

# COVID-19, POPULISM, AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN TURKEY

*COVID-19 hit Turkey in the middle of an economic crisis and a rivalry between Erdoğan's populist government and opposition mayors, particularly Istanbul mayor İmamoğlu. The pandemic's impact on this rivalry will depend on how their support groups are affected. Citizens' increased tolerance of submission to a central authority and their increased dependence on economic assistance could contribute to Erdoğan's position, while a lack of available funds to distribute would threaten it. Meanwhile, İmamoğlu has successfully been using certain elements of populism like his rival, but with more concern for democracy and sustainability. If he retains his popularity, the nightmare of the ruling party may come true: İmamoğlu could run against Erdoğan in the 2023 presidential elections with a good chance of winning.*

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**O**ne of the most striking trends in world politics over the past decade has been the rise of populist governments. In their best form, they gave a voice to the non-elites and expanded participation, while in their worst, they prioritized short-term popularity over the long term interests of the society and centralized politics, at the cost of liberal rights and freedoms. With the COVID-19 outbreak and its transformation of all aspects of social life, social scientists cannot help but consider the political consequences of the pandemic, such as its possible impacts on populist governments. Would the financial and administrative expansion of the state during the pandemic reinforce populist leaders' tendencies to centralize power? Or would the economic downturn due to the pandemic limit the distributive capacity of populist leaders and curb their ability to forge "authoritarian bargains" with voters where economic benefits are exchanged for rights and liberties?<sup>1</sup> Are municipalities going to become more significant in the management of the pandemic, due to easier access to local needs, or will central governments maintain their dominant role?

The Turkish case provides some answers. Recent developments in Turkey suggest that the pandemic impacts populist rulers based on how their distributive and mobilization capacity are affected.

The COVID-19 outbreak hit Turkey in the middle of a major economic crisis and a fresh political rivalry between the central government and opposition municipalities that marked the 2019 municipal elections and their aftermath. Particularly significant was the victory of the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP, Republican People's Party) Istanbul candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu, who ended the more than two-decades-long control of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP, Justice and Development Party) in Turkey's largest city.<sup>2</sup> In fact, this was also a rivalry between two forms of populism: the AKP's populist rule, which had taken an authoritarian turn over the previous decade, was now contested by a more positive form of populism embraced by İmamoğlu who prioritized delivering to underrepresented groups and mobilizing the masses while at the same time promising re-democratization.

Gauging how the pandemic will affect Turkey's populists in power and the opposition's chance to replace them requires taking into account the particular context of the COVID-19 outbreak and how both parties' support groups were affected. Citizen's increased tolerance of submission to a central authority due to the rising

<sup>1</sup> See Raj Desai, Anders Olofsgard, and Tarek M. Yousef, "The Logic of Authoritarian Bargains," *Economics & Politics*, Vol.21, No.1 (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Before 2019, Istanbul municipality was run either by Erdoğan (between 1994-1998) or by someone from his party. Before Erdoğan founded the AKP in 2001, he was a member of the *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party) and then its successor, *Fazilet Partisi* (Felicity Party).

need for coordinating collective action as well as increased dependence on economic assistance could contribute to President Tayyip Erdoğan's position. However, the fact that the outbreak took place during an economic downturn which limited available funds to distribute is bad news for Erdoğan. On the other hand, Istanbul mayor İmamoğlu remains committed to his successful use of positive populism during the pandemic. This strategy involves addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups, although through more thrifty and sustainable ideas, while at the same time promoting political participation through pandemic-safe new means such as online voting, which energizes his voters. If İmamoğlu continues to retain his popularity during the pandemic, the worst nightmare of the ruling party may come true: he could run against Erdoğan in the 2023 presidential elections with a good chance of winning.

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### ***The Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic***

COVID-19 caught the AKP on the back foot. The AKP had already been suffering from declining public support, which manifested itself in the loss of ten cities to the CHP in the 2019 municipal elections. The loss of Istanbul municipality was the most dramatic because of the unique symbolic and economic importance of the city for Turkish politics.

