

International

Let down by Erdogan, Kurds cautiously back secular rival

Kilicdaroglu attracts sympathies because of his Alevi faith

DIYARBAKIR, Turkey: Exhausted by crackdowns in Turkey's Kurdish heartland, Ali is backing the main rival of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in elections next Sunday — though his faith in the presidential hopeful is not great. "It's time for a change," the 50-year-old told AFP in Diyarbakir, the Kurds' unofficial capital in southeast Turkey.

"For anyone watching TV in Turkey, Kurds are terrorists," said Ali, who declined to give his full name for fear of retribution. "But I would be lying if I said I fully trust the opposition candidate," he added, referring to Kemal Kilicdaroglu of the secular CHP party. Representing roughly a fifth of Turkey's 85 million people, Kurds have suffered repressions throughout the course of the post-Ottoman republic, which was created by CHP founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923.

Turkey officially denied the existence of such an ethnicity, depriving Kurds of cultural and education rights. Many Kurds embraced Erdogan's Islamic-rooted AKP when it ended decades of secular rule in 2002, seeing it as more inclusive and committed to changes. Erdogan tried to broker a deal to end a bloody Kurdish fight for an independent state, seeking to etch his place in history as the one who finally settled one of Turkey's most painful problems. The collapse of the talks in 2015 and a failed coup attempt the following year prompted Erdogan to resume military operations in Kurdish regions, pushing him closer to Turkey's nationalists.

'Mosque or prison'

After holding out for much of the campaign, the pro-Kurdish HDP party has officially backed Kilicdaroglu, an endorsement that might just tip the close vote. The HDP's support "is a major boost" to Kilicdaroglu, Hamish Kinnear, a senior analyst at the Verisk Maplecroft risk consultancy, told AFP.

Mehmet Emin Yilmaz, who wears a traditional Kurdish scarf, says he is ready to vote for whomever the HDP

points to. "I am Kurdish. The HDP defends my rights. If the police unjustly detains me today, the HDP will take care of me," the 60-year-old said.

But while the election is one of Turkey's most important in its modern era, deciding the future of its longest-serving leader, there is little excitement on the streets of Diyarbakir.

"The people are intimidated, there are cameras everywhere. If more than two people gather, the plainclothes police arrive," said Erdem Unal, the CHP chief in Diyarbakir's historic Sur district. "Erdogan left Kurds with two options: mosque or prison," he said — and not the cemeyis, places of worship for the separate faith exercised by Alevi Kurds. "Diyarbakir has turned into an open-air prison," he said.

Erdogan's alliance with the Huda-Par (Free Cause Party) has opened additional wounds. Huda-Par has links to the Kurdish Hezbollah movement, which is distinct from the Lebanese Shiite group of the same name. Comprised of Sunni Islamists, the Kurdish Hezbollah was implicated in the extrajudicial killings of Kurdish and women's rights activists in the 1990s. Some analysts viewed the Kurdish Hezbollah as a government tool for fighting the Kurdish insurgency led by the leftist PKK. Eyup Burc, founder of the pro-Kurdish IMC TV channel that has since been shut down, said Erdogan's embrace of Huda-Par meant he was trying to hang on to the most conservative elements of the Kurdish vote. "Surveys show around 15 percent support for Erdogan in Diyarbakir, and it's melting further," Burc said.

Kilicdaroglu's leftist CHP is almost invisible in Diyarbakir. But the 74-year-old former civil servant appears to attract local sympathies because of his openly Alevi faith—and less emphasized Kurdish identity. Most Kurds call Kilicdaroglu "Piro" from "pir", a Kurdish word for grandfather that also describes an Alevi religious leader. But many Kurds have long-standing reservations about Kilicdaroglu and his six-party oppo-



DIYARBAKIR, Turkey: People sit at a traditional tea house at the historical Sur district in Diyarbakir, southeastern Turkey. — AFP

sition alliance. It backed Erdogan's military incursions into Syria, which hit Kurdish areas controlled by a sister party of the PKK.

The HDP's support for Kilicdaroglu follows the arrest of more than 100 Kurdish activists, journalists and lawyers in what the government billed an "anti-terror" operation. The roundups were aimed at "sending a message to Turkey's (mostly Sunni) west", said Nahit Eren, who heads the Diyarbakir bar association.

