

The Local Elections that Shook Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey

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The results of the recent local elections in Turkey echoed around the world. The election results, which were widely reported in the global press as a “stinging defeat”¹ and “a blow”² for President R. Tayyip Erdogan, were described as a “historic victory” for the Turkish opposition.³

The main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) won 37.8% of the national vote, beating Erdogan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which received 35.5%. Importantly, CHP mayors will now govern 35 of Turkey’s 81 provinces with a total population of 53 million, including the ten largest metropolitan cities. In contrast, the AKP won only 24 provinces, representing 19.5 million people. The reason why the results have caused such excitement despite being local elections is that these are the worst results for Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party in local elections since it was founded more than 20 years ago.⁴

Considered an example of competitive authoritarianism as theorized by Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way for the Erdogan regime, elections constitute the main source of legitimacy for its rule, leading the opposition in Turkey to place elections at the centre of political struggle.⁵ According to the distinction made by Levitsky and Way, authoritarian systems do not meet the average criteria of democratic regimes, such as broad protection of political rights and civil liberties, including freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom to criticize the government, and fair and free elections, as well as those that openly violate democratic rules and It is also different from full-scale authoritarian systems that eliminate Although elections in competitive authoritarian regimes are held regularly and are often free of mass fraud, state resources are routinely misused, freedom of the press and association is limited, election results are manipulated, and opponents are forced to engage in politics under constant threat.⁶

Although the political system in Turkey has had these features for a long time, the defeat of Erdogan and the AKP in the Presidential and general elections held last May was considered a great possibility. Following the country’s economic crisis and the major earthquake disaster that revealed the government’s incompetence, something that had not been possible in the country’s politics for a long time happened and six opposition parties from the right and left formed an alliance against Erdogan. Yet both Erdogan’s populist electoral economics and the need for security created by the earthquake that devastated almost a third of the country have failed to fulfil expect-

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tations. Erdogan's continued rule had plunged the country's opposition parties into a serious crisis and created the fear that opposition voters would not go to the polls again and that authoritarian rule in the country would consolidate and become full-scale. Indeed, after the May elections, local courts, which had initially started to resist the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, started to ignore the rulings of the Constitutional Court, the highest court in the country, and the debate on a new constitution began.

As those who follow Turkey's recent history know, constitutional crises and the constitutional amendments that followed have been an important pillar of Turkey's authoritarianization. Questioning the existence of the Constitutional Court, most of whose members were appointed during Erdogan's 20 years in power and who rarely make decisions that uphold the foundations of law and human rights principles, would mean the end of the rule of law in a country where judicial independence has been largely lost. On the other hand, although the debate on constitutional amendments started over the legitimacy of the Constitutional Court, it is a well-known fact that Erdogan needs different arrangements for re-nomination in order to maintain his power despite previous constitutional amendments. Moreover, despite Erdogan's alliance with ultra-nationalists after the failed coup attempt in 2016, the Islamic discourse and anti-gender and anti-LGBTI+ sentiment, which he started to re-emphasize after 2020, were expected to be another driving force for the constitutional amendment. In the constitutional amendment they were preparing to open for discussion in 2024, AKP officials had reflected in the press that they would change the definition of family in the Constitution and define family as the union of men and women, despite the fact that LGBTI+s in Turkey do not have the right to marry. These proposed constitutional amendments, which include the reorganization of the Constitutional Court and the family and will most likely serve as a curtain for new regulations that will create the conditions for Erdogan to run again, were planned to be submitted to a referendum, as Erdogan always does due to the fragmented structure of the parliament, which has already become ineffective with the presidential system.

The local elections shook not only Erdogan's confidence in the majority of voters but also the legitimacy of his rule. The success of the Republican People's Party's renewed leadership with young and female candidates after its defeat in May has created new hope for democracy. Moreover, in Istanbul, the most populous city in Turkey and Europe, Ekrem Imamoglu, who became mayor for the second time by a significant margin against Murat Kurum, the Minister of Environment and Urbanization, who was nominated by Erdogan because of the earthquake risk in the city, proved to be a leader with a good chance of success against Erdogan. Ekrem Imamoglu's candidacy in the May elections was blocked due to a political lawsuit filed against him. While the political case against Imamoglu remains a threat, the deepening economic crisis in Turkey, the despair following the earthquake and the institutional disintegration caused by the judicial crisis are causing the public to perceive Erdogan's rule as a problem and strengthening support for the new leader.⁷

Although Erdogan has gradually shifted from a democratic conservative discourse to an authoritarian nationalist political Islam since he came to power in 2002, his supporters are largely composed of two main groups. The majority of Erdogan's voters are those who support the stability created by his long rule. This promise of stability,

fuelled by the coup attempt and Erdogan's security policies against the liberal Kurdish movement, is coming to an end with the economic crisis and institutional collapse. Erdogan's second and most loyal constituency is the Islamists, who have been socially uplifted under Erdogan's rule. Political Islamists, a group that has at times been marginalized in the country's history due to the country's founding secularism, fear that with Erdogan's fall, they will lose the power they have gained and even be marginalized again. However, Erdogan's abandonment of the Palestinian cause, one of the founding discourses of political Islam, while maintaining commercial relations with the Israeli state in the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict, has created serious confusion among this group as well.

But the real secret of Erdogan's political survival lies not in increasing the number of his supporters, but in dividing his opponents. Erdogan's divide-and-rule strategy has succeeded many times before precisely because he knows how to manage the country's two biggest problems: secularism and the Kurdish question. In line with this strategy, Erdogan wasted no time after these elections to break the alliance between the nationalist left and the Kurdish left, which had been successful in the local elections. In Van, one of the largest Kurdish provinces, the provincial electoral board gave the winning DEM party candidate's seat to Erdogan's AKP candidate, who received only half as many votes as the winning candidate, on the grounds that the candidate did not meet the eligibility requirements. This process was similar to the appointment of district trustees to replace Kurdish candidates who had won mayoralships in all Kurdish provinces in two previous local elections. This time, however, after two days of demonstrations in the province, openly supported by CHP leaders and Imamoglu, who declared the decision unlawful, the government backed down and the winning candidate in Van was given his license. As this example shows, Erdogan's competitive authoritarianism can only be overcome through elections if the opposition is united.⁸

Unlike other authoritarian leaders, Erdogan does not have the economic power of natural resources and his remaining term in office is four years. While early elections are a risk for Erdogan at this stage, there is also the possibility that he could use the processes in the Middle East to re-divide the opposition groups in the country through war politics in order to achieve the constitutional change and stability he needs. On the other hand, Erdogan's loss of majority power will cause interest groups in the country not to support him unconditionally, and the ruling elite, especially the bureaucracy, and even members of his party, which has become more of an alliance of interests than a political party, to look for new options. Under these circumstances, the real elections that will determine Turkey's direction will be the presidential and general elections scheduled for 2028, the timing of which has now become controversial. Certainly, the next elections will also determine the trajectory of competitive authoritarianism in the world by showing whether an authoritarian leader can be defeated at the ballot box.

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- ¹ Nicolas Bourcier, “Turkey’s local elections: Sweeping victory for the opposition is stinging defeat for Erdogan”, Le Monde, 01.04.2024.
- ² Ben Hubbard, “Winning City Halls, Turkish Opposition Strikes Blow to Erdogan”, The New York Times, 01.04.2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/01/world/middleeast/turkey-election-results.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=styl-turkey&variant=show®ion=MAIN_CONTENT_1&block=storyline_top_links_recirc
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