

Local Elections Redraw the Political Map of Turkey

Key takeaways:

- The local elections proved that millions of Turkish citizens retain their confidence in the power of the ballot box, even when competitive elections are not fair.
- The nationwide victory of the largest opposition party CHP underlined the willingness of Turks to use ballots to articulate rising displeasure with Erdoğan and his party, the AKP.
- The cost-of-living crisis experienced by Turkish citizens and the absence of election gifts being distributed by the government contributed to the historic defeat of AKP.
- The new mayors from CHP now face not only huge responsibilities, but also unprecedented political leverage to shape local politics.
- The results provided an encouraging example of the importance of elections in illiberal democracies such as under President Erdoğan.

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Introduction

The results of the local elections¹ in Turkey from Sunday, March 31, 2024 are a watershed moment for the country's political landscape. Hardly anyone in Turkey saw it coming. Once again, the results confounded the pollsters. International observers were also taken by surprise. Citizens inclined to vote for opposition parties celebrated in the streets across the country. Their sense of victory carried an emotional message: that the opposition can win elections, a rare success story in Turkish politics.

Not since over two decades had the largest opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), managed to win a nation-wide election. The CHP received 37.77 per cent of the overall vote, compared with 35.49 per cent for AKP. That's the largest share of the total vote nationwide for the CHP since the 1970s. The largest opposition party gained ground across the country even in conservative rural districts such as Adiyaman, Afyon, and Amasya that are the traditional strongholds of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Only ten months after a poor showing in the presidential elections the CHP handed the AKP the worst defeat in its 22-year history in power.

Voter participation reached 78.55 per cent. What appears to be a solid turnout for local elections in most European countries was in fact a declining participation rate in Turkey. Since the AKP first came to power in 2002, turnout had hovered between 82 to 90 per cent in various elections over the past two decades. The lower turnout this time around suggests that many citizens who were inclined to vote for the AKP decided to vote with their feet and stay at home instead of going to the polls.

We should add to this observation the fact that more than 2.2 million voters cast ballots, but they were all invalid. Thus, the protest vote was not only expressed by abstaining from voting, but also by going to a polling station and explicitly casting a "no" vote. Again, the most likely explanation is that these numbers include citizens who would rather vote for the AKP.

The Race in Istanbul

The marquee race of these local elections, which particularly attracted international attention, took place in Istanbul, the economic, commercial, and cultural centre of Turkey. One-fifth of Turkey's electorate lives in the metropolis of 16 million. The incumbent mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, won a second term in office by a landslide, defeating Erdoğan's preferred candidate, former urbanisation and environment minister Murat Kurum, by 51.14 per cent to 39.59 per cent. Such an unprecedented margin of difference corresponded to more than a million votes separating İmamoğlu from Kurum.

Equally significant, the CHP also wrested control of Istanbul's city council from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). This will give mayor İmamoğlu greater political leverage to implement his local policy agenda. The consequences of this twin achievement should not be underestimated, e.g., in financial terms. Holding a majority in the Istanbul city council gives İmamoğlu the opportunity to issue local bonds and/or borrow otherwise on capital markets to finance local projects. This resource opportunity was denied to the mayor in the past because İmamoğlu did not have a majority in the city council.

The Race in Ankara, Izmir, and Flipping Cities

Although the media spotlight was on Turkey's largest city, the country's capital also saw a unique electoral development. In Ankara, the incumbent CHP mayor Mansur Yavaş defeated his AKP opponent by a margin of 28.76 percentage points. In Turkey's third most populous city, Izmir, the incumbent CHP mayor prevailed over the AKP candidate by a margin of 48.97 per cent to 37.06 per cent. As local elections in Turkey are based on a single round of voting in a first-past-the-post system, there is no need for a run-off and the margin of victory can be less than 50 per cent.

With the re-election of the mayors of Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, the CHP not only managed to maintain its electoral presence in Turkey's three largest cities, but actually increased it. The CHP also took control of the city of Bursa in north-western Turkey, defeating incumbent AKP mayor Alınur Aktaş by 10 percentage points. Turkey's fifth largest municipality, the coastal city of Antalya, also switched from the AKP to a CHP

