

# Turkey's Elections: How Erdoğan Could Try to Engineer a Win and Stay in Power

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## SNAPSHOT

### SUMMARY

- As Turkey gears up for momentous elections on May 14, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government are expected to use several tactics to undermine the vote and try to engineer a win.
- Controlling key institutions like the judiciary and media, Erdoğan has ensured that the elections will not be fair. Many are also worried that his government could resort to media bans, electoral fraud, and violence on May 14 to win the election or defy a possible loss.
- Turkey has a long tradition of holding competitive elections, and opposition parties and civil society are committed to securing the vote. Whatever anti-democratic tactics Erdoğan and his government may deploy on election day, they are sure to face formidable resistance.

### INTRODUCTION

With pivotal presidential and parliamentary elections set to take place on May 14, Turkey is at a critical juncture. Over the past decade, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has transformed Turkey from a promising democracy into an authoritarian state. Now, as citizens prepare to go to the polls on the republic's **centennial**, both Erdoğan and his opposition consider Turkey to be at a "**crossroads**" in history—and see the election as a referendum on how Turkey will be governed over the next

century. Erdoğan, who has long criticized the republic's secularist and Western-oriented foundation, **seeks** a mandate to realize his vision for a "**new Turkey**." His opposition, represented by a six-party alliance and secular Kurds who support them, **seeks to finally unseat** Erdoğan after 20 years and restore Turkey's democratic path.

Turkey has maintained a tradition of competitive multiparty elections for nearly 80 years. For the citizens of Turkey, the ability to elect their leaders is a hard-earned right. Even

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under Erdoğan, Turkish elections are still marked by high mobilization and turnout, a serious opposition, lively campaigning, and robust opinion polling. With the polls showing that voters are almost evenly split between Erdoğan and the opposition, this year's contest is shaping up as the **fiercest** in the country's modern history.

To be sure, the competition will not be **fair**: With his growing control over the **judiciary, media,** and **public resources** over the last decade, Erdoğan has stacked the odds in his favor. Opposition campaigns barely get media coverage, and opposition politicians regularly face baseless criminal investigations.

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But despite all the repression, Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) remain vulnerable to the electorate, often winning just enough votes to form a majority in parliament and sometimes actually losing to their rivals. With Erdoğan's popularity battered by Turkey's devastating economic crisis and earthquake disaster, his electoral prospects are now lower than ever. His opposition, sensing the historic opportunity, is **more united and optimistic** than ever before. They stand a very real chance of prevailing despite the unfair playing field—so long as Erdoğan does not steal the vote.

This Snapshot describes how Erdoğan has subverted election integrity in the past and what

anti-democratic tactics he might pursue this time to keep power. Supporters of Turkey's democracy must be on the lookout for such sabotage and ready to respond.

## PRE-ELECTION TACTICS

In recent years, Erdoğan's government has used a variety of unfair tactics to suppress opposition voices ahead of elections that have called into question the fairness and transparency of the electoral process. These tactics, which include politically motivated criminal investigations into Erdoğan's opponents, heavy censorship of independent or pro-opposition media, and government-sanctioned violence to intimidate opposition parties and their voters, hint at what the government might do ahead of this year's elections.

### *Criminalizing the Opposition*

Among Erdoğan's most common tactics to suppress his opposition ahead of elections has been to criminalize opposition parties or leaders. The foremost victim of this tactic has been the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Turkey's second-largest opposition party. In June 2015, the HDP scored a major election victory and **became the first** Kurdish-majority party in Turkey to enter parliament, causing the AKP to **lose its parliamentary majority** for the first time since 2001.

