

Rise and Fall of the AKP's Islamist Appeal in Türkiye

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Brief Analysis

Türkiye's latest elections have allowed the YRP to demonstrate success in certain areas of President Erdogan's traditional, pious base in Türkiye, emphasizing the waning power of Erdogan's political message after his shift away from ideologically guided politics.

Recip Tayyip Erdogan has demonstrated an impressive resilience in over two decades of power in Türkiye, marked by seasoned pragmatism both at home and abroad. However, the results of the March 31 municipal elections suggest that this policy of pragmatism may have reached its limits. Specifically, this approach has increasingly come at the expense of the ideological roots of his power, "the cause" – the reformist Islamism that Recep Tayyip Erdogan championed and that initially propelled the AKP (the Justice and Development Party) to power.

President Erdogan's gradual distancing from reformist Islamist ideas and embrace of an increasingly nationalistic outlook—all while simultaneously deconstructing and reconstructing alliances over the past decade to meet his needs—appears to have provided an opening for the relatively new Islamist YRP (the New Welfare Party).

Reformist Islamism, which President Erdogan claimed to embody, once resonated with large masses and propelled him to power, allowing him to win critical political battles against forces once deemed invincible during the early post-Cold War era of Türkiye. Yet over the past decade, President Erdogan has increasingly adopted a more nationalist and realist outlook at home and abroad, choosing interest over conscience. The cause of Islamism in Türkiye, one of the fundamental schools of thought in Turkish politics, has essentially been orphaned as a result of this transformation. The YRP seized the opportunity and garnered roughly 7% of the votes nationwide with an unapologetically Islamist outlook—one much more conservative than the AKP's founding principles.

Fatih Erbakan, who led the YRP's election campaign, is the son of the late Necmettin Erbakan—who founded the first popular Islamist political movement in Türkiye called the National View movement. President Erdogan was himself a member of the National View movement since his teenage years in the late 1960s, and referred to Necmettin Erbakan as "*Hoca*" (teacher/thought leader). It was only in 2001, that Erdogan and other party "reformists" broke

from their “*hoca*” and founded the AKP. Twenty-three years later, the YRP, led by the son of “*Hoca*”, is the third most popular party in Türkiye in only their second election, outperforming AKP’s biggest ally, MHP (the Nationalist Movement Party) and playing an indisputable role in President Erdogan’s first ever defeat in a nationwide election.

After allying itself with President Erdogan in the May 2023 presidential elections following its founding and securing 2.90% of votes nationwide along with 5 seats in parliament, the YRP leadership broke with the AKP and has harshly **criticized (<https://www.diken.com.tr/erbakan-destek-icin-sartlarini-siraladi-israille-ticareti-kes-kureciki-kapat/>)** the Turkish government’s alleged alignment with the West and refusal to sever trade ties with Israel altogether in the wake of the Gaza War. Also emphasized were the poor and increasingly deteriorating economic conditions of Turkish pensioners, who **constituted (<https://www.dw.com/tr/emekliler-i%C3%A7in-yeterli-kaynak-yok-mu/a-68013149>)** an estimated 18% of the population in 2023. The substantial rise of the YRP in the local elections cost the AKP several municipalities and ultimately brought down its nationwide vote below that of the main opposition party CHP, marking the first time the AKP did not come first in any nationwide election since its foundation in 2001.

Erdogan’s Rise as an Islamist Reformist

YRP’s success can be at least partially rooted in Erdogan’s own political decisions over time. When it was founded and for roughly a decade thereafter, the AKP claimed to stand for a Türkiye that openly embraces its Islamic heritage—though not necessarily at the expense of the country’s secular principles—and rejected the harshly secular, nationalistic, and securitized doctrine that has characterized modern Türkiye’s domestic and foreign policy since its inception. In line with these aspirations, Erdogan as Prime Minister lifted bans against religious dress codes, specifically women’s headscarves, in Turkish public institutions, and strengthened regional ties with Türkiye’s Muslim neighbors while also advancing modern Türkiye’s longstanding objective of achieving full integration with the West.

More importantly, President Erdogan’s reformist Islamism envisioned welfare for middle class and lower-middle class Turks, the core demographic of the Islamist base that dominates smaller cities and towns in inner Türkiye. The National View movement had argued that successive governments had repeatedly ignored and looked down on these masses. Thus a “just order” addressing the needs of the pious “natives” of Anatolia needed to be established. At its social core, the Islamists perceived Türkiye’s economic troubles in the 1990s as a result of the practices of the distorted, socially, and economically corrupt elites in Ankara and Istanbul.

In line with this understanding, the middle and lower-middle class were among the main beneficiaries of the economic growth that Türkiye saw for a decade after Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to power in 2002. The poverty rate steadily **decreased (<https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/TUR/turkey/poverty-rate>)** from 42% in 2003 to roughly 13.80% in 2013. Furthermore, Türkiye’s PPP-adjusted GDP per capita also **increased (<https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/gdp-per-capita-ppp#:~:text=GDP%20per%20Capita%20PPP%20in,of%2012398.66%20USD%20in%201991.>)** from \$14,800 to \$24,000 in the same period, while the Gini coefficient **decreased (https://ycharts.com/indicators/turkey_gini_index)** from 42.20 to 38.80 by 2011, suggesting that the standard of living dramatically improved in favor of the middle and lower-middle classes in Türkiye. Indeed, then-Prime Minister Erdogan’s popularity also increased during this period, allowing the AKP to win three successive general elections through a clean parliamentary majority, a first in Turkish political history.

