



**Building up Opposition from the Local Level in Turkey:
Key Figures and Political Strategies**

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- In the 2019 local elections, the AKP lost both Istanbul and Ankara to the chief opposition party, the CHP. While this was heralded by some as the beginning of the end for AKP rule, President Erdoğan and his party proved resilient and went on to win the 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections.
- In the 2024 local elections, the AKP lost nearly every major metropolitan municipality to the CHP; for the first time in its history, the party had fallen into second place nationally. This scenario, so unfamiliar for both the AKP and Erdoğan, closely mirrored the political narrative they themselves had written 30 years before.
- Üsküdar mayor Sinem Dedetaş has transformed communication, a crucial tool in the art of politics, into a positive instrument rather than a source of complaint or negativity. This approach differentiates Dedetaş from other mayors.
- The mayor of Aydın, Özlem Çerçioğlu, addresses governance challenges and administrative obstacles by means of practical solutions based in participatory democracy.
- The mayor of Ankara, Mansur Yavaş, prefers to avoid creating noise and using controversy to remain in the spotlight. Instead, he focuses on quietly defending the rule of law and safeguarding the rights of Turkey's capital city.
- One of the key strategies employed by Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu has been to focus on creative grassroots projects which directly affect people's lives in areas such as social assistance, free transportation for students, and water discounts aimed at improving the life quality of Istanbul residents. Such initiatives have allowed İmamoğlu to win public trust, despite the obstacles placed in his way by central government, and to continue in office.

- The ability of CHP municipalities to consistently meet public expectations and deliver efficient governance, despite the obstacles placed in their way by the AKP administration, could be critical in shaping future electoral outcomes. Much as in the 1990s, where changes in local government became the precursor to national shifts, CHP-led municipalities may once again serve as the catalyst for political change in Turkey.

Introduction

Many studies addressing recent political developments in Turkey point to how winning major municipalities in the 1990s paved the way for the political hegemony of Turkish political Islam since the early 2000s (Oktem 2021; Ozbudun 2006). In the 1994 local elections, the victory of “Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*-RP)” candidates in leading cities such as Istanbul and Ankara proved to be a harbinger of political change. The municipalities hosted a grassroots movement that challenged the state elites and sought to transform Turkey. It was this movement that first brought the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) to power, before morphing into what the AKP would later brand the “new Turkey” (Baser and Ozturk 2017; Grigoriadis 2014). While history never fully repeats itself, there are striking similarities with a grassroots movement in Turkey’s leading municipalities today, which is this time challenging the AKP administration and its head.

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In the 2019 local elections, the AKP lost both Istanbul and Ankara to the chief opposition party, the CHP. While this was heralded by some as the beginning of the end for AKP rule, the party and President Erdoğan proved resilient and went on to win the 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections (Yavuz and Ozturk 2023). However, this did not serve to consolidate the hegemony of the AKP. In the 2024 local elections, the AKP lost nearly every major metropolitan municipality to the CHP; for the first time in its history, the party had fallen into second place nationally. This scenario, so unfamiliar for both the AKP and Erdoğan, closely mirrored the political narrative they themselves had written 30 years before. In response, they have sought to prevent the CHP-led municipalities from replicating their own success story. In so doing, their approach has not been very different from that taken by Turkish governments in response to the rise of political Islam in the 1990s: they have used bureaucratic and judicial channels to obstruct the municipalities in question. Hence, [financial](#), legal, and administrative instruments have been employed to portray CHP-supported mayors as incapable of running their municipalities and the CHP as unable to govern Turkey.

