

# Turkish election - a choice between Erdogan and a nationalist opposition

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There was already much to suggest that the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, "Party for Justice and Recovery/Development") and MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, "Party of the Nationalist Movement") would not wait until November 2019 for parliamentary and presidential elections. In mid-March 2018, it was announced that the High Electoral Commission had ordered 500 million envelopes for ballots from YSK. However, with only 55 million voters in Turkey, the opposition sensed initial preparations for large-scale electoral fraud. This had already happened during the constitutional referendum in April 2017. At that time, ballot papers that had not been officially stamped were included in the result - "Evet" was ticked on all of them, that is, a "Yes" to the presidential system.

To legalise this fraud, AKP and MHP MEPs also voted in March this year on a reform package to try to ensure their coalition's election victory. In a meeting in the middle of the night, from which the Press were excluded, it was decided that unstamped ballot papers should, nonetheless, be regarded as valid. Instead of lowering the extremely high threshold of 10 percent to enter parliament, it was also decided that it should be possible to divide the votes within an electoral alliance. This means that if one of the alliance parties receives less than 10 percent of the votes, it can still be hoisted into parliament by its stronger coalition partners.

In practice, this is intended to prevent the MHP from failing to appoint a member of parliament in individual districts. The MHP, which is currently theoretically in opposition but is already working closely with the AKP and is preparing an electoral alliance with it, is struggling with a big loss of votes after a split. The split, led by Meral Aksener, has formed the İYİ-Parti, the "Good Party" and easily passing the 10 percent hurdle in most surveys.

Currently, it is one of two parties in the so-called "Alliance of the Nation", which have members in Parliament, the other is Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, the "Republican People's Party". Also in the Alliance are Saadet Partisi, the "Party of Bliss", SP, and the Demokrat Parti, "Democratic Party", DP. They both see the alliance as an opportunity to return to the political stage in Turkey.

Although the four parties come from different political traditions, they are not only united by their opposition to the AKP and MHP but also by their agreement to exclude the pro-Kurdish Halkların Demokratik Partisi, "People's Democratic Party", HDP, from the coalition and thus leave it as the only party that actually has to overcome the 10 percent hurdle on its own.

Speaking on the German radio station WDR, Kürsat Akyol praised this coalition as a "democratically unified alliance" that could transform the elections in Turkey into a "celebration of democracy". However, a closer look at the individual member parties shows that this is no real opposition, let alone a democratic

alternative to the current government.

## CHP

The CHP is the party of state founder Mustafa Kemal, "Atatürk", and is Turkey's oldest party and the largest opposition party in parliament. Its core electorate consists of secular Turks from the west of the country and the larger cities. It is also supported by the religious minority of Alevis. Although the party, often misleadingly described as a social-democratic party, actively supported the "No" camp in the constitutional referendum of April 2017, in May 2016 it voted in parliament for the waiver of the immunity of 50 of the 59 HDP members of parliament. It thus paved the way for the arrest of the then party leaders, Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yüksekdağ, who are now being tried in countless trials.

At the beginning of the year, the CHP fought a real battle with the AKP over the level of support for the Turkish army's attack on the Kurdish city of Afrin in northern Syria. Party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu said shortly after the start of "Operation Olive Branch": "This is a national problem and the security of Turkey's borders is in question. That is why we will provide all the support we can. It is important that we contribute to the moral support of our army." In the same interview, he criticised Erdogan for using this issue for voter capture, adding that he felt disturbed by the approval of the CHP.

For the presidential election, the party decided to stand Muharrem İnce as its candidate. He has been a CHP member of the Turkish parliament since 2002, where he held the position of parliamentary group leader. He is also considered a rival of the party leader Kılıçdaroğlu, by whom he was twice defeated in the election for his office. The fact that he has now been selected as a presidential candidate also points to a political change within the CHP.

His speeches are full of populism and racism, especially against fugitives from Syria. Like Erdogan, he promises the population that the minimum wage will be raised and scholarships will be given to students. If asked how he would finance this, he answers that he would rather give the money to "his people" than to the Syrians. He completely ignores the fact that Syrian refugees in Turkey live in extreme poverty, that they either have to flee further into Europe via dangerous routes or that children already have to work in sweatshops.

Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because of this, he has a good chance of running against Erdogan if the election goes to a second round. In that event, he could even win the election. Almost all the opposition parties would support anyone who dared to challenge Erdogan, even if he is a racist Kemalist.

## IP

The IP chairwoman, Meral Akşener, has been described as the "Turkish Marine Le Pen". She's not a new star in politics. She was expelled from the MHP in September 2016 because she challenged party leader Devlet Bahçeli. Her main criticism was his cooperation with Erdogan's AKP. She accused him of having initiated the peace process with the PKK and of no longer taking tough action against the Kurdish independence movement. With regard to the Kurdish population, the motto of the IP is therefore clear: forced assimilation instead of cultural or even political equality.

But what else does the party, which went to almost 20 percent in the polls immediately after its launch, stand for?

First and foremost, she presents her rejection of the presidential system that Erdogan would like to introduce. Nevertheless, Akşener will run for the presidency as a precautionary measure and could also become Erdogan's opponent in the second round of the election.

