

## Turkey: Erdogan's Latest Coup

Friday 17 May 2019, by [IŞIKARA Güney](#), [KAYSERILIOĞLU Alp](#), [ZIRNGAST Max](#) (Date first published: 9 May 2019).

**This week's decision to overturn the results of the Istanbul mayoral election is the latest sign that the Erdoğan regime has no intention to yield to democratic demands.**

On May 6<sup>th</sup>, Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council (YSK) decided by a seven to four vote to annul and repeat Istanbul's municipal election. The original election, on March 28, saw Ekrem İmamoğlu from the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), win the mayorship by a margin of 13,729 votes.

The redo election will be held on June 23<sup>rd</sup>. The YSK's decision was substantiated by the claim that some ballot box officials were not civil servants. Considering all the irregularities that take place every election in Turkey (none of which have been annulled), this is a laughable rationale. Moreover, Istanbul voters simultaneously cast votes in three other elections: for district, city council, and mukhtar elections. These votes were collected in the exact same envelopes, and cast in the exact same ballot boxes, as the mayoral votes. Yet those three other elections were not annulled. Finally, previous elections also had ballot box officials who weren't civil servants.

Why then was only the mayoral election annulled and not the other ones? The YSK's decision, in short, has no "technical" or "juridical" justification. It should be named for what it is: a civil coup attempt by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his allies.

In our [earlier analysis](#) of the local elections, we drew attention to the fact that the results — particularly in Istanbul — were still contested. The elections saw the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its People's Alliance lose control over most major cities, including Istanbul, Ankara, Adana, Mersin, and Antalya. But particularly in Istanbul, the regime has refused to concede and is attempting to reverse the results. What is at stake is not just who gets to be the mayor of Istanbul. The future of the current regime, consisting of the official AKP-Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) alliance and others, is at stake. So is the future of Turkey itself.

The decision made by the YSK will probably lead the regime even deeper into crisis. The decision was made in an atmosphere already riddled with multiple crises, the most acute being [the economic one](#). The official data, while unreliable, nonetheless shows the scale of desperation: the unemployment rate reached 14.7 percent in January, with youth unemployment over 26 percent. Depreciation of the lira has accelerated once again, and signs of recovery have failed to appear in manufacturing and other crucial industries.

There is also an ongoing struggle over the positioning of Turkey within the world system. Turkey's decision to buy a stock of the Russian S-400 missile systems has, once again, severely strained its relationship with the US and NATO. This led to Mike Pence [threatening](#) that Turkey must choose between NATO and Russia. On top of it, Iran-style sanctions, from which Turkey has so far been exempted, now seem imminent.

The Kurdish crisis looms behind the others. On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, lawyers were granted permission to visit the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan. It was the first time in

eight years he was afforded such a visit.

Öcalan and three other inmates issued a short written declaration, which was read out by his lawyers at a press conference on May 6 — by chance, only hours before the Istanbul election was annulled. Some interpreted Öcalan's statement as a call for the Kurdish movement to return to negotiations with the government. The coincidence of the close timing between Öcalan's declaration on the one hand, and the election annulment on the other, inspired widespread rumours. Many theorised that the PKK had made a deal with Erdoğan to partially withdraw Kurdish support for the opposition, allowing the regime's candidate to retake Istanbul.

However, nothing of the sort was signalled in Öcalan's message. In any case, peace between Kurdish forces and the ruling AKP seems impossible. Despite Öcalan's request that PKK detainees end their hunger strike for his release, the inmates declared they would continue. For its part, the leftist Peoples' Democratic Party ([HDP](#)) stated that their position had not changed since March 31<sup>st</sup>, and called for a "[common struggle against fascism](#)."

## **Elite Divisions**

What could be the real reasons for the annulment of the election?

Since the moment polls closed, a faction within the AKP has been contesting the results. In many Istanbul districts, it took almost three weeks for the votes to be recounted after the ruling party's allegations of invalid and miscounted votes. This recount, however, did not change the results substantially. Thus, the AKP started to invent new excuses.

That said, the response by the AKP and the ruling bloc was not a unified one. Some within or close to the AKP called for the party to accept the results and engage in self-criticism, even as others launched into a campaign to delegitimise the elections.

In its panic over the results, the AKP fragmented internally about how to respond. Even Erdoğan, on election night and afterwards, vacillated between a self-conscious acceptance of the results and an aggressive push against the same results. It was not until May 4 that he [made](#) a clear call that the YSK should order a reelection due to massive "irregularities."