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Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore how the heads of four different CHP municipalities have responded to these government policies and to draw meaningful conclusions from their responses. The mayors interviewed are Sinem Dedetaş, the mayor of Üsküdar; Özlem Çerçioğlu, the metropolitan mayor of Aydın; Mansur Yavaş, the metropolitan mayor of Ankara; and Ekrem İmamoğlu, the metropolitan mayor of Istanbul. All four of the mayors selected have displayed strong performance. [Sinem Dedetaş](#) is the first female mayor of Üsküdar, a rather conservative Istanbul borough, while [Özlem Çerçioğlu](#), the female mayor of Aydın, has won three consecutive terms, increasing her votes each time. Both [Ekrem İmamoğlu](#) and [Mansur Yavaş](#) are considered leading political figures on the national level, as well as potential candidates in the next presidential elections. Their differing governance styles have led them to adopt various strategies in response to the AKP’s restrictive policies. An additional interview was conducted with [Özgür Özel](#), the head of the CHP, regarding the range of views within his party on municipal mobilization. This is significant, as the CHP-run municipalities will be seen as a bellwether for its credibility as a viable alternative to the AKP in central government.¹

¹ All interviews were conducted face-to-face in the offices of the political actors in July and August 2024.

Sinem Dedetaş: The Power of Effective Communication

At the age of 43, Sinem Dedetaş, the recently elected Mayor of Üsküdar, is a relatively new and young actor in Turkish politics. A naval engineer by training, she served between 2019 and 2023 as the general manager of Istanbul Ferry Lines (*Istanbul Şehir Hatları*) within the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. When she ran for the position of mayor of Üsküdar in the March 2023 elections, many doubted her potential for success in a conservative municipality where President Erdoğan maintains his Istanbul residence. Dedetaş' electoral success was reinforced by her governance style and practices pointing towards reinforcing [participatory democracy](#). Since entering office, the weekly public neighbourhood meetings, projects relating to women's health and social security, forgiving debts owed to previous administrations, scholarships for students, and the rectification of certain legal issues have all contributed to her positive public image. When asked about her visibility, she attributed it to one of the most crucial tools in politics: communication:

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I cannot claim to be ambitious regarding politics and my career. The only answer I can give about my next goal is this: a more liveable Üsküdar whose residents are happier. I can only achieve this by establishing effective communication with the people of Üsküdar. Look, Üsküdar is a large and diverse living space. In this regard, I communicate voluntarily with both those in the most economically challenging situations and some of Turkey's wealthiest individuals, solely for the benefit of Üsküdar. I believe that effective communication, truly listening to people and utilizing resources efficiently, is one of my most important duties as a local administrator.

The year 2024, when Dedetaş assumed the mayorship, was marked by [economic hardship in Turkey](#); this included decrees imposing strict austerity measures on the public sector. Given these circumstances, municipalities faced difficulties carrying out certain activities. Dedetaş' solution to this issue also relied on successful communication.

If I say that the austerity measures are not a challenge, I would not be telling you the truth. Moreover, we unfortunately inherited a municipality with a significant amount of debt. In this context, we sometimes struggle to do things that are essential in these times, such as acquiring new computers. However, I believe that if you hold the office of mayor, you and your team must find solutions, regardless of the circumstances. Just as we are communicate with the people of Üsküdar, so we are also in contact with the private sector, civil society, and organizations that provide us with resources. We have a single criterion here: everything done must be for the benefit and happiness of the people of Üsküdar.

According to Dedetaş, CHP municipalities provide an alternative for Turks who feel overwhelmed after so many years of AKP rule. She argues that the neglect of many activities which municipalities are supposed to undertake has led to the unfortunate downgrading of true municipal governance in Turkey. In this context, Dedetaş emphasizes that combating the machinations of the AKP administration requires the practice of genuine municipal governance. She continually highlights the importance of

effectively and accurately communicating her efforts. Dedetaş has managed to transform communication, a crucial tool in the art of politics, into a positive instrument rather than a source of complaint or acrimony.

Özlem Çerçioğlu: Participatory Governance

Of the four mayors interviewed for this study, Özlem Çerçioğlu is the most experienced. She was elected as a CHP Member of Parliament for Aydın in the 3 November 2002 parliamentary elections and served in Parliament until 2009, when she first assumed the role of metropolitan mayor of Aydın. Having a strong professional background in the private sector, she has applied a hands-on and practical mindset to municipal governance. She has engaged in social projects such as supporting education, combating drug addiction, rehabilitating street children, upholding Turkish republican principles, and encouraging population planning. When asked whether she faced challenges from the AKP government, she replied:

Çerçioğlu believes that the government is imposing both direct and indirect costs on municipalities due to the adverse economic conditions facing the country. However, she addresses these challenges by leveraging the advantages of her private sector background.

