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**Monkey Cage** Analysis

## Will Turkey's president accept the country's election results?

Opposition parties won local elections — but Erdogan is demanding ballot recounts.



Newly elected Mayor of Istanbul Ekrem Imamoglu addresses his supporters outside city hall on Wednesday. (Kemal Aslan/Reuters)

By **Murat Somer**

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In Turkey's March 31 local elections, the opposition parties — particularly the center-left Republican People's Party CHP and the informal alliance it formed with a newly founded right-wing party IYI (Good Party) — won the country's trendsetting megapolises, including Ankara and Istanbul, even though the results are [still unofficial](#).

The opposition's electoral advances present President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party AKP with yet another opportunity to set Turkey on a different and better path by sharing, rather than monopolizing, power. If they choose this path by respecting the electorate's decision, recognizing the new political reality and honoring Turkey's democratic traditions, this could start a process of depolarizing society and then restoring and reforming democracy and rule of law.

Instead, Erdogan and the AKP have [contested the results](#), especially in Istanbul, demanding [vote recounts](#) based on dubious complaints. After the recount still showed the CHP's candidate for Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, as the victor, they [demanded the election be annulled](#) and elections repeated in the city.

If their demands are met, this would amount to an election reversal and threaten to put an end to one of the last vestiges of Turkey's long-standing democracy under Erdogan: No longer fair, no longer free — yet still competitive and winnable — elections.

### **A referendum on Erdogan**

The Istanbul results pose a major threat to Erdogan and the AKP, even though their informal alliance with the Nationalist Action Party MHP managed to win the majority of the vote nationwide. There are several reasons.

Erdogan portrayed the elections as a referendum on his government — and had [previously argued](#) that losing Istanbul would be the beginning of the end for its rule.

Istanbul has long underwritten the AKP's national machinery of winning elections and engaging in social engineering. Multibillion-dollar pork-barrel projects and partnerships have been financing election campaigns, charity to the poor, pro-government media owners, GONGOs and religious endowments.

The opposition ran a decidedly positive, non-polarizing and pro-democratic campaign. This had a disarming effect on Erdoğan, who has long relied on [polarizing politics](#).

The alliance with the MHP could not deliver the AKP Istanbul and Ankara. But with 7 to 11 percent of the votes in recent elections, the MHP has been having disproportionate influence over policies. It also [attracted disaffected AKP voters](#). Any groups within the AKP who will be blamed for losing Istanbul probably will be punished and sidelined by Erdogan.

### **Free and fair elections?**

Like [other Turkish elections in recent years](#), the elections were [far from being free and fair](#). The opposition's gains were more impressive for happening in an extremely unequal *and* actively manipulated playing field. Erdogan and the AKP had access to unfettered use of the state institutions that lost their independence and were packed by partisans. They also enjoyed almost complete [control of the mass media](#) through the state media and government-funded purchases of private media by cronies. The results under these conditions undermine Erdogan's image and suggest his actual support — in a more equal and less manipulated electoral and informational environment — might be much lower.

The AKP effectively used tactics of psychological and informational warfare in the past. This time, its efforts — including announcing misleading poll numbers and declaring victory in the early hours after the election — didn't work, even though they had the full cooperation of the state Anatolian News Agency. The CHP was much better organized. Images of opposition MPs sleeping on ballot bags guarding votes during the recounts went viral on social media.

In response, the AKP is trying to use a well-known strategy in the “[menu of manipulation](#)” of electoral-authoritarian regimes: suspending and reversing results by selectively abusing, not applying or violating the law.

### **Turkey's lost opportunities**

There is precedent for not respecting the results. In the [June 2015 elections](#), the AKP lost its majority, which necessitated the formation of a minority or coalition government. However, amid a series of terrorist attacks and violence that erupted after the elections — where Erdogan presented himself as the strongman who can provide order and security — Erdogan did not hand over the government-forming mandate to the CHP until the end of the legal period. This violated a principal democratic norm that had until then been well entrenched. Soon after, the outcome was reversed in repeated elections in November.

Turkey's troubled economy and democracy — and arguably Erdoğan himself — could have been in a much better place today if Erdoğan had used the opportunity in 2015 to share power with the CHP. Instead, he took a series of steps to usurp and monopolize his increasingly personalized power, among other policies cracking down on dissent, and using the 2016 coup attempt as an excuse to replace the parliamentary system with a superpowered presidency system in a plebiscitarian referendum in 2017.

Erdoğan's earlier accomplishments — such as fairly prudent economic management, pro-poor welfare policies, expanded religious liberties and subduing the intrusive military — have been undermined by two strategies he used to overcome political and institutional resistance to his policies.

He struck Faustian bargains with a series of actors, benefiting from their support before discarding and at times persecuting them. These included segments of the liberal intelligentsia, Gülenist Islamists, crony capitalists, nationalists, ultranationalists, and pro-Eurasian and pro-Russian intelligentsia and fringe parties. He employed polarizing and populist politics and a long-term policy of packing and paralyzing independent institutions that would otherwise be a check on his powers. In the end, Erdoğan won power struggles, but undermined the foundations of Turkey's hard-won democratic political institutions.

What has prevented Turkish democracy's full collapse into [competitive \(or electoral\) authoritarianism](#) has been its strong legacies of multiparty democracy, civic activism, grass-roots resistance and well-rooted political parties. When democratic institutions responsible for guarding and regulating democracy are packed or hollowed out from inside, it is the democratic will and capability of organized political actors, most importantly parties, that can save and bring back democracy. Turkey's future will depend on how its newly revitalized opposition parties use their opportunities in the short and long term in a still severely polarized country.

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