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Election Analysis

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# The Vulnerability of Hope and Optimism: Reflecting on Turkey's 2023 Elections

Derya Özkaya\*

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## Introduction

In May, Turkey held one of the most consequential elections in its recent history. The vote took place amid a deepening economic crisis, one of the deadliest earthquakes of the last century, and an expanded realm of oppression targeting almost all fields of social and political life. What made the elections of May 2023 more contested than their predecessors was that it was the first time in the last two decades, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) were not viewed as the clear favorites. Motivated by the collective sense of urgency to hand the ruling government an electoral defeat, along with a strong desire for constructing a more democratic republican regime for the centennial, broad but oftentimes disparate alliances were constructed in an effort to oust. While expectations ran high, with the political opposition brimming with unbridled hopes and optimism leading up to the parliamentary and presidential elections on May 14, Erdoğan defeated his two challengers Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and Sinan Oğan with a slim margin (49.5 percent), but could not avoid a second round. The country trudged to the polls again on May 28 for a run-off election, which resulted in a victory for Erdoğan and a secured third term as president. Though the presidential elections garnered widespread attention from the public, media, and international observers, the parliamentary elections also held significant implications for Turkey's politics. Erdoğan's AKP saw a decline in vote share, but their governing coalition strengthened with support from far-right, nationalist, and Islamist parties. This coalition protected AKP's parliamentary majority, retaining 322 out of 600 seats. On the other hand, the opposition parties performed below expectations, only securing 35 percent of the parliamentary vote.

The aftermath of the elections sparked various analyses of the opposition's defeat, the factors behind Erdoğan's enduring support, the surge in right-wing and nationalist parties' votes, the implications of the new period's economic policies and Turkey's international standing. While analysts increasingly express concern about Erdoğan's new term and the potential threats to Turkey's alleged democracy, the 2023 elections have also revealed very important lessons for political dissent.

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Initial reflections on the opposition's failure were centered around the manipulation of results, uneven conditions of the electoral campaigns, unequal media coverage, and the selection of the "wrong" candidate for the presidency. However, more profound issues lie in comprehending Erdoğan's ability to appeal large masses despite the country's devastating economic situation and the state's weakened institutions which was exposed following the February earthquakes. The current parliament composition reveals a dominant presence of nationalist and conservative parties,<sup>2</sup> warranting in-depth analysis of the growing threat of nationalism in Turkey and other countries worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

### **Political actors of the contested race**

Long before the elections, the political opposition, spanning from the center-left to the socialists, had mobilized around alliances to challenge Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's bid for a new presidential term. Turkey's political landscape began shifting towards this form of electoral alliance, a relatively new phenomenon driven by the transition to the presidential system in 2017, which centralized the role of the presidency and, requires candidates to secure over 50 percent of seats in Parliament. For the 2023 elections, there were three main alliances and several small-scale parties ran for the contested race: The People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*), formed in 2018, included the AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP). This alliance was supported by the far-right, ultranationalist Grand Unity Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi*, BBP), the ultraconservative New Welfare Party (*Yeniden Refah Partisi*, YRP), and the Kurdish Islamist Free Cause Party (*Hür Dava Partisi*, HÜDA PAR).<sup>4</sup> Appealing to the right-wing, religious, and nationalist voters, the People's Alliance united around the candidacy of President Erdoğan who appeared as the centerpiece of their electoral campaign.

