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The Post-Erdoğan Vision of Turkish Opposition: Opportunities and Limitations

Edgar Şar

Nearly a year after its formation, the Nation Alliance, consisting of six opposition parties (“Table of Six”), finally started to act like a full-fledged electoral alliance against the ruling bloc under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The six opposition leaders have long been criticised for failing to take concrete steps towards embodying a viable political alternative to the People’s Alliance of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) since they publicly signed the joint manifesto for Turkey’s transition into the “Strengthened Parliamentary System” in February 2022. Although the alliance has yet to announce its joint presidential candidate, it has manifested an unprecedentedly comprehensive joint platform in nine policy areas, including the rule of law, public administration, social policy, economy, and foreign policy. The 200-page joint document provides a comprehensive overview of what changes Turkey can be expected to go through in the short and medium terms should the Nation Alliance manage to defeat President Erdoğan’s ruling bloc in the upcoming elections, which will probably take place on 14 May 2023. Even though it would not immediately offer a solution to various issues in Turkey–EU relations, a possible opposition victory could bring bilateral relations back to an institutional framework, whereby both parties can cooperate in a productive way to work out their problems and focus on common interests.

Following the joint declaration on 28 February 2022 by the leaders of the six opposition parties – the main opposition social democratic Republican People’s Party (CHP), the centre-right/nationalist Good Party (İYİP), the Islamist Felicity Party (SP), the centre-right Democrat Party (DP), and two splinter parties from the ruling AKP: the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and the Future Party (GP) – the Table of Six was widely expected to formulate a joint election strategy

and rapidly become a single opposition bloc to face Erdoğan and his alliance in the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, which are officially scheduled for 18 June 2023. Nevertheless, that was not exactly the case. In line with its very first slogan, “Turkey of Tomorrow”, the Table of Six has long been busier focussing on the future of Turkey after the elections than on the strategy of how to replace Erdoğan and his ruling bloc. Even though the leaders of

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the six opposition parties proclaimed on various occasions that they would nominate a joint candidate and further deepen their cooperation in the upcoming elections, the Table of Six hardly took a concrete step towards these rather difficult objectives for a long time.

Its rather sluggish and cautious pace brought about a debate on “the lack of synergy” in the Table of Six among the bases of the opposition in Turkish society. For many, the Table of Six could only create synergy by announcing their joint presidential candidate. However, none of the six opposition leaders was eager to make an early nomination. They stated on various occasions that picking the candidate after the official announcement of the electoral calendar would be the best course of action. This rather long and inconclusive debate revealed a deepening gap between the expectations of the anti-Erdoğan masses and what the Table of Six were ready to offer them.

In the meeting hosted by the main opposition, the CHP, on 2 October 2022, the Table of Six finally took a concrete step – as expected by the public – and committed to putting forward a comprehensive joint policy platform. The declaration released after the meeting vowed the formation of nine different working groups – composed of representatives from each of the six parties – to prepare joint policy documents that would serve like a government programme for the Nation Alliance, should they emerge victorious from the elections.

These working groups have produced a 200-page joint programme, which the alliance made public on 30 January 2023. The programme can be analysed in three pillars: restoring the rule of law, dealing with the economic crisis, and formulating a new foreign policy.

Restoring the rule of law

On 28 February 2022, the Table of Six introduced what they call the “Strengthened Parliamentary System” (SPS), a system of

government that the representatives of the six parties drafted together. The six leaders committed Turkey’s transition to the SPS by means of a broad consensus, should their joint political platform win the elections and secure the required majority in the parliament. Thereby, the Table of Six vows not only to abolish the “hyper-presidential system”, or what is commonly labelled the “one-man rule”, but also to establish a brand-new parliamentary model.

The Commission for the Constitutional and Legal Reform – one of the working groups formed by the Table of Six on 2 October 2022 – prepared a constitutional amendment package envisaging Turkey’s transition to the SPS publicised on 28 November 2022. The package proposes amendments that anticipate not only the adoption of the new parliamentary model but also the reinstatement of an independent and impartial judiciary, the reform of public institutions, and the systematic prevention of human rights violations. This package is the most comprehensive roadmap on how the Table of Six plans to restore the rule of law, should it come to power.

