

## Why Turkey's Local Elections Matter

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Many major jurisdictions are up for grabs, with potentially weighty foreign policy implications if Erdogan maintains his current coalition's hardline nationalist trajectory.

Turkey will hold nationwide local elections on March 31, with voters picking mayors as well as city and provincial council members. Due to a unique alignment of domestic and foreign policy issues, these elections could affect U.S.-Turkish relations and Ankara's actions in the Middle East, warranting greater attention from Washington than one might expect.

### AN 'EXISTENTIAL' VOTE

Under normal circumstances, local voting would have minimal relevance to geopolitical issues, but President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have set their campaign on a security-oriented platform, suggesting that Turkey's very "existence" hinges on the outcome. In Turkish politics, the word "existence/survival" (*beka* in Turkish) is code for fighting Kurdish separatism. It is no surprise, then, that Erdogan has picked Devlet Bahçeli—leader of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and a staunch opponent of engagement with Kurdish political factions—as his ally for these elections. Together, the AKP and MHP have branded themselves as the "People's Alliance," and they are running in a de facto bloc behind joint candidates in many of Turkey's 81 provinces and 992 electoral districts.

In response, Turkey's main opposition leaders—Kemal Kilicdaroglu of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and Meral Aksener of the Good Party (IYI)—have formed the "National Alliance." IYI itself formed after some politicians splintered from MHP to join Aksener, banding with her and some center-right politicians. Currently, CHP and IYI are fielding joint candidates in many local races.

As for the third-largest faction in parliament, the Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP), Erdogan and Bahçeli have been denouncing this predominantly Kurdish bloc's members as "terrorist extensions" and accusing them of links to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Thus far, the HDP has not named candidates in big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. This decision spurred the AKP-MHP to claim that the CHP-IYI alliance is "collaborating with terrorists" because it will benefit from the absence of other opposition candidates in these areas.

Erdogan's "existence" platform has direct implications for U.S. policy in Syria. Throughout the campaign against the Islamic State, Washington has collaborated with the People's Defense Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish PKK wing that serves as the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This partnership upsets Ankara, particularly given reports that some 30,000 YPG militia members have received NATO-standard equipment and U.S. military training. In fact, most Turks resent U.S.-YPG cooperation, apart from some in the HDP's base. Erdogan sees the local elections as a test of public support for his approach to such issues.

### CRUCIAL RACES IN ISTANBUL AND ANKARA

In 2018, Bahçeli's backing helped Erdogan win reelection in the first round with 52 percent support. This year, the president's goal seems to be for the AKP-MHP alliance to retain at least that percentage nationwide. Failing that, he hopes to retain control over the mayoral seats that each party won in the majority of Turkey's provincial capitals in 2014 (fifty-three of the eighty-one for the AKP and six for the MHP).

That may be easier in some cities than in others. For example, Erdogan asked former prime minister Binali Yildirim to step down from his current post as parliamentary speaker in order to run for mayor of Istanbul under the AKP-MHP banner. During his past tenure as transportation minister, Yildirim gained ample name recognition as a builder of highways, bridges, and metro lines. Many of Istanbul's 15 million residents view him favorably, hoping he will improve the city's infrastructure. Some polls show him leading CHP-IYI candidate Ekrem Imamoglu by 3-4 percent.

Yet other recent polls show that Erdogan's camp may lose Ankara, the country's capital and the second-largest city with nearly 5 million inhabitants. The CHP-IYI candidate for that race is Mansur Yavas, who lost by just 1 percent in 2014 amid claims of voter fraud. This time around, he reportedly has a 2-3 percent lead on AKP-MHP candidate Mehmet Ozhasaki. The Ankara vote will be perhaps the most important race to watch on March 31, in part because voters may see losing the capital as a psychological turning point in the president's long ascent.

Erdogan first became a household name in 1994 when he was elected mayor of Istanbul, his springboard to becoming prime minister and president.

As for Turkey's third-largest city, Izmir, the CHP will likely retain its hold there. Other large cities are in play, however, including Bursa, Adana, and Antalya, the hometown of Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. The AKP-MHP alliance leads CHP-IYI in all three of these provincial capitals, but only slightly.

## **OPPOSITION GOALS, DOMESTIC CHALLENGES**

Fearing a repeat of the 2014 Ankara race, opposition parties have been raising concerns about possible election fraud, especially at the vote counting and reporting stage. So far, however, few CHP or IYI candidates have shown much promise of pulling large numbers of voters away from the AKP-MHP alliance, at least in terms of their campaign platforms and performance. This leaves room for other factions to make gains—for example, the Felicity Party (SP), a conservative political Islamist group, could attract some AKP voters, while the HDP is likely to win key cities in the predominantly Kurdish-populated southeast, including Diyarbakir.

Even if Erdogan and Bahceli manage to hold on to major cities on March 31, difficult days await them. The Turkish economy officially entered recession this month, meaning no growth for two consecutive quarters. This is a particularly painful development given the record-breaking economic growth spurt Erdogan has overseen since becoming prime minister in 2003 (apart from a temporary hiccup in 2008). Moreover, inflation hit 25 percent last October, its highest point in fifteen years. To curb that trend, Erdogan has resorted to unorthodox methods, including price suppression. Yet ongoing bilateral friction regarding Turkey's decision to purchase Russian S-400 missile defense systems has raised concerns that Washington could target Ankara with economic and military sanctions. Such a development would exacerbate the economic crisis—as happened in 2018 when President Trump slapped tariffs on the Turkish government over its detention of American pastor Andrew Brunson, contributing to the lira's meltdown.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY**

Continuation of the Erdogan-Bahceli alliance might mean more hardline policies in Ankara, including a tougher stance against the U.S.-YPG partnership in Syria and stricter domestic security measures justified by the counterterrorism struggle against the PKK. Widespread AKP-MHP victories might also boost the "Eurasianist" approach within the AKP—namely, seeking closer relations with Russia, China, and Iran without actually leaving NATO, under the expectation that all of these adversaries will accept Turkey's indiscriminating ties.

In contrast, if the AKP-MHP alliance underperforms in the local elections, Erdogan may drop Bahceli entirely. In recent years, the MHP has had a significant say on government matters as if it were a formal coalition partner, but without sharing any responsibility for the government's problems as such partners normally do. If Erdogan strips away the MHP and its strong anti-Kurdish nationalist platform, he could experiment with different political alignments in the coming years. For instance, he might—in the mid-term—adopt a more liberal attitude regarding Kurdish nationalism in Turkey and regionally.

In this regard, time will be on his side after March 31. Turkey has undergone seven nationwide votes and a cataclysmic (2016) coup attempt since 2014, but the next major election is not scheduled to come around until 2023. However well the AKP performs, the current elections will trigger changes in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy.

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