Since then, to erode the party's legitimacy and electoral strength, Erdoğan has treated the HDP as an extension of the Kurdish nationalist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist group that has been at war with the Turkish state since the 1980s. Not only do Erdoğan, his political allies, and his media continuously level verbal attacks against the HDP. But the AKP-controlled judiciary has launched criminal investigations into hundreds of HDP members and arrested dozens. Many, including the party's charismatic former co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş, are still behind bars. The AKP-controlled parliament has also stripped several HDP deputies of their parliamentary



Opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (R) and Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu (L) appear together at the opening ceremony of a women's center and park in Istanbul, March 26, 2023. Photo credit: Ekrem İmamoğlu Official Facebook account

seats, and the AKP-controlled government has **removed** dozens of popularly elected HDP mayors from their positions in the predominantly Kurdish southeast, replacing them with appointees.

In the lead-up to the 2023 elections, Erdoğan has taken his attacks against the HDP to the next level. In June 2021, Turkey's Constitutional Court **agreed** to review a case brought by an Ankara prosecutor to close down the HDP—and impose a political ban on hundreds of HDP members, including elected deputies—for its alleged links to the PKK. The case is **widely seen** as politically motivated, with the judiciary having fallen increasingly **under government control** in recent years. Although the court has **not yet issued a ruling**, the party seems resigned to its fate of being shut down. In late March, the HDP **announced** that it would not run in 2023 as its own party, but would instead field its candidates under the banner of the affiliated Green Left Party (YSP).<sup>1</sup>

The main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), has also faced judicial harassment. Most notably, last December a Turkish court **convicted** the CHP mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, of “insulting the state” over his 2019 remarks criticizing Turkey's High Election Board (YSK). The court not only sentenced him to two years and seven months in prison but also imposed a political ban that would, if upheld by the appeals courts, remove him from his post as mayor—and prevent him from taking office should he run in and win the presidential election. The move effectively removed İmamoğlu, who was at the time considered a likely rival to Erdoğan in the 2023 election, from contention as the opposition's candidate. (The six-party opposition coalition says, however, that it plans to appoint him as a vice president if it wins.) International human rights groups criticized the conviction in the strongest terms, with Human Rights Watch **calling** it a “politically calculated assault on Turkey's political opposition in the run up [sic] to 2023

1. Turkey has a long history of banning Kurdish political parties. The HDP is the eighth Kurdish-rooted left-wing political party in Turkey to face legal action for potential closure since 1993 for allegedly breaching the constitution; see Amnesty International, “Türkiye: HDP Closure would Violate Rights to Freedom of Expression and Association,” April 11, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/EUR4466632023ENGLISH.pdf>



elections.” Imamoğlu’s conviction followed a similar case against his campaign guru Canan Kaftancıoğlu, the head of the CHP’s Istanbul branch, who in 2019 was sentenced to 10 years in prison for “insulting” Erdoğan and the state.

### *Government Control and Manipulation of the Media*

Pro-government media bias and censorship have been major problems in recent elections, including Turkey’s last two nationwide votes: the 2018 general elections and the 2019 local elections. Through either direct state ownership of media or government-aligned companies, Erdoğan has come to exert significant influence over 90 percent of Turkey’s mainstream media over the last decade. In recent elections, these media outlets heavily promoted the ruling party while limiting coverage of the opposition.

In addition to controlling the vast majority of the media landscape, the government has worked to silence the few critical voices that remain. In the lead-up to both the 2018 and 2019 elections, authorities levied heavy fines and bans on, and even revoked licenses of, independent or pro-opposition media outlets for wild claims that they were spreading propaganda or supporting terrorist groups.

The government has similarly muzzled social media, which has become exceedingly important for Turkish citizens’ access to information in recent years. In 2017, the government banned Wikipedia and kept it blocked before the 2018 election. Before the 2019 elections and on voting day, the government blocked access to Twitter and other platforms in certain areas of the country.

The 2023 campaign season has seen similar moves to block access to information and suppress debate. As of this writing, independent media outlets were continuing to face fines for their reporting. In early April, Turkey’s broadcast regulator (RTÜK) fined each of the independent broadcasters FOX TV, Halk TV, and TELE1 3 percent of their respective monthly advertising revenues due to news anchors’

criticism of the government. All three channels had already faced a series of fines in February and March because of their critical coverage of the government’s earthquake response. On April 13, 20 international human rights organizations issued a joint statement calling on RTÜK to stop fining these broadcasters, stating that the regulator was being “weaponised by the governing parties to . . . provide them with an unfair advantage in the May 2023 elections.”

