

Turkey's Envisioned Exit from Authoritarianism

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Turkey has been ruled by the AKP (Justice and Development Party) under Recep Tayyip Erdo#an's leadership for more than 20 years. Throughout this time, Erdo#an got almost total control over state administration and judiciary, and enchained the media and big capital owners to himself. In 2017, he constitutionalized a one-man rule by changing the political regime from parliamentarism to executive presidentialism in a referendum conducted under state of emergency restrictions.

Since 2022, a joint political platform called Nation Alliance (aka the Table of Six)¹⁾ appeared as the most powerful competitor and a real challenge to Erdo#an's rule. The Nation Alliance vows to change the political regime from executive presidentialism to parliamentary democracy in case it should defeat Erdo#an on May 14. The opposition does not envision a restoration of the pre-2017 system, but rather a strengthened parliamentary model by means of a series of legal and constitutional changes.

The scope of the [proposed regime change](#) has been relatively well discussed (also [here](#) and [here](#)). What is less emphasized is how the transition from one regime to another would take place. In that regard, Turkey will turn over a new leaf in its Republican history, if, for the first time, a regime change would take place through a civilian transition.

The relevance of dual elections on May 14

The date for Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections was set for May 14. In both of the elections a very fierce struggle will be fought between the Nation Alliance of six opposition parties and the People's Alliance of ruling AKP and the nationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party). After protracted negotiations, the Nation Alliance picked Kemal K#l#çdar#lu, the leader of CHP (Republican People's Party), on March 6 as its joint presidential candidate. On March 10, Erdo#an announced himself as the candidate of the People's Alliance amid severe debates on [constitutionality of his candidacy](#). Erdo#an was elected as the president for the first time in August 2014. In June 2018, he was elected for the second time as the president of the new executive presidential system. After constitutional amendments of January 2017, Article 101 of the Turkish Constitution reads that a person can be elected president two times at most. According to Article 116 of the Constitution, a president serving his second term can only run again if the parliament resolves to renew the elections – which is not the case for May 14 elections. Although the constitutional articles are unambiguous, on March 24 the Supreme Election Council approved Erdo#an's presidential candidacy, and on March 30, unanimously ruled to reject any objections against this.

Even though all eyes are on the presidential elections, it is also well known that victory in presidential race will not be enough for the regime change promised by the Nation Alliance. In order to enact the reform laws, the opposition must secure the necessary majorities in a 600-seat parliament – a simple majority for new laws and a qualified majority for constitutional amendments. In this case, every vote counts for the Nation Alliance. Erdoğan's overtures to left-wing parties as well as his meeting with the co-chairs of HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) is an attempt to amplify the Alliance's power and broaden its electoral base. Despite the apparent irreconcilability between the nationalist Good Party (second largest party of the Nation Alliance after the CHP) and the pro-Kurdish HDP, it is not hard to imagine that the HDP would support the Nation Alliance in parliament. It is mainly because; both the Alliance and the HDP emphasize political regime change, freedoms, and democracy, as stated in the election manifesto of the Green Left Party, under whose umbrella the HDP will compete in the May elections in order to baffle the possible [closure of the party](#). The HDP also [announced](#) that it will not field a presidential candidate in order to "fulfill its duty against the one-man regime".

Erdoğan's People's Alliance, on the other hand, is on a similar path of extension. Recently, archconservative New Welfare Party and Huda-Par (Free Cause Party), the successor of Islamist armed group Hezbollah, announced their support to People's Alliance. Although these two parties do not have large vote shares, they are symbolically important. The New Welfare Party wants to abolish Law no 6284, a penal code that offers state protection to women facing abuse at home, close LGBTI + organizations, and end alimony to women after divorce. Huda-Par's policy agenda, on the other hand, includes abolishment of compulsory coeducation, opening of separate schools for boys and girls at all levels of education, and [criminalization of adultery](#). With these two new political parties, the People's Alliance poses an abject threat to democratic rights and freedoms.

The Nation Alliance's job is hard; the race is very close. Still, most polls show Erdoğan ahead of Erdoğan, which raises hopes for an exit from authoritarianism through elections.

The envisioned transitional period

Authoritarianism is one of the recurring themes in almost all of the National Alliance's memoranda of understanding. For instance, [the Memorandum of Understanding on Reinforced Parliamentary System](#) states that the presidential system has led to personalization and arbitrariness in governance; and created an authoritarian rule by granting the president very broad and unchecked powers that put the legislature, executive and judiciary under his control. Meanwhile, [the Memorandum of Understanding on Common Policies](#), sees the presidential system as the basic reason behind the deepest administrative and economic crisis in the history of Republic. Against this context, the Nation Alliance pledges to establish separation of powers through an effective and participatory legislative, a stable, transparent and accountable executive, and an independent and impartial judiciary for the realization of a strong, liberal, democratic and just system under parliamentary regime.

Corresponding to the unprecedented havoc that Erdoğan's one-man rule has wreaked on the constitutional state and democracy during two decades, the scope of reforms proposed by the Nation Alliance is also very broad, covering 2.300 policies and projects under nine themes and 75 sub-themes. Their implementation requires amending 84 articles of the [Turkish Constitution](#) under nine headings. That being the case, a transitional parliament is needed for a change of this magnitude. [The Roadmap of the Transition Process to a Strengthened Parliamentary System](#) draws the outline of such a transitional parliament. *The Roadmap* limits the term of office of the president and the parliament to be elected on May 14 with the period of transition to the parliamentary regime. Article 11 reads that after transition to the strengthened parliamentary system, the president and the parliament will complete their mandate without the need for a new election. With the completion of the transition, the president's political party membership will come to an end as well (Article 10). Hence, the president and the parliament to-be-elected are envisioned to carry out the task of regime change and dissolve themselves as soon as this task is accomplished.

Turkey so far experienced such *ad hoc* parliaments as constituent assemblies established after the military coups of May 1960 and September 1980. In these cases, regime change corresponded to transition from military junta rule to civilian governments. In case of a Nation Alliance's victory, for the first time in Republican history regime change will expectedly be realized through a transition period, in which power will be transferred from civilians to civilians again.

The parliament stipulated by the Nation Alliance is also commensurate to a constituent assembly: it would work temporarily, be elected by the people through direct and universal suffrage, and amend the constitution. It would not draft a new constitution, but the reforms prescribed to bring about the regime change are so comprehensive and concise to the extent that it is almost equivalent to penning a new constitution. Nor will the parliament's sole task be to consolidate the parliamentary system. It will also continue its normal legislative activity and (with the powers it will acquire through the reforms) oversee the government.

Other devices are also set forth to strengthen the participatory and deliberative character of the parliament. According to the Article 9 of *the Roadmap*, certain mechanisms will be established to coordinate the collaborative legislative activity during the transition. These mechanisms have not yet been concretely discussed. Yet, they are critical to ensure that civil society actors are actively involved in the transition process. Similarly, *The Memorandum of Understanding on Common Policies* and *the Memorandum of Understanding on Reinforced Parliamentary System* reiterate that it will be a rule to seek the opinions of relevant civil society institutions, professional organizations and experts during the discussion of law proposals and drafts in the parliamentary committees. If this participation can be effectively realized, civil society will be integrated into the law-making process in the long term, not only during the transition period.

May 14 elections is a turning point for Turkey. All hopes for the restoration of democracy are pinned on the ballot box to bring an end to the long-standing authoritarian rule.

References

- They are the Republican People's Party, Good Party, Felicity Party, Democrat Party, Future Party, and Democracy and Progress Party.

