

The Red Wave: Is Türkiye Entering CHP Era?

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Another Türkiye central and local election cycle is now behind us. The parliamentary and presidential elections of 14-28 May 2023 failed to change the status quo, and just 10 months later, the municipal elections held on 31 March 2024 have given birth to a totally new political climate in the country. The most important political result of these elections is that Turkish incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), suffered the worst defeat in local elections in all of its 22 years of existence. The main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) came out on top by party both sets of contested elections: mayoral and municipal council. What factors contributed to the defeat of the ruling bloc and the success of the opposition less than a year after elections the former won? Is the CHP's victory a situational and temporary event made possible by conjunctural causes or will the upward trend for this party continue? What does the result of the 31 March elections mean for Türkiye's future in the short term? I present answers to these questions in this article.

Election results

There are 81 special provincial administrations in Türkiye, of which 30 are metropolitan municipalities with at least 750,000 inhabitants. Metropolitan municipalities exercise local power not only in the administrative center but also throughout the province. According to the election results, the CHP won in 35 provinces (14 of which were metropolitan municipalities), the AKP in 24 provinces (12 metropolitan municipalities), the People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) in 10 provinces (3 metropolitan municipalities), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in 8 provinces, the New Welfare Party (YRP) in 2

provinces (1 metropolitan municipality) and the Good Party (IYI) and Great Equality Party (BBP) each in 1 province.

Voting results for candidates in mayoral elections across the country were as follows:

CHP – 37,77%

AKP – 35,49%

YRP – 6,19%

DEM – 5,70%

MHP – 4,99%

IYI – 3,77%.

Voting results for candidates in municipal council elections across the country were as follows:

CHP – 34,5%

AKP – 32,4%

YRP – 7%

MHP – 6,6%

DEM – 5,8%

IYI – 4,6%.

The results for municipal councils are more remarkable because here voters vote for parties under a system of proportional representation, which allows us to draw parallels with parliamentary elections. If parliamentary elections were held on 31 March 2024, the results could have been similar to the ones above.

Why did the CHP win and AKP lose?

The AKP and Erdoğan have been in a position of hegemony in

Türkiye for more than 21 years. During that long period of rule, there has been a diffusion of the ruling party and the state apparatus, and President Erdoğan, by concentrating in his hands the fullness of power, has achieved autocratic rule in the country. The electoral defeat of his party in the face of such unequal political competition can be considered a historic success for the CHP. This result is also significant for the CHP because it is the party's first country-wide electoral victory in 47 years: the last time the party won an election was in 1977 under Bülent Ecevit.

Although it was predicted that the CHP would again win in many of the metropolitan municipalities on 31 March, the *red wave* that occurred across the country and the ruling party's defeat were unexpected. This is because 10 months ago, when the opposition was defeated in the presidential and parliamentary elections, opposition voters were bitterly disappointed and despairing. Sociological [studies](#) confirmed that voters began to display emotions of resentment, anger and apathy. After the presidential elections, whose importance was overestimated by opposition representatives as the last chance to protect the secular democratic republic, it was possible to observe the depressed mood of a disaffected class of voters on social media platforms, at a time when there was no shortage of messages from users across the country saying they had lost faith in the change and would no longer vote. President Erdoğan's announcement on the evening of 28 May of his goal of winning the municipal elections as he [addressed](#) his supporters gathered in front of his house in Istanbul alongside the disintegration of the opposition coalition—the electoral *Nation Alliance* (CHP and IYI)—and the *Table of Six* format of cooperation after the elections had pundits believe that the opposition's chances were not good. The CHP's most spectacular success was that it managed to win the mayoral and municipal council elections in Bursa, the fourth largest Turkish city, while still holding onto the other three larger cities of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir.

It would be inappropriate to view this result primarily as a somewhat delayed reaction of citizens to poor governance, economic crisis, high inflation, and declining welfare. While the same problems existed in the run-up to the 2023 elections, we should briefly explain why Erdoğan and his People's Alliance won that year. These reasons can be grouped into three main headings:

1. The growing suspicion among voters that the opposition would not be able to govern the country effectively if it comes to power after the [scandal](#) associated with the selection of a candidates within the *six-party* electoral alliance;
2. A false spring in society as a result of President Erdogan's populist [measures](#) in the socio-economic field—the so-called “Choice Economy” in Türkiye—in the run-up to the elections and the Central Bank's quantitative easing policy (the discount rate stood at 8,5% in May 2023);
3. The *Table of Six* coalition's mistake in choosing a candidate: It chose Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu over the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul, who seemed to be more favorable than Erdoğan in opinion [polls](#).

