

## Istanbul election: remaking of Turkey's new political landscape?

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# SWP Comment

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## Istanbul Election: Remaking of Turkey's New Political Landscape?

*Galip Dalay*

Istanbul's fiercely fought municipal election is over. The opposition candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, won a landslide victory over his rival. The governing Justice and Development Party (AK Party) has arguably suffered its most severe defeat since coming to power in 2002. The repercussions and reverberations of this election will be deeply felt across the political spectrum in Turkey. This election will have a formative impact on this new period of Turkish politics. Turkey has gained new political actors, for example İmamoğlu, as a result of this election. The same election has also further opened the way for contestations on the conservative end of the political spectrum. Former President Abdullah Gül, former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and former Minister of Economy Ali Babacan are set to break away from the AK Party and form their own political movements.

Whether this defeat will lead to a new period of irreversible decline for the ruling AK Party is dependent on what lessons President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan draws from this defeat. Palliative and tactical steps cannot reverse his party's political decline. Yet, Erdoğan's ability to undertake necessary reforms and introduce course-rectifying measures is significantly constrained, given the nature of his alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the de-institutionalisation of his party, and the personalisation of power in Turkey. As Erdoğan's grip on power and Turkish politics is weakened, the search for new political alternatives – both at the nation-wide level more broadly as well as on the conservative end of the political spectrum in particular – will gain momentum. These developments, in return, are sowing the seeds of a new political landscape in Turkey.

On 23 June 2019, Turkey's ruling party lost control of Istanbul to opposition candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu, a member of the Republican People's Party (CHP). This followed an electoral battle of more than six months, which included the period of campaigning for the local election of 31 March and the

rerun election in Istanbul on 23 June. The gap between İmamoğlu and his main rival, former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, was around 9 per cent. Whereas İmamoğlu garnered 54 per cent of the vote, Yıldırım received around 45 per cent – according to the unofficial results. What made this



victory for the opposition and defeat for the governing AK Party more meaningful and consequential is the fact that İmamoğlu had to win the same local election twice in order to become the mayor of Istanbul. He had won the local election in Istanbul on 31 March with a margin of around 0.16 per cent of the vote. Yet, the government – with the support of its ally, the far-right MHP – disputed the results and made an appeal to the Supreme Election Board (YSK) on tenuous charges of electoral fraud and irregularities to rerun the election in Istanbul. In response, the YSK annulled the electoral outcome solely for the post of metropolitan mayor – despite the fact that citizens had cast their votes for all of the following posts in the same envelope: metropolitan mayors, district municipality mayors, city councils, and *mukhtars* (neighbourhood representatives).

Scrapping the outcomes for the metropolitan mayoral elections paved the way for the rerun of the election in Istanbul on 23 June, and hence the governing coalition's major defeat at the polls. This decision was regarded to be political rather than legal – across the board. This has created a sense that electoral injustice is being committed against the opposition candidate. This sense of injustice – which helped to consolidate the social base of the opposition bloc and further disillusioned a segment of educated upper-middle-class conservative voters, coupled with İmamoğlu's dynamic campaign strategy and Kurdish dissatisfaction with the ruling party – worked in favour of İmamoğlu and contributed to Yıldırım's final and decisive defeat in the race. A comparison between the electoral outcomes of 31 March and 23 June confirms this. Although the difference between both candidates' votes on 31 March stood at around 13,000, this gap increased to around 800,000 on 23 June – in both cases in favour of İmamoğlu.

Despite being local elections, both the local election on 31 March in Turkey and the rerun election on 23 June in Istanbul were fought on national terms. The national implications of İmamoğlu's win in Istanbul and the opposition's broader victories across

Turkey are attracting even more curiosity and scrutiny than the local ramifications.

In any case, the election of 23 June is a historic moment that will have far-reaching consequences for Turkey. The governing AK Party has arguably suffered its most severe defeat since coming to power in 2002. Whether this will be the start of a new trend for the governing AK Party and its coalition partner, the MHP (which together form the People's Alliance), is dependent on what lessons President Erdoğan will draw from this defeat and what policy and political responses he will offer. This concerns, in particular, what he will do to rejuvenate and institutionalise his party, whether he will reach out to the AK Party's previous political elites to prevent the emergence of new political parties, and whether he will change his style of polarising politics and personalised governance, as populist politics in Turkey appear to have reached their climax. But one thing that is clear is that Turkish politics have entered a new phase, and Erdoğan cannot reverse his party's political decline with mere palliative and tactical steps. However, even if he diagnoses the situation accurately and draws the right lessons from this defeat, his room for reform and manoeuvre is severely limited, given the nature of his alliance with the nationalist MHP, the de-institutionalisation of his party, and the personalisation of power in Turkey. His political choices in recent years have created path dependencies that cannot be easily reversed.

