

## **Explaining the Electoral Success of the Turkish President: Is it the Economy Again?**

*By Gregory T. Papanikos \**

*The current president of the Turkish Republic has dominated domestic politics since 2003. For the first time in this two-decade period, the political opposition appears to be a serious threat and according to polls, they run neck-and-neck. This paper assesses to what extent the economy has played a role once again in determining the electoral results of the last twenty years in Turkey. This issue is addressed by comparing the performance of the Turkish economy of the twenty-year period before and after the critical year of 2003 when the current Turkish leader emerged to power. The descriptive analysis of the data is unable to reject the main hypothesis of this paper that it is the economy which plays an important role--albeit not the only one--in determining electoral success.*

**Keywords:** *Turkey, elections, economy, per capita GDP, unemployment, inflation, military spending, education enrollment, foreign exchange rate*

### **Introduction**

Turkey is going to elect a new leader on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2023 and if needed, elections will be repeated on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2023. Since 2003, the current president of the Turkish Republic has been its undisputed leader. The purpose of this paper is to test the hypothesis as to whether it is again the economy which can explain his undisputed political dominance over the past two decades, and whether it is again the economy which may explain his downfall in the polls--at least over the last few months.

Of course, this is not an argument that other factors such as ideology does not play a role, but for those voters who may determine whether the current president can win or not, the economy counts more than the ideology. I am not going to discuss Turkish politics and ideologies even though some remarks are made in the concluding section of the paper. I will only concentrate on the macroeconomic performance of the Turkish economy in the last 20 years (2003-2023) and compare it with corresponding performance of the 20 years prior to this period (1983-2002).<sup>1</sup>

The paper is organized into six sections including this short introduction. The next section provides a selective brief overview of the relation between national economic performance and election outcomes. The third section uses data from the World Bank and other sources to compare the macroeconomic performance of the

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<sup>1</sup>In a series of articles, both in English and Greek language, I have examined many aspects of the Turkish society and politics with emphasis on the Turkish-Greek relations and the Mediterranean in general; see Papanikos (2008, 2011, 2015, 2016, 2017b, 2020b, 2021, 2022d, 2022e).

Turkish economy during the period of 1983-2023. Multiple indicators are used: per-capita income in current US dollars; economic growth; the unemployment rate and the inflation rate. The fourth section provides two additional interesting indicators of population and military spending. The fifth section looks at the most recent developments of the Turkish economy by examining the Turkish lira's foreign exchange rate which has been a headache for the current president of the Turkish Republic. The final section concludes.

### **Election Outcomes and the Economy**

This section provides a very brief overview of the relation between macroeconomic indicators and electoral outcomes. The classical work by Antony Downs (1957) on *An Economic Theory of Democracy* spearheaded a burgeoning literature in explaining electoral processes using economic analyses and models. In democratic<sup>2</sup> societies, it is through elections that decides who is going to undertake the responsibility of running the country for a given maximum period of time, i.e., normally four or five years. Down's Median Voter Model predicts that political parties (at least two) would adopt such policies in order to satisfy the preferences of the median voter. In such a convergence of policies, voters would be indifferent to which political party wins because all will implement the same policies. Under such circumstances, the model predicts that people have no incentive to turn out to vote and instead absenteeism will dominate the electoral process. The hearsay that voters believe that all political parties and politicians are the same may be interpreted that all those who run for office adopt (economic) policies to lure the median voter and in doing so, win the elections.

Economic policies, though important, are not all that is in an election battle. Apart from policies, voters may be tempted by ideology. Citizens may vote for a political party (leader) which is closer to their own worldview, even despite the policy similarities of the different political parties and candidates.

In addition to ideology, voters may want to elect someone who has personal charisma to lead and represent the nation in the international fora. This charisma may correlate with other characteristics of political parties and their leaders such as credibility, honesty, courage, stamina, etc. In many cases, the best rhetorician wins the election. One may substitute the word rhetorician for populist.

