

Turkey After June 23

written by Shahin Jafarli Şahin Cəfərli

In our previous [article](#), published before the March 31 municipal elections, we noted that local elections in Turkey are important political campaigns that have a serious impact on the country's domestic politics. The victory of the opposition in four major cities, including Ankara and Istanbul, was the first defeat in the 17-year rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which indeed showed that the political climate in Turkey has begun to change. The loss of Istanbul – the biggest city in the country (and also in Europe) with 10.5 million voters, and Turkey's economic and financial center where Erdogan's political career began and about which he said "who wins Istanbul, also wins Turkey" – was a tragic result for the ruling party. Therefore, AKP decided to challenge the legitimacy of the results based on the fact that the difference in votes between the candidates was very small (13,729). (Erdogan [stated](#) that with a difference of only 13-14 thousand votes, nobody can claim victory in a city like Istanbul, even though on the night of the election Binali Yildirim, the candidate of the People's Alliance, consisting of AKP and the Nationalistic Movement Party (MHP), prematurely announced his victory while only 3,870 votes ahead, and immediately the ruling party hung posters in the streets and on the bridges of the city saying "Thank you, Istanbul.") No one doubts that it was only due to political pressure that the Supreme Election Council (YSK) of Turkey voted seven votes to four to cancel the results and schedule a new election on June 23.

The result of the evening of June 23 – the victory of Ekrem Imamoglu, the candidate of the Nation Alliance, consisting of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (IYIP), with a large margin (9.2% or 806 thousand votes) – was an earthquake in Turkish politics, a fiasco for the ruling party,

and a historical success for CHP since it took control of Istanbul for the first time in 25 years. This election showed that the electoral institution in Turkey still exists, despite the fact that other democratic institutions have been undermined, civil and political rights have been restricted, and it was widely believed both locally and internationally that “Erdogan will not lose elections, and even if he does, he will not concede.” The results also increased public confidence in the possibility of changing the central government through elections in the future. The citizens rejected political interference in the ballot box. In this regard, the Russian daily [Vedomosti](#) was not wrong to call the election results the rehearsal of the fall of Erdogan.

The Imamoglu Phenomenon and the New CHP

There are political, social, and economic causes behind the crushing defeat of AKP in Istanbul. However, before discussing them, first, it is necessary to talk about the opposition's successful choice of candidate and election strategy the paradigm shift in CHP, which is known as the party of the minority secular elite; and the new policy of the party aimed at attracting the masses. Imamoglu, who has had a very brief political career and was the mayor of a peripheral district of Istanbul, began his election campaign from an unfavorable position. Among the potential CHP candidates for mayor of Istanbul, he was the least known politician. [Canan Kaftancioglu](#), head of the Istanbul Regional Office of CHP, said that only 16% of the city population knew Imamoglu. [Zilan Karakurt](#), a member of Imamoglu's media team, remembers the early days of the campaign: “For example, when we entered a bazaar, one of us went ahead to introduce Imamoglu to people.” Imamoglu's campaign Director [Necati Ozkan](#) said that they turned the problem into an advantage because the people are more interested in those who are unknown. The traditional media, controlled by the government, ignored the opposition candidate before the March 31 elections because they were convinced of the victory of Yildirim, who was not only a well-

known politician and the second person in the government, but also was not hated by the opposition-minded electorate; thus, the traditional media did not see the need to promote the activities and promises of an alternative candidate.

The ruling party and its media outlets realized too late that Imamoglu was not a stereotypical CHP candidate, who could easily be defeated by AKP, because Imamoglu preferred to meet personally with conservative voters on the outskirts of Istanbul and tried to overcome the coldness between his party and these voters, the roots of which can be traced back to the establishment of the Republic. Imamoglu's [conversations](#) and [debates](#) with elder supporters of AKP and Erdogan in the neighborhoods where CHP performs worst were uploaded to social media by Imamoglu's media team and attracted great public interest. In general, Imamoglu can be considered the most effective user of social media among Turkish politicians. He focused on the fundamental problems of social justice, poverty, and unemployment, while trying to undermine the motivation of the government's supporters without directly targeting the ruling party and the president. His short videos on social media about specific problems (e.g. [transportation](#)) were quite effective. In this regard, his election campaigns revealed both on March 31 and June 23 that authoritarian regimes' total control of the mainstream media is meaningless in the modern era, and the lifetime of a lie on social media is just a few minutes.

