



## Turkey: How Not to Handle a Pandemic

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Turkey's official COVID-19 numbers reveal the government's efforts to combat the pandemic as worthy of a *commedia all'Italiana*. As of mid-April, Turkey was the second-worst performer in the world, with 710.46 cases per million people. This is despite the country's possession of a strong health infrastructure.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic a year ago, the nations of the world have fought a near-existential war against the plague of the century. Those battles have had their ups and downs, but the varying approaches taken by different countries revealed their governance capabilities and public administration qualities.

Turkey's COVID-19 story is full of "Turkishness." Despite the country's relatively strong health infrastructure, the survival reflex of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the malfeasance of his government endangered tens of thousands of lives.

From the earliest days of the pandemic, the virus forcefully reminded Turks how divided they are—so much so that they could not come together to fight a nationwide non-ideological disaster. On March 30, 2020, President Erdoğan launched a national donation campaign whereby wealthier Turks, both individual or corporate, would help poorer Turks. In other words, the Ankara government would collect money from the people to help the people. Unsurprisingly, the campaign collected an embarrassingly meager \$245 million in a country of 82 million people—and most of that came from government-controlled companies.

Parallel to Erdoğan's campaign, the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, launched local campaigns to collect donations to help the poorest in those two large cities. But İmamoğlu and Yavaş were

opposition mayors who had ended Islamist rule in their cities the year before after a 25-year run. The Ankara government vented its anger by refusing permission to city councils run by opposition mayors to launch money-raising initiatives. On March 31, Vakıfbank, a state-owned lender, froze the Istanbul municipality's account, where coronavirus donations had reached \$130 million. The Interior Ministry launched criminal investigations against both mayors on charges of illegal fundraising. The government also banned and shut down opposition municipalities' free bread distribution campaigns, a field hospital, a public concert for fundraising, and soup kitchens.

The Erdoğan government's own campaign to fight the pandemic featured the kinds of efforts one might see in *commedia all'Italiana* films of the 1960s. The government launched a "stay at home" campaign but kept workplaces open. The 65+ age group was banned from public travel but not from flying. They were not allowed to go out for groceries but were free to go to the mosque. On a single day (July 9, 2020), during the reopening of the Hagia Sophia mosque in Istanbul, 400,000 worshipers came together for Friday prayers.

Shopping malls were allowed to open, with thousands of shoppers milling around each other indoors, while joggers were fined. Buses and tubes carried millions everyday while taxi traffic was restricted and park benches were removed to stop people from sitting down. The under-20 age group was not allowed out, but five million youths took a centralized university exam.

Eateries could remain open but were not allowed to play music. The only time the government shut restaurants down was during the Muslim month of Ramadan, raising questions about whether the move was aimed at forcing secular Muslims into fasting. "What a virus!" people joked on social media. "It attacks restaurant patrons during Ramadan but not before or after."

For months, the Health Ministry refused to release the number of COVID-19 cases out of fear that doing so would further damage Turkey's already crippled tourist industry and speed up the economic downturn. The ministry instead regularly reported the number of "critical cases in hospitals." Health Minister Fahrettin Koca claimed this was done to "protect our national interests." He pledged that a majority of Turks would get their vaccines by December at the latest, but as of April 2021, only seven million out of a population of 82 million had received their second doses.

While lockdown and curfew were in effect, Erdoğan boasted that his party congresses "attracted stadiums full of party members." While funerals of ordinary citizens were restricted to 30 mourners, funerals of religious leaders and relatives of government bigwigs were attended by thousands.

The official numbers paint a grim picture. Turkey reported a total of 78,829 coronavirus cases for the week of March 1-7. By the week of April 12-18, the number of cases had more than quintupled to 419,436. In the same period, the number of COVID-19 deaths rose 4.3 times, from 461 to 1,987.

According to the official figures, there were 544,931 active coronavirus cases in Turkey by April 18—but Professor Mehmet Ceyhan of the Hacettepe University of Medicine puts the actual number at “at least five million.” That makes Turkey the world’s second-worst COVID-19 performer, with 710.46 cases per million people (Uruguay is the worst, with 826.70). The number of cases per million is 203.78 in the US and 306.48 in the EU.

Partisan politics, political polarization, unscientific Islamist practices, and general governmental malpractice threatened tens of thousands of Turkish lives during the crisis. Erdoğan’s priority is to reverse the economic slowdown, a near impossible task, before it becomes a decisive vote-changer in the presidential elections to take place in 2023.

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