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Situation Assessment | 5 April 2024

Do Türkiye's Municipal Elections Mark a Turning Point?

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

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Unit for Political Studies

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Nine months after parliamentary and presidential elections which saw the coalition led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) win the presidency and a majority in parliament, Türkiye's municipal elections on 31 March were no less important. The result, however, was starkly different: a landslide victory for the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), which seized municipal councils in 35 cities, including the three largest and most important, Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir.

In a major setback for Erdoğan's party, Turkish voters, suffering economically and disillusioned after two decades of AKP rule, shifted allegiances. Many AKP loyalists opted to vote instead for the conservative New Welfare Party, while the CHP also snatched votes from the Good Party, and smaller parties that had broken away from the AKP were marginalized. In sum, these shifts set the scene for a major reshaping of Türkiye's domestic politics in the lead-up to 2028 general elections.

Results and Turnout

A total of 34 political parties competed in the elections, and as usual the most fierce competition was over the municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara, due to their demographic, economic and political importance.

Nationwide, turnout was 78.6%, a decrease of 6% compared to the 2019 elections and the lowest figure since 2004. This owes largely to voter fatigue stemming from the deep polarization of Turkish society, which was especially evident at last year's general election and the presidential poll, held in two rounds on 14 and 28 May 2023.

Moreover, many parties have lost the confidence of large portions of their voters, whose aspirations they have failed to meet and who have been put off by manoeuvrings around electoral alliances. This time, the opposition CHP won 37.8% of the votes, compared to the AKP's 35.5%, while the New Welfare Party (Yeniden Refah) came in third place with 6.2%.

Table 1: Main parties' share of the vote in 2019 and 2024 municipal elections

Party	Share of the vote in 2024 (%)	Share of the vote in 2019 (%)	Municipalities won in 2024
CHP	37.8	30.1	35
AKP	35.5	44.3	24
New Welfare Party*	6.2	0.0	2
People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM)**	5.7	4.2	10
Nationalist Movement Party	5.0	7.3	8
Good Party***	3.8	7.5	1
Felicity Party	1.1	2.7	0
Hüda Par (Free Cause Party)	0.6	0.0	0

Party	Share of the vote in 2024 (%)	Share of the vote in 2019 (%)	Municipalities won in 2024
Great Unity Party	0.4	0.4	1

Source: Prepared by Political Studies Unit

* Founded in late 2018; did not take part in the 2019 election.

** Took part in 2019 as the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) but did not enter candidates in major cities.

