



SEPTEMBER  
2024

# Is the Republican People's Party (CHP) Rising from the Ashes?



Aurélien DENIZEAU

The French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) is a research center and a forum for debate on major international political and economic issues. Headed by Thierry de Montbrial since its founding in 1979, Ifri is a non-governmental, non-profit foundation according to the decree of November 16, 2022. As an independent think tank, Ifri sets its own research agenda, publishing its findings regularly for a global audience.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Ifri brings together political and economic decision-makers, researchers and internationally renowned experts to animate its debate and research activities.

The opinions expressed in this text are the responsibility of the author alone.

ISBN: 979-10-373-0918-1

© All rights reserved, Ifri, 2024

Cover: © Ankara Turkey, 20.05.2023 – CHP headquarters building  
© Birol Dincer/Shutterstock.com

#### **How to quote this publication:**

Aurélien Denizeau, “Is the Republican People’s Party (CHP) Rising from the Ashes?”, *Ifri Studies*, Ifri, September 2024.

#### **Ifri**

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel. : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: [accueil@ifri.org](mailto:accueil@ifri.org)

**Website:** [ifri.org](http://ifri.org)

# Author

**Aurélien Denizeau** is a research associate in Ifri's Contemporary Turkey and Middle East program. His areas of research include Turkey's strategic vision and the evolution of its foreign policy.

After graduating from Sciences Po Paris with a degree in history, Aurélien Denizeau went on to complete a PhD in political science and international relations at Inalco. His thesis is a reflection on the strategic and diplomatic vision of Turkish political Islam. His area of research includes the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, Turkey's internal dynamics and their impact on the country's foreign policy. He is also interested in the issues of Turkish diasporas in Europe and Turkish-European relations.

Aurélien Denizeau speaks Turkish and has conducted numerous field studies in Turkey. In collaboration with Ifri, he has worked on the pro-Kurdish HDP party, the Turkish media, the strategic influences shaping President Erdoğan's policies and the main electoral coalitions structuring the country's political system.

# Executive summary

The victory of the CHP [Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, Republican People's Party] in the Turkish municipal elections of March 2024 firmly established it as the leading party of opposition to the Islamic-conservative AKP [Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party], which has been in power since 2002.

The CHP, which came into existence in 1923 in parallel with the Republic, was initially the only party and the standard bearer for Mustafa Kemal's modernizing, secular nationalism. Its program became more socially democratic with the transition to a multi-party system and then more liberal in the face of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's growing authoritarianism. This long history explains the party's complex identity and the diverse factions within it.

From the 2010s onwards, its strategy of building alliances and winning back voters has established it as the undisputed leader of the opposition. The increasing secularization of Turkey's youth, the CHP's success in major cities, and its ability to reach out to civil society and forge international partnerships are all assets the party could capitalize on in the forthcoming elections.

But it has a number of challenges to overcome: achieving consistency in its program and its alliances, finding a less vertical structure, and uniting around a winning candidate.

# Résumé

Sa victoire aux élections municipales turques de mars 2024 a confirmé le Parti républicain du peuple [CHP – Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi] dans son rôle de premier parti d'opposition face au Parti de la justice et du développement [AKP – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi], le mouvement islamo-conservateur au pouvoir depuis 2002.

Apparu en même temps que la République en 1923, le CHP a d'abord été un parti unique, porteur et défenseur du nationalisme modernisateur et laïc de Mustafa Kemal. Avec le passage au multipartisme, il a teinté son programme de social-démocratie. Puis, face à l'autoritarisme croissant de Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, il s'est voulu davantage libéral. Cette longue évolution explique son identité complexe et la diversité des courants en son sein.

À partir des années 2010, sa stratégie d'alliance et de reconquête de l'électorat lui a permis de s'imposer comme l'incontournable leader de l'opposition. La sécularisation croissante de la jeunesse turque, la conquête des grandes villes du pays et sa capacité à s'adresser à la société civile ainsi qu'à nouer des partenariats internationaux sont autant d'atouts dont le CHP pourrait tirer profit lors des prochaines élections.

Il lui faudra toutefois surmonter plusieurs défis : retrouver une cohérence à la fois dans son programme et dans le choix de ses alliances, trouver un mode de fonctionnement moins vertical et se rassembler autour d'un candidat à même de le mener à la victoire.

# Table of contents

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>ONE PARTY, MULTIPLE INHERITANCES .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Kemalism: An inheritance shared with much of     the Turkish political spectrum .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The move towards social democracy and its legacy.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>A more liberal culture emerges in response to the AKP.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>A persistently plural identity .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>MOVING TOWARDS A RENAISSANCE .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>New forms of opposition.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>An alliance-building strategy.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Electoral success .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ERDOĞAN'S TURKEY.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Aligning with a generational shift .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Growing engagement with civil society.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Leading Turkey's cities.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>International partnerships .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>THE MANY CHALLENGES STILL FACING THE CHP .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>The struggle for ideological definition .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>The recurring problem of alliances .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Rethinking the party's operations.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>CONCLUSION: WHAT FUTURE, WHAT TEAM, AND WHAT CANDIDATE? .....</b>	<b>41</b>

# Introduction

On March 31, 2024, Turkey's largest opposition party, the Republican People's Party [*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP], inflicted an unprecedented defeat on the Justice and Development Party [*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP], which had been in power since 2002. As well as strengthening its hold on the country's major cities – Istanbul, Ankara, and to a lesser extent Izmir – it took dozens of new municipalities and, above all, established itself for the first time since 1973 as the leading party in terms of percentage of the vote (37.8%, compared to 35.5% for the AKP).<sup>1</sup>

The CHP, which represents a Kemalist politics – that is, one inspired by the principles of the Republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – has cemented its position as the main alternative to the AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Prime Minister from 2003 until 2014, when he became President of the Republic. The CHP's victory came as a surprise, occurring less than a year after it suffered a severe defeat in the general elections of spring 2023,<sup>2</sup> when, despite leading a broad opposition coalition, it failed to win a majority in parliament. In addition, the CHP's leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, fell well behind Erdoğan in the first round of the presidential election and was defeated in the second (with 47.8% of the vote, against 52.2% for Erdoğan).

This recent victory is among the CHP's most surprising achievements. Having stood in the AKP's shadow for more than twenty years, the party is increasingly attracting the interest of observers, who are discovering the contradictions and complexity of its history and its vision.

The first puzzle concerns the party's ideology, which European journalists and commentators describe in a range of sometimes contradictory ways: “social-democratic”,<sup>3</sup> “secular and nationalist”,<sup>4</sup> “center-left”,<sup>5</sup> and so on. As a member of the Socialist International, the CPD can be very hard on immigration. As a nationalist, centralizing party, it tries to appeal to minorities, particularly the Kurds, a large ethnolinguistic minority whose status as a distinct identity is typically downplayed or

---

1. The CHP won or kept a total of 420 municipalities. In comparison, it won 263 in 2019.

2. The legislative elections and the first round of the presidential election took place on May 14, 2023. The second round took place on May 28.

3. “Élections en Turquie: Erdogan concède une victoire historique de l'opposition aux municipales”, *La Croix*, March 31, 2024.

4. R. Boukandoura, “Turquie. Qui est Özgür Özel, nouvelle tête pour l'opposition à Erdogan?”, *Ouest-France*, November 6, 2023.

5. A. Mourenza, “Erdogan trata de aprovechar de la división de la oposición en las elecciones municipales de Turquía”, *El País*, March 29, 2024.

denied by Turkish narratives. This alone is enough to confuse analysts. A similar bewilderment arises with the party's approach to alliances: the CHP works with Islamists, nationalists, and even pro-Kurdish parties, defending a grand coalition of opposition groups but imposing its will on its partners without granting them any major concessions. Despite these contradictions, or maybe because of them, it remains the only party that can offer any serious electoral competition to the AKP. Fundamentally, the CHP's very nature is still unclear. How should we define a party with so many dated ideological reference points? Is it just a refuge for dissatisfied voices, or does it offer a real alternative? What lies behind the recent series of crushing defeats (as in 2011 and 2023) and unexpectedly large victories (as in 2019 and 2024)?

To understand these puzzles, we must first examine the CHP's history, which, as Turkey's oldest party, is almost identical to that of the Republic. This longevity means that the party's ideology has changed at numerous points, and this succession of distinct influences gives the modern CHP's political vision its heterogeneous character. We then examine the path it has taken over the last two decades of AKP rule, as it has moved from the margins to become an increasing presence at the polls. And we then confront the fundamental question for Turkey's future: could the CHP win power? Has it risen from the ashes like a phoenix, or are its supporters getting carried away in pursuit of a chimera? This is a simple question with a complicated answer. The CHP undeniably possesses firm advantages it could use to dominate Turkish politics in the coming years, but it can only capitalize on them if it recognizes its own weaknesses and confronts the challenges ahead.



# One party, multiple inheritances

The difficulty of pinning down the CHP's ideological identity is largely due to its long, rich history, which parallels that of the Republic itself. Founded by Mustafa Kemal at the same time as modern Turkey, the CHP views itself as the guardian of his legacy. It was the sole party until the Cold War when it was forced to adapt as competing groups emerged and frequently took power from it. Under the leadership of Bülent Ecevit, from 1972 to 1980, the CHP's political thinking became more complex, adding a social democratic edge to its old Kemalist principles. In 2002, it entered a long period of opposition, remaining the second-largest party but never regaining power. The situation encouraged new developments: increasingly defining itself by its opposition to Erdoğan, the CHP moved towards a more liberal and democratic rhetoric – a shift encouraged, perhaps, by pressure from a section of its voters, allies, and supporters. At the end of a century of contradictions, the CHP's program has become diverse and not entirely coherent, uniting under its banner a range of different positions with no clear guiding principle.

## **Kemalism: An inheritance shared with much of the Turkish political spectrum**

The CHP's historical roots are a source of pride for its officials, activists, and supporters. Beyond simply being a republican party, it claims to be “the party of the Republic” – a claim that grants a special legitimacy in modern Turkey. It derives a distinctive legitimacy from its position as the quintessential Kemalist party, standing as a symbol in its own right.

To understand this special status, we must go back to the founding of the Republic, which developed from the opposition of Mustafa Kemal, an Ottoman army general, to Allied plans to dismantle the Ottoman Empire following its defeat in the First World War. These plans, which were ratified by the Treaty of Sèvres (August 10, 1920), would have involved heavy territorial losses – to Armenia and a proposed Kurdish state in the west and to Greece in the east – and given the British control over Istanbul and the Straits, and the French and Italians control over the southern coast. In response, Kemal led a nationalist uprising based in Ankara. Laying claim to the whole of Anatolia, the “rectangle” that forms the core of contemporary Turkey, he fought off the Armenian, French, and Greek armies and successfully demanded a new agreement. With the Treaty of Lausanne

(July 24, 1923), Turkey still lost the Ottoman Arab territories but retained Anatolia and Istanbul. Buoyed by this success, Kemal proclaimed the Republic on October 29, pinning the blame for the Ottoman defeat in the First World War on the imperial regime and marking the official end of the Empire.

While the *Gâzi* had de facto control of the new state,<sup>6</sup> it was a classic parliamentary system, and Kemal wanted a party in the “Grand National Assembly of Turkey” [*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*] that fully supported his plans for reform. By 1919, he had already unified all the resistance groups opposed to the Allied occupation.<sup>7</sup> Peace came at the end of 1922, and on April 8, 1923, he laid out the guiding principles for a new party: national sovereignty, parliamentary supremacy, abolition of the sultanate, legal and tax reform, centralization of education, and financial, economic, and administrative independence. The People's Party – soon dubbed the “republican” party – came into existence on September 9, 1923. Kemal immediately assumed the post of “general president” [*genel başkan*], more commonly abbreviated to “president”, a position he held until his death in 1938. From the outset, then, the party was conceived on a centralized model, with an individual leader deciding its main positions. The longevity of many of these leaders meant they had a pronounced impact on the CHP's history and development, imposing their views on officials and activists who had little power beyond deciding whether to reappoint them.<sup>8</sup> This centralism was particularly pronounced under Kemal's presidency. Beyond some brief attempts at a multi-party system in 1924-1925 and 1930-1932, Turkey remained a one-party state.<sup>9</sup> The CHP consequently dominated Turkish political life in its early years and was essentially just a tool to carry out the unquestioned will of its leader.