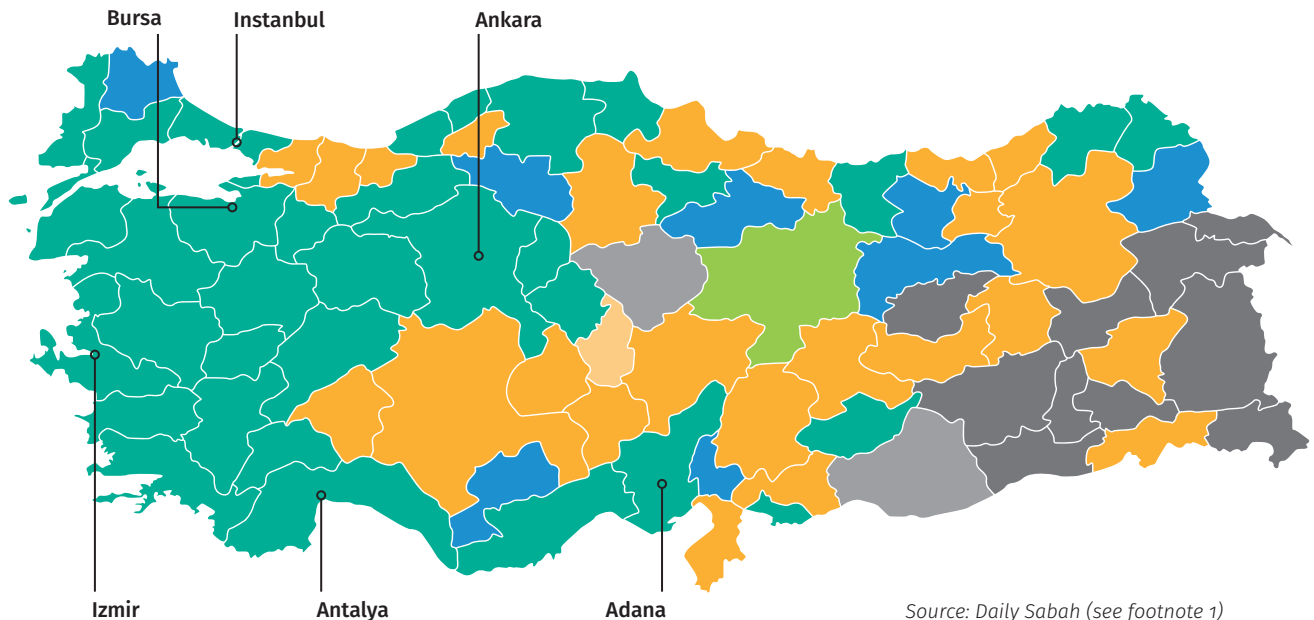
1 See Daily Sabah, "Turkish Local Election results", <https://www.dailysabah.com/elections/march-31-2024-turkish-local-elections-results/> (accessed 02.04.2024). This hyperlink provides an interactive map which has the most detailed results across Turkey of the local elections in 2024, and in comparison, to the previous elections in 2019.

Local Elections Redraw the Political Map of Turkey

Turkish local elections 2024

Winning party in each district

■ CHP ■ AK Party ■ DEM ■ MHP ■ New Welfare Party
■ Good Party ■ Great Unity Party



Source: Daily Sabah (see footnote 1)

mayor. The opposition CHP now holds the mayoralty in 35 out of 81 cities, up from 21 in 2019, and a CHP mayor will govern all five of Turkey's largest municipalities.

It's the state of the Economy

If opposition candidates were able to win mayoral seats not only in Turkey's largest cities, but also in smaller rural districts in the centre of the country, far from their traditional coastal base, then some analysis is needed to explain this extraordinary migration of voters. Take Üsküdar, the wealthy Istanbul district where Erdoğan has a house. It went to the CHP, as did the eastern province of Adiyaman and several areas close to the Black Sea long considered too conservative to be in play for the opposition.

Dissatisfaction with the country's turbulent economic situation was widespread among voters. There was no more cheap credit for consumers and investors, no more pre-election government handouts. Erdoğan could no longer offer voters the kind of largesse they had become accustomed to in recent years, such as increases in the legal minimum wage, free heating for a month or substantial increases for pensioners, as he

had done ahead of the presidential elections in May 2023.

Instead, Turkish citizens are enduring a multi-year inflationary crisis combined with a dramatic depreciation of the national currency, the Turkish lira, against the US dollar and the euro. In addition, the availability of credit has been severely curtailed by a policy reversal by the Turkish central bank. Key interest rates are now at 50 per cent, while official price inflation was 68.5 per cent (year-on-year) in March 2024. The World Bank reported last month that Turkey's nominal food inflation is the fourth worst in the world at 71 percent year over year, surpassed only by Argentina, Lebanon, and Zimbabwe.² That's not a happy neighbourhood to be associated with.

Against this economic backdrop, it was only a matter of time before the cost-of-living crisis for the majority of citizens would boil over and translate into political protests. The local elections at the end of March 2024 provided an ideal and safe opportunity. Voters could vent their frustration, either vote candidates in or out of office without appearing to vote directly against Erdoğan. Instead of outrightly punishing an incumbent

2 The World Bank, "Food Security Update", 18. March 2024, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/40ebbf38f5a6b68b-fc11e5273e1405d4-0090012022/related/Food-Security-Update-CII-March-18-2024.pdf> (accessed 06.04.2024).

