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May 2023**

by Mark Meiwitz



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“ADVANCING DIVERSITY”

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Election of the Least Unwanted Candidate: 2023 Presidential Election in Türkiye

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The last general election for the seats in the Parliament and Presidential elections took place on 14 May 2023. Despite getting more votes from the electorates, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won the election in the second round by getting the support of 52 per cent of the votes against oppositional leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. There have been many interpretations of how to read the results or what the electorates want to say. In many of them, reasons why Erdoğan won again after two decades of power or why Kılıçdaroğlu could not be elected.

Media, especially social media accounts, openly or covertly implied that the rein of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan would come to an end and a new reign start with unique synergy gathered around Kılıçdaroğlu. They were not actually wrong given that there were many reasons why Erdoğan could lose the election, such as two-decade power mostly distorted AK Party, economic crisis negatively influenced every single electorate, appointments of family members of significant political figures starting from the President himself were taken under scrutiny in the media, resentments were raised from the provincial party administrations against the candidate list for member of parliaments. The list can be extended with several more entries. From this perspective, it was quite a surprise that Erdoğan could still win the elections, right? However, it must be emphasised that all these arguments for a possible failure of Erdoğan in the election were about Erdoğan himself. In other words, a couple of months before the election day, it seemed that the presidential election was between the old Erdoğan and the new one.

I have two arguments to raise based on my observations and knowledge. First, all reasons opposition political parties articulated in their campaign to tackle President Erdoğan could be applied to themselves. For instance, long-term party leadership and a century-long political party history could be compared to Erdoğan's two-decades-long power in Türkiye. Leading political parties are normally defected from power, and opposition can be the centre of hope in subsequent elections. However, CHP as a political party and Kılıçdaroğlu as an oppositional leader were not able to serve as the centre of hope in terms of politics but just considered as a means to dethrone Erdoğan. This sort of inability can extend to economic realms. Erdoğan himself has been seen as an architect of the most successful financial period and has still been credited among the people of Türkiye. This argument might seem

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unreasonable as he is also a primary reason for current economic deterioration, but it makes sense to combine with multi-leader unmanageability of the opposition alignment presented with six-plus one table (6 + 1 Masa) as the pre-elections coalition. One more example of fortifying my argument of all critics against Erdoğan that could be applied to the opposition is nepotism and corruption. Both pro and anti-Erdoğan electorates have been aware of nepotism and corruption occurred in the local admirations run by oppositional political parties, but the disparity between the ruling AK Party and oppositional political parties in terms of nepotism and corruption was too high so that it was manipulatively employed as the only political party using nepotism and engaged in corruptions is ruling political party.

My second argument on the recent presidential election in Türkiye is also the source of why I have titled this opinion piece “The Least Unwanted Candidate”. I would argue that the last presidential election is to choose the least unwanted candidate. Let me make it a bit clearer.

Elections are political campaigns in which several candidates are run. Campaign managers or political leaders prioritise the positive features of their candidates, and as a result, people think the one they would vote for is better than the other. However, the 2023 Presidential election in Türkiye was a bit different. To make it clear, I argue that most of the people who voted for each candidate were unhappy with them but voted to ensure the opposing candidate would lose. In other words, people were unhappy with both candidates and clearly did not want them to run the country but had to decide which candidate was the least wanted. So, the most unwanted would not run the country.

This way of approaching the elections and candidates might reach the same result, so considered meaningless, but the philosophy behind their political preferences is quite different. In this perspective, what people expect from politics and politicians differentiates from the other way around. Electorates who supported the opposition were quite sure that they would win and publicly expressed their feelings as the reign of Erdoğan would end. On the other hand, people who support Erdoğan could not express their preferences as the ambience for change also influenced them. Some people claim that they witnessed that appointed bureaucrats preparing their suitcases to leave the country or gathering their staff in their offices as they lost hope for Erdoğan’s victory. If the result were as expected, especially in social media and public opinion research, there would be no psychological issue as both sides’ electorates were ready for the results. However, President Erdoğan won the election, and both sides’ electorates experienced reverse psychology comparing the pre-election period. As Erdoğan several times emphasised, the elections could be won in social media and public opinion research but in the squares and election boxes. Psychology management in the pre-election period was different from the results. The reflection of the difference between pre-election expectations and post-election results has clearly seen after the election.

AK Party and its high-ranking politicians and oppositional political parties and their politicians might think that at least more than half of the electorates still unconditionally support them. In this sense, AK Party's ruling elites, including President Erdoğan, argue that people gave them the green light to continue with what and how they are doing politics and opposing politicians and electorates suggest that the re-elections of Erdoğan meant that people were happy with the political, economic and social conditions.

That is NOT the case. Neither most of the people were happy with social, economic and social conditions in Türkiye, nor opposition political parties and leaders were capable of giving hope that they could run the state after Erdoğan. Eventually, President Erdoğan is the least unwanted candidate compared to Kılıçdaroğlu. In a closing statement, waiting for subsequent elections in five years, the candidates will run in the election not in a negative way but positive way.

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