In the entire literature on elections, determining electoral success may be a function of two categories of variables: economic and noneconomic. However, what is important are the swing votes. Usually, variables like ideology does not change. There has always been a left and a right division of the electorate or

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<sup>2</sup>In a number of papers and books I have thoroughly discussed the issue of democracy using five criteria to evaluate the democratic performances of different countries; see Papanikos (2011, 2016, 2017a, 2020a, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023). On these see the comments by Meydani (2022) and Petratos (2022). On the issue of democracy and elections in general see also Carrera (2022), Çelik et al. (2022), Coulter and Herman (2020), de Caria Patrício (2022), Fruncillo (2017), Gilby (2021), Igwe (2021a, 2021b), Marchetti (2020), Obot (2019), Parziale and Vatrella (2019), Rafapa (2018), Reid (2019) and Verharen (2020).

progressive and conservative. The great majority of the people stand alongside with their beliefs all their life. However, there is a critical mass of voters who swing between parties and leaders according to non-ideological characteristics. One such characteristic is how the economy performs. They associate this with the effectiveness of a leader which can be measured only when this leader is elected and is called upon to deliver what they promised. In normal circumstances (e.g., there is no war), the economy is something that is used to measure the effectiveness of a leader. It is also an area that is well-measured by quantitative indicators and an area where the opposition leader –the challenger—can attack the ruler because they have not been tested yet. The difference between the two leaders then becomes the performance of the economy<sup>3</sup> and personal charisma. These two characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Election Results, the Economy and Leaders*

<b>The sitting leader is</b>	<b>more charismatic than the Challenger</b>	<b>less charismatic than the challenger</b>
<b>Economy</b>		
The economy is perceived by voters as performing well	The leader is reelected	?
The economy is perceived by voters as not performing well	?	The leader is not reelected

In a democracy, leaders alternate more frequently than in non-democracy countries and in some countries, this is embedded in their constitution, e.g., the leader cannot run for more than two terms as is the case in the US. The difference is that in a democracy, who runs the country is decided by elections.

One could also argue that how frequently leadership changes may be used as a good measurement of the quality of democracy. Russia and Turkey have elections as well as many other countries, but what distinguishes them from others is that their leaders in one way or another have ruled their countries for almost two decades. Many have questioned their electoral practices, accusing them of using fraud and threats against voters and/or other politicians. Others have emphasized that leaders of both these countries have personal charisma as is shown in Table 1 which explains their electoral success. Germany also has elections and a democracy. It had a female leader who ruled Germany from 2005 to 2021. It is of interest to note that she did not lose an election but she decided that time had come to step down. In the longer-term, personal charisma cannot win elections if the economy is doing badly.

What does Table 1 tell us? First, if a leader's popularity (charisma) remains intact and the economy is booming, then this leader has a great chance to be

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<sup>3</sup>Of course, this relates to how voters perceive the existing economic conditions. It is a subjective evaluation. Huberman et al. (2018) have interpreted this as follows (p. 597): "What does this question about economic conditions capture? First, what are people thinking about when they give an answer regarding economic conditions "as a whole": are they thinking about themselves (i.e., pocketbook) or national economic indicators (i.e., sociotropic)? Second, are respondents shifting their answers to signal something about their party (i.e., partisan cheerleading) and/or do they shift their economic decision-making due to these beliefs?"

reelected. A leader may lose their charisma (popularity) for other reasons that relate to ethics and integrity, e.g., sexual encounters or drug use which are considered unacceptable by the majority of voters. In many such cases, the leaders (presidents, prime ministers, etc.) were forced to resign because of public outcry despite the performance of the economy.

Second, even if the economy is booming a challenger may appear who is considered more attractive to voters. The outcome of an election in this case is uncertain marked in the table by a question mark—this is the case of effectiveness versus attractiveness. In many cases, people may have nothing against a leader but they vote against them because they want a new face.<sup>4</sup>

Third, if the economy is perceived as not doing very well and the leader is popular—most probably for other reasons such as nationalist pride—then a reelection is uncertain; it very much depends upon voters' concerns about the economy.

Fourth, if voters see the economy is performing below than what they would consider as acceptable and the leader is unpopular for other reasons besides the economic performance of the country, then most probably their reelection is at stake.

The above discussion is relevant of the current president of the Turkish Republic who has dominated Turkish politics since 2003. The economy has been very kind to him throughout this period with the exception of the last couple of years. This has been correlated with a dramatic drop in his popularity and for the first time, he is facing a serious threat to be overthrown by the opposition leader in the forthcoming May elections. The economic performance of Turkey is examined in the next section of this paper.