The largest coalition of the opposition gathered around the Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*), also known as the "Table of Six," referring to the six political parties as its constituents. The Nation Alliance included the main opposition social democratic Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), the nationalist Good Party (*İyi Parti*, İYİP) (formed by a group that broke away from the MHP), the Islamist conservative Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*, SP), the center-right Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP), and two splinter parties from the ruling AKP: the liberal-right Democracy and Progress Party (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi*, DEVA) and the center-right Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*, GP). On January 2023, the Nation Alliance announced their agreement protocol entitled "Memorandum of Understanding on Common Policies,"<sup>5</sup> in which they presented a detailed roadmap on various topics including the rule of law, domestic, economic, and foreign policy. The main premise of this joint manifesto was the transition into the "Strengthened Parliamentary System" to restore

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<sup>2</sup> Ten out of sixteen parties are nationalists and another five are extreme right-wing; while almost two-thirds of parliamentarians are right-wing conservatives or Islamists. For more details, see Taştekin, Fehim. 2023. [Turkey's new parliament: 50 shades of nationalism, conservatism](#). *Al-Monitor*, 20 May 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Tugal, Cihan. [Rightwing Populism on the European Periphery](#) (accessed: 27 July 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Hüda-Par has been historically linked to Hezbollah, a Kurdish group that waged a brutal campaign of violence in the 1990s as it fought the PKK and targeted Turkish police officers.

<sup>5</sup> Nation's Alliance. [Memorandum of understanding on common policies](#) (accessed: 6 June 2023).

Turkey's democracy which appeared as the motto of their electoral campaign. After a long period of fractious negotiations these six parties united behind the candidacy of the CHP leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu.

The third largest and the only left-wing alliance was the Labor and Freedom Alliance (*Emek ve Özgürlük İttifakı*) led by the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), which ran in the elections under the Green Left Party (*Yeşil Sol Parti*, YSP) due to an ongoing court case for its closure. Several socialist parties including the Workers' Party of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TİP), the Labour Party (*Emeğin Partisi*, EMEP), the Workers' Movement Party (*Emekçi Hareket Partisi*, EHP), the Federation of Socialist Assemblies (*Sosyalist Meclisler Federasyonu*, SMF), and the Social Freedom Party (*Toplumsal Özgürlük Partisi*, TÖP) were also among this alliance. The *Labor and Freedom Alliance* did not nominate an independent candidate and supported Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential elections.

Two additional candidates ran for president in the first round: Sinan Oğan, who has been a former member of the MHP, announced his candidacy backed by the ATA (Ancestral) Alliance consisting of four far-right and anti-migrant parties. Oğan secured 5.17 percent of the vote and decided to support Erdoğan for the run-off, justifying his decision on the grounds of Erdoğan's "non-stop struggle against terrorism."<sup>6</sup> Another presidential candidate was the Chairman of the Homeland Party (*Memleket Partisi*), Muharrem İnce, the former CHP presidential candidate in 2018 who withdrew from the race three days before the first round of elections.

### **Contrasting campaign strategies: fear vs. hope**

During the electoral campaign, Erdoğan adopted a polarizing discourse: his rhetoric targeted diverse ethnic, religious, and sexual identities, and fostered fear and hostility towards the opposition, accusing them of cooperating with "terrorists." Presenting themselves as "native and national" and putting moral values and religion at the center of his speeches, he portrayed the opposition as a threat to their voters' ways of life. He aimed to convince his supporters to protect the conservative family structures and fight against degeneration targeting, LGBTQI+ communities as deviant tendencies in society. The People's Alliance repeatedly labeled the opposition as "pro-LGBT," and equated them with "terrorists." Additionally, Erdoğan capitalized on nationalist sentiments by showcasing defense industry advancements, such as the first Turkish car (TOGG), military investments, and nuclear power plant construction. He also utilized the perception of a more internationally active Turkey to emphasize his credentials as a strong international leader. To bolster his image and gain votes, he implemented economic tactics, including extensive construction projects in earthquake zones, cheap mortgages, energy bill discounts, a doubled minimum wage, and early retirements for two million citizens. While these moves found support among Erdoğan's voter base, large segments of the political opposition belittled AKP supporters for turning a blind eye to the debilitating currency crisis.

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<sup>6</sup> Gavin, Gabriel, and Elçin Poyrazlar. 2023. [Erdoğan wins support from Turkey's election 'kingmaker'](#). *Politico*, 22 May 2023.