It was during this period that the current of thought, later known as Kemalism, began to take shape. Appealing directly to Atatürk's ideas, Kemalism was not strictly speaking an ideology, as it did not offer a new interpretation of society based on a system of ideas. Rather, it synthesized a range of influences that Kemal had encountered in his youth. As an Ottoman officer who moved in reformist circles, his career brought him in contact with the idea of a German-style “nation in arms”, with scientism in vogue among nationalist elites at the time, with French-style Jacobinism,

---

6. The title is an Ottoman honorific used for military victors. It is often used by extension to refer to Mustafa Kemal.

7. As the Association for Defense of National Rights, which provided the basic structure for the CHP.

8. For example, Mustafa Kemal occupied the position for fourteen years, İsmet İnönü for over thirty-three, Bülent Ecevit for over eight, Deniz Baykal for almost sixteen, and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu for over thirteen.

9. H. Bozarslan, *Histoire de la Turquie: De l'Empire ottoman à nos jours*, Paris: Tallandier, 2015, pp. 355-362.

and even with a form of Muslim communism.<sup>10</sup> As the leader of Turkey, Kemal drew on these influences for a series of reforms that did not fit clearly into any one ideological bloc, strengthening state control over society, establishing a homogenous nation-state, and modernizing (that is, given the period, Europeanizing) practices and customs. In 1937, he enshrined six principles in the Constitution which broadly defined the position later known as Kemalism:<sup>11</sup>

- republicanism, which ruled out any return to the Ottoman imperial system;
- nationalism, in the form of a pugnacious sovereigntism which, above all, rejected any foreign interference;
- populism, initially an anti-capitalist position which after 1923 took the form of a paternalism that rejected class struggle and emphasized mass education;<sup>12</sup>
- statism, which is characterized by significant state control over the economy;
- secularism, meaning state control of religion rather than the strict separation of politics and religion on the French model;
- and progressivism, the rapid transformation of society, overturning existing structures and making some real advances, like votes for women in 1934.

These principles form part of the CHP's ideology, which since 1938 has symbolized them with the six arrows it still uses as its emblem. There is a solid basis for the party's claim to have been created by Kemal, to have inherited his legacy, and to be the first republican party.

The CHP is often criticized for monopolizing this legacy by presenting itself as "Atatürk's party" rather than "the party founded by Atatürk".<sup>13</sup> Since the introduction of the multiparty system, there has been a broad consensus in Turkey in favor of Kemalism, with most parties claiming, more or less explicitly, to be inspired by Atatürk and his principles. The situation has remained the same across changes in government. The first officially sanctioned opposition party, the Democratic Party, was founded on January 7, 1946, by Adnan Menderes, Celâl Bayar, Fuat Köprülü, and

10. The way these different and sometimes clashing influences were reflected in Mustafa Kemal's politics has been analyzed in detail by Ş. Hanioglu in *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

11. F. Monnier, "Le kémalisme, une parenthèse dans l'histoire turque?", *Moyen-Orient*, No. 37, January-March 2018, pp. 36-41 ; V. Ter-Varanosyan, *Turkey, Kemalism and the Soviet Union: Problems of Modernization, Ideology and Interpretation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 7-38.

12. B. Lewis, *Islam et laïcité. La naissance de la Turquie moderne*, Paris: Fayard, 1988, pp. 407-408.

13. Y. Nuri Öztürk, *Atatürk'ten sonraki CHP Çağı (Yanlış Okumanın Serüveni)* [The CHP After Atatürk (The History of a Mistaken Reading of the Period)], Istanbul: Yeni Boyut, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2023, pp. 7-9.

Refik Koraltan, all of whom had been CHP deputies.<sup>14</sup> When they won the 1950 elections, they were careful not to break with the image of the Republic's founding father. On the contrary, they took measures to perpetuate the cult of Atatürk, making it a crime to “insult his memory” (1951) and moving his body to a vast mausoleum (1953).<sup>15</sup> At this point, the CHP lost its de facto monopoly on Kemalism and has never regained it. Most of the other political parties, conservative and nationalist alike, lay claim to the same heritage, with only Islamist and pro-Kurdish parties taking a more ambivalent position. The AKP, which follows a tradition of Turkish political Islam, has never been directly associated with Kemalism. But Erdoğan's nationalist turn and his tributes to “Gâzi Mustafa Kemal” show that even he cannot directly oppose an ideological heritage that is so widely agreed upon.<sup>16</sup> Erdoğan's current main coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party [*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP], claims to be Kemalist, with its vice-president, Mevlüt Karakaya, describing it as “an Atatürkist party in the truest sense of the word”.<sup>17</sup>

While the CHP is traditionally associated with Kemalism, this alone cannot define it, partly because such principles do not form a clearly defined ideology, but mainly because numerous other parties also lay claim to them. As early as 1971, Nihat Erim, the Prime Minister installed by the military, summed up the problem: “Everyone's an Atatürkist . . . Either [this dilemma] resolves itself, or someone in a strong position will say, ‘My interpretation is the only Atatürkist one’, and everyone else will say ‘Yes, master’, and then we'll move on”.<sup>18</sup> Aware of this limitation, from the 1960s onwards, the leaders of the CHP tried to give more substance to their political vision.

## The move towards social democracy and its legacy

The CHP's defeat in the 1965 parliamentary elections led to the appointment of Bülent Ecevit as the party's secretary general in 1966. Ecevit, a young deputy with close ties to the trade union movement, was elected President in May 1972. It was he who popularized the concept of “left of center” within the party.<sup>19</sup> Emphasizing three of the Kemalist “arrows” – secularism, statism, and populism – he defended the need for a more social state focused on the poor, who still made up a large section of society. This ideological shift was reflected in his 1969 slogan, “*Toprak*

14. B. Lewis, op. cit., pp. 268-269.

15. A. Mango, *Ataturk: The Biography of the founder of Modern Turkey*, New York: Overlook, 2002, p. 36.

16. F. Monnier, op. cit., p. 41.

17. Interview with the author (Ankara, July 19, 2022).

18. Quoted in H. Bozarslan, op. cit., p. 432.

19. B. Ecevit, *Ortanın solu* [The Left of Center], Istanbul: Kim, 1966.

*işleyenin, su kullananın*” [Land for those who cultivate it, water for those who use it]. Internationally, he adopted a more critical stance towards NATO and the alliance with the United States, pushing to diversify the country's foreign relations.<sup>20</sup> This ideological shift laid the foundations for a genuine Turkish social democracy.<sup>21</sup> But Ecevit was initially reluctant to define himself as a “social democrat”, a term he believed had Marxist connotations. Unlike European social democratic parties, the CHP initially saw itself as a nationalist movement. Ecevit preferred to define himself as part of the “democratic left”, presenting this as a reinterpretation of Kemalism's classic “populist” arrow.<sup>22</sup> Until then, the term “populism” [*halkçılık*] had referred to the push for a unified, classless society invested with sovereignty, which had historically been appropriated by Ottoman elites. In the 1970s, however, the CHP increasingly used the term to refer to policies that aided the poorer strata of society.<sup>23</sup> This was, in part, a form of terminological conservatism, as the party wanted to avoid the appearance of abandoning its earlier positions. The CHP nonetheless underwent a fundamental shift, which reached its apogee in 1976 when it joined the Socialist International, aligning itself fully with European social democracies. The CHP gradually developed the image of a “center-left”, “social democratic” party, concepts which are now widely accepted and which its leaders frequently use to define its program.<sup>24</sup>

This period in the party's history still divides its allies and supporters. Even in the 1970s, the shift was criticized as a move towards communism, and Ecevit was attacked with the slogan “*Ortanın Solu, Moskova'nın yolu*” [Left of center is the road to Moscow].<sup>25</sup> There remains a fringe of public opinion, ranging from anti-Western Eurasian movements to the nationalist right represented by the MHP, which accuses the party of distorting traditional Kemalism in favor of a leftist program inspired by the West.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, those on the party's left-wing criticize the modern CHP for having forgotten this social dimension, pointing out that the party achieved the greatest electoral success in its history under Ecevit.<sup>27</sup> A somewhat hazy

---

20. D. Billion, *La politique extérieure de la Turquie. Une longue quête d'identité*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997, pp. 183-185.

21. A. Açıkgöz and M. Uğur-Çınar, “Social Democracy in Turkey: Global Questions, Local Answers”, *The European Legacy*, Vol. 28, 2023, pp. 615-638.

22. B. Ecevit, *Demokratik Solda Temel Kavramlar ve Sorunlar* [Principal Concepts and Problems of the Democratic Left], Ankara: Ajans Türk Matbaacılık Sanayii, 1975, pp. 51-53.

23. Y. Emre, *CHP, Sosyal Demokrasi vs Sol* [The CHP, Social Democracy, and the Left], Istanbul: İletişim, 2013.

24. Author's interviews with CHP officials in Istanbul and Ankara, 2022-2023.

25. F. Özey, “Ortanın Solu” [The Left of Center], *Nedeniyet*, December 21, 2020, available at: <https://nedeniyet.com>.

26. K. Gücüm, “Bülent Ecevit'in Sosyal Demokrasi tanımı: Batıdan gelen basınç” [Bülent Ecevit's Definition of Social Democracy: Pressure from the West], *Aydınlık*, April 26, 2024.

27. F. Bilâ, *CHP'de sağ sapma* [The CHP's Rightward Shift], Istanbul: Kırmızı Kedi, 2024, p. 11; H. Karaveli, “Not Condemned to the Authoritarian Right: Turkey's Local Elections Show the Way to a Different Future”, *The Turkey Analyst*, April 11, 2024, available at: [www.turkeyanalyst.org](http://www.turkeyanalyst.org).

fault line dates from this period, dividing proponents of orthodox Kemalism – nationalist, centralizing, and independent from the right-left divide – from those who want to turn the CHP into a center-left movement focused on social issues.

## A more liberal culture emerges in response to the AKP

From the 1970s until the turn of the century the CHP was in an unstable position, governing only for short periods, almost always in coalition with parties aligned to varying degrees with its own values.<sup>28</sup> Turkey was in upheaval, with growing political violence and a series of military coups. Following the 1980 putsch, which was by far the most violent of these, political parties were barred from using their old names and acronyms. The party, therefore, reformed as the Social Democratic Populist Party [*Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti*, SHP]. The ban was lifted in 1987, the CHP began using its old name once more in 1992, and it merged with the SHP in 1995. These events also led to a number of splits in the party. The most significant was the break with Ecevit, who in 1985 oversaw the creation of the Democratic Left Party [*Demokratik Sol Parti*, DSP],<sup>29</sup> which firmly distanced itself from the SHP and CHP.<sup>30</sup> Ecevit became increasingly nationalist and conservative toward the end of his life, criticizing the CHP, which was led by Deniz Baykal in the 1990s and 2000s, for abandoning the fundamentals of Kemalism.

