

A historic election in an authoritarian world – a weekly news review

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Scrolling through twitter, I see image after image of police violence, and I have to check twice to see where they are from. Across the world, there is a ramping up of authoritarian oppression as ruling elites defend a political system that generates growing inequality and destroys the planet and that is facing a rising tide of resistance. Even here, in picturesque Strasbourg, I have got used to seeing riot police and tear gas, and while the situation in France is hardly of the same order as that in Turkey, both arise from the suppression of challenges to elite power, and oppressors in different countries learn and take encouragement from each other. Across the world, state violence is combined

with attacks through the legal system, the demonisation of minority groups to divert popular anger, and the growth of militant nationalism. French environmental protesters have been left [struggling for life](#). A woman faces the [possibility of a prison sentence](#) for referring to the French President as garbage on Facebook, using a law that has [equivalents](#) in many other European countries. Spain has [arrested](#) (though subsequently released) MEP Clara Ponsatí for her role in the Catalan independence referendum. A week ago, in “the world’s largest democracy”, India’s increasingly politicised judiciary gave a [prison sentence](#) to Rahul Gandhi, who had become a leading opposition voice, causing him to be expelled from parliament. The UK government has produced a string of [brutal, and sometimes illegal, plans](#) to target refugees and attempt to make them a focus for anger against the hardships resulting from government policies. In Israel, proposed new laws [threaten the separation of government and judiciary](#), while Israeli [apartheid](#) has become even more extreme and violent with legal and military backing.

And Western nations continue to fuel the increasingly dangerous and bloody war in Ukraine rather than work for a peace agreement. The idealisation of European, or Western, “values” has been exposed as hollow, much to the glee of non-Western authoritarians.

Turkish authoritarianism and violence is not an exotic and different thing, but part of this overall trend, and this continuity becomes overt when other countries use their own security or legal forces in response to Turkey’s bidding. Yesterday, the Turkish Parliament [voted to accept](#) Finland’s NATO application – though they were not asked to consider lifting the Turkish veto on Sweden. Last week, Finland demonstrated their readiness to submit and contribute to Turkish authoritarianism, when armed Finnish riot police [forcibly removed](#) an Erdoğan doll before a planned protest action.

Turkey

Within Turkey itself, the authoritarian regime still manages to reach new lows, and nowhere is this more disturbing than in the treatment of the many political prisoners. The number of serious medical conditions exhibited by prisoners is

a testimony to the poor level of physical care. This week, Mezopotamya News Agency wrote about prisoners with Covid being [refused](#) their requests to go to the infirmary, and about a Human Rights Association (İHD) report on the torture and ill treatment of prisoners in the earthquake zone. This included disciplinary punishments for banging on cell doors on the day of the quake, and strip searches and beatings when prisoners were transferred to other prisons. A spokesperson for the İHD observed, “There is a policy of impunity in Turkey. In recent years, we have been passing through periods in which human life is ignored in Turkey. There are terrible cases of suspicious deaths, torture, ill-treatment, violation of the right to health, that is, the violation of the right to life in prisons. Those who hide behind this policy of impunity can easily inflict torture and ill-treatment, because they don’t consider it a crime.”

One of the most sadistic mistreatments of prisoners – and one that is becoming increasingly common – is the extension of their sentence beyond the release date, which is done on the basis of petty excuses. This not only impacts those directly involved, but also hangs as a threat over all prisoners, who can never be sure when they will be released. I don’t know if this is officially considered a form of torture, but it should be. Mezopotamya Agency reports that, in Bolu Prison, 12 prisoners had their [release delayed](#) 30 times within a year for “not using water economically”, “not leaving the organisation” (i.e. the PKK), “not making a petition of regret”, or “not participating in spiritual activities”.

They also report on a prisoner in another prison who was serving a “life sentence” for “destroying the unity and integrity of the state”. A “life sentence” is not generally expected to last more than 30 years, but he was [kept locked up](#) for a further 15 months. He went into prison a young man of 22 and emerged aged 53 with poor health.

