



CHP within “New Turkey”: The formation of a government party?

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- Despite serious internal reform, the CHP under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has been unable to take over the administration of Turkey from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s AKP for more than ten years, for various and intertwined reasons.
- The transformation of the CHP, its popularity rates and limitations will also tell us to what extent political parties are likely to change under authoritarian regimes. We can examine this change by focusing on three issues: a) How and in what direction the party has changed from top to bottom in terms of cadres; b) What the change in its cadres tell us about the main problems facing Turkey's domestic politics, especially in the economic sphere; c) What these changes tell us about Turkey’s foreign policy and its position in the world.
- The change in the management cadres under Kılıçdaroğlu prevents a harmonious discourse within the party. Although this can be seen as a gain in terms of plurality, it can also leave room for cacophony. This can also be seen at the local level.
- The CHP has come a long way in the last ten years, both organizationally and in domestic politics. Although the party still lacks a comprehensive policy in areas as important as the Kurdish issue, religion and state affairs, it may now be in a position to sit down and work these out.
- It is very important for the CHP to organize and express itself within Turkey, but it must also consolidate its position globally. It must therefore transform itself into a modern party in how it operates both at home and abroad.
- Even though the CHP has improved itself in some areas, and developed highly successful strategies despite the AKP's hegemonic authoritarianism, it has also faced a number of setbacks.

Introduction

It was a matter of great curiosity what Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu would do when he was appointed Chairman of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*-CHP) at the [extraordinary congress on May 22, 2010](#). On the one hand, while his achieving a transformation of both the party and Turkey was discussed, with Kılıçdaroğlu nicknamed "[Gandhi Kemal](#)", commentators also wondered whether he would remain in the orbit of Önder Sav, the legendary general secretary of the CHP whose support won him the party chairmanship, and who is a Kemalist and supporter of the [status quo](#). Although Kılıçdaroğlu somehow managed to remove Önder Sav and most of his group from the party in less than two years (Sav himself noted that "[the flood recedes, but the sand remains](#)"), and despite the process of serious internal reform, the CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu has been unable to take over the administration of Turkey from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) over the last decade and more.

Although there are multiple intertwined reasons for this failure to take over, Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP has accomplished a lot in Turkey as the country have shifted under Erdoğan from competitive authoritarianism (Esen and Gumuscu 2016) to authoritarian rule (Baser and Ozturk 2017). His contributions to the structure that made it possible to resist the partnership of the AKP and the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi-MHP), the so-called [Nation Alliance](#) (Millet Ittifakı), must not be underestimated. Beyond the efforts of the Nation Alliance, winning the mayorship of many metropolitan municipalities, including [Ankara and Istanbul, in 2019](#), can be cited as one of the greatest achievements of Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP.

Although Kılıçdaroğlu has already made significant changes both within the CHP and in relation to the position occupied by the CHP in Turkish politics, the party and its leader are now approaching one of the biggest turning points of the AKP era. [The ever-worsening economic situation](#), the social divisions deepened by the AKP-MHP power bloc, and a presidential system of government which generates constant crises (Bedirhanoglu 2021) rather than a functional management approach seems to have brought the CHP-led Nation Alliance closer to power than ever before in the AKP period. However, the announcement made by [the Chairperson of the Good Party \(İYİ Parti\), the other main partner in the Nation Alliance, Meral Akşener](#), that she [will not run for the Presidency](#), and [Kılıçdaroğlu's disapproval of mayors putting themselves forward as candidates for the office, mean that](#) all eyes are on one person for the Presidency: CHP Chairperson, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. However, despite Turkey's current problems, the polls conducted so far do not foresee an absolute victory for the CHP and its leader, in which the majority of voters do not feel confident. This situation is likely to change as the election approaches. Still, how and in what way it will change will depend on parameters relating to how and to what extent the CHP has changed, and on the party's stance on certain critical issues. Moreover, the transformation of the CHP, its popularity and limitations will also shed light on the extent to which political parties can or are likely to change under authoritarian regimes. Of course, the case of the CHP presents both differences and difficulties compared to other parties in terms of change, given that it is the party that founded modern Turkey.

We can examine this change by focusing on three main issues. These are: a) How and in what direction the party has changed from top to bottom in terms of cadres; b) What its changing cadres says about the main problems facing Turkey domestically, especially in the economic sphere; c) What the change in cadres tells us about Turkey's foreign policy

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In this context, this paper will examine how the party's top staff and organizations, primarily Kılıçdaroğlu, have changed since the departure of former chairperson Deniz Baykal. Secondly, it will discuss the domestic politics adopted by Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP, what it can do and how it can transcend the limitations on its popularity. The last section will discuss where and how Turkey, which has experienced a serious long-term axial shift in foreign policy under the AKP, could position itself under a possible CHP administration.

