

# [***After a huge setback in local elections, which way forward now for Turkey's Erdogan?***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BP7-J941-JC5B-G2HV-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

ISTANBUL — The huge gains made by the opposition in Turkey’s [*local elections are raising the possibility*](https://apnews.com/article/turkey-erdogan-local-elections-things-to-know-1cad0f209f0aed8c78f41307b52d4c2d) that the long-serving President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling party could step back from some of the populist leader’s more polarizing policies ahead of the next round of voting in four years’ time.

There is no doubt that Sunday's local polls were a blow to both Erdogan and his Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party, or AKP, which won last year’s presidential and parliamentary elections.

In the balloting, the main opposition [*center-left Republican People’s Party, or CHP, kept hold of Istanbul*](https://apnews.com/article/istanbul-turkey-local-elections-photos-2dfba1624cd8f3759f7a8fb63ebf326d) and the capital of Ankara by wide margins, but also added wins in conservative provinces — such as Adiyaman and Kilis in the south — to municipalities it gained in the 2019 balloting.

**WHAT HAPPENS NOW?**

Some analysts said on Monday the outcome was a warning and that they expect Erdogan’s government will pursue a path of "normalization” that also includes soothing ties with NATO allies such as the United States and neighboring Greece — and adopting less antagonistic programs at home.

Erdogan, who has presided over Turkey for more than two decades — as prime minister since 2003 and president since 2014 — acknowledged the electoral setback in a speech from the balcony of the presidential palace late Sunday, saying his party had suffered “a loss of altitude” across Turkey.

The people delivered a “message” that AKP will “analyze” by engaging in “courageous” self-criticism, he said.

Seda Demiralp, a political science professor at Isik University in Istanbul, said she has already seen this pattern when Erdogan upset predictions of an opposition win in last May's elections after the [*devastating earthquake that killed more than 53,000 people*](https://apnews.com/video/earthquakes-2023-turkey-syria-earthquake-turkey-mustafa-bahadirli-national-85c69c5d28a247ffb9080667b9133346) in the country’s south.

Despite its demoralizing performance last year, the CHP won the popular vote in many major cities.

“This was a warning," Demiralp said. “I expect Erdogan to continue normalization ... or (the AKP) will keep losing further.”

**WHAT ABOUT ISLAMIC AND FAMILY VALUES?**

Others who have been watching Turkey closely don't see Erdogan making any radical U-turns or drastic changes in his conservative Islamist policies. But a toning-down may be on the cards.

Wolfango Piccoli, the co-president of New York-based consulting firm Teneo, suggests Erdogan may put a brake on his planned [*constitutional changes that would emphasize “family values”*](https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-business-europe-97230ecd5224435e1dc606bef03f268f) and safeguard, for example, the rights of women wanting to wear Islamic-style headscarves — but which many see as an attack on the rights of the LGBTQ+ community.

Still, “Erdogan will not move towards greater political accommodation, given his aversion to share power, and will not tone down his polarizing rhetoric due to this stinging defeat,” Piccoli said.

Sunday’s elections saw the opposition CHP win 35 of Turkey’s 81 provinces — including the country’s five most populous cities — while Erdogan’s AKP, took 24.

Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, director of the German Marshall Fund in Ankara, described the results as unprecedented for Erdogan.

Turnout was around 78%, according to the state-run Anadolu Agency, compared to 87% in last year's election. The results suggested it was mostly AKP supporters who failed to vote.

“We have never seen him lose like this,” he said. “Now the CHP is leading the AKP in the polls for the first time \u2026 This is a landslide for the CHP because they got more votes than the AKP for the first time.”

“Turkey is ready for change," said Unluhisarcikli.

**WHERE IS THE ECONOMY GOING?**

The elections took place against the backdrop of an ongoing [*cost-of-living crisis*](https://apnews.com/article/turkey-interest-rate-increase-inflation-8cc9cf03ef15d2490ea06935effa76fc), with voters facing annual inflation that rose to 67% in February. Meanwhile, Erdogan has allowed borrowing costs to rise to 50% in a bid to combat soaring prices.

Erdogan has long been a proponent of an unorthodox policy of cutting interest rates to fight inflation and had fired central bank governors who resisted his rate-slashing policies. That runs counter to traditional economic thinking, and many blame Erdogan’s unusual methods for Turkey's economic turmoil.

Commentators said that although the economic crisis left Erdogan’s popularity largely unaffected in last year’s national polls, AKP voters felt more inclined to express discontent when his name was not on the ballot paper.

“I think Turkish voters sent the clear message to Erdogan that enough is enough,” said Berk Esen, associate professor of political science at Istanbul’s Sabanci University.

“If Erdogan does not get his act together and change his ruling party, this ... decline that we have experienced vis-a-vis AKP’s vote share is going to continue,” Esen added.

**HOW HAS THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE CHANGED?**

Although Istanbul, where Erdogan was born and raised and where he began his political career, was seen as the main battleground in the election and where the opposition retained its hold on the city, in the southeast, the pro-Kurdish Equality and Democracy Party took 10 provinces — despite years of repression that have seen Kurdish mayors removed and replaced with government appointees, and thousands of political activists arrested.

The Erdogan-allied Nationalist Movement Party, or MHP, won eight scattered across the country. The New Welfare Party, or YRP, which largely competed with the AKP over the support of conservative voters, took two provinces.

It was the third biggest party in terms of nationwide votes, taking 6.2%. The IYI Party and the Great Unity Party won the remaining two provinces.

Those who had expected the opposition to perform poorly in Sunday’s election were stunned.

A change in the leadership in the CHP after last year's elections — from the 75-year-old Kemal Kilicdaroglu to [*Ozgur Ozel*](https://apnews.com/article/chp-ozel-leadership-kilicdaroglu-turkey-opposition-election-c8fa993c831d7013a22e656002b8781b), 49 — appeared to have revitalized the party and paved the way for incumbent CHP mayors and other candidates to secure conclusive victories.

Analysts contrasted the strong candidates fielded by the opposition — such as [*Ekrem Imamoglu in Istanbul*](https://apnews.com/video/istanbul-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan-turkey-government-ekrem-imamoglu-dfe3d9055a9f41059ebe9b1c08b9a759) and Mansur Yavas in Ankara — to those for the AKP, who were largely overshadowed by Erdogan during the campaign.

Imamoglu won by a margin of more than 11 points while Yavas secured a gap of nearly 29 points on his AKP rival.

The results could position Imamoglu as a potential challenger for the presidency in 2028, despite an outstanding legal case that could see him banned from ***politics***.

“Leadership is becoming more important than parties and ideologies,” Demiralp said. “Especially in a country like Turkey where institutions are weak, people connect to leaders rather than parties and other institutions.”

**WHAT IS THE WORD ON THE STREET?**

Sentiments were mixed on Monday on the streets of Istanbul, where many lauded the opposition's victory but others expressed concerns amid the economic crisis and their daily struggles.

“We woke up to a good day," said opposition supporter Ayse Poplata, adding the results "will be beneficial for our country.”

Hicabi Pekdemir, 54, said he voted against Erdogan's AKP, citing a six-fold increase in his rent over the last two years.

“I live by myself and I have two kids," he said. "How do I make ends meet?”

Fatma Hanedar, 40, said she was “devastated and very upset” by the outcome and said the voters showed "such ungratefulness” for Erdogan's leadership through Turkey’s recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and rebuilding efforts after last year’s earthquake.

“Thank God our president is still at the helm,” said another AKP supporter, Husamettin Ezer, 52.

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