



## Turkey's 2024 Local Elections: Potential Effects on Domestic and Foreign Policy

TURKEY PROGRAMME

**Ahmet Erdi ÖZTÜRK**

*Non-Resident Scholar, Turkey Programme, ELIAMEP*



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HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY (ELIAMEP)  
49, Vasilissis Sofias Ave., 10676, Athens, Greece  
Tel.: +30 210 7257 110 | Fax: +30 210 7257 114 | [www.eliamep.gr](http://www.eliamep.gr) | [eliamep@eliamep.gr](mailto:eliamep@eliamep.gr)

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### Summary

- While local elections may not be as crucial as general elections, one can argue that these upcoming local elections hold an exceptionally important position for both Turkey and its region—indeed, even for the international system.
- It should be remembered that President Erdoğan has control over the state apparatus, which gives him bargaining chips with which to negotiate with the various political actors.
- While Erdoğan has the power to use state resources to negotiate with various actors who could potentially take votes from İmamoğlu or bring votes to Kurum, İmamoğlu brings to the table a possible alternative to Erdoğan's hegemony in Turkey's political arena (a hegemony which has been tarnished in many areas, particularly the economy, in recent years), along with his youth and his potential to appeal to various segments of society.
- Ekrem İmamoğlu's re-election will not directly impact Turkey's foreign policy, but it will influence the stance international power centres adopt towards Turkey. İmamoğlu will once again attract the attention of many Western power centres, particularly in the European Union.
- It is a statement of fact to say that the results of the local elections in Istanbul could be a milestone for Turkish politics. If İmamoğlu emerges victorious in Istanbul on the evening of March 31, which appears likely at the moment, the local elections will mark the beginning of a marathon general election campaign. In this context, we can say that we are on the verge of re-entering the İmamoğlu vs Erdoğan period, which was interrupted during the 2023 elections.

TURKEY WILL BE HOLDING a very [important local election](#) on March 31, 2024. While local elections may not be as crucial as general elections, one can argue that these upcoming local elections hold an exceptionally important position for both Turkey and its region—indeed, even for the international system, if we consider [Turkey's unique positionality within the global political arena](#). In fact, considering the significance of these local elections, one could go further and argue that they have the value of an early general election for Turkey. Taking into consideration [the results of the May 2023 presidential elections](#), however, and the events that followed, we might expect these local elections to be uneventful and lacklustre.

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This is because, in May 2023, despite almost all the opposition parties coming together against the hegemonic and repressive regime of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Baser and Ozturk 2017), the incumbent won a clear victory over the former leader of the Republican People's Party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (Yavuz and Ozturk 2023). Following this victory, President Erdoğan obtained approval to continue governing the country with his developed [Turkish-style presidential system](#) until 2028, leaving the opposition both demoralized and unable to regroup. In addition, the presence of significant and successful figures like Hakan Fidan, Ali Yerlikaya, and Mehmet Şimşek in Erdoğan's post-election government promised seriousness or relative change. Consequently, the opposition electorate were left demoralized and feeling hopeless about the future.

However, as the local election draws near, and while there are still many disillusioned voter masses, the local elections have begun to gain in importance. The most significant—though not the only—factor in this are the Istanbul elections and the current [Mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu](#). Istanbul holds considerable significance for Turkey and Turkish politics in many respects. Istanbul is both historically significant and one of the most populous cities in the world. It also generates more than [35% of Turkey's Gross Domestic Product](#) (GDP). The significance of governing this city, which attracts migration from every corner of Turkey, is almost equivalent to that of governing a European country. Furthermore, the political journey of President Erdoğan, who has left his stamp on Turkish politics over the past thirty years (Selcuk, Hekimci and Erpul 2019), began in Istanbul and flourished there. In this context, Istanbul holds both material and normative importance for President Erdoğan (Gorener and Ucal 2011), which is why he seeks to regain the city which he lost in the two controversial elections of 2019.

At this point, it must be noted that many conditions favour President Erdoğan. Firstly, as mentioned above, because the opposition's core voter base is feeling tired, hopeless and possibly more disengaged from politics than ever before in Turkish history. Furthermore, while President Erdoğan effectively controls nearly all the apparatus of state, following their defeat in the 2023 elections, the opposition bloc has emerged fragmented. This atomized structure and disillusioned voter base are also prevalent in the dynamics of Istanbul. Ekrem İmamoğlu, who won Istanbul in the 2019 local elections with a large coalition, will now be running alone, since the [Good Party \(İYİ Parti\)](#), the [Democracy and Progress Party \(DEM Party\)](#)--which garnered the majority of Kurdish votes, and all other parties are participating in the elections with their own candidates. This prevents İmamoğlu from forming a broad coalition.

