

EUROPE & CENTRAL ASIA

What Awaits Turkey's Political Landscape in the Aftermath of Earthquakes?

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Turkey is facing one of the worst disasters in its modern history just weeks before its most critical elections. Two major earthquakes, with magnitudes of 7.8 and 7.5, rocked southeast Turkey within 10 hours on February 6. They struck a large area including 10 provinces with 13 million people. Winter conditions posed a further challenge to recovering thousands of survivors trapped under debris and slowed down search and rescue operations. Thus, the earthquakes caused a devastating human tragedy. However, they also became a regime test that revealed the scale of misgovernment and the consequences of [crony](#) capitalism in Turkey – eliciting reactions from victims and citizens alike. In contrast, the opposition played a proactive role on the field from the first minutes of the crisis. This traumatic experience, combined with mounting anger against the AKP, will have an impact on voter preferences. Yet, in order to woo angry voters, the Turkish opposition must convince them that it has the stomach to confront Erdogan.

Unusually, the twin earthquakes have not caused a rally-around-the-flag effect in Turkish politics. Instead of a discourse of solidarity, an outburst of anger against the AKP and more directly Erdogan has been the overwhelming emotion in the social media postings from the earthquake-hit regions. When the newly-built buildings or highways collapsed, for most people the AKP government's corruption, inefficacy, and incompetence were the first things people blamed. Lack of proper urban planning and inspections has magnified the effect of the disaster and human suffering. Erdogan failed in crisis management too as his over-centralized bureaucracy could not give an effective response to the crisis. Besides, he has shown that his

political calculations are above the crisis in his priorities. His reluctance in deploying the military, threats against the critics, and the decision to slow down Twitter added insult to injury. Thus, the earthquakes have tarnished Erdogan's image as a competent leader and caused irritation even in AKP strongholds. Public reactions against the Minister of Justice, governors, bureaucrats, and even the pro-AKP TV channels have become common scenes in the region.

On the other hand, the opposition seemed to be much more prepared and organized in responding to the crisis. Since the first moments of the incident, it has been playing a more constructive and proactive role in crisis management (except for Umit Ozdag's Zafer Party, which tries to provoke racist sentiments against Syrians). The opposition parties, municipalities, and, more importantly, the NGOs took the initiative in collecting donations, recruiting volunteers, and organizing rescue operations. Their relentless efforts are steadily receiving applause and gaining for them the confidence of the public. For the first time since the 2013 Gezi demonstrations, the Turkish opposition is mobilized and united.

More importantly, the Turkish opposition has crossed the borders that Erdogan has drawn for a legitimate and domesticated opposition. The leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Kilicdaroglu, did not respond to the government's call for unity and recognized the issue as a political problem. Kilicdaroglu directly blamed Erdogan for the scale of the disaster. The Turkish opposition's search and rescue operations turned into a kind of civil disobedience against an incompetent, authoritarian, and corrupt government, to the extent that the famous singer and NGO leader, Haluk Levent, had to announce that he had no political intentions and promoted his cooperation with government agencies. The CHP leader, meanwhile, [asked](#) CHP mayors to ignore bureaucratic limitations on search and rescue operations. If needed, get arrested, Kilicdaroglu told his mayors. This might be the first act of defiance for an opposition party that has respected Erdogan's red lines so far.

However, this is not Erdogan's first crisis in his political career. In a mine [explosion](#) in 2014, 301 miners were burnt to death or suffocated. A train [accident](#) in 2018, the 2021 [floods](#) in the western Black Sea region, the 2021 [wildfires](#), and the 2021 [sea-snot](#) disaster in the Marmara Sea are only some of the crises that Erdogan survived in the last few years. In all these

incidents, a lack of proper inspections, corruption, nepotism, and poor crisis management either caused or deteriorated the crisis. All these crises stirred up anger and resentment, at least among victims, against the AKP. Nevertheless, as time passed on and Erdogan offered some compensation, suffering, and rage have ceded their place to submission, inescapability, and fatalism. Likewise, this initial wave of rage will not automatically turn into votes for the opposition. Although this recent disaster is much bigger in scale, Erdogan will do his best to live down the effects of earthquakes.

At this point, the task of politicizing such disasters and turning them into a political struggle falls upon the shoulders of the opposition, particularly Kilicdaroglu. He made a good start by defying Erdogan's attempts to monopolize search and rescue operations. Yet, it is important to maintain this stance in the aftermath. The CHP, to illustrate, could have given stronger support to the earthquake victims who have been arrested for booing the Minister of Justice or criticizing the AKP bureaucrats. This is a historic moment for the opposition to reach the people of the region. Ensuring victims' freedom of speech should have been higher on the CHP's agenda. If the opposition wants to convince the voters that it can protect the ballots and make Erdogan accept electoral defeat, it must be more confrontational especially when Erdogan is at his weakest. Despite its risks in the undemocratic environment of Turkey, such a confrontational approach can make the voters believe that Erdogan has a real alternative.

Another critical issue that needs a firm stance is the postponement of elections because of the disaster. As a part of his strategy to live down the effects of the crisis, Erdogan may ask for the postponement of elections under the pretext of disaster. Such a move will not only help Erdogan to divert attention but will also set a precedent for all elections from now on - if they will ever be held. If the opposition allows Erdogan to stretch the constitution that far, it will give him more power to intervene in election procedures. This situation may create a fait accompli that will further consolidate Erdogan's regime and allow him to bypass the few remaining democratic mechanisms. Thus, the opposition should not let Erdogan change the date of the elections at his will.

A Game Changer?

At the end of HBO's series on the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, it is reminded that Gorbachev [saw](#) Chernobyl as the real cause of SSCB's collapse. "According to [Gorbachev](#), the Chernobyl explosion was a 'turning point' that 'opened the possibility of much greater freedom of expression, to the point that the system as we knew it could no longer continue.'" From this perspective, this earthquake disaster might be Erdogan's Chernobyl, but only if the opposition can seize the opportunity.

This week might be a game-changer in Turkish politics. All of Erdogan's preparations, calculations, and investments for the elections up to now may have gone to waste. His image has suffered significant damage. Meanwhile, the opposition is more mobilized, more united, and more courageous. It is possible to say that the opposition has a bigger chance now, and Turkish politics will fluctuate greatly in the upcoming period. Yet, in order to get the desired outcome, the Turkish opposition must put in greater effort. The Turkish political agenda does not stay fixed on a single issue for too long. Erdogan can divert the attention with a foreign policy crisis within a few weeks and make the suffering forgotten. Initial outrageous sentiments will be softened, and people will get used to the new situation. Because of this reason, it's the opposition's duty to prevent this scenario from repeating itself.

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