The victory of reform supporters competing with status quo supporters at the CHP congress held in November 2023 and the [election](#) of 49-year-old Özgür Özel to replace 75-year-old Kılıçdaroğlu, who had led the party for 13 years, can be considered a turning point for the opposition on the way to its victory in the 31 March elections. Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu was front and center in the party's overhaul as can be seen with his [address](#) on 29 May and his subsequent role in realizing the change in leadership. The CHP, with its new party council with a median age of 43 years, brought about a new spirit and dynamism to party activities. The public has also [commented favorably](#) on this new spirit. This is what should be noted first when turning to the factors that played a part in the recent victory. The population positively

reassessed its views on the CHP because of its successful municipal model in municipalities, started in 2019. This model has worked especially well in large metropolitan municipalities such as Ankara, Istanbul, Adana, and Mersin. Other factors working in the party's favor were the increase of social assistance to those in need during the pandemic and the implementation of projects to support the poor and low-income groups that were traditionally distant from the party. In the run-up to the 31 March 2024 elections, the government, unlike during the last election campaign, neither focused on economic populism nor took steps contrary to the rational economic policy implemented by Minister of Treasury and Finance Mehmet Şimşek and the Central Bank's measures to reduce the balance sheet. For example, on 21 March, the Central Bank raised the discount rate to 50%. Contrary to pensioners' expectations, the government did not and could not increase [pensions](#) because [an increase](#) was supposedly inconsistent with the available budget.

CHP's success also makes some typical opinions and ideas about Turkish society questionable now. These include, for example, "70 percent of the Turkish population is right-wing and will never vote for the left"; "Even if Atatürk rose again and led the CHP, the party wouldn't win more than 25% of the vote"; "The CHP cannot win votes in conservative-nationalist Anatolian provinces" and similar clichés were upended. The CHP is now winning votes from conservatives, nationalists and Kurds in addition to its traditional electoral base of highly educated secular middle-class voters. CHP's popular figures Mansur Yavaş and Ekrem İmamoğlu, who won the Ankara and Istanbul metropolitan municipalities in the 2019 local elections, repeated that success 5 years later, triumphing over the competition with an easy victory and holding the majority of municipal council posts. This will make their further plans easier to execute in the coming term. Naturally, the names of both politicians continue to be mentioned as the two of the most favorable candidates for the next presidential

election. Thanks to his election victory, Özgür Özel managed to position himself as a leader within the party and in national politics, yet he was not seeking the presidential nomination and made no secret of the fact that the party would nominate either Imamoğlu or Yavaş. Undoubtedly, the electoral victory and winning municipalities open new opportunities for the CHP, increasing its resources. When a municipal institution has daily, direct contact with the citizen and solves their local problems, that has positive political implications for the party that runs it. Some 62% of Türkiye's population (52,9 million people) live on the territory of the municipalities won by the CHP. These regions account for 73% of national income and 80% of Turkish exports. The defeat of the ruling bloc in the major industrial and tourist centers deprives it of local resources in these regions, and these opportunities pass into the hands of the opposition. If the opposition municipalities can build on the better performance, they have achieved in some major cities over the last 5 years, and if the municipalities they have now won do the same, the impact on macro policy will be inevitable. However, it is important to point out that voter behavior in local elections and central government elections is not the same: party affiliation and ideological identity come more to the fore in parliamentary elections and influence them significantly. From this point of view, the successful selection of CHP candidates, led by figures such as Mansur Yavaş and Ekrem Imamoğlu, who have risen from the local level to the national, plays an important role in the result the party has achieved after almost half a century. Namely, it is incorrect to consider the 37,77% of votes cast in favor of CHP candidates as the party's own vote as a whole. The CHP enjoyed significant gains from other parties, especially from İYİ's secular nationalist masses in major cities and from Kurds living in western provinces. Party leader Özgür Özel admitted the party's benefit from these other groups. For the CHP, the main challenge in the coming phase is to build these recent supporters into a more consistent coalition.

The slightly lower turnout of voters in favor of the AKP was also a factor influencing the final result last month. 78,5% of voters participated in the 31 March elections. In comparison, the turnout percentage for the 14 May 2023 elections was 87%. The 2019 municipal elections also saw a higher turnout: 84,6%. About 30% of voters who voted for the AKP in the May 2023 elections acted differently in this election. Two million of them did not vote, 1,5 million voted for the CHP and 1,4 million for the YRP, [according to](#) Can Selcuki, the Director of *Türkiye Raporu* Institute. It would be equally wrong to say that these voters have completely broken away from the ruling party, and whether they return in the next elections is still an open question. But the growing popularity of the CHP is an undeniable reality. This is also confirmed by a post-election opinion poll. In the [opinion poll](#) conducted on 2-5 April by *Optimar*, a survey company close to the ruling party, voters named the economic situation as the country's most serious problem and in response to the question "who can solve this problem?" for the first time, the CHP was ahead of the ruling party: 24,3% of respondents believe the economic crisis can be solved by the CHP and 20,2% by the AKP.

