



Revenge of the Pensioners - On the Recent Local Elections in Turkey

by Prof. Efrat Aviv

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,276, June 3, 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The local elections in Turkey at the end of March 2024 had some surprising results. Economic factors were a decisive factor in the relatively low numbers for the ruling AK Party. Pensioners, a growing demographic sector in Turkey, were frequently mentioned during the AK Party's election campaign but were neglected in practice, which was the main reason for the AK Party's failure. In both the near and distant term, it will now be impossible to ignore the rights of pensioners in Turkey.

On Sunday, March 31, 2024, local elections were held in Turkey. In the long months leading up to the March elections, Erdoğan employed all the standard methods to strengthen his position: offering benefits to retirees, launching impressive campaigns, delivering fiery speeches, threatening to crush Israel, and impeding his opponents.

Flush with success from the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2023, Erdoğan was optimistic about his likely victory in the local elections as well, and for good reason. The 2023 electoral success came despite an ongoing economic crisis and breakneck inflation that rose far beyond the official numbers given by the authorities. A victory against that background seemed to mark Erdoğan's undisputed ability to win, both nationally and locally. If Turkey trusted Erdoğan's party and Erdoğan

himself after such an acute crisis, it was reasonable to assume that that support would extend to the local elections as well.

Erdoğan also expected to benefit from a crack that had appeared in the opposition: following its defeat in the general elections, the "[Table of Six](#)" coalition fell apart when the main opposition parties, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İYİ Parti), presented separate candidates for mayoral positions.¹ In contrast, the AK Party and its main partner, the National Action Party (MHP), entered the election in partnership, supporting each other's candidates in key districts.

In addition, these were the first elections contested by the new leader of the CHP, Özgür Özel, a close associate of İmamoğlu, who successfully challenged his predecessor in the position, Kılıçdaroğlu, starting in November 2023. It was difficult to predict the success of the new leader compared to his predecessor, and this doubt also encouraged Erdoğan to believe in his own likely upcoming victory.

The results, in which only 24 AK Party candidates were elected (a decrease of 15 from the previous elections) and 35 from CHP (an increase of 14 from the previous elections), were described as a "spectacular" victory for the opposition. Although it did not form alliances, the opposition managed to keep all the metropolitan heads except for one (Hatay) while winning four other metropolitan cities (as well as several others, some of which have a right-wing conservative character). Only one metropolitan city was not taken from the AK Party.

The CHP's most significant achievement is maintaining the party's power in important metropolises such as Istanbul - about which Erdoğan said a few years ago that whoever wins Istanbul wins Turkey - and the capital Ankara, whose respective representatives, İmamoğlu and Yavaş, were re-elected. This changed the power dynamic elsewhere. The expansion of the CHP's influence beyond its traditional urban strongholds into areas long considered AK Party territory, such as Bursa, Manisa, Adıyaman and more, is the strongest proof of the degree of its victory. Further evidence is the fact that even within Istanbul, conservative neighborhoods like Beyoğlu shifted their support to İmamoğlu. It should be noted that the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara also secured a majority in their

metropolitan councils, granting them more powers and authorities than they had in their previous terms.

For İmamoğlu, this is a great victory. First, the rivalry between Erdoğan and İmamoğlu, who gained great popularity as mayor of Istanbul, a tough metropolis of about 16 million people (likely many more), had begun even before the elections. İmamoğlu was accused of calling the members of Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council "fools" in a press release in response to one of the AK Party ministers calling him that name. This was after the AK Party challenged the initial vote in the 2019 local elections that İmamoğlu had won. In the re-election in Istanbul, İmamoğlu won again and by a bigger margin than the first round. (If his appeal is not accepted, İmamoğlu may face a prison sentence of more than two years as well as disqualification from any political activity, in accordance with the court's decision.)

When such a candidate wins against Erdoğan's candidate, it means one thing: the dictatorship can no longer help Erdoğan defeat a truly charismatic leader. This point is crucial as the Turkish government controls about 90% of the media in the country, which leads to a dominance that has been skewing public discourse in its favor for at least two decades. The opposition struggles to communicate with voters through mainstream channels, has its screen time reduced, and is sometimes silenced completely. Additionally, Turkish law allows journalists and social media activists to be jailed for up to three years for sharing "lies" or "misleading" information, which is of course subject to interpretation and works to the detriment of the opposition.

The silencing and erasure of the rights of the opposition is apparently no longer helpful. İmamoğlu may be a candidate for the presidency in 2028. While Erdoğan asserts that he will refrain from engaging in another election campaign, he might find himself confronted by someone whom he recently attempted to imprison. There is another point that greatly disturbs Erdoğan in the case of İmamoğlu: Erdoğan himself began his political career as the mayor of Istanbul in 1993, a position in which he was successful and gained great sympathy.

