

Why Erdogan Will Win in Istanbul, and What This Means for Turkish Democracy

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Brief Analysis

Despite the opposition's resilience, the president can use any number of legal, political, or foreign policy tools to ensure his candidate wins this time around, no matter the reputational costs.

On May 6, Turkey's election board canceled the outcome of Istanbul's March 31 mayoral race, in which opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate Ekrem Imamoglu defeated Binali Yildirim of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) by less than 1 percent of the vote. The ruling came shortly after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan alleged that the race was "stained" and demanded that it be re-run. Signaling the strength of his hold on the country's institutions, Turkey's election monitoring body has announced that a new Istanbul election will in fact be held on June 23. Imamoglu faces a seemingly unwinnable battle in his quest to win again, since Erdogan will pull out all the legal, political, and diplomatic stops to bring his candidate (perhaps Yildirim again) to victory.

WHAT MIGHT HELP IMAMOGLU

Imamoglu's March victory came as a surprise to many given Yildirim's past experience as prime minister and transportation minister, during which he developed a reputation as a "builder of bridges, tunnels, and metro lines." Istanbul sorely needs better infrastructure, and Yildirim seemed like the best candidate to rise to this challenge.

In contrast, Imamoglu oversaw an outlying district of Istanbul and was relatively unknown prior to entering the race in January. The president personally campaigned for Yildirim—a major contribution given that Erdogan controls nearly 90 percent of the country's media. Even so, Imamoglu quickly surged ahead in the polls by showcasing his ample political skills and resources, all of which could conceivably help him win again.

For one thing, Erdogan is a populist nativist leader who has won successive national and local elections by demonizing demographics unlikely to vote for him; in response, most of his opponents have tried to be even more nativist and populist than him, with poor results. Yet Imamoglu went a different route, employing a so-called “radical love” strategy that centered on ignoring Erdogan’s populist rhetoric while still reaching out to those who love the president. This approach helped him broaden the CHP’s base in Istanbul.

At the same time, a host of previously divided opposition factions united behind Imamoglu in the run-up to the March vote. Most notably, Meral Aksener and her urban/middle-class Turkish nationalist faction formally allied with the CHP, while the Kurdish nationalist Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) did not field a candidate in Istanbul, indirectly encouraging its base to vote for Imamoglu.

If a unified opposition base helped Imamoglu to victory, the democratic vigilance of his supporters helped preserve the win, at least at first. As vote tallies came out on election day showing Imamoglu ahead of Yildirim, the government-controlled Anadolu Press Agency, the only body permitted to issue formal election results, stopped broadcasting poll data for nearly twelve hours. Yildirim then appeared on live television to declare victory, while CNN-Turk and other mainstream national networks denied Imamoglu airtime. Imamoglu’s well-organized campaign moved in, though, using social media to provide the public with well-tabulated vote tallies gathered from nearly 31,000 ballot boxes across the city, successfully documenting his victory.

WHY ERDOGAN WON’T LET ISTANBUL SLIP AWAY

As yesterday’s decision shows, however, Erdogan simply cannot afford to lose Istanbul. His long ascent from the city’s mayoral office to the presidency shows the degree to which Istanbul is Turkey’s political brand-making machine. In other words, if Imamoglu’s victory stands, the CHP leader could eventually pose a challenge to Erdogan in the 2023 presidential election. Moreover, Istanbul accounted for nearly a third of Turkey’s \$2.3 trillion economy as of 2018, so it plays a major role in oiling the wheels of Erdogan’s political machine, creating loyal support networks in the business community.

Erdogan will therefore play a smarter game in the run-up to June 23. In light of the voided March election results, he has apparently decided that the financial and political cost of losing Istanbul far outweighs the loss of legitimacy he will suffer domestically and internationally by forcing a revote. He is already hinting at an unconventional race even compared to Turkey’s recently falling democratic standards. According to a BBC account of his May 7 parliamentary speech, he slammed the “dark circles, economic saboteurs, and so-called elitists” who were collaborating to “rob the nation of its will.” Such rhetoric indicates that will use his control of Turkey’s courts, media outlets, election monitoring bodies, and other institutions to target opposition members, campaign staff, and even Imamoglu himself as “criminal.”

To be sure, massive vote rigging would be difficult given the resilience of Turkey’s opposition and civil society. But Erdogan’s desire to change the outcome is so fervent that he might suspend certain democratic liberties to stack the odds in favor of his Istanbul candidate, using national security issues as an excuse.

THE FOREIGN POLICY ANGLE

Besides casting his political opponents as “enemies of the state,” Erdogan could use security crises abroad as a pretext to tip the revote in his favor. Take for example Turkey’s [brewing crisis with Cyprus](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/cyprus-gas-discovery-could-be-an-east-mediterranean-game-changer) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/cyprus-gas-discovery-could-be-an-east-mediterranean-game-changer>) over natural gas exploration in the East Mediterranean, where conflicting maritime border claims could be escalated into a showdown that further galvanizes Erdogan’s nationalist base. A confrontation between Turkish and Assad regime forces in Syria could serve similar ends.

Erdogan might also choose to rile up his conservative political Islamist base. The latest escalation between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip gives him fodder to rally such supporters, especially since the run-up to the June 23 vote overlaps with the holy month of Ramadan, traditionally a time of heightened Muslim sensitivities.

THE KURDISH ANGLE

Another option for Erdogan is using Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), to split Kurdish nationalist HDP voters from Imamoglu's camp. Ocalan has been in jail since 1999 and in solitary confinement for a number of years now, but on April 6, Erdogan allowed him access to his lawyers for the first time in eight years. Despite leading a designated terrorist group, Ocalan holds immense gravitas with the HDP's base, whom he urged to cultivate better ties with Erdogan in a recent communique.

Syria is where Ocalan and Erdogan could cut a bigger deal. The PKK's Syrian allies, the People's Defense Units (YPG), are currently in talks with Ankara over establishing a U.S.-backed safe zone along the border. While Ocalan's communique did not explicitly ask HDP voters to withdraw support from Imamoglu, he may make such a request (or simply instruct them to stay home on election day) in return for Erdogan completing the YPG deal and easing his solitary confinement. Alternatively, should the safe-zone talks fail, Erdogan could order a military invasion of YPG-held portions of north Syria, providing yet another national security crisis to leverage against Imamoglu.

TIME WARP TO 1946?

If none of these measures is sufficient to guarantee a win for Erdogan's candidate, he may even cancel the June 23 race altogether. The voiding of an opposition win in Istanbul is already a seismic event in the context of Turkish history. When the country held its first multiparty elections in 1946, the widely rigged outcome made its democracy look like a sham. Turkey made fast progress soon afterward, holding free and fair polls for decades beginning in 1950. Yet yesterday's decision and its coming repercussions may warp the country's institutions back to 1946.

Soner Cagaptay, the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, is author of [The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey](https://www.newsultan.info/) (<https://www.newsultan.info/>). ❖

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