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Opinion – Türkiye's 2024 Local Elections Challenge President Erdoğan

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MARTIN DUFFY, APR 12 2024

As an election observer, in a few (admittedly) restless days I cover whole vistas of even a vast country like Türkiye. This enormous territory is as divided geographically European cum Asian – as between a sense of “democracy-seeking-progress” and “traditional-Islamic thinking”. Previously when President Erdoğan lost little happened. The state party often annulled votes, claimed election fraud and often put in their own candidate. I rarely have a genuine sense of déjà vu, but I fear the events of April 2024 will happen again. In the essay which follows, I will offer short vignettes on the current state and opposition views of these municipal elections, before some concluding words on what I might suggest could be the way forward for Türkiye.

A spokesperson of the Turkish National Election Commission talked on conditions of anonymity. Such secrecy is not unusual for Türkiye wavers uncomfortably from being “on page” with its President while mimicking the wriggle room of a progressive “free-speaking” Europe-inclined state:

Elections are complicated things. The President has far more supporters in the big cities than these results suggest. It is just that in the big cities the older people who love President Erdoğan with all their hearts, find it hard to get to the poll because of transportation difficulties. In the villages he does so much better because family networks being strong there and people can get a lift with their families to go and vote for their much-loved president. That does not happen any more in the big cities as people are scattered and the old stay at home. And in the cities our President's corrupt rivals are far more effective in concealing their tricks and trying to steal the election from President Erdoğan. But it is just a sham. Those parties have mobilised vast hordes to vote twice or even thrice against the President, and they have even summoned the dead from the cemeteries to vote against him. The Commission has worked hard to eliminate these forms of gross corruption but only the party and supporters of the president play by the strict rules of democracy.

One should not see the reportage of official bodies like the Election Commission as “fabricated falsehoods” or “reconstructions of fact”, as some of the official opposition might suggest. It is probably more accurate to state that there is such a psychological incognizance or even dis-cognizance between the ruling party and the new civic society which has emerged in Türkiye that state officers actually find it difficult to understand the degree of electoral change. This is a narrative of “shock and maybe disbelief. It is certainly true that the President has problems in getting his older voters out. That might electorally be seen as a negative factor. But a new civil society will mean that younger voters will gradually and numerically challenge his party. Then too, for many others, the President is no longer conservative enough. All these matters were reflected in these local elections.

Not that much reassured by the words of the election commission, I took the matter to the spokesperson for one of the major voices of opposition, the Republican People's Party (CHP):

We could vote ten times and ten times more, and still Erdoğan will either order the annulment of the election or play with the numbers. His biggest problem is that his ego is so big that he cannot just win...he needs to win overwhelmingly...and to do that in the modern cities of this country who see real alternatives and are absolutely enraged by Erdoğan...he must order massive electoral fraud. This involves not so much cooking the books as

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redrawing the whole electoral kitchen of the country, and framing it so that this monster becomes a kind of president for life. No coup, velvet revolution, or even any election observation apparatus offers any chance of anything other than more Erdoğan...In fact we might as well just accept it...it does not matter what happens in any local election- we are stuck with Erdoğan pretty much for life...and I am sure that he will also not plan to retire without naming his loyal successor....It is a vast dynasty....not just a political empire...it is a financial family...A kin empire that has its hands on every commercial transaction the common folk make across Türkiye. We (unavoidably) are Erdoğan in all that we do in this country every day...

The CHP voice is almost one of despair. Faced with this juxtaposition of perspectives, I ponder just how far the 31 March municipal elections genuinely represent a potential crossroads between status quo and change. One might think that the numbers released by the Election Commission so far suggest an unprecedented shift in recent Turkish politics. It is beyond question that the results have led to administrative change in no less than 29 provinces, all across Türkiye, producing a substantial alteration in the contours of local power dynamics. CHP activists must be left wondering what more they can do, as reflected in the statement above.

For the first time in two decades, the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), have surpassed Erdoğan's conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) on a national scale, securing 37.77% of the vote. What is still more electrically significant and morally historic- is its influence beyond traditional urban strongholds. These local elections show salient electoral penetration in numerous local polling areas long considered Erdoğan bastions.

Erdoğan's party still clings to certain strongholds but his majority has dropped even there. He held central Anatolia (albeit losing some ground) but held on in southeast regions affected by earthquakes in February 2023, notably in the southeastern of Kahramanmaraş and Gaziantep. This suggests that the President's visits there and subsequent relief funds have paid off. In political science, we know this as the advantage of the incumbency.

