

“Pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will” – a weekly news review

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Sarah Glynn

It has dominated the region’s politics, offering the possibility of democratic change, but also of dictatorship, and it has provided motivation for oppression at home and aggression in other countries. Turkey’s election now appears to have a date and is expected to take place on 14 May. This crucial election – or, more properly, elections, both general and presidential – has to be held by 18 June, but there had been endless speculation that President Erdoğan

would [choose to bring it forward](#), and, on Wednesday, in a speech to his party, he made his preference clear. 14 May is the anniversary of Turkey's first multiparty elections in 1950, when Adnan Menderes, who has been described as Erdoğan's political idol, roundly beat the Republican People's Party (CHP), which is now the main opposition party. 14 May is after Ramadan and the Eid holiday, and also after the new election rules come into play on 6 April – rules designed to favour Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and their coalition partner, the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – though it has been argued that, since the official call for the election would have to be made before 6 April, the new rules should not apply.

Like every party in power, the AKP wants to pick a time that will allow it to maximise its chances of winning. They also have an added reason for wanting to bring the election forward. The Turkish constitution [does not allow the president to seek a third term](#), but it makes an exception if the parliament calls for a new election before the second term is ended. However, for this rule to come into play, the decision to bring forward the election would have to be supported by 60% of MPs. This could only be achieved with the help of some opposition members, which is very unlikely to be forthcoming. Erdoğan's lawyers claim that the introduction of the new presidential system in 2018 effectively reset the clock so this will not count as a third term. This claim could be legally challenged, but nobody would expect the Supreme Election Board to go against Erdoğan's wishes.

The elections will be between three coalitions. The coalition made up of the AKP and MHP goes under the name of the People's Alliance. The Nation Alliance is made up of the CHP, the İYİ Party- which is a split from the MHP – and four much smaller parties. And the Alliance for Labour and Freedom is essentially the leftist, pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) along with a collection of small left parties. Economic woes have leached political support from the ruling AKP. A slight economic recovery (aided by Russian investment) and some tactical increases in pensions, the minimum wage, and [public sector salaries](#) have allowed the People's Alliance to gain a very slight polling lead over the Nation Alliance which appears disunited and has

not yet [agreed](#) on a presidential candidate, but this still leaves HDP voters as kingmakers.

The HDP

The HDP itself is under threat of being closed down, like every previous pro-Kurdish party. The closure case is being looked at by the Constitutional Court. Everyone expects the decision to be whatever best suits Erdoğan, but when an Anadolu University law professor set an exam question on the pressures facing the judiciary in this case he was [suspended](#) from his post and the students were made to resit the exam. This was [just the latest](#) in a long line of government sponsored interference and dismissals at the university.

Despite attacks through the judiciary, including the recent stopping of their state funding, the HDP is running a determinedly positive campaign. The tens of thousands who attended their [rally in Istanbul](#) last Sunday even heard a recording of a song written and sung by their imprisoned former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, who has called on HDP supporters to [contribute](#) their own songs to the campaign.

The MHP

Meanwhile, Erdoğan's far-right coalition partners in the MHP are seeing their criminal connections exposed. In the investigation into the murder of the former head of their paramilitary organisation, the Grey Wolves, suspects include the MHP's Istanbul Provincial Director, the private secretary of an MHP deputy chairman, and a former manager of the Grey Wolves headquarters, who was detained at the house of an MHP Deputy, and is [said](#) to have used an MHP vehicle in the assassination plot.

In a separate case, Alparslan Çelik, who is accused of killing a Russian pilot in 2015 as he parachuted from his plane (a war crime) and is theoretically being sought for a murder threat against a former naval commander who had criticised the government, has shared [photographs](#) of himself with the MHP's leader, Devlet Bahçeli. Çelik [has also been accused](#) of being an agent of the

Turkish Intelligence Service (MIT) and of being involved in organised crime, and he appears to be protected by those in high places.

It should also not be forgotten that the phone belonging to the woman accused of planting the bomb in central Istanbul in November had [received](#) calls from the number of an MHP district president.

Politicised justice

MHP members can expect sympathetic treatment from state authorities, and so can members of the police, while government critics can expect to be made targets. This situation will only get worse as we get closer to the election.

On Tuesday, Diyarbakır 7th Heavy Penal Court gave their ruling in the retrial of the police officer who killed Kurdish student, Kemal Kurkut, during the 2017 Newroz celebrations. The court ruled that the police officer had done nothing wrong so there was no room for punishment – despite clear photographs by the journalist Abdurrahman Gök showing a policeman shooting Kurkut from behind. These photographs are so incriminating that the photographer has been sent to jail. (His 1 ½ year sentence was [upheld](#) by the appeals court a week ago.) After Tuesday's decision, the Kurkut family's lawyer [described](#) the situation as "An ordinary trial where the perpetrator is a police officer and the slain person is a Kurd".

