

DEMOCRACY & HUMAN RIGHTS

AKP Election Defeat Signals Shifting Political Landscape in Turkey

APRIL 13, 2024

Turkey's local elections on March 31st resulted in the biggest electoral defeat for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). For the first time in decades, the main opposition, the Republican People's Party (CHP), won the majority votes in several key metropolitan areas, including Istanbul, Ankara, Bursa, Adana, and Antalya. The election results will pose a significant threat to President Erdogan and the AKP. Also, elections reaffirmed that re-elected Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu will be Erdogan's formidable opponent in the next presidential elections. The results will challenge Erdogan's ability to circumvent public resentment emanating from the daunting economic crisis and signal that the political landscape has shifted.

Since its establishment in 2002, the AKP has consistently secured the majority of votes, making it an exception to the historical trend of poor performance by ruling parties in local elections in Turkey. This election marked a departure from that trend. The AKP was unexpectedly defeated by a center-left party, the CHP, in a victory that had not been seen since 1977. Despite the AKP's control over most of the media and its dominance in the election campaign landscape, the opposition managed to connect with the voters.

The local elections were not just a victory for the CHP, but also a clear indication of the AKP and President Erdogan's failure. Factors such as the economic crisis, high

inflation, and the AKP's inability to deliver tangible mitigation measures played a significant role in shaping voters' decisions. A poll, conducted in February 2024 showed that 85% of respondents said Turkey's biggest problem is the economy.¹ The AKP's poor choice of candidates, presenting out-of-touch narratives and lifestyles, also contributed to the election outcomes.

The main opposition party, the CHP's success in winning major cities, including traditional AKP strongholds like Bursa, Balıkesir, Adana, Denizli, Afyonkarahisar, and several other cities, indicates strong voter discontent with the AKP's economic and social policies. For instance, Mansur Yavaş², the incumbent and the CHP's mayoral candidate for Ankara, received 60.44% of the votes, while his contender got only 31%.

Erdogan faces several formidable challengers to his reign going forward. The re-election of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the 52-year-old incumbent mayor of Istanbul, by a large margin over Erdogan's hand-picked Murat Kurum, is a significant development. Equally important is that the AKP lost its majority in the city council, relieving İmamoğlu of another potential strain. More significantly, while İmamoğlu's official contender was a former minister in the AKP cabinet, his real rival was Erdogan, who campaigned as if he was on the ballot personally. The victory solidifies İmamoğlu's position as Erdogan's most formidable rival and a strong candidate in the presidential elections 2028.

The AKP's other challenge will be the New Welfare Party (YRP), formerly the flagship political Islamist Welfare Party. Erdogan's inability to designate a successor could solidify Fatih Erbakan's position, who is the son of the late leader of political Islamists in Turkey, Necmettin Erbakan. His decision to depart the People's Alliance and run as a single party led the YRP to win 6.2% of the national

vote, making it the third-largest opposition party. The YRP could be a rallying point if the AKP's decline continues.

Third, despite the AKP's comprehensive control over the political system, including the media, their ability to weaponize security agencies and leverage the judicial system against its opponents, the election results confirmed some decline in their power. Given how the AKP governs Turkey through coalitions, this could weaken the People's Alliance both in parliament and the government agencies.

Fourth, Erdogan's divide-and-conquer tactics against the six-party coalition—the Nation Alliance—have not produced the intended outcome. While the coalition was dissolved and every party in it—except for the CHP—performed poorly in the elections, the election results boosted the CHP's ambitions.

