‘Nation has often resembled Germany in the 1930s’

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Days after Recep Tayyip Erdogan called elections in April a poster appeared on my street in Istanbul. Across it were printed the letters “OHAL”, standing for Turkey’s 23-month-old state of emergency. The “O” was fashioned into a face that was stylised but instantly recognisable: Adolf Hitler.

Over the past two years, as its civil society has roiled under Erdogan’s post-coup emergency laws, Turkey has often resembled Germany in the 1930s. NGOs, newspapers and arts centres have been closed. Popular culture has been brought into the service of the ruling party with Ottoman history series and the blacklisting of non-pliant actors.

Erdogan’s political opponents are bullied, blackmailed and silenced.

In the run-up to the polls the opposition found the backbone to say what a growing number of Turks are thinking. The secularist CHP, which produced that poster, led a storming grassroots campaign. So too have the other opposition parties. They also agreed to put aside their differences to unite against Erdogan.

Muharrem Ince, the CHP’s presidential candidate, had three rallies with million-strong crowds before Sunday’s elections.

Given only 15 hours of time on state television TRT compared to Erdogan’s 181 hours, Ince’s team turned to social media. In Istanbul over the weekend Ince drew a crowd of at least one million. By the time voting started 3.3 million people had watched the live stream of the rally on Facebook. The President’s interviews have scored lower ratings than the weather.
When Erdogan called elections 17 months early he was banking on the frailty of his opposition. He may have thought that the secular Turks, beaten into apathy, would forfeit their vote for their summer beach holiday. But Turks did turn out to vote in large numbers, making the result closer than many expected. The figures appear to show that Erdogan is alienating many Turks. Former insiders say that that is largely down to his advisers, who have shrunk from a diverse, educated and moderately independent circle to a clique of yes-men and women. Within Erdogan's entourage, ambitious courtiers are told they will be rewarded for the time they spend showing face to the President, not their ideas or talent. There is almost no one left who can speak truth to power.

The few respected figures left in the government, such as Mehmet Simsek, the Deputy Prime Minister and former Wall Street banker, have been shunted aside.

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