

Making Turkey Great Again, the rise of the far right – a weekly news review

Erdoğan boasts of his independence from the United States and portrays his rival as in America's pocket, but it is America's world-wide fight against communism and socialism and their readiness to resort to any means in order to make the world safe for US capitalism that has made space for the growth of neo-fascism and intolerant religious extremism. Erdoğan owes his position to America and her allies who have systematically attacked Turkey's left movements for decades.

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Now is not a good time to be a Kurd; nor to be a woman, to be a government critic, to be gay, to be Alevi, to be any minority. It is not a good time to be a prisoner, to worry about corruption, to care about the environment, to look for peace. It is not a good time to be a refugee from Turkey hoping one day to go home. But most of all it is not a good time to be a Kurd.

Sunday's elections saw a further blow to prospects for freedom and democracy – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's People's Alliance has retained their majority in parliament, and he seems poised to win the second round of the presidential elections. In trying to understand what has happened I want to stress that this article is not a call to abandon the struggle to beat Erdoğan in that second round. There is still a slim chance of beating him if the small minority who didn't vote can be persuaded to come out, and no one should give up while that chance remains.

These were never free and fair elections. There have been important questions raised both about the voting process itself, and even more significantly about the impossibility of fair elections under an authoritarian regime – and I will go on to look at these. But it is also impossible to deny that there are large numbers of people in Turkey who are very happy with the election results.

Ever since his Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost their overall majority in the election of June 2015, Erdoğan has built his politics around a right-wing populism that has combined Turkey's long and brutal tradition of ethnic nationalism with a rigid religious conservatism. His winning formula has persuaded his loyal followers that he is leading Turkey to a new powerful position on the world stage as a leader of the Muslim and Turkic worlds: that he is Making Turkey Great Again. They themselves may be struggling to make ends meet under rampant inflation, or they may have lost family in the earthquakes whose disastrous consequences were magnified by the government's callous unpreparedness and inadequate and disruptive response, but Erdoğan is perceived to be on their side. They are persuaded that their enemies are not their brutal power-hungry and corrupt government, but are "terrorist" Kurds who would deny Turkish unity, people who promote sexual freedoms and question the traditional patriarchal family, and external

powers that would deny Turkey its greatness and destroy Turkey's economy. Erdoğan is adept at using his rhetorical powers to build and weaponise hate.

Difficult material conditions can make people more desperate to believe in a saviour that can help them – a strong man who can lead them out of their difficulties, even when objective analysis shows that man to be responsible for many of their woes. Erdoğan is demonstrably powerful as he has taken control of most aspects of the state. Moreover, he portrays himself as doing God's will. He has a symbiotic relationship with the religious authorities, and religion encourages people to accept their God-given fate. In contrast, the main opposition could offer no coherent story and their vital message of a return to former democratic norms failed to resonate with people who looked to the president for their salvation.

The rise of the far right

Turkey's main opposition Nation Alliance has its own problems and its own entanglement in ethnic nationalism (as its name suggests), and Turkey's authoritarian state has built a particularly unlevel playing field, but it is not only in Turkey that Turkey's are voting for Christmas. What is happening in Turkey needs to be looked at as part of an international revival of the far right that is rarely fully analysed. Across large parts of the world, masses of people have been seduced by right wing rhetoric to support leaders and parties that do not act in their interests. This is the predictable result of a liberal hegemony that instead of delivering the promised good life has left people isolated in the face of devastating inequality and insecurity and has combined this with the systematic undermining of all forms of socialist alternative. The governments of liberal democracy have consistently demonstrated that they would prefer to countenance the far right, including fascists and militant Islamists, than to give any space to the left.

So long as the Soviet Union was able, despite its own fundamental problems, to provide an alternative pole of attraction, Western governments were forced to make compromises to social democracy, but for the last three decades even that restraint has gone. Similar developments to those happening in Turkey are happening in other places too. Other leaders are moving into fascism, such as Netanyahu, Modi and Orban, and there is growing

authoritarianism and support for the far right in the old European democracies, such as the UK, France, and Sweden. The rise of the far right has been made possible by the systematic crushing of the left.

Erdoğan boasts of his independence from the United States and portrays his rival as in America's pocket, but it is America's world-wide fight against communism and socialism and their readiness to resort to any means in order to make the world safe for US capitalism that has made space for the growth of neo-fascism and intolerant religious extremism. Erdoğan owes his position to America and her allies who have systematically attacked Turkey's left movements for decades. The American way of defending "democracy" has been to ensure that those they do not want to win are always at a disadvantage. This selective approach towards "democracy" is common to all capitalist elites, but it is America that has dominated world politics.