It is important to underline that this package does not propose a brand-new constitution but rather a set of amendments to the existing constitution, making some critical interventions in certain provisions. The first group of proposed amendments concerns constitutional guarantees for fundamental rights and freedoms. For instance, the package proposes the incorporation of the concept of “human dignity” into the constitution as the basis of the constitutional order. The package also emphasises the supremacy of rights and freedoms and includes amendments to broaden the scopes of freedom of expression, freedom of press, freedom of association, and to incorporate animal rights into the constitution. Although the proposed amendments are quite important, it is also necessary to stress that the main reason behind the systematic violation of fundamental rights and freedoms for the past decade has not been the constitutional provisions themselves but rather the way they are interpreted. Therefore, an

independent and impartial judiciary is at least as essential to stop this systematic violation.

The second group of proposed amendments regards relations between the legislative and executive branches of government. The hyper-presidential system that was adopted by popular vote in 2017 de-institutionalised some important powers of the Turkish Parliament and allowed the president to be able to rule almost independently from the parliament. The package proposes the reinstatement of these legislative and budgetary powers of the parliament, thereby strengthening the system of checks and balances vis-à-vis the government. The package also reintroduces the institutions of the non-partisan presidency as head of state and the premiership as the executive branch of government, thereby aiming to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of a politically partial president.

The third group of proposed amendments is about the reinstatement of an independent and impartial judiciary. The package includes new provisions that would help de-politicise the Constitutional Court and the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK). Furthermore, improvement of the constitutional guarantee for judicial tenure and recognition of the Supreme Electoral Board (YSK) and the Court of Accounts as high courts are important proposals for strengthening the system of checks and balances against the danger of executive intervention in judicial independence.

Finally, the fourth group of proposed amendments concerns the reorganisation of certain public institutions such as the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) and the Council of Higher Education (YÖK). The package proposes to grant these institutions significant autonomy to prevent them from becoming instrumentalised by the government. The package also abolishes the authority of the Ministry of Interior to dismiss elected mayors and appoint trustees in lieu of them.

In sum, the package embodies a comprehensive proposal to restore the rule of

law in Turkey. However, it is also important to underline that this is just an initial consensus by the six opposition parties rather than a final text that would be directly adopted should they win the elections.

Dealing with the economic crisis

The current state of the Turkish economy, and particularly the issue of hyperinflation, is not only the most influential factor that will influence the voting behaviour of the Turkish electorate in the 2023 elections but also the most urgent problem to be addressed by the incoming government. Determined to stand firm in its unorthodox economic policy, the ruling bloc lowered the interest rate from 19 per cent down to 9 per cent in 15 months' time. Despite the official inflation rate hitting a 24-year high of more than 85 per cent, Erdoğan has so far not hesitated to make generous economic gestures, including increasing in the minimum wage and public spending to make sure that his voter base remains loyal in the elections. Even though economic hardship and hyperinflation clearly lessen the chances of victory for Erdoğan and his ruling bloc, the Table of Six has so far failed to turn these issues into a clear advantage, as they have yet to offer a joint plan on how to fix the economy after the elections. One of the main reasons behind this failure is the lack of consensus on the questions of what will be done and by whom, which is a result of the ongoing competition between the parties in the Table of Six. There has particularly been a remarkable competition between the İYİP's economic team, led by Bilge Yılmaz, and DEVA, a splinter party from the AKP founded by the famous former minister of economy, Ali Babacan, over who will be in charge of Turkey's economy.

The "Institutional Reform Commission", formed by the Table of Six, released a declaration on 13 June 2022 in which the six parties committed to rendering the policy-making processes in the areas of economy, finance, monetary policy, and price stability more institutionalised and inclusionary for

the stakeholders, with a special emphasis on their allegiance to the autonomy of Turkey's Central Bank. Likewise, the joint policy platform, declared on 30 January 2023, places a special emphasis on the “restructuring and strengthening of the economic institutions”. The alliance vows to form a committee that provides a damage assessment to clearly reveal the state of the Turkish economy; revitalises and refunctionalises the existing institutions for strategic planning in order to make policy-making processes inclusionary and participatory; abolishes the Turkey Wealth Fund; and restructures the Turkish Statistical Institute as an autonomous institution.

