



A New Political Landscape Out of Turkey's Municipal Elections

By Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı

The municipal elections that took place on Sunday in Turkey were a clear win for the opposition. While this will have no immediate impact on the presidency of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the country's political landscape will change with a reenergized opposition that will now have access to local government resources and with emerging political actors such as the new mayor of Istanbul.

Two main blocs competed in the polls: the People's Alliance comprised of President Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AK Party) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) against the Nation Alliance formed by the main opposition Republican People's Party and the moderate nationalist Good Party (İYİ). The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) put forward candidates only in heavily Kurdish-populated southeastern Turkey and elsewhere asked its voters to support the opposition candidates.

Turkey went into these elections with the economy in recession, unemployment at 12 percent and youth unemployment at 24 percent, inflation close to 20 percent, and the lira has lost more than 40 percent against the dollar in the last 12 months. Some had predicted that Erdoğan's People's Alliance would suffer a serious setback as a result. Other argued that its use of identity politics would limit the losses it would suffer. The result was somewhat in between—the People's Alliance lost Istanbul, Ankara, and other important municipalities but at the same time, thanks

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to identity politics, its overall vote loss was not too high.

The CHP has won in Istanbul (the AK Party will surely challenge the result but with a very low likelihood of any change) as well as in Ankara. Considering that it already held Izmir, the CHP is set to govern Turkey's three largest cities. Other important municipalities—such as Antalya, Adana, and Mersin—also flipped from AK Party and the MHP to the CHP, while none flipped from the CHP to AK Party or the MHP. While the pro-Kurdish HDP played a key role by ensuring opposition victories, including in Istanbul and Ankara, it suffered setbacks in the east, losing some municipalities to the AK Party and MHP.

Turkish democracy is generally accepted as deeply flawed after the political transformation of the past few years. For example, Freedom House categorizes Turkey as “not free” and the European Parliament has argued, “there has been a stark regression in the areas of the rule of law and human rights during the last few years in Turkey.” Against this backdrop, many Turks and observers outside the country had argued that it would be impossible to hold genuine elections under existing circumstances. Others had argued that, while elections in Turkey have become unfair, they are still competitive. Sunday's results prove the latter to be true—not only were the elections competitive, they will have real consequences.

There were concerns about an effort to rig the election in Istanbul, which was pushed back by a vigilant but calm opposition. The state's Anatolia News Agency was the main channel for releasing the regularly updated results but it unexpectedly stopped doing so at around 11:30 pm when the AK Party and the CHP were neck and neck and informal channels were suggesting the CHP was



winning. Meanwhile, the AK Party claimed victory and decorated Istanbul with celebratory posters at night. The CHP stood its ground while citizens urged the Anatolia News Agency and the High Electoral Council (HEC) to continue updating the vote counts. Close to noon, the HEC started to update results again and declared that the CHP candidate was leading. The opposition's ability to protect its win in Istanbul is another positive sign for Turkish democracy.

These results point out to an emerging new political landscape in Turkey. The strong presidential system Erdoğan has created will remain dominant. He will continue governing until 2023 when the next presidential election is scheduled—as long as he keeps the economy under control. However, the cities governed by the CHP and emerging political actors such as the new mayor of Istanbul will inevitably change the landscape, which has become more colorful.

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