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THE BATTLE OF ISTANBUL

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It doesn't often happen that local elections attract so much international attention. On 31 March Turkey had an appointment with the ballot boxes to elect its mayors but there was much more at stake than municipal leadership. The controversial decision of the Electoral Commission to rerun the Istanbul mayoral election has made this even clearer. At the very least, this might be called an exceptional situation. The Turkish analyst **Sinan Ulgen** describes it as the litmus test for Turkish democracy. The recount confirmed the victory of the opposition candidate, Ekrem İmamođlu, with a margin of several thousand votes but, three weeks after he took over as mayor, the Electoral Commission's decision sent things back to square one. Tensions are at boiling point.

“Whoever wins Istanbul, wins Turkey” is an old saying. Nevertheless, in this case, it's not about winners but losers. The obsession over not losing control of the country's main city can be explained by a number of very different causes but all of them have one point in common: a feeling of vulnerability.

The 2023 presidential elections are still a long way off. Moreover, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan could have chosen to say that the defeat in Istanbul wasn't his defeat but that of the local candidate. On the national scale, he could have boasted that his coalition had won the elections. He could have chosen to wait until İmamođlu and other opposition mayors were worn down by the attrition of exercising power. After all, it is probable that local governments, too, will have to make budget cuts if there is a sustained economic recession. And if the wear and tear of office out were not enough, the power of the state apparatus should have sufficed to silence critical voices. Yet it seems that this wasn't the plan. This, then, is one more proof that the feeling of vulnerability is even greater than we thought.

Erdoğan and his parties are worried by underlying currents of public opinion and their translation into politics. So far, Erdoğan has constructed his leadership around allusions to popular support and his ability to win elections. However, in Istanbul and other big cities that have gone over to the opposition, unease and dissatisfaction have been expressed about the authoritarian way the country is being governed. Also to be taken into account is the economic downturn: soaring inflation, wage moderation, youth unemployment, and increasing inequalities.

Turkey is the third most unequal country in the **OECD**. But in these elections, the vote was not only against the system but also in favour of a new way of doing politics. İmamoğlu presented himself as approachable, transparent, conciliatory, and attached to the diversity of this great metropolis with some sixteen million inhabitants of very different origins, creeds and lifestyles. Nobody is unaware of the fact that, among the many who voted for him, there were people who on other occasions had voted for the pro-Kurdish HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party).

Erdoğan is a politician with a fine-tuned sense of politics. And a good memory too. He, more than anyone, is aware that governing a city —and even more so if that city is Istanbul, of which he was mayor from 1994 to 1998— can be a springboard into national politics. Until a few months ago İmamoğlu wasn't a well-known figure in Turkish politics but he has been able to capitalise on his reputation as a good administrator, which he built up during his successful management as mayor of the middle-class district of **Beylikdüzü**. Above all, he has stood out as an excellent orator who went out among the people and campaigned in the neighbourhoods, speaking with residents about local problems while his rival, the former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, always accompanied by the President, kept pointing out enemies of the fatherland and resorting to the discourse of fear.

Losing Istanbul could also be a blow for the ruling party AKP (Justice and Development Party) in both economic and reputational terms. The **budget** of the mayor's office (\$7.3 billion) exceeds that of some ministries. A very significant part of this budget is earmarked for meeting the costs of construction of infrastructure and provision of services. And it is well known that many of the urban construction and service companies are linked with the business network close to the AKP. One of many examples is **Albayrak Holding**, a family business that has been contracted for Istanbul's biggest infrastructure projects for decades. The fear that cases of corruption and nepotism will start coming to light now that the opposition has taken over the City Hall has been a major factor in the resistance against losing the city.

In his more difficult moments, Erdoğan has opted for a show of strength, which has allowed him to control his party, the state and the country. One of the main fears was that defeat in the municipal elections, and especially if Istanbul was lost, would bring to the surface criticism from members of his own party who, although having been side-lined, haven't dared to confront the President directly for fear of reprisals. Yet, the decision to repeat the election has also opened up cracks within the AKP. Figures like **Abdullah Gül**, co-founder of the AKP and a former President of Turkey, and **Ahmet Davutoglu**, who is well known as the architect of the new Turkish foreign policy and a former Prime Minister, have openly criticised the government's performance and have taken a stand against repeating the election. In this regard, Erdoğan and his advisors had to choose between two bad options and, faced with the dilemma, decided to ignore the party's old glories.

At the global level, another point should be considered. Turkey seems to be joining a **trend** that is being observed in other parts of the world, from the United States to Italy, in which cities and their political representatives are acting as a bulwark of resistance to the authoritarian tendencies and entrenchment of national leaders. This tendency was indicated by the results of 31 March and is something that a good part of the power structures in Turkey seem ill-disposed to tolerate.

The battle of 23 June will be an unequal one. When Turkey held its presidential elections one year earlier, **Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı** described them as unfair but real and competitive. The same thing happened on 31 March and hence the very high level of participation. Now that the opposition has discarded the option of boycott, it can only trust in its own strengths and ability to mobilise its supporters as well as AKP voters who don't approve of the party's recent drift. They can't afford

to lose hope because this battle will mark the country's political future since it is not only a matter of who wins but how. At this point, it seems that Erdoğan will do whatever it takes to keep Istanbul, even if he has to pay the price of a huge loss of reputation, fuel citizens' mistrust of the institutions, and keep on deepening divisions in the country. If he goes ahead with this strategy, the defeat of his rivals will be heroic and his victory shameful.