

Plausible contender lays down challenge to Erdogan



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in Ankara

Kılıçdaroğlu leading Republican People's Party in bid to restore secular impetus

Change is in the air in Turkey's capital city – and it's not just the arrival of spring after a typically chilly winter. In Ankara's bustling Altındağ neighbourhood, many are daring to believe that a mild-mannered former bureaucrat dubbed Turkey's Gandhi might oust the pugilistic Recep Tayyip Erdogan in next month's election.

In many ways, it's a battle for the soul of the nation. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu leads the Republican People's Party (CHP), established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the military commander who founded the modern Turkish republic out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire. A win for Kılıçdaroğlu would wrest the country away from Erdogan's pious authoritarianism, resurrecting the country's secular heritage and potentially restoring parliamentary democracy.

It's set to be a close contest. Kılıçdaroğlu is leading the polls by a hair's breadth but needs to convince voters that the decency he exudes in his campaign videos filmed in his modest kitchen and in posters featuring

ing his earnest, spectrally men against a backdrop of pink blossom does not equate to weakness. "We've had enough of Erdogan," says Berkant Yükseltürk (50), owner of the Hacı Bayram canteen. "But being a good person is not enough for a leader. You have to be able to make decisions."

After two decades of Erdogan, it seems that tough-guy tactics and punchy populism are perceived by many as the only credible template for leadership. Aytaç Mumcu (32), who works at the nearby pesticides shop in the Ulus Yeni Hal market, hopes Kılıçdaroğlu, aka Gandhi Kemal, will set a new trend. "Kılıçdaroğlu is properly honest. He's never stolen from anyone," he says, respecting the candidate's long-standing fight against graft. "The only ones who are saying he is weak are Erdogan's people."

Paradox at play

There's a certain paradox at play, says pollster Özer Sencar, who runs Ankara-based Metropoll. Recent polls have indicated that voters are fed up with the regime, in particular with the ongoing economic crisis – inflation peaked at 85 per cent

in October. "There is widespread displeasure but at the same time hopelessness about the opposition's ability to help Turkey," he says. Voters don't seem quite able to believe change is possible.

Erdogan still holds considerable sway, his man-of-the-people brand of religious conservatism inspiring cult-like devotion among millions of voters in small Anatolian towns and rural areas. "They see Erdogan as one of them. He grew up in religious circles and is very well aware of what will resonate well with religious people," says Sencar, citing the president's intimation that the high death toll in February's earthquake was down to "destiny's plan", rather than non-existent building standards. His most hardcore supporters believe this theory.

But Kılıçdaroğlu is a quiet force with which to be reckoned. The ultimate underdog, he was born into a poor family in the eastern province of Tunceli, a member of the historically persecuted Alevi minority, an ethnically mixed branch of Shia Islam. Some of his family members were killed during the Turkish military's genocidal campaign against the region's Alevites in 1938. The young Kılıçdaroğlu rose from his impoverished beginnings to study economics at one of Ankara's most prestigious universities and to hold top bureaucratic positions at the ministry of finance and in various government agencies.

Now leading the very party that massacred his forebears, the scholarly politician is known for his bold stands against injustice, which have drawn comparisons with Gandhi. In 2017, he led tens of thousands on a 280-mile march in protest against Erdogan's



■ A poster of Turkish presidential candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in Istanbul, reads: 'I will work so that every moment you lose, every year, every penny, every smile comes back to you. Promise to you'.

PHOTOGRAPH: ERDEM SAHAN / EPA-EFE/SHUTTERSTOCK

crackdown on freedom of expression that followed an attempted coup in 2016. Among the tens of thousands jailed in the aftermath, CHP member of parliament Enis Berberoglu, former editor of *Hürriyet*, one of the country's biggest newspapers, had been arrested for leaking a video regarding Turkish support for Syrian rebels.

More recently, last Tuesday, Kılıçdaroğlu accused Erdogan of stoking ethnic tensions, following the latter's attempts to link the opposition with Kurdish dissidents, who have

been at war with the Turkish state for decades. Kılıçdaroğlu hit back by posting a video defending Kurdish rights on Twitter.

But Erdogan's attempts to demonise his foe could stick in his core constituency of Sunni conservatives, who may have difficulty countenancing the prospect of an Alevi leader.

'Nationhood'

In the Ulus Yeni Hal market, The Irish Times met voters who accused Kılıçdaroğlu of supporting terrorism and serving foreign interests. "Our priority is nationhood," said Kerem Çaliskan kan (52), a university administrator.

But, with many voters sick of the country's slide into authoritarianism, the conditions are ripe for change.

The corrupt will be prosecuted, says Ipek Özbe, a journalist with *Sözcü* TV, one of the few critical outlets in the country –

according to Reporters without Borders, 90 per cent of the media is now under government control.

"Authoritarianism will end, human rights and freedoms will return. Education is one of the important issues. And most importantly, I think freedom of the press will come again."

"Calinness is a powerful force," she says. "People in Turkey do not perceive the concept of power correctly. They confuse aggression with power." She believes Erdogan has left a legacy of "fear" and "disap-

pointment". By contrast, she believes Kılıçdaroğlu is "patient, honest and fair".

On the surface, with his control of the airwaves and the best billboards in town Erdogan appears more invincible than ever. On a billboard overlooking Ankara's Gazi Mustafa Kemal Boulevard, the strongman gazes soulfully into the middle distance. One hundred years from Atatürk's founding of modern Turkey, he is "the right man" for the country's next chapter. Kılıçdaroğlu riposte comes in one of his own posters,

which features him saluting against a patchwork of Erdogan's failures, including an allusion to the \$128 billion that allegedly went missing from central bank reserves in 2019 and 2020. "I am Kemal. I am coming," he promises.

Dilek Ates (40), a dishwasher at the Hacı Bayram canteen, says she cannot wait. With prices shooting up, she has trouble putting food on the table for her two daughters. "I agree with Kılıçdaroğlu's mindset," she says. "I believe in a secular, democratic system. I am a Kemalst."

