

Can Turkey Overcome Its Bitter Factionalism?

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President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey faces a difficult election on June 24 as the opposition parties show surprising unity. Credit Erdem Sahin/Epa-Efe, via Shutterstock.

On June 24, Turkey will vote to elect [a president with immensely increased powers](#) that will replace the country's parliamentary democracy with a strongman. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan designed the position for himself, relying on the loyalty of the nearly 50 percent of voters who have sided with him in past elections.

The usually fractious opposition has come up with [a unified strategy](#) to stop his juggernaut. The governing Justice and Development Party, known as the A.K.P., uses the largely cowed and co-opted media to target new enemies and scapegoats for its failures.

What are the chances for political and social unity in a badly fractured nation? Since the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the government has [detained, arrested or dismissed](#) from their positions well over 100,000 people. The charge is usually a vaguely defined accusation of "terrorism" that can be based on the flimsiest of evidence or anonymous denunciation by a neighbor, co-worker or even family member.

The A.K.P. and many Turks lay the blame for the attempted coup on Hizmet, [a far-reaching, secretive Islamic movement](#) following the cleric

Fethullah Gulen that administered an educational, media and commercial empire. Graduates of their schools took up positions in state institutions and for many years cooperated with the A.K.P.

They parted ways in 2013 after prosecutors believed to be members of the Gulen network brought corruption charges against Mr. Erdogan's inner circle. Mr. Erdogan accused the group of setting up a parallel state within Turkey that threatened his regime. In May 2016 he [formally designated the group a terrorist organization](#): Fethullah Terrorist Organization, or FETO.

“FETOist” has become a blanket accusation in the media, courts and public discourse, sometimes implausibly applied to known atheists and leftists and other dissenters. Anyone can be accused of treason.

The roots of these troubles lie in Turkey's nation-building project. Since its founding in 1923, Turkey has been unable to develop a unifying national identity that represents all of its citizens. The country experienced coups or other severe political crises on average every 10 years, along with long periods of extraordinary rule. The state of emergency enacted after the 2016 coup attempt remains in force.

At various times, Turkey has splintered along religious, ideological and ethnic lines and seen further divisions within those religious, ideological and ethnic formations as well. Relations between groups are often marked by deeply felt hatred and demonization.

When I was a student in Ankara in the 1970s, street violence between leftists and rightists killed more than 5,000 people. Turkey today is a different place from the insular, closed society of the 1970s, yet it remains intensely polarized.

Why is there so much antagonistic factionalism? Turkey's institutions primarily protect the interests of the state, not the citizen. So people seek protection and provision of their everyday needs through their families and communities or an association, religious brotherhood, political party or other group that will absorb them into its networks. Groups also provide a social identity often founded on rivalry with other groups, producing the unstable ground that breeds factionalism.

Turkish political life tends to be brittle because the glue that holds parties together is not allegiance to the party, the government or the state, or a shared ideology. Rather, followers are bound by their loyalty and obedience to a single leader. Disagreement with the leader becomes a personal betrayal that requires the traitor to leave the group, taking his networks with him, often reforming around new leaders in a continual process of fracturing into mutually hostile groups.

In 2001, followers of the veteran politician [Necmettin Erbakan](#) broke away to form a new party led by Mr. Erdogan, who had made a name for himself as the mayor of Istanbul. Recently, Meral Aksener, a charismatic politician from the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party, known as the M.H.P., [broke away](#) from her party with her network.

The M.H.P. is allied with the A.K.P. in the coming elections. Ms. Aksener created a new party, the Good Party, and is contesting the presidential elections against Mr. Erdogan.

The forthcoming Turkish election is a battle between Mr. Erdogan and [an improbably united opposition](#) — secular, Islamist, nationalist and Kurdish parties — that have sworn to fight together, despite their past enmity. Each opposition party has fielded a presidential candidate for the first round of voting on June 24. If nobody wins a majority, the two top candidates will face off on July 8.

The opposition parties have vowed to instruct their followers to support any candidate facing Mr. Erdogan if he doesn't win in the first round. Along with electing a new kind of president, the voters will also elect members of the Turkish Parliament. The opposition plans to combine their votes to thwart Mr. Erdogan's executive presidency.

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The mind of the opposition is unusually focused because the implications for Turkish democracy are vast. Many expect that Mr. Erdogan will win his presidency but that the opposition will gain a majority in Parliament. How long can a unified opposition survive under these untried conditions?

The Turkish media mostly covers Mr. Erdogan and his party's campaign. The opposition is responding by creatively using the internet and social

media. The Good Party used Google AdWords to send political messages in response to Google inquiries. If you Google the term “freedom,” you will be followed around by an ad that says, “Search result not found; Try again on June 25.”

Muharrem Ince, the new presidential candidate for Turkey’s largest opposition party, the Republican People’s Party, has reinvigorated his supporters. Mr. Ince, a former physics teacher and a lawmaker, has pleased the crowds with his oratory, sense of humor and charisma.

Selahattin Demirtas of the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party is campaigning as a presidential candidate from prison. He has been in prison for more than a year on vague charges of “supporting terrorism.” He held his first campaign meeting by telephone and sent handwritten notes as responses to questions he was asked on Twitter. The Saadet Party, a tiny Islamist party, has also joined the united opposition.

Half of the Turkish population is under 30; the voting age is 18. In 2013, during the Gezi Park protests, a wide spectrum of young people, both secular and pious, demonstrated peacefully against the government. They were a 21st-century generation facing off against 20th-century autocrats. The youth might turn out to be another unifying force.

The electoral season has seen Turkish political parties and their followers cross a Rubicon. Traditional parties have put aside their differences to unite against a common enemy, following in a path already forged by Turkey’s youth. The question is whether this unity will survive the election and bring stability or whether the new political environment, which vastly increases the power of a single leader, will simply redefine the enemy.

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