



The Political Aftershocks of Turkey's Earthquake

Ayla Jean Yackley

The massive earthquake that struck southern Turkey on February 6, 2023, killed more than 52,000 people, destroyed a quarter of a million buildings and tore a deep wound in the nation's psyche. It has also upended its politics, striking just months before parliamentary and presidential elections that coincide with the centenary of the Turkish republic's founding.

After two decades in power, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan now faces his toughest electoral test in a vote he wants held on May 14. As the death toll mounts, so does anger over shortcomings in the state's rescue and relief efforts, with many blaming Erdogan's centralisation of power for the failures. Others point to the government's cultivation of a construction industry that makes up nearly a third of the economy but is riddled with substandard building practices, lax regulatory enforcement and legal loopholes that allowed it to erect so many structures that failed in the 7.8-magnitude earthquake.

Still, the domineering Erdogan has cut a strong figure in the quake's aftermath, promising a traumatised nation stability if he is re-elected and pushing the country to rapidly rebuild. In contrast, an alliance of opposition parties that has vowed to restore civil rights and economic prosperity has wobbled.

Just days before announcing Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the head of the main opposition Republican People's Party, would be its presidential candidate, the opposition bloc nearly fell apart. A last-minute power-sharing deal brought back the rightwing Good Party, its second-biggest partner led by Meral Akşener, a nationalist firebrand who has emerged as Erdogan's toughest critic. But the infighting revealed that a governing coalition of mixed

ideologies will be fraught and may have further dampened lacklustre support for Kılıçdaroğlu, a social democrat.

Whoever wins will be tasked with the grim and gruelling recovery. The earthquake may lop off 1 percent off of Turkey's gross domestic product this year, according to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Damage from the devastating quake is expected to exceed \$25 billion, investment bank JPMorgan said.

Turkey's \$750 billion economy was already in the throes of a severe cost-of-living crisis as inflation hit a high of 85 percent last year and the lira currency lost almost a third of its value. Erdogan's unconventional economic policy of cutting interest rates while prices soar has shrunk the country's middle class and deterred foreign investors. Before the quake, Erdogan had begun priming the pump with populist spending measures, offering early retirement to millions, doubling the minimum wage, cutting mortgage rates and swelling the budget deficit.

An outpouring of international aid after the quake will prop up Turkey's vulnerable finances. The United States, the European Union, the World Bank and even Saudi Arabia are sending funds that total billions of dollars. This and other forms of help from abroad could reshape foreign policy. As Turks watched footage of rescue teams from Greece, Israel and Armenia saving dozens of people trapped in the ruins of their homes, animosity towards these conventional foes has dimmed.

Could the shared pain of the earthquake encourage reconciliation with Syria? Of the dead, more than 6,000 were in northern Syria. In the previous weeks, both sides had mooted a meeting between their presidents to end more than a decade of hostility over Turkey's support of Syrian opposition fighters.

That outreach was part of Erdogan's broader pivot away from a confrontational stance towards the rest of the region and traditional allies in the West. Since 2021, he has worked to repair strained relations, end Turkey's diplomatic isolation and lure trade and investment to the crisis-hit economy.

Serious hurdles remain. Ankara continues to block Sweden's application to join NATO over accusations it supports Kurdish terrorists and members of the religious Gülen network,

blamed for a 2016 coup attempt against Erdogan. Tensions remain with Washington over Turkey's close economic links with Russia, despite its opposition to the war in Ukraine, and persistent questions about fealty between Turkey and the rest of the military alliance.

But first, Turkey will hold its election. Staging one in a vast expanse of territory stricken by the earthquake will be formidably difficult. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced. Polling places have been leveled. Tens of thousands of voters have died. Yet amid the terrible loss, Turks cannot afford to now lose their democracy, and so vote they must.



Ayla Jean Yackley is a journalist who has covered Turkey for more than two decades. Her work has appeared in the Financial Times, The New Yorker, The Atlantic, The Economist, Foreign Affairs and other publications. Her reporting has taken her to Iraq, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Russia, Armenia, Germany Azerbaijan and Cyprus.

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