

TURKEY: “Istanbul again” but for Imamoglu, not Erdogan

- Despite their local character, the 31 March elections will have indirect political ramifications for both the ruling coalition and the opposition.
- The outcome of the vote is likely to disappoint President Tayyip Erdogan as his plans to regain control of Istanbul and other large cities is expected to fail.
- Absent a victory in Istanbul, Erdogan will continue to provide half-hearted backing to the disinflation efforts. Regardless of the outcome, a reshuffle of the economic team is unlikely.

On 31 March, around 58mn registered voters will go to the polls in local elections to choose mayors for nearly 4,000 cities and smaller towns, as well as tens of thousands of city and provincial council members and other local officials. With voters casting their ballot across the whole country, the outcome will serve as a bellwether for national politics. The local elections will have (indirect) political consequences far beyond the election of mayors and other local administrators.

These elections are equally critical for both President Tayyip Erdogan and the opposition. For Erdogan, the vote is an opportunity to avenge his 2019 defeat and, above all, win back Istanbul – Turkey’s largest city and economic hub with enormous economic resources. “Istanbul again” has been the mantra used by Erdogan since his re-election last year. The electoral test is also significant for Erdogan’s pursuit of a new constitution (or constitutional amendments) to side-step presidential term limits and remove the remaining elements of judicial independence.

As for the opposition, the vote is seen as a litmus test for its strength and its prospects to stand as a viable alternative to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) after a painful defeat in the twin elections last year. The opposition control of Turkey’s main cities, especially Istanbul, represents its last meaningful holdout. Istanbul’s Mayor Ekem Imamoglu, and others like Ankara Mayor Mansur Yavas, were elected in 2019 through an unlikely coalition of their main opposition People’s Republican Party (CHP), a right-wing nationalist party (Good Party), and the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP, now renamed as DemP). This year, no such coalition exists. Candidates like Imamoglu and Yavas are instead running on accomplishments which, they say, have been made despite of the lack of support, if not outright opposition, of the AKP-led national government.

Erdogan likely to receive a new blow in the local elections

The outcome of the vote is likely to be a significant blow for President Erdogan and his ruling AKP. In the most likely scenario, Erdogan will neither recapture the local administration of Istanbul – the biggest prize of all – nor win back any of the other large cities (except for possibly Antalya) that he lost to the opposition in 2019.

While the race for Istanbul remains tight, Imamoglu has the upper hand thanks to his campaign skills and the disastrous performance on the campaign trail of his AKP opponent, Murat Kurum. In Ankara, incumbent Mayor Yavas is set to be re-elected by a large margin, possibly higher than ten percentage points. The AKP may also struggle to retain control of Bursa, Turkey’s fourth-most populous city and largest automotive production center. The New Welfare Party (YRP), a conservative right-wing party traditionally close to the AKP that did surprisingly well in the 2023 legislative elections, may win in the southeastern city of Sanliurfa. This would be a bitter blow for Erdogan as the YRP is targeting disenfranchised AKP voters. The YRP decided to field its own candidates after failing to reach a deal with the AKP.

It is mainly, if not all, about Istanbul

Despite the significance of the battle for Turkey’s largest city, the local election campaign has failed to create much excitement. Most of the polls suggest that Imamoglu is leading the race against Kurum. Imamoglu is not only a gifted campaigner but has also managed to neutralize attacks from Erdogan and his loyalist media outlets. Regardless, it will be critical for Imamoglu to secure votes from Kurdish voters and supporters of the nationalist Good Party.

In contrast, Kurum has made plenty of blunders and failed to convey the impression that he is qualified for the job. Even Erdogan's campaigning efforts have apparently failed to boost the popularity of his uncharismatic candidate.

A re-election (basecase) would boost Imamoglu's political prominence at the national level, confirming his status as the only figure who can beat Erdogan and setting him up as the opposition frontrunner for the next presidential election. This, in turn, could rejuvenate the political fortunes of the anti-Erdogan front.

Feeling politically vulnerable less than a year in his new term in office, Erdogan could become less predictable and opt for polarization by doubling down on populist initiatives domestically and abroad. The bottom line is that such a playbook has usually delivered for Erdogan at past similar critical junctures.

Regardless, no shift is expected in terms of economic policymaking, nor is a change in the economic team likely. However, a major disappointment for Erdogan on ballot day will mean that backing for his economic team will remain half-hearted, further complicating the disinflation program. On this front, a moment of truth could come in late May/June when it will become clear if Erdogan will hike the minimum wage in H2, conceding to the growing calls for a second increase in 2024.

If Erdogan succeeds in regaining control of Istanbul, he could afford not to worry about possible challengers and the opposition for some time as Imamoglu would likely be driven into a political limbo. This should allow Erdogan to provide stronger support to his economic team but still short of anything close to *carte blanche*.

Erdogan's next priority: constitutional change

Erdogan is expected to push ahead with his plan to change Turkey's constitution regardless of the outcome of the vote.

A victory on 31 March, however, would provide a significant boost to Erdogan's chances of success in seeking constitutional change. A defeat would likely complicate, but not necessarily completely derail, Erdogan's efforts to secure the support of the opposition lawmakers needed (around 38 if there are no defections from the 322-strong ruling alliance) to reach the parliamentary threshold (360 votes to advance a constitutional amendment to a referendum) to overhaul the constitution.

A new constitution (or amendments to the current one) could do away with presidential term limits, reduce the threshold for the election of the president, limit the power and prerogatives of the Constitutional Court and possibly enshrine conservative social values.

The 2019 local elections: A bitter defeat for Erdogan

In the 2019 local elections, voters terminated the AKP's local governance in the country's two largest cities after 25 years and handed the ruling party its most serious electoral defeat since its rise to power in 2002. The poor state of the economy, growing discontent with the government's policies, and effective coordination of opposition parties facilitated this outcome.

The AKP ended up controlling the mayoralty in 39 of Turkey's 81 provinces, nine less than it had before the vote. A bigger blow for Erdogan and his party was the fact that the opposition prevailed in six of Turkey's ten largest cities. Except for Izmir – a traditional opposition bastion – the other five cities (Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Adana and Mersin) were under the rule of the AKP and its nationalist ally until ballot day.

Two major blocs contested in the 2019 local elections besides several fringe parties and the pro-Kurdish HDP: the AKP and the MHP formed the People's Alliance while the main opposition CHP joined with the Good Party in the Nation Alliance. The HDP did not join the Nation Alliance but supported it by not putting forth candidates in provinces where they were unlikely to win. The AKP-led People's Alliance won just below 50% of the vote nationwide, while the Nation Alliance secured 37.6%. The pro-Kurdish HDP received 4.5%. Turnout was 84.7%.

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