### **The Turkish Macroeconomy, 1983-2023**

This section looks at the macroeconomic performance of the Turkish economy for a period of forty years. This period was selected to compare the twenty years of rule by the sitting president with the twenty years preceding his rise to power. In particular, the aim is to show that the last twenty years have been

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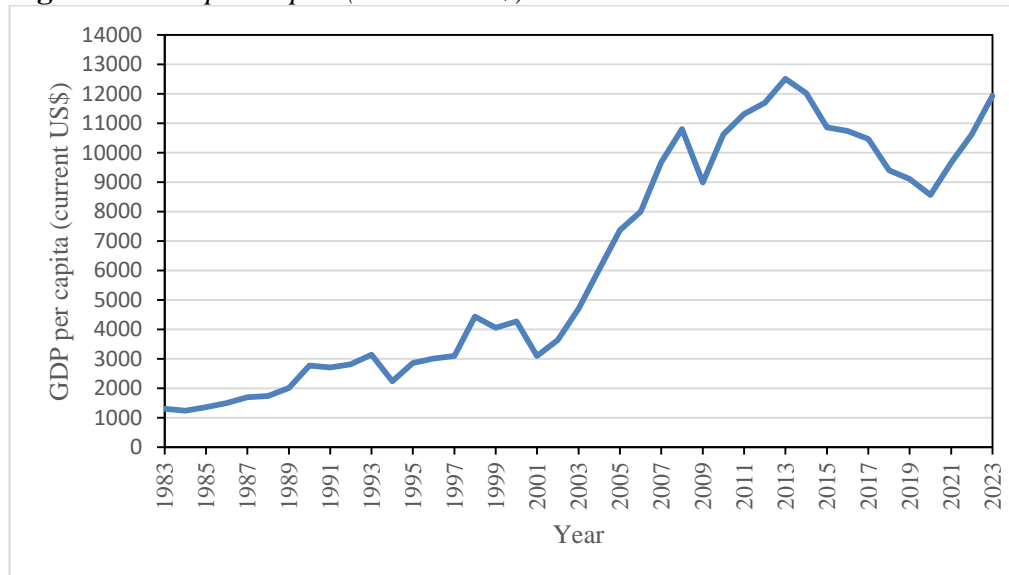
<sup>4</sup>In ancient Athens, as reported by Plutarch in his *Parallel Lives (Aristides)*, when there was a referendum to ostracize Aristides (540–468 BCE), who had built a reputation of being a fair man-politician, a voter approached on the day of the vote without recognizing him and asked to put down the name of Aristides because he did not know how to write it on the ballot. When he asked what had Aristides done to him, he responded 'nothing, I do not know the man, but I am disturbed to hear everywhere that he is fair'. Plutarch describes the story as follows: γραφομένων οὖν τότε τῶν ὀστράκων λέγεται τινα τῶν ἀγραμμάτων καὶ παντελῶς ἀγροίκων ἀναδόντα τῷ Ἀριστείδῃ τὸ ὀστράκον ὡς ἐνὶ τῶν τυχόντων παρακαλεῖν, ὅπως Ἀριστείδῃν ἐγγράψει. τοῦ δὲ θαυμάσαντος καὶ πυθομένου, μὴ τι κακὸν αὐτὸν Ἀριστείδης πεποίηκεν, “οὐδέν,” εἶπεν, “οὐδὲ γινώσκω τὸν ἄνθρωπον, ἀλλ' ἐνοχλοῦμαι πανταχοῦ τὸν Δίκαιον ἀκούων.” ταῦτα ἀκούσαντα τὸν Ἀριστείδῃν ἀποκρίνασθαι μὲν οὐδέν, ἐγγράψαι δὲ τοῦνομα τῷ ὀστράκῳ καὶ ἀποδοῦναι. τῆς δὲ πόλεως ἀπαλλαττόμενος ἤδη, τὰς χεῖρας ἀνατείνας πρὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν εὐξάτο τὴν ἐναντίαν, ὡς εἶοικεν, εὐχὴν τῷ Ἀχιλλεῖ, μηδένα καιρὸν Ἀθηναίους καταλαβεῖν, ὃς ἀναγκάσει τὸν δῆμον Ἀριστείδου μνησθῆναι. (Plutarch, *Parallel Lives: Aristides*, 7).

much better for the Turkish economy, relative to the twenty years period which preceded it.

