



MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

An analysis of Turkish municipal elections

When local becomes national. Implications for Turkey's political future

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The March 31, 2024, municipal elections in Turkey represented an important signal for the country's changing sociopolitical environment. Indeed, the opposition led by the CHP party succeeded in a threefold feat: confirming itself in the big cities, expanding its consensus geographically, and, most importantly, overtaking Erdoğan's AKP at the national level for the first time. The result appears even more striking when one considers that just a year ago presidential and parliamentary elections had reconfirmed Erdoğan and his party. Although these two elections underlie different dynamics, it is crucial to analyze the factors that led to this partial reversal and that will undoubtedly have an impact on Turkey's future.

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For what concerns Italy, we believe it is important to deeply analyze the political dynamics in light of the historical depth of Turkish-Italian relations and the importance of enhancing a solid mutual understanding for better cooperation. In doing so, we have decided to include a plurality of voices, all experts on the subject, trying to cover most of the aspects that influenced the vote in the local elections of March 31 and their repercussion on Turkey's political future, domestically and internationally. The dossier is also accompanied by a series of photographs taken by the photographer and journalist Italo Rondinella, whom we especially want to thank.

This would not have been possible without the valuable contribution of the experts who kindly accepted to be part of this research.

Glossary of abbreviations

AKP: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)

CHP: Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican's People Party)

DEM (pro-Kurdish party, first HDP and HEDEP): Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party

DP: Demokratik Parti (Democrat Party)

DSP: Demokratik Sol Partisi (Democratic Left Party)

DYP: Doğru Yol Partisi (True Path Party)

İP: İYİ Parti, (Good Party)

IS: Daesh (Islamic State)

PKK: Partîya Karkerên Kurdîstan (Kurdistan's Workers Party)

SHP: Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti (Social Democratic Populist Party)

SP: Saadet Partisi (Felicity Party)

YRP: Yeniden Refah Partisi (New Welfare Party)

Introduction

Amid a long and relentless process of transformation in Turkey's sociopolitical context¹, the current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP have for a long time seemed to enjoy nearly unlimited maneuvering spaces after more than twenty uninterrupted years in power. However, the municipal elections of last March 31 have taken a different direction (see Figures 1 and 2), with the opposition led by the CHP managing to achieve a triple feat: **confirming itself in the big cities, expanding its consensus** in areas previously "foreign" to it (such as those of Anatolia) and, above all, **surpassing the AKP at a national level for the first time**. The result appears even more remarkable when considering that, just one year ago, despite an economy already in significant difficulty and the aftermath of an earthquake², the presidential and parliamentary elections had reconfirmed Erdoğan and his party at the helm of the country³.

Certainly, it would be a mistake to draw *tout-court* parallels between two rounds of elections that were played at different levels and with quite

¹ Kirişçi; A. Sloat. "The rise and fall of liberal democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West", *Brookings*, February 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-rise-and-fall-of-liberal-democracy-in-turkey-implications-for-the-west/>.

² Editorial staff Kaleidoskop, "Terremoto / La regione colpita nell'anniversario del sisma", *Kaleidoskop*, 24 February 2024, <http://kaleydoskop.it/societa/terremoto-la-regione-colpita-nell-anniversario-del-sisma/>.

³ B. Hubbard. "Five Takeaways From Turkey's Presidential Election", *New York Times*, 29 May 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/29/world/middleeast/turkey-election-takeaways.html>.

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different actual values. At the same time, considering the peculiar context of the electoral game and its reverberation at a national level, it is necessary to analyze the factors that have allowed this turnaround and will undoubtedly impact Turkey's immediate and future socio-political dynamics.

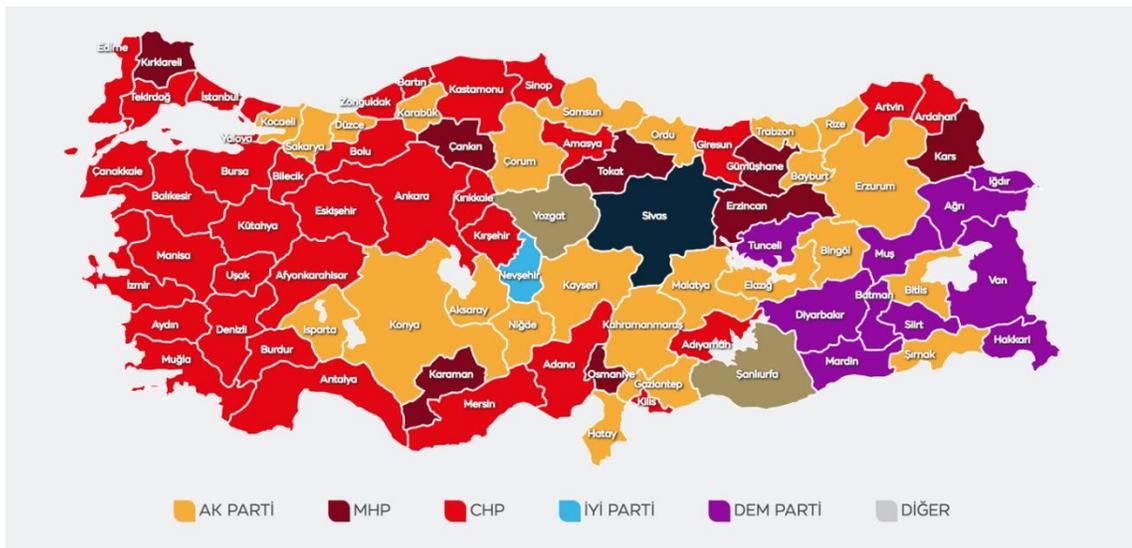


Figure 1 Electoral Results 2024. Source: Anadolu Agency

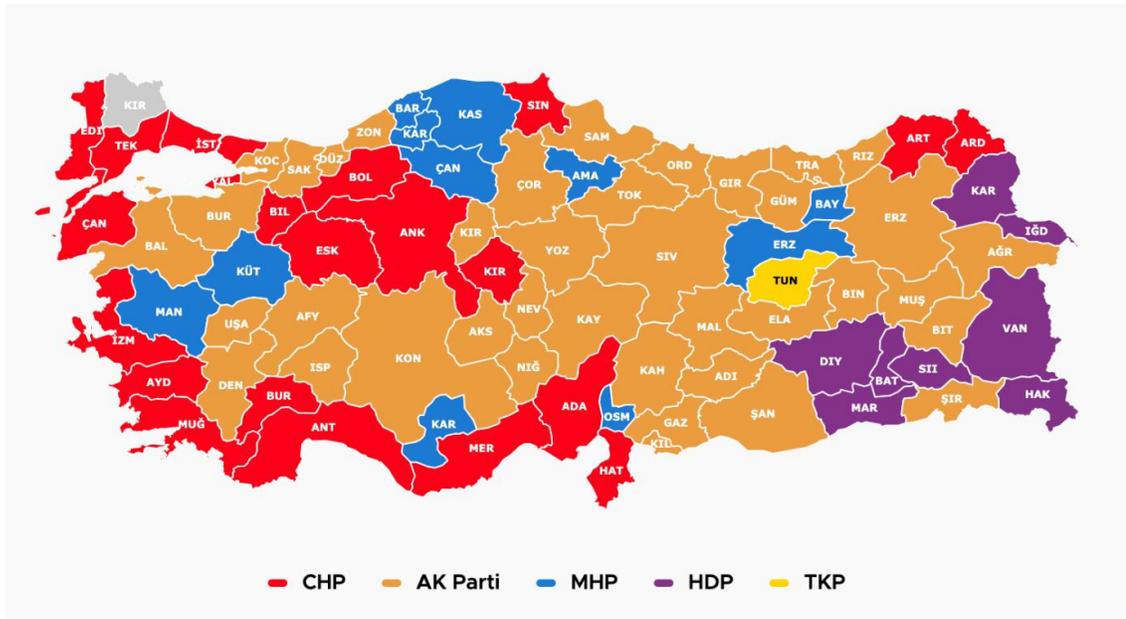


Figure 2 Electoral Results 2019. Source: TRT Haber

For some time now, before and after each electoral round to which Turkish voters are accustomed to responding with great participation, it is common to remark that elections in Turkey are "free, without blatant or decisive fraud for the result, but at the same time not entirely fair"⁴. As demonstrated by the first contribution from **Hakan Yavuz**, this occurs because the context in which the last electoral games have been played – whether being about electing the President, promoting a referendum, or electing local representatives – is marked by the traits of a so-called **competitive authoritarianism**. In short, the term indicates a regime where, although elections are held regularly and there is space for real electoral competition

⁴ B. Esen, S. Gumuscu, "How Erdoğan's populism won again", *Journal of Democracy*, 34(3), 2023, pp. 21-32.

for the opposition, such maneuvering space, as well as the media and institutional tools, are distributed unfairly in favor of the ruling party.⁵

Although the **CHP's victory** this time seems to go beyond the pure logic of numbers, it remains necessary to focus on the statistical dimension of the result in order to thoroughly analyze its causes and consequences. Regarding the large municipalities, the CHP managed to reclaim the three main metropolitan cities, significantly increasing its votes in Istanbul and Ankara compared to 2019.⁶ Founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk following the establishment of the Republic, the CHP is the oldest party in Republican Turkey, remaining until the 1950s, the only party present in the electoral landscape. With the introduction of multi-party politics, the CHP had to contend with other political formations, undergoing a long phase characterized by loss of support and difficulty in reforming and adapting to a rapidly changing Turkey. **Massimo D'Angelo and Selin Gücüm** highlight the party's transformation from its foundation to today, analyzing the factors that have enabled its assertion in the latest elections and that could allow the party to play a leading role in the near political future.

⁵ S. Levitsky, L.A. Way, 'The rise of competitive authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy*, 13(51), 2002, pp. 51-56.

⁶ Editorial staff ANSA, "Turchia: l'opposizione per la prima volta è più forte di Erdogan", ANSA, 1 April 2024, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2024/04/01/turchia-l'opposizione-per-la-prima-volta-e-piu-forte-di-erdogan_83271cc5-95d3-49bf-a6a2-4f825774461c.html#:~:text=Il%20maggior%20partito%20di%20opposizione,uno%20dei%20risultati%20pi%C3%B9%20bassi.

However, as **Michelangelo Guida** points out, the "**secondary cities**" fundamentally shaped the national scenario. Here, in fact, the data is even more surprising considering that the CHP managed to make inroads in centers such as Bursa, Afyon, Adiyaman, Giresun, and Kastamonu, traditionally strongholds of the AKP. Moreover, looking at the individual districts of the city of Istanbul, the economic and cultural capital of the country, it's noticeable how the CHP also managed to win neighborhoods like Beyoğlu (European side) and Üsküdar (Asian side), where a female mayor was elected. Analyzing the results from a gender perspective⁷, it can certainly be stated that, in a country with only 20% female representation in parliament, these elections have represented an important step forward, thus increasing the number of **cities led by female mayors to 11 out of 81**. The "purple wave" was particularly significant in the Thrace region, where two-thirds of the mayors are now female.

In any case, the victories achieved by the CHP correspond to about 4/5 of the Turkish economy and 2/3 of the country's population.⁸ While Guida's contribution emphasizes the importance of municipalities in providing significant resources to parties – and therefore higher chances to increase their consensus – the economic theme is at the core of **Selin Gücüm's**

⁷ Editorial staff Hürriyet, "Local polls see surge in number of women mayors", *Hürriyet*, 1 April 2024, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/local-polls-see-surge-in-number-of-women-mayors-192078>.

⁸ A. Ziccardi. "Elezioni amministrative in Turchia: quali conseguenze per il Paese?", *Centro Studi Internazionali*, 3 April 2024, <https://www.cesi-italia.org/it/articoli/elezioni-amministrative-in-turchia-quali-conseguenze-per-il-paese>.

contribution, which analyzes the "wallet variable" by highlighting two aspects: the erosion of votes from the AKP due to poor economic management and the **possible socio-political consequences** of Turkey's precarious financial situation.

Additionally, as highlighted by **Yasin Duman's** contribution, the "**Kurdish vote**" remains a variable of crucial importance for its numbers and the complex socio-political backdrop in the history of the Turkish state. Indeed, despite being forced to change its name multiple times due to periodic judicial rulings intended to halt its political activity, the pro-Kurdish left-wing party (now known as DEM) has not only reconfirmed its position in Kurdish-majority areas but also among the main forces at the national level. This can also be seen as the final outcome of a longer process that began much earlier under a new party leadership that managed to distance itself from the revolutionary and nationalist that has for a long time been accused of being supportive of the activities of PKK, which is considered a terrorist organization by Turkey, EU, US and other entities.

Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that the loss of support for the AKP is not solely due to a winning strategy implemented by the CHP but also to a **fracture within the right-conservative wing**.⁹ One of the data that strongly

⁹ M. Guida, "La fine del monopolio dei grandi partiti? Le elezioni locali del marzo 2024 in Turchia", *Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale*, 28 March 2024, https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/osservatori/allegati/approf._28_elezioni_locali_2024_-_guida.pdf.

emerges is the assertion of the YRP, which not only managed to reach the position of the third political force at the national level with 6.19% but also to wrest some strongholds from the AKP. This result even surpassed the ultranationalist MHP, a government ally, which stopped its political thermometer at 4.98%. If we consider that, just a year before the presidential elections, both these formations had run within the People's Alliance led by the AKP, we can deduce that some extremely religious and/or nationalist factions wanted to send a signal to the AKP and to certain policies considered "too soft". On this last point focuses the contribution of **Filippo Ciccù**, who analyzes the **AKP's communication strategies**, from the "golden years" to the recent difficulties in advancing a narrative that was once winning but now has to confront a political landscape in strong change.

Increasingly relevant in electoral rounds of any value or context is the role of social media and, with them, the practices related to **disinformation and its impact on the electorate**. This topic is addressed by **Jacopo Franceschini**, who analyzes the impact of such aspects both in the connection between political parties and the population and in altering perceptions and issues within the public debate, highlighting the impacts on the credibility of political information during electoral campaigns.

Lastly, drawing on the insights of this dossier, the contribution of the editors **Abrami and Gasco** attempts to trace a balance of these elections in two directions: their immediate and concrete impact at the "local" level and their

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reverberation on the complex dynamics pending for Turkey's future political landscape.

Competitive authoritarianism at the local level

Which future for Turkish democracy?

by *Hakan Yavuz*



© Italo Rondinella. Late at night, when Imamoğlu's victory is assured, supporters of the re-elected mayor flock to the area around Saraçhane Park in the Fatih district; köfte (meatballs) sellers seize the opportunity.

On the 31st of March, Turkish voters headed to the polls, this time to elect local governments. The campaign process was symptomatic of the apathy registered among Turkish voters. Opposition voters were significantly demoralized due to the failure of the opposition alliance to beat Erdoğan in 2023.¹AKP voters were also disgruntled by the ongoing economic crisis and AKP's detachment from its electoral base. The apathy in the electorate was reflected in the turnout, which dropped from 87 percent in 2023 to 76 percent. Although these turnout rates remain significantly higher than in Western European countries, Turkey's decline in 2024 local elections is remarkably high.

Introduction

Despite this apathy, the opposition and, most importantly, the main opposition party, CHP, recorded a surprising victory and became the first party after over 40 years by claiming a 37.8 percent vote share. The party could not only withhold and consolidate its position in critical metropolitan municipalities but also **retain many provinces and districts that used to be AKP's strongholds**. Overall, the CHP now controls 35 out of 81 provinces. It

¹ B. Esen, S. Gumuscu, "How Erdoğan's Populism Won Again". *Journal of Democracy* 34 (3), 2023, pp. 21-32.

is also important to note that these provinces are the strongest ones from an economic perspective. The opposition achieved these surprising results under a competitive authoritarian regime where the electoral playing field was heavily tilted to the advantage of the incumbent.²

Competitive authoritarian regimes need to achieve multiple goals to sustain themselves. First and foremost, to contain possible defections and elite rivalries, **the regime needs a strong party and the capacity to engage in partisan rent distribution and clientelistic voter mobilization.** Although the electoral playing field is skewed to the incumbent's advantage, elections are still meaningful and pose significant uncertainties for the regime.³ Therefore, incumbents also need effective electoral mobilization. Thirdly, the regime needs to coopt potential parties and influential figures to sustain its electoral dominance. Finally, the regime's capacity for cooptation and effective electoral mobilization mostly rests on its perceptual electoral invincibility.

All in all, in competitive authoritarian regimes, incumbents face several threats and uncertainties that can emanate horizontally from political elites and vertically from society.⁴ Considering these dynamics, the results of the

² S. Levitsky, L.A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

³ A. Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁴ M. A. Svoboda, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

recent local elections will have important implications for Turkey's competitive authoritarian regime's fate.

