

# Turkey's Local Elections: Why Do They Matter?

by Sinan Ekim



Turks are once again headed to the polls this Sunday, 31 March – to vote in local elections, which may result in a change of leadership in metropolitan, provincial and district municipalities, as well as neighbourhoods and villages across the country.

As in every local election, the purpose is to elect local leaders. Yet, the contest has so far been more reminiscent of the run-up to parliamentary elections.

While Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is not on the ballot, he is traversing the country and campaigning for his party as if he were. Most posters and leaflets bear Erdoğan's picture, and the lyrics of election songs

blasted at demonstrations consist mainly of his name.

The vote has indeed been reframed as a poll on Erdoğan's leadership. The president is panicking: developments since parliamentary elections in June 2018,<sup>1</sup> which had already seen his Justice and Development Party (AKP) receive its lowest percentage of votes since it came to power in 2002 (except for the June 2015 elections, which were eventually voided and repeated), may have bruised the AKP's popularity beyond treatment. In this sense,

<sup>1</sup> Kemal Kirişçi, "How to Read Turkey's Election Results", in *Order from Chaos*, 25 June 2018, <https://brook.gs/2IrlDv5>.

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securing a decisive victory will allow Erdoğan to claim he still represents the will of the people, exerting a legitimising effect on his style of leadership and his plans for Turkey's future.

The state of the economy is the main cause for the president's concern. Turkey is now effectively in recession, after its GDP shrank 2.4 per cent in the last quarter of 2018.<sup>2</sup> The lira is still reeling from last summer's currency crisis; unemployment is at 13.5 per cent, having gone up from 10.4 per cent at the end of 2017; and food inflation has reached an unprecedented 31 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

The government has so far implemented some policies to mitigate the social impact of Turkey's economic malaise. For instance, it has pressured retailers to hold down prices, and set up vegetable stalls in Istanbul and Ankara that sell discounted produce.<sup>4</sup> It has also announced it would pay the salaries, taxes and social security premiums of new employees recruited by 30 April for a three-month period, and cover their taxes and premiums for another nine months thereafter.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Laura Pitel, "Turkey Falls into Recession as Lira Crisis Takes Long-Lasting Toll", in *Financial Times*, 11 March 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/92818e7c-43c6-11e9-b168-96a37d002cd3>.

<sup>3</sup> Cagan Koc, "Turkish Food Fight Spreads with Fines, Raids as Inflation Stings", in *Bloomberg*, 10 February 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-10/turkish-food-fight-spreads-with-fines-raids-as-inflation-stings>.

<sup>4</sup> Amberin Zaman, "Turkish Ruling Party Sets Up Mobile Food Stalls to Lure Votes", in *Al-Monitor*, 12 February 2019, <http://almon.co/365d>.

<sup>5</sup> "İstihdam Seferberliği 2019 İstanbul buluşması", in *HaberTurk*, 15 March 2019, <http://hbr.tk/NWJn3C>.

Erdoğan has also and once again resorted to religiously charged electioneering. At several rallies in Istanbul and Ankara over the past weeks, Erdoğan said that Turkey was surrounded by inimical forces, bent on curbing its rise to prominence, and that he would never let Turkey surrender at the hands of Islam's enemies.<sup>6</sup> Most strikingly, he framed the tragic mosque killings in New Zealand as part of a wider conspiracy against Turkey and Islam.<sup>7</sup>

During rallies following the assault, crowds were shown a video of the killings that was presented together with a screenshot of a recent European Parliament resolution that called for the formal suspension of accession talks with Turkey as well as footage of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of Turkey's opposition Republican Peoples Party (CHP), arguing that "terrorism is rooted in the Islamic world".<sup>8</sup> Since the attacks, Erdoğan has shown this footage during at least eighteen rallies.<sup>9</sup>

This is one of Erdoğan's "trademark" strategies: create a familiar enemy; depict Turkey and Islam as the victim; display Erdoğan as the saviour and the

<sup>6</sup> "Erdoğan: Türkiye'nin yükselişi Haçlı artıklarının zoruna gidecek", in *Karar*, 16 March 2019, <http://krr.im/4CFC>.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Pitel, "Erdoğan Angers New Zealand by Airing Footage of Killings", in *Financial Times*, 18 March 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/ba0ee778-498e-11e9-bbc9-6917dce3dc62>.

<sup>8</sup> Burhanettin Duran, "Taking Stock of Campaign Rhetoric in Turkey", in *Daily Sabah*, 21 March 2019, <http://sabahdai.ly/95c39A>.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Lowen, "Christchurch Shootings: Why Turkey's Erdoğan Uses Attack Video", in *BBC*, 20 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47638936>.

undisputed leader of the Muslim world – and, in return, distract the electorate from the many pressing issues that his administration is responsible for.

This approach is also meant to remind the religiously-minded sections of the Turkish population that the AKP was the first party to uphold their interests, and if the CHP emerges victorious, their religious identity will once again be relegated to the side-lines of Turkish social and political life.

This is similar to what unfolded ahead of the last municipal elections in 2014, which took place against the backdrop of the Gezi Park protests and corruption allegations that surfaced in December 2013 and engulfed the Erdoğan family and its closest allies. Once reframed as the machinations of Turkey's enemies, these troubles barely raised a shrug in Erdoğan's core constituencies, carrying the AKP to a decisive victory and even laying the groundwork for his election as president.