Using descriptive data analyses, the objective is to show that the economy once again may explain why the current leader has been so successful in maintaining power for so long. A note of caution is needed at this point. Usually, a strong assumption is made that the political leader who is responsible for running the national affairs of a country somehow, with a magic stick I guess, can run the entire economy as well. This is far from the truth. This issue is not examined here. In other words, I do not imply any cause-effect relation between a political leader and the economic performance of the country, although I do imply correlation, i.e., good economic conditions favor reelections. Thus, the sitting president of the Turkish Republic, most probably, was fortunate to be associated with a good overall economic performance. This is best demonstrated by per capita GDP (in current USD) as is depicted in Figure 1.

I use GDP per capita in current USD because many Turks use this currency for precautionary purposes to protect themselves from the volatility of the Turkish lira's exchange rate value as is shown below in section five. Other indicators such as the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita in Purchasing Power Parity Units (PPP) of current international dollars (see Table 2 below) do not change the main message portrayed in Figure 1, i.e., since 2003 GDP per capita has been increasing at a very high rate. From less than \$5,000 USD in the period before 2003, it reached \$12,508 USD in 2013. Today, Turkey's per capita GDP has reached its highest during the entire forty-year period examined here.

**Figure 1. GDP per Capita (Current US\$)**



This by itself could explain why the current leader has been so successful. This fact by itself makes him a leader with a “special charisma”. His popularity is strongly correlated with the unprecedented economic performance of the country. However, recent polls show that this image has been shattered. He is not as popular as he used to be. Figure 1 offers an explanation why this might be the

case. Since the peak year of 2013, per capita GDP had been declining until 2020 when it dropped to \$8,561 USD. This is primarily due to the dramatic fall in the Turkish lira as shown below. In Figure 1, predicted values of years 2022 and 2023 are also shown. It appears that the economy is recovering but it remains to be seen if this will still be true when the actual data is reported.

If the economy and polls have shown that they matter, then the sitting president of the Turkish Republic will have tough time winning the next elections scheduled for the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 2023. To return to the previous discussion of cause-effect, one may argue that the Turkish economy has many reasons to justify its sluggish macroeconomic performance such as the Great Recession of 2008 and the pandemic of 2020, and more recently the earthquake of 2023. Therefore, one may consider the current leader as being unlucky that he had to cope with these issues. But, one may inverse the argument and say that he was very lucky to rule the country in period of favorable international economic conditions as those were during the post 2003 period until the Great Recession of 2008.

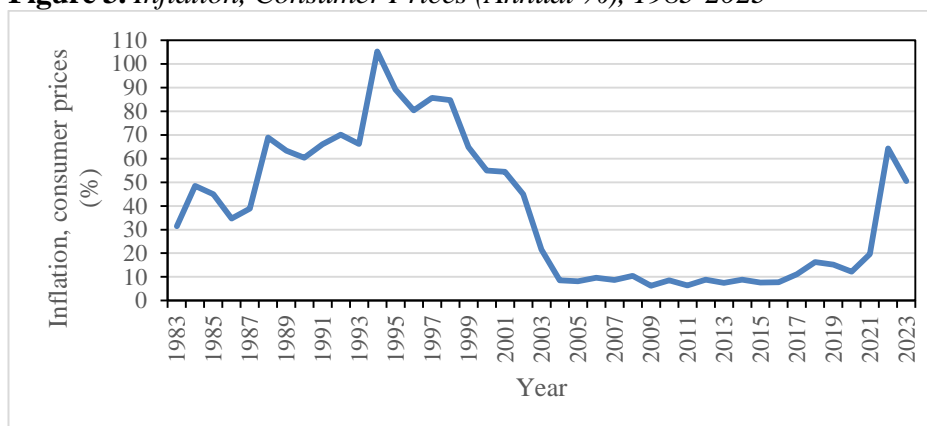
Figure 2 shows another important economic indicator: the unemployment rate. Even though the picture looks about the same as with per capita GDP, nevertheless it is not as clear. In 2002 the unemployment rate reached its highest value of the first twenty year under examination. It dropped after the current leader was first elected in 2003 but it jumped to 11% in 2009 due to the Great Recession; an economic turning of the events that nobody would claim was bad domestic economic policy. Following the Great Recession, the unemployment rate dropped to 8.3% in 2012 and started rising ever since until 2019 when it hit 13.7%. It has dropped since then to 12% in 2021 and is expected to be 10.5% in 2022 and 11% in 2023.

