



Turkey's Local Elections: What We Know and What We Do Not Know

By Emre Erdoğan

The recent local elections in Turkey produced mixed outcomes and raised several questions. Jumping to quick conclusions about the country's political future based on the results, as some commentators have, would be a gross mistake because many puzzles remain. With the Supreme Electoral Council (SEC), the highest decision-making body on the elections, later ordering a rerun of the election for the position of mayor of Istanbul, some of these puzzles became crucial for Turkish citizens and for friends of Turkey too.

Turkey's administrative structure is composed of 30 metropolitan cities (which contain 80 percent of the population) and 31 provinces. All cities and provinces are composed of districts. The mayors of metropolitan municipalities govern the whole city and in provinces each district has a mayor with similar powers.

The outcome of the local elections certainly do not good look for the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The People Alliance it formed with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) lost major metropolitan municipalities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Adana, and Mersin to the Nation Alliance formed by the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the newly founded İYİ Party (İYİ). The opposition now has a majority in the more developed cities, particularly in the western part of the country.

Identity before Economy

One lesson from the results is that the elections were not about the economy. During the last year, Turkey experienced a long period of economic instability: the lira lost about 40 percent against the dollar, inflation increased to 19 percent and unemployment to 15 percent (27 percent among the young), the economy stagnated, and the consumer confidence index fell to a historical low (55). According to the theory of economic voting behavior, Turkey's voters would have been expected to hold the incumbent party accountable for this situation and to punish it at the polls. Instead, identity politics dominated and the People Alliance's vote decreased only by 4 percentage points from 53.7 in the last parliamentary elections held in June 2018 to 49.7 percent this year. While this small decline can partially be attributed to the state of the economy, it would have been much steeper if economic considerations had dominated voter behavior.

The Nation Alliance owes much of its success to support from the voters of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). In several cities, the HDP did not put forward candidates and instead unilaterally supported those of the Nation Alliance. This decision was a game changer, particularly in metropolitan cities. Out of 30 metropolitan cities, the HDP competed in only 13 and won in 3 that are located in the majority-Kurdish southeastern part of the country. The Nation Alliance won in 10 metropolitan cities where the HDP did not run although it had a considerable voter base there. In these cases the HDP's choice was decisive. The Nation Alliance has not acknowledged cooperation with the HDP and did not make any public commitments to the party, but



there is no doubt that without the HDP's support it would not have performed as well as it did.

The key to the benevolence of the HDP toward the opposition block is the government policies in southeastern Turkey since 2015. After the elections that year, when the AK Party lost its majority in parliament and political parties failed to form a government, the country experienced an intense period of political violence, particularly in the majority-Kurdish southeastern provinces. Meanwhile the Kurdish peace process came to an end. Violence increased in the region in the run-up to the snap elections of November 2015 and during the winter of 2016. The AK Party securitized the Kurdish problem and through hardline policies attracted nationalist voters in the snap elections. This helped it regain a majority in parliament, but led to losing the support of Kurdish voters. This year's local elections and the pivotal role played by the HDP in them suggests that relations between the government and the Kurdish political movement may be beyond repair, or at least for as long as the AK Party keeps the nationalist MHP as its ally.

The AK Party-MHP Alliance

The AK Party and the MHP were not always allies. Before 2015 the MHP and its leader, Devlet Bahçeli, harshly criticized the AK Party and used strong anti-Erdoğan rhetoric. However, the party reversed its policy and aligned itself with Erdoğan and the AK Party after the failed coup attempt of 2016. The vulnerability of the MHP due to the split in the party that resulted in the formation of the breakaway İYİ Party in 2017 was one of the factors that cemented the MHP-AK Party alliance.

The MHP's support proved vital for Erdoğan and the AK Party in the presidential referendum in 2016 and in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2018. The AK Party would not have had enough votes in parliament to initiate the 2016 referendum without MHP support. Even today Erdoğan only has a parliamentary majority thanks to MHP support.

In the local elections the MHP supported AK Party candidates in major cities and the latter returned the favor in a smaller number of other cities and sub-districts.