## Reverse of Turkey's 1994 Moment

The symbolism of this election was unmistakable. Municipal elections normally have a limited impact on the political direction of a country. Yet, in post-Cold War Turkey, two municipal elections – in 1994 and 2019 – proved otherwise. In the local elections of 1994, the pro-Islamic Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) won the municipalities of the country's two largest cities: Istanbul and Ankara. The then young and charismatic 40-year-old, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,

became mayor of Istanbul, which was the start of a journey that later took him to the top of the political pyramid in the country. Melih Gökçek won the municipality of Ankara — a position that he retained until 2017. This election marked the clearest manifestation of the advent of “political Islam” in Turkish politics and set in motion a series of events that gave birth to the AK Party, which has ruled the country since 2002. The political discussions in the media, think tank circles, and academia that followed the 1994 election, both in Turkey and abroad, were not about the municipal management of Istanbul and Ankara, but rather focussed on the political orientation and future of Turkey.

The municipal elections of 31 March 2019, particularly with regard to the rerun of the Istanbul election on 23 June, have a similar flavour. Instead of just pertaining to the municipalities, the result of this election is a strong indication of the political course of the country from here onwards. In the end, after the change of the political system from a parliamentary to a super powerful executive presidency on 16 April 2017, the post of mayor of Istanbul has arguably become the second most important political post in the country — bearing in mind that the vice president is an unelected figure and the parliament has lost much of its political weight. Given this fact, it is highly likely that the new figures rising in Turkish politics will come mostly through the municipalities. In Turkey, politics is not only local, but will increasingly become more municipal.

This election is set to bring major consequences on multiple levels.

## Nation-wide Implications

First, the rerun of the Istanbul election was just the latest in a series of major initiatives that Erdoğan has undertaken in recent years to increase the longevity and durability of his power, but which have produced the reverse effects. To be more specific, from forming an alliance with the MHP

to changing Turkey’s political system to rerunning Istanbul’s municipal election, Erdoğan has been trying to secure and prolong his political power. Yet, all these steps have proven to be grave mistakes that have weakened his power base. To start with, the alliance with the MHP has dramatically reduced the AK Party’s political flexibility. The clearest manifestation of this occurred in the aftermath of the local election on 31 March. Following the election, Erdoğan spoke of the necessity of forming a “Turkey alliance” in order to deal with the country’s burgeoning challenges.

Yet, the MHP saw this as the government/Erdoğan testing the grounds to explore the possibility of forming a closer working relationship with the opposition, if not outright replacing the MHP with a new political ally. Alarmed by this move, the MHP leader rebuffed this proposal outright and called upon the AK Party to be more straightforward about its alliance with the MHP. Faced with what came across as an ultimatum from the MHP, Erdoğan and AK Party officials gave up on their idea of forming a new political ally and renewed their pledge to continue their alliance with the MHP. The cost of this alliance has been multifold. Electorally, this alliance — coupled with the government’s nationalist turn — has driven wedges between the Kurds, educated middle-class conservatives, and the AK Party. The loss of major cities (Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Adana, and Mersin) was the electoral outcome of this alliance. In a sense, the alliance that Erdoğan had pinned his hopes on to win the local elections turned out to have cost him those same elections. Policy-wise, this alliance — coupled with the government’s nationalist, regressive, and anti-democratic turns in recent years — has dramatically reduced the government’s scope for policy choices, particularly the ones that will conflict with the MHP’s political preferences. This, in turn, has aggravated Turkey’s political and economic woes and further undermined the government as well as Erdoğan’s political appeal.

Likewise, the new political system, which requires contenders to win more than 50

per cent of the vote in order to become president, makes Erdoğan dependent on alliances. Given the increasingly close vote share of the People's Alliance and the opposition, which roughly stands at around 51 to 52 per cent versus 48 to 49 per cent, respectively, puts the future of Erdoğan's power at risk and in doubt. In particular, the increasingly visible split within the AK Party casts further doubt on the future of Erdoğan's political power. In contrast, in a parliamentary system, the AK Party would have maintained its power with a much lower share of the vote total. There would have been less of a need to form alliances in order to continue ruling the country. Lastly, the decision to rerun the Istanbul election has further tainted the AK Party's political standing – it lost the political and moral high ground to the opposition, made the divisions within conservative circles more visible and louder, and cast İmamoğlu as the new underdog of the political system.