The AKP's declining support was mainly due to the post-2016 economic crisis, which decreased the government's ability to extend economic benefits to its voters. As a populist party, the AKP relied heavily on its capacity to transfer funds to voters in order to maintain public support. Declining levels of democracy, especially since 2013, were tolerated by voters as long as the government continued to redistribute. In other words, the AKP had forged an authoritarian bargain with citizens where economic benefits were exchanged with liberal rights and freedoms. Thus, the unstoppable economic decline since 2016 affected the AKP more negatively than the many obstacles it faced during its rule, including mass protests, a corruption scandal, and a coup attempt.

Populist governments are notorious for adopting short-term oriented economic

policies that bring popularity for the moment but have high costs in the long run for the larger society. The AKP ambitiously pursued such policies including privatization of profitable state enterprises, pressuring interest rates, aggressive development and redevelopment of land, or toleration of tax evasion. These policies, which brought revenues and popularity in the short run, became unsustainable over time. Since 2017 the rise of the inflation rate could no longer be reversed and the depreciation of Turkish lira hit records, especially following political tensions between the US and Turkey between 2016 and 2018.<sup>3</sup> Between 2017 and 2019 growth rate dropped from 7.4 to 0.8 percent.<sup>4</sup> Companies with foreign debt went bankrupt and the unemployment rate exceeded 13 percent in 2019.<sup>5</sup> Income inequality began to increase again (reaching a Gini score of 41.9 in 2018) in contrast to the first two terms of the AKP when it had a negative trend.<sup>6</sup> With declining tax revenues and an increasing current account deficit, the government became less capable of distributing funds, which harmed its popularity irreparably.<sup>7</sup>

The economic decline's negative impact on the AKP votes was enhanced by the opposition's successful campaign strategy during the 2019 elections. İmamoğlu's campaign reflected an especially carefully planned strategy of avoiding the opposition's past mistakes and making the most out of the incumbents' weaknesses.<sup>8</sup> This strategy also demonstrated a realization that for democrats to beat populists they needed to borrow some of the latter's strategies and combine them with the goals of liberal democracy. Accordingly, İmamoğlu adopted the positive qualities of populism such as increasing representation and delivering to the needs of the disadvantaged, while avoiding negative qualities such as culturally divisive discourses and political centralization. He steered clear from counter-polarization along the secularism-Islamism cleavage and focused instead on the economic decline experienced by the masses. He was also careful not to directly confront or accuse Erdoğan, to avoid re-consolidation around the AKP. Instead, he directed his criticism to a vaguely defined "system of waste that has been ruling the country for more than a quarter century." As his campaign advisor Necati Özkan explains, this discourse of

<sup>3</sup> Cem Cakmakli, Selva Demiralp, Şebnem Kalemli-Özcan, Sevcan Yesiltas, and Muhammed A. Yildirim, "Covid-19 and Emerging Markets: An Epidemiological Model with International Production Networks and Capital Flows," *NBER Working Paper No: w27191* (2020), [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3603823](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3603823)

<sup>4</sup> The World Bank, "GDP growth (annual %) – Turkey," <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2019&locations=TR&start=2015>

<sup>5</sup> Statista, "Turkey: Unemployment rate from 1999 to 2020," <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263708/unemployment-rate-in-turkey/>

<sup>6</sup> The World Bank, Gini index (World Bank estimate) – Turkey, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=TR>

<sup>7</sup> According to Heritage Foundation's Economic freedom index, government spending decreased considerably since 2016, see: <https://www.heritage.org/index/country/turkey>

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed study of İmamoğlu's campaign strategy see Seda Demiralp and Evren Balta "Defeating Populists: The Case of 2019 Istanbul Elections," presented at Populism, Democracy, Security Conference at Işık University, 10- 11 December 2020, Istanbul.

waste worked brilliantly because it was vague enough to avoid direct confrontation with Erdoğan—as opposed to the corruption accusations made by the opposition in the past—but clear enough to resonate with average citizens.<sup>9</sup> Also, “waste” instead of “corruption” highlighted the opportunity cost of public funds which could have been spent for the interests of average citizens while “corruption” rather signaled unethical behavior, which was irrelevant for many citizens unless it hurt their interests directly.<sup>10</sup> İmamoğlu’s campaign highlighted that the short-term oriented populist policies of the AKP had reached a limit. Pressure on interest rates led to high inflation, conflict with West led to a free fall of the Turkish currency, and the rents obtained from an aggressive privatization of public land could not be sustained in the long run. The luxury high rises, new airports, bridges, canals and other pet-projects of the government-accrued costs for the general public. Cronies’ gains were the losses of average citizens. In short, never directly confronting the AKP government or Erdoğan, but targeting a vaguely defined “system of waste,” İmamoğlu was able to attract voters who still liked Erdoğan but wanted to express their disappointment with the economic problems they observed.

