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The Istanbul Revote: What Happens Next?

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Brief Analysis

Four experts discuss the opposition's landslide victory and its implications for Turkish politics generally and President Erdogan's future specifically.

On June 24, Soner Cagaptay, Lisel Hintz, Kemal Kirisci, and Alan Makovsky addressed a Policy Forum at The

Washington Institute. Cagaptay is the Institute's Beyer Family Fellow and director of its Turkish Research Program. Hintz is an assistant professor of international relations and European studies at John Hopkins University's School of Advanced Studies. Kirisci is the TUSIAD senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, where he directs the Center on the United States and Europe's Turkey Project. Makovsky is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SONER CAGAPTAY

The outcome of Istanbul's June 23 mayoral election is good news for Turkey's democracy. Opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate Ekrem Imamoglu once again defeated Binali Yildirim, the candidate from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling party. It takes a long time to build a democracy, but apparently it takes a long time to kill one off as well. Even with all of the state's resources mobilized against him, Imamoglu won the revote by a landslide, showing that Turkey's democracy is alive and kicking.

One of Erdogan's main campaign strategies—publicizing a letter from jailed Kurdistan Workers Party leader Abdullah Ocalan asking supporters of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) to abstain from the election—was a failure. HDP leader Selahattin Demirtas successfully directed his supporters to vote for Imamoglu, indicating that the political arm of the Kurdish movement may have gained ascendancy over the military arm. Meanwhile, Nationalist Action Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahceli has been weakened by his tacit endorsement of the Ocalan letter—a stance that will be difficult for his Turkish nationalist base to forget. Bahceli's rival, IYI Party leader Meral Aksener, will benefit the most from this development, likely emerging as the face of Turkey's "new right."

Erdogan's political brand has been damaged as well. His past image as the representative of those marginalized by Turkey's secularist system is now largely undermined. By canceling Imamoglu's slim victory in the initial March election, he unwittingly cast this nascent rival and his supporters as Turkey's new dispossessed, helping them increase the margin of victory this time around by nearly fifty times.

Calling for a revote was a mistake, one that many observers believed Erdogan was incapable of making. The error likely stemmed from Turkey's 2018 switch from a parliamentary to a presidential system, which centralized decisionmaking to a dramatic degree. Policies are no longer produced by a painstaking process of deliberation with experts and government agencies, but rather through the machinations of "palace politics" among a handful of advisors, who often act based on what benefits them and undermines their rivals rather than what is best for the country.

LISEL HINTZ

The results are surprising to many, but they do not necessarily mean that Turkish democracy is doing well. There is much evidence to the contrary, such as the ongoing Gezi Park trials and the detainment of Osman Kavala and others. Democracy requires not only democratic actors, but also a government that does not demonize and prosecute them. We are far from that today.

Nevertheless, Imamoglu's victory was much needed, long underway, and well deserved. Starting with the Gezi protests of 2013, a disparate group of previously passive citizens came together to resist what they saw as the state's creeping control of their lives. This was followed by the CHP's 2017 "March for Justice" and Muharrem Ince's 2018 presidential campaign. These events built momentum toward the more tangible triumph of June 23.

Imamoglu deserves credit for not taking up the confrontational, divisive rhetoric often demonstrated by Ince, which people previously believed was necessary to defeat Erdogan. Imamoglu is soft-spoken, inclusive, and generally averse to the politics of hatred and polarization that have characterized Turkish discourse in the past few years. Much of his success stems from an ability to deliver his message without being dragged down by polemics.

The Kurdish role in this election was greatly consequential as well. Imamoglu was willing to reach out to the HDP, and the party was willing to support him. Demirtas deserves credit for standing up to Ocalan, and the outcome holds significance beyond the election, especially in terms of ameliorating relations between opposition camps. The result also made clear that Kurdish voters cannot be easily won over by empty promises. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party has made assurances to the Kurds in the past only to turn its back on them. Thus, when the AKP spread rumors about Ocalan's release in recent weeks and publicized his letter in the hope of swaying Kurdish voters, it seriously underestimated their political acumen.

KEMAL KIRISCI

The election's outcome will unleash a set of processes within Turkish politics, including the reinstatement of democracy, the restoration of institutions, the renewal of the CHP, and the restructuring of the AKP. The first process has already begun, as seen in the humble post-election remarks of Erdogan and Yildirim. Democracy tends to humble people, especially when the outcome is as decisive as this.

The country's media may also be opening up, overtaken by the reality of national developments and the need to turn a profit. Among other things, this trend will soon generate public discussions about Ankara's decision to purchase S-400 missile defense systems from Russia and generally cozy up to Moscow. The media will also begin pointing the finger at those responsible for recent foreign policy blunders, starting with Erdogan.

The second process will begin with the realization of how severely the AKP-Gulen alliance has damaged Turkey's institutions, particularly the military, the Treasury, and the Foreign Ministry. Fortunately, great human capital still exists in government ministries, not to mention the various NGOs and international organizations that operate in Turkey. Many ministry personnel are good bureaucrats who believe in acting by the book rather than at the direction of one person. Despite all the institutional damage and brain drain, these people can help lift Turkey out of its current rut.

Moreover, the people's craving for inclusiveness is so much more potent than many had imagined. Imamoglu has successfully reached out to the electorate through his all-embracing rhetoric and amicable body language, allowing him to prevail against Erdogan's majoritarianism by a wide margin. For many years, his party proved unable to adjust to a very conservative society. Yet Imamoglu is different from Erdogan because he feels comfortable not only with Turkey's republican and secular values, but also with its conservatism—all without resorting to Islamism. If Imamoglu's rise denotes a larger transformation within the CHP, the party's base could expand dramatically.

ALAN MAKOVSKY

The great increase in the AKP's margin of defeat since March reflects both Turkey's declining economy and the public's rejection of Erdogan's electoral manipulation. A recent poll showed that up to 13 percent of those who voted for Yildirim in the first election were planning to switch their votes.

Yet while media coverage indicates that Erdogan is damaged, there is little possibility that Turkey will hold early presidential and parliamentary elections, which is very difficult to do under the new system. As currently scheduled, these votes will not occur until 2023, so Erdogan would hardly announce plans for cutting his first presidential term so short.

Another possibility is the opposition calling for elections through a parliamentary majority, but this is improbable as well. The new system has increased the number of seats required to call for elections from a simple majority to 60 percent of parliament. The opposition would therefore have to count on major defections from the AKP, which controls around 48 percent of the seats. Given Erdogan's meticulous placement of loyalists on party lists before each election, this seems unlikely.

Even so, Turkey's economic swoon is steadily undermining confidence in Erdogan. This creates a unique and dangerous situation in which political pressures cannot be relieved by elections anytime soon.

Whatever happens in the coming years, the effects of Erdogan's legacy are already visible in Turkey. A 2018 poll showed that while an unsurprising 80 percent of AKP voters saw Turkey as a natural leader for the Muslim world, so did a remarkable 60 percent of CHP voters. The latter attitudes were unimaginable previously.

This summary was prepared by Deniz Yuksel.

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