Moreover, it was during his rule that the Turkish government officially engaged in diplomatic efforts and initiated a peace process with the PKK—the armed branch of the Kurdish movement designated as a terrorist organization by Türkiye itself, the U.S., the UK, and EU—seeking to find a political solution to Türkiye’s longstanding Kurdish issue. Then-Prime Minister Erdogan often used the argument of religious brotherhood at his rallies in Kurdish-majority

provinces during election campaigns, openly **expressing** (<https://twitter.com/ArsivUnutmaz/status/734823588344254464>) his rejection of “all kinds of nationalism”—Kurdish nationalist aspirations and Turkish nationalism. Such rhetoric resonated with Kurds, who also constitute a religiously conservative demographic, allowing the AKP to emerge as the only serious contender to the Kurdish political movement in Türkiye’s Kurdish-majority southeastern region. The AKP even won the majority of municipalities in this region during the 2004 local elections, and it shared power more or less evenly with the Kurdish movement in the subsequent elections of this period.

A Turn to Pragmatism

Today, the dynamics of Türkiye and President Erdogan’s politics are completely different. President Erdogan has deconstructed his old alliances and constructed new nationalist alliances in their stead. These decisions have been in response to major developments in Turkey, such as a near civil war Türkiye’s Kurdish-majority southeastern region between different Kurdish factions in late 2014, triggered by developments in Northern Syria after the civil war, and a failed coup attempt in July 2016. As he grappled with multiple crises challenging his hold on power over the past decade, President Erdogan increasingly aligned himself with Türkiye's nationalists, a political camp in Turkish politics that is distinct from Türkiye's Islamists in history and ideology.

President Erdogan once harshly criticized nationalists for dominating the *raison d'être* of the Turkish state, presenting himself as a fellow victim of that understanding as an Islamist alongside Kurds, liberals, and other minorities. He claimed to have built the “new Türkiye” for those groups, free of the “pains” and “sufferings” of the “old Türkiye”. However, while the 2000s appeared to represent a change in the essential ideas shaping the Turkish doctrine, President Erdogan’s somewhat more democratic “new Türkiye” ended up being a reconsolidated version of the nationalist “old Türkiye” he once vehemently criticized. Now, the AKP’s nationalist alignment has reached an extent where it is genuinely difficult to ideologically differentiate between the AKP and the MHP, representing two sides of the same nationalist coin.

When it comes to foreign policy, in the wake of the Gaza War, the Turkish government has pursued a double-layered approach to Israel by adopting harsh rhetoric but largely maintaining bilateral trade ties—the foreign policy version of Erdogan’s pragmatic and realistic approach. The gap between rhetoric and policy has been a target for YRP criticisms, which no doubt fueled some of its support.

The shift in President Erdogan’s political audience has also reflected in economic policy, directly affecting the daily lives of the AKP’s traditional base. As political uncertainty increased in the wake of multiple crises and President Erdogan’s transformation in the late 2010s, the flow of foreign funds to Türkiye slowed. Rather than adopting a tighter monetary policy to address the problem, President Erdogan repeatedly advocated for lower interest rates, triggering an ongoing inflation and cost-of-living problem. High inflation rates and lower borrowing costs benefited those with existing savings and those with close ties to the government. The policy rate for interest stayed below the market rate, and not everyone was able to access cheap loans.

As a result, while the PPP-adjusted GDP per capita continued to **grow** (<https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/gdp-per-capita-ppp#:~:text=GDP%20per%20Capita%20PPP%20in,of%2012398.66%20USD%20in%201991.>) during this time, reaching \$33,600 in 2023, the Gini coefficient **increased** (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=TR>) to 44.1 in 2021, even worse than that of 2002, suggesting that the higher-income group has been the main beneficiary of Türkiye’s economic growth over the past decade. Moreover, following a steady decline during the first decade of President Erdogan’s rule, the poverty rate remained stagnant throughout the last decade in Türkiye, **standing** (<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Poverty-and-Living-Conditions-Statistics-2023-53713&dil=2>) at 13.90% in 2023, roughly the same figure as in 2014.

The middle and lower-middle class in Türkiye, President Erdogan's "organic" Islamist base, has seen their relative wealth deteriorate over the past decade. Meanwhile, the new beneficiaries of the economic program, those with higher incomes, backed Erdogan more for economic and political opportunism than ideological alignment. This shift in support has left President Erdogan's organic base struggling with a cost-of-living crisis while opportunistic newcomers reap the economic and political benefits of a government that Erdogan's pious base brought to power.

The cost-of-living crisis remains rampant. Therefore, the YRP potentially stands to meet the disappointment and frustration of those masses left behind. The YRP, however, is hardly the ideal answer to the ownership crisis Islamism faces in Türkiye. President Erdogan's reformist Islamism found appeal among larger masses precisely because of its more liberal outlook; in contrast, the YRP is too conservative to garner such appeal at the moment. However, the March 31 elections suggest that it indeed is a serious contender for ownership of the Islamist "cause."

The AKP is allegedly set to reform under President Erdogan's directives following the election results, and President Erdogan will likely consider some of these issues when making decisions. In line with that, cultural and constitutional debates in Türkiye, as well as Türkiye's Israel policy, will be among the most vulnerable issues. However, the potential success of such reforms remains to be seen considering President Erdogan's new, deeply entrenched nationalist and transactional outlook at home and abroad. ❖

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