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THE CURRENT: What's at stake in Turkey's elections?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

After 20 years in power, Turkey's President Erdoğan is seeking another term in presidential and parliamentary elections slated for May, just three months after a deadly earthquake that killed tens of thousands and rendered many more homeless.

Joining us today from Turkey to discuss the upcoming elections and the opposition that has coalesced to run against President Erdoğan is Aslı Aydintaşbaş, a visiting fellow with the Center on the United States and Europe here at Brookings. Aslı, thanks for talking to us today.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Hi, Adrianna. Good to be here.

PITA: So President Erdoğan is aiming for a third decade in power. During his time, he centralized a great deal of power in his presidential role, implemented an increasingly authoritarian policies on everything from the political opposition to freedom of the press. What can you tell us about the current state of things in Turkey as he's going into this reelection?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Adrianna, this is a very consequential election both for Turkey and Turkish citizens, but in many ways for the world, because Erdoğan has been one of the symbols of democracy's global decline. He started out as a reformist, but then really for the past decade took the country in an authoritarian direction. But Turkey sits at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, right to the south of Ukraine, next to Russia, next to EU, to the north of Syria. So it is an incredibly important country with a very sensitive location. So Europeans, Russians, Ukrainians, United States, everyone will be watching this election. But for Turkish citizens, what matters is whether Erdoğan's 20-year reign, which came not just with an illiberal culture, securitized culture, but also, as you mentioned, a consolidated power.

20 years is a long time. Erdoğan started as a reformer with massive support and actually lifted people off poverty, particularly the low-income bracket. But for the past ten years, he's lost his touch with the youth, with urban masses, and in particular over the past few years, because of the economic decline, he started losing the support of conservative masses as well. So all of those things will be voted. And it looks, it looks today like the opposition has a good chance of winning.

PITA: How has the earthquake played into things? It's often being referred to as a manmade disaster as well as a natural disaster. How is that affecting Erdoğan's prospects?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Well, the earthquake was devastating. It was on a biblical proportion, so no country could have handled it easily. But it is the case that Turkey suffered more. It was deadlier in Turkey because of construction, because of corruption. Because Turks, Turkish contractors and local officials and state officials and federal officials had created a corrupt system whereby Turkey's own building codes were not honored. In other words, Turkey's in a seismic zone. There are a number of faults that pass that transverse the Anatolian plate, and Turkey has quite strict building codes which were solidified after a devastating earthquake in 1999. But we're seeing now that some buildings, some state buildings, some big hospitals or some residential blocks just were stealing, not abiding by Turkey's own rules and regulations. And I think people are very, very angry in earthquakes zones because of this reason.

It is also brought to surface something else, which is in 2017, Turkish president has lobbied for and successfully transitioned the country into what he calls a presidential system. It's a said it's often described

as a one-man regime. The problem was, it was like the U.S. system, except checks and balances, except free media, except independent judiciary and a weak Congress. So it does result in a one-man regime. And I think that this earthquake has brought to the surface the fact that consolidated systems do not provide better governance. The promise of the presidential system, what was that it would provide efficiency and better governance. And people saw with this earthquake that, you know, one man had to decide on everything, which rescue teams go where, and who gets to, which of the ministers are supposed to be at what city and, you know, which organization, which rescue to, you know, it's impossible. Human experience historically tells us that devolution, decentralization of responsibility and governance actually provides better governance. And I think that was a hard lesson in this instance, particularly in the search and rescue. So people are angry and I think that is showing in polls right now.

PITA: It's probably worth a reminder to our listeners that the 1999 earthquake saw the ouster of the government prior to Erdoğan. That's that sort of helped lead to his rise to power, if I remember that correctly.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: The key difference with 1999 is Turkey's a lot more authoritarian today than it was. The opposition does not have media power. The government controls mainstream media. It controls communications. It has limitless resources. There is no checks and balances.

PITA: All right. Let's talk about the opposition. It was just announced this week that a Kemal Kılıçdarğlou will be the main opposition candidate. He was the choice of a coalition of six other parties. Who is he and how did he come to be the candidate of choice?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: If we were discussing this a few years ago, I would have told you Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is the least likely candidate because he comes from a minority Alawite background and represents a political party whose primary feature is secularism, secular social democrats, and they tend to not have the support of conservative masses. But what happened several years ago, two years ago, is Turkish opposition started coordinating, getting together. And about a year ago, six opposition parties got together, formed something which people called the "Table of Six," because they have these dinners around a table, around a round table every month. The Table of Six represents political parties from different ideological strains, including Islamists, including former Erdoğan lieutenants, including a nationalist party. And their purpose is to restore democracy in Turkey and to bring back parliamentary system, a parliamentary democracy, undoing Erdoğan's consolidation of power. And Kiliçdaroğlu is positioning himself, has positioned himself as a unifier. His pledge was, I am not pretending to be the leader of the whole bloc, but I am the best transition person you can have, because I'm 74. I'm not going to try to run the country for the next 20 years, but I will do all I, everything I can to transition it back to democracy. And I think that voters and particularly the other opposition parties seem to seem to find that plausible. They are going with this decision. In some ways, he is the Biden formula for Turkey, a unifier that can also get middle-class support. And he's also backed by Kurds who represent--the pro-Kurdish party represents 12, 13% of the vote. So Erdoğan is running against a big, big coalition.

PITA: What's your take on their prospects, given that, as you were saying earlier, the amount of power and communication control, particularly, that Erdoğan has going into this election?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: I think they have a good chance. Until a week ago or so, I used to tell people who ask me privately, I would say it's a toss-up. I don't know. I can't tell you, because Turkey's a very unpredictable place right now. The mood of the country is very much in favor of the opposition. They seem to frame the discourse and seem to have the upper hand. But the elections are 67 days away. 67 days is a long time in Turkey. A lot can happen and the mood can change. This is a country in the middle of a chaotic geopolitical region, but also it's a very, very polarized society. I've just arrived, Adrianna, to Istanbul and it feels like a boiler room. It's very stressed. People are very, very, very polarized. And, you know, it's important to see how the mood will be in the country a month from now.

PITA: To close things up, 67 days may be a long time in Turkey ahead of these elections, but that doesn't seem like a great deal of time as far as administering an election, particularly in the areas that were hit so badly by the earthquake. Beyond just that, that area, The Economist had recently been warning that if Erdoğan wins again, Turkey is going to become a full-blown dictatorship. What can you tell us about how this

election will be administered, both for the earthquake regions and just more broadly, how, you know, "free and fair" do you think this is going to be?

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Adrianna, this is a high stakes game for everyone at this point, which is why it's no ordinary election and hence my trepidation when I talk about 67 days. Elections tend to take place in an uneven playing field in Turkey. There's a good deal of suppression in rural Kurdish areas, and there is some legal pressures on candidates, such as the Istanbul mayor being disqualified in December, allegedly for insulting the judiciary and being slapped with a lifetime ban. So this is not a normal functioning democracy. But one thing Turkey has is, on the day of elections, the voting is relatively free and transparent, as is accounting. Which is why Erdoğan lost all major cities in 2019 at local elections. So while we may see stuff until the day of election, political turmoil and, you know, hopefully not instability, but a lot of polarization, on the day of voting, it tends to be rather transparent and fraud-free. It's one of the features that sets Turkey apart from countries like Russia or Venezuela or even China and others. It's not a functioning democracy, but it's an elected system, electoral autocracy in many ways. Therefore, elections, once we get to that date, will be okay. I think it's just a question of getting to that date.

PITA: All right. Well, thank you, Aslı, so much for talking to us today about this.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Thank you, Adrianna.