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The government gained another weapon in its arsenal of suppression last October when, the AKP-led parliament passed a new law, popularly called the “disinformation law,” that provides for prison sentences of up to three years for any citizen found guilty of spreading what authorities deem fake news (often simply criticism of the authorities). In February, a court applied this law to sentence journalist Sinan Aygül to 10 months in prison over his tweets alleging that a police officer and a soldier were involved in a sexual abuse case—tweets that he later deleted and apologized for. Authorities also used the law in February to arrest two journalists over their social media posts about the government’s failed earthquake response.

### *Pre-Election Political Violence*

Political violence against opposition parties has also been a growing problem in recent years. In one of the worst cases to date, in 2016, the

PKK **attacked** the convoy of CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu while it was traveling through the northeastern province of Artvin, killing a driver and injuring others. Kılıçdaroğlu faced another threat against his life during his weeks-long “Justice March” from Ankara to Istanbul in 2017, when the police, acting on a tip-off, **detained** an Islamic State militant and his supporters who were planning to attack him.

But terrorist attacks are not the only problem. Turkey’s 2018 and 2019 elections also saw numerous **instances** of violence against opposition parties and supporters believed to be perpetrated by AKP supporters or government-backed mobs.

A **report** by the Human Rights Association, a Turkish NGO, recorded 93 violent attacks against the HDP, 12 against the CHP, and 12 against the country’s third-largest opposition party, the Good Party (IP), during the 2018 campaign. The HDP’s offices and campaign stands came **under attack** in several cities, allegedly by supporters of the AKP or its far-right ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). In Istanbul, MHP supporters **beat and stabbed** eight IP supporters at an IP campaign stand; an **attack** against another IP campaign stand in the western province of Bursa left six people injured. **Several** other **incidents** occurred across the country.

Similar cases of violence haunted the March 2019 local elections. Assailants **opened fire** at the CHP’s election office in Izmir from a moving car, injuring two people. In the eastern province of Ağrı, attackers **fired gunshots** at the IP mayoral candidate’s car. In Samsun, a group of 10 people **ambushed** the convoy of the IP’s mayoral candidate outside his home following a campaign event, kicking and throwing stones at his car. In Istanbul, AKP supporters attempted to attack opposition supporters during a CHP rally. The attacks didn’t end after the election, either. Kılıçdaroğlu faced yet another **assault** on his life in April, when an angry mob violently attacked the CHP leader during the funeral of a slain soldier in Ankara and threatened to burn down the house where he took refuge. Kılıçdaroğlu **called** the attack “an open lynch attempt.”



*A bullet hole remains in the window of a Good Party office in Istanbul after unidentified assailants fired gunshots at the building on March 31, 2023. Photo credit: Ekrem İnamoğlu Official Twitter account*

Violence against opposition figures has occurred during this year’s election cycle, as well. On March 10, CHP deputy chairman Özgür Özel announced on television that the party had **received** warnings of a possible assassination attempt against Kılıçdaroğlu. On March 31, unidentified assailants fired **gunshots** at the IP’s Istanbul office. Six days later, the CHP **reported** that assailants shot at the party’s Istanbul office from a moving car. Both the IP leader Meral Akşener and CHP politicians pointed to Erdoğan’s polarizing language and verbal attacks against the opposition as the reason for the attacks.

Indeed, such election-related violence shows just how polarized Turkey has become under Erdoğan’s rule. But the large number of attacks against opposition parties, candidates, and supporters, and the government’s blind eye toward

such incidents, also indicate that the latter has a clear motive to cause fear and panic among the opposition, disrupt its ability to campaign freely, and intimidate both its members and voters ahead of elections.

