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European Languages

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30.04.2024

Domestic political transformations in Turkey



Although in its domestic political development Turkey has not yet reached the standards of European democracy, it has made significant progress in terms of the political competition between the leading parties, respect for voters' civil rights and the transparency of elections. The municipal elections held on March 31, 2024, which resulted in a landslide victory, albeit with a narrow margin, for candidates from the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), can be cited as a good example of how far Turkish democracy has developed.

The CHP, or Kemalists, not only managed to retain power in Turkey's major cities (notably Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir), but also won in many other provinces. With a voter turnout of 78.11 percent, the CHP won local elections in 35 cities, beating the ruling AKP for the first time in 20 years. In addition to Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and Antalya, the Kemalists gained power in Bursa and Tekirdağ, and 14 of the 30 largest cities now have mayors from the CHP.

Notably, the CHP has enjoyed success not only in much of western Turkey, where this was to be expected given the more liberal electorate and the Republican incumbent mayors in the major cities, but also in the more conservative regions near the Black Sea and Central Anatolia, which have traditionally been seen as hostile to its policies and as supporting Erdoğan.

Given the relative sophistication of Turkish democracy, it is important to point out that there is a very real political split in modern Turkey. In particular, centralized political power in Turkey remains concentrated in the hands of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, while local power has shifted to the main opposition group – the country’s oldest political party, founded back in the days of Kemal Ataturk in September 1923.

And given that in Turkey’s Parliament (or Grand National Assembly) the CHP has 35% (212 seats out of 600) and the AKP has 49.5% (322 seats), we can say that the political tensions in Turkey are continuing. Those tensions are due not so much to the numbers of seats held by the main competing parties in the parliament, but rather to the differences in their political programs and foreign policy orientations, as well as to the ongoing severe financial and economic crisis, caused in no small measure by the inconsistencies distortions in the economic policy of President Recep Erdoğan and his diplomatic course of escalating disagreements with Turkey’s leading Western allies.

Painful as the results were, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan acknowledged his party’s defeat and the victory of the Kemalists in the recent municipal elections, seeing the results as a signal or warning sent by voters to the ruling party about its mistakes. “Nine months after our victory in the May 2023 elections, we unfortunately failed to get the results we wanted in the municipal elections,” [he said](#) in an address to Turkish citizens.

The Turkish leader added that the municipal elections have once again shown the world that democracy has won in Turkey. “Regardless of the results, the winner of these elections will be first and foremost our democracy and the will of our people. The real winners of the electoral marathon, above all, were not the candidates, but Turkey itself and its people, all 85 million of them, [regardless of their political affiliation.](#)”

Erdoğan decided not to ignore the results of the municipal elections and against the will of the citizens, instead promising to correct the “mistakes made” and learn from the people’s messages over the next five years. Perhaps, in this address to the nation, the Turkish president was also signaling to interested external forces (primarily the United States) his recognition

of the success of the pro-American CHP, and thus pledging to introduce more productive financial and economic relations in a bid to overcome the consequences of the severe crisis.

The fact that Turkey's major cities, where the major capital and financial infrastructure are concentrated, remain under Kemalist control gives support to Erdoğan's rather shaky hopes for a turnaround in relations with the United States and Europe. However, the mayors of Istanbul (Ekrem İmamoğlu) and Ankara (Mansur Yavaş) retain high ratings, and both aspire to the presidency. Given the age gap between Erdoğan and the much younger Kemalist hopefuls (especially Ekrem İmamoğlu), the AKP may also lose its control over the national government in the near future.

As readers may remember, until 2010, under its former leader Deniz Baykal the CHP positioned itself as a centrist party. But after his resignation, the new party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu returned the CHP to the bosom of center-left politics and proclaimed it a "modern social democratic party" focused on European integration and strengthening Turkey's military and political alliance with the US and NATO.

After Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's defeat by Erdoğan in the second round of presidential elections in 2023, with 47.8% of the vote, the CHP underwent a number of organizational and personnel changes. In particular, in November 2023, the 38th Party Congress elected Özgür Özel, nominated by the intra-party opposition, as the new leader of the CHP. In other words, a "young liberal" has taken over from the "refined conservative." At the moment, the CHP has almost 1.5 million members, and its latest victory in the local elections could serve as an incentive for more members to join its ranks.

Accordingly, we can conclude that between November 2023 and March 2024, the CHP took a number of effective measures to remedy its previous mistakes, place its hopes in young and popular politicians and change its methods of working with the electorate, and it owes its success in the municipal elections to these reforms. The CHP was also aided by the worsening state of the Turkish economy and the miscalculations of President Erdoğan's financial and banking policies before the March 31 elections (rising Central Bank interest rates, hyperinflation, rapid devaluation of the Turkish lira, a fall in living standards and an increase in the number of people living in poverty).

And it is impossible to deny that there was a certain level of US interference in the election campaign. This interference included threats by the US Ministry of Finance in the form of secondary sanctions introduced by President Joseph Biden's much discussed decree in December 2023. As a result of this pressure from the Americans, the Turkish authorities did not intervene when banks began to refuse to process payments related to transactions by

Russian companies and Turkish exporters of dual-use goods to the Russian Federation. Naturally, this external intervention has further aggravated the situation of Turkish businesses.

