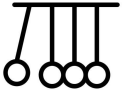


TURKEY'S UNHEARD VOICES

The Effects of the 2023 Elections on Domestic Policies and Opposition Strategies

POLITICS

ALİ KÜÇÜK



Abstract

This research report will examine the effects of the 2023 Turkish General Elections on domestic policies and opposition strategies. In this election process, which marked a critical turning point not only for opposition parties but for Turkish politics as a whole, the actions taken and decisions made by politicians will be analyzed in detail in terms of their impact on the election. Additionally, the report will evaluate the effects of the election results on Turkey's political atmosphere, societal perceptions, and future political orientations.

The Table of Six

In the 2023 elections, the opposition bloc known as the “Table of Six,” also referred to as the Nation Alliance, assumed the most prominent role for the opposition and its supporters. However, this coalition also brought about certain negative consequences. The public’s reaction of “Kılıçdaroğlu should not be the candidate” was ignored, and as a result, a figure that the people did not support ended up representing the opposition—this played a critical role in the continuation of the AK Party’s rule.

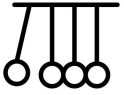
Although Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has been involved in politics since 2002, he has not proven himself as successful as other candidates in terms of election victories. His failures in a total of seven general elections and one local election have weakened his credibility as a potentially winning candidate.

On February 2—just four days before the devastating earthquake—a massive banner reading “I am Kemal, I’m Coming” was hung at the headquarters of the Republican People’s Party (CHP). At that time, CHP and Kılıçdaroğlu had not yet reached an agreement with the Good Party (İYİ Party). There was no concrete consensus, and the Table of Six had not yet decided on a candidate for the presidential election. The unprofessional management of this process within the coalition was one of the significant factors contributing to the opposition’s failure in this election.

A strong example of this is the meeting between İpek Özkal Sayan, Deputy Chair of the Homeland Party (Memleket Partisi), and Meral Akşener shortly before the election. In that meeting, Akşener told her that the method for selecting the candidate would be decided at the next Table of Six meeting. Ms. Sayan responded with, “With so little time left before the election, how has the method still not been decided?”

The constant public and opposition supporter discussions on this matter, and the clear expression of what the people wanted, were largely ignored by the Table of Six.

In addition to all these factors, when analyzing the political parties within the Table of Six and their influence in Turkish politics, it becomes clear that Kılıçdaroğlu emerging as the natural candidate was not surprising. The other candidates did not possess a voter base large enough to challenge and dismantle the ruling power.



Meral Akşener

Meral Akşener was the most politically prominent figure in the Table of Six coalition after Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. Akşener's sudden withdrawal from the Table of Six made headlines at the time and left a significant mark on the political agenda. It was a move that most politicians would not have made, as such an action could have reflected negatively on her and potentially weakened her political standing. However, it was the right move on behalf of the people, as she used this moment to call on Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş to become candidates, saying, "Come and run for office."

However, when İmamoğlu and Yavaş publicly declared their support for Kılıçdaroğlu, Akşener was forced to return to the Table of Six. In this process, it is also important to highlight a mistake made by Mansur Yavaş.

Among opposition supporters, especially the younger demographic, there was significant support for Yavaş to run for president. This was because Yavaş possessed stronger political qualities than Kılıçdaroğlu; when considering his nationalism and other factors, this distinction became even clearer. However, Mansur Yavaş chose to ignore the public's calls and instead aligned himself with the party elites.

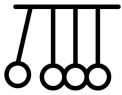


As the author of this report, I was watching the live broadcast the evening the Nation Alliance announced its candidate, and I noticed something: the expression on Meral Akşener's face—a look that seemed as if she had been forced to do something she did not want to do, and that conveyed regret over her actions. I can still picture that look, because it was filled with sorrow. Her expression made it clear that Akşener knew Kılıçdaroğlu did not have the qualities to win and that the election had already been lost in that very moment.