According to a [study](#) conducted by Oxford University in 37 countries, Turkey is the leading country in *fake news* and 27th place in media trust. The study revealed that trust in pro-government media is very low, and this was evident in the March 31 and June 23 elections. Following the cancellation of the election results on May 6, pro-government television channels and newspapers launched a negative campaign against Imamoglu, unprecedented in scale and intensity in Turkish politics. There have been [racist charges](#), even unthinkable allegations that Imamoglu will turn Istanbul into

Constantinople, and conspiracy theories that he is a front for some [clandestine groups](#). The goal was to create suspicion around Imamoglu in order to damage his positive campaigning as well as to mobilize resentful conservatives who did not go to the polls in the March 31 election. This tactic did not work, on the contrary, attacks against the rising politician further popularized him. Imamoglu, unknown just six months ago, was now also popular in [Anatolia](#), became a national political leader, and is seen as a favorite candidate for the next presidential election.

As for the changes in CHP, let us briefly note that there have been significant changes in the party after Kemal Kilicdaroglu became its leader on May 22, 2010. CHP was long perceived as a party of the state and of an elite minority rather than of the people (these perceptions still exist), and even though the party was not in power, it was believed to be responsible for all the negativity of the Kemalist bureaucracy. In the last eight years, Kilicdaroglu first began to replace the party's public representatives, and then he changed the party's policies; fierce Kemalists were slowly sidelined from the decision-making mechanisms in the party. The new CHP has adapted itself to social realities by backing down from the policy of radical social transformation in line with Ataturk's revolutionary principles. The election strategy of the party was called *Radical Love*, and the selection of candidates was in line with this new paradigm. One of the authors of the strategy, PR expert [Ates Ilyas Bassoy](#) explains radical love: Ignore Erdogan, but love those who love him.

In all previous elections, CHP did the opposite: it built its campaign on harsh criticism of Erdogan and did not allocate enough time and energy to explain what it aimed to do if it came to power, or its platform was overshadowed by harsh political polemics. Last year, Muharrem Ince's election campaign showed that this tactic was not effective. Although Ince managed to mobilize his supporters by constantly engaging in polemics against Erdogan, he also consolidated the

supporters of his opponent. *Radical Love* rejected this path. The campaign ad, ["All of Us Are on the Same Municipal Bus,"](#) made in accordance with this approach, was very successful. Instead of using polarizing language, CHP adopted rhetoric and politics that overcome the gap and allow voters to move from the opposite camp to CHP. Although the government used its old rhetoric that [if CHP comes to power, we will lose our religion](#), these obsolete tactics failed. CHP's predecessor, SHP (Social Democratic Populist Party), defeated the ruling conservative Motherland Party (ANAP) in the 1989 municipal elections by winning 39 regions, including 3 major cities. After 25 years, history repeated itself.

Why was AKP Defeated?

Without understanding the changes society had undergone, President Erdogan thought that he would succeed again by using the politics of polarization. The creation of the People's Alliance by AKP and MHP before the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2018 consolidated the whole political right and was assumed to be a step towards easy electoral victories at all levels. In the 2015 elections, AKP received 49.49% and MHP had 11.90% of the votes, that is, the two parties had a total of more than 61% of the votes. Despite the fact that as an alliance, for the first time in history, the total votes of AKP and MHP fell to 53.7% in 2018, this result did not necessarily cause any alarm. In Istanbul, the Alliance had 51% of the votes. However, in a short time, deepening problems negatively affected this figure.

First, it is necessary to mention the economic crisis. This crisis damaged the paternalistic relationship between the government and the people as well as Erdogan's success story, and it also removed the middle class from power. [Nezih Onur Kuru](#), a researcher at Koç University, notes that there is a correlation between the economic crisis, unemployment and inflation, and the electoral behavior of voters. As the economic indicators deteriorate, voters break with the ruling

bloc. One of the main problems that increasingly worries Turkish citizens is the Syrian refugees living across the country. In Istanbul or in other regions, there are regular tensions between the locals and the Syrians. Some AKP supporters [cite this issue](#) to explain the victory of Imamoglu, especially in the regions considered the fortress of conservative politics.

Another social phenomenon that the government could not see or ignored is a generational change in Turkey. There were 41 million voters in Turkey during the 2002 election when AKP came to power; now there are more than 57 million, i.e. the number of voters has increased by more than 40%. The proportion of people born in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, namely the Y and Z generations, is more than 50% of the general population. The level of ideological polarization is slowly decreasing. The new generations did not witness the left-right conflicts of the 1970s, they are less prone to ideological polarization, they are more social and politically influential, and they have better access to information through information and communication technologies (ICT). In this regard, the period from March 31 to June 23 is a good research topic for sociologists. Berkay Gezgin, 16, is the author of Imamoglu's famous campaign slogan ["Everything is going to be great."](#) An important element of this election campaign was the politicization of teenagers, who are not yet of voting age, through ICT and social media, and Imamoglu's direct messages to them. Famous Islamist writer [Abdurrahman Dilipak](#) writes in his essay about an interesting event in Turkey's changing realities. Before the election, some AKP representatives met with some girls studying in high school at one of the Imam Hatip schools (religious high school lyceums). When one of the party members commented, "You're probably voting for Binali bey," the girls' response was unexpected: "Do we have to vote for AKP just because we study at an Imam Hatip school? Ekrem Bey's position is closer to ours."