### **The End of the AK Party's Political Hegemony**

Second, since coming to power in 2002, the governing AK Party has maintained both numerical and political hegemony in Turkish politics. It was the agenda-setter. It defined the political framework in which Turkish politics operated. The opposition usually played the game that the government put forward. Yet, the recent local election and developments since then are changing this: The government is losing its ability to set the agenda. Instead, in many instances, the government has copied the opposition's political initiatives and strategies. The stark differences in the government's pre- and post-March election strategies and narratives are illustrative of the AK Party's loss of status as the main agenda-setter in Turkish politics.

Prior to 31 March, the government had once again bet on the politics of polarisation, adopted a highly nationalistic and anti-Kurdish discourse, and portrayed the election in national rather than local terms.

In contrast, the opposition has struck a conciliatory chord, played down the politics of polarisation, and put the spotlight on its candidates rather than chairpersons of the political parties that formed the opposition block. Whereas Erdoğan – and to a lesser extent Devlet Bahçeli, chairman of the MHP – was the face of the People's Alliance's municipal election campaign, the municipal candidates were the faces of the opposition block's election strategy. Likewise, whereas the People's Alliance invested in the increasing polarisation and solidification of the political and identity divides of Turkey in order to secure victory, the opposition block saw its fortune in lowering the level of polarisation and de-solidifying the political and identity divides of the country – given that the opposition needed to gain votes beyond its traditional base to win.

When the opposition strategy worked, the People's Alliance changed strategy in the aftermath of 31 March and prior to the rerun of the mayoral election in Istanbul. Putting aside the week prior to the election on 23 June, the government put the spotlight on its candidate, Binali Yıldırım, rather than on Erdoğan; struck a conciliatory tone; tried to mend ties with the Kurds; and tried to prioritise local issues over national ones in a new campaign strategy. In a sense, the People's Alliance's post-March election strategy was the opposite of its pre-March strategy and resembled that of the opposition camp. It is a novelty for the opposition to be playing the pro-active and agenda-setting role in Turkish politics. This, in return, is bringing both an electoral (numerical) and political balance to Turkish politics and contributing to the country's democratic resilience. It seems that the government can no longer singlehandedly decide on the parameters of Turkish politics and define the rules of the game.

### **The Emergence of New Political Actors**

Third, with the weakening of the government's political dominance, the public

sphere and public discussions are likely to become more varied. As a corollary to this, the government is likely to face more public criticism from different corners of Turkish society and politics. There are already ample early indications of this trend in the immediate aftermath of the election on 31 March. Casting aside its docile posturing vis-à-vis the government, Turkey's largest business association, the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSIAD), escalated its criticism of the government's actions, particularly its decision to rerun the Istanbul election. Former high-profile AK Party politicians have become more vocal and public in their criticisms of the government and President Erdoğan. A chunk of the conservative media circle and journalists have also followed suit.

In a similar vein, the political cost for new actors to enter the political sphere has diminished. This is particularly important for the internal divides within conservative and government circles. In recent years, there has been growing political dissatisfaction among some AK Party political elites about the party and the country's political direction. Three names have been particularly important in this regard: Abdullah Gül, Ahmet Davutoğlu, and Ali Babacan. Because they are losing hope for the possibility of change and reform within the AK Party, these figures are opting for solutions outside of the party. To that end, they are working on two separate political initiatives: One of them is being led by Babacan and Gül, and the other one by Davutoğlu.

The result of the Istanbul election will provide more motivation and fuel for these initiatives. As a reflection of this, the split from the AK Party will become more visible, if not institutionalised. In April, Davutoğlu already published his political manifesto, which was highly critical of the government's political direction. This manifesto can also be seen as providing a framework for Davutoğlu's political activism in the coming period. Likewise, Babacan resigned from the AK Party. In his letter of resignation, he gave strong indications of forming a new party. This, in return, will dent Erdoğan's

appeal and weaken the AK Party's political monopoly over Turkish politics, but particularly over the conservative end of the political spectrum.

