



STATUS QUO OR CHANGE? THE BATTLE FOR TURKEY'S MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

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Turkey's May 2023 presidential elections saw the reappointment of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP (Justice and Development Party) for [another term](#). Despite the hopes nurtured by the opposition and declining support for the President, his incumbent coalition has demonstrated, once again after two decades, its ability to devise winning political strategies at the national level.

Next March 31, however, voters will be asked to cast their ballots and vote in municipal elections. To understand the importance and resonance of this event, one needs to consider that Istanbul alone, with its 16 million, has a larger population than many European countries. Moreover, although Turkey is a highly centralized regime, thanks to reforms instituted by the AKP, [large municipalities](#) now enjoy ample room for maneuver and enormous resources at their disposal. Finally, the extreme relevance depends also on the fact that the whole country and all municipalities are [simultaneously called to vote](#).



What's at stake?

Despite the national character of these elections, all eyes are on Ankara and Istanbul. First, because of the symbolic value of the two political and economic capitals, further invigorated by the famous Turkish political mantra that "[whoever wins Istanbul, wins Turkey](#)." Second, because the real value of what is at stake is, ironically, related to the fact that the CHP (Republican People's Party) is leading the major cities following its troublesome victory in the 2019 round.

While for the ruling party the elections represent a chance to regain firm control of the country, for the opposition, it is a matter of "survival" after the fiasco of its strategy at the 2023 national elections. This is because, though aiming to repeat the political accomplishment of five years earlier, the CHP led Nation's Alliance demonstrated to be a heterogeneous front that was united more by the sole common intention of defeating Erdoğan than by any other greater vision. Thus, having failed to repeat the political accomplishment of five years earlier, the opposition finds itself in a highly fragmented situation now.

Moreover, the past presidential elections have highlighted two main dynamics. On the one hand, contradictions and differing visions led to the breakup of the opposition front, from which the Kurdish-majority party (now become the DEM, the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party) and the İyi Parti (Good Governance Party) led by Meral Aksener have splintered.

On the other hand, the impact of the defeat gave rise to a process of [internal restructuring](#) within the CHP itself. Following the strong criticism inherent in the latest in a long line of defeats, the historical leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was deposed by a fresh and younger faction of the party led by Özgür Özel, who became the new secretary. Within this wing of "reformists," a prominent figure is the



current mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, who will try to assert himself for a second term.

On the other side, the contender will be Murat Korum, nominated by the government coalition backed by the ultranationalists of the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party). Some see the choice as strategic. As a former minister of construction from 2018 to 2023 and a trusted man of the president, Kurum could be the ideal man to address one of the most pressing issues for Turkey's urban centers: housing security and a plan to cope with natural disasters such as the [earthquake](#) that struck Turkey on Feb. 6, 2023. Others, however, see the nomination of an uncharismatic candidate as functional for Erdoğan to personalize the elections in Istanbul, ready to take credit if he wins or dump him if he loses.

Beyond the traditional “much fanfare” and crowded rallies in a fierce election campaign, all sides in the field are faced with providing answers to the country's real problems. Holding sway, as much in political debate as in daily life, is the [dire economic situation](#). Reported inflation exceeding 60 percent, an unstoppable devaluation of the lira and a steady rise in prices have exacerbated social gaps, reduced the purchasing power of the working middle classes and put small and medium-sized enterprises in great difficulty. Another major issue is the management of urban centers with regard to building redevelopment, the efficiency of public infrastructure, and the reduction of the negative implications of [urbanization](#) (traffic, pollution, highly populated areas).

Casting Votes in a Polarized Context

Not least, in an increasingly socio-politically polarized context, identity issues play a relevant role. As many have [noticed](#), over the years, the main players in party politics have failed to advance their political positions and turned to identity politics rather than addressing the sociological changes on the ground. Looking at the [voting behavior](#) of recent elections, it is evident that while the



Turkish electorate spans from four extreme points of the graph – approximately representing conservatives, secularists, Turks, and Kurds – these distinctions are more blurred than clear-cut.

As the big parties lost some credibility, new ones emerged, with varying degrees of success. A shared variable for both major parties relates to the challenges posed by [minor ones](#). The AKP has to deal with the Yeniden Refah Partisi (New Prosperity Party), a composition considered to be the offspring of the same political-ideological tradition of the AKP. Unlike its support in the past presidential elections, it has nominated its own candidate for this round. Its slogan for “a just order” aims to capture the so-called protest votes of those who are dissatisfied with the poor “[performance and moral decadence](#)” of Erdoğan’s party. A similar pitfall comes from the Zafer Partisi (the Victory Party), whose nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric could siphon off votes in the conservative right-wing area.