Erdoğan's antagonistic rhetoric toward the opposition alliances and their supporters framed the election as an existential crisis, life or death, generating anxiety among his supporters. Conversely, his main rival, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, adopted a positive and inclusive approach, delivering optimistic and hopeful messages about the future supported by hand gestures with a heart symbol and love-filled expressions. To reach a broader and younger audience Kılıçdaroğlu released video messages,<sup>7</sup> a strategy to avoid the government's control and censorship of media. Particularly the videos on the recognition of Alevis<sup>8</sup> and Kurds, and the call for reconciliation (*helalleşme*<sup>9</sup> in Turkish referring to mutual forgiveness) with the contested past of the Turkish Republic quickly went viral, reaching more than hundreds of million viewers. These video messages were seen as breaking political taboos<sup>10</sup> and celebrated by large segments of society as a glimpse into a potentially brighter, and post-Erdoğan, future. Besides promoting Kılıçdaroğlu's calm personality, the Nation Alliance's primary election strategy focused on criticizing the government's inadequate response to the February earthquakes as well as highlighting the deepening impacts of the financial crisis on Turkish living standards. Additionally, their messaging promised a return to an orientation around Western-aligned foreign policy.

While their pledge to abolish the executive presidential system and return to a parliamentary created enthusiasm among their supporters, the lack of concrete solutions to address structural problems undermined their appeal to a wider electorate. Additionally, Kılıçdaroğlu shifted his strategy after the first round, adopting a more nationalist tone and targeting Syrian refugees as scapegoats for the economic crisis, and expressed a willingness to deport ten million refugees. This shift in tone was followed by negotiations with the far-right Victory Party (*Zafer Partisi*, ZP) Chairman Ümit Özdağ, one of the senior members of the ATA Alliance, who is publicly known for his anti-immigrant and racist discourses.

The Labor and Freedom Alliance's electoral strategy to support the Nation Alliance without being a part of it has been decisive not only for the presidential elections but also for the future of Turkey's political dissent. Instead of running an independent left-wing candidate, the Labor and Freedom Alliance declared "unconditional support" to Kılıçdaroğlu to "take a breath" to restore the country. In their election consensus declaration, the alliance highlighted fundamental issues, such as the high cost of living, low wages, unemployment, poverty, urgent actions to be taken in the earthquake region, a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue, struggle for gender equality for women and the LGBTQI+ community, and improving fundamental rights and living conditions for working-classes and

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<sup>7</sup> For Kılıçdaroğlu's videos, see <https://www.youtube.com/@kemalkilicdaroglu/videos>

<sup>8</sup> Alevis are among Turkey's minority communities who follow a heterodox Islamic tradition that distinguishes them from Sunni and Shia Muslims. They have historically been targeted by the ruling regimes of almost all times and witnessed organized violent attacks, displacements, and massacres in Turkey's recent history. Kılıçdaroğlu is also a member of the Alevi community and this has been pointed out by the *People's Alliance's* election campaign to convince their Sunni majority voters base not to support him and to cultivate identity-based polarization. For a brief analysis of Kılıçdaroğlu's video on Alevis, see Daşlı, Güneş. 2023. [In historic speech, Kılıçdaroğlu talks about his Alevi heritage, says Turkey will overcome identity politics.](#) *Duvar English*, 20 April 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Daşlı, Güneş. [Can Helalleşme become a localized concept of reconciliation in Turkey?](#) (accessed: 16 July 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Semo, Marc. 2023. [Elections in Turkey: 'By claiming to be an Alevi, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu broke a taboo.'](#) *Le Monde*, 12 May 2023.