Promises

In the "Common Policy Consensus Text" published by the Table of Six, their electoral promises were presented. These included: the abolition of the President's veto power and the transformation of this power into a "return law"; the restructuring of institutions like TRT and Anadolu Agency under the principle of independence; the promise to reduce inflation to single digits within two years after the elections and to restore the Turkish Lira's stability; and the claim that they would not allow uncontrolled concentrations or ghettoization of refugees on a neighborhood, district, or provincial level. These promises were among those that contributed most significantly to the coalition's ability to attract votes.

The conservative stance of the ruling party—especially its oppressive policies toward social life—and the instability in the economy created widespread dissatisfaction among the

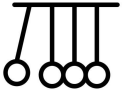


public. Moreover, the 2017 Constitutional Amendment Referendum, which abolished the parliamentary system and brought the Presidential Government System, concentrated legislative, executive, and judicial powers in a single person—Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—rendering his authority nearly limitless. This led to a weakening of democratic checks and balances. All these developments sparked deep concern among opposition voters, directing them toward parties that emphasized the rule of law, economic reform, institutional transparency, and a more democratic form of governance.

According to Article 1 of the Turkish Radio and Television Law, all broadcasts by the TRT institution must be carried out under the principle of neutrality, without granting privileges to any political party, religion, political group, or race. However, TRT has disregarded this principle and begun to show political bias, becoming a platform that defends the state and pushes the opposition into the background. For example, according to the 2014 RTÜK Monitoring and Evaluation Report, TRT allocated 13 hours and 32 minutes of total airtime to the AK Party between February 22 and March 2, 2014, while giving only 2 hours and 48 minutes to the opposition. In its election broadcasts featuring excerpts from rallies, TRT Haber allocated 89.52% of its airtime to the AK Party, 5.29% to the MHP, and 4.96% to the CHP (Hürriyet, 2014). These extraordinary disparities in airtime show that TRT is not “the people’s channel,” but rather “the state’s channel.” As a result, TRT’s biased broadcasts and marginalization of the opposition have led opposition parties to find their own media outlets, which in turn gave rise to partisan channels like Sözcü and Halk TV. Consequently, instead of providing impartial media and journalism, television channels became platforms for one-sided reporting, delivering only the content the audience wants to hear. This has further fueled the already major societal issue of political polarization in Turkey.

Anadolu Agency is not much different. Founded under the leadership of the founder of the Turkish Republic, the Great Leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and one of the most esteemed figures in Turkish literature and former member of parliament Halide Edip Adıvar, Anadolu Agency has deviated from its core principles of impartiality and fair journalism. Former editors of the agency’s English section, Kate O’Sullivan and Laura Benitez, described Anadolu Agency as “just one of the many institutions controlled by the ruling AK Party.” O’Sullivan and Benitez also touched on the state’s control over television channels, stating that the majority of Turkish TV is imposed by the state and that the already limited number of opposition channels face the constant risk of broadcasting bans for not glorifying the state.

Another opposition promise that drew significant attention and interest from voters was the replacement of the presidential system—implemented with the 2017 Constitutional Referendum—with a system called the “Strengthened Parliamentary System.” With all control transferred to a single person—the president—opposition parties, who viewed the Presidential System as the main reason behind Turkey’s economic and political crises, proposed a new system with reduced presidential powers. In this system, the president would become independent of any political party, lose their veto power (which would be transformed into a return law), serve a seven-year term, be prohibited from returning to active politics after their term, and no longer bear political responsibility to the parliament.



From a voter's perspective, this promise is particularly important, as the president being directly affiliated with a political party places nonpartisan voters in a dilemma. For example, a voter may trust the president as an individual and believe in their promises, but not support the policies or members of their affiliated party. This weakens the voter's sense of representation and negatively affects democratic participation. Therefore, the system proposed by the opposition would help voters select a president they can trust more clearly and without conflict.

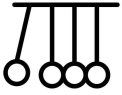
In the 2023 elections, the opposition's strongest card was its promises to revive the economy. The economic weakness brought about by the long-ruling AK Party government created public dissatisfaction and prompted a firm decision among voters, especially the youth. The promises in the Common Consensus Text to reduce inflation to single-digit figures within two years and to restore stability to the Turkish Lira became increasingly significant for opposition voters, as the Lira had begun to lose value uncontrollably against globally important currencies like the dollar and euro after 2020, inflation rates had risen rapidly since 2019, and the disparity between price increases and salary raises had drastically reduced purchasing power.

