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Research Report

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SWP Comment

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Political and Economic Implications of the Turkish Earthquakes

Centralisation of power has eroded state capacity

Hürkan Ash Aksoy and Salim Çevik

On 6 February 2023, Turkey was hit by one of the worst earthquakes in its history. Buildings were destroyed and damaged across the southern and eastern provinces. The official death toll is already over 50,000, and it is conceivable that the real numbers will be much higher. The earthquake also exposed the scale of political and institutional deterioration in Turkey. During Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's two decades in power, Turkey has experienced an enormous construction boom, evolved into an important player in humanitarian aid, and become an increasingly important regional military actor. However, the earthquake revealed that the highly centralised and personalised system of power had weakened state institutions and undermined their capacity to deliver. Turkey needs to reform its disaster management and governance. The European Union should assist the recovery and reconstruction efforts by targeting aid and using the momentum to mitigate anti-Westernism.

While natural disasters often take countries unawares, Turkey lies in a known earthquake zone and should have been prepared. A massive earthquake in Kocaeli province, near Istanbul, caused more than 17,000 deaths in 1999. That event functioned as a wake-up call for the Turkish state and society. Widespread criticism of mismanagement and lack of state capability during and after the earthquake and the subsequent economic crisis in 2001 – partly triggered by the earthquake – contributed to major shifts in the political landscape. The most fundamental of these was the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), in 2002.

The 1999 earthquake created public awareness that Turkey's location on tectonic plate boundaries places it at risk of major earthquakes. New regulations were introduced requiring the construction sector to make new buildings earthquake-proof, while existing structures in potential earthquake zones were to be inspected, strengthened, and if necessary re-built. A special tax was levied to finance earthquake preparations and post-earthquake relief work. Earthquakes became a topic of public debate. Geologists became public celebrities and regular guests on prime-time television. Experts have repeatedly warned the state and the public about imminent earthquake

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risks, even specifically pointing to the Kahramanmaraş-Hatay region. That is where the devastating earthquakes occurred on 6 February. A first quake of magnitude 7.8 was followed by a second of magnitude 7.6 within twelve hours.

Considering the background, one would have expected Turkey to be much better prepared. As the extremely high death toll reveals, this was not the case. On the contrary, earthquake revealed multiple weaknesses in governance, administration, resources and capabilities. Grave deficits affected the government's preparations and the immediate response. Those failures will have long term social and political implications.

Lack of enforcement of laws

The catastrophic effects of the earthquake revealed once again the endemic corruption in Turkey's political system, where contractors receive favours from local and national authorities in exchange for political and financial support. While contractors seek to maximise their profits, officials turn a blind eye to sub-standard construction. Since 1999 more than US\$38 billion in earthquake tax has been collected. If this money had been used as intended to transform Turkey's urban landscape, 800.000 apartments could have been built according to the new regulations. In fact, it is unclear what the earthquake tax revenues have been spent on.

The February 2023 earthquakes also exposed extremely lax enforcement of construction regulations. Even where there was any proper auditing at all, corruption enabled contractors to avoid consequences. As a result, even buildings constructed after the 1999 earthquake — supposedly according to the regulations for earthquake-proof construction — also collapsed in large numbers. These included public buildings, hospitals, highways, airports, and even the Hatay headquarters of AFAD, Turkey's disaster and emergency management agency. Here it should be noted that opposition-run municipalities fared no better than those

held by the AKP. Everywhere, contractors with close political connections, especially to the ruling party, made enormous profits as they operated with scant regard to safety regulations and environmental concerns, and scant oversight. Their surplus profits were channelled into keeping the government in power. This connection between the “construction rentier system” and political finance is salient at all levels of Turkish politics.

Furthermore, in 2018, Erdoğan's government passed legislation to amnesty constructions that violated safety regulations. Unsafe and unlicensed buildings were granted legal status in return for payment of certain levies. One could say that corruption was legally sanctioned at the national level. As a result of corrupt practices and weak enforcement, more than twenty thousand buildings collapsed in the earthquakes.

