

Hostile takeover – court removes leader of Turkey’s opposition party

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On 21 May, a court in Ankara annulled the results of the general congress of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), Turkey’s largest opposition party. The decision effectively removed Özgür Özel as party leader and reinstated his predecessor, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The court justified its ruling by citing alleged irregularities in the vote that had brought Özel to power. In response, CHP members and supporters barricaded themselves inside the party headquarters. The occupation ended on 24 May following a forcible police intervention. Özel, together with his associates and supporters, then marched through the streets of Ankara to parliament, where he pledged to continue resisting the decision and called for further demonstrations.

The court-imposed change in the CHP leadership appears intended to paralyse the party and ultimately transform it into a controlled opposition force. Özel regards the ruling as politically motivated, refuses to comply with it and continues to present himself as the party’s leader. Kılıçdaroğlu’s return has not been welcomed by the party’s supporters. Public reaction has so far remained limited, apart from demonstrations organised by local CHP branches, largely because Turkey is entering the holiday period ahead of Eid al-Adha.

Commentary

- **The court-imposed change in the CHP leadership is part of a broader crackdown on Turkey’s opposition.** A politicised judiciary has played the leading role in this campaign, focusing primarily on municipalities governed by the CHP. So far, six CHP mayors have been arrested and removed from office, including the mayor of Istanbul and the party’s likely presidential candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu (see [‘Turkey: intensification of repression against the opposition’](#)). The pressure also extends to other groups critical of the government, including journalists, artists and academics. On the same day that the court invalidated the CHP congress, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued a decree ordering the closure of the prestigious private Bilgi University. The decision was reversed three days later, although no official explanation for the reversal was made public.
- **Under Özel’s leadership, the CHP gained momentum and began to pose a serious challenge to Erdoğan’s rule.** He took over as party leader in November 2023 amid growing dissatisfaction with the long-standing leadership of Kılıçdaroğlu, who earlier that year had taken the unpopular decision to run in the presidential election and was defeated by Erdoğan. Özel introduced internal reforms, improved the party’s

communication with voters and helped boost its popularity, culminating in a nationwide victory in the 2024 local elections (see '[Turkey: opposition wins local elections](#)'). Following İmamoğlu's arrest, Özel emerged as the leading opposition figure. Through frequent political rallies, he positioned himself as a vocal critic of the government while seeking to maintain pressure on the authorities and keep opposition supporters mobilised.

- **The government's objective is to neutralise Turkey's largest opposition party** and reduce the CHP to a controlled opposition force incapable of seriously challenging President Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Reinstating Kılıçdaroğlu appears designed to deepen internal divisions within the party and could even trigger its fragmentation. The authorities are also likely to seek to remove Özel from political life altogether, potentially through arrest. In recent days, prosecutors have opened another case against him, accusing him of resisting security forces during the occupation of the party headquarters. Ankara mayor Mansur Yavaş has also come under increasing pressure and faces allegations of misusing public funds. In recent years, he has consistently outperformed Erdoğan in opinion polls.
- **The growing pressure on the opposition is also likely to be linked to preparations for snap presidential and parliamentary elections.** Under the current electoral timetable, the next elections are scheduled for 2028. However, an early vote called by parliament would give Erdoğan a constitutional opportunity to run for another term (see '[In line for the throne: preparing for a transfer of power in Turkey](#)'). The government's plans could still be undermined by large-scale protests or a severe economic downturn. For the time being, however, the authorities appear confident that neither scenario will materialise. Instead, they are counting on public attention shifting to the conflict between Kılıçdaroğlu and Özel, thereby reinforcing the government's narrative of a divided and ineffective opposition. International reactions to the situation facing Turkey's opposition have so far remained limited. The external environment also appears to work in the government's favour, particularly in light of ongoing regional conflicts. Western partners continue to view Ankara primarily through the prism of regional security and the forthcoming NATO summit in Ankara on 7–8 July.