The implications of local elections for competitive authoritarianism in Turkey

First and foremost, the incumbent's electoral invincibility is an important factor that affects the longevity of competitive authoritarian regimes. If there is a strong societal perception that the regime is electorally invincible, voter defection from the incumbent parties remains negligible. More importantly, the electoral invincibility of the regime increases the regime's capacity to prevent elite defections and coopt elites and parties effectively. **The electoral invincibility of the competitive authoritarian regime in Turkey took a severe hit with the recent local elections.** The AKP has become the second party for the first time in over twenty years of political life. The main alliance partner, MHP, also registered a very weak electoral performance. Depending on the post-election strategies the opposition and the ruling alliance will endorse, AKP's declining perceptual electoral invincibility may lead to intra-regime elite rivalries and possible defections.

A second important possible implication of the recent local elections is the capacity of the competitive authoritarian regime to impose selective repression against prominent opposition figures. Although the instruments

for inflicting repression remain intact, the cost has significantly increased.⁵ The incidents in the province of Van⁶ right after the Provincial Election Council's decision not to give the official mandate to the DEM candidate demonstrated that the **democratic resilience capacity of the opposition in Turkey has significantly increased**. Furthermore, such repressive tactics will come with a price as AKP needs to mobilize multiple segments of the society and cooperate with multiple parties for possible upcoming constitutional drafting processes and general elections.

The campaign process and results of the local elections also demonstrate the declining organizational capacity of the AKP. Against a CHP that revitalized itself through leadership change after 2023, AKP failed to nominate candidates with effective mobilizational capacity. Especially in Istanbul and Ankara, AKP's candidates recorded a very weak performance compared to their main competitors. This is partly due to the de-institutionalization process that the AKP has been going through in parallel with the autocratization process in the country.⁷ **The party has become detached from society**, and core voters of the party mainly vote for the party because of its charismatic leader, Erdoğan. Another important outcome of this de-

⁵ B. Baser, A.E. Öztürk, *Authoritarian politics in Turkey: Elections, resistance and the AKP*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.

⁶ A. Samson, "Turkish authorities yield to protesters over local election", *Financial Times*, 4 April 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/1a19275c-a877-444e-bdaa-5aa4ee88f20a>.

⁷ Ş. Yardımcı-Geyikçi, H. Yavuzylmaz, 'Party (de)institutionalization in times of political uncertainty: The case of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey', *Party Politics*, 28(1), 2022, pp. 71-84.

institutionalization process was the rise of party personnel who, instead of valuing the party in and for itself, established pragmatic instrumental bonds with AKP. Such a process that primarily rests on partisan rent distribution significantly hinders the mobilizational capacity of the party.

The local governments had been highly important for AKP's clientelistic voter mobilization and patronage politics.⁸ The landslide by the opposition in the recent local elections will have two important repercussions for AKP. Firstly, the **penetration of the CHP to the conservative provinces** and sub-provinces significantly increases the party's capacity to deliver services that will strengthen its hand in AKP's strongholds. While this still depends on the future performance of the opposition in these provinces and districts, it will have important repercussions for AKP's clientelistic voter mobilization at the local level. Secondly, as Esra Çeviker Gürakar's seminal study demonstrates, many AKP politicians have been the recipients of partisan rents that are generated at the local level.⁹ The results of the local elections will also have important repercussions for **AKP's capacity to achieve intra-elite cohesion** as the party's capacity to sustain the local patronage distribution took a severe hit. This may initiate intra-party defections and diminish AKP's capacity to sustain intra-elite cohesion.

⁸ K. Çınar, "Local determinants of an emerging electoral hegemony: the case of Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey", *Democratization*, 23(7), 2016, pp. 2-23.

⁹ E. Çeviker Gürakar, *Politics of Favouritism in Public Procurement in Turkey: Reconfigurations of Dependency Networks in the AKP Era*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

New Welfare Party's (YRP) rise to the third-party position will also have important implications for AKP's and Erdoğan's capacity to mobilize right-wing conservative voters. In its uninterrupted incumbency, the AKP and Erdoğan have successfully coopted their potential rivals on the right end of the political spectrum. Even though Erdoğan successfully coopted the YRP in the 2023 presidential elections, his failure to repeat that success in local elections was an important factor for the poor performance of AKP. AKP voters, who were disgruntled by the AKP yet ideologically could not switch to the opposition camp, found a new address. **YRP engaged in a highly successful campaign** by emphasizing AKP's failure to offer policies that target increasing living costs. YRP's critical emphasis on AKP's ambiguous stance on the Gaza war also resonated well among religious conservative voters. Thus, under the diminishing perceptual electoral invincibility of the AKP and the regime's capacity for co-optation, YRP's electoral rise poses an important threat to AKP and Erdoğan's future electoral performance.

Finally, the outstanding performance of İmamoğlu in Istanbul and Yavaş in Ankara and their possible candidacy for the upcoming presidential elections stand out as an important threat to Erdoğan's personal mobilizational capacity. Both actors demonstrated their capacity to mobilize ideologically and ethnically diverse societal segments in Turkey. In fact, the electoral decline of the pro-Kurdish DEM party and the nationalist IYI party, which both nominated separate candidates in Istanbul and Ankara, demonstrated the mobilizational capacity of İmamoğlu and Yavaş. Their consolidated

position as mayors of Ankara and Istanbul will potentially increase their space of maneuvering and their prospects of becoming competitors against Erdoğan in the upcoming elections.

Conclusion

To sum up, the results of the 2024 local elections will have several repercussions for the sustainability of competitive authoritarianism in Turkey. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the regime in **Turkey is still an authoritarian regime** with instruments that enable it to tilt the playing field in its favor. Moreover, the 2023 presidential elections showed that Erdoğan's mobilizational capacity and popularity remain intact. The reactionary AKP voters who refrained from casting their votes for AKP can still cast their votes for Erdoğan in the upcoming elections.

Nevertheless, from now on, Erdoğan who has been a proficient political juggler needs to balance several new balls along with the remaining ones: (1) he has to revitalize a highly deinstitutionalized party without generating intra-party rivalry and defection; (2) solve the dire inflation problem without generating further voter and elite defections (especially within its business cronies and party officials); (3) keeping the playing field skewed to his advantage through selective repression and authoritarian practices without further consolidating societal and political democratic resilience; (4) effectively contain the electoral rise of YRP without jeopardizing his fragile

alliance with ultra-nationalist MHP; (5) obstructing the performance of opposition-led local governments without generating resentment in the electorate.

The results of the recent local elections once again showed that **the regime is competitive yet still authoritarian**, but the democratic resilience in Turkey is also high. Thus, there is a potential for democratization through elections. The realization of this potential will largely depend on Erdoğan's skills in terms of political juggling and the opposition's performance in terms of further consolidating and expanding the revitalized democratic resilience under a tilted political playing field.

What does this victory mean for the CHP?

A new generation with a new formula

by *Massimo D'Angelo e Selin Güçüm*



© Italo Rondinella. Ekrem İmamoğlu, during the election campaign, just a few days before the vote, inaugurates the successful renovation of the Eminönü square to his people, at the foot of the Galata bridge connecting the Beyoğlu district with the historical peninsula.

The AKP as a party and Erdoğan as a leader have dominated the narratives, perceptions, and debates about Turkey's sociopolitical atmosphere since 2002, within and outside the country. However, as both the historical phases of the Turkish

Republic and the latest events show, another prominent and everlasting actor is the CHP. It is not only the oldest founding party of the Turkish Republic (1923) but also one that is in the limelight of contemporary Turkish politics, as it is the main opposition party whose actions, transformations, and electoral results are impacted – and has at the same time an impact on – either the success or contestation of the two-decades-long AKP rule and the trajectory of the political regime of Turkey at large.

Introduction

The CHP's deep roots in Turkish political history make it susceptible to praise and criticism. While the party is the champion of modernization and progress for many, for others, it is the repressive apparatus of Kemalism and the bureaucratic status quo against the voices of "the people"¹. This is related to the party's long and complex history.

Indeed, when the Republican People's Party was founded in 1923, the Constitution adopted by the Turkish Parliament designed a unicameral system, an independent judiciary, and an executive system that put CHP at the center of the political system. The party originated from the various

¹ C. Kursat, M. Ugur-Cinar, A. Acikgoz, 'Turkey's Republican People's Party (CHP): A Longue Durée Analysis', *Turkish Studies*, 24(2), 2023, pp. 205-230.

resistance groups founded during the Turkish Independence War under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (renominated then Atatürk, father of the Turks) in 1919. In 1923, Kemal became the first president of this party, which would then take its official name in 1924.² Except for a few instances when opposition parties were founded and then disbanded under the influence of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the CHP maintained **a single-party system** in Turkey from its establishment until 1950 under the leadership of İsmet İnönü. Although it never resembled a fully totalitarian regime, according to some scholars, the party's rule was authoritarian, mobilizing a corporatist ideology in which the party vision used to parallel with national interest and the benefit of the people.³ Holding a firm hand in running the state allowed the party to bring many changes at different levels. Many of the institutions that were expressions of the Ottoman Empire were reformed, modernized, and strengthened, while other new institutions were founded. In this respect, the early republican era was often considered to be the period that saw the formation of the central institutional bodies of modern Turkey in the economic, political, and cultural realms.⁴

As the party of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in 1937, CHP promoted a new Constitution, which codified "**Kemalism**" as one of the founding principles

² A.L. MacFie, *Atatürk*. Routledge, 2014.

³ D. Arslantaş, Ş. Arslantaş, A. Kaiser, "Does the Electoral System Foster a Predominant Party System? Evidence from Turkey", *Swiss Political Science Review*, 2020, 26(1), pp. 125–143.

⁴ B. Çelik B. *Technology and national identity in Turkey: mobile communications and the evolution of a post-Ottoman nation*, I.B. Tauris, 2011.

of the Turkish Republic and a dogma to which everyone was obliged to show allegiance.⁵ This allowed the CHP to present itself as the defender of this state ideology that, to simplify, was based on six arrows (*Altı Ok*) and principles linked to an overarching idea of modernization, presenting the West as the central reference point.⁶ Political and social mobilization was somewhat limited during this period, as the dominance of the single-party regime and the "National Chiefdom" system within the CHP peaked around 1945. In the following years, Turkey fully embraced a multi-party political structure, which remains in place despite its imperfections.

Following the electoral defeat against the Democrat Party in 1950, a new era of multipartisanship dawned, allowing other parties besides the CHP to take office. Despite sporadic instances of governance by the CHP, primarily through coalition administrations, its tenure in power was limited until the late 1970s. While maintaining a significant political presence over time, the party has struggled to emerge as a dominant force through elections. Nevertheless, it has consistently been a target, especially for right-wing and Islamist factions, who portray it as the proponent of a Kemalist modernization agenda that opposes Turkey's predominantly Sunni-Muslim

⁵ Additionally, the Preamble of the 1982 Constitution declared that "no protection shall be accorded to an activity contrary to Turkish national interests [...] reforms and modernism of Atatürk". Thus, the Constitution appears not to extend state protection to non-Kemalist activities. Kemalism was deemed the "superior ideology" above all other ideals and forms of political activities.

⁶ These arrows were populism, republicanism, secularism, secularism, nationalism, and revolutionism. See S. Akşin, *The Nature of The Kemalist Revolution*, in *Essays in Ottoman-Turkish Political History*, Piscataway, NJ, USA, Gorgias Press, 2011, pp. 209-218.

culture and as the advocate of secularism and political elites at the expense of Islam and the general populace. One major shift that shaped the party's transforming trajectory occurred in the 1970s with the emergence of Bulent Ecevit's formula named *ortanın solu* (the left of the center), turning CHP into a mass party that attracted the highest level of political support in its history.

After a military coup in 1980, which **resulted in the banning of all political parties and the imprisonment of major politicians**, including those from the CHP, the party was prohibited until 1987. Former members of the CHP gave life to successor parties, notably the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP) and the Democratic Left Party (DSP). Following the ban lifting in 1992, Deniz Baykal, a prominent leader of the former CHP, re-established the Republican People's Party in 1992 and subsequently absorbed the SHP in 1995.⁷

The CHP's identity struggle

The early 21st century heralded a critical juncture for CHP, coinciding with the AKP's rise to power under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership in 2002. This era witnessed a profound reassessment of the party's ethos since 2010.⁸

⁷ For this period, see A. Güneş-Ayata, "The Republican People's Party", *Turkish Studies*, 3(1), 2002, pp. 102–121.

⁸ K. Kılıçdaroğlu, 'Change in Political Party Strategy and Organization in Turkey: The Republican People's Party in Government and in Opposition', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20(4), 2020, pp. 593–615.

During this period, under the leadership of **Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu**, the party embarked on a deliberate departure from entrenched nationalist narratives in favor of a more nuanced vision of social democracy anchored in humanism, tolerance, and solidarity. This transformation sought to bridge historical divides within Turkish society, leveraging Anatolian cultural values to foster a broader appeal. However, intra-party dynamics saw the emergence of the neo-nationalist (*ulusalci*) faction, which advocated for staunch secularism and expressed skepticism towards Western influences and the Kurdish question.⁹ Concurrently, the other social democrat faction, epitomized by Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership, espoused a "**social-liberal synthesis**", aligning with European social democratic principles while advocating for political liberalism and a social market economy.¹⁰ Overall, this period of ideological contestation within the CHP unfolded against the mounting electoral pressure from the centre-right AKP.

However, the dominance of the AKP in Turkey's political landscape compelled the CHP to soften **internal divisions**, aiming to appeal to a more diverse electorate.¹¹ The culmination of this transformative phase was underscored by the favorable outcomes of the 2019 municipal elections

⁹ T. Kardaş, A. Balcı. "Inter-Societal Security Trilemma in Turkey: Understanding the Failure of the 2009 Kurdish Opening", *Turkish Studies*, 17(1), 2016, pp. 155–180.

¹⁰ T. Alaranta, "Preconditions for the EU-Turkey Relations in the Secular-Nationalist Vision", FIIA Helsinki, 2 December 2019, <https://www.fiia.fi/wp>.

¹¹ D. Arslantaş, Ş. Arslantaş, A. Kaiser, "Does the Electoral System Foster a Predominant Party System? Evidence from Turkey", *Swiss Political Science Review*, 2020, 26(1), pp. 125–143.

when the CHP won key urban centers by leading a heterogeneous coalition. The party tried to repeat a similar strategy in the past presidential elections in 2023, building on the previous success. Nevertheless, under the leadership of Kilicdaroglu, the six-party **National Alliance** (*Millet İttifaki*) proved to be excessively heterogeneous and with a strategy almost exclusively in an "anti-Erdoğan" function, thus unable to convince an equally heterogeneous electorate with real and alternative proposals. The presence of different factions within CHP also remained, and this led to ambiguous policies. For instance, CHP's call for European values during the 2023 presidential elections clashed with the concurrent nationalist anti-migrant campaign where posters throughout Turkish cities invited Syrians to return home. Therefore, despite huge expectations, the opposition was unable to unsettle Erdoğan and his coalition.¹²

A new generation towards municipal elections

The turnout rate during the 31 March municipal elections was remarkably lower (78.5%) compared to the previous ones. This decrease was mainly attributed to the unmotivated and frustrated electorate on the side of Erdoğan's AKP. However, it is important to note that the CHP's dashed hopes after the 2023 loss contributed to lower motivation and increased the

¹² B. Esen, S. Gumuscu, "How Erdoğan's Populism Won Again", *Journal of Democracy*, 34(3), 2023, pp. 21–32.

frustration of its voters during the last year. For instance, as the head of the CHP in Istanbul, Özgür Çelik, revealed during an interview after these elections, half of the 33,227 poll watchers and two-thirds of the lawyers who had volunteered in the past declined to get involved again.¹³

Yet, in less than one year, the CHP managed to ensure the security of the polls by establishing an efficient mechanism for surveying and working in the electoral process. They were able to activate enough CHP voters to direct them to the polls. In contrast, AKP voters were more inactive. They expressed their "protest" in different ways: by abstaining from voting, by voting for other Islamist-conservative parties, or, in some cases, like in major cities, by shifting towards the CHP. Therefore, it is important to focus on the factors that made these changes possible and favorable for the party in such a short time.

Above all, **after the defeat suffered in 2023**, the CHP entered the electoral procedure under a newly elected leader, Özgür Özel, who belongs to the **social democrat wing** along with the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu. This group has called for a full-scale change within the party after the May 2023 presidential elections, including a change in leadership. Despite the delegate system, which has usually given an advantage to Kılıçdaroğlu as the head of the party, Özel was elected leader of the CHP, supporting a greater change within the party at the 38th ordinary congress held in November

¹³ TV 1000. "Az Önce Konuştum", 2 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ng8jQa9kZck>

2023. However, this does not mean the old party establishment has disappeared. In this context, the CHP chose its candidate and campaigned for the local elections. Particularly in the earlier stages, this internal split became evident in several instances, including the selection of the candidate for Izmir and the nomination process for candidates in specific districts of Istanbul.

