



THE WIND IS SHIFTING IN TURKISH POLITICS: CONSIDERATIONS ON THE 2024 MUNICIPAL ELECTION OUTCOMES

Jacopo Franceschini

Turkey's Municipal Elections Background Context

Almost one year after the last presidential elections, on March 31st, 2024, Turkey's voters returned to the municipal elections' polls. In Turkey's electoral rule and custom, local elections for municipalities, districts, and local referents for villages are undertaken in one day across the country. Given the temporal proximity with the last general elections won by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP), the results of local elections were expected to retrace last year's general elections results. Only in Istanbul, the outcome between the mayor in charge, Ekrem İmamoğlu, belonging to the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), and Erdoğan's candidate, Murat Kurum, was considered more uncertain.



The Overtaking of the Opposition

Beyond any expectation, CHP witnessed a notable success, securing most of its metropolitan mayoralities and capturing 35 of Turkey's 81 province capitals. This represents a significant rise compared to the 2019 elections, during which the CHP had gained dominance in large urban centers such as Ankara and Istanbul but had gained fewer provincial capitals in total. Today, the CHP achieved notable successes by achieving unforeseen triumphs in regions that were previously considered "political fortresses" under the government's control, including Bursa, Balıkesir, Manisa, Kütahya, Adyaman, Amasya, Kırkkale, and Denizli. Conversely, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) did not secure the top position in a general or municipal election for the first time since its establishment in 2001. The AKP, in conjunction with its ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), experienced a decline in electoral support, as the AKP secured 35.5% of the total vote, while the CHP obtained 37.5%. In the 2019 elections, the CHP had achieved victory in 11 metropolitan municipalities, while the AKP had obtained victory in 15 metropolitan municipalities. As such, during the previous term, the AKP and MHP gained a significant portion of district municipalities and councilor positions. However, since 2019, the political landscape has undergone a substantial shift in support of the CHP, encompassing metropolitan and district towns. The metropolitan municipality of Istanbul remained in the hands of Ekrem İmamoğlu without a real *tete â tete* with Murat Kurum, who was distanced by 10 points by the re-elected opposition mayor. The opposition was also able to win in some districts of Istanbul which are considered highly conservative, such as Eyüp Sultan, and both in the districts of birth (Beyoğlu) and residence (Üsküdar) of President Erdoğan.



The role of Kurdish and Islamist voters

AKP's political power in municipal elections has also been eroded by the Kurdish People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), which emerged as the successor to the People's Democratic Party (HDP). Unlike the 2019 municipal elections, the DEM Party chose to run its candidates in many regions outside the CHP coalition, managing to maintain 3 metropolitan cities and 7 provinces in Eastern Turkey and increase from 59 to 79 the district municipalities under their control.

A recently formed political formation, the Re-Welfare Party (YRP), gave another blow to the government's party.. The YRP was founded by Fatih Erbakan, the son of Necemettin Erbakan, the leader of the Wellness Party who became Turkey's first Islamist Prime Minister in 1996 until his resignation forced by the military in 1997. YRP obtained a cumulative total of 60 mayoralties, including 1 metropolitan municipality (Şanlıurfa), 1 provincial municipalities (Yozgat), 39 district municipalities, and 19 town municipalities. The YRP gained 6% of votes nationally, making it the third biggest party after CHP and AKP.

What went wrong for Erdoğan's party?

In Turkey, there is a well-known statement by Süleyman Demirel (1924-2015), one of the most influential Turkish politicians of the 20th century: "There is no power that an empty pot cannot destroy." Inflation, skyrocketing prices, costs, and the increased poverty level among the population, with the government offering no rapid solution for the current economic crisis, were probably decisive in sealing the opposition's victory.

Another issue that could explain the results of the last municipal election is the political framework created by President Erdoğan within his party. Indeed, the AKP has come to resemble a one-person system with the President as the main center of the AKP's narrative, highlighting his achievements and political stands and



gains, especially in the international arena. This approach might have limited the room for the AKP local administrators and candidates to emerge and get known by their voting pool. At the same time, the CHP and other parties followed a more capillary strategy, supporting and giving space to their candidates. During the past years, electoral campaigns undertaken by the AKP were quite effective in targeting the explicit domestic political or economic promises they wanted to achieve or the threats they would address if elected. This focused communicative strategy lacked for the 2024 municipal elections and might have left some voters without precise or concrete reasons to choose the AKP candidates in their constituencies. On the other hand, an outsider party like the mentioned Islamist YRP offered a more evident religious and ideological program that hijacked part of the more conservative AKP voters.

The future of Turkey's domestic politics

Despite the lower turnout, standing at 78%, the 2024 municipal elections should be considered a historic turning point in Turkey's domestic politics. After the disappointing results in the general election in 2023, the CHP dismissed its last general secretary and presidency candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. His political posture, based on a coalition between significantly different ideological parties, added to his poor electoral performance and incapacity to intercept the Kurdish vote, were instrumental in convincing the CHP to undertake this establishment change. Under Özgür Özal's new secretary mandate, the CHP now seems committed to work more independently and to take advantage of Istanbul and Ankara mayors' popularity. Right now, after last Sunday's victory, their goal should be to prove to the Turkish electorate (minorities and conservatives who voted for them included) that they deserve the trust that was placed in them. If they weren't be able to capitalize on this transversal trust that the Turkish society provided them with,



they would risk losing people's confidence in the following years and be punished by voters in the next presidential election in 2028. President Erdoğan, on the other side, is a skilled statesman who will surely learn from the 2024 elections lesson. He also is aware that he is at his last mandate, and with this opposition supremacy, calling for anticipated general elections or for a constitutional referendum (the only two possible legal ways to give him access to a third mandate) might be a political debacle. Against this backdrop, a feasible choice for him would be to consolidate his position and political legacy. In this sense, he should prove his ability to guide the country beyond today's severe economic crisis, improving his relations with international stakeholders while not making any discount to opposition mistakes. Returning to a divisive and polarized rhetoric won't be beneficial neither for his mandate nor for the future of his political party.

Four years ahead of the next general election in Turkey, last municipal vote proved again the inscrutability of Turkish politics. What remains a firm point is the capacity of Turkish voters to make the political wind change suddenly, despite all the domestic and external difficulties they are navigating in.