Watch](#), 12 July 2022

<sup>182</sup> Council of Europe, [Committee of Ministers refers Kavala v. Turkey case to the European Court of Human Rights](#), 3 February 2022

<sup>183</sup> Council of Europe, [Implementing ECHR judgments: Council of Europe urges Turkey to release Osman Kavala](#), 4 September 2020

<sup>184</sup> BBC News, [Osman Kavala: Turkish activist sentenced to life in prison](#), 26 April 2022

grata” after they called for a speedy resolution of the case and for Turkey to comply with Council of Europe rulings.<sup>185</sup> Erdoğan later rowed back from the statement.<sup>186</sup>

In July 2022, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Turkey had failed to implement the earlier judgment which called on the government to end the applicant’s detention and secure his immediate release. In a joint statement the chair of the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers (Ireland’s Foreign Minister Simon Coveney), the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe said Turkey had failed to fulfil its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights and called once again for the release of Kavala.<sup>187</sup> Turkey’s appellate court upheld the earlier sentence in a ruling in December 2022.<sup>188</sup>

## Foreign policy

### Syria

Turkey’s foreign policy has become increasingly assertive since 2018. It launched further military operations in northern Syria at the beginning of 2018, targeting the US-backed Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG). The Turkish government said the YPG was linked to the PKK.<sup>189</sup> The operation was aided by Russia which controlled airspace over Syria and allowed Turkish warplanes and drones to operate in the region.<sup>190</sup> This increased tensions with the USA, which were further exacerbated as Turkey began to take deliveries of Russian air defence systems purchased in a deal agreed in 2017.<sup>191</sup> The USA subsequently imposed limited sanctions on Turkey and removed it from its F-35 fighter jet program.<sup>192</sup>

Turkey launched a further incursion into northern Syria in October 2019 after the USA withdrew its forces.<sup>193</sup> Turkey then came to an agreement with Russia on a buffer zone that would keep Kurdish forces in Syria away from the border with Turkey.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> DW, [Turkey set to ban 10 Western ambassadors](#), 23 October 2021

<sup>186</sup> DW, [Why is Erdogan backpedaling in diplomatic row?](#), 26 October 2021

<sup>187</sup> Council of Europe, [ECHR judgment in the case Kavala v. Türkiye: joint statement by the Council of Europe leaders](#), 11 July 2022

<sup>188</sup> DW, [Turkish court upholds life sentence for activist Kavala](#), 28 December 2022

<sup>189</sup> BBC News, [Turkey targets Kurdish forces in Afrin: The short, medium and long story](#), 22 January 2018

<sup>190</sup> Al Jazeera, [Why is Russia helping Turkey in Afrin?](#), 29 January 2018

<sup>191</sup> CNN, [Turkey bought Russian S-400 missiles designed to down NATO planes. For the US, that's a problem](#), 13 July 2019

<sup>192</sup> CBNC, [U.S. sanctions Turkey over purchase of Russian S-400 missile system](#), 14 December 2020. See also Council on Foreign Relations, [Turkey’s Growing Foreign Policy Ambitions](#), updated 24 August 2022

<sup>193</sup> See also House of Commons Library briefing 8710, [Syria: US withdrawal and Turkish incursion](#).

<sup>194</sup> United States Institute of Peace, [In Syria, Russian-Turkish Deal is a Game Changer on the Ground](#), 23 October 2019

In November 2022, Turkey launched air strikes in both on Kurdish groups in northern Syria and Iraq following a bombing in Ankara that it blamed on the PKK and allied groups, also threatening another invasion.<sup>195</sup>

## Libya

Turkey has also intervened in the Libyan Civil War, providing support to the Government of National Accord (GNA), which is the internationally-backed government based in Tripoli.<sup>196</sup> Turkey began to send military advisers, weapons and equipment to the GNA at the end of 2019. In early 2020, it also sent mercenaries from Syria to fight alongside GNA forces against the Russian-backed Libya National Army (LNA).<sup>197</sup> The Turkish Parliament gave official support for intervention in Libya in January 2020.<sup>198</sup>

## The Eastern Mediterranean

Turkish-intervention in Libya related to its dispute with Greece and Cyprus over drilling rights in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>199</sup> At the end of November 2019, Turkey had signed a memorandum with the GNA declaring a maritime area between northeast Libya and southwest Turkey an exclusive economic zone (EEZ), and ignoring claims made by Greece.<sup>200</sup> In October 2022, Turkey and the GNA agreed an energy exploration deal in these waters, but this was later struck down by a court in Libya.<sup>201</sup>

Earlier in 2019, the Turkish government had prevented Cypriot attempts to find offshore oil and gas by blocking a private drill ship owned by the Italian company Eni off Cyprus. In 2020, tensions increased after Turkey said it was beginning drilling activities close to Greek islands, and in August 2020 naval frigates from the two countries were involved in a collision.<sup>202</sup>

Turkey's actions were condemned by the EU, as well as by the US. Israel and Egypt also gave support to the exploration rights of Cyprus and Greece in the region.<sup>203</sup> The EU adopted limited sanctions on individuals and entities involved in the activities.<sup>204</sup> In January 2021, Greece and Turkey resumed talks

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<sup>195</sup> Middle East Institute, [What's at stake if Turkey invades Syria, again](#), 7 December 2022.

<sup>196</sup> Foreign Policy Institute, [Why Turkey Intervened in Libya](#), 7 December 2020. See also Council on Foreign Relations, [Who's Who in Libya's War?](#), 18 June 2020

<sup>197</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, Increased Regional Assertiveness and Tensions with Russia](#) [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>198</sup> Foreign Policy Institute, [Why Turkey Intervened in Libya](#), 7 December 2020. See also Council on Foreign Relations, [Who's Who in Libya's War?](#), 18 June 2020

<sup>199</sup> See House of Commons Library 9555, [Cyprus: recent developments and peace talks](#)

<sup>200</sup> Foreign Policy Institute, [Why Turkey Intervened in Libya](#), 7 December 2020. See also Council on Foreign Relations, [Who's Who in Libya's War?](#), 18 June 2020

<sup>201</sup> Reuters, [Libyan court suspends energy deal with Turkey](#), 10 January 2023

<sup>202</sup> See these useful explainers on this issue: BBC News [Turkey-Greece tensions escalate over Turkish Med drilling plans](#), 25 August 2020; Financial Times [What is at stake in the eastern Mediterranean crisis?](#) 8 September 2020; and International Crisis Group [How to Defuse Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean](#), 22 September 2020.

<sup>203</sup> Andreas Stergiou, [Cyprus, recent history](#), Europa World, accessed 24 May 2022

<sup>204</sup> DW, [EU leaders back sanctions on Turkey over gas drilling](#), 11 December 2020



aimed at defusing these tensions.<sup>205</sup> However, the Turkish government later said it would be resuming its drilling activities in the area.<sup>206</sup> In May 2022, President Erdoğan announced he was cutting all ties with the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. He accused Mitsotakis of deliberately antagonising Turkey when he addressed the US Congress a week earlier.<sup>207</sup> In December 2022, the Turkish government warned Greece that it would “take the necessary steps on the ground” if it continued to militarise Greek islands in the Aegean Sea.<sup>208</sup>

## Cyprus

In November 2020, Erdoğan visited northern Cyprus and called for a “two-state” solution on the island. This followed the victory of Ersin Tatar in the presidential elections in October 2020 in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (a breakaway state recognised internationally only by Turkey).<sup>209</sup> Tatar also supports a two-state solution in Cyprus in October 2020.<sup>210</sup> This is a break from the proposal to reunify Cyprus in a federal model proposed in a UN-backed plan in 2004. This had had been supported by the Turkish Cypriots in a referendum in 2004 but rejected by the Greek Cypriots.<sup>211</sup> Plans to revive peace talks based on this model broke down in 2017.<sup>212</sup>

Informal peace talks in April 2021, also involving the UK, Greece and Turkey, did not make any headway.<sup>213</sup> In July 2021, Erdoğan visited the beach town of Varosha in northern Cyprus alongside Tatar and announced plans to reopen it as a resort.<sup>214</sup> This move was criticised by the UK and EU as contrary to UN Security Council resolutions.<sup>215</sup>

## Azerbaijan

Turkey intervened in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. Azerbaijan had ceded control over the territory following a conflict in 1994. In the summer of 2020, Turkey and Azerbaijan staged joint military exercises, and there were reports that Turkish military advisers had helped Azerbaijan to finalise plans to retake the enclave. War broke out between Azerbaijan and Armenia at the end of September 2020, with Turkey providing military advisers and drones to

<sup>205</sup> France 24, [Greece, Turkey resume talks on maritime disputes after years of strife](#), 25 January 2021

<sup>206</sup> eKathimerini, [Turkey to resume drilling program in Eastern Mediterranean ‘soon,’ says energy minister](#), 2 April 2021

<sup>207</sup> The Guardian, [Erdoğan says he is cutting all ties with Greek PM, dashing hopes of talks](#), 24 May 2022

<sup>208</sup> Politico, [Turkey issues new threat against Greece over Aegean islands](#), 6 December 2022

<sup>209</sup> See House of Commons Library briefing paper, 9555, [Cyprus: recent developments and peace talks](#)

<sup>210</sup> Reuters, [Erdogan visits Northern Cyprus, calls for two-state solution for island](#), 15 November 2020.