Second, while the economic crisis, inflation, and the cost-of-living crisis were important factors in CHP's victory, these alone might not have been enough either to demotivate AKP voters or convince them to change their vote, let alone motivate CHP voters.¹⁴ It is essential to highlight that municipal elections have different dynamics than general elections. If one examines each district closely, it clearly emerges how the CHP has followed up on the strategy adopted in 2019 to run effective campaigns and select suitable candidates from a "new generation"¹⁵. Particularly in Istanbul, each district's candidate had a strong background story that resonated with the history of the district and its electorate. For instance, İnan Güney, the candidate for the district of Beyoğlu, is the son of a Beyoğlu municipality employee, born and raised in Beyoğlu, and had been involved with the CHP youth branch since 1995 before serving as the head of CHP Beyoğlu between

¹⁴ E. Aytaç, "Economic Voting During the AKP Era in Turkey", In M.T. Güneş, (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.

¹⁵ H. Yavuzılmaz, "When local becomes general: Turkey's 31 March 2019 elections and its implications for dynamics of polarization and sustainability of competitive authoritarianism", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 23(4), 2021, pp. 622-642.

2011-2014 during the Gezi protests. Candidates were also well-qualified for their positions and had previous experiences, allowing them to challenge AKP's governance effectively. Another interesting case is Sinem Dedetaş, the candidate for Üsküdar. A ship civil engineer whom the AKP's Istanbul Municipality prohibited from entering the Haliç shipyard, which the municipality aimed to privatize. The youngest mayor in Istanbul, Eren Ali Bingöl, the candidate for Tuzla, is a lawyer who also served as the former head of CHP in Tuzla. All three candidates won their districts for the first time in CHP's history, marking a new generation of young candidates with solid backgrounds, qualifications, relevant experience, and the potential to go beyond some of the firm points that historically prevented the CHP from expanding its voter base.

Effective campaign, softening polarization, and historical victory

Alongside the right candidate, the CHP pursued a campaign strategy that paid off. For the party, winning elections mainly hinges on appeasing nationalists without alienating Kurdish voters. Both groups possess the potential to radicalize each other and instigate polarizing discussions.¹⁶

¹⁶ E. Kalaycıoğlu, "Two elections and a political regime in crisis: Turkish politics at the crossroads", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 18(1), 2018, pp. 21-51.

While the opposition failed to strike this balance in the 2023 elections, most CHP candidates for mayoral positions appear to have regained equilibrium by shifting their political discourse away from nationalist rhetoric. In this delicate equilibrium, candidates cultivate a more democratic dialogue, concentrating on local issues while articulating arguments on the economy, social policies, merit, and public service. From a standpoint of political rhetoric, Imamoglu's case in Istanbul has shown a certain inclination to attract votes from the city's Kurds. Avoiding proposing solutions for a total end to the Kurdish question, on several occasions the newly elected mayor has attempted to use his charisma and the card of "emotional politics" and to "win hearts and minds" of a broader constituency, but without alienating the more traditional CHP base.¹⁷

A prime example of this approach was the *Kent Lokantaları* (municipality-owned restaurants serving inexpensive and healthy meals) in Istanbul and the free soup service in Ankara, which were appreciated social initiatives during economic turmoil. İmamoğlu, for his part, avoided major missteps during his campaign despite being the candidate who frequently addressed national politics. Given the government's tight control over the media, the opposition has minimal room for error.

¹⁷ For the topic, see M. Gizem, E. Müyesseroğlu, "Political Storytelling of Ekrem İmamoğlu on Instagram during 2019 Istanbul Mayoral Elections in Turkey", *Visual Studies*, 38(5), 2023, pp. 894–910.

Additionally, CHP's success in winning various districts in Istanbul and provinces across the country, including traditionally conservative regions like Adıyaman in Southeast Turkey and Kilis, a province bordering Syria, for the first time, indicates a softening of polarization along the secularism-conservatism divide.¹⁸ As mentioned above, the increasingly challenging economic conditions and the deepening cost-of-living crisis shaped electoral dynamics. In contrast to people's worsening living conditions, the CHP has been able to capitalize on its effective social policies and general "good management" over the last five years.

However, it is still crucial to exercise caution in voting behavior. Undoubtedly, these dynamics could compel AKP voters to either abstain from voting or, in some cases, support CHP. Yet, **this shift seems more of a warning than a definitive departure from the AKP**. In reality, these voters, aware that their dissent, or what AKP supporters call a "slap", wouldn't topple Erdoğan, intended to signal the party to address internal issues by

¹⁸ E. Ivković. "Somer: Overcoming harmful political polarization requires genuinely reformist politics", *EWB*, 31 March 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/03/31/ewb-interview-somer-overcoming-harmful-political-polarization-requires-genuinely-reformist-politics/>. Also see the author's other works on these dynamics, like M. Somer, J. L. McCoy, E.L. Russell, "Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies", *Democratization*, 28(5), 2021, pp. 929–48.

penalizing local candidates. Thus, it would be premature to interpret this as a definitive indication that voters will reject Erdogan in 2028.¹⁹

Conclusion

In the current situation, CHP managed to become Turkey's leading party for the first time since 1977, running alone, highlighting **two key points**: the party has strengthened its position and gained the autonomy to pursue its politics independently, and it has gained shares of votes from Kurdish, religious, and nationalist electorates. Each of these groups harbors certain expectations from CHP. Therefore, the CHP is now expected to send a message indicating that, while preserving its core identity, the party not only recognizes them as its voters now but is also attentive to their needs. Especially in Istanbul and in large cities outside the Kurdish-majority area, the pro-Kurdish party DEM's choice of not-so-charismatic candidates seems to have been unwilling to stand in the way of the CHP, with the intention of not draining votes in favor of the AKP.

Indeed, CHP achieved a significant victory, yet AKP's loss could have been more substantial. It seems more that voters gave CHP a credit of five years to prove itself capable of governing the country effectively at the municipal

¹⁹ Turkey Book Talk, "Seda Demiralp on Turkey's surprise local election results", *Turkey Book Talk*, 9 April 2024, <https://turkeybooktalk.com/2024/04/09/seda-demiralp-on-turkeys-surprise-local-election-results/>.

level. To some extent, the performance of local governance over the next five years will ultimately determine the outcome at the ballot boxes in 2028, in the sense that the local level will represent a visible platform on which the CHP can exhibit and concretize its "new outlook".

Furthermore, while Ozgür Özel assumed leadership of CHP, the other faction within CHP did not disappear, and some of its members managed to win municipal positions. Among them was the Afyonkarahisar candidate, who garnered attention for her strongly nationalist and anti-DEM rhetoric, prompting public reactions from Özel and İmamoğlu. Her unexpected election victory led to her first visit to Kılıçdaroğlu, further attracting attention within the party. This indicates that the internal struggle within CHP is not over yet but merely postponed, with the social democratic faction currently in an advantageous position. While the possibility of another congress remains on the table, the administration of CHP is becoming younger, more energetic, and more democratic, representing a progressive step for Turkish democracy on the part of the main opposition party.

Election results in "secondary" cities

The value of the vote beyond Istanbul and Ankara

by *Michelangelo Guida*



© Italo Rondinella. Before victory is certain, in front of the CHP party headquarters in Beşiktaş, an enclave of secular Istanbul society, Ekrem İmamoğlu's supporters begin to celebrate.

The March 31 elections witnessed the opposition's surge against the AKP in Turkey's major urban centers. International and Italian media headlines have focused mainly on the significant re-election of CHP mayors in Ankara and Istanbul.

Undoubtedly, these outcomes are noteworthy. However, to grasp the real impact of these elections – and possibly to ponder future political effects – a detailed look at the CHP's success and the AKP's decline across many provinces is essential.

Introduction

This article focuses on the election results in several provinces beyond the two major metropolitan cities, examining how the parties performed and their implications. Before proceeding, it is critical to outline the **Turkish electoral process** briefly. Turkish voters were presented with four different ballots: one for the village head (*Muhtar*) or urban neighborhood overseer, another for the provincial council (*İl Meclisi*) or the metropolitan municipality mayor (*Büyükşehir Belediyesi*), a third for the municipal council (*Belediye Meclisi*), and finally, one for the district municipal mayor (*İlçe Belediye Başkanı*). The provincial council primarily manages environmental affairs and construction outside municipal areas. However, such councils are not present in provinces governed by metropolitan municipalities.¹

In Turkish politics, local governments play a vital role. They are responsible for building regulations, transportation, urban infrastructure, waste

¹ E. Massicard, *Street-level governing: negotiating the state in urban Turkey*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2022.

collection, municipal policing, firefighting, cemeteries, parks, social services, marriages, and fostering the cultural and economic development of the city. Since 2020, Turkey has 30 metropolitan municipalities, akin to the Greater London Authority. After the recent municipal elections, the CHP controls 14 of these, while the AKP holds 12. The largest is Istanbul, with over **15 million residents**, while Erzurum, despite being the third-largest province by area, has just over 750,000 inhabitants. Metropolitan municipalities are tasked with the general regulatory plan, provincial transportation, public services for the elderly, people with disabilities, and children, local agricultural support, traffic management, and critical provincial communication routes.²

Turkish municipalities also play a crucial role in political funding and maintaining patronage networks. Over the past two decades, the **construction boom has fueled economic expansion** in this sector, with municipalities and metropolitan bodies regulating it. Concurrently, the need for improved local infrastructure has made municipalities key contracting authorities. In many cases, building permits are exchanged for "voluntary" donations to initiatives dictated by local administrators, such as funding sports teams, foundations, nursing homes, mosques, etc. Entrepreneurs also cover election office expenses, hoping their supported candidate succeeds. These practices and substantial social assistance spending are

² H. Akilli, H.S. Akilli, "Decentralization and Recentralization of Local Governments in Turkey", *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 140, 2014, pp. 682–686.

strategically organized to consolidate or expand the voter base. Additionally, municipalities cover part of the election expenses for incumbent mayors by advertising their achievements on billboards and emphasizing the critical role of municipal control in consensus-building.

The CHP from Izmir to Adıyaman

Let's analyze the CHP's success, beginning with the country's third most significant city. Izmir has been a CHP stronghold since 1999, so the outcome was unsurprising. The party also won 27 out of 28 municipalities within the metropolis. However, due to his alignment with the former party leadership, the previous mayor wasn't renominated and chose not to support the new candidate. This resulted in a four-percentage-point loss for the party, indicating internal discontent and the unpopularity of the new leadership's politics. Particularly, mayors **İmamoğlu and Yavaş represent a shift towards center-right**, which everyone hasn't received well in the city, which many consider the most progressive.

This change was instead welcomed in provinces beyond the western coastal belt. For the first time, the CHP made significant inroads in traditionally nationalist-conservative areas like Balıkesir and Manisa. In the latter, the party didn't increase its vote share but benefited from the AKP's plummeting support. In Balıkesir, in 2019, the CHP didn't field a candidate but supported

the nationalist İYİ Party (Good Party, İP), which came second with 46%. This time, the CHP nominated a parliamentary representative without any coalitions and secured 51% of the votes, distancing itself by eleven points from the AKP. In comparison, the İP garnered a mere 3%.

Yet, what truly surprised everyone was the CHP's result in Adıyaman, where in 2019, the party had supported a candidate from the religious Felicity Party (SP), partly due to receiving a meager 12% in the 2018 policy elections. The province is among those most affected by the **devastating earthquake of 2023** and has a **conservative Kurdish population**. Only 31.2% of the electorate had voted for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential elections. However, Erdoğan had to admit that the relief efforts were delayed by three days in the city, which increased the casualty count, and he asked for forgiveness. It seems that the local population did not forgive him. The result was a lower turnout (70%, 10% less than in 2019), and the AKP here halved its votes, dropping from 53% to 27%. The CHP candidate Tutdere obtained 50% of the votes, thanks to his efforts to alleviate the city's suffering immediately after the earthquake.

The AKP in Konya and Şanlıurfa

For the AKP, Konya remains a bastion, with the incumbent mayor of the metropolitan municipality re-elected. Nevertheless, the AKP's vote share

dropped from 70% to 49%. The incumbent mayor barely secured a majority in the municipal council as the CHP took five municipalities, and the **YRP achieved 23% of the provincial vote and took over six towns**. This shift in Konya was foreshadowed by Kılıçdaroğlu's 47% in the presidential runoffs a year ago. The YRP, reaping the dissatisfaction, has gathered former AKP voters, aiming to revive the Islamist movement of the 90s. In the 2019 local elections, the secular CHP did not present its candidate and supported the SP candidate ideologically tied to the Islamist movement. However, such an alliance of ideologically diverse parties didn't resonate with the electorate.³ Now, the CHP has garnered significantly more votes than the previous broad coalition and inherited the ballots from the İP, which, in Konya, managed to win only one municipality and secured a scant 3% across the metropolitan area.

The city of Şanlıurfa, bordering Syria, is a province where the AKP has consistently won and the CHP is virtually non-existent. In the latest political elections, the AKP received 43% of the votes here (nearly ten points less than in previous elections), with the Kurdish party being the second—Şanlıurfa has indeed a significant Kurdish (and Arab) population. However, in this province, local dynamics, tribal networks, and clientelism have always influenced the electorate. In the 2014 elections, an independent candidate, excluded from Erdoğan's party lists, surpassed the AKP candidate by four

³ M. Guida, "Friendship, kingship and interest: Informal politics in Turkey and the Example of Vote Mobilization in Istanbul and Şanlıurfa", *Alternatives Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 12(4), 2013, pp. 65-76.

points due to his own personal popularity. Even though the AKP later co-opted him, the city assertively demonstrated its autonomy to the AKP. It rejected Erdoğan's claim that "**even if I presented my jacket as a candidate, everyone would vote for the AKP**" (Erdoğan's own words at a rally in the city at the time). In these elections, the town once again rebuffed the ruling party. The YRP, with Mehmet Kasım Gülpınar — a four-time parliamentary member from the AKP, a Presidential advisor, and a representative of one of the province's main tribes — stood out. Gülpınar, in many interviews during the campaign, expressed feelings of being sidelined by the AKP, especially by Erdoğan's advisors. The resentment towards the President's inner circle is a critique often raised by right-of-center voters, who maintain sympathy for the President but not for his advisors (currently, none have resigned from their positions). With this strong critique, Gülpınar united other dissatisfied right-of-center minor party members under the YRP banner, who believed in the new party's slogan. The result was that the **YRP won a relative majority of 39%** and took control of the metropolitan municipality and one of the province's thirteen municipalities. The AKP's support plummeted from 60% in 2019 to 34%. The vote split between the AKP and the YRP favored the Kurdish DEM party, which won seven municipalities compared to only one in 2019.

Given the YRP's national results, it would be challenging to co-opt Gülpınar, who has achieved success that could re-launch him into national politics with a young movement promising to change national politics.

The YRP in Yozgat

Yozgat, northeast of Ankara, is the second province the YRP wrested from the AKP, securing 36% of the votes. In this province, like many in the Black Sea and Central Anatolia regions where leftist parties are non-existent, the AKP-MHP alliance did not present a joint candidate but separate ones. The division of votes favored the YRP, even though the **MHP increased its share from 16% to 30% since 2019**. The YRP presented Kazım Arslan, former city mayor elected in 2014 for the AKP. When not re-nominated in 2019, he ran as an independent and garnered 37% of the votes, just four points shy of his AKP rival.

Şanlıurfa and Yozgat have shown the AKP's underestimation of the YRP's ability to attract **protest votes** and those AKP members who felt marginalized.⁴

Conclusion

These examples elucidate the reasons behind the CHP's success, which has not seen such high percentages since the 1970s. In 2019, the "table of six"

⁴ On this, see M.E. Yilmaz, "The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey: The Case of the Welfare Party", *Turkish Studies*, 13(3), 2012, pp. 363–378.

didn't benefit the party. Indeed, in provinces like **Adiyaman or Konya, the party achieved a result far exceeding its joint list from 2019**. This indicates that the cultural and geographical barriers previously stunted the party's growth have been partly dismantled. Yet, the 1989 elections are often recalled. Then, the social democratic SHP secured 29% nationally, wresting numerous provinces and the country's main cities from the center-right. The SHP's (which later merged with the CHP) disastrous and corrupt administration led, in 1994, to the emergence of an Islamist party, causing a political earthquake and seizing numerous cities, including Ankara and Istanbul. Therefore, the party must carefully manage the towns taken from the AKP and strengthen its most popular and younger candidates.