oppressed minorities.<sup>11</sup> Despite inner tensions, particularly between the HDP and TIP regarding strategic decisions for the parliamentary elections, the Labor and Freedom Alliance received enthusiastic support from feminist and women's movements, LGBTQI+ organizations, urban and ecology movements, and politically autonomous groups. Yet, it remained overshadowed by the Nation Alliance and failed to expand concretely on its promise of a return to a parliamentary system for democratic transformation in Turkey. Additionally, the alliance could not confront Kılıçdaroğlu's xenophobic rhetoric on refugees, his inadequate responses to Erdoğan's criminalization of the pro-Kurdish YSP, and his threatening language towards the queer community during the electoral campaigns. Consequently, the alliance had limited influence on critical agendas and demands of a broader dissent, resulting in a failure to increase their votes in the parliamentary elections, and thus lost their seats to various right-wing nationalist and religious parties. Selahattin Demirtaş, the former HDP co-chair who ran as a candidate from prison in the 2018 Presidential elections, proved more effective in calling for cooperation among opposition alliances and reaching out to a broader audience from prison. While Kılıçdaroğlu's "national turn" unsettled some of his supporters— particularly the Labor and Freedom Alliance – they were not sufficiently vocal on this shift, which illustrated a potential threat to the future of political opposition, minorities, and migrants in Turkey under his potential presidency. Despite their criticisms, almost all factions of political opposition transferred their hopes and expectations for change to the main opposition and attributed miraculous meanings to Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy.

#### **In the wake of another “historic” failure**

Immediately after the elections, President Erdoğan hastily set a new course for his rule by replacing nearly all former cabinet members with new technocrats in key positions.<sup>12</sup> Particularly the appointment of a new treasury and finance minister, along with a new head of the central bank is seen as a change in the government's economic policy, signaling an effort to tackle the soaring inflation rates and depreciation of the Turkish Lira. These issues had a deep impact over a large segment of society, who had been grappling with a cost-of-living crisis for over two years.

Simultaneously, Erdoğan reaffirmed his commitment to a robust foreign policy agenda, showing his intent to maintain Turkey's position on the global stage, and appointed the former head of the National Intelligence Organization as foreign minister. Additionally, changes in key positions like the Minister of the Interior and Minister of Defense indicated a focus on “Turkey's 2023 Vision,”<sup>13</sup> and the centennial of the Republic. The implications message in these actions are clear; the space for political dissent is shrinking.

While Erdoğan and his allies have swiftly worked to restructure state institutions, the oppositional alliances seemed to retreat, and faded from public

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<sup>11</sup> Evrensel Daily. 2023. [Labour and Freedom Alliance announced election consensus declaration](#). *Evrensel Daily*, 8 April 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Aksoy, Hürkan Aşlı, Yaşar Aydın and Salim Çevik. *Turkey's new cabinet: a wind of change in Turkish politics?* (accessed: 20 July 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye. *Türkiye builds its 2023 vision on the goal of being one of the biggest in the world in terms of politics and economy* (accessed: 3 June 2023).

discussions. The perceived abdication from the political stage left their supporters “feeling ghosted.”<sup>14</sup> Following their defeat, the main opposition party, CHP, faced internal turmoil and harsh criticism. The ensuing schism presented a strong rivalry between the current head, Kılıçdaroğlu, and Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, seen as the strongest alternative. Both the CHP members and supporters and the other members of the Nation Alliance continue to harshly criticize Kılıçdaroğlu as reproducing the “one-man rule” within his party. However, Kılıçdaroğlu does not seem to be willing to change his position. Blaming each other for their collective electoral failure instead of genuine self-reflection and thinking about alternative ways to reach a broader society, both factions within the party have already started to develop new strategies for the upcoming 2024 local elections.

Furthermore, the head of the far-right Victory Party, Ümit Özdağ, revealed the “secret” agreement with Kılıçdaroğlu, guaranteeing his party three Cabinet posts and the intelligence agency if he won. Soon after Kılıçdaroğlu himself confirmed the deal defining it as “a protocol entrusted in the honor of two people alone.” This secretive deal, significant for Turkey’s future politics and society, and Kılıçdaroğlu’s aggressive responses to criticisms about his understanding of democracy and political ethics have added to the ongoing tensions within the CHP and among the *Nation Alliance*’s members and supporters.

