

# Battling to be on the ballot paper – a weekly news review

Election time raises fears that Erdoğan might try to launch another foreign attack in order to gain electoral advantage. An operation against the Kurds, which would, of course, be presented as protecting Turkey's "justified security concerns", would force the opposition to tail-end the government and would alienate them from Kurdish voters, who would be left unable to support either of the two main presidential candidates.

[11:59 am 19/03/2023](#)

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There has been a trend in the branding industry for paring down logos. A casual glance would suggest that this trend had been followed by Turkey's pro-Kurdish, leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP); however, reality is more complicated. The still very recognisable but simplified logo is the new symbol of the Green Left Party, Yeşil Sol Parti in Turkish, and with the threat of closure hanging over them, the HDP made public this week that they have decided to field their candidates under the Green Left banner.

Yeşil Sol is one of the five parties that came together to found the HDP in 2012. They have not previously taken part in elections, however, in 2021 when threats to close down the HDP became serious, the decision was made to carry out the large-scale organisational work that would make them eligible to stand candidates, and last Saturday they [announced](#) that they had gained the right to participate in the elections by reaching 48 provinces and 212 district organisations.

The HDP closure case is scheduled to have its final hearing at the Constitutional Court a month before the election, and the day after the deadline for candidate registration. There is a general understanding that the judges' decision will reflect the electoral calculations of President Erdoğan, and there was no point in the HDP building an election strategy that depended on the court reaching a positive decision and rejecting closure. This is far from the first time that a pro-Kurdish party has had to undergo a reincarnation, but the HDP, which has [received](#) support from across the world, has been the most successful of the pro-Kurdish parties, and this time there are added complications.

The prosecution is also calling for 451 party members to be banned from any party politics for five years. If the court decides to ban the party, it can also decide to ban all or some of these named people. They could still stand as independent candidates, but an independent MP can do much less than a party member. The HDP has a rule, which they [say](#) that they will keep to, that MPs should not generally serve for more than two terms. Even so, there are exceptions to this, and the potential ban hovers over most of the party leadership.

## Political prisoners

It is also not at all clear how much would change, even in the event of a change of government, for party members already criminalised or undergoing judicial processes. Ongoing cases include the Kobanê case, in which 108 people, including leading HDP members, face the possibility of life imprisonment without parole. The authorities are trying to push this through before the elections, but the earthquake has meant that they haven't been able to move as quickly as planned. If the opposition's Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu becomes president, he has [said](#) that Turkey will comply with the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights and release the HDP's imprisoned former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, but the opposition Nation Alliance has had little to say, publicly at least, about how they will restore judicial independence and prevent the corrosion caused by Erdoğan's political placemen, or if anything will be done for the thousands of other political prisoners. In the case of former HDP MP Semra Güzel, for whom the prosecutor [demanded](#) an even longer sentence this week, Kılıçdaroğlu and the Republican People's Party (CHP) of which he is the leader, supported the lifting of her political immunity so that she could face trial just a year ago.

## After the earthquake

A further layer of organisational uncertainty has been generated by the earthquakes. People are expected to register and vote where they are currently living, and Ferda Cetin [notes](#) that in the eleven affected provinces, 4-4 ½ million of the 8 ½ million voters have moved to a new province. If they had not registered in their new location by last night's deadline, then they should still be [registered](#) at their last valid address, but that may not be very practical for actually casting their vote. In 2018, over 60% of the deputies elected from the earthquake zones were from Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) or its People's Alliance partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Earthquake victims may well turn against a government that many hold responsible for unsafe construction and a murderously inadequate emergency response, but, as Cetin comments, they may also have other things occupying their mind than electoral registration and voting. The

earthquake zone includes a large number of Kurds and was also responsible for electing a significant share of the HDP's deputies. Although these are mainly not from the very worst affected areas, the general shuffling of population could also impact the HDP vote, though with so many intersecting variables, any attempt to predict the nature of that impact would be destined to fail.

Part of the earthquake zone has now been hit by deadly floods, following heavy rain which started on Tuesday. At least 17 people have [died](#) in the cities of Urfa and Adiyaman. The Abide Junction in central Urfa, where people drowned in the flooded underpass, has become the focus of widespread criticism for fundamental problems in design and maintenance. It had been opened by Erdoğan just three months ago, and when the city's AKP mayor came to visit the site of devastation he was [forced](#) to leave by protestors.

### **The People's Alliance**

The AKP made their formal decision to [nominate](#) Erdoğan as their presidential candidate on Thursday, and have also been attempting to bring two ultra-conservative Islamist parties into their People's Alliance, which currently consists of themselves, the far-right MHP, and the tiny Great Unity Party (BBP), which combines far-right nationalism with Islamism.