CHP Cadres and the Leader: caught between polyphony and cacophony

The Party Assembly, and the Central Executive Board which Kılıçdaroğlu formed when he unexpectedly won the chairmanship of the party with the support of its former general secretary, Önder Sav, in May 2010, bore traces of Sav rather than himself; in a sense, they were formed in response to Baykal. [Apart from Ayhan Yalçınkaya alone, Haluk Koç, Umut Oran and Gülsün Bilgehan, all of whom had stood against Baykal in 2008 for the General Chairmanship, entered the A team](#), while Ankara Deputy Hakkı Suha Okay, who was Sav's right-hand man, was appointed party spokesperson. In short, Sav thought he would be able to lead the party alone over Kılıçdaroğlu, who would be nothing more than a figurehead. However, Kılıçdaroğlu, who had serious state experience, pushed many "former" CHP members, including Önder Sav, [out of the administration on November 3, 2010](#), using the authority given to him by the CHP's internal regulations. All of which goes to show that anything can happen in politics at any time.

Kılıçdaroğlu's rapid ousting of cadres who had devoted years to the party led to rumors that he would both be a permanent fixture in the party and that he could be instituting other major changes in the years to come. When we look at the ten plus years that have passed since then, it is clear that these rumors proved prescient, to a large extent. Kılıçdaroğlu, who has changed the composition of the Central Executive Board and Party Assembly countless times, has quietly driven out figures like [Gürsel Tekin](#), who had been with him since his candidacy for the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, while simultaneously managing to get people like Bülent Kuşoğlu, who comes from the center right, and Yüksel Taşkın, who is close to the left, to [work together in a coordinated way](#).

In fact, these are rational moves for a leader who wants to take power away from a multi-layered repressive political structure such as the AKP. However, multidimensional cadre changes of this sort are huge maneuvers for a party that 'never changes'. The delegate structure, which is designed to always support Kılıçdaroğlu, compatriotism, sectarianism, the unchanging 'military' and inexperienced representatives included in the Party Assembly make it easy for the leader to make such moves; however, it also turns ideological discussions within the party into a luxury. It is also crystal clear that the 2019 local elections and the significant number of Alevi party members elected among the grand congress delegates have reinforced Kılıçdaroğlu's position as Party Chairperson and given him some room to maneuver.

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It is obvious that Kılıçdaroğlu has brought about a remarkable change both in Turkish politics and in the classic perception of the CHP, despite his choice of relatively weak party councilors and a central board of directors which is not always composed of experts in their fields.

Despite these policy zig-zags, Kılıçdaroğlu and his management cadres have managed to bring together a different layered structure like the Nation Alliance, and paved the way for radical changes in many provinces, especially the CHP's Istanbul provincial organization.

As such, the leader's discourse or moves cannot reflect the views of a large cadre, and some variations may occur. In other words, the major changes introduced into the management cadres by Kılıçdaroğlu prevent harmonious discourse within the party. Although this can be seen as a gain in terms of plurality, it can also leave room for cacophony. This is seen not only within the party administration, but also at the local level. Thus, the party cadre includes both Tanju Özcan, the [Mayor of Bolu](#), who makes statements that could easily be described as racist, despite being made in an effort to win popularity, and [Sezgin Tanrıku](#), who tries to stand by the victims and always maintains his high visibility within the party as a popular deputy. Which poses the question: at this point in time, which political figure is actually representative of the CHP? We should certainly also underline the significant and highly impactful position of Canan Kaftancıoğlu, the CHP's provincial president in Istanbul. She adds another color to the party, and is most probably one of the leading architects of the party's success in the Istanbul local elections. [She is also very influential among younger millennials, Kurds, and Generation Z](#). In contrast, the CHP's provincial president in Ankara, Ali Hikmet Akıllı, is a relatively unknown and ineffective political figure with the general public; this is another issue within the party's organization.