<sup>211</sup> The Independent, [Greek Cypriots reject UN plans for unification](#), 25 April 2004

<sup>212</sup> The Guardian, [Cyprus reunification talks collapse amid angry scenes](#), 7 July 2017

<sup>213</sup> Politico, [Cyprus talks failed to find common ground, UN says](#), 29 April 2021

<sup>214</sup> The Guardian, [Erdoğan plan to unilaterally revive Cyprus ‘ghost town’ condemned by EU](#), 20 July 2021

<sup>215</sup> See UK Government, [FCDO Statement on the reopening and resettlement of Varosha](#), 20 July 2021; and Council of EU, [Varosha: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union](#), 27 July 2021

Azerbaijan.<sup>216</sup> Armenia also accused Turkey of sending its own military personnel and Syrian mercenaries to Azerbaijan, but this was denied by the Turkish government.<sup>217</sup> A ceasefire was eventually brokered by Russia in November 2020, with Azerbaijan having regained some territories.<sup>218</sup>

### Response to Russian invasion of Ukraine

Turkey has sought to maintain a delicate balance in relation to Russia and Ukraine since February 2022. Turkey joined NATO allies in condemning the invasion and voted for the UN resolution condemning it. It also continued to supply Ukraine with weapons, including drones, banned all combat ships from the Turkish Straits and blocked Syria-bound Russian aircraft from Turkish airspace.<sup>219</sup>

However, Turkey did not join sanctions against Russia. Turkey encouraged business investment and trading ties with Russia, benefiting from the loss of Russian investment opportunities in other countries following sanctions.<sup>220</sup> Turkey continues to rely heavily on Russian energy imports and to collaborate with Russia on the Turkstream gas pipeline and the construction of a nuclear power plant in Turkey.<sup>221</sup> The latter was inaugurated in April 2023.<sup>222</sup>

Turkey has also presented itself as a mediating force between Russia and Ukraine. This included brokering separate agreements with Russia and Ukraine in July 2022 to allow the export of Ukrainian grain and other agricultural exports across the Black Sea, as well as some Russian grain and fertiliser exports.<sup>223</sup> Erdoğan announced in May 2023 that Russia had agreed to extend the deal.<sup>224</sup>

Erdoğan caused consternation among NATO allies by initially threatening to veto the applications made by Finland and Sweden to join the alliance in the wake of the Russian invasion. He accused both countries of providing safe havens for Kurdish militants and demanded their extradition.<sup>225</sup>

Erdoğan appeared to have lifted the veto at the NATO summit in June 2022, leading to the USA indicating that it would sell F-16 fighter aircraft to Turkey.<sup>226</sup> Turkey subsequently delayed ratification of accession of the two countries. The Turkish parliament eventually ratified Finland's membership in

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<sup>216</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, The 2020 Nagorny Karabakh War](#) [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>217</sup> Al Jazeera, [What's Turkey's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?](#), 30 October 2020

<sup>218</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, The 2020 Nagorny Karabakh War](#) [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>219</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, [Turkey's Growing Foreign Policy Ambitions](#), updated 24 August 2022

<sup>220</sup> Europa World, [Türkiye \(Turkey\), Recent History, The War in Ukraine](#) [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>221</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, [Turkey's Growing Foreign Policy Ambitions](#), updated 24 August 2022

<sup>222</sup> Reuters, [Putin hails Turkey ties as first Turkish nuclear plant inaugurated](#), 27 April 2023

<sup>223</sup> AP News, ['A beacon of hope': Ukraine, Russia sign grain export deal](#), 23 July 2022

<sup>224</sup> AP News, [Russia agrees to extend Ukraine grain deal in a boost for global food security](#), 18 May 2023

<sup>225</sup> DW, [Turkey threatens to 'freeze' NATO bids](#), 18 July 2022

<sup>226</sup> The Hill, [Biden praises Erdoğan for allowing Finland, Sweden to join NATO](#), 29 June 2022

March 2023, while Sweden's accession had still not been ratified by the time of the May 2023 elections in Turkey.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Al Jazeera, [What Turkey's elections mean for Sweden's NATO membership](#), 12 May 2023

## 2

# Presidential and Parliamentary elections, May 2023

Turkey's constitutional reform in 2017 provided for presidential and parliamentary elections to be held on the same day every five years. The 2023 elections were scheduled to be held on 18 June, but on 21 January 2023 President Erdoğan said they were being brought forward to 14 May.<sup>228</sup> There was speculation that the elections could be delayed after the devastating earthquake in southern Turkey in February.<sup>229</sup> However, President Erdoğan confirmed on 10 March that the elections would go ahead in May. He said this was to avoid a clash with university exams, summer holidays and travel to the Hajj pilgrimage in June.<sup>230</sup>

## 2.1

### Constitution and electoral system

#### The revised constitution

Turkey's current constitution was adopted in 1982 following the military coup in 1980 but has been amended several times since then. Prior to the 2017 referendum on constitutional reform, an article by the Brookings Institute commented that the 1982 constitution had been amended three times via a referendum and 15 times through legislative action, with most articles of the constitution no longer standing in their original form.<sup>231</sup>

Reforms until 2017 were mainly focused on liberalising and democratising the constitution and reducing the special privileges and influence of the military.<sup>232</sup> Some of these reforms were adopted after the AKP came to power in 2002, partly to ensure Turkey met EU membership conditions.<sup>233</sup>

However, the 2017 constitutional reform transformed the constitution from a parliamentary system to a presidential system and led to warnings, including from the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, that the revised constitution removed checks and balances that would prevent authoritarian rule.<sup>234</sup> Under the revised constitution, the directly elected President appoints

<sup>228</sup> Al Jazeera, [Erdoğan says Turkish elections to be held on May 14](#), 22 January 2023

<sup>229</sup> Reuters, [Explainer: How the earthquake threw Turkey's election plan into turmoil](#), 14 February 2023

<sup>230</sup> Reuters, [Erdoğan calls Turkish elections for May 14, three months after quake disaster](#), 10 March 2023

<sup>231</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>232</sup> Middle East Research and Information Project, [Turkey's Constitutional Coup](#), Number 288, Fall 2018

<sup>233</sup> BBC News, [Q&A: Turkey's constitutional referendum](#), 12 September 2010

<sup>234</sup> As above, paragraph 130

ministers. The role of prime minister has been abolished, but the president can appoint one or more vice-presidents. The unicameral parliament is responsible for adopting legislation, but the president has substantial scope to issue decrees that carry the force of law. The president can dissolve parliament, leading to early parliamentary elections (before the end of its five-year term), but early presidential elections would also then need to be held at the same time (see section 1.6).<sup>235</sup>

## The electoral system

The 2017 constitutional reform aligned the presidential and parliamentary terms so that both would last for five years, with elections to both the presidency and parliament taking place on the same day.<sup>236</sup>

### Presidential elections

Although the 2017 constitutional reform established an executive presidency with enhanced powers, direct elections to the presidency had been introduced by an earlier reform in 2007 which also shortened presidential terms to five years (it had previously been seven). The first direct elections to the presidency were held in 2014. The 2023 presidential elections are the second elections under the new executive presidential system introduced by the 2017 constitutional reform.

Under Article 101 of the Turkish constitution, elections to the presidency are held by universal suffrage. The candidate receiving an absolute majority of the valid votes (50% plus one) is elected to the presidency. However, if no candidate reaches this threshold, a second round is held on the second Sunday following the first ballot. The second round ballot features the top two candidates in the first round, and the winning candidate in this round is elected president.<sup>237</sup>

To stand for president, a candidate must be a Turkish citizen, over forty years of age and have completed a higher education (bachelor's) degree. Presidential candidates can be nominated by parties that received at least 5% of votes in the last parliamentary election or have 20 seats in parliament. A candidate can also be nominated if he/she has collected 100,000 signatures in support from the electorate.<sup>238</sup>

The president's term of office is five years, and the president can serve for a maximum of two terms. However, if parliament dissolves itself before the end of a five-year term, early parliamentary and presidential elections will be held

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<sup>235</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>236</sup> Brookings Institute, [The Turkish constitutional referendum, explained](#), 13 April 2017.

