

Turkish Voters Punish Erdoğan for the Economy and the Gaza War

Remi Daniel | No. 1845 | April 10, 2024

The results of the municipal elections that were held across Turkey on March 31 surprised many Turkish commentators because of the magnitude of the blow that voters delivered to the government. For the first time since it came to power, the party of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not finish in first place. In contrast, the opposition recorded a historic achievement. Not only did the opposition prevent Erdoğan-backed candidates from retaking control of Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, but it also recorded victories in many other cities, including places that were considered conservative strongholds. Turkish voters sent a clear message to Erdoğan and his party—frustration and anger over the prolonged economic crisis. Some of Erdoğan’s traditional supporters also wanted to punish him for what they see as his hypocrisy over the Palestinian issue. Turkey will not have an election for several years now, but it remains to be seen whether this period will be characterized by a change of policy from the Erdoğan government, including on the international stage.

The opposition’s victory in the Turkish municipal election and the extent of that win took the country’s political commentators by surprise. They had been expecting a close race, given the extensive efforts by the government to defeat a disunited opposition, which had already suffered a stinging defeat in the national elections of 2023. But the Republican People’s Party (CHP), founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and loyal to Atatürk’s values of secularism, nationalism, and a center-left economic approach, recorded a historic achievement on March 31. For the first time since 1977, the CHP is now the largest party in Turkey, garnering 38 percent of the vote. The CHP maintained control of the three largest cities in Turkey and even widened its winning margin there. The party also recorded victories in other big cities and made inroads in regions that until now were considered more conservative and, in some cases, strongholds of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

For Erdoğan’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the election results were a bitter defeat. With just 35 percent of the vote, the party failed to attract voters for the first time since it was established and ran for elections in 2002. The plans of the Turkish president—who had asked voters to “break records” in terms of electing his party and who made no secret of his burning desire to regain control of Istanbul—failed less than a year after his victory in the presidential election.

Moreover, the AKP also faced the challenge of an Islamist rival, the New Welfare Party. With its name, symbol, and leadership highly reminiscent of the party in which Erdoğan began his political career in the 1990s, the New Welfare Party has been trying for

several years to attract voters disappointed with the AKP's more moderate approach. After all, the AKP based its political success on deviating from Islamist orthodoxy to attract a broader base of voters, and according to extremist Islamists, it did not do enough to promote religion in Turkey. After forging an alliance with Erdoğan in last year's national elections, the New Welfare Party decided this year to run independently. This gamble turned out to be successful, as the party finished in third place, with 6 percent of the vote.

One of the main reasons why the Turkish people chose to punish the government is the dire state of the country's economy. Turkey is currently facing a severe economic crisis, with consistently high levels of inflation. For years, Erdoğan adhered to economic policies that went against conventional monetary theories; however, he changed course after last year's national elections and appointed a finance minister who brought Turkey back in line with economic orthodoxy. Despite the measures taken to control prices, they have not yet had any significant impact and have actually worsened the personal financial situation of many Turks. The generous measures that the government announced toward the end of the election campaign and the suggestion that some of them might only be fulfilled if the AKP won the election did not convince voters, especially pensioners, who form a significant portion of the Turkish population and have been heavily affected by the economic crisis. In contrast to the national elections in 2023, in which voters were more concerned about issues of national security and identity, Turkish voters used these municipal elections as a way to express their frustration with the government.

Moreover, the election campaign was marked by a lively discussion about the war in the Gaza Strip and Israel–Turkey relations. President Erdoğan tried to gain support from voters by highlighting his strong condemnation of the Israeli government and the generous aid that Turkey sends to the Palestinians; however, this tactic failed. On the contrary, AKP's rivals were highly critical of the government for not ending all commercial ties with Israel. The New Welfare Party was particularly vocal on this issue and even said that every vote for the AKP was like sending a bullet to the Israeli military to continue its “genocide” in Gaza. Hence, the defeat of Erdoğan's party, compared to the significant success of a rival Islamist party that takes a more radical stance on the Gaza conflict, can be attributed to some of the AKP's conservative, Islamist base wanting to punish the president for his inconsistent approach toward Israel. The influence of the Gaza war on the Turkish election campaign also contributed to the overall decline of parties identified with Turkish nationalism, which decreased from 20 percent of the vote last year to around 10 percent this year. This phenomenon of the decline of the nationalist parties illustrates, *inter alia*, the change in the Turkish political discourse, which, in 2023, focused on the issue of Syrian refugees in Turkey, while this year centered on the war in Gaza—an issue about which the nationalist parties do not have any distinct message compared to the other parties.