It is obvious that Kılıçdaroğlu has brought about a remarkable change both in Turkish politics and in the classic perception of the CHP, despite his choice of relatively weak party councilors and a central board of directors which is not always composed of experts in their fields. In late 2021, the call to bid farewell to the classic repression-oriented state philosophy in which CHP governments and right-wing party administrations participated was a very important step for a party like the CHP, which prides itself on establishing modern Turkey following the struggle for independence. Furthermore, the CHP's willingness to welcome figures embraced by society into the party, regardless of their ideological views and political background, will also allow the CHP to break through the vote ceiling it has been stuck under for many years. However, like his choice of management cadres, the political preferences and moves which Kılıçdaroğlu has developed in recent years are built upon unstable foundations. In fact, the CHP is trying to be compatible with both a nationalist and a survival discourse-oriented state structure in Turkey.

While Kılıçdaroğlu has shown that he has a problem with the current mindset and administration of the state, and has promised change through his important [Justice March](#) (*Adalet Yürüyüşü*) initiative, he has also contributed more than indirectly to the authoritarianism that predominates in Turkey today. The biggest example in this context is the parliamentary session in May 2016 at which [the immunity of HDP deputies](#) was lifted, with the CHP declaring their support, despite the lifting of immunity being unconstitutional. That Kılıçdaroğlu also hailed July 15 as the declaration of a new Turkey, and supported the regime at the [Yenikapı Rally](#) help after the coup attempt of July 15, 2016, which he would later describe as a [controlled coup](#), may mean that the CHP supported the regime indirectly, if not directly. While it is now clear that the militarization of foreign policy (Adar and Toygur) is the cross-border dimension of AKP authoritarianism (Ozturk 2021), the CHP has [supported Turkey's cross-border operations](#) with few exceptions, and paved the way for the AKP regime to use nationalism as a political argument (Kosebalaban 2020). Examples like these have also made it hard for the Kurds, who have been victimized en masse since 2016, and for other groups, to trust the CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu.

However, it should be noted that, despite these policy zig-zags, Kılıçdaroğlu and his management cadres have managed to bring together a different layered structure like the Nation Alliance, and paved the way for radical changes in many provinces, especially

the CHP's Istanbul provincial organization. Moreover, it is clear that the choice of candidates in the last local elections, and in particular Mansur Yavaş for Ankara and Ekrem İmamoğlu for İstanbul, have the potential to change the face of Turkey tomorrow, if not directly today. However, overcoming both a hegemonic authoritarian state with such radically different policy preferences and a cadre with a low level of specialization poses certain difficulties.

The CHP and Turkey's domestic problems

Republican Turkey has been battling certain problems that still define the framework of Turkish political debate since its foundation. Thus the Kurdish issue (Gurses and Ozturk 2020), the division between the sects of Sunni Islam (less serious), gender discrimination and violence, and the state of the economy are major long-term problems. Like every major party that seeks to rule, the [CHP has published reports](#) on these issues, sharing both the reports and their proposed solutions with the public from time to time and, more importantly, trying to find solutions in collaboration with the stakeholders through various deputy chairpersons. Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP, which stages conferences for young people, farmers and women, seems to be better prepared in relation to these issues than in previous periods. In addition, it has also become less obsessive about certain issues, such as secularism.

The CHP has come a long way in the last ten years, both organizationally and in domestic politics. Although the party still lacks a comprehensive policy in areas as important as the Kurdish issue, religion and state affairs, it may now be in a position to sit down and work these out.

In this context, one might say that the CHP has done positive work. However, it is clear from the CHP's inclusion of the phrase "[When we come to power, by the will of Allah and the nation](#)" in its manifesto that the party is also very much impressed by the AKP's transformation of politics. Nevertheless, like the election promises made by would-be American presidents, the CHP shares its short-term plans with its voters in advance. For instance, direct economy-oriented promises are listed under the heading "[What we will do during our first week in power](#)". These are practical suggestions that touch on life directly, such as students' dormitory problems and the cancellation of loans given to businesses during the COVID-19 period. However, the party also makes nationalist and religious promises, such as returning the tomb of Süleyman Shah to the homeland. At this point, although we see that the CHP does, in a sense, understand Turkey's real problems, such as the economy, and has solutions for them, it is also clear that the party has been exposed for a considerable time to the ethnic, nationalist and religious-based discursive policies of the AKP (Yavuz and Ozturk 2019).

Despite this internal turmoil, the CHP is also working to understand the young population of Turkey. The Science, Management and Culture Platform, chaired by [Prof. Dr. Fethi Açıkel](#), has prepared reports on the recent multidimensional migration away from Turkey, the problems in health policy, agriculture's reform needs, and many other vital issues that touch people's daily lives and feed into policies to be applied when the party is in power. At this point, although there are solution-oriented studies on very important issues written in language that can be understood, the main issue is to what extent these solution proposals can be shared with society. At this point, it is still unknown to what extent these reports, which have become news for a few media organs close to CHP, especially Cumhuriyet, are shared with CHP organizations and thus explained to the public.

