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The Race for Istanbul: Erdogan's Plan A and B

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Brief Analysis

Although massive state resources have been mobilized against Imamoglu, the opposition candidate has taken up the mantle of the underdog who could challenge the status quo nationally, just as Erdogan himself did two decades ago.

In Istanbul's mayoral race redo, polls indicate that opposition candidate Ekrem Imamoglu is pulling ahead of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's candidate, former prime minister Binali Yildirim. Although Imamoglu won the first race on March 31, the country's electoral board voided the election, alleging irregularities regarding the formation of ballot commissions in some Istanbul districts, and called for a revote on June 23.

Considering that Istanbul accounts for a third of Turkey's economy and that Erdogan was Istanbul's mayor before he became prime minister in 2003, this election could serve as a platform for Imamoglu to challenge the president nationally. Yet Erdogan—who controls many of Turkey's institutions, including much of the media, courts, police, and election boards—has two plans to win Istanbul, one formulated before March 31 and one after.

PLAN A: WIN THE VOTE WITH A POLITICAL COCKTAIL

Erdogan's preferred plan to win the Istanbul race for Yildirim is through a "cocktail of methods": that is, blending various tools designed to make incremental gains in favor of his preferred candidate rather than one large "make or break it" moment. For starters, nearly half a dozen opposition journalists have been physically attacked in recent weeks. Despite inflicting some serious wounds, the perpetrators barely received a slap on the wrist; instead, the

police and the courts gave them immunity. Meanwhile, false stories and doctored videos in pro-Erdogan media have promoted various allegations against Imamoglu, including that he is of “Greek origin” and should therefore be disqualified from becoming mayor.

There is also a chance that election day will be marred by minor vote rigging. Turkey has enjoyed free and fair voting since 1950, and large-scale rigging seems out of the question. Yet the election board has largely favored Erdogan in its recent decisions, such as its May 6 verdict to cancel the Istanbul vote. On June 6, the board removed thirteen of the thirty-nine district heads in charge of polls in Istanbul. Compliant electoral officials could help Erdogan swing the outcome in his favor on June 23 if the margin between Imamoglu and Yildirim is narrow again (it was reportedly around 13,000 votes in March).

Furthermore, ongoing and successful Turkish military operations against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a designated terrorist group, could further help Erdogan’s camp. Various “national security crises” could do the same—for instance, wider conflict between Turkish and Greek Cypriot forces in the East Mediterranean, where the two countries have been at loggerheads recently over natural gas exploration. Barring such unforeseen incidents, however, Erdogan presumably hopes that his control over Turkey’s institutions—including semiofficial news agency Anadolu, the only body authorized to release election results—could help manipulate the outcome in Yildirim’s favor.

TURKEY’S “NEW ERDOGAN”

Despite the asymmetry between the candidates’ resources, Erdogan’s “Plan A” may have inadvertently helped create a “New Erdogan” out of Imamoglu, whose success should be analyzed within the context of Erdogan’s own rise in Turkey. Erdogan was born in a gritty, working-class Istanbul neighborhood in 1954. His initial political brand relied on casting himself as a poor, pious underdog in a Turkey that, at the time, restricted political power for people who wanted to wear religion on their sleeves. After he embraced political Islam and entered national politics in the 1990s as Istanbul’s mayor, he thrived by defending the interests of the “common pious voter” against the “secularist establishment.” This, among other factors, helped his Justice and Development Party (AKP) win Turkey’s 2002 parliamentary elections, elevating him to prime minister and, later, president.

For nearly a decade after 2002, Erdogan represented change in Turkey. He believed in a forward-looking vision for the country, suggesting that he could navigate the most pressing challenges, from the Kurdish issue to corruption to economic mismanagement. And he did. For this reason, many in the electorate supported him and his party at the ballot box.

That no longer seems to be the case, however. Erdogan has ruled Turkey for sixteen years, becoming the country’s most powerful politician in recent history. Nearly 31 million Turks, around 40 percent of the population, have come of voting age under him. Many of these citizens hold him responsible for the country’s current problems, such as renewed conflict with the PKK, a collapsing economy, and an oppressive environment toward the opposition.

Put another way, Erdogan now represents the status quo, and in this sense he may have inadvertently helped Imamoglu by undoing the March election. Under normal circumstances, mayoral votes should not affect national politics, but Erdogan has personally campaigned for his party’s candidate in this race, essentially turning the polls into a referendum on his popularity and providing Imamoglu with a wider platform as the “New Erdogan”—the underdog that represents a chance for change.

For example, Imamoglu is a pious Muslim, but unlike Erdogan, he wants to separate religion and government, a position that resonates with many citizens upset about the politicization of religion in recent years. Imamoglu has also rallied against corruption, nepotism, and wasteful government spending, striking solidarity with an electorate turned off by government excesses at a time of severe economic downturn. Moreover, he has rallied for an inclusive government, saying he is ready to treat all citizens equally regardless of their religious practice or lack thereof,

striking the same chord Erdogan did in 2002.

PLAN B: GRADUALLY UNDERMINE IMAMOGLU IF HE WINS

If Imamoglu wins on June 23, Erdogan will not immediately rush to undermine him. Rather, the timeline of events after the March 31 vote provide a blueprint for his likely strategy. After winning the previous round, Imamoglu had to wait for over two weeks to officially take office. Erdogan allowed him to act as mayor for nearly three weeks before calling on the election board to cancel the vote and eject him from office; the board obliged to this demand in less than forty-eight hours. Had Erdogan called to annul the vote immediately, he likely would have triggered massive protests. Instead, he opted for a gradual approach spread over five weeks, thereby avoiding much of the public backlash that otherwise would have resulted.

Should Imamoglu win again, Erdogan will likely move slowly while taking steps to undermine the mayor's authority. For instance, he could push his majority faction in parliament to pass legislation curbing Imamoglu's powers. The most lethal legislative step would be to cut the city's funding, since local governments in Turkey have limited means of raising revenue and rely on the central government for nearly two-thirds of their budget.

Another option is to sack Imamoglu and appoint a "caretaker" mayor, a measure Erdogan has previously used in other cities to replace elected mayors from the Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) based on allegations that they had connections to the PKK. Given Imamoglu's popularity, though, replacing him with a caretaker for no credible reason would likely spark protests.

To overcome this hurdle, Erdogan may resort to a combination of legal tools. When the election board canceled the previous Istanbul vote, it did so on the much-disputed grounds that, contrary to the law, a number of polling station officials were not civil servants. On June 5, however, the board decided that these same officials should not be substituted on June 23. Erdogan has already commented on this apparent contradiction, saying "I think there is misunderstanding." This opens the door for him to eventually ask the board to annul the next Istanbul vote on the same grounds if Imamoglu wins again. Simultaneously, Erdogan could pursue parliamentary steps to limit funding for Imamoglu's new government, which could result in collapsing city services and turn public sentiment against the mayor in the short- to mid-term, making it easier to remove him.

Imamoglu has already defeated Erdogan's "Plan A" once before, prevailing in the March vote against long odds. To do so again, and to stave off "Plan B" machinations, he will need to rise above Erdogan's legal games and convince enough voters that he is the underdog and defender they seek.

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