

International

Erdogan eyes third decade of rule in historic runoff

Turkish president defends 'special relationship with Putin'

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan cruises on Sunday into the final week before an historic runoff election as the big favorite to extend two decades of his Islamic-rooted rule until 2028. Secular leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu gave the opposition's best performance of Erdogan's dominant era in May 14 parliament and presidential polls. The retired bureaucrat of Kurdish Alevi descent broke ethnic barriers and Erdogan's stranglehold on the media and state institutions to win almost 45 percent of the vote. But Erdogan still came within a fraction of a point of topping the 50-percent threshold needed to win in the first round.

The 69-year-old leader did it despite Turkey's worst economic crisis since the 1990s and opinion surveys showing him headed for his first national election defeat. Kilicdaroglu will now need to rally his deflated troops and beat the odds yet again to wrest back power for the secular party that ruled Turkey for most of the 20th century.

The Eurasia Group consultancy put Erdogan's chances of winning next Sunday at 80 percent.

"It will be an uphill struggle for Kilicdaroglu in the second round," Hamish Kinnear of the Verisk Maplecroft consulting firm agreed.

Erdogan rode a nationalist wave that saw smaller right-wing parties pick up nearly 25 percent of the parallel parliamentary vote. Kilicdaroglu is courting these voters in the second presidential round.

The 74-year-old revamped his campaign team and tore up his old playbook for the most fateful week of his political career. He has replaced chatty clips that he used to record from his kitchen with desk-thumping speeches and pledges to immediately rid Turkey of millions of migrants. "As soon as I come to power, I will send all the refugees home," he said in his first post-election address. He has chased the endorsement of a little-known ultra-nationalist, whose tiny vote share pushed Turkey into its first presidential runoff.

Iraqi, Syrian Kurds divided over Erdogan's battle

ARBIL, Iraq: Turkey's presidential election is being anxiously watched by Kurds in Syria and Iraq as economic interests compete with fears of a regional military escalation against some Kurdish groups.

The long-running and deadly conflict between Ankara and militant groups from the ethnic Kurdish minority has spilled across the borders of both Iraq and Syria. But Turkey is also a major economic partner, especially for northern Iraq's autonomous Kurdish province which has long exported oil through a pipeline that runs through Turkey and has trade ties worth billions. "Economically, there are mutual benefits," said Iraqi political scientist Mohamed Ezzedine.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, having governed for 20 years, has fostered key strategic links with Iraqi Kurdistan's president Nechirvan Barzani who has been in power for three decades. After the first round of elections, as votes were still being counted, Barzani called Erdogan, the Turkish "reis" (chief), to express "confidence and optimism" he would defeat challenger Kemal Kilicdaroglu.

But some Kurds in Iraq and across the border in Syria fear an Erdogan victory will see a military escalation in their home regions. Fighting between Ankara's army and Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) militants from Turkey has for decades spilled over into Iraqi Kurdistan, a rugged mountain region where

And he has punched back against Erdogan's claims that he was associating with "terrorists" — a code word for Kurdish groups fighting for broader autonomy in Turkey's southeast. "We have millions of patriots to reach," Kilicdaroglu said. But Kilicdaroglu's sharp right turn could prove costly with voters from Kurdish regions that overwhelmingly backed him in the first round.

Kurds embraced Erdogan during his first decade in power because he worked to lift many of their social restrictions. They turned against him when Erdogan formed his own alliance with Turkey's nationalist forces and began to unleash purges after surviving a failed coup attempt in 2016. Kilicdaroglu's new and more overtly nationalist tone echoes a secular era during which Kurds — who make up nearly a fifth of Turkey's population — were stripped of basic rights.

'Severe currency crisis'

The political battles are being accompanied by market turmoil that set in once it became apparent that Erdogan was on course to keep his grip on power. Turkey's recent years have been roiled by economic upheaval that erased many of the gains of Erdogan's more prosperous early rule. Most of the problems stem from Erdogan's fervent fight against interest rates — an approach some analysts link to his adherence to Islamic rules against usury. "I have a thesis that interest rates and inflation are positively correlated," he told CNN this week. "The lower the interest rates, the lower inflation will be." The markets' trust in more conventional economics have put massive pressure on the lira.

