

Istanbul Elections Fuel Hope for Turkish Democracy, but an Uphill Battle Awaits

by Sinan Ekim

Last Sunday's re-run of Istanbul's mayoral elections delivered a thundering defeat to Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its candidate Binali Yıldırım, resulting in the stunning electoral triumph of Ekrem İmamoğlu from the country's main opposition Republican Peoples' Party (CHP).

This was İmamoğlu's second victory, having already won the same contest on 31 March. The AKP contested the outcome at the time, citing organised irregularities and fraud. After recounts in several districts, Turkey's electoral council (YSK) invalidated the results and called for a repeat – effectively buckling under pressure from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who did not want to accept defeat.

Istanbul is "special" for Erdoğan for several reasons. It is both his personal and political home, having launched his own political career as the city's mayor in 1994. Since then, Istanbul had

been administered by either the AKP or its ideological forerunners.

A more important reason is financial. As Turkey's economic powerhouse, Istanbul accounts for 40 per cent of Turkey's 850 billion US dollar economy and had a municipal budget of 7.3 billion US dollars last year,¹ exceeding the combined budget of multiple ministries. The AKP has used these funds to sustain patronage networks in the past, funnelling money via lucrative contracts to pro-government circles.

In his seventeen-day tenure as mayor before the YSK overturned his victory, İmamoğlu had started to uncover cases of corruption and nepotism,²

¹ Melvyn Ingleby, "Cracks Are Deepening in Erdoğan's Ruling Party", in *The Atlantic*, 22 April 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/04/istanbul-erdogan-political-career-akp/587698>.

² Ayla Jean Yackley, "Istanbul's Opposition Candidate Urges Supporters to Retain Faith in Ballot Box", in *Al-Monitor*, 23 May 2019, <http://almon.co/37n5>.

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threatening to unravel the AKP's patronage networks and costing Erdoğan a crucial pillar of support that he had built up over the past twenty-five years.

This attempt to invalidate the election results massively backfired.

Last Sunday, İmamoğlu was able to transform his razor-thin margin of less than one per cent on 31 March to a resounding landslide of nine per cent, securing 54 per cent of the vote against Yıldırım's 45 per cent. He emerged victorious in 28 out of Istanbul's 39 districts, including in such conservative districts as Beykoz, Fatih and Üsküdar that had hitherto been the AKP's strongholds.

How and why this became possible carries important lessons for both the incumbent and the opposition.

The electorate is clearly fed up with Erdoğan's polarising identity-politics. The president's trademark discourse of national survival³ – which involves campaigning on fear and casting external and internal critics as threats to the nation – had always delivered results. It had helped secure a parliamentary majority in the snap elections of November 2015, for example, and led Erdoğan to emerge triumphant from the constitutional referendum of April 2017.

In both the March and the June elections, however, these tactics fell flat.

³ Ishaan Tharoor, "The Political Trend That's More Important Than 'Populism'", in *The Washington Post*, 16 February 2018, <http://wapo.st/2o3cKZx>.

Much of it has to do with the country's economic situation – the plummeting value of its national currency, soaring inflation, skyrocketing prices of basic food staples and record levels of youth unemployment. In fact, the AKP's religious electioneering has underplayed how much the party's popularity had depended on booming growth and guaranteeing prosperity to those classes that had been neglected economically – not only politically and culturally, as the "national survival" discourse insists – under pre-AKP administrations, lifting them into the middle-class.

Now beset with widespread economic anxiety, the electorate had less interest in listening to Erdoğan's incendiary exclamations, and even started to blame the party for the country's problems.

Against this, İmamoğlu offered politics of reconciliation. Instead of further deepening the city's fault-lines, he campaigned on the importance of bringing people together – captured in his now-trademark slogan, "we are great together".

In addition to his pledges to end hate speech and the scapegoating of the city's ethnic and religious minorities, İmamoğlu also offered actionable policy proposals on the city's problems, outlining how he would usher in an era of greater transparency and rule of law after twenty-five years of waste and corruption and start to heal the population's economic woes.⁴

⁴ Merve Tahiroglu and Aykan Erdemir, "Why Istanbul's Rerun Is a Battle for the Soul of Turkey", in *OpenDemocracy*, 14 June 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/>

Crucially, İmamoğlu refrained from constant AKP-bashing, despite the AKP's best efforts to drag him into its usual identity-based electioneering. Erdoğan's reactions to İmamoğlu's dispute with the governor of Ordu at the city's airport is telling in this respect.⁵

By insisting that İmamoğlu should apologise or "the courts will decide" his fate, Erdoğan tried to provoke defiance. The same logic underpinned Yıldırım's constant interruption of İmamoğlu during their televised debate on 16 June – which was another effort to goad him into an aggressive exchange –, as well as Erdoğan's insinuating that İmamoğlu had connections to Fethullah Gülen, an Islamist cleric whom Erdoğan blames for the failed coup attempt of July 2016.