The joint policy platform also pledges to ensure fiscal discipline by fighting what it calls “the public extravagance”, legally and financially reviewing all the public – private partnership projects carried out by the Erdoğan government, and institutionalising the decision-making processes on public spending. Not surprisingly, the joint document does not make reference to any fiscal tightening – in the sense of pursuing austerity policies – but instead vows to ensure that the decisions be made in a more inclusive and rational manner and that financial resources be allocated to the proper areas. In fact, the alliance pledges to pursue a comprehensive social policy by expanding the scope of social aid and services and improving redistribution mechanisms.

The economic vision laid down in the joint policy platform is not restricted to actions that deal with the economic crisis – it also expresses a commitment to take further steps towards revitalising the Turkish economy. These include the actions required to partake in the institutions and programmes created by the European Union (EU) for digital transformation, the formation of new institutions to adapt to the European Green Deal, and clearing the way for productive negotiations with the EU regarding the modernisation of the Customs Union.

The joint policy platform lays down the most comprehensive economic programme

that the opposition has so far jointly put forward. However, it is at least as important as to what kind of economic team will be formed to realise this programme. All six opposition parties have respectable and competent staff in the area of economy and will not have any difficulty forming an eligible team to address the economic crisis, should they win the elections. Yet, it remains to be seen how the Nation Alliance will work out the above-mentioned rifts regarding team formation.

Formulating a new foreign policy

Security and foreign policy have usually been considered areas where the opposition has mostly failed to generate a joint platform. In fact, the opposition has so far failed to offer a programme that could be considered a viable alternative to that of the ruling bloc. However, it has apparently been a deliberate preference of the Table of Six to not focus on foreign policy issues in their joint agenda for at least two reasons. First, there have been significant divergences in the approaches of some opposition parties, and thus reaching a consensus on foreign policy issues would be quite tough. Second, foreign policy is generally understood to have very little effect – if none at all – on the voting behaviour of the Turkish electorate, particularly under the grueling conditions of economic hardship. However, it is also argued that the recent recovery of Erdoğan and his bloc from a long and steady electoral decline is actually related to his capability of showing strength in the area of foreign policy, particularly concerning diplomacy in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Turkey's rapprochement with the Gulf States, Israel, Egypt, and possibly even Syria. The opposition, on the other hand, has so far seemed uninterested and incapable of offering something tangible that can be considered a viable foreign policy alternative.

Although there are still serious questions about whether the six opposition parties can pursue a joint foreign policy – and, if

so, to what extent it would be different from that of the government – there are significant convergences between them concerning how Turkey’s foreign policy should change. These include the abandonment of personalised foreign policy-making and its re-institutionalisation; the recognition of Turkey’s Western alignment and an abandonment of the pursuit of non-Western strategic orientations; the continuation of balanced relations with Russia and China that do not jeopardise alliance commitments; the reconfirmation of Turkey’s bid to become a full EU member; and the need to focus on repairing Turkey’s human rights record. These convergences are indeed crucial and might ultimately pave the way for substantial alterations in Turkey’s foreign policy approach in the event of a change in government.

The joint policy platform, declared on 30 January 2023, does not make reference to specific issues when describing the future foreign policy of Turkey, except for the mentioning of the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus, and Turkey – Greece relations. The joint document vows to prioritise diplomacy and multilateral talks to deal with these issues, and it makes a commitment to protect Turkey’s national interests. Furthermore, as was frequently declared by the opposition parties in the past, the joint document also pledges to reconsider the agreements between the EU and Turkey regarding the readmission of asylum seekers.

