

# A candidate for the entire opposition? – a weekly news review

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Sarah Glynn

Turkey's elections – presidential and general – will be held on 14 May. President Erdoğan signed off the official order yesterday, but election manoeuvrings have long been under way, and this week's news has been dominated by the pre-election tactics of the opposing players. While these may give the impression of a complicated game, their denouement will determine the future direction of Turkey.

When I wrote last week's review, Meral Akşener and her İYİ Party had just upset opposition plans, and pundits' predictions, by denouncing the decision by the major opposition Nation Alliance, of which they were a part, to nominate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), as their joint presidential candidate. However, by Monday Akşener and the İYİ Party were back on board, with their credibility suitably dented. And now that Kılıçdaroğlu has been confirmed as the Alliance's presidential candidate, the discussion has moved to whether the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which is not part of the Nation Alliance, will support him in the first round rather than put up their own candidate. Meanwhile, the Constitutional Court has lifted the block on the HDP's funding and delayed the court case over their closure in what can be understood as an attempt to bully them not to give Kılıçdaroğlu their support. I will now look at all of this more slowly and in more detail.

The Nation Alliance is made up of six parties with very different political perspectives, but with a shared stated aim of replacing the one-man presidential rule, brought in by President Erdoğan in 2018, with a return to a parliamentary democracy in which the position of president would be largely ceremonial. If Kılıçdaroğlu is elected president, he will be expected to use his presidential powers to diminish his own role.

Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP is the Alliance party that commands the most support among the electorate, with the İYİ Party a poor second. The CHP was established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, father of modern Turkey and also of the republic's ethnic nationalism. It describes itself as social democratic. Which aspect of the party's persona is emphasised varies widely between party members. While Kılıçdaroğlu has admitted his party has made mistakes in the past and has called for reconciliation, the CHP historically has been no friend of the Kurds, and they have backed Erdoğan's invasions of Syria and

Iraq. They supported the 2016 constitutional amendment – subsequently condemned by the European Court of Human Rights – that enabled the lifting of parliamentary immunity from HDP MPs; however they have criticised Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) for not releasing the HDP's imprisoned former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, as instructed by the European Court (an instruction reiterated in an [interim resolution](#) from the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers this week).

The İYİ Party was established in 2017 by Akşener when she broke away from the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The MHP is part of the People's Alliance, along with the AKP, and acts as a coalition partner to the AKP government. Although the İYİ Party has a less aggressive image than the MHP, there were Grey Wolf signs at their launch event (the Grey Wolves are the far-right paramilitary group linked to the MHP) and they have no time for the Kurds – especially for the HDP. They have ensured that the HDP is kept out of the Nation Alliance and have blocked the possibility of a broader alliance for democracy.

The CHP has worked with the İYİ Party almost from the beginning. Before the 2018 elections they agreed that 15 members of the CHP would move to the İYİ Party in order to ensure that the latter complied with the requirements needed to take part in those elections, despite being newly established. At the same time, they set up the Nation Alliance along with the much smaller Felicity Party – Islamist and conservative – and Democrat Party – conservative descendent of the True Path Party.

At the beginning of last year, these four parties were joined by two more small parties, both breakaways from the AKP, to form what has been known as the Table of Six. The Future Party was formed by former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and the Democracy and Progress Party, DEVA, was formed by Ali Babacan, a former minister. At the beginning of this year, they too became part of the Nation Alliance, which issued a [Memorandum of Understanding on Common Policies](#). This Memorandum has been criticised for the many things not addressed, including the Kurdish Question.

Despite over a year of meetings, the Table of Six had discouraged potential supporters by its failure to agree on a presidential candidate, but on Thursday 2 March they announced that they had reached a common understanding on who this would be. That announcement proved premature with Akşener's [statement](#) the following day that her party would not back Kılıçdaroğlu, the candidate supported by the other parties. She accused her Alliance partners of forcing her to “choose between death and malaria”, and was adamant that “Of course, we won't give in”. But after failing to persuade either the CHP mayor of Ankara or of Istanbul to put themselves forward instead, and after watching people leave her party in protest at her stance, Akşener was persuaded to go back on her words. On Monday, all six party leaders [stood together](#) as Kılıçdaroğlu made his first short speech as presidential candidate.

We know that the two CHP mayors were instrumental in persuading Akşener to return to the fold, but we can't know what other discussions took place. We can see though, that from the point of view of a conservative political establishment, the İYİ Party's presence in the Alliance is a guarantor that whatever happens in the elections, any progressive changes will be very limited. Both main alliances include a right-wing nationalist party.