The election has proceeded in a comfortable manner for President Erdoğan, leading him to field a candidate he deemed 'safer': former minister [Murat Kurum](#). However, recent polls indicate that Kurum may not be fully meeting President Erdoğan's expectations; for instance, the latest survey by the Metrapoll company places İmamoğlu ahead of Kurum by an average of three points.

However, this situation does not appear entirely realistic for a country like Turkey, which is governed hegemonically by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Given Istanbul's material and symbolic significance, and its importance for his future political career, President Erdoğan must win these elections. Consequently, he must make strategic moves that extend beyond his own actions and involve manoeuvres with regard to the Democracy and Progress Party (DEM Party) and the [Welfare Party \(Yeniden Refah Partisi\)](#), both of which will play a crucial role in the election. Thus, if President Erdoğan can somehow make the DEM Party more active and thus neutralize the influence of the Welfare Party, he could alter the balance of power. Undoubtedly, Ekrem İmamoğlu will also make his own strategic moves in response. However, it is essential to emphasize once again that, regardless of the outcome, the Istanbul elections will change the balance of power in both Turkey and the region.

In light of all this, it is necessary to examine first what Erdoğan and İmamoğlu can do with only a few days left until the election. After that, it would be appropriate to discuss what the alternative scenarios will mean for Turkey's domestic and foreign policies.

## Erdoğan vs. İmamoğlu

President Erdoğan nominated Murat Kurum, a relatively low-profile candidate, to compete against İmamoğlu, one of the most challenging rivals he has faced in his political career. There could be several reasons for this. Firstly, Erdoğan, who achieved significant success in the May 2023 elections, may have thought the comfort zone created by his resounding victory would allow him to win with any candidate he chose. The second reason may relate to the political future: meaning that if Erdoğan's candidate won Istanbul, it should prevent his leadership being questioned in the future. A final reason may be that Erdoğan did not want to use up one of the prominent figures he could potentially field against İmamoğlu in the future. For instance, if someone like his [son-in-law Selçuk Bayraktar](#) lost to İmamoğlu, one of the important princes of the Erdoğan movement could have been left bearing a wound in the years ahead. This made Murat Kurum a rational choice for Erdoğan, but the candidate went on to make mistakes during the campaign, performing worse than expected and leaving the election a stand-off between Erdoğan and İmamoğlu. However, at this point, both Erdoğan and İmamoğlu still have cards to play in the days leading up to the election.

First and foremost, it should be remembered that [President Erdoğan has control over the state apparatus](#), which gives him bargaining chips with which to negotiate with the various political actors. In this context, in addition to taking to the streets between now and the election, there are three things he can do: First, he can provide direct or indirect financial support to economically vulnerable segments of society, particularly pensioners. Disregarding fiscal discipline and improving pensions and offering pensioners discounts on utilities are among the most obvious measures he could make here.

The second scenario could be related to Kurds and Kurdish votes. In this context, Erdoğan may succeed in increasing the role of the DEM Party in Istanbul through direct and indirect means, which would lead to a decrease in İmamoğlu's voter share. The agenda may also include removing the appointees with whom the state replaced the democratically-elected mayors in predominantly Kurdish-populated provinces and granting more rights to Kurds through a new constitutional amendment. However, despite these considerations, according to the terms of the [joint agreement between Turkey and Iraq signed on March 14, 2024](#), Turkey will launch a significant operation against the PKK starting in April, which could potentially extend into northern Iraq. This is indicative of

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Erdoğan's intentions, which are less to win over the Kurds than to neutralize their influence.

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While Erdoğan has the power to use state resources to negotiate with various actors who could potentially take votes from İmamoğlu or bring votes to Kurum, İmamoğlu brings to the table a possible alternative to Erdoğan's hegemony in Turkey's political arena (a hegemony which has been tarnished in many areas, particularly the economy, in recent years), along with his youth and his potential to appeal to various segments of society. Moreover, as Erdoğan was able to do in the past, İmamoğlu can appeal to many different groups simultaneously. İmamoğlu may not be as powerful an orator as Erdoğan, but he is more charismatic. He has a personality that allows him to engage with almost everyone in society. However, İmamoğlu lacks a narrative for both these local elections and the future political landscape.

This contrasts with President Erdoğan, who has embarked on a journey with a grand narrative, whether this is interpreted through Şerif Mardin's center-periphery dichotomy (Bakiner 2018) or examined through the institutionalization of religious political actors (Ozturk 2020). He has promised political and social space to the masses who were directly and indirectly marginalized by the founders of the Republican system, while he has also shown the world, especially post-9/11, that Muslims can be compatible with the neo-liberal world order and even demonstrated it in practice for a time (Dagi 2008). In doing so, Erdoğan intertwined the Kurdish issue and the European Union reform process, challenging and dismantling taboos in the process. However, he did not do this alone: it was most likely the support he enjoyed from liberal-left intellectuals, the Gülen Movement, and many other unofficial coalition partners that enabled him to be so organized. With his understanding of the society from which he himself emerged and his leadership charisma, he became irreplaceable. As İmamoğlu has said himself, Erdoğan is a political figure who has left an indelible mark on the last 30 years of Turkish politics, regardless of how he is remembered. İmamoğlu has not yet reached that level as a political actor, and his greatest shortcoming compared with Erdoğan is that he lacks a narrative.