### ELECTION DAY MISCONDUCT

Given the high stakes on May 14, securing the integrity of the vote on election day is a major concern for Turkish citizens. Among the biggest worries are government-led fraud, violence, and censorship.

#### *Fraud*

Turkish and international observers, including from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), have **documented** incidents of government fraud and irregularities in recent national elections. Today, many in Turkey are highly worried that similar problems will occur on election day.

Voting in Turkey mostly takes place in schools, where voting stations are set up in classrooms. Each room has a committee of seven people to set up the ballot boxes, oversee the voting process (check voters' IDs, hand out ballots, and collect voters' signatures), count the votes, and then send the boxes to the YSK, the state election authority, to announce the official results. Two members of the committee are assigned by the government, while the other five are representatives of the five largest parties in parliament.

Several issues can come up on election day that could cast a shadow over the legitimacy of the voting process and vote count. Members of the committees, for example, could stuff the boxes with pre-stamped ballots before or after the voting process. Voters, too, could try to cast multiple ballots at once. Ballot officials **might allow** some citizens to vote on behalf of family or friends, or enter the poll booths together with them, all of which are **illegal**. Ballot box board members could also argue over whether a ballot should be counted or discarded. By law, ballots that are torn or damaged or have the

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## SECURING THE INTEGRITY OF THE VOTE ON ELECTION DAY IS A MAJOR CONCERN FOR TURKISH CITIZENS. AMONG THE BIGGEST WORRIES ARE GOVERNMENT-LED FRAUD, VIOLENCE, AND CENSORSHIP.

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wrong number of stamps, as well as envelopes that contain anything other than a single ballot, **must** all be discarded.

Turkey's 2017 constitutional referendum to approve Erdoğan's "presidential system" was an **especially controversial** vote, which the opposition said was rigged. Voters claimed to have witnessed several instances of ballot stuffing and other irregularities. One video, for example, **showed** a single man leaving the voting booth with five envelopes and casting them all into the ballot box. Another video showed a man **stamping** four ballot slips in a row and placing them in envelopes. Yet another **showed** a single hand stamping multiple ballots in favor of the government. Someone **found** a trash can full of unstamped ballots near a school. In one polling station, people **alleged** that someone had signed the vote slip on behalf of five people who did not actually show up to vote. A **photograph** showed an unsealed ballot box at a polling station. Opposition parties **claimed** that committee officials conducted the vote count in private (without the presence of observers) in several cities and validated a pile of voting slips hours after the vote count. A German lawmaker observing the election on behalf of the Council of Europe **said** that up to 2.5 million votes throughout the country—roughly twice the margin of victory—could have been manipulated through such tactics.





Leaders of Turkey's six-party opposition alliance (L-R), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, Temel Karamollaoğlu, Meral Akşener, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Ali Babacan, and Gültekin Uysal, met jointly for the first time on February 12, 2022. Photo credit: Alp Eren Kaya/Republican People's Party

Turkey's opposition parties and civil society can try to safeguard against fraud and check misbehavior by sending pro-opposition or independent observers to polling stations throughout Turkey. Many issues recorded in previous elections have taken place in rural areas with few or no election observers from opposition parties or civic groups. In 2017, opposition parties **reported** that local authorities had prevented 170 opposition party members from participating in election observation. In 2018, some **11,000** of Turkey's roughly **165,000** ballot boxes (including those in polling stations inside the country and abroad) recorded zero votes for the CHP. Given that any CHP representative at those stations would have cast a vote for the party, this means that the CHP had no presence in these rooms.

Opposition parties are trying to prevent such issues from occurring this year by making sure that each of the country's **191,884** voting stations has a party representative or independent monitor. Last year, the main opposition alliance—which includes the CHP, İP, and four smaller parties, but not the HDP—created a **task force** for election integrity and published a 24-point **roadmap**, whose provisions range

from scrutinizing the government's voter registration records to setting up systems for monitors to record and share their observations at voting stations on election day.