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Still, İmamoğlu’s victory did not come easily. Pro-government media channels stopped broadcasting election results around 23:00 when İmamoğlu was just forging ahead. Shortly after, the AKP candidate Binali Yıldırım gave a victory speech, despite the CHP’s public statement that İmamoğlu was winning based on the Supreme Election Council’s (SEC) data. The next morning when the SEC finally declared that İmamoğlu was ahead (by 0.5 percentage points), the AKP officials declared that they detected irregularities and were prepared to object to the results. With pressure from the AKP, the SEC decided upon a rerun in Istanbul. İmamoğlu reacted strongly to the situation, while once again avoiding direct accusations against Erdoğan or his government. At many public meetings he spoke to millions who looked up to

<sup>9</sup> Necati Özkan, *Kahramanın Yolculuğu* (Istanbul: MediaCat, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> A 2014 Konda Survey showed that 40% AKP voters believed in the corruption accusations but supported their party anyway. See “Yolsuzluk ve Ekonomik Durum Algısının Seçmen Tercihlerine Etkisi [Impact of Perceptions of Corruption and Economic Conditions on Voter Preferences],” at <https://konda.com.tr/tr/rapor/yolsuzluk-ve-ekonomik-durum-algisinin-secmen-tercihine-etkisi/>

him, his target was always and only the SEC. It was clear that the government was behind the SEC's decision, but this fact was strategically omitted in his speeches. Thus, İmamoğlu was able to make the most out of the injustice he faced without falling into the trap of polarization which could have scared off the AKP voters he had attracted.

In the end, the cancellation of the elections turned out to be a big mistake for Erdoğan. Only further alienating AKP's already disillusioned voters, rerun elections brought İmamoğlu a larger victory (by 10 percentage points). This time, the ruling party accepted the result. This was the first defeat of the AKP since it came to power in 2003 and its significance for the opposition was phenomenal.<sup>11</sup> The possibility to defeat the incumbents through elections had become a possibility again. Even though it was only a municipal election, this victory excited the opposition tremendously because of the unique symbolic and economic role of Istanbul in Turkish politics. As a microcosm of Turkey, political trends in Istanbul typically predicted national trends and winning in national politics was hardly possible without winning the hearts and minds of Istanbulites. In the eyes of many, the popularity of İmamoğlu quickly surpassed that of his party's leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and was even perceived to stand a chance against President Erdoğan in the 2023 presidential elections. After all, if he could win Istanbul back, anything was possible.

### *The COVID-19 Outbreak and Turkish Politics*

As students of Turkish politics carefully observed the aftermath of the 2019 elections as a possible re-start of a multi-party period, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Turkey. The pandemic did not distract observers from the new rivalry between the AKP government and the CHP's Istanbul mayor. Rather, attention shifted to how both sides responded to the crisis within the limits of their powers.

Following the diagnosis of the first COVID-19 patient in Turkey on 11 March 2020, the government responded with a partial lockdown. Within days, schools were shut down, group meetings were canceled, and most offices moved their employees to work from home. International flights were canceled, Turkish citizens abroad were brought back home, and curfews were initiated. By the end of March, elderly citizens, children, and youths younger than 20 were prohibited from leaving their homes. The next month, weekend and holiday curfews began for the rest of the population, and restaurants, hair salons, and movie theaters were shut down. Social distancing was implemented on public transportation and the use of masks was mandated in public spaces.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to Istanbul, some other larger cities including Ankara, Antalya, and Adana moved to CHP as well.

With these measures came various problems. In addition to the primary requirement for healthcare facilities and personnel, there were also other urgent needs. Since day one, there was a shortage of affordable masks and hand sanitizers. For elderly people who could not get out of their homes, delivery of food and other basic items was a necessity. People who could not work due to the pandemic needed economic assistance. Students from low-income families needed affordable internet access and technological devices to keep up with distance education.