The AKP has been penalized for its poor economic management and inability to renew its local cadre. The alliance with the MHP is unfavorably viewed by a significant faction of the party, mainly because the alliance forced a more nationalist discourse. Thus, the party lost Kurdish sympathies and halved its votes in Diyarbakır. Even if the government manages to reduce inflation, it can only do so by cooling the economy—which implies unemployment and growth slowdown, all carrying a heavy political cost. **The loss of many municipalities nationwide makes future electoral propaganda challenging**. Until recently, the party could easily control public discourse through its administrations and media. Municipalities will now contribute to promoting their parties' image, and some private media

are already realigning with the new political climate. The party's only hope is a radical overhaul, but it may no longer have the resources.

Local elections through the prism of the economy

Voting shifts and perspectives on Turkey's economic outlook

by *Selin Gücüm*



© Italo Rondinella. Late at night, when Imamoğlu's victory is assured, supporters of the re-elected mayor flock to the area around Saraçhane Park in the Fatih district; köfte (meatballs) sellers seize the opportunity.

*"There is no power that an empty pot cannot destroy".
Süleyman Demirel, former President and Prime Minister of the*

Turkish Republic used to pronounce this sentence to stress how the economy matters in terms of political dynamics. As a matter of fact, when asked about the 31 March election result during street interviews, many AKP voters admitted their anger towards the party because of the growing cost of living and increasing inequality.¹ Although the economic turmoil in Turkey started in 2018, this time it seems that "pocket issues" have affected the voters and electoral results more than usual in Turkey. On the other hand, Turkey's economic challenges are far from being overcome. In a country where politics and economy are severely intertwined, the election result will heavily impact the country's economic and financial direction.

Introduction

Powered by the presidential system adopted via the 2017 referendum, Erdoğan has been increasingly intervening in the economic realm in an unprecedented way. Due to the unorthodox economic policies of his government, also known as "Erdoganomics", which blames high-interest rates for inflation, Turkey's economy has been struggling with runaway

¹ Yurttaş TV, "Ekonomi AKP'ye Oy Verenleri Ağlattı! "Bir B.. Olmaz Bizden!" | Sokak Röportajları | Ekonomi", 23 September 2023, https://youtu.be/UKBQV_ExTR0?si=do6ZJLBBL-TyQZFT.

inflation and the consequent erosion of purchasing power since 2018.² In fact, despite signals in the opposite direction, Turkey's Central Bank has been lowering interest rates since August 2022. Aligned with Erdoğan's desire to decrease lending costs to single-digit figures, interest rates decreased from 14% in August 2022 to 8.5% in February 2023. What clearly shows the politicization of the economy is that the President removed three Central Bank governors between 2019 and 2021. This move led to increasingly less independent economic management, favoring a centralized executive role that has transformed Erdoğan into the micromanager of Turkish finances.

While Turkey reached a year-on-year GDP growth of 4% in the fourth quarter of 2023, the ultra-easy monetary policy pursued for years has produced the worst cost-of-living crisis in two decades and a huge devaluation in the local currency. The lira has fallen 62% against the dollar since 2021 and reached a record low of 30.005 against the greenback in January 2024.

The u-turn and political pragmatism

As the situation deteriorated further in the last months, Erdoğan had to step back **from his long-lasting push for unorthodox economic policies**

² A. Aydinbas, "What's wrong with Turkey's economy? 'Erdoganomics.'", *Washington Post*, 23 December 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/23/turkey-economy-erdogan-management/>.

towards a more conventional approach. However, as an experienced politician aware of the potential backfire of "tears and blood" reforms, he waited for the May 2023 presidential elections to be over before being forced to accept unpopular remedies for the economy. The first step in the transition to more orthodox economic policies was the appointment of Mehmet Şimşek as the new Minister of Treasury and Finance. Furthermore, Hafize Gaye Erkan, another prominent name in the field, was appointed as the governor of the Central Bank. Since then, the institution has gradually increased rates, reaching 41.5 percentage points in March 2024. Although Erkan resigned last February due to a "massive defamation campaign", her successor, Fatih Karahan, continued in the same direction and lifted the borrowing cost by five percentage points to 50% a week before the elections, aiming to cool down the inflation³.

Notwithstanding the return to orthodox policies, the Turkish economy worsened this year. The consumer prices index (CPI), the widely used measure of inflation, reached 68.5% yearly in March 2024, well above the Central Bank's target of 5%, and the Central Bank expects inflation to increase further by summer to 80% year-on-year. It should be highlighted that the inflation peaked in October 2022 at 85.5% year-on-year⁴ before

³ E. Erkoyun, D. Butler, "Turkey central bank stuns market with 500-point rate hike to 50%", *Reuters*, 21 March 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/rates-bonds/turkey-hikes-key-rate-500-points-50-surprise-move-2024-03-21/>.

⁴ I. Topa-Serry, "EM reaction: Turkish opposition obtains landslide victory in local elections", *AXA Investment Managers*, 2 April 2024, <https://www.axa-im.co.uk/research-and-insights/investment-institute/macroeconomics/market-alerts/em-reaction-turkish->

decreasing to 38% in June 2023⁵. One of the main reasons for the worsening inflation is the 49% increase in the minimum wage implemented in January, widely considered a vote-winning initiative before the March municipal elections. The decline in the value of the Turkish lira led to a surge in the cost of imported goods, further complicating efforts to control inflation. This situation has added to the vulnerability in a scenario where markets and investors are already concerned about policymakers' capacity to combat inflation effectively. Although the increase in interest rates before the elections somewhat alleviated the pressure by boosting confidence and resulting in a modest improvement of the Turkish lira against the dollar, there remains a significant journey ahead.

According to Turkey's banking watchdog, the total sum of foreign currency bank deposits held by Turkish residents has increased by approximately \$6 billion this year, reaching \$128 billion⁶. Despite last week's gains, the country's currency has depreciated by 8% against the dollar since the beginning of 2024, and, in case of not implementing more orthodox policies,

opposition-obtains-landslide-victory-local-elections#:~:text=With%20double%2Ddigit%20inflation%20rate,stimulus%20pushed%20by%20President%20Erdo%C4%9Fan.

⁵ B. Akman, "New Turkish Central Banker Redraws Inflation Path But Not Policy", *Bloomberg*, 27 July 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-07-27/new-turkey-central-banker-surprises-with-high-inflation-forecast>.

⁶ Editorial staff Financial Times, "Turkey raises interest rates to 50% as it seeks to cool runaway inflation", *Financial Times*, 21 March 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/70ad468f-1fc7-4cdb-9920-14ff64f3c609>.

some expect the lira to depreciate further in the coming months after the municipal election.⁷

The "electoral slap".

What changed in one year?

While many expected the economy to overthrow Erdoğan's government during the presidential elections, the economy seems to have weighed more in the local elections. The "empty pot" did not cease the AKP's rule because last year, the CHP did not manage to convince the voters around the country that they would do better in its management. On the one hand, while the CHP's organization was unsuccessful in penetrating the 81 provinces of Turkey, the electorate doubts that the six-party alliance would bring even more instability and skepticism about whether the CHP would be able to rule the economy better than AKP prevented any significant shift of preferences from the latter to the former. On the other hand, nationalistic discourses certainly prevailed during the presidential campaign, where CHP was accused of cooperating with PKK (Kurdish Terrorist Organisation). Erdoğan's maneuver to use Turkey's growing defense industry and the recall

⁷ Editorial Staff Reuters, "Turkey lira firms, stocks wobble after local elections", *Reuters*, 1 April 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/turkey-stocks-climb-lira-low-after-opposition-election-win-2024-04-01/>.

to a powerful Turkish army reinforced his image of "a strong man who can solve all the problems"⁸.

If this mechanism led someone to think that "AKP's sympathizers would follow Erdogan in all conditions" the worsening of Turkey's economic situation and its heavy impact on people's everyday life showed a more nuanced picture. Thus, contrary to the common belief, on 31 March, voters appeared well aware of the economic crisis and headed to the ballot boxes "with more than one hand on their pockets"⁹.

The first reason behind this ultimate shift in voters' behavior resided in the peculiar dynamics of the local elections that happened in a context where the crisis deepened, and the whole situation became more evident to the eyes of the common citizen. Even though Erdoğan had to concede with unpopular economic policies by raising the interest rates, problems such as inflation, depreciation of the currency, and the cost of living crisis continued to worsen.¹⁰ Among these categories, the retired population, who saw their pensions melt to almost half of the minimum wage, and the young people, who seem to care more about their future perspectives than ideological

⁸ H. L. Kara, "Adam Yine Kazandı: Ama Neden? ", *Kriter*, 1 April 2024, <https://kriterdergi.com/dosya-secimler/adam-yine-kazandi-ama-neden>.

⁹ Middle East Institute, "Turkey's Municipal Elections: What's at Stake for the Country's Democracy?", *Middle East Institute*, 28 march 2024, https://www.youtube.com/live/PlhhMbEL92Y?si=NUtJlaB_LObNk7ie.

¹⁰ S. Demiralp, G. Sert, B. Kokoz, L. Cerrahoğlu, "2024 Yerel Seçimlerine Doğru: Seçmen Apatisi ve Siyasi Tercihler", *Istanbul*, 2024, March 28, <https://t.co/tQEhwZ2Psr>.

stances¹¹, were the most vulnerable. As the retired population constitutes a significant portion of the AKP's voters, these local elections are likely to have presented them with a chance to punish AKP's mismanagement.¹² Indeed, the local elections are a unique occasion in which AKP voters were able to send a strong signal to the party about dissatisfaction with the economy and the wish to see an improvement, yet without the risk of major instability, namely without putting Erdoğan's presidency and leadership in danger overall.

The other crucial factor was **the performance of the municipalities run by CHP**. As clearly showcased by the good examples of Istanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipalities, the party has successfully implemented social policies that aid people in challenging economic conditions. For instance, under Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Istanbul municipality has established a Social Policy Centre and implemented various social aids such as the *Kent Lokantaları* (municipality-owned restaurants serving inexpensive and healthy meals), widely advertised during the campaign. Similarly, the daily free soup service became central in advocating the municipality's social policies in Ankara. The same was the case at the district level in Istanbul, where, for instance, Beylikdüzü and Beşiktaş municipalities distributed

¹¹ B. Uzun, Begüm, L. Demet, "Polarisation and Youth in Turkey: Young People as Gatekeepers or Challengers of Polarisation?", *South European Society and Politics*, 2024, pp. 1–23.

¹² Editorial Staff Financial Times, "Turkey's opposition wins big cities in blow to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan", *Financial Times*, 1 April 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/0deead7-d98f-46a3-aac9-a4e18086e8b1>.

lunch meals to school kids. In terms of political trust, the attempt of the AKP candidate, Murat Kurum, to criticize and mock those projects has not only increased their popularity but also had a negative perception among voters, for whom "concrete improvements" seemed to bypass ideological or party affiliations.¹³

However, it should be highlighted that those economic difficulties impacted citizens much more severely in the bigger cities (where CHP is stronger) than in the rural areas (where usually the AKP is stronger).¹⁴ Yet, two factors might explain **how the CHP could penetrate Anatolian regions typically out of its traditional electorate basins at this time**. First, the virtuous example of the CHP-run municipalities might have convinced the voters in these areas about the party's realistic ability to help them overcome the economic difficulties, prompting a wider desire, also in Anatolian voters, to be ruled by CHP municipalities as well. A second related point, as the section below explains, is about the consequences one year after the tragic earthquake.

The financial cost of the earthquake

¹³ Editorial staff Politikyol, "Madde madde: Kent Lokantaları hakkında gerçekler neler? ", *Politikyol*, 24 February 2024, <https://www.politikyol.com/madde-madde-kent-lokantolari-hakkinda-gercekler-neler/>.

¹⁴ F. Gündem, 'Beliefs, economics, and spatial regimes in voting behavior: the Turkish case, 2007–2018', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 2023, 10(1), pp. 1-15.

On February 6th, 2023, an earthquake of immense magnitude hit a big portion of Turkey's Southeast territory and killed almost 50,000 people. This catastrophic event left millions without homes in the twelve hit cities. The affected region comprises approximately 15% of Turkey's population of 85 million. TÜRKONFED (Turkish Enterprise and Business Confederation) reported that these areas contribute 9% of the nation's GDP, 11% of income tax revenue, and 14% of income from agriculture and fisheries. The immediate damage of the catastrophe is estimated to be at \$34 billion, almost 4% of Turkey's annual economic output, according to the World Bank.¹⁵

TÜRKONFED projected the overall expense of the earthquake to reach \$84.1 billion, primarily allocated to housing costs at \$70.8 billion. Additionally, it accounts for lost national income at \$10.4 billion and calculates lost working days at \$2.91 billion. **This means that the earthquake's indirect impact on the economy is significantly greater, and the recovery process will neither be simple nor swift.** While the real meaning of these numbers might not have been so clear before the last Presidential elections, in the advent of the 31 March local elections, the delayed and cumbersome reconstruction process made more and more evident how heavy the economic cost for the

¹⁵ Editorial staff The World Bank, "From Earthquake Devastation to Resilient Revival in Türkiye", *The World Bank*, 6 February 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2024/02/05/from-earthquake-devastation-to-resilient-revival-in-turkiye#:~:text=The%20World%20Bank%20Group%20mobilized,earthquake%20resilient%20recovery%20in%20T%C3%BCrkiye>.

people is. Therefore, this became a test not only for the government but also for municipalities themselves.¹⁶

As such, another indirect cost of the earthquake was undoubtedly an electoral one for the AKP-led government. **The region impacted by the earthquake was widely spread over the AKP's electoral base.** At least until the presidential elections, thanks to promises to rebuild houses and provide state aid, the government gave the impression of being able to cope with the consequences of the earthquake. This partially explains why, contrary to many expectations, voters in the region acted with their survival instinct and remained AKP voters. Contributing to these dynamics were also discourses of Erdoğan's party that pictured the AKP as a savior who made more realistic promises based on state capacities. Conversely, this portrayed the CHP as a riskier alternative in their perspective.

Indeed, the anti-Propaganda sentiment toward the CHP was another element that helped the AKP remain a strong party in the region. One example among many fostered by the pro-governmental media is statements about a potential collaboration between the PKK terrorists and the party. Therefore, discourses based on national security and nationalistic tones prevented any major change in voters' preferences.

¹⁶ Editorial staff The Guardian, "Still in ruins: the 2023 Turkish earthquake – then and now", *The Guardian*, 2 February 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/02/2023-turkish-earthquake-then-and-now>. See also R. Gasco, "Terremoto / Il sisma visto da Antakya. Un racconto", *Kaleydoskop*, 17 February 2023, <http://kaleydoskop.it/spazi/terremoto-il-sisma-visto-da-antakya-un-racconto/>.

To the surprise of many, AKP was the region's first party during the presidential elections, but this strategy proved less sustainable locally towards the 31 March local elections. Adıyaman, an affected region in the southeast, voted for AKP with 53%, and the Islamist SP with 28% in 2019, was won by CHP for the first time in 47 years.¹⁷ Similarly, Şanlıurfa, previously at the hand of AKP, was won by the Islamist party YRP. AKP lost a considerable amount of votes in the region. The earthquake's epicenter, Kahramanmaraş, where AKP received almost 70% of the vote in 2019, was barely won again by AKP with only 42% of the votes. The reason behind this was undoubtedly the disillusion of the voters in the region, who lived in tents beside ruins for more than a year and did not receive the help the government had promised.

Therefore, the gap between promises and reality could provide the key to explaining resounding defeats in areas where accusations of inequitable post-earthquake aid distribution were under the spotlight.¹⁸

Conclusion

¹⁷ H. Kamer, "Adıyaman'da CHP 47 yıl sonra nasıl seçim kazandı, seçmenler ne diyor?", *BBC News Türkçe*, 2 April 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cjq88x939xdo>.

¹⁸ Editorial staff Financial Times, "Election reverses show Erdoğan is more vulnerable than he thinks", *Financial Times*, 1 April 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/468b0c13-b89c-4ea9-93ca-7b2ec78939b8>.

Despite the return to orthodox economic policies and the tightening of monetary policy by the Central Bank, Turkey's economy continues to suffer from high inflation, a severe cost of living crisis, and currency depreciation. While both elements negatively affected the AKP votes, municipalities under CHP convinced the voters that they could support them better than AKP under these circumstances. Furthermore, the local election dynamics encouraged voters to punish AKP due to the growing economic problems and their decreasing life quality. Additionally, it should be noted that these elections were also affected by the fact **Erdoğan's government was unable to distribute benefits**. Losing Istanbul, the country's economic engine, in 2019 deprived the AKP of access to important resources like rents and construction business. The AKP managed to distribute benefits until the May elections, yet the severity of the situation did not allow the government to keep following the same unsustainable path. During his political meeting on the 24th of March at the former Atatürk Airport, Erdoğan had to admit the economic discontent openly. Pensioners and young people now represent those groups ruthlessly affected by the economy. From a more long-term perspective, the middle class in Turkey has been melting and losing its gains in recent years. The enlargement of this void also explains the shift of voters within the conservative-Islamist camp from the AKP to YRP. While the latter has usually successfully targeted this basin of the electorate, in times of high inflation, any attempt to redistribute the benefits evaporates much faster and fails to heal people's grievances. Despite a similar ideological

background, YRP has presented itself in a populist manner as a party that could fill the void left by the AKP, which "detached from the working class of the country"¹⁹.

