

# THE REPEAT MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS OF ISTANBUL, 2019: A NEW BEGINNING FOR ISTANBUL AND DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY

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## ABSTRACT

The Istanbul repeat elections held on June 23, 2019 re-solidified the electoral defeat of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in a major election. Earlier, the March 31, 2019 municipal election had already resulted surprisingly with the AKP's loss of major provinces and metropolitan municipalities, Istanbul and Ankara in particular, to the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and its party-allies of the Nation Alliance. The CHP's candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu won even more decisively this time, with more than 54% of Istanbul's voters. These wins in the municipal and repeat-Istanbul elections provide an opportunity for a new democratic onset in Turkish politics. The CHP-led municipalities of Turkey in general, and the Istanbul municipality by İmamoğlu in particular, have the potential to become the driving force of a new wave of democratization in Turkey. This policy paper aims to lay out clearly some steps to be taken for that direction.

**Keywords:** Turkish Politics; Municipal Elections of Turkey 2019; Istanbul Repeat Elections (2019); Ekrem İmamoğlu; Nation Alliance

### 1. The background of June 23, 2019 Istanbul repeat elections

Istanbul electorates have elected conservative, right-wing metropolitan municipality mayors for almost a quarter century. A win of Istanbul by the Republican People's Party (CHP) has almost felt like a miracle for liberal-democratic and urban-secular generations for quite some time. In such a context, Ekrem İmamoğlu's win of Istanbul on the CHP ticket, even with the additional support by voters of the Good Party (*İyi Parti*, İYİ) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) on March 31, 2019 and his even more decisive win in the Istanbul-only repeat elections of June 23 the same year came as a surprise. What was a surprise for the opposition came as a major political shock for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the two, ruling right-wing parties of the People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*): the conservative/Islamist Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) and the radical right Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP).

President Erdoğan has been ruling the country almost single-handedly particularly after the partisan presidential referendum of 2017. Retrospectively, Erdoğan and the AKP's rule goes back to 27 years for the national onset and 19 years for the actual executive office. His political rise started out with the 1994 municipal elections, in which he won Istanbul on the Islamist Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP) ticket. In later years, Erdoğan founded his own AKP in 2001, won his first general election in 2002, and ruled the country with the AKP's upsurges and declines ever since.

Erdoğan's initial rise to municipal then executive powers in 1994 and 2002 respectively corresponded to a time period in which center politics in Turkey had collapsed altogether (Tosun, 1999). The two former secular center-right parties Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) and True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*, DYP), as well as the three center-left parties, Social Democratic Populist Party (*Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti*, SHP), Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Parti*, DSP) and the former CHP led by Deniz Baykal, had bankrupted both electorally and politically back in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the very years of the rise of political Islam in Turkey. As the center politics lost its electoral and political appeal, the AKP filled in this big vacuum left by former traditional actors in Turkey. In fact, İmamoğlu's rise in Istanbul corresponds to a new 'times' in which it is the AKP now losing its credibility and clout in both local and national politics after all these 25 years.

After March 31, the AKP's inner circles raised conspiracy theories about the municipal elections, and the process of pressure on the Supreme Election Board (*Yüksek Seçim Kurulu*, YSK) was initiated. President Erdoğan did not accept the electoral defeat, and consequently, the AKP applied to the YSK and demanded a re-run of the Istanbul metropolitan election on a series of accounts, including fraud and 'irregularities' during the voting process. This process included a recount of votes in two districts of Istanbul, Maltepe and Küçükçekmece, a recount of votes in all Istanbul districts, as well as an extraordinary appeal to the YSK over the appropriateness of officials during the election process. Eventually, as an extension of the pressure held on the YSK by President Erdoğan and the AKP, the YSK cancelled the Istanbul metropolitan elections in isolation, and rescheduled a repeat election for Istanbul metropolitan only on June 23, 2019.

The period between the two elections was critical, especially the post-Ramadan break period, which corresponded to the last two weeks before the election date. Not only the conditions of the elections were quite different, but also the language and psychology of the two elections campaigns changed considerably from March 31 to June 23. The first difference of conditions was about the number of parties and independent candidates to

contest in the Istanbul metropolitan elections. A significant number of political parties, mostly fringe parties, announced to withdraw from the Istanbul repeat elections either neutrally or with an endorsement of İmamoğlu on the grounds of the unfair YSK decision for its cancellation of Istanbul metropolitan elections.