But there are fissures in what might be considered the Erdoğan core vote. His loss of votes is not only linked to the CHP's strategy but also to the achievements of those political forces that supported Erdoğan in last year's presidential elections. Indeed, the 31 March results show that right-conservatives want a harder President. The success of the more extremist factions, represented by the Islamist Yeniden Refah Partisi (YRP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), points to disappointment on both sides of Erdoğan's electorate. In this local election, many who believe the AKP has adopted too lenient a stance on religion and nationalism have moved toward the YRP and MHP.

Other AKP loyalists for basic economic reasons have also shifted toward the Republican People's Party (CHP). Exploiting these drifts within the right-conservative camp, the CHP achieved a breakthrough in municipalities like Bursa (Northwest), Afyon (West), and Adiyaman (Southwest). Bad economic performance and the wrong choice of candidates may be part of the reason for Erdoğan's losses, but this expansion also signalled a broadening support base for the opposition, even in conservative regions.

In Istanbul, CHP, while reappointing İmamoğlu, also managed to secure victories in traditionally conservative neighbourhoods such as Üsküdar (Asian Side) and Beyoğlu (the European Side of the city of Istanbul). There is also no doubt that elsewhere there is further bad news for Erdoğan e.g. in Kurdish voting, which has traditionally acted as the swing vote in determining election outcomes. The pro-Kurdish and left-wing party, DEM, increased support in the southeast, along the border with Syria and Iraq.

CHP reflected their supporters' wishes for change after numerous electoral losses under the leadership of Kemal Kilicdaroğlu. By appointing Özgür Özel as the new secretary and elevating the profiles of charismatic mayors like İmamoğlu and Yavaş, who oppose Türkiye's shift toward autocracy, the party has made significant strides in appealing to voters.

Türkiye, known for its high electoral turnout, saw a slight decrease in voter participation, with rates falling from 84% in 2019 to 78% now, reaching the lowest level since 2004. This decline predominantly reflected the dissatisfaction

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among Erdoğan's party supporters, many of whom expressed discontent with the country's economic trajectory. Promises of improvements went unfulfilled, fuelling voter disillusionment, especially from the more vulnerable e.g. retired and unemployed.

One might also usefully draw a psychological distinction between Erdoğan and his party. With Erdoğan not being a direct candidate, AKP's supporters wavered between the leader and the party. Despite his indirect candidacy, the highly personalised campaign led by Erdoğan failed to energise his base, highlighting a desire for political renewal and change. This might be a consequence of the implementation of the presidential system, which, starting in 2018, has increasingly concentrated power in the hands of the President.

Take the predominantly Kurdish southeast, where the electoral campaign was centred against appointing government officials in place of mayors elected in the previous municipal elections. This challenge, in a normal democracy, would lead one to conclude that his party should realistically think of a "pension plan" for this President.

Ultimately this supposedly "competitive" but authoritarian system cannot evade regional counter-balances. What Erdoğan got was a vehement local protest vote. Civil society activism challenges the country's drift toward authoritarian rule, and so the local results show some democratic resilience

So Ekrem İmamoğlu, re-elected mayor of Istanbul, announced, "We send a message to the world- the decline of democracy is over." This highlights that, despite the lower turnout, Turks assert their choice. The results underlie political dynamics, with economic dissatisfaction, leadership renewal, and governance concerns driving voters towards CHP.

Centrally, Erdoğan remains until 2028. To do better, CHP needs a depolarising narrative aimed at bridging the traditional secularist-conservative divide that characterises Turkish voters. CHP require a long-term plan for the economy and unemployment to secure transversal support beyond traditional identity and religious cleavages.

Türkiye demonstrates a popular desire for transformation among its citizens that could redefine the nation's longer-term political trajectory. CHP must seize effective municipal power in enough places. Whatever the international allegations of "Putinesque brutality", Erdoğan's regime may have an inherent flaw which even state coercion cannot remedy. He has to delicately balance the concentric plates of "ultra-Islam" and "modernization". To conservatives, Erdoğan is already compromised by political deals with moderates. All leaders aspiring to "go on and on" must consistently recalibrate their shifting power bases. Some of Erdoğan's proxy choices appear very "Erdoğan-light". Ironically, he must placate moderates, but appease also a growing hard-right of religious conservatives. This may ultimately be such a political conjuring trick that it threatens his regime's stability.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.