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TURKEY IS NOT THE US AND KILIÇDAROĞLU IS NOT OBAMA

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The May 14 elections represent a historical junction for Turkish politics. Contrary to the latest surveys that foresaw a clear lead for the opposition - with a gap of 5.6 percent¹ - the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı - Cİ) once again managed to win a historic victory against Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and his Republican People's Party (CHP)-led Nation's Alliance (Millet İttifakı - Mİ).²

However, unlike the previous general elections, this time none of the presidential candidates managed to receive more than 50 percent of the public's support. As a result, for the first time ever, Turkey experienced a second round in the presidential elections. On May 28, the Turkish people once again cast their votes in the runoff election.

Since the Turkish presidential system requires absolute harmony between the executive and the legislative bodies, stability became the core agenda of the second round. Erdoğan had the upper hand, therefore, after having secured the parliamentary majority (323 seats out of 600) for his coalition in the first round.

Turks cast their votes once again in favor of Erdoğan seem to have chosen to avoid a political deadlock. Thanks to winning 52.18 percent of public support, the Turkish president managed to secure five more years the office surpassing all his predecessors including the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

In retrospect, the 2023 elections will be remembered as the most challenging general elections for Erdoğan's political survival. The deteriorating economy, the de-valuation³ of the Turkish Lira vis-à-vis the US Dollar, the high cost of living, and the mishandling of the February 6 earthquake disaster - that claimed more than 50 thousand lives⁴ - all significantly risked Erdoğan's chances of winning.

Thus, in order not to waste a single vote, Erdoğan had no choice but to work on growing his Cİ alliance. This act of survival paved the way for the Cİ to include controversial radical Islamist parties such as the Turkish Hizbullah terrorist organization's legal wing the Free Cause Party (HÜDAPAR – an acronym also for the "Party of God" – Hizbullah) and the "Renewed Welfare Party" (YRP) of Fatih Erbakan.⁵

In the other camp, seizing all the above-mentioned negative parameters as a historic political opportunity, the secular CHP's leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu forcibly rallied the Turkish opposition around his leadership believing that this time he had a real chance to defeat Erdoğan. Despite this assumption, in retrospect the serious dispute and disagreement among the six party leaders around Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy portrayed a very negative, unstable, chaotic, and inefficient image that led the Turkish constituency to fear a potentially unstable future if the Mİ were to win. Certainly, the Turkish media's undeclared pact favoring Erdoğan instead of Kılıçdaroğlu also played a crucial role in shaping this negative image. While Erdoğan enjoyed fully favorable coverage in the mainstream Turkish media, Kılıçdaroğlu had no choice but to focus on social media and YouTube-aired TV shows like Babala TV.⁶

Despite all odds, at last Kılıçdaroğlu formed his impossible alliance with the Turkish nationalists, Islamists, neo-liberals, and even managed to receive indirect Kurdish support.

This strategy attempted to recreate and repeat the groundbreaking 2019 municipal election victory of CHP-affiliated mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu against the Erdoğan-backed candidate, Binali Yıldırım. But this time the strategy was directed against Erdoğan himself in the general elections. However, there was a slight difference... Instead of Ekrem İmamoğlu who projects a charismatic, hybrid political profile that is characterized by a semi-secular, semi-religious, conservative-liberal profile, blended with his family roots from the Black Sea coast area – a very important advantage that could eliminate regionalist motivated votes in favor of Erdoğan - Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who suffered three defeats in general elections and one in a public referendum against Erdoğan, challenged the Turkish president yet once again.

Apart from the lack of charisma perhaps, Kılıçdaroğlu's most important vulnerability was his Alevi identity. The Alevi faith is a heterodox Islamic belief system which is an offshoot of the Shi'a Islam. It can be summarized as a synthesis of Shiite Islam and the pre-Islamic Turkish traditions. Both Sunni and Shi'a orthodox representatives regard this belief system as heretical due, for instance, to its extraordinary customs like the "Cem" ritual which brings men and women to worship together. The ceremony is accompanied by musical instruments, which is normally frowned upon by the major branches of Islam. Their houses of worship include iconic portraits of admired figures ranging from the Caliph Ali to the 13th century mystic, Hacı Bektaş Veli (Hacı Bektash Veli).⁷

Despite being described as a secular republic, Turkey is nonetheless considered the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, and as such, maintains the legacy of a Sunni-Islamic state. Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) represents Sunni Islam and does not recognize the Alevi faith as a separate belief system.

Seeing this element in his identity as a serious obstacle, Kılıçdaroğlu decided to present himself as Turkey's Barack Obama – a minority leader who deserves to break through

the glass ceiling imposed by the majority. He took a very bold step when he openly revealed and embraced his Alevi identity via a short video on Twitter - which was viewed 116 million times.⁸ The video should be considered as a milestone in Turkish political history but at the same time it was an open challenge against the Sunni state tradition that was inherited from the empire.

Kılıçdaroğlu managed to receive 25.5 million votes (47.8 percent). It is an important achievement and a win for pluralism, highlighting the fact that many Turks voted for Kılıçdaroğlu despite his Alevi identity. It seems that for many of those Turks, eliminating Erdoğan from power was more important than sectarian identity politics.

However, this cannot be said for the whole nation. The Turkish presidential system follows an absolute majority. In other words, if a candidate would like to win an election, he/she needs to get the floating votes and even must manage to divert the supporters of the other camp in his/her favor. Kılıçdaroğlu failed to get the support of the pious Turkish conservatives in the Central Anatolia and even in the earthquake region.

Besides this sectarian issue, Kılıçdaroğlu also failed to receive the sympathy of the Turkish nationalists. The unofficial alliance with the Kurds and his reluctance of condemning the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militants' anti-Erdoğan videos on social media played into the hands of Erdoğan.

