

Turkey: Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, Erdoğan's Challenger

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Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of Turkey's main opposition party, the CHP, announced on 6 March that he would be running for president. He has the backing of thirteen other parties, though the opposition alliance came close to disintegrating as its right-leaning members asked if Kılıçdaroğlu, a 74-year-old former social security specialist, was an 'electable candidate'. Despite his honesty, diligence and political savvy, they wondered if their prospective candidate might lose against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on 14 May for cultural and historical reasons. What they didn't say out loud is that Kılıçdaroğlu is an Alevi.

Alevi, who follow a heterodox belief system that incorporates aspects of both Shia and Sunni Islam, make up less than 10 per cent of Turkey's population. They have been a persecuted minority at least since the early 16th century, when the Shia founder of the Safavid dynasty of Iran, Shah Ismail, fought against the Sunni Ottoman sultan, Selim I, for control over eastern Anatolia, which was home to many Alevi. The Ottomans suspected them of supporting the Safavids and slaughtered as many as forty thousand of them. For the next half millennium, Alevi lived under suspicion of aligning with enemies of the Sunnis.

Their mistreatment continued in the Republican era. In 1938 thousands of Alevi Kurds were bombed and gassed to death in Dersim, Kılıçdaroğlu's hometown. Many others died in a series of later massacres: in Ortaca in 1966, in Maraş in 1977, in Malatya in 1978, in Sivas in 1979, in Çorum in 1980 and in Madımak in 1993. The injustices seeped into the 21st century, as demands for constitutional recognition of Alevism and legal status for communal worship centres fell on deaf ears. A 2019 survey found that 59 per cent of Alevi felt like 'foreigners' in Turkey while 66 per cent felt like 'second-class citizens'.

The doubters had this legacy in mind when they suggested that Kılıçdaroğlu was unelectable as a replacement for Erdoğan, who ten years ago named a new bridge across the Bosphorus after Sultan Selim. Five weeks after announcing his presidential bid, Kılıçdaroğlu posted a video online with a short caption: 'Alevi'. He addressed first-time voters, dismissed the notion that 'an Alevi couldn't be president', and praised Turkey's secularist legacy, which allowed people of any religious faith to become leader. The three-minute video went viral like no other recent piece of Turkish political propaganda: in four days, it was watched more than 100 million times. By expressing his Alevi faith with such understatement, Kılıçdaroğlu's iconoclastic presidential pitch seemed to have done the job.

Kılıçdaroğlu was born in 1948 in Dersim, where Alevi make up around 85 per cent of the population. His mother was an illiterate rural worker and his father was a low-level bureaucrat. He wrote poetry as a teenager and said his discovery of Yaşar Kemal's novel *Memed My Hawk* in high school transformed his life. In 1968 Kılıçdaroğlu moved to Ankara for college (where he was a classmate of Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Turkish Nationalist Action Party, which supports

Erdoğan's bid) and after graduating got a job at the Ministry of Finance. In 1991 he became head of Turkey's Social Security Institution. In 2002, three years after retiring from the civil service, he was elected as an MP, and in May 2010 he became leader of the CHP when his predecessor resigned over an alleged sex scandal.

The party, founded by Atatürk in 1923, was responsible for the Dersim massacre. Kılıçdaroğlu was its first Alevi leader. He purged its ultra-nationalist hawks and began using the expression 'the New CHP'. He acknowledged its history of oppressing Kurds, women in headscarves and Islam in general. The CHP's share of the vote rose from 21 per cent in 2007 to 26 per cent in 2011.

But it was the 'Justice March' of June 2017 that solidified the New CHP's direction. After Erdoğan's prosecutors arrested a CHP MP, Kılıçdaroğlu spent three weeks walking the 450 km from Ankara to Istanbul carrying a small placard that said 'Justice'. Thousands of citizens joined him. Government supporters dumped manure on the road and threw stones at the marchers.

Kılıçdaroğlu accepted fifteen candidates from the İYİ Party, a breakaway nationalist movement, to contest the 2018 general election under the CHP banner, so they wouldn't be blocked from entering parliament by the minimum vote threshold. He also picked politicians with conservative backgrounds to chip away at Erdoğan's electoral base. The victorious CHP candidate for mayor of Istanbul in 2019, Ekrem İmamoğlu, FaceTimed his Qur'an recitation from a mosque and expressed support for imprisoned Kurdish politicians. The CHP won five out of six metropolises in those local elections, including Ankara for the first time in a quarter of a century. The latest polls heading into Sunday's election show Kılıçdaroğlu on 45 to 49 per cent, as much as five points ahead of Erdoğan.

Speaking of his rival, Kılıçdaroğlu has pledged to 'take that gentleman down from his seat democratically'. Erdoğan is using different language: 'You've reached the age of 74; why did you suddenly come forward announcing your religious sect, I wonder?' he asked at a recent rally. 'This nation's foundation is strong; Allah allowing, it will teach a lesson to Bay Bay Kemal,' he sneered, inviting his supporters to 'bury' Kılıçdaroğlu at the ballot box. For years, Erdoğan referred to his competitor 'Bay' (Mr) Kemal, implying he's an elitist with the same name as Kemal Atatürk. Kılıçdaroğlu embraced the title and made it the slogan of his presidential campaign. Erdoğan these days addresses his Alevi challenger as 'Bay Bay (goodbye) Kemal'. We'll find out on Sunday which one of them is on the way out.

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P.S.

• London Review of Books. 12 MAY 2023:
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2023/may/erdogan-s-challenger>