

# Guardian

## Election fever grips nation riven by great divide

**Ian Traynor** The Guardian  
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### In Turkey, stakes are high in poll pitting Islam against secularism and military against democracy.

This vast, sprawling city is in the grip of election fever, caught up in a boisterous and tense clash of two cultures whose outcome will shape the future of Turkey and resonate beyond the borders of a pivotal country straddling Europe, the Middle East, and the Caucasus.

Virtually every avenue and square is draped in the bunting, posters, and flags of Turkish politics. Campaign lorries power through the traffic-clogged streets, blasting out throbbing Balkan techno music. Boats come paddling up the Golden Horn and motor launches hare across the Bosphorus, peddling political parties and competing to command the attention of voters.

The red and white of the big-city bureaucratic elites who fondly imagine they have a congenital right to rule Turkey are being drowned in a sea of blue, orange and white, the colours of the ascendant new force - the successful nouveaux riches and religious Muslim conservatives from the provinces who stand poised to claim a historic second term victory in general elections tomorrow.

Some see the ballot as a battle between Islam and secularism, others as a referendum on the prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Or a contest between competing visions of Turkey - an open, more confident, more democratic place or an isolated Turkey locked in a siege mentality that sees the outside world as conspiring against it.

"This is an election between those who want more democracy and those who want less," says Egemen Bagis, an adviser to the prime minister. Pinar Korzay, by contrast, thinks democracy is a luxury that such an unruly country can ill afford. The well-heeled Istanbul woman, like many Turks, prizes the country's powerful generals over its politicians. "This is not Latin America. The military is a wonderful thing here. Everyone here worships the military. This country's too big for democracy."

Then there are the ultra-nationalists associated with the thuggery and violence against writers, journalists, and others in the past two years.

"Freedom and democracy are being used against our country to weaken us. We need to stand alone and fulfil our potential. The national consciousness is awakening," claims Erol Gul, a leader of the MHP party of extreme nationalists, which looks likely to re-enter parliament tomorrow.

With the country highly polarised after months of showdown between the governing camp and the military, Soli Ozel, an Istanbul political scientist, says the stakes tomorrow are high. "This has worldwide implications," he said. At issue is whether Turkey can succeed in becoming "a secular, capitalist, democratic country with a Muslim population" enjoying greater liberties.

Among the ubiquitous posters and hoardings showing far-sighted male politicians striding purposefully forward, there is a striking gap in the election campaign imagery. There is no sign of the headscarved Muslim woman, embodiment of the incendiary dispute that ostensibly triggered the early election tomorrow.

When the prime minister proposed his foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, for the post of president in April, the army top brass and the opposition went berserk because Mr Gul's wife, a devout Muslim, keeps her head covered.

The result was deadlock, confrontation and crisis, with the army command issuing a midnight ultimatum to the prime minister. The veiled threat of a junta takeover combined the old and the new. The military has staged four coups in recent decades. Old habits die hard. But the ultimatum took the novel form of a late-night posting on the high command's website. The grounds for the threatened "e-coup" were that Mr Erdogan was jeopardising Turkey's constitutionally enshrined secularism. The warning sparked panic.

The consensus in Istanbul and Ankara is that Mr Erdogan made a rare blunder by pushing so forcefully for the presidency. So he called the election four months early to try to settle the crisis. All the opinion polls suggest he will be vindicated, securing a majority in the 550-seat parliament in Ankara and a second five-year term for his AKP or Justice and Development party.

"We will have crossed the Rubicon," says Cengiz Candar, an analyst. "It will be a big defeat for the nationalists, the jingoists, and the generals who whipped up a frenzy against the government."

The military sabre-rattling has probably backfired and strengthened Mr Erdogan. The quid pro quo is that he may have to forfeit the presidency.

The main opposition CHP or Republican People's party has no chance of winning the election and has concentrated on scaremongering, accusing the government and AKP, which has its roots in political Islam, of secretly plotting to turn Turkey into a theocracy.

"Even if it's not true, that campaign has been very successful," says Ali Carkoglu, a psephologist. "Up to 30% of the electorate believe in the nightmare scenario of a second Iranian revolution. Educated working women especially are worried that their daughters will find themselves in a country similar to Saudi Arabia or Iran in a few years."

Ms Korzay shares such apprehensions. "Everybody I know is voting against the AKP because the prime minister's wife keeps her head covered. The AKP has been fabulous for business, but now you go to the new malls shopping and you see women in Gucci and Louis Vuitton headscarves. Iran is just too close to home here and it scares people. Secularism is more important than democracy."

