

# “Whoever Wins Istanbul Wins Turkey”

## How a Mayoral Race Has Precipitated a National Crisis

### A Conversation with Howard Eissenstat

June 2019

*On March 31, Turkish citizens nationwide elected more than a thousand municipal and district mayors, as well as municipal council members, neighborhood heads, and other local officials.<sup>1</sup> More than 57 million voters participated, representing a turnout of nearly 85 percent (typical of Turkey, where voting is both required and a widely accepted civic duty).<sup>2</sup>*

*Although President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s ruling AK Party (AKP), in coalition with the right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP), won the majority of local races, it lost the mayorships in Ankara, Izmir, and Istanbul to the main opposition, the secularist Republican People’s Party (CHP). In the most important contest, the CHP’s Ekrem İmamoğlu was elected Istanbul’s new mayor by a margin of less than 1 percent, ousting the AKP from a key office that it had controlled for more than 25 years.*

*But on May 6, the Supreme Election Council (YSK) effectively annulled his election, citing unspecified irregularities, and ordered a new vote to be held on June 23. The YSK’s ruling, widely seen as having been made under AKP pressure, is unprecedented. The loss of Istanbul was a bitter pill for the AKP—and, so far at least, one that Erdoğan has refused to swallow. POMED Nonresident Senior Fellow Howard Eissenstat explains how İmamoğlu won on March 31, whether he can do so again on June 23, and why this election holds tremendous importance not only for Turkey’s greatest city but for the country as a whole.*

### **POMED:** Why is the Istanbul mayorship so important?

**Howard Eissenstat:** This is a powerful and prestigious position, akin to the mayorship of New York City. The mayor is the chief executive of Turkey’s largest city, whose 15 million

1. For basic information on the types and roles of local government structures, see “Municipalities in Turkey,” Union of Municipalities in Turkey, <http://www.tbb.gov.tr/en/local-authorities/municipalities-in-turkey/>

2. “Turkey local elections: Setback for Erdogan in big cities,” BBC, April 1, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47764393>

people represent more than 18 percent of the national population.<sup>3</sup> Istanbul is Turkey's cultural and economic center, generating more than 30 percent of GDP.<sup>4</sup> The mayor manages an annual budget of more than \$10 billion and has extensive executive powers.<sup>5</sup> Istanbul also serves as a powerful source of patronage and revenue for Erdoğan and his allies.<sup>6</sup> The city is a focus for Erdoğan's vision of a powerful modern Turkey as the inheritor of the Ottoman imperial tradition. Moreover, Istanbul was the base for Erdoğan's own political trajectory. He was born and raised in the neighborhood of Kasımpaşa, and as Istanbul mayor from 1994 to 1998 rose to national prominence there.<sup>7</sup>

For all these reasons, Erdoğan has often quoted the maxim that “whoever wins Istanbul wins Turkey.”<sup>8</sup>

### How much of a surprise was İmamoğlu's win?

The AKP clearly was concerned about its chances in Ankara, but it evinced no similar worry about Istanbul, and my sense is that the party was caught flat-footed by İmamoğlu. Unlike AKP candidate Binali Yıldırım, a stolid former prime minister, İmamoğlu was not a national figure before this race. He was mayor of the northwest Istanbul suburb of Beylikdüzü, a middle class, largely residential area with a population of some 300,000. At forty-nine years old, he is relatively young, though not strikingly charismatic. But the CHP ran a surprisingly effective campaign. İmamoğlu, in particular, seemed to thrive in impromptu street-level engagement with voters and demonstrated both a common touch and a capacity to speak empathetically with diverse populations.

Four other factors seem to have helped the CHP. First, the weak economy seems to have motivated some AKP voters to support the opposition so as to teach the ruling party a lesson in a lower-stakes local race. Election year-generated government spending seems to have temporarily ended a bout of recession, but economists fear a new downturn in the coming months.<sup>9</sup> As one long-time AKP supporter told journalist Ayla Jean Yackley, “[Voting for the CHP] is a 180-degree turn for me... But I'm not afraid of change. When I can't afford to go to the market, what's left to fear?”<sup>10</sup>

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3. “Turkey's population passes 82 million, Istanbul still most populous city,” *Daily Sabah*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2019/02/01/turkeys-population-passes-82-million-istanbul-still-most-populous-city>

4. “Istanbul's share in total GDP stood at 31 percent in 2017,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 7, 2019, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/istanbuls-share-in-total-gdp-stood-at-31-percent-in-2017-140330>

5. David Gauthier-Villars, “Election Puts Istanbul's Budget—and the Ruling Party's Use of It—In Spotlight,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/election-puts-istanbuls-budget-and-ruling-partys-use-of-it-in-spotlight-11560245400>

6. See, for example, Berk Esen and Şebnem Gumuscu, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey,” *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1589–1590, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1135732>; and Esra Çeviker Gürakar, *Politics of Favoritism in Public Procurement in Turkey: Reconfiguration of Dependency Networks in the AKP Era* (New York: Springer, 2016).

