

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu: Turkey's opposition leader is leading in the polls, here's what you need to know

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Opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is looking like he might end the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the upcoming election.

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Turkey's general election on Sunday, May 14 will see voters cast their ballots for 600 members of its parliament and the country's powerful presidency. This election has become intensely competitive in a country which has undergone [severe democratic erosion](#) over the past decade, but may now be looking for change.

Turkish president, and previously prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is attempting to extend his 21-year rule, but the unified opposition candidacy is now consistently [ahead](#) in the polls. Many opposition parties agreed to nominate the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, as their candidate, overcoming previous [divisions](#).

Kılıçdaroğlu has led the CHP since [2010](#), and has helped spearhead some of the opposition's recent local election victories. He hails from Turkey's [Alevi minority](#), an Islamic tradition which has been persecuted over the years, and would be the first Alevi leader if elected. His appointment as a presidential candidate was [not easy](#), with leaders of allied parties initially preferring the charismatic mayor of Istanbul [Ekrem İmamoğlu](#).

But Kılıçdaroğlu has managed to secure the support of a wide range of parties that now form the Millet (nation) Alliance. These include: the nationalist İyi, the small religious Felicity party, the conservative Democrat party and two splinter groups from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) – the Democracy and Progress party and the Future party. Since his candidacy was confirmed, Kılıçdaroğlu has maintained a steady but [narrow lead](#) over Erdoğan in the polls. Many people are now asking what changes Kılıçdaroğlu and his coalition would make.

Erdoğan's past and present

In 20 years of AKP government Erdoğan has massively [centralised](#) power, [undermining](#) the rule of law and constitutional checks and balances. Undoing this process is a core policy for the alliance and was highlighted in the draft [constitutional reform package](#) they published last November. This document proposes measures to prevent future leaders from accumulating power in the way Erdoğan did, as well as strengthening the independence of the judiciary. The alliance's [election](#)

[manifesto](#), published in January 2023, also heavily emphasised these themes.

Over the years, the AKP government has [taken control](#) of most media outlets in the country. In addition, a vaguely worded [disinformation law](#) was passed in 2022, which has made it easier for the regime to crack down on its critics and further tighten its control over online platforms. The opposition leader and the coalition have put an emphasis on freedom of speech and expression. Kılıçdaroğlu recently [released](#) a video on his Twitter account, stating that: “If I become president, you will be free to criticise me.” He also vowed to repeal the [law](#) on insulting the president, which is punishable by imprisonment of one to four years.

The opposition campaign has been focused on plans to reverse some of the changes that Erdoğan has made to the Turkish constitution since 2002. This is widely supported by the coalition parties, who are fiercely opposed to the [hyper-presidential system](#) introduced in 2017 and which concentrated power in Erdoğan’s hands.

The [proposals](#) discuss restructuring into a parliamentary system and reducing executive dominance. The president would be reduced to a single seven-year term, the post of prime minister re-established and the presidential veto abolished, increasing the power of parliament. This is partly a response to the extreme personalisation of the executive that has taken place under Erdoğan and the single-party dominance that has existed since 2002. They also plan to change the threshold for parliamentary representation from 7% to 3% of the vote, to give smaller parties a chance.

Foreign policy shift

Turkey’s foreign policy could also undergo a significant change if Millet wins. The country’s relationship with the west has suffered under Erdoğan, with the EU accession process stalling, tensions with [Greece](#) and [Israel](#) increasing and conflict with [US-backed Kurdish forces](#) in Syria. Turkey’s now [warm relationship with Russia](#) has also been a source of concern in western capitals. The opposition parties have largely coalesced around a pro-west agenda. They have [pledged](#) to restart the EU accession process, comply with ECHR rulings, and to abandon strategic positions at odds with their Nato alliance partners.

It is unclear whether human rights would improve for Kurdish people, Turkey’s largest minority group. Erdoğan has cracked down on Kurdish organisations and activists in the last few years – [making](#) over 120 arrests of Kurdish activists, journalists, and artists only a few weeks before the election. While elements in the Millet coalition have expressed conciliatory views towards the Kurds, CHP governments have been equally repressive in the past and İyi leader Meral Akşener is a [former hardline interior minister](#).

The alliance has also pledged to [build free houses](#) for those people who lost their homes in the catastrophic earthquakes on the Turkish/Syrian border, where 50,000 people died and where irregularities in [planning regulations](#) are believed to have led to many sub-standard buildings being destroyed.

Kılıçdaroğlu and the opposition would start off with a difficult hand. Turkey has been going through an [economic crisis](#) for years. With consistently [high inflation](#) rates and a significantly [devalued currency](#), economic constraints are felt through all parts of Turkish society. It will prove to be an extremely difficult task for the opposition to fix this. The [dire state](#) of the country’s economy has been one reason why Erdoğan has [lost support](#) and voters will be expecting a rapid improvement. It also faces massive reconstruction work in the earthquake zone, where millions are now homeless.

The AKP has carefully placed loyalists into all parts of the state who are not likely to cooperate with a new regime. Regardless of this, Millet is a diverse coalition of the left and right united only by their opposition to Erdoğan, and keeping this unwieldy band united for an entire term will be an enormous challenge.

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