Both per capita GDP and the unemployment rate were not so bad for the president of the Turkish Republic. He could persuasively argue that the bad years of economic performance were not his fault given that he had to cope with the Great Recession of 2008 and the pandemic of 2020. Inflation, however, is a completely different story. This was an entire domestic affair<sup>5</sup> and recently has been affecting all Turks, especially those with fixed incomes such as pensioners and wage-earners. Figure 3 shows the inflation rate from 1983 to 2023. Relative to the first twenty years of the period being examined, inflation during the 2003-2020 period was kept stable at about 10% per year. However, in 2021 it jumped to 20% and in 2022 to 64%. It is expected to slightly drop in 2023 to about 50%.

The above indicators are summarized in Table 2, adding also the growth rate of GDP and the per capita GNI in PPP. The last two were not shown in the figures above. The data are reported as averages of periods of ten years. What counts most is per capita GNI in PPP. During the twenty years of ruling Turkey's current leader was fortunate enough to be associated with almost tripling per capita GNI; from 9,672 international dollars in the period of 1993-2002 to 26,202 in the last decade (2013-2022).

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<sup>5</sup>One possible cause was his intervention with the monetary policy of the country and setting the Turkish interest rates too low. The details of his mingling with the monetary policy are not examined here. From a political point of view, what counts is the fact that he failed to deliver what he promised, i.e., a lower inflation rate.

**Figure 2. Unemployment Rate (%), 1983-2023****Figure 3. Inflation, Consumer Prices (Annual %), 1983-2023****Table 2. Turkish Macroeconomic Indicators, 1983-2022**

	<b>GDP growth (%)</b>	<b>Unemployment rate (%)</b>	<b>Inflation Rate (%)</b>	<b>Per Capita GDP (Current US\$)</b>	<b>GNI per capita, PPP (current international \$)</b>
1983-1992	5.01	7.95	52.67	1918	8690*
1993-2002	3.26	7.31	73.03	3386	9672
2003-2012	5.70	9.75	9.74	8919	14807
2013-2022	5.27	11.11	17.06	10327	26202

\*Average 1990-1992.

Source: World Bank.

The last indicator presented in this section (see Figure 4) is not a macroeconomic variable per se even though it is quite often used to show the

economic development (as opposed to economic growth) of a country. This is an indicator which shows the transformation of a country from an agricultural to an industrial economy. This sectoral decomposition of GDP shows the level of economic development. A lower share of agricultural output implies higher levels of industrialization and therefore higher per capita income.

