

# Will Turkey-Syria earthquake doom Erdogan's dreams of re-election?

Wednesday 15 February 2023, by [DAHHER Joseph](#) (Date first published: 13 February 2023).

**The government's inadequate response to the earthquake speaks to decades of mismanagement, corruption, and cronyism that could threaten Erogan's career, as public outrage soars alongside the death toll, writes Joseph Daher.**

More than a week after the deadly earthquake in Turkey and Syria, which has [killed more than 35,000](#) people and [counting](#), including 29,695 in Turkey and more than 3,500 in Syria, public criticisms against Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government continue to increase.

The Turkish president and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) are already looking fragile ahead of the [upcoming presidential and legislative elections](#) in May. Current criticisms of Erdogan's government in the aftermath of the earthquake centre on two main issues.

First, the response to the earthquakes has been considered by many as [insufficient and inadequate](#). Many collapsed buildings have been left unattended and people left without electricity, water and food.

There has been growing frustration from the population, with critics signalling the lack of equipment, expertise and support to [rescue those trapped](#) under the rubble and questioning why the army, which played a key role after a 1999 earthquake, was not brought in sooner.

"This is not the first time that Ankara is denounced for its failures to deal with natural disasters"

Erdogan himself recognized there were problems and limitations with the government's [initial response](#) to the earthquake. One of the problems is the continuous weakening of the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (known by its acronym AFAD), which is the institution responsible for [search and rescue](#) and providing food during emergencies.

Its staff and personnel have been diminished, and thus their efficiency and capacity in search and rescue operations have been reduced considerably. In addition, many specialised, volunteer search and rescue groups were [blocked from helping](#) because they could not get certification from the pro-AKP bureaucracy.

Criticisms have also highlighted the lack of relevant experience and expertise of the [head of AFAD's Disaster Response Department](#), who has significant working experience in the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyamet) but no knowledge on disaster-related matters.

This is not the first time that Ankara is [denounced](#) for its failures to deal with natural disasters. The Turkish government already had to face important criticisms over its poor response and inadequate preparedness for the precedent earthquake in Izmir region in 2020, and [for large-scale wildfires](#) in 2021.

Critics and analysts explain these shortcomings as consequences of Erdogan's policy of [centralising power](#) in his own hands, undermining institutions of their independence, nominating inexperienced people loyal to his party to key positions, and weakening or eliminating civil society organisations that do not support his policies.

The second source of anger has focused on the [poor construction of collapsed buildings](#), leaving tens of thousands of residents with virtually no chance.

In the regions touched by the earthquake, many of the collapsed buildings, old and new, were subcontracted via state tenders under the AKP government included public institutions that are vital in emergency response, such as hospitals, dormitories, hotels, as well as AFAD and municipality buildings.

Turkey is no stranger to earthquakes. On 17 August 1999, a devastating earthquake struck in the northwest of the country, leaving around 18,000 people dead. In the aftermath, the government began collecting "earthquake taxes" meant to ensure the country was more quake-resistant and prepared.

Now, as the death toll soars, more and more voices are accusing the government of [mismanagement and corruption](#) with the billions that were collected.

Instead of guaranteeing safety, the taxes have funded AKP government projects used to make political gains and enrich pro-government contractors.

This represents more than a decade of rapid development of the construction industry combined with cronyism, particularly of mega projects such as two new bridges over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, a massive new airport in Istanbul's exurbs, and a new presidential palace.

When the [#TurkeySyriaEarthquake](#) happened, [@will\\_christou](#) went to report.

We spoke to him for the latest episode of [@TheNewArabVoice](#).

Listen in full: <https://t.co/RyjiBkyUJw> [pic.twitter.com/hFQ1vcdkgU](https://pic.twitter.com/hFQ1vcdkgU)

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In the regions affected by the earthquakes, the Turkish government issued [hundreds of thousands of exemptions](#) from earthquake safety standards for the building of social housing.

AKP encouragement of the construction sector has been a key component of the government's efforts to temporarily stimulate the economy rather than a genuine effort to develop and improve the infrastructure of Turkish cities.

In response to these rising criticisms, Ankara has attempted to assuage public anger while resorting to familiar repressive tactics to silence critics.

Turkish authorities have issued more than 130 [arrest warrants](#) over collapsed buildings in an attempt to deflect blame and appear as taking action against those responsible for weak infrastructures. A dozen construction contractors, architects and engineers have already been arrested in the south of the country.

In addition, during his visit to the disaster area in Kahramanmaraş, a city near the epicentre of the

earthquake, the Turkish president vowed that social housing would be constructed for all survivors within a year and allocated [10,000 Turkish pounds \(€494 euros\)](#) to every affected family.

At the same time, the Turkish government has been trying to silence any forms of criticism, particularly from journalists, through bans, detentions and investigations, while [blocking access](#) to Twitter and TikTok for periods of time.

The government has undertaken a war on alleged “disinformation”. The Turkish president has declared that the government is [monitoring](#) those “who are trying to polarise the nation through fake news and distortion”.

The Directorate of Communications at the Turkish Presidency has also launched an app on February 7<sup>th</sup> on which individuals can denounce alleged [fake news and disinformation](#). With the majority of the mass media in the hands of Erdogan’s business friends, coverage of the government’s response has been rather favourable.

“After all, it was the mismanagement and failings of the ruling government in the aftermath of the 1999 earthquake that was a key factor in the AKP’s rise to power”

The AKP-led government is aware that further criticisms and public anger of its mismanagement of the earthquake response could weaken its chances at re-elections. The country is facing its most severe economic crisis since the AKP came to power in 2002, with year-on-year inflation over 80%, the lira falling by 30% against the dollar last year and the country’s current account deficit reaching almost 5% of the GDP.

In response to this situation, the government has, on the one hand, [increased its public spending](#) by offering retirement for 2.3 million workers, significant energy subsidies and promises to build half a million homes for low-income families. These measures boosted the popularity of Erdogan prior to the earthquakes.

On the other hand, the Turkish government has continued to repress its rivals. Istanbul’s mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu has been sentenced to more than 2 years in prison for allegedly “insulting public officials”.

This sentence had nothing to do with justice, but was clearly political and aimed at removing a powerful opposition figure and potential candidate for the 2023 presidential elections. Similarly, there are high chances that the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) will be [banned](#) from running in the upcoming elections. Its bank accounts have already been blocked.

In this context of mounting public indignation and criticisms, doubts have been [raised](#) that elections will be held as scheduled on May 14. Erdogan’s government could decide to prolong the state of emergency declared after the earthquake and postpone the elections to secure a better outcome.

After all, it was the mismanagement and failings of the ruling government in the aftermath of the 1999 earthquake that was a key factor in the AKP’s rise to power.

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