Regarding what to expect from policymakers and the economy, **it is unlikely that Erdoğan will return to his unorthodox policies** as he has no other choice but to continue supporting Mehmet Şimşek's policies and implement more structural reforms. One on the government's table is to change a tax system that impacts the lower and middle classes more than the high-income ones (which have benefitted from cheap credits). This would mean redistributing the cost of a "bitter drug" that has to be swollen in any case. Yet, there is still a very long and difficult path ahead.

¹⁹ M. Hamsici, "Yeniden Refah Partisi neden ve nasıl güçlendi?", *BBC News Türkçe*, 2024, April 4, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c8033n7zn8ko>.

The role of the pro-Kurdish DEM party in the 2024 local elections

Navigating new political waters

by *Yasin Duman*



© Italo Rondinella. Before victory is certain, in front of the CHP party headquarters in Beşiktaş, an enclave of secular Istanbul society, Ekrem İmamoğlu's supporters begin to celebrate.

This contribution aims to analyze the outcomes of the recent local elections held on March 31, 2024, by focusing on the DEM

Party as an emerging actor across three key themes: coalition and alliance strategies, conflict resolution, and the potential to restore the democratic autonomy model. It is important to look at these fields as the DEM Party has the potential to consolidate its power in Kurdish-populated areas, across Turkey and influence the trajectory of the next Presidential elections.

Introduction

As the "Turkish-Kurdish question" represents one of the most significant unresolved issues in the history of republican Turkey, also **Kurdish political movements have always had to face significant human rights violations, including party closures** (see Table 1), imprisonment, torture, and the killing of their cadres and members of parliament, mayors, and supporters.¹ On the one hand, since most Kurdish political parties have traditionally been influenced by the ideology of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish armed group that has been in conflict with the Turkish state since 1984, these parties have struggled to become legitimate political actors. On the other hand, ethno-nationalist divides and transnational security issues

¹ A. Işık, *Turkish Paramilitarism in Northern Kurdistan: State Violence in the 1990s*, Edinburgh University Press, 2024.

make it difficult for these movements to exist through resistance against the Turkish state's oppression and indiscriminate violence.²

² M. Yegen, 'Ethnopolitics to geopolitics: the Turkish State and the Kurdish question since 2015', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 50(4), 2023, pp. 943-961.

Middle East and North Africa An analysis of Turkish municipal elections

Table 1: Timeline of the mainstream Kurdish parties

<i>Party name</i>	<i>Formed in</i>	<i>Election outcomes</i>	<i>Disbanded in</i>
People's Labour Party (HEP)	1990	18 MPs elected as a result of coalition with (SHP).	1993
Freedom and Democracy Party (ÖZDEP)	1992	No election. Formed following the possibility of closure of HEP.	1993
Democracy Party (DEP)	1993	No election. Formed following the possibility of closure of ÖZDEP.	1994
People's Democracy Party (HADEP)	1994	Failed to win parliamentary seats in 1995 due to 10% threshold; won 37 municipalities.	2003
People's Democracy Party (DEHAP)	1997	Elected mayors of HADEP moved to DEHAP.	2005 (dissolved itself)
Free Party (ÖP)	2003	Won 69 municipalities in 2004.	2007 (dissolved itself)
Democratic Society Party (DTP) ³	2005	In 2007, 20 MPs were elected as independents to bypass the 10% threshold. Won 97 municipalities in 2009.	2009
Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) ⁴	2008	In 2011, 36 MPs were elected as independents and formed the BDP's parliamentary group. Won 102 municipalities in 2014, with mayors under BDP.	2014 (dissolved itself and changed its name to Democratic Regions' Party ⁵)
People's Democratic Party (HDP)	2012	BDP's cadres transitioned to HDP, winning 95 municipalities in 2014 and 80 seats in the 2015 general election with 13% of votes. However, seats dropped to 59 in a subsequent 2015 election. In the 2018 early general election, HDP secured 67 seats and won 65 municipalities in the 2019 local election. For the first time in 2016, the Ministry of Interior appointed trustees to replace all of HDP's elected mayors, and 59 in 2019.	A case was filed to disband the HDP in 2021. To avoid the risk of closure, HDP candidates joined the Green Left Party (YSP), which was formed in 2012.
The Green Left Party (YSP)	2012	HDP's candidates entered the YSP's lists and won 61 seats in the 2023 general election.	Following the election, replaced by the People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Parti)
People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Parti)	2023	Won 85 municipalities ⁶ in the 2024 local election.	

³ Introduced co-chair system to ensure equal representation of male and female chairs.

⁴ Played a key role in the 'Peace Process' initiated in 2013.

⁵ Democratic Regions' Party was formed to be active in the provinces of northern Kurdistan supporting the HDP in its programs across Turkey.

As such, Kurdish movements have always tried to seek alternative approaches to address the likely threats and barriers, such as imprisonment, party closure, and legislative restrictions. Even though the issue has deeper historical roots and underlies more complex dynamics, for the sake of the latest developments, it is important to highlight how these alternative approaches have been elaborated as well as how they are still significantly impacting Turkish socio-political dynamics.

Coalitions and alliances

Coming to power in 2002 and winning the majority of the votes until the 2015 election, Erdoğan and his AKP became the major players in Turkish politics. The **historic success of the pro-Kurdish HDP (now DEM) in 2015** gave a significant blow to Erdoğan's party. The party's former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtas, played a key role in this success as he had the ability to reach out and include a wider and more diversified population, particularly during the 'Peace Process', which is explained further below. Running as a presidential candidate in 2018 while he was imprisoned, he was able to garner 8.4% of the votes. This led the AKP to seek the support of the ultranationalist MHP to pass a law in 2018 allowing parties to form electoral alliances. These two parties then formed the People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*). As a response, the

⁶ The DEM Party objected to the election outcomes in some provinces, claiming the government party has been involved in frauds to win the municipality.

CHP formed the Nation's Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*) with the newly formed right-wing İYİ Parti (who set apart from the MHP) and four other smaller parties, including two emerging ones from within the AKP, that joined the alliance at a later stage.

For the HDP and its leaders, it was never an option to join either the first or the second alliance as the coalition member parties were known for their racism against and hatred towards Kurdish politics⁷ and insisted that the HDP should be closed.⁸ Therefore, recognizing these impossibilities, **HDP had only one option: forming the Labour and Freedom Alliance in 2022** with five other left-wing parties, none of which were as powerful as HDP. Although the majority of the supporters of the Labour and Freedom Alliance voted for the opposition's presidential candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, against Erdoğan in the first (44.88% vs. 49.52%, respectively) and second (52.18% vs. 47.82%) round of 2023 election, their support was not enough to replace Erdoğan. This strategy led to voters' disappointment and sharp criticism of the party's decision to back Kılıçdaroğlu without a tangible gain. This was especially true when, before the runoff, Kılıçdaroğlu allied with the Victory Party (*Zafer Partisi*), another formation known for its ultra-nationalist and anti-Kurd stance. As a result, the Kurdish movement, which had

⁷ F. O'Connor & B. Baser, "Communal Violence and Ethnic Polarization Before and After the 2015 Elections in Turkey: Attacks Against the HDP and the Kurdish Population", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 18(1), 2018, pp. 53-72.

⁸ Editorial staff Bianet, "HDP will be closed down 'both legally and politically,' says AKP's Özkan", *Bianet*, 3 March 2021, <https://bianet.org/haber/hdp-will-be-closed-down-both-legally-and-politically-says-akp-s-ozkan-240240>.

advocated for a "third way" – neither siding with the opposition nor the government and proposing radical democracy as a solution to issues including the Turkish-Kurdish conflict – appeared to set aside its principles in hopes of defeating the People's Alliance in the election.

What is more critical was the illusion that an alliance, including the Victory Party and İYİ Party, could work towards the peaceful resolution of this conflict. Soon after the 2023 election, the HDP officials recognized the dysfunctionality of their strategy (making the AKP lose) and went through a transformation process, returning to the "third-way" strategy. In the recent local election, this helped the Kurdish movement to consolidate its power, win the majority of the provincial municipalities in Kurdish regions, and vote strategically in other provinces, as was the case in Istanbul, to defeat the People's Alliance and ensure the election of their candidates. Thanks to the "Council Consensus" (*Kent Uzlaşısı*), HDP's preferred candidate, Ahmet Özer, was elected as mayor of Esenyurt, a district in Istanbul with a significant Kurdish population. Similarly, the **Kurdish community in Istanbul largely supported CHP's Ekrem İmamoğlu** over AKP's Murat Kurum. Additionally, as highlighted by D'Angelo and Gücüm's contribution, the DEM Party's decision not to back Başak Demirtaş (Selahattin Demirtaş's wife and a favorite among Kurds in Istanbul) was strategic. Although Başak was unlikely to win, her potentially high vote count could have jeopardized İmamoğlu's chances of victory against the AKP.

Therefore, the experiences of exclusion from the alliances and critiques of the pro-Kurdish representatives' abnegation of negotiation for political gains 'forced' the movement to change its policy, which also gave an opportunity to re-emerge as a powerful actor as it was before 2018.⁹

Conflict resolution

During its second term, in 2009, the AKP initiated the "Democratic Opening", a peace process aiming to address the issues stemming from the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, that ethnic, sectarian, and other minority groups encounter. In this process, some progressive steps were taken, including the lifting of the ban on the Kurdish language. Despite its limitations, this was an important process showing that, for the first time, **a government publicly announced that it was negotiating with the PKK and its leader**, Abdullah Öcalan. Joint efforts were made by both sides to achieve societal reconciliation, recognizing it as an essential factor for a long-lasting peace.¹⁰

⁹ I. Woudwijk, "After their elected officials were replaced, DEM Party voters head to the polls without expectations", *Turkey Recap*, 25 March 2024, <https://turkeyrecap.substack.com/p/after-their-elected-officials-were>.

¹⁰ B. Baser & A. Ozerdem, "Conflict Transformation and Asymmetric Conflicts: A Critique of the Failed Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33(8), 2021, pp. 1775-1796.

Following the collapse¹¹ of the peace process in 2015 and the failed coup attempt in 2016, the government initiated a full-scale "security operation" against the HDP, arresting its co-chairs, MPs, and hundreds of members and a series of military operations against the PKK and Kurdish armed units in Rojava (a majority populated region in Northern Syria) and the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. The prevailing feelings of insecurity among AKP officials, stemming from political power losses to the HDP and perceived betrayal by the Gülenist Movement, facilitated the alliance with the MHP and other "hardcore" right-wing parties. These parties capitalized on the AKP's vulnerabilities to advance their interests, push for military operations against Kurdish forces, and prevent a return to the peace process.

Another critical aspect to consider is that with ultranationalist parties losing support in the recent local elections, the DEM Party stands poised to exert considerable influence over the balance of power. This is particularly significant as the AKP finds itself in its weakest position since 2002, while the CHP has attained its strongest stance since 1977. DEM Party's support to any of them can significantly contribute to securing a majority in the next elections. Therefore, if the DEM Party can consolidate its influence over the next five years and reinforce its electoral base, the **prospects for a new phase of the peace process become increasingly plausible, whether with the AKP or the CHP.** One potential avenue for the DEM Party to strengthen its position is by revitalizing the democratic autonomy model through

¹¹ Both the AKP and the HDP blamed each other for the failure of this process.

municipal governance. However, the feasibility of this approach largely hinges on whether the AKP chooses to stay with the ultranationalist parties and criminalize the DEM's local governance initiatives or return to its relatively more democratic foundational principles in 2002.

Demirtaş and the democratic autonomy model

The democratic autonomy model has been one of the key factors shaping DEM's election campaign. The Kurdish movement took the first steps toward the democratic autonomy model following the formation of the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) in 2007. This administrative model, proposed by Öcalan and currently practiced on a full scale in Rojava (Syria), "emerged as a grassroots challenge to the nation-state model of politics and governance on the principles of radical democracy, ecology, and gender liberation"¹². The model aims to reduce the state's impact on how society organizes itself, increase its efficacy in self-govern, address its social and financial problems, and **ensure the political representation of different identities**. There is now a possibility that the DEM Party co-mayors will try to re-introduce democratic autonomy policies through municipal projects. An example of

¹² E.W. Schoon, 'Building Legitimacy: Interactional Dynamics and the Popular Evaluation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 28(4–5), 2017, pp. 734–54.

this is the reinstatement of multilingual administration, which was promptly implemented upon the co-mayors assuming office.

Selahattin Demirtaş, HDP's former co-chair, has increasingly become an important political figure not only among Kurds but also in Turkish politics as a staunch advocate of his party's policy to defeat Erdoğan since 2018. However, as this strategy failed in the 2018 and 2023 presidential elections, he chose to remain largely silent before the 2024 local election. Yet, just before the elections, he called on the DEM supporters to play their historical role. A similar call was made by Leyla Zana, another highly influential figure in Kurdish politics, who spoke at DEM Party's meetings and Newroz celebrations, urging Kurds to unite and the government to resume negotiations with Kurds.¹³

The case of Van

One key moment in the recent election centered around the case of Van, a city with a high density of Kurdish people. The Provincial Electoral Board unlawfully substituted the DEM Party's elected candidate, who had secured 55% of the vote, with the AKP's candidate, who had only received 27%, just two days after the election. The reason for substitution was related to the

¹³ Editorial staff Rudaw, "Leaders call for resolution of Kurdish issue at Diyarbakir Newroz celebrations", *Rudaw*, 22 March 2024, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/22032024>.

Court's decision, initially allowing him to stand for election but reversing his right just two days before the vote. This led to widespread protests across the city, met with violent responses from the police and criticism from almost all parties (except for the ultranationalist ones).¹⁴ As a result, the Board was compelled to **reverse its decision and reinstate the DEM Party's candidate**. Both Demirtaş and Zana also played active post-election roles, particularly in the province of Van. Demirtaş wrote a letter addressing Erdoğan to follow through on his promise of respecting the people's decision and election outcome. Zana, accompanied by other DEM Party's co-chairs, MPs, and Başak Demirtaş, traveled to Van the next day to support DEM Parti's struggle to reverse the decision.

The case of Van is critical from several points of view. First, the AKP attempted to implement another form of trustee regime (*kayyum*) by taking advantage of its control over the judicial system but was unsuccessful, mainly due to the Kurdish voters' continuous struggle despite police violence. Second, there is a consensus that the trustee system is not advantageous for the AKP, as it lost in most of the Kurdish region. Many claim the party could only win in the municipalities of the Kurdish provinces (e.g. Şırnak and Bitlis) by **relocating people from other provinces to vote for them**. Furthermore, it does not benefit the people, as the AKP's

¹⁴ Editorial staff Financial Times, "Turkish authorities yield to protesters over local election", *Financial Times*, 4 April 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/1a19275c-a877-444e-bdaa-5aa4ee88f20a>.

candidates in Van and Diyarbakır declared in advance that they do not want to be appointed as trustees. Lastly, due to the AKP's suppressive policies in the Kurdish region and the corruption caused by the trustee regime, the party lost significant support from the Kurdish electorate.

Conclusion

Despite facing challenges such as marginalization, suppression, and violence from the Turkish state, the Kurdish political actors have demonstrated resilience and determination. The failure of the previous peace process, coupled with ongoing conflicts and authoritarian measures, has shown the need for constructive engagement and dialogue. As the **DEM Party emerges as a significant actor following the recent local elections**, there is potential for reshaping the political landscape and advancing towards a more inclusive and democratic future. However, this journey requires concerted efforts, collaboration, and a commitment to addressing the grievances and aspirations of all stakeholders. By navigating through these complexities and joining their collective strength, the Kurdish movement stands self-confident in contributing positively to Turkey's democratic evolution and societal harmony.

Erdoğan and the AKP's communication strategy

A perpetual electoral campaign

by *Filippo Ciccù*



© Italo Rondinella. Late at night, when Imamoğlu's victory is assured, supporters of the re-elected mayor flock to the area around Saraçhane Park in the Fatih district; köfte (meatballs) sellers seize the opportunity.

"Full Speed Ahead" (Tam Yol İleri) and "We Don't Stop, We Move Forward" (Durmak Yok, Yola Devam). There isn't much difference between the campaign slogans of the two leading

figures in the latest local elections in Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul who already defeated the Turkish President's candidate at the polls five years ago, and on May 31 was once again confirmed as the mayor of Turkey's largest and most important city, receiving even wider public support than in 2019.