After the defeat in the first round, Kılıçdaroğlu's position became even more complex. The Mİ leader at last understood that to secure a victory against Erdoğan he needs to get the support of the nationalist camp. Kılıçdaroğlu made an alliance with the xenophobic Victory Party of Ümit Özdağ and astonished his leftist and Kurdish supporters.⁹ Kılıçdaroğlu adopted Machiavelli's well-known proverb "the end justifies the means" at the wrong time, appearing to take a sharp u-turn, which created a shallow and unreliable image in the eyes of many Turkish citizens.¹⁰

Contrary to Kılıçdaroğlu, knowing his people's sensitive spots, Erdoğan projected the stable, firm image of a strong nationalist-conservative leader who puts his emphasis on family values (against the LGBTQ+ movement), an anti-PKK security agenda, and of course, on religious values. As a pious Sunni Muslim Erdoğan concluded his first campaign in the recently converted Hagia Sophia Mosque¹¹ (which was previously a museum) and before the runoff, he prayed at the Eyüp Sultan Mosque.¹² The latter is named after Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, a close disciple of Prophet Muhammad who is believed to have taken part in the previous sieges of Constantinople before the conquest by the Ottomans in 1453. Throughout Ottoman history, the Eyüp Sultan Mosque was the site of the famous sword parade of the coronation ceremony of the sultans. Erdoğan used these powerful symbols to remind his conservative Turkish constituency that they should vote for "the man who represents their values" instead of an anti-system figure like Kılıçdaroğlu.

Erdoğan's success is unique, with a series of victories in every election he's faced since the early 2000s. However, apart from his charisma and his achievements, perhaps his most important blessing is the failed Turkish opposition which failed to connect deeply with ordinary Turkish people.

By putting an emphasis on traditional Islam, family values and security policies that are characterized by anti-PKK operations and strengthening Turkey's arms industry's independency vis-à-vis the West, Erdoğan knows very well that he appeases the public anxiety from a Mİ government. His campaign overcame the Maslow pyramid of hierarchy of needs' second most fundamental layer: economic safety.

The election results once again reveal that even in the current economic circumstances the Turkish people have not given up their traditional political views. The Turkish constituency is apparently not ready for a president of Alevi origin. In short, Turkey is not the United States and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is not Barack Obama.

The opinions expressed in MDC publications are the authors' alone.

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Notes

¹ "KONDA anketi: Kılıçdaroğlu yüzde 49,3, Erdoğan yüzde 43,7; 'ilk turda bitme ihtimali var'," *Euronews*, May 12, 2023, <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/05/11/konda-anketi-kilicdaroglu-yuzde-493-erdogan-yuzde-437-ilk-turda-bitme-ihtimali-var> [Accessed: May 31, 2023].

² "Seçim 2023," NTV, <https://secim.ntv.com.tr/> [Accessed: June 8, 2023].

³ On May 14, 2023: 1 USD = 19.58 Turkish Lira - On May 28, 2023: 1 USD = 19.97 Turkish Lira.

⁴ "6 Şubat'taki depremlerde can kaybı 50 bin 500'e yükseldi," *BBC Türkçe*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c51kdv8d15jo#:~:text=%C4%B0%C3%A7i%C5%9Fleri%20Bakan%C4%B1%20S%C3%BCleyman%20Soylu%2C%206.bin%20500'e%20y%C3%BCkseldi%C4%9Fini%20a%C3%A7%C4%B1klad%C4%B1>. [Accessed: May 31, 2023].

⁵ "Yeniden Refah Partisi Cumhur İttifakı'na katıldı, HÜDA PAR adayları seçime AKP listelerinden girecek," *BBC Türkçe*, March 24, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cmjzylvj5vo> [Accessed: June 8, 2023].

⁶ "Mevzular Açık Mikrofon 15. Bölüm I Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu," *YouTube*, May 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWUEOnTvJjM> [Accessed: May 31, 2023].

⁷ For More Details: *Alevilik – Bektaşilik açısından Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi* (Ankara, Ardıç Yayınları, 1996).

⁸ Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's official account, @kilicdaroglu, Twitter, April 19, 2023, <https://twitter.com/kilicdaroglu/status/1648755862905708551?s=20> [Accessed: June 5, 2023].

⁹ "Ümit Özdağ, 28 Mayıs Cumhurbaşkanı Seçimi'nde Kılıçdaroğlu'nu destekleyeceklerini açıkladı," *Euronews*, May 24, 2023, <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/05/24/umit-ozdag-28-mayis-cumhurbaskani-seciminde-kilicdaroglunu-destekleyeceklerini-acikladi> [Accessed: June 8, 2023].

¹⁰ "Özdağ'ın Kılıçdaroğlu'na destek kararı ve 'İçişleri Bakanlığı' açıklaması Millet İttifakı'nda ve HDP'de nasıl karşılık buldu?," *BBC Türkçe*, May 24, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c51p7yj1gdjo> [Accessed: June 8, 2023].

¹¹ “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan seçim programını Ayasofya'da sonlandırdı,” *Hürriyet*, May 14, 2023, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-secim-programini-ayasofyada-sonlandirdi-42267262> [Accessed: June 8, 2023].

¹² “Vatandaşların yoğun ilgisiyle karşılandı... Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan Eyüp Sultan Camii'nde akşam namazını kıldı,” *Hürriyet*, May 27, 2023, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/vatandaslar-yogun-ilgisiyle-karsilandi-cumhurbaskani-erdogan-secim-programini-eyup-sultan-camiinde-sonlandirdi-42274648> [Accessed: June 8, 2023].