In light of all this, it is important to emphasize once again that the results of the Istanbul election could potentially have a greater impact on Turkey's domestic and foreign policy than that generated by an ordinary local election.

## The potential outcomes of the elections

To evaluate the results of Turkey's upcoming local elections, it will be sufficient to look at the outcomes of the Istanbul elections alone. There, two possible outcomes exist: either [İmamoğlu wins Istanbul again, defeating President Erdoğan for the fourth time](#), or Erdoğan's candidate defeats İmamoğlu, relegating him to the pool of those who have lost to Erdoğan on the political stage.

If Erdoğan's candidate, Murat Kurum, wins the Istanbul elections, İmamoğlu will be stripped of his unbeatable status. This will lead to even greater despair among already fragile segments of society, who are acutely disillusioned with politics. Among dissident youth in particular, the ongoing trend of disengagement from politics, loss of hope in the country's future, and a growing inclination to leave the country will continue or intensify. In addition, President Erdoğan, his confidence bolstered by defeating his greatest rival, will undoubtedly be emboldened in domestic politics and strengthen his combative authoritarian regime. This strengthening may lead to a return to idiosyncratic practices, especially in areas such as the economy. If it does, it could lead to a parting of the ways

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with Mehmet Şimşek, who advocates discipline in the economy and, on occasion, austerity measures. Although a fiscal relaxation could cause greater problems for Turkey in the days ahead, it is highly probable that this is the course Erdoğan will choose. Of course, the reverse is also possible, with Erdoğan holding Şimşek and his team accountable should İmamoğlu win. In short, domestically, Erdoğan will clearly continue to be the sole power. At the same time, if he achieves his goal of taking Istanbul, Erdoğan will also seek ways to enact constitutional changes that will allow him to remain President for longer.

I am not entirely certain that an İmamoğlu loss in the elections would affect Turkey's foreign policy significantly. However, we can expect more assertive stances from Erdoğan and his foreign policy team in terms of rhetoric. Specifically, a tougher approach towards Israel may be observed in the rhetorical realm with regard to Gaza, where guarantees are being sought. Similarly, the [operation planned for the north of Iraq this summer](#), despite objections from the US, could spill over into northern Syria and potentially result in Erdoğan losing the Kurds as a whole domestically. Likewise, while the Erdoğan administration will continue to deal with the West through the arms trade and in the security sphere, issues relating to democratic development and human rights are likely to be sidelined.

It is difficult to predict how a victory for Ekrem İmamoğlu in the elections would impact domestic politics. Erdoğan could exhibit both softening and hardening stances, particularly on fundamental issues such as the economy. Erdoğan's choices here would depend on his calculations on how to defeat [Ekrem İmamoğlu in the 2028 Presidential elections](#). However, an İmamoğlu victory could also lead to a relative loss of power for Erdoğan within the state apparatus, with individuals and groups within the People's Alliance who may be dissatisfied with Erdoğan, but have been pragmatic in their approach due to power considerations, approaching İmamoğlu. While this may not be the case across the military, judiciary and other state institutions, it remains a possibility. Individuals and groups may begin to make post-Erdoğan-focused calculations. Similarly, powerful religious groups within the state and society could also distance themselves from Erdoğan and approach İmamoğlu. It is highly likely that İmamoğlu's relationship with these entities will resemble [Süleyman Demirel's relationship with religious groups](#), which were also driven by interests and power dynamics.

Ekrem İmamoğlu's re-election will not directly impact Turkey's foreign policy, but it will influence the stance international power centres adopt towards Turkey. İmamoğlu will once again attract the attention of many Western power centres, particularly in the European Union. Considering Turkey's significant role as a producer and consumer in the global defence industry, we can expect multinational corporations as well as countries to show an increased interest in İmamoğlu. In this regard, İmamoğlu and his circle may be indirectly supported by states, businesses, diplomacy and academia.

### March 31, 2024: The Beginning of a New Era for Turkey?

Predicting outcomes in politics is inherently risky, while making long-term predictions about a country as volatile and fragile as Turkey may not be entirely rational. However, it is a statement of fact to say that the results of the local elections in Istanbul could be a milestone for Turkish politics. If İmamoğlu emerges victorious in Istanbul on the evening of March 31, which appears likely at the moment, the local elections will mark the beginning of a marathon general election campaign. In this context, we can say that we are on the verge of re-entering the İmamoğlu vs Erdoğan period, which was interrupted during the 2023 elections.

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