<sup>237</sup> Constitute Project, [Turkey's Constitution of 1982 with Amendments through 2017](#), 27 April 2022 (PDF), Article 101 of the constitution.

<sup>238</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey election: Your guide to how the electoral system works](#), 12 May 2023

simultaneously. If this is done before the end of the president's second term, he/she can then stand for the presidency for a third term.<sup>239</sup>

Having already served two presidential terms by 2023, some observers suggested that President Erdoğan would not be able to run for a third time unless parliament dissolved itself early.<sup>240</sup> However, President Erdoğan and the AKP argued that his first term, prior to the 2017 constitutional reform, did not count for the purposes of the two-term limit. After objections to his candidacy by some opposition parties, Turkey's Supreme Election Council (YSK) ruled on 30 March 2023 that Erdoğan could run again under the new system.<sup>241</sup>

### Parliamentary elections

The 1982 established a 400-seat unicameral parliament, the Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (TGNA—Turkish Grand National Assembly). Reforms have expanded its membership over time, with the 2017 reform expanding it from 550 to 600 members.<sup>242</sup> The 600 members are elected in 87 multi-member constituencies, using the D'Hondt system of proportional representation.<sup>243</sup> Parties present closed lists with a fixed ranking of candidates on the list meaning voters cannot express a preference for individual candidates.<sup>244</sup> Political parties must however reach the threshold of 7% of votes cast nationally in order to win seats even if they perform well in particular electoral districts.<sup>245</sup> The rules are different for independent candidates, as they are elected if they receive more than 7% of the votes in a single district.<sup>246</sup>

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe had expressed concerns that the previous 10% electoral threshold was the highest amongst Council of Europe member states and hindered political pluralism in parliament.<sup>247</sup> However, the threshold remained the highest among Council of Europe states even following a reform in March 2022 that brought it down to 7%.<sup>248</sup>

An earlier reform adopted by parliament in March 2018 modified the threshold so that it also applies to pre-electoral alliances of parties, rather than the

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<sup>239</sup> Article 116 of the constitution.

<sup>240</sup> Verfassungsblog, [Is This President Erdogan's Last Term in Office? A Note on Constitutional Interpretive Possibilities](#), 28 March 2019

<sup>241</sup> Duvar, [Turkey's Supreme Election Council allows Erdoğan to run for presidency again](#), 30 March 2023

<sup>242</sup> BBC News, [Turkey referendum grants President Erdogan sweeping new powers](#), 16 April 2017

<sup>243</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [How Turkey's Parliamentary Elections Work](#), 6 November 2015

<sup>244</sup> TRT World, [Turkey Elections: 6 Things You Need to Know](#), March 2023

<sup>245</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [How Turkey's Parliamentary Elections Work](#), 6 November 2015

<sup>246</sup> Library of Congress, [Turkey: Parliament Passes Law Amending Election Laws and Lowering Electoral Threshold](#), 2022

<sup>247</sup> Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, [Observation of the early presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey \(24 June 2018\)](#), 3 September 2018

<sup>248</sup> Library of Congress, [Turkey: Parliament Passes Law Amending Election Laws and Lowering Electoral Threshold](#), 2022

individual parties in the alliance. This was viewed as a way of ensuring the representation in parliament of the AKP's ally, the far-right MHP, and boosting the governing majority.<sup>249</sup>

Candidates for parliament must be at least 18 years old. This is the same as the minimum voting age for voters in both the parliamentary and presidential election.<sup>250</sup>

## 2.2 Competing electoral alliances

Different electoral alliances took shape in the run-up to the elections. By the end of 2022 there were three main electoral blocs. These were:

1. the People's Alliance bringing together the governing AKP and its allies the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and originally formed to fight the 2018 election.
2. The Nation Alliance, the main opposition alliance which was formed to fight the 2018 election and was re-established by six parties in 2022, also becoming known as the "table of six"
3. the Labour and Freedom Alliance. This included the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), and other Kurdish and left-wing parties.<sup>251</sup>

### People's Alliance

The AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) party, which has been described as ultranationalist<sup>252</sup> or far-right<sup>253</sup>, have worked together since 2015.<sup>254</sup> The MHP provided parliamentary support for the AKP's constitutional reform proposals in 2017 and early elections in 2018. The AKP and MHP then formed the People's Alliance for the 2018 elections. This was renewed for the 2023 elections, although at the beginning of April 2023 the MHP said it would run independently in the parliamentary elections while supporting Erdoğan in the presidential elections.<sup>255</sup> The MHP is viewed as having steered the government markedly to the right, notably on foreign policy and the Kurdish conflict.<sup>256</sup>

<sup>249</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Q & A: Turkey's Elections | Human Rights Watch](#), 7 June 2018

<sup>250</sup> Council of Europe, [Collection of electoral data on Turkey](#) [accessed 22 March 2023]

<sup>251</sup> Al Jazeera, [The 2023 Turkish elections: An unmarked road](#), 9 October 2022. See also E-International Relations, [Opinion – Turkey's May Elections Are about Regime Change](#), 4 May 2023

<sup>252</sup> Financial Times, [Kingmaker brings ultra-nationalism to Erdogan's Islamist mix](#), 30 June 2018

<sup>253</sup> PolitPro, [Turkey: Parties at a glance](#) [accessed 28 April 2023]

<sup>254</sup> Washington Institute, [The Coming of Erdoğan's Fourth War for Control: The AKP's Looming Showdown with Turkey's Nationalists](#), 10 February 2023

<sup>255</sup> Hurriyet daily news, [MHP to run independently for parliament](#), 7 April 2023

<sup>256</sup> Financial Times, [How Erdoğan beat the odds: Turkey's election in charts](#), 16 May 2023

The coalition is also supported by the far-right conservative Great Unity Party (BBP) and the Islamist New Welfare Party (YRP), which is a successor to the Welfare Party that was banned in 1998.<sup>257</sup> The Kurdish Islamist Free Cause Party (HÜDA-PAR) also supported the People's Alliance.<sup>258</sup>

### Election programme

Launching his campaign in April 2022, Erdoğan said he would reduce inflation to single digits by 2024.<sup>259</sup> However, he also said he would continue with the policy of low interest rates which analysts say has pushed inflation up.<sup>260</sup> The inflation rate had peaked at 85% in October 2022, before falling to 44% in April.<sup>261</sup>

Erdoğan pledged a reconstruction programme following the devastating earthquakes in February. This would involve building 650,000 new homes, including 319,000 in one year.<sup>262</sup> He said regulations would also be introduced to prevent high increases in rents and property prices.<sup>263</sup>

On foreign policy Erdoğan said he would continue to normalise relations in the region, having already established better relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria. He said Turkey would also continue to act as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. He also said there would be “voluntary” returns of Syrian refugees to their country, which was possible because of improved relations with Syria.<sup>264</sup>

Erdoğan said he would continue a crackdown on “terror” groups, including the PKK and the Gulen movement. He also accused the opposition of being “pro-LGBT” and said his government would “actively fight against deviant tendencies such as LGBT that threaten our family structure”.<sup>265</sup>

### Nation Alliance

The so-called “table of six” parties signed a joint declaration in February 2022. Among the parties signing were the main opposition social democratic Republican People's Party (CHP), Turkey's ruling party in the first decades of the Republic. It moved to the centre-left in the 1960s and was banned following the coup in 1980, before reviving in the 1990s. It has been the main

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<sup>257</sup> Duvar, [Islamist New Welfare Party decides to join ruling coalition after chairman's meeting with Erdoğan](#), 24 March 2023

<sup>258</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's elections: What are the key alliances promising?](#), 11 May 2023

<sup>259</sup> Al Jazeera, [Economy tops Erdogan's manifesto for Turkish elections](#), 11 April 2023

<sup>260</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's elections: What are the key alliances promising?](#), 11 May 2023. See also CNBC, [Turkey's inflation tops 85% as Erdogan continues to rule out interest rate hikes](#), 3 November 2022

<sup>261</sup> CNN, [Turkey economy: Erdogan vows to keep cutting rates to bring inflation down](#), 19 May 2023

<sup>262</sup> Al Jazeera, [Economy tops Erdogan's manifesto for Turkish elections](#), 11 April 2023

<sup>263</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's elections: What are the key alliances promising?](#), 11 May 2023

<sup>264</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's elections: What are the key alliances promising?](#), 11 May 2023

<sup>265</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's elections: What are the key alliances promising?](#), 11 May 2023



opposition party to the AKP since 2002.<sup>266</sup> The CHP formed the Nation Alliance to fight the 2018 elections along with the three other parties: the centre-right/nationalist Good Party (İYİ), the Islamist Felicity Party (SP) and the centre-right Democrat Party (DP). These four parties were later joined in the “table of six” by two parties that have splintered from the ruling AKP since 2019: the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and the Future Party (GP).<sup>267</sup>