After the Second World War, the United States used their new international dominance to ensure that left wing movements could not succeed and gain power. They used their wealth to help the war-torn countries to rebuild their economies in a way that tied them to US-dominated capitalism. Turkey became a member of NATO in 1952 and has received US military assistance costing billions of dollars. And the Turkish establishment has also received covert assistance as part of America's war against communism and against the growth of socialism.

In the late 1940s, NATO, the CIA, and Britain's MI6, together with national intelligence agencies, set up secret paramilitary organisations in European countries that were dedicated to the elimination of the left and were not too particular about how this was done. They employed former Nazis and recruited among local fascists. Their methods often included black flag operations that could be blamed on left groups, as well as murders and disappearances. In Italy these organisations were known as Operation Gladio. In Turkey they were known as [Counter Guerrillas](#), and although names and structures change, violent and illegal deep state organisations, with links to the far right and to organised crime have been a constant and prominent part of Turkey's political history.

The CIA has [worked closely with the Turkish deep state](#) to terrorise and destroy left organisations and to facilitate attacks on the left by far-right groups such as the Grey Wolves. Under both Democrat and Republican presidencies, American arms and military training have been used to carry out coups and murder revolutionaries and even to clear out Kurdish villages. The generals did not have to worry about nice Jimmy Carter's reaction to the 1980 coup that was followed by a brutal crackdown. (It was also President Carter who began supporting warlords and Islamists against Russia in Afghanistan.)

After such a comprehensive and continuous assault on the left, many people have nowhere to turn to when they are let down by liberal democracy, and become easy pray for the false promises of right-wing populism and the certainties of conservative religion. Even in places where the assault on the left has not been as physically brutal as in Turkey, left ideas and projects are constantly undermined by the authorities.

One way this is done is by treating resistance to the approved order as "terrorism"; and one way the United States and Europe continue to help Turkey delegitimise the country's biggest left-wing movement is by echoing the Turkish government's designation of the PKK as a terrorist organisation.

The Kurds in the election

While Erdoğan has become a ruthless practitioner of ethnic nationalism, this has been a fundamental tenet of all mainstream Turkish politics throughout the hundred years of the Turkish republic. As much the biggest minority, the Kurds have become the main focus of Turkish racism, and the more they have tried to assert their cultural rights, the more they have become a target. The power of the heart symbol made by Erdoğan's main presidential contender, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, could not undo a century of racist indoctrination, much of it perpetrated by Kılıçdaroğlu's own Republican People's Party (CHP).

His [promise of reconciliation for past mistakes](#), made eighteen months ago, faded into the background as he concentrated on holding together his politically diverse alliance.

While everyone wants Kurdish votes, any concessions to Kurdish demands are seen as an electoral liability that will alienate the majority who have been inculcated with anti-Kurdish nationalism. The Nation Alliance undertook a balancing act, attempting to demonstrate that they were safe partners for the Kurds in the battle for democracy and against Erdoğan's authoritarianism, while maintaining a firm political distance. They made no commitments to the Kurds or to the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), but Erdoğan and his People's Alliance took every opportunity to portray them as in close partnership with the HDP, which he refuses to distinguish from the PKK guerrillas. Their propaganda drew a simple equation $CHP=HDP=PKK$.

With general expectations that the elections would produce no overall majority and that there was a real chance that Kılıçdaroğlu could beat Erdoğan in the race for the presidency, the Kurds had come to be seen as playing a king-maker role. It made sense for Kılıçdaroğlu to avoid alienating the Kurdish vote, and it made sense for the HDP – running under the banner of the Green Left due to the risk posed by the politically motivated closure case against their party – to support Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential race. The HDP's argument was that this could secure a win for Kılıçdaroğlu in the first round and avoid the risk of a two week wait for the second presidential vote in which Erdoğan might be tempted to resort to all manner of violence in order to maintain power.

With the pre-election predictions proved so inaccurate, questions will be raised over whether this was the correct decision. An HDP (or Green Left) presidential candidate would have had a platform, however limited, to put across the party's own programme, which would have strengthened their parliamentary campaign; and – if the defeated first round candidates whose voters needed to be won over had included a member of the HDP and not only, as now, the far-right racist Sinan Oğan – the tenor of the debate might be rather different. If the Kurds could carry Kılıçdaroğlu over the line, attitudes might change, but that seems very unlikely, and even though the Kurds were offered nothing, some opposition supporters are already arguing that even being seen standing next to the HDP was too damaging. Instead of realising how Turkish politics has become poisoned by racism and seeking to change

the political climate, they prefer to accept this as immutable and show themselves to be as racist as their competitors.