In addition to political parties, nonpartisan civil society organizations such as Oy ve Ötesi (Vote and Beyond) and Türkiye Gönüllüleri (Turkey Volunteers) are working to mobilize and train citizens to serve as monitors who will observe and record the vote count at ballot stations on election day. Such monitoring efforts have played a crucial role in past elections, allowing citizens to compare the official vote tally with the numbers recorded by these monitors. This year, these groups aim to reach more than one hundred thousand volunteers by May 14. If successfully mobilized, such election monitors, whether acting on behalf of opposition parties or independent NGOs, could raise awareness of any discrepancies or fraud.

### *Violence*

One major spoiler for those counting on election monitors to secure the vote, however, could be the threat of violence on election day. Although in previous elections instances of violence have

largely taken place during the campaign period, some gun fights and other attacks have taken place on voting day as well. During the March 2019 local elections, for example, the nephew of an AKP candidate **shot and killed** an election official and one observer in a voting booth in Malatya. A similar instance of violence directed at pro-opposition election observers on May 14 could create a chilling effect throughout the country and cause other monitors to abandon the voting stations where they are observing elections.

To provide security on election day, the Turkish gendarmerie, a mostly rural security force, has **assigned** 196,000 personnel to man the voting booths and oversee the transportation of ballots to the YSK. But this large presence could have the unintended consequence of intimidating opposition voters and election observers: The gendarmerie is under the control of the Ministry of Interior, which has become a highly partisan pro-Erdoğan institution in recent years. Indeed, the gendarmerie officials are commanded by General Arif Çetin, who is **known** for his close connections with fiercely pro-Erdoğan mafia leaders responsible for much of Turkey's political violence. Given this reality, the presence of these officials at the ballot booth is unlikely to bring opposition voters and observers a real sense of security.

### *Censorship and Media Bias*

Another key worry is that media bias and censorship could undermine the vote counting. Normally, as the YSK tabulates the votes on election night, Turkey's state-owned Anadolu Agency (AA), a wire service, publishes what are deemed to be the "official" results in each precinct, which other media outlets then report on their websites and TV channels. In recent elections, however, AA has come under **severe criticism** for calling victories for Erdoğan and the AKP before the YSK's vote-counting process was even completed. On May 14, many people who no longer trust the AA's reports will be tuning into independent media outlets and journalists to follow the results—as well as potential challenges to those

results by independent election monitors or opposition parties.

Social media will be another key means for citizens following the results. Political parties and election-monitor NGOs often publish their own vote counts on social media. This effort could be compromised should the government decide to block access to social media on the night of May 14 and prevent these organizations from challenging the official narrative. Erdoğan's government has set a precedent for this. In 2014, it **blocked** Twitter ahead of the March local elections. More recently, the government **blocked access to Twitter and social media platforms** following the February earthquake to silence criticism of the government's disaster response.

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## THE GOVERNMENT HAS USED SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES' REFUSAL TO TAKE DOWN CERTAIN POSTS AS A PRETEXT TO IMPOSE THE ACCESS BAN AGAINST THESE PLATFORMS.

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In previous instances, the government has **used** social media companies' refusal to take down certain posts as a pretext to impose the access ban against these platforms. Companies are now looking to preempt this on May 14 by closely monitoring their platforms and trying to proactively remove any disinformation or harmful content that might emerge, thereby removing the government's pretext. Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, has declared that it is establishing a "Türkiye Elections Operations Center" to identify such content in real time and respond quickly. The company said that it works closely with prominent fact-checking organizations in Turkey such as **Doğruluk Payı** and **Teyit**.





Turkey's High Election Board, Yüksek Seçim Kurulu (YSK), has the final say on all election-related matters. Photo credit: Hawar News Agency

In addition to potentially blocking social media, however, the government could also choose to target individual election monitors, politicians, or journalists by using Turkey's newly passed **disinformation law**. This law has already had a chilling effect throughout Turkish society, leading many citizens to practice self-censorship online to avoid punishment. On election night, the government could further intimidate anyone seeking to challenge the official results announced by AA, or publish any information related to the count, by threatening to charge them under the law.