**Figure 4.** *Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing, Value Added (% of GDP), 1983-2021*

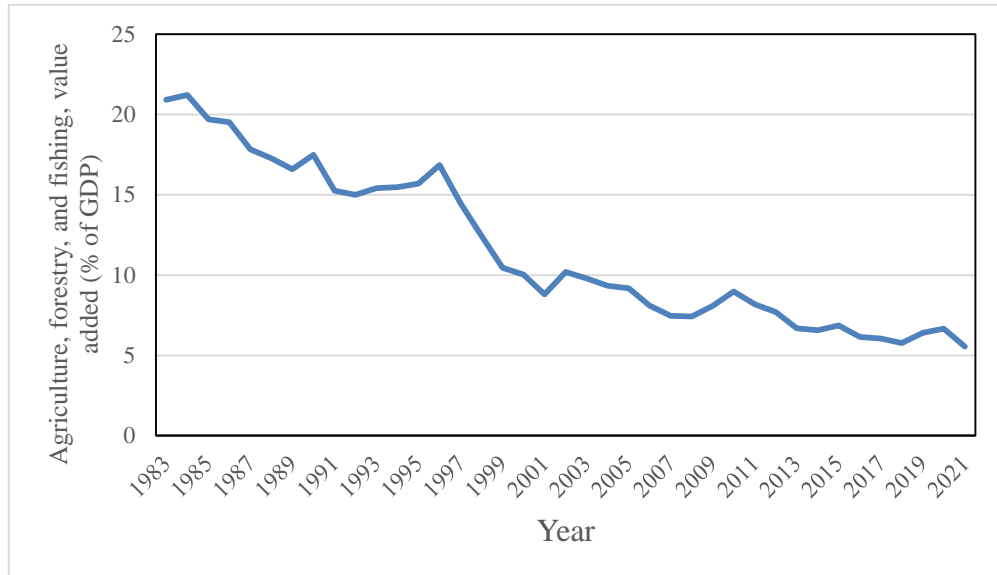


Figure 4 demonstrates that this was the case for Turkey over the last 40 years. In the early 1980s, the share of agriculture, forestry and fishing accounted for over 20% of GDP. In the early 2020s, this share has dropped to almost 5%. This structural transformation of Turkish GDP explains the unprecedented increase in the country's standard of living as demonstrated by per capita output as shown above in Figure 1 and Table 2.

In concluding this section, the Turkish economy reached unparalleled increases in per capita income, lower inflation and relative manageable rates of unemployment. However, this bright picture has been blurred in the last couple of years which has been associated with a decrease in the popularity of the Turkish president. Whether this will materialize as a loss in the elections of the 14<sup>th</sup> of May is something still to be seen because he still retains some of his personal charisma relative to the leader of the opposition. The next section looks at two more noneconomic indicators before we examine the volatility of the Turkish lira.

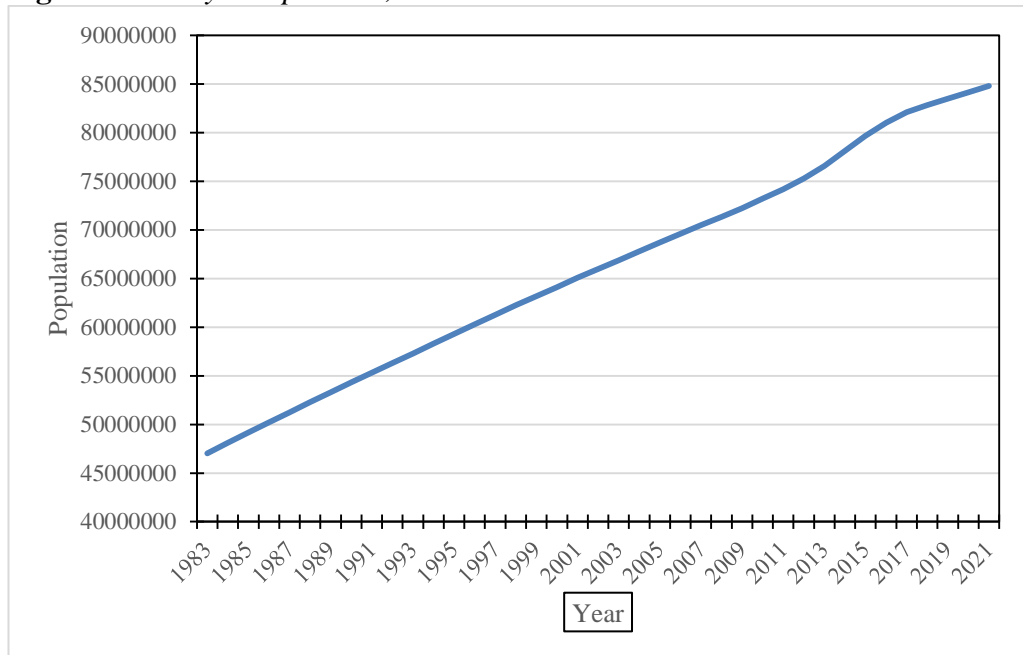
## Two More Indicators

Turkey is an important country in the international and regional political arena but faces certain restrictions as were analyzed in Papanikos (2021). Two indicators are important which testifies their importance: population (and therefore a large army) and military spending. Apart from its growing economy shown in the