*** Supported the CHP in 2019.

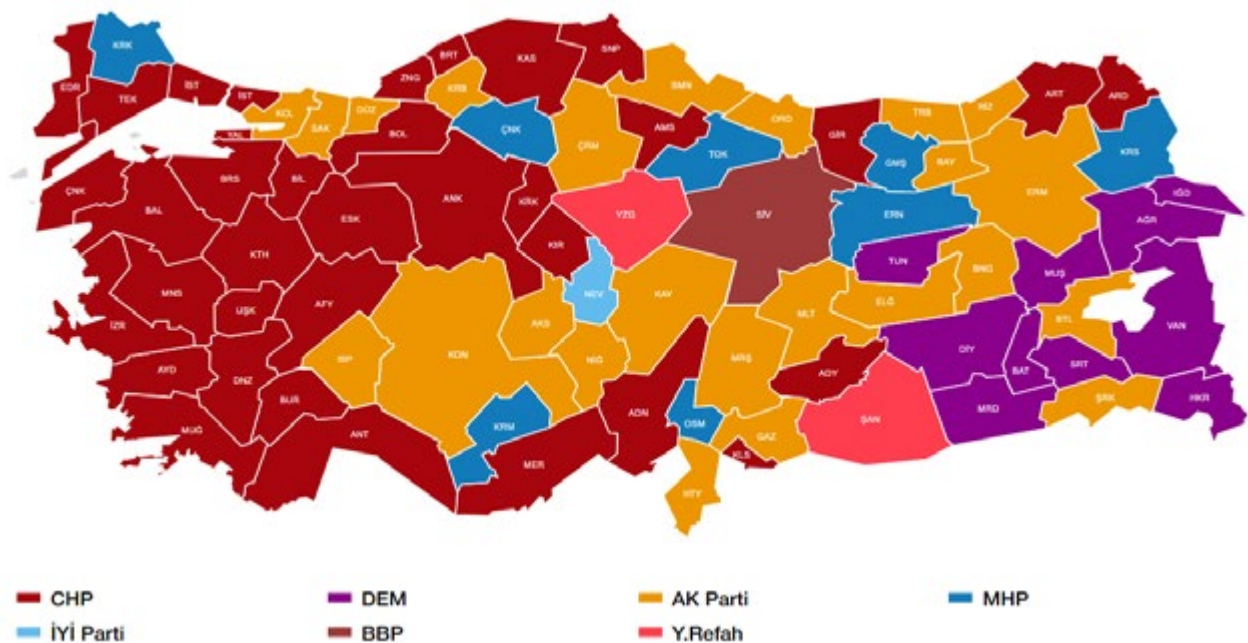
Results of the Main Parties

1. Republican People's Party (CHP)

The victory of the CHP can be clearly seen on the map below, on which it is shown in red. It won 35 municipalities, compared to 21 in the 2019 elections. It also kept its grip on the posts of mayor in Türkiye's three most important municipalities, Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir – and by a much greater margin than in 2019 in the first two, although its lead dropped slightly in Izmir.

Nationwide, the CHP gained the most votes of any party for the first time since 2002, with 37.8% of the ballot. Moreover, and unlike in the 2019 elections, it won a majority on the municipal councils of both Istanbul and Ankara. In the former, it added 12 districts to the 14 it already controlled, while in the latter, it swept from three districts to 16, out of a total of 25 that make up the capital.

Map Showing Turkish Municipalities and Winning Parties in 2024 Municipal Elections



Key to Acronyms: **CHP:** People's Republican Party; **DEM:** People's Equality and Democracy Party; **AK Parti:** Justice and Development Party; **MHP:** Nationalist Movement Party; **İYİ Parti:** Good Party; **BBP:** Great Unity Party; **Y. Refah:** New Welfare Party



The CHP, whose influence has traditionally been limited to larger, coastal cities, also made unprecedented gains in the heart of Anatolia, including relatively small cities. For the first time, it took control of the municipalities of Manisa, Afyonkarahisar, Kilis, Kütahya and Zonguldak. It also won the south-eastern municipality of Adıyaman for the first time since 1989, and the municipalities of Amasya, Bartın, Giresun, and Kastamonu for the first time since 1977. These results prompted the CHP's Chairman Özgür Özel to boast that these were the first municipal elections of the second century of the Turkish Republic, telling the party's supporters that it would win the next general elections in 2028.¹

For decades, the CHP – the party of the founder of modern Türkiye Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – had commanded around a quarter of the national vote. The 31 March election marks a break with this. This is partly due to changes at the top of the party, as Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu resigned as leader in the wake of the party's general election defeat last year. The CHP also owes some of its success to its strategy of taking positions and promoting programs that are more relevant to voters' concerns, and of capitalizing on public fatigue after two decades of AKP rule and failed economic policies.

All this chimes with party leader Özel's comments that the outcome of the election reflects the Turkish voter's appetite for change. However, it is also important to note that a significant portion of the İyi (Good) party's supporters switched allegiances to vote for the CHP. The party's undeclared alliance in some cities with the DEM party also helped it win certain municipalities, most notably Istanbul. The low turnout among traditional AKP voters also played to the CHP's advantage.

Yet despite its landslide victory, the CHP's popularity waned in its heartland, notably Izmir, as well as the Çankaya district in Ankara, which was the seat of Atatürk's rule and has long been seen as a CHP stronghold.

2. Justice and Development Party (AKP)

President Erdoğan's party lost 16 municipalities out of the 39 it had won in the 2019 elections, including cities in its historical Anatolian heartland such as Adıyaman, Afyonkarahisar, and Kilis. Most of these municipalities went to the CHP, while two – Yozgat and Şanlıurfa – were snatched up by the New Welfare Party. The Great Unity Party won the municipality of Sivas. The AKP held onto the municipalities of Kocaeli, Gaziantep, Konya, Kayseri, Samsun, Trabzon, Sakarya, Ordu, Malatya, Kahramanmaraş and Erzurum.

