

Türkiye's Ongoing Autocratic Crackdown is Paving the Way for a Compromised Election

What Happened?

Ekrem İmamoğlu, mayor of İstanbul and the main opposition party Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi's (CHP) **candidate for the Turkish Presidency**, was jailed three weeks ago and later **arrested on corruption and terrorism charges**, sparking protests and outrage from the opposition.

Significance

Although İmamoğlu was the Presidential candidate for the CHP, he was widely recognized by the general Turkish opposition to be a unifying actor across all opposition parties for the upcoming presidential elections. Several polling agencies, including those known to have links to the current Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) government, had shown that **İmamoğlu would beat Erdoğan** in a two-candidate race. His arrest signals that Erdoğan will pursue any means possible to avoid facing him in the 2028 elections, on top of the revocation of his diploma right before his arrest – which İmamoğlu is required to have by Turkish law to participate in the Presidential elections.

Analysis

Two Birds with One Stone

The Turkish Presidential elections are not going to be held until May 2028, but Erdoğan is seizing an opportune moment to crack down on his most serious competition. Likely directed by Erdoğan himself, leader of the Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP) Devlet Bahçeli had called for negotiations with the imprisoned Partiya Karkeren Kurdistanê (**PKK**) leader **Öcalan for the militia group to lay down their arms** in late 2024, and Öcalan called for the group to disband in February 2025. Although both Bahçeli and Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi (DEM) officials, rejected that the PKK or DEM would get something in return for PKK's disbandment, **Erdoğan is likely to have promised concessions to DEM under a new constitution**. In exchange, DEM would not only have to convince Öcalan to disband the PKK, but also to support the new constitution in parliament. Having transformed the country to a semi-presidential system in 2016 with a new constitution, **Erdoğan is now seeking another constitution** – or an amendment – to be able to continue his 20 years of rule after the 2028 elections.

While DEM was already an outlier party among the Turkish opposition, Erdoğan isolated it further through this maneuver, marking it as a collaborator from the opposition's perspective. Although the CHP had unofficially worked with DEM in the previous elections, both parties had received significant criticism from their respective hardliners for collaborating with 'fascists' and 'terrorists' respectively. Having sown the seeds for the opposition's division, Erdoğan is now enjoying the lack of DEM voters on the streets.

The Judiciary and İmamoğlu's Future

Erdoğan has long held significant influence over the Turkish judiciary, consolidating his already concentrated power in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, where hundreds of thousands of government workers, including prosecutors, judges and others were purged with allegations of ties to the Gülen movement. Put simply, **İmamoğlu's fate most certainly depends on Erdoğan's decision**, and so far there has been no indication that he intends to free İmamoğlu.

Erdoğan's Türkiye has been dealing with severe inflation for over five years now, alongside significant capital outflows. İmamoğlu's arrest certainly did not inspire confidence among foreign investors, as the USD/TRY exchange rate spiked from 36 to 38 overnight. Yet the damage is already done, and most investors that have so far remained in the country were aware of the extent of politically motivated arrests already.

Although there has been an official statement made by the European Union (EU) that expressed concern over the arrest, the rapprochement between Türkiye and the EU does not seem to have been significantly affected. Security concerns of the EU over shaky trans-Atlantic relations are likely contributing to a level-headed approach towards Türkiye. On the other side of the Atlantic, Trump is not too concerned with İmamoğlu's arrest either, as it was only mentioned in passing by Marco Rubio, who merely stated that they were aware of allegations that it was politically motivated.

While the lack of a strong international reaction is not encouraging for the future of İmamoğlu, Erdoğan likely would not have changed course even in the face of threats of sanctions or similar measures. Survival comes first for Erdoğan, and İmamoğlu's candidacy has been identified as a threat by him, and rightly so.

The Opposition's Alternative and the Path to 2028

Prior to the announcement of İmamoğlu's candidacy, the CHP had been involved in a process of selecting a single party candidate that would not face competition in the closed primaries. Mansur Yavaş, the current mayor of Ankara, was the only serious alternative to İmamoğlu. Although Yavaş has a strong base among the nationalist leaning voters, due to

his stance on the PKK and his “Ülkücü” (Turkish ultra-nationalist) past, he was not favored by the Kurds and the left-leaning minority within the CHP.

As it stands, **Yavaş is likely to be the actual candidate of the opposition in the upcoming elections.** While the CHP continues to protest for İmamoğlu’s freedom, Yavaş will not want to disrupt the party line any time soon, but an eventual campaign announcement is likely in the long run, with İmamoğlu announcing his support for Yavaş.

Takeaways

- While protests continue, a divided opposition and strong repression by the state will weaken the protestors’ resolve over time
- İmamoğlu is not likely to be released soon, and will not be able to participate in elections
- Erdoğan seeks a new constitution, and will likely move to vote on it soon while the opposition remains distracted
- Yavaş might eventually take over the opposition’s candidacy, with support from İmamoğlu