Local Elections Redraw the Political Map of Turkey

president, they directed their anger at the party he leads and the candidates he chose. Nevertheless, the political signal sent was clear: change course before it is too late. This message suggests that there are many voters who may still consider voting for Erdoğan, but who are abandoning the AKP in droves. The growing gap between support for the AKP and voting preferences for Erdoğan is one of the most important conclusions of these local elections.

Political Consequences of the Municipal Elections

The resurgence of the CHP will certainly reshape national politics. This has even been acknowledged by an unlikely source, namely President Erdoğan himself. On Sunday evening, after the ballots had been cast and the votes counted, he made a hitherto unthinkable speech from the AKP's Ankara headquarters: Erdoğan publicly conceded defeat in an election, arguing to his remaining loyal supporters that the results marked "a turning point".³

It remains to be seen what direction Turkish politics will take in the coming years. After voting in presidential, parliamentary, and local elections in the space of eleven months, Turkish voters will now have to wait four more years before casting their ballots again in the presidential elections scheduled for 2028. But this electoral roadmap could be different and shorter. A number of factors, ranging from party politics, over the state of the economy to, most importantly, decisions taken by President Erdoğan himself, will determine the medium-term course of policy action in Turkey. In short, the "turning point" assertion for Turkish politics applies not only to the governing AKP, but equally to the lead opposition party CHP.

While the largest opposition party has been promoting a new cohort of mayors,⁴ from Imamoğlu and Yavaş to the new CHP leader Özgür Özel, Erdoğan himself missed an opportunity to identify convincing mayoral candidates, one of whom could even serve as a potential successor when his presidential term officially ends in 2028 according to the provisions of the current Turkish constitution. Although he needs such a candidate, he seems unwilling to appoint one. During the electoral campaign of the past months when Erdoğan

zigzagged across the country, he repeatedly spoke about his retirement plans. However, past experience and statements of his suggest that Erdoğan is not exactly a man of his word.

What Does the Strong Showing for the New Welfare Party Tell us?

The local elections also saw the breakthrough of the New Welfare Party (YRP, founded in 2018), led by Fatih Erbakan, the son of Erdoğan's former mentor and prime minister, Necmettin Erbakan. The latter is considered the founding father of political Islam in Turkey. Erdoğan's political career began in the elder Erbakan's Welfare Party. After the May 2023 presidential elections, the party split from Erdoğan's ruling coalition over policy differences such as the YRP's demand for a pension increase and an end to all trade relations with Israel, and Erdoğan's approval of Sweden's accession to NATO.

In the local elections, the YRP received more than six per cent of the total vote and won outright in two of Turkey's 81 provinces. It is now the third largest party in Turkish politics. It has drawn voters away from supporting AKP candidates. This suggests that neither the AKP nor Erdoğan can take the nationalist-Islamist vote for granted. The combination of nationalism and Islamist populism that Erdoğan used to fire up the masses in previous campaigns is no longer enough. The YRP's breakthrough means that Erdoğan now has a real political competitor within this spectrum of Turkish politics.

European Reactions and Implications

With much of Europe itself in election campaign mode ahead of the European Parliament elections on 6–9 June 2024, reactions to the surprise results in Turkey were mostly positive, albeit mixed with uncertainty about future developments. Statements from German representatives underlined the determination of Turkish citizens to "vote for change" and reflecting "a good day for Turkish democracy".⁵ But other voices seemed more myopic. The Bavarian politician Manfred Weber, president of the European People's Party (EPP) since 2022 and leader of the EPP group in the European Parliament since 2014, argued the day after the sur-

3 See Turkish Minute, "Erdoğan concedes 'turning point' for party after local elections defeat", 01. April 2024, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2024/04/01/erdogan-concede-turning-point-for-party-after-local-elections-defeat/> (accessed 02.04.2024).

4 This is the first time in more than 20 years that many more women have been elected as mayors and local councillors across the country. In total, 11 female mayors were voted into office.

5 The Chair of the Delegation to the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee, MEP Sergey Lagodinsky (GREENS, DE) praised "the general functioning of the institute of democratic elections". He also underlined that "democratic forces and structures in Turkish societies are still alive despite the repeated setbacks in recent years."