While the İYİ Party's inclusion in the Nation Alliance may boost hopes of the figures adding up to give an opposition win, it will restrict possibilities for others to impact Nation Alliance policy – specifically for the HDP, which has come together with five small progressive parties to form the Labour and Freedom Alliance. Although polling figures are very variable, the two main groups – the People's Alliance and the Nation Alliance – are sufficiently close in their levels of support, that the HDP is expected to acquire the role of kingmaker.

In the 2019 local elections, tactical voting by HDP supporters in Istanbul and Ankara enabled the election of CHP mayors in a major upset to the AKP; but the mayors have made no concession to Kurdish interests, or even acknowledged the HDP's role in their election. The HDP does not want to experience a repeat of this on a national scale, and refuse to be taken for granted.

The HDP have still kept open the option of standing their own candidate in the presidential elections, but when Kılıçdaroğlu was nominated as presidential candidate, HDP co-chair, Mithat Sancar, congratulated him and [invited](#) him to visit the HDP's headquarters in order to discuss the possibility of the HDP supporting his candidacy. Kılıçdaroğlu has confirmed that he will make the visit, [explaining](#) in a TV interview, "There cannot be anything more natural than me visiting the HDP. I am of an understanding that tries to reach all sections of society." Akşener [told](#) a TV interviewer that the CHP can meet the HDP but never bring the party to join their Alliance Table.

Sancar [told](#) Fox TV that the HDP will decide whether or not to run their own presidential candidate after they have met with Kılıçdaroğlu.

Selahattin Demirtaş has written an [open letter](#) to Akşener from his prison cell, asking "as an HDP voter" for her to clarify her position. He observes, "While a large part of society is trying to raise hope with the slogans 'by uniting we will win' before this historic election, I think that some of your statements and approaches towards our party, the HDP, are not suitable for this purpose... As a part of the Nation Alliance, you have conducted negotiations even with the parties in your own alliance. Why is the politics of negotiation, which is a right for you, not a right for the HDP? I am sure that you do not see HDP voters as second class citizens, as citizens without a will. In that case, what is wrong with the HDP negotiating with the presidential candidate it will vote for?"

What the HDP will actually be able to do will depend on the outcome of the court case to close the party down, which has been driven by demands from the government's far-right partners in the MHP. The decision will be made by the fifteen judges of the Constitutional Court – a group that is dominated by government supporters – and is expected to conform to whatever Erdoğan calculates as in his own best interests. The nomination of Kılıçdaroğlu, the potential candidate most favourable to HDP interests, and the forthcoming meeting between him and the HDP, appear to have served as a cue for the Constitutional Court to make new moves in the ongoing closure case.

The HDP had attempted, without success, to get the case postponed until after the elections. On Thursday, it was announced that the final court hearing

would be moved back from 14 March to 11 April to allow for disruption resulting from the earthquake. However, this would still allow the court to ban the party just before the vote, leaving no time for other options. Sancar has [said](#) that the HDP will make a further application for postponement.

The court also [ruled](#) to lift the block on the HDP's state funding. Parties that have received more than 7% of the vote are given substantial public grants in proportion to their support, and these fund salaries and running costs as well as election expenses. The block was imposed in early January as a temporary measure in the closure case, with the argument that the HDP was actively maintaining terrorism links. (The Turkish government regards the PKK as terrorists and refuses to draw a distinction between them and the HDP, which acts strictly within constitutional politics.) Although the HDP had responded to the situation with an appeal to their supporters that had received a strong response, there is no doubt that the court's reversal will be welcome. The reasoning behind it is less clear, but it could be interpreted as a reminder to the HDP from the government that the party ban is not yet a foregone conclusion and might not be implemented if they keep their distance from the Nation Alliance. The January decision to block the funding was also seen as especially questionable as it did not have the required 2/3 majority. The following day, Turkey's highest appeal court, the Court of Cassation, [ruled](#) that the fine given to Kılıçdaroğlu for a criticism of President Erdoğan made in 2018 was not sufficient, and that the case should be looked at again.

As Gazete Duvar [explains](#), "Kılıçdaroğlu had detailed how the public tender system was used to route 6 billion Turkish Liras in profit to a company closely tied to Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP)."

The latest court decision makes for interesting timing as Kılıçdaroğlu can be seen as the anti-corruption candidate. Gönül Tol [writes](#) in Politico, "Kılıçdaroğlu is known to his supporters and opponents alike as an honest man. Erdoğan presides over a state deeply mired in corruption, while Kılıçdaroğlu made a career of fighting against graft." For Tol, the soft-spoken former bureaucrat "is everything President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan isn't";

however her otherwise positive assessment admits that he has “a cautious approach to the Kurds”.

