



APRIL  
2023

## Political Coalitions in Turkey in the Run-Up to the 2023 Elections



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: 979-10-373-0708-8

© All rights reserved, Ifri, 2023

Cover: Politicians from Turkey's "Table of Six" opposition parties, Istanbul,  
December 15, 2022.

© Tolga İldun/Shutterstock

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

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

#### **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<sup>1</sup>

**Aurélien Denizeau** is a graduate of Sciences Po Paris in history and holds a doctorate from Inalco (National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations) in political science and international relations. His research focuses on Turkey's strategic vision and the evolution of its foreign policy.

He is the author of a doctoral dissertation devoted to the strategic and diplomatic vision of Turkish political Islam. His field of study includes the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, the internal dynamics of Turkey, and their impact on the country's foreign policy.

He is also interested in the issue of Turkish diasporas in Europe and Turkish-European relations. As a Turkish speaker, he has conducted numerous field studies in Turkey, and has worked, in collaboration with Ifri, on the pro-Kurdish HDP party, the Turkish media, the future of the EU-Turkey Customs Union, the *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland) doctrine, and the strategic influences to which President Erdoğan is subject.

---

1. This paper has been translated by Sam Ferguson.

# Executive Summary

The year 2023, already marked by a deadly double earthquake in the south-east of the country in February, is the year of the centenary of the Republic, but above all an election year for Turkey. The general elections (parliamentary and presidential) will take place on May 14 and are unanimously considered to be crucial for the political future of the country. The electoral campaign is polarized around two major coalitions: the People's Alliance, led by the presidential AKP and the MHP, which supports the re-election of President Erdoğan; and the Nation Alliance, formed by the main Kemalist party CHP with five other parties, and supporting Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as a presidential candidate. Two other coalitions are also present and could tip the election one way or the other: the Labor and Freedom Alliance, centered around the progressive and pro-Kurdish HDP, and the Ancestral Alliance, which supports the nationalist Sinan Oğan.

While this political configuration may seem familiar to European observers – where cross-party coalitions are common, especially in parliamentary regimes – there are indications, such as the tensions between the İYİ Party and its partners in the Nation Alliance over support for Kılıçdaroğlu, that call into question the nature of these coalitions: are they motivated by ideological proximity, or are they merely tactical tools for gaining power? In particular, these coalitions seem to derive from the nature of the Turkish political regime and its evolution over the last decade, with an ultra-presidentialization of the system under the successive presidential terms of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan which has led all political actors to position themselves in relation to his personal power. As socio-economic conditions weaken the AKP's electoral base, the prospects for this election seem more open than ever.

# Résumé

Année du centenaire de la République, d'ores et déjà marquée par un double séisme meurtrier dans le sud-est du pays en février, 2023 est également une année électorale pour la Turquie. Les élections générales (législatives et présidentielle) auront lieu le 14 mai et sont unanimement considérées comme cruciales pour l'avenir politique du pays. La campagne électorale s'est polarisée autour de deux grandes coalitions : l'Alliance du peuple, dirigée par le parti présidentiel AKP et le MHP, qui soutient la réélection du président Erdoğan ; et l'Alliance de la nation, formée par le grand parti kémaliste CHP avec cinq autres formations, et soutenant Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu comme candidat à la présidence. Deux autres coalitions sont également présentes et pourraient faire basculer le scrutin d'un côté ou de l'autre : l'Alliance pour le travail et la liberté autour du HDP progressiste et pro-kurde, et l'Alliance ancestrale, qui soutient le nationaliste Sinan Oğan.

Bien que cette configuration politique puisse sembler familière aux observateurs européens, où les coalitions entre partis sont fréquentes – notamment dans les régimes parlementaires, certains indices, tels que les tensions entre le İYİ et ses partenaires de l'Alliance de la nation sur le nom de Kılıçdaroğlu, remettent en question la nature de ces coalitions : sont-elles motivées par une proximité idéologique, ou ne constituent-elles que des outils tactiques pour la conquête du pouvoir. Ces coalitions semblent notamment dériver de la nature du régime politique turc et de son évolution au cours de la dernière décennie, avec une ultra-présidentialisation du système sous les mandats de Recep Tayyip Erdoğan qui a conduit l'ensemble des acteurs politiques à se positionner vis-à-vis de son pouvoir personnel. Alors que les conditions socio-économiques affaiblissent le socle électoral de l'AKP, les perspectives de ce scrutin semblent plus ouvertes que jamais.

# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>THE SPECIFICITY OF THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Socio-Economic Conditions Weakening the AKP’s Electoral Base .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>An Institutional Framework that Focuses Debate     on the Presidential Role .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>THE PEOPLE’S ALLIANCE: A PROCESS OF PARTY AMALGAMATION DESPITE IDEOLOGICAL CONVERGENCE .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>The MHP’s Decision to Join the People’s Alliance: A Foundational Act .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Party Identities Transcended by a Shared     National-Conservative Ideology .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>A Model that Does Not Support the Maintenance     of a Strong Party Identity .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>THE NATION ALLIANCE: AN ELECTORAL GROUPING WEAKENED BY THE HETEROGENEITY OF ITS MEMBERS .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>The Long and Difficult Quest to Unify the Opposition .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>A Platform Focused on Achieving Electoral Success .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>The Weaknesses of a Heterogeneous Alliance .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>OTHER ATTEMPTS AT FORMING COALITIONS .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>A Progressive, Pro-Kurdish Coalition That Could Swing     the Parliamentary Elections? .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>The Difficult Creation of an Alternative Nationalist Coalition .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>A POLITICAL LANDSCAPE STILL FRAUGHT WITH UNCERTAINTY .....</b>	<b>37</b>

# Introduction

Uncertainties surrounding the general elections (both parliamentary and presidential) scheduled for the spring of 2023 in Turkey have deepened as this pivotal vote approaches. The date itself was the subject of considerable speculation, and it was only in January that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (in office since 2014)<sup>2</sup> announced that they would be held on May 14, a few weeks before the end of his current term. The disaster of the two earthquakes that hit the southeast of the country on February 6 led observers to question whether the elections could still be held on this date. After a few days of uncertainty, and in the absence of consensus on the issue, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan chose not to postpone the election. No sooner had the announcement been made than the main opposition coalition revealed, on March 7, its presidential candidate: Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, chairman of the Kemalist party CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* or Republican People's Party) since 2010. This choice of candidate was not unanimous across the coalition, and for several days it caused the CHP's main partner, the İYİ Party (*İyi Parti* or the Good Party), a nationalist movement hostile to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to threaten to leave the coalition.<sup>3</sup> This was a brief but intense internal crisis, which gave rise to doubts about the cohesion of the partisan alliances that had been formed with a view to contesting elections of such symbolic importance, since the year 2023 marks the centenary of the Turkish Republic.

The campaigning for these elections has been dominated by the opposition between two major coalitions: the People's Alliance, made up primarily of the presidential party AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or Justice and Development Party, in power since 2002) and the MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* or Nationalist Action Party), and seeking the re-election of President Erdoğan; and the Nation Alliance, built around the pact between the CHP and the İYİ Party, with Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as its standard-bearer. The two electoral groupings each include smaller partners, and two other coalitions are also on the scene: the Labor and Freedom Alliance, centered around the progressive, pro-Kurdish HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* or Peoples' Democratic Party), which is not fielding a candidate in the presidential election, and the Ancestral Alliance, which

---

2. He was previously prime minister from 2003 to 2014, and the main leader of the AKP since its victory in the 2002 parliamentary elections.

3. Following internal negotiations within the opposition coalition, it was decided that although Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu would indeed be the joint presidential candidate, he would commit to appointing Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and Ankara Mayor Mansur Yavaş as vice-presidents, whose candidacy was desired by the İYİ Party.

supports the nationalist presidential candidate Sinan Oğan. Finally, Muharrem İnce, who split from the CHP, is leading an independent presidential bid.

This electoral configuration may instinctively remind the Western European observer of the patterns found in major parliamentary democracies. Germany, for example, traditionally sees two coalitions come together to contest elections: one formed from two large center-right parties, the CDU (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* or Christian Democratic Union of Germany) and the CSU (*Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern* or Christian Social Union in Bavaria – the Bavarian equivalent, although more conservative, of the CDU), and the other formed by the center-left SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or Social Democratic Party of Germany) and the environmentalist party. The formation of these coalitions allows for the creation of absolute majorities in parliament, which can then determine the political tenor of the government. Often, alliances that include smaller parties (such as the Liberal Democratic Party in the German example) allow the latter to play the role of kingmaker, and to bring about a change in political leadership. Although the Turkish political landscape, centered around the two large coalitions described above (and which have now been in existence for several years), may at first glance bring to mind this type of configuration, certain details, such as the tensions that have emerged between the İYİ Party and its partners, raise questions about the nature of these coalitions. Do they really arise from the ideological proximity of the parties involved, or are they merely a tactical instrument for the conquest of power? The very great diversity of the political movements present could lead to a splintering of the vote among a large number of parties – a situation that is avoided by the formation of these major groupings.

In reality, the principle behind the coalitions seems to derive from the nature of the Turkish political system and its evolution over the past decade. First, the requirement since 1982 for parties to pass a threshold of 10% of the vote – lowered to 7% in 2022 – in order to enter parliament has traditionally led small parties to seek alliances in order to overcome this “barrier”. But above all, the ultra-presidentialization of the system during Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s terms in office has led all political actors to position themselves in relation to his personal power, whether they support him or oppose him. This focus on one man and the regime he has shaped simplifies the divide, relegating ideological questions to the background.

However, the two major coalitions are not of the same nature. The People’s Alliance, which supports Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is primarily the result of an ideological convergence among its members, which makes it particularly strong – but at the expense of the specific identities of the parties that make it up. The Nation Alliance, on the other hand, was built on the desire, shared by very different movements, to bring an end to Recep



Tayyip Erdoğan's presidential regime. This union is therefore not the result of a convergence of overall vision, but of tactical and political necessity. This fundamental difference largely explains the fragility of this opposition, which, unlike the presidential bloc, struggles to maintain its unity. This instability is increased by the fact that other opposition movements, of a pro-Kurdish or nationalist tendency, are operating in the same political space and also seem tempted to form alliances of their own.