Pinar Selek is a sociologist who has written about minorities in Turkey, including the Kurds. She has four times been put on trial for a fatal explosion in Istanbul to which she had no connection, and which has been shown to have been an accident involving a gas cylinder. Four times she has been acquitted. The "evidence" against her was a witness statement from a man who said that they had carried out an attack together, but who subsequently told the court that his statement had been extracted under torture, and who was himself found not guilty of the crime. Now, Turkey's Supreme Court has ruled that Selek will be tried yet again, and, since she is living in exile in France, Turkey has issued an international arrest warrant. Selek feels protected here in France, but she [told](#) French radio station, RFI, on Tuesday, "This trial reflects

both the continuity of the authoritarian regime in Turkey, since it began before the current government, but also the configurations of the repressive devices put in place ahead of the presidential elections". She expects to see more attacks, accusations and criminalisations by the Turkish government in the run up to the elections as part of what she describes as "a strategy of chaos and terror".

On Thursday, thousands gathered to mark the anniversary of the assassination, 16 years ago, of Hrant Dink, Armenian journalist and editor and fearless campaigner for Armenian consciousness and inter-ethnic fraternity. Dink had faced a constant hounding by the Turkish state and the Turkish ethnic nationalists that the state encouraged, and, despite 26 convictions in his murder case, including of former police chiefs, the full extent of the conspiracy behind his death has yet to be exposed.

The [commemorations](#) were held outside the office of his newspaper, Agos, at the spot where he was murdered, and, as at his funeral, the crowd chanted "we are all Armenians".

Syria

As is widely acknowledged, election considerations play an important role in Turkey's foreign policy. Erdoğan's vulnerability in the economic sphere gives his foreign adventures added weight, and the Ukraine war has opened up opportunities for him to demonstrate his strength in foreign fields. Having failed to achieve a vote-winning victory against the PKK in northern Iraq, his main focus is on Syria, where, metaphorically speaking, he performs a diplomatic handshake with one hand, while holding a gun in the other. An election date is yet another factor for the different states involved in Syria to put into the equation. The Syrian regime, which has [made it clear](#) that any agreement with Turkey would be premised on the withdrawal of Turkish troops, could negotiate either with Erdoğan or with a president and government from the opposition Nation Alliance, who also want to rebuild relations with Syria. But they also might want to take advantage of Erdoğan's need to show a result, or feel pressure from Russia who would like to see

Erdoğan remain in power, or feel threatened by Erdoğan's talk of a further invasion of autonomous North and East Syria.

Last Sunday, Mazloun Abdi, Commander in Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which defend North and East Syria, [told](#) Amberin Zaman for Al Monitor, "We expect an attack in February. The town of Kobanê is a likely target because of its symbolic meaning for Kurds the world over. Turkey is heading for elections, and we are aware that President Erdoğan wants to rally nationalist support and he appears to believe that attacking Rojava again can serve this purpose."

Yesterday was the [fifth anniversary](#) of Turkey's invasion of Afrîn, prompting many accounts of the regime of terror and destruction that came in its wake. If Erdoğan manages to come to an agreement with Syria, he will still want to maintain a measure of control over Kurdish activity in the border areas, and he will try to ensure that both Afrîn and the Turkish occupied area between Girê Spî and Serêkaniyê remain unwelcoming to their former Kurdish majority populations. In any case, the mass demographic manipulation that Turkey has been indulging in has the potential to result in centuries of instability.

Sweden

Voter perceptions also play a major part in Turkey's negotiations about Sweden and Finland joining NATO. Turkey has used the leverage provided by their ability to veto new NATO members to win concessions from the Nordic countries and possibly from the United States, and also to make a very public show of international power. Last week's protest action by the Swedish Solidarity Committee for Rojava, who hung a mannequin with an Erdoğan mask upside down outside Stockholm City Hall, probably had a bigger impact than even its (native Swedish) organiser could have hoped for. It showed up Turkey's readiness to intervene in Sweden's criminal justice system, the Swedish government's obsequious response to Turkey's bullying, and the dangers posed to freedom of speech and democracy.

The Turkish government responded to the stunt by cancelling a planned visit from the speaker of the Swedish Parliament and summoning the Swedish

ambassador to demand that Sweden find and punish the culprits. The Swedish prime minister and foreign minister panicked at what the former described as “sabotage against the Swedish NATO application”, and they didn’t hold back from condemning the action; but the local prosecutor kept their head, [reporting](#) that nothing illegal had taken place so no investigation was necessary.

Nils Funcke, [writing](#) in SvD Debatt, points out that the ministers’ condemnations not only have implications for freedom of speech by making people self-censor criticism of Turkey, but also put the government itself in a bind. After this, if they don’t react equally strongly to any future action it will be assumed that they approve.

