



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The earthquake will determine the outcome of elections in Turkey, if elections take place at all



Turkey and the entire world mourn the thousands of victims of the catastrophic earthquake in the southeast of the country. It will take years to rebuild the devastated areas along the border with Syria, which is not part of Turkey's wealthier tourist and business centres.

With all its tragic consequences, the earthquake has turned the country's political scene upside down and become the number one issue for candidates to deal with until the May 14 elections. If elections are held at all.

The President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has a complicated puzzle to solve and needs to make decisions that will provide him with the best prospects in the elections where he will be fighting for another mandate.

Erdogan faces the deteriorating economic and financial situation in the country, which is why his opponents are gaining support.

Erdogan and his AK Party have maintained high popularity with broad financial relief for the population.

According to recent surveys, they have reached their highest approval ratings in the last two years, but Erdogan still lacks 8 to 10 percent to expect assured victory.

Possible postponement of the elections

Complicated pre-election projections have to factor in the earthquake and all its consequences becoming an inevitable topic for political confrontation, and the issue on which the future election winner will be decided.

The tragedy in the southeast of the country raises the question of whether elections will be held at all. Elections were scheduled for June 18, but Erdogan announced that they would be moved to May 14. This should be decided in March.

However, if due to the consequences of the

earthquake and the state of emergency in the country there are no conditions for holding elections, they may be postponed. This will be the first significant moment when the Turkish president reveals his election strategy.

Erdogan has experience of holding elections during a state of emergency. The 2018 elections were held during a continuous extension of the state of emergency that was introduced after the coup attempt in 2015.

Earthquakes have changed those holding power

It is symbolic that Erdogan's AK Party came to power two decades ago, in the wake of the tragic 1999 earthquake, which claimed more than 17,000 victims in the developed northwest, including Istanbul.

The then government of Bülent Ecevit dealt disastrously with the consequences of the earthquake, and it emerged that thousands of victims were victims of bad construction practices, due to corruption and poor control.

Citizens were furious with the then mainstream parties and politicians, and placed their trust in new faces - Erdogan and his AK Party - which has been in power to this day.

However, this past experience and the circumstances under which the AK Party and its leader came to power have not been working in Erdogan's favour today.

Today, he is a possible target of public anger, for the same reasons that brought him to power 20 years ago.

The laws on construction quality that were passed in 2007 and 2017, which were supposed to introduce stricter standards, so that tragedies from frequent earthquakes in Turkey would not recur, have frequently been violated. Construction control has been questionable, and corruption is still widespread.

“With the laws enacted by the central government, a system of arbitrary licensing was created for construction companies which distorted the initial urbanisation goals. The construction of structures was legal on paper but contained flaws that fuelled disasters”, said Professor Pelin Pinar Giritlioğlu, president of the Istanbul Branch of the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects.

Limited scope for the opposition

If election preparations continue according to the planned calendar and without delays, Erdogan and his party will act as the national headquarters for the reconstruction of the destroyed areas.

The election strategy will be based on Erdogan's and the government's ability to manage the crisis. They will mobilise the nation to help their vulnerable population in solidarity.

Their opponents will not have many ways to counter such a strategy, particularly since the vast majority of the media in Turkey is close to Erdogan.

The Turkish president has already shown, in the first days following the disaster, that he knows how to correct some mistakes from the past, and to change some actions, expecting them to bring results.

In contrast to his stubborn refusal to accept international aid in the wake of catastrophic fires in previous years, Erdogan has now opened the door wide to rescue teams, and aid in general, from around the world.

This reduces the risk of new criticism that he isolates the country to its detriment, and simultaneously counters attacks that he has worsened relations with important global partners.