# The Specificity of the 2023 General Elections

The political context in early 2023 is unprecedented: despite their great disparity and uncertain reliability, since 2021 polls have regularly suggested the possibility of an AKP defeat. Not only could the presidential party lose the parliamentary majority it has held until now thanks to the MHP's support, but it even seems possible that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan could be defeated in the presidential election. This situation seemed hardly imaginable even a few years earlier. Admittedly, the elections of June 7, 2015, saw the AKP lose its parliamentary majority, a first setback after a series of uninterrupted victories since 2002. But in hindsight, this failure seems more like an anomaly than a real setback for the AKP. In fact, the opposition parties then proved unable to unite to form a parliamentary majority, leading to the organization of new elections, which the AKP won by a large margin (49.5% of the vote, providing 317 seats out of 550). Moreover, although he had been involved in the parliamentary campaign, it was not Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself who had been defeated. In June 2018, the parliamentary and presidential elections actually resulted in a new success for the AKP-MHP coalition, which obtained a parliamentary majority (344 seats out of 600), while the President was re-elected in the first round with 52.6% of the vote.

However, this electoral momentum was broken in the municipal elections held the following year, when the AKP notably lost the mayoralties of Istanbul and Ankara. The erosion of support for the People's Alliance is undoubtedly linked to the deterioration of the economic situation and the emergence of new generations who are less responsive to the AKP's conservative discourse; but it can also be explained by an institutional context that places the presidential figure at the heart of the political game, thus creating unity both among his supporters and his opponents.

## Socio-Economic Conditions Weakening the AKP's Electoral Base

Since 2018, Turkey has been experiencing a worsening fiscal and economic crisis, to the point that this has become the main concern of the electorate. In an Optimar Institute survey from March 2022, 75.8% of respondents

considered economic issues to be the country's "most serious problem";<sup>4</sup> a survey by the Sonar Institute in June 2022 found a similar result (75.4%).<sup>5</sup> Turkey has experienced a particularly worrying rate of inflation, reaching a record 85% year-on-year in October 2022, according to official figures, although these are disputed by independent institutions, which provide even more alarming figures.<sup>6</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's supporters explain the situation by pointing to external factors (a "trade war" led by U.S. President Donald Trump in the summer of 2018, the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020, and war in Ukraine from February 2022...). But his opponents see the current economic problems as the consequences of a heterodox economic policy that, by refusing to raise interest rates, leads to the devaluation of the lira.

The government has suffered even more serious consequences from the economic crisis as a result of the fact that its electoral base is essentially drawn from the working classes, which are the most vulnerable to shocks of this nature. While the high rate of inflation has greatly penalized Turks who use foreign currencies, and therefore belong to a more privileged social class, the rapid increase in the price of certain basic foodstuffs, such as meat, has hit the entire population and made the situation of the least well-off even more precarious. In December 2022, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced a package of measures that were supposed to maintain the purchasing power of the poorest, including a 54.5% increase in the minimum wage<sup>7</sup> and the abolition of the minimum legal age for receiving a pension. But these measures are proving to be insufficient to offset the effects of price rises.<sup>8</sup> The deterioration of economic purchasing power therefore lies at the heart of the election campaign, which is structured around two competing discourses: by emphasizing the role of external factors, the ruling coalition suggests that a new leader would not be able to redress the situation; the opposition, meanwhile, argues that the crisis is linked to a lack of confidence of foreign investors and partners in the figure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which is leading them to sanction the Turkish economy. In fact, the debate revolves more around the figure of the President than around ideological issues: in terms of policy, although the opposition is in favor of greater autonomy for the Central Bank, it proposes a classic economic program, not far removed from that pursued by the AKP

---

4. A. Selvi, "Ekonomi ve Ukrayna savaşı anketlere nasıl yansdı" [How the Economy and the War in Ukraine Are Perceived in Opinion Polls], *Hürriyet*, March 24, 2022.

5. H. Bayrakçı, "Türkiye Genel Siyasi Eğilimler Araştırması – Haziran 2022" [Research on General Political Trends in Turkey – June 2022], *Sonar Araştırma*, June 2022, available at: <https://sonararastirma.com.tr>.

6. M. Debelloir, "Turquie : l'inflation continue d'exploser et atteint 85 %", *Cryptoast*, November 3, 2022, available at : <https://cryptoast.fr>.

7. S. Belhassem, "Turquie : Erdogan annonce une hausse du salaire minimum de 54 % à partir de janvier", *La Tribune*, December 25, 2022.

8. Based on interviews conducted by the author in Istanbul and Ankara during January 2023.

in the 2000s,<sup>9</sup> and which does not challenge the economically liberal model that has been followed in recent decades. The debate is not, therefore, concerned with systemic change, but rather with the practices of the President. As the economic advisor to one of the leaders of the Nation Alliance put it, at the height of the crisis: “the country’s economic foundations are sound; if Recep Tayyip Erdoğan leaves power, the policy of [controlled] interest rates will cease and investors will return to Turkey”.<sup>10</sup>

Another structural factor could explain the gradual erosion of the AKP’s rating in popularity surveys: there is now talk of a generational shift. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s party embodied a new conservative generation, born in the 1960s through to the 1980s, which grew up in an environment of military-controlled re-Islamization. Military leaders, together with liberal-conservative governments such as that of Turgut Özal (1983-1989), produced a political offering that combined state-controlled Islam with traditional nationalism, in order to cut the ground from under the Islamist movements, and also because they saw religious values as a bulwark against communism.<sup>11</sup> Several generations that came of age in the 1990s and 2000s were imbued with the values of this Turkish-Islamic synthesis. Paradoxically, the restrictions that were imposed in this same period on the public expression of Islam (for example, regarding the veil, the wearing of which was forbidden in public institutions) led a whole sector of the electorate to support the AKP project, which defended the freedom of religious practice.<sup>12</sup> However, the generations coming of age in the early 2020s are quite different. Since their childhood, they have seen only the AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in power, in a context of growing authoritarianism. These generations, who are both more urban<sup>13</sup> and more educated than their predecessors, have moved away from the religious conservatism that characterized the AKP’s earliest electorate.<sup>14</sup> The instrumentalization of religion by the ruling party has also provoked opposition from young people, who are much less religious than their elders. It is obviously difficult to quantify this phenomenon, but religious activities now seem to attract fewer young people than before, and more and more young adults are describing themselves as agnostics, deists, or,

---

9. It should be remembered that one of the main figures of the “Table of Six” – the informal name given to the Nation Alliance in 2023 – is none other than Ali Babacan, who was Minister for the Economy in the AKP government from 2002 to 2007.

10. Interview with the author in Istanbul, June 25, 2022.

11. G. Dorronsoro, *Que veut la Turquie ? Ambitions et stratégies internationales*, Paris: Autrement, 2009, pp. 34-37.

12. D. Billion, *La Turquie : Un partenaire incontournable*, Paris: Eyrolles, 2021, pp. 75-78.

13. At the start of the 2010s, more than 75% of the population lived in urban areas, compared to an average of 25% in the 1960s (H. Bozarslan, *Histoire de la Turquie : De l’Empire ottoman à nos jours*, Paris: Tallandier, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2015, p. 442).

14. R. Soyulu, “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).

more rarely, atheists.<sup>15</sup> If the phenomenon persists, we can draw the hypothesis that the AKP's electoral base will tend to shrink with the change of generations: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will then have difficulty renewing his voter base.

The gradual erosion of support for the AKP thus seems to be linked to a political weakening of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Whether we are talking about the economic crisis, accusations of authoritarianism, or challenges to a conservative model of society, everything points to the figure of the President. Consequently, in the current institutional context, a personal failure on the part of the President would lead to the rout of his party.

## An Institutional Framework that Focuses Debate on the Presidential Role

The 2017 constitutional reform is the latest and most far-reaching amendment made by the AKP to the 1982 Constitution. Supporters of the successive reforms have generally justified them by pointing to the authoritarian nature of the Constitution, which was adopted under military patronage in the aftermath of the 1980 coup. Conversely, opponents of the reforms have seen them as an attempt to change the system to benefit the majority party. In any case, the 2017 reform is notable for the breadth of powers it grants to the President of the Republic,<sup>16</sup> transforming Turkey from a parliamentary system led by an executive duo of a president and a prime minister to a presidential system that confers considerable power on the head of state. This role now combines the presidential function with that of head of government, since the post of prime minister has been abolished. The president is therefore responsible for choosing a vice-president (with very limited powers) and all ministers. The president also has the power to govern by decree and to declare a state of emergency. The reform also connected the political survival of the president to that of the Parliament (whose members increased from 550 to 600), by making their elections coincide. The president can therefore dissolve Parliament, but he must then stand for re-election; conversely, parliamentarians can dismiss the president, but in this case they must dissolve their own assembly and accept a new parliamentary vote. Although the redesigned regime largely benefits the authoritarian figure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, it does impose some limitations on him. First, the president can only serve two full terms. Second, in the absence of a parliamentary majority he would retain certain capabilities, but he would be limited in his ability to make laws as he

---

15. D. Minoui, "Turquie : quand la jeune génération boude discrètement la religion", *Le Figaro*, February 16, 2021.

16. It is worth noting that President Erdoğan's election by direct universal suffrage in 2014 already effectively granted him more power than his predecessors, who had been elected by the Parliament.

wishes, and especially to make further constitutional changes. Indeed, a change to the constitution requires a referendum and the support of at least 360 (out of 600) members of parliament (MPs), or, alternatively, the support of 400 MPs if there is no referendum.

