



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Turkey and Coronavirus: Divided We Stand

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Erdoğan government in Turkey has banned fundraising efforts to fight the coronavirus in municipalities controlled by the opposition. It has frozen the bank accounts of the city of Istanbul and of soup kitchens, shut down hastily constructed coronavirus field hospitals, and cut off free bread distribution—all in opposition-controlled areas. The pandemic has forcefully reminded Turks how divided they remain—a division that is stopping them from coming together to stem a potential catastrophe that is national, not ideological.

Turks often boast about their strong national unity “in good and bad times.” “Dozens of ethnicities came together to win the War of Independence (1920-22),” they learn at school. “The only friend to a Turk is another Turk,” they learn from their elders. Regardless of ideology, ethnicity, or social class, they are equally devoted to their national sports squads. The Crescent and Star, a symbol of unity, is considered a sacrosanct image. The national anthem commands uniform respect: a person might be violently confronted if he keeps walking when others stand still when the anthem is playing.

Yet all that signaling behavior hides a bitter truth: Turks remain deeply and increasingly divided along ideological, ethnic, religious, sectarian, and social lines. The country is even split about whether or not the country is split. A survey in January by Istanbul’s Kadir Has University found that 50.8% of Turks think their society is divided and 49.2% think it is not.

In a 2016 survey commissioned by the German Marshall Fund and conducted by the pollsters Infakto RW, 70.4% of Turks said they thought differences in lifestyle had grown in recent years while 69% thought political differences had grown too. The study found that 83.4% of Turks would not agree to his or her daughter marrying a spouse who supports a “hostile party.” Similarly,

78.4% would not do business with “the political other,” 76% would not accept them as neighbors, and 73.9% would object to their children making friends with children of “the other.”

This deep underlying hostility has dark implications. A study conducted in 2018 by Istanbul’s Bilgi University found that viewing the political other as different, wishing to remain socially separate from the other, and viewing oneself as “morally superior to the other” results in “demands to restrict the rights of the other.”

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has forcefully reminded Turks of their deep underlying divisions. Those divisions are making it impossible for them to come together to fight a potential catastrophe that is national, not ideological.

In an address to the nation on March 30, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan launched a national donation campaign asking wealthier Turks, individual or corporate, to help poorer Turks. The campaign only managed to collect an embarrassing \$245 million from a country of 83 million people, and most of that came from government-controlled companies.

Parallel to Erdoğan’s campaign, mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu and mayor of Ankara Mansur Yavaş tried to launch local campaigns to collect donations to help the poorest in their cities, which are Turkey’s largest. But there was a problem. İmamoğlu and Yavaş are opposition mayors who brought Islamist rule in Istanbul and Ankara to an end last year after 25 consecutive years.

The national government declared that city councils, according to law, must obtain permission from the Interior Ministry to launch money-raising initiatives. İmamoğlu and Yavaş argued that other, government-controlled municipalities were raising donations to help workers and small business owners who had lost their incomes due to the coronavirus. Yes, the government said, but they had obtained permission whereas Istanbul and Ankara had not.

On March 31, Vakıfbank, a state-owned lender, froze the Istanbul municipality’s account, where coronavirus donations had reached \$130 million. “Pathetic” was all İmamoğlu could say. But there was more to come. The Interior Ministry launched criminal investigations against both mayors on charges of illegal fundraising.

“This ban [on municipal donation campaigns] was imposed on orders from Erdoğan,” [said](#) Kemal Kilicdaroglu, leader of the main opposition Republican

People's Party (CHP). "The government has still not recovered from the shock of losing the big cities to the opposition last year," Utku Çakırözer, a CHP member of parliament, [told](#) *Al-Monitor*. "At a time when the entire world is looking for ways to protect their citizens against this calamity, in Turkey alone there is a government that is setting such concerns aside to focus on how it can best prevent opposition municipalities from performing their duties."

In the following days the Interior Ministry banned the CHP-controlled Mersin municipality's free bread distribution campaign even as the Central Anatolian province of Kayseri, which is controlled by the government, distributed thousands of free loaves. In Adana, another CHP-controlled city, the municipality's newly opened field hospital for coronavirus patients was closed down by the government because "it did not have the necessary licenses to operate." In Istanbul's Kadıkoy district, another CHP stronghold, a public concert of "national solidarity songs" was banned by the government. On Apr. 10, the Interior Ministry blocked the bank accounts of soup kitchens run by the CHP-controlled municipality of Eskisehir.

After the coronavirus crisis passes, Turks will continue to proudly chant songs and slogans of national unity. They will keep adoring their flag and national anthem. They will fill the stadiums to root for their national teams. They will still believe the only friend to a Turk is another Turk. And half of them will keep privately hating the other half.

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