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Turkey: The beginning of the next phase of
autocratization or the revival of democracy

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In May 2023, Turkey will hold the most critical elections since the founding of the Republic 100 years ago. For the first time in 20 years in power, public polls point at an electoral defeat of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. What does the crisis and potential demise of President Erdoğan mean for Turkey? Is this the beginning of a next phase of autocratization or the chance for transition to democracy?

Autocratization came gradually after recurrent electoral victories of the ruling AKP. The executive takeover (Svolik 2019) has entailed the colonization of state institutions, the control of the judiciary, the mainstreaming of media, the curtailment of democratic rights and liberties and the reorganization of business capital. Authoritarianism reached a new level after the failed coup attempt of 2016 and introduction of a presidential system in 2018¹. Ever since executive powers are united in the hands of the president. He can rule with executive orders, appoint ministers and bureaucrats and redesign institutions and ministries without the approval of the parliament. Parliament was weakened and checks and balances largely eliminated. Independent state institutions such as the Supreme Election Committee, the Regulatory Radio and Television Authority or the Central Bank have lost their autonomy. Without exception, they are all led by loyal supporters who are appointed by the president.

The rise and survival of competitive authoritarianism

Meanwhile, Turkey qualifies as a competitive authoritarian regime (Levitsky & Way 2002, Esen & Gümüşcü 2016). These are political systems that are characterized by authoritarian practices of rule, despite elections and the existence of formal democratic institutions and processes. Elections are regularly held and they are usually free of fraud but they do not take place under fair conditions. The ruling party, government officials and police abuse state resources, limit the ability of the opposition to appear in media and often harass candidates and supporters of the opposition (Levitsky and Way 2002). Nevertheless, despite obstacles and limitations, an electoral win for the opposition is possible; however, it requires a level of “mobilization, unity, skill, and heroism far beyond what would normally be required for victory in a democracy” (Diamond 2002, 24).

Presidential and parliamentary elections will take place against the backdrop of a dramatic economic crisis. In 2022, the Turkish Lira lost approximately 35 percent of its value. While official inflation rates point at 64.28 percent, the assessment of the Independent Inflation Research Group (ENAG) of a real inflation rate at 137.55 percent seems more credible (Euronews 03-01-2023).

¹ Approved by the majority in the referendum of 2017.

The government has reacted to its dwindling popularity with further autocratization. The number of jailed journalists doubled in 2022 (Voa 15-12-2022) and the freedom of media was further curtailed. The government passed in 2022 the so-called disinformation law which threatens to rein in media and social media and subdue open debate in the run-up to the elections (The Guardian 13-10-2022). Also control over universities was tightened. In recent months President Erdoğan appointed a large number of new university rectors, many of them with direct links to the ruling party. Most recently, the government has not shied away to use the judiciary to prevent potential challengers. In December 2022, a court sentenced Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu (CHP) the mayor of Istanbul to two years in prison. This includes a ban from politics². Oppositional media revealed that the judge and the prosecutor of the lawsuit against İmamoğlu have close personal ties to the ruling party (Cumhuriyet 16-12-2022)³.

² Selahattin Demirtaş, the former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish HDP has been in prison without trial since 2016

³ Access to the article of Cumhuriyet on the issue was temporarily blocked by the government.

⁴ The local elections of 2019 in Istanbul provide a warning example. Back then, the state news agency stopped publishing voting results for Istanbul once it became clear that the oppositional candidate was ahead. Later the AKP disputed the result and called for a re-run. The Supreme Election Committee followed the AKP's objections and ordered the re-run of the elections from which Ekrem İmamoğlu emerged as winner.

The challenges ahead

Much is at stake for President Erdoğan and the multi-layered patronage system he stands for. Neither the president nor his party or his ardent supporters seem to be willing to surrender to electoral defeat⁴.

President Erdoğan's most important challenger is the Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*) which was only established in 2022. The Nation Alliance unites six ideologically rather different political parties such as the Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party), the party of Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, the newly established moderate nationalist İYİ Parti (Good Party), the Islamist SP – Felicity Party and three smaller parties⁵. The members of the alliance have put ideological differences and political rivalries behind and have focused on the common goal of voting out President Erdoğan and bringing about a return to a parliamentary system⁶.

However, the alliance is fragile. Pitfalls are the decision on the the alliance's common

⁵ The center-right Democrat Party, the DEVA Party founded by former AKP minister of economy Ali Babacan and the Future Party led by former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.

⁶ The oppositional Nation Alliance is in polls for the parliamentary elections with 41.7 percent of the votes ahead of the People's Alliance consisting of the AKP and the ultranationalist MHP whose support only amounts to 37.6 percent (BirGün 27-12-2022). In regard to presidential elections 54.4 percent stated that they would under no circumstances vote for Erdoğan (Cumhuriyet 06-12-2022).

candidate against Erdoğan and identity issues. Although, CHP-leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu signals that he would like to run against Erdoğan, his party colleagues, Imamoğlu the mayor of Istanbul and Yavaş, the mayor of Ankara prove to have much better chances according to surveys (Diken 09-01-2023). The person of the candidate is crucial. He or she needs to embrace a broad spectrum of right wing, left wing, secular and Islamist, conservative, Turkish nationalist, and Kurdish voters. So far, the Nation Alliance has chosen a rather soft strategy against the regime when it comes to conservatism and Turkish nationalism. The litmus test for the alliance's promise of democratization will be its attitude towards the Kurdish issue.

The government has accused the pro-Kurdish HDP of being the long arm of the PKK. Many of its members, including the former co-chair Demirtaş are imprisoned. Although, a victory of the Nation Alliance's candidate for presidency will most probably depend on the support of the HDP, the alliance has tried

hard not to appear as collaborating with the HDP⁷. The Nation Alliance has remained silent to the arrests, to the human rights abuses and to the dismissal of elected HDP mayors in Eastern provinces and their replacement by government appointed trustees. A simple return to the parliamentary system will not resolve the Kurdish issue.

The run-up to the elections has increased political tensions, insecurity and a standstill. Politicians, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, civil society, activists, diplomats, and regular citizens stare at the election date and wait. The elections will not only determine the future of the country and the chances for democracy in Turkey, but they might also be indicative of the chances for oppositional movements and government transition in other competitive authoritarian regimes. In either case, the victory of the incumbents or the victory of the opposition Turkey has entered a difficult open-ended transformation process.

⁷ The HDP was not invited to join the Nation Alliance and formed together with other leftist

parties the so-called Labor and Freedom Alliance.

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