The table of six declaration in February 2022 pledged to abolish the executive presidential system introduced by the 2017 constitutional reform, returning to a parliamentary system, restoring the office of prime minister and guaranteeing civil liberties.<sup>268</sup> In November 2022, the table of six published a constitutional reform package which would involve the adoption of a new parliamentary model, reform of public institutions and reinstatement of an independent and impartial judiciary. Legislative and budgetary powers would return to parliament, and the office of prime minister would be reinstated with the presidency returned to a non-partisan role.<sup>269</sup>

### **Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu confirmed as presidential candidate**

There were disagreements within the Nation Alliance as to who should be their presidential candidate. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was confirmed as the candidate on 6 March 2023. Kılıçdaroğlu has been leader of the CHP since 2010, and a CHP member of parliament since 2002. He was previously an accountant and civil servant, working in the finance ministry and general directorate of revenues.<sup>270</sup> He is a member of the [Alevi religious minority](#) in Turkey.<sup>271</sup>

Kılıçdaroğlu’s confirmation as candidate came three days after İYİ leader Meral Aksener briefly withdrew her party from the Alliance because she opposed his candidacy. She had proposed that either Ekrem İmamoğlu or Mansur Yavaş, the CHP mayors of Istanbul and Ankara respectively, should be the opposition candidate. The Alliance eventually agreed on a compromise whereby Kılıçdaroğlu would be the presidential candidate and Imamoglu and Yavas would be appointed vice-presidents if the Alliance won the election.<sup>272</sup> Aksener had argued that either of the two mayors would do better than Kılıçdaroğlu and was unlikely to defeat Erdoğan.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Al Jazeera, [Towards The Third CHP: An Anatomy of the Main Opposition in Turkey](#), 10 April 2014. See also Foreign Policy, [What Happens When a Turkish President Loses an Election? No One Knows](#), 22 April 2023

<sup>267</sup> German International for International and Security Affairs, [The Opposition Alliance in Turkey: A Viable Alternative to Erdoğan?](#), 1 September 2022

<sup>268</sup> German International for International and Security Affairs, [The Opposition Alliance in Turkey: A Viable Alternative to Erdoğan?](#), 1 September 2022

<sup>269</sup> German International for International and Security Affairs, [The Post-Erdoğan Vision of Turkish Opposition: Opportunities and Limitations](#), 9 February 2023

<sup>270</sup> Al Jazeera, [Who is Kılıçdaroğlu, Turkish opposition’s presidential candidate?](#), 6 March 2023

<sup>271</sup> France 24, [‘I am Alevi’: Turkish presidential hopeful Kılıçdaroğlu breaks religious taboo in video](#), 26 April 2023

<sup>272</sup> Reuters, [Turkey’s opposition names Kılıçdaroğlu to take on Erdogan in election](#), 6 March 2023

<sup>273</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey opposition split as Aksener rejects presidential candidate](#), 3 March 2023

Opinion polls in 2022 had suggested Kılıçdaroğlu was less popular than the two mayors and Aksener among potential opposition presidential candidates.<sup>274</sup> Aksener had however previously ruled herself out as a presidential candidate and said she aimed to be prime minister once the post had been restored.<sup>275</sup>

### Election programme

In April 2023, the Nation Alliance set out its programme for the election, incorporating the earlier positions set out on constitutional reform. It said the president's right to veto legislation and issue decrees would be abolished. The president would be non-partisan and only be able to serve one seven-year term. There would also be reforms to ensure the independence of the judiciary and steps to ensure judges abide by rulings of the constitutional court and European Court of Human Rights rulings. Pre-trial detentions would also be curtailed and steps taken to strengthen freedom of expression and the right to hold demonstrations.<sup>276</sup>

Other aspects of the Nation Alliance programme included plans to lower inflation to single digits within two years and restore the stability of the Turkish lira. This would also involve ensuring the independence of Turkey's central bank.<sup>277</sup> The Alliance's presidential candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu criticised Erdoğan's policy of low interest rates, and said he would reintroduce more traditional economic policies to decrease inflation. He would also work to regain the confidence of foreign investors in Turkey and promote manufacturing.<sup>278</sup>

Kılıçdaroğlu also promised earthquake relief and pledged to build homes for earthquake victims free of charge. On housing more generally, Kılıçdaroğlu said his government would quadruple the amount of social housing in Turkey over five years, and cap social housing rents at 20% of the minimum wage. Property sales to foreigners would be banned until Turkey's housing crisis was resolved.<sup>279</sup>

On foreign policy, the Alliance would seek to improve relations with the USA. It would also seek to revive the accession process with the EU, while reviewing Turkey's 2016 refugee agreement with the EU. Kılıçdaroğlu said he would work with the Syrian government to return Syrian refugees back to their country.<sup>280</sup> He also said he would work to secure visa-free access to the EU for Turkish citizens within three months.<sup>281</sup> Turkey and the EU had previously agreed on a

<sup>274</sup> German International for International and Security Affairs, [The Opposition Alliance in Turkey: A Viable Alternative to Erdoğan?](#), 1 September 2022

<sup>275</sup> Hurriyet daily news, [İYİ Party's Aksener says she will run for prime minister not president](#), 26 September 2021

<sup>276</sup> Reuters, [Factbox: How Turkey's opposition plans to roll back Erdogan's policies](#), 6 May 2023

<sup>277</sup> Reuters, [Factbox: How Turkey's opposition plans to roll back Erdogan's policies](#), 6 May 2023

<sup>278</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's elections: What are the key alliances promising?](#), 11 May 2023

<sup>279</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's elections: What are the key alliances promising?](#), 11 May 2023

<sup>280</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's elections: What are the key alliances promising?](#), 11 May 2023

<sup>281</sup> Euronews, [Visa-free EU travel could be on the horizon for Turkey after next month's election](#), 11 April 2023

roadmap to achieve visa-free access, but Turkey still needs to meet certain EU standards for this to be agreed by the EU.<sup>282</sup> The Nation Alliance also said it would commit Turkey to complying with the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights. However, it also committed to protecting “the acquired rights of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” which is currently only recognised internationally by Turkey.<sup>283</sup>

The Alliance said that Turkey would maintain constructive relations with Russia but the Akkuyu nuclear plant project, built and run by a Russian state corporation, would be reviewed. Gas contracts would also be renegotiated in order to reduce energy dependence on certain countries.<sup>284</sup>

## Labour and Freedom Alliance

The HDP went into the election with the case brought by the state prosecutor to close the party down still being considered by the constitutional court (see section 1.4). On 15 March 2023, the HDP decided to stand in the elections under the banner of the Green Left party which had been listed by the Supreme Election Council (YSK) as one of the parties permitted to take part in the elections.<sup>285</sup> A statement from the HDP said the decision to contest the elections under the Green Left Party was made in order “to escape this politically motivated legal labyrinth and the risk of being closed down”.<sup>286</sup>

The HDP formed a wider left-wing alliance, the Labour and Freedom Alliance with a group of left-wing parties in August 2022.<sup>287</sup> It called for a peaceful and democratic solution to the Kurdish issue and emphasised equality and environmental issues and the need to address the high cost of living and economic disparities.<sup>288</sup>

## Election programme

The Labour and Freedom Alliance election programme pledged a return to a parliamentary system and “to stop the destruction caused by the one-man rule” in Turkey.<sup>289</sup> It also focused on cost of living and equality issues and plans to provide free and high-quality healthcare, transport and education services. It said it would remove all barriers to equality for women and the LGBTQ community. It promoted a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue and called for an end to the practice of removing elected HDP mayors and replacing them with government-appointed trustees.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> European Commission, [Questions & Answers: Third Report on Progress by Turkey in fulfilling the requirements of its Visa Liberalisation Roadmap](#), 4 May 2016

<sup>283</sup> Foreign Policy, [What if Kemal Kilicdaroglu wins Turkey's election?](#), 14 April 2023

<sup>284</sup> Reuters, [Factbox: How Turkey's opposition plans to roll back Erdogan's policies](#), 6 May 2023

<sup>285</sup> Duvar, [HDP to enter elections under Green Left Party over closure risk](#), 15 March 2023

<sup>286</sup> HDP, [HDP closure case file handed over to rapporteur](#), 11 April 2023

<sup>287</sup> HDP, [Labour and Freedom Alliance held its first public meeting in Istanbul](#), 26 September 2023

<sup>288</sup> Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung, [Can the Labour and Freedom Alliance Deliver?](#), 13 January 2023. See also ANF, [Labour and Freedom Alliance will not field a presidential candidate](#), 22 March 2023

<sup>289</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's elections: What are the key alliances promising?](#), 11 May 2023