The New Welfare Party claims that the AKP accepted all their conditions for joining the People's Alliance, including amendment of law 6284 on preventing violence against women; however, some members of the AKP, including the group deputy chair and the Minister of Family and Social Services, have made it clear that the law is a [red line](#) that cannot be crossed. Other New Welfare Party [demands](#) include closing LGBT associations and creating an education system based on "*moral and spiritual priority*".

The AKP has been in talks with Hûda Par since January. This is a Kurdish party established as a conservative response to the Kurdish Freedom Movement. Alongside misogynistic social conservatism, its demands include Kurdish autonomy within a federal system – alienating the MHP and other

nationalists. They have yet to make a formal agreement to join the People's Alliance, though they publicly declared their support for Erdoğan's presidential candidacy last Saturday. They also have a pedigree of extreme violence and working with state security forces, heightening concerns over potential attacks in the pre-election period. The current organisation was established in 2012, but their political ancestors, Hizbullah (who have no relationship to the Lebanese Shia group of the same name), were responsible for hundreds of killings in the 1990s, when they attacked alleged PKK members, politicians and journalists. In 2014, [Hüda Par](#) were prominent, alongside state forces, in the violent counter-protests against the Kurdish supporters of Kobanê, then under ISIS siege; counter-protests that left some fifty people dead. Support for Hüda Par is very low – they received just 0.3% of the vote in the last election – and it has been suggested that they may repel more people from the People's Alliance than they attract.

### **The opposition**

After the brief estrangement of the İYİ Party two weeks ago, the main opposition Nation Alliance has maintained a unified stance – publicly at least. However, there were concerns this week about the Labour and Freedom Alliance, which is made up of the HDP and five other much smaller parties, after the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP) and the Labour Party (EMEP) made it clear that they were not happy with the HDP's plan for a united candidate list. Issues appear to have been resolved, and by Thursday the concept of a united list had [received](#) agreement from all constituent parties.

The Labour and Freedom Alliance has still not said whether they will stand their own presidential candidate or simply support Kılıçdaroğlu from the Nation Alliance. A Labour and Freedom Alliance candidate would have no realistic hope of winning the presidency, and they might consider it safer to push for a Kılıçdaroğlu win in the first round and avoid the delay of a second-round vote. The intention had been to make an announcement about this after Kılıçdaroğlu's visit to the HDP that was scheduled for today, but that meeting has now been [postponed](#) to a later date due to the CHP leader's tight

schedule. The delay is not, perhaps, the most reassuring message for those who hope that the HDP will be listened to.

Meanwhile, in a curiously worrying development, the CHP Mayor of Ankara, who is a joint vice-presidential candidate for the Nation Alliance along with the CHP Mayor of Istanbul and the leaders of the other alliance parties, has used the new Disinformation Law to charge an environmentalist who criticised the municipality for cutting down trees for road building. This is the law that has been [dubbed](#) the Censorship Law, and getting rid of it is a Nation Alliance promise.

### **Ex-patriot voters**

Turkish citizens abroad are also able to vote in the elections, with facilities arranged in 71 countries. Currently, around 6 ½ million are [registered](#), of which 5 ½ million are in Europe, with 1 ½ million of these in Germany. New registrations will increase these figures, but they make up a significant proportion of the electorate, which totalled around 60 million at the last election. The parties will campaign hard among the expatriate voters, and government-backed organisations and far-right groups will be mobilising for Erdoğan. Some far-right Grey Wolves organisations are very large. Lindsey Snell [points out](#) on Twitter: *"Turk Federasyon in Europe denies being a Grey Wolves organization; [but] has [a] giant Grey Wolves logo on [the] wall of [their] creepy cabal meeting hall and still operates openly in France, which 'banned' the group in 2020".*

### **Erdoğan's foreign adventures**

Election time raises fears that Erdoğan might try to launch another foreign attack in order to gain electoral advantage. An operation against the Kurds, which would, of course, be presented as protecting Turkey's *"justified security concerns"*, would force the opposition to tail-end the government and would alienate them from Kurdish voters, who would be left unable to support either of the two main presidential candidates. So far, though, the Turkish army has not been able to make their anticipated advances in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq; and, although Russia would like to see Erdoğan remain in power, Russian

plans to put together a deal between Erdoğan and Syria's President Assad have failed to persuade the Syrian leader. Erdoğan wants Turkey and Syria to join forces against the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, but, while Assad wants to destroy the region's autonomy and to drive out the Americans, he also wants to see an end to Turkish occupation in the north and northwest, and an end to Turkish support for the anti-regime Islamist militias. He [told](#) Russia's RIA Novosti agency on Wednesday, that any meeting between him and Erdoğan *"is linked to us reaching the point when Turkey is ready, fully and without any uncertainty, for a complete withdrawal from Syrian territory."* A Moscow meeting between Syria, Russia, Turkey, and Iran, planned for this week, has been [postponed](#). The CHP has long been [ready](#) to make peace with Syria as part of their plans to return Syrian refugees, which they regard as a priority, and Assad has no reason to rush through a deal before the Turkish election.