In response to the question: "Which party would you have voted for if you had voted?" 27,9% of voters who did not participate in the 31 March elections favored the CHP while 20,9% the AKP. These answers show that the popular thesis in the Turkish pro-government media that the AKP will win if voter turnout is high does not reflect the truth.

Another promising detail for the CHP is its high rating among young voters. The party leadership, citing exit-polls, [found](#) that 80% of voters casting their ballots for the first time on 31 March preferred opposition parties (of which: 56% were in favor of CHP). This indicates that a generational shift is gradually changing Türkiye's political landscape. Younger generations, who are more secular, freedom-loving and unwilling to accept narrow ideological patterns, are now entering the pool of voters.

The 31 March 2024 elections also revealed another threat to the ruling party: the YRP. Founded in 2018 by Fatih Erbakan, son of the late Necmeddin Erbakan, a legendary Turkish Islamist leader, the YRP is currently Türkiye's 3rd largest party both in terms of recent election results and membership. The YRP won 7% of the votes in the municipal council elections, which is the minimum threshold set by law for representation in parliament. Having participated in the 2023 elections within the People's Alliance, the YRP has already achieved the power to receive 7% of valid votes alone and get representation in the parliament. This party will become the main source for staunch conservatives leaving the AKP. If Erdogan's government fails to sort out socio-economic problems at home and some foreign policy issues (e.g., trade relations with Israel) that displease the conservative class, the degradation of the AKP and an influx of AKP members into the YRP could continue. The government's [decision](#) on 7 April to restrict trade with Israel in this regard is not by chance.

An urban legend: Erdoğan will lose the next elections

Despite the fact that there are problems with human rights and freedoms, the independence of the branches of government, and the functioning of democratic institutions in Türkiye, the institution of democratic elections largely retains its functionality with a few exceptions of violations at the local level. The widespread Western conclusions about the impossibility of changing Erdoğan's power through elections do not correspond to reality. The current rule in Türkiye can be characterized as *electoral soft authoritarianism*. Of course, election campaigns are not conducted on a level playing field, the ruling party capitalizes on state power in its own interests and against its opponents, but if it ultimately fails to win votes from the people, it cannot violently hold on to power.

In the 31 March 2024 elections, the people counterbalanced the authoritarianism of the central government by handing local

power to the opposition. Although the opposition had disintegrated at the institutional level after the last election, this division did not spread to the coalition's grassroots support, and the protest electorate formed natural alliances among themselves. The country's main opposition party gained first-party status in this election, shattering the 22-year status quo in Turkish politics, which set the grounds for predicting a similar victory in macro-politics in the near future.

Of interest in terms of global political trends is that the CHP, a social democratic party, won in Türkiye at a time when the far right is growing across continental Europe. The migrant issue, one of the main reasons for the rise of the populist radical right in Europe, also exists in Türkiye. But we see that the Victory Party (ZP), which has made anti-immigrant policies a core principle of its program, only won 2,2% of the vote in the parliamentary elections and 2,7% in the last elections.

President Erdoğan and his AKP are currently [analyzing](#) the reasons for their defeat. Changes in the leadership of the party and the composition of the government are expected to take place. But personnel changes may not be enough; there are deeper causes of the country's problems. The inefficiency of the system is somewhat obvious: The country's economic performance [has been deteriorating](#) since it shifted to a presidential system of government. The country needs to conduct institutional reforms, to abandon the hard line in domestic politics, and to ensure judicial independence. Does President Erdoğan understand this need or, to the contrary, does he believe that the policies he has implemented so far are correct? We don't know that yet. Another problem of his stems from his dependence on his nationalist alliance partner. Erdoğan's AKP needs an alliance with the MHP to maintain its majority in the Turkish Parliament, so the latter exercises a major influence on decision making. The MHP, however, is not represented in the government and feels it's more important

that its staff be present in the state bureaucracy. The MHP favors a more authoritarian approach in domestic politics. If Erdoğan chooses a course of reforms, he will have to face obstruction from the MHP which could create the risk of a political crisis in the country. He might consider ending his alliance with the MHP and establishing a temporary alliance with other right-conservative parties in the [Turkish Grand National Assembly](#), but in this case, he would then need to accept their conditions.

Yes, it is also possible to continue the existing policies without any recourse to radical changes, but there is a high risk of losing power at the end of this path. In short, it seems not an easy task for President Erdoğan and his ruling party to extract the country and themselves from this situation.