In this context, the parliamentary and presidential elections are closely linked. Competing in these elections requires both the formation of an electoral coalition that is likely to win a majority in Parliament, and the selection of a presidential candidate who will be capable of leading this coalition. However, the two main blocs present today seem to be adopting opposing strategies to deal with this situation. In the People's Alliance, which supports the current presidentialist system, the dynamics of party politics are disappearing in favor of support for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Meanwhile, the Nation Alliance, which favors a return to parliamentarianism, is built on a coalition of political parties, and in theory their chosen presidential candidate has no other role than that of helping them to win power to implement their shared policy program.

# The People's Alliance: A Process of Party Amalgamation despite Ideological Convergence

The People's Alliance, centered around its support for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was formed in the wake of the 2017 referendum and with a view to contesting upcoming general elections. Its creation was first announced on November 30, 2017, when Devlet Bahçeli, President of the MHP, revealed on television the existence of talks to create an electoral pact, which, he suggested, "we can call a 'presidential alliance'". On February 20, 2018, President Erdoğan confirmed the formation and name of this alliance between the AKP and the MHP. In May 2018, the BBP (*Büyük Birlik Partisi* or Great Unity Party), a small party with radical Islamist and nationalist tendencies, joined this coalition. The alliance is effectively cemented by the MHP's decision to abandon its former oppositional role and join forces with the majority party. This decision is consistent with the change in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's positioning, which, since 2015, has moved closer to a much more nationalist stance. This coalition is not, therefore, simply a tactical electoral pact, but rather an agreement based on ideological convergence. The very nature of the presidentialist regime nevertheless leaves Recep Tayyip Erdoğan a great deal of autonomy of movement, and it is above all the future of the MHP as a party that is called into question.

## The MHP's Decision to Join the People's Alliance: A Foundational Act

In contrast to the coalition of the "Table of Six" (the constituent parties that make up the Nation Alliance) that faces it, the People's Alliance is based on a bipartisan understanding. Although the BBP is a formal member and Yeniden Refah,<sup>17</sup> another Islamist movement, also announced in March 2023 that it would join, the low level of electoral support and lack of public recognition<sup>18</sup> enjoyed by these two small parties made them marginal

---

17. The New Prosperity Party, founded by Fatih Erbakan, the son of the Islamist Necmettin Erbakan. Its name refers to the Prosperity Party (*Refah Partisi*) founded in 1983 by Necmettin Erbakan, prime minister from 1996 to 1997, which was banned in 1998. This party gave rise to many figures of Turkish political Islam, including those who founded the AKP in 2001.

18. The BBP obtained only one MP in 2018, which was thanks to its alliance with the AKP and MHP, and registers less than 1% of public support in polls. The same is true of Yeniden Refah,

to the coalition from the outset. It is therefore the MHP's decision to join forces with the AKP and President Erdoğan that has been the real driving force behind this coalition. In terms of numbers, the MHP received around 10% of public support in the 2010s and has had several dozen MPs,<sup>19</sup> which makes it a significant electoral partner. Above all, and unlike the BBP and Yeniden Refah, the MHP has an important historical and symbolic grounding in Turkey. It was formally founded in 1969 by Alparslan Türkeş,<sup>20</sup> one of the military officers involved in the 1960 coup d'état, and it has always been the main incarnation of radical Turkish nationalism. Although the MHP has sometimes made pacts with religious parties, it presents itself as Kemalist, nationalist, and secular. Until the mid-2010s it opposed the AKP in the name of these principles. During the 2015 parliamentary campaign, Devlet Bahçeli, who has led the party with an iron fist since the death of Türkeş in 1997, even declared that he intended to have Recep Tayyip Erdoğan prosecuted.<sup>21</sup> The MHP thus appears to have played a structuring role in modern Turkish political history: it represents the entire nationalist fringe that opposed the liberal measures of the AKP, remaining attached to traditional values while rejecting political Islam. The agreement between this movement and the AKP reflects not only a strategic move by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, but also the latter's change in ideological posture during the 2010s.

These ideological considerations explain the fierce opposition between the MHP and the AKP that existed throughout the 2010s. The criticisms made by the nationalist MHP related to symbolic, security, and strategic concerns. First, the MHP claims a Kemalist heritage, based in particular on secularism. Its narrative thus differs profoundly from that of the AKP, which, during its first years in power, questioned the Jacobin nation-state model inherited from Kemalism. But above all the nationalists criticized the "Kurdish Opening" undertaken by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, arguing that the AKP's policy of granting cultural rights, and particularly linguistic rights,<sup>22</sup> to the Kurds contravened the "great taboo of the Republic"<sup>23</sup> and undermined the very foundations of Turkish nationalism as it had been conceived throughout the twentieth century. From 2012, this "opening" was

---

which has no MPs (its creation dates back to November 2018, that is, after the general election of June 2018).

19. The MHP received 13% of the vote and 18 MPs in the June 2011 parliamentary elections, and 12% of the vote and 40 MPs in the November 2015 elections.

20. The MHP was the successor to the CKMP (*Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi* or Republican Peasants' Nation Party), which was founded in 1958 and headed by Alparslan Türkeş in 1965.

21. "MHP lideri Devlet Bahçeli: Böyle giderse Erdoğan'ın sonu Zeynel Abidin Bin Ali gibi olacak" [MHP Leader Devlet Bahçeli: If He Continues Like This, Erdoğan Will Meet the Same End as Zine elAbidine Ben Ali], *Hürriyet*, March 17, 2015.

22. G. Perrier, "Progressivement, Ankara autorise la langue et la culture kurdes à sortir de la clandestinité", *Le Monde*, December 9, 2009.

23. D. Schmid, "L'AKP face au tabou kurde", *Repères sur la Turquie*, Ifri, No. 3, June 8, 2009, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).



combined with negotiations with the separatist movement PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* or Kurdistan Workers' Party)<sup>24</sup> – a group that is strongly condemned, not only by the MHP, but also by the main Kemalist party, the CHP. Finally, the AKP's foreign policy increasingly provoked the MHP, as the latter considered that it prioritized religious solidarity and support for Sunni Muslim movements over the defense of national interests. In particular, the MHP criticized the AKP's position on the Syrian civil war (from 2011) and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as the MHP was in favor of maintaining diplomatic relations with Bashar al-Assad and a good relationship with Israel. In other words, until around 2015, the MHP's opposition to the Erdoğanist movement was primarily driven by ideological considerations, with the movement embodying the nationalist sector of public opinion that opposes both political Islam and the liberalization initiatives of the AKP.

The gradual rapprochement of the MHP with the AKP over the past decade therefore testifies more to a change in the positioning of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan than it does to a change in the direction of the nationalist movement, which has broadly maintained its original ideological stance. The year 2015 is very important in this respect. Although the AKP failed to secure a majority in the parliamentary elections of June 2015, the party managed to remain in power as a result of the opposition parties' inability to form a governing coalition; the MHP and pro-Kurdish HDP were notably unable to make common cause. At the same time, the effects of the Syrian civil war were making themselves felt in Turkey itself: the country was hit by attacks attributed to Daesh, and the PKK, which accused Turkey of being sympathetic to the jihadist movement, resumed hostilities.<sup>25</sup> The summer of 2015 was thus marked by the first strikes by the Turkish army in northern Syria and by a situation of quasi-civil war between the military and the PKK in southeastern Turkey. Within a few months, President Erdoğan radically changed his discourse: he officially renounced the negotiation process with the PKK, declaring the latter (together with the HDP, which he associated in his speeches with the terrorist movement) to be his main enemy, and thereby effectively relegated to the background his fight against Bashar al-Assad's regime. The failed coup of July 15, 2016 brought this change to its conclusion. The Turkish president accused the Islamist brotherhood of Fethullah Gülen – with whom relations had deteriorated from 2010 onward, before being broken off entirely in 2013<sup>26</sup> – of having organized the coup, and he drove out thousands of civil servants

---

24. This movement, founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan, demands first the independence, then the autonomy of the Kurdish provinces of Turkey. It is classified as a terrorist group by Ankara, but also by the United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom.

25. "Le PKK revendique le meurtre de policiers turcs", *Le Figaro*, July 22, 2015.

26. B. Balci, "Islam et politique en Turquie : alliance et rupture entre le mouvement de Fethullah Gülen et le Parti de la Justice et du Développement de Recep Tayyip Erdoğan", *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, Vol. 28, Nos. 1-2, 2021, pp. 144-149.

and military personnel who were accused, rightly or wrongly, of being close to them. The replacements for these expelled personnel were mostly drawn from the pool of nationalists, and especially from among the military officers who had been sidelined during the 2000s, and who were now rehabilitated or recalled to the world of politics. Incidentally, the summer of 2016 was marked by a clear rapprochement with Russia, which allowed Turkey to obtain Moscow's approval to intervene in Syria against Kurdish and jihadist militias, but without attacking the Syrian regime. By the end of 2016, there was thus no longer a major ideological divergence between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the MHP: the Turkish president had renounced his "Kurdish Opening" and designated the PKK as his primary enemy; he had rehabilitated the army leaders who had been sidelined, and drawn closer to the military establishment; and finally, he had undertaken to pursue a less ideological foreign policy, which led him to smooth out his differences with Russia and Israel.

It was in this context that the MHP started to change its own discourse, reducing its criticism of the Islamic-conservative movement while the latter, following the direction set by its leader, adopted a nationalist and security-oriented line. The alliance between the two parties was therefore not the cause, but the result of an ideological convergence. The first sign of this alliance appeared on the occasion of the constitutional referendum of 2017. While the CHP campaigned in favor of the "no" vote, the MHP supported the proposal, which was finally adopted with 51.4% of the vote – although the validity of this ballot was widely questioned.<sup>27</sup> It only remained for the two movements to formalize their alliance, which they did in early 2018.

The protocol<sup>28</sup> that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Devlet Bahçeli signed to seal their agreement is interesting in that it defined the date of 2023 as a common goal from the outset. It was therefore conceived from the beginning as a long-term alliance rather than a one-off pact. This text also designates Erdoğan as the only shared presidential candidate, automatically ruling out the prospect of a candidate from the MHP. This is a major difference from the Nation Alliance, whose parties each supported a different presidential candidate in the 2018 election. The results of the 2018 election consolidated the alliance: as the AKP obtained 42.6% of the vote and only 295 seats out of 600, it did not hold an absolute majority in Parliament, and could only muster a majority with the support of the 49 MPs of the MHP. In other words, the support of the nationalist party had become essential for governing.