Although the municipal elections have redrawn the map of Turkish politics, Erdoğan has no need to worry about his continued presidency in the short term. The next planned elections will be held in 2028, and Erdoğan has a solid parliamentary majority, so he will continue to rule the country with broad room to maneuver and enough time to overturn the most recent election results. In addition, despite the AKP's loss, the overall outcome reflects certain trends that could be positive for Erdoğan. Taken together, the New Welfare Party and the AKP won more than 40 percent of the vote, which corresponds to the level of support that Erdoğan enjoyed in the past. The New Welfare Party had been allied to Erdoğan; it is ideologically close to his party on many issues, and it even told Erdoğan that it would drop out of the election in exchange for the AKP adopting some of its political agenda. Therefore, it seems that he will be able to bury the hatchet with the New Welfare Party in the future and once again will be able to count on its voters.

Nonetheless, the new political map will make it harder for Erdoğan to promote his political agenda. Among other things, the president will have to rethink his plans for amending the Turkish constitution by means of a referendum since he is no longer assured of a majority of the votes. Moreover, the results of the municipal election strengthen the opposition. First of all, after some 20 years in which no strong figure emerged to challenge Erdoğan's dominance on the political stage, the mayors from the opposition—especially those reelected in Istanbul and Ankara—are a growing threat to the Turkish president. Second, after decades of trying to defeat Erdoğan by means of complex coalitions that ended up in failure, the outcome of this election—with the CHP recording a major achievement and the other opposition parties falling short—created a new order in the opposition camp. Now, there is one main party that is able to mobilize opponents of the regime around it. Even Kurdish citizens decided to vote tactically, by supporting pro-Kurdish parties in districts where they had a chance of winning and voting for the CHP elsewhere, such as in Istanbul. Finally, the CHP's successes in the municipal elections mean that it now controls local authorities that represent around 66 percent of the country's entire population and around 80 percent of its GDP and resources; these resources will be important tools in future campaigns. In light of this, Erdoğan will face a stronger and more effective opposition in the next national elections.

In any case, players on the Turkish political stage will have to prepare for an unequal fight—something that was illustrated again in last month's election, which highlighted the ambivalent nature of Turkish democracy. Masses of Turkish citizens participated in the election; the 78 percent voter turnout, which is relatively low when compared to previous elections in Turkey, is actually quite high relative to other countries. Moreover, the voting was as a whole proper and correct. One additional interesting fact is that more women than ever were elected, confirming the slow trend toward more female involvement in the Turkish political system, which was already evident in last year's

national election. At the same time, the opposition was forced to conduct its campaign under trying circumstances, against state institutions, and a media that were comprehensively mobilized behind government candidates. In addition, since the judicial system is no longer independent, candidates and even elected mayors from the opposition camp are under threat of political detention. For example, the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, is awaiting a retrial after he was sentenced in 2022 to two and a half years in prison for what the government claimed were comments that insulted the election committee. In a more sweeping case, the government systematically dismissed mayors from southeastern Turkey, where there is a Kurdish majority, and replaced them with regime loyalists. Government attempts to do something similar in the aftermath of last month's municipal elections are already causing tension in the region. Therefore, the most common expression used to describe elections in Turkey—"free but not fair"—fit the reality this time, too, and should also characterize the next election.

The picture that emerges from the Turkish municipal elections is complex, especially for anyone seeking to analyze it from an Israeli perspective. Contrary to Israel's Foreign Minister Israel Katz's tweet after the election, which claimed that the result reflected the price that Erdoğan paid for his anti-Israel policies, the exact opposite could also be argued: Turkey's position on the war in the Gaza Strip harmed Erdoğan in the election, since he did not go far enough in the measures he took against Israel, according to a large percentage of the electorate. Still, it is too soon to say whether the election will influence Ankara's policies, especially its foreign policy. In a speech after the preliminary election results were announced, Erdoğan described the outcome as a "turning point" for him and his party, which suggests that changes could be afoot. However, without elections on the horizon, Turkey is entering a period during which Erdoğan no longer is concerned about the pressure of public opinion. Turkey's foreign policy, and especially its approach toward Israel, is influenced by conflicting factors too. There are those in the Turkish political system who will pressure Erdoğan to take a more extreme position vis-à-vis Israel and they will have been bolstered by the gains made by the New Welfare Party. It is safe to assume, however, that Ankara will continue to be wary of translating aggressive rhetoric into reality-changing measures against Israel, since the Turkish government recognizes the importance of maintaining continued relations with Jerusalem, in order to preserve its regional standing and help stabilize its economy.

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