## The Kurds As the Kingmaker of Turkish Politics

Fourth, it is arguable that one of the motivations for the MHP and AK Party alliance to change the political system was that, in the new presidential system, Kurdish political actors and pro-Kurdish parties were supposed to be marginalised when it came to deciding about the country's power structure. The assumption was that Turkish politics is roughly made up of two main historical and identity blocks: a 60–65 per cent conservative-nationalist block versus a 35–40 per cent secularist-leftist block. In this scenario, the conservative-nationalist block was expected to comfortably rule the country for the foreseeable future. Moreover, according to this view, any alliance with the pro-Kurdish parties was deemed to be costly for whichever side formed it – hence, it was anticipated that both ends of the Turkish political spectrum would avoid the Kurds. This was not a completely baseless calculation. In fact, in forming the alliances, both the People's Alliance and the Nation Alliance (opposition block) avoided engaging in any formal relationships with the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Despite the fact that Kurdish support was the most decisive factor in the opposition block winning the major cities, most notably in Istanbul, this block still felt uncomfortable acknowledging this support publicly.

In spite of the opposition's stance, the Kurds voted for the opposition CHP candidates *en masse*. More than helping the opposition to win, the motivation for the Kurds was to defeat the AK Party and MHP coalition – hence weakening Erdoğan and the AK Party's grip on power. In fact, the pro-Kurdish party set two primary goals for itself in this election: to make the government lose control of the major cities in the western part of the country, and to win

back the municipalities from the government-appointed trustees in the Kurdish-majority regions in the east and south-east. Regarding the former goal, the HDP achieved its aims; regarding the latter one, it fell short of the goal it had set for itself. But overall, the HDP proved to be a durable and decisive actor in Turkish politics.

Far from being a marginalised force in Turkish politics, the Kurds played the role of kingmaker in this local election. The People's Alliance's tactic of criminalising and securitising Kurdish politics backfired. The frenetic move by the government to appeal for Kurdish votes and even try to enlist support from the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, as a last resort to prevent the Kurds from voting for the opposition candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, in Istanbul was revealing.

### **New Sociological or Political Reality?**

No doubt that the Kurds on their own cannot decide who will rule the country. But what is increasingly becoming clear is that the Kurds, particularly the pro-Kurdish HDP, have sufficient power to decide who will not come to power. In this regard, Kurdish support is both an opportunity as well as a challenge for the opposition. The opposition needs to develop a Kurdish policy that can at least partially meet Kurdish cultural and political demands. It needs to bear in mind that the opposition's victories in municipal elections were not the outcome of a new sociological reality, but rather the result of a new political reality. This new political reality is related to alliance politics, in which Turkish politics is, broadly speaking, divided into two main camps: the People's Alliance (the governing coalition) versus the Nation Alliance (the opposition grouping). The Kurds throwing their weight behind the Nation Alliance was the most decisive factor in tipping the balance in its favour in the local elections.

Such nature of these opposition victories in this election makes them fragile, not

solid, in the absence of a well-developed Kurdish policy by the opposition. It was the HDP's motivation of defeating Erdoğan that was the Kurd's major driving force for effectively allying with the opposition in the local elections. But this driving force might not be as long-lasting as many think if Turkey and the Syrian Kurds find a *modus vivendi* between themselves to move beyond their current conflictual relationship, and in the absence of a coherent Kurdish policy from the opposition. The opposition can no longer easily escape the necessity of developing a Kurdish policy. This policy, or its lack thereof, will define the future of cooperation with the Kurdish opposition.

### **The Meaning of İmamoğlu's Victory**

This election will have a formative impact on this new period of Turkish politics. İmamoğlu differs from other opposition actors in one main way: He can overcome the political constraints of opposition politics by appealing to voters who have traditionally not belonged to the constituencies of the opposition parties. In spite of this, what İmamoğlu means for the future of Turkish politics is still unclear and in the making. He has deftly diagnosed the political vacuum in Turkey. Such an accurate diagnosis – coupled with being the underdog of the system after the annulment of the March election results in Istanbul – helped him to win a landslide victory over his rival. It is not clear yet whether İmamoğlu will prove to be the figure that fills the burgeoning political vacuum or whether he will be the gate-opener for others to fill this vacuum.

### **Is the AK Party Capable of Reforming Itself?**

As regards the governing party and Erdoğan, these are the questions they need to ask themselves: What was defeated in Istanbul? Was it the AK Party's candidate for a municipal post who was defeated? Is this the political trajectory of the govern-

ment in recent years? Is this due to the AK Party's current politics? It is crucial for the AK Party to find more clarity about what they think was defeated in Istanbul on 23 June.