Government data showed Turkey's foreign currency reserves — topped up by aid from Arab allies — dropping by \$9 billion and reaching their lowest levels in 21 years in the week running up to the first-round vote. Analysts think most of the money was spent on efforts to prop up the lira against sharp and politically sensitive falls. "There is now a

both sides operate military bases — with civilians often caught in the crossfire.

In northeast Syria, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) have established a semi-autonomous administration amid the chaos of the long-running civil war, and the group is backed by the United States as part of an anti-jihadist coalition. Ankara, however, considers them an extension of the PKK, which is labeled a terrorist group by Turkey and its key Western allies, and has waged successive military campaigns against them.

Despite the conflict's impact in Iraqi Kurdistan, the region also benefits from its neighbor, with trade ties worth an estimated \$12 billion in 2022. Many local businesses would like to keep things the way they are. "Since Erdogan became president, we have been satisfied," said Ahmed Krouanji, who runs a shop in Arbil's market. "There is a lot of trade with Turkey, the economic situation has improved." Others express views reflecting solidarity with Kurds across the border.

An Erdogan victory "is not in the interests of the Kurds of Turkey," said Ali Khodr, a man aged in his thirties. Turkey's leading pro-Kurdish party, the People's Democratic Party, denounces Ankara's persecution of its Kurdish minority and backs Kilicdaroglu. But the only consolation for the president's opponents after first-round voting that delivered the incumbent a comfortable lead, was that for the first time, Erdogan has been forced into a runoff. Over two decades, Arbil's leaders have forged close ties with the Turkish president, who receives Nechirvan Barzani and his cousin, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, on their regular visits to Ankara. — AFP



ARBIL, Iraq: A voting clerk holds a ballot showing images of the two candidates for the Turkish presidency on May 20, 2023, at her country's consulate in Erbil. — AFP

very real risk that an Erdogan victory could lead to macroeconomic instability in Turkey, including the threat of a severe currency crisis," Capital Economic warned.

But Erdogan has exuded confidence since the first round. He has ridiculed his rival's nationalist overtures and stuck by some of his more controversial policies — including an increasingly strong relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Erdogan's turn towards Russia has helped secure billions of dollars of relief on Turkey's huge energy bill. "Russia and Turkey need each

other in every field possible," Erdogan told CNN. He also argued that his more "balanced" stance towards Putin helped him negotiate a UN-backed deal with Russia under which Ukraine was allowed to resume exporting grain. "This was possible because of our special relationship with President Putin," Erdogan said. He also scoffed at remarks from 2019 by US President Joe Biden — recalled by Erdogan's allies throughout the campaign — calling Erdogan an "autocrat". "Would a dictator ever enter a runoff election?" Erdogan asked. — AFP

France's Macron arrives on first visit to Mongolia

ULAANBAATAR, Mongolia: Emmanuel Macron arrived Sunday in Mongolia for a brief yet symbolic visit, the first by a French president to the country nestled between China and Russia that is of growing strategic interest in the West.

The French head of state landed in the capital Ulaanbaatar at around 6:30 pm, according to an AFP photographer travelling with his delegation, after participating at the G7 summit in Hiroshima, Japan.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was the star guest at the G7, where he addressed key Western allies but also leaders of non-aligned nations like Brazil and India.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, France has stepped up its efforts to speak with countries who have not explicitly condemned it — of which Mongolia is one. In Ulaanbaatar, where he will only spend an evening, Macron will dine with President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa, the Elysee said.

He will also visit the museum of Genghis Khan, named for the 13th-century Mongol conqueror, which will lend part of its collection to the Nantes History Museum in western France for an exhibition scheduled for October.