"Of course, they are attempting to challenge us, but they overlook two things. The first is the extensive experience of my team and myself. The second is their misconception that they are obstructing Özlem Çerçioğlu alone. Because they are also trying to hinder Aydın and its people, which makes their efforts futile. Since 2009, I have increased my votes on each occasion I have been re-elected mayor. Local government is neither a personal enterprise nor a separate entity. It is an intermediary organization which exists to serve the people of Aydın. We manage Aydın with the people of Aydın."

While these comments may seem like typical political statements, Çerçioğlu goes on to provide numerous examples. The Aydın Metropolitan Municipality is known for conducting small-scale local referendums. Even the shape and colour of a sidewalk tile are decided by public votes. This approach allows the public to perceive themselves as a fundamental element in local governance, as in advanced participatory democracies. This conveys the message that political participation is not confined to election periods. It seems that in Aydın, the public is invited to be involve itself continuously in decision-making processes. Çerçioğlu believes that the government is imposing both direct and indirect costs on municipalities due to the adverse economic conditions facing the country. However, she addresses these challenges by leveraging the advantages of her private sector background:

"Frankly, I cannot say that we are facing direct obstruction, but the economic austerity measures are challenging us, and we are aware that we are faced with greater penalties for even minor mistakes. So, what do we do? We always strive to find alternative solutions. We work to create resources with our limited means. For example, if we are told that we cannot open a day-care centre, we rename it and open similar facilities, because they are essential for the development and empowerment of our children and women. Another example concerns green spaces. If we are not permitted to create new green spaces, we naturally develop our existing ones, thereby

adding value for the people of Aydın. I have a principle: if there's a problem, find a solution instead of complaining."

In a nutshell, Çerçioğlu addresses governance challenges and administrative obstacles by applying democratic and practical solutions, thereby boosting citizen participation in municipal affairs.

Mansur Yavaş: Strengthening Transparency, Accountability and the Rule of Law

Mansur Yavaş, a lawyer by training from the town of Beypazarı, west of Ankara, began his political career in the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*-MHP) but moved to the CHP due to discord within his former party. After a highly controversial defeat in the 2014 municipal elections, Yavaş was elected as the metropolitan mayor of Ankara in the 2019 local elections; he won re-election by a landslide margin of almost 30 percent in 2024. Since assuming office in 2019, Yavaş has emphasized concepts such as "transparent, social, accountable, and productive municipality," and has worked to spread the "Mansur Yavaş municipality" model across the country. During his tenure, Yavaş has pioneered several initiatives, including live streaming municipal council meetings and tender procedures, installing cameras on snowploughs with a license plate tracking system accessible to the public via digital platforms, establishing the [Başkent Kart \(Capital Card\)](#) system that allows low-income families to make purchases based on their needs while prioritizing local tradespeople. He has also discontinued the distribution of aid packages in social assistance programs, a practice traditionally linked to political clientelism.

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Yavaş is a popular political figure in Ankara but also throughout Turkey. He is therefore considered a potential opposition candidate for future presidential elections. This, coupled with his role in running Turkey's capital city, has exposed him to increased pressure from the central government. This makes the case of Yavaş distinct from those of Dedetaş and Çerçioğlu. When asked whether he faces obstacles and how he feels about them, Yavaş responds as follows:

"Of course, they attempt to obstruct me. Beyond obstruction, they also try to defame me. However, what they fail to see is that they are not obstructing Mansur Yavaş. They are obstructing the provision of services to the people of Ankara. But both the people of Ankara and the citizens of the Republic of Turkey recognize this, as evidenced by the record vote that re-elected me, and my approval ratings in Turkey are consistently high."

