

Opinion

Erdoğan and his hardline allies have won Turkey - women and LGBTQ+ people will pay the price

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For civil society and rights defenders, five more years of the Turkish president and his radical backers are a daunting prospect

On Sunday, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was [declared the winner](#) of Turkey's presidential runoff elections. According to numbers reported by the state-owned Anadolu news agency, more than [27 million voters](#) cast their ballots in favour of Erdoğan, who has been at the country's helm for more than two decades. He entered the second round in the lead in the polls, and was expected by most to emerge victorious. Although Erdoğan captured slightly more than half of the vote, more than 25 million people also mobilised to vote against him.

The elections were being held under deeply unfair conditions, with an opposition set up to fail. Istanbul's mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, was [recently sentenced](#) to more than two years in prison and banned from holding public office for insulting members of the supreme election council. This left the opposition unable to nominate its maybe most promising candidate. This was all amid biased media coverage, relentless smear campaigns against the eventual opposition candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, threats, manipulation and a crackdown on civil society, such as [the arrest](#) of 126 Kurdish lawyers, activists and politicians at the end of April in Diyarbakır.

Everything was at stake in a country where the judiciary now does little more than rubber-stamp policy dictated by the president. It would be an understatement to say that for rights defenders, five more years under Erdoğan is a daunting prospect. Women's and LGBTQ+ rights groups especially will find themselves in the immediate line of fire. During his first victory speech in Istanbul last night, Erdoğan targeted LGBTQ+ groups again. "Could those LGBT elements ever find their way into the AK party?" he asked to a resounding "no" from the crowd. "Family is holy to us," he continued.

Ahead of the runoff elections, the women's rights group Left Feminist Movement warned that the choice between Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu was one between "darkness" and "light". A statement signed by several dozen well-known female musicians, actors, writers and rights defenders said: "We either succeed in tearing apart the darkness and glimpse the light of dawn, or we will suffocate."

Many have argued that Turkey has never had a more ultra-conservative and misogynistic parliament than it does now. Two radical Islamist fringe parties have joined the national assembly on Erdoğan's side. His AKP has not only brought the [New Welfare party \(YRP\)](#) into its alliance, but also nominated four senior members of the Kurdish Free Cause party (Hüda-Par) under its parliamentary candidate list. All [four were elected to parliament](#) on 14 May. The Free Cause party is closely affiliated with

Kurdish Hezbollah, a Sunni militant group that originated in the Turkish south-east and gained notoriety in the 1990s when its members tortured and killed hundreds of Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK) members and supporters, as well as others who opposed its ideology, though it has since officially renounced violence. Free Cause calls for gender segregation in schools and has argued that state services for women, such as healthcare or education, should only be rendered by female employees.

Meanwhile, in the New Welfare party's manifesto, it demands that "morals, chastity, mercy, devotion and productivity" should be strengthened among women through female "role models". Both parties have aggressively lobbied against LGBTQ+ rights, targeting them as "perversion", as well as for the criminalisation of adultery. They have also vowed to scrap [law 6284](#), introduced by the AKP government in 2012, which aims to prevent violence against women. Women's rights activists have [accused them](#) of aiming for "Taliban-style" rule.

Despite almost unfettered presidential powers, Erdoğan may need the support of these parties to push through legislative changes in parliament. Their presence further normalises discriminatory attitudes, already rampant among the governing bloc, towards women and LGBTQ+ people both inside and outside state politics.

The dangers facing women and LGBTQ+ people in Turkey have already increased in recent years. Femicide and gender-based violence are on the rise. Erdoğan [compared abortions to murder in 2012](#), and although he failed to introduce a law that would have banned abortions after six weeks of pregnancy, women across Turkey still [struggle to access](#) safe terminations. Women's rights groups speak of a "de facto abortion ban". Women's Day marches have increasingly been met with police violence and the Istanbul Pride parade has been banned since 2015. Feminist and women's rights groups have been increasingly sidelined. Many civil society organisations fighting against discrimination and gender-based violence have been shut down since the [2016 military coup attempt](#).

In 2021, Erdoğan unilaterally [withdrew Turkey](#) from the Istanbul convention, an international treaty to fight gender-based discrimination and violence. Women's rights groups reported that police officers had refused to assist victims of domestic violence, citing the withdrawal from the convention.

Last year, bogus charges of "acting against morality" [were brought](#) against We Will Stop Femicide, a feminist platform that fights gender-based violence and keeps a monthly count of murdered women. If found guilty, the group will be shut down. The next hearing will take place on 13 September.

On Sunday night, rights activists took to social media to declare that the election results should not deter people from fighting. "Our hopes should not be broken, but we need to be aware of the consequences," [tweeted Fidan Ataselim](#), general secretary of the We Will Stop Femicide platform. "We have no other choice than to keep organising, to give voice to reason and to stick together."

At the same time, political leaders around the world rushed to congratulate Erdoğan on his election win. EU politicians are perhaps a little too relieved that the Turkish president, who has been a willing partner in their project to keep refugees out of EU states, will remain in power. For them, Kati Piri, a Dutch MP and former [Turkey](#) EU rapporteur, had one question: "What's your message to the 25 million people who voted for restoration of democracy and rule of law?"

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P.S.

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