The Turkish government has also been [preventing striking workers](#) from carrying out a protest march; and the Turkish authorities have been [taking the property](#) of Syrian refugees after forcibly deporting them. New witness statements [confirm](#) the account from 2 ½ years ago that two Kurdish civilians were deliberately thrown from a Turkish military helicopter, killing one and

seriously injuring the other. And parts of North Kurdistan/southeast Turkey remain [affectively a war zone](#), where, on grounds of pursuing the PKK, soldiers are forcing entry into village homes and making life impossible for local people, even cutting down their fruit trees.

Election process and progress

Despite all of this, and much more, there are hopes that the presidential and general elections on 14 May could provide an opportunity for Turkey to turn the tide and begin to rebuild democratic structures. Or – if Erdoğan hangs onto power – they could accelerate the slide into fascism. Mithat Sancar, co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), has [described](#) the People's Alliance around President Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) as "the darkest and most dangerous alliance in our history".

This current parliament has already demonstrated the extreme racist and misogynist brutalisation promoted by the AKP's main alliance partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The newest members of the People's Alliance are only small parties, but they have imposed their own demands. The [protocol](#) signed with the New Welfare Party commits the alliance to curtail the rights of women and of the LGBTI+ community.

The inclusion of Huda Par also increases fears that campaigners will resort to physical violence.

All agree that the elections have huge importance for Turkey and the whole region. Because everywhere is connected, they could also impact the international tendency towards authoritarianism. So, I thought it might be helpful to look at how these elections are organised. I will begin with the presidential election, which is relatively uncomplicated. As in France, the elected president needs to win 50% plus one of the votes cast. When there are more than two candidates, if no one gets this absolute majority of votes in the first round of voting, the two leading candidates go through to a second round of voting to determine the winner.

The battle for the presidency is between the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP). Objections that Erdoğan's candidature is unconstitutional because he has already been president for two terms have been [dismissed](#) by the Supreme Election Board. Parties with a parliamentary group can nominate presidential candidates, but there are also two candidates from small parties who achieved nomination through gathering 100,000 signatures in support of their candidature. Sinan Oğan represents a small political alliance that is led by the far-right anti-immigrant Victory Party. Muharrem İnce, who now leads the Homeland Party, was formerly a member of the CHP and their candidate in the 2018 presidential election. On Thursday, Kılıçdaroğlu [visited İnce](#) and it was expected that İnce would be persuaded to withdraw, but before the meeting took place it was made clear that this was not on the cards. In justifying his stand, İnce claims that most of his votes come from the AKP and not the CHP.

This observation, along with İnce's frequent demonising of the PKK, provides a sobering reminder that distinctions between the mainstream political parties can be blurred – which is not to say that it isn't hugely important to see Erdoğan and his increasingly fascistic political alliance voted out.

The 600 MPs that will form Turkey's Grand National Assembly are elected to represent 87 districts. The districts vary a lot in size, and the number of MPs elected in each district varies from 1 to 36. The number is supposed to be proportional to the size of the district's total population (not actually the voting-age population). However, the system is very imperfect and the number of voters per MP varies widely. Even though the bigger cities are divided into two or three districts, the voter distribution gives more representation from smaller provinces.

Within each district, MPs are elected by the D'Hondt system, from a party list, though it is also possible for candidates to stand as independents. This is a mathematical system for approximating proportional representation, which can never be exact as you cannot have fractions of representatives.

In addition, Turkey operates a threshold system whereby any party whose national vote falls below the threshold – now 7% – of the total is excluded from the count. The threshold does not apply to independent candidates. Parties can avoid being cut off by the threshold by being part of an electoral alliance. For the purpose of the threshold, all parties within an alliance are lumped together.

Within alliances, the different parties can choose whether to run on separate party lists or agree on a joint list, and this can become the subject of political calculation and tense negotiation. A combined list will, more often than not, allow an alliance to achieve the maximum number of seats, but smaller parties fear losing their identity and their supporter base. Different parties may argue that they appeal to different electorates and that they don't want their appeal to be diluted, or even negated. The selection and ordering of list candidates can also provide many traps for political unity.

There are three main electoral alliances fielding candidates in the forthcoming election. The People's Alliance centred round the ruling AKP, with the MHP as main partner, which bases its appeal on conservatism, ethnic nationalism, and Islam; the Nation Alliance centred round the ostensibly social democratic CHP, with the right-wing İYİ Party as main partner, which is also nationalist and has come together with the aim of ousting the incumbent government and reversing its totalitarian changes; and the Labour and Freedom Alliance centred round the HDP, which unites leftist parties in support of more far-reaching democracy and [progressive social change](#) – including addressing the Kurdish Question, which is not mentioned by the Nation Alliance.

