



## Turkish President Erdogan's Ruling Party Suffers Unprecedented Local Electoral Defeats

An unexpected blow was dealt to Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in recent local elections, in which the country's main opposition party achieved a monumental upset. The party won majorities in key areas of Turkey, shifting the political landscape across the country in their favor. The opposition party, known as the Republican People's Party (CHP), had received 37.8% of the overall vote – handing Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) a defeat as they had received 35.5% of the overall vote. This is the AKP's worst defeat in its 22-year history. Furthermore, according to *The Economist*, these figures in their totality mask the truly sizable nature of the CHP's victories in Turkey's largest cities, where the win margins were particularly significant. In Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, the city's CHP incumbent mayor, trounced his AKP rival by winning 51.1% of the vote to his opponent's 39.6%. Additionally, in Ankara, Turkey's capital and second-biggest city, the CHP incumbent mayor Mansur Yavas utterly defeated his AKP opponent by 29 percentage points. The CHP also made important inroads in regions near the Black Sea and central Anatolia, traditionally areas under the AKP's sphere of influence. In this way, these elections are deemed to hold important implications for the political landscape of Turkey. In fact, Evren Balta, a professor at Ozyegin University, expressed that "the electoral map of Turkey has been transformed," emphasizing that this election cycle marks a departure in Turkey's political structure and forebodes possible changes down the line.

These local elections were a surprising turn of events considering that Erdogan had just consolidated his power in last year's general elections, and the latest results may expose a slip in his hold on power. Experts contend that they symbolize a wider dissatisfaction with Erdogan and the status quo, providing a gauge for both the president's support and the opposition's durability. This signals a potential turning of the tide in Turkish politics, as it marks the first time since Erdogan came into power that his party was defeated at the ballot box nationwide. Critics suspect that if his party had succeeded, it would have encouraged him to amend the constitution so that he could alter the term limits on the presidency. However, the election results demonstrated public discontent with Erdogan, indicating that such actions would likely be resisted. Another important insight gained from these elections is the revelation that political competition may be possible in Turkey. The election highlights the emergence of a Turkish political party that can oppose the AKP, a development that many analysts hope will have a positive effect on the country's democracy.

For some CHP supporters, the latest election results established candidates for the next general election that may have a chance when running against Erdogan. Various observers believe that the CHP did not fare well in last year's general election due to the candidate they put forth against Erdogan. This election, however, has solidified CHP Leader Ozgur Ozel and Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu as potential rivals to Erdogan, paving a clear path for the CHP to run in the 2028 presidential election. Erdogan himself was a former mayor of Istanbul, and formed a brand of populist nationalism which helped catapult him to prominence. Istanbul is an important city, as it is home to 20% of Turkey's population and produces more than 30% of the country's economic output – including trade, tourism, and finance – making it an excellent breeding ground for up-and-coming politicians. In a speech given after his victory, Imamoglu told his supporters "Starting from tomorrow, Turkey will be a different Turkey. You opened the door to the rise of democracy, equality, and freedom...You ignited hope at the ballot box." The speech appeared to serve as a signal of optimism for the Turkish people that their democracy was alive and well. In

response to the defeat, President Erdogan acknowledged that the election had not gone as he had hoped, and promised that he would make changes so that voters were satisfied with his performance.

The evident improvement in the election results for the CHP has much to do with the economic downturn experienced in Turkey. Despite interest rate increases of more than 40%, the annual inflation in Turkey is approaching 70%, an issue that is compounded by Erdogan's inability to offer further economic concessions to his voters. This economic pain seems to be a notable sticking point for voters, and may have driven some AKP members away from casting their ballots. Another factor that played a role in the upset was the strong showing of New Welfare, an Islamist party that drew votes away from AKP candidates due to voters' disillusionment with the party. The CHP, under new leadership, also attracted many voters by building broader coalitions and identifying more closely with their voter base. The results stand in the face of Erdogan and the AKP's extensive grip on the machinery of the state and the media. Imamoglu conveyed his hope that the latest election results would serve as an example of how opposition parties and voters can unseat politicians despite a regime's suspected illiberal practices, commenting that the election "marks the end of democratic erosion in Turkey and the resurgence of democracy...people oppressed under authoritarian regimes now turn their gaze to Istanbul." Experts argue that Turkey's political horizons have been broadened as a result of these recent elections, and that the increased competition witnessed could mean an evolved governmental landscape for the country.