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WORLD

Erdogan and Challenger Appear Headed for Runoff Election in Turkey

Neither President Recep Tayyip Erdogan nor opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu was able to claim an outright victory

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ISTANBUL—Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his main challenger said they were both prepared to accept a runoff election later this month with neither candidate claiming an outright victory in a vote that marked the most severe political challenge to the Turkish leader's two decades in power.

Early results appeared to show neither Mr. Erdogan or his top challenger, opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, reached the 50% threshold required to avoid a runoff, which would take place on May 28.

Mr. Erdogan won 49.49% of votes, with Mr. Kilicdaroglu claiming 44.7% with more than 91% of votes counted, according to the head of Turkey's election authority, who spoke on national television early on Monday.

If a runoff election is confirmed, it would send the country of 85 million people into two weeks of political uncertainty and intense campaigning as both sides seek to rally a majority.

The Turkish election could have far-reaching geopolitical consequences due to Turkey's role as an aspiring global power and a key member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization that also has close relations with both Russia and Ukraine.



Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan greeted his supporters as he left his residence in Istanbul on Sunday. PHOTO: MURAT CETINMUHURDAR/PPO/VIA REUTERS

Mr. Erdogan has towered over Turkish politics for two decades, tightening his grip over the country and eroding democratic institutions at home, while also raising the country's profile on the international stage.

Now, he faces the tightest race of his career against Mr. Kilicdaroglu, who is backed by a six-party alliance. Mr. Kilicdaroglu has promised to mend an economy rocked by what economists say are misguided policies and roll back the extraordinary powers Mr. Erdogan has accrued in recent years.

Both sides claimed they were in the lead.

Mr. Kilicdaroglu's party claimed an internal tally showed he was leading Mr. Erdogan 49% to 45%. Still, he acknowledged that he would likely face off with Mr. Erdogan in the runoff.

"Erdogan was not able to get the result he expected despite all his slandering and insults," he said.

Mr. Erdogan, meanwhile, maintained he was in the lead.

"We know that we are leading by a large margin, however because the result is not officially in front of us yet with complete rates, we wait for the national will to manifest itself," said Mr. Erdogan, addressing a throng of supporters in Ankara early on Monday.

Mr. Erdogan also claimed a victory for his ruling alliance in parliament, which if confirmed would deal a setback to the Turkish opposition, who before the election brimmed with confidence that they could ride a tide of economic discontent to push the president from power.



Opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu is backed by a six-party alliance. PHOTO: BURAK KARA/GETTY IMAGES

A defeat of Mr. Erdogan could ripple far beyond Turkey, given the outsized influence the country has acquired under the Turkish president. Mr. Erdogan has deftly leveraged the country's position at the crossroads between East and West, exploiting its role as a member of NATO while also seeking to become a bigger power in the Middle East. He has also cultivated a close relationship with Russia that has created friction with the U.S. and its allies.

Over the past year, the conflict in Ukraine has handed Mr. Erdogan a unique opportunity to leverage Turkey's relations with both Russia and the U.S. and its allies. However, since the start of the war, Mr. Erdogan has at times proved a frustrating partner for the U.S. and its European partners, blocking the expansion of NATO and expanding trade with Russia.

Mr. Kilicdaroglu has promised to steer Turkey closer to the U.S. and its allies, while maintaining a stable relationship with Russia.

"A Turkey that tilts a little more toward Europe or NATO, even if it's not a full pivot, that would be a huge change for the global balance of power, particularly with Russia's war on Ukraine," said Asli Aydintasbas, an expert on Turkish foreign policy and fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Mr. Erdogan—in power since 2003—presided over an economic boom at home earlier in his tenure that benefited many Turks. But in recent years, he centralized power within the Turkish state and jailed political opponents. In a referendum he called in 2017, he scrapped Turkey's parliamentary system in favor of a presidential system that granted him greater powers.

Mr. Erdogan's popularity has waned in recent years in the wake of economic turmoil stirred by unorthodox economic policies that have pushed millions of people closer to

poverty.

On Sunday, voters jammed the hallways of a concrete-block school in Istanbul's Kagithane district, where many rose into the middle class earlier in Mr. Erdogan's tenure. Now residents here say they have had to cut back on meat and even vegetables due to soaring costs.



People lined up to vote outside containers acting as improvised polling stations in the southern Turkish city of Antakya on Sunday. PHOTO: CAN EROK/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Selinay Gural, 19 years old, said she backed Mr. Kilicdaroglu. "I believe he will bring us freedom. I'm also tired of this economic situation," she said. "This is a beautiful day."