By the way, KONDA Research and Consultancy has conducted a

study of the changes in the lifestyle and worldview of young people between the ages of 15 and 29 over the last 10 years. [According to their research](#), the number of young people who introduce themselves as religious-conservative fell from 28% to 15% during that period. The proportion of those who say that they have fasted during Ramadan decreased from 74% to 58%, the share of those who regularly pray fell from 27% to 24%, and the number of those who evaluate their lifestyle as *modern* increased from 34% to 43%. The percentage of married young people fell from 39% to 19%, and the proportion of newspaper readers fell from 72% to 22%.

A New Phase in Turkish Politics and the Risk of Division in AKP

The main political consequence of the 2019 municipal elections was that the people gave local government to the opposition. Before the elections, 67.2% of the general population lived in municipalities controlled by the ruling party, but after the elections this figure fell to 39%. Currently, 48.4% of the population lives in regions controlled by CHP; before the election this figure was only 15.8%. The most important thing is that 62% of the country's gross domestic product is generated in regions controlled by CHP while territories under the control of the People's Alliance account for less than 35%. According to the 2017 figures of the [Turkish Statistical Institute](#) (TÜİK), Istanbul alone produces 31% of Turkey's GDP, while half of the country's exports originate from that city. Istanbul is also a tourism center. In the first 4 months of 2019, out of the 8.7 million foreign tourists who came to Turkey, 4.3 million visited Istanbul. The [budget](#) of the Istanbul Municipality is 23.8 billion TRY and its 28 companies have a revenue of 24 billion TRY. Every year, [a large amount of money](#) was allocated from the municipal budget to pro-government NGOs. Municipal tenders were also won by companies that openly supported AKP, including the owners of pro-government media outlets. The opposition is convinced that this was the reason behind the cancellation of the elections

by the President Erdogan. There is no doubt that these financial channels will no longer be available for AKP.

The defeat of the ruling party, twice in three months in the elections of March 31 and June 23, in Istanbul, a mosaic of the country where you can find people from all regions, will inevitably have significant effects on Turkish politics. We can already point to some initial manifestations of these defeats: just one year after its introduction, the presidential system is being questioned; moreover, Ali Babacan, one of the founding members of AKP and a former Minister of Economic Affairs, [resigned from AKP](#) and has accelerated the formation of a new political party with the support of former President Abdullah Gul. According to a survey conducted by [Metropoll Research](#), if a referendum were held today, 58.6% of the population would vote for a return to the parliamentary system. The opposition shares this position and thinks that the presidential system has not fulfilled its promise. Even though AKP says the system will not change, it announced that the system will be [rehabilitated](#), but it is still unclear what is meant by rehabilitation. Those who are in favor of the restoration of parliamentary democracy or, at least, the separation of powers within the presidential system, are not limited to the current opposition parties. Well-known politicians, such as former President Abdullah Gul, Ali Babacan, and Ahmet Davutoglu, the former Prime Minister and the former leader of AKP, are among those who oppose the current form of the presidential system. In his resignation, Babacan emphasized that Turkey needs a new vision and added that democracy, human rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law are important principles. It is said that his party will have a center-right platform, far away from political Islam, and it will support integration with the European Union and remaining in the Western bloc, and will prepare a package of significant economic reforms. While Babacan's future party does not want to be regarded as an extension of AKP, it is expected that not only some members and supporters of the

ruling party, but also enough MPs to establish a parliamentary fraction (minimum 20) will join Babacan's new party. Even though the party has yet to be announced, early polls have revealed that Babacan's party will be able to divide the votes of the ruling party. For example, Ibrahim Uslu, the head of *ANAR* research center, announced that Babacan's party will gain [10-12% of its votes from AKP](#). In a poll conducted by *Piar* research center, 8.9% of respondents said that without any hesitation they will vote for Babacan's party while 18.1% said they will think about it after the establishment of the party, thus, *Piar* reported that the new party will have a potential to gain [27% of votes](#) in general elections. [Bekir Ağırđır](#), director of *KONDA* research center, said that the number of undecided voters increased to 40% and most of them are AKP voters. He added that the proportion of die-heart AKP voters who supported the ruling party in any situation declined from 38% to 27%. All this shows that the risk of division and decline in AKP in the near future is high.

The next parliamentary and presidential election should be held in 2023, when the Republic's 100th anniversary will be celebrated. Turkish politics, however, is very dynamic and volatile, thus, it is difficult to predict what will happen even a day in advance. As the late Turkish President Suleyman Demirel said, 24 hours is a very long time in Turkish politics. The flood of events may require snap elections in the country.