Kılıçdaroğlu's foreign policy advisor has also [made](#) it clear that if Kılıçdaroğlu is elected he would lift Turkey's veto on Finland and Sweden joining NATO. Under Erdoğan's watch, it seems that Finish membership will be allowed to proceed, but that Turkey is still [holding out](#) for more concessions from Sweden. They want tighter restrictions on Kurdish immigrant politics, and more extraditions of Kurdish (and Gülenist) activists. But the Swedish government might be advised to wait for the Turkish election results.

### **Iran – Komala and the Alliance for Democracy and Freedom**

While Turkey's political parties manoeuvre around the elections, some Iranian politicians are manoeuvring to benefit from the ongoing revolution. Three weeks ago, I [looked](#) at a group of diaspora Iranians, including the son of the former shah, who are attempting to establish themselves in international circles as leaders and representatives of the ongoing revolution. They have now [produced](#) their promised charter under the name of the Alliance for Democracy and Freedom in Iran. The surprise inclusion in this group is Abdulla Mohtadi, General Secretary of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan – but the use of the Komala name has [elicited](#) a furious rebuttal from the "Komala Central Committee". As Kamran Matin explained to me, Mohtadi's



group split from the radical left Komala – Kurdistan Organisation of the Communist Party, led by Ebrahim Alizadeh, in 2000, and he has moved away from its communist/socialist roots. In the charter website this is portrayed as *"He led fundamental internal reforms in the Komala party and oversaw its evolution into a modern, social democratic platform in 2000."* (There was also a further split from the mother party last year to create a new group, under Salah Mazoochi, which gives less emphasis to the Kurdish Question.)

The protest over the charter and over Mohtadi's signature comes from the party led by Alizadeh. On the charter itself, they comment, *"it has nothing to do with the goals of the liberation revolution of 'Women, Life, Freedom'. This consensus does not represent the demands of the oppressed people, workers, women, youth, and subjugated nations, including the oppressed people of Kurdistan."* They see the charter as an attempt to negotiate with international powers while the people of Iran are kept waiting, and they draw critical attention to the paragraph on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which suggests that guards might be integrated into the army, and which, they point out, also gives the role of the military as "not to defend the borders against external attacks, but to defend the territorial integrity of the country".

### **Iranian schoolgirls and the European Union**

This week, one of the charter's signatories, Sirin Abadi, was a guest speaker at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, and in the evening the parliament [discussed](#) the reports of mass poisoning of Iranian schoolgirls. Although thousands of girls have been affected in different parts of the country, there is no evidence as to the cause. We also have no proof of who is responsible, so it was surprising to hear Abadi, who – before the Islamic Revolution – was Iran's first female judge, state categorically that the state has been using chemical gases to poison schoolgirls. The state has certainly shown its contempt for the girls in its reluctance to respond to what has been happening, and we can have no more faith in an Iranian Government investigation than for any other part of Iran's justice system, but that does not prove that they instigated the attacks, although that is a widespread assumption.



In fact, we may never know what has been happening. Experts [consulted](#) by the BBC, the [Guardian](#), and [Nature](#) stress the difficulty of finding proof, and suggest various possibilities from deliberate poisoning with agricultural chemicals to mass psychogenic illness. Copycat attacks and heightened anxiety could provide different causes for different instances. While some hardliners are against girls' education, this is not the case for the Iranian government as a whole, though many have interpreted the attacks as punishment for the revolutionary leadership role taken by young women. Nature suggested a request be made to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) for an investigation.

Potential poisonings in Iran are discussed in the Parliamentary Chamber, but when it comes to allegations of poisoning by Turkey against the PKK it is much harder to get these noticed – though the ban on chemical weapons is universal, applying to everyone everywhere. The same day that MEPs were discussing Iran's schoolgirls, Xoşnav Ata, who lost two of his nieces in these Turkish attacks, was [visiting](#) the parliament to meet with MEPs and ask them to put pressure on the OPCW for an investigation into Turkey's actions. Of course, most of those respectable politicians, righteously proclaiming Women, Life, Freedom, don't realise that this is a slogan of the Kurdish Freedom Movement.

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