The political atmosphere of the opposition bloc in Turkey seriously changed upside down with the March 31, 2019 municipal elections for the better. For the last few years, the opposition actors and electorates have been exhausted of consecutive electoral disappointments, electoral defeats to the AKP's and Erdoğan's favor. The switch of major provinces from AKP or MHP to the CHP, plus the Ankara and Istanbul wins by CHP, paved the way for the opposition's pessimism (the feeling "the AKP and Erdoğan will never be defeated with democratic elections") to turn towards optimism (the opposite feeling that the AKP and Erdoğan can be democratically-electorally defeated). It is fair to argue that this optimistic feeling by the opposition actors under the leading wave of İmamoğlu did not change much from March 31 to June 23 municipal elections.

## 2. Changing electoral conditions from March 31 to June 23: withdrawn parties and candidates

This repeat Istanbul municipal election was not the first 'repeat' or 'snap' election of its kind in Turkish electoral history. A similar situation came up when the AKP lost its majority of seats in the national assembly, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*, TBMM) in the June 7, 2015 general elections. As the Kurdish left HDP surpassed the 10% national electoral threshold with 13.1% of national votes and 80 out of 550 seats and the AKP's number of seats remained below the necessary number (276) to continue a single-party government, Erdoğan and the MHP's chair Bahçeli pushed for a second election, which was held on November 1, the same year.

Several experts expected similar results of June 7 with the November 1 elections, but almost all of the polling companies and experts failed to predict the results of the second election. Due to the changing political conditions such as the breakdown of the Kurdish peace process in between the two elections, the AKP's national vote share increased from about 40.9% to 49.5%, and the politics reverted back to AKP's rule once again. Bekir Ağırdir, the chair of the KONDA, a well-respected polling company, who also failed to predict the November 1 outcomes, pointed a significant factor that everybody missed from one election to the other: electorates saw November 1 as the second round of June 7.<sup>1</sup> For instance, right-wing voters who punished the AKP by voting for other right-wing parties like MHP, SP and BBP most probably returned to the AKP from the first to the second (repeat) election in 2015. This time, however, there were quite different conditions, and the second specific election for the Istanbul metropolitan mayor definitely did not work to the AKP's advantage.

Some of the candidates who ran for Istanbul metropolitan mayor on fringe parties' tickets or as independent candidates on March 31 withdrew from the Istanbul repeat elections of June 23. The very first party that withdrew its Istanbul candidate was the Communist Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi*, TKP) and its candidate Zehra Güner Karaoğlu. The formal statement by the TKP stated that the cancellation of the Istanbul metropolitan elections was a decision not by the YSK but by Erdoğan. In a direct confronting response to this this behavior, the TKP withdrew its candidate instead of boycotting the elections.<sup>2</sup> Even though the TKP did not openly endorse İmamoğlu directly and even encouraged its voters not to vote in the repeat elections decisively<sup>3</sup>, this was a maneuver mostly to work for İmamoğlu's electoral benefits on June 23.

Other fringe parties pursued a similar electoral strategy of withdrawing their İstanbul candidates, following the TKP's path, openly or indirectly to İmamoğlu's electoral advantage. Muammer Aydın, the Istanbul candidate from the DSP, announced on May 12 that he resigned from the candidate position.<sup>4</sup> He received 30,817 votes, which corresponded to 0.36% of the votes for the Istanbul metropolitan on March 31.<sup>5</sup> It was reasonable to expect the voters of both TKP and DSP to strategically vote for İmamoğlu and against Yıldırım on June 23 due to the relative ideological closeness of these parties as different tones of the left in Turkey.

