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► To cite this version:

Nevzet Çelik. Earthquakes and Refugees: Turkey's Political and Economic Challenges Ahead of a Presidential Election. Les Dossiers du CERI, 2023, "Le retour de la démocratie en Turquie?". hal-04282020

HAL Id: hal-04282020

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-04282020>

Submitted on 13 Nov 2023

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EARTHQUAKES AND REFUGEES: TURKEY'S POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AHEAD OF A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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In : Dossier « Le retour de la démocratie en Turquie ? », *Les Dossiers du CERI*, avril 2023

<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/content/dossiersduceri/earthquakes-and-refugees-turkeys-political-and-economic-challenges-ahead-presidential-election.html?d20>

On February 6, 2023, two devastating earthquakes of magnitudes 7.8 and 7.5 struck southern Turkey within a span of nine hours. Another earthquake of magnitude 6.4 hit the region on February 20. These earthquakes resulted in an estimated 50,000 deaths in Turkey and approximately 6,000 deaths in northwest Syria. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates more than 4.1 million people affected by the earthquakes are currently relying on humanitarian assistance and the latest official [report](#) from Turkey reveals the cost of the earthquakes is 2 trillion Turkish lira, which is approximately 103.6 billion US dollars. The massive devastation caused by the earthquakes prompted the government to immediately declare a state of emergency in the 11 affected provinces, impacting a 500 km² area and almost 14 million people, equivalent to 15% of Turkey's population.

Turkey is known for being one of the most seismically active countries in the world, located at the convergence of multiple tectonic plates. Unfortunately, the country's recent earthquakes have highlighted the shortcomings of its infrastructure and building standards when it comes to seismic activity. Nearly 98% of collapsed structures were

constructed before 2000, a significant year for Turkish construction regulations because it followed the devastating 1999 earthquake in Izmit. Rebuilding the affected areas will require a significant amount of resources, time, and further fundamental changes to construction permit laws. These catastrophes have emphasized the urgent need for disaster preparedness and response in Turkey and highlighted the importance of safe and earthquake-resistant housing.

One organization that has received praise for its efforts in providing such housing is the state-owned Housing Development Administration of Turkey ([TOKI](#)). Despite facing criticism in the past for its role in urban transformation projects and its impact on urban development, TOKI has demonstrated the effectiveness of its earthquake-resistant housing. Notably, none of the [TOKI](#) housing units were damaged or collapsed during the recent earthquakes in Turkey, including the massive earthquakes in February 2023. This has earned TOKI a growing reputation for providing affordable housing to low- and middle-income families while prioritizing safety. The Turkish government is considering a new law in response to the success of TOKI's earthquake-resistant housing. The proposed legislation aims to address the seismic vulnerability of buildings in [Istanbul](#) and other cities by transforming low-quality structures and limiting the involvement of private contractors. The law would be implemented in a state-centered manner, with TOKI playing a critical role in the process.

The ultimate objective of this initiative is to ensure that buildings in Istanbul, which is the country's capital of trade, business, investment, finance, and tourism, are safer and more resistant to earthquakes. Given that [Istanbul](#) accounts for 20.3% of Turkey's labor force, 50.6% of its exports, and 54.6% of its imports, the potential impact of a major earthquake could be devastating not only for the city but also for the country's economy as a whole. Therefore, the proposed law is a significant step towards protecting both the lives of the people and the economic stability of the country.

Turkey's economy has experienced significant instability in recent years, with inflation rates fluctuating and the devaluation of the Turkish lira causing concerns. To address these issues, the government has

implemented various measures, including lowering interest rates, enacting an early retirement age law affecting around 5 million individuals to lower unemployment, and launching housing projects to provide affordable accommodation for low- and middle-income families, which also helps in boosting the economy. The recent earthquake [affected](#) 9.3% of the gross domestic product (GDP) and 8.5% of Turkey's exports. Additionally, the affected provinces contribute 16% of Turkey's agricultural output. Despite these challenges, Turkey has the financial resources and fiscal capacity to undertake immediate-term reconstruction efforts. Known Turkish contractors have significant opportunities in the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa, making the construction industry, which plays a vital role in the country's economy, poised to take the lead in this process.

