

# Turkey: The Short History of the Nation Alliance and Its Performance in the 2023 Elections

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**The Republican People's Party (CHP) decided to form a broader front with the intention of putting an end to Erdogan's two-decade-long rule. In 2018, the Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı), which promised a gradual transition from the Presidential system to a parliamentary system, in other words, opposed Erdogan's authoritarian rule, was established with the participation of six political parties. Led by the CHP, this anti-Erdogan alliance pledged to steer the economy to the neoliberal orthodoxy, which had been increasingly deviating since 2015, in line with the demands of international capital, and to hand over the broader state bureaucracy to supposedly more competent cadres. The Nation Alliance, which claimed to be the main actor in the post-Erdogan economic and bureaucratic restoration, also declared that it would bring about a "democratic normalization" at the political level.**

Under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroglu, the CHP has maintained a voter share of around 25-28% for many years. It seemed unlikely that they would be able to defeat the overwhelming majority of the ruling Islamist conservative AKP, led by Erdogan, and the nationalist right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which had settled in the 45-50% range as part of the Nation Alliance. Kılıçdaroglu, the leader of the social democratic and secular CHP, assumed that the general political inclination of the Turkish people leaned towards various right-wing political representations. Based on this assumption, he designed the Nation Alliance as a platform for an alliance with more right-leaning parties.

The Good Party (İyi Parti or İYİP), led by Meral Akşener, emerged as the second major partner of the alliance after splitting from the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which had traditionally been the main party of nationalists in Turkey and the second party for center-right voters. İYİP recruited significant figures from the MHP ranks, aligning nationalism with a more centrist right-wing politics, declaring its loyalty to a liberal-economic program, and primarily targeting urban, young, and center-right voters.

The other minor partners of the Nation Alliance were the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi) and the DEVA Party (Deva Partisi). The Felicity Party represents the main Islamic tradition of the National Outlook (Millî Görüş) movement, founded by Necmettin Erbakan, and embodies a more traditionalist line of Islamic politics with more pronounced Islamic tones. The DEVA Party, led by Ali Babacan, one of the founders of the AKP who served as the Minister of Economy for three terms, is a newly established party that embraces a more centrist-right and reformist Islamic approach. Another former member of the AKP, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who claims to represent a moderate form of Islamism and has held positions such as Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, is also part of the Nation Alliance with his Future Party (Gelecek Partisi).

The Kurdish Movement, which represents almost 10% of the voting population (including Kurds, progressive democrats, and socialists), has been excluded from this alliance due to the reaction it might provoke among nationalist-conservative voters in Turkey and objections from nationalist cadres, primarily IYIP. However, they are considered implicit supporters from outside the alliance. As mentioned earlier, the main actor in this anti-Erdogan alliance is the CHP, and the alliance itself constitutes a political hybrid that includes right-wing, nationalist, and Islamic political elements from the former AKP and MHP cadres.

The Nation Alliance faced its first significant test in the 2019 local elections and achieved a partial victory. Joint candidates were nominated at the local level, and the majority of big cities, including Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, came under the control of the Nation Alliance. In Ankara, Mansur Yavaş, a former member of the MHP who gained the support of center-right and secular voters, became the mayor. In this election, Ekrem Imamoglu, who had roots in the CHP and enjoyed widespread appeal among various segments of society, ranging from center-right to social democrats and Kurds, emerged as the prominent figure and became the new mayor of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. The significant loss of Istanbul by the AKP, which had held control over the city's administration since the local elections in 1994 and had built its movement on that foundation, provided a significant morale boost to the Nation Alliance. Despite the repeated election, the AKP's defeat in Istanbul by a significant margin provided the Nation Alliance with a strong sense of morale and motivation, making the idea of defeating Erdogan more apparent to the public in the upcoming 2023 general elections.