As noted, Ankara, being the capital and a potential presidential candidate's city, is targeted more frequently by the central government than any other city, with the exception of Istanbul. Consequently, Yavaş has to be very cautious about his political initiatives. A lawyer by profession, he stresses that he chooses to adhere to legal principles while managing the affairs of the city of Ankara:

"Are there pressures? Of course, there are. However, I do not find it appropriate to make a fuss or complain about the central government to the people of Ankara. Instead, I use the law and file lawsuits to assert my rights. Although the judiciary

in Turkey today is not independent, I believe it is crucial to prioritize the law. Moreover, I must protect Ankara and its importance and capital identity. For example, if the government wants to move the central bank to Istanbul, I will fight in every legal way to protect the capital of the Republic of Turkey."

To sum up, Yavaş prefers to avoid creating noise and using controversy to remain in the spotlight. Instead, he focuses on quietly defending transparency, accountability and the rule of law, and on safeguarding the rights of Turkey's capital city.

Ekrem İmamoğlu: Opposition Through Creativity and Grassroots Work

Ekrem İmamoğlu, the metropolitan mayor of Istanbul, has emerged as one of the most prominent figures in Turkish politics, second only to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Starting his political career as the mayor of Beylikdüzü, a city in the western outskirts of Istanbul, to which post he was elected in the local elections of 30 March 2014, İmamoğlu was catapulted onto the main stage of Turkish politics by his election as metropolitan mayor of Istanbul on 31 March, and then again on 23 June, 2019. Five years later, in the local elections of 31 March 2024, he secured re-election with a triumphant 51.14% of the vote, winning a majority on the municipal council on this occasion, too. Meanwhile, İmamoğlu has faced systematic obstruction from the government, including a lawsuit to ban him from politics on spurious grounds. How does he feel about this?

One of İmamoğlu's key strategies has been to focus on projects which directly affect people's lives in areas such as social assistance, free transportation for students, and water discounts aimed at improving the life quality of Istanbul residents.

"I am saddened, deeply saddened. Istanbul is not the jewel of Turkey alone; it belongs to the world. It is a mega-city with opportunities and challenges, and serving this city is a sacred duty. Every time we try to make progress, we encounter an obstacle, which saddens me greatly. If we could use the energy, we expend overcoming these obstacles to address Istanbul's problems in collaboration with those creating the obstacles, we could make this city a place to which the whole world looks. We have lost our collective wisdom under the current administration, and I am very saddened by that."

In Istanbul, a city which faces major traffic problems and potential earthquake risks, solving problems clearly requires both considerable organization and creativity. İmamoğlu states that "obstacles make us more creative" and highlights that the difficulties have forced them to seek alternatives solely to serve the people of Istanbul. Furthermore, İmamoğlu has been saddled with a substantial debt burden since he took office and faced unprecedented restrictions on financial resources from the central government. He has confronted issues such as delayed approvals for foreign loans and funding applications. However, İmamoğlu has sought to strengthen the financial structure of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and secure funding for projects by establishing direct relationships with international financial institutions, engaging with foreign investors, and working to attract investment to Istanbul.

Many Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality infrastructure projects have been delayed or blocked while awaiting approval from the central government. This issue has become particularly acute in critical areas such as transportation and green space development.

İmamoğlu has attempted to finance these projects using local resources and to garner support for his projects by communicating directly with the public. Despite enjoying broad social support in Istanbul, İmamoğlu has faced intense criticism from media outlets controlled by the AKP. To address this, he has made effective use of social media and digital communication tools to interact with the public directly. He also keeps the public continuously updated through municipal social media accounts and digital platforms, thereby maintaining a transparent approach to governance. İmamoğlu frequently emphasizes "I am moving forward with the people, supported by the people". He has also highlighted his inclusive management approach by means of the slogan "the voice of 16 million Istanbulites". He has sought to overcome political obstacles by garnering support from different segments of society. One of İmamoğlu's key strategies has been to focus on projects which directly affect people's lives in areas such as social assistance, free transportation for students, and water discounts aimed at improving the life quality of Istanbul residents. Such initiatives have allowed İmamoğlu to win public trust, despite the obstacles placed in his way by central government, and to continue in office. His response to government obstructionism has thus been to get creative to promote grassroots work aiming at improving citizens' day-to-day lives.