Parallels are also present in the more recent run-up to the constitutional referendum of April 2017, when Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, was banned from flying into Rotterdam to address the city's Turkish constituency and Dutch police blocked another minister from entering the Turkish consulate. In return, Erdoğan accused the Dutch of employing "Nazi" practices,<sup>10</sup> and turned the standoff into the focal point of the campaign – which eventually overshadowed the

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Darroch, "Netherlands 'Will Pay the Price' for Blocking Turkish Visit – Erdoğan", in *The Guardian*, 12 March 2017, <https://gu.com/p/64j52>.

actual issue that was being voted.

Of course, the question is whether this strategy will pay off again. There are enough reasons to believe that this time it may well fall flat. Indeed, the economy has sunk to such a low that many voters may rethink their electoral behaviour.

A number of surveys have revealed dwindling support for the AKP – so much so that Erdoğan, normally a close observer of opinion polls, has said that he had "no confidence" in them.<sup>11</sup> The AKP already runs the risk of "losing" Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey's two largest cities, industrial and financial centres.

The AKP's candidate for Istanbul, former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, is facing a close contest against Ekrem İmamoğlu, a unity candidate fielded by the CHP and İyi Party. More alarmingly, Mehmet Özhasseki, AKP's representative-hopeful in Turkey's Capital Ankara, is currently trailing behind Mansur Yavaş, another joint-candidate by CHP and İyi.<sup>12</sup>

A recent study by the Konda polling agency also put forward some interesting conclusions. It estimated that the percentage of those who identified themselves as "religious-conservative" decreased from 32 per cent to 15 per cent between 2008 and

<sup>11</sup> Jasper Mortimer, "Erdogan Blasts Polling as Turkey's Local Elections Approach", in *Al-Monitor*, 27 February 2019, <http://almon.co/36du>.

<sup>12</sup> Jasper Mortimer, "All Eyes on Turkey's 3 Biggest Cities as Local Elections Approach", in *Al-Monitor*, 18 March 2019, <http://almon.co/36o1>.

2018.<sup>13</sup> The percentage of those who regularly fasted also dropped from 77 per cent to 65 per cent during the same period.<sup>14</sup>

According to another influential survey conducted by the Istanbul-based Kadir Has University, 51.1 per cent of those interviewed defined "unemployment/cost of living/devaluation of Turkish lira" as the most pressing item on Turkey's agenda.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, "unemployment" was listed as the top problem in five out of Turkey's seven regions, and came in second in Eastern Anatolia and Southeastern Anatolia, where the top issue was "terror" and the "cost of living" respectively.<sup>16</sup>

The survey also shows that fewer people define the AKP administration as "successful" – in terms of both political and economic policy, with 57.1 per cent of those interviewed admitting that they are doing worse economically as a result of developments over the last year.<sup>17</sup>

What will happen if these surveys and polls accurately capture shifts in Turkey's society? What can one expect if Erdoğan's "charm" as "the hero of a country under siege" is unable to offset the pressure from economic troubles?

<sup>13</sup> Konda, "Lifestyles", in *What Has Changed in 10 Years?*, <https://interaktif.konda.com.tr/en/HayatTarzlari2018/#5thPage/1>.

<sup>14</sup> Konda, "Religious Practices", in *What Has Changed in 10 Years?*, <https://interaktif.konda.com.tr/en/HayatTarzlari2018/#7thPage/2>.

<sup>15</sup> Mustafa Aydın et al., *Social and Political Trends in Turkey 2018*, Istanbul, Kadir Has University, 30 January 2019, p. 15, <http://ctr.khas.edu.tr/sources/TSSEA-2018-EN.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26 and 46.

And what if the opposite occurs and, once again, the AKP manages to secure gains or avoid a resounding defeat in the upcoming local elections?

For one, if surveys are proven correct and the AKP loses control of key municipalities, it will send a strong message by showing that, after sixteen years in power, it can be defeated at the ballot box. This in itself should re-energise the country's often-lacklustre opposition.

If the AKP is pushed out of power in Istanbul and/or Ankara, this message will be strengthened even further. As Turkey's largest metropolis, financial and industrial centre, and home to almost 20 per cent of its population, Istanbul has always been the prize of any electoral contest; it is also where Erdoğan took his first step onto Turkey's political scene in 1994, when he served as mayor.

In addition to being the country's capital and second largest industrial hub, Ankara, too, carries symbolic importance: the AKP and its ideological forerunners have administered the city since 1994. The "fall" of these key cities – which, together, house one quarter of Turkey's population – will demonstrate that Erdoğan cannot effectively claim to be representing the will of the nation.

However, Erdoğan does not accept defeat graciously. He could therefore outright reject the results and demand repeat elections, or even push through measures that will keep him entrenched in power, redoubling on his authoritarianism. In this sense, an opposition victory could end up being

a double-edged sword.

Moreover, a defeat will not mark the end of the AKP era. Erdoğan will still be facing a four-year window with no scheduled polls – which will take him up to 2023, the centennial of the founding of the Turkish Republic that Erdoğan has reportedly set as a deadline for some of his more sweeping ambitions.

It will therefore be crucial to watch how the government interprets the outcome, and uses this timeframe to 2023 to continue enacting its priorities. There are boundless possibilities – ranging from pushing through much-needed economic and political reforms to realising more controversial projects that may completely wipe away the vestiges of a liberal and secular Turkey.

By 2023, we could be either looking at a Turkey with its house in order, or a society fundamentally transformed through top-down acts of unchallenged social and political engineering. In many ways, after 31 March, Turkish politics will have entered what will likely become one of its most critical and formative phases.

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