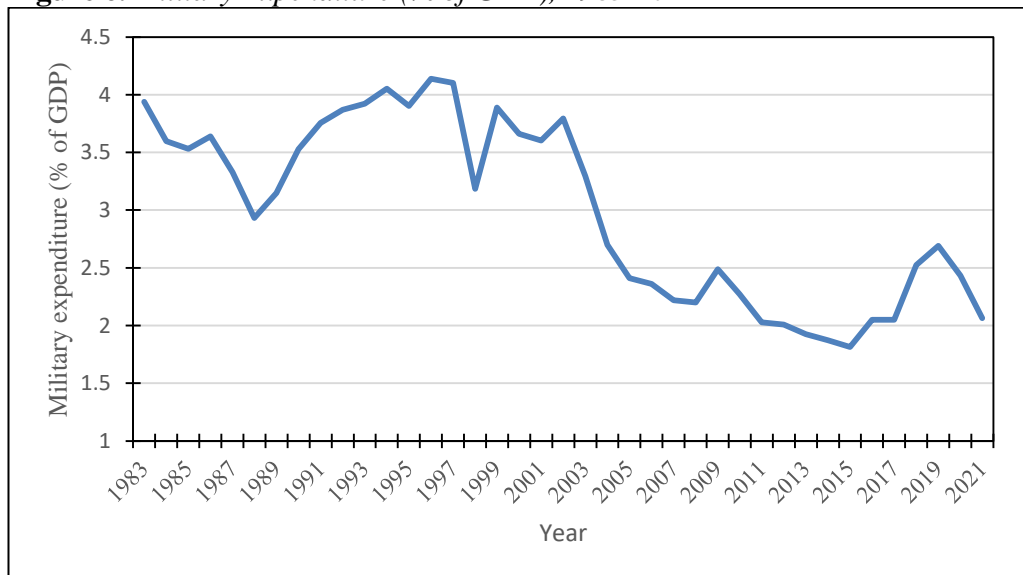


previous section of the paper, Turkey almost doubled its population over the last forty years as shown in Figure 5—from 47 million in 1983, it increased to 85 million in 2021. Turkey ranks number 17 on the list of countries with the highest population in the world. Its population accounts for 1.08% of the total world population. The population of Turkey is young with a median age of 31.5 years.

**Figure 5.** Turkey's Population, 1983-2021



**Figure 6.** Military Expenditure (% of GDP), 1983-2021



A large population, especially a young population, implies that Turkey has the potential to form a huge army which currently stands second among the NATO

countries. According to one measurement of military strength,<sup>6</sup> Turkey ranks 11<sup>th</sup> on the list of the strongest armies in the world today. To support this strong army, Turkey spends a considerable percentage of its GDP on military. However, as shown in Figure 6, as a percentage of GDP military spending, it has decreased in the last twenty years relative to the preceding twenty years—from about 4% in the 1983-2003 period, it fell to about 2% in the last two decades.

### The Foreign Exchange Volatility

In the last 2-3 years, the bad economic news has come from the devaluation of the Turkish lira. Apart from the apparent economic effects there has also been political effects. The national currency is part of the national identity and pride of any country. A devaluation shatters the image of the political leader responsible for governing the country. Figure 7 shows the historical value of the Turkish lira per USD, i.e., how many Turkish liras are needed to buy one USD.

When the current leader of Turkey came to power in 2003, Turks needed only 1.5 liras to buy one USD. In 2016 this amount doubled to 3 liras. Six years later, in 2022, one US\$ costed 16.6 Turkish liras. This downfall is expected to continue well into 2023. As shown in Table 3, up to mid-April 2023 the Turkish lira was traded between 18.7 and 19.3 USD.