Introduction

"The sentence 'we don't stop, we move forward' is not just a slogan for us; it's a summary of our life and our approach to service", Erdoğan declared on April 16, 2017¹, the day when 51.4% of voters approved amendments to the Constitution, through a referendum, which replaced the parliamentary system with a presidential one, **labeled as inappropriate by the Venice Commission** of the Council of Europe².

This slogan, also widely used in the campaign for these elections, is, after all, one of Erdoğan's party's historic messages, already appearing on AKP posters after its first election victory in 2002. Erdoğan's party has always invested heavily in shaping its image, creating very interesting messages

¹ Tweet AK Parti, <https://twitter.com/Akparti/status/942033933478309888>.

² European Commission For Democracy Through Law, "Turkey, Opinion on the Amendments to the Constitution Adopted by the Grand National Assembly on 21 January 2017 and to be Submitted to a National Referendum on 16 April 2017", 13 March 2017, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=cdl-ad\(2017\)005-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=cdl-ad(2017)005-e).

from a communicative point of view and proving them effective in attracting attention and voters. The way the party's name is referred to - in the media, during conversations among people on the streets, or in public debates in Turkey - marks a distinction between those who support and those who oppose the political force of the President. The latter generally refer to it as AKP, simply using the acronym with the initial letters of the three words that define the Justice and Development Party. On the contrary, supporters of Erdoğan and the President himself more often use the expression "Ak Parti", emphasizing the word "*ak*", which in Turkish means "white," "clean," or "pure". This has been cleverly used to express the **image of a new political force aiming to distance itself from the economic crisis and the political confusion** where Turkey was heading at the end of the 1990s. Another expression used by the AKP in its early days, in line with the same idea, was "*gömlek değiştirmek*", which translates to changing one's shirt, again indicating the intention to leave behind the deadlock reached by Turkish political parties at that time³.

The communicative power of the AKP

The AKP's effective political communication has played a crucial role in the success story of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since he established the party in

³ On the origin of the party see V. Giannotta, *Erdoğan e il suo partito. AKP tra riformismo e conservatorismo*, Roma, Castelvechi, 2018.

2001. It brought together Turkish political Islam – while moderating its religious fervor – with the pragmatism of the liberal center-right. Intended as a **catch-all party**, it indeed became a sanctuary for Islamists who had been oppressed by the post-modern coup a few years earlier, which saw the military ban these political forces, as well as for voters disillusioned by the disarray within center-right parties amid an almost unstoppable economic crisis. Without aiming to win over the center-left, in the 2002 elections, the AKP managed to secure the majority of the votes with 34.2%, leading the government and dominating a parliament where only the CHP, which had secured 19%, was present, as none of the traditional political Islam and liberal right parties could cross the 10% threshold to enter the assembly.

Thanks to the significant resources gathered following several victories at the elections, the party has always invested heavily in political communication, presenting sophisticated and modern campaigns. New slogans were added to the historical ones, **creating a coherent image that voters repeatedly rewarded**. Without ever giving too much space to its Islamist identity – at least in terms of political communication – which nonetheless is a fundamental element of the AKP, the party positioned itself as the force guaranteeing the country's economic development (*kalkınma*) through services for the population. This focus became the pact with the voters, who supported the party because of tangible results, such as economic growth, public health services, and the construction of significant infrastructures necessary to increase and maintain newly achieved wealth.

"We don't stop; we move forward", "*Durmak yok, yola devam*" was what citizens were supposed to remember at the ballot boxes before choosing the AKP symbol once again: a lit lightbulb, representing the idea of "*ak*" (clean), the purity of light to illuminate Turkey's future.

This communication strategy has, over the years, consistently surpassed with its impact other political forces, perhaps except for the pro-Kurdish party, which has changed its name several times over the last ten years but has always managed to present a compelling and coherent communication strategy, alongside significant gains in the elections, that have kept it as the third most represented force in the Turkish parliament even after the 2023 elections. Since the AKP's initial victory in 2002, the CHP has struggled to stand out in electoral performance and communication strategies. Despite consistently being the second most-voted party, the CHP has failed to establish itself as a challenger to Erdoğan, in contrast to the AKP's successes in nearly every election since then. This situation began to change five years ago, with the local elections where Turkey was introduced to Ekrem İmamoğlu⁴, then mayor of the suburban district of Beylikduzu on the European side of Istanbul, who ran with the CHP to become the mayor of Turkey's biggest city, challenging the former Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, supported by Erdoğan.

⁴ R. Gasco, "Imamoğlu: chi è il Sindaco che ha sconfitto Erdoğan a Istanbul", *Orizzonti Politici*, 12 April 2024, <https://www.orizzontipolitici.it/imamoglu-chi-e-il-sindaco-che-ha-sconfitto-erdogan-a-istanbul/>.

The initial challenges

The first major hiccup for the AKP in terms of communication came from a televised debate between İmamoğlu and Yıldırım. The opposition's mayoral candidate pushed for a live interview with Yıldırım. Initially hesitant, the former Prime Minister eventually agreed to attend the debate but ended up appearing quite awkward against İmamoğlu, who, on the other hand, appeared confident and **managed to cast a strong and fresh image into the homes of Turkish citizens**, where television remains a crucial medium of communication. The AKP's 2019 election posters featured Yıldırım's face alongside Erdoğan's, sending a clear message to voters to once again move forward in the same direction ("*yine biz yaparız*", "we will do it again") while their connection with Istanbul was described as "**a love story**" ("*Bir aşk hikayesi*"). İmamoğlu also employed this latter concept during that election campaign. It remains unclear who first coined the phrase, but İmamoğlu managed to convey it more authentically and persuasively. Using an inclusive and peaceful language, based on Ateş İlyas Başsoy's theory of radical love⁵, İmamoğlu's election posters showed him with a bright smile, and his slogan was "*Her şey çok güzel olacak*", which translates to "everything

⁵ F. M. Wuthrich, M. Ingleby, "The Pushback Against Populism: Running on "Radical Love" in Turkey", in *Journal of Democracy*, 31(2), pp. 24-40, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-pushback-against-populism-running-on-radical-love-in-turkey>.

will be all right"⁶. While the AKP simply continued with the political communication that had characterized it for nearly two decades, İmamoğlu presented himself as a breath of fresh air, partly due to reconciliatory rhetoric towards the cultural mosaic of the Turkish society and avoiding the polarizing speeches that had marked both his party's past ideology and Erdoğan's approach in previous years. While the Turkish president dominated the traditional media and pointed fingers at certain segments of society during his rallies, **İmamoğlu skillfully used social media to maximize his presence**, presenting himself as a calm, moderate man open to compromise, thus breaking the conventional Turkish politics of that era⁷. In the 2019 elections, İmamoğlu triumphed over Erdoğan's candidate not only once but twice. The AKP's objections following the initial defeat were accepted by the Election Board, and at the elections re-run a few months later, İmamoğlu's lead over Yıldırım dramatically increased.

Campaigning for the latest municipal elections

Five years on, Erdoğan failed to retake Istanbul, marking a significant setback for the Turkish President, taking into consideration that İmamoğlu

⁶ Editorial staff ANSA, "L'ascesa di Imamoglu, il rivale del Sultano", *ANSA*, 1 April 2024, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2024/04/01/lascesa-di-imamoglu-il-rivale-del-sultano_945ec3ff-8bd7-4364-b6f5-c1e1b5d7e635.html.

⁷ R. Gasco, "Imamoğlu: chi è il Sindaco che ha sconfitto Erdoğan a Istanbul", *Orizzonti Politici*, 12 April 2024, <https://www.orizzontipolitici.it/imamoglu-chi-e-il-sindaco-che-ha-sconfitto-erdogan-a-istanbul/>.

had already seized the city from Erdoğan's party in 2019, while his political movement had ruled over the city unchallenged for over two decades. The AKP attempted to win back the city by nominating a bureaucrat, former Minister of Environment and Urban Planning Murat Kurum, employing the slogan "*yeniden İstanbul*" (New Istanbul), reminiscent of a Trump-like "**make Istanbul great again**". At rallies, Kurum often seemed merely a background actor next to Erdoğan, who dominated the stage, speaking for nearly an hour on nationwide broadcasts and leaving the mayoral candidate with just a few minutes at the end. This pattern was replicated by the Turkish president in the dozens of rallies he held across the country during a month-long election campaign, where Erdoğan would draw applause from the crowd and only briefly introduce his candidates at the end, who did little more than greet the audience.

In this election campaign, Erdoğan partially shifted his rhetoric from the one used just ten months before for the presidential election, which he won in the second round⁸. He significantly toned down the aggressive rhetoric and attacks against the opposition, trying not to politicize the campaign too much, focusing more on the promise of services his party could offer to the population than ideological issues. This approach somewhat mirrored the opposition's electoral strategy in 2019. The Turkish leader spent less time

⁸ Editorial staff Redazione ANSA, "Erdogan vince ancora, ma ora il sultano è meno forte", ANSA, 30 May 2023, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2023/05/28/turchia-erdogan-si-riconferma-presidente-con-il-521-delle-preferenze_a7af6b1c-af7f-4e61-b1e5-b163ea5562fd.html.

on criticisms and more on listing achievements, mentioning infrastructure newly built, hospitals opened, highways nearing completion, and services provided to the general population, broadcasting explanatory videos. It's here that the slogan "*durmak yok, yola devam*" (no stopping, keep going) re-emerges, although in some contexts, it seemed disconnected from reality, like in Istanbul and Ankara, where the opposition had governed for the past five years. In Istanbul, İmamoğlu's "*tam yol ileri*" (full speed ahead) slogan appeared more credible to voters, a message he adapted from the AKP's old motto, making it his own but elevating it to a new level, **reflecting the changed context in today's Turkey compared to ten or twenty years ago.**

Erdoğan's message this year seemed less credible than usual, especially since Turkey has been experiencing an economic crisis over the last five years that has yet to be resolved. **It is not easy to convince voters that the best solution is to continue with the same direction**⁹ when inflation surpasses 68% and the national currency constantly weakens¹⁰. Economic issues were also present last year when Erdoğan still managed to win the presidential election. The head of state had asked for patience from the population, promising that problems would be resolved over time. However,

⁹ Editorial staff ANSAMED, "Turchia: media, astensione ed economia hanno sconfitto Erdogan", *ANSAMED*, 2 April 2024, https://www.ansa.it/ansamed/it/notizie/rubriche/nazioni/2024/04/02/turchia-media-astensione-ed-economia-hanno-sconfitto-erdogan_14fa611f-5613-4f35-bcbd-442ddaa67eba.html.

¹⁰ G. Sak, "Post-election Turkey returns to economic orthodoxy", *Gisreportsonline*, 7 February 2024, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/turkey-economic-orthodoxy/>.

seeing that the situation remained almost unchanged ten months after the presidential election, many voters decided to turn their backs on the Turkish leader.

Conclusion

The outcome of any election, anywhere in the world, is never solely related to communication. Still, without a doubt, an **effective communication strategy** can play a significant role in achieving favorable results. The success of the AKP, from 2002 onwards, has always been associated with a savvy political communication campaign. The defeat in the municipal elections reveals that Erdoğan's communication technique fails when it is not backed by the tangible results that his electorate had grown accustomed to, with the vote in the latest elections sending him a strong message. When economic outcomes do not meet expectations or align with past successes, asking voters to bet on continuity may not work. Erdoğan could still play the "*durmak yok, yola devam*" (no stopping, keep going) card if he manages to settle the economic crisis by 2028 when parliamentary and presidential elections in Turkey are scheduled. Four years are left, signs of recovery are present, albeit weak, and time may not be sufficient after a long-standing economic crisis.

The defeat in the municipal elections did not lead so far to a further collapse of the Turkish lira, and many financial analysts welcomed the appointment of Mehmet Simsek, a former minister for about a decade during better economic times, as the head of the Treasury in 2023. The markets seem to appreciate the Central Bank's new monetary policy - concurrent with Mehmet Şimşek's Treasury appointment - which has been regularly raising its benchmark interest rate after years in which Erdoğan waged a "war" on rates, pushing the institution to keep them low as the economic situation continued to deteriorate. The Turkish president must find the right words to tell the population that, under current conditions, the price of economic recovery seems to be austerity, with the risk of being seen as the leader of a party that has become part of the system, a populist force losing touch with the people.

During troubling years in the past, like the 2013 Gezi Park protests or the 2016 coup attempt, **Erdoğan has been able to turn adversity into advantage**, managing to stay in power through very harsh reactions echoing violent and aggressive rhetoric. A card he could play even after today's defeat, but without the support of most of the voters and in a challenging economic context, it might prove too risky. For this reason, the president may maintain relatively moderate rhetoric on domestic issues while trying to present himself to the Turks as a strong leader in the international context, a role he has managed to carve out with the crisis in Ukraine and which has been widely acknowledged by the Western world. Having

seemingly announced his intention not to run in the 2028 presidential election¹¹, Erdoğan, now 70 years old, might also seek to present a successor, who many believe could be Selçuk Bayraktar¹², the young engineer who, along with his brother Haluk, leads Baykar, Ankara's defense industry flagship, a company internationally known for selling drones to Ukraine that played a significant role in the first months following Russia's invasion. It would be a family affair, as Selçuk, the president's son-in-law, married Sümeyye, one of the president's daughters, in 2016.

¹¹ Redazione ANSA, “Erdoğan, 'quelle di marzo saranno le mie ultime elezioni'”, *ANSA*, 8 March 2024, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/europa/2024/03/08/erdogan-quelle-di-marzo-saranno-le-mie-ultime-elezioni_0f99d391-9b62-486b-833c-6db801dea4b1.html.

¹² J. Malsim, E. Kivilcim, “His Drones Helped Ukraine on the Battlefield. Could He Be Turkey’s Next Leader?”, *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/his-drones-helped-ukraine-on-the-battlefield-could-he-be-turkeys-next-leader-6d77bafa>.

Disinformation and politics in Turkey

A trend of disinformation campaigns and voters' disillusion

by *Jacopo Franceschini*



© Italo Rondinella. Before victory is certain, in front of the CHP party headquarters in Beşiktaş, an enclave of secular Istanbul society, Ekrem İmamoğlu's supporters begin to celebrate.

Disinformation has become a significant threat to the integrity of democracy. The recent municipal elections in Turkey exemplify a clear instance where the distinction between truth and political fiction became indistinct, influencing public

perception and cultivating a sense of voter dissatisfaction. This paper not only explores the dissemination of inaccurate information but also serves as an examination of a society struggling with the alteration of reality through digital means.

Introduction

Compared to the past, disinformation is a phenomenon that is becoming more relevant and incisive. The **digital age accelerated the pace of disinformation** campaigns, which expanded their diffusion and efficacy to a level that would have been considered unthinkable only a few years ago. The definition of disinformation also becomes problematic in identifying and framing the diverse typologies of false or manipulated information, which could be instead described more properly as misinformation or mal-information.

Additionally, the absence of a shared and homogenous definition of disinformation has made framing it more difficult. Still, the European Commission and NATO gave two official perspectives on the phenomenon. The EC delineates disinformation as "*verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm. Public harm comprises threats to democratic political and policymaking processes as well as public goods such as the*

protection of EU citizens' health, the environment or security".¹ NATO's outline approaches disinformation similarly by pointing out that disinformation is "the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information with the intent to deceive and/or mislead. Disinformation seeks to deepen divisions within and between Allied nations and to undermine people's confidence in elected governments."²

Despite being a member of NATO and an official candidate country to the UE, **Turkey represents an almost unique case in disinformation**, given the government's approach to this issue. The high technological and digital development that the country is witnessing, added to Turkey's social and political complexities, have contributed to creating a unique and fertile environment for disinformation. Nevertheless, the influence of disinformation campaigns in the last municipal elections might have had an unexpected outcome. Before exploring the impact of disinformation in recent elections, it is instrumental to examine the legal framing and the sociopolitical developments concerning disinformation and digitalization in Turkey.

¹ European Commission, "Communication - Tackling online disinformation: a European approach", *EU Commission*, 26 April 2018, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/communication-tackling-online-disinformation-european-approach>.

² NATO, "NATO's approach to countering disinformation: a focus on COVID-19", *NATO*, 17 July 2020, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm>.