İmamoğlu did not fall into the trap. This disarmed Erdoğan, who had capitalised on such reactions from the opposition in the past. Such hits had provided an excellent pretext for him to whip up fears that an opposition victory would mean a return to the status quo ante, when the conservative Turks were effectively shunned from Turkish social and political life.

These tactics created a profile for İmamoğlu as a unifying figure as well as a competent administrator. He was able to build a broad coalition that far exceeded the scale of support that had rallied behind last year's presidential hopeful Muharrem İnce. Of course, İmamoğlu's winning coalition did not

[why-istanbul-rerun-is-a-battle-for-the-soul-of-turkey](#).

⁵ "Ordu'da VIP tartışması", in *Haberturk*, 6 June 2019, <https://www.haberturk.com/ordu-da-vip-tartismasi-2485453>.

exclusively consist of CHP supporters.

The fact that the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) did not field its own mayor, and that the HDP's jailed leader Selahattin Demirtaş exhorted Kurdish voters to support the CHP candidate, was key in carrying İmamoğlu to victory. So were supporters of the İyi "Good" Party, the CHP's coalition partners in the elections. İmamoğlu even received the backing of a significant number of supporters from AKP and its ultra-nationalist ally, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

The most important outcome of İmamoğlu's triumph is ending an era in Turkish politics in which Erdoğan had seemed unstoppable, and emboldening an opposition that had remained fractured for much of the past seventeen years. After 23 June, it is difficult to argue that Turkish politics suffers from an opposition vacuum – a spirit that will hopefully be channelled through the coming years into 2023, when the next parliamentary and presidential elections are scheduled.

Not facing re-election for four years, Erdoğan should ideally push for normalisation, releasing the tens of thousands of prisoners that are in jail on spurious charges, dismantling the system of cronyism that has come to govern most transactions in Turkey's business circles and introducing measures to elevate the country's minorities to an equal footing with its Sunni Turkish majority. Extending his congratulations to İmamoğlu on social media was a good first step – so was his first appearance in parliament,

where he vowed to make adjustments in line with “the messages given by the people”.⁶

Erdoğan could also crank up the intensity of his authoritarianism, however. The trial of Osman Kavala, a Turkish businessman that is accused of attempting to overthrow Erdoğan’s government during the 2013 Gezi Park protests, that took place a day after the mayoral vote and did not result in his release, demonstrates that Erdoğan could in fact go the other way.⁷

One should therefore be circumspect about how far Erdoğan will let this upset challenge his rule. The AKP still commands a majority in Istanbul’s municipal council. It is not unthinkable for Erdoğan to instruct his foot-soldiers to basically block any forward motion and thereby paralyse İmamoğlu’s administration. He could also deploy his executive powers to squeeze funds out of Istanbul, as well as several other municipalities that the opposition now controls.

To push back, İmamoğlu’s will have to insist on transparency, increasing participation in local councils and immediately make public any effort to curtail his administration. Regardless of how much it is deserved, İmamoğlu should refrain from immediately blaming the AKP for every set-

back. This could easily play into the leadership’s hands, allowing them to argue that the opposition is trying to outsource responsibility.

Moving forward, İmamoğlu’s success should be institutionalised. This is crucial, if the opposition is adamant in repeating last Sunday’s success on a nationwide scale in 2023. Any action or rhetoric that demonises women with headscarves or belittles the conservative values of traditional AKP-voters – which have unfortunately come to be expected from Turkey’s social democrats – will immediately backfire, emptying İmamoğlu’s unifying message of any substance.

It is certainly not possible to say that Turkey is a healthy democracy. Yet, last Sunday’s elections have provided a refreshing demonstration that democracy is not dead and can in fact be consolidated. In this respect, the most powerful lesson of 23 June vote is that it has restored a degree of hope to Turkish politics and society – confirming that it is not naïve to believe that change is possible.

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⁶ Suzan Fraser, “Turkey’s Leaders ‘Vows’ to Heed Messages of Istanbul Election”, in *AP News*, 25 June 2016, <https://apnews.com/78c23665c5d546a1b33d5b0c1c01d830>.

⁷ “Court Rules Kavala Stay in Jail in Gezi Park Trial”, in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 26 June 2019, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/court-rules-kavala-stay-in-jail-in-gezi-park-trial-144477>.

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