As the 2023 general elections approached, one of the most significant sources of tension within the Nation Alliance was determining who would be the presidential candidate. There was extensive discussion, particularly about Ekrem Imamoglu, as he was considered one of Erdogan's substantial rivals and capable of attracting votes from Erdogan's voter base. It was also mentioned that Mansur Yavaş would appeal to the center-right voters and pose a strong challenge against Erdogan. The leader of the main opposition, Kılıçdaroglu, who made the alliance possible, aimed to position himself as the leading candidate to defeat Erdogan in the 2023 elections and end his own political career with a presidency.

After it became certain that Erdogan would be the candidate of the Nation Alliance and that the general election would be held on May 14 instead of June, the pressure on the Nation Alliance regarding its candidate increased. The candidate put forward by the alliance's second party, IYIP, were Imamoglu and Yavaş. Kılıçdaroglu implied and claimed that his Alevi identity posed a psychological barrier among Sunni, center-right voters, and pushed for one of the alliance's candidates to be one of these two names. IYIP's claim also served as a cover to conceal their long-term political plans. It was alleged that Erdogan specifically highlighted these two names to eliminate potential rivals in the post-Erdogan period and facilitate the transition to a parliamentary democracy process. As the deadline for announcing the candidate approached, IYIP made a strong maneuver by withdrawing from the negotiation table, alleging that Kılıçdaroglu was pressuring the People's Alliance to assert his leadership. This move by IYIP resulted in an unexpected public reaction. After Akşener's strong statement, the party took a step back, and negotiations with the alliance accelerated within 48 hours. IYIP accepted Kılıçdaroglu's candidacy with the condition that a political campaign led by Imamoglu and Yavaş, and if the election is won, the two would be appointed as Vice Presidents to Kılıçdaroglu with specific duties.

Before the election, Muharrem Ince, the leader of the Nation Party, who was one of the political rivals capable of attracting voters from the People's Alliance's voter base, withdrew from the candidacy. As a result, Turkey faced an electoral landscape where three presidential candidates would compete: Erdogan (People's Alliance), Kılıçdaroglu (Nation Alliance), and Sinan Ogan, a former MHP member who targeted the votes of the radical right (Ata Alliance). On the evening of

May 14, contrary to the expectations of the polls, the anticipated outcome did not occur. Erdogan received 49.5% of all votes, Kılıçdaroglu received 44.9%, and Ogan received 5.17%. There was no winner in the first round of the election. Although the AKP experienced a partial decrease in votes, the party obtained 35.6% of all votes. CHP once again received around 25% of the votes. The unexpected rise came from the MHP. Initially predicted to receive around 5-7% of the votes, the MHP made a significant jump to 10%. As a result, the People's Alliance, which included more right-wing, nationalist, and even paramilitary Islamist figures in its ranks, gained a significant majority in parliament compared to the People's Alliance.

Since 2015, there has been a consolidation of authoritarian politics and, following the pandemic, an intensified economic crisis, which has led to a significant increase in Islamic, but particularly nationalist, votes. The political reflection of this has been seen in the Cumhur, Millet, and Ata Alliances, with the total vote share of the MHP, IYIP, and Zafer Party, representing different political representations of more radical (racial) and more central nationalism, reaching approximately 22%.

The Nation Alliance, unable to secure a parliamentary majority, aims to compensate for the defeat by winning the two-candidate presidential election on May 28<sup>th</sup>. Kılıçdaroglu, who is operating in a fragile balance and receiving support from the Kurdish movement from the outside, has resorted to a nationalist discourse in order to attract the votes that went to Sinan Ogan in the second round and convince the voters who did not participate in the first round. He has hastily announced the deportation of Syrian refugees back to their country, while trying to be more cautious on the Kurdish issue. On the other hand, Sinan Ogan's short-term negotiations with Erdogan and Kılıçdaroglu after May 14<sup>th</sup> indicate that it is possible for nationalist demands, excluding the political representation of the Kurdish movement, and anti-immigrant sentiments to shape Turkish politics.

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