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Erdogan pays homage to Menderes

Kilicdaroglu has focused on more immediate issues as he tries to come from behind

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid homage to his executed Islamic predecessor on Saturday in a last-gasp attempt to rally his conservative base on the eve of a historic runoff election. Erdogan's visit to Istanbul's Adnan Menderes mausoleum took him back to the man he cited when he called early polls for May 14 in a bid to ease his way to an unprecedented third decade of rule.

Menderes was tried and hanged one year after the military staged a coup in 1960 to put Turkey back on a more secular course. Erdogan survived a putsch attempt against his own Islamic-rooted government in 2016. "The era of coups and juntas is over," the 69-year-old declared after laying a wreath at his mentor's tomb. "I once again call on you to go to the ballot boxes. Tomorrow is a special day for us all."

Erdogan told his followers in January that he wanted to continue Menderes' fight for religious rights and nationalist causes in the officially secular but overwhelmingly Muslim republic of 85 million people. He paid a similarly symbolic visit to Istanbul's iconic Hagia Sophia mosque on the eve of the first round. His conversion of the ancient seat of eastern Christianity into a mosque in 2020 cemented his hero status among poorer and more rural voters who have helped keep him in power since 2003.

Erdogan ended up beating secular opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu by nearly five percentage points two weeks ago. But his failure to top the 50-percent threshold set up Turkey's first runoff Sun-

day and underscored the gradual ebbing of Erdogan's support.

"They are afraid"

Kilicdaroglu has focused on more immediate issues as he tries to come from behind and return power to the secular party that ruled Turkey for most of the 20th century. He used a late-night TV interview on Friday to accuse Erdogan's government of unfairly blocking his mass text messages to voters. "They are afraid of us," the 74-year-old former civil servant said.

Observers say Turkey's votes are free of meddling on election days — but unfair because the odds are stacked against the opposition in advance. "These were competitive but still limited elections," the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) election observer mission's chief Michael Georg Link said after the first round. "The criminalization of some political forces... prevented full political pluralism and impeded individuals' rights to run in the elections," Link said.

Opposition supporter Zerrin Altayli said she thought Kilicdaroglu would win a fairly held vote. "I hope the votes come out of the ballot boxes without any fraud," the 60-year-old said. "If that happens, the results will be different than in the first round."

"Creating fake news"

Erdogan's first decade in power was distinguished by strong economic growth and warm relations with Western powers that elevated his global status and domestic support. His second began with a



ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan greets the audience as he attends a meeting of non-governmental organizations (NGO) and mukhtars at Taha Akgul Sports Hall on May 24, 2023. — AFP

corruption scandal and soon descended into a political crackdown and years of economic turmoil that erased many of the early gains. Erdogan's consolidation of power included a near-complete monopolization of the media by the government and its business allies.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) estimated that Erdogan received 60 times as much airtime on the TRT Haber state broadcaster as Kilicdaroglu in April.

"They have taken over all the institutions," Kilicdaroglu said in his television interview. Erdogan used his own TV appearance Friday to attack Western coverage of the campaign. "They are more interested in the elections in Turkey than in their own countries," Erdogan said. "But they are always creating fake news."

The vote is being accompanied by growing alarm about the fate of Turkey's beleaguered lira and the stability of its

banks. Erdogan forced the central bank to follow through on his unconventional theory that lower interest rates bring down inflation. The exact opposite has occurred. Turkey's annual inflation rate touched 85 percent last year while the lira entered a brief freefall. The lira has been holding remarkably steady this year — a sign the government is ploughing vast sums into market interventions to avoid politically sensitive falls. — AFP

Erdogan is 'family' in conservative heartland of Turkey

BAYBURT, Turkey: Old Fiat cars and yellow tulips dot the eastern Turkish town of Bayburt, the heart of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ultra-loyal conservative base that is ready to extend his two-decade rule to 2028. Betraying a serene calm hanging over the picturesque province of the same name, Bayburt voters roared into life for Erdogan in the first round of Turkey's presidential election on May 14.