According to data from April 2021, the [CHP has 1,288,226 members](#). Although this seems very small compared to the 11 million members of the AKP, which uses state facilities and a neo-patrimonial management strategy, it is a good number compared to the party's vote percentage. However, the problem of active members is a separate issue. An

active member is a member who will make neighborhoods calls and man the ballot boxes during elections, but will also convey the problems facing society from the neighborhood to the district, the district to the province, and the province to headquarters. Although the CHP is aware of many of these problems, especially in the economic sphere, thanks to social media, it still seems to lack an active and functional organizational structure. One of the main reasons for this is that it is operating under the hegemonic and authoritarian rule of the AKP.

The CHP and the organic intellectuals that support it, who have recently put the AKP under pressure over economic issues and begun to produce solutions, have not said much about Turkey's impractical normative issues. In this context, we do not know exactly what the CHP has to say about the increasing social divisions created by religion and religious issues during the AKP period, and what kind of solutions they offer to the rampant favoritism and/or clientelism in every part of society. In fact, we do not know what the CHP's agenda will be in relation to these issues, which are very important and will enable young people to place their hopes in Turkey once again. And while these issues are discussed on some platforms such as [PolitikYol](#), which is known to be independent but relatively close to the CHP, the extent to which these discussions permeate outwards into society is also unknown.

One of the questions which needs to be asked at this point is what the CHP, which lacks state facilities and does not have a religious or other organized power structure behind it, can do to express itself abroad and be effective within the diaspora.

The CHP has come a long way in the last ten years, both organizationally and in domestic politics. Although the party still lacks a comprehensive policy in areas as important as the Kurdish issue, religion and state affairs, it may now be in a position to sit down and work these out. The setbacks it has suffered relate to its still clumsy organizational structure, central management that does not know exactly what to do with its political preferences, and the alliance system forced on it by the AKP.

The visibility of the CHP outside Turkey

The AKP administration has been and remains very active outside Turkey, both within state facilities and compatriot and religious organizations, thanks to its experiences within the National Outlook Movement in the past. It retains a presence in the Balkans, Western and Central Europe, Asia and Africa by means of Turks Abroad and Relative Communities, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the Yunus Emre Institute, the Maarif Foundation (Baser and Ozturk 2020) and even Turkish Airlines (Selcuk 2013). One of the key reasons for this is the AKP's use of Sunni Islam in its foreign policy and diaspora management, some of the practices of which extend beyond the definition of classical soft power. Although this has been welcomed in some places, it has elicited negative reactions in others. One of the questions which needs to be asked at this point is what the CHP, which lacks state facilities and does not have a religious or other organized power structure behind it, can do to express itself abroad and be effective within the diaspora.

The CHP assigned importance to its overseas structuring before Covid-19, and currently has [12 representatives in 14 countries and 27 unions in different countries](#). Its organization efforts remain intense in countries where Turkish citizens live. Furthermore, the party is continuing its efforts to establish new unions in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Ireland, Georgia and Azerbaijan. While party officials have said that the work is progressing slowly due to the pandemic, it has also said that it is planning to get the new unions up and running as soon as possible. The country with the highest number of unions within the CHP's foreign organization is Germany, where there is a large Turkish diaspora. The party has a total of nine unions in cities including Hamburg, Hessen, Bremen and Munich.

The country with the second highest number of CHP unions is France where, in addition to Paris, five other unions operate in Strasbourg, Lyon, Bordeaux, Marseille and Nantes respectively. In addition, there are unions in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Scotland, England, Italy, Romania, Australia, Canada and Sweden. However, just as we do not know what the CHP thinks and does in relation to some issues in domestic politics, it remains unknown how effective these agencies are. Still, it is important for the CHP to open offices both in places where the Turkish diaspora is dominant and in the Middle Eastern countries where Turkey has become more active, and this is a sign of a great change. In short, although the CHP's efforts are admirable in all these areas, its lack of success is due to three main reasons: a lack of staff abroad, the lack of an economic and institutional structure through which to reach different groups abroad, and its inability to appeal to as many people as the AKP from an ideological point of view.