Abbas Sahin, whose Green Left Party will represent pro-Kurdish candidates in the parliamentary portion of the ballot because of a threatened shutdown of the HDP, vowed that Erdogan would be consigned "to the dustbin of history".

But Gulistan Atasoy Tekdemir, the HDP co-chair in Diyarbakir, said Kurds expected "courage" from the opposition candidate, insisting that their support should not be taken for granted. — AFP

Women's struggles under Erdogan's conservative rule

ISTANBUL: Turkish women have fought hard to protect their rights during two decades of socially conservative policies overseen by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamic-rooted party.

AFP looks back at some of their battles ahead of next Sunday's election in the mostly Muslim but officially secular nation of 85 million people.

Erdogan's decision in 2021 to withdraw Turkey from a European convention aimed at combating violence against women raised alarm due to rising femicide rates. At least 397 women were killed in Turkey last year, according to the We Will Stop Femicide Platform, a women's rights group that prosecutors want to shut down for "acting against the law and morality". "We have seen the number of femicides rise every year under (Erdogan's) government," group member Fidan Ataselim said. Ultra-conservatives in Erdogan's ruling coalition argued that the treaty damaged family unity and promoted LGBTQ rights. Erdogan has repeatedly attacked the opposition during the campaign for standing up for the LGBTQ community. "We are against the LGBT," he said this week. The withdrawal

represents a policy reversal for Erdogan.

The treaty was signed and negotiated in Istanbul in 2011. Turkey was the first country to ratify it the following year. "These were the early years of the (ruling party), when it positioned itself as moderate conservatives," said Gokce Gokcen, the deputy head of the main secular opposition party.

Conservative women, on the other hand, have made big strides. Erdogan's government lifted a ban on wearing headscarves in state institutions in 2013, creating room for millions of religious women to go to university and enter the workforce. Erdogan portrays himself as the guarantor of Muslims against secular elites that dominated Turkish politics for much of the 20th century.

They stripped religious symbols from state institutions as part of a modernization drive that pushed post-Ottoman Turkey closer to Europe. No major political movement currently wants to reintroduce a headscarf ban. "There has been a significant progress on this issue," said Berrin Sonmez, a member of the Esik feminist platform. "Pious women and secular women are now working together in feminist organizations."

"Abortion is murder", Erdogan declared in 2012, comments that triggered demonstrations that ultimately forced his government to back down from a proposed abortion ban. "It had to take a step back after protests and fierce public opposition," Ataselim said. — AFP

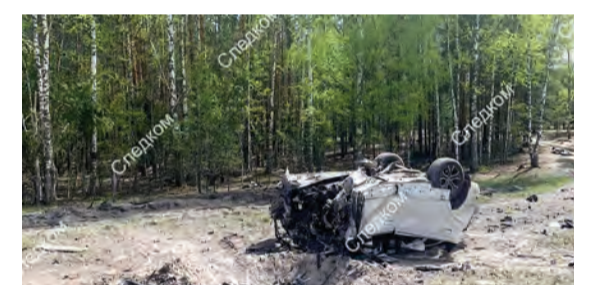
Evacuations spur UN watchdog concern over Ukraine N-plant

MOSCOW: Evacuations from the front line around Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant prompted safety warnings from the UN nuclear watchdog on Saturday, as a string of recent strikes escalate predictions of a looming spring counteroffensive.

Moscow has blamed Kyiv — and its Western supporters — for an escalating number of long-range attacks and sabotage operations, including on the Kremlin.

A car bomb on Saturday wounded prominent nationalist writer Zakhar Prilepin and killed his assistant in an attack Moscow pinned on both Kyiv and Washington. The head of the Russian paramilitary group Wagner meanwhile asked Moscow to let Chechen fighters relieve his forces at the flashpoint city of Bakmut in eastern Ukraine.

Citing stepped-up shellings by Kyiv, Moscow has ordered families with children and elderly to temporarily evacuate a slew of Russian-held areas in southern Ukraine, including the town near Europe's largest nuclear plant. "The general situation in the area near the Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power



This handout picture released by the Russian Investigative Committee on May 6, 2023 shows the place of explosion of a car of Russian writer Zakhar Prilepin in Nizhny Novgorod region. — AFP

Plant is becoming increasingly unpredictable and potentially dangerous," IAEA chief Rafael Grossi said in a statement on Saturday. "I'm extremely concerned about the very real nuclear safety and security risks facing the plant."

