Türkiye: Towards Non-Competitive Authoritarianism

written by BRI Political Studies Group BAI Siyasi Araşdırmalar Qrupu

Türkiye has entered a new political phase following the arrest of Ekrem Imamoglu, the mayor of Istanbul and the presidential candidate of the Republican People's Party (CHP), in March. Prior to this event, the Turkish regime was described as competitive authoritarianism. However, this characterization is now debatable. Imamoglu, the leading opposition candidate, who had a high chance of winning, was first disqualified by the annulment of his university degree, and later arrested, which barred him from holding office or participating in active politics. Overall, the strongest opposition party, CHP, is under heavy pressure by the government. These developments have cast doubt, for the first time, on the possibility of a peaceful transfer of power through elections in Türkiye. This article examines recent events in Türkiye and their possible political consequences.

The Road to March 19 and the Attempt to Crush the Opposition

Following the opposition's victory in the March 31, 2024, municipal elections, we noted at the end of our article published by *Baku Research Institute* that President Erdogan was analyzing the causes of his defeat. We pointed out that he might make personnel changes within the ruling party and government, but that deeper problems would require reform. Erdogan did not opt for reform. Instead, he chose a repressive policy in line with the classical reflex of authoritarian regimes facing crises.

To implement a hardline political course, a new appointment was made to the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office in October 2024. Akın Gurlek, who previously served as deputy minister of justice, a political position, was appointed chief

prosecutor of Istanbul. During his time as judge, Gurlek oversaw many political cases and often ruled against the accused. It was clear that his transfer to Istanbul was politically motivated. CHP leader Ozgur Ozel referred to him as a "mobile guillotine." It is also notable that Gurlek's wife was appointed by the president to the Turkish Capital Markets Board.

The chronology of events following Gurlek's appointment suggests an attempt to reshape politics through the judiciary and law enforcement. In October 2024, shortly after Gurlek assumed office, the Kurdish mayor of Esenyurt – a district in Istanbul with a population of one million – of the CHP was arrested on charges of membership in the PKK terrorist organization. In January 2025, the CHP mayor of Besiktas, a central district in the city, was arrested on corruption charges. In early March, the same happened to the CHP mayor of Beykoz.

Everyone could see that these moves were building step by step toward the real target: Imamoglu. On January 28, CHP leader Ozel announced that the party would hold a primary to determine its presidential candidate. On February 10, it was revealed that the Ankara Chief Public Prosecutor's Office had launched an investigation into the party's 38th Congress, held on November 4, 2023, during which a leadership change occurred – former CHP leader Kemal Kilichdaroglu lost to Ozel. On February 11, the CHP announced the primary would be held on March 23. Just ten days later, the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation into the alleged illegitimacy of Imamoglu's university degree. According to the constitution, citizens without a higher education degree are not eligible to run for president. On March 18, the Istanbul University Board of Directors annulled Imamoglu's degree. Within hours, during the early morning of March 19, police conducted a large-scale operation, detaining Imamoglu and over 100 individuals.

The March 19 operation was not only a move against an individual political figure. It was a strategic campaign aimed at eliminating a systemic threat to the regime. In this context, two additional steps were planned alongside Imamoglu's disqualification and arrest.

The first was to appoint a trustee to the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) and regain control of this resource-rich institution. Before CHP's 2019 victory, IMM had been actively financing NGOs aligned with the AKP, including those established by the president's children, as well as religious orders and media outlets. After taking office, Imamoglu cut this funding and reclaimed properties allocated to those NGOs. To justify a trustee appointment by the government, Imamoglu was accused not only of corruption but also of collaborating with a terrorist organization. During the state of emergency declared after the 2016 coup attempt, the government had granted itself the authority to issue decrees with the force of law (*Kanun Hükmünde Kararname* – KHK). Decree No. 647 amended the Municipal Law, giving the interior minister the authority to dismiss mayors accused of links to terrorism and replace them with trustees.

The second step involved allegations that Ozel had been elected CHP chairman at the 38th Congress by bribing delegates. Through this claim, the government aimed to have the current CHP leadership removed by court order. If successful, either the former chairman Kilichdaroglu would return by judicial decision, or a trustee committee, selected from party members opposed to the current leadership, would manage the party until a new congress. This would trigger a power struggle between the old and new leadership factions, pushing CHP into internal chaos. Sensing the danger, Ozel called for an extraordinary congress on April 6 and rewon the leadership.

The mass protests that began on March 19 with significant participation from university students, along with the

financial turmoil caused by the events, forced Erdogan to postpone the next planned moves regarding IMM and CHP. On March 23, the day the court ordered Imamoglu's pretrial detention, CHP's primary turned into a massive protest. Nearly 15,5 million people participated, including party members and citizens. That evening, the court issued an arrest order based on corruption charges rather than terrorism. IMM remained under CHP control.

However, the threat to the opposition is not over. Legal proceedings against the Istanbul municipality continue. A fourth wave of arrests has taken place. The prosecutor's office has demanded the removal of all visual materials related to Imamoglu from the city, including posters and advertisements, and has ordered a halt to the broadcasting of his image and voice on municipal transport. Imamoglu's X page has been blocked. Meanwhile, the investigation into the CHP congress is nearing completion. A ruling that could remove the party leadership from office is not off the table. In short, pressure on CHP continues at full force.

Why Is Imamoglu a Threat to Erdogan?