Meanwhile, the third largest party in the Turkish parliament, HDP, responded to criticisms from their voter base by initiating meetings for self-criticism on the decline of their votes and restoring decision-making mechanisms within the party. Even though the HDP voters dedicatedly implemented their party’s central decision to support Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential elections, they are not silencing their unrest about their party’s election strategy anymore. In an illustration of the party’s capacity for critical self-reflection, the HDP co-chairs declared that they would step down at the upcoming party congress. Former co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş who has been in prison since 2016, also announced his retirement from active politics and leveled criticism towards his party for not having an effective election strategy.<sup>15</sup> The remaining members of the HDP-led bloc remain silent about their failed election strategies and future steps, leaving their supporters without clear explanations.

The polarization within the parliamentary opposition has fractured any organized dissent and frustrated citizens who seek democracy, freedom, and better living conditions. This negatively contributes towards feelings of political apathy and disengagement, particularly among the youth. Still reeling in the nascent recovery of the devastating earthquakes, those who have been raising their concerns over the ruling regime’s authoritarian practices are currently stricken with post-election trauma.

However, the AKP government continues its relentless aggression toward its citizens who defend their environment against the government’s rent-based

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<sup>14</sup> Gümrükçü, Selin Bengi. 2023. [The 2023 Turkish elections—a roller coaster ride between hope and despair](#). *Public Seminar*, 14 June 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Bianet. 2023. [Demirtaş announces retirement from active politics](#). *Bianet*, 31 May 2023.

destruction projects,<sup>16</sup> questioning the state-led violent instances,<sup>17</sup> and seeking justice.<sup>18</sup> Accelerating the nonstop oppression of its opponents, the re-elected President and his new cabinet are cementing their rule by arresting critical journalists, lawyers, and political activists; banning protests, concerts, and festivals; restricting LGBTQI+ rights and marginalizing them; and leaving no space for any kind of anti-government voices. Nevertheless, there are still small-scale ecological resistances, workers' strikes, and protests as well as solidarity initiatives across the country that are organized by the citizens and grassroots movements.

### **Substituting elections for politics**

Election turnout in Turkey has been consistently high since the foundation of the Turkish Republic, averaging between 82-87 percent for local and general elections, as well as referendums. This reflects citizens' motivation to intervene in politics and protect their democratic rights. However, it is also a consequence of the ruling regimes' decades-long marginalization, criminalization, and violent suppression of extra-parliamentary opposition, the right to organize, and street politics, which are perceived as threats to the status quo. Over the last two decades, electoral politics under the ruling Erdoğan regime has gained even more significance. While Erdoğan eagerly embraced the historical enmity towards any kind of political organization, the main opposition parties have also looked towards citizens' self-organizations and street protests. A closer look at the workers' resistance and strikes in the CHP-led municipalities would demonstrate the main opposition party's hostile reactions to the right to organize and protest. Leftists, socialists, and revolutionaries, who used to advocate alternative forms of political organization, have lost their ties with the broader masses. As a result, the political field is highly restricted to elections, and different factions in the political opposition are often captured by parliamentary ambitions.

As I explain elsewhere, a notable exception to this election-centric landscape was the Gezi uprisings of 2013 and their aftermath until the 2015 national elections.<sup>19</sup> During this period, Turkey witnessed the most massive popular uprisings in its recent history representing a significant challenge to the ruling regime's unrestrainable hegemony since it came to power in 2002. After the massive mobilizations and two weeklong occupation of public spaces, political dissent spanned very diverse forms of political participation. In this period, various self-organized and grassroots citizen initiatives leading to new grassroots mobilization were formed across the country. These initiatives sparked discussions about socio-political transformation through direct democracy, extending beyond representative politics. However, these grassroots initiatives eventually became entangled in subsequent electoral campaigns,

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<sup>16</sup> Limb, Lottie. 2023. 'We will not give up': How a Turkish forest became the site of fierce coal mine resistance. *Euronews*, 28 July 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Gercek News. 2023. Police violence at Suruc commemoration. *Gercek News*, 22 July 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Duvar English. 2023. Turkish police once again disregard top court's ruling on Saturday mothers, detain 50. *Duvar English*, 29 July 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Özkaya, Derya. 2023. Fluctuating between the "local" and the "national": the politics of alliances from below in the afterlives of Gezi. *Jadaliyya*, 20 July 2023.



contributing to a cycle of political mobilization followed by electoral disappointment.