While these ideological changes were gradual, 2002 marked the beginning of the period in which the CHP took its current form. For the first time in many years, the parliamentary elections in November of that year resulted in a clear victory for one party, Erdoğan's newly created AKP, which won 34.3% of the vote and an absolute majority of seats, 363 out of 550. The CHP won only 19.4% of the vote, but, as a result of the electoral threshold,<sup>31</sup> it was the only other party to enter parliament and took almost all the remaining seats (178). The resulting situation has barely changed since, with the CHP consolidating its position as the main opposition party but never regaining power on a national scale. Over more than two decades, the situation has slowly transformed the CHP as it changes to reflect the

---

28. For instance, from January to November 1974 it was in coalition with Necmettin Erbakan's Islamist movement, from January 1978 to November 1979 with two small parties, one Kemalist and one center-right liberal-conservative, and from October 1995 to March 1996 it was part of a coalition government Prime Minister Tansu Çiller's liberal-conservative party.

29. Bülent Ecevit was barred from politics by the military until 1987, like all other party leaders from the 1970s. It was initially his wife Rahşan who led the new party.

30. This hostility is still visible today. In the 2023 presidential election, the DSP chose to support Erdoğan over Kılıçdaroğlu, provoking sharp internal disagreements and leading a number of officials to resign.

31. To avoid having too many candidates, the Turkish constitution requires a party to obtain at least 10% of votes nationally to gain any seats in parliament.



society that voted for the AKP, trying to present a credible alternative to Erdoğan's party.

The evolution of the CHP owes much to its president from 2010 to 2023, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. An economist with a low profile, he made a name for himself in 2008 by protesting a number of corruption scandals involving the AKP.<sup>32</sup> He stood for mayor of Istanbul in 2009 and succeeded Baykal as party head the following year after the latter was caught up in a sex scandal. Kılıçdaroğlu saw himself from the outset as a synthesizer, claiming to represent the CHP's entire heritage "from Mustafa Kemal to İnönü, from Ecevit to Deniz Baykal".<sup>33</sup> But he was also quick to emphasize democracy and human rights in reaction to Erdoğan's growing authoritarianism. Encouraged by a series of electoral victories, Erdoğan strengthened his grip on Turkish society during the 2010s. Under Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP increasingly attacked this authoritarian shift. While the CHP supported Erdoğan after the coup attempt of July 15, 2016, it was highly critical of the judicial crackdown that followed. This criticism culminated in Kılıçdaroğlu's "March for Justice" between June 15 and July 9, 2017, when the CHP leader, already approaching old age, walked from Ankara to Istanbul with thousands of supporters, protesting the arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of opposition members.<sup>34</sup>

A secondary effect of this challenge to Erdoğan's authoritarianism has been a remarkable shift in the CHP's position on the Kurdish question.<sup>35</sup> As we have seen, centralizing statism – a nationalist-inflected form of Turkish Jacobinism – has historically been one of the CHP's foundation stones. The party has consequently opposed any possibility of cultural or identity-based autonomy for the Kurdish people, let alone administrative independence. When the AKP embarked on a new policy of engagement, recognizing certain cultural rights for the Kurds, the CHP, led at the time by Baykal, initially accused the government of favoring ethnic identity over national identity.<sup>36</sup> There was a change of direction under Kılıçdaroğlu. As the AKP government gradually ended its engagement policies and then cracked down increasingly on pro-Kurdish groups, the CHP moved in the opposite direction. It still supports armed operations against Kurdish insurgent groups in Turkey and Syria – the PKK [*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Workers' Party] and its proxies – but has protested against the

---

32. O. Örmeci, *2023 Turkish Elections in All Aspects*, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2023, pp. 149-150.

33. Y. Nuri Öztürk, op. cit., p. 234.

34. F. Ozerkan and L. Sarmini-Buonaccorsi, "La 'marche pour la justice' se termine par un rassemblement géant", *Le Devoir*, July 10, 2017.

35. There are at least forty million Kurds across the Middle East, speaking an Indo-European language related to Farsi and entirely unrelated to Turkish. Their population center straddles the borders of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. It is estimated that fifteen to twenty million Kurds are Turkish citizens. For many years, Turkey has refused to recognize a distinct Kurdish identity, viewing them as "Mountain Turks". Kurdish uprisings were brutally suppressed during the Republican period.

36. J. Marcou, "L'opposition piégée par la question kurde", OVIPO, August 13, 2009, available at: <https://ovipot.hypotheses.org>.

imprisonment of pro-Kurdish political activists.<sup>37</sup> As the academic Ozan Örmeci puts it, “since the government has taken a far harder line on the Kurdish question, the CHP has been drawn towards a more liberal position”.<sup>38</sup>

This shift is embodied by Kılıçdaroğlu himself, who comes from a Zaza family (an ethnolinguistic group generally viewed as Kurdish). He has yet to openly identify as Zaza, but during the 2023 presidential election, he freely acknowledged that he was an Alevi, a member of a heterodox religious movement distinct from Sunni Islam, which has long occupied a marginal position in the Republic. In line with its defense of individual and political freedoms, the CHP has also committed to supporting religious groups concerned about restrictions on their practices. In particular, Kılıçdaroğlu and those close to him have offered reassurances to women that they will defend the right to wear headscarves, a right which the AKP has extended to new areas, including universities and the police force.<sup>39</sup> In 2018 the party even considered proposing Abdullah Gül – a founding member of the AKP and President of the Republic from 2007 to 2014, who has subsequently distanced himself from Erdoğan – as the joint opposition candidate.<sup>40</sup> The idea was criticized internally and quickly abandoned, but showed just how far the CHP is prepared to set aside its traditional ideology.

These gestures toward openness may have met with reluctance within the party itself. It was common to hear complaints in CHP circles that Alevi officials, supposedly united by communal solidarity and a desire to protect Kılıçdaroğlu despite his failures, had the party in a stranglehold.<sup>41</sup> The Alevis' relationship with the CHP has always been complex: despite their forced assimilation to Sunni Islam by Atatürk's regime and the brutal repression of the Dersim uprising in 1938, many saw the regime's secularism as a bulwark against political Islam, which was hostile to their heterodox views. While some Alevis became involved in radical left-wing movements, many joined the CHP, defending a strict secularist line and remaining quiet about their own religious affiliations. Kılıçdaroğlu's emphasis on his Alevism, which is seen above all as a challenge to Erdoğan's national-conservative bloc, also marked a break with the CHP's traditional stance, where the Alevi minority was tolerated but never explicitly mentioned.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the party's apparent openness on the Kurdish question must be put in perspective. Ekrem İmamoğlu relied on the support of Istanbul's Kurdish voters when he won the city in 2019, but

---

37. Ö. Kayhan Pusane, “Turkish Opposition Parties Grapple with the Kurdish Question”, MERIP, September 21, 2022, available at: <https://merip.org>.

38. Interview with the author (Istanbul, September 18, 2020).

39. F. Bilâ, op. cit., pp. 57-59.

40. L. Gültekin, *Yaklaşan kasırga* [The Coming Storm], Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2022, p. 182.

41. Interviews in 2022-23 with CHP activists in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir.

42. É. Massicard and M. Semo, “Élections en Turquie: ‘En se revendiquant alevi, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu a brisé un tabou’”, *Le Monde*, May 10, 2023.



five years later Kurdish activists are increasingly disappointed with the concrete steps he has taken on cultural issues and other matters.<sup>43</sup> Finally, opening up the CHP to more conservative and religious sectors of society has not been easy. It was not until 2020 that its General Assembly, the body responsible above all for selecting candidates, nominated a woman who wears a headscarf, the lawyer Sevgi Kılıç, who had Kılıçdaroğlu's support.<sup>44</sup> During the 2023 campaign, İmamoğlu and Kılıçdaroğlu's meeting in Trabzon with a voter wearing a headscarf even sparked a minor controversy, with the conservative media claiming that the woman did not in fact wear a headscarf and was a CHP member. While these rumors turned out to be unfounded, they show the mistrust that persists in conservative circles towards the CHP.<sup>45</sup> While symbolic, these positions represent a genuine attempt at change – given, for instance, that in 2007 the CHP opposed Gül's presidency because of his wife's headscarf.

The years spent in opposition to Erdoğan have shifted and perhaps even fundamentally altered the CHP's ideological discourse. The party has promoted liberal, democratic values in its fight against the growing authoritarianism of the *Reis*. As a result, it has sidelined on the one hand certain fundamentals of Kemalism like centralized statism and secularism, and on the other Ecevit's social-democratic vision. As a 2019 study of changes in terms used by CHP leaders showed,<sup>46</sup> in comparison with Baykal, Kılıçdaroğlu almost never used the terms “left” [*sol*] or “Atatürk”, but made far greater use of “economy” [*ekonomi*], as well as religiously inflected terms like “prophet” [*peygamber*] or “Allah” – a fundamental break with his predecessors.<sup>47</sup> A tally of certain concepts used in campaign speeches showed the same trend: “secularism” [*laiklik*] fell from 35 occurrences in 2007 to 9 in 2018, and “capital” [*sermaye*] from 20 to 3. Conversely, occurrences of “development” [*kalkınma*] increased from 23 to 51 and “growth” [*büyüme*] from 19 to 40.<sup>48</sup>

43. According to statements by multiple Kurdish political and cultural figures in Istanbul and Diyarbakır, March 2024.

44. Ş. Yaman, “Son dakika! CHP tarihinde ilk: Başörtülü aday” [Newsflash! A First in CHP History: a Candidate in a Headscarf], *Milliyet*, July 27, 2020.

45. “Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu ve Ekrem İmamoğlu’nu Trabzon’da Karşılamanın Başörtülü Kadının Ashında Tesettürlü Olmadığı, Trabzon’da Yaşamadığı ve CHP İlçe Teşkilatına Üye Olduğu İddiası Doğru Değil” [The claim that the woman in a headscarf who welcomed Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and Ekrem İmamoğlu to Trabzon does not in fact wear a headscarf, does not live in Trabzon, and is a member of the local CHP is incorrect], *Malumatfurus*, available at: [www.malumatfurus.org](http://www.malumatfurus.org).

46. A. Fulya Şen and Ş. Yenigün Altın, “Sosyal demokrasiden yeni sağa CHP’nin söylemsel dönüşümü: Bir siyasal söylem çözümlemesi denemesi” [A Shift in CHP Discourse from Social Democracy to the New Right: A Study of Political Language], *Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi* [Journal of the Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences of Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University], Vol. 21, No. 3, December 2019, pp. 434-461, available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr>.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 453.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 454-455.

## A persistently plural identity

These very different stages in the CHP's history, rather than enabling the party to define a precise doctrine, have instead made it uniquely difficult to understand its values and goals. As we have seen, while the party continues to claim Atatürk's legacy – implying a degree of nationalism, authoritarian centralism, and strict secularism – it has combined this with a form of social democracy, and subsequently developed an anti-authoritarian discourse which emphasizes individual freedom. These multiple, sometimes contradictory influences explain the wide range of positions within the party. Understanding them is made more difficult by the absence of official comment, as the CHP operates in a highly centralized manner and does not air its divisions publicly. As elsewhere, personal friendships or rivalries within the leadership can exist alongside ideological differences. It is consequently very difficult to categorize the party into factions. We can nonetheless distinguish four: orthodox Kemalist, liberal-democratic, social-democratic, and left-progressive.

The orthodox Kemalist faction emphasizes its loyalty to the principles inherited from Kemal and the early years of the Republic. Nationalism and the integrity of the state play a key role, which explains this faction's strong opposition to any negotiations on the Kurdish question. It is also rooted in a strong sense of sovereignty, which leads to wariness of foreign influence, whether through an alliance with the United States or integration with the EU. Finally, this faction views strict secularism as a hallmark of the Republic. Historically, it made itself known through internal opposition to the changes initiated by Ecevit and Kılıçdaroğlu. The mayor of Ankara, Mansur Yavaş, a member of the nationalist MHP party, is popular among this faction.<sup>49</sup> It seems also to be prominent in security circles, including the army.