---

27. L. Mas, "Turquie: bourrage d'urnes et fraudes en série pendant le référendum", *France 24*, April 17, 2017.

28. "Cumhur İttifakı Protokolü'nün tam metni ortaya çıktı" [The Full Text of the People's Alliance Protocol Has Been Revealed], *Star*, May 4, 2018, available at: [www.star.com](http://www.star.com).

## Party Identities Transcended by a Shared National-Conservative Ideology

The AKP-MHP electoral pact derives much of its strength from the ideological convergence of the two movements, which have very largely aligned their public discourses. At the same time, President Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian style has alienated the liberal fringe of his movement from him. In fact, in its early years the AKP had pursued a pro-European platform, favoring the opening of Turkish society and the liberalization of its public life. This stance, which was personified by Ali Babacan, twice Minister for the Economy (2002-2007, 2009-2014) and chief negotiator for accession to the European Union (2005-2009), was later gradually sidelined. Furthermore, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's break with Fethullah Gülen's brotherhood deprived the AKP of the support of Islamist activists, whose entry into public institutions and the security services had previously been facilitated. This double loss on the part of the AKP – of its liberal wing and part of its support from religious activism – has favored the rise within the presidential party of figures with a more national-conservative profile. Süleyman Soylu, Minister of the Interior since 2016, is a perfect example of this trend.<sup>29</sup> His background does not lie in political Islam, but in the liberal-conservative, but secular, Democrat Party; he only joined the AKP in 2012. Once in office, he had HDP mayors arrested, and actively participated in purges of former Gülenist activists, which earned him the approval of nationalists.

At the same time, the MHP's rapprochement with the AKP has led to a fracture within the former party. The campaign for the constitutional referendum in April 2017 brought these difficulties to a head: a number of MHP leaders and MPs distanced themselves from Devlet Bahçeli's choices at that time. The dissenters, led by Meral Akşener and Koray Aydın, eventually chose to break with the movement and to found their own party, the İYİ Party. Meral Akşener became its president and Koray Aydın its vice-president. However, these defectors mostly came from the secular wing of the MHP, which was very critical of political Islam.<sup>30</sup> This split of the secular and anti-Islamist wing from the MHP – mirroring the departure of liberals from the AKP – has favored the more conservative tendency of the original party.

The AKP, deprived of its liberals and the Gülenists, and the MHP, deprived of its secular wing, thus find themselves on an ideological path that is reminiscent of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis conceived by

29. "Süleyman Soylu kimdir? İşte Süleyman Soylu'nun hayatı ve siyasi kariyeri hakkında bilgiler..." [Who Is Süleyman Soylu? Here Is Information about Süleyman Soylu's Life and Political Career...], *Sözcü*, April 12, 2020, available at: [www.sozcu.com](http://www.sozcu.com).

30. A. Bonzon and A. Levent, "Meral Akşener, une 'louve' nationaliste face à Erdoğan", *Slate*, April 27, 2018, available at: [www.slate.fr](http://www.slate.fr).

conservative circles in the 1980s. By attempting to reconcile nationalism with the defense of traditional religious values, they are proposing to find a complementarity between Sunni Islam and the Turkish nation, arguing that Islam has provided Turkey with its spiritual identity, while Turkish nationalism has protected the Muslim religious model from being distorted by the Western world or the communists.<sup>31</sup> This ideological stance can be found today in the public speeches of both the AKP and the MHP. Thus, for example, the return of the Hagia Sophia to the status of a mosque in 2020 was welcomed by both parties: while AKP spokesman Ömer Çelik attacked foreign states that had condemned the decision,<sup>32</sup> Devlet Bahçeli declared that “the Hagia Sophia Mosque must be returned to the hearts of Muslims, and its doors must of course be opened to worship”.<sup>33</sup> More recently, Süleyman Soylu spoke on this same subject in a statement that combined religious vocabulary with nationalist sentiments.<sup>34</sup>

## A Model that Does Not Support the Maintenance of a Strong Party Identity

While this clear ideological convergence makes it easier to maintain the coalition, it also raises the question of the ability of each of the parties in the coalition to maintain its own identity. Officially, the People’s Alliance is based on a pragmatic agreement between parties that share common objectives, but where each retains its own identity, according to a classic coalition model. On the MHP side, there is even a certain insistence on the conditionality of the alliance: it can only continue to hold as long as the AKP maintains the ideological line adopted in recent years. Mevlüt Karakaya, MP for Adana and vice-president of the MHP, described his party as being “extremely committed to the fight against all terrorist organizations, including the PKK and the Gülen movement”, and as being “satisfied with the government’s efforts” and “determined to support it to the end”.<sup>35</sup> On this basis, he concluded that “there is no problematic element” within the alliance. However, he added that this issue of the fight against terrorism can be considered as “a red line for the MHP”. In other words, the party would not accept an alliance with a government that enters into talks with the PKK or the Gülen movement – as the AKP had done until the mid-2010s. A former MHP candidate who had previously stood in the

---

31. T. Jossieran, *La nouvelle puissance turque : L'adieu à Mustapha Kemal*, Paris: Ellipses, 2010, p. 26.

32. “AKP Sözcüsü Çelik’ten Ayasofya açıklaması” [Statement on the Hagia Sophia by AKP Spokesman Çelik], *Yeniçağ*, July 12, 2020, available at: [www.yenicaggazetesi.com](http://www.yenicaggazetesi.com).

33. “Son dakika... MHP lideri Bahçeli’den Ayasofya açıklaması” [Last Minute... Statement on the Hagia Sophia by MHP Leader Bahçeli], *Hürriyet*, June 14, 2020, available at: [www.hurriyet.com](http://www.hurriyet.com).

34. “Süleyman Soylu: Ayasofya-i Kebir Cami-i Şerifi bu ülkenin namusu ve istikbalinin garantisidir” [Süleyman Soylu: The Hagia Sophia Mosque Is the Guarantee of this Country’s Honor and Future], *Sürmanşet Haber*, December 11, 2022, available at: [www.surmansethaber.net](http://www.surmansethaber.net).

35. Interview with the author in Ankara, June 22, 2022.

parliamentary elections expressed this point even more frankly: “If the AKP enters into a new negotiation process with the PKK, or if it questions the fundamentals of the Turkish Republic, we will obviously break off the alliance”.<sup>36</sup> These elements may suggest that the government coalition allows each of its actors a certain autonomy in the expression of their political identity.

However, observation of the facts leads one to wonder whether the AKP’s partners are able to resist being absorbed and losing their own party identity. In terms of foreign policy, the example of the Uyghur issue illustrates the constraints that the MHP might face in expressing its ideological vision. Traditionally, the majority of the Turkish nationalist movement has strongly supported this persecuted Turkish-speaking minority in China.<sup>37</sup> In June 2019, the party found itself adopting a position on this issue that was at odds with its electoral base: after an İYİ Party MP tabled a proposal for a parliamentary inquiry into the Chinese government’s oppression of Uyghurs, AKP MPs voted against the proposal and the MPs of the MHP abstained, which led to the proposal being rejected by the parliament.<sup>38</sup> A few months earlier, an HDP MP had placed the MHP in an awkward situation by criticizing the tolerance of the AKP and its allies in relation to the Chinese repression in Xinjiang.<sup>39</sup> Many internet users close to the nationalist movement expressed their surprise at seeing that a pro-Kurdish MP was more committed to this cause than the MHP, while it is traditionally strong in Pan-Turkist organizations. Although the hesitancy of the MHP to adopt a stronger position on this subject can be explained by the desire not to break up the coalition over a matter that it perceives as being of secondary importance, it shows that it can be difficult for a party to support the government without losing its political identity. The same questions arise in relation to the agreement formalized on March 11, 2023 between the AKP and Hür Dava Partisi (or the Free Cause Party), a group that unusually presents itself as both Islamist and a supporter of Kurdish autonomy. Although it did not formally join the People’s Alliance, but only made a bipartisan agreement with the AKP,<sup>40</sup> its support for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s candidacy makes it a de facto ally of the MHP, which poses a challenge to the latter’s nationalist orthodoxy. Such problems are less relevant in the case of the BBP, which criticized the MHP in the 1990s for not sufficiently integrating the defense of religion in its nationalist discourse, and which therefore seems perfectly compatible with

---

36. Interview with the author in Ankara, November 3, 2022.

37. T. Bilener, *La Turquie et la Chine : Une nouvelle convergence en Eurasie*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2019, pp. 239-240.

38. S. Oktay, “Turkey’s Phantom Coalition: The AKP-MHP Partnership and Turkish Foreign Policy”, *APSA MENA Politics Newsletter*, Vol. 3, No. 1, spring 2020, p. 18.

39. The speech of the HDP MP was shared on his Twitter account, available at: [www.twitter.com](https://www.twitter.com).

40. “HÜDA-PAR supports People’s Alliance in Türkiye elections”, *Daily Sabah*, March 19, 2023, available at: [www.dailysabah.com](https://www.dailysabah.com).

the ideological foundations of the People's Alliance (as is also the case of Yeniden Refah); yet, for this very reason, both the BBP and Yeniden Refah struggle to distinguish themselves from their two larger partners, and it seems possible that these smaller parties could be absorbed by either the AKP or the MHP.

In fact, the future of the MHP seems to depend heavily on its degree of success in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The party has been slipping in the polls in the first quarter of 2023, regularly falling below the 7% threshold needed to enter parliament. Yet it is vital for the MHP not only to reach this threshold, but also to achieve a high enough vote share to demonstrate that it represents a significant proportion of the electorate, and to have enough MPs so as to be indispensable to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for securing a majority. The party could then use this relative success to maintain its own ideological line and present itself as a loyal, but politically distinct ally of the AKP. On the other hand, if the election results confirm these signs of the MHP's declining electoral importance, it will become more difficult for it to avoid being absorbed by the majority party. The withdrawal, weakening, or disappearance of Devlet Bahçeli could ultimately weaken the MHP as an autonomous party. This situation would result in a gradual departure of officials and activists who are attached to the maintenance of a distinct party identity, and would effectively lead to an increasing marginalization of the party.