Macron will then depart for Paris at the end of the evening. "The fact that Mongolia will be on the route back allows us to make this historic first (visit) and



ULAANBAATAR: France's President Emmanuel Macron (left) receives a traditional welcome upon arrival at the Chinggis Khaan International Airport in Ulaanbaatar on May 21, 2023. — AFP

gives it a special meaning," a source in the Elysee's entourage said. "Mongolia is landlocked between Russia and China, but is also a country which has a liberal model of government," they said, adding it is trying to "diversify its partnerships in order to be more robust and able to deal with its large Russian and Chinese neighbors". The French presidency is seeking to "loosen the constraint exerted on Russia's neighbors and open up to them the choice of their options", they added.

On the bilateral level, France has considered that there are "very significant possibilities for cooperation" with Mongolia, particularly in energy, with the country struggling to decarbonize its coal-dependent economy. The vast north Asian country has been the subject of growing interest in recent years from the United States as part of a strategy to thwart the rise of China. — AFP

Outrage after Zionist minister...

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Tours of the site by Zionist nationalists have long been criticized by Palestinians and Arab nations, while Ben-Gvir's visits have taken on added weight

since he took office in December. The office of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas said "harming Al-Aqsa Mosque is playing with fire". "(It) will push the region into a religious war with unimaginable consequences that will affect everyone," said Abbas's spokesman, Nabil Abu Rudeineh, in a statement published by the Palestinian news agency Wafa.

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The timing of Sunday's visit also holds significance, coming days after extremists marched through the Old City to celebrate east Jerusalem's capture by Zionist forces in the 1967 Six-Day War. Thursday's event was marred by incidents of violence against Palestinians and journalists, while the United States condemned "the hateful chants such as 'Death to Arabs'" during the rally.

Ben-Gvir's visit also follows a Cairo-brokered truce reached on May 13 between the Zionist entity and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, ending five days of cross-border fighting. Egypt's foreign ministry on Sunday pressed the Zionist entity to "immediately stop the escalatory practices which inflame the pre-existing state of tension in the occupied (Palestinian) territories". — AFP

Saudi astronauts heading...

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she is looking forward to sharing her experience with kids while on the ISS.

"Being able to see their faces when they see astronauts from their own region for the first time is very thrilling," she said. A career fighter pilot, Al-Qarni said he has "always had the passion of exploring the unknown and just admiring the sky and the stars". "It is a great opportunity for me to pursue this kind of passion that I have, and now maybe just fly among the stars."

The mission is not Saudi Arabia's first foray into space. In 1985, Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, an air force pilot, took part in a US-organized space voyage. But the space mission involving a Saudi woman is the latest move by the oil-rich Gulf kingdom, where women only gained the right to drive a few years ago, to revamp its ultraconservative image. The kingdom established the Saudi Space Commission in 2018 and launched a program last year to send astronauts into space.

The four-member team is set to carry out some 20 experiments while on the ISS. One of them involves studying the behavior of stem cells in zero gravity. They will join seven others already on board the ISS: three Russians, three Americans and Emirati astronaut Sultan Al-Neyadi, who was the first Arab national to go on a spacewalk last month.

The mission to the ISS will be the second in partnership with ISS-key holder NASA by Axiom Space, a private space company, which offers the rare voyages for sums that run into the millions of dollars. The company oversees training the astronauts, chartering their means of transport and ensuring the smooth management of their stay.

Axiom Space carried out its first private astronaut mission to the ISS in April 2022, sending three businessmen and former astronaut Michael Lopez-Alegria to spend 17 days in orbit as part of Ax-I. Some astronauts on the ISS at the time said they had to take time out of their day — precious in zero gravity — to take care of the space tourists. "My time is actually a lot less constrained than Mike Lopez-Alegria's time was on the first mission," said Whitson. "I'll be available to help the crew members a lot more as they need assistance."

For Axiom Space, these missions are a first step toward an ambitious goal: The construction of its own space station, with the first module expected to launch in 2025. The station would at first be attached to the ISS before separating and orbiting independently. NASA plans to retire the ISS around 2030 and to instead send astronauts to private stations, which will also host their own clients, leading the US space agency to encourage the development of programs by several companies.