**Figure 7.** Official Exchange Rate of the Turkish Lira per US\$ (Period Average)

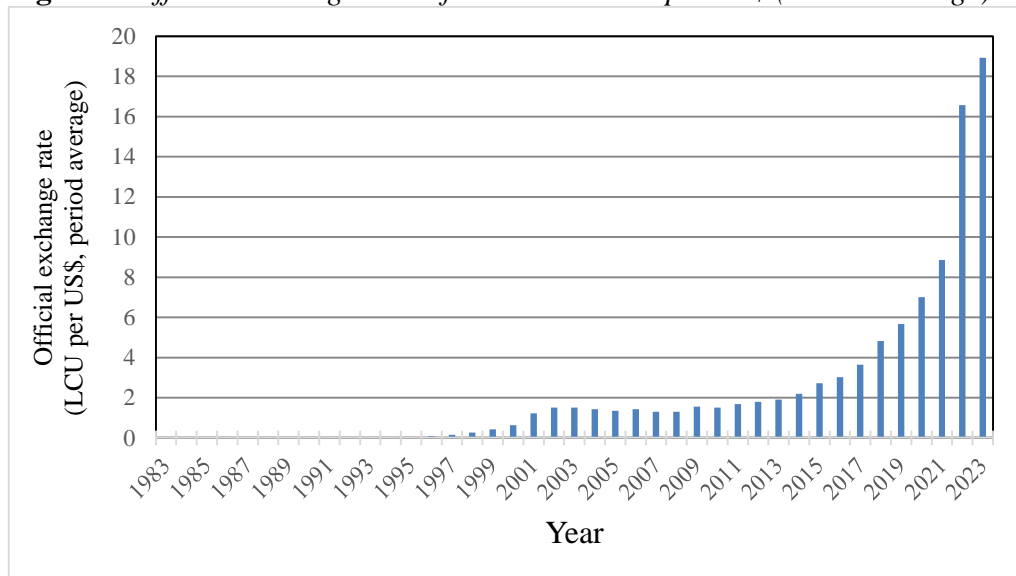


Table 3 also shows the volatility of the Turkish lira in the last five years. 2021 was a very bad year for the lira. The range of values was 9.7 US\$ which was the highest in the last five years. 2022 followed with a range of 5.6 liras per one US\$.

Against this adverse economic environment, Turkey is having elections on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 2023. For the first time, the sitting leader will campaign for reelection

<sup>6</sup>See <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>.

against the worst economic conditions that the country has ever faced. It was the bad economic conditions which existed prior to 2003 which may be interpreted as having been conducive to his electoral win. It was also the good economic conditions that kept him in power for so long. Now, the economic conditions are different. One may expect that he will have a hard time getting reelected. Based on recent polls, the race seems to be very close.

**Table 3.** Foreign Exchange Volatility, 2019-2023

	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Average	18.9216	16.5754	8.8922	7.0194	5.6828
Best for the Turkish Lira	18.7017	13.0955	6.962	5.8566	5.1809
Worst for the Turkish Lira	19.3189	18.7138	16.6687	8.5253	6.1661
Range	0.6172	5.6183	9.7067	2.6687	0.9852

Source: <https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/USD-TRY-spot-exchange-rates-history-2023.html>.

## Conclusions

Good economic conditions are not the only determinants of an electoral success of a sitting leader. Other variables are important as well. However, a healthy economy can be used by a sitting president to achieve political success. A leader can run for reelection based on the good performance of the economy. Of course, the opposition will emphasize other noneconomic issues.

Since 2003 all political campaigns in Turkey were run according to this dichotomy between economic and noneconomic issues. The next elections of 2023 will be different. The current president must apologize for the bad economic conditions. Also, he faces an additional criticism of handling the effects of the earthquake that hit Turkey early this year.

He has two choices. First, he can argue that international and national developments were beyond his control. And he will be right because he had to face a global Great Recession that started in 2008, a world pandemic that started in 2020 and recently, in 2023, a catastrophic earthquake that killed more than fifty thousand people and affected about ten million people. Second, he may opt to change the agenda and emphasize other issues such terrorism and religion.

It seems that he has decided to use both. On one hand, to blame the bad economic conditions that were the result not of his policies, but also of adverse and unpredicted exogenous factors. On the other hand, he uses nationalist and religious arguments such as blaming the US government for intervening in domestic political affairs including the failed *coup de etat* in 2016.

At the international level Turkey seems to search an independent role; one that is independent from the western alliance of NATO. Its role in the Russia-Ukraine war have been interpreted by many as being part of this new dogma of what some have called neo-Ottomanism. But here also there appears to be some failures. Turkey's foreign policy of minimum troubles with its neighbors turned out to become exactly the opposite. The support for the Islamic brotherhood was a complete failure undermining Turkey's relation with another big country in the area, namely Egypt. The religious card is also played and the change of the status

of Hagia Sophia is a characteristic example of shifting the political agenda from economic to noneconomic issues. One only wonders why he did not do that in 2003 and waited for almost twenty years. His performance in the polls might be one explanation. The issue of Hagia Sophia was examined in Papanikos (2020b).

All of the above noneconomic issues were not examined in this paper, which emphasized only the economic conditions. The economy was very good for the sitting leader of Turkey ever since his first election win in 2003, but the last few years the economic performance of Turkey has been problematic to say the least. This turn of economic events has forced him to change the agenda. Whether this shift is sufficient to win the next elections we must wait until after the elections.

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