

Istanbul Election Will Shape Erdogan's Policy Trajectory

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Brief Analysis

If the president's faction takes the city back from the opposition on March 31, he may feel comfortable enough to focus on more positive legacy-building steps, but a loss could see him double down on nativist and populist policies at home and abroad.

On March 31, around 58 million registered Turkish voters will go to the polls in nationwide local elections to choose mayors for nearly 4,000 cities and smaller towns, as well as tens of thousands of city and provincial council members and other local officials. The outcome will not have a direct impact on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government. Yet with voters casting ballots across the entire country, local elections serve as a bellwether for Turkey's national politics, the equivalent of American midterms.

As such, the elections will help Erdogan decide if he can simply start ignoring his challengers at this point. In the May 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections, he defeated his opposition, an alliance of six parties spanning the political spectrum, including the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). That victory firmly established him at Turkey's helm, and if he can defeat the opposition one more time on March 31, he may conclude that he no longer has legitimate challengers. This would allow him to enter the legacy-building phase of his career—that is, solving problems at home (e.g., by pursuing a “Kurdish opening,” or dialogue with the country's Kurdish community) while embracing a more internationalist role in foreign policy (e.g., further developing Ankara's recent resets with neighbors like Greece; pursuing a potential reset with the United States regarding Syria).

If, however, the president's candidates fail to take Istanbul and other key cities from the opposition, Erdogan would likely emerge from the elections feeling politically vulnerable. Moreover, if Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, who defeated Erdogan's candidate in the 2019 local elections, trounces the president's current candidate Murat Kurum, this would catapult him to political prominence as the “star politician who can beat Erdogan.” Such a development would also cast Imamoglu as a credible challenger to Erdogan himself, boosting momentum for the country's anti-Erdogan bloc. In such a situation, Erdogan may aim to solidify his base and prevent the opposition from surging by

doubling down on nativist/populist policies domestically and internationally.

Istanbul's Significance

Each of Turkey's three largest cities—Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir—is currently controlled by the opposition. Yet Istanbul is the largest by far, and remains the country's economic, financial, and cultural capital, so it stands out as the grand prize in the race. If Kurum can take this prize back from Imamoglu, the electorate will conclude that Erdogan won the elections, even if his candidates fail in other big city races. Alternatively, if Imamoglu keeps Istanbul, he will be seen as having singlehandedly defeated Erdogan, making him a perceived match for the president. Currently, polls show a tight race for the city, with Imamoglu leading Kurum by a small margin.

Beyond its symbolic importance for the March 31 elections, Erdogan has an interest in taking Istanbul for personal and financial reasons. Born and raised there, he entered national politics in 1994 as the city's mayor before becoming Turkey's prime minister in 2003 and president in 2014. He considers Istanbul "his city," a key part of the Erdogan "brand," and is therefore keen on taking it out of Imamoglu's hands.

Istanbul also holds great economic weight for the president. Accounting for nearly half of Turkey's tax base and around one-third of its economic output, the city is a money-making machine. Its local construction, real estate, and urban renewal projects (e.g., tearing down earthquake-prone structures to build earthquake-resistant ones) generate large amounts of cash, and Erdogan wants to make these funds available to his supporters and the businesses that back him. Winning Istanbul means everything to him.

Two Possible Trajectories

If Imamoglu wins despite Erdogan's various advantages (e.g., near-complete control of the media), the president's flank will be exposed, and the reelected mayor may experience a meteoric rise. In that scenario, Erdogan's go-to countermeasure would be political polarization. To this end, he may launch a debate for a new constitution that includes a "family values" amendment, defining marriage exclusively as a union between a man and a woman in order to rally right-wing voters. The new constitution might also lower the threshold for winning the next presidential election to 40 percent, easier for Erdogan to achieve than a majority. As part of his strategy to win such a referendum, he might also embrace a hard foreign policy turn, capitalizing on issues such as anti-Western sentiment, the Gaza war, and ties with the United States to rally right-wing voters. This approach would likely resemble Turkish policy circa 2013-19, when Erdogan emphasized nativist/populist policies at home and abroad.

If Imamoglu loses, however, the president would likely adjust his political calculus and steer Turkey in a different direction. For starters, a victory for Kurum would effectively halt Imamoglu's political career, likely ensuring he is no longer a threat to the president. Furthermore, the main opposition CHP would lose a major source of revenue and clientelist networks in Istanbul, while many elements of the country's broader opposition movement would simply give up on the idea of voting Erdogan out. Accordingly, the president would emerge from the elections believing (rightly) that he has almost no viable opposition to worry about—a notable exception being the small but hard-Islamist New Welfare Party (YRP), which could challenge his Justice and Development Party (AKP) on the right.

An Istanbul win would also allow Erdogan, who has been running Turkey since 2003, to enter the legacy-building phase of his career. He wants to be remembered as a beloved statesman, not a polarizing politician; acting accordingly after an Istanbul win, the president could move beyond the culture wars in which he has often engaged to mobilize his base. He could even embrace diverse groups that he has often demonized in the past, such as secularist and leftist voters. In addition, this scenario could enable him to put forward a constitutional amendment package giving himself additional terms in office. Yet unlike the previously described "losing leads to political polarization" scenario, a victorious Erdogan might instead build a broader electoral consensus in order to change the constitution, including outreach to the Kurdish community.

Indeed, this is where Turkey’s elusive Kurdish problem comes in, with Erdogan likely taking steps to tackle the country’s top political challenge at the moment. Ankara has recently implemented a successful counterterrorism strategy to defeat the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist entity. Once boasting thousands of armed fighters inside Turkey, the group has seen its local strength dwindle to a few hundred thanks to the government’s successful counterterrorism strategy. However, a political solution to the Kurdish problem is yet to come. At this stage, the demands of pro-Kurdish groups are limited to some Kurdish-language rights (as in education) and recognition of mayors elected from the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party (aka the DEM Party).

Interestingly, perhaps anticipating an olive branch from the president, the DEM Party will not back Imamoglu on March 31—unlike in previous elections, where pro-Kurdish parties supported the CHP politician—deciding instead to run its own candidate. This development may cost Imamoglu the mayoral race by peeling off a significant number of Kurdish voters (estimated to be around 10 percent of the city’s voters) and handing Kurum a victory.

A rapprochement between Erdogan and Kurdish communities that support the DEM Party would have ramifications beyond the country’s borders, especially in light of the seemingly growing potential for U.S. withdrawal from Syria. Since 2014, the United States has partnered with forces from the Syrian Kurdish People’s Defense Units (YPG), an offshoot of the PKK, to fight the Islamic State. Even though the YPG folded itself into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2015, this partnership continues to arouse Ankara’s ire. Washington’s relationship with the YPG will likely become less visible, if not completely cease to exist, in the event of a U.S. withdrawal from Syria. Whichever way U.S. Syria policy works out, the YPG issue will become less damaging to U.S.-Turkey ties if the PKK agrees to unconditionally disband, disarm, and subsequently withdraw from Turkey in response to a Kurdish opening by Erdogan.

Conclusion

Polls show a competitive race for Istanbul on March 31. Although the contest is technically just for the city’s mayor, the results will have significant ramifications nationwide, as Erdogan’s legacy and the future of the U.S.-Turkey relationship may hang in the balance.

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