A second faction is more liberal than authoritarian, and more democratic than republican. This developed in opposition to Erdoğan and his autocratic style, and through criticism of the CHP's former methods. Opposing an overly restrictive vision of secularism, this faction seeks to reassure conservative voters and guarantee the rights of devout Muslims, and is willing to countenance alliances with conservative and religious parties in the name of a shared anti-authoritarianism. It is also less strict about nationalism than the orthodox faction, and shows greater willingness to engage with the Kurds. Ekrem İmamoğlu, who became mayor of Istanbul by appealing to both Kurdish and conservative voters, is the key representative of this trend. This faction was highly influential on Kılıçdaroğlu and the CHP's campaign in 2023, pushing them to ally with conservatives, to reassure religious voters, and to reach out to Kurdish nationalists.

---

49. S. Adar, "Turkey's Electoral Map Explained: Actors, Dynamics, and Future Prospects", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 4, 2024, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

Following in Ecevit's footsteps, the CHP's social-democratic faction is characterized by greater interest in social issues. Kılıçdaroğlu is sometimes viewed as a social democrat, as is Özgür Özel, who succeeded him in 2023. But even within this faction Kılıçdaroğlu was criticized for placing insufficient emphasis on social questions and instead introducing a more liberal approach.<sup>50</sup> Özel is apparently trying to break with his predecessor by returning to a social democratic approach, using the term heavily and showing willingness to engage in renewed dialogue with trade unions.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, a far more progressive current focuses on the rights of women, minorities, and homosexuals, on social inequality, and on the environment. This faction, which supports an alliance with pro-Kurdish movements, is a minority in the party but well represented among Istanbul's educated youth. Canan Kaftancıoğlu, who was İmamoğlu's municipal campaign strategist in 2019, is the most media-savvy and popular figure in this group.<sup>52</sup>

It is difficult at this stage to precisely define the political nature of the CHP. Broadly speaking, it can be understood as a republican, sovereigntist party, influenced by social-democratic ideas, and hostile to Erdoğan's authoritarianism. Its complex history and diverse influences have prevented it from building as strong an identity as some of its rivals. But this ideological flexibility has also enabled it to maintain a substantial voter base, a fact that is becoming visible once more as Turkish society seems to shift in the party's favor.

---

50. Interview with Kılıçdaroğlu's economic adviser (Ankara, November 3, 2022); E. Yıldızoğlu, "CHP'de değişim' ama nasıl?" ["Changing the CHP" – But How?], *Cumhuriyet*, June 19, 2023.

51. H. Karaveli, op. cit.

52. U. Aydın and A. Bonzon, "Sans elle, Istanbul serait peut-être toujours aux mains d'Erdoğan", *Slate*, July 18, 2019, available at: [www.slate.fr](http://www.slate.fr).

# Moving towards a renaissance

While the CHP has consistently been the leading opposition party throughout the AKP's time in government, its position has changed over the years. It was on the margins during the AKP's first years in power but still managed to keep its share of the vote above 20% in every election. Above all, the party became more active from the 2010s onwards as different segments of society began to oppose Erdoğan. This period of renaissance has been reflected in three interrelated developments. On the one hand, in response to a growing protest movement, the CHP has become more sharply critical of those in power. Secondly, it has been trying to unite the other opposition parties around itself. Lastly, perhaps as the result of the two previous developments, the party's share of the vote has risen and it has won a number of local elections.

## New forms of opposition

The first years after the AKP's victory in 2002 were difficult for the CHP, which was the only opposition party in parliament. Turkey's new leaders, who presented themselves as conservative democrats rather than Islamists, were enjoying a honeymoon period.<sup>53</sup> They introduced a series of measures to liberalize Turkey's political life, promote economic recovery, and stabilize relations with its neighbors.<sup>54</sup> A broad swathe of the public and many of Turkey's international partners approved of the AKP's actions during this first term of office. The stated aim of the first major anti-AKP demonstrations, in the run-up to the 2007 parliamentary elections, was to defend secularism. In principle this is one of the CHP's main concerns, but the party was not in the front line. While some of its leaders were present at the protests, they rarely spoke publicly and focused more on the electoral process.<sup>55</sup> There was a similar sense of hesitancy during the Gezi Park protest in the spring of 2013.<sup>56</sup> While in principle the CHP's leading figures supported the protesters, it was not a major presence on the ground, with

---

53. D. Schmid, *La Turquie en 100 questions*, Paris: Tallandier, 2017, p. 86. Yalçın Akdoğan, one of the party's theorists, wrote an essay promoting this concept of conservative democracy: *Ak Parti ve Muhafazakar Demokrasi* [The AKP and Conservative Democracy], Istanbul: Alfa, 2004.

54. M. Bozdemir, *La Marche turque vers l'Europe*, Paris: Karthala, 2005.

55. "Nouvelle manifestation pro-laïcité en Turquie", *Le Nouvel Obs*, May 20, 2007.

56. The name derives from the planned redevelopment of a park in Istanbul, which led to major protests. The protesters' concerns were initially ecological, but after they were harshly put down large sections of civil society joined the protests, condemning the authoritarianism of Erdoğan and the AKP. See D. Akagül, F. Bilici, and A. Kazancıgil (eds.), *La Turquie, d'une révolution à l'autre*, Paris: Pluriel, 2013, pp. 335-338; E. Caliskan and S. Waldman, *The New Turkey and Its Discontents*, Glasgow: Hurst & Company, 2016, pp. 102-106; D. Schmid, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-104.

few public statements from party leaders and a visible disconnect between the CHP and the young protesters.<sup>57</sup>

But the emergence during this period of an opposition movement that bypassed the traditional party system did, in fact, attract the attention of the CHP's leadership, which decided to pay greater attention to civil society protests. As a result, having supported Erdoğan after the 2016 coup, the CHP became increasingly critical as the crackdown on the judiciary intensified. Kılıçdaroğlu's "March for Justice" was a milestone in the process of rapprochement between the party and the public. The lack of partisan symbols, the appeal to ordinary citizens under the banner of "Justice" [*adalet*], and the physical performance itself all show the party trying out new methods.<sup>58</sup> The CHP is no longer happy simply standing in elections. It now supports protest movements and is becoming increasingly outspoken in its opposition to the AKP.

## An alliance-building strategy

The CHP is pursuing its electoral battles even as it continues to work closely with social movements. Here, too, its approach is changing. Until the 2010s, the CHP went it alone. But it became clear after the Gezi Park protests that opposition to the government was taking many forms. Rather than political parties, the protests were led by civil society organizations, or simply by young people acting spontaneously. In the wake of these events, the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party [*Bariş ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP] joined with several smaller protest and anti-capitalist parties to form a new group, the Peoples' Democratic Party [*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP]. The HDP took a confederate approach, allowing the parties and movements within it a degree of freedom, and presenting itself primarily as an electoral platform. In response, the CHP has realized that it is no longer the sole party of opposition, and is gradually embarking on a strategy of alliance-building.<sup>59</sup> Working with the nationalist MHP, it lent its support to a non-partisan candidate, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, in the 2014 presidential election. Erdoğan beat İhsanoğlu in the first round, with almost 52% of the vote to 38.5%. There was internal opposition to the CHP's support of the somewhat conservative İhsanoğlu,<sup>60</sup> which perhaps reflected the party's difficulties in fielding a candidate of its own, but the decision at the very least demonstrated an ability to abandon a strictly partisan approach.

---

57. B. Türkmen, "From Gezi Park to Turkey's Transformed Political Landscape", OpenDemocracy, July 7, 2015, available at: [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net).

58. F. Ozerkan and L. Sarmini-Buonaccorsi, op. cit.

59. A. Denizeau, "Political Coalitions in Turkey in the Run-Up to the 2023 Elections", *Études de l'Ifri*, Ifri, April 2023.

60. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu was secretary general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation from 2004 to 2014.

The urgent need for alliance-building became clear the following year. The AKP lost its majority in the parliamentary elections of June 2015, and in theory the opposition could have formed a new government. But for this to happen the three main opposition parties – CHP, MHP, and HDP – would have to reach an agreement. The CHP sought to rally the other parties around it, but failed to get the MHP or the pro-Kurdish HDP to work together. With no majority in sight, Erdoğan called for new elections in November 2015. The HDP lost ground in the wake of increasing political hostility to pro-Kurdish parties, and the AKP regained its majority. The episode highlighted the fundamental problem facing the Turkish opposition: it had a potential majority at the ballot box, but the sharply different parties contained within it failed to unite. From that point on the CHP has devoted a great deal of effort to overcoming these divisions, proposing electoral alliances with itself as the driving force.

With the constitutional reforms of 2017, the possibility of a broader alliance came into view.<sup>61</sup> The question was, starkly enough, whether to accept a form of government in which all power was concentrated on Erdoğan. In this instance the MHP supported the AKP, but some of its members rejected the decision, with a group led by the energetic Meral Akşener splitting from the party. Some of Erdoğan's former ministers also opposed the reforms. The CHP could now rally dissidents around itself, leading a "resistance front" that also included pro-Kurdish groups. This laid down the basis for building an opposition coalition: a rejection of Erdoğan's personal power and a return to a parliamentary system. In 2018, with early elections scheduled for June of that year, the CHP made an alliance with a number of small conservative parties and the MHP dissidents, who had created a new nationalist party, the Good Party [*İyi Parti*, İYİ]. The alliance was only proposed for the legislative elections, and each side presented its own candidate for the presidential election. The parties returned to the alliance for the 2019 municipal elections, and in Istanbul all the opposition parties, including pro-Kurdish groups, rallied around a single CHP candidate, İmamoğlu. The alliance seemed to be a winning formula, and reached a new peak in the 2023 elections, when the CHP led a coalition of six parties which formed an alliance for the legislative elections, and also supported Kılıçdaroğlu as its sole candidate for the presidency. Kılıçdaroğlu subsequently received the support of the HDP's successor, the Green Left Party [*Yeşil Sol Partisi*, YSP]. But note that these alliances remain a matter of debate within the CHP, and some orthodox Kemalists have strongly opposed any engagement with conservative or Islamist movements.

---

61. A. Denizeau, op. cit.



Nonetheless, at least in 2023, party leaders viewed the strategy as a way to guarantee success.<sup>62</sup>

## Electoral success

The CHP's fortunes have unquestionably improved across a series of elections from the mid-2010s onwards. This improvement is the third factor which makes it possible to speak of a CHP renaissance: there has been a steady increase, modest but real, in its vote share. Whereas the party stagnated at around 25% in the parliamentary elections of 2011, June 2015, and November 2015, its coalition won 34% in 2018 and 35% in 2023. It has made similar progress in number of seats. Having failed to win more than 135 seats between 2002 and 2015, it claimed 144 in 2018 and 169 in 2023, with coalition partners winning around 40 more in both cases. This represents a real trend which, at least in legislative elections, derives to some extent from its strategy of building alliances. It is harder to assess the party's progress in presidential elections, as the three that have taken place in the period have all occurred under very different circumstances. In 2014, İhsanoğlu, who had the support of the CHP (as well as the MHP) without belonging to it, was defeated in the first round with 38.4% of the vote. In 2018, Muharrem İnce, a leader and long-standing member of the CHP, won 30.6%. In this case the other main opposition parties each fielded a candidate. In 2023, Kılıçdaroğlu won 44.9% of the vote in the first round. At first sight this was spectacular progress, but his success was vitiated by the fact that he was effectively the sole opposition candidate.<sup>63</sup> While he held his own in the second round, he failed to significantly increase his share of the vote (47.8%).