<sup>290</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's elections: What are the key alliances promising?](#), 11 May 2023

## Support for Kılıçdaroğlu in presidential election

Following Kılıçdaroğlu's selection as the Nation Alliance candidate, the Labour and Freedom Alliance stated that it would also support him for the presidency if there was agreement on fundamental principles.<sup>291</sup> It confirmed support for Kılıçdaroğlu in a statement on 28 April. HDP co-chair Mithat Sancar said: "Our goals coincide with Kılıçdaroğlu's on ending the one-man regime".<sup>292</sup>

## Other presidential election candidates

Alongside Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu there were two other candidates in the presidential election:

- Muharrem İnce, formerly a member of parliament for the CHP and its presidential election candidate in 2018. He subsequently established the Homeland Party (MP) in 2021. He gathered the 100,000 signatures necessary to get on the ballot for the presidential election in 2023.<sup>293</sup>
- Sinan Oğan, a former member of parliament from the MHP. He also obtained more than 100,000 signatures and ran at the head of the far-right ATA alliance.<sup>294</sup>

## 2.3

## Election campaign

Opinion polls in 2022 and in the lead-up to the general elections in May 2023 indicated that opposition challengers could defeat Erdoğan in the presidential election. One poll published on 8 March 2022, just after Kılıçdaroğlu was confirmed as the opposition presidential candidate, showed he would receive 55.6% of the votes while Erdoğan would receive 44.4%. The poll also showed that the opposition Nation Alliance would win 44.1% of the vote in the parliamentary elections, and the HDP 10.3%, while the AKP and MHP together would win 38.2%. Other polls in early March indicated similar results.<sup>295</sup>

Support for Erdoğan had initially appeared to drop after the earthquakes in February 2023, following criticism of the government's slow response.<sup>296</sup> The government was also criticised for not enforcing building regulations, which meant that many newer buildings collapsed during the earthquake.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Reuters, [Turkey's opposition names Kılıçdaroğlu to take on Erdoğan in election](#), 6 March 2023

<sup>292</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's pro-Kurdish party backs Erdoğan's rival for president](#), 28 April 2023

<sup>293</sup> Duvara, [Muharrem İnce becomes third presidential candidate after gathering 100,000 signatures](#), 25 March 2023

<sup>294</sup> Duvara, [Four candidates officially running in Turkey's 2023 presidential elections](#), 28 March 2023

<sup>295</sup> Reuters, [Polls show Erdoğan lags opposition by more than 10 points ahead of May vote](#), 13 March 2023

<sup>296</sup> Al Jazeera, [Economy tops Erdoğan's manifesto for Turkish elections](#), 11 April 2023

<sup>297</sup> DW, [Turks blame government negligence for quake devastation](#), 11 February 2023

Kılıçdaroğlu said the government had turned “houses into graves” and “took money for it” for an amnesty programme in 2018 that gave retrospective approval for building projects that had breached regulations.<sup>298</sup>

President Erdoğan gained ground during the campaign, emphasising themes including national security, public investment and traditional conservative family values, and accusing Kılıçdaroğlu of “partnering with the PKK” and being a “puppet of the West”.<sup>299</sup> In rallies leading up to election day, President Erdoğan stressed the government’s defence and infrastructure investments and warned the opposition would roll them back.<sup>300</sup> He said Kılıçdaroğlu was incapable of leading Turkey and was colluding with terror groups.<sup>301</sup>

Another campaign theme was attacks on the opposition for being pro-LGBT and “anti-family”. At a rally on 7 May, Erdoğan said that the AKP and other parties in the People’s Alliance “would never be pro-LGBT, because family is sacred to us. We will bury those pro-LGBT in the ballot box”.<sup>302</sup>

Erdoğan and the governing parties appeared to benefit from pro-government media coverage, with independent media outlets facing fines and censorship. Three independent broadcasters were fined by the media regulator in early April following criticism of the government by presenters. They had also been fined in February and March over their critical coverage of the government’s response to the earthquake.<sup>303</sup> On 13 April 2023, a group of international human rights and journalist organisations issued a joint [statement](#) calling on the regulator to stop these fines and said it was being “weaponised by the governing parties” to provide them with an unfair advantage in the elections.<sup>304</sup>

During the campaign, the opposition complained about its lack of coverage by the main state broadcaster, TRT. The broadcaster was estimated to have given Erdoğan 33 hours of airtime in April 2023, compared to 32 minutes given to Kılıçdaroğlu. The CHP launched legal action against TRT in April for failing to screen its campaign video.<sup>305</sup>

The HDP accused Turkish authorities of trying to intimidate its supporters after police raids on 25 April which led to over 150 people detained.<sup>306</sup> Police carried out raids across Turkey targeting Kurdish civil society organisations,

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<sup>298</sup> Financial Times, [Erdoğan under fire as shoddy Turkish building standards exposed by earthquake](#), 14 February 2023

<sup>299</sup> France 24, [Kilicdaroglu faces 'real uphill battle' after Erdogan nearly clinched first-round win](#), 16 May 2023

<sup>300</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's Erdogan, Kilicdaroglu end campaigning before election](#), 13 May 2023

<sup>301</sup> AP News, [Campaigning in Turkey's pivotal elections ends, voting nears](#), 13 May 2023

<sup>302</sup> Reuters, [Erdogan calls opposition 'pro-LGBT' at election rally](#), 8 May 2023

<sup>303</sup> Project on Middle East Democracy, [Snapshot – Turkey's Elections: How Erdoğan Could Try to Engineer a Win and Stay in Power](#), 5 May 2023

<sup>304</sup> Balkan Insight, [Turkey Accused of 'Persecuting' Critical Media Ahead of Key Elections](#), 13 April 2023

<sup>305</sup> AP News, [Turkey's opposition denounces fairness of vote under Erdogan](#), 8 May 2023

<sup>306</sup> HDP Europe, [A new stage in Erdogan's election labyrinth: At least 110 journalists, politicians, artists, lawyers detained](#), 25 April 2023

with lawyers, journalists, representatives of nongovernmental organisations and HDP officials detained. Human Rights Watch described the raids as “another step in the systematic harassment and intimidation of Kurdish media and political opposition in the country”.<sup>307</sup>

On 7 May, a campaign visit to the city of Erzurum for the opposition by Istanbul mayor İmamoğlu had to be cut short when government supporters threw stones at his campaign bus. İmamoğlu blamed the police and governor for failing to intervene in the attack.<sup>308</sup>

On 9 May, five days before election day, President Erdoğan announced a 45% pay increase for public sector workers.<sup>309</sup> This followed announcements of reductions in energy bills, and increases in the minimum wage and public sector pensions.<sup>310</sup>

On 11 May, Muharrem İnce announced he was withdrawing from the presidential election. He said he was “doing this for my country”. İnce had been criticised for dividing the opposition to Erdoğan. At the time of his withdrawal, opinion polls suggested that İnce would win around 2% of the vote. Earlier polls had shown him at 8%.<sup>311</sup> His withdrawal was viewed as a boost for Kılıçdaroğlu, although it was too late to take İnce’s name off the ballot paper.<sup>312</sup>

Also on 11 May, Kılıçdaroğlu accused Russia of meddling in the elections, and spreading deepfake content and misinformation. In a tweet he expressed support for cooperation between Turkey and Russia, but said that Russia must take its “hands off” the Turkish state.<sup>313</sup> In an election rally on 12 May, Erdoğan accused the opposition of working with US President Joe Biden to topple him.<sup>314</sup>

On 12 May, Erdoğan also dismissed speculation that he would resist any handover of power if he lost the election. He said the suggestion was “very ridiculous” and said that if the nation chose an alternative “we will do exactly what’s required by democracy”.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Turkey: Pre-Election Crackdown on Kurds](#), 25 April 2023

<sup>308</sup> Middle East Institute, [Turkish Election Watch: The Week of April 30-May 7](#), 8 May 2023

<sup>309</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey raises public worker salaries by 45% days before elections](#), 9 May 2023

<sup>310</sup> Financial Times, [Erdoğan hands pay rise to 700,000 public workers ahead of Turkish vote](#), 9 May 2023

<sup>311</sup> AP News, [Turkish candidate drops out in boost to Erdogan's main challenger](#), 11 May 2023

<sup>312</sup> Middle East Institute, [Turkish Election Watch: Last Edition?](#), 12 May 2023

<sup>313</sup> Politico, [Turkish opposition leader accuses Russia of spreading conspiracies, deep fakes ahead of election](#), 11 May 2023

<sup>314</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's Erdogan, Kılıçdaroğlu end campaigning before election](#), 13 May 2023

<sup>315</sup> AP News, [Campaigning in Turkey's pivotal elections ends, voting nears](#), 13 May 2023

## 2.4 Election results

Despite opinion polls during the campaign suggesting an opposition lead, the ruling People's Alliance won a majority in the parliamentary elections and President Erdoğan was just short of an outright victory in the presidential election.

