

# Turkey's Opposition, Straining at the Seams

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Brief Analysis

## Opposition factions face numerous difficulties in the lead-up to the next elections, as internal disputes may undermine their success.

The forthcoming elections in Turkey are going to be of a highly symbolic value: 2023 is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the proclamation of the republic, and the first time the opposition is somewhat united and self-confident against more than two decades of Erdoğan's rule. "The Table of Six," as they have been called for a while by the media, managed to come up with a single, joint candidate against Erdoğan—a feat deserving recognition considering the very heterogeneous nature of the alliance. Meanwhile, Erdoğan is marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a renewal date for his party and his vision of a "New Turkey," a discourse that also has tacit references to religious resistance against the proclamation of the republic and introduction of secular law.

The Erdoğan-led alliance, at least at first glance, seems to have no inner conflicts, but the opposition has hardly been so. The initial alliance between the Republican People's Party (CHP) and "the Good Party" (İYİ), consisting of a wide secularist voter base, saw the success of electing opposition candidates for two important cities as mayors, which was interpreted by many as the herald of Erdoğan's decline. Erdoğan himself had risen to prominence as mayor of İstanbul. The alliance expanded, however, including minor parties led by disgruntled ex-AKP ministers and a former prime minister, and launching an effort to designate a joint candidate to contest Erdoğan.

It was not an easy task—party leaders, especially the center-left CHP President, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, saw the popularity of the two mayors, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, as a threat to his authority within the party. Kılıçdaroğlu also felt that the minor parties were demanding too many places on MP lists and in potential minister posts in return for their support. When Meral Akşener, the leader of moderate-Nationalist İYİ Party, eventually voiced support for either of the mayors as candidates, the Table experienced its first crisis. Akşener denounced the alliance and publicly announced that the İYİ Party was no longer able to negotiate. Many were shocked as the previous subterranean disputes within the alliance were not made public. The timing was also challenging; Akşener [announced \(https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/aksener-parts-ways-with-table-of-six-181346\)](https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/aksener-parts-ways-with-table-of-six-181346) the split on

March 3 when the official elections were scheduled to begin on March 10, and the election date being May 14. Acting as middlemen, İmamoğlu and Yavaş managed to find common ground between the parties, and Akşener returned to the Table. Soon after, the alliance made a public announcement of Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy.

Although this crisis was quickly resolved, it probably will not be the last for the Table of Six. Indeed, another crisis looms on the horizon: the question of the People's Democratic Party (HDP). The HDP voter base is mostly Kurdish and their agenda differs from that of the parties in the alliance. Their demands are almost always dictated by Kurdish nationalism and as one might expect, this does not bode well if they are expected to cooperate with Turkish nationalists. Kılıçdaroğlu views the 10% vote that can be provided by the HDP base as crucial, but the potential involvement of the HDP could also mean losing voters from the pre-existing base—mostly from the İYİ Party but also from CHP. Hawkish statements from prominent HDP members like Hasip Kaplan, who said

**(<https://www.tamgaturk.com/kurtcu-hasip-kaplan-dan-tehdit-mansur-yavas-hayal-kurmasin-kurtler-haddini-bildirir/59167/>)** “The Kurds will put you in your place,” only make matters worse. Kılıçdaroğlu also faces another issue: many in the traditional opposition base do not like the idea of voting for any ex-AKP members, who had continued supporting the AKP during and after the referendum. Kılıçdaroğlu is facing a multivariable equation, and has little means to solve it as there is not much time left before the elections.

The HDP issue is one which has played out before in Turkish politics, especially in the case of the HDP's previous alliance with the AKP. In many ways, the HDP was the cornerstone of Erdoğan's equation for ensuring his rule—collaborating with the HDP during the so-called “Solution Process” strengthened the HDP's position in Kurdish populated areas significantly. But the HDP's ten percent has no natural allies in the rest of the political environment, and this often estranges any of its allies from the rest of the populace. Whoever is perceived as being too close to the HDP is somehow punished by the voters. Case in point, the AKP itself was punished in 2015, failing to win a sufficient majority to form the government for the first time, after which it ended the Solution Process. Even during Gezi Protests, many protesters decided to leave the movement after organizations affiliated with the HDP and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) appeared on the streets. Considering the HDP's polarizing effect, the already-divided Table of Six could experience even more turbulence if the HDP is brought too close. Even the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP), an ally of HDP, is now having a mild crisis with HDP after the former managed to gain some media coverage independent of HDP thanks to its young and innovative leadership. The supporters of once-allied parties now accuse each other of racism.

Meanwhile, many polls show that due to poor economic management, AKP voters are demonstrating a slow but consistent drift away from the party—a trend accelerated by the disastrous mismanagement of the catastrophic earthquake that hit southeastern Turkey in early February. However, the AKP still controls a wide and efficient propaganda machine led by Fahrettin Altun, the Director of Communications for the Presidential Office, who Kılıçdaroğlu has dubbed a “vitamin deficient Goebbels.” Mainstream media is almost nonexistent in Turkey, as all big media outlets are either owned by AKP supporters or tied to the government via financial means. Altun has already managed to successfully portray Kılıçdaroğlu as the scape-goat for the misfortunes in Turkey, at least in rural and less developed areas, despite the fact that Kılıçdaroğlu has virtually no authority to intervene in any decision-making.

The “outsider forces” discourse spun by Altun has managed to catch many estranged AKP supporters, causing them to give Erdoğan's government a second chance lest the “outsider forces” get what they want. But this seems to be the only card left to play in Erdoğan's hand—he can no longer promise a change in attitude towards religion and he can no longer promise liberalization of the economy. This lack of tangible political promises is now compensated by narratives aimed mostly at uneducated and impoverished masses. In order to gain traction, Kılıçdaroğlu must reach out to such audiences and prove himself not to be the “agent of the outsider forces” as he is portrayed. Again, he only

has two months to do so.

For the opposition, forcing a second round in the elections—meaning none of the candidates reach the 50%+1 threshold in the first run—seems to be the only possible route to victory. I expect many of the disillusioned AKP supporters to vote for Erdoğan in the presidential election, but support other parties in the National Assembly. In such a scenario, there could be a rally effect in the fragmented components of the opposition, allowing it to gain confidence, which it has lacked for some time. New negotiations might persuade the masses and appease their fears, and a second run for Kılıçdaroğlu could be portrayed as the return of Atatürk's party on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. But this is all dependent on two conditions—whether or not the HDP runs with its own candidate, and the possibility of an independent candidate vying for votes from the disillusioned Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) base who are still enraged by the assassination of the former Grey Wolves President Sinan Ateş. Indeed, after the media exposed the MHP's many ties to the police department and drug cartels in the aftermath of the assassination, there was great public outcry which could translate into some election support.

The emergence of an independent nationalist candidate in this context might have a large impact disproportionate to the percentage of votes he or she might get—even a few percentage points could make a big difference. If an independent nationalist candidate took several percentage points from the MHP base, neither Kılıçdaroğlu nor Erdoğan would win in the first round. In the second round, the atmosphere would be much more in favor of the opposition.

*Editorial note: The HDP has not yet stated its official support for Kılıçdaroğlu, but has given signals that could be interpreted in this manner. Another important factor is that the HDP has stated they will run the campaign under the list of the Green Left Party, due to the possibility of the judicial branch outlawing the HDP at any time on the grounds of terrorist ties. ❖*

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