

Beautiful words and dodgy dealings in Turkey's election – a weekly news review

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[12:48 pm 22/04/2023](#)

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"Everybody should watch this with their heart. It is possible to live on these lands without discrimination, in equality and peace, as siblings. I congratulate Mr Kılıçdaroğlu and wholeheartedly support his beautiful message." So tweeted Selahattin Demirtaş, the imprisoned former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). The [beautiful message](#) from opposition presidential candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, which he posted on Twitter under the single heading "Alevi", has been shared over seventy thousand times.

Alevis practise a version of Islam that is not recognised by Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs, which is exclusively oriented towards a Turkish form of Sunni Islam. There are both Turkish and Kurdish Alevis and, though estimates of their number vary widely, they may make up a quarter of Turkey's population. They have faced brutal prejudice since Ottoman times,

with pogroms as recently as the 1990s, and prejudice is encouraged by laws that do not recognise their cemevis as places of worship and refuse to exempt Alevi children from Sunni religious classes at school. Many people had argued that Kılıçdaroğlu's Alevi faith would prejudice his election chances and be used against him by his adversaries. He has pre-empted this by a video that [embraces his faith](#) and uses this for a call to "pull the country out of hurtful sectarian debates".

Addressing himself to young first-time voters, he states, "I am an Alevi, a sincere Muslim who grew up with faith in God, Muhammed, and Ali... Identities make us who we are. We must of course uphold them with pride. We cannot choose our identities, we are born with them ... but there are more important things we can choose in life. We can choose to be good people, to be honest and ethical, to have a conscience, to be virtuous and just. We can choose to live a better life, in a free and prosperous country. Our choices can transform society rapidly." Sadly, this did not stop him being [aggressively hassled](#) when he visited the earthquake-hit province of Adiyaman yesterday.

This video followed [another](#), released two days earlier, in which Kılıçdaroğlu called for Turkish/Kurdish brotherhood and castigated President Erdoğan for treating Kurds, and anyone who worked with them politically – including Kılıçdaroğlu and his party – as terrorists: "My dear people, in recent years, whenever we talked about elections, whenever the Palace saw that it was going to lose the elections, the Kurds were labelled as terrorists... Remember the fellowship between us. Absolutely do not forget this. There is a destiny that makes Turks and Kurds brothers. I will never, ever allow anyone to harm this fellowship for a few votes. We are almost there."

Despite the history of Kılıçdaroğlu's own Republican People's Party (CHP), and despite their pragmatic alliance with the nationalist İYİ Party, which will be far from comfortable with these statements, Kılıçdaroğlu's words carry weight because he is perceived as a man of integrity. In a curious twist of fate, the man whose election pledge is to get rid of the dictatorial powers accrued to the presidency under Erdoğan, could also have a unique opportunity to use

some of those powers to reorientate Turkey towards the tolerant society he has outlined in these videos.

By contrast, Erdoğan has [promised](#) continued war in Syria and Iraq, using a Ramadan dinner to cast the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as terrorists alongside the PKK, and also, again, to accuse Kılıçdaroğlu, of “standing with terrorist organisations”. And Erdoğan’s defence minister has encouraged supporters to [envisage a violent conclusion to the election process](#). When supporters chanted “We will shoot at your command, we will die at your command”, the Minister responded, “That time will come too, wait for it.” As Can Dündar has [pointed out](#), this was an echo of an exchange ten years ago, only on that occasion the person responding that the time will come was Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), who are now Erdoğan’s allies, and Erdoğan then described Bahçeli as irresponsible.

With hatred and violence encouraged from the top, it is unsurprising to see attacks on party offices. This time a [CHP office in Istanbul](#) was hit, though only blanks were fired, and a gunman fired at a temporarily empty office of Erdoğan’s ruling [Justice and Development Party \(AKP\) in Adana](#). It is unlikely that these will be the last attacks.

As the party in power, the AKP is trying to woo voters with pre-election giveaways. On Thursday, Erdoğan commissioned a Black Sea gas plant, [promising a gift](#) of a set amount of free gas to every household.

Erdoğan has been [accused](#) of turning opening ceremonies paid for with public money into election propaganda. Legislation introduced a year ago lifted regulations over this, leaving the system open to exploitation.

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Manipulation of social media has become a worry in every election everywhere, but Turkey is especially known for its government-funded army of trolls and use of mass Twitter bots; and Russia could also intervene to try and keep their friend Erdoğan in power. Potentially disruptive stories can also be spread just to get hits and make money.

