



Turkey Update  
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## Turkey's Opposition, playing it safe, risking it all

Turkey's catastrophic Earthquakes should be devastating for Erdogan politically. Already unlikely to win in the upcoming Presidential elections after years of crisis, high inflation and lost confidence, the collapse of too many buildings erected in Erdogan's two decade reign should quash his chances of winning legitimately. But the opposition alliance has thrown Erdogan a lifeline. Why? because they are so confident of an Erdogan loss, they are willing to put a up a candidate that can believably lose.

This past week the opposition alliance looked like it was crumbling as nationalist IYI party leader Meral Aksener balked at left-leaning CHP party leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu as the opposition candidate in the planned May 14 Presidential election. She was on to something. Kilicdaroglu has disappointed in every election since he took over the secular CHP in 2010. Kilicdaroglu has something that Erdogan loves, high negatives.

A lively 74, Kilicdaroglu may be thinking he has evolved into a more popular elder statesman, and yes, he has. But the CHP is so historically hyper-secular, even though he is flanked by the more centrist mayor of Istanbul and more nationalist mayor of Ankara, as the name on the ticket, the risk is Kilicdaroglu won't swing many, if any, socially conservative voters. While in a coalition that could win him the Prime Ministership, he's fighting a Presidential election where obtaining over 50% of the vote is the pre-requisite. Yes he can win considering how high Erdogan's negatives now are, but it will be unnecessarily close. Knowing that everyone who truly dislikes Erdogan and has never voted for the AKP will support literally any opposition candidate (assuming they are not hostile to Kurds), the exam question for the opposition was who can chip away at traditional but frustrated Erdogan supporters? Plenty of others, including many with much lower formal popularity than Kilicdaroglu, would have been better choices. In playing it safe with a known commodity, the opposition is taking a risk.

In the 2014 Presidential election, when Erdogan was near peak popularity and Kilicdaroglu understood it would be career-killing to run and lose, he tasked the unheard of 71 year old lacklustre socially conservative Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu to represent the opposition. Ihsanoglu scarcely campaigned and captured 39% of the vote just for showing up. As every Kurdish vote and then some went to the now jailed HDP leader Selahattin Demirtas, Erdogan squeaked by with less than 52%. If there is one conclusion from that election, it is that nearly half the vote will automatically go to anyone who is not Erdogan and capable of capturing Kurdish votes. The other known in Turkish politics is that few who have voted for Erdogan's social conservatism will support someone who has a strong legacy in left leaning Turkish secularism. While Kilicdaroglu has elevated himself in opposition to Erdogan's

excesses, it is a challenge for him to skim from the traditional socially conservative electorate that has grown tired of Erdogan.

Those frustrated voters supported more socially conservative CHP mayors like Ekrem Imamoglu who won the Istanbul mayorship by a landslide in 2019 that Erdogan fought tooth and nail. Erdogan understands this risk and the courts have banned Imamoglu from politics (he remains mayor pending appeals). Erdogan seems to have effectively scared the CHP into choosing a lesser candidate. But Kilicdaroglu, choosing himself to fight Erdogan, not only raises the risk of a loss for the opposition, it elevates the credibility of an Erdogan win no matter how flawed the vote.

With Kilicdaroglu it will no longer be a question of have frustrated socially conservative voters had enough of Erdogan that they will try someone new (as happened in Istanbul)? They now have to vote for someone they have historically chosen to vote against. Kilicdaroglu probably fancies his chances as a Biden-like elder statesman that can win enough dissenters in this time of national crisis for Turkey. However putting him forward is arguably more like having Hilary Clinton run against Trump again in 2020 (yes she could get the Democratic & anti-Trump votes but her negatives were so high she didn't have a prayer with the average Republican). Kilicdaroglu's personal negatives aren't as strong, but he is the long-time leader of a party that is anathema to socially conservative Turks.

If Kilicdaroglu loses, crying foul about the election will not resonate like it would with a candidate who was already convincingly polling ahead of Erdogan (like Imamoglu). But the choice was not just Imamoglu, with Erdogan's negatives so high there was also scope for someone technocratic and credible like Ali Babacan, a former AKP founder and Minister. He may not be anyone's first choice, but when it is just him vs Erdogan, everyone who would vote for Kilicdaroglu will vote for Babacan. More importantly, in a polarized Turkey, so too will many of those frustrated AKP supporters who see in Babacan the social conservatism that they value. This is not just true for Babacan, it would be true for any centrist candidate with a pulse.

For the past decade, as Erdogan has increasingly entrenched his power, Turkey has retained a democratic safety valve of a credible hope that elections could remove him. That has helped retain social stability despite the power grab. The great fear of course is that Erdogan will not allow democracy to run its course. With his huge negatives, this is likely the election where Turkey's democracy will be tested. However for the opposition to have full leverage, it needs any claims of electoral illegitimacy to look obvious. If Kilicdaroglu is the losing candidate, plenty will blame the opposition as much as they blame Erdogan. That strengthens Erdogan's election and post-election hand considerably. To get the most of the election, the opposition should have chosen a candidate that not only has a claim to win, but one that would have a claim to lead even after a "loss." Kilicdaroglu should win, but he is a flawed choice should Erdogan somehow remain in power. Many highlight the challenge Kilicdaroglu faces in being perceived as a patriot while keeping Kurdish voters onside, but that's relatively easy as Erdogan's extreme nationalism has done the heavy lifting to push Kurdish votes the opposition. Kilicdaroglu's bigger challenge these next two months to sound credible as he goes overboard trying to win the votes of socially and religiously conservative Turks (he can take leftist votes for granted). And his second most important

Redacted Version

task is to have clear succession in place should the opposition need a new leader to counter Erdogan after the election.

*This is a heavily redacted version of Cribstone's latest research on Turkey that is produced for Cribstone's fund and corporate clients. Should you wish to purchase the full version which talks about the likely election outcome and the post election social and economic risk-reward, please reach out via [cribstonestrategicmacro@outlook.com](mailto:cribstonestrategicmacro@outlook.com)*

*Mike Harris, the Founder of Cribstone Strategic Macro, was the highest ranked sell-side analyst in the history of the Turkish market. Of his 22 number 1 rankings in the Institutional Investor Survey, 13 were for coverage of the Turkish market.*