In the Labour and Freedom Alliance, HDP members will stand on the list of the Green Left (Yeşil Sol Parti) as the HDP itself is threatened with closure before the election. They will be joined on that list by all the other small parties in the alliance except the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP), which has four MPs and ran on the HDP list in the last election. TİP insists on running on their own separate list and argues that they can attract voters who would not vote for the pro-Kurdish HDP.

In the People's Alliance, dominated by Erdoğan's AKP, Huda Par, the small Kurdish Islamist party, will compete as part of the AKP list, while the other constituent parties will compete on separate lists, with Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the far right Nationalist MHP, the second biggest member of the alliance, making clear that his party [intends to stand candidates in every district](#). In the Nation Alliance, parties are listed separately, but that has not prevented some members of other parties from [applying](#) to be on the CHP list.

All candidate lists have to be finalised by 9 April.

Choosing and campaigning for the candidates is the official part of the election process, but we can expect this to be accompanied by attempts to hamstring the opposition at all stages. Yesterday, someone [shot](#) at an İYİ Party office in Istanbul. The HDP has long been used to physical attacks, as well as attacks through the legal system to imprison members and close the party. They also had their funds temporarily blocked by the Constitutional Court as an interim measure, and Halk TV has reported that Erdoğan allegedly [called court members](#) to question their decision to change their earlier ruling and release the funds. The detention of HDP activists continues. Twenty-three people were [detained](#) in Urfa on Monday and are still being held after being charged with being members of a terrorist organisation; and more people were [detained](#) in İzmir on Friday. To help protect the vote itself, the HDP, as on previous occasions, is asking for international volunteers to act as election observers.

Meanwhile, Erdoğan is attempting to construct a façade of success. He has again [raised](#) the very low minimum wage – but this has not even kept pace with inflation; and he was filmed inaugurating the foundations of a new hospital in the earthquake zone – but the concrete and steel were subsequently [shown](#) to have been a removeable prop.

The opposition – both the Nation Alliance and the Labour and Freedom Alliance – are campaigning on changing the constitution back to a system where power is concentrated in the parliament and the presidency is stripped of the overweening control allotted to it under Erdoğan's rule. However,

constitutional change requires more than a simple majority. A bill to change the constitution needs 2/3 support to go ahead, or 3/5 support to be put to a referendum. The AKP's support for strong presidential powers may wither if the president is not from their party, but the size of any opposition victory is important if they are to achieve their main goal.

The PKK

After the earthquake, the PKK announced that they would not carry out any attacks but would restrict their actions to the defence of their positions so that all resources could be devoted to the rescue effort. Although the Turkish government didn't respond, and the Turkish army, which could have been helping in the earthquake zones, has continued to attack the PKK's mountain bases in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and also to attack North and East Syria, the PKK has said that they will [continue their moratorium](#) on attacks up until the election date. This decision recognises the importance and potential of the election, where the focus needs to be on parliamentary politics, and a PKK attack could be exploited to push people towards the government. It also provides an important opening for a potential new government that wished to pursue peace.

Other news

With no space for much more, I will end by noting that a new report details the frightening extent of the [deforestation of Afrîn](#) under Turkish occupation, with over 50% loss from main forest areas as logs are cut for fuel and to make way for new settlements; that oil exports from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq were [stopped](#) last Saturday, following the long-anticipated ruling by the International Court of Arbitration in Paris that oil deals must be made by the Iraqi Federal Government, and that this could have severe consequences for a region that had borrowed heavily against future oil exports; and that bullets used by the Iranian Security forces against Iran's citizens have been found to have been [made in the EU and in Britain](#).

This time next week, I will be in Hamburg with hundreds of others at the first big international [Challenging Capitalist Modernity conference](#) to be organised

since Covid. Governments are resorting to authoritarianism because the current world system is in crisis. In resisting this system, we need to set up new ways of seeing and organising society and to come together to achieve them – which is, of course, what such a conference is all about.

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