President Erdoğan received 49.5% of the votes cast in the presidential election. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu received 44.9% of the vote. Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu would go through to a second round which would be held on 28 May. The far-right candidate Sinan Oğan came third with 5.2%. The votes of his supporters in the second round would be viewed as crucial to the final outcome.<sup>316</sup> There were reports that some supporters of İYİ (part of the Nation Alliance) voted for Oğan.<sup>317</sup> Despite pulling out of the election a few days earlier, Muharrem İnce still received 0.4% of the vote.

### Presidential election: First round results

Candidate	Party	No. of valid votes	% of valid votes
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Justice and Development Party	27,133,837	49.52
Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu	Republican People's Party	24,594,932	44.88
Sinan Oğan	Independent	2,831,208	5.17
Muharrem İnce	Homeland Party	236,097	0.43
<b>Total</b>		<b>54,976,074</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: [Election 2023](#), Anadolu Agency [retrieved 23 May 2023]

In the parliamentary election, the People's Alliance also received 49.5% of the vote, but it gained a majority of seats (323 of the 600 seats). The main opposition Nation Alliance won 212 seats (with 35% of the vote), while the Green Left/HDP-led Labour and Freedom Alliance won 65 seats with 10.6% of the vote.

Erdoğan and the AKP were widely viewed as having confounded expectations in the elections. Nevertheless, the AKP's vote share dropped to 35.6% from 42.6% in 2018. This made it more reliant on its MHP allies who dropped one percentage point to 10.1%. The ruling parties benefitted from new allies, including the New Welfare Party (YRP) which received 2.8% of the vote and won five seats in the parliamentary elections.

<sup>316</sup> BBC News, [Turkey's presidential race to be decided in run-off](#), 15 May 2023

<sup>317</sup> The Conversation, [Turkey's presidential election – how Erdoğan defied the polls to head into runoff as favorite](#), 15 May 2023

## Legislative election results

Alliance / Party	No. of valid votes	% of valid votes	Seats
<b>People's Alliance</b>	26,934,455	49.50	323
Justice and Development Party	19,387,412	35.63	268
Nationalist Movement Party	5,484,515	10.08	50
New Welfare Party	1,529,119	2.81	5
Great Unity Party	533,409	0.98	0
<b>Nation Alliance</b>	19,063,781	35.04	212
Republican People's Party	13,791,299	25.35	169
Good Party	5,272,482	9.69	43
<b>Labour and Freedom Alliance</b>	5,744,004	10.56	65
Party of Greens and the Left Future	4,803,774	8.83	61
Workers' Party of Turkey	940,230	1.73	4
<b>Ancestral Alliance</b>	1,323,893	2.43	0
Victory Party	1,215,264	2.23	0
Justice Party	108,629	0.20	0
<b>Homeland Party</b>	502,802	0.92	0
<b>Union of Socialist Forces</b>	159,405	0.29	0
Left Party	78,032	0.14	0
Communist Party of Turkey	63,509	0.12	0
Communist Movement of Turkey	17,864	0.03	0
<b>Young Party</b>	112,732	0.21	0
<b>Motherland Party</b>	65,686	0.12	0
<b>Patriotic Party</b>	53,339	0.10	0
<b>Nation Party</b>	52,382	0.10	0
<b>Rights and Freedoms Party</b>	42,547	0.08	0
<b>Justice Unity Party</b>	41,086	0.08	0
<b>People's Liberation Party</b>	31,298	0.06	0
<b>Power Union Party</b>	27,325	0.05	0
<b>National Road Party</b>	17,688	0.03	0
<b>Innovation Party</b>	11,164	0.02	0
<b>Independents</b>	226,873	0.42	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>54,410,460</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>600</b>

Source: [Election 2023](#), Anadolu Agency [retrieved 23 May 2023]

The opposition performed well in big cities, coastal areas in the south and west, and in the Kurdish southeast where HDP voters supported Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential election. However, Erdoğan was well ahead in rural areas and Black Sea provinces. He also won by a considerable margin in the Kahramanmaraş province that was badly hit by the February earthquake. The



Financial Times commented that Erdoğan was able to count on “conservative, nationalist and pious voters across the vast Anatolian heartland”.<sup>318</sup>

Following the elections both the CHP and Green Left complained about discrepancies and ballot irregularities.<sup>319</sup>

## OSCE preliminary findings

The day after the elections, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) released preliminary findings from its election observation mission in Turkey. It stated that while voters had a choice between genuine political alternatives and voter participation was high “the incumbent president and the ruling parties enjoyed an unjustified advantage, including through biased media coverage”.<sup>320</sup>

It referred to continued restrictions on fundamental freedoms of assembly, association and expression which hindered the participation of some opposition politicians and parties, civil society and independent media in the election process. However, it said the campaign itself was competitive and “largely free for most contestants” but “marred by harsh rhetoric, instances of misuse of administrative resources, and the pressure and intimidation faced by one opposition party”.<sup>321</sup> This was a reference to the treatment of the Green Left Party under which HDP representatives stood in the election.

The ODIHR also referred to “inflammatory messages and harsh language” and noted that the president was not explicitly subject to the same restrictions in the campaign period as other high level public officials “and often campaigned while performing his official duties”. It said the inaugurations of numerous large-scale infrastructure projects by several incumbents, misuse of administrative resources, and announcements of significant social benefit programmes provided “undue advantage of incumbency, and blurred the line between party and State”.<sup>322</sup>

The Turkish foreign ministry dismissed the ODIHR observations as “politically charged and accusatory”.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Financial Times, [How Erdoğan beat the odds: Turkey's election in charts](#), 16 May 2023

<sup>319</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's opposition claim ballot irregularities in Sunday's polls](#), 17 May 2023

<sup>320</sup> OSCE, [Türkiye, General Elections, 14 May 2023: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions](#), 15 May 2023

<sup>321</sup> OSCE, [Türkiye, General Elections, 14 May 2023: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions](#), 15 May 2023

<sup>322</sup> OSCE, [Türkiye, General Elections, 14 May 2023: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions](#), 15 May 2023

<sup>323</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey slams election observers' 'lack of transparency' comment](#), 16 May 2023

## 2.5

## The second presidential round

A second-round presidential election run-off was scheduled for the first time on 28 May. Given how close he came to winning outright and his confounding of the polls in the first round, Erdoğan was viewed as the favourite to win the second round.<sup>324</sup>

Erdoğan's prospects of winning were boosted further on 22 May, when the third placed candidate in the presidential election, Sinan Oğan, said he would endorse Erdoğan in the second round. Oğan said it was important that the presidency was under the same leadership as parliament. He also noted that the Nation Alliance "could not display sufficient success against the People's Alliance which has been in power for 20 years, and could not establish a perspective that could convince us about the future". He added that the endorsement of Erdoğan was based on the principle of "non-stop struggle [against] terrorism".<sup>325</sup> Immediately after the election Oğan said he would only endorse Kılıçdaroğlu in the run-off if he agreed to offer no concessions to the Kurdish HDP. He also said that voters had sent a message that "they don't trust the opposition enough".<sup>326</sup>

On 17 May, Kılıçdaroğlu criticised Erdoğan for allowing 10 million refugees into the country. He followed these comments up on 18 May by saying "as soon as I come to power, I will send all refugees home. Period."<sup>327</sup> These comments were interpreted as a pitch to win over nationalist voters in the second round of voting, although Kılıçdaroğlu had made similar comments about expelling refugees throughout the election campaign.<sup>328</sup> On 24 May, Kılıçdaroğlu and the leader of another far-right nationalist party, Ümit Özdağ of the Victory Party, announced that they had signed a memorandum of understanding, which included guarantees to deport all refugees in Turkey within a year if Kılıçdaroğlu won the election. The Victory Party had previously supported Oğan in the presidential election.<sup>329</sup>

Kılıçdaroğlu and Özdağ also agreed not to reinstate democratically elected Kurdish mayors in southeast Turkey who had been replaced by government appointees. Their reinstatement had been an important demand of the HDP, which had supported Kılıçdaroğlu in the election.<sup>330</sup>

In an interview with CNN shortly after the first round of the elections, Erdoğan said the ruling alliance's strong performance in the parliamentary elections would boost his chances in the presidential run-off and a victory for him would prevent an unstable situation emerging. He said: "Stability and

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<sup>324</sup> The Conversation, [Turkey's presidential election – how Erdoğan defied the polls to head into runoff as favorite](#), 15 May 2023

<sup>325</sup> Al Jazeera, [Sinan Ogan endorses Erdogan in Turkey's presidential run-off](#), 22 May 2023