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<sup>1</sup> Kemal Göktaş, *Cumhuriyet*, "KONDA Genel Müdürü Bekir Ağırdir: HAYIR başarabilir" [KONDA Chair Bekir Ağırdir: The 'No' Can Succeed], January 23, 2017,

[http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/664078/KONDA\\_Genel\\_Muduru\\_Bekir\\_Agirdir\\_HAYIR\\_basarabilir.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/664078/KONDA_Genel_Muduru_Bekir_Agirdir_HAYIR_basarabilir.html)

<sup>2</sup> *Cumhuriyet*, "TKP, İBB Başkan Adayı Karaoğlu'nun Bir Dahaki Seçime Aday Olmayacağını Açıkladı" [TKP Declared Its Candidate Karaoğlu Would Not be a Candidate in the Next Election], May 6, 2019,

[http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/1380830/TKP\\_iBB\\_Baskan\\_Adayi\\_Karaoğlu\\_nun\\_bir\\_daha\\_ki\\_s\\_e\\_cime\\_aday\\_olmayacağını\\_acıkladi.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/1380830/TKP_iBB_Baskan_Adayi_Karaoğlu_nun_bir_daha_ki_s_e_cime_aday_olmayacağını_acıkladi.html)

<sup>3</sup> *Gazete Duvar*, "TKP Haberi Sert Tartışma Çıkardı" [TKP News Caused a Harsh Debate], June 17, 2019,

<https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2019/06/17/tpk-haberi-sert-tartisma-cikardi/>

<sup>4</sup> *Sözcü*, "DSP'nin İstanbul Adayı Muammer Aydın Adaylıktan Çekildi" [DSP's İstanbul Candidate Muammer Aydın Withdrew from Candidacy], May 12, 2019, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/muammer-aydin-adayliktan-cekildi-4768806/>

<sup>5</sup> *NTV*, Municipal Election Outcomes, March 31, 2019, <http://secim.ntv.com.tr/istanbul-yerel-secim-sonuclari>

The other fringe parties that withdrew their Istanbul metropolitan candidates include the conservative, right-wing Independent Turkey Party (*Bağımsız Türkiye Partisi*, BTP) and its candidate Selim Kotil, the center-right Demokrat Parti and its candidate Ersan Gökğöz, the left-wing Laborist Movement Party (*Emekçi Hareket Partisi*, EHP) and its candidate Özge Akman, and the Communist Movement of Turkey (*Türkiye Komünist Hareketi*, TKH) and its candidate Aysel Tekerek. On the other hand, two significant fringe parties decided to go ahead and put forth their Istanbul metropolitan candidates again in the Istanbul repeat election: the right-wing, religious-conservative Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*, SP) and its candidate Necdet Gökçınar and the secular-nationalist Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*, VP) and its candidate Mustafa İlker Yücel.<sup>6</sup>

The reason for the SP's electoral strategy of maintaining its candidate is a bit complicated. On the one hand, even though both the SP and AKP have similar origins in Islamist, religious revivalist politics, the two parties also represent a historical divorce at a critical crossroad. The common descendent of these two parties is the National Vision (*Milli Görüş*) movement of the late 1960s and mostly 1970s, represented by Necmettin Erbakan's earlier parties in the past.<sup>7</sup> As Turkey had its first election with an Islamist party winning in 1995 and its first Islamist-led 'Refahyol' coalition government (1996-97), the then hardliner secularist Turkish Armed Forces (*Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri*, TSK) initiated a process of attack on the coalition and its related conservative/religious circles, a process known as 'Turkey's Postmodern Coup of 1997' or the 'February 28 Process'. It was at these times that the National Vision was divided into traditionalist SP evolving into electoral fringes and reformist AKP turning into the dominant party since 2002. All in all, the AKP and SP constitute a divorced couple relationship because of a shared history.

This relationship between the two parties evolved into a bitter reciprocity in which both parties had fundamental, existential problems with one another. Ideologically, they continued to share some policy advocacies such as heavy industrialization, religious education/freedoms, prohibition of population control as well as allowing headscarf in public space. However, they also tended to diverge on some other issues such as the AKP's embrace of neo-liberal economics as opposed to the National Vision's and thus SP's anti-Capitalism, also the former's advocacy for better relations with the West (US, EU) and Israel in contrast to Erbakan's strong anti-West and anti-Israel attitudes (Atacan, 2005: 188).