The joint document also includes an implicit criticism of the present dynamic in Turkey’s relations with Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and it briefly lays out how this dynamic will change. Without specifically mentioning any current issue, such as the fate of the S-400s or the war in Ukraine, the opposition vows to continue its relations with Russia in an “institutionally balanced and constructive” way and to have “realistic and sustainable” relations with organisations such as the SCO and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

In sum, although the joint document does not seem to proclaim any big changes

in approaches to intractable issues, the commitments to the prioritisation of diplomacy and smart power in conflict resolution and to a return to the rules-based, institutionalised understanding of Turkey’s relations with its transatlantic partners can be seen as a window of opportunity for substantial change that is geared towards more constructive relations between these EU members and Turkey.

And what about the pre-election strategy?

The Nation Alliance exemplifies an array of political beliefs that is unprecedented in the history of the Republic, whereby representatives of different political traditions – ranging from moderate Islamism to secular nationalism – came together and developed such a broad-based and common vision for the future of Turkey. In this regard, it is also a remarkable development that the alliance formulated a joint programme to be applied in the event of a change in government in the 2023 elections. Although this programme can be criticised from various points of view for not being progressive, inclusionary, or even bold enough, it is also clear that its implementation would be an effective way to structurally stop and even reverse the process of autocratisation, which has been relentless in Turkey for more than a decade now.

However, one should not forget that this joint policy vision can only be realised if the opposition secures the necessary majorities in the post-election parliamentary configuration. In order to govern, the Table of Six must have an absolute majority, whereas for the parts of the joint programme that require constitutional reform, even larger majorities (three-fifths and two-thirds of the parliament) are required, which, according to current polls, is quite unlikely to be exclusively secured by the six parties at the table.

For the Nation Alliance to be in a governing position, it first needs to mobilise an electoral majority by convincing voters that

it is electable and governable. Although it knows very well that it takes a winning electoral strategy to do this, the alliance has so far prioritised working on its post-election vision, of which this joint policy platform is an important part. However, without a pre-election strategy that is based on a durable consensus for a joint presidential candidate, his/her team, and lists of parliamentary candidates, this vision might remain a dream. The choice by the Nation Alliance to leave the joint pre-election strategy right to the end seems to be a result of the six parties' tactical preference to maintain competition with one another down to the wire and to sit at the negotiating table with as much leverage as possible.

The tactical choice of the Table of Six to not yet concentrate on the pre-election strategy resulted in the opposition looking quite unwieldy, as the ruling bloc under Erdoğan started to perform remarkably better in the polls amid growing confidence that he will win the elections. Considering the already unlevel playing field and the ruling bloc's capacity and capability to instrumentalise the media, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy in its favour, it will definitely not be an easy win for the opposition, even though Erdoğan is still struggling to secure a majority to back him.

The Nation Alliance is expected to finally announce its joint candidate before the end of February, along with the jointly drafted roadmap concerning the transition to the SPS. Despite the opposition parties finally having realised that time was no longer on their side, they still seem to have quite a lot to negotiate before they agree on a clear election strategy. Although it seems increasingly difficult for the alliance to reach an agreement on the joint candidacy of someone other than CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, it is still difficult to predict what stand the Kılıçdaroğlu sceptics, particularly the İYİP, will take and how it will impact the negotiations. Considering the fact that the ongoing negotiations have to address the joint presidential candidate, the joint lists in all the constituencies, and the post-election roadmap for the transition, all at

the same time, the Nation Alliance still has a lot to do in a very short time.

In any case, the Nation Alliance desperately needs to be solidly united to win the elections, which will not be very easy amid internal debates on who should get what.

The possible role of the EU and its members during the pre-election period

Despite its shortcomings, the joint policy platform provides a clear picture of the changes that Turkey can be expected to go through after a possible win by the opposition in the 2023 elections. The EU should continue to engage with the opposition parties, and particularly the Nation Alliance, to help build communication channels and facilitate productive exchanges on important policy areas that matter the most for the future of EU–Turkey relations.