The People's Alliance therefore appears more like a gradual fusion of movements that are united in support of President Erdoğan's policies than like the sort of electoral coalition seen in parliamentary regimes. It is both more solid than such coalitions, as it is based on deep ideological convergences, but also more problematic for the AKP's partners, as it makes it difficult for the latter to exist outside the alliance (which perhaps explains the particular position of Huda Par, which supports the alliance without formally becoming a member). Although this situation has little impact on the BBP and Yeniden Refah, which, in any case, play a very marginal role on the political scene, it is more worrying for the MHP, which has historically represented a major part of public opinion that is attached to a position of intransigent nationalism.

# **The Nation Alliance: An Electoral Grouping Weakened by the Heterogeneity of Its Members**

The Nation Alliance, which, according to the polls, is the main political force opposing the People's Alliance, is similarly composed of a coalition of several parties, some of which are firmly rooted in Turkish political history. However, rather than being based on ideological convergence, it is the result of a very pragmatic realization by various opposition movements that they need to unite in order to come to power. It took many years for this realization to culminate in an apparently effective strategy. Nonetheless, the tensions that arose over the nomination of a shared presidential candidate revealed divisions in the alliance. These divisions are due to the nature of the platform: unlike the People's Alliance, the Nation Alliance is founded more on the goal of achieving an electoral objective than anything else. It is made up of very diverse parties, and while this heterogeneous nature makes it stronger in some ways, it also makes its unity more fragile.

## **The Long and Difficult Quest to Unify the Opposition**

Until the beginning of the 2010s, the context was largely unfavorable to the construction of an opposition coalition. The AKP had a virtually hegemonic dominance over the Turkish political scene, enjoying a comfortable parliamentary majority, genuine support from public opinion, and a degree of goodwill from international partners. The pro-Kurdish opposition was limited in its access to Parliament and still carried little political weight, especially as a result of the fact that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government made repeated signs of openness toward the Kurdish electorate. The opposition was therefore reduced to the historic Kemalist party, the CHP, which was often then supported by a weakened MHP. The Kemalists, with electoral scores far too low to entertain hopes of overturning the balance of power,<sup>41</sup> were content to be the formal opposition to an uncontested conservative bloc. However, 2013 marked a turning point. The so-called "Gezi" movement, which started with demonstrations aimed at protecting

---

41. The CHP obtained 19.4% of the vote in the 2002 parliamentary elections, 20.8% in the 2007 elections, and 26% in the 2011 elections.

Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park from development, saw thousands of protesters challenging Erdoğan's rule. There had never previously been a protest movement of this scale in Turkey.<sup>42</sup> Most importantly, whereas previous demonstrations had been attended by a sector of public opinion that was already supportive of the CHP, these new demonstrations showed a greater diversity. The protestors in the Gezi movement were made up not only of Kemalists, but also of libertarians, environmentalists, and anarchist activists, and even individual supporters of the MHP or those close to the liberal wing of the AKP.<sup>43</sup> The phenomenon, which attracted a large number of young people, appeared to be more generational than partisan in nature. It highlighted two new developments: first, that the AKP was no longer the undisputed political power that it had been in the 2000s; and second, that its opponents were made up of more diverse groups than before. From these developments, a simple conclusion emerged: the opposition could win, if only it could manage to unify itself.

The years following this realization were marked by a series of failures or semi-victories that demonstrated the difficulty of putting this idea into practice. In 2014, the CHP and the MHP tried to present a joint candidate for the presidential election, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu. In contrast to the figures traditionally associated with the Kemalist movement, the choice of this former president of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was intended to appeal to conservative voters who might be tempted to support the opposition's political offering. However, this attempt was not successful, as the CHP and the MHP were unable to come to terms with the pro-Kurdish opposition, who were led by the emerging figure of a young and charismatic candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was in his element competing in an electoral contest based on personal charisma, crushed the competition, being elected in the first round with 51.8% of the vote. Yet, a year later, the parliamentary elections of June 7, 2015 marked the first electoral setback for the AKP: with 40.9% of the vote and 258 out of 550 MPs, they found themselves in the minority and unable to form a government. However, the difficulty of unifying the opposition then came to a head: the CHP approached the nationalist MHP and the HDP, a young party representing a progressive and pro-Kurdish electorate, but it did not manage to get these two parties to come to an agreement so as to construct an alternative majority. This failure was punished severely by voters in new elections on November 1, 2015: the MHP lost 40 MPs, and the

---

42. There had, however, been other episodes of protest in recent Turkish history: in 2004, the mobilization of civil society (as well as criticism from European institutions) dissuaded the government from adopting a law penalizing adultery; and in 2007 a series of large demonstrations were held by Turks who feared that the secular model for the Turkish state was being challenged, but this did not represent a serious threat to the power of the AKP.

43. E. Caliskan and S. Waldman, *The New Turkey and Its Discontents*, Hurst&Compagny, 2016, pp. 102-106; C. Letsch, "Turkey Protests Spread after Violence in Istanbul over Park Demolition", *The Guardian*, June 1, 2013.



HDP 21, while the CHP stagnated. The constitutional referendum of April 2017 then offered the opposition a new opportunity to unify themselves: it was no longer a matter of building a governing majority, but of accepting or rejecting the form of the political regime and, consequently, the figure that was driving the reform, that of President Erdoğan. The CHP led the opposition, and was joined in its attempt by some former AKP members, as well as members of the MHP who rejected their party's support for the President. At the same time, the CHP managed to reach an agreement with the HDP and several small left-wing parties, so as to organize a joint "no" campaign.<sup>44</sup> The "yes" side of the referendum finally won by a narrow margin (51.4%), with accusations of fraud or irregularities in the voting process weakening its legitimacy.<sup>45</sup> This Pyrrhic victory reflected the Turkish electorate's growing distrust of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and showed the effectiveness of a unified opposition.

## A Platform Focused on Achieving Electoral Success

The following set of elections became an opportunity for the opposition to realize this aspiration for unity. In the aftermath of the referendum, some leading figures of the MHP split from the party and, on October 25, 2017, announced the creation of the İYİ Party, a new nationalist party opposed to the government and led by Meral Akşener. This new party immediately began talks with the CHP, several of whose leading members also joined the ranks of the İYİ Party. The development of this new collaboration was catalyzed by changes to the electoral calendar: in April 2018, Erdoğan announced that the general elections scheduled for November 3, 2019, would be brought forward to June 24, 2018. Yet, according to Turkish electoral rules, the İYİ Party would only be able to contest elections from June 28, which marked the end of the legally imposed period for the creation of a new party. However, the rules permitted it to avoid this limitation if it already had a group of MPs. The CHP took this opportunity to help its new ally: on April 22, it authorized fifteen of its MPs to join the İYİ Party, thereby allowing the latter to satisfy this requirement and compete in the elections.<sup>46</sup> All the elements of a broad-based coalition were now in place.

---

44. "HDP, CHP, EMEP, ÖDP ve Halkevleri: Ev ev dolaşma zamanı" [HDP, CHP, EMEP, ÖDP and the "People's Houses": It's Time to Go from Home to Home], *Evensel*, January 22, 2017, available at: [www.evrensel.net](http://www.evrensel.net).

45. D. Boffey, "Turkey Should Investigate Referendum Vote 'Irregularities', Says EU Commission", *The Guardian*, April 18, 2017.

46. It is worth noting that, in informal discussions with CHP leaders and activists, this tactic of lending MPs is often presented as a favor that was granted by the CHP to the new party, supposedly earning the İYİ Party's recognition and ensuring its support. During the crisis that occurred between the two parties in early March 2023, this discourse was used extensively on social networks by CHP supporters.

In early May, four opposition parties announced the creation of the Nation Alliance. The CHP and the İYİ Party were joined by two parties with no MPs but who brought with them a significant symbolic weight: the Democrat Party, founded in 2007, which was the heir to the center-right parties that had dominated Turkish politics in the 1980s and 1990s; and Saadet (*Saadet Partisi* or the Felicity Party), an Islamist movement founded by Necmettin Erbakan, a leading figure of Turkish political Islam and formerly a mentor to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The inclusion of Necmettin Erbakan in the Nation Alliance is particularly interesting, and was intended to serve two objectives: first, to show that it was not pitched against religious elements; and second, to ensure that conservative parts of the electorate could be represented in Parliament without having to vote for the AKP.<sup>47</sup> The alliance of these four parties, however, was aimed solely at the parliamentary elections: the CHP, the İYİ Party, and Saadet each presented their own candidate for the presidential election, which was to be held on the same day as the parliamentary elections, while agreeing to support whichever candidate was left standing in the second round against President Erdoğan. Meanwhile, the HDP was left out of the coalition, despite its explicit desire to be included in the process, owing to the intransigence of the İYİ Party:<sup>48</sup> the nationalist İYİ Party was fully opposed to the pro-Kurdish HDP, criticizing the latter's policy platform for decentralization and Kurdish autonomy, and condemning it for maintaining links with the PKK. The results of the elections on June 24, 2018, were a partial disappointment for the opposition: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won the presidential election in the first round with 52.6% of the vote,<sup>49</sup> and retained a solid parliamentary majority thanks to his alliance with the MHP. In early July, the spokespersons of the main opposition parties announced the temporary suspension of the alliance, not because of disagreements between them, but because it did not serve any purpose outside electoral periods.