The continuation of Erdoğan's rule following the 2023 elections caused great disappointment among opposition voters. This election held serious hopes for all opposition segments, especially young people. The conservative stance of the ruling government and the majority of its supporters coming from this group, the perceived inadequacy and carelessness of economic measures, the increasingly visible authoritarian and merely nominally democratic governance (particularly evident through the Saraçhane protests), and the biased, pro-government media were among the most disturbing issues for opposition supporters. Furthermore, the opposition's inability to transform public enthusiasm into a long-term political strategy, its superficial connection with voters, and its failure to unite different ideological groups under a truly common goal were other sources of disappointment.

With the AK Party's election victory, the realization that people would have to continue living under these conditions for at least five more years created a deep sense of despair among the opposition. However, this picture is not only a sign of failure but also serves as a warning for the opposition to build a more determined, inclusive, and coherent political strategy in the coming period.

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu

The then-chairman of the CHP and the presidential candidate of the Table of Six, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, was the figure representing the opposition in the 2023 elections. His political experience spanning over 25 years and being the strongest party leader within the Table of Six had made him the natural candidate of the coalition. However, the public was not enthusiastic about Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy. His past failures in previous elections had distanced him from being a qualified presidential candidate.



Furthermore, Kılıçdaroğlu's promise to secure the acquittal of imprisoned HDP member Selahattin Demirtaş became one of the factors that caused him to lose votes. All these elements led opposition supporters to grow disillusioned with Kılıçdaroğlu. Additionally, slogans like “Kılıçdaroğlu should not be a candidate” were chanted by large crowds among opposition voters. Especially the youth, who had high hopes for this election, strongly wished for a qualified and winnable candidate and wholeheartedly supported such a figure.

In line with the demands of the youth, support for names like Mansur Yavaş and Ekrem İmamoğlu was far greater than that for Kılıçdaroğlu. Unfortunately, these names chose to ignore the public's calls and instead yielded to the elites of their respective parties, opting not to run as candidates.

For months, posts saying “Kılıçdaroğlu should not be a candidate” trended on platforms like X (Twitter); and even in street interviews, people repeatedly and loudly emphasized that Kılıçdaroğlu should not run. Nevertheless, the candidate of the Table of Six ended up being Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. Voters were left with no alternative and had to vote for him out of obligation.

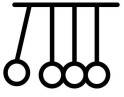
However, Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy was not entirely surprising. On February 2, a huge banner reading “I am Kemal, I'm Coming” was hung at CHP Headquarters. At that time, neither CHP nor Kılıçdaroğlu had reached an agreement with the Table of Six. There was no concrete decision, and the coalition had not yet determined its presidential candidate. The unprofessional manner in which this process was handled within the coalition was one of the major factors contributing to the opposition's failure in this election.

Kılıçdaroğlu was the only party leader within the Table of Six with the potential to be nominated; the other candidates' parties did not have a support base as large or influential as that of the CHP. Following all of this, Kılıçdaroğlu's decision to run despite public opposition—and his eventual defeat in the election—deeply angered opposition voters. Slogans calling for Kılıçdaroğlu's resignation began to spread throughout the country. Ultimately, Kılıçdaroğlu stepped down from his position as CHP Chairman after more than 13 years, passing the role on to Özgür Özel.

Conclusion – Lost Youth

The shattering of our hopes, the branches we cling to being as heedless and misguided as those in power, a reckless opposition candidate, and so many youths buried beneath the dark soil...

The opposition's disregard for its people and self-interested actions; despite having candidates capable of winning, ignoring the calls of the public by putting forward an unqualified candidate and pursuing an ambitious opposition mindset, have dragged down the hopes of millions of young people along with them.



TURKEY'S UNHEARD VOICES

Our idealistic youth has not yet faded, even in these days when they long for the past. While biased media and wretched elites threaten to destroy the country's future and independence, we continue to dream of beautiful tomorrows with our faint remaining hopes and cigarettes in our hands.