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The government announced a stimulus package on 18 March in response to the pandemic.<sup>12</sup> In addition, tax obligations, social security premiums, and credit payments were postponed by government decree. The limits of the Credit Guarantee Fund were increased to make bank loans more accessible. The government also extended income support to needy families as well as workers whose income was affected due to the pandemic. However, government funds allocated to pandemic-related costs were low by international standards: while in Turkey government spending for COVID-19 constituted about 5 percent of GDP, the average was 10 percent among G20 countries.<sup>13</sup>

As government funds remained short in assisting citizens affected by the pandemic, the municipalities stepped in. As soon the pandemic broke out, Istanbul municipality responded by distributing masks at metro entrances. This worked wonders because wearing masks on public transportation was required but there was a shortage of masks. The limited supply of masks was sold at high prices and was hard to find. The government’s solution had involved firstly banning the sales of masks (to avoid excessive profiting from mask sales) and distributing them itself. However, it was a clumsy system that failed quickly. Eventually, the government found no other solution than allowing masks sales again, this time with a ceiling price. The problem was finally resolved with mask supply meeting the demand, but until then the municipality became the main agent that provided a practical solution.

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<sup>12</sup> Cakmakli et al., “Covid-19 and Emerging Markets.”

<sup>13</sup> Cakmakli et al., “Covid-19 and Emerging Markets.”

Istanbul municipality also started a donation campaign on 30 March to fund food packages and cash support for the elderly and the needy. The campaign received major interest from the citizens, as more than 10 million Turkish liras were collected in only one week.<sup>14</sup> However, the government reacted quite negatively to the campaign. On 2 April Erdoğan delivered a speech stating that municipalities were no longer allowed to collect donations, that this was the central government's job, and that he would not allow non-governmental institutions to act like a "state within a state."<sup>15</sup> While İmamoğlu and other opposition mayors defended the legality of their action, all donation accounts were frozen by government decree.<sup>16</sup> Erdoğan declared that from then on, donations would be collected by the Presidency's own campaign: *Biz Bize Yeteriz Türkiyem* ("We are self-sufficient, my Turkey").<sup>17</sup> Going a step further, the ministry of interior affairs started an investigation against mayors who collected donations.

The government's reaction to municipalities' donation campaigns reflected its deep concern with the prospect of losing the urban poor to the opposition. Extending funds to the poor in return for political support had been the key strategy of the populist rule of the AKP, and municipalities had been important agents of its redistributive mechanism. Thus İmamoğlu's (and other mayors') control of this tool was deemed too risky. İmamoğlu responded with his usual strategy of indirect confrontation. He used the situation to prove that if the opportunity had not been taken away from him, he would have delivered more benefits to the citizens. Yet again, he avoided direct accusations against Erdoğan. Instead, he targeted the banks which froze donation accounts, calling the situation "a dark stain in the history of banking."<sup>18</sup> His discourse was polarizing just enough to mobilize discontented citizens, but not too much to cause consolidation on the rival side. İmamoğlu followed up with another maneuver and organized a new campaign. With the new *askıda fatura* ("paying bills forward") campaign, citizens who wanted to help the needy would go ahead and pay some of their utility bills (gas, water, or electricity). Because no money would be going directly into the municipality's accounts, this campaign escaped the restriction imposed by the government.

<sup>14</sup> "İmamoğlu'na bir haftada 500 bin kişi bağışta bulundu [500,000 people sent donations to İmamoğlu in one week]," *Sözcü*, 17 May 2019, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/imamogluna-bir-haftada-500-bin-kisi-bagista-bulundu-4839849/>

<sup>15</sup> "No point in being a state within the state," *Duvar English*, 1 April 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/politics/2020/04/01/no-point-in-being-a-state-within-the-state-erdogan-says-on-main-oppositions-coronavirus-donation-campaigns/>

<sup>16</sup> "Interior minister launches probe into Istanbul mayor," *Duvar English*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/politics/2020/04/17/interior-ministry-launches-probe-into-istanbul-mayor-over-collection-of-donations-against-coronavirus/>

<sup>17</sup> "Erdoğan launches national campaign against COVID-19," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-launches-national-campaign-against-covid-19-153428>

<sup>18</sup> "Istanbul and Ankara mayors under probe over COVID-19 aid campaign," *Arab News*, 18 April 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1660696/middle-east>