7. “Biography,” Presidency of the Republic of Turkey website, accessed June 2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/receptayyip Erdogan/biography/>

8. Kaya Genç, “Why Turkey's Election Results Test Erdoğan's Grip on Power,” *The New Yorker*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/why-turkeys-elections-results-test-erdogans-grip-on-power>

9. Laura Pitel, “Turkish Economy Emerges From Recession After Three Quarters,” *Financial Times*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/c6f08856-8373-11e9-b592-5fe435b57a3b>

10. Ayla Jean Yackley, “Erdoğan ‘the invincible’ faces tough elections test,” *Politico Europe*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/tayyip-erdogan-turkey-election-the-invincible-faces-tough-election-test/>

Second, the candidate of the Saadet (Felicity) Party, a more traditionally Islamist contingent within Turkey's religious right, garnered a small number of votes that might otherwise have gone to Yıldırım. Some of these were likely protest votes by erstwhile AKP voters who wanted to lodge their discontent with the ruling party but who could not stomach the idea of voting for the secularist opposition. Third, the CHP took steps to portray itself as more welcoming and tolerant. This helped the party distinguish itself both from the militant secularism and nationalism of its own past and from the highly polarizing AKP and MHP, which increasingly have portrayed all political dissent as treason and as support for terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Fourth, İmamoğlu benefited from the tacit support of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which is strong in Istanbul. An open alliance with the HDP has higher costs, as the party is distrusted across much of Turkey's political spectrum. But tacit HDP support helped push İmamoğlu over the top on March 31. On June 18, the jailed leader of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş, made his support of the CHP candidate explicit. This will both cement İmamoğlu's Kurdish support and give the AKP further fuel to portray him as a "terrorist."

“THE CHP TOOK STEPS TO PORTRAY ITSELF AS MORE WELCOMING AND TOLERANT.”

### Remind us what happened next.

The days that followed witnessed much political drama. On election evening, as İmamoğlu's strength became apparent, the AKP's reaction was confused, if not panicked. Late that night, carrying only a tiny lead and with tens of thousands of votes still uncounted, Yıldırım declared victory. Soon after, Turkey's official media outlet, Anadolu Agency, suddenly stopped providing updates on the count, and the YSK stopped reporting results for several hours. During this time, it seems that the AKP was considering overturning the results and installing Yıldırım. By the next day, however, İmamoğlu had claimed victory by a margin of some 28,000 votes out of nearly nine million total ballots cast.<sup>12</sup>

As the CHP celebrated its stunning upset, and AKP officials filed a barrage of complaints with the YSK about irregularities, a debate broke out within the AKP leadership over how to respond. On April 8, Erdoğan went on record as saying that "organized crimes" had occurred in Istanbul to deliver the CHP victory.<sup>13</sup> At that point, however, it was unclear whether the president's harsh rhetoric would result in any direct intervention in the electoral process. Then, on May 6, the YSK ruled in a 7–4 vote that "electoral improprieties" required a new Istanbul election. It was not until May 22 that the YSK finally published its rationale, alleging the presence of non-civil servants as heads of some polling stations and other minor procedural irregularities.<sup>14</sup> On June 7, the Interior Ministry installed the appointed Istanbul governor as trustee mayor to serve until the June 23 revote is concluded.

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11. Nick Ashdown, "Radical Love Book' hailed as key to Turkish opposition election success," Middle East Eye, April 11, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/radical-love-book-hailed-key-turkish-opposition-election-success>

12. Cagan Koc, "Turkey Election Board Says Opposition Leading Istanbul Race," Bloomberg, April 1, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-01/turkey-election-board-says-opposition-leading-race-in-istanbul-jty0zmgb>

13. Zia Weise, "Erdoğan claims Istanbul Vote was 'irregular,' backs recount," *Politico Europe*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/recep-tayyip-erdogan-election-istanbul-vote-irregular-backs-recount/>

14. "Top election body releases detailed ruling for Istanbul revote," *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 23, 2019, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/top-election-body-releases-detailed-ruling-for-istanbul-revote-143643>