The Turkish government's response to the earthquake has come under fire from opposition leaders, who have criticized the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency ([AFAD](#)), the organization responsible for coordinating the efforts of various agencies and organizations in disaster and emergency situations in Turkey. Some argue that more could have been done to rescue people in affected areas. However, the government has stated that the damage caused was extensive and widespread. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has acknowledged the difficulties faced by the government in the aftermath of the earthquake, such as the severe weather conditions and damaged infrastructure. To address the housing problem in the affected region, the government has provided free accommodation and transportation for those impacted and relocated them to hotels in tourist areas and other cities. President Erdogan has also pledged to rebuild homes and workplaces and provide financial assistance, rent coverage, and health expenses to earthquake victims within a year. Nevertheless, the earthquakes are expected to have significant implications not only for the country's infrastructure and economy but also for politics and the ongoing debate around immigration. The government's handling of the disaster and its aftermath could influence public opinion of the ruling party and the upcoming May 14 elections. However, the most critical issue that will determine the election outcome is the refugee issue.

Turkey currently hosts the world's largest refugee population, with nearly 4 million individuals, including around 3.7 million Syrian refugees. However, the situation for Syrian refugees in the country is uncertain, with opposition parties using anti-immigrant rhetoric as a tool to gain support. Unfortunately, the recent earthquakes have only intensified racism and tensions in the country, highlighting the challenges faced by Syrian immigrants in Turkey.

The ruling party in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), and opposition parties hold differing views on the issue of Syrian immigrants in the country. While the government under President Erdogan has largely maintained an open-door policy towards refugees, the opposition parties have been using anti-immigrant populism and xenophobic rhetoric to gain support, with Syrian immigrants being a major target. This is particularly concerning given that the upcoming elections are only two months away. The main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), claims to be a social democratic party, but its use of xenophobic and populist language is also concerning. In addition, there have been reports of rising racism and tensions towards Syrian immigrants in the aftermath of the earthquakes. Recently, the leader of a small far-right party shared a false video on social media claiming that a Syrian stole a firefighter's mobile phone, further fueling the already tense situation. This type of propaganda and dissemination of misinformation has the potential to widen the gap between various communities in Turkey and fuel negative sentiments towards immigrants.

With Turkey's presidential election on the horizon, refugees residing in the country may be apprehensive about the emergence of a newly formed political alliance, "6'lı Masa" or "The People's Alliance - Millet Ittifaki." This coalition comprises several parties with different ideological backgrounds and political agendas, and they have gained significant momentum in recent years, even securing victories in the Istanbul and Ankara municipal elections of 2019. It is important to remember that during the 2019 local elections, the issue of immigration, particularly of Syrian refugees, was a hotly debated topic among political parties and it is likely to be a central topic for the presidential election in 2023.

Both the People's Alliance and President Erdogan's party will be making a concerted effort to win the election, with the general Kurdish vote remaining a crucial factor, given that the AK Party is the second major party among the Kurds. However, the main Kurdish Party (Peoples' Democratic Party, [NC1] HDP)[cgw2] [NC3] has announced that it will participate in the May 14 elections under the Green Left Party and declared its support for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential race. Although the six opposition parties and the HDP have formed an alliance, their programs do not align on many issues. While the HDP favors immigrants, the six-party coalition's program is based on returning immigrants. Furthermore, the İYİ Party wants to reintroduce the "Andımız" anthem in schools, which contains nationalist arguments and was abolished by Erdogan. However, the HDP does not support this proposal.

The People's Alliance faces a tough challenge against President Erdogan and his ruling party. In the midst of growing anti-immigrant sentiments in Turkey, the People's Alliance has recently announced a [migration policy](#) that prioritizes the repatriation of immigrants, including Syrian refugees under temporary protection, to their home country. This policy has caused significant concern among refugee communities in Turkey, especially given that Syria is still plagued by protracted conflict and security issues. If the opposition prevails, it is likely that millions of Syrian refugees will be sent back to Syria, or Europe may face a new wave of immigration.