Despite these good results, the CHP has failed to win any legislative or presidential elections during the AKP era. It is above all the trend in municipal elections that reveals how far it has come. In 2014, the CHP won 26% of the vote nationwide, and among the major cities only triumphed in Izmir, a traditional Kemalist stronghold. In 2019, it won 37.5% of the vote, retaining Izmir and taking the country's two largest cities, Istanbul and Ankara. In 2024, its vote share remained stable at 37.7%, but since the AKP won only 35.5% it became the leading party nationwide, and retained Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir with large majorities while also capturing major cities like Bursa. This most recent success is particularly striking because the coalition formed in 2019 imploded in 2023, and the CHP consequently entered the fray alone. For the first time in its history,

---

62. Interviews with Seyit Torun, CHP deputy for Ordu (Ankara, June 21, 2022), Gürsel Tekin, CHP deputy for Istanbul (Istanbul, April 24, 2023), and one of Kılıçdaroğlu's economic advisors (Ankara, November 3, 2022).

63. Sinan Oğan, who represented the ultranationalist opposition, won 5.2%. Between the rounds he threw his support behind Erdoğan, to the displeasure of some of his supporters.

it inflicted a clear defeat on the AKP at a national scale, and did so without allies.

With President Erdoğan due to leave office in 2028 under the current system, the CHP is well placed to win upcoming contests. The party is now capable of a more aggressive style, has the experience and resources to forge cross-party alliances, and is increasingly seeing returns worthy of a major opposition party. Could this be enough to win power in the next general election? The answer remains uncertain, given the twists and turns of Turkish national politics, but the CHP now undeniably has solid advantages.



# Strengths and opportunities in Erdoğan's Turkey

The CHP's renaissance is based on a combination of factors in its favor. It is tempting to see the party's success as an automatic result of the weakening power of Erdoğan and the AKP. Turkey's involvement in the Syrian civil war has led to a resurgence of tensions and security threats in the southeast, and the country has struggled to absorb millions of refugees. The economic crisis that began in 2018 remains unresolved, with serious social consequences. The aging Erdoğan has led the country for over twenty years, and his party has been gradually depleted of any strong figures to support or take over from him. This situation is clearly good for the opposition.<sup>64</sup> But the CHP also has a number of specific assets that make it a serious alternative with a growing base of support. Perhaps its greatest strength is the younger generation in Turkey, whose vision of society far more closely resembles the CHP's traditional values. Secondly, the CHP has worked hard to build closer links with a range of civil society organizations. The party has led Turkey's major cities since 2019, providing it with resources and giving an opportunity to demonstrate its practical abilities. Finally, the party is actively forging international partnerships, which are crucial for its credibility should it come to power.

## Aligning with a generational shift

The CHP's greatest strength perhaps lies in the emergence of younger generations in Turkey who feel very attached, if not to the party itself, then to the values it is traditionally associated with. The AKP's victories and near-hegemony in the 2000s relied on the coming of age of voters educated in the 1980s, who had been influenced by the re-Islamization of society and the emergence of a small-scale conservative capitalism.<sup>65</sup> Since then, however, Turkey's social structures have continued to evolve, with further urbanization, greater access to higher education, and a more international outlook. Two major trends have resulted among younger people which bring them closer to the CHP: rapid secularization, and a still vibrant nationalism which has rediscovered the figure of Atatürk.

---

64. M. Özkaya, "Turquie: quelles perspectives pour les élections du centenaire?", Sciences Po Grenoble, December 21, 2022, available at: <https://blog.sciencespo-grenoble.fr>.

65. M. Bazin and S. de Tapia, *La Turquie: Géographie d'une puissance émergente*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2012, p. 103, 140-141.

Understanding the secularization of Turkey's younger generations is essential if we are to grasp the country's new political sociology.<sup>66</sup> Erdoğan's goal was to raise a society of devout young people, but sociological changes seem to belie this aspiration, with the youth in Turkey displaying a much more flexible relationship to religion. A study by the Konda Institute found that the number of young people identifying as religious has fallen from 22% in 2008 to 15% in 2018. Over the same period, those who said they fasted during Ramadan dropped from 74% to 58%.<sup>67</sup> This trend is particularly noticeable in urban public spaces, not only in Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara, but also in more conservative eastern cities like Konya and Diyarbakır, where many restaurants and cafés remain open during Ramadan, with large numbers of young customers.<sup>68</sup> It is still rare for young people to call themselves atheists, but it is now common to hear some label themselves as “agnostic” or “deist”.<sup>69</sup>

The growing secularization of Turkey's youth has been accompanied by an apparent resurgence in nationalism, which, while traditionally influential in Turkey, now seems firmly entrenched among young people.<sup>70</sup> Clear signs of this include the fervor which Kemal inspires. On October 23, 2023, the centenary of the founding of the Republic, processions broadcasting Atatürk's speeches over loudspeakers circulated through the center of Istanbul. Most of those in the crowd were young people, often with tears in their eyes.<sup>71</sup> As Mustafa Görkem Doğan, professor of political science at Istanbul University, explains: “Young people don't recognize themselves in Islam or the current government, so they turn to the Turkish Republic and Mustafa Kemal – more distant points of reference, but they remain attached to them”.<sup>72</sup>

In March 2024, another survey by Konda revealed that the adjective most used by 18- to 30-year-olds to describe themselves was “Atatürkist” [*atatürkçü*], with 44% identifying with the term (compared to 39% in 2022). This was followed by “nationalist” [*milliyetçi*] (39%). In comparison,

---

66. R. Soylu, “Turkish Youth Increasingly Secular and Modern Under Erdogan, Poll Finds”, *Middle East Eye*, March 20, 2019, available at: [www.middleeasteye.net](http://www.middleeasteye.net).

67. Ibid.

68. As observed by the author during a visit to Turkey during Ramadan (Istanbul and Ankara, May 2018; Ankara, Konya, and Izmir, April 2022; Istanbul and Diyarbakır, March 2024).

69. As observed by the author during interviews between 2018 and 2024 in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Eskişehir, Şanlıurfa, and Diyarbakır. See also A. Andlauer, *La Turquie d'Erdoğan*, Paris: Le Rocher, 2022, pp. 29-30; D. Minoui, “Turquie : quand la jeune génération boude discrètement la religion”, *Le Figaro*, February 16, 2021.

70. D. Minoui, “Turquie : comment le nationalisme ‘ordinaire’ irrigue toute la société”, *Le Figaro*, March 30, 2024.

71. As observed by the author (Istanbul, October 29, 2023).

72. Interview with the author (Istanbul, May 24, 2018).

only 10% identified as “Islamist” [*islamcı*] (a sharp drop from 20% in 2022), 10% as “democrat” [*demokrat*], and 5% as “liberal” [*liberal*].<sup>73</sup>

This shift among the youth in Turkey towards a more secular way of life, and towards a political identity which remains attached to Kemalist nationalism, could make them more sensitive to the CHP's traditional concerns. The two “arrows” of secularism and nationalism, and the party's affiliation with Kemal himself, make it a vessel for these young people's aspirations. The CHP has clearly benefited from this. In the same Konda survey,<sup>74</sup> 46.1% of young people said they were undecided or abstained from voting, but of the remainder 24.1% supported the CHP, compared with just 11.2% for the AKP.<sup>75</sup> Another research institute, Gezici, reported in 2021 that the CHP-led alliance had the support of 56.9% of 15-21 year olds, compared to 24.6% for the AKP-led alliance. These figures contrasted sharply with over-42 year olds, who were only 40.1% in favor of the CHP's alliance and 44.9% in favor of the AKP's alliance.<sup>76</sup> We can foresee that, as the population ages, the CHP's electoral base will gradually broaden, and that of the religious parties will gradually shrink. But this change will not leave much room for any party identifying as liberal, rather than Kemalist or nationalist.

## Growing engagement with civil society

Having come to represent opposition to the AKP, the CHP has gradually moved away from its essentially parliamentary role, and has tried to develop and strengthen its links with civil society, having recognized the increasing importance of the latter towards the end of the 2000s.<sup>77</sup> This is a result of direct influence on the part of Kılıçdaroğlu, for whom political stability depends on a society in which no group is left behind, a vision that involves a permanent “constructive dialogue” between the various social groups.<sup>78</sup>

In this respect the CHP has lagged behind the AKP, which was the first to encourage the emergence of a civil society and relied on it heavily in its early years.<sup>79</sup> The AKP's aim at the time was to reach out to NGOs,

73. “Gençlerin Politik Tercihleri Araştırması 2024” [2024 Research Report on Young People's Political Preferences], Report by KONDA, March 2024, available at: <https://go-for.org>.

74. Ibid.

75. Interestingly, the ultranationalist Victory Party [Zafer Partisi], which only won 2.2% of the vote in the 2023 legislative elections, had 5.1% support in this study, apparently confirming the growing influence of nationalism among young people.

76. “Genç seçmen anketi: 2023'te kime oy verecekler?” [Study of Young Voters: Who Will They Support in 2023?], *Gazete Duvar*, March 26, 2021, available at: [www.gazeteduvar.com.tr](http://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr).

77. R. Türmen, “Sivil toplum vs CHP” [Civil Society and the CHP], *Milliyet*, March 18, 2011.

78. A. Erdi Öztürk and H. Yavuz, *Kılıçdaroğlu and the New Republican People's Party in Turkey*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023, p. 79-81.

79. S. Vaner, “L'essor d'une société civile face aux incertitudes démocratiques”, in D. Akagiül, F. Bilici, and A. Kazancıgil (eds.), op. cit., pp. 78-84.

chambers of commerce, and business associations, particularly those with conservative tendencies who might feel left out of the traditional republican model. The opposition, too, has gradually understood the need to reach out to these bodies. To do so, it has even tackled a taboo subject : dialogue with Islamist groups. This was a major development, since throughout its history the CHP has defined itself by presenting Islamists as the republican model's natural enemy. Reaching out to such groups was also a way to compete with the AKP on its home turf. In 2022, the newspaper *Aydınlık* – which is Eurasist, nationalist, and anti-Western, favoring closer ties with Moscow, but also hostile to political Islam – revealed that in the 2019 municipal elections the CHP had secured the support of the Süleymana brotherhood, with thousands of its members receiving local government positions in Istanbul and Ankara in return.<sup>80</sup> Also in 2022, there was heated debate online, and criticism from both Kemalists and Islamists, about the CHP youth movement's decision to host representatives of the Islamist NGO İHH,<sup>81</sup> with the organizers insisting that the groups must learn to coexist.<sup>82</sup> These are isolated phenomena, but they show the party's desire to provide outreach and reassurance to conservative civil society. Shortly before the 2023 elections a CHP deputy explained that “the brotherhoods are part of our society, with a strong local presence, and it would be absurd not to take them into account if our aim is to reach out to all of Turkey”.<sup>83</sup>

Alongside the CHP's unprecedented engagement with traditionalist circles, the party has also had to get used to working with trade unions again, having distanced itself from them to some degree in the 1990s.<sup>84</sup> According to a lawyer interviewed before the 2023 elections, who supports the party and is close to Kılıçdaroğlu, “the CHP hasn't made any major effort to win over the unions up to now. Indeed, the party knows that when the unions are faced with the AKP they'll support it anyway. For their part, the unions aren't very engaged, because they don't expect any great social progress from us”.<sup>85</sup> He added that Kılıçdaroğlu preferred civil liberties groups over trade unions. Things seem to be shifting since the congress of autumn 2023 and the change of leadership, with Özel keener to build links with these neglected partners. In the first few months of his mandate, Özel teamed up with the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions of Turkey

80. U. Kanal, “CHP'den Süleymanlılara kadro tahsisi” [The CHP Gives Positions to Süleymanlı Members], Youtube, May 22, 2022, available at: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

81. İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı [Aid Foundation for Human Rights, Freedoms, and Humanitarian Relief]. This charity was the driving force behind the group of ships that tried to force the blockade of Gaza in 2010, leading to the deaths of ten of its members when the Israeli military intervened and setting off a serious diplomatic crisis between Ankara and Tel Aviv.

