

Turkey 2024

A roundup of news and analysis on Turkey's upcoming March 31 municipal elections



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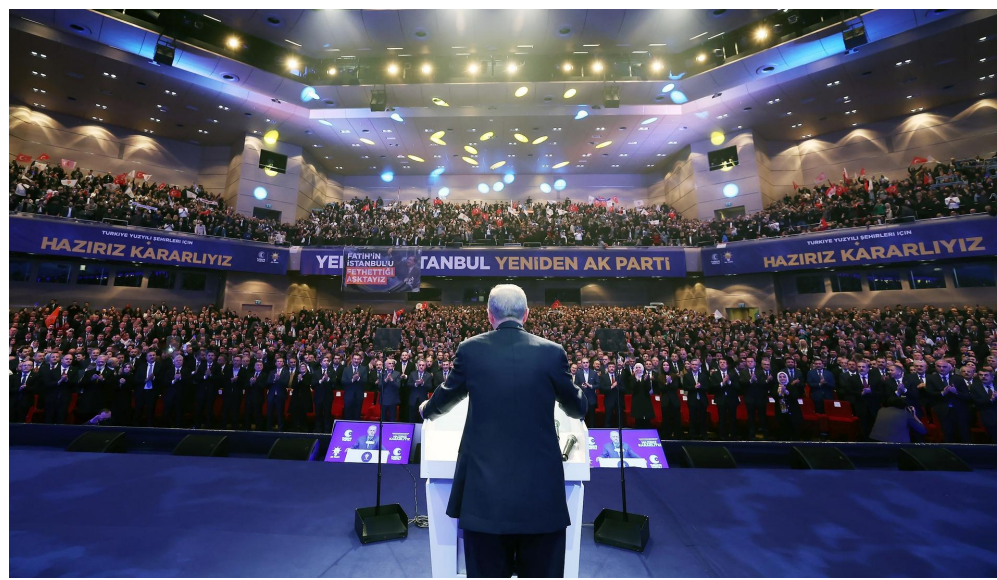
Dear Readers,

Welcome to "Turkey 2024", the CATS Network's roundup of news, developments and analysis in the run-up to Turkey's March 31 municipal elections.

Our first issue asks: **What is at stake** in the local elections? We also shed light on some of the main parameters of the race. These include **AKP's candidate selection** in Istanbul and Ankara, the **economy** and the impact of the 2023 February **earthquakes** on voters in 2024.

Should you have any questions or suggestions, then please e-mail us at cats@swp-berlin.org.

On the Spot



picture alliance / Anadolu | Murat Cetinmuhurdar

On March 31, Turkish citizens will go to the ballot box, once again. This time, to select mayors of (metropolitan) municipalities, district mayors, provincial assemblies, and neighbourhood and village administrators. Notwithstanding the local character of the election, **the stakes are high for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), its partners and the opposition parties.**

For President Erdoğan, a victory in major metropolitan cities currently run by the opposition—primarily in Istanbul—is vital to consolidate his authoritarian rule underlined by nationalist and Islamist currents. **For the opposition, the upcoming elections will be a test for the parties' future prospects to stand as viable alternatives to the 20+ years of AKP rule.**

Erdoğan Strikes Back

For President Erdoğan, March 31 represents the chance to enact revenge for the 2019 local elections when his party lost the Istanbul and Ankara municipalities to the Republican People's Party (CHP). Erdoğan is determined to bring these lost localities back to the AKP fold and in so doing reinforce AKP's political legitimacy. Also, an AKP victory will increase the party's financial resource base—Istanbul alone amounts to one-third of the Turkish economy. Finally, were the AKP able to retake Istanbul and Ankara, it would strike a psychological advantage against the opposition. **The political, economic and emotional consequences of an AKP victory in these two cities (and beyond) would support Erdoğan's goal of consolidating the Turkish presidential system and his power in it.**

Compared to five years ago, Erdoğan is now in a better position to further deepen his rule. After last year's presidential and parliamentary elections, the Turkish president has the mandate to govern until 2028. Erdoğan's ruling alliance—composed of [nationalist and Islamist parties](#)—has the majority in the parliament. These parties are also influential beyond the executive and the legislative branches of government. Thanks to the [secularisation](#) of domestic politics, [militarisation of foreign policy](#), and [expansion of Islam into society](#), **nationalist and Islamist narratives dominate public discussion.** Equally important, after last year's elections, **the President also appears to have sidelined potential rivals within his alliance.**

Yet, it is not only the regime's internal challengers, the opposition has lost ground as well. After losing last year's elections, the so-called "[Table of Six](#)" has quickly fallen apart. Meral Akşener's Good Party (İYİP) has already announced that it will run with its own candidates. At the time of this writing, it is unclear whether the Kurdish DEM—a follow-up party to the People's Democratic Party, HDP—will support the CHP's candidates in the metropolitan elections. [Ideological divides](#), [mistrust against one another](#) and [weakening internal coherency](#), **combine to render the opposition parties strategically vulnerable.**

Claims of Stability in an Environment of Increasing Insecurity

Thanks to the opposition's ability in the 2019 local elections to strategically capitalise on the changing electoral game due to the introduction of [alliance politics](#) under the presidential system, the efforts by the AKP and its junior partner, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), to turn local elections into a [fateful struggle for the sheer survival of the nation and state](#) did not succeed. The AKP lost Istanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipalities to the CHP.