The purpose of the Nation Alliance is, therefore, since its inception, purely electoral. It is not so much a matter of ideological convergence as of the parties' shared will to obtain a parliamentary majority. There are certainly points of convergence between the CHP and the İYİ Party: both movements officially claim the heritage of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's

---

47. In 2018, an electoral list had to reach a threshold of 10% of the vote in order to gain MPs. Before these elections, Saadet generally did not reach even 1% of the vote, therefore he had no MPs because of this rule. A desire to vote "strategically" could therefore lead religious parts of the electorate to vote for the AKP, since this was a movement that was certain to have representatives in Parliament. By joining a coalition that was certain to receive more than 10% of the vote, Saadet found the opportunity to gain MPs of its own, and also to avoid being penalized by the tendency for strategic voting.

48. H. Duran, "Is the Nation Alliance Collapsing?", *Politics Today*, September 25, 2019, available at: <https://politicstoday.org>.

49. The CHP candidate Muharrem İnce received 30.6% of the vote; the İYİ Party candidate, Meral Akşener, 7.3%; while Temel Karamollaoğlu, Saadet's candidate, received only 0.9%.

republicanism; they both present themselves as secular; they insist on the indivisibility of the Turkish territory (thus rejecting the proposals for decentralization promoted by pro-Kurdish movements); and they both profess their nationalism, which is more pronounced in the İYİ Party but is also well established in the CHP. But it is clear from an examination of the circumstances of their alliance that it was the fact of opposing Erdoğanist rule that brought them together. As for the Democrat Party and, above all, Saadet, their inclusion in the coalition was a matter of purely tactical considerations. The *raison d'être* of this political grouping was therefore its possibility of achieving electoral success.

In this respect, the 2019 municipal elections constituted a major test for the Nation Alliance. As the vote approached, scheduled for March 31, the CHP, the İYİ Party, and their partners reactivated their joint platform and, in a new development, presented joint lists in the major cities in order to avoid splitting their vote share. They achieved significant gains: the opposition lists triumphed in four of the country's five largest cities: in addition to retaining Izmir, which is traditionally won by Kemalists, they took Adana and Ankara – whose new mayor, the CHP's Mansur Yavaş, a former MHP member, had been able to attract support from nationalist and conservative parts of the electorate. The case of Istanbul is even more striking: the opposition-backed candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu (CHP), won by a narrow margin, but after the AKP and MHP made accusations of electoral fraud, the Supreme Electoral Council annulled the election results on May 6 and scheduled a new election for June 23. According to Yavuz Ağralıoğlu, an MP for the İYİ Party, “This was a big mistake by President Erdoğan, because this decision angered voters and strengthened the unity of the opposition”.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the new election in Istanbul saw the building of an unprecedented alliance, as Ekrem İmamoğlu received not only the support of the Nation Alliance but also that of the HDP,<sup>51</sup> and eventually won with 54.2% of the vote (compared to 48.8% in March). Several senior members of opposition parties claim that it was these events that really cemented the electoral union by showing its effectiveness.<sup>52</sup>

From this point on, the organization of the opposition has followed a more or less similar pattern: that of a grouping of parties, acting together by presenting joint candidacies and benefiting either from mutual tacit support or, at the very least, from the absence of competition in the case of the HDP, which has refrained from presenting candidates in elections where the Nation Alliance can win. At the same time, the landscape of

---

50. Interview with the author in Ankara, June 22, 2022.

51. R. Soylu, “Jailed pro-Kurdish Leader Demirtaş Throws Weight behind Opposition Istanbul Candidate”, *Middle East Eye*, June 18, 2019, available at: [www.middleeasteye.net](http://www.middleeasteye.net).

52. Author's interviews with Gürsel Tekin, CHP MP for an Istanbul constituency (Istanbul, May 27, 2022); Yavuz Ağralıoğlu, İYİ Party MP for an Istanbul constituency (Ankara, June 22, 2022); and Orhan Tıraşoğlu, former CHP mayor of Beylikdüzü (Istanbul, October 31, 2022).

political parties has continued to change: in December 2019, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was the main architect of the AKP's foreign policy and Erdoğan's prime minister between 2014 and 2016, founded a new party, Gelecek (*Gelecek Partisi* or the Future Party), which is conservative but favors a return to a parliamentary system; in March 2020, Ali Babacan, a former Minister for the Economy (2009-2015), also created a similarly inclined, but pro-European party, DEVA (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi* or the Democracy and Progress Party). These two new political entities soon expressed their desire to join the Nation Alliance. Negotiations took place throughout 2020 and 2021, culminating in the establishment of the "Table of Six" [*Altı Masa*] on February 22, 2022: the opposition movements signed a joint declaration, aimed at winning elections and bringing about a return to the parliamentary system. The six parties involved are the CHP, the İYİ Party, Saadet, the Democrat Party, Gelecek, and DEVA. Their clearly stated goal is victory in the 2023 general elections: they have agreed not only to present joint lists for the parliamentary elections but also to support a joint presidential candidate. The Nation Alliance is therefore the response to the clearly identified strategic need for all opposition movements to unite, which has taken almost a decade to put into practice.

## The Weaknesses of a Heterogeneous Alliance

The "Table of Six" agrees on one simple principle: the rejection of the ultra-presidentialism that has resulted from the 2017 constitutional reform and the return to a classical parliamentary model. However, this principle brings together six parties with very different, even opposing, ideological orientations. The CHP sees itself as the heir to the values of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Republic (secularism, sovereignty), but also to a certain social-democratic discourse that it adopted in the 1960s. Today it is divided between various trends, ranging from a form of progressivism with elements of socialism (notably represented by the figure of Canan Kaftancıoğlu,<sup>53</sup> architect of the party's municipal campaign in Istanbul) to a republicanism tinged with nationalism (embodied by Mansur Yavaş, the mayor of Ankara). The İYİ Party is relatively close to the latter tendency, but although it originated in defections from the nationalist MHP, it presents itself as belonging to the "center-right".<sup>54</sup> This label is also claimed by three other parties of the Nation Alliance: Gelecek, which has a more conservative discourse on social issues, DEVA, which is economically liberal and more oriented toward Western partners, and the Democrat Party,

53. N. Ashdown, "A Motorcycle-Riding Leftist Feminist Is Coming for Erdogan", *Foreign Policy*, May 1, 2020, available at: [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

54. D. Tansi, "İyi Parti ve merkez sağ'ın inşası" [The İYİ Party and the Construction of a Center-Right], *Uluslararası Politika Akademisi*, March 5, 2023, available at: [www.politikaakademisi.org](http://www.politikaakademisi.org).

which is the heir to the liberal conservatives of the 1990s. Finally, Saadet continues to use a discourse with elements of political Islamism, even though it focuses its criticism of the AKP on issues of authoritarianism and corruption.

At first sight, it seems difficult to imagine how the Nation Alliance could construct a government out of such varied political visions. To achieve this, the six parties have chosen a method that one of their officials has compared to the construction of a building: “First, we had to choose a firm base, the foundations: this was the principle of a return to parliamentary government; then we tried to find common principles on each theme, which would be solid walls; the choice of a common candidate is the roof of the building”.<sup>55</sup>

In detailing the process of negotiation within the alliance, this senior advisor defined it as a series of rounds of discussion, involving meetings between the officials and experts of the six parties, organized around a thematic agenda, and aimed at formulating joint proposals – while elements on which they could not reach consensus were set aside. Following these negotiations, on January 30, 2023, the “Table of Six” published a government manifesto<sup>56</sup> that includes the points of consensus among its members. This manifesto is based on three main themes: a return to a balanced parliamentary system; the fight against inflation in order to improve the economic situation; and respect for human rights and democratic standards. These are important issues for public opinion, but they are expressed in very general terms, and the manifesto proposes broad principles without detailed measures.

The diversity of the Nation Alliance’s member parties is presented as an advantage by their officials, who argue that it demonstrates both the breadth of the consensus to reject the current presidential regime and the ability of its members to work together in a spirit of openness.<sup>57</sup> The CHP and the İYİ Party, by virtue of their number of MPs (135 and 37, respectively) and their performance in polls (which give between 25% and 30% to the former and between 10% and 15% to the latter) constitute the main pillars of the coalition, and this fact both provides them with a large potential for electoral success and guarantees that they will have a significant number of MPs. Since the CHP is the strongest party in the Nation Alliance, it is agreed that the joint presidential candidate will be drawn from their ranks. The İYİ Party is focused instead on the return to parliamentarianism, and Meral Akşener has stated that she does not wish to compete for the presidency of the Republic, as she would prefer the post of

---

55. Interview with an advisor to one of the leaders of the “Table of Six”, Ankara, January 17, 2023.

56. Available at: [www.2712.com.tr](http://www.2712.com.tr).

57. Author’s interview with Gürsel Tekin, CHP MP for an Istanbul constituency (Istanbul, May 27, 2022), and Seyit Torun, CHP MP for Ordu (Ankara, June 21, 2022).

prime minister.<sup>58</sup> The presence of DEVA and Gelecek is important for two reasons: on the one hand, it can attract liberals who had supported the AKP in its early years before they moved away from it; on the other hand, the leaders of these parties, Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoğlu, embodied, respectively, Turkey's economic success and its diplomatic openness in the 2000s, and their presence, therefore, lends credibility to the alliance on these issues. Meanwhile, the inclusion of Saadet is considered important as a way of showing “that the coalition is not hostile to religious Turks”, and “because of its strong local roots, and its popularity with a certain popular electorate”.<sup>59</sup> In contrast to the People's Alliance, whose parties seem to converge along a shared national-conservative and Erdoğanist line, the Nation Alliance can seem to be a grouping that is representative of a diverse set of segments of the population, and which is united by electoral and institutional goals.

