


# The media played an important role in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's presidential election victory in Turkey

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*Turkey held the first direct presidential elections in its history on 10 August, with the country's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, winning enough support in the first round of voting to secure the presidency. [Asli Tunc](#) argues that while Erdoğan undoubtedly has widespread support across the country, the role of the media was nevertheless important in securing his victory in the election. She notes that the key focus for Erdoğan will now be to increase the relatively limited powers assigned to the president.*



Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has [swept to a landslide victory](#) in the country's first direct presidential election. His win follows three terms as the country's prime minister and he has made no secret of his desire to be a president who is politically active, as opposed to the ceremonial role it has traditionally been.

No doubt Erdoğan is extremely popular throughout Turkey, but his win was aided by a campaign that had significant help from media coverage. Indeed, before the ballots were open to the public, the media campaigns in the election build up did not bode well for democracy, transparency and open debate in the country.

For instance, in three days of the campaign during July, the public broadcaster, TRT, allocated 533 minutes – almost nine hours of air time – to Tayyip Erdoğan. His two opponents were given less than four minutes: Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu had three and the third candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, had just 45 seconds.

## Traditional media dominance

Turkey is a country where the majority of society relies heavily on traditional media outlets. Aware of the impact of television especially, Erdoğan declined all offers from his opponents to take part in any televised debate programmes. Instead, he handpicked the journalists who are too afraid to lose their jobs for interviews where they avoided asking challenging or even follow-up questions.

In one of his solo TV appearances, he was interviewed by a veteran journalist, Oğuz Haksever on the nationwide channel, NTV. In this interview, Erdoğan complained that the opposition was carrying out a smear campaign against him by claiming that he was from another ethnic origin: "They called me a Georgian. Pardon me for saying this, but they said even uglier things. They called me an Armenian! As far as I have learned from my father and grandfather, I am a Turk."

After these outrageous comments, the journalist did not even challenge him by saying that those words might be offensive and discriminatory for the country's Armenian minority – the remnants of a much greater community that lived during the Ottoman Empire – numbers around 70,000 people, most of them living in Istanbul.

Another low for Turkey's media and democracy in the build up to the election was Erdoğan's targeting of a prominent female journalist, Amberin Zaman. He called her a "shameless woman" and told her "to know your place" in his election rally in the city of Malatya. These intimidating comments came after Amberin Zaman, who writes for the Economist and the Turkish daily Taraf, questioned the level of freedom there was [to criticise the country's authorities](#).

The Economist immediately stood by its correspondent of 15 years and [released a statement defending her](#). So too did the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, who expressed concern over the way she was

targeted. One of their representatives on Freedom of the Media, [Dunja Mijatovic](#) said: “I am alarmed by the latest example of intimidation of and threats towards journalists in Turkey”.

Besides all this intimidation of the media, Erdoğan also targeted the Doğan Media Group for giving “full support” to his rival in the election, the main opposition candidate Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu. Ironically, two days after this statement, Enis Berberoğlu, editor-in-chief of the group’s leading Turkish broadsheet, The Daily Hürriyet, resigned from his post. He denied the link between political pressure and his resignation, but the timing indicates the opposite.

## Opposition and new media

With Erdoğan dominating traditional media outlets and exercising significant control over their reporting, social media continues to be a [platform for opposition](#) in Turkey. The biased media coverage was highly criticised on social media, as the state agency was essentially used to make propaganda with citizens’ taxes, covering every single one of the prime minister’s rallies and public appearances.

New media has also been used to improve democratic participation. After initial polls showed a low turnout, an online campaign was started to encourage those on vacation to vote. This concern turned out to be true with a [75 per cent turnout rate](#), which is quite low in Turkey’s political history: 65 per cent of the two million voters who did not turn out are thought to be mostly [CHP](#) supporters.

Similar to the previous local elections, citizen journalism initiatives such as [140Journos](#) and [dokuz8haber](#) worked to gather reports of possible wrongdoings and fraud in ballot stations and to monitor the vote counting process. Twitter was also used in creative ways where many people took pictures of the ballot by adding symbols and slogans on their papers, posting them on social media as a symbol of reaction, despite taking cell phones into the voting cabin being strictly forbidden.

With Erdoğan’s victory expected to bring an unconventional and active presidency for him, we can expect him to interfere with the media scene even more easily. This is worrying for Turkey’s democracy, as, if this election is anything to go by, he will place unremitting pressure on the media not to carry material critical of the government’s policies and actions. And, whether or not he fulfils his [promise to be a president for all Turks](#) may not be something that they will even be able to freely discuss.

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