Fifth, Kurds continued playing a key role in the elections. The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) Party won ten cities in south and southeastern Turkey. While DEM had a candidate in Istanbul, election results suggest that Kurds also favored İmamoğlu.³ In an interesting and concerning development, the regional electoral board invalidated DEM's mayoral candidate Abdullah Zeydan's victory in the eastern city of Van. The court's decision sparked protests⁴ as opposition parties rallied around the DEM Party's candidate. Surprisingly, the Supreme Election Council (YSK) overturned the local board's decision and reinstated Zeydan as mayor.⁵

Finally, Erdogan and his party could become victims of their own doing. The AKP's inability to recover from the economic crisis is also connected to increasing authoritarianism, serious backsliding on democratic standards, the rule of law, human rights, and judicial independence, and corruption coupled with a patronage system.⁶

Corruption is a critical issue leading to resentment among voters, especially during times of deep economic crisis. Transparency International ranks Turkey 115/180 in the corruption index⁷, which states, “an overly dominant executive branch and few democratic checks and balances remaining in place. A lack of judicial independence also stands in the way of progress.

While the World Justice Project ranks Turkey 117th among 142 countries⁸, Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2024 report⁹ scores Turkey as ‘not free.’ The report further states that President Erdogan and his AKP “have become increasingly authoritarian in recent years, consolidating significant power through constitutional changes and by imprisoning opponents and critics.”¹⁰

Erdogan has three options at the domestic level. He may maintain the status quo by resorting to his current playbook, leveraging his control over the judiciary, the media, and state security agencies to suppress the opposition and critics—which will likely exacerbate sentiments of opposition. The AKP government may disregard the call to mend the rule of law and democratic processes. For example, the European Union¹¹ and the Council of Europe¹² “urged the Turkish authorities to immediately release Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş, in line with judgments from the European Court of Human Rights.” The legal crisis is not just limited to disregarding the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling. At the domestic level, encouraged by Erdogan¹³ and other AKP officials, lower courts ignore the decisions of even Turkey’s Constitutional Court.¹⁴

During the elections, the opposition candidates faced mounting obstacles and were deprived of media access. Citing the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Freedom House reports “continued restrictions on freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, political interference in the electoral process, and a

lack of transparency”¹⁵ as significant issues in the election process in Turkey. Also, the Supreme Electoral Council (YSK) is comprised of judges appointed by AKP-dominated judicial bodies who “often defer to the AKP in their decisions.”¹⁶

Second and related to the first option, Erdogan might want to deal with İmamoğlu by simply banning him from politics. A court has already sentenced İmamoğlu to two and a half years in prison and imposed a political ban on him for insulting public officials.¹⁷ The appeal process is still pending. However, given local election results, if Erdogan chooses to attack him, it could elevate İmamoğlu’s position further as well as validate Erdogan’s fear of him as a legitimate political contender in the eyes of the public. Such a scenario would be very similar to Erdogan’s own history in politics, once banned and out of prison in 1999, which ultimately elevated him to a position of leadership.

The third option is that Erdogan could seize the opportunity to promote the rule of law, transparency, and accountability, however unlikely this appears now. In his address after the election results were announced, Erdogan claimed “This is not an end for us, but actually a turning point... If we made a mistake, we will fix it.”¹⁸

How Erdogan will fix mounting social, economic, and political problems is unclear. Though there is always a possibility of going back to democratization and strengthening the rule of law, accountability, and transparency, Erdogan might see that as a sign of weakness. Or Erdogan may launch another process to resolve tensions with Turkey’s Kurdish population in order to win both Kurdish votes and potentially improve relationship with the West. However, any step toward that direction requires extensive legal and structural change and political resolve, which will not align with how the state currently operates under the AKP.

In the realm of foreign policy, Turkey's current posture may not change. However, Erdogan's image as an invincible leader might have been damaged. In lieu of more aggressive economic and financial mitigation measures, the AKP may embrace a hardliner position against refugees to defuse public discontent. Depending on the extent and duration of the operation, Ankara's plans to carry out a military incursion in Iraq could reverberate in the region and at the domestic level among Kurds and Turkish nationalists.

The elections showed the voters' desire to exercise their democratic rights, which, according to Cook and Ciddi, is a testament to "... the continuing strength of Turkey's democratic practices—without the country qualifying as a democracy..."¹⁹ While this would be the case, the performance that the CHP will demonstrate in municipalities will determine the votes it will receive in the general and presidential elections.

This shifting political landscape presents both challenges and opportunities in Turkey. While Erdogan and the AKP party are facing the biggest political challenge of their lifetime, the CHP also has serious obstacles to overcome if it hopes to become a governing force.