82. “CHP'li gençler ve İHH'lı gençler buluştu, ‘mahalleler’ rahatsız oldu” [A Clash Between Young CHP and İHH Supporters: Trouble in the “Neighborhoods”], *Serbestiyet*, February 16, 2022, available at: <https://serbestiyet.com>.

83. Interview with the author (Istanbul, April 24, 2023).

84. A. Erdi Öztürk and H. Yavuz, op. cit., p. 5.

85. Interview with the author (Istanbul, January 12, 2023).

[*Türkiye Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu, DİSK*] to reform of the tax system,<sup>86</sup> and the CHP proposed a law to parliament on bonuses for unionized civil servants.<sup>87</sup> As the lawyer remarks, “it’s not enough to attract the liberals – Özel thinks the unions can mobilize more voters”.<sup>88</sup>

The party’s increased engagement on this point has been made easier by the rise of new figures in the party more connected to the concerns of civil society. Kaftancıoğlu, who represents the CHP’s progressive tendency, is a good example. A human rights activist, he was personally involved in activism throughout the 2010s, demonstrating at the Justice Palace against the arbitrary imprisonment of academics and activists, and visiting a factory where unionizing female workers had been threatened with dismissal.<sup>89</sup> Abdurrahman Tutdere, a member of parliament for Adıyaman who comes from the same generation but has a very different style, also emphasizes on-the-ground activism. He has gained a measure of popularity for his enthusiastic defense of the tobacco industry, the flagship industry in the province. In March 2024, Tutdere won the mayor’s office from the AKP. While partly attributing his victory to his opponents’ missteps, Tutdere also sees it as a reflection of his work on the ground.<sup>90</sup> In a variety of ways, the CHP is keen to re-establish links with different areas of civil society, and no longer wants to be viewed merely as an electoral force. Winning Turkey’s major cities has enabled it to refine this strategy, giving it greater room for maneuver.

## Leading Turkey’s cities

The CHP has been able to rely on a solid foundation in local government since the municipal elections of 2019, and even more so since 2024. The party controls 337 of 519 districts [*ilçe*] and, more importantly, 14 of 30 metropolitan municipalities [*büyükşehir belediyesi*]. These include the five largest: Istanbul (with over 15 million inhabitants), Ankara (over 5 million), Izmir (over 4 million), Bursa (over 3 million) and Antalya (around 2.5 million). Together these account for over 30 million people, or nearly a third of Turkey’s population. Metropolitan municipalities are divided into districts with a number of responsibilities, and with the 2024 elections, the CHP also strengthened its grip on these. Since the last elections the CHP now controls most districts of Istanbul – 26 of 39, compared with 14 previously. The same holds for Ankara, where the number of local

86. H. Karaveli, “Can the New CHP Leader Revive Social Democracy in Turkey?”, *The Turkey Analyst*, January 25, 2024, available at: <https://turkeyanalyst.org>.

87. D. Kalkan, “CHP sendikali memurlar için ikramiye teklifini Meclis'e sundu” [The CHP Submits a Proposal for Bonuses for Unionized Civil Servants to Parliament], *Gazete Duvar*, March 7, 2024, available at: [www.gazeteduvar.com.tr](http://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr).

88. Text message to the author (June 13, 2024).

89. U. Aydın and A. Bonzon, op. cit.

90. Ifri research trip to Adıyaman, May 26-30, 2024.

municipalities controlled by the CHP has risen from 5 to 16 out of a total of 25. This strong position in the major cities means the CHP can use them as showcases for its policies, while at the same time benefiting from significant local resources.

A saying often attributed to Erdoğan, who was mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1998, and repeated by İmamoğlu during his campaign, illustrates the enduring symbolic importance of the former Ottoman capital: “Whoever conquers Istanbul conquers Turkey”.<sup>91</sup> The city’s symbolic role is founded on material realities: as the country’s largest metropolis and economic capital, the AKP has pursued a policy of major works in Istanbul in order to demonstrate the scale of its ambitions for Turkey.<sup>92</sup> Now that it is at the helm, the CHP is striving to make the city a showcase for its own policies, appealing to a range of voter groups. Between 2019 and 2024, İmamoğlu pursued a policy of infrastructure development, with major construction sites like the tramway along the Golden Horn covered with posters and drawings depicting him as a construction worker modernizing the city. İmamoğlu’s record as a builder and urban planner is carefully emphasized – despite the fact that he struggled to secure funding for such projects during his first term. He presents his urban policy as sustainable, and his support for green spaces and opposition to the “Kanal İstanbul” project for a new canal parallel to the Bosphorus in the west of the city have won him support from young urbanites interested in environmental issues.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, the mayor appealed to nationalist voters by criticizing the presence of Syrian refugees and the use of Arabic in Istanbul.<sup>94</sup>

With this communication strategy, İmamoğlu has been able to strengthen his electoral base. He won the majority of districts in the 2024 municipal election and now has greater room for maneuver, with Istanbul acting as the launchpad for his ambitions. The mayor of Ankara, Mansur Yavaş, has pursued a similar policy. During his time in power he has focused in particular on anti-corruption measures, opening several dozen investigations.<sup>95</sup> During the pandemic his aid programs benefited the poorest in the city, consolidating his base of support among them.<sup>96</sup> Simultaneously, urban planning policies which promote green spaces and eco-friendly transport appeal to a more gentrified stratum of Ankara’s

91. “Ekrem İmamoğlu: İstanbul'u Kazanan, Türkiye'yi Kazanır” [Ekrem İmamoğlu: Whoever Conquers Istanbul Conquers Turkey], *TamgaTurk*, August 15, 2023, available at: [www.tamgaturk.com](http://www.tamgaturk.com).

92. A. El Jabri, “Turquie: Istanbul, laboratoire de la politique de grands travaux d'Erdoğan”, RFI, June 21, 2019, available at: [www.rfi.fr](http://www.rfi.fr).

93. “İmamoğlu'ndan yeşil alan vurgusu” [İmamoğlu Emphasizes Green Spaces], *Sözcü*, July 4, 2024.

94. İmamoğlu’s strategy has been criticized from the left. See, for instance, “Mülteciler konusunda tehlikeli ortaklık ve rekabet” [Common Ground and a Dangerous Rivalry Over Refugees], *Marksist*, July 2, 2019, available at: <https://marksist.org>.

95. D. Minoui, “Mansur Yavaş, l'homme qui fait trembler Recep Tayyip Erdoğan”, *Le Figaro*, November 30, 2020.

96. R. Çakır, “Un exemple d'une lutte positive contre l'épidémie: Mansur Yavaş, maire de la métropole d'Ankara, en Turquie”, *Medyascope*, April 11, 2020, available at: <https://medyascope.tv>.



population. His dynamic policies were recognized with a British thinktank's "World Mayor Capital" award in 2021.<sup>97</sup> Yavaş increased his share of the vote by almost ten points in the 2024 elections.

Beyond the recognition and prestige associated with leading these major cities, controlling them provides the CHP with a range of resources. In particular, these cities' social and redistributive programs give it access to the working-class voters it initially struggled to win over. Numerous studies have examined the AKP's clientelist policies,<sup>98</sup> but there is no indication that the CHP's hands are any cleaner in this regard. The party has regularly been accused of nepotism, particularly since its victory in 2024.<sup>99</sup> For instance, Ayşe Karakoç, a political scientist and CHP supporter, says: "When a party takes power in a city, it changes the local government teams. In Istanbul, İmamoğlu has hired thousands of civil servants, particularly in urban renewal and development, most of them CHP or opposition members".<sup>100</sup> Local governments also provide the CHP with a pool of future administrators, ensuring that if it wins control in a national election it will have competent hands to serve in the civil service and regional government. Its experience governing particular cities also means that the CHP can offer support to newly elected local officials. For example, when Tutdere was elected in Adıyaman, he could turn for assistance to Ceyhan Kayhan, the former deputy mayor of the municipality of Karabağlar in Izmir. In this way, Kayhan's experience could be passed on to the new team.<sup>101</sup> Finally, in managing major cities, the party can forge new links with foreign countries, and so pursue its strategy of international engagement.

## International partnerships

The CHP's positioning relative to its foreign partners is somewhat contradictory. Despite formally being a member of the Socialist International and the Party of European Socialists, it has not built real working relationships with its counterparts. On the contrary, its sovereigntist stance makes it somewhat skeptical of European integration and the cooperation that implies. Beginning in the 2010s, however, it has sought to engage once more with other countries, but often preferring

97. A. Akyüz, "Mansur Yavaş, le maire d'Ankara, récompensé du World Mayor Capital Award", *Le Petit Journal*, September 16, 2021, available at: <https://lepetitjournal.com>.

98. C. Ark Yıldırım, "Political Parties and Grassroots Clientelist Strategies in Urban Turkey: One Neighborhood at a Time", *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2017, pp. 473-490; D. Arslantaş and Ş. Arslantaş, "Clientelism, Partisanship, and Ideology", *International Area Studies Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2023, pp. 235-251; F. Ocaklı, "Political Entrepreneurs, Clientelism, and Civil Society: Supply-Side Politics in Turkey", *Democratization*, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp. 723-746.

99. A. Şahin, "CHP'li belediyelerde 'kayırmacılık' tartışması: Parti yönetimi önlemleri sertleştirecek" [The Debate over "Nepotism" in CHP Municipalities: Party Leaders to Take Stricter Measures], BBC Türkçe, May 9, 2024, available at: [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

100. Interview with the author (Istanbul, October 29, 2023).

101. Ifri research trip to Adıyaman, May 26-30, 2024.

decentralized cooperative relationships – between municipalities, for instance – over formal alliances.

The CHP still faces two fundamental difficulties in its relations with foreign political parties. Firstly, Kemalism is not by nature part of any specific international movement, in contrast to Islamist or Communist parties, for instance. When it has sought foreign partnerships, the CHP has sometimes looked to socialist groups, despite the fact that its nationalism and its authoritarian heritage set it apart sharply from most of these. For a long time such relationships were in name only. This is true, for instance, of the CHP's membership of the Socialist International, which dates to 1976 and was intended, as we have seen, to confirm the party's "social-democratic" turn. Strikingly, however, most CHP members are unaware that the party is part of the Socialist International, and officials barely mention the fact. The group itself has sometimes questioned whether it belongs there. In 2007, the Council of the Socialist International opened a case against the CHP, which it accused of opposing democratic principles.<sup>102</sup> While the case was dropped, it reinforced the CHP's mistrust of its foreign partners. In Kemalist circles it is frequently said that such maneuvers by European social democrats play into Erdoğan's hands. Furthermore, the idea has developed within the most nationalist factions of the opposition that transnational alliances between parties on ideological grounds – along the lines of the AKP's relationship with Arab Islamo-conservative parties – would harm Turkey's interests.<sup>103</sup>

The CHP isn't instinctively inclined, then, to reach out to foreign political parties. Nevertheless, as the prospect of electoral victory loomed, it sought to consolidate or re-establish international links. Its goals were twofold. The first was to lend the party domestic credibility, since foreign policy has long been seen as a factor in Erdoğan's success and a weakness for the opposition. The second was to secure the support of external partners in the event of victory.<sup>104</sup> Particularly since Özel's election, the CHP seems to want increased cooperation with European social-democratic parties. Özel's meetings with his partners in the Socialist International and social-democratic groups in the European Parliament can be viewed as an effort to situate the CHP within a "global social-democratic" model.<sup>105</sup> Selin Sayek Böke, who was tipped to become Foreign Minister if the CHP won in 2023, is

---

102. M. Copin, "Le CHP 'dans le collimateur' de l'Internationale Socialiste...", OVIPOT, July 20, 2007, available at: <https://ovipot.hypotheses.org>.