The easier answer is to say that the AK Party's municipal candidate was defeated by İmamoğlu. Blaming the defeat on Yıldırım might be seen by the governing cadres as a convenient option. But it is clear that Yıldırım's loss to İmamoğlu is only part of the story, arguably a minor part. What happened on 23 June in Istanbul was much more than this. The fact that the election was fought on national terms rather than local ones; that Erdoğan was the most prominent face of the governing coalition's campaign; that the AK Party's nationalist turn and its alliance with the MHP were what primarily drove the Kurds to vote for İmamoğlu; and that a segment of the educated middle-class conservative voters have grown increasingly dissatisfied with the AK Party as a result of Erdoğan's discourse and the political trajectory of the government and the AK Party in recent years all indicate what was primarily defeated in Istanbul on 23 June: namely, the nationalist and polarising populist politics of the government and the AK Party as well as Erdoğan's political parlance, his leadership style of recent years, and his alliance with the MHP.

However, even if the AK Party asks the right questions and makes accurate assessments of the defeat and the overall political situation, it is still not clear whether it can develop an appropriate prescription for the issue and implement it. There is likely to be a gap between diagnosis, prescription, and implementation. Erdoğan's room for manoeuvre is not that wide, given the nature of his alliance with the MHP, his political course of recent years, and due to the growing distance between him and most of the AK Party's previous political elites.

## Conclusion

In recent years, particularly since the coup attempt in 2016, Turkey has experienced fast-paced democratic regression, political decay in concurrence with the country's authoritarian turn, and economic deterioration. These developments have arisen in a context where the AK Party and President Erdoğan had almost a complete monopoly over Turkish politics. With the recent election in Istanbul, the AK Party's power monopoly has been diminished – new actors are, and will be, entering the Turkish political and public spheres. Istanbul has generally played the role of trend-setter in Turkish politics. It appears that it will again play the same role.

## Scenarios

- One of the immediate manifestations of the political course that the government will take will be defined by its approaches to the newly elected mayors, particularly those of Istanbul and Ankara. The government controls the financial resources and has the legal means to undermine the performances of the new mayors. There have been reports that the government is contemplating the transfer of some mayoral authority to municipal assemblies, where the governing party has the majority, and to the governors, who are appointed by the central government. If this scenario materialises, this means that the government will not rectify its political course of recent years, and that tensions between the government and opposition and political polarisation will continue unabated.
- The discontent within the AK Party will likely give birth to new parties. The result of the Istanbul election is set to accelerate this. Currently, Davutoğlu and Babacan are leading two separate political initiatives. Babacan resigned from the AK Party. Davutoğlu has been vocal in his criticism of the government. Once these political initiatives are formalised and institutionalised, this will bring



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more plurality to Turkey's political scene and terminate Erdoğan's monopoly over the conservative end of the political spectrum.

- The combined impacts of the above two scenarios will be a further decline in the political fortunes of the AK Party and President Erdoğan.
- The Kurds are increasingly playing the role of kingmaker in Turkish politics.

One of the major factors that could shape the future of Turkish politics is whether the pro-Kurdish HDP's alliance with the opposition is sustainable. In contrast, the challenge for Erdoğan will be whether he can drive a wedge between the Kurds and the opposition – without Kurdish support, the opposition's chance of defeating Erdoğan is still limited. Two factors will be decisive for this issue. First, the opposition has thus far only shown the gesture of goodwill towards the Kurds, but it does not have a Kurdish policy and is unlikely to have one soon. From their stance on the Syrian Kurds to the fate of the imprisoned Kurdish politicians in Turkey, the opposition will come under increasing pressure to develop a Kurdish policy. The more likely scenario is that the opposition CHP will have an ad hoc policy on Kurdish issues. Second, whether Turkey and the Syrian Kurds can move beyond the current conflictual relationship is another factor that will define the place of the HDP in Turkish politics. The challenge that Erdoğan faces is that he cannot continue his alliance with the MHP and initiate a political opening to the Kurds in Turkey and Syria at the same time. Therefore, the most likely scenario is that the HDP's alliance with the opposition will continue, but it will be fragile. The Istanbul election has ended the

political monopoly of the governing party and Erdoğan. Yet, it has not set a clear path for Turkish politics. The future course will be shaped by the actions and interactions of

the incumbent political class, such as Erdoğan, Bahçeli, the CHP leadership, and Kurdish political actors; critical political actors within conservative circles such as Davutoğlu, Babacan, and Gül; and emerging faces such as İmamoğlu. Such a multiplication of political actors in itself illustrate the end of an era in Turkey – when Erdoğan and the AK Party had an almost complete monopoly over Turkish politics.

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