Local Elections Redraw the Political Map of Turkey

prising news from Istanbul, Ankara and elsewhere that while an expansion of the customs union with Turkey was possible, EU accession would “overburden” both sides.⁶

Such reactions point to a larger strategic challenge for most policymakers in Brussels and among EU member states. With Turkey’s political landscape in flux, the question of what strategic priorities EU officials and politicians in Paris, Berlin, and Rome have vis-à-vis Ankara is becoming more acute. While they have (reluctantly) come to terms with ‘the devil they know’ in Ankara, they may now need to reformulate some of their policy positions towards Turkey and expand their outreach to CHP representatives in order to have a broader set of communication channels. How EU-Turkey relations are (re-)defined will critically depend on the outcome of the European Parliament elections, the composition of the new Commission in Brussels and key positions such as the head of the European Council and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

At the local level, there is a wide range of European cooperation formats with re-elected and newly elected Turkish mayors. Town and city twinning arrangements offer various opportunities for cooperation with Turkish civil society representatives. In the aftermath of the tragic earthquake in southern Turkey in February 2023, many foreign NGOs have been working at the local level to provide practical assistance to Turkish citizens, businesses and municipal representatives. This expanding geography of bottom-up cooperation between officials from, say, Germany, France, Italy or EU institutions constitutes a large reservoir of local engagement that both sides should make good use of in the coming years.

Conclusion

Rarely in the past two decades have commentators in Turkey and international analysts agreed that the outcome of local elections would affect Turkish politics for years to come. But this time the verdict was almost unanimous, with some calling it a “historic victory” and others talking of a “revolution at the ballot box”. These euphoric assessments may need to be qualified in due course, but they point to an important feature of Turkish electoral democracy: voters have choices and can make a difference at the ballot box. This distinguishes

Turkey from recent elections in autocratic regimes such as Russia, Iran, and Egypt.

Conversely, the extent to which Turkey could be the next Poland, where re-democratisation is taking place through elections and a change of government, remains to be seen. There are hopeful signs, but it is too early to write off Erdoğan and his autocratic regime. Events after the local elections in the city of Van (near the border with Iran) with the elected pro-Kurdish mayor from the Peoples’ Equality and Democracy (DEM) party initially being prevented from assuming office suggests that the repressive reflexes against opposition politicians remain intact. However, in reaction to mass protests in Van and cross-party support from CHP with DEM, the Turkish authorities were forced to back down and appoint the elected mayor, Abdullah Zeydan. In total, the pro-Kurdish DEM party succeeded in ten provincial capitals compared to eight in 2019.⁷

President Erdoğan now faces a delicate political and economic decision. Is he prepared to support the efforts of his finance minister, Mehmet Şimşek, and the governor of the Central Bank, Fatih Karahan, to fight hyperinflation at the expense of economic growth and the risk of further popular anger? If the answer is yes, this means that both the finance minister and the governor must be given political and institutional leverage without Erdoğan threatening their dismissal and/or policy reversal in the background. If the answer is no, and Erdoğan decides to return to his version of ‘unorthodox’ economic policy, then all bets are off. While he has four years remaining in the mandate of his second-term presidency, time is not on his side.

The state of the Turkish economy requires immediate and sustained adjustments in the areas of price inflation, currency stability and the country’s external deficit. Implementing these adjustments is primarily the responsibility of the central government in Ankara and the Turkish Central Bank. However, an interesting political-economy consequence of the local elections is that the opposition CHP is now in charge of cities, municipalities, and provinces covering some 52 million citizens. This not only gives the largest opposition party political standing, but also positions the CHP as an economic factor throughout the country.

The victorious CHP has much to celebrate, but should keep its success in perspective. Much remains to be

6 See post by Manfred Weber on X, <https://twitter.com/ManfredWeber/status/1775128066785747056> (accessed 02.04.2024).

7 The results of local elections in the predominantly Kurdish cities and provinces of southeast Turkey have been marred by allegations of massive voter fraud. The Kurdish DEM party accused the Ankara government of sending thousands of soldiers and police from outside the provinces to vote in Kurdish towns and cities. This manoeuvre swung two provinces in favour of the ruling coalition.

Local Elections Redraw the Political Map of Turkey

done at the municipal level by the re-elected and newly elected mayors on pressing issues such as public transport infrastructure, earthquake risks, and affordable housing. Imamoğlu's victory gives the mayor of Istanbul a great deal of recognition and prestige within the CHP.

But a word of caution is in order. On the night of his re-election, he spoke to a jubilant crowd and hardly sounded like a mayor, but rather like the leader of the main opposition party. The process of identifying the CHP candidate best positioned to run in the 2028

presidential elections remains open and is by no means predetermined in Imamoğlu's favour. The re-elected CHP mayor in Ankara, Mansur Yavaş, and the CHP leader, Özgür Özel, make this a three-horse race within the resurgent CHP.

While the saying goes that all politics is local, the CHP and other opposition parties now have a unique opportunity. They can prove through good governance across the country that they are also fit for purpose at the national level. Time is on their side to prepare for and execute such a political challenge.