Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 2.04.2024 www.osw.waw.pl

Turkey: opposition wins local elections

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On 31 March, the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) unexpectedly won the local elections in Turkey. According to exit polls, it gained power in the largest metropolises and garnered the most votes nationwide (37.8%). The defeat of the government Justice and Development Party (AKP), with 35.5% support, seems to have been caused by the demobilisation of its electorate, the poor economic situation and the lack of distinctive candidates (this latter probably had a major impact). The elections in Istanbul were of particular political importance and were treated almost like a popularity vote and here the CHP candidate and incumbent mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu (51.1%) clearly beat Murat Kurum (39.6%), who was running for the AKP. Another reason behind the AKP's poor result was the emergence of conservative competition, namely the New Welfare Party (YRP), which came third nationwide (6.2%). The nationalist forces – the Good Party (İYİ) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – as well as the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) have weakened significantly. The turnout was 78.6%.

The vote will have a limited impact due to the strong centralisation of the state and the distant prospect of parliamentary and presidential elections (2028). However, the result is a sign of a revision taking place on the Turkish political scene and confirms the existence of the basic elements of the democratic system in the country.

The winners and the losers

The Sunday local elections were a great success for the opposition party CHP. Compared to last year's parliamentary elections, its support level has risen by 13.5 percentage points. On top of that, this is the first time it has won an electoral race in over 40 years. Furthermore, the number of mayors who will govern provinces or metropolises has increased to 35 (14 more than in 2019). The CHP's candidates also gained a significant advantage over their rivals from the government camp in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, and reclaimed several smaller towns from the AKP in the western and central parts of the country.

The recent election was the worst in the AKP's history, both in terms of total support and the number of provinces under its control (24, which is 15 fewer than in 2019). Despite a large expenditure of resources and an active campaign involving Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, it failed to repeat its last year's success, when it dominated the political scene with 44.3% of the vote. The president accepted the election result during the election night. Third place for the YRP, which was making its debut in local elections, caused a stir. This party effectively took two provinces from the AKP. The number of provinces in southeastern Turkey controlled by the pro-Kurdish DEM party has increased from eight to ten. However, the party's poor performance nationwide suggests that the Kurds are succumbing to the polarisation seen

all over the country and are increasingly aligning themselves with one of the two main parties. This is particularly clear in the vote for the mayor of Istanbul, where Meral Danış Beştaş from the DEM received only 2.1% of the votes.

The nationalist groups should be considered as the losers of these elections. The MHP, which is a member of the government coalition, and the opposition party İYİ received 5% and 3.8% of the votes respectively, although both had been aiming to become the third parliamentary force last year. Low support levels for these parties are more of an expression of distrust in their leaders than a sign of weakening nationalism, which is inherent in the identity and agenda of all political forces in Turkey, except the DEM.

Economic crisis and competition on the right of the political scene

The scale of the CHP's victory significantly exceeds the expectations. This party seemed considerably weakened due to its defeat in the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2023. The breakup of the opposition alliance, which could have led to the splitting of votes among smaller parties, was also expected to work against CHP candidates. However, the party's reorganisation under the leadership of the new leader, Özgür Özel, a positive election campaign and the involvement of charismatic candidates, such as Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş (the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara), undoubtedly contributed to the victory.

The AKP's result was lower than expected, which comes as a warning sign to the government camp. One of the direct reasons behind its poor performance could be the lack of improvement in the economic situation contrary to the promises it had made during the parliamentary and presidential elections. The economic crisis and the rising living costs, especially in metropolitan areas, were key topics during the election campaign. Additionally, the AKP's lacklustre, technocratic candidates worked against the party, and the emergence of the Islamist party YRP as a competitor on the conservative side of the political scene further weakened the AKP, as the YRP effectively attracted some disillusioned AKP supporters. The government camp was also disadvantaged by the lower voter turnout, suggesting that part of the pro-government electorate had been demobilised.

Political consequences

The AKP's defeat has given Turkish domestic politics a new dynamic. The Sunday elections proved that the CHP is the strongest opposition party in Turkey and is capable of taking over the electorate of other groups on this side of the political spectrum. İmamoğlu's re-election in Istanbul positions him as the leader of the Turkish opposition and a potential presidential candidate in the 2028 elections. The fact that the AKP came second demonstrates the ongoing depletion of a party whose success for years has been based on its strong leader, President Erdoğan. The AKP's strictly authoritarian character was the main reason it lacked charismatic leaders capable of seeking power at the local level. Public weariness with the governing party has also led to the rise of the YRP as a conservative competitor to the AKP.

The opposition's victory in local elections will influence current politics, but it will have no impact on the way the state is governed. Turkey is a highly centralised country, and the competencies of the local authorities are limited to local affairs. The next presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2028, so it cannot be assumed that the positive effect of the recent victory for the opposition will persist until then.

The election result and the fact that it has been accepted by President Erdoğan indicate that, despite serious deficiencies in democracy and the systemic prevalence of the power elite, the government cannot afford to ignore the electoral factor or engage in large-scale manipulation. Public approval is an unquestionable condition for holding power in Turkey. Therefore, it seems highly unlikely that İmamoğlu, who is popular, will be eliminated from the political scene due to charges brought against him. However, there might be difficulties in appointing DEM candidates to positions in the southeastern provinces, as in recent years Kurdish mayors there have been replaced by commissioners after being accused of having ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party.