These conclusions are also supported by the reactions of young Turkish voters and the expert community. For example, 19-year-old university student Ege Ersoz told journalists, “Turks have opened their eyes and voted for those candidates who think about Turkey’s economy and the education and future of its younger generation”. Turkey is a dynamic country with a high proportion of young people. And in previous economic crises the position taken by young people brought about many changes of direction in the domestic political disputes playing out within Turkish society.

For his part, Selim Sazak, head of Sanda Global (Ankara), a consultancy company that advised on several campaigns during the local elections, said, “This is a resounding message. The voters are telling the government that the economy is really hurting them.”

“These results will put İmamoğlu and the CHP at the center of Turkish politics,” said Yusuf Can, an analyst with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, discussing the results of the March 31 elections. This is obviously the result the US is aiming for.

Erdoğan will now have to reckon not just with the outcome of the local elections, but also with the opinion of the Kemalists, who are gaining strength. “My dear Istanbulites, you opened the door to a new future today,” Istanbul’s Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu said in an address to the public after the votes had been counted. “Starting from tomorrow, Turkey will be a different Turkey. You opened the door to the rise of democracy, equality and freedom.”

It should be noted that Erdoğan specifically tried to block İmamoğlu from participating in elections, and before the 2023 presidential election he challenged the legitimacy of the young politician’s victory in Istanbul in 2019. As a result of this challenge, Erdoğan was able to exclude an inconvenient rival from the last presidential election, but lost to him on March 31. The Turkish leader himself began his career in national politics with a terms as Mayor of Istanbul, and now he is seeing his opponent follow the same path.

Many consider Ekrem İmamoğlu a rising star among the Turkish opposition, especially since he defeated his AKP rival Murat Kurum, a former official and environment minister, by a significant margin of some 10%.

Before the March elections, analysts and representatives of the AKP admitted the possibility of early presidential elections in Turkey in the event of the opposition’s success and a third

term as President for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, but after the disappointing results of the March 31 vote, the AKP leader abandoned the idea of early elections. That means that:

- a) the experienced Erdoğan, soberly assessing his opportunities for success, does not want to suffer a resounding defeat to İmamoğlu now, when he is at the end of his political career;
- b) Erdoğan is not in good physical shape and health problems may play a “cruel joke” on him;
- c) in the event of a defeat, he would need to take time out until the next regular elections, during which time he would need to raise the AKP’s ratings and prepare a successor candidate ready to run for office in five years.

That would seem to be enough time and candidates will be found, but with a new charismatic leader it will be difficult to find a second Erdoğan. After all, all the other members of his party are an order of magnitude less popular than both Erdoğan himself and his real competitors such as İmamoğlu or Yavaş.

Nevertheless, the media have recently started to speculate about Erdoğan’s likely successor – his son-in-law Selçuk Bayraktar, who is married to his daughter Sümeyye and oversees Turkey’s military-industrial complex. He is also the co-founder of Baykar Teknoloji, whose Bayraktar-TB2 UAVs were used by the Azerbaijani army in 2020-2023 and by the Ukrainian army in 2022-2024. Selçuk Bayraktar does not rule out the possibility of Erdoğan inviting him to run in the next presidential election. Selçuk Bayraktar also shares Erdoğan’s political course: his strategic goals of neo-Ottomanism and pan-Turanism, his condemnation of Israel’s policy towards Palestine and the IDF’s military actions in the Gaza Strip, and his desire to develop Turkey’s defense complex and strengthen the Organization of Turkic States.

However, he is still a “dark horse” – not enough is known about him for him to serve as a high-level politician, let alone the leader of such a complex Middle East country as Turkey. Of course, “the East is a delicate matter” and often family links and heredity prevail over any principles of democracy and political logic. In other words, everything is possible, and nothing can be excluded.

Nevertheless, Turkey is a country with great historical traditions, especially in politics. The March 31 elections demonstrated that, with the economy still foundering, Turkish society is not particularly keen on any further strengthening of the Erdoğan clan. Selçuk Bayraktar is not a physicist – he did not develop the UAVs and name them after himself – nor is he a politician with a proven track record and experience in serving the Turkish state. He can, for now, best be described as a statistician or a banker who holds public (or rather family) funds

in his hands and advertises Turkish drones throughout the wider Turkic world and in the conflict zones where NATO is involved (including in Ukraine).

Meanwhile, the AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's inner circle have accomplished politicians and statesmen who would be able to replace him in the next presidential election. And one of Erdoğan's favorites is the low-key but proven, experienced, reliable and educated Hakan Fidan, who is well-schooled in intelligence work and diplomacy. But today, with the elections still 5 years away, it is too early to draw a conclusion, although it is clear that Erdoğan moved Fidan from MIT to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a reason.

The March 31 elections, of course, not only signaled possible changes in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy, but also presented Erdoğan's allies and partners with something of a problem. After all, Erdoğan is an authoritative figure who has shattered previous stereotypes and made sharp turns in diplomacy without considering anyone else's opinion (including, all too often, that of his key ally, the US).

Experts in Azerbaijan and Russia are also wondering what the likely changes in Turkish politics may mean for their countries. Of course, the coming to power of the CHP does not mean that Ankara will cease to be guided by its national interests or take a pragmatic view of a profitable partnership, nor will it abandon its Turkic-centered approach to diplomacy and other matters. But the CHP is not the same as the AKP, and İmamoğlu is not Erdoğan at all. Everything is subject to change, and nothing will last for ever. However, we will discuss that aspect of Turkey's transformation in future articles.

29.04.2024

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