Weakened state capacity

A second element that exacerbated the death toll was the slowness of emergency response. There was very little rescue activity at all in the crucial first twenty-four hours, and only a little more the following day. National and international rescue teams were only deployed in large numbers on the third day. More lives could have been saved if the rescue efforts had been better coordinated. It took even longer to provide basic assistance to the survivors, such as shelter, food, drinking water and sanitation. One month after the earthquake, there were still deficits in emergency accommodation and food distribution.

The slow and uncoordinated response revealed a weakening of state capacity related to the change in the political system and the decline of public institutions. One dimension of the decline in state capacity is disregard for merit, as partisan appointments to bureaucratic posts have become widespread practice. Several key institutions suffered from incompetent management. For instance, the director of AFAD came from

the Directorate of Religious Affairs and has no experience in disaster relief.

If partisanship damaged the capability of state institutions, the new presidential system introduced in 2018 paralysed them. Erdoğan and his supporters promoted this system as “presidentialism à la Turca”. Turkey’s extremely centralised and personalised system grants the president extensive control over all state institutions. Proponents argued that the new system would increase efficiency and speed up decision-making, hewing to a right-wing populist narrative that regards consultation, checks and balances, and bureaucracy in general as a needless encumbrance on executive power. In fact it incapacitated the state, leading — as the slow response to the earthquake demonstrated — to an over-centralisation of decision-making processes. As a result, local authorities were unable to respond with the speed and flexibility required for rescue efforts. This ineffectiveness of the government response had also been experienced in earlier disasters, although on a much smaller scale: earthquakes in Izmir and Elazığ provinces and wildfires almost every summer.

Absence of the military

The lack of military involvement in the relief and rescue process represents a crucial aspect of the deficits in the state response. The military was almost entirely absent during the first day, and was only able to mobilise 3,500 soldiers — a tiny contribution given the magnitude of the disaster and the size of the regions affected. The fact that Turkey’s Second Army is headquartered in Malatya, one of the provinces hit hardest by the earthquake, only amplified the questions over why the military had not been more active in the rescue and relief operations. There are two narratives on the absence of the military. The first is that Erdoğan feared the military, believing that a full mobilisation could trigger a chain of events leading to a military coup. The second is that the military’s hands were

tied by annulment of the EMASYA (Security and Public Order) Protocol, which enabled the military to conduct relief and rescue operations (as well as internal security) without the permission of civilian authorities. The first narrative presupposes a military that is still politically very powerful, while the second regards it as weak and constrained. Neither is truly convincing. The political price of not mobilising the military in the face of such a grave catastrophe far outweighs the risk. While the legal changes did prevent the military from responding on its own initiative, they do not explain why the government did not order it to do so.

The answer to the dilemma lays elsewhere, in the transformation experienced by the Turkish military under AKP rule and especially since the attempted coup of 15 July 2016. Through the democratic reforms of the early 2000s and the subsequent Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials, which today are believed to have relied mostly on fake evidence, Erdoğan’s governments undermined the dominance of the military in politics, and damaged its institutional autonomy. Contrary to the popular narrative the institutional capability of the military was not targeted at that stage. Institutional collapse came after the 2016 coup attempt, when almost half of the generals were purged and many imprisoned. Overall, almost 25,000 officers were purged and important military facilities, such as hospitals, were closed.

At the time there were warnings that a purge of this magnitude would create acute security risks and undermine the military’s fighting capacity. However, a series of cross-border military operations — especially in Iraq and Syria — rebuilt confidence. Mishaps and failures in these military missions were obscured under hyper-nationalist propaganda and the success of Turkish drones. Aside from strategic objectives, military operations have been useful in keeping the military busy abroad.

The military’s inability to engage in earthquake response highlighted important shortcomings of this strategy. The most obvious

is having insufficient numbers to participate in rescue efforts. For the first time ever, Ankara had to move redeploy forces from Cyprus back to Turkey. This shows that the military is overstretched by its international campaigns. Turkish military experts have long been warning that military personnel have been exhausted by never-ending military campaigns without sufficient resources. The failure to participate quickly in the relief and rescue operations revealed the severity of institutional decline and lack of crucial mobilisation and planning capabilities.