Responding to the government’s criticisms, the activists shared an image of a Putin doll that was hung on a gallows outside the Russian embassy in Oslo last March, and they [asked](#) “Did Norway’s government condemn a suspended Putin doll as a ‘heinous’ threat to a ‘popularly elected leader’ who could ‘threaten Norwegian security’? No... Despots deserve protests, and as much as one might wish, puppets pose no real threat to the lives of dictators.”

In his anger at the perceived insult, Erdoğan has demanded even more extraditions – 130 to be precise – though he must know that if Sweden is to maintain an independent judiciary these are not in the government’s gift. A Finnish paper, *Ilta-lehti*, [responded](#) with a cartoon entitled “Mocking Erdoğan has a price”, which suggested that a naked Erdoğan might be valued at “200 terrorists”, and Erdoğan as a dog at 500.

While Nordic activists were using stunts to battle for freedom of speech, the Biden administration has been trying to secure Turkish compliance in exchange for access to [F-16 fighter jets](#). Such a deal at the current juncture would not only give the Turkish army access to more high-powered weaponry to use against the Kurds, but would also be chalked up as an achievement by Erdoğan that could translate into electoral support. However, there is still resistance to such a deal within Congress, especially among members with

Greek links, and Erdoğan's continued bellicose comments directed at Greece will make this hard to dispel.

Germany

Germany, with its large Turkish and Kurdish population, is directly affected by Turkish elections, as expatriate Turkish citizens form an important constituency. Before the 2018 Turkish elections the politics got so heated that Germany banned election rallies. A week ago, in a speech made at a mosque run by the Grey Wolves in Neuss, which was also shared on social media, a visiting MP from the ruling AKP incited his listeners to "crush" supporters of the PKK (which is often taken to mean most Kurds) and of Erdoğan's former ally and now arch enemy, Fetullah Gülen. Mustafa Açıkgöz [told](#) his listeners, "Just as we don't recognise their right to life in Turkey, neither will we recognise it in Germany. No matter where in the world they flee, we will crush the supporters of the PKK and FETÖ". Germany's foreign minister publicly [upbraided](#) him for hate speech and invited the Turkish ambassador for an interview.

At the same time, successive German governments have agreed to restrict Kurdish political activities within Germany in line with Turkish claims of what constitutes terrorism. Last Saturday, a [march](#) for Öcalan that was due to take place in Berlin was called off as the Berlin police would not allow marchers to carry flags with his image.

Condemning atrocities is easier politics, and, on Thursday, Yazidis welcomed a [unanimous vote](#) in the Bundestag to recognise ISIS crimes against the Yazidis in Shengal as genocide – a recognition already given by the European Parliament.

Iran

There has been similar widespread revulsion at the actions of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and their brutal attempts to crush the ongoing revolution. On Thursday, the European Parliament passed a cross-

party motion on Iran that called on the EU Council and member states to add the IRGC to their list of terrorist organisations. International support for the revolution is important. It is also important that other countries avoid any engagement that legitimises the Iranian regime. However, we might want to be wary of legitimising the idea of a terrorism list, since, in many instances, there is no consistent definition of what constitutes terrorism and, as in the case of the PKK, the [decision](#) to classify an organisation as terrorist can be inconsistent and political.

External solidarity is welcome, but often this comes with less-welcome external meddling, and this can also be true with respect to diaspora communities. Unsurprisingly, many more Iranian exiles look towards the former monarchy than do the people still living in Iran, and it is concerning to see how these exiles use their relative prominence and access to social and other media to promote the son of the deposed shah. Iran International [reports](#), “Many Iranians, including prominent artists and athletes have signed a petition endorsing exiled Prince Pahlavi Reza as their representative to lead a transition from clerical to secular rule.”

In the meantime, the people on the ground, where many protests clearly reject both shah and mullahs, continue to struggle against the regime despite intensified crackdowns. It has been reported that a Tehran cleric has [claimed](#) that the official language of hell is Kurdish and that even in the afterlife Kurds are rioters – an acknowledgement of their revolutionary role.

Resistance

No one can doubt Kurdish commitment to resistance. The last fortnight saw two people set fire to themselves in order to protest against the continued isolation of Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan. The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) was [forced to remind](#) the community that Öcalan himself has “clearly stated in the past that he deeply values such manifestation of willpower, but he does not approve of such actions.”

I want to end with a further observation on Kurdish resistance by Pinar Selek, the sociologist who has been persecuted by the Turkish state under both current and previous governments for 25 years. She [told](#) RFI “I always repeat Antonio Gramsci’s famous phrase: ‘You have to combine pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will.’ Currently, pessimism of the intellect is obviously stronger, but there is a very great resistance in Turkey. The prisons are full and we know that everyone can find their way there one day, no one is untouchable. But despite this context of terror, many people are mobilizing... I learned about the reversal of my acquittal from the Turkish media, but they also spread my word and many people who live in Turkey spoke out in support of me. It shows that they have not succeeded...”

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her [website](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#)