This alliance has been fruitful for the MHP as the party has increased the number of provincial municipalities it holds from 8 to 12. Although the opposition does not have the power to push for early elections even with the support of the MHP because this requires a two-third majority in parliament, the MHP has veto power in every legislative issue requiring a simple majority. This disproportionate power of the party restricts the government's policy space, and in particular it prevents a new Kurdish peace process.

Mayors vs. Councils?

As noted above, more than 80 percent of Turkey's population lives in metropolitan cities that are governed by directly elected mayors who have substantial powers. However, they also have metropolitan municipal councils composed of the mayors of districts and some members of the district municipal councils, disproportionately representing smaller districts. These councils have limited powers but they can occasionally obstruct the mayors. As a result of the recent elections, some of the mayors of the opposition parties will have to share their power with councils controlled by the People Alliance. Cohabitation and power-sharing are not a traditional element of the Turkish political culture and Erdoğan has already hinted that the metropolitan councils that the AK Party controls will check or obstruct the CHP mayors.

Questions Raised

The outcomes of the Turkey's local elections raise some questions. First, in the absence of exit polling data, it is not clear if there was a flow of voters from the AK Party to the MHP due to discontent with the economic performance of the government. The nature of "tribal" politics in the country prevents

voters from shifting their votes to the other camp, but as the AK Party and the MHP are perceived to be on the same side of the country's polarized politics, there is a possibility that dissatisfied members of the former preferred to vote for the latter. Considering the worsening economic conditions of the country, the forthcoming rerun of elections in Istanbul will show if this possible intrablock volatility will be replaced by interblock one.

There is another question mark about the support of HDP voters for the Nation Alliance, especially in critical elections. As the HDP voter base is known for its disciplined political behavior, temporary tactical voting to preventing a People Alliance victory is a better explanation for this temporary support. HDP support for the ruling party this time may not mean a realignment in the country's political life. This implicit alliance may exist only at the ballot boxes and it does not reduce the polarization between Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms.

With the SEC's decision to rerun the Istanbul elections, the "million dollar question" now is the outcome of the new contest that will take place on June 23. The decision has triggered a significant societal reaction, bringing different parts of the opposition behind the hashtag "#hersecokguzelolacak" (#everythingwillbefine). Several celebrities have participated in this campaign. Regardless of the outcome of the rerun, the decision has damaged the credibility of political institutions of the country in the eyes of at least half of the citizens.

Factors Affecting the Istanbul Rerun

As the votes of the People Alliance and Nation Alliance candidates were very close in the overturned election, it is impossible to predict the outcome of the rerun. Four factors will be in play.

The first is a potential consolidation of votes in favor of the Nation Alliance's Ekrem İmamoğlu. Smaller left-wing parties representing close to 1.5 percent of the votes in Istanbul have announced that they will withdraw from the race and support him. But it is

also possible that the societal uproar over the rerun election will consolidate the vote for the People Alliance by triggering tribal instincts. This brings us to the second factor to watch: turnout, particularly for the People Alliance. If President Erdoğan can use the defeat in the original election to create a sense of urgency and increase turnout among his supporters, the People Alliance can gain an advantage. The third factor is the economy. While the economy was not the main driver of voter behavior in the local elections, it does have a limited impact and could be decisive in a close race such as the upcoming one. The fourth factor is if there will be any major incident that leads to a "rally around the flag" moment, such as a major terrorist attack, a military confrontation with an external enemy, or a political confrontation with another country. As result of these the rerun in Istanbul could go both ways—but the damage to trust in Turkey's political institutions cannot be undone.

On the basis of all of the points raised above, it is important not jump to quick conclusions about the meaning of the outcome of Turkey's local elections, such as seeing them as the "beginning of the end" of the Erdoğan era. There is still much that is not known and the future will be determined by a combination of all of the factors discussed here as well as others. Considering everything that has taken place in Turkey during the last four years one would need to be really bold to make any assumptions about future political developments, particularly about the presidential election scheduled for 2023, based only on what happened in the 2019 local elections.

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