The removal order has led to "a mad panic and no less mad queues" at the checkpoint into Russian-annexed Crimea, said Ivan Fedorov, the mayor of Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia Oblast. With buses ferrying people out every 20 to 30 minutes, he said stations have been drained of gasoline. "The partial evacuation they announced is going too fast, and there is a possibility that they may be preparing for provocations and (for that reason) focusing on civilians," Fedorov wrote on Telegram. — AFP

Damascus back...

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The Arab League statement also expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people on the 75th anniversary of the Nakba, when Zionist militias forced Palestinians off their lands. He noted the meeting called for supporting all measures to protect Palestinians and their right to worship freely at the Al-Aqsa Mosque as well as churches in Palestine, stressing on the importance of releasing Palestinian prisoners from Zionist jails. The Zionist occupation of Palestinian lands since 1967 should cease as well as the inhumane treatment of the Palestine people, he affirmed.

Assad has been politically isolated since the war began, but recent weeks have seen a flurry of diplomatic activity ahead of an Arab League summit in Saudi Arabia on May 19. The ministers in a statement emphasized their "keenness to launch a leading Arab role in efforts to re-

solve" the Syria crisis. They agreed to form a ministerial committee to continue "direct dialogue with the Syrian government in order to reach a comprehensive solution".

Ahmed Aboul Gheit, head of the 22-member Arab League, said the decision "brings the Arab side into communication with the Syrian government for the first time in years, in order to look into all aspects of the problem". Syria's return to the body is "the beginning... not the end of the issue", he added, noting it was up to individual countries to decide whether to resume ties with Damascus. Following the announcement, Syria's foreign ministry stressed the importance of "Arab cooperation", in a statement carried by state news agency SANA. "The next stage requires an effective and constructive Arab approach... based on dialogue, mutual respect and common Arab interests", it added. Several Arab countries cut ties with Syria early in the conflict, betting on Assad's demise, while some including Qatar and Saudi Arabia provided support to the Syrian opposition. — Agencies

has not stopped. The retailer Bazmandegan said that even if "the market has become more unstable... relations of mutual trust, the fruits of years of cooperation", allowed Iranian and Emirati traders to continue their exchanges. He imports fans, coffee makers and washing machines from Western manufacturers like Philips, Tefal and Toshiba. The goods arrive "thanks to our Emirati intermediaries", Bazmandegan said, adding that "90 percent of the products come from Dubai".

But the international sanctions and diplomatic ruptures have meant Qeshm's traders have struggled in recent years, pushing some of them into bankruptcy. "One competitor died after a heart attack due to daily price changes," Bazmandegan said. Nooradin Tata, who owns a guesthouse in central Qeshm, said the personal lives of islanders have also suffered amid the diplomatic troubles. Hundreds of thousands of Iranians live in the UAE and Tata said people from Qeshm with family abroad are "stressed" by the onerous administrative and logistical hurdles to "bringing or going to visit family members" living in Gulf countries. — AFP

stitutions will not be reformed without political reforms of the three powers — the judiciary, the Assembly and the government. He also called for amending the election system.

Fresh candidate Ali Al-Kandari insisted that there can be no development amid continued political disputes. Fawaz Al-Rasheed called for building a new Kuwait and for creating a new political environment to serve the country. Hamad Al-Olayan said it has become necessary to review powers enjoyed by the constitutional court, which has nullified the National Assembly and elections three times in the past 11 years. Bader Al-Mutairi said Kuwait is passing through a very dangerous turning point in which development has stalled.

Zionists raze Palestinian...

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A trailer and classrooms constructed of tin sheeting were cleared out of their contents before the demolition, an AFP correspondent said. COGAT, the Zionist defense ministry body overseeing civilian affairs in the occupied territories, imposed in March a two-month deadline to vacate the premises following an order by a Jerusalem court. The body had determined that the school had been "built illegally" and posed a "safety hazard".

Ahmed Naser, a Palestinian education ministry official, told AFP the school had replaced another demolished by the Zionist entity in 2019. Naser noted its remote location, which he said prevents the "displacement and forced eviction" of local Palestinians, charging that the Zionist entity "wants to confiscate these lands".