### How unusual is the YSK ruling? And how credible is it?

It is unprecedented. Although in recent years the YSK has become more politicized and increasingly willing to intervene on behalf of the AKP, the decision to do so in *this* election has shocked many Turkish voters. And the ruling lacks legal credibility. For one thing, the 250-page decision provides no evidence to substantiate its claims. For another, other local Istanbul offices were chosen through the very same allegedly improper process, yet the YSK has not declared those results invalid. (The AKP won the majority of those races.) Even erstwhile AKP luminaries who rarely speak out publicly against Erdoğan, such as the former foreign minister and prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and the former president Abdullah Gül, have condemned the ruling as undemocratic.<sup>15</sup>

The YSK had already come under considerable scrutiny for its handling of the complaints process for the March 31 elections. According to an analysis by the independent news site Dokuz8, the YSK accepted 87 percent of the total complaints filed by the AKP, but only 17 percent of HDP complaints, which suggests a fundamental political imbalance in its decisions.<sup>16</sup> Even more strikingly, the YSK ruled that some HDP candidates were ineligible only *after* they had won local seats, thereby denying the HDP the capacity to run alternate candidates and effectively handing those seats to the AKP.

The fact is that the YSK can no longer be considered an independent body. In general, Turkish elections historically have been run fairly, even if certain electoral rules were clearly designed to limit the role of regional (meaning Kurdish) political parties. But in recent years the AKP has worked to defang and co-opt the YSK, most notably through the removal of party representation on its board in favor of commissioners who are entirely judges, who are themselves chosen by the government.<sup>17</sup> Because the AKP established control over the judiciary following a massive purge in 2016, the effect is to ensure that the YSK is staffed almost entirely with AKP loyalists.

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The blatant use of the YSK to overturn an AKP loss illustrates a core reality of the electoral system under Erdoğan. Turkish citizens still believe strongly in electoral democracy and engage actively in the process; at the same time, the core institutions meant to ensure free and fair elections have been progressively undermined.

### What have been the repercussions of the YSK ruling so far?

It has underlined basic political problems with which Turkey was already wrestling. These include the degree to which the AKP’s power is dependent on control of patronage systems, the extent to which governance has been bent to the party’s interest, and the weakness of purportedly independent institutions in safeguarding the most basic elements of free competition.

The AKP’s decision to force the overturning of the Istanbul results underlines the weakness of

15. Ragıp Soyulu, “AKP heavyweights come out against election rerun in Istanbul,” Middle East Eye, May 8, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/former-turkish-government-members-come-out-against-election-re-run-istanbul>

16. “Partilerin seçim sonuçlarına itirazları ve bu itirazların kabul oranları: HDP %17, AKP %87,” Dokuz8 [Tr], April 6, 2019, <http://www.dokuz8haber.net/gundem/politika/partilerin-secim-sonuclarina-itirazlari-ve-bu-itirazlarin-kabul-oranlari-hdp-%17-akp-%87/>

17. Ayla Jean Yackley, “Turkey changes electoral law in boost for ruling party,” Al-Monitor, March 15, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/turkey-changes-electoral-law-benefit-akp.html>

its democratic *bona fides*. The AKP's legitimacy has continued to rest on its claim to represent the democratic will of the people and on its purported respect for elections expressing that will. I have argued elsewhere that since at least 2015, these claims have been more myth than reality. The undoing of the result in Istanbul highlights just how empty these claims are today.

Many Turks seemed to shrug off apparent improprieties in the 2014 Ankara mayoral election, in which many suspect that ballot rigging helped ensure an AKP victory, or in the 2017 referendum on constitutional changes to enhance Erdoğan's powers, when, in contravention of the law, the YSK allowed unstamped ballots to be counted, tipping the scales in favor of a "yes" result. And many condoned or even applauded the clear attack on democratic elections represented by the government's replacement of elected HDP mayors with government-appointed trustees starting in 2016. The overarching narrative of "Turkey has democratic elections" seemed to overwhelm these accumulating data points about electoral manipulation. Turkey's opposition was willing to accept attacks on the pro-Kurdish HDP but never imagined similar attacks on basic electoral principles in the nation's economic and cultural center.

This time seems different. The opposition victory in Istanbul was so hard-won, the AKP's determination to use any subterfuge to maintain control so flagrant, that a basic element of the AKP's legitimacy finally seems to have broken. Of course, the AKP's rejection of unfavorable outcomes is not limited to Istanbul. The YSK's overturning of some HDP victories in eastern Turkey is just as antidemocratic. It is the question of Istanbul, however, that really sparked the AKP's crisis of legitimacy.