However, from the earliest months of the coalition's existence, this heterogeneity has been a weakness, jeopardizing its ability to remain united until the elections, and raising doubts about its ability to form a stable government if it wins. The press regularly reports on recurring tensions. As early as April 2021, Ali Babacan's announcement that his party, DEVA, would run “with its own name, its own glory, its own logo” led observers to predict the break-up of the Nation Alliance. From June to August 2022, and again in October, various rumors suggested that Meral Akşener might launch her own campaign for the presidential election.<sup>60</sup> Although this campaign did not ultimately transpire, senior members of the CHP privately discussed “what the İYİ Party is up to” – which also hints toward more serious disagreements between the parties. Aside from personal issues, the diversity of the Nation Alliance also limits its possibility of developing a substantive agenda. Some topics, such as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the so-called Istanbul Convention), from which Turkey withdrew in March 2021, causing concern among its European partners, are not mentioned in the joint roadmap, which suggests that the parties could not reach any consensus on the matter. Earlier this year an academic close to the AKP, Hasan Basri Yalçın, expressed the view that “even if the opposition manages to win, it would not stay in government for more than six months, given its internal disagreements”.<sup>61</sup> In this respect, a comparison with Israel is apt: the improbable coalition set up to oust

---

58. K. Congar, “Meral Akşener: Cumhurbaşkanlığına değil, başbakanlığa adayım” [Meral Akşener: I Am Not a Candidate for the Presidency of the Republic, I Am a Candidate for Prime Minister], *Euronews Turkey*, September 25, 2021, available at: [www.euronews.com](http://www.euronews.com).

59. Author's interview with Yavuz Ağralıoğlu, İYİ Party MP for an Istanbul constituency, in Ankara, June 22, 2022.

60. Many articles were published in the press and on websites in these periods with the title “Meral Akşener aday olacak mı?” [Will Meral Akşener Be a Candidate?].

61. Interview with the author in Istanbul, January 9, 2023.

Benjamin Netanyahu (2009-2021) from the government only retained its majority for a year and a half, before a new parliamentary session allowed Netanyahu to return to the office. While the leaders of the “Table of Six” reject this comparison, it is nonetheless clear that they do not have a long-term agreement on several sensitive political issues. This is obviously the case with respect to the Kurdish issue: while the İYİ Party asserts that any concession to the PKK constitutes a “red line”,<sup>62</sup> DEVA stirred up controversy in early January 2023 by proposing to replace the term “Turk” in the constitution with more inclusive terms.<sup>63</sup> Religious issues are another sensitive topic. In October 2022 Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu proposed to give legal protection to the right to wear the veil. This was intended to reassure his conservative partners, but the attempt was strongly criticized within his own party by the wing most attached to secularism. The shared manifesto is more consensual on the need to put an end to the inflationary spiral, although it does not offer a clear solution to this problem.

However, the cause of the first serious crisis was disagreement over the choice of the joint presidential candidate. Although Meral Akşener decided early on not to run for president herself, she also stated her clear preference in late 2022 for the choice of candidates for the respective mayors of Istanbul and Ankara: Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş. She notably appeared alongside the mayor of Istanbul in December 2022 after his conviction for “insulting a public official”, whereas the CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu remained particularly quiet on this subject. Although it is difficult to know the nature of internal negotiations at the “Table of Six”, it seems clear that there was no consensus on the choice of the joint candidate, which led to the announcement of the candidate being repeatedly postponed. It was supposed to be revealed on February 14, but the date was then postponed due to the earthquakes that ravaged the country on February 6, and it was finally announced on March 2, that Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu would be the joint presidential candidate. Meral Akşener, who a few hours earlier had signed a joint statement by the “Six” stating their consensus regarding the choice of the candidate, immediately condemned it and briefly withdrew the İYİ Party from the coalition. This decision seems to have caught her coalition partners off guard – in January 2023, senior members of the CHP said they were certain that the İYİ Party would remain loyal to the alliance regardless of the chosen candidate.<sup>64</sup> After several days of uncertainty, Meral Akşener finally returned to the “Table of Six” and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s candidacy was

---

62. This was stated by Yavuz Ağralıoğlu, an İYİ Party MP, interviewed by the author on June 22, 2022, in Ankara; in late March 2023, Yavuz Ağralıoğlu announced his resignation from the İYİ Party in objection to the party’s talks with the HDP.

63. M. Ersoy, “DEVA Partisi, Türk kelimesinden rahatsız oldu! Anayasa’dan kaldırmak istiyorlar!” [DEVA Is Uncomfortable with the Word Turk! They Want to Remove It from the Constitution!], *Bölge Gündem*, January 4, 2023, available at: [www.bolgegundem.com](http://www.bolgegundem.com).

64. Interviews with the author in Istanbul and Ankara.

formalized on March 6. As the main concession to the İYİ Party, it was specified that Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu would appoint the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara as vice presidents if he won the presidential election. The outcome certainly attests to the negotiating skills of the opposition members, but this sudden last-minute crisis revealed the weaknesses of a tactical coalition built on electoral goals rather than a shared political vision. By favoring this model, the opposition leaves itself open to criticisms that cast doubt on its ability to govern Turkey in a stable and long-term manner.



## Other Attempts at Forming Coalitions

The model of coalition politics, which was popular in the years before the advent of the AKP, has therefore become popular in Turkey once again, because it makes it possible to bring together a variety of forces in a country whose political sphere is fragmented into a myriad of small parties, and offers the latter a greater chance of passing the 7% electoral threshold, as well as providing greater visibility for their presidential candidates. Two other movements, with limited representation within the two major coalitions described above, are also trying to organize themselves into electoral groupings: the HDP is seeking to unify various movements that are close to its own dual identity as both pro-Kurdish and progressive-libertarian; at the other end of the political spectrum, the nationalist Ümit Özdağ, a former member of the İYİ Party, leads a heterogeneous electoral grouping, the Ancestral Alliance, which produces a radically nationalist and anti-immigration discourse.

### A Progressive, Pro-Kurdish Coalition That Could Swing the Parliamentary Elections?

The absence of the HDP in the ranks of the Nation Alliance is striking: with 11.7% of the vote in the 2018 parliamentary elections and 67 MPs, it remains one of the main opposition parties in Turkey. This does not mean, however, that there is no agreement between them. Privately, officials of the Nation Alliance admit that there are talks, including on the subject of joint monitoring of election security. A statement by Ünal Çeviköz, a CHP MP for an Istanbul constituency, referring to the release of HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş in the event of a Nation Alliance victory, suggests that negotiations have also addressed this topic.<sup>65</sup> Finally, on March 22, 2023, after several months of uncertainty, the HDP announced that it would not field a presidential candidate, to facilitate the defeat of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.<sup>66</sup> A full-fledged alliance, however, does not seem likely to emerge in the foreseeable future. The problem is essentially the issue of the PKK:

---

65. “Ünal Çeviköz: AİHM kararı çerçevesinde Demirtaş ve Kavala serbest bırakılacak” [Ünal Çeviköz: In the Framework of the ECHR Decision, Demirtaş and Kavala will be released], *TRT Haber*, March 2023, available at: [www.trthaber.com](http://www.trthaber.com).

66. “In Vote Setback for Erdogan, Turkey’s HDP Will Not Field Candidate”, *Reuters*, March 22, 2023, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

although the HDP rejects the violent actions undertaken by this group, it also maintains links with it that are difficult to define. Any contact between the CHP and the HDP is strongly condemned by pro-government activists, who criticize them by sharing the hashtag “#CHPKK”. There is no doubt that any further rapprochement would considerably damage the image of the “Six” in the eyes of Turkish voters. The creation of a formal alliance with the HDP is also a red line for the İYİ Party, which accuses it of threatening the territorial integrity of the Republic.

In this context, the HDP has undertaken to assemble around itself a coalition of small protest parties that do not recognize themselves either in the national conservatism of the People’s Alliance or in the Kemalist orthodoxy that dominates within the Nation Alliance. In this exercise, the HDP has a head start, since it was itself the product of a coalition formed in the wake of the Gezi Park protests from the combination of the pro-Kurdish BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi* or Peace and Democracy Party, founded in 2008 and dissolved in 2014 to form the HDP) and several activists from more generalist left-wing protest groups.<sup>67</sup> On September 24, 2022, four small parties claiming to be Marxist-Leninist communists, the TİP (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi* or Workers’ Party of Turkey, with four MPs), the EMEP (*Emek Partisi* or Labor Party), the TÖP (*Toplumsal Özgürlük Partisi* or Social Freedom Party), and the EHP (*Emekçi Hareket Partisi* or Workers’ Movement Party), joined forces with the HDP to create the Labor and Freedom Alliance – a name that indicates the movement’s wish to combine libertarian themes with the more classical models of the anti-capitalist left.<sup>68</sup>

This HDP-organized coalition, which relies primarily on the Kurdish electorate but also appeals to the more left-wing sectors of public opinion, could, if it secures a large enough vote share, play the role of kingmaker between the People’s Alliance and the Nation Alliance, while negotiating an agreement of benevolent neutrality that would allow the latter to win the elections and exercise a relative majority in Parliament. So far, however, no pro-Kurdish party has been able to reach an official agreement with a party that lays claim to the Kemalist tradition. This can be explained both by the weight of the historical legacy (Mustafa Kemal Atatürk harshly repressed several Kurdish uprisings in the 1920s and 1930s) and by the existence of a fundamental disagreement over the management of the Turkish territory: when Kurdish movements call for decentralization or even federalization, as a way of obtaining administrative autonomy for themselves, Kemalists protest against what they perceive as a challenge to the unity of the Republic and a threat to its territorial integrity. A full integration of the

67. On the dual nature of the HDP see A. Denizeau, “Le HDP, un nouveau venu en quête d’ancrage”, *Note franco-turque*, Ifri, No. 16, January 2016, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

68. “What Does the ‘Labour and Freedom Alliance’ in Turkey Stand For?”, *World Socialist Web Site*, October 18, 2022, available at: [www.wsws.org](http://www.wsws.org).

HDP would therefore profoundly change the nature of the Nation Alliance, which would change from being a national-republican bloc toward being a social-democrat movement, with less focus on sovereignty and a greater attachment to the question of minorities. At the same time, this could lead the HDP to break with its essentially oppositional and populist culture in favor of a strategy of access to government. This prospect, which became conceivable when the İYİ Party was threatening to leave the Nation Alliance, quickly receded when the İYİ Party returned to the fold. The HDP has therefore returned, for the time being, to its traditional political strategy of gathering together two marginalized political spheres – the anti-capitalist left and the pro-Kurdish movement – in an attempt to combine them in its own coalition model. The choice to focus its electoral fight on the parliamentary elections without fielding a presidential candidate – despite Selahattin Demirtaş’s proven charisma – nevertheless represents a major concession to the Nation Alliance, benefitting the latter’s sole presidential candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu.