Istanbul, Türkiye's largest city, where nearly 20 percent of the electorate lives and one-third of the GDP is produced, was run by Islamists from the time Erdogan's election there as mayor in 1994 until 2019. Long-term control of Istanbul, with its vast resources, helped popularize the conservative political line and contributed to Erdogan's rise to central power. His tenure saw the resolution of key issues such as water shortages.

Imamoglu ended the 25-year dominance of Islamist politics in Istanbul. He narrowly defeated the ruling party's candidate Binali Yıldırım (the last Prime Minister of Türkiye) in the March 31, 2019, election and won by a landslide in the June 23 rerun. He instantly became a nationally significant political figure. From that moment, his name began to be mentioned as a

presidential contender. Legal proceedings against him began immediately. A criminal case was filed accusing him of insulting members of the Supreme Election Council. Five months before the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, he was sentenced to 2 years and 7 months in prison and banned from politics. Although the verdict had not yet been finalized and was under appeal, it gave CHP's leadership grounds to claim that Imamoglu's candidacy was risky and insist on nominating Kilichdaroglu instead. In the 2024 municipal elections, despite Erdogan and his ministers campaigning actively in Istanbul for the AKP candidate, Imamoglu won easily. CHP also gained control of 26 out of 39 district municipalities and secured a majority in the city council. Considering his 2014 victory in Beylikduzu, this marked Imamoglu's fourth win over the ruling party in Istanbul.

Born in 1971, Imamoglu attracts votes not only from CHP's traditional secular, urban, educated base but also from conservatives, nationalists, and Kurds. He is especially popular among the youth. His ability to communicate comfortably with all segments of society, including conservatives, undermines pro-government propaganda. He cannot easily be branded as a secular elitist who is hostile to religious and national values. These factors make him a particularly undesirable rival for Erdogan.

Following the opposition bloc's defeat in the 2023 elections, which caused deep disappointment among opposition voters, Imamoglu played a key role in helping the opposition recover and remain competitive. The day after Erdoğan's victory on May 28, he released a video on social media calling for change in the CHP. Six months later, on November 4, the candidate he supported, Ozel, defeated the 13-year-tenured leader Kilichdaroglu to become the CHP leader. Just four months after that, in the March 2024 local elections, the CHP defeated the AKP for the first time to become the country's leading party. This election shifted the political climate in favor of the opposition and replaced public apathy with renewed energy.

These developments compelled Erdogan to resolve *the Imamoglu problem* once and for all. A series of new criminal investigations was launched against him. The CHP's decision to hold a primary may have triggered the operation slightly earlier than planned. On March 18, Imamoglu's degree was annulled, and the operation took place on the 19th.

The Electoral System Is at Risk

Under Erdoğan, especially after the July 15, 2016, coup attempt and the 2017 transition to a presidential system, individual rights and freedoms have been consistently restricted in Türkiye. During the two-year state of emergency from July 2016 to July 2018, the executive branch took over legislative powers and gained the right to amend laws. Although this was constitutionally allowed, Erdogan abused this authority and gradually distanced the country from democratic standards. According to the 2024 Rule of Law Index by the World Justice Project, Türkiye ranks 117th out of 142 countries. In Reporters Without Borders' 2024 Press Freedom Index, it ranks 158th out of 180. The Economist Intelligence Unit's 2024 Democracy Index categorizes Türkiye as a hybrid regime.

Despite serious setbacks in democracy and human rights, elections still exist in Türkiye. While the government exploits state resources during campaigns and does not ensure fair competition, election results are generally not falsified and reflect voters' preferences. However, the March 19 operation has shown that even electoral democracy is now in danger. The broad protests were fuelled by this concern. The physical isolation of the opposition's strongest candidate and his disqualification from the presidency suggest that Erdogan intends to conduct future elections without real competition. Many now believe that Erdogan not only wants to defeat the opposition but also choose its candidate. Unlike post-Soviet regimes, Erdogan does not rig election results. He aims to force the opposition to nominate a weak, regime-friendly

candidate so that the election outcome is predetermined. At the same time, successive waves of arrests are meant to create an atmosphere of fear, demoralize opposition voters, and foster the belief that Erdogan's power is unshakable.

In parallel with repression, the government is also preparing to limit the opposition's power derived from local governance. This is seen as part of the broader plan to entrench authoritarianism. Erdogan has emphasized the need to revise the status of municipalities and strengthen the role of centrally appointed officials like governors and district governors. Currently, CHP governs 14 of the 30 metropolitan municipalities, including Ankara and Istanbul. 62 percent of Türkiye's population lives in CHP-controlled municipalities. These regions account for 73 percent of national income and 80 percent of exports. Successful local governance raises CHP's popularity in national politics. For this reason, the government aims to centralize control and reduce the opposition's resources. In addition, the ruling party has proposed a law granting the president authority to dismiss military officers up to the rank of colonel. The goal is to remove mid-ranking officers who are ideologically distant from AKP and prevent them from rising to senior command.

If all these plans are realized, Türkiye may transition into a consolidated authoritarian regime. The current international environment favors such a shift. Liberal democracy is in crisis. Donald Trump's presidency has strengthened radical right-wing movements worldwide and emboldened authoritarian leaders. The European Union, now more dependent on Türkiye in the face of security risks and reduced US support, has remained silent. No Western power wants to damage its relations with Erdogan. Turkish democracy is undergoing a very difficult test.