

## Turkey: wave of protests following the arrest of Istanbul mayor

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On 23 March, a court ordered the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu on corruption charges, while Turkey's Ministry of the Interior announced his dismissal from office. On the same day, the Republican People's Party (CHP) held a primary election, selecting İmamoğlu as its presidential candidate for the 2028 elections. The vote took the form of a solidarity campaign with the imprisoned politician, allowing non-party members to participate. According to a CHP statement, approximately 15 million people cast their votes in person.

The arrest of İmamoğlu, who is seen as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's most serious political rival, is viewed by the Turkish opposition as a clear shift towards authoritarianism, driven by a politicised judiciary. This interpretation is reinforced by the pro-government camp's narrative, which suggests that the authorities aim to dismantle the CHP and form a state-sanctioned opposition. The arrest has triggered the largest protests in years. While primarily centred on university campuses and in major cities, demonstrations are increasingly spreading to areas traditionally supportive of the AKP. The protests have significant potential to escalate, and their future course will depend on the CHP's ability to unify the opposition and coordinate protest activity.

### Commentary

- **The arrest and removal of İmamoğlu from office mark the culmination of efforts to exclude him from Turkish political life.** As he enjoys nationwide public support, he was expected to be the CHP's candidate in the next presidential election in 2028. His candidacy was due to be confirmed by Sunday's primary election, which had been scheduled several weeks in advance. İmamoğlu had already faced multiple criminal cases. The charges against him included insulting the head of state and other institutions, irregularities in public tenders, and the alleged misuse of a university diploma, which was annulled a day prior to his arrest. Under the Turkish Constitution, only individuals with a university degree are eligible to run for president. İmamoğlu's arrest undermines the supremacy of the "will of the nation", a notion repeatedly emphasised by Erdoğan. The authorities have invoked this principle in the past, including when they acknowledged their defeat in last year's local elections.
- **The politician's arrest has triggered the largest wave of public protests in over a decade.** Demonstrators have taken to the streets in major cities, including Istanbul and Ankara, with rallies also spreading to areas previously dominated by the AKP. A support

rally for İmamoğlu, organised by the CHP on 23 March outside Istanbul's city hall – held despite an ongoing ban on public gatherings – reportedly drew up to half a million participants, according to organisers. Protests have also spread across university campuses, where regular clashes with security forces have been reported. Turkish media have reported that rubber bullets have been used against demonstrators. The number of protesters continues to grow. Other opposition parties, including the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), as well as civil society organisations and trade unions, have voiced their support for İmamoğlu. The momentum of the protests will depend on the opposition's ability to communicate effectively with the public and maintain internal unity. Plans are underway to expand the movement through consumer boycotts targeting companies linked to the government, as well as strikes at universities and workplaces.

- **İmamoğlu's arrest has destabilised the political landscape in Turkey and poses a threat to the so-called 'Kurdish opening'**, a process launched in October last year in which the government **commenced** negotiations aimed at securing the disarmament of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (see '[A 'new Kurdish opening' in Turkey: a bumpy road to peace](#)'). The pro-Kurdish party DEM has cautiously supported the protests. However, broader cooperation with the CHP is hampered by DEM's involvement in talks with the PKK, and by elements of the CHP establishment that remain hostile towards DEM. This includes the popular mayor of Ankara, Mansur Yavaş, who employed distinctly anti-Kurdish rhetoric during a recent rally. The ruling bloc, until now largely unified, is seeking to portray the CHP as a force undermining public order. In the coming weeks, further repressive measures targeting opposition parties and leading politicians, including Yavaş, are likely. A **likely** escalation of protests could prompt the authorities to intensify their crackdown, aiming to suppress anti-government demonstrations entirely.