

Earthquake Aftermath in Turkey

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ON FEBRUARY 6, 2023, an earthquake with a magnitude 7.8 struck the southeastern Turkish province of Kahramanmaraş. About nine hours later, a M 7.5 quake hit about ninety miles north. At the time of writing the quakes have killed close to 50,000 in Turkey and more than 7,200 in northwestern Syria. Millions have been displaced.

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The affected region is an earthquake zone, a triple junction between Anatolian, Arabian and African tectonic plates. The quakes of 2023 were caused by the Arabian plate's movement northwards and grinding against the Anatolian plate.

While the February quakes were massive, Turkey has experienced similar events in the past. In 1939 a M 7.8 earthquake struck the eastern province of Erzincan, killing 33,000 and injuring 100,000. In 1999, an earthquake in Kocaeli province near Istanbul officially killed 17,000 — the actual number was likely considerably higher.

Then-mayor of Istanbul Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was among the most vocal critics of the government's flawed response to the catastrophe. It might therefore have been expected that the current Turkish government under President Erdoğan and his AK Party would be prepared for such a disaster.

Instead, in the critical 48 hours after the quakes the government was slow to respond and coordination efforts were often botched. As the scale of the catastrophe became evident, videos went viral of people left to their own devices and unable to find loved ones in the middle of winter.

Cronyism and Ideology

The Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) has received much scrutiny and criticism. While the military was not immediately mobilized for search-and-rescue efforts, AFAD responded confusedly and lacked coordination. This was all the more unforgivable considering the agency had conducted an earthquake drill in the region less than four years ago.

In addition to alleged internal divisions, the agency appears to have been another casualty of AKP cronyism and ideology. İsmail Palakoğlu, head of the agency since 2018, was previously an administrator in the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Palakoğlu is a graduate of Ankara University's Faculty of Theology with no training in disaster-related subjects.

AFAD's budget was reduced by a third in 2022-23 ; that of Diyanet increased 56.6%, its 36 billion Turkish liras more than the Foreign and Culture Ministries combined.

Surprisingly, Erdoğan acknowledged problems in the government's response, going so far as to ask for forgiveness from the population for inevitable "human" errors. Perhaps less surprisingly, he attributed the disaster to "fate" (kader) in a manner similar to mining disasters in recent years that have killed hundreds of workers.

Attributing preventable disasters to fate absolves employers and the state of responsibility while urging resignation and passivity on victims. In reality, much could have been done to minimize the earthquakes' impacts.

Construction has been central to Turkey's economic growth in recent decades. Yet Turkish architects — the professional association of Turkish engineers and architects, TMMOB, seen by the AKP as a political enemy — have long pointed to the skirting of building regulations by politicians and developers. Codes for earthquake engineering standards are rarely enforced.

The government has sought to place blame for collapsing buildings during the earthquakes (while those up to code fared far better) on corrupt contractors — more than 200 have been arrested at the time of writing. However, as many have pointed out, the Turkish state regularly issues so-called construction "amnesties" that allow illegal buildings to be certified for a fee. Millions of structures have been built this way : in 2018 the Urbanization Ministry acknowledged that half of the structures in Turkey did not meet building and earthquake regulations.

Videos from 2019 of Erdoğan boasting about such construction amnesties in earthquake-hit provinces of Kahramanmaraş, Malatya and Hatay went viral after the earthquakes. Though providing cheap housing (and thus votes), the catastrophic consequences of such short-term thinking were made brutally clear in February.

This was recognized at the time by MP Garo Paylan of the People's Democracy Party (HDP), who argued in 2018 that a proposed zoning amnesty was putting millions of lives at risk.

Political Fallout ?

The social and psychological effects of the earthquakes will be felt for many years. What the political fallout from the disaster will be is uncertain.

After initial rumors that elections scheduled for May would be delayed, Erdoğan has confirmed they will be held as planned. He has promised to compensate relatives of the deceased with 100,000 Turkish liras [about \$5,000], and has also promised to resolve all housing issues within a year. For him to fulfill his promise, of course, he will have to win the election.

Prior to the earthquakes, the election was widely seen as the biggest challenge for Erdoğan since coming to power in 2002. The Turkish economy has been in crisis for five years, as the value of the Turkish lira has collapsed and record-breaking inflation is the highest in Europe. According to the official Turkish Statistical Institute inflation hit 85.5% in October 2022 ; independent analysts have put the figure as high as 176%.

In early March, a six-party opposition coalition known as the Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı) named People's Republican Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as its candidate for president. Although the leader of the nationalist "Good" Party (İYİ) Merel Akşener cause a mini-crisis by withdrawing her party's support for Kılıçdaroğlu (a moderate social democrat), widespread outrage — including within her own party — forced her to rejoin the opposition alliance.

The AKP still needs the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) to maintain its majority in parliament (though support for the MHP in polls has been falling precipitously), and has in recent weeks displayed its desperation by reaching out to fringe Islamist parties like the Welfare Party (RP) and the Free Cause Party (Hür Dava Partisi), a kind of Kurdish Hezbollah.

While things look grim for Erdoğan and his alliance, as authoritarianism grows, liberal democratic niceties like elections decrease in significance. The widespread demonstrations of solidarity and autonomous organization that have emerged in the state's absence, both nationally and internationally, have provided inspiration in a very dark time.

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- Against the Current, No. 224, May/June 2023 :
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc224/earthquake-aftermath-in-turkey/>