Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 24.06.2019 www.osw.waw.pl

Turkey: the opposition wins in Istanbul

Mateusz Chudziak

On 23 June, the re-run election for mayor of Istanbul was won by Ekrem İmamoğlu, the candidate of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), with 54.21% of the vote. His main rival Binali Yıldırım, from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), won 44.99%; the turnout was 84.44%. The AKP has recognised the results, and both Yıldırım and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have congratulated the winner. For his part, İmamoğlu has said that he is ready to cooperate "in harmony" with the authorities in Ankara.

The elections had originally been held on 31 March, when İmamoğlu won by a small margin (13,000 votes). After this failure for the AKP, it proceeded to exert pressure on the Supreme Election Council (YSK). This proved effective: on 6 May İmamoğlu was deprived of his newly assumed post as mayor, and new elections were called. In the explanatory memorandum it was stated that there had been procedural irregularities during the elections.

Commentary

- The defeat in Istanbul is a serious blow to the AKP. Whoever governs the largest city in Turkey – which has 15 million inhabitants (20% of the population), and generates around 30% of its GDP – can wield very significant political and business influence, which had previously been one of the pillars of AKP governments. The party's failure is also symbolically very painful. Erdoğan himself had been mayor of Istanbul in 1994-8, and has long insisted that the city is of key importance in governing Turkey. After forcing the YSK to re-run the elections, the clear margin of opposition's victory (over 775,000 votes) shows that the voters' resistance to the government camp's methods and its use of its dominance over the administrative apparatus to ensure the continuity of its rule were **the decisive factors**. Currently, in the light of the recession which has been ongoing since autumn 2018, the argument that Erdoğan's rule is the only way to ensure political and economic stability is losing credibility.
- The victory for the candidate of the largest opposition party in Turkey's largest city shows that democratic change is possible, despite the AKP's overwhelming control over the state apparatus and the media. However, we should not expect the AKP's imminent collapse at the national level. Local governments are limited in what they can do, and the next elections in Turkey are not due to be held until 2023. Nevertheless, political life in Turkey will take on a new dynamic: firstly, because İmamoğlu's government could make room for forms of opposition to the authorities to arise from the bottom up; and secondly, it is likely that the new mayor will reveal the ties between the government and

big business. We should expect the political war to move into a harsher phase; during the campaign İmamoğlu was accused of having ties to Fethullah Gülen, who is suspected of being behind the failed coup of 2016. In that light, if the clashes between İmamoğlu and the government in Ankara become serious, the central authorities may undertake radical actions (such as removing him from office), which would significantly undermine Turkey's political stability.