

Erdogan, or Turkey's Autumn

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On May 14, nearly 65 million Turkish citizens will head to the polls for crucial presidential and parliamentary elections. Many see the vote as a chance to turn the page on the Recep Tayyip Erdogan era, after a quarter century in power – longer than any Turkish leader since the abolition of the caliphate nearly a hundred years ago. Facing him is Kemal Kiliçdaroglu, leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), who has chosen a slogan heavy with promise and symbolism: *"I promise you that spring will return."*

From modernization to stagnation

In his early years, Erdogan embodied a sense of renewal. As mayor of Istanbul and later prime minister, he pursued economic and institutional reforms that put Turkey on a path of sustained growth for more than a decade. His foreign policy, built around the principle of "zero problems with neighbors," appeared to break with the region's traditional confrontational postures and enhanced Turkey's international appeal.

An economy under severe strain

After years of expansion, Turkey's economy has sharply deteriorated. Inflation exceeded 55 percent in 2023–2024, while the Turkish lira has lost more than 80 percent of its value against the dollar since 2018. Foreign direct investment, once above \$20 billion a year, now hovers around \$10–11 billion – insufficient to sustain long-term growth.

The trade deficit has widened significantly, while labor market conditions have worsened to levels reminiscent of the crises of the 1990s, with youth unemployment exceeding 20 percent. To prop up growth, Turkey has relied on a low-cost strategy based on subsidies, wage suppression, and currency depreciation. The burden has fallen primarily on households, even as the brain drain accelerates and research and development spending – now just over 1 percent of GDP – undermines long-term prospects.

The earthquake as a test of state failure

The handling of the 2023 earthquake, which affected nearly three million people and caused more than \$120 billion in damage, crystallized public discontent. It exposed the widespread use of fraudulent building permits, decaying infrastructure, and delayed decision-making that magnified the scale of the disaster.

Authoritarianism and domestic isolation

Politically, Erdogan has come to symbolize systematic repression against real or perceived enemies: followers of his former mentor Fethullah Gülen, remnants of the far left, and segments of the Kurdish electorate. He placed the Muslim Brotherhood under Turkish patronage, at the cost of deteriorating relations with Sunni monarchies.

Now allied with ultranationalists and pan-Turkist movements such as the Grey Wolves, Erdogan presides over a country ranked among the world's leaders in the number of political prisoners, journalists included. His attempt to forge a new national identity—blending Hittite, Trojan, Seljuk, and Ottoman references—has left much of society unconvinced.

An erratic and costly foreign policy

On the international stage, Erdogan appears increasingly isolated. He has accumulated more adversaries for Turkey than any leader since the siege of Vienna. European Union membership, once a strategic horizon, now seems out of reach.

Relations with NATO have soured over Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems and its blocking of Sweden's accession to the Alliance. Ankara has supplied advanced drones to Ukraine in its war with Russia. It has also damaged relations with Israel—despite its status as a strategic partner—in hopes of appealing to Arab and Iranian public opinion.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, rather than negotiating a resource-sharing arrangement with Greece, Erdogan opted for nationalist escalation, discouraging investors. His repeated attacks on Israel contributed to the formation of a defense alliance among Greece, Cyprus, and Israel.

Multiple theaters of intervention

The Syrian civil war has turned Turkey into the world's largest host of refugees. Ankara has occupied parts of northern Syria, displaced Kurdish populations to resettle Syrian refugees, and supported the establishment of new local authorities drawn from former jihadist groups. This strategy has raised deep concerns, particularly among Syria's Alawite, Kurdish, and Druze minorities, who have faced repeated abuses. Israel has made clear it does not want hostile forces in southern Syria, a stance that reassures the Druze population.

By extending the Kurdish conflict into Iraq and Syria, Erdogan seeks to establish a security buffer in northern Syria. At the same time, Ankara aims to repatriate some three million Syrian refugees and expand its influence over a future Damascus regime, as Sunni monarchies – led by Qatar – signal readiness to mobilize the hundreds of billions of dollars needed to rebuild a war-ravaged Syria.

In Libya, Somalia, and the Caucasus, Turkey has committed substantial resources with limited returns. Even Azerbaijan, which Ankara backed against Armenia, has refused to grant Turkey preferential terms on oil exports. Turkey has invested economically and militarily in Somalia, while Israel has recognized Somaliland, a strategic asset for monitoring Houthi activity in the Red Sea.

Turkey is also seeking to expand its economic footprint in Central Asia, but faces growing competition from China. Ankara is attempting to influence the route of a future Saudi pipeline, advocating a land passage through Turkey rather than Israel. While this maneuver appears to partially sway Riyadh, the Ankara–Doha axis, long associated with support for the Muslim Brotherhood, remains unacceptable to the Saudi kingdom. Still, the military alliance forged among Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkey signals a notable shift.

What is at stake in the vote

An Erdogan presidential victory without a parliamentary majority would plunge Turkey into political uncertainty. Conversely, an opposition victory

would be welcomed by those who still see Turkey as a major regional power capable of playing a constructive role in resolving crises in the Middle East, North Africa, the Caucasus, and Europe's periphery.