Notwithstanding the recent economic crisis in Turkey and the AKP-MHP alliance's loss of metropolitan cities such as Ankara and Istanbul, which has focused the world's attention on both the CHP and the Nation Alliance it leads, we do not know how the CHP's approach to foreign policy will differ from the AKP's when it comes to power. There are three main reasons for this: First, the perception of friends and enemies among the Turkish people, which the AKP has transformed over its many years in power. For example, according to the results of the latest survey published by [Metropol Araştırma](#), voters of all parties except the HDP favour Turkey following a foreign policy based along the China-Russia axis. As such, we do not know exactly what the CHP thinks about the S-400s, relations with the European Union, and Turkey's reintegration into the West, or how far it will go to align its policies with the preferences of its base. At this point, we have little to go on, apart from the speeches of the party leader, which are not particularly illuminating. Thus, we still do not know what the CHP thinks about issues such as the Eastern Mediterranean issue, Turkey's struggle with France in North Africa, and Qatar's impact on Turkey. Furthermore, the CHP has remained silent on many issues in world politics--for instance, with regard to [Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022](#). President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has repeatedly underlined that [Turkey cannot abandon its ties to Russia or Ukraine](#), most probably due to [his position](#) stuck between Russia and the West regarding security, the economy and energy. In other words, Erdoğan's Turkey currently finds itself between a rock and a hard place, but despite that the CHP still has not managed to establish a vocal anti-war voice, to differentiate itself from the AKP.

Even though it is hard to know what the CHP's foreign policy would be if it came to power, one of the most important indicators that Turkey will turn to the West is the fact that the Istanbul Deputy and retired diplomat [Ünal Cevikoz](#) is its main foreign policy expert. In this context, it is possible to imagine Turkey locating itself somewhere between the West and the East under a possible CHP administration, within the framework of its unique position.

As in the CHP's organization and domestic policy, this paints the party in both a positive and negative light. However, at this point, one thing should be said: it is very important for the CHP not only to organize and express itself abroad, but also to consolidate its position in the world. It has to transform itself into a multi-dimensional, fully functional structure.

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Can the CHP establish a new post-AKP Turkey?

Currently, although this may seem paradoxical, the CHP's biggest advantage is the AKP's authoritarian character and mismanagement.

Whether the CHP can establish a brand-new Turkey or not depends more on whether Turkish voters will give it the chance to than on its intention to do so. In other words, if the AKP is to be removed from power and a brand-new Turkey established, it is the Turkish voters who will ensure it. However, given Turkey's new system, the executive position in such a situation will be occupied by the Nation Alliance; and since it is led by the CHP for the time being, the CHP will also be important. However, if the right-wing parties and Good Party especially, start to fill the void left by the AKP in Turkey, the CHP may lose the importance it has today. However, for the time being, as explained above, even though the CHP has improved in some areas and developed very successful strategies despite the AKP's hegemonic authoritarianism, it has its problems, too. The main reason why it gives these different images is that it experiences advantages, obstacles and limits at the same time.

Currently, although this may seem paradoxical, the CHP's biggest advantage is the AKP's authoritarian character and mismanagement. Although the AKP, which is oppressive, restrictive and has led the country into trouble in numerous areas including the economy, has never had to face a sizable opposition including the CHP, it has indirectly lost voters en masse to the opposition or left them as undecided voters. Here, the main reason why voters remain undecided or prefer opposition parties other than the CHP relates to the CHP's own limitations and problems.

First of all, if we talk about the CHP's limitations, the most serious is its organization, which is afraid of big changes, actually conservative and still effective in the party and its management cadre, which changes very often. At this point, the CHP can neither produce permanent and/or radical solutions to the Kurdish issue, relations between religion and state, and similar issues, nor can it keep the cadre that will generate such solutions long enough for them to do so. Of course, this is related to its historical mission, but a degree of flexibility can bring about significant changes.

If Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu acts wisely and manages to wrest power from Erdoğan, he needs to start immediate reforms within the Turkey.

The CHP's biggest obstacle is the other members of the Nation Alliance, which may seem like an advantage at the moment, but could emerge as serious rivals in the future. In fact, fragile political parties that think differently on many issues have come together in the Alliance with a common goal: getting rid of the AKP. However, this means accepting each other's sins, shortcomings and policy preferences in a sense. However, despite everything, it seems that the decisions of the CHP and its leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu will determine Turkey's future destiny. And if Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu acts wisely and manages to wrest power from Erdoğan, he needs to start immediate reforms within the Turkey. And to introduce all the complicated and urgent changes that are needed, Kılıçdaroğlu should have to fix the failing parts of his party as immediate as possible.

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