

Why Turkey's Election Results Test Erdoğan's Grip on Power

[Kaya Genç](#)

After the preliminary results of Turkey's municipal elections were announced, on Sunday night, President [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#) stood on the terrace of his party's Ankara headquarters with a microphone and, in a sombre tone, launched into a campaign song long popular with his supporters. "Ours is a love story, a bit like a black-and-white film," Erdoğan sang, as members of the crowd in the streets below joined him. Television closeups showed some people in tears. The Turkish leader had just learned that his Justice and Development Party, or the A.K.P., had narrowly lost the mayoralty of Ankara, the country's capital, and might lose Istanbul, Turkey's largest city, in local elections that were seen as a referendum on his leadership. Both cities had been controlled by the A.K.P. or its Islamist forebears since 1994, when Erdoğan was first elected the mayor of Istanbul. The strongman President had suffered one of the most serious electoral defeats in a quarter-century as the country's dominant political figure.

For the elections, Erdoğan had aligned the A.K.P. with the ultra-right-wing National Movement Party, with which it currently holds a parliamentary majority, against an opposition coalition led by the secularist Republican People's Party (C.H.P.) and its candidates. The state-run Anadolu news agency reported that, in Istanbul, the C.H.P.'s Ekrem İmamoğlu garnered 48.79 per cent of the vote, edging out the A.K.P.'s Binali Yıldırım, a former Prime Minister, by less than three-tenths of a percentage point. In Ankara, the C.H.P. won by a larger margin, 50.93 per cent to 47.12 per cent. (The C.H.P. also further secured its grip on Izmir, Turkey's third-largest city, which it has controlled for fifteen years.) As of Monday morning, the A.K.P.

controlled nine fewer cities than it had before the vote; it now holds the mayoralty in thirty-nine of Turkey's eighty-one municipalities.

In the fifty days leading up to the elections, Erdoğan had campaigned intensively—holding a hundred and two rallies in fifty-nine cities—and adopted increasingly nationalist rhetoric. Invoking a conspiracy that Turkey faces existential threats to its existence and prosperity by foreign-backed enemies, he claimed that the elections concerned the country's national security more than its municipal governance. On International Women's Day, March 8th, when thousands of participants demonstrated in Istanbul for women's rights, he declared them "invaders" and assured his supporters that "the Turkish state can topple them with our police force and military." Following the mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15th, he showed fragments of the video taken by the terrorist's helmet camera at rallies; he warned of the gunman's call for Christians to recapture Istanbul and vowed that attackers targeting Turkey would return home "in caskets." During the final week of the race, he announced that the military had conducted an air strike on a camp, in the Qandil mountains of [northern Iraq](#), believed to belong to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or the P.K.K., a militant Kurdish separatist group that has been fighting the Turkish government for thirty-five years.

Erdoğan's sharp rhetoric appeared to be an effort to distract voters from Turkey's spiralling economic crisis, one that opposition members say is [fuelled and perpetuated by Erdoğan's politics](#). In August, 2018, the value of the Turkish lira plunged, losing twenty-eight per cent of its value against the dollar. Though the lira has rebounded slightly since then, the country officially entered its first recession in a decade in March. Inflation is at twenty per cent, the price of produce has skyrocketed, and the federal minimum wage has fallen by roughly ten per cent since this time last year, to three hundred and sixty dollars a month. To force down prices, Erdoğan

installed government-subsidized vegetable stalls in city squares around the country. He also called for Turkey's banking regulator to investigate "a JPMorgan plot" that he claimed was causing volatility in the value of the lira.

Near the end of the campaign, Erdoğan seemed to grow increasingly desperate. Five days before the polls, he pledged to turn the [Hagia Sophia](#)—a Greek Orthodox cathedral turned Ottoman mosque turned museum, built by the Byzantine emperor Justinian I, in 537—back into a mosque, a politically radical move that took even his supporters by surprise. In an attempt to attract younger voters, the A.K.P. built a Web site, GeleceğiniSec.com (ChooseYourFuture.com), inspired by "[Black Mirror: Bandersnatch](#)," the latest interactive episode of the Netflix series. It allowed viewers to control the decisions of a young Turkish software coder on Election Day. His choice is to vote for the A.K.P. or for "the Others"—which, according to the video, would spark mayhem in Turkey's streets and an economic collapse.

After the preliminary results came in, Erdoğan was quick to point out that, despite losing in the country's three biggest cities, his party won the larger share of the general vote: 44.32 per cent, compared to 30.11 per cent for the C.H.P. As President, he still has the mandate to govern Turkey for another four years, until the next scheduled federal elections. Yet, on the campaign trail, he had often repeated the mantra "Whoever wins Istanbul wins Turkey." Soner Çağaptay, the director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the author of "[The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey](#)," told me that the loss of the country's largest city was potent. "Istanbul is where Erdoğan's political career started, and it made him a rock star, in political terms," he said. "Losing that city is a big blow to his political brand."

Failing to secure Istanbul has financial consequences for Erdoğan's ruling

party, too. In recent years, the city has served as a major source of A.K.P. patronage, generating “large amounts of rent from construction, urban renovation, and zoning projects” for businesses aligned with the Party, Çağaptay said. Under A.K.P. rule, government-owned housing has grown significantly. Between its founding, in 1984, and 2002, Turkey’s public-housing-development agency produced a little more than forty-three thousand units; during the Erdoğan era, between 2003 and 2015, it produced more than five hundred and fifty thousand. The ruling party’s defeat in Istanbul “means losing a significant source of rent to the opposition,” Çağaptay said—a major revenue source “that has oiled the gears of the A.K.P. machine and Erdoğan’s rise.”

The results boosted the hopes of secular voters who have watched Erdoğan win election after election and grow increasingly autocratic during his sixteen years in power. Since a 2016 coup attempt failed to remove him from office, Erdoğan has centralized power; removed his perceived opponents in the bureaucracy, judiciary, military, and police; and jailed tens of thousands of people. Nazım Dikbaş, an artist living in Istanbul’s Beyoğlu district, told me that he hoped the results would create a more democratic atmosphere. “I am cautious about getting carried away, but I am hopeful,” he said.

Erdoğan’s party, though, is already beginning to fight the outcome. On Tuesday, the A.K.P. formally contested the Istanbul and Ankara results, alleging irregularities. But, even if the current results are corroborated by the final vote counts, which are expected on April 11th, at the earliest, some fear unrest during the transfer of power. Others are anxious about A.K.P. meddling. “Erdoğan will try to undermine local government,” Çağaptay, the Washington-based Turkey expert, predicted. “There will be a contentious relationship. . . . [He] may not be so willing to settle for a Turkish-style cohabitation between his rule and opposition-controlled cities.”