Özgür Özel: Promoting Public Services and Interparty Cooperation as a Path to Victory

While the views of the four mayors provide powerful insights into the position in which the CHP finds itself in the aftermath of the local elections, it is also important to listen to the party leader. CHP chairperson Özgür Özel believes the success the party achieved in the local elections can be sustained in the upcoming national elections. He aims to win public support by demonstrating that the services provided by CHP-run municipalities are more effective than the practices of the AKP-run central government. He supports the development of projects aimed at increasing public satisfaction in the major cities under CHP control, and in particular in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. Özel aims to showcase these success stories across the country to demonstrate that local governments can work for the people not against them, showcasing the CHP as a party that has continued to provide services despite the obstacles placed in their municipalities' way by the AKP administration.

Özel highlights that the pressure the AKP administration has put opposition municipalities under, and the restrictions they have placed on their municipal resources, frequently make life harder for citizens. By doing so, he both underscores the challenges faced by the CHP and explains how they have produced solutions despite these pressures. This situation implies that the CHP is resilient in the face of the central government's obstacles and could provide better services if it comes to power. Özel places importance on sharing the CHP's municipal services directly with the public through social media and local community meetings. Turkey's CHP-supported mayors strive to overcome the central government's obstacles by keeping the public informed, particularly with regard to social assistance, education, and infrastructure projects. His strategy seeks to strengthen the public's connection with local government.

Özel advocates for solidarity not only among CHP municipalities but also with municipalities led by other parties within the former "Nation Alliance (*Millet Ittifakı*)" opposition coalition. This fosters the sharing of experiences and successes in local governance and helps develop a unified opposition strategy. Municipalities that achieve

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success at the local level can serve as powerful proof in future presidential and parliamentary elections of the CHP's readiness to rule the country.

Conclusions

CHP municipalities have employed several key strategies which include: effective political communication that reaches and resonates with diverse demographics; participatory governance that invites local communities to take part in the decision-making process; committing to transparency and accountability, bolstering public trust; upholding transparency, accountability and the rule of law, ensuring fairness in governance; creativity in service delivery, addressing local needs through unconventional means; grassroots engagement, fostering a deeper connection with local populations.

This study delves into the strategic responses devised by key municipalities run by the Republican People's Party (CHP) in Turkey, specifically in the face of challenges posed by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP administration has placed a series of financial, legal, and bureaucratic barriers on local government, with a marked focus on those led by the CHP. These hurdles are part of a broader strategy designed to constrain the ability of these local governments to deliver services, illustrating the AKP's ongoing efforts to preserve its political supremacy.

However, despite these constraints, this research reveals that CHP municipalities have managed not just to sustain but actually to enhance service delivery across their regions through a combination of innovative, creative and practical solution-driven approaches. These municipalities have implemented various methods to gain and retain the trust of their constituents while showcasing effective governance, despite the significant pressure from the central government. CHP municipalities have employed several key strategies which include: **effective political communication** that reaches and resonates with diverse demographics; **participatory governance** that invites local communities to take part in the decision-making process; **committing to transparency and accountability**, bolstering public trust; **upholding transparency, accountability and the rule of law**, ensuring fairness in governance; **creativity in service delivery**, addressing local needs through unconventional means; **grassroots engagement**, fostering a deeper connection with local populations. These tactics have enabled CHP mayors to extend their influence on even conservative voters, who traditionally fall outside the CHP's core electoral base. Despite the AKP's efforts to stymie these local governments, their attempts have not succeeded in halting the growing strength of the CHP at the national level.

The study highlights the fact that the success of CHP-led municipalities could play a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of Turkey's national politics. The CHP's victories in major Turkish cities in the 2024 local elections are emblematic of a growing desire for change, signalling unhappiness with the AKP's prolonged hegemony. These local successes, achieved despite intense pressure from the AKP, have reinforced the CHP's standing locally, but also as part of a broader national political strategy. In this context, the proven ability of CHP municipalities to consistently meet public expectations and deliver efficient governance, despite the obstacles put in their way by the AKP administration, could be critical in shaping future electoral outcomes. Much as in the 1990s, where changes in local government became the precursor to national shifts, CHP-led municipalities may once again serve as the catalyst for political change in Turkey.

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