

Turkey: Erdogan to run in first direct presidential election

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Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's prime minister for the last 11 years and an increasingly authoritarian and polarising figure, will, as expected, run in the country's first direct election for the presidency on 10 August.



No one expects him to lose, least of all Erdogan himself. His Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) has won the last six general and local elections. He faces a term limit as prime minister next year.

Erdogan will run against Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the former head of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, who is the joint candidate of the two biggest opposition parties, the centre-left Republican Peoples Party (CHP), established by Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, and the right-wing National Action Party (MHP), and Selahattin Demirtas, a pro-Kurdish politician. By uniting under one candidate, the CHP and the MHP, which represent the secularist elite, hope to narrow the distance with the AKP.

The current job of president (elected by parliament) is a largely ceremonial post; Erdogan would like French-style presidential powers but he does not have the required two-thirds support in parliament to change the constitution and push through reforms. A general election is due next year. The AKP has mooted the idea of changing the electoral law based on narrower constituencies, which would give the party more seats, and lowering the threshold of 10% of the vote, which would benefit pro-Kurdish parties.

Erdogan is courting the country's Kurds, who constitute up to 20% of Turkey's population. The government stepped up its efforts last month to end the decades-long conflict with Kurds, which has claimed some 40,000 lives, by sending to parliament legislation giving legal protection to officials negotiating with the outlawed PKK terrorist group and authorising 'necessary measures for the members of the [PKK] organization who give up arms to come home and adapt to and participate in social life'.

In an historic shift also last month –which broke a taboo– the AKP signalled its support for an independent Kurdish state in what is now northern Iraq. This move would be for strategic reasons –as a buffer against the militant group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (known as Isis)– and would go down well with Turkey's own Kurdish community. Turkey has a more than 300km long border with Iraq and some 900km with Syria, where Isis also controls some territory. An independent state is now regarded as a foregone conclusion and one that Ankara would have no option but to accept.

The government has also gone some way towards mending fences with the once powerful military and arbiter of political life as a result of the release in June of 230 people, most of them officers, previously convicted for plotting a coup in 2003 after the

AKP came to power. The constitutional court had ruled that the defendants' rights had been violated in a case known as Sledgehammer. The ruling came the same day that a court in Ankara sentenced the 97-year-old Kenan Evren, Turkey's president between 1982 and 1989, to life imprisonment for leading the 1980 coup.

But for the government's aggressive political fight for power with the movement of Fethullah Gulen, a US-based Islamic preacher and former ally of Erdogan, whose followers had infiltrated the police and prosecution service with the government's knowledge and initial blessing, the court's ruling might never have happened. The Sufi-inspired Gülen fled Turkey in 1999, apparently fearing he would be arrested for plotting against the secular state.

Some of the evidence used in the trial, however, was so flimsy and in some cases fabricated that the European Court of Human Rights would probably have overturned the verdict on the 230 eventually. According to a report by a group of international scientists, the Sledgehammer court ignored the fact that documents said to be from 2002-03 used fonts 'not available until MS Office 2007 was released'.

Corruption scandals involving the AKP and allegedly Erdogan himself and family members, the government's flaunting of the rule of law and the prime minister's majoritarian concept of democracy, the ban on YouTube (lifted in June more than two months after the blocking of access, following another ruling by the constitutional court), and the harsh crackdown on protests beginning with those in **Gezi Park** in Istanbul in May 2013 and including the rough handling of bereaved demonstrators after a fire in a coal mine killed 301 miners in May 2014,¹ have seemingly done little to dent support for Erdogan, particularly among AKP's core pious voters in the conservative Anatolian heartlands. The AKP has a formidable electoral machine and most of the media is pro-government; the party swept the board in last March's **local elections**, increasing its share of the vote from 39% in 2009 to 45%.

Erdogan's strong point has been the economy, whose stellar growth until 2013 has raised living standards considerably. Per capita income has trebled since 2003. The economy, too reliant on hot money and cheap credit, is now coming unstuck. The country's currency slumped early this year, forcing Turkey's central bank into a U-turn to stave off a collapse of the lira when it hiked its benchmark interest rates. Last month, however, the bank, apparently under pressure from the government, shaved 75 basis points off the weekly repo rate to 8.75% despite inflation almost double the bank's 5% target.

Erdogan would have liked a larger cut; he called the one in May –of 50 basis points– a 'joke'. The latest move came shortly after Numan Kurtulmus, the AKP's deputy chairman, suggested the central bank's independence should be curtailed, and two weeks after leading bank officials, including the governor's chief of staff, were moved from their posts. The size of this cut seemed to be a middle course between holding them and incurring Erdogan's wrath or reducing interest rates to a greater extent.

¹ A much publicised photo of a miner being kicked by Yusef Yerker, a UK university-educated aide of Erdogan, while two soldiers pinioned him to the ground caused outrage on social media inside and outside of Turkey. Erdogan called the disaster an 'ordinary' occurrence in the mining industry.

Erdogan has been in power so long that some refer to him as ‘the Sultan’. The only doubt seems to be whether he will win outright in the first round or have to face a run-off round on 24 August.