The SP, with the most recent leadership of Temel Karamollaoğlu, took an entirely confrontational path against the AKP, almost aligning itself with the parties of the secular left and right. The SP participated in the Nation Alliance before the June 24, 2018 general and presidential elections, and then it was bombarded with harsh criticisms for aligning with its historical foes by the pro-AKP circles.<sup>8</sup> This bombardment went to the extent of associating the SP with the left-most party of Turkey, the Kurdish leftist HDP and even the illegal Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), considered a terrorist organization on legitimate accounts.<sup>9</sup>

The AKP and Erdoğan overestimated their own electoral clout before the March 31 elections, and looked down on the SP using a truly humiliating vocabulary.<sup>10</sup> In the repeat elections, the SP did not pardon this behavior, and consistently rejected to withdraw its candidate to Yıldırım's favor despite an allegedly systematic pressure on the SP to do so.<sup>11</sup> Abdullah Sevim, the SP spokesperson, mentioned that this pressure was not at a threat level but at the levels of thankfulness in advance, begging and request.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, the difference of votes between the

<sup>6</sup> Onur Erem, *BBC News*, "İstanbul Seçimi: Hangi Partiler 23 Haziran'da Seçime Girecek, Hangileri Çekildi?" [Istanbul Election: Which Parties Will Participate on June 23rd, Which Ones Withdrew?], June 10, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-48202445>

<sup>7</sup> These parties include National Order Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*, MNP), National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*, MSP), Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP) and Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*, FP).

<sup>8</sup> *A Haber*, "İşte Saadet Partisi'nin de Zillet İttifakında Yer Aldığının Kanıtları" [Here is the Evidence for the Felicity Party's Participation in the Zillet Alliance], March 3, 2019,

<https://www.ahaber.com.tr/gundem/2019/03/03/iste-saadet-partisinin-de-zillet-ittifakinda-yer-aldiginin-kanitlari>

<sup>9</sup> *Sabah*, "HDPKK ile Saadet Partisi'nin Kirli İttifakı Deşifre Oldu" [The Dirty Alliance Between the HDPKK and the Felicity Party is Uncovered], March 14, 2019, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2019/03/14/hdpkk-ile-saadet-partisinin-kirli-ittifaki-desifre-oldu>

<sup>10</sup> *Cumhuriyet*, "Saadet Partisi Adayı Necdet Gökçınar: Deniz Bitti Erdoğan Gidiyor" [Saadet's Candidate Necdet Gökçınar: It's Over, Erdoğan is a Goer], May 26, 2019,

[http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/1411049/Saadet\\_Partisi\\_adayi\\_Necdet\\_Gokcinar\\_Deniz\\_bitti\\_Erdogan\\_gidiyor.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/1411049/Saadet_Partisi_adayi_Necdet_Gokcinar_Deniz_bitti_Erdogan_gidiyor.html)

<sup>11</sup> Bahadır Özgür, *Gazete Duvar*, "Saadet İl Başkanı Sevim: Seçimden Çekilmemiz için Ciddi Baskı Var" [Saadet Provincial Chair Sevim: There is a Serious Pressure for Our Electoral Withdrawal], June 18, 2019, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/video/2019/06/18/istanbulun-secimi-saadet-il-baskani-sevim-secimden-cekilmemiz-icin-ciddi-baski-var/>

<sup>12</sup> *TV5*, "SP İstanbul İl Başkanı Abdullah Sevim: Binalı Bey Adaylıktan Çekilsin, Gelin Bizi Destekleyin!" [SP İstanbul Provincial Chair Abdullah Sevim: Let Mr. Binalı Withdraw, and Support Us], June 20, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IC0NtmdwAzk>

two major candidates in the repeat election was high enough to overshadow any marginal contribution from the SP to be a game-changer.

The other party that did not withdraw its Istanbul metropolitan candidate was the Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*, VP), a unique political group of its own with a hardliner secularist and a radical Turkish nationalist, anti-Kurdish politics, shortly called “ulusalçı” (neo-nationalist, national-itarian). This is a party that first took a distance to the AKP government, but later aligned with the People’s Alliance in the context of fighting the Gülen movement, also known as the Fethullahist Terror Organization (*Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü*, FETÖ) after the failed coup of July 15, 2016. All in all, the VP’s decision to put forth its candidate again had zero influence on İmamoğlu’s winning chances in the repeat election.