A particularly active player after the elections was the employee association TÜSIAD, which represents big capital. On election night, it called for an extensive economic reform campaign (and Erdoğan repeated this rhetoric in his public statements the same night). In the following weeks, the association stressed that the electoral cycle was over and that now is the time to give all attention to economic questions. And it has called the YSK's decision "[troubling](#)." TÜSIAD's position was echoed by the bourgeois Koç Group's pointed decision to visit Imamoğlu on the day the YSK made its annulment decision.

Big capital, then, is worried that the AKP-MHP's manoeuvres to maintain their fragmenting hegemony could exacerbate the economic crisis. But Istanbul is too important for the ruling bloc to sacrifice. For one thing, it is the heart of the economy, containing 20 percent of the country's population.

Secondly, the AKP government in Istanbul has been extremely corrupt. If the opposition came to power, it could obtain municipal documents and data, exposing improper tender bids and resource transfers. That would damage the AKP's reputation tremendously. Imamoğlu, for instance, took the opportunity of his election to order all municipal data from the AKP's administration over Istanbul; almost immediately, a court [blocked](#) his order.

Last but not least, the AKP's loss of control of one of Turkey's biggest cities has produced a clear change in the popular state of mind. In recent years, the regime's authoritarian tendencies have strengthened over its ability to co-opt dissenting forces. Especially in the context of an economic crisis, it will have little ability to accommodate a new wave of hope.

## **An Authoritarian Regime**

The regime won't just idly hope for different results in the new elections. They certainly have a plan for how to change the outcome. This is not to say that this plan will be successful. A lot will depend on the actions of the opposition and popular forces.

The country went through a similar process when the AKP was defeated in the June 2015 elections. The party responded by demanding another election in November of that year; in the interim, it drenched the country in war and blood. The terror they unleashed served to bring the AKP back to power in the re-done election.

Erdoğan himself [pointed](#) to this period in arguing for reelections, saying they would win again now as they did in 2015. It is very likely that the ruling bloc will try to divide the opposition into camps that cannot vote for the same candidate — and try to terrorise them into passivity. They will manipulate the Kurdish question and the so-called fight against terrorism to make parts of the opposition appear beyond the pale. And maybe we will see bombs going off again, as in 2015 and 2016.

A textbook example of the regime's "election strategy" was demonstrated on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, when CHP chair Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was almost [lynched](#) at the funeral of a soldier in Ankara. Almost no security personnel intervened. Hulusi Akar, minister of national defence and former chief of general staff, addressed the mob at the scene, [calling](#) them his "esteemed friends" and telling them "that they had made their message clear enough." The main protagonists of this well-organised assassination attempt were AKP members, and they were detained only for a short time before being released.

The message is clear: the regime can and will use its paramilitary forces within the context of elections. The ruling bloc is taking on authoritarian characteristics at a pace that is now irreversible. The more it uses force to defend its mandate, the more dependent it will become on violence, to the exclusion of other strategies.

The YSK's decision was met with widespread protests in many quarters of Istanbul. Ekrem İmamoğlu delivered a speech that same night. In this speech he took on a more aggressive style than before, seeking to present himself as a leader of a popular movement. He will run again as the CHP's candidate for Istanbul on June 23<sup>rd</sup>.

We can't predict the events to come. But this move to repeat the elections is a high-risk gamble by Erdoğan and the regime. Depending on the actions and reactions of other actors, it could backfire and plunge the regime into an even deeper crisis.

The spontaneous protests, featuring slogans and symbolism similar to the Gezi Uprising in 2013, are a positive development that need to be deepened by popular and democratic forces. The outcome of the current struggles lies in the hands of the people. If they take the initiative and do not allow the regime to successfully execute their civil coup, then we might witness a process of genuine democratisation.

About the Author

Güney Işıkkara is a PhD student in economics at the New School for Social Research.

Alp Kayseriliođlu is an editor at re-volt magazine and is working on his PhD on political economy, hegemony, and popular dynamics in the AKP era in Turkey. He currently lives in Cologne, Germany.

Max Zirngast is an independent writer studying philosophy and political science in Vienna and Ankara.

---

**Güney Işıkara**  
**Alp Kayseriliođlu**  
**Max Zirngast**

*[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.*

---

**P.S.**

Tribune  
<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2019/05/erdogans-latest-coup>