

Turkey's 2015 general election: a final look at the parties and the campaign

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Turkey will hold a general election on 7 June. [Sezin Öney](#) and [Emre Erdoğan](#) take a final look at the campaign before the country heads to the polls. They write that politics in Turkey has taken a notable populist turn in recent years, with the 2015 election campaign becoming dominated by a personalised style of politics, particularly in relation to the current Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the leader of the pro-Kurdish HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş.



During the campaign in 2014 for Turkey's first popularly elected President (or 'Head of the Republic') we wrote a [piece](#) declaring that the real winner was not so much Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself, who secured victory with 52 per cent of the vote, but populism. Ahead of Turkey's parliamentary elections on 7 June, it is worth taking stock of what has changed since last August. As it happens, if there has indeed been a 'change' it has been the further transformation of Turkey into a fully populist-based political system.



Political rhetoric in Turkey: the rise of populist discourses

Although there is no consensus on the definition of populism, a widely accepted version is that [proposed](#) by Cas Mudde, who views populism "as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* of the people".

Populism is something more than a simple 'people oriented' narrative, it is a chameleonic phenomenon; it tends to take the shape of the cup it is poured in, ranging from the far left to the far right of the political spectrum. The academic literature on the subject contends that popular frustration with the status quo is one of the underlying factors that allows populism to flourish. We argue that particular domestic reasons in Turkey have contributed to popular disenchantment.

On the one hand, Turkey's leadership claims that a systemic change is required for further development of the country and they have mobilised all of the political power they possess toward strengthening the executive. On the other hand, erosion of the independence and strength of state institutions and a fusion of executive, legislative and judicial powers in the ruling [Justice and Development Party's](#) (AKP) hands has generated popular disenchantment among the opposition. Discontent with the current state of politics is a sentiment expressed by both the government and opposition. But in order to get rid of the 'status quo', whose vision of the future will triumph?

If this is the key political issue in Turkey then it should come as no surprise that in the lead up to the parliamentary elections the political scene has become engulfed by a polarised 'us against them' dynamic, which portrays each side as attempting to represent the general will of the people against a 'corrupt and evil' rival. In this form of populism, the highly charged language of charismatic leaders has become the only viable type of politics, with speeches choreographed to heighten emotions among supporters to extreme levels, and demeaning prose levelled at rival politicians and parties – who are taken as barriers preventing the representation of the people's will.

This rhetoric frequently focuses on 'non-issues', such as the degree of religiosity of one leader as compared to another, while personal insults such as 'liar', 'thief' and even 'infidel' and 'murderer' are regularly fired off from one party podium to another. The intense level of political polarisation now present in Turkey has been skilfully manufactured by the country's main political leaders, with a charismatic war of words constituting the medium

through which the election campaign has been fought.

Erdoğan's quest for a presidential system

Formally, the Head of the Republic, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has to be 'independent' and unaffiliated with political parties. However, his desire to transform the political system of Turkey into a fully presidential one has driven him toward playing an excessively active role in the campaigning for his 'former' party, the AKP. Erdoğan's desire for a presidential system has been [well-known](#) since the 2000s and he also openly set it as a [target](#) during the presidential elections.

Turkey's Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, has backed the system change in his own parallel campaign: the AKP has made the creation of a presidential system its top priority, alongside a new constitution, in its [2015 Election Declaration](#). The AKP and Erdoğan argue that the 'people's will' would be best represented by a strong leader's presidency, with the whims and manipulations of an elitist minority of oligarchic interests presented as the key obstacle to a proper representation of the Turkish people's views.

However an unlikely beneficiary emerged from last summer's elections, namely Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-leader of the pro-Kurdish [People's Democratic Party](#) (HDP), who has adopted his own variant of the 'us versus them' rhetoric. The HDP was previously the only opposition party the AKP engaged with, albeit reluctantly, as part of the peace process to resolve the Kurdish question. But the HDP's dissatisfaction with the stalemate in the peace process, coupled with the leadership of Demirtaş, has allowed it to develop into a new force in Turkish politics. Pioneering a campaign aimed explicitly at Erdoğan, the AKP and the proposed presidential system, Demirtaş has firmly seized the moment to shine.