<sup>326</sup> Reuters, [For Turkey runoff, potential kingmaker draws red line at concessions to Kurds](#), 15 May 2023

<sup>327</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's Kılıçdaroğlu promises to kick out refugees post-election](#), 18 May 2023

<sup>328</sup> The Guardian, [Ultranationalist leader backs Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu for Turkish presidency](#), 24 May 2023

<sup>329</sup> The Guardian, [Ultranationalist leader backs Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu for Turkish presidency](#), 24 May 2023

<sup>330</sup> The Guardian, [Ultranationalist leader backs Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu for Turkish presidency](#), 24 May 2023

confidence are very important and people who look for stability will do what is necessary at the polls”. He also said Turkey had a “special relationship” with Russia and President Putin, which had allowed Turkey to play a mediating role in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. He said the approach of the West towards Russia was not balanced and indicated that Turkey would continue to block Sweden’s accession to NATO while it allowed “offshoots of terror groups in Turkey to roam free in Sweden”.<sup>331</sup>

## Election result

President Erdoğan won the presidential election in the second round held on 28 May 2023, with 52.2% of the vote, securing his third presidential term (second under the presidential system introduced in 2017). Kılıçdaroğlu received 47.8% of the vote. Kılıçdaroğlu gained over a million additional voters compared to the first round, whereas Erdoğan gained just over 700,000. However, voter turn-out fell by over 1.5 million between the two rounds.

### Presidential election: Second round results

Candidate	Party	No. of valid votes	% of valid votes
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Justice and Development Party	27,834,692	52.18
Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu	Republican People's Party	25,504,552	47.82
<b>Total</b>		<b>53,339,224</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: [Turkey – Directory: Government and Politics](#), BBC Monitoring [retrieved 7 June 2023]

Following the vote Erdoğan said that the “entire nation” had won.<sup>332</sup> Kılıçdaroğlu referred to state resources having been mobilised for Erdoğan and denounced it as “the most unfair election in recent years”.<sup>333</sup>

## Reaction from world leaders

Erdoğan was congratulated on his election victory by several heads of state and government from around the world including both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.<sup>334</sup> President Putin said that the election result was “a natural result” of President Erdoğan’s “selfless work” as President and “clear evidence of the support of

<sup>331</sup> CNN, [Exclusive interview: Erdogan hails 'special relationship' with Putin ahead of crucial runoff vote](#), 19 May 2023

<sup>332</sup> BBC News, [Turkish election victory for Erdogan leaves nation divided](#), 29 May 2023

<sup>333</sup> See Medya News, [Erdoğan wins Turkey's presidential election amidst controversy, opposition decries unfair process](#), 30 May 2023; and AP News, [Turkey's Erdogan wins another term as president, extends rule into 3rd decade](#), 28 May 2023.

<sup>334</sup> See Al Jazeera, [World leaders congratulate Turkey's Erdogan on election win](#), 28 May 2023; and AP News, [Turkey's Erdogan wins another term as president, extends rule into 3rd decade](#), 28 May 2023

the Turkish people for your efforts to strengthen state sovereignty and conduct an independent foreign policy”.<sup>335</sup> Putin expressed his appreciation for Erdoğan’s “personal contribution to the strengthening of friendly Russian-Turkish relations and mutually beneficial cooperation in various areas”.<sup>336</sup> President Zelenskyy said he hoped to strengthen the strategic partnership between Ukraine and Turkey and strengthen cooperation “for the security and stability of Europe”.<sup>337</sup>

Among the many EU leaders congratulating Erdoğan were President Macron of France, Chancellor Scholz of Germany and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. Von der Leyen said she looked forward “to continue building the EU-Türkiye relationship”, and that it was “of strategic importance for both the EU and Türkiye to work on advancing this relationship, for the benefit of our people”.<sup>338</sup>

The UK Prime Minister’s Office issued a statement to say that Rishi Sunak had spoken to President Erdoğan on the evening of 28 May 2023 to congratulate him on his re-election. The statement said that the Prime Minister had “reiterated the strong relationship between the United Kingdom and Türkiye, as economic partners and close Nato allies”. The Prime Minister “pledged the UK’s continued solidarity with the Turkish people” following the earthquake earlier in the year and the two leaders “agreed to continue working closely together to address shared challenges”.<sup>339</sup>

US President Joe Biden said he looked forward “to continuing to work together as NATO allies on bilateral issues and shared global challenges”.<sup>340</sup>

## OSCE-PACE joint observation mission findings

A statement from a joint OSCE-ODIHR and PACE observation mission on the second round of voting that “as in the first round, biased media coverage and the lack of a level playing field gave an unjustified advantage to the incumbent”.<sup>341</sup> It also referred to continuing media bias, with the public broadcaster and numerous private outlets significantly favouring Erdoğan, and ongoing restrictions to freedom of expression, with trials and arrests of journalists and bloggers continuing ahead of the run-off.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Al Jazeera, [World leaders congratulate Turkey’s Erdogan on election win](#), 28 May 2023

<sup>336</sup> Al Jazeera, [World leaders congratulate Turkey’s Erdogan on election win](#), 28 May 2023

<sup>337</sup> Al Jazeera, [World leaders congratulate Turkey’s Erdogan on election win](#), 28 May 2023

<sup>338</sup> Al Jazeera, [World leaders congratulate Turkey’s Erdogan on election win](#), 28 May 2023

<sup>339</sup> UK Government, [PM call with President Erdoğan of Türkiye: 28 May 2023](#), 29 May 2023

<sup>340</sup> Al Jazeera, [World leaders congratulate Turkey’s Erdogan on election win](#), 28 May 2023

<sup>341</sup> OSCE PA/PACE, [International Election Observation Mission, Republic of Türkiye – Presidential Election, Second Round, 28 May 2023, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions](#) (Pdf), 29 May 2023. See also OSCE PA press release, [In Türkiye’s presidential runoff, a competitive campaign continued to be marked by lack of level playing field and media bias: international observers](#), 29 May 2023

<sup>342</sup> OSCE PA press release, [In Türkiye’s presidential runoff, a competitive campaign continued to be marked by lack of level playing field and media bias: international observers](#), 29 May 2023

The observation mission also referred to “ongoing use of public resources for campaign purposes”.<sup>343</sup> It noted that instances of campaigning while performing official duties had continued ahead of the second round, including breaches of the ban on inauguration events in the campaign period.<sup>344</sup> It said that both sides used discriminatory and inflammatory language, with “harsh, accusatory rhetoric, mostly from the opposition, towards migrants and refugees” and “inflammatory statements regarding the LGBTI community” from high-ranking government officials “including the incumbent”.<sup>345</sup>

## 2.6

### Commentaries on Erdoğan’s victory

Prior to the election, several commentaries indicated that a victory for Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential election was likely. Among factors viewed as counting against Erdoğan were the impact of the economic crisis in Turkey, the unity of the opposition behind one presidential candidate and declining popular sympathy for the president since 2018, with parts of the nationalist right also turning against him.<sup>346</sup> The February 2023 earthquake, and its political repercussions, was also viewed as likely to hasten Erdoğan’s demise.<sup>347</sup> Some commentaries however voiced concerns that Erdoğan might resist a smooth transition of power if he lost the election.<sup>348</sup>

There were also assessments of the challenges that Kılıçdaroğlu might face if he won the elections<sup>349</sup>, and what this would mean domestically for Turkey, and its relations with other countries.<sup>350</sup> This included relations with the EU, and the possibility that a new government in Turkey might seek to re-start accession negotiations with the EU.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> OSCE PA, [In Türkiye’s presidential runoff, a competitive campaign continued to be marked by lack of level playing field and media bias: international observers](#), 29 May 2023

<sup>344</sup> OSCE PA/PACE, [International Election Observation Mission, Republic of Türkiye – Presidential Election, Second Round, 28 May 2023, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions](#) (Pdf), 29 May 2023.

<sup>345</sup> OSCE PA/PACE, [International Election Observation Mission, Republic of Türkiye – Presidential Election, Second Round, 28 May 2023, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions](#) (Pdf), 29 May 2023.