Political implications

An event of this magnitude will certainly have important political, economic and social repercussions. The immediate question is how it will affect the elections due to be held on 14 May. Despite the government's abysmal performance during the earthquake, polling suggests that Erdoğan's power base remains strong. After the earthquake it was not immediately clear whether Erdoğan would try to postpone the presidential and parliamentary elections, but on March 10 he confirmed they would go ahead. Erdoğan's popularity has been on the rise since summer 2022 due to a policy of high government spending geared to boost his popularity: huge increases in the minimum wage, early retirement for millions of people, and massive social housing projects. The spending spree is sustained by lax monetary and fiscal policy. The central bank reserves have been depleted and large loans obtained from the Gulf states and Russia. This spending needed only to be sustained for a couple of months, until the elections. Postponing the elections would have revealed the (already existing) economic crisis.

That explains why the government opted to hold the elections as scheduled: the expectation that current circumstances are more favourable for the government. This depends on Erdoğan's ability to control the narrative. Even in the immediate aftermath

of the earthquake, the government prioritised narrative control over actual rescue efforts. The road to the elections now seems ever more repressive. The government imposed a state of emergency in the ten provinces affected by the quake, supposedly to combat disinformation. Slowing down Twitter, which was widely used for rescue efforts, after Erdoğan's visit to the disaster area was an early signal that muting criticism and controlling the narrative would be prioritised over rescue and relief operations. The AKP government also censored one of Turkey's most popular websites "Ekşi Sözlük", a collaborative reference project and online community.

The earthquake also had an impact on Turkey's opposition, revealing deep divisions between the two largest opposition parties; the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İYİP). At the time, they were embroiled in bitter public exchanges over the selection of the opposition's joint candidate. Although CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu had been announced as the candidate of the Nation Alliance, its largest constituent organisation, the İYİP, objected that he lacked sufficient public appeal to defeat Erdoğan. Behind the focus on the personality and electability of the joint candidate lay ideological divisions between the two parties and their leaders. Their responses to the earthquake revealed the differences. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was in the disaster area from the first day and orchestrated a political campaign calling out Erdoğan and his bureaucrats. İYİP leader Meral Akşener was silent in the early days. When she did speak her criticisms were muted and she insisted that this was not a political debate. Her nationalist and right-wing reflexes shaped a discourse that was empathetic to the victims but reverent to the state's authority. This difference in tone could have been an advantage for the two leaders, if they had been able to coordinate their stances. Instead, the underlying ideological differences still have the potential to create problems for the opposition during their election campaign — and even after the elections if they come to power.

Economic impact

The most lasting and concrete legacy of the earthquakes will be their economic toll. The affected areas are home to 15 per cent of the country's population and contribute approximately 9 per cent of its GDP. Estimates of the economic cost range between US\$20 billion and more than US\$100 billion. Most of the economic cost relates to reconstruction. According to one estimate, almost half the buildings in the eleven provinces are damaged, around one million in all. Roads, airports, pipelines and public infrastructure will also need to be repaired and reconstructed. According to the World Bank, the cost of direct physical damage caused by the earthquakes is over US\$34 billion, equivalent to 4 per cent of Turkey's GDP in 2021. Secondary costs related to loss of economic activity are harder to estimate and will depend largely on the speed of recovery.

Turkey faced the earthquake aftermath with one of the world's highest inflation rates and insufficient foreign exchange reserves. This was due to an economic policy based on stimulating growth at the expense of macroeconomic stability and controlling inflation. Erdoğan's insistence on low central bank interest rates to keep the cost of borrowing down led to a significant devaluation of the Turkish lira and high inflation. The central bank became depleted and loans and cash transfers were sought from the Gulf states and Russia to support the currency. Despite its shortcomings, this economic policy achieved its fundamental objectives: to maintain economic growth and prevent rising unemployment until after the elections.