103. A. Coşkun and S. Üzgen, "Political Change and Turkey's Foreign Policy", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 14, 2022, available at: <https://carnegie-production-assets.com>.

104. Interview with one of Kılıçdaroğlu's economic advisors (Ankara, November 3, 2022).

105. K. Gücü, "Uluslararasılaşan CHP" [The CHP is Internationalizing], *Teori*, July 2024, available at: <https://teoridergisi.com>.



responsible for coordinating with these European leftist parties.<sup>106</sup> As always, though, this new approach is limited by the CHP's traditional sovereigntism, which in its rhetoric remains tightly focused on Turkish national interests. The CHP runs a website showcasing its work with the European Union, at least in theory – but as of July 12, 2024, this was still under construction, simply displaying the message: “*çok yakında*” [very soon].<sup>107</sup>

Nonetheless, this is an area where local elected officials can show initiative and build new types of relationship which bypass the traditional institutional framework. A few months after being elected mayor of Istanbul in 2019, İmamoğlu traveled to Paris to meet Anne Hidalgo, his counterpart, and to discuss the prospect of a friendship and cooperation pact between the two cities.<sup>108</sup> This was the first initiative on this scale in a decade. The subjects discussed – transport, the environment, democracy, women's rights, and so on – were political as much as technical, and reflect an effort to create long-term ideological links. İmamoğlu's subsequent support for Hidalgo in the French presidential election of 2022 was perhaps risky (she won only 1.7% of the vote in the first round),<sup>109</sup> but reflected his desire for an enduring partnership. He visited again in May 2024, after the municipal elections, stressing the democratic values uniting the two administrations,<sup>110</sup> and did so again in August, this time with Özel and Yavaş. This latest visit took place during the Paris Olympics, and İmamoğlu stated once more that he wanted Istanbul to bid for the 2036 Games, a project first mentioned in 2021. He said, rather lyrically, that the Olympic rings on the Eiffel Tower inspired him, and that he wanted to see them adorning the Bosphorus Bridge “which links Europe to Asia”.<sup>111</sup> Rather than reflecting an organized, party-wide partnership strategy, such projects are to a large extent a dynamic form of communication. Still, they may inspire other elected representatives. Tutdere's effort to build a partnership between Adıyaman and Istanbul failed, but İmamoğlu's example has raised in his mind the possibility of cooperating with foreign cities.<sup>112</sup>

106. S. Görür Yücel, “CHP'li Selin Sayek Böke: ‘Türkiye'nin birinci partisi olarak sorumluluklarımızın farkındayız’” [The CHP's Selin Sayek Böke: “We Are Aware of Our Responsibilities as Turkey's First Party”], *Medyascope*, April 18, 2024, available at: <https://medyascope.tv>.

107. CHP Avrupa Birliği Temsilciliği [CHP Mission to the European Union], available at: <http://chp-avrupabirligi.org>.

108. “Anne Hidalgo accueille M. Ekrem Imamoğlu, maire d'Istanbul”, Press release, Paris City Hall, October 2, 2019, available at: <https://cdn.paris.fr>.

109. “İmamoğlu Supports Paris Mayor in French Presidential Race”, *Duvar English*, September 20, 2021, available at: [www.duvarenglish.com](http://www.duvarenglish.com).

110. “Ekrem İmamoğlu Paris Belediye Başkanı Hidalgo'yu ziyaret etti” [Ekrem İmamoğlu Visits Hidalgo, Mayor of Paris], *Son Haber Burda*, May 4, 2024, available at: <https://sonhaberburda.com>.

111. “Ekrem İmamoğlu Paris'teki ‘İstanbul Evi’ Açılışında Konuştu” [Ekrem İmamoğlu Speaks at the Opening Ceremony of “Istanbul House” in Paris], İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, August 8, 2024, available at: <https://frd.ibb.istanbul>.

112. Ifri research trip to Adıyaman, May 26-30, 2024.

The CHP is well placed to position itself as a major political force in the years ahead. The shift towards secularism among young people, the party's ability to forge links with civil society, its control of the country's main cities, and its links with international partners should all strengthen its position in the long term. But the party's electoral prospects are by no means certain. It remains fragile, and must resolve a number of issues that threaten its cohesion and credibility.

# The many challenges still facing the CHP

The CHP's victories in the 2019 and 2024 municipal elections were a mark of its renaissance, but it has yet to win a national election. The twofold failure of the 2023 election was particularly bitter. Despite the support of the entire opposition, Kılıçdaroğlu lost the presidential election, doing worse than expected. More importantly, the coalition of the CHP and its allies failed to win a majority in the National Assembly. These disappointments show the difficulties that remain. The CHP faces three challenges before the next general election, currently scheduled for 2028: it must clarify its ideological position; it must then find a strategy for alliance-building that does not distort its message; and it must find a less vertical, more grassroots-oriented way of operating. If the CHP can make progress on these complicated issues, it will be in a position to confront a fourth challenge: finding a winning team and candidate.

## The struggle for ideological definition

Turkey has been described as a “Janus-faced state”,<sup>113</sup> torn between its desire for a Western identity and its ancient Ottoman and Anatolian heritage. Similarly, the CHP sometimes seems to be a “Janus-faced party”, with two identities that are almost directly opposed. On the one hand, it is a progressive, liberal party, open to globalization and sensitive to issues of discrimination and minority rights. This is the CHP that Europeans most often encounter, the party of university-educated young people and progressive metropolitan elites. Its mobile, urban, English-speaking representatives find it easy to engage with foreign observers. But coexisting within the same organization is a party far more resistant to change, rooted in a more nationalist, authoritarian tradition. This CHP has the support of the army, the traditionally Kemalist civil service, and young people who, despite their education and their interest in Europe, remain solidly sovereigntist and may even subscribe to an exclusionary nationalism that opposes minority expression or immigration from the south.

This dual identity is not unique to the CHP. Other Turkish political movements, like the AKP and the pro-Kurdish HDP, find themselves in a similar position. It might reasonably be seen as an asset in elections, enabling these parties to bring together distinct voter groups. But the CHP

---

113. T. Jossieran, *La Nouvelle puissance turque : l'adieu à Mustapha Kemal*, Paris: Ellipses, 2010.

risks becoming a catch-all party, attracting very different voters united only by their shared hostility to Erdoğan. Moving in this direction would present two problems. Firstly, every party in the Turkish political ecosystem defines itself by taking a clear ideological line, and their long-term survival relies on them holding this line.<sup>114</sup> Secondly, based on the current constitution and Erdoğan's own public remarks, he will step down in 2028. If his hyper-personalized regime comes to an end, an opposition party defined exclusively around its anti-Erdoğan stance, with no alternative ideological position, will find itself weakened. The risk is that the party then breaks up into factions which are no longer just different but irreconcilable. It is essential that the CHP identifies ideological features that can bind it together to give structure and coherence, and to offer voters a clear choice.

The fundamental question is whether the CHP can remain a major party while retaining its old Kemalist principles – secularism, nationalism, and authoritarian centralism – or whether it must modernize and liberalize. As we have seen, Kılıçdaroğlu took the latter course during his time as leader. In particular, the CHP sought to reassure conservative religious voters. For instance, the right of girls to wear headscarves in school had been one of the AKP's signature issues, and such voters generally like the changes the government has introduced on this point.<sup>115</sup> The CHP has recognized this change and tried to demonstrate its openness – for instance, by fielding an increasing number of candidates who wear headscarves in legislative elections. During İmamoğlu's campaign in Istanbul he projected an image of piety and respect for religious traditions and believers. The CHP has also tried to take the edge off its traditional nationalism, particularly through a measure of engagement with the Kurdish question. While the party remains hostile to Kurdish political autonomy, it has quietly called for the release of pro-Kurdish political prisoners. By moving away from the old Kemalist orthodoxy, the CHP has tried to reassure both conservatives and minorities.

But the party's disappointing performance in parliamentary elections has raised concerns about this strategy. Starting in 2018, young CHP activists, in particular, began criticizing the party's concessions to conservatives.<sup>116</sup> Its failures in 2023 further undermined the strategy. In the absence of a pro-Kurdish presidential candidate, Kılıçdaroğlu won a large majority of the vote in the eastern Kurdish provinces, but this was counterbalanced by an apparent decline in the CHP vote in traditionally Kemalist regions. In Edirne, İzmir, Kırklareli, and Muğla – the only four provinces where the CHP won more than 40% in the 2018 parliamentary

---

114. The AKP might have seemed to be an exception to the rule during the 2000s, attracting a very broad range of voters from its earliest contents, ranging from liberals to Islamists. Even in this period, however, the party emphasized its conservative identity, which won it the majority of its support.

115. A. Andlauer, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-48.

116. L. Gültekin, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-186.

elections, and which it should be able to count on more than anywhere – there was a clear drop in vote share during the 2023 presidential election.<sup>117</sup> This increasing disaffection on the part of voters who identify as Kemalist is also reflected in interviews with CHP members and supporters, particularly younger people, and often focuses on Kılıçdaroğlu himself. In October 2022, Kılıçdaroğlu's proposed guarantees on the freedom to wear headscarves were unenthusiastically received, with many CHP voters and officials viewing it as a clumsy move that mainly benefited Erdoğan.<sup>118</sup> Young people are rapidly becoming more secular and nationalism remains influential, with 58.8% of CHP voters in summer 2023 describing illegal immigration as the main threat to the country.

In this context, straying too far from traditional Kemalism could hurt the party. There has long been internal criticism of its increasingly liberal-conservative direction: as early as 2014, forty-two former party ministers and deputies signed a letter criticizing its strategy, and particularly Kılıçdaroğlu's support for the freedom to wear headscarves.<sup>119</sup> İmamoğlu's emphasis on his faith has also attracted criticism.<sup>120</sup> These criticisms can be summed up in a joke popular in the secularist wing of the party: "If piety won votes, Necmettin Erbakan [the historic leader of Turkish Islamism] would have been *padişah!*" In other words, while the AKP won power by emphasizing its firm respect for secularism, the CHP has nothing to gain by portraying itself as a religious party.<sup>121</sup>

One of the main difficulties for the CHP to solve in the coming years, then, is to strike a balance between, on the one hand, an ideological position which matches the party's traditional principles, and which may align better with young voters, and on the other the concessions necessary to reassure conservative and minority voters, who still represent a large segment of the population.

## The recurring problem of alliances

The question of alliances is related to that of ideology. From 2014 until the 2023 elections, the CHP's strategy was to bring together groups opposed to Erdoğan's increasingly personal rule, based simply on shared hostility to his authoritarianism. In keeping with its increased flexibility on policy

117. M.-V. Robert, "Élections en Turquie: d'Erdoğan à Erdoğan", Fondation Jean Jaurès, May 24, 2023, available at: [www.jean-jaures.org](http://www.jean-jaures.org).

118. "Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu başörtüsü çıkışının nedenlerini açıkladı: 'Oy hesabı yapmadım, teklif sadece başörtüsü ile ilgili değil'" [Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu Explains his Remarks on Headscarves: "I'm Not Trying to Win Votes, and the Proposal Isn't Just About Headscarves"], *Cumhuriyet*, October 6, 2022; CNN Türk, "İnce'den Kılıçdaroğlu'na 'başörtüsü' eleştirisi: 'Erdoğan'ın ekmeğine yağ sürme!" [İnce criticizes Kılıçdaroğlu on the Headscarf Question: "Don't Play into Erdoğan's Hands!"], Youtube, October 7, 2022, available at: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

119. F. Bilâ, op. cit., pp. 67-68.

120. L. Gültekin, op. cit., pp. 202-203.

121. Ibid., pp. 213-215.

questions, the CHP happily made alliances with parties whose fundamental positions were very distant from its own. Its alliance with the secular nationalists of the İYİ made some sense: indeed, while the İYİ is less focused on social issues and takes a harder line on the Kurdish question, there is very little difference between its own ideological background and that of the CHP's orthodox Kemalist faction. It also shares the CHP's unwavering opposition to Erdoğan and his ultra-presidential regime. Far more surprising was the CHP's alliance with the Future Party [*Gelecek Partisi*] and the Democracy and Progress Party [*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi*, DEVA], which were founded by Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ali Babacan, respectively, both former conservative AKP ministers. More startling still was the inclusion of the Felicity Party [*Saadet Partisi*], the representative of traditional Turkish Islamism. Finally, the CHP won informal support from the pro-Kurdish HDP for the June 2019 municipal election, followed in 2023 by official support from the pro-Kurdish YSP for Kılıçdaroğlu's presidential campaign.