<sup>346</sup> Foreign Policy, [Turkish Election: Erdogan’s Rule Might Actually End This Weekend](#), 9 May 2023

<sup>347</sup> Foreign Affairs, [Turkey’s Disaster - and Erdogan’s: How the Earthquake Could Spell the End of His Rule](#), 1 March 2023

<sup>348</sup> Project on Middle East Democracy, [Turkey’s Elections: How Erdoğan Could Try to Engineer a Win and Stay in Power](#), 5 May 2023. See also E-International Relations, [Opinion – Turkey’s May Elections Are about Regime Change](#), 4 May 2023; and Foreign Policy, [What Happens When a Turkish President Loses an Election? No One Knows](#), 22 April 2023

<sup>349</sup> E-International Relations, [Opinion – How the West Can Prepare for a Post-Erdogan Era in Turkey](#), 14 May 2023

<sup>350</sup> See Foreign Policy, [What if Kemal Kilicdaroglu wins Turkey’s election?](#), 14 April 2023; Carnegie Europe, [The Strategic Consequences of a Kılıçdaroğlu Victory Over Erdoğan](#), 13 April 2023; and Euronews, [Turkish election: Here’s how the outcome could impact ties with the EU, Russia and the eastern Med](#), 13 May 2023

<sup>351</sup> See LSE Europp blog, [What would an opposition win mean for Turkey-EU relations?](#), 11 May 2023; and Politico, [Why the EU loves Erdoğan](#), 11 May 2023

Following the first round of voting on 14 May, an article in Foreign Policy magazine by Sinan Ciddi of Marine Corps University (USA), and Steven A Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations suggested that there had been exaggerated expectations around Kılıçdaroğlu's election prospects with too little attention paid to Erdoğan's advantages. They commented: "After two decades in charge, the president could instrumentalize the power of the state, leverage a friendly media landscape, and play Turks against each other with politically potent messages about identity".<sup>352</sup> They also commented that polling had been unreliable and suggested that much of the pre-election analysis was based on wishful thinking, concluding that against "bad economic times, a devastating earthquake, and an invigorated opposition", Erdoğan remained popular "and his message about piety, power, and prosperity continues to resonate".<sup>353</sup>

Other commentators have pointed to the inability of an opposition coalition made up of parties with divergent views to convince voters that it could govern in a united and coherent fashion.<sup>354</sup> Instead, Erdoğan was viewed as offering stability and was able to use state resources and his control of the media to his advantage, skilfully exploiting popular anxieties notably in relation to the threat of the PKK.<sup>355</sup> This included the use of manipulated videos to link Kılıçdaroğlu to the PKK.<sup>356</sup> However, genuine videos released by PKK rebels which said they would temporarily halt hostilities to give the opposition a chance to win were also viewed as unhelpful to the opposition.<sup>357</sup> Gonul Tol of the Middle East Institute notes that while a range of problems, including Turkey's economic problems, poor building regulation that exacerbated the impact of February's earthquake, and the large number of refugees in Turkey, could be blamed on Erdoğan, many voters saw him as best placed to fix them.<sup>358</sup>

Similarly, in an article for the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Ziya Merla commented that Erdoğan was still able to count on a substantial number of votes from religious conservatives, nationalists and Islamists, including in areas affected by the earthquake, and despite the impact of his unorthodox economic policies, "because of the complex web of affiliations, identities, beliefs and fears that cement political views, and a sense among voters that even with all of Erdoğan's failures, his party is still the only one that can deliver for them".<sup>359</sup> Nevertheless, he noted that not all was well for Erdoğan, given a fall in vote share (at the first round) compared to the last two

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<sup>352</sup> Foreign Policy, [Why Turkey Experts Got Erdogan's Re-Election Results All Wrong](#), 17 May 2023

<sup>353</sup> Foreign Policy, [Why Turkey Experts Got Erdogan's Re-Election Results All Wrong](#), 17 May 2023

<sup>354</sup> Sciences Po, [Turkish elections: why is Erdogan still unbeatable?](#), 16 May 2023

<sup>355</sup> See Foreign Policy, [Erdogan won by Exploiting Fear](#), 31 May 2023; and Sciences Po, [Turkish elections: why is Erdogan still unbeatable?](#), 16 May 2023

<sup>356</sup> Foreign Policy, [Erdogan won by Exploiting Fear](#), 31 May 2023. See also DW, [Fact check: Turkey's Erdogan shows false Kilicdaroglu video](#), 24 May 2023

<sup>357</sup> Sciences Po, [Turkish elections: why is Erdogan still unbeatable?](#), 16 May 2023

<sup>358</sup> Foreign Policy, [Erdogan won by Exploiting Fear](#), 31 May 2023

<sup>359</sup> Royal United Services Institute, [Turkish Elections: What's Next?](#), 18 May 2023

elections and the AKP's decline in vote share in the parliamentary elections to 35% and its reliance on coalition partners to hold a majority in parliament.<sup>360</sup>

Other commentaries also focused on shortcomings in the opposition's campaign. A Middle East Institute article by Howard Eissenstat referred to mismanagement of the campaign and "a lackluster candidate and a wobbly coalition that shared little other than a desire to end Erdoğan's rule".<sup>361</sup> It also referred to Erdoğan's "control of 90% of the media, his use of the courts to limit the opposition, his jailing and prosecution of rivals and critics, and his use of government resources to support his own campaign".<sup>362</sup>

A Middle East Eye article criticised Kılıçdaroğlu for running an ineffective campaign, with voters being unsure about what he stood for, and not presenting a clear strategy for addressing Turkey's economic problems or doing enough to counter Erdoğan's claims that he was sympathetic to the PKK. It also noted that some parties within the Nation Alliance did not campaign for him enthusiastically. His strategy for the second-round presidential run-off, allying with the nationalist Victory Party, may also have alienated Kurdish voters.<sup>363</sup>

### Erdoğan's third term as president

Erdoğan was sworn in for his third term as president on 3 June 2023.<sup>364</sup> This will be his second and final term under the revised constitution approved in 2017. In his Middle East Institute article, Howard Eissenstat commented that Erdoğan "will either need to groom a successor (his son-in-law Selçuk Bayraktar being the most likely candidate), change the constitution (not an easy task), or face internal squabbling as others vie for position".<sup>365</sup>

After being sworn in for his third term, President Erdoğan made several new appointments to the government, with most leading ministers replaced. A new central bank governor was also appointed.<sup>366</sup> The changes were interpreted as signalling a move to more orthodox economic policies.<sup>367</sup> The central bank increased interest rates, nearly doubling them, to 15% later in June.<sup>368</sup>

According to Galip Dalay of the Chatham House think tank, the new appointments were also likely to signal a close connection between Turkey's foreign and economic policies, which would be particularly pressing given the

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<sup>360</sup> Royal United Services Institute, [Turkish Elections: What's Next?](#), 18 May 2023

<sup>361</sup> Middle East Institute, [Weekly Briefing: Turkey looks set for greater instability as Erdoğan wins reelection](#), 30 May 2023

<sup>362</sup> Middle East Institute, [Weekly Briefing: Turkey looks set for greater instability as Erdoğan wins reelection](#), 30 May 2023

<sup>363</sup> Middle East Eye, [Turkey elections: Why did Kılıçdaroğlu lose?](#), 31 May 2023

<sup>364</sup> Al Jazeera, [Turkey's Erdoğan takes oath as president after historic win](#), 3 June 2023

<sup>365</sup> Middle East Institute, [Weekly Briefing: Turkey looks set for greater instability as Erdoğan wins reelection](#), 30 May 2023

<sup>366</sup> Al Jazeera, [Who is Hafize Gaye Erkan, Turkey's new central bank chief?](#), 9 June 2023

<sup>367</sup> Financial Times, [Erdoğan signals economic shift for Turkey as he revamps cabinet](#), 3 June 2023

<sup>368</sup> BBC News, [Turkey hikes interest rates as Erdoğan stages economic U-turn](#), 22 June 2023

country's economic problems. To address these, he suggested that Turkey would “likely embark on a mission to find money and investment” and that “the Gulf, Russia and China could offer money with no strings attached; or it could turn to the West – but that would come with a set of conditions”.<sup>369</sup>

Commentaries on future developments under Erdoğan generally do not expect major changes in foreign policy, with Turkey expected to continue its more assertive foreign policy in recent years. This is likely to involve tense and transactional relations with the EU and “the West” more generally while strengthening ties with other powers.<sup>370</sup>

Domestically, the government was expected to pursue conservative pro-family policies. An agreement between the AKP and one of its new coalition partners, the Islamic YRP, included a pledge to re-evaluate existing laws to “protect the integrity of the family”. YRP has called for the closure of LGBT+ organisations. Both YRP and HÜDA-PAR, which also supported the People's Alliance, have also called for an amendment to the law on prevention of violence against women and children.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Chatham House, [How will geopolitics shape Turkey's international future?](#), 5 June 2023

<sup>370</sup> Centre for European Reform, [Erdoğan's victory and the West](#), 31 May 2023. See also LSE Europe blog, [What Erdoğan's reelection means for Turkey](#), 31 May 2023.

<sup>371</sup> The Conversation, [Turkey: what to expect from Erdoğan, his ultranationalist alliance and their 'family values' pledges](#), 31 May 2023. See also Al Monitor, [Turkey's ruling alliance welcomes Islamist parties with misogynist agendas](#), 27 March 2023




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