



Political earthquake in Istanbul

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Turkish democracy isn't dead. That was the central message behind this past weekend's rerun of the mayoral election in Turkey's famous city, Istanbul. The outcome, a resounding repeat victory for opposition candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu over the Turkish government's pick, former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, is more than simply a milestone in Turkish politics. It is an event that could presage a major shift in Turkey's political direction.

İmamoğlu's win is all the more striking because it has been so vociferously contested by Turkey's political overlords. Back in March, the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suffered a very public black eye when the ruling Justice & Development Party (AKP) lost the mayoral races in Turkey's three largest cities, Istanbul, Ankara and İzmir. Erdoğan and his cronies grudgingly conceded defeat in the other two, but for them Istanbul was simply too large of a political prize to abandon. The reasons were logical: in addition to being Turkey's most iconic symbol, Istanbul is also an economic powerhouse and a sprawling metropolis that encompasses roughly a fifth of the country's total population of 80 million. As such, conceding defeat there would be tantamount to accepting a major loss of national political status.

Erdoğan simply wasn't prepared to do that, so he strong-armed the country's Federal Election Council into declaring the results of the March Istanbul race (which İmamoğlu had won by a razor-thin margin) to be fraudulent. That set the stage for Sunday's repeat election. But, contrary to conventional wisdom, the end result of the latter contest was an even more stark rebuke to Erdoğan and his followers. With İmamoğlu ahead by nearly nine percentage points (54 percent to Yıldırım's 45 percent), the latter was forced to concede the election late on Sunday.

The opposition victory is tantamount to a public vote of no-confidence in Erdoğan and the AKP, who have ruled virtually uncontested since coming to power in the early 2000s. Of late, however, a protracted economic crisis and growing disaffection with Erdoğan's stewardship of the Turkish ship of state has soured many on his rule. That was reflected in Sunday's vote, which saw İmamoğlu increase his margin of victory to nearly one million votes, making it virtually impossible for Erdoğan to contest the result like he did the last time.

What comes next could be decisive. Astute Turkey watchers have noted that Erdoğan's grip on power has been bolstered of late by a political alliance with the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) of Devlet Bahçeli. If Sunday's electoral rout of the AKP in Istanbul forces Bahçeli to bolt from the country's ruling coalition, it would cause a collapse of the Turkish Parliament and set the stage for a truly national political upheaval.

That may not happen. Erdoğan, ever the wily politician, is sure to be working overtime to shore up his grip on power. If past history is any judge, he will do so through a mix of media marketing and promises of economic and political largesse intended to keep his coalition partners mollified.

It may. But Sunday's poll was nonetheless an unmistakable sign that Erdoğan and the AKP's grip on political power is now far less unassailable than previously thought. That is bound to energize Turkey's notoriously fragmented political opposition, which has languished in recent years. And it will doubtless inspire all those who have looked with growing alarm at the increasingly Islamist, authoritarian direction the country has taken under Erdoğan's stewardship.

Suddenly, that trajectory doesn't seem nearly so assured. Neither, potentially, does Erdoğan's perpetual leadership.

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