

Erdoğan finds a scapegoat in Turkey's election: LGBTQ+ people

Saturday 13 May 2023, by [OLIVER Christian](#), [POYRASLAR Elçin](#) (Date first published: 13 May 2023).

The president is blaming LGBTQ+ people for undermining family values to distract from the ruling party's failings — particularly on the economy.

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ISTANBUL — To President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's LGBTQ+ community represents [“deviant structures”](#) and a [“virus of heresy.”](#)

In the run-up to [Sunday's too-close-to-call election](#), he has ramped up his poisonous invective against homosexuality, as he seeks to shore up his conservative [Islamist base](#). Almost every other speech from the campaign trail accuses the opposition of undermining family values and of being in the thrall of improbably powerful LGBTQ+ networks — sometimes with hints they are run by paymasters abroad.

“The AK Party has never been an LGBT supporter,” Erdoğan roared at a recent Istanbul rally, referring to his governing party. “We believe in the sanctity of the family. Family is sacred.”

Adding a menacing note, he followed up with: “So are we ready to bury these LGBT supporters in the ballot box?”

To some extent, the homophobic focus of the campaign is easily explicable. Increasingly deserted by his early supporters, Erdoğan is having to form coalition partnerships with more extreme Islamists in this year's elections.

But even so, his language smacks of a fixation, and an attempt to divert attention from the country's most pressing ailments — including a snowballing cost of living crisis and scorching inflation.

Diversionsary tactics

Fulden Ergen, editor of Velvele.Net, an online debate platform for LGBTQ+ rights, said she was taken aback by the ubiquity of Erdoğan's propaganda against the LGBTQ+ community in this year's campaign.

She reckoned the attacks were an attempt to mask how few answers to Turkey's profound problems the AK Party now has.

“I was not expecting them to be this devoid of policies and just talking about LGBTI,” she said. “The

alliance does not have much to give people anymore,” she added, referring to the conservative coalition backing the president. “They don’t know how to deal with the economic crisis. They have no policies left, I see this campaign as a defeat.”

Though he may be running out of ideas, Erdoğan could still win. And that is now a serious concern to LGBTQ+ people.

Life is already tough, and could get significantly worse. LGBTQ+ flags are banned, gatherings are arbitrarily blocked by the government and participants in pride parades are regularly attacked or detained by police. The fear is that their organizations could now be made illegal, and — in the worst case scenario — that laws to protect families could be extended to outlaw homosexuality itself.

Activists say that if Erdoğan stays in power, violence could follow his hate speech.

An anti-LGBTQ+ rally in Istanbul in 2022 | Chris McGrath/Getty Images

One of the dangers is that his government could use security laws to crack down on homosexual relations — casting them as part of a foreign conspiracy. The government is playing on perceptions that “people don’t believe LGBTI can be from Turkey,” Ergen said.

One of the biggest setbacks for women and LGBTQ+ people has been Turkey’s 2021 withdrawal from the — ironically named — Istanbul Convention, which is intended to prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and promote gender equality.

Domestic violence is a severe problem that kills at least one woman every day in Turkey. According to data from the Monument Counter, a website that commemorates women who lost their lives to domestic violence, 824 women have been killed in just the past two years.

Gender parity is another failing across the country’s political spectrum. According to the country’s Women’s Platform for Equality, a rights group that has been tracing the candidates on the various parties’ electoral lists, a mere 117 female deputies are set to be elected [to Turkey’s 600-seat parliament](#).

‘I have seen many Erdoğans in my life’

Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti, who has been an activist for trans rights for 30 years, looks set to be an exception to that trend. She is a candidate for the Workers’ Party of Turkey and the first openly trans woman with a good chance of making it to parliament.

In a café in Kurtuluş, a neighborhood in Istanbul where there are significant numbers of trans voters, Esmeray told POLITICO that, if elected, she would fight for the rights of LGBTQ+ people against discrimination, hate crimes and violence. “I am getting very positive feedback from the streets,” she said. “If we can judge it by looking at the streets then I’ll definitely be getting into the parliament.”

If Erdoğan stays in power, Esmeray believes he will take the country in a more religiously conservative direction, even aiming for Sharia law.

Ergen, the Velvele.net editor, echoed Esmeray’s line of thought. She feared that Article 10 in Turkey’s constitution — a part of the national charter that gives some vague protection to gender equality — might be doctored, paving the way to the possible criminalization of homosexuality.

“This is my biggest fear,” she says. “If they win, they are going to do it.”

Still, the fear of Erdoğan does not mean the LGBTQ+ community feels completely protected by the opposition, whose candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is leading in the polls ahead of Sunday’s first round vote.

Ergen thinks the right-wing parties within the wide-ranging opposition alliance could also lobby to make life harder for LGBTQ+ groups.

Kılıçdaroğlu himself is fairly guarded in his LGBTQ+ remarks, knowing that the government could easily turn the subject against him.

To Erdoğan, Turkey’s LGBTQ+ community represents “deviant structures” | Burak Kara/Getty Images

He is, however, committed to a trajectory toward EU norms. When asked for his stance by POLITICO, he said: “We defend all human rights. It is our common duty to defend human rights. Democracy demands it. You cannot alienate people based on their beliefs, identities and lifestyles, you have to respect everyone.”

Both Esmeray and Ergen believed the priority should be for Turkey to return the Istanbul Convention to reinforce some basic freedoms.

And both reckoned Turkey’s population was ahead of its politicians.

“I am more optimistic about people, not political parties,” said Ergen, who based her hopes on the breadth of civil society activities in Turkey.

Esmeray added: “I have seen many Erdoğans in my life. If he wins, we will continue fighting. If it comes to that, I will face him and tell him to kill me.”

ELÇİN POYRAZLAR AND CHRISTIAN OLIVER

P.S.

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