Since the Gezi uprisings, Turkey has held six elections. Scores of people have engaged in electoral campaigns and activities to contribute to the transparency, accountability, and security of voting – particularly against electoral fraud – an indispensable component of elections in the AKP era. Not only ordinary people or the voters of main opposition parties but also the supporters of extra-parliamentary opposition and even anarchists have been incorporated into electoral campaigns. Such contradictory political positionings have also appeared as a theme in political jokes as written in the most popular satirical magazine *Uykusuz* following the June 2015 elections:

*“The anarchists of the world occupy buildings, establish communes, and do not vote. Far from voting, our anarchists ran around for the signed ballot box protocols. [...] Nothing can be done, my brothers, without questioning the darkness that created a polling observer by an anarchist.”*<sup>20</sup>

This humorous illustration of the changing field of political opposition in Turkey is also indicative of the extent to which politics and political activity have been confined to voting. While the momentum of street mobilization and protest movements quickly unwound between successive elections, political dissent invested their desire for change into electoral campaigns and mobilized collective energies for political action around an overemphasis on the possible “defeat” of the ruling government in the polls.

Such election-centered politics has faced criticism from scholars, analysts, and activists themselves – immediately in the aftermath of the 2023 elections. Even the fervent advocates of the opposition's electoral victory, who have often aggressively silenced the criticisms for this over-enthusiasm around elections, have contributed to these critical reflections. Still, responsibility for perpetuating this restricted political environment is often evaded by various political actors. Often critiques are raised without referring to a real actor as if an exterior power captured millions of voters. However, it is critical for all factions of the political opposition – not only the CHP and Kılıçdaroğlu – that reproduce the restricted political field around electoral campaigns and channel all hopes and expectations to a possible electoral victory should take responsibility for their actions. They should also openly share the reasons for their failure and their organizational strategies for a broader political horizon with their supporters if they aim to (re)establish their ties with the broader public.

### **Burying hopes of change in ballot boxes**

Portraying the political opposition's electoral victory as the new emancipation for Turkey's democratization, the collective discontent that had been brewing for years within broad segments of Turkish society have once again been projected towards the ballot boxes. Along with these projections comes the tacit assumption of positive change upon the election of the opposition party; foisting the task of system change onto the backs of voters. Particularly in the context of

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<sup>20</sup> Uygur, Barış. 2015. Akıl Fikir Ofisi. *Uykusuz* 406.

the devastating earthquakes, the shift in Turkey's political dissent's affective state from collective pain and despair, to hope and optimism, appeared as a powerful source for collective political actions around the electoral campaigns. Main slogans of the opposition's campaign like "Promise you, the spring will come again!" and "Everything will be alright!" also successfully conveyed these hopeful messages to their supporters and quickly went viral. However, this prevailing hope led to an expectation of unconditional support for the main opposition candidate – thus stifling any form of criticism. On the other, the politics of hope around the elections generated new affective attachments to the fantasy of democracy with freedom of choice and political participation instead of a radical confrontation with its social, political, and historical contestations.