### POST-ELECTION SCENARIOS

Trying to manipulate the results on election day is not Erdoğan's only path to victory, however. Should he lose the election, Erdoğan could choose to defy the results. Having stacked the YSK with judges who are politically loyal to him, Erdoğan exerts a strong influence on the council, which has the final say on all election-related matters. If Erdoğan chooses to challenge the results by calling for a partial or full recount of the vote or the outright

annulment of the result, the YSK is highly likely to accept his demands.

Such a scenario took place in the March 2019 **local elections**, when his AKP lost control of major provinces to the opposition. Of those provinces, the most important was Istanbul, Turkey's most populous city and financial capital. Having controlled Istanbul for 25 years, Erdoğan and the AKP did not want to give up the city based on a narrow loss to the CHP. On election night, as the CHP's Imamoğlu declared victory, the AKP contested the results. The YSK, on Erdoğan's behest, ordered a full recount of votes in five of Istanbul's 39 districts, which brought down the vote difference from an initial 25,000 to just 14,000, though still in favor of Imamoğlu. Within two weeks, the AKP, baselessly citing electoral fraud, asked the YSK to annul the vote altogether. In May, the obsequious YSK agreed, ordering a repeat election to take place in June. Imamoğlu **won the second race** by almost one million votes.

Erdoğan could make a similar move if he fails to win on May 14. In Turkey, the presidential race is won by a simple majority. If no candidate

receives more than 50 percent of the votes, the two most popular candidates face a runoff held two weeks later. Should any other candidate pass the 50 percent benchmark on May 14, Erdoğan could contest those results by declaring fraud and compelling the YSK to order a runoff or a rerun.

In such a scenario, the reaction of the opposition would likely be a key determinant in the outcome of the second vote. In 2019, İmamoğlu's strong and unwavering claim to victory convinced hundreds of thousands of Istanbul voters that the YSK's imposition of a repeat vote had subverted their democratic will. Those voters not only showed up to vote for him again in the repeat in June. They also worked day and night to mobilize other voters and to volunteer as vigilant election observers. Should a similar scenario take place in next year's presidential elections, the opposition will need to throw its support decisively behind its candidate and convince public opinion to rally behind its cause.

In the worst-case scenario, Erdoğan could not just challenge the election results legally, but also by force. Using violence to remain in power illegally would be an unprecedented move for him. As described above, Erdoğan has so far resorted to political machinations and judicial strong-arming, not force, to overturn losses. But using violence is far from unimaginable. For Turkish citizens, Erdoğan's decision to unleash horrific police violence on peaceful Istanbul protesters in the summer of 2013, now recorded in history as the "Gezi Park events," is still a fresh memory.

In the event of the government's unjust rejection of the electoral will in 2023, opposition voters are highly likely to take to the streets in protest, especially in major cities such as Istanbul and Ankara. Erdoğan could choose to forcefully suppress such mobilization in three ways. First, he could unleash the police force on protesters, as he did in the Gezi demonstrations. The Turkish police are under the command of Turkey's vengeful minister of interior, Süleyman Soyulu, who is intensely loyal to Erdoğan—and who would be certain to lose his powerful position under an opposition-led government. In



*Turkish generals applaud as President Erdoğan insults opposition leader Kılıçdaroğlu during a ceremony at the Turkish Ministry of National Defense's Arifiye Campus on April 23, 2023. Photo credit: TGRT Haber Screenshot*

the event of a mass protest following a stolen election, Soyulu would likely be willing to order the police force to crack down on demonstrators with tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets.

Second, Erdoğan could call for the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) to intervene against protesters. TSK elites have become increasingly politicized in recent years thanks to massive purges by the AKP government. This partisanship was on open display in January: During a speech at the opening of a tank factory in northern Turkey, a video captured two generals applauding Erdoğan's invectives against Kılıçdaroğlu.