Kılıçdaroğlu's balancing act has now become even harder as he wants to appeal to the over 5% of voters who supported Oğan, while not losing Kurdish votes. Heart signs and spring flowers have been left behind. He has [doubled down on his anti-immigrant rhetoric](#), and he has also castigated Erdoğan for the 2013-15 peace talks with the PKK. Erdoğan is a more recent convert to the populist anti-refugee position and Kılıçdaroğlu has blamed him for letting 10 million refugees into Turkey, promising to send them back the moment he is elected. There is no evidence for the 10 million figure. The official number is 4 million, of whom 3 ½ million are from Syria. However, despite this hard nationalist turn, a Kılıçdaroğlu win still offers the possibility of an escape from one man rule – an escape that the HDP is working hard not to lose sight of.

An undemocratic election

That Erdoğan maintains substantial support is clear, but it is also clear that this was not a fair election. As [explained by Frank Schwabe](#), head of the election observer delegation sent by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Turkey “does not fulfil the basic principles for holding a democratic election”.

Erdoğan has almost total control over the media. Thousands of government critics are in prison. Even a years' old tweet can result in a jail sentence. Freedom of speech and freedom of assembly are prerequisites for democracy. At the same time, government corruption has bought the support of an elite layer who can then protect sympathetic followers, and state events such as opening ceremonies have been turned into election propaganda.

The biggest obstacles to equal participation are reserved for the HDP. Thousands of party members have been sent to prison, including the former co-chairs and former MPs and mayors. Activists face perpetual harassment and detentions. Two major ongoing court cases hang over the party – the Kobanê case that could see 108 people, including leading party members, jailed for life without parole, and the closure case where a judgement to ban the party could be made at any time. Whatever the results of these cases, they

take time and energy and taint the image of the party. Because of the closure case, the HDP ran under the banner of the Green Left, and supporters had to be introduced to the change in a very short time. This also deprived them of the privileges that would have been due to the HDP as a party with parliamentary representatives: election funding and representation on the ballot box committees.

Fraud at the ballot box

While reports about serious problems in the polling stations were not numerous enough to prevent the PACE delegation [describing the process on the day](#) as “generally well-organized”, they also noted that “important safeguards, particularly during the counting, were not always implemented”. However, the transfer of votes into the computer system has been the subject of thousands of appeals. There appears to have been a [systematic attempt to misappropriate voting scores](#), including many examples of Green Left votes being assigned to the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Erdoğan’s far-right alliance partners. So far, the discrepancies found have not been enough to change any results, but they do raise the question of whether there may have been other, less readily spottable, tampering. The Workers’ Party of Turkey (TİP) has also [questioned suspiciously high turnouts](#) in around 20,000 ballot boxes.

Protesters outside the state election office were [briefly detained](#), but Erdoğan and his government may be unconcerned by the outrage around stolen votes, seeing it as a distraction that is only likely to discourage opposition voters from coming out in the second round.

What this means for the region

In case anyone was in any doubt that an Erdoğan victory would not be good news for Kurds in Syria and Iraq, Süleyman Soylu, Erdoğan’s Interior Minister and loyal bulldog, [told](#) television viewers on Wednesday “we will not leave any Americans or terrorists in Iraq or Syria.” For Soylu, the PKK and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are both terrorist organisations. And Erdoğan [told](#) CNN’s Becky Anderson on Friday that if Syria cooperated with Turkey in attacking the SDF – which he referred to as the fight against

terrorism – there was no obstacle in the way of Turkey/Syria reconciliation, though he also promised to maintain a military presence in Syria, which President Assad has said is unacceptable.

In a [podcast interview](#) with Jake Hanrahan, Alexander McKeever has provided a sobering assessment of the many pressures faced by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. McKeever describes negotiations between Erdoğan and Assad as at a stalemate, but he sees little prospect for an end to the Turkish threat to the autonomous region, and an enhanced risk of another major military operation following an Erdoğan presidential victory.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which is still blocking North and East Syria's only border crossing, is [delighted](#) with Erdoğan's election results, and no doubt looks forward to further collaboration with Turkey against the PKK.

All in all, a hard week to be a Kurd, but the Kurdish Movement is doing what it has had to do so many times before and is continuing the struggle. For another week, this means working to get out the anti-Erdoğan vote for the second round of the presidential election on 28 May, but, as they are very aware, politics is about much more than elections.

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