Others suspect that in the case of the Kemalist Ince's candidacy, she will change sides and call for Erdogan's support. Although the CHP in particular is keen to present its electoral alliance as a great alternative to the AKP/MHP government, a closer look shows that it is merely an association of right-wing forces that do not stand for democracy, justice or peaceful coexistence. Instead, they have their own plans to administer the Turkish state, often hampered by the internal contradictions of this alliance. Two candidates from this alliance will run in the presidential election: Muharrem Ince for CHP and Meral Aksener for IP

Since both are currently on about the same level, the question of which candidate can win the support of the Kurdish movement could also become decisive in the second round of voting.

HDP - the only opposition?

The AKP is currently losing its voter base among conservative Kurds who put their trust in the peace process and are now disappointed by the Turkish nationalist course. The party is trying to get these lost votes back through the MHP, taking advantage of the nationalist mood created by the attack on Afrin. But could the HDP win over the Kurds disappointed by the AKP to their side?

The massive repression against HDP politicians, their press organs and smaller left-wing organisations has been growing steadily since the party first entered parliament in June 2015. The government's goal is to completely destroy the structures of the opposition and to nip another rebellion in the bud. The HDP is deprived of its most basic democratic rights, although it is still theoretically a legal party in the Turkish parliament.

AKP policy also determines the strategy of the HDP in the elections. A few months ago, during the debates about the new party leader, the internal party split between - simply put - representatives of the Turkish left on the one hand and the Kurdish movement on the other became clear. There is an unwritten rule in the HDP according to which the dual leadership of the party is not only gender balanced but there is always one representative from the socialist and the other from the Kurdish movement.

The attack of the Turkish army on the Kurds in Turkey and Syria led to a rise of Kurdish nationalism in the HDP. Co-Chairwoman Pervin Buldan said: "When you went to Afrin, you spoke of giving them an Ottoman slap. Prepare yourselves for a Kurdish slap. You will regret the songs you sang on the way to Afrin." With this verbal attack, she rightly wants to put Erdogan in his place and call for retaliation for the attack on the Kurdish people. Unfortunately, however, the HDP cannot present a strategy for overcoming the divisions between the oppressed in Turkey and actually create a party for all these.

Whether the HDP will make it into parliament is uncertain. Surveys predict a range of eight to eleven percent. While the election campaign in Turkey is massively restricted, HDP supporters abroad are mobilising around the clock.

The HDP speculates that, with the new electoral system, under which parties can shift their seats back and forth between themselves, another party may give it seats in order to weaken the AKP/MHP coalition in parliament. However, the recent past has also shown that the CHP, often described as "social-democratic", would immediately sacrifice the HDP in order firstly not to endanger itself and secondly to maintain its hope of participation in the new presidential system.

The lack of a clear strategy for the second round of the presidential election on the part of the HDP shows that they also want to keep the door open in order to possibly curry favour with the CHP. However, this is a hotly debated question within the HDP. It is to be hoped that the forces that reject such a "tactic" will

prevail. It harms the fight against both Erdogan and the reactionary opposition.

## Erdogan's greatest weakness

Turkey's extremely weak economy is the sore point for the government and could make Erdogan regret having called new elections. For the first time in years, he has played more of a defensive role than an aggressive one. The intimidation of the civilian population by massive pressure from the government, but also the endangered security situation, has resulted in the decline of foreign investment on which Turkey depends.

Initially, the tourism industry, which is one of Turkey's central sources of income, made heavy losses. In recent months, this has been linked to a growing debt crisis that has become a threat to the Turkish economy. The total debts of Turkish companies now amount to 70 percent of economic output and these were mostly incurred in foreign currencies. The fall in the value of the lira against the dollar and the euro and the decline in investment in Turkey show that the AKP's economic policy has failed.

Turkey is dependent on long-term foreign investment, but the tense political situation has prevented this. While inflation is currently at 10 percent, youth unemployment has risen to 20 percent and the real wage loss is increasingly obvious among the population. Many see the economic situation as one of the biggest risks for the AKP government, while it presents its financial problem as a conspiracy by foreign powers and calls on the population to stand together and exchange their last dollars.

In this situation, Erdogan and the AKP see their majority in the elections at risk. Conversely, the opposition alliance around the CHP is not a progressive alternative. On some issues, it, or individual parties of the opposition, even stand to the right of the AKP. Moreover, it is quite possible that one of these forces would be prepared to form a coalition with Erdogan if the political price were right.

In any case, their aim would be to resolve the emerging economic crisis at the expense of the population, to continue the war against the Kurdish movement and the occupation of Afrin, to maintain Turkey's position as a regional power. They would legitimise all this with a mixture of nationalism, demagoguery and racism, in other words by dividing and inciting the masses between town and country.

In the elections, we critically support the HDP. Although it is not a workers' party, but a petty-bourgeois, cross-class party, it represents the struggle of the Kurdish people, oppressed since the foundation of Turkey, and the resistance against the occupation of Afrin. The performance of the HDP is therefore also an indicator of the rejection of Erdogan's policy and of expansive Turkish nationalism.

At the same time, however, the programmatic and political weaknesses of the HDP have become ever clearer in recent years. It fluctuates between "tough" opposition and opportunistic manoeuvres, such as considering support for the CHP candidate, Ince, if there is a second round of the presidential election. The decisive reason for this is that, as a petty-bourgeois party, it does not rely on a socialist class policy oriented towards the interests of the wage-dependent, the peasants and the oppressed.

The socialist forces within the HDP should present such a policy and campaign for it publicly because, regardless of whether the reactionary AKP or the equally reactionary opposition wins, the coming crisis can, indeed will, shake up Turkish capitalism and that will open new possibilities in the class struggle.