

Turkish Opposition Witnessing a Revival?

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The results of country-wide municipal elections in Turkey held on 31 March 2019 threw a [few surprises](#). Firstly, the People's Alliance of ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) lost the important positions of mayor in three major cities including Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. AKP's defeat in these three cities is significant because the ruling party members have been repeatedly elected as mayors in these important cities in the last 25 years. The loss in Istanbul is deemed more vital because President Recep Tayyip Erdogan started his political career from the city when he was elected as its mayor in 1994. It was his four-year term (1994-1998) as the city's mayor that had put him on the national map and helped him eventually become prime minister in 2003 after the then newly-launched AKP under Erdogan's leadership won the 2002 general elections.

The importance of Istanbul for national politics and the [narrow margin of victory](#) of 13,000 votes prompted the AKP and its ally MHP to file a complaint against rejection of some of the votes demanding a recount. However, after recounting and investigation into invalid votes, the Supreme Election Council (YSK) declared the opposition Nation Alliance, comprising Republican People's Party (CHP) and Good Party (Iyi), candidate Ekrem Imamoglu as elected. The AKP and MHP did not give up and filed a fresh application demanding annulment

alleging massive irregularities in recording of the votes. This was seen as a last-ditch effort to not lose control of Turkey's largest city and the economic capital. The bid eventually succeeded as the YSK on 6 May [announced a re-run](#) to be held on 2 June. Nonetheless, the fact that the Imamoglu had defeated the former Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, who was the ruling party candidate, underlined the shifting mood in Turkish politics.

Secondly and more importantly, the opposition Nation Alliance did better than expected as far as the overall results were concerned. The elections were being held for electing mayors and councillors for 30 metropolitan municipalities (30), 921 district municipalities and 397 town municipalities. While the position of 21,750 councillors were being contested by independent candidates, the mayoral elections, especially in the 81 provincial capitals were being fiercely contested by candidates from the two nation-wide alliances. Overall, the opposition National Alliance [won 21 of the provincial capitals](#), an increase of 6 compared to the 2014 municipal elections. On the other hand, the People's Alliance won in 50 provincial capitals, a decrease of 5. Surprisingly, the Kurdish-dominated People's Democratic Party (HDP) members were elected mayors in 8 capital cities while 2 went to independents. Even in terms of the overall percent of votes, the main opposition alliance [polled 36.97 percent](#)

[votes against the AKP-MHP alliance's 49.7 percent](#). Though still a gap of nearly 13 percent compared to the 2014 municipal elections, the opposition vote saw an increase by 10.63 percent while the AKP-MHP voted witnessed a drop of 10.99 percent.

The perceived poor performance of the ruling AKP and its ally MHP and a good show by the main opposition CHP and newly-launched İyi has prompted a debate within Turkey and outside of a change in political mood in the country. The primary factor behind this is considered to be the continuous economic downturn despite the measures taken by AKP-government. President Erdogan had succeeded in effecting a constitutional reform in 2016 to [change the system](#) of government from parliamentary to presidential. Then and subsequently at the time of [Erdogan's election](#) as the head of the newly introduced presidential form of government in June 2018, the change was hailed by the AKP as the one-step solution of all problems facing the country. It was argued that the parliamentary system was leading to tardiness in decision making and hence not allowing changes necessary for revival of the economy. Despite these rhetoric, the Turkish economy has continued to suffer from serious problems and Turkey for the first time in over a decade is [staring at recession](#) with downward economic growth and devaluation of Lira. On top, troubles in relations with the US and European Union, Turkey's major economic partners, have harmed trade. This has left Ankara look for alternative markets in

Russia, Middle East and Central Asia, and radical economic measures, such as selling of forex and borrowing from the central bank, but success has eluded the country.

In this context, the debate on the revival of the opposition acquires significance. With Istanbul going for re-election on 2 June, the electorate as well as the political parties remain on the edge. However, one cannot ignore the fact that the AKP has retained most of its support base and it is its ultra-Nationalist ally the MHP which has lost most of its support to its breakaway İyi or Good Party. The İyi was launched in 2017 under the dynamic leadership of Meral Aksener and had since then gone from strength-to-strength to emerge as the third largest political force in Turkey. Given the fluid nature of Turkish politics, it would be wrong to write-off AKP and Erdogan who is a shrewd politician and is known for whip up surprises to remain in power. With the change in fortunes of MHP, the political circles in Ankara have already started discussing the chances of the ruling alliance getting rid of the MHP and seek alternative political partners to strengthen its electoral fortunes.

Undoubtedly, the municipal election results underline the changing dynamics of electoral politics and if the results are any indication, Turkish politics is up for some interesting times in coming months.

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