¹ "CHP Chairman Özgür Özel: 'We Will Put Atatürk's Party in Power at the First General Elections of the Second Century'," CHP website, 31/3/2024, accessed 4/3/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/r3xz6>.



Table 2: Municipalities won by the CHP and the AKP, respectively, in the last three municipal elections

Party	2014	2019	2024
CHP	13	21	35
AKP	50	39	24

The AKP was not alone in its defeat. Its parliamentary ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), also lost five out of the 11 municipalities it had won in 2019, all to the CHP. The MHP did however cling onto the municipalities of Kırklareli, Çankırı, Erzincan, Osmaniye and Kars. It also snatched two municipalities from the AKP where the two were in competition, namely Tokat and Gümüşhane.²

Although the AKP's share of the vote, at 35.5%, was almost identical to the 35.6% it obtained in the May 2023 general elections, a more telling comparison is with the previous municipal elections in 2019, in which the ruling party had received 44.3% of the vote. By this measure, the AKP lost around a tenth of voters in the municipal elections, which arguably offer a more accurate picture of voters' day-to-day realities than national polls.

3. New Welfare Party (Yeniden Refah)

The New Welfare Party's success was the second main surprise in the March elections. Despite only being founded in 2018 and entering the elections alone rather than as part of a coalition, the party came in third place, with 6.2% of the vote. It won two municipalities, Yozgat and Şanlıurfa, at the provincial level, as well as several other sub-districts. It also came second in important cities such as Konya.³ This result presents the New Welfare Party with an opportunity to become a major player in Turkish political life.

4. Good Party (İYİ)

The nationalist Good Party was another major loser in the March elections. It had decided to run alone in the poll, dropping its alliance with the CHP after their bloc was trounced in last year's general elections. The Good Party's share of the municipal vote declined from 8% in 2019 to just 3.5%, far short of estimates, up until last year, that it could command between 10-12% of ballots. In the event, the Good Party won just a single municipality.

The party appears to have been mired in confusion since its poor performance at last year's general elections. Prior to that poll, leader Meral Akşener had joined the CHP in the six-party Nation Alliance, which sought to ouster President Erdoğan – then left it, only to return just three days later. She had also turned a blind eye to the alliance with the Kurdish opposition, undermining the trust of the party's Turkish nationalist supporters.

² Yeni Şafak, "Türkiye Local Election Results 31 March 2024," accessed 2/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/pckq3t>.

³ Ibid.

As a result, an estimated half of those who voted for the Good Party in the last elections switched to vote for the CHP this time around. This setback has sparked a chorus of demands from within the party for Akşener to resign. It is quite possibly that she will, especially as she had publicly vowed that that if her party lost, she would "go home."⁴

Analysing the Results

There are several factors that helped determine the results of the election. Key among them are the following:

5. The Economy

Even before the coronavirus pandemic crisis and the Ukraine war sent fuel and food prices spiralling, Turks were struggling under double-figure inflation. By 2022, this had topped 70%, the worst rate since the AKP took power in 2002. Turkish households saw their purchasing power collapse as the value of the lira fell from two to the dollar, in 2015, to some 30 liras to the dollar today. None of Erdoğan's policies, including changing the governor of the Central Bank and his economic team, succeeded in curbing inflation or reining in the collapse of the exchange rate.⁵ As a result, the incomes of some seven million voters fall within the minimum wage category.

6. Pensions

There are some 16 million retirees in Türkiye, and on average, their pensions amount to just 11,000 liras (\$340) a month, even after the latest increase approved by the government in early 2024. Pensioners also complain that they have been treated unfairly compared to state employees, whose salaries have been raised several times over the past two years in response to inflation, while state pensions have not. Retirees have historically been a key constituency for the AKP, but in March it appears that many decided that the party no longer represents their interests. The New Welfare Party capitalized on this, with messaging suggesting it was fighting in their corner. After the elections, Erdoğan admitted that the government had failed to address this issue.⁶

7. Selection of Candidates

There is a broad consensus among observers that the AKP's insistence on fielding former candidates with little popular support severely damaged the party's electoral fortunes, as voters select their

⁴ Oksijen, "Akşener: If you don't vote, I will go home and stay away from politics," 8/3/2024, accessed 3/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/hvm2o>.

