

The Value of Positive Campaigning: Imamoglu's Victory in Istanbul

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The sweeping victory of opposition candidate Ekrem Imamoglu of the Republican People's Party (CHP) over Binali Yildirim of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the repeat election forced on Istanbul voters was impressive in terms of the percentage of votes won by Imamoglu, compared to percentages in previous municipal elections in Istanbul in recent decades. Whereas the gap between Imamoglu and Yildirim was below 1 percent in the March 2019 election, in the June election it was more than 9 percent. The decision to force a repeat election proved to be a significant mistake on the part of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his camp, after a long period in which most of their political maneuvers had succeeded. Beyond being an opposition victory, this election may suggest that the Turkish government's capability to assess the domestic situational has declined.

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The election campaign did not focus on the specific platforms of the two candidates, who limited themselves to general or isolated pledges. Imamoglu's success apparently stemmed from his ability to win over voters with positive rhetoric that stressed what brings people together, in an effort toward reconciliation among the city's different communities. With the slogan "Everything Will Be Fine," he presented himself to the Turkish public as a new kind of politician who sought to end incitement, corruption, and partisan interests so as to unite the entire city around change and new hope. This strategy was a major success, and Imamoglu significantly expanded his support-base.

Yildirim, by contrast, ran a campaign with less direct public outreach, and focused more on his achievements during a long political career and the successes of the AKP since it took power in 2002. Nor did Yildirim and his senior associates hesitate to attack Imamoglu directly. Moreover, as with the March local elections, it was categorically

apparent that the importance of the Istanbul election went far beyond the city itself. Thus, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan played an active part in the campaign's final days, albeit on a smaller scale than in the previous rounds of elections, and outside political figures on both sides were heavily involved (for Yildirim, the President and cabinet ministers; for Imamoglu, party heads and the mayors of other cities, including the new mayor of the capital, Ankara).

The campaign also incorporated matters touching on national politics, particularly the running of the country by the President and his party. In this context, two issues are noteworthy; first, the state of democracy in Turkey. The widespread feeling was that holding a repeat election was unjust and that Imamoglu's first victory had been "stolen." Second, there was also a heightened sense of helplessness among the Turkish public in the face of the country's economic crisis. It is hard to believe that Imamoglu's electoral success would have been so impressive had the government's economic conduct been perceived as leading to an improved situation.

Two main events lent the campaign an added special dimension. First, a live debate between the two candidates was televised, the first of its kind since 2002. Second, amid various attempts to win over voters of Kurdish origin, jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan issued a call to the Kurds for neutrality, in stark contrast to the former co-chairman of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party, Selahattin Demirtas, himself also jailed, who urged voting for Imamoglu. Imamoglu's success stems in part from his ability to rally Kurdish voters as well as from the fact that Ocalan's call evidently did not affect the political conduct of the Kurdish minority in the election.

Three foreign affairs issues were particularly prominent during the repeat election. First was the issue of Turkish-US relations. President Erdogan and other government officials made unequivocal statements about proceeding with the S-400 deal with Moscow, despite American opposition. In a June 7 letter sent by the acting American defense secretary to his Turkish counterpart, the United States made clear that if Turkey implements the deal with Russia it will not be able to remain a partner in the F-35 project. This letter was interpreted in Turkey as a modern version of the historic Johnson letter of 1964, that was once presented as a "diplomatic atom bomb," in which President Lyndon Johnson threatened that were Turkey to intervene militarily in Cyprus, NATO would not necessarily come to its aid in the event of a response by Moscow.

A second significant issue was Turkey's controversial conduct vis-à-vis Greece and Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean. While such steps were not without precedent, Turkey still saw fit, as the election neared, to dispatch a second gas drilling ship to disputed waters near Northern Cyprus – a move that drew condemnation from the

European Union, which is even considering imposing EU sanctions on Turkey in response. The Americans also condemned the Turkish action. The widening of the rift with the United States and the European Union, and the economic cost of this rift, increased the Turkish public's sense that the government is essentially rudderless in dealing with economic problems, and is even worsening them.

A third issue was the tension between Turkey and Egypt, which grew over the death of Egypt's former president Mohamed Morsi. Erdogan disputed that Morsi had died of natural causes, called him a martyr, and framed the Istanbul election as a choice between "Sisi and Yildirim." He even called for a UN commission of inquiry into Morsi's death. The lack of a satisfactory response in the West to Morsi's death amplified what in his eyes has been protracted Western hypocrisy manifested by the non-recognition of Morsi's toppling as a military coup. For Erdogan, as for his followers, unwillingness to label what happened in Egypt a military coup is inextricably linked to the fact that when Turkey experienced a failed coup in July 2016, Western countries were slow in condemning it. However, Istanbul voters apparently did not buy into the Imamoglu-Sisi equation.

Perhaps surprisingly, few Israel-related statements have been heard from Ankara of late, with the exception of Erdogan's remark at a conference in Tajikistan that Turkey "rejects efforts to create a new fait accompli in Jerusalem." This relative quiet should not be interpreted as an improvement in bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey, but as a sign that there are many other issues preoccupying Ankara.

While it is difficult to project the outcome of the local elections in Turkey on to future general elections, the success of inclusive rhetoric over threat-based rhetoric may contribute in the long run to a degree of moderation in Turkish internal and foreign policy, especially if Imamoglu succeeds in his role and becomes the opposition representative in the next presidential election. However, despite his impressive electoral achievement, the new mayor will need to struggle against the AKP-controlled government institutions as well as the City Council, where a majority backs Erdogan, and thus he will necessarily enjoy limited latitude. Furthermore, the Istanbul defeat will not impact immediately on Erdogan's future, as he has four years remaining in his term, during which he can count on a parliament where AKP and its coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), wield a majority. At the same time, there is no doubt that the stinging loss in Istanbul will force Erdogan and the AKP to rethink their future modes of action. Imamoglu's victory is also good news for the Turkish opposition. The opposition has now perhaps created rhetoric that can beat Erdogan's threatening narrative, and perhaps has also found a rival to the President who has ruled the country for more than 16 years. The decision to hold a repeat election proved to be a significant

mistake on the part of Erdogan and his camp, after a long period in which most of the President's political maneuvers were successful. It is therefore possible that beyond the opposition victory, the election points to a reduced ability of the Turkish government to read the domestic situation correctly.