The YSK ruling has heightened investor fears about Turkey's stability and exacerbated the economic problems that contributed to the AKP's defeat in Istanbul. Inflation is officially 20 percent, but some experts believe that the real inflation rate is much higher, perhaps even reaching 49 percent.<sup>18</sup>

### What do you expect to happen in the revote?

I don't think there is any question that in a free and fair election, İmamoğlu would win again. Indeed, if Turkey's elections were still truly free and fair, he would have never been removed from office in the first place. I see little reason why İmamoğlu would lose votes on June 23. If anything, his support should tick up somewhat, due to the strength of his campaign performance so far, the anomaly of the rerun itself, and an emboldened opposition. A poll by the KONDA polling firm released on June 19 shows him opening a considerable lead of more than 8 percent over Yıldırım, largely from gains made on undecided votes.<sup>19</sup> But İmamoğlu needs to significantly over-perform his March 31 result. To govern Istanbul, the opposition needs to win so decisively that manipulating the election results would be too blatant for the AKP.

“THE YSK RULING HAS HEIGHTENED INVESTOR FEARS ABOUT TURKEY'S STABILITY AND EXACERBATED THE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE AKP'S DEFEAT IN ISTANBUL.”

18. Steve Hanke, "Turkey's Inflationary Woes," *Forbes*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevehanke/2019/05/01/turkeys-inflationary-woes/#2bfb2e615f4a>

19. Konda Research and Consultancy Inc., "Note on the Election on June 23," June 19, 2019, <http://konda.com.tr/en/duyuru/note-on-the-election-on-june-23/>

In his campaign for the revote, İmamoğlu has doubled down on the style of positive politics that delivered him victory in the first place, summarized in his most popular campaign slogan, “*her şey çok güzel olacak*,” or “everything’s going to be just fine.” The slogan is a statement of optimism and normality, conveying a sense of smiling defiance of both the vilification the opposition has suffered in recent years under Erdoğan and the attacks on the basic institutions of democracy that the YSK decision underlines. In a sense, İmamoğlu’s message is that the worst aspects of AKP rule—its polarization of the electorate, its demonization of opponents, its mismanagement, and its authoritarian hubris—can simply be left behind. İmamoğlu is telling voters that the fate of Istanbul, and of Turkey, is still in their hands, should they have the hope and optimism to grab hold.

“IN HIS CAMPAIGN FOR THE REVOTE, İMAMOĞLU HAS DOUBLED DOWN ON THE STYLE OF POSITIVE POLITICS THAT DELIVERED HIM VICTORY IN THE FIRST PLACE.”

İmamoğlu has maintained this message despite constant vilification by the AKP, such as when ruling party-affiliated news outlets distributed a television interview edited to make it appear that İmamoğlu was making common cause with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Gülen Movement, both considered terrorist organizations in Turkey.<sup>20</sup> AKP media and officials also dredged up old racist tropes by suggesting that İmamoğlu’s eastern Black Sea roots might mean that he is actually descended from the Pontic Greeks who once inhabited that area and was therefore not truly Turkish. (Ironically, Erdoğan’s family comes from Rize, which is only about 40 miles east of İmamoğlu’s hometown of Trabzon.<sup>21</sup>) These attacks seem to have backfired.

Besides questioning the opposition’s loyalty and attempting to appropriate some of its campaign slogans, the AKP has reached out to Kurdish voters in recent weeks, reflecting the importance of Kurdish votes in Istanbul. The government allowed jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan to meet his lawyers for the first time in eight years, and İmamoğlu’s opponent Yıldırım made a campaign stop in the largely Kurdish city of Diyarbakir, where he even spoke a few words of Kurdish. None of this is likely to alter the Kurdish vote significantly, however.

The decision of the AKP leadership to accept a live television debate between the candidates on the evening of June 16 is, I think, evidence of real concern about the rerun. This was the first televised debate between political candidates in 17 years. Neither candidate performed particularly well, and I doubt that the debate changed many minds. But the fact that it occurred at all signals a loss of AKP confidence.

The AKP’s overall control of the media, especially broadcast media, certainly helps to dull İmamoğlu’s messaging, but a decisive Yıldırım victory would require a redoubled effort to leverage the party’s machinery to ensure that loyalists turn out. It is not clear what else the AKP would do to prevent another İmamoğlu win. The extreme step of the YSK’s nullification of the March 31 result suggests that it might be willing to go very far.