Tuğrulcan Elmas, who studies the impact of social media in Turkey, describes how its form and its algorithms favour [soundbite news stories that provoke reaction](#), often generated by anonymous news websites; and how mass automated tweets that are instantly deleted are used to [make hashtags trend](#). These tweets can either be from bot accounts or from hijacked genuine accounts whose owners will have no idea that this is happening. Stories that have trended on Twitter are picked up by other media. Elmas claims that these agenda-capturing techniques are much more systematised in Turkey than elsewhere, and that “the manipulation campaigns carried out by bots are generally in favour of the AKP”. He notes that Elon Musk sacked the Twitter team that was working on this problem and that he has made it harder for academics to access the data they need to uncover what is happening. Elmas also observes that more sophisticated bots could even use ChatGPT to produce tweets that seem to make sense.

It has recently been [found](#) that thousands of Russian, Hungarian, and English language accounts have been reactivated as Turkish ones. This need not imply foreign intervention as the accounts could have been bought or stolen by people in Turkey.

When it comes to voting, all parties are making plans to guard the ballot boxes from intervention. This is a big organisational task and includes plans for diaspora countries, where expatriate Turkish nationals can cast their votes between 27 April and 9 May. Parties are also organising international election observers beyond the officially invited groups organised through the Turkish government.

There have been concerns raised over access to ballot boxes by earthquake survivors who have left their former place of residence and have not registered to vote at the place they are currently staying. If they want to take part in the election, they will have to travel back to the earthquake areas. This is clearly something that the political parties will want to facilitate for their voters, but the many uncertainties are only increased by the government-imposed state of emergency, which is not due to end until a week before voting. Most of the worst affected areas previously gave strong support to the ruling AKP, though the earthquake may have changed some minds. In Hatay, the vote last time was more equally divided, and the CHP mayor of Hatay has [questioned](#) the decision not to open the airport until three days after the forthcoming election.

When it comes to the HDP, government attempts to stymie their election chances are much more blatant, with Turkey's increasingly politicised judicial system being used to imprison thousands of party members and force others into exile. The Constitutional Court could also rule for the closure of the party at any time, and for the suspension of up to 451 people from party politics. In the separate [Kobanê Case](#), 108 people, including leading party members, face the possibility of life imprisonment without parole. The next hearing for this case has been set for July, but although the case is unfinished and has not yet had a ruling, it is still being used as a pretext for the party's closure. Because of the threatened closure, HDP members are standing for election under the list of the Yeşil Sol Party, the Green Left.

Seventeen of the Kobanê case defendants are already detained in prison. Sirri Süreyya Önder MP, another defendant, was issued an arrest warrant a week ago. He is standing for re-election on the Yeşil Sol list and [told](#) Bianet "I moved from preparing for parliamentary representation and political work to preparing for prison."

Accusations of more general corruption in the governing AKP have also been sending social media aflutter, though it is not clear how much they will influence voters as there have been many allegations before. Like on the last occasion, these new accusations are coming from one man via his video

channel. Indeed, [Muhammed Yakut](#), the Kurdish businessman behind the current accusations, claims to be a long-term friend of mafia boss Sedat Peker, whose videos grabbed the limelight two years ago. Not that the AKP wants to take any more chances. A journalist who interviewed Yakut was detained (though subsequently released) and Yakut's YouTube channel has been blocked.

Although Kılıçdaroğlu is polling ahead of Erdoğan in the presidential race, the two other candidates are getting enough support for it to be unlikely that he will get the 50% plus one votes he would need to win the first round. And if the presidential election goes to a second-round fight between Kılıçdaroğlu and Erdoğan, many people are worried about what Erdoğan might do in the intervening two weeks to secure a win.

To try and avoid this, Selahattin Demirtaş has [tweeted](#) a photoshopped ballot paper that includes three images of Erdoğan and one of Kılıçdaroğlu. The implication is that a vote for either of the other two candidates would only benefit Erdoğan.

Demirtaş has also [urged](#) supporters to vote tactically in the parliamentary elections and not waste votes on people with no chance of being elected.

It's not a good time to be a woman

This election is of historic importance for everyone in Turkey, but perhaps especially for women. As in many other parts of the world, growing authoritarianism has gone hand in hand with misogyny and a major setback to women's rights in many areas of life.

In a further reminder of Turkey's structural misogyny, another actress is [facing a potential prison sentence](#) for "insulting" a soldier rapist by her comments on social media, while the rapist himself, despite being found guilty, remains free. (His victim was so traumatised she killed herself.) And a [television drama](#) that showed a traditional Muslim woman being thrown out of the window on her wedding night after resisting her arranged marriage, and then rebuilding her life, was pulled by the censors, and replaced with a documentary on

Islamophobia. Evrim Kepenek, writing in Bianet, commented, “the blocking of the series is like the teaser of what is deemed proper for women after the elections.”

The AKP and their friends also have no tolerance for LGBTQI+ rights and encourage prejudice to win votes. Kılıçdaroğlu has promised to end discrimination based on sexual orientation. [Erdoğan](#) claims to be protecting the “sacred institution” of the family. His message to voters: “We will not allow perverted movements such as LGBT to exist in our country and to be imposed on our nation”.