During the pre-election period, the EU and its member states should be as open to dialogue with the opposition as they are with the government, but at the same time they should avoid giving the appearance that they prefer one over the other. There might be speculation about the expectations of the EU and its member states concerning the 2023 elections in Turkey. On the one hand, it can be anticipated that the ruling bloc will act as if the EU and its members are working with the opposition. On the other hand, people close to the opposition might be convinced that the EU and its members will always prefer Erdoğan over an unknown opposition, as they can easily negotiate with him based on a transactional relationship, as has been the case in recent years. So, the EU and its member states should deliberately refrain from creating impressions that would lead people to draw either of these conclusions.

Moreover, one should not forget that the talk of “foreign enemies” has proved to be quite useful for the ruling bloc, particularly during electoral periods. One should remember that 2023 is an election year not only for Turkey but also for Greece and

Cyprus, and an increase in tensions in Turkey's relations with these countries is quite probable. In this case, although the EU would feel obliged to show solidarity with two of its members, it should refrain from actions and discourses that might play into the hands of the ruling bloc and allow it to present Greece, Cyprus, as well as the EU and other member states as foreign enemies.

Last, but certainly not least, election security must be a focal point in the dialogue between the EU and Turkey in the months ahead. Even though the playing field is already skewed in favour of the ruling bloc, the EU should keep making reminders about the importance of free and fair elections and the possible costs of electoral fraud. On election day, the EU and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe alike should play an active role in monitoring the elections and documenting irregularities.

Implications for the EU in the event of a change in government

In the event of a change in government, EU – Turkey relations, which have recently suffered a lot due to transactionalism, might again be brought back within an institutionalised framework. The strong and unanimous emphasis by the Nation Alliance on the need for the re-institutionalisation of foreign policy-making in Turkey opens a window of opportunity for bilateral relations to finally become constructive again – first and foremost by changing the rhetoric.

The opposition continues to be criticised for not being vocal enough about how its foreign policy would differ from that of the current ruling bloc. It was not a secret that, given utterly divergent approaches, reaching a consensus on Turkey's current foreign policy issues would be more difficult for the Nation Alliance than for almost any domestic issue. In fact, the joint policy platform on foreign policy, security, and defence does not include in-depth formulations regarding the substance of Turkey's future

foreign policy, which the alliance apparently considers to be the job of the foreign ministry of the next government. Nevertheless, the unanimous decision to underline the need for the re-institutionalisation of foreign policy-making is a strong signal that significant change will occur in Turkey's foreign policy under a new government.

The EU, too, should think of a new framework that will work both for itself and for Turkey under a new government. Despite the strong emphasis of the Table of Six on Turkey's determination about full membership, the accession framework, which has never worked for various reasons, will probably not automatically become functional in the event of a change in government. Therefore, the EU should also be ready to work with a new government to develop an alternative framework for a constructive relationship between the two actors.

In the event of a change in government, revitalised EU – Turkey relations will be very important as the new government addresses the economic crisis. As the Nation Alliance seems determined to do its part to restart negotiations for the modernisation of the Customs Union, a green light by the European Council on the commencement of negotiations would be a good starting point for further deepening bilateral cooperation by means of the European Green Deal.

The conventional wisdom is that Turkey's foreign policy will not be any more cooperative on issues such as migration, Cyprus, and the Eastern Mediterranean, even if there is a new government in Turkey after the elections. However, the unanimous determination to change how foreign policy is made will probably offer more room for diplomacy, which might increase the likelihood of sustainable settlements on these rather intractable issues.

The EU should also be open about its expectations for Turkey to start seriously negotiating visa liberalisation. The facilitation of current visa application procedures, which have *de facto* become much more complicated, might be a good start.

Besides, the expansion of all kinds of exchange programmes for students, academics, and administrative staff should be taken into consideration. Greater mobility for Turkish citizens in Europe will foster better relations between the EU and Turkey, as it has in the past.

In sum, if the EU can develop a constructive relationship with Turkey as it fixes the economy and reverses democratic backsliding, it will make a significant contribution to the country's long-term stabilisation. A more stable Turkey will definitely be much easier for the EU and its member states to deal and cooperate with.

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