### Patronising

Such arguments are breezily dismissed by the government as patronising and discriminatory. "It's not up to governments to decide what you should wear, eat, read, or think," says Mr Bagis, the Erdogan adviser and AKP candidate. "Anyway 63% of Turkish women have some kind of fabric on their heads. And the right to wear a headscarf is just as important as someone else's right to wear a miniskirt."

The headscarf has become the totemic issue of the election, turning the ballot into a contest between closet Islamists and militant secularists. Mr Ozel and Mr Candar say this is a smokescreen. The real battle is for power.

The country is in the throes of a long, slow, and complex revolution. The political and business elites in Ankara and Istanbul who have traditionally run modern Turkey - the army, security services, bureaucracy, judiciary - are being supplanted by a new Muslim middle class - provincial, entrepreneurial, successful, deeply conservative and religious, previously excluded and clamouring for influence.

The enigmatic Mr Erdogan is the human face of this new Turkey, his AKP the political agent of this tectonic shift. In his first term in office, he has been highly successful. He opened EU membership negotiations, tamed runaway inflation, slashed interest rates, more than doubled average income and opened the country to a flood of foreign investment. He has shielded Turkey from the impact of the multiple catastrophes unfolding next door in Iraq.

"He has totally transformed the way Turkey works. It's a virtuous circle," says Gerald Knaus, an Austrian who runs an Istanbul-based thinktank.

In the casino of globalisation Turkey has been one of the winners. But there have been losers, too, feeding the extreme nationalist backlash that results in bombs and murders, security service dirty tricks and the harassment

of liberals such as Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel prizewinning novelist.

### Mistrust

Mr Erdogan has also sown mistrust and suspicion by packing state bodies with religious cronies selected on grounds of piety and loyalty rather than merit, while miscalculating in his attempt to seize the presidency and allowing his lieutenants to encourage a climate of intolerance of non-Muslim habits. All evidence, say the sceptics, of a hidden agenda.

"They see it as the beginning of the end, signalling a complete takeover of the central institutions of the republic by the conservative Islamist periphery," says Mr Carkoglu.

But given his record, there is a body of opinion that believes Mr Erdogan should be given the benefit of the doubt.

"For all their faults, Erdogan and the AKP do represent a transformed, more open and more democratically inclined Turkey. This is their vocation even if they don't realise fully what this entails," says Mr Ozel. "If they get a majority [tomorrow] their only option and not just their best option is to widen the democratic space in the country."

Opinion polls predict he will get that majority and be able to lead a single-party government.

"These elections," says Mr Candar, "are not about headscarves or about secularism and Islam ... The real issue is how strong Erdogan's new mandate will be and what he chooses to do with it. Everything depends on the scale of his victory."

### Key figures

#### Recep Tayyip Erdogan

Prime minister poised for a second five-year term at the head of his AKP Justice and Development party, which represents Turkey's new middle class of pious, conservative Muslim money-makers. A former mayor of Istanbul, promising footballer and Islamist firebrand in his youth, he says he has matured into a leader of a conservative, democratic party based on religious values, not dissimilar to the Christian democrats of Europe. Critics fear a hidden Islamist agenda.

#### General Yasar Buyukanit

Hawkish chief of staff of the armed forces, the general has been calling the shots behind the scenes, issuing veiled threats of a coup against the Erdogan government and triggering the showdown between military and politics that has led to tomorrow's election. Replaced a more moderate predecessor last August and shows little compunction about interfering in politics. The main, but weak, opposition party is seen as the political arm of the generals. Did stints at Nato headquarters in Belgium and

as military intelligence chief at Nato southern command in Naples. As head of the second biggest armed forces in Nato, is regarded as having intimate connections to the Pentagon despite acute US-Turkish tension over the war in Iraq.

**Mustafa Kemal, aka Ataturk, father of the nation.**

The Ottoman military officer who led the revolution that created the modern republic of Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire in 1923 is the revered object of a personality cult. Ataturk remains what Lenin or Mao were to the Soviet Union and China.

**... and the AKP's main rivals**

**Republican People's party**

Founded by Ataturk and led by veteran politician Deniz Baykal, and staunchly secularist.

**Nationalist Movement party**

Led by Devlet Bahçeli, the far-right group was a part of the coalition that lost to the AKP in 2002.

**Democratic party**

Centre-right party, led by Mehmet Ağar, and the most likely coalition partner if the AKP cannot form a government alone.