The case of İmamoğlu is also important because it proved that after many years of Kılıçdaroğlu's control of the CHP, a younger and more charismatic leader could

undermine that control. It is not impossible that the CHP could have gained more power against the AK Party had there been more contestants like İmamoğlu in previous election cycles. It used to be thought that Erdoğan meets the theoretical definitions of a charismatic leader who derives his success from extremely high self-confidence and strong communication skills. Since Turkish citizens typically vote for a leader rather than for a party or ideology, it can be deduced that Erdoğan's successful years were facilitated by the absence of a formidable charismatic challenger. However, when such a challenger emerges, Erdoğan's party experiences a decline. The loss of the elections reflects not only the CHP's strategy but also the fragmentation of Erdoğan's power and a decrease in voter turnout.

Also, the success of a faction more extreme than the AK Party, the New Welfare Party (YRP), the Islamist party of the late Erbakan, shows a level of dissatisfaction among Erdoğan's own electorate. Some Kurds, too, preferred to give their votes to representatives of other parties, which again hurt Erdoğan's party. Beyond that, there was a decrease in the general voting percentages, which were only 78% compared to the previous years. Commentators hold that most abstainers were AK Party supporters.

It appears that the economic issue is what tipped the scales in these elections. The question now is whether in the next general election the people will again settle accounts with the AK Party government over the economy. On the other hand, it is possible that because these were local elections that do not pose a danger to the AK Party government, and because it was not Erdoğan himself but his representatives on the ballot, this vote reflected a desire to improve the economic situation and not necessarily a desire to harm Erdoğan. Another reservation about the economic factor is reflected in the vote for the AK Party in earthquake-stricken areas such as Gaziantep, which, despite claims of poor government treatment, remained loyal to Erdoğan.

How are the elections related to pensioners?

In the period leading up to the elections and especially in the days immediately before them, Erdoğan made the issue of pensioners a main topic in his election speeches and promised them dividends and rewards. The issue was seen as so

important that Erdoğan declared 2024 the "Year of the Pensioners". The current economic situation has affected pensioners perhaps more than anyone else. The drop of the Turkish lira and high inflation dramatically reduced their purchasing power. In light of this, the government took steps to raise pensioners' standard of living, such as increasing minimum monthly allowances, promising to equalize most pension payments by July, granting the right to free travel on public buses and subways, and other rights.

Why is it crucial to court the votes of pensioners? In the current elections, while 1.15 million 18-year-old voters participated for the first time, a significant 2.1 million individuals who retired last year also cast their votes. There are thus more retired voters than young voters in the electorate. Such a trend aligns with the demographic shifts occurring in Turkey. While Turkey was previously perceived as a "young" country, demographic changes over the last decade have been notable. The proportion of elderly individuals in the population of 85 million reached 10% in 2023, and this proportion is expected to continue to increase. At present, the pensioner vote comprises approximately 16 million citizens. Furthermore, with the 2023 pension law amendment, Turkey has opened the door to retirement at a relatively young age for a total of 5 million people within a decade, potentially increasing the number of retirees to 20 million before 2030.

In the run-up to the elections, Erdoğan attempted to improve pensioners' financial situation through a series of increases starting in January 2024. The pension for retirees was increased three times, but even after the increases, the amount remains below minimum wage. Turkish pensioners must tolerate many injustices and violations of their rights: for example, if civil servants from any sector receive a salary increase, this does not affect pensioners of that sector. Retirees receive a third of the salary they would have received while still working due to a cut in their allowances. The demand is to increase it to two-thirds of their original salary.

It appears that pensioners will emerge as a critical issue not only in the upcoming elections but throughout the next decade of Turkish politics. Erdoğan (as well as the opposition) will need to allocate more resources to the concerns of pensioners than they have done thus far. It is evident that, particularly at the local level, pensioners are highly dissatisfied with the performance of AKP representatives in their cities.

Erdoğan expressed regret over the election results, which were characterized as a "disaster" for the ruling party. In his first address following the elections, he stated that he and his party would take measures to hear and respond to the messages conveyed by the Turkish nation. He emphasized that "wherever we lose or lag behind, we will carefully identify the reasons and take necessary actions."

Will this setback prompt Erdoğan to adopt a more authoritarian approach to bolster his power further, or will he seek or be compelled to revise his stances on religious and social issues? It is quite possible that one of the first things to occur following this defeat will be the advancing of a constitutional amendment proposed by Erdoğan in October 2022 that aims to abolish the constitutional limit preventing a president from serving more than two terms.

In the interim, and subsequent to the lifting of the veto on Sweden and Finland's NATO accession, Erdoğan received an invitation for an official visit to the White House for the first time since Biden assumed office. Will this visit serve as consolation for Erdoğan regarding the election results? All possibilities are open.

Prof. Efrat Aviv is a senior researcher at the BESA Center and a s an associate professor in the Department of General History at Bar-Ilan University.

¹ In local elections in Turkey, voters choose three office bearers in a normal district city and five office bearers in a city that is considered a metropolis, of which there are 30 out of 81 districts in Turkey.