Turkey's ecosystem in tackling disinformation

As in previous general elections in 2023 and also in the recent municipal elections, disinformation permeated the electoral campaigns on both sides. The disinformation phenomenon is not a recent development in Turkish politics but has been increasingly present in the last 20 years. Throughout the past two decades, **disinformation has kept up with the evolving political situation in the country** by changing targets, modalities, and audiences. However, with the advent of the digital age, the issue's magnitude has escalated, changing the tools and strategies of disinformation. Turkey has reached an alarming penetration of disinformation in recent years, making the Anatolian country among the most exposed in the world. The phenomenon is so widespread that in Turkey, the citizens targeted by the disinformation campaigns reached 49% of the population.³

Such high spread of disinformation in the digital sphere is attributable to multiple factors. The first one is the fast digitalization of the country. In 2013, the daily internet usage in Turkey involved 29,74% of the population, while in 2022, it had reached 80,02%.⁴ **The large consumption of digital tools** and

³ N. Newman, R. Fletcher, A. Kalogeropoulos, D. A. L. Levy and R. Kleis Nielsen, “News Report 2018”, Reuters Institute, 2019, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/digital-news-report-2018>.

⁴ Statista, “Share of daily internet users in Turkey from 2013 to 2022”, 8 August 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1238470/turkey-daily-internet-users/>.

internet usage as primary sources of information has expanded the country's disinformation risks.

The second significant factor is how legal bodies govern the flow of information, employing a state-centered approach to address the challenges posed by disinformation. Several crime typologies already present in the Turkish penal code, such as defamation, insulting the president, or spreading false information about the state and its institutions, have been amended or expanded by jurisprudence in order to include disinformation in their legal frames. The first law directly addressing disinformation is the so-called "Internet Law", adopted in 2007. This law, which allows blocking websites and removing content deemed to violate personal rights or privacy or to preserve national security and public order, has been used to target content the government claims to be false or disinformation. Since 2020, the "Social Media Law" requires social media platforms with more than one million daily users to establish a legal presence in Turkey while also compelling them to comply with Turkish court orders to remove content or face hefty fines and bandwidth reductions. As such, this regulation is exploited to control the spread of what the government considers disinformation and hate speech.⁵ More recently, in 2022, the Center for Fight against Disinformation was created to limit hate speech and fight

⁵ J. Franceschini, M. Falduti, "Cybercrime across Four Mediterranean Countries: a preliminary analysis of regulation and policies in Israel, Italy, Spain and Turkey", in G. M. Arrigo, J. Franceschini (Eds.) *Revolutionary Times: Mediterranean Perspectives*, Rome, Aracne, 2023.

disinformation. The specific objective of this institution is to observe and combat actions such as psychological warfare, propaganda, perception operations, manipulative content, and local and foreign disinformation efforts. In the same year, the "Law for Fight against Disinformation" was enforced, which focuses on rules pertaining to developing communication technologies and platforms. The legislation grants broadcasters and content creators specific privileges, places obligations on service providers, and aims to safeguard citizens against hate speech and the spread of disinformation.⁶

This legal framework has raised criticism and concerns about its efficacy in combating disinformation from several points of view. In an environment where more than 90% of media have some sort of connection with the government⁷, the fight against disinformation often overmatches the executive's censorship agenda. Moreover, a multistakeholder environment instead of a strictly state-centered one would have been beneficial for creating organizations that could independently research and disseminate studies on disinformation through fact-checking works.

⁶ F. Altun, "Truth is a Human Right", *Insight Turkey*, 25(1), 2023, pp. 13-28.

⁷ B. Esen, "Turkey's New Disinformation Law: An Alarming Trend Towards Cyber-Authoritarianism", German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkeys-new-disinformation-law-an-alarming-trend-towards-cyber-authoritarianism>.

Disinformation campaigns in Turkey's digital ecosystem

As briefly mentioned, disinformation has been shaped by the political and social debates shaking Turkey. In the aftermath of the 15th of July 2016 coup attempt, disinformation started to considerably permeate narratives through a tip-off campaign of alleged members of FETÖ⁸, which is largely considered to be behind the coup attempt in Turkey.⁹ **Trolls and Bots campaigns undertaken by pro and against government accounts** also significantly increased during the 2017 presidential referendum. An internet troll is somebody who deliberately provokes and upsets others online. Driven by their goals or financial incentives, these individuals frequently spread incomplete, erroneous, or blatantly fake news and information. On the other hand, a social bot is an automated social media account that impersonates a genuine individual yet functions without any human involvement and aims to spread fake news or target real individuals through bombing messages.¹⁰

In the past decade, other issues already linked to Turkey's national security have also become the focus of disinformation campaigns, especially on

⁸ Fethullah Terroristic Organization

⁹ M. Akser, "News media consolidation and censorship in Turkey: From liberal ideals to corporatist realities", *Mediterranean Quarterly* 29 (3), 2018, pp. 78-97.

¹⁰ Technology at MSU, "Troll and Bots", *Michigan State University*, 10 October 2022, <https://tech.msu.edu/news/2022/10/bots-and>.

social media. The actions of the Islamic State (IS)¹¹ or the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK)¹² have been exaggerated, minimized, or invented through social media disinformation.

Moreover, **disinformation is actively contributing to creating social unrest**, making use of the social problem created by the high number of refugees, especially those of Syrian origin. Fake news disseminated on social media often depicts Syrian refugees as beneficiaries of social funds and discounts precluded to Turkish citizens, while fake posts on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) claiming Syrians committing crimes such as rape and kidnapping against locals provoked actual clashes and turmoil.¹³

Nowadays, disinformation is not an abnormality in Turkish communication but rather a deliberate political communication used by both official government accounts and the opposition.

¹¹ K. Costello, "Russia's Use of Media and Information Operations in Turkey", *RAND Corporation*, 28 August 2018.

¹² M.S. Mencet, "Effect of Photo Verification Applications on Digital Manipulation: "Afrin Operation" Case", in A. Ayhan (Ed.), *New Approaches in Media and Communication*, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2019, pp. 415-430.

¹³ M. A. Foça, "13 false information about Syrians living in Turkey on social media", *Teyit*, 21 September 2017, <https://en.teyit.org/fact-check/13-false-information-about-syrians-living-in-turkey-on-social-media>.

Trends and effects of disinformation in the 2023/2024 elections

In this environment already saturated by polarization and the spread of disinformation, Turkey entered 2023 with a biennial of pivotal elections, as the municipal elections followed the presidential elections held in May 2023 and in March 2024. In this framework, both **electoral campaigns were marked by new and more technological modalities of disinformation** consisting of artificial intelligence and, more precisely, deepfakes, making media consumption more confusing to the public.

The deep fake campaigns targeted primarily the candidates for the Presidency of the Republic, concentrating mainly on the Republican People Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kiliçdaroğlu and the president in charge, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Images and videos have been manipulated to discredit Kiliçdaroğlu by associating him with Fethullah Gülen, the exiled cleric and head of FETÖ, and also with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK. On the other side, Erdoğan was shown in fabricated videos celebrating the presidential victory at Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and, in previous years, being appointed the Jewish Medal of Distinguished Service by Israel.¹⁴

¹⁴ M.C. Yılmaz, “The State Information Disorder of 2023 Turkish Presidential and General Elections”, *Teyit*, 27 September 2023, <https://en.teyit.org/insight/the-state-of-information-disorder-2023-turkish-presidential-and-general-elections>.

More than real deep fakes, the mentioned disinformation products, as many others, have been defined as "**cheapfakes**" **given the low quality of images and AI used** to fabricate them. Nevertheless, the many misleading reciprocal fake news and accusations between candidates and factions weakened public trust.

Last municipal elections witnessed cases of deepfake again, with a more raffinate use of artificial intelligence. The most famous case is the fake speech by the opposition mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, praising and thanking President Erdoğan for the work done by the ruling party in improving Istanbul's transportation system.¹⁵ A significant case with direct political repercussions interested Gökhan Zan, the mayoral candidate of the Workers Party in Hatay, who appeared in a tape discussing the offering of a bribe and a possible position at the state-owned broadcaster TRT in return for his campaign against the current CHP mayor. Zan's assertion that the recording had been manipulated using artificial intelligence resulted in his decision to withdraw from the mayoral election. This episode emphasized the **increasing influence of manipulated media and disinformation in Turkish politics**, igniting discussions regarding the integrity of the voting procedure and the difficulties in countering fabricated content in the era of

¹⁵ Editorial Staff Duvar, "AI-generated voiceover in fake campaign video targets Istanbul Mayor İmamoğlu", *Duvar English*, 22 January 2024, https://www.duvarenglish.com/ai-generated-voiceover-in-fake-campaign-video-targets-istanbul-mayor-imamoglu-news-63696#google_vignette.

digital technology.¹⁶ Fake accusations of bribery and corruption crimes committed by members of parties and recorded on tape were the peculiar characteristics of the disinformation campaigns that flooded this last electoral campaign.

The unexpected wide victory obtained by CHP at the municipal elections was also marked by one of the lowest electoral turnouts (78% of voters) in Turkey's elections. Differently from the presidential elections, where disinformation had appeared to have a role and influence in changing voters' choice over candidate preferences, the effects of disinformation in municipal elections seemed to have triggered a rejection of politics. In the age of **(Dis)information à la Turca**, consisting of a highly controlled and regulated information framework and, at the same time, a heated disinformation environment, Turkish citizens expressed their disillusion over media and social media, with a direct reflection on electoral results.

Conclusion

Both the 2023 presidential and 2024 municipal elections have highlighted the **widespread influence of disinformation on political processes and**

¹⁶ Redazione Turkish Minute, "Bribery allegations force party to withdraw candidate in quake-hit province", *Turkish Minute*, 12 March 2024, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2024/03/18/bribery-allegation-force-party-withdraw-candidate-quake-hit-province/>.

public confidence in Turkey. Disinformation has always been a consistent aspect of politics, but its transformation in the digital era has introduced fresh complexities and difficulties. Turkey's fast digitalization has heightened the population's susceptibility to deception, rendering digital space and tools powerful instruments for manipulating public sentiment. At the same time, the extensive legal framework developed by the Turkish government to combat disinformation reflects a state-centric approach. However, this approach has faced scrutiny and concerns as critics contend it frequently aligns with the government's objectives of suppressing information rather than adequately tackling disinformation's complex and diverse aspects. All these elements have contributed in the last municipal elections to create a sort of '**disinformation fatigue**,' with the electorate's excessive exposure to altered content resulting in electoral disengagement and loss of faith in media reliability.

The post-election scenario.

Between ambitions and reality¹

by *Samuele C.A. Abrami e Riccardo Gasco*



© Italo Rondinella. Before victory is certain, in front of the CHP party headquarters in Beşiktaş, an enclave of secular Istanbul society, Ekrem İmamoğlu's supporters begin to celebrate.

¹ Some of the concepts of this section are expressed in another article published for the Oasis Foundation: S.C.A. Abrami, R. Gasco, “La sconfitta di Erdoğan in Turchia: fallimento dell’AKP o merito delle opposizioni?”, *Fondazione Oasis*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/it/la-sconfitta-di-erdogan-in-turchia-fallimento-akp-o-merito-delle-opposizioni>.

It is finally springtime for the CHP?

As taught by the biography of Erdoğan², a "self-made man" born and raised in the working-class Kasımpaşa neighborhood on Istanbul's European shore and politically established as a successful mayor of the city furrowed by the Bosphorus, municipal elections have an important specific weight for Turkey's political and social balances. First, as Michelangelo Guida's contribution points out, **governing well at the local level**, and especially in metropolitan areas with millions of inhabitants (Istanbul alone is more populous than many European countries) **can be a springboard** for certain political figures and movements seeking renewal to (re)launch themselves. Second, because the historically very high voter turnout in Turkey makes the numbers statistically relevant at the macro level. This explains the idea that "whoever wins Istanbul wins everything"³ as well as Erdoğan's understanding of the "ballot box fight" through the logic of majoritarian democracy, in which a victory – regardless to its percentages – corresponds to full popular support.

On these points, the CHP attempted to push further what was achieved in 2019, when it was able to wrest Turkey's major cities from the AKP by leading

² F. Donelli, *Sovranismo islamico. Erdogan e il ritorno della Grande Turchia*, Luiss University Press, 2019.

³ S. C. A. Abrami, R. Gasco, "Status quo o cambiamento? Le Elezioni Municipali in Turchia", *Geopolitica.info*, 28 March 2024, <https://www.geopolitica.info/le-elezioni-municipali-in-turchia/>.

a heterogeneous opposition coalition with the nationalist İyi Parti and the pro-Kurdish leftist HDP (now DEM). Based on that success, the party tried to repeat a similar strategy in the 2023 presidential elections. Nevertheless, under the leadership of long-serving secretary Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the CHP-led six-party National Alliance proved to be excessively heterogeneous and with a strategy that mostly relied on an "anti-Erdoğan" function, thus unable to convince an equally heterogeneous electorate with real and alternative proposals.⁴

Instead, as Massimo D'Angelo and Selin Gücüm highlight, many elements seem to have changed before this last municipal election. If the personalization of politics is a dominant feature of Turkish politics, the change of secretariat with the younger Özgür Özel⁵ and the reappointment of the charismatic mayors Ekrem İmamoğlu⁶ (Istanbul) and Mansur Yavaş⁷ (Ankara) played a key role in giving voice to the more reformist wing of the party. **The change at the top of the party's leadership took the form of an election campaign focused on concrete issues and improvements** in the cities that have increased CHP mayors' popularity since 2019. In contrast,

⁴ T. Ash, "Erdoğan Profits as Turkey's Table of Six Upended", *CEPA*, 3 March 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/erdogan-profits-as-turkish-opposition-split-before-election/>.

⁵ A. Wilks, "Turkey's main opposition party elects Ozgur Ozel as new leader", *AP*, 5 November 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/chp-ozel-leadership-kilicdaroglu-turkey-opposition-election-c8fa993c831d7013a22e656002b8781b>.

⁶ R. Gasco, "İmamoğlu: chi è il Sindaco che ha sconfitto Erdoğan a Istanbul", *Orizzonti Politici*, 12 April 2024, <https://www.orizzontipolitici.it/imamoglu-chi-e-il-sindaco-che-ha-sconfitto-erdogan-a-istanbul/>.

⁷ A. Özkut, "Mansur Yavas, Mayor of Ankara, Turkey", *World Mayor*, 2021, <http://www.worldmayor.com/contest-2021/essay-mayor-ankara.html>.

the party's move away from typical discourses frequently accused of being "from Kemalist elites with villas on the Aegean" paid off in two directions. First, it has avoided the "us vs them" clash typical of a politically identity-polarized context in which no one better than Erdoğan knows how to play.⁸ Second, especially in urban centers and among the youth, the CHP finally appeared inclined to go beyond its typical ideological approach centered on strict Kemalist dictates, which many considered outdated or insufficient.⁹ Rather, as have pointed out, the goal is to "present and conform as a party that is increasingly close to liberal and social-democratic instances".¹⁰ Finally, the statistics of March 31 show how, despite (or precisely because) lacking the support of allied parties in past election rounds, the CHP has been able to adopt a **depolarizing and more inclusive strategy**. After the rout only a year ago, when the slogan was that of "a new spring"¹¹, this seems to endorse the party's internal restructuring process and meet the expectations of change demanded by its electorate.

⁸ N. Fisher-Onar, "Pluralism vs. Ultra-Nationalism: The Real Cleavage Behind Turkey's Elections and Populism's Rise", *E-international Relations*, 31 May 2023, <https://www.e-ir.info/2023/05/31/pluralism-vs-ultra-nationalism-the-real-cleavage-behind-turkeys-elections-and-populisms-rise/>.

⁹ R. Silverman, "A Post-Kemalist Election", *reubensilverman*, 28 March 2024, <https://reubensilverman.wordpress.com/2024/03/28/a-post-kemalist-election/>.

¹⁰ S. C. A. Abrami, R. Gasco, "La sconfitta di Erdoğan in Turchia: fallimento dell'AKP o merito delle opposizioni?", *Fondazione Oasis*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/it/la-sconfitta-di-erdogan-in-turchia-fallimento-akp-o-merito-delle-opposizioni>.

¹¹ CHP - Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, *Sana Söz Yine Baharlar Gelecek*, 27 March 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEOZYJr4Xm8>.

The AKP's challenges: economy and new parties

Undoubtedly, however, the CHP's victory is built on the same and opposite factors that led to the AKP's substantial defeat and the continuation of a hemorrhage of support that was already encroaching on Erdoğan's party. As Selin Gücüm analyzed, while not the sole determinant, the **economic variable** carried more weight this time than in previous election rounds. With an unrelenting devaluation of the Turkish lira and inflation that has reached soaring levels that show no signs of decreasing, an increasingly large segment of Turkish citizens is facing particularly difficult living conditions. If some government aid measures a year ago had convinced many AKP voters to renew their confidence in Erdoğan, the lack of promises regarding significant improvements in minimum wages and pensions for the current year seems to have played a decisive role.¹² Not surprisingly, the drop to 78% in turnout can be read as the abstention from voting of a good chunk of pensioners, unemployed, and workers unhappy with the direction taken by the party. The gap between promises and reality could also be the key to resounding defeats like the one in Adıyaman¹³, where accusations of inequitable post-earthquake aid distribution seemed to have cost the AKP some 30 percentage points.