In terms of effectiveness, the results of this vast system of coalitions and alliances were ultimately ambivalent. It did not lead to an opposition victory in 2023, and the CHP did better when it stood alone during the 2024 municipal elections. Nor has it ever really been possible to unite nationalists, conservatives, Kemalists, and pro-Kurdish groups into a coherent whole. The YSP attacked Kılıçdaroğlu in harsh terms for negotiating support from the highly nationalist Victory Party [*Zafer Partisi*] between the two rounds of the 2023 election.<sup>122</sup> Interviews in Diyarbakır in March 2024 with officials of the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party [*Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi*, Dem], the successor to the HDP and YSP, revealed bitterness towards the CHP, which they accused of going too far in courting the nationalist fringe.<sup>123</sup> Simultaneously, tensions with the İYİ increased during the spring 2023 campaign, and the following autumn it left the electoral coalition and refused to consider any new alliances with the CHP.

This may be an opportunity for the CHP to carefully examine the successes and failures of its alliance-based strategy. The İYİ deputy Yavuz Ağırlioğlu<sup>124</sup> and the CHP deputy Gürsel Tekin<sup>125</sup> summed up the basis of the electoral coalition of 2023 in a single phrase: “*Adam gitsin!*” [Get him out of here!] In other words, the binding force behind the alliance was the end of Erdoğan's regime. Once again, the prospect of a general election in 2028 without Erdoğan in the picture changes the calculus. In that case the

122. “YSP milletvekilinden Kılıçdaroğlu'na çok sert Ümit Özdağ tepkisi” [One YSP Deputy's Very Strong Reaction to Kılıçdaroğlu and Ümit Özdağ], *Yeniçağ*, September 2, 2023, available at: [www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr](http://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr).

123. Interviews with the author (March 25-30, 2024).

124. Interview with the author (Ankara, June 22, 2022). Note that Yavuz Ağırlioğlu resigned from the İYİ at the end of March 2023 in protest against the discussions with the HDP.

125. Interview with the author (Istanbul, April 24, 2023).

CHP will likely be unable to build another very broad coalition and will have to make a choice. There are three possible options:

It could conceivably forge an alliance with one or more secular nationalist movements, capitalizing on widespread social trends and solidifying a coherent base of support. However, this could alienate the party from the Kurdish voters it won over for the 2023 elections. Furthermore, the parties in question face a highly uncertain future in the wake of the 2024 municipal elections. These dealt a heavy blow to the İYİ, which now looks sidelined, with no nationalist opposition party currently in a position to take its place.

An alliance with the pro-Kurdish movement would mark a radical change in approach, breaking with Kemalist conservatism and enabling a major reconfiguration driven by a progressive, liberal approach. Such an alliance might include small parties sympathetic to Kurdish issues like the DEVA. For the time being, however, this option is difficult to implement because of fundamental differences between the CHP and pro-Kurdish groups, and more generally the absence of any plan for peace with armed Kurdish militants.

Finally, we can imagine a situation where the CHP decides it can succeed without allies and goes it alone. This is counterintuitive on the face of it, but made more plausible by the 2024 municipal elections, where the party achieved a particularly high share of the vote without any significant alliances. In a single-round proportional representation system, where small parties have difficulty getting a foothold, the CHP can expect strategic voting in its favor.<sup>126</sup> In the two-round presidential election, it has a serious chance of remaining on into the second round and winning support from other opposition groups. This second option would invert the trend in Turkey since the AKP's rise to power. For years, until the MHP rallied, the AKP dominated the divided opposition. Faced with a newly strengthened CHP, it might be the AKP's turn to seek other alliances in an effort to avoid too severe a defeat.

## Rethinking the party's operations

Whatever ideological and strategic choices the CHP makes, the way it reaches its decisions is also important. Here we touch on one of the party's great weaknesses: its inability to listen to its base. Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy in the presidential election is a case in point. While the CHP's former leader won respect for his ability to bring opposition parties into alliance, public opinion was against him standing. Most polls conducted before March 2023 (when his candidacy was made official) predicted scores well below those

---

126. To be represented in parliament, a party must win over 7% of the national vote.



expected for İmamoğlu or Mansur Yavaş.<sup>127</sup> Despite this, after many months of discussions, the details of which have never been made public, the opposition coalition finally chose Kılıçdaroğlu as its candidate on March 2, 2023. This demonstrated both a failure to listen to party members and a failure on the CHP's part to heed the views of its partners. Reacting to the decision, Meral Akşener, the leader of the İYİ, angrily left the alliance for a period, claiming her own demands had been ignored.<sup>128</sup>

Kılıçdaroğlu's reaction after his election defeat is even more revealing: he refused to resign despite many calls to do so from civil society and party supporters, and stood for re-election at the party congress the following fall, only standing aside when he was defeated by Özel.<sup>129</sup> Again, this highly vertical culture is not specific to the CHP. Most Turkish political parties have grown out of movements centered on and led by a charismatic leader who keeps tight control of the system. But while supporters tolerate such an approach when it gives victory after victory – as with Erdoğan's AKP – it becomes frustrating when the defeats pile up.

This highly vertical leadership structure may also hinder the CHP at the local level. Its underperformance in Izmir in the 2024 municipal elections offers a clear illustration of this. The party's decisive victory in Istanbul and Ankara, and its performance nationally, overshadowed the fact that it won only 49% in Izmir, where its returns are usually far higher.<sup>130</sup> Tunç Soyer, the mayor from 2019 to 2024, wanted to stand for re-election, but the new CHP leadership refused to nominate him on the grounds – according to Soyer himself and several sources close to the party – that he had been too close to Kılıçdaroğlu.<sup>131</sup> Cemil Tugay, the mayor of Karşıyaka (one of the city's central districts), was selected in his place, a choice that angered some voters and party activists who saw it as a political decision that failed to take local realities into account. The CHP's unprecedentedly poor performance in the election gave substance to these concerns. The party's failure to heed local expectations may hobble it. Kılıçdaroğlu was

127. For instance, a Metropoll survey from November 2022 predicted that Yavaş and İmamoğlu would win against Erdoğan with 46.4% of the vote (against 39.7% for Erdoğan) and 42.9% (against 42%), respectively. Only Kılıçdaroğlu was predicted to lose with 39.4% (against 44.5%). See <https://web.archive.org>. Shortly beforehand, a study by the Yöneylem Institute predicted that all three would win, with Kılıçdaroğlu receiving only 43.6% of the vote, Ekrem İmamoğlu 47.9%, and Mansur Yavaş 56.3%. See T. Şahin, "Erdoğan, Kılıçdaroğlu, Mansur Yavaş ve İmamoğlu... Seçim anketleri hız kesmiyor! Bu sonuçlar çok konuşulur" [Erdoğan, Kılıçdaroğlu, Mansur Yavaş et İmamoğlu... The Polls Keep Coming! And the Results Are Causing a Stir], *MyNet*, November 3, 2022, available at: [www.mynet.com](http://www.mynet.com).

128. A. Denizeau, op. cit.

129. A. Andlauer, "Turquie: Özgür Özel prend les rênes du CHP (opposition)", RFI, November 5, 2023, available at: [www.rfi.fr](http://www.rfi.fr).

130. For instance, the CHP won 58% of the votes in the 2019 municipal elections. In the second round of the 2023 presidential election, Kılıçdaroğlu won 67.1%.

131. "İzmir için aday gösterilmeyen Tunç Soyer'den ilk açıklama" [Tunç Soyer Confirms for the First Time that He Has Not Been Selected as Candidate for Izmir], *Kısa Dalga*, March 25, 2024, available at: <https://kisadalganet>.



applauded for introducing new local candidates to regain the ground held by the AKP,<sup>132</sup> but the Izmir incident casts doubt on the ability of Özel's new team to pursue this project.

---

132. F. Bilâ, op. cit., pp. 90-91.

## Conclusion: What future, what team, and what candidate?

The next general election in Turkey will take place in 2028 unless Erdoğan leaves office early or dissolves the National Assembly before then. This gives the CHP plenty of time to overcome the challenges described above. By successfully establishing itself as the main political alternative in the years to come, the party seems to be rising from the ashes after several moribund decades. If it can clarify its ideological position, settle the question of alliances, and reform its overly rigid leadership structure, it will find itself in a very strong position for the coming elections. Its strategic choices on these questions will likely determine the nature of the team and the choice of candidate for the campaign. For the time being, we can only speculate on this.

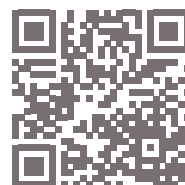
Within the CHP, there were two big winners in the 2024 municipal elections: Özel, the party's *genel başkan*, and İmamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul. Özel can boast of leading the CHP to its biggest victory since the 1970s, partially erasing the painful setback of 2023. İmamoğlu confirmed his status as an election winner, outpacing his main adversary by more than ten percentage points in the city which, for many, is the proving ground for any national political career. There are conflicting rumors about relations between the two men, but both will likely have a role to play in the party's efforts to win back power. While Özel is primarily seen as a party leader and campaign organizer, İmamoğlu has established himself as a charismatic figure capable of appealing to a range of voters. This suggests a possible division of roles in the battles to come, with Özel uniting the party, defining its strategy and its relationships with other opposition groups, and preparing it, especially for the legislative elections, while İmamoğlu uses his position as mayor of Istanbul as a springboard for a presidential candidacy.

Yavaş, the very popular mayor of Ankara, was once tipped to be a candidate for the presidency but is reportedly hesitant to seek national office. As a result, Özel and İmamoğlu seem to have a clear field for the upcoming contests. But Turkish political life is changing fast, and there may be surprises in store. The image of the phoenix rising from the ashes is tempting, certainly. But the other metaphor to evoke is the chimera, in the sense of a seductive but unattainable illusion first of all – and the 2023 elections provided a harsh reminder of this possibility – but also in the sense that the chimera, in myth, is a weird amalgamation of different animals: a fitting image, perhaps, for a party built on very different and sometimes conflicting strands of ideology. The CHP's divisions make it

fragile. The recent rift between İmamoğlu and Kaftancıoğlu, who represents the party's left wing, suggests the former may encounter internal opposition. A number of officials and activists have already criticized him for authoritarian tendencies and a lack of ideological firmness,<sup>133</sup> and it is possible that younger leaders hungry for change will emerge within the party. Furthermore, there are questions about Kılıçdaroğlu's next steps: for the time being, he has withdrawn from politics but still has loyalists in the party. Finally, the suggestion that Özel and İmamoğlu could work together assumes no serious crisis comes between them. Its long history and the complexity of its factions mean the CHP has always been fragile. There is no doubt Erdoğan and his supporters will exploit the CHP's flaws as soon as they become visible, and are waiting for an opportunity to show that the phoenix is merely a chimera.

---

133. Ifri research trip to Adiyaman, May 26-30, 2024.



27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris cedex 15 – France

[Ifri.org](http://Ifri.org)