Such contradictory manifestations of hope within Turkey's political landscape can be usefully analyzed under critical affect theorist Lauren Berlant's conceptualization of "cruel optimism."<sup>21</sup> Berlant claims that late capitalism breeds a different form of optimism, which is "cruel" since the desired objects and the attachments we generate prevent us from flourishing as individuals. Asking why people stay attached to their fantasies of a good life – like family, markets, political institutions, systems, etc. – despite their declines under contemporary capitalism, Berlant argues that keeping attachments to sustain the good life fantasies, whether they are cruel or injurious, allows people to maintain day-to-day life when it has become unliveable.<sup>22</sup>

Defining the politics of hope around elections as a form of cruel optimism could offer important insights into the emotional undercurrents driving Turkey's contemporary oppositional landscape. However, I also argue that by cultivating over-enthusiasm around a potential electoral victory accompanied by hope and optimism for the alleged democratization of Turkey, political opposition engenders an "optimist cruelty" for the larger society. Occupying the political field with temporary electoral agendas, potential candidates, alliances, and negotiations among them, almost all factions of Turkey's political opposition keep subordinating other fields of political activity and different forms of collective struggle. Limiting the mobilization of public support only during elections effectively side-steps addressing legitimate existential social and economic concerns of the larger society and fails to create strong networks of solidarity and resistance. Hence, the political opposition became trapped in the highly restricted political field designed by the ruling regime. As a result, they indirectly contribute to the continuation of the regime known for its cruelty.

### **Good intentions or continuous struggle? Navigating Turkey's opposition**

In the pursuit of liberation from a decades-long oppressive regime, opposition alliances rallied supporters around virtuous aspirations for a post-Erdoğan political landscape. However, this fervor often eclipsed any real concrete strategies and actionable steps necessary to forge a brighter future. Reiterating a vague and ungrounded political discourse, the opposition envisioned Turkey's quandaries dissolving upon President Erdoğan's departure, pinning their hopes

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<sup>21</sup> Çubukçu, Ayça. 2023. [After Erdoğan's victory, movements in Turkey must fight beyond the ballot box](#). *Truthout*, 29 July 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

on his rival, Kılıçdaroğlu, as Turkey's sole beacon of democracy. Yet, good intentions alone are not sufficient for political transformation. The cluttered aftermath of elections and Kılıçdaroğlu's subsequent actions demonstrated are further proof of this. The path forward demands sustained collective resistance, unification of the masses grappling with the far-reaching impacts of neoliberal capitalism, authoritarianism, precarity, poverty, inequality, and injustice in all fields of life.

Looking back to Turkey's recent history of political movements and mobilization offers precious insights to learn from previous experiences of political organization, collective action, and struggle, fostering a political culture of resistance. Even a short detour back to the Gezi uprisings of 2013<sup>23</sup> illuminate the potential for radical political imaginations that transcend conventional representative politics. Recalling the extraordinary experiences of collective resistance during the uprisings and the subsequent nationwide political mobilization that left a legacy of alternative forms of political participation holds promise for alternative inspirations albeit their limitations.

While some opposition parties have already begun drafting electoral strategies aimed at increasing their votes and negotiating for new candidates or alliances for forthcoming elections, citizens nationwide are left to grapple with poverty, inequality, and injustices. Rural inhabitants, spanning across the gender and generational spectrum are valiantly safeguarding their land and environment. Journalists, lawyers, and human rights persistently advocate and amplify their dissenting voices – all while braving the specter of imprisonment. Workers wage a battle against degrading living and working conditions. Women and LGBTQI+ communities confront enduring violence and marginalization, tirelessly seeking survival. Students and youth harbor concerns about their future prospects, while survivors of the February earthquakes tenaciously cling to life. These active, yet weak networks of resistance demonstrate the capacity to transform the frustration and despair of opposition parties' supporters into hope for shaping Turkey's future political landscape through collective action. Those who disregard these actors and their demands, viewing them solely as electoral fodder, risk undermining Turkey's path to regaining democracy and freedom. Without actively engaging in the lives of these individuals, or suggesting concrete solutions to their vital problems; and without building collective pathways of living and acting together to build a better life, Turkey's political opposition is condemned to failure.

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<sup>23</sup> Gökmenoglu, Birgan and Derya Özkaya. 2023. Roundtable introduction: "Remembering Gezi"—beyond nostalgia ten years on. *Jadaliyya*, 6 June 2023.

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