¹² Editorial staff Financial Times, "Election reverses show Erdoğan is more vulnerable than he thinks", *Financial Times*, 1 April 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/468b0c13-b89c-4ea9-93ca-7b2ec78939b8>.

¹³ H. Kamer, "Adıyaman'da CHP 47 yıl sonra nasıl seçim kazandı, seçmenler ne diyor?", *BBC*, 2 April 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cjq88x939xdo>.

Another substantial difference is the disconnect between voting for Erdoğan and voting for the party. First, the president's personalization of the political scene continues on balance to work at the national level but severely limits and obscures his candidates, inhibiting their ability to make an impact at the local level. As pointed out by Filippo Ciccù, the party's communication and persuasive strategy seems to have become less effective than in the AKP's golden years as a "catch-all" party. Emblematic is the choice of Istanbul candidate Murat Kurum, a former environment minister chosen by the AKP leadership to restore the city's problems, but who turned out to be a confident man lacking in charisma, clumsy in speeches, and unable to listen to the real demands of citizens.¹⁴ Finally, there is a rationale why, as stated by the leader of the Islamist **YRP**, Fatih Erbakan, "the result of these elections was decided by the behavior of those who continued to trade freely with Israel and the Zionist murderers". That is, a "**protest vote**" by the more religious and traditionalist fringe of the AKP that seems to have wanted to punish the party's "decadence and moral ambiguity".¹⁵

A final element that cannot go unnoticed is what Yasin Duman pointed out, namely the numerical and symbolic weight of the "**Kurdish vote**", which

¹⁴ I. Woudwijk, "For Kurum The Bell Tolls", *Turkey recap*, 14 March 2024, <https://turkeyrecap.substack.com/p/for-kurum-the-bell-tolls>.

¹⁵ M. Guida, "La fine del monopolio dei grandi partiti? Le elezioni locali del marzo 2024 in Turchia", *CESPI*, 28 March 2024, https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/osservatori/allegati/approf._28_elezioni_locali_2024_-_guida.pdf.

makes up about 20 percent of the country.¹⁶ Again, pre-election strategies were different from the previous cases. In contrast to 2019 and 2023, the leftist pro-Kurdish DEM party decided not to run alongside the CHP. Nevertheless, looking at the case of Istanbul and large cities outside the Kurdish-majority areas, the choice of not-too-charismatic candidates appeared as a tacit invitation against draining "the safer vote" to the CHP in an anti-Erdoğan-AKP function. Such dynamics also underlie a shift within the Kurdish electorate, as especially the younger segments of the urban centers have moved closer to Selahattin Demirtaş's more conciliatory and left-progressive vision than to instances of the more historic Kurdish nationalist approach.¹⁷ In contrast, the party's reassertion in the typical Kurdish-majority strongholds in the south and east of the country has not been without consequence¹⁸. In some of these areas, the results were **contested** by government authorities, increasing fears that the practice of "*kayyum*" – the replacement of officials and/or political figures who oppose the government with trusteeship figures lowered from above – would be repeated. This tactic has worked many times, partly because opposition parties have often hesitated to show real support for the Kurdish cause for

¹⁶ S. Aydın, "The Kurdish Vote and the Turkish Election", *Carnegie Endowment*, 20 April 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/89583>.

¹⁷ S. Demiralp, "Seda Demiralp on Turkey's surprise local election results", *Turkey Book Talk*, 9 April 2024, <https://turkeybooktalk.com/2024/04/09/seda-demiralp-on-turkeys-surprise-local-election-results/>.

¹⁸ Y. Karaağar, G. Tokyol, "Election (almost) denied: Winning DEM Party mayor not replaced by runner-up in Van", *Turkey recap*, 3 April 2024, <https://turkeyrecap.substack.com/p/election-denied-winning-dem-party>.

fear of being fingered by the government as terrorists. This mechanism seems, at least in part, to have become more difficult to implement, thanks in part to an increasingly attentive opposition led by the CHP and a changing political landscape. Thus, adding to the smear campaigns during the election advent and borderline institutional practices to target the DEM party, the events of the immediate post-election period demonstrate once again how the "Kurdish issue" remains a raw nerve of the Turkish state. However, it might also represent a variable on which the opposition could capitalize in the future, provided that certain equations of securitarian logic are overcome.

The real impact in Turkey's future

President Erdoğan opened the traditional post-election speech from his party headquarters in Ankara by declaring disappointment with the result but "**accepting the will of the people**" and adding that "Turkey has more than four years of treasure ahead of it. We cannot waste this period with discussions that will waste the nation and the country's time".¹⁹ In the short term, this suggests how the election result indicates the ruling party's inability to amend the constitution for a second time to allow Erdoğan's

¹⁹ Editorial staff ANSA, "Erdoğan, 'al voto non abbiamo ottenuto ciò che volevamo'", ANSA, 31 March 2024, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2024/03/31/erdogan-al-voto-non-abbiamo-ottenuto-cio-che-volevamo_e1747bd9-1641-4ba0-93b9-690943f08297.html.

running for another term in 2028. Many pointed out that there would not even be much interest for the AKP's parliamentary allies to dissolve the chamber for new elections because the leader "has lost the ability to attract voters outside his ranks".²⁰

Moreover, Erdoğan himself declared that "we will work with the mayors who won" and called on his party to be "self-critical". It is against this backdrop that solving the country's ill economic situation is not the only problem for the government. What further narrows its room for maneuver is the fact that the President will have to deal with the issue of political succession, made even more complex by the increasing overlap between his figure and the party. If indeed Erdoğan will want to live up to his words that this was his "last political run"²¹, the question that remains open is therefore related to who would in case dare to take over the political reins and manage such a heavy legacy. As pointed out by Filippo Cicciù in his contribution, at the moment, one of the most credible figures seems to be Selçuk Bayraktar, the young engineer at the helm of Baykar, the flagship of the Turkish defense

²⁰ S. Antoine, "Municipales en Turquie : une débâcle pour Erdogan ?", *France 24*, 1 April 2024, <https://www.france24.com/fr/émissions/le-débat/20240401-élections-municipales-en-turquie-erdogan-la-débâcle>.

²¹ I. Demir, Z. Rakipoğlu, "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Bu seçim son seçimim ama netice bir emanetin devri olacak", *Anadolu Agency*, 8 March 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-bu-secim-son-secimim-ama-netice-bir-emanetin-devri-olacak/3159681>.

industry. If so, the succession would remain "**a family affair**", since Bayraktar married Sümeyye, one of President Erdoğan's daughters.²²

For the time being, however, Erdoğan could play international statesman, with an upcoming visit to the White House scheduled for May 9. Likely, the horizon of 2028 will play in his favor over the next four years. At the same time, several analysts²³ point out that the possibility of a gradual "transfer of power" could open to uncertain scenarios for the future of the AKP party. Should the dominant figure of its leader take a step back, it would be hard to replace his political image that functions as an incommensurable "vote catalyst".

In the short term, these challenges increase the pressure on Erdoğan to bridge the partial **cleavage between the party and its voters**. While a highly centralized power leaves the decision-making scepter in the hands of the President, this also includes the burden and responsibility of restoring an economy in deep crisis. Indeed, the challenge will be to alleviate the hardships of millions without further worsening the economic situation, both in the immediate and in the long term. As Selin Gücüm and Michelangelo Guida pointed out, **governing municipalities is crucial to**

²² J. . Malsin, E. Kivilcim, "His Drones Helped Ukraine on the Battlefield. Could He Be Turkey's Next Leader?", *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/his-drones-helped-ukraine-on-the-battlefield-could-he-be-turkeys-next-leader-6d77bafa>.

²³ I. Tharoor, "Turkey's shock elections offer another lesson for the world", *Washington Post*, 2 April 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/02/turkey-election-autocracy-global-lessons-democracy/>.

securing economic resources and political visibility for parties.

Therefore, the fact that Istanbul will remain in the hands of the opposition for another five years will further reduce the AKP's redistribution mechanisms in favor of specific segments of the population. In contrast, the words of Minister Mehmet Şimşek call for the immediate imperative of implementing structural reforms.²⁴

Another challenge on the domestic front is to neutralize the Islamist appeal to its voter base coming from the Islamist YRP party. Many have highlighted that the AKP's choice to antagonize the New Welfare Party has turned into a boomerang effect that has provided the latter with greater visibility among more conservative voters. In this sense, then, **the YRP appears to be the "political force to watch" in the immediate future.** First, because the parties share a substantial common voter base. Although with different shades and nuances, both appeal to issues very much related to religion and certain traditional values. At the same time, however, the YRP has emphasized differences and capitalized on a certain malapportionment through thorny issues such as the Palestinian issue and the fact that the AKP "forgot, not only the country's neediest classes, but also the Muslim communities under attack".²⁵ This combination has thus enabled the party

²⁴ A. Yeşilada, "Economy czar Simsek to initiate spending cuts", *P.A. Turkey*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.paturkey.com/news/economy-czar-simsek-to-initiate-spending-cuts/2024/>.

²⁵ B. Korucu, Tensions Rise Between Yeniden Refah and AKP as Critical Elections Approach, *Politurco*, 14 January 2024, <https://politurco.com/tensions-rise-between-yeniden-refah-and-akp-as-critical-elections-approach.html>.

to present itself as a viable alternative, both ideologically and in terms of its proximity to the problems of the country's periphery. Second, it will be important to understand **how the AKP will attempt to shorten the gap created in such fractions of the population.** To do so, it may revert to a more markedly religious and conservative tone, as well as translate this into political concessions to various Islamist interest groups. Yet, as evidenced by the ambiguous position in the Gaza issue, this risks intensifying polarization and provoking further defections among its supporters in urban centers and younger people. Moreover, as pointed out by some, if the AKP has built its success on the combo of good governance for Turks and appeal to political Islam, such a balance now seems to be challenging the governing coalition in a Turkey that seems to be tending toward a sociopolitical spectrum that transcends, in a sense, binary and identitarian logics of political affiliation. This appears to be borne out by the voting dynamics in the more urbanized areas which, though not overwhelmingly, have shown a shift in preferences toward the **CHP**. Even the latter, however, if it is to realize its ambitions of reaching out to the country's most deprived classes, it will have to bridge "**ideological and cultural affiliation** advantage" of YRP over the CHP's elitist and Kemalist background.

On the international front, it is credible how the government will try to grip on traditional security issues related to Kurdish terrorism and the PKK in Iraq and Syria, thus seeking to increase its domestic support by exploiting the classic "rally round the flag" phenomenon. This is further evidenced by

recent visits to Iraq by a number of Turkish Ministers after Baghdad recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization and pledged to Ankara to increase counter-terrorism operations.²⁶ All of this comes in times when the international system is under severe pressure due to the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. In this context, Turkey has tried several times to play a leading role, but has achieved results that, while important, have not been able to open the path to dialogue. Nonetheless, the local elections seem to highlight an immediate awareness on the part of the government of the need **to win back those more disillusioned electoral components through foreign policy** as well. Not surprisingly, contrary to previous reticence, Ankara has imposed a series of embargoes and restrictions on exports to Israel.²⁷

An international afflatus is also present in the post-election speech of Ekrem Imamoglu, who in front of a crowd of supporters declared "as we celebrate our victory, we send a message to the world: the decline of democracy is over".²⁸ In fact, as remarked by Hakan Yavuzilmaz, while Turkey remains a

²⁶ I. Okuducu, "Turkey's Anti-PKK Operation and "Development Road" in Iraq Are Two Sides of the Same Coin", *Washington Institute*, 8 April 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-anti-pkk-operation-and-development-road-iraq-are-two-sides-same-coin>.

²⁷ T. Gumrukcu, B. Karakas, "Turkey imposes export restrictions on Israel until Gaza ceasefire", *Reuters*, 9 April 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-imposes-export-restrictions-israel-until-gaza-ceasefire-2024-04-09/>.

²⁸ E. Ayaydin, "Ekrem Imamoglu on Turkey's renewed faith in democracy", *The Economist*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2024/04/10/ekrem-imamoglu-on-turkeys-renewed-faith-in-democracy>.

system characterized by competitive authoritarianism with narrow political spaces, it also highlights how, however, **democratic resilience** remains a key peculiarity, especially thanks to a marked activism of civil society.²⁹ This turns out to be as valid for Erdoğan – who has always linked legitimacy and power to the will of the people – as it is for an opposition that wants to follow up on the election result. The legacy of March 31 reminds us how the interpretation of these results affirms the enduring confidence in the effectiveness of electoral processes, despite their imperfections". They also suggest to us a renewed confidence in the potential effectiveness of traditional "check and balance", although they have to face formidable obstacles at the governmental level.

The democratic variable, especially for the CHP electorate, which is typically tied to voting as a cornerstone for the smooth functioning of a system-country, may thus have played a role not to be overlooked. However, true pluralist progress requires comprehensive reforms that go beyond simply replacing the ruling party. As some have noted, this requires a fundamental shift in the mindset of the state, fostering an environment that embraces diversity and supports genuine equality, a paradigm shift that has yet to materialize in Turkey's history.³⁰

²⁹ A. Zarakol, "Turkey's Democratic Resilience", *Project Syndicate*, 11 May 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/turkish-election-shows-opposition-dedication-to-democracy-by-ayse-zarakol-2023-05>.

³⁰ S. C. A. Abrami, R. Gasco, "La sconfitta di Erdoğan in Turchia: fallimento dell'AKP o merito delle opposizioni?", *Fondazione Oasis*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/it/la-sconfitta-di-erdogan-in-turchia-fallimento-akp-o-merito-delle-opposizioni>.

Opposition control over major cities not only makes future opposition electoral victories more likely, but also offers a chance for "**subnational democratization**" under a competitive-authoritarian regime.³¹ In addition to being a symbolic steppingstone, victory in many of the country's nerve centers ensures that the opposition will manage two-thirds of the population. In political terms, this means that **an expansion of available economic resources could balance the unequal playing field** and, in the case of good administration at the local level, become a crucial basis for further increasing support at the national level.

The way ahead

Nonetheless, much will also depend on how the AKP will respond to such challenges. In this regard, it is important to point out that the governing coalition does not constitute a homogenous bloc, but remains pervaded by different currents, both within Erdoğan's own party and because of the presence of the ultranationalist MHP and other more "**hardline and conservative**" parties. Should the demands of the latter groups prevail, there would be a further tightening of the grip on the state. Yet, with the risk of further eroding the party's more open-minded electoral base. Therefore,

³¹ B. Esen, S. Gumuscu, "How Turkey's Opposition Won Big", *Journal of Democracy*, April 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-turkeys-opposition-won-big/>.

more probable is the initiation of a process of "**concessions and openings**" that will certainly not be continuous and free of contradictions but at least aimed at not further undermining an already delicate sociopolitical balance. In light of these considerations, however, looking at these local elections as a perfect litmus test of national dynamics would be a mistake. At the same time, it is inevitable that the March 31 results will form the basis for the parties to build their strategies ahead of the next presidential elections in 2028. This reminds us how, although the numbers of this last election denote an opposition that has achieved a political revival through voters' recognition, Erdoğan's leadership remains intact both formally and legally at the national level for four more years. Moreover, as many have noted, the variations in voting behavior appear to confirm the shift from a "conservative-Islamist versus secularist-Republican" logic to a broader and more complex fault line between "various forms of pluralism and ultranationalism".³²

Therefore, to further capitalize on what it has built over the last year, the CHP will need to adopt long-term strategies for change. On the one hand, it will have to continue to face shrinking political space and limited access to state resources. While for many, the reappointment of the charismatic Ekrem İmamoğlu now represents his definitive establishment as a future

³² N. Fisher-Onar, "Pluralism vs. Ultra-Nationalism: The Real Cleavage Behind Turkey's Elections and Populism's Rise", *E-international Relations*, 31 May 2023, <https://www.e-ir.info/2023/05/31/pluralism-vs-ultra-nationalism-the-real-cleavage-behind-turkeys-elections-and-populisms-rise/>.

challenger to the current President, the defamation conviction pending on the Istanbul mayor remains an open issue on which the CHP is expected to move carefully. On the other hand, the Republican People's Party is being called upon to demonstrate greater closeness to citizens by embracing increasingly **depolarizing narratives**. In this sense, Imamoğlu represents the figure most capable of reaching the electorate tied to traditional values, while Yavaş's appears complementary in maintaining the trust of the voters most loyal to national and Kemalist roots. Thus, the challenge for a successful recipe necessarily resides in the party's ability to move beyond the typical identity divisions of the Turkish context, but without forgetting the country's concrete and immediate problems.

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