There are, however, several reasons to doubt that the TSK will choose to use force against protesters in the wake of elections. The person ultimately in charge of deciding whether to intervene in such a situation would be Turkey's Defense Minister Hulusi Akar. As a former

four-star general of the TSK, Akar exerts strong influence over the army. While the minister certainly appears loyal to Erdoğan, analysts note that he has **maintained** a notable degree of independence in recent years, especially vis-à-vis the increasingly anti-NATO sentiment among Ankara's security circles. Unlike Soylu, Akar has a neutral relationship with the Turkish opposition and is rarely criticized by opposition politicians and the opposition-aligned media. In terms of both his temperament and political views, he is unlikely to be inclined to insert the TSK into a political maelstrom over the upcoming elections. Moreover, the TSK is a conscription force whose members enjoy organic ties with society. As one Turkish political scientist explained to the author, members of the TSK will be unlikely to jeopardize these ties.

A third option for Erdoğan to stay in power after an electoral loss, and the scenario most feared by opposition supporters, would be to encourage pro-government mobs and paramilitary forces to mount a violent attack on protesters. In 2016, when a rogue group of military officers attempted a coup against Erdoğan's government, **Islamist vigilantes** in Istanbul took to the streets to defy the coup and physically fight the officers attempting to enforce a curfew. In the meantime, they also passed through liberal neighborhoods, intimidating secular citizens with chants and open displays of weapons. Since 2016, such groups have proliferated under Erdoğan's open support and have regularly descended on liberal protests. Indeed, throughout the 2023 campaign cycle, militant AKP supporters have been openly threatening to carry out violent attacks on opposition figures and voters if the opposition wins. In one terrifying video posted on social media on April 19, an AKP supporter **told** his viewers, "We know where these people live, their children and their daily routines. . . . I hope Kılıçdaroğlu wins the election and frees [HDP leader] Demirtaş from prison. At that point, hell will begin for you. We will not let you walk the streets in peace."

As for paramilitary forces, several trained private armies-for-hire have emerged since 2016. The most **notorious** is SADAT, which fashions itself

as a Turkish version of Blackwater. Composed of former military officers sacked from the Turkish army due to their Islamist ideology in the 1990s, SADAT and its radical leader Adnan Tanrıverdi enjoy the broad support of the AKP; Tanrıverdi, in fact, served as an advisor to Erdoğan between 2018 and 2020. Last summer, Kılıçdaroğlu held a **bold press conference** in front of SADAT's Istanbul office, warning the public, "If anything happens to shake the security of the [2023] elections, SADAT and the [Presidential] Palace are the responsible ones."

## CONCLUSION

Turkey's upcoming elections will be its most competitive and contentious in at least 20 years. Despite all the powers he has amassed over his two decades of rule, President Erdoğan looks more vulnerable than ever, and he faces his most united and optimistic opposition yet. Given the stakes, observers inside and outside Turkey are deeply worried about the integrity of the upcoming vote and whether Erdoğan will allow a democratic transfer of power should he and his party lose.

## IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE TO DISCOUNT THE POWER OF THE TURKISH ELECTORATE JUST YET.

Indeed, Erdoğan may try a variety of undemocratic tactics to secure his hold on power in May. He may seek to manipulate voters or rig the elections; he could even defy the results through legal maneuvering or resort to force. Regardless of the opposition's optimism and fervor, all of these scenarios will loom large as voters go to the polls in a few weeks.

But it would be a mistake to discount the power of the Turkish electorate just yet. To be sure, Erdoğan is an authoritarian leader who has



turned Turkey into a near-dictatorship over the last decade. Even under such conditions, however, Turkey's political opposition, independent journalists, and civil society—and voters' belief in the possibility of elections to change leaders—remain remarkably resilient. Whatever tactics

Erdoğan and his government may choose to deploy to circumvent that right on May 14, they are sure to face formidable resistance. The international community must be ready to stand with the Turkish people and help protect their right to a free and democratic election.



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Cover Photo: Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan faces a crowd of supporters in Sakarya, Turkey, on April 23, 2023. Source: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Official Facebook page