As I have argued elsewhere, the AKP has been able to maintain its hold on power because in tightly contested elections control of the media and key state institutions has allowed it to

20. “Turkey’s ruling AKP shares altered video of opposition’s Istanbul candidate, mars campaign -Cumhuriyet,” Ahval, May 28, 2019, <https://ahvalnews.com/ekrem-imamoglu/turkeys-ruling-akp-shares-altered-video-oppositions-istanbul-candidate-mars-campaign>

21. Amberin Zaman, “AKP’s Istanbul campaign sinks to new lows,” Al-Monitor, June 6, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/06/turkey-trolls-call-imamoglu-greek-christian.html>

nudge results to ensure victory. It has been willing to accept some defeats at the local level so long as it can maintain overall control. This system has ensured both AKP dominance and the compliance of Turkey's opposition, which has retained a basic faith in the electoral system. In a sense, any outcome in the Istanbul rerun election weakens this system. Research suggests that most of the electoral manipulation under Erdoğan has been based on AKP control of voter rolls and has occurred mainly in rural districts in the east and southeast.<sup>22</sup> While it is possible that similar manipulation could occur in a major city like Istanbul, the YSK has promised to use the same voter rolls as on March 31. At the same time, the YSK's record in recent years does not leave me with any great faith that it will stand up to increased AKP political pressure.

If Erdoğan decides to accept an AKP defeat, we should expect him to work to limit İmamoğlu's effective freedom of action to govern by either devolving power to the district level or by expanding central government control over the municipality.

### What are the stakes for June 23?

March's local elections should have been relatively low stakes. As important as the large municipalities are, the AKP retains control over the central government and has many tools to punish or undermine opposition strongholds. By forcing a rerun, Erdoğan has raised the stakes considerably. The election for Istanbul's mayor has become a national referendum and a national test for him.

More blatant manipulation in the election would have much higher costs, eroding Erdoğan's basic electoral legitimacy and creating a major political crisis that the country can ill afford. As Sinem Adar and Yektan Türkyılmaz recently argued, the potential for this crisis to destabilize Turkey further is very real.<sup>23</sup> In the aftermath of the March 31 results, we have seen the pro-AKP media level increasingly hysterical accusations that the opposition are traitors. We have seen a half-dozen journalists critical of the government beaten, and—many seem to have already forgotten—CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu violently attacked during an April 21 visit to Ankara.

Even if Yıldırım were to win the rerun without any further obvious manipulations of the system, the opposition has unavoidably entered into a new phase, one that calls for new strategies and new leadership. Whatever the outcome, it is clear that İmamoğlu is a national leader with significant political skills.

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22. Abdullah Aydoğan, “Electoral irregularities benefited Turkey's ruling party, not the opposition,” Monkey Cage Blog, *Washington Post*, May 10, 2019; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/10/electoral-irregularities-benefited-turkeys-ruling-party-not-opposition/>; Abdullah Aydoğan, “Why the results of Turkey's election are surprising,” Monkey Cage Blog, *Washington Post*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/31/why-the-results-of-turkeys-election-are-surprising/>; Cenk Aygül, “Electoral Manipulation in March 30, 2014 Turkish Local Elections,” *Turkish Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016), 181–201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2015.1135061>; Adam Syzmański and Wojciech Ufel, “Beyond Vote Rigging: Common Patterns in Electoral Malpractices in De-Democratizing Regimes,” *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 47, no. 4 (2018), 601–605, <https://doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2018401>

23. Sinem Adar and Yektan Türkyılmaz, “Turkey: the post-election brawl – a regime at a crossroads,” openDemocracy, April 30, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/turkey-the-post-election-brawl-a-regime-at-a-crossroads/>

Let's assume for the moment that İmamoğlu wins once again and that Erdoğan is either unable or unwilling to overturn the outcome. This is, undoubtedly, the best immediate outcome for Turkey's democracy and for its institutions, but it too may result in greater instability. Erdoğan is likely to face not only an emboldened opposition but also more open dissent within the AKP itself, where concerns over mismanagement and increasing personalization have long simmered. A rebellion within the party would shake Erdoğan's control but is unlikely to dislodge him. A weakened Erdoğan may well be a more dangerous one. The politicization of core institutions ensures that any battle would soon extend to the courts and, potentially, to the security services.

Whatever else we know about Erdoğan's political identity, it is that all political conflict is, for him, existential. Thus, whatever happens on June 23, Turkey's path for the short and medium term remains rocky indeed.



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