Russia recently agreed to extend its use of the ISS until 2028, having threatened an earlier pullout last year as ties unraveled between the Kremlin and the West over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. The other international partners — Japan, Canada and the European Space Agency — have committed themselves, like the United States, to continue operations until 2030. — AFP

Court upholds barring candidate...

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Candidates running in the general elections launched their campaigns for the decisive polls by raising a number of issues. Former MP Saad Al-Khanfour called on the government to find and implement fundamental solutions to the housing problem that has been hounding every Kuwaiti family. He also called for improving the standard of living through a clear short-term plan.

Candidate Hamad Al-Alyan said that if voters do not

turn out in big numbers on election day, "bad elements will be elected to the next Assembly", adding voters should turn out in a big way to ensure that reformist members are elected.

Candidate Fawaz Al-Dhafiri said the establishment of a high commission for election is the gateway for political reforms, adding that the amendment of the electoral constituencies is a major step for reforms. He said it is not logical that a constituency with 200,000 voters elects the same number of lawmakers as a constituency with just 60,000 voters.

Member of the 2022 Assembly Abdullah Al-Anbaei said he hosted a number of former MPs and candidates to discuss an initiative to unify election programs. He said that they reached a joint draft for launching programs that are capable of implementation.

Gulf giants turn to start-ups for...

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Al-Kaabi, ADNOC's executive director of low-carbon solutions, told AFP. "I would love to see more wind and solar energy, but to be practical and transparent, it's not going to solve the problem." Carbon capture was a hot topic at a recent climate tech conference in the UAE capital Abu Dhabi, home of ADNOC. Start-ups displayed their advances in carbon capture and storage (CCS) which removes carbon dioxide as it is pumped from power plants and heavy industry. There were also firms presenting their plans for direct air capture (DAC), a newer technology that extracts CO2 directly from the atmosphere.

The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says the existing fossil fuel infrastructure — without the use of carbon capture — will push the world beyond the Paris deal's safer global warming limit of 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The debate between whether to primarily target fossil fuels or emissions is shaping up as a key battleground at the COP28 climate talks, which will be held in UAE financial hub Dubai.

Citing the IPCC, the COP28 president-designate Sultan Al-Jaber — ADNOC's CEO and his country's climate envoy — last week said it was time to "get serious about carbon capture". But environmentalists are skeptical about the central role that big energy firms are seeking in climate solutions, saying they have a vested interest in maintaining fossil fuel sales. Julien Jreissati, program director at Green-

peace MENA, labelled it a "distraction". ADNOC's Kaabi, however, argued that the oil giant's engineering capabilities and deep pockets make them best placed to propel climate tech. "The world has two options: We could leave it to the small players or have the big players accelerating this decarbonization," Kaabi said.

In 2016, ADNOC launched the region's first commercial-scale CCS project, Al-Reyadah, which has the capacity to capture 800,000 tons of CO2 per year. Globally, there are only around 35 commercial facilities using carbon capture utilization and storage globally, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA), which says even those planned until 2030 would capture only a fraction of the emissions needed.

The entrepreneurs at the UAE conference included Omani company 44.01, a winner of the UK's Earthshot Prize for its technology that permanently removes carbon dioxide from the air by mineralizing it in peridotite rock. "Climate change is an urgent challenge and for us to be able to tackle that challenge we need to move quicker," said CEO Talal Hasan. "The oil and gas partnerships help us move quickly," he told AFP.

Hasan's 44.01 has partnered with ADNOC to develop a carbon capture and mineralization site in Fujairah, one of the UAE's seven emirates — the first such project by an energy company in the Middle East. "In one ton of peridotite, you could probably mineralize 500 to 600 kilos of CO2... this means that with the rocks just in this region, you could potentially mineralize trillions of tons," Hasan said. For Hasan, energy firms are good partners because "we use a lot of the same equipment, infrastructure, people and resources". "That will help us accelerate scaling," he said. — AFP