Almost 80 percent of the electors there plumped for Erdogan, his highest vote share in a single province, helping him win 49.5 percent of the national ballot and become a strong favorite in Sunday's

runoff vote. "Getting to know the heart of Bayburt is getting to know Turkey," said Orhan Ates, a newly elected MP for Erdogan's ruling Islamic-rooted AKP party in the parallel parliamentary vote. "Are you ready to re-elect our president?" he asks passers-by, greeting them holding Islamic prayer beads with a knowing nod.

A 47-year-old eye doctor, Ates holds impromptu appointments with patients in the street, issuing a prescription on a crumpled piece of paper to one man wearing worn-out shoes. "I started as a shoe shiner. I became a medicine professor. People see themselves in me, like we see ourselves in Erdogan," whose family originates from neighboring Rize province, Ates told AFP. Erdogan "talks to everyone, not just to the elites", he said.

"We're a big family here and Erdogan is a part of it. He's as solid as our castle," said provincial AKP official Haci Ali Polat, referring to a centuries-old fortress towering over the town. Residents who spoke to

AFP said they stayed faithful to Erdogan because he repelled attacks by foreign powers, just as Bayburt fought Russian invaders in the 19th century. "We are nationalist and conservative and we love Erdogan," enthused Bedirhan Bayen, a 26-year-old university graduate speaking from his father's shop. "What people want is a strong leader," he said, admitting he would have liked a "new face" but judging secular opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu as "weak".

Muhammed Emre Teymur works in the construction industry — a sector that enjoyed an unprecedented boom under Erdogan — and refuses to see Turkey's raging economic crisis as a reason to abandon the president. "Erdogan has produced his own ships, his own weapons, his own planes," said the 19-year-old, who earns 10,000 lira (\$500) a month. "You don't vote for a 'cucumber' due to the price of onions," he added, using a pejorative term to refer to Erdogan's secular challenger Kemal Kilicdaroglu. — AFP



BAYBURT, Turkey: Prof Dr Orhan Ates, newly elected MP of AKP, makes a medical examination of a man during an election campaign visit on May 23, 2023. — AFP



HOUSTON: Dr Suzanne Bell, Lead for NASA's Behavioral Health and Performance Laboratory, walks through a simulated Mars exterior portion of the CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha at the Johnson Space center on April 11, 2023. — AFP

Meet the scientist (sort of) spending a year on Mars

WASHINGTON: Living on Mars wasn't exactly a childhood dream for Canadian biologist Kelly Haston, though she'll soon spend a year preparing for just that. "We are just going to pretend that we're there," the 52-year-old told AFP, summing up her participation in an exercise simulating a long stay on the Red Planet. At the end of June, she will be one of the four volunteers stepping into a Martian habitat in Houston, Texas that will be their home for the next 12 months. "It still sometimes seems a bit unreal to me," she laughs.

For NASA, which has carefully selected the participants, these long-term experiments make it possible to evaluate the behavior of a crew in an isolated and confined environment, ahead of a real mission in future. Participants will face equipment failures and water limitations, the space agency has warned — as well as some "surprises," according to Haston.

Their communications with the outside world will suffer from the delays that exist between Earth and Mars —

up to 20 minutes one-way, depending on the planets' positions — and 40 minutes two ways. "I'm very excited about this, but I'm also realistic for what the challenge is," says the research scientist, whose status as a permanent resident of the United States made her eligible for the program.

The habitat, dubbed Mars Dune Alpha, is a 3D printed 160-sq-m facility, complete with bedrooms, a gym, common areas, and a vertical farm to grow food. "It's actually surprisingly spacious feeling when you go inside it," said Haston, who visited last year before her participation was confirmed. "And we do have an outdoor area as well where we will mimic spacewalks or Mars walks."

This area, which is separated by an airlock, is filled with red sand, though it is still covered rather than being open air. The crew will have to don their suits to do "spacewalks" — "probably one of the things that I'm looking forward to the most," says Haston, a registered member of the Mohawk Nation. Haston wasted no time in filling out her application when her partner told her about the opportunity. "It's aligned with many of my goals in life to explore different avenues of research and science, and then also to be a test subject, and to give to a study that will hopefully further space exploration." — AFP



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