Iran

Across the eastern border in Iran, the women’s revolution continues its struggle against that country’s deeply institutionalised oppression. Reports tell of more girls’ schools suffering from mysterious gas attacks, with videos showing pupils being carried to ambulances, while the Iranian government stands accused of a dismissive response. [Amnesty International](#) has launched an appeal letter calling for an independent investigation and urging Iran to allow the United Nations to become involved.

The Iranian authorities may seem unperturbed by the nightmare confronting thousands of girls, but they have been demonstrating their active determination not to relax their hijab laws. At the beginning of the week, they [announced](#) that over 150 shops and restaurants had been sealed shut for not observing the rules, and that they were using smart technologies to spot offenders.

Meanwhile, the man who would be king – Reza Pahlavi, the son of the deposed Shah – has [been in Israel](#) as self-appointed envoy of the Iranian people to build bonds with Israel’s most right-wing leader ever. While many Iranians want to see an end to their country’s support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, not least because of the cost, this does not have to mean cosying up to the Palestinians’ increasingly fascistic oppressors.

In the border villages of Rojhelat, Iran's Kurdish northwest, the Iranian government is trying to cut cross-border ties and clear away residents to increase military control. There are plans to [empty 33 Kurdish villages](#), and the government has [killed horses](#) belonging to Kolbers who carry heavy loads over the border passes.

Iraq

Local people also find themselves in a military zone in the mountains of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where Turkish incursions have emptied out many villages and resulted in numerous civilian casualties. A week ago, the bodies were recovered of two men [killed by a Turkish airstrike](#) 11 days earlier as they foraged for wild vegetables.

Turkey has also carried out another targeted assassination in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Huseyin Türeli was [fatally shot](#) on Monday, after also being attacked 11 months ago. He had come to Iraq from Turkey because he was being prosecuted for a bomb attack carried out in 2008, of which he denied all knowledge. It is believed that this and other recent assassinations are the work of the Turkish Intelligence service, MIT.

Syria

Turkey continues their attacks on Syria, and the insecurity this creates helps ISIS to continue to find new recruits. This is a dangerous part of the world to forage. Firat News Agency reports that, since the beginning of February, over 250 people have been [killed while collecting truffles](#) in the Syrian desert.

As Arab states normalise their relations with Syria, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has [clearly reiterated](#) that they want to negotiate a peace with Damascus, but a peace that allows them to keep their local multicultural autonomy within Syria. So, yesterday could hardly have been a worse time for the Washington Post to publish an [article](#) – based on recently leaked “United States intelligence” – that claims that Ukraine discussed a secret plan for the Syrian Democratic Forces to attack Russian

forces in Syria in exchange for training and air defence systems. While the SDF's need for air defence is clear, the risk of antagonising Russia is huge, and many commentators have greeted the article with scepticism. SDF spokesperson, Farhad Shami, told the Washington Post, "The documents that you are talking about regarding our forces are not real; our forces have never been a side in the Russian-Ukrainian war".

The US and Europe

The United States delivered another blow to the Kurds last week when they announced that they would be going ahead with the [sale of upgrading software](#) for Turkey's F16 fighters, with agreement from the congressional committees. Not only is the decision bad news in itself, but the fact that this can be agreed just after the SDF's commander in Chief, Mazloun Abdi, and US military escorts were targeted by a Turkish drone gives a clear indication of US priorities.

There has been more bad news from France, where 11 Kurdish activists have been given [prison sentences](#) of between three and five years for membership of the PKK. The Kurdish community points out that terrorist attacks have been committed against Kurds in France, not by them.

In Germany, persecution of the Kurdish community continues. Police [raided Kurdish associations](#) in Darmstadt in response to a memorial event, held nearly three years ago, for a PKK member; a [Kurdish asylum seeker](#) was nearly deported to Turkey after a careless bureaucratic error; and Germany [demanded the extradition](#) of a man accused of PKK membership from Cyprus, where he has been living as a refugee since 2020.

Turkey has made many requests for the extradition of Kurds from Sweden, but this time the request for extradition was made by Sweden to Turkey: and Turkey said, No. The man the Swedes want to see on trial is a drug trafficker known as the [Kurdish Fox](#). The association of that nickname with violent crime has been very damaging for the Kurdish community in Sweden.

Turkey has refused to budge from vetoing Sweden's membership of NATO, and the activists of Sweden's Rojava Committees group are at least as determined to confront Turkey's demands. Last Tuesday, they [flew PKK flags](#) from several places in Gothenberg. They explain that the flags are a protest against Sweden's plans to increase the scope of the Terrorist Crimes Act.

[There is no space left to write about last Saturday's big](#) rallies for Öcalan's freedom, but, as well as Öcalan's importance and the brutality of his isolation, speakers emphasised the potential game-changing importance of the forthcoming election.

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