Interestingly, the party's female co-leader, Figen Yüksekdağ, has received barely a fraction of the media attention devoted to Demirtaş. The HDP has implemented a unique platform of co-leadership in all positions of the party due to a variety of factors, including the ideology of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, which advocates the 'liberation of women'; the prevalence of a human rights movement among politically repressed Kurds; and the effect of the EU's promotion of Europeanisation.

In stark contrast to the previous achievements of the HDP and its much more staunchly pro-Kurdish precursor parties, which had to be closed down either due to court indictments or party decisions; the charismatic stance adopted by Demirtaş has generated unprecedented media attention. He is widely praised by political commentators and even [compared](#) affectionately to Turkey's most popular comedian, Cem Yılmaz, while also being [billed](#) as the 'Kurdish pop star of politics'.

Demirtaş and Erdoğan's personalised politics

In the public psyche, the figures of Demirtaş and Erdoğan now appear almost as superheroes. Both have been adorned with affectionate nicknames: in the case of Demirtaş he is lovingly referred to as 'Selocan' by his supporters, while Erdoğan's backers have the nickname 'Tall Man' and 'The Master'. They are regularly described in glowing terms by fans using words rarely applied to politicians in other contexts, such as 'handsome', 'charismatic', 'humane' and 'just'.

Erdoğan has long been known for his talent for public speaking, bewitching the masses with lofty, emotional and domineering rhetoric. However he also frequently indicates that "without the will of Allah, no one can succeed", alluding to the notion that his success as a political leader is based in part on the support of a higher power. In the lead up to the election, he has played the religion card far more overtly than in the past, at times raising up a Quran in his hands during speeches. Taking as emotive a line as possible, he has also [publicised](#) his will, while signalling that 'enemies' are targeting him in a similar manner to the Muslim Brotherhood leader in Egypt, Mohamed Morsi.

Demirtaş also emphasises his devoutness. According to [him](#), an individual can both be a believer in Allah and a

leftist. But spiritualism aside, they both contain differences in style. Erdoğan's signature approach is reciting poems; whereas Demirtaş excites crowds by singing. While Erdoğan [argues](#) that far from being a Sultan, he is simply a humble servant of the people; Demirtaş takes his inspiration from [Robin Hood](#), with the aim of taking from the rich to give to the poor. Both the AKP and the HDP offer a clear demarcation of the line between 'us' and 'them': the AKP's [campaign slogan](#) is "They talk, we act"; while the HDP's [slogan](#) is simply "We!" By "we" both parties mean the people: vaguely defined masses with one clear and shared identity of 'ordinary citizens oppressed by the elite'.

The leaders of Turkey's other political parties have captured less media attention and have failed to dominate the agenda in the same manner as Erdoğan and Demirtaş. The major opposition force of the [Republican People's Party](#) (CHP) launched its [economic platform](#) on the basis of a promise to increase the minimum wage, decrease the price of fuel, and double the level of social aid given to poor families. The opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP) also [included](#) a pledge to increase the minimum wage, alongside promises to eliminate taxes on fuel and fertilisers, and ensure greater job security for public sector workers. Yet the leaders of both parties simply lack the charisma of Erdoğan and Demirtaş and while they will both receive significant shares of the vote, they have found it difficult to shape the agenda.

The government itself also has its own 'charisma problem'. Prime Minister Davutoğlu has been criticised by the opposition for his lower profile vis-à-vis Erdoğan. In return, the Prime Minister has [attacked](#) other parties for their 'populist' platforms. This is a criticism that has been taken up by Turkey's Finance Minister, Mehmet Şimşek, who has [claimed](#) that the "end result of populism is bankruptcy". Demirtaş is not immune to these critiques either, with pro-government media figures [accusing](#) him of being a 'neo-populist'; while Erdoğan himself has likened Demirtaş to a "nightclub star".

The irony of course is that populism has now become the name of the political game in Turkey, and that Erdoğan's long quest to create a 'people's presidency' has been one of the key underlying factors in this development. The end of this trend may occur when the people of Turkey grow weary of personalised politics, but that point is some way off – and certainly far beyond the upcoming elections.

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