## The Difficult Creation of an Alternative Nationalist Coalition

The Turkish party political landscape cannot be entirely explained by a division into the three major spheres described so far (supporters of President Erdoğan, the Kemalist opposition, and the pro-Kurdish and protest movements). A fourth political trend has gradually been emerging since 2021, centered around a form of nationalist dissent that opposes the government while rejecting the strategy adopted by the opposition. Although the various groups associated with this subsystem receive little support in the polls (less than 1% of voting intentions, in most cases), their influence should not be underestimated, since they appeal to highly politicized sectors of the electorate.

This alternative movement has its roots in the defection of the academic Ümit Özdağ from the İYİ Party, of which he was formerly a founding member, as well as a close associate of Meral Akşener. He resigned from the İYİ Party in March 2021, launching the Zafer Party (*Zafer Partisi* or Victory Party) in August of that year. Ümit Özdağ’s rhetoric criticizes the İYİ Party for its alleged abandonment, in the course of joining the Nation Alliance, of two of its fundamental objectives: the fight against the Gülenists and the PKK respectively.<sup>69</sup> Ümit Özdağ accuses the Kemalist opposition of playing into the hands of Kurdish separatists when it

---

69. “Ümit Özdağ, Fuat Uğur’a konuştu: Meral Akşener, Gülen’in talimatını uyguluyor” [Ümit Özdağ Speaks to Fuat Uğur: Meral Akşener Follows Gülen’s Instructions], *Gazeteciler*, November 21, 2020, available at: [www.gazeteciler.com](http://www.gazeteciler.com).

conducts talks with the HDP.<sup>70</sup> As of 2022, Zafer has focused its political messaging on the theme of migration, denouncing the presence of Syrian, Afghan, and Pakistani migrants in Turkey. This discourse is now gaining ground in Turkey because, as explained by Ahmet Gedik, a social scientist in Istanbul: “in the context of the economic crisis, public opinion is growing weary of the presence of millions of refugees, especially in the major cities”.<sup>71</sup> Although both the People’s Alliance and the Nation Alliance refer to migration issues, agreeing on the need to stop receiving Syrian refugees and to send some of them back (the People’s Alliance believes that this is only possible by creating a security zone in Syria to take them in), only Zafer has made this issue the core of its campaign and placed it at the center of public debate.

This approach, combining radical nationalism and criticism of the major parties, has attracted the support of several small political groupings ranging from the center-left to the nationalist-right. This is the case, for example, of Doğru (*Doğru Parti* or the Just Party), a movement that claims the heritage of the center-right of the 1990s, and whose president, Rifat Serdaroğlu, opened a dialogue with Ümit Özdağ in 2022. These two men developed the idea of forming an alliance with Memleket (*Memleket Partisi* or the Homeland Party), led by Muharrem İnce, a former official of the CHP, whose nationalist wing he embodied, and who stood as the candidate for the Nation Alliance in the 2018 presidential election. Having broken with the CHP in early 2021, İnce remains a popular figure in some opposition circles, mainly those of activists who maintain a commitment to Kemalist values but are hostile to the current CHP leadership team. On February 28, 2023, Ümit Özdağ even made it known that he considered Muharrem İnce as his presidential candidate.<sup>72</sup> At the time, there seemed to be a strong prospect of the creation of an alliance for the parliamentary elections made up of Zafer, Doğru, and Muharrem İnce’s Memleket, and this development, combined with the defection of the İYİ Party from the Nation Alliance (since senior figures from the various parties in question sent messages in support of Meral Akşener while criticizing the CHP), could have substantially altered the political landscape. However, a series of events in early March forced Zafer to rethink its partnerships: while the İYİ Party returned to the “Table of Six”, Ümit Özdağ broke with Muharrem İnce, and the latter then decided to go it alone, presenting his candidacy for the presidential election with only the support of his own party.

---

70. “Ümit Özdağ’dan HDP’lilere bakanlık vadeden Millet İttifakı’na sert sözler: Bu PKK’ya teslimiyettir” [Ümit Özdağ’s Harsh Words toward the Nation Alliance for Planning to Give a Ministry to the HDP: It Is a Capitulation to the PKK], *Yeni Şafak*, May 16, 2021, available at: [www.yenisafak.com](http://www.yenisafak.com).

71. Interview with the author in Istanbul, January 6, 2023.

72. “Ümit Özdağ: Cumhurbaşkanı adayımız Muharrem İnce” [Ümit Özdağ: Our Presidential Candidate Is Muharrem İnce], *Kamudan Haber*, February 28, 2023, available at: [www.kamudanhaber.net](http://www.kamudanhaber.net).

On March 11, 2023, Zafer announced the creation of the Ancestral Alliance, which involved a union with three other small movements: the nationalist “My Country” Party (*Ülkem Partisi*), the liberal-conservative Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*), and the nationalist and modernizing Turkey Alliance Party (*Türkiye İttifakı Partisi*). This new electoral grouping supports the presidential candidacy of Sinan Oğan, a former MHP member. Doğru, meanwhile, ultimately refused to join the Ancestral Alliance, on the grounds that fielding an additional presidential candidate could play into Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s hands.<sup>73</sup>

For now, with the exception of a result of 12% from a poll conducted immediately after the announcement of his candidacy,<sup>74</sup> Sinan Oğan receives between 1% and 2% in the polls; he is therefore in competition with Muharrem İnce, who has been receiving between 3% and 7%. However, in the absence of an HDP candidate in the presidential election, both Sinan Oğan and Muharrem İnce can hope to play the role of “third man”, and act as a kingmaker if Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu end up neck and neck in the first round. This scenario would force the two main presidential contenders into a delicate balancing act: they would have to adopt a nationalist tone in order to appeal to the Ancestral Alliance and Muharrem İnce, without losing their own Kurdish supporters –Hüda Par and the HDP respectively. The same dynamic of kingmaking may also emerge in the parliamentary elections: the balance of power and the vote share obtained by the Ancestral Alliance and the Labor and Freedom Alliance respectively may influence the line adopted by the two major parliamentary coalitions.

---

73. “ATA İttifakı’nda aday krizi... Doğru Parti ayrıldı” [Candidate-Related Crisis in the “Ancestral Alliance”... Doğru Has Left It], *Veryansın TV*, March 11, 2023, available at: [www.veryansintv.com](http://www.veryansintv.com).

74. “Yenilenen İBB seçimlerini doğru tahmin eden Themis son seçim anketini açıkladı” [Themis, Which Correctly Announced the Election Results for the New Greater Istanbul Mayoral Election, Presents Its Latest Election Survey], *Haber 3*, March 17, 2023, available at: [www.haber3.com](http://www.haber3.com).

# A Political Landscape Still Fraught with Uncertainty

Meral Akşener's unexpected decision to withdraw from the "Table of Six" ten weeks before the presidential election, followed by her return – just as unexpected – a few days later, could turn out to be significant for the opposition. It weakens the position of the Nation Alliance in a campaign scenario that seems all ready to play out: two large coalitions facing each other, while two smaller alternative movements try to position themselves as kingmakers. Two major questions arise concerning the future of these electoral blocs.

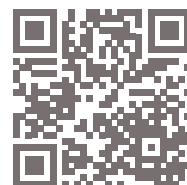
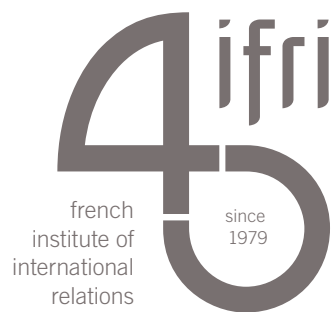
The first unknown is the future of the nationalist fringe of the Turkish electorate. It is currently divided between several political positions: that represented by Meral Akşener and the İYİ Party, who have been willing to form a bloc with the CHP in order to bring about a change of government; the more intransigent and radical stance represented by the Ancestral Alliance, Ümit Özdağ, and Sinan Oğan; and the position of the MHP, which is committed to its alliance with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Yet nationalist discourses remain influential in Turkey, including among the new urbanized generations who reject the conservatism of the AKP. No movement can succeed electorally without drawing to some extent on this ideological resource. While the polls indicate a slow erosion of support for the MHP, which is now challenged in its role as the historical spokesperson of Turkish nationalism, it is not easy to predict who will take up the torch. The Ancestral Alliance may appeal to the most politicized activists owing to its ideological coherence, but it also runs the risk of becoming locked into an oppositional and populist discourse that is perceived as being politically ineffective. The İYİ Party, on the other hand, may have difficulty reconciling its nationalist discourse with its position in an alliance that includes liberals, Islamists, and may even come to include pro-Kurdish movements. In view of these different elements, it seems likely that no single electoral bloc will succeed in uniting Turkish nationalists, and that the latter will remain divided between several rival coalitions in the medium term.

The second unknown concerns the future of the Nation Alliance: how long will this reorganized opposition manage to maintain its minimal level of unity? From the very outset of the crisis triggered by Meral Akşener's departure from the Nation Alliance, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the presidential candidate from the CHP, tried to downplay its importance, indicating in

particular his willingness to work with new parties: he mentioned upcoming negotiations with the Left Party<sup>75</sup> and especially the TİP, which is an ally of the HDP in the Labor and Freedom Alliance. Meanwhile, the HDP reacted by calling for unity between opposition parties. The Nation Alliance, however, will not run the risk of forming a union with the HDP and its allies, which could fracture the CHP itself, as its most nationalist wing rejects this option. These recurring incidents indicate that the various reorganizations of the party landscape are far from over: the political dynamic is re-emerging in a country where the opposition had previously been languishing throughout two decades of unchallenged AKP rule.

---

75. *Sol Parti*, formerly known as *Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi*, the Freedom and Solidarity Party.



27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris cedex 15 – France

---

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