



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy - how convincing is the unity of Erdogan's opponents?



Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the long-time leader of Turkey's largest opposition party, the CHP, will have the opportunity in two months' time to end the tradition of electoral defeats by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AK Party.

Economist and bureaucrat, Kılıçdaroğlu (74) won a surprise victory last Monday within the six-member opposition bloc, which, after the twists and turns, gave him confidence and nominated him as the joint presidential candidate.

That victory is only the first step towards the big showdown on May 14 with the two-decade Turkish leader Erdoğan.

The outlook remains uncertain, although the opposition enters the race with great optimism, having finally managed to find an internal compromise and act as a united bloc.

Will this unity regarding a common presidential candidate be enough for victory?

The opposition has recovered

The latest public opinion polls conducted last February give the opposition slight grounds for optimism.

Erdoğan's AK Party suffered a decline of about 2.5%, although in the last quarter of 2022 its rating was on the rise, mainly due to the broad financial support to the population by the state.

At the same time, the February rating of the opposition National Alliance, which now has a common presidential candidate, increased.

The most important research result, and the data that gives the opposition the reason for optimism, has been that more than half of the respondents (52%) said they expect the opposition to win. This was the first time that expectation has exceeded half.

By agreeing on the candidacy of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the opposition bloc managed to

overcome a major handicap, which had otherwise reduced its chances of success against Erdoğan.

The opposition bloc has made a huge effort to achieve that consensus, and exposed the old weaknesses of not particularly strong internal ties.

Compromise for peace at home

That is why there remains doubt whether the common presidential candidate will be convincing enough to secure the firm support of all bloc members, or whether he will be recognised as a forced, pragmatic solution without real support.

There are only two months left until the elections, in which Kılıçdaroğlu and his partners will have to prove their unity to the voters.

Meral Akşener and her nationalist IYI party have not been particularly enthusiastic about her candidacy, as they demanded that the joint candidate be one of the mayors of Istanbul or Ankara, Ekrem İmamoğlu or Mansur Yavaş, as winners over Erdoğan's candidates in 2019.

A compromise was reached. Along with Kılıçdaroğlu's presidential candidacy, the remaining five party leaders would be the future vice presidents of Turkey, including two popular mayors.

Such an agreement raises suspicions of a political compromise within the group that is attempting to convey the impression of a happy family, rather than a reliable and solid alliance that guarantees that it will implement its programme in unison.

The opposition National Alliance offers the citizens of Turkey a shift from Erdoğan's policies. The focus is on economic recovery, curbing inflation and reducing it to a single-digit level in two years.

The strengthening of parliamentarianism has also been high on the list of priorities, at the

expense of the huge presidential powers that Erdoğan has acquired for himself during his long reign.

The President of the Republic should be a ceremonial and less executive function. The President would not belong to any political party. He would be deprived of the authority to rule by decree, and would have a mandate of no more than seven years.

Earthquake as an electoral factor

However, such a strategy, according to some opinions, may be ineffective, because a large number of voters in Turkey will not connect their daily problems with the type of government.

Ali Çarkoğlu, professor at Koç University in Istanbul, has previously assessed that the average Turkish voter would not link Erdoğan's poor performance to governmental structure. The opposition bloc could find greater success in highlighting Erdoğan's mistakes as an individual, said Çarkoğlu.

Based on this, both for the opposition and for Erdoğan, the significant unknown will be the citizens' reaction to the consequences of the tragic earthquake in the south of the country.

From the first day of the tragedy, Erdoğan has visibly tried to dampen the anger of his fellow citizens due to his initial poor handling of rescue missions, knowing that he must not allow himself to become the object of their anger a few months before the elections.

He asked for help from abroad from the start, not wanting to repeat the mistake of previous years when he did not ask for external help for disaster recovery, for example in extinguishing catastrophic fires.

Uncharacteristically for the Turkish president, he even publicly apologised to citizens for the slow response in helping threatened areas.

"Due to the devastating effects of the quakes and bad weather, as well as difficulties caused by damaged infrastructures, we were not able to work the way we wanted in the first few days. For this, I apologise", said Erdoğan during a tour of Adiyaman province.

With all the previous criticisms of Erdoğan's rule, the opposition will undoubtedly use the consequences of the great tragedy in the south of Turkey as an electoral trump card.

By itself, that trump card will not be enough for electoral success, because the opponent will also try to use this crisis as a chance to demonstrate his management capabilities.

Two old political rivals, Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu, are therefore entering an uncertain race for the presidency, where the tradition of past results will not be of much help to them. New circumstances make this race new and unique for both sides.