The EU called on the Zionist entity to "halt all demolitions and evictions, which will only increase the suffering of the Palestinian population and further escalate an already tense environment". "Demolitions are illegal under international law, and chil-

dren's right to education must be respected," the office of the EU representative to the Palestinian Territories said in a statement.

In January, a group of United Nations experts had called for action to stop the Zionist entity's "systematic and deliberate" demolition of Palestinian structures. "Direct attacks on the Palestinian people's homes, schools, livelihoods and water sources are nothing but (the Zionist entity's) attempts to curtail the Palestinians' right to self-determination and to threaten their very existence," the experts said in a statement.

Mubarak Zawahir, head of the Beit Tamar local council where the school was located, told AFP Zionist authorities had agreed a stay on the demolition pending a court appeal on Wednesday. "But the (Zionist) army ignored that and just demolished it," he said. Naser, the education ministry official, said a tent would be erected Monday on the site with basic infrastructure to replace the demolished structures.

COGAT and Zionist group Regavim said the demolition was the result of a petition filed by the right-wing organization whose mission, according to its website, includes "the protection of (Zionist) national lands". Regavim in statement accused Palestinians of using the school's construction "against the law" to manufacture "a humanitarian crisis". — AFP

Qeshm hopes to cash in on...

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another trader in Qeshm, Hassan Ebrahimi, 52. Located in the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf's key maritime corridor, the island of 150,000 residents has long served trade with the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia and Africa's eastern coast — but this has also made Qeshm sensitive to the vagaries of geopolitics.

For 40 years, Hassan Rostam has plied the waters between Qeshm and the UAE in his lenj, a traditional wooden ship synonymous with the ports of the Gulf. The weathered-faced captain loads vegetables in Iran's ports and returns from Dubai with "dried fruits and other products", he said. Despite restrictions following the diplomatic break in 2016, the tradition of business, traffic and trade in the Gulf

Movement slams new blood bag...

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of the tribal chief of Kuwait's largest bedouin tribe Al-Awazem, who said he might contest the speaker's post if he wins a seat in the next Assembly.

He stressed Kuwait's retreat is not because of democracy or the National Assembly, but because of fighting between those who want to seize the country's fortunes. New candidate Mohammad Jawhar Hayat said state in-

Gunman kills 8 in rampage...

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But on Sunday, as Democrats repeated calls for Congress to enact gun safety legislation and blasted Texas and other states for allowing permitless carry, Abbott, a Republican, refused to be drawn on whether restricting gun sales or enacting other reforms should be considered.

"People want a quick solution. The long-term solution is to address the mental health issue," he told Fox News Sunday, saying the focus should be on growing "anger and violence" in America. Local officials hailed the actions of the police officer who charged and killed the shooter. "We owe a debt of gratitude to first responders that ran toward the gunfire and acted swiftly to neutralize the threat," said Keith Self, a Republican congressman whose district includes the city of Allen.

The police chief later said authorities believe the unidentified shooter "acted alone." CNN showed a cropped photograph of the apparent gunman dead

on the ground, wearing tactical gear with extra magazines, and with an AR-15-style rifle at his side. Steven Spainhower said he was confronted with haunting, unforgettably graphic images when he rushed to the scene and performed CPR on victims before the official first responders arrived. Finding one female victim on the ground, "I felt for her pulse, pulled her head to the side, and she had no face," Spainhower told CBS News. He found the son of another victim lying under his dead mother and "covered head to toe" in blood. "It's just unfathomable to see the carnage," he said.

Janet St James, a spokesperson for Medical City Healthcare, which operates multiple trauma facilities in North Texas, said it received eight patients from the shooting, ranging in age from five to 61, NBC News reported. "Allen is a proud and safe city which makes today's senseless act of violence even more shocking," mayor Ken Fulk said in a statement, as he said the quick response of authorities likely saved lives. Jaynal Pervez, who arrived at the mall while his daughter was inside, told CNN: "There's no more safe places. I don't know what to do." With more firearms than inhabitants, the United States has the highest rate of gun deaths of any developed country — 49,000 in 2021, up from 45,000 the year before. — AFP