Inflation was expected to fall eventually, on account of the base effect. Whoever forms the government after the elections will need to develop a new economic programme based on macroeconomic stability and fiscal prudence. However, it will be difficult to contain inflation in the face of the need for massive government spending, which will require extensive international borrowing and/or additional taxes that

could hamper economic activity. Moreover, the decline in economic activity in the disaster region can be expected to drag overall economic growth down. Turkey is facing weak growth combined with extremely high inflation. Given this economic scenario, it makes even more sense for Erdoğan to avoid postponing the elections.

Conclusion and recommendations

The earthquake and the belated relief and rescue operations present a picture in stark contrast to Erdoğan regime's domestic and international image. The regime's economic and political foundations are deeply rooted in the construction sector. Construction was the engine of Turkey's economic boom in AKP's first decade, and lavish construction projects continued even after the economy started to falter in the second decade. Under the AKP Turkey became a leader in humanitarian aid, and a major donor. Its state and non-state organisations played leading roles in international humanitarian assistance. At the same time, Turkey also became an increasingly assertive military power. Military operations in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and the South Caucasus, military bases in Somalia and Qatar, and a growing domestic arms industry presented an image of military power and self-reliance. The government's self-confident narrative of growing state capacity dismissed the economic problems as griping by a West that was supposedly fearful of Turkey's growing influence — as demonstrated by booming cities and infrastructure at home and a humanitarian and military presence abroad.

For all the attempts to demonstrate power, the earthquake clearly exposed the Turkish state's limited capacity. It will be hard to alter this in the short term even if the current policies are changed. Given the economic, military and political costs, Turkey can be expected to pursue a lower international profile in coming years. On the other hand, the earthquake also revealed a society that is highly resistant, creative and active. Civil initiatives took the lead where

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the state was absent and proved more reliable and successful. These qualities, which cross-cut Turkey's otherwise identity-based fault lines, demonstrate the country's potential to heal its wounds. Here, international help will be crucial.

As already mentioned, Erdoğan was already relying heavily on cash inflows and loans from authoritarian regimes in the Gulf, Russia and China to postpone economic disaster until after the elections. But the amounts now required for recovery can only be sourced from Western donors and institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. The World Bank has already announced an assistance package worth US\$1.78 billion. The United States has promised donations that amounting to US\$185 million, while Germany has pledged US\$115 million. The EU will soon organise a meeting of donors to raise further funds for Turkey's recovery efforts. These are all welcome moves. It is geopolitically wise as well as morally right for the EU to help Turkey in its reconstruction. The speedy dispatch of rescue teams and shows of solidarity by Western countries already undermined Erdoğan's fiery anti-Western rhetoric. Just as in 1999, assistance from Western countries can mitigate anti-Westernism. This creates an additional opportunity to repair EU-Turkey relations in the long run.

However, it is crucial to conditionalise any assistance. Just as the earthquake tax was misappropriated for other purposes, endemic corruption can siphon off the influx of help — or Erdoğan could divert international aid into election-related government spending. Donations should preferably be in kind rather than cash. The EU and international organisations should prioritise working with local authorities and actors rather than the central state institutions. The World Bank has already declared that its first assistance package will be delivered to municipalities for their recovery projects. It is vital that the funded

projects are carefully monitored. Civil society organisations representing almost every political view appeared more flexible and successful than state organisations, and deserve more earthquake relief funding.

While drone warfare against militias and irregulars made Turkey's military appear highly capable, the earthquake has placed question marks over its capacity as a standing army of NATO. The events have revealed serious unpreparedness, planning and mobilisation failures, and lack of personnel and resources.

Overall, the earthquake has demonstrated that concentrating power in the hands of the president has crippled institutions and governance, leaving the state unable to provide vital services to its people. The Turkish government's future hinges on the public response to the quake. In two months-time, voters will decide whether Erdoğan and his government will pay the price.

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