This article was originally published in Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum (MENAF)'s [Manara Magazine](#).

¹ Tufan, S. (2024). "What is Turkey's biggest problem? 85% agree", *Marketing Türkiye*, retrieved from: <https://www.marketingturkiye.com.tr/haberler/turkiyenin-en-buyuk-sorunu-ne-yuzde-85-ayni-goruste/>.

² Euronews (2024). "2024 local elections: Which are the 10 cities where parties received the highest and lowest votes?", 2 April 2024, retrieved from: <https://tr.euronews.com/2024/04/02/2024-yerel-secimi-partilerin-en-yuksek-ve-en-dusuk-oy->

aldiklari-10-sehir-hangisi-veriler-n.

³ Sezer, C. and Karakas, B. (2024). “Turkey’s resurgent opposition trounces Erdogan in pivotal local elections”, *Reuters*, 1 April 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-battles-key-rival-turkeys-local-elections-2024-03-31/>.

⁴ Kirby, P. (2024). “Turkey reinstates pro-Kurdish elections winner Zeydan after days of unrest in Van”, *BBC News*, 4 April 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-68730330>.

⁵ Habertürk Ankara (2024). “YSK announces decision for Van”, 6 April 2024, retrieved from: <https://m.haberturk.com/son-dakika-haberi-ysk-van-icin-gerekceli-karari-acikladi-3675934>.

⁶ Reuters (2023). “European Commission says Turkey backsliding on democracy, rule of law”, 8 November 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/european-commission-says-turkey-backsliding-democracy-rule-law-2023-11-08/>.

⁷ Transparency International (2024). “CPI 2023 for Eastern Europe & Central Asia”, 30 January 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2023-eastern-europe-central-asia-autocracy-weak-justice-systems-widespread-enabling-corruption>.

⁸ World Justice Project (2024). “WJP Rule of Law Index”, retrieved from: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global/2023/Turkiye/>.

⁹ Freedom House (2024). “Freedom in the World 2024”, retrieved from: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2024>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ EEAS Press Team (2022). “Turkey: Statement by the High Representative on the conviction of Mr. Osman Kavala”, 26 April 2022, retrieved from: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/turkey-statement-high-representative-conviction-mr-osman-kavala_en.

¹² Council of Europe (2023). “Türkiye: the Committee of Ministers reiterates calls for the immediate release of Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş”, 10 March 2023, retrieved from: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/execution/-/t%C3%BCrkiye-the-committee-of-ministers->

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¹³ Euronews (2024). “President Erdogan said ‘I cannot digest these decisions taken by the Constitutional Court’”, 15 February 2024, retrieved from: <https://tr.euronews.com/2024/02/15/erdogan-anayasa-mahkemesinin-almis-oldugu-bu-kararlari-hazmedemiyorum>.

¹⁴ Sözcü (2020). “Is it possible that the local court will not implement the decision of the Constitutional Court?”, 14 October 2020, retrieved from: <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/yerel-mahkemenin-aym-kararini-uygulamamasi-mumkun-mu-wp6080911>.

¹⁵ Freedom House (2024). “Freedom in the World 2024”, retrieved from: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2024>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Michaelson, R. (2024). „Ekrem Imamoglu, the Istanbul mayor emerging as likely challenger to Erdogan”, *The Guardian*, 1 April 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/01/who-is-ekrem-imamoglu-istanbul-mayor-recep-tayyip-erdogan-reign-president-ak-party>.

¹⁸ Butler, D. and Toksabay, E. (2024). “Erdogan vows to make amends after humbling election loss in Turkey”, *Reuters*, 1 April 2024, retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-vows-make-amends-after-humbling-election-loss-turkey-2024-04-01/>.

¹⁹ Cook, S.A. (2024). “Post-Erdogan Turkey Is Finally Here”, *Foreign Policy*, 4 April 2024, retrieved from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/04/04/turkey-local-elections-erdogan-akp-imamoglu/>.

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