At the same time, the CHP and the AKP face a possible loss of votes coming from the [DEVA \(Party of Democracy and Progress\) and the Gelecek Partisi \(Future’s Party\)](#), founded by former leading AKP figures and also recently spilled out of the CHP-led coalition for the past presidential election. Whether voters of these liberal-conservative parties will decide to support one or the other candidate remains a difficult factor to decipher, but one that in an election played on a razor’s edge could prove decisive.

Similarly, as anticipated, the CHP also cannot count on the same key parties of the May 2023 elections. If the splintered [İyi Parti](#) seems to be grappling with a battle for its own political survival, the leftist pro-Kurdish DEM party will certainly be the needle of the scales for the final outcome. First, the party currently represents the third largest force in parliament. Second, the “[Kurdish vote](#)” is traditionally referred to as a “swing vote.” Initially, the possible nomination of Başak Demirtaş – wife of the imprisoned Kurdish leader Selahattin Demirtaş – as the candidate for Istanbul had



generated strong enthusiasm and the prospect of higher takeaways for the party. Nevertheless, the opposite result could be driven by other factors, such as the eventual choice for a less charismatic candidate like Meral Daniş Beştaş, internal fractures within the party regarding "a return to the Kurdish cause," and accusations by the CHP of [under-the-table negotiations](#) with the AKP. While certainly such dynamics impact less in Kurdish-majority areas, in Istanbul and large cities they may instead make the party's newer sympathizers lean toward a safer choice for CHP candidates.

These unpredictable dynamics have called the AKP and CHP to come up with different strategies. Consistent with its tradition, the former's populist and nativist rhetoric emerges in Murat Kurum and Erdoğan's proclamations that, from Turkey to Gaza, a victory for their party would represent [a victory for "the oppressed."](#) Playing in the field of emotional and divisive politics, however, is more thorny for the latter, which has to convince a diversified plurality of voters. While the party seeks to replicate the [2019 winning strategy](#) by insisting heavily on social media and young voters, it finds itself forced to adapt its rhetoric to embrace a spectrum ranging from conservatives to Kurds without turning its back on the [Republican and Kemalist hardcore](#).

Another important factor to consider concerns the political institutional set-up and the general atmosphere within which the game is being played. What is undeniable is the fact that the country has become [increasingly authoritarian](#) and with a strong centralization of power. As a consequence, although the CHP can count on five years of rule in the Istanbul municipality, it still has to cope with a [shrunk room of electoral competition](#). For instance, the space left for the opposition on television and in the traditional mass media is increasingly reduced due to monopolization by the government. Yet, this does not imply neither the battle to pledge people's votes is not visible and visible nor that the Turkish population is detached from politics. On the contrary, the presence of a highly participatory and heated election campaign suggests



that a semblance of plurality and political confrontation still remains, both at the party level and at the grassroots level. As a matter of fact, civil society activism and high turnout rates in Turkey showcase traits of "[democratic resilience](#)."

What's next?

"[These will be the last elections of my life](#)." These latest statements by Erdoğan also signal how much breaching the emotional aspect plays a major role in Turkey's highly polarized environment. While the President is no stranger to such proclamations, the possibility of his exit would open up a range of possible post-election scenarios. An AKP victory would only confirm the [cornerstones](#) on which Erdoğan has built his career and firmly maintained power. Namely, his concept of majoritarian democracy is self-sustained by election campaigns aimed at reaffirming his political consensus throughout the nation and his image as a "man who keeps winning over others." In a context characterised by domestic uncertainties and geopolitical shifts, a success for the government would prompt strategies for the survival of the state through a balance between security (in the freedom–security dilemma) and welfare (in the democracy–welfare dilemma).

In contrast, confirmation of the opposition, especially in Istanbul, would demonstrate the possibility of defeating Erdoğan at the polls without downward compromises with disparate coalition partners. Moreover, in line with its voters' desire for "change and rejuvenation," it would show how the CHP's party restructuring process has been positively received. On this regard, one could argue that, while 2019 elections represented a chance to elaborate new opposition strategies, this time the CHP feels the "responsibility" to set clear priorities and to make some of those formulas sustainable in the long run.

This would also allow the party to develop a broader strategy and prepare the ground for an even more structured strategy toward



the 2028 presidential elections. Last but not least, a potential victory for Imamoğlu would make him the only politician in the past two decades who has managed to defeat Erdoğan at the polls.

Overall, it thus becomes clear how these municipal elections' political and symbolic significance goes beyond the mere vote for representatives at the local level. Rather, looking as much at the media battle, the fierce campaigning, and the daily political confrontation at the grassroots level, the March 31 appointment seems to have taken on the contours of a referendum. Not only as a choice between the two most prominent politicians of the moment - Erdoğan and Imamoğlu - but also as a more delicate one for the country's political future.

Yet to be seen, whatever the results, the outcomes of these elections will have reverberations on the complex socio-political dynamics, the many problems to be solved internally, and the future direction of Turkey.