Kılıçdaroğlu himself [claims](#) to be of Turkman descent but not to be “an ethnic person”. In 2011, he [told](#) Habertürk newspaper, “I have always refused to engage in politics based on ethnic identity and religion. I am Alevi. Since when has this been considered a crime in this country?”

In the same interview he commented “If meetings with Öcalan are beneficial for the country, why should we object?”

Demirtaş [told](#) medyascope’s Ruşen Çakır from his prison cell, “Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu is currently the joint candidate of the Nation Alliance. He has not yet become the common candidate of the entire opposition. If he meets with the political and social opposition and gets the support of everyone, he will become the common candidate of not only the Nation Alliance, but also of the whole people...HDP supporters are waiting for a visit to the HDP and reconciliation so that they can vote for Mr Kılıçdaroğlu willingly and with peace of mind... I believe that Mr Kılıçdaroğlu is sincere and brave about change. If the working team acts with the same thought, then, with the support of the HDP, Turkey can realise the change of the century.”

Of course, difficulties would not end with the election of Kılıçdaroğlu. That would be just the end of the beginning, but it would allow Turkey to turn away from a path that is currently leading the country, and consequently the whole region, into a very dark abyss.

First, though, Turkey must go through the election process, and there are many reasons to be concerned over how this will be allowed to play out. As Erdoğan has demonstrated in the past, he is ready to break rules and even resort to violence in order to hang onto power. He has destroyed the separation of government and judiciary and can use the courts to destroy the opposition. His political rhetoric ignites ethnic and religious conflict, and the November 2015 election was marked by violent attacks against HDP offices. Before that election, government authorities were even accused of enabling the horrific ISIS attack on a large peace rally, with the EU intelligence

unit [observing](#) that, “there is reasonable reason to believe that the AKP forces specifically deployed Daesh militants in this case.” There continue to be fears that Erdoğan will launch another major cross-border attack on North and East Syria, which, even if it fails to lead to his long-desired victory, would put the Nation Alliance on the back foot – compelled to back the national cause in his wake – and alienate HDP voters. He can also look to some sort of support from Russia, who will not want to see the loss of a leader with whom they have developed a mutually beneficial relationship.

The potential for brutality is also demonstrated by Erdoğan’s response to February’s earthquakes, where he prioritised propaganda and censorship over saving lives; and, as Fehim Tastekin [observes](#) in Al-Monitor, “The post-quake experience offers a clue as to what means of censorship Ankara might employ in the run-up to the elections”.

The virulence of government-promoted racism was [demonstrated](#) last Sunday when Amedspor played an away football match against Bursaspor. Amed (or Diyarbakir) is the unofficial capital of North (Turkish) Kurdistan, and Bursaspor fans and players were fired up with anti-Kurdish racism. (Amedspor fans were not permitted to attend the game.) The aggression began the night before, with a racist demonstration outside the hotel where the visiting payers were staying. During the match, banners were displayed in the stands showing portraits of key figures involved in the murder and disappearance of Kurds in the 1990s and one of the white cars used for their abduction. Amedspor was forced to play under a shower of objects launched from the stands – and were lucky to escape with only a slight injury to their goalkeeper – and the Amedspor players were physically attacked before the match, and afterwards when leaving the pitch and in the locker room. Not only was all this allowed to happen without the game being stopped, but Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the MHP, [publicly congratulated](#) Bursaspor fans.

This week, the [17th International Conference on the EU, Turkey, the Middle East and the Kurds](#), organised by the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC), was held in the European Parliament in Brussels. Discussions were wide-ranging, but a repeated theme was the hypocrisy of European governments

and institutions in failing to defend the values they claim to stand for. Speakers, including MEPs, were critical of the realpolitik that repeatedly leads the EU to turn a blind eye towards Turkish crimes against human rights and the rule of law, and helps to provide Turkey with justification for these crimes through criminalising the PKK. It was also observed that even when the European Parliament does demand action, this can be ignored by the bureaucrats and heads of state who take the lead in policy-making. Despite this several speakers raised the importance of European institutions putting pressure on Turkey to ensure that the elections are as free and fair as they can be in these unpromising circumstances.

Speakers also stressed the important opportunity presented by the PKK ceasefire, announced three days after the earthquake. Although we heard that this was asked for by many parties, including the United States, Turkey has not reciprocated, and the ceasefire has received relatively little publicity. Other countries and organisations could help publicise the PKK's move and keep hopes alive. If it continues, response to the ceasefire might become a test for a new Turkish government...

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