Mehmet Sulun, a 40-year-old computer engineer, said he voted for Mr. Erdogan, pointing to such government achievements as the growing defense industry. He said he believes the opposition is seeking to tear down "everything they've built until today."

"Everything except the economy, but the economy isn't everything," he said.

If Mr. Kilicdaroglu were to win, Western investment is expected to flow back into Turkey after years in which investors have scaled back their exposure to the local currency, analysts say. A return of foreign investment could help stabilize the Turkish lira and provide a pathway to reviving the country's economy over the long term.

"They are very keen to jump back in, they are almost looking for an excuse. They are going to have more trust," said Hakan Akbas, a senior adviser at Albright Stonebridge Group, who advises foreign businesses on investing in Turkey.

The Turkish president has pressured the central bank into cutting interest rates despite the country's rapid inflation, wiping more than half the value off the lira and eroding the economic gains that many Turkish people enjoyed earlier during his time in power.

Mr. Kilicdaroglu has led Mr. Erdogan in most recent polls, but often short of the 50% threshold he would need for a first-round victory on Sunday. If neither presidential candidate wins an outright majority, a runoff election is scheduled to take place on May 28.

In a last-minute surprise, one of two third-party candidates dropped out of the presidential race on Thursday, raising the possibility that Mr. Kilicdaroglu could win more than 50% of the votes. The candidate, Muharrem Ince, is a former leader from Mr. Kilicdaroglu's party, but polls showed he drew support from across the political spectrum. The leading opposition candidate was upbeat as he cast his vote in the capital, Ankara, on Sunday morning.

"Spring will come to this country from now on," he told reporters.

Still, the incumbent remains a force in Turkish politics. Beloved by millions as an icon of Muslim leadership, Mr. Erdogan maintains broad support among Turkey's conservative and religious voters. He survived a military coup attempt in 2016 and has trounced a string of previous electoral challengers.

During the campaign, Mr. Erdogan has emphasized the global stature Turkey has acquired under his leadership. He has pushed Turkey's interests within NATO and sent the Turkish armed forces into Syria, Iraq and Libya.



People watched early results of the general election in a tea house in Istanbul on Sunday. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

He has leveraged his close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin to broker diplomatic breakthroughs during Russia's war in Ukraine, including a deal to unblock Ukraine's globally important food exports.

Mr. Erdogan has proved a difficult partner for the West. The U.S. sanctioned Turkey's defense industry and expelled the country from an advanced jet-fighter program after the Erdogan government purchased a Russian air-defense system.

He is currently holding up the membership of Sweden in NATO citing Turkish objections over the presence of alleged Kurdish militants in the country, accusations that Sweden has pushed back on. Western officials also accuse Turkey of facilitating Moscow's evasion of sanctions.

"We should show off the power of Turkish democracy," he said, speaking to a crowd that assembled outside a polling station after voting near his private residence.

In a sign of the potential shift in Turkey's stance toward Russia, Mr. Kilicdaroglu accused Moscow of interfering in the Turkish election by spreading a "deep fake" campaign after an alleged sex tape surfaced online of a Turkish third-party candidate. "Get your hands off the Turkish state. We are still in favor of cooperation and friendship," he wrote on Twitter on Thursday night. Russia has rejected the accusations.

After 20 years in which Mr. Erdogan has expanded his party's control over Turkey's media, security forces, central bank and other institutions, the election exemplifies the wider struggle between democratic values and autocracy.

"There's been a clear sense of momentum behind illiberalism," said Derek Mitchell, a former U.S. ambassador and now president of the Washington-based National Democratic Institute, an organization promoting democracy. "Turkey is on that list, a symbol of whether there will be a move away from trends toward autocracy and illiberalism, whether that wave will crest."



People on Sunday walked through debris caused by this year's devastating earthquake in Antakya. PHOTO: CAN EROK/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Sunday's presidential and parliamentary elections are taking place in the aftermath of the country's worst natural disaster in a century. Earthquakes in February killed more than 56,000 people in both Turkey and Syria and uprooted millions from their homes. Residents of the quake zone criticized the initial government response, which left thousands of people trapped beneath the rubble of collapsed buildings awaiting help.

Thousands of people piled into cars and buses heading back into the earthquake zone to vote on Sunday, returning to vote in temporary containers and in schools with cracked walls and other damage from the earthquake. The government ignored calls from the opposition to allow people displaced by the disaster to cast their ballots remotely.

"I cried all the way back, still it's a very good feeling to see my old friends, my relatives," said Mujgan Bahop, 43, who drove some 200 miles to return to Samandag, a seaside town in southern Turkey that was hit hard by the quakes.

"Nobody's talking about the elections here, everyone's talking about where they will live, where they will sleep, what their future life will look like," she said.

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