

Turkey 2024

A roundup of news and analysis on Turkey's upcoming March 31 municipal elections



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to "Turkey 2024", the CATS Network's roundup of news, developments and analysis in the run-up to Turkey's March 31 municipal elections.

Alliances and frictions are at the centre of this roundup, not only within the ruling coalition and among the opposition, but also with regard to the **positioning of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM)**, the successor of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

Should you have any questions or suggestions, then please e-mail us at cats@swp-berlin.org.

On the Spot



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The upcoming local elections continue to grip Turkish politics. With the announcement of candidates, **the country's eyes have now fixated on Istanbul**. Given its status as Turkey's economic powerhouse and its position as the city with the highest number of eligible voters, Istanbul will undoubtedly see the most heated contest these elections.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) candidate, **Murat Kurum, is considered by experts to be a low-profile figure loyal to President Erdoğan**. In contrast, his primary challenger, the Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate and incumbent mayor of Istanbul, **Ekrem İmamoğlu, who won the 2019 local elections against the AKP, is widely perceived as the main challenger of Erdoğan himself**. Therefore, the Istanbul elections are not only a litmus test for Turkish politics, but also for the future of İmamoğlu and the opposition overall.

Unlike 2019, during this local election cycle **the opposition parties have each fielded their own candidates, failing to unite against the AKP**. But the opposition is not alone in facing internal competition, **the AKP is also being challenged by the Islamist New Welfare Party (YRP)**, which supported Erdoğan's alliance during the presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023.

The Parties' Strategies and Challenges

Unless any last-minute developments occur within party alliances, the parties' and candidates' current campaigns will be decisive in determining the outcome of the elections. While President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Islamist-nationalist alliance appear confident with a clear strategy to recapture Istanbul, the opposition seems to be floundering.

AKP candidate Murat Kurum, who is supported by the President's junior partner, the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), is campaigning on a service-oriented local policy that promises Istanbulites earthquake preparedness and solutions to heavy traffic and problems resultant of the city's urban transformation. A civil engineer by trade, Kurum epitomises the central role that construction plays in the Turkish economic and political spheres under the AKP. Indeed, before being appointed Minister for Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change in 2018, he worked at Turkey's Housing Development Administration (TOKİ), an institution that has been crucial to the AKP's urban development projects. **He enjoys the full support of Erdoğan**, who is himself in the field campaigning, employing a populist discourse with heavy Islamist-nationalist undertones that maintains the support of his constituency. At the same time, Erdoğan is also mobilising all available state resources for Kurum's elections campaign.

The increasingly popular Islamist YRP has fielded its own candidate however, and this could be a potential spoiler for the AKP. **Appealing to radical parts of the Islamist voter base that are disillusioned or dissatisfied with the AKP**, the YRP has been critical of construction-centred local governance.

Without an opposition alliance, **Ekrem İmamoğlu** is relying on his popularity among various groups of voters in Istanbul, including religious-conservative and nationalist ones. While he might be able to garner votes from the right-wing, secular Good Party (İYİP), **religious-conservative voters appear hesitant to support him** as they believe that he is likely developing a strategy for his career with an eye to national rather than local politics. A conservative Future Party (FP) parliamentarian, Selim Temurci, although elected to the parliament through the CHP lists, even publicly declared that he would support Kurum over İmamoğlu because he is more focused on serving Istanbul. The ultra-nationalist Victory Party (Zafer Partisi), which supported the opposition alliance in the May elections, is also gaining popularity among nationalist voters who see İmamoğlu as too soft on Syrian refugees and Kurds.

The Kurdish DEM party's decision to run its own candidates, Meral Daniş Betaş and Murat Çepni, also presents a challenge for İmamoğlu, whose victory in the 2019 local elections was largely due to the support of the Kurdish voters. Representing 7 to 8 percent of all voters in Istanbul, **the Kurds will once again be kingmakers in the upcoming local elections**.

Shrinking Political Space for the Opposition

Still, these are not the only hurdles before İmamoğlu, who, faced with the unfair nature of Turkish elections, **continues to be mired in legal troubles**. In June 2023, an Istanbul court began hearing a case against him, and if found guilty, **he could face between three and seven years in prison and a ban on running for office**. In 2022, he was sentenced to more than two years in prison for insulting public officials; if this sentence is upheld, he also faces a political ban, but this appeal has been postponed to April 2024, after the local elections.

The path to victory for the opposition is narrowing while the AKP seems to be champing at the bit for a win in Istanbul. Erdoğan and pro-government media systematically emphasise the fragmented nature of the opposition. And while the political space for the opposition shrinks, Erdoğan is securing his regime's stability. (Hürcan Aslı Aksoy)

Recommended Readings

In this [SWP Point of View, Hürcan Aslı Aksoy and Salim Çevik](#) argue that the prosecution of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu represents one of many measures designed to abolish competition in Turkey's political system.

In the wake of the opposition's defeat in the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, [Ekrem Eddy Güzeldere from CATS Network Partner ELIAMEP](#) examines the opposition's various political programs and the dangers that would emerge were Turkey's opposition to disappear.

This [SWP Comment by former IPC-Stiftung Mercator Fellow Mesut Yeğen](#) sheds light on the reasons for and opportunities arising from the resumption of efforts to resolve the Kurdish question in Turkish politics.

Three Questions for...



Roj Girasun, born in Diyarbakır, Turkey in 1992, is a researcher who has been engaged at various organisations since 2012. As of 2018, he is the general manager of the Diyarbakır-based Rawest Research.

Turkey is suffering from economic imbalance while still trying to recover from the 2023 earthquakes that devastated Kurdish-populated provinces. How does the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), the successor of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), approach the dire economic situation?

The DEM Party is garnering the highest number of votes in provinces with Kurdish majorities. Compared to the rest of Turkey, these provinces also have the lowest levels of socio-economic development, less employment opportunity and inequitable income distribution. The DEM Party's leadership and grassroots see the deviation from democratic principles and aggressive policy vis-à-vis the Kurdish question as one of the main causes of Turkey's economic decline.

In the upcoming mayoral elections, the DEM Party has decided to run its own candidates in Istanbul and Ankara instead of supporting the Republican People's Party (CHP) as it did in 2019. Why?

The DEM Party decided to run its own candidates because its base wanted it to. They were concerned that supporting candidates from other parties could undermine its identity. The party leadership also calculated that its absence from a secular opposition bloc would make the AKP less dependent on its alliance with the nationalist MHP. Aside from that, CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu's cooperation with the right-wing Victory Party in the second round of the 2023 presidential elections, and their signing of a secret protocol, undermined the Kurds' trust in the CHP.

Under normal circumstances, the DEM Party's candidate for mayor in Istanbul, Meral Daniş Betaş, would be considered a formidable contender. However, earlier considerations to nominate Başak Demirtaş, the wife of imprisoned Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtaş, cast Betaş in a less favourable light. This could boost support for İmamoğlu.

Following the 2019 local elections, the AKP government removed elected HDP mayors from office and appointed trustees in their place. How would the DEM Party react if this happens again?

The DEM Party may choose to adopt a neutral stance in metropolitan areas where it holds sway in order to safeguard its dominance in other provinces. This approach is partly motivated by the intent to normalise relations with the government through trust-building.

Interviewed by Yaşar Aydın

That's all until the next issue!

Kind regards,

The CATS Team