As the pandemic continues, İmamoğlu goes on with delivering to the needs of his target constituencies, especially the youth and women. In addition to reducing transportation fares for students and providing free transportation for women with small children, the municipality has also been working to support both groups in joining the work force. Employment desks (*İstihdam ofisleri*) in various parts of the city helped connect the supply and demand side of the work force, guiding young people toward the needs of industry and, when possible, helping them to land available jobs. In addition, the municipality provided new job positions too, promising 200,000 jobs in five years. During the pandemic, 14,000 people have been placed in jobs, with half of them at the municipality.<sup>19</sup> Quotas for female metro and bus drivers, a position traditionally filled by men in the past, have presented an example where both goals—creating jobs and supporting women—have been met.

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During the pandemic, İmamoğlu also has had the opportunity to make his environmentalist agenda more relevant to a larger proportion of the society due to the increased need for open spaces. During his election campaign he had heavily criticized the aggressive development of green spaces as a result of rent-driven policies. This environmentalist approach, which resonated more with middle- and upper-class citizens in the past, appealed to wider audiences during the pandemic. Since he took office in June 2019, İmamoğlu directed the opening of two city forests to the public; this received major interest from various social groups especially when access to closed spaces has been banned or limited since March 2020.

Finally, İmamoğlu has continued political mobilization during the pandemic despite the fact that citizens have been mostly confined to their homes. In addition to heavily using social media to show how the municipality works during the pandemic, and turning the lockdown into an opportunity to fix the infrastructure of the city, İmamoğlu also introduced direct democracy via online voting for the implementation of certain city plans. Following a contest to design plans for Istanbul’s historical

<sup>19</sup> Ekrem İmamoğlu, “FOX TV’de İsmail Küçükkaya’nın salgın gündemiyle ilgili sorularını yanıtlıyorum [I answer İsmail Küçükkaya’s questions about the pandemic agenda.]” YouTube Video, 11 September 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkqu1fuDdOI>

Taksim and Bakırköy squares, as well as the coastal zone in Salacak, the top plans were opened to online voting. Citizens were asked to send their votes through a municipality website for their favorite design projects.<sup>20</sup> This democratic experience energized voters, not only because it was such a rare opportunity, but also because it gave Istanbulites a feeling of political efficacy in the context of a highly restricted political environment that had become even more dull during the pandemic.

### *Prospects of Turkish Politics*

With three more years until the presidential elections, and the pandemic presenting unexpected challenges every day, what the future holds for Turkish politics is uncertain. Political theories suggest that if a leader stays in power for longer than three terms, his chances of leaving office through elections decline considerably.<sup>21</sup> A change then becomes more likely through external shocks such as the death of a party leader, a war, an economic crisis, or a natural disaster. Turkey's unstoppable economic decline since 2016 has presented a shock of the kind that led to the AKP's first (partial) defeat in the 2019 municipal elections. The pandemic may present an additional shock by placing an economic burden on the government and eroding the already limited funds available for redistribution, thereby chipping away at a main pillar of the AKP's populist rule.

The opposition which finally found a leverage point against the AKP in the 2019 elections is working hard to use this opportunity to prove its ability to govern. Eyes are especially on the performance of Ekrem İmamoğlu as a possible figure to lead the opposition in the near future. So far, İmamoğlu has been playing wisely. His response to the pandemic reflects a continuity of his successful election strategy: combining positive aspects of populism with democracy. He is making smart moves and avoiding dead ends; but more importantly, he is pushing the government to make mistakes, which is perhaps his main winning strategy. According to a recent SONAR survey, İmamoğlu was chosen as the most appreciated mayor during the pandemic and it hardly came as a surprise.<sup>22</sup> The future holds many unknowns, but if the current trend continues, it appears that even if the central government survives the pandemic, its rivals will come out stronger than before.

<sup>20</sup> "İstanbul senin, karar senin [Istanbul is yours, the choice is yours]," [istanbulsenin.org](http://istanbulsenin.org)

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Geddes, "Authoritarian Breakdown: Empirical Test of a Game Theoretic Argument," paper presented at APSA (September 1999).

<sup>22</sup> "İstanbul's İmamoğlu most successful mayor in handling COVID-19: Poll," *Duvar English*, 29 July 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/domestic/2020/07/29/istanbuls-imamoglu-most-successful-mayor-in-handling-covid-19-poll/>