



[Arrest of Istanbul Mayor Sparks Mass Protests in Turkey](#)

Mass protests have erupted in Turkey over the past week after the controversial arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu. The demonstrations are the largest that the country has seen in more than a decade, and have sprung up across provinces in at least two-thirds of the nation. Many contend that the detainment is politically motivated, noting that the timing of it coincides with Imamoglu's emergence as the official 2028 presidential candidate nominee for the main Turkish opposition party – the Republican People's Party (CHP) – with the Istanbul mayor widely regarded as the most viable rival to current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The arrest has triggered such a large-scale public reaction because it also comes amid a months-long crackdown against political opposition figures in Turkey, dozens of whom have been jailed pending trials under questionable circumstances. In light of this, analysts view the latest detainment and the mass demonstrations that have followed as a significant moment and test for the state of Turkish politics.

Critics of the current Erdoğan government deem its arrest of Imamoglu to be the latest – and certainly most aggressive – attempt to tighten the regime's grip on power. Experts point out that while the Turkish political system has had its shortcomings and flaws, the arrest of the main opposition figure in the country on dubious charges is a particularly concerning development. It strongly suggests that the Erdoğan government perceives its popular support is declining, and thus, has made the calculation to take this type of risky action and hope that the purported reasoning behind it is enough to maintain the political status quo. In an effort to try and defend the actions that they are taking against Imamoglu, government officials have claimed that the Turkish judicial system functions as an independent entity. However, even prior to the arrest of Imamoglu, some skeptics of the regime had already been proclaiming during the preceding years that President Erdoğan was initiating measures aimed at eroding democracy like limiting negative coverage in the news media and appointing loyalists as state prosecutors and judges.

Those that are uneasy over the ongoing political climate in Turkey have also voiced their alarm by highlighting the recent moves that the government has made against perceived opponents and critics. Various business sector members, journalists, elected officials, and others have been detained and, often times, indicted on suspicious charges. Since October of last year alone, authorities have removed multiple Istanbul district mayors on accusations of corruption and terrorism, replacing at least one of them with a government appointee. Istanbul Mayor Imamoglu himself appears to have especially elicited Erdoğan government pushback due to his increasing popularity. He was initially elected mayor in what was viewed as an upset victory back in 2019, and was able to win by an even larger margin in a redo election after the government got the results thrown out over alleged voting irregularities. Then, last year, Imamoglu was re-elected after defeating a candidate backed by Erdoğan while his CHP party also outperformed the Turkish president's party in the capital city of Ankara, therefore seemingly solidifying his position as a serious threat to the incumbent leader of Turkey. The efforts to smear Imamoglu's political standing and plant the seeds for trying to justify his arrest appear to have been in motion for a while now, with all of this culminating in what transpired last week. It is perhaps unsurprising then that amid news of his detainment, Imamoglu's alma mater Istanbul University also announced that it had annulled his degree, something that if upheld, would disqualify his ability to seek the presidency as well.

The Turkish government's heavy-handed response to the mass protests has seen more than 1,400 people detained, including journalists, students, and lawyers. Human rights groups have [criticized the arrests](#) and the manner in which authorities have used force to suppress the demonstrations. Even before the outbreak of these recent protests, many of these organizations – similar to Erdoğan regime critics – had been seeking to draw attention to the troubling developments taking place at the expense of human rights and the rule of law in the country. In fact, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has submitted binding judgements regarding several human rights violations which they argue that Turkish authorities have either rejected or ignored. Meanwhile, the Erdoğan government has claimed that the ongoing protests are “illegal” as its justification for carrying out thousands of arrests and exerting control over the media. Ultimately, it will be worth monitoring whether or not circumstances quell in Turkey over the coming days and weeks or if conversely, the widespread disapproval of the government's actions snowballs and continues to grow.