Erdogan Prepares for Yet Another Presidential Term

The next Turkish general elections are scheduled for June 2023. The incumbent Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan plans to run as a People’s Alliance presidential candidate, a coalition that had been formed by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been in power since 2003 (first, as prime-minister). In 2007, he pushed through amendments to the Constitution that would mean that the president would be elected by popular vote (earlier the president was elected by parliament). In August 2014, he won the first direct presidential election in the country mustering 51.8% votes. In 2018, Erdogan won snap presidential election on the first ballot enlisting the support of more than 52.5% voters.

However, in today’s crisis-ridden Turkey, Erdogan’s popular support is dwindling. The latest polls conducted in Turkey by independent research organizations attest to an aggravating social and political crisis in the country, with some experts saying that internal situation could exacerbate, a development that would entail further crackdown by the current authorities on the opposition. According to a slew of analysts, the Turkish economy has entered a period of a prolonged recession that is in part driven by the increasing side effects of the current economic growth model and social and economic fall-out from the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic. The country has faced double-
digit inflation, rising unemployment, weakening of the national currency and outflow of foreign investment. Analysts say that Turkey’s economic prospects look increasingly bleak amidst wide-spread youth unemployment and exacerbating poverty.

As an information and analytical Turkish portal Duvar reported on February 18, the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) announced the results of the “2021 Life Satisfaction Survey,” which revealed that the proportion of Turks who say they are “happy” has decreased from 59.6 percent to 49.3 percent in the past 19 years. In other words, the survey covers the period when Turkey was ruled by the Justice and Development Party led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The study also questioned Turks regarding their “life expectations in the upcoming year.” The results showed that the proportion of those who said “it could get worse” increased from 9.3 percent in 2003 to 33.8 percent in 2021.

According to a recent report by the Istanbul Municipality’s Planning Agency (IPA), most people in this Turkish metropolis are left “desperate and hopeless” by the state of the economy, with a large proportion claiming last month that their economic outlooks are bleak.

Given these circumstances, the opposition is calling on Erdoğan to step down, and the police have investigated people for using social networks to organize demonstrations. In addition, the debates regarding Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s right to run for president again are raging on, with the elections scheduled to take place in 2023. The sticking point is that according to the Constitution, the leader of the republic cannot be elected for more than two terms if the elections are proceeding according to the schedule. For that reason, Erdoğan’s critics think that he may not legally run in the upcoming elections while many, including MPs, some of whom represent opposition parties, believe otherwise.

The president’s ally and leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party, Devlet Bahceli, claims that nothing impedes Erdogan to run for office again. He made this statement after one of former ministers and members of the Justice and Development Party Ertuğrul Günay had said that if the election were to be held as scheduled, the incumbent leader could not run for president and would be able to do so only in case of snap election.

Bahceli and other Erdogan’s allies argue that the president was elected only once since the reform of the political system had taken place, which allegedly offsets the Constitution’s disputed paragraph in his specific case. At the same time, the MHP leader stressed that if there were a need to introduce constitutional amendments to extend the president’s term, his party and the AKP would do their best to make that happen. Some critics, however, say that such amendments would require a two-third parliamentary majority with MHP—AKP falling short of this number in the Grand National Assembly.

However, the opposition reacted to this bickering with surprising indifference. This could be explained only by the fact that Erdogan is swiftly losing support of Turkey’s population as opposition strongly believes that he would lose. At the same time, as for the reasons for the incumbent president’s dwindling popular support, the opposition has been citing not only Turkey’s deteriorating social and economic prospects due to Erdogan’s domestic policy blunders. A role in this process was also played by the Turkish authorities’ brutal crackdown on dissent that has only picked up steam after an attempted coup in 2016 and mass purges with thousands of Turks ending up behind bars. Neither does Erdoğan gain support by imposing religious way of life on the society considering that his push to islamize the country is frowned upon not only by the youth, but also by senior citizens that are used to the secular order. Besides, Turks have been witnessing ever-lasting major corruption scandals which force the most prominent members of the ruling AKP party to skedaddle, with some of them establishing new political organizations. These include former Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan, former Foreign Minister and former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and others who were at the root of the AKP. They argue that Turkey needs an entirely new vision for the future, claiming that “Erdoğan has exhausted the resources to continue his geopolitical experiment” and that its “economy cannot withstand his ambitious foreign policy.”

At the same time, with Erdogan still in power, there is an apparent lack of charismatic political leaders, which gives the incumbent president a chance to splinter the opposition and win the 2023 elections even against the backdrop of his dwindling popularity. All opposition figures operating in the country are not independent and try to entrench themselves in electoral terms as they rely on various alliances with Western external forces. The political landscape is shaky, a situation that was clearly understood by the US which made a “sudden” U-turn in the Eastern Mediterranean towards Turkey, saying that it no longer supports the Greek-Israeli EastMed gas pipeline project. Moreover, according to US-based Foreign Policy magazine, Washington has faced the danger of losing Turkey and is now trying to hinder its “rapprochement with the East” and therefore undoubtedly will make efforts to ensure Erdogan’s victory at the upcoming elections.
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