Given the fragmented nature of the opposition parties after their electoral defeat in last year's twin elections, **the ruling alliance's strategy of turning the March 31 municipal elections into a referendum on Turkey's future might—this time—bear fruit.** This is especially so given Turkey's ongoing [military operations in Iraq and Syria](#) against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the increasing regional instability in the Middle East.

Unsurprisingly, the ruling alliance systematically deploys nationalist and Islamist rhetoric to consolidate votes and simultaneously to divide the opposition further. AKP elites position themselves as the guarantors of stability. Their promise of national security is coupled with their emphasis on [urban renewal projects](#) against earthquakes and natural disasters. Given the blurred boundaries between the party and the state, **the choice presented to voters by AKP-led and supporting media is one between harmony offered by the AKP and cacophony represented by the opposition.**

More than a Local Election

Even though it is unclear to what extent and for whom an AKP victory in the major metropolitan cities on March 31 would bring national security, and urban protection, it would undoubtedly demoralise the opposition parties and their electoral base. After last year's elections, opposition voters are already disillusioned. The outcome of the upcoming elections in this regard will be decisive for the voters' morale. **It will also be a test for the future ability of the opposition parties not only to cooperate strategically, but also to resist the ruling alliance's efforts to criminalise and stigmatise dissidence.** (Sinem Adar)

Recommended Readings

In light of the outcome of last year's general elections in Turkey, this [SUITS Policy Brief by Murat Somer](#) examines the erosion of democracy and whether Erdoğan's electoral victory is linked to a successful construction of Turkish autocracy or the failure of conventional parties.

After losing major cities to the opposition in 2019, the March 31 local elections will be a special test and a rematch for Erdoğan, which he is eager to win, stresses [Alper Coşkun in this Carnegie Endowment Commentary](#).

The [SWP Comment by Hürcan Aslı Aksoy, Yaşar Aydın and Salim Çevik](#) discusses Erdoğan's personnel choices in forming the Turkish cabinet and sheds light on some possible rationales underlying his ambition to recapture the municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara, among others, in the 2024 local elections.

Three Questions for...



Salim Çevik is a CATS fellow. His research focuses on Turkish domestic politics and Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East and Africa.

In Mid-January, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) announced its mayoral candidates in the most important Turkish cities, Istanbul and Ankara. Given the profiles of the candidates Murat Kurum (for Istanbul's mayor) and Turgut Altınok (for Ankara's mayor), who are less-known and not popular among the (AKP) electorate, why has President Erdoğan chosen those names?

Turgut Altınok is a well-known figure locally. Nationalist votes are stronger in Ankara and Altınok, with his nationalist background, embodies the current ruling alliance between Islamists and nationalists.

But Murat Kurum is a different story. Erdoğan has never chosen high-profile candidates for Istanbul to prevent the emergence of potential challengers to Erdoğan's power. This may also be related to post-Erdoğan scenarios, aiming to avoid challenges to a designated heir apparent. Finally, the opposition can only win if it can unite. The candidacy of a high-profile AKP politician could foster that unity. In contrast, Kurum, an uncharismatic technocrat, is not that threatening and therefore doesn't create extra reasons for unification.

The AKP seeks support from its Islamist ally the New Welfare Party (NWP) for its Istanbul mayoral candidate Murat Kurum, but the NWP has not yet greenlit this offer from the AKP. What are the reasons behind NWP's hesitation or rejection?

NWP also hesitated in supporting Erdoğan during the presidential elections in May, going back and forth before finally declaring their support. This reluctance is partly due to the party seeking better offers. Additionally, after two decades in power, the AKP is experiencing a decline in popularity, even among conservative voters. In the last elections, Erdogan secured 52 percent of the vote through a nationalist-Islamist alliance, while the AKP itself reached a historic low of 35 percent. NWP aims to capitalize on this diminishing support for the AKP.

Turkey goes to the polls under a looming economic and financial crisis, and the country is still trying to recover from the devastating effects of the earthquakes occurred in February 2023. Can the opposition capitalize on the dire economic circumstances?

This is a protracted crisis that has been going on since 2018. And it has already changed voting behavior to some extent. For example, the old adage that "whoever wins Istanbul, wins Turkey" no longer applies. The economic crisis is felt more deeply in metropolitan areas, leading in 2019 and 2023 the opposition to win in Istanbul and many other metropolitan areas, despite losing the national vote in 2023. If the opposition manages to unite, it will still have the upper hand in metropolitan areas in 2024 due to the monetary challenge of widespread inflation in the country.

All of the cities in the February 2023 earthquake zone, except Hatay, are AKP strongholds. Reconstruction is a key concern in these areas, necessitating the central government's assistance. AKP municipalities will have better access to that support and the electorate knows this. Therefore, the February 2023 earthquakes will actually benefit the AKP.

Interviewed by Hürcan Aslı Aksoy

That's all until the next issue!

Kind regards,

The CATS Team