⁵ Yeni Şafak, "President Erdoğan evaluates the local elections, emphasizing the 'disease of arrogance': We either recover or melt like ice," 2/4/2024, accessed 3/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/ghmq1>.

⁶ "Doğan Bekin, Deputy Chairman of the New Welfare Party: The pensions of retirees will determine the outcome of the municipal elections," New Welfare Party website, 1/2/2024, accessed 3/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/02vzmt>.



favoured candidates not only on the basis of electoral programs, but also on the credibility of the candidates themselves. Thus, some of the party's nominations may have pushed people to vote for other parties, or to abstain.⁷

8. Failed Alliances

The AKP failed to persuade the New Welfare Party to join an electoral alliance after the latter set three conditions for doing so: Türkiye must halt all commercial transactions with Israel over the war in Gaza, close NATO's Kürecik radar base in southern Türkiye, and raise state pensions to 20,000 Turkish lira.⁸ The AKP also decided not to join forces with its former ally, the MHP, in cities where each thought it could compete against the other, believing that the CHP would not stand a chance there. These calculations proved to be mistaken in many cities, leading to losses by both parties.

9. Low Turnout

Relatively low voter participation was particularly damaging to the ruling AKP.

10. The War in Gaza

Although foreign policy issues tend not to play a huge role in Turkish municipal elections, there are some indications that the government's position on Israel's war on Gaza war may have impacted results this time. Many voters expressed their dissatisfaction with the way the Turkish government had responded to the war, writing slogans on ballot papers or on social media. Erdoğan admitted that his party had come under heavy attack due to its position on the Gaza war. In a speech, he said: "Unfortunately, even on an issue such as the Gaza crisis, for which we did everything we could and paid the price, we failed to fend off political attacks and convince some circles of our position. We will definitely make our evaluations about these issues, including their pros and cons."⁹

11. Local Concerns

Many other issues may have affected how the Turkish electorate voted. The proliferation of stray dogs is of deep concern to many in Türkiye, where more than 30 people were killed by strays in 2022 alone – an issue that primarily falls to municipalities to tackle. However, it seems clear that Turkish citizens' desire for change after nearly a quarter of a century of AKP rule played a key important role in determining the outcome.

⁷ Yeni Şafak, "President Erdoğan evaluates the local elections".

⁸ Halk TV, "Erbakan tells AKP: Three conditions for withdrawing from Istanbul," 28/3/2024, accessed 3/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/gjq1yh>.

⁹ Yeni Şafak, "President Erdoğan evaluates the local elections".



Conclusion

The major blow to AKP in Türkiye's March municipal elections could have knock-on effects for many initiatives on its agenda, including the drafting of a new civil constitution proposed by President Erdoğan. Erdoğan has acknowledged that the election may have been a turning point for his party, and he may therefore be expected to make major changes to the structure of his party and its policies – especially economic ones – to stem any further bleeding of popular support.

The CHP, for its part, is likely to seek to capitalize on its victory to use it as a launch pad for a similar outcome at the next general election. The mayors of Istanbul and Ankara, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, have each strengthened their personal clout in the Turkish political arena, with an eye on the 2028 elections. Yavaş hinted that he may stand for president, saying that his success in Ankara could be transferred the whole of Türkiye. But some fear a tough internal battle within the CHP over who would be the party's candidate, especially since Chairman Özgür Özel has also emerged as a strong contender given his success in managing the party's internal affairs. This could augur a showdown with İmamoğlu, who received nearly five million votes in Istanbul in March and has already begun to act like a presidential candidate and party leader.

In conclusion, the municipal elections have already a major impact on the political scene in Türkiye. Their fallout is likely to continue in the form of major shifts within and among political parties as they prepare for the next major electoral battle in 2028, and to determine what is to come after Erdoğan, who is currently serving the last presidential term he is allowed under the current constitution.