### 3. Tri-polarization and the changing electoral behavior of conservative voters

The political sociology of Turkey originates from a socio-political fault line inherited from the late Ottoman legacy, which Mardin (1973) refers to as the center-periphery cleavage. In his analysis, Mardin adapts Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) sociological theory in the explanation of the Western European party politics to Turkey and Turkish party politics. In this context, the center-left CHP party tradition has represented the political center in Turkey, often urban, highly educated, Western-oriented, secular, Kemalist<sup>13</sup> and Jacobin social strata. As opposed to the center, the right-wing parties since the 1950s<sup>14</sup> have represented the peripheral strata, more rural, more traditional, social conservative, lesser educated, and more pious. Kalaycıoğlu and Davison use the term *kulturkampf* in their differentiation of these two distinct social strata. In particular, the ‘secular’ *kulturkampf* refers to the center while the ‘revivalist’ *kulturkampf* is the periphery side (Kalaycıoğlu, 2005: 50-53; Davison, 1998: 18-50). Despite the depth and divergence of the two camps in terms of their worldviews and lifestyles, these differences have waned if not totally disappeared, and the two sides not only borrowed from each other but also resembled one another over time.

The decade of the 1970s is a special one with regard to the CHP’s relations with the periphery in particular. It was during this decade that the CHP came up with a new, young leader Bülent Ecevit, and connected to the periphery with a new, left agenda that applied to both national and municipal politics. Ecevit represented a significant break from the former party leadership by İsmet İnönü, as Ecevit was pro-civilian and anti-militarist in domestic politics criticizing the 1960 and 1971 military interventions, with a leftist agenda of his own. While İnönü brought a left-of-center (*ortanın solu*) agenda to the CHP, it was Ecevit who became the party ideologue with his theoretical studies on the devise of ‘democratic left’ (*demokratik sol*) in Turkey (Ecevit 1966, 1968, 1975, 1976, 1977). These periods were, however, halted with a military coup in 1980 that not only crushed the left but also changed everything radically in Turkish politics, including the CHP and Ecevit.

The 2000s experienced a strong electoral upsurge and political rise of Islamist revivalism in Turkey with the collapse of the center-left and center-right, together with a quite socially discredited military political heritage. For most of its multi-party period, Turkey was known as a right-leaning society with about 35-40% of its national votes for the left and 60-65% for the right. This picture became more complicated with the emergence of an ethnic cleavage in Turkey in later years, particularly the 1980s, the Turkish-Kurdish cleavage. While the MHP has represented the radical right Turkish nationalist heritage, the HDP party tradition has represented the Kurdish left and identity politics since the early 1990s. With these parties at national politics, Turkey’s national politics has come to be composed of four major poles on two basic axes most recently: Kemalist/secular CHP, pious/conservative AKP, Turkish right-wing MHP and Kurdish left-wing HDP.

During the late years of the AKP dominant-party period, Turkey’s electoral dynamics have demonstrated a trend of tri-polarization, however. This trend started after the June 7, 2015 general elections in which the AKP lost its majority of parliamentary seats for the first time since 2002. The AKP could have the general elections ‘repeated’ with the MHP’s support back then, and the former restored its single-party government with the November 1 elections held the same year. The following years witnessed the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016 and the subsequent state of emergency period for almost two years, and later the MHP’s push for a Turkish-type,

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Kemalist’ refers to the follower(s) of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, and the radical, top-down renovations under his lead during the early Republican years, the 1920s and 1930s. These renovations include the abolition of the sultanate and the caliphate, proclamation of a new republic, secular mixed education, a secular constitution and secular judicial system, enfranchisement of women and the adoption of a new Latin-based alphabet.

<sup>14</sup> These right-wing parties include Demokrat Parti of the 1950s, Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP) of the 1960s and 1970s, True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*, DYP) and Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) of the 1980s and 1990s, and most lately, the AKP.

authoritarian partisan presidential system. The 2017 referendum allowed this new system to pass with some electoral doubts,<sup>15</sup> yet the two parties came even closer due to their joint support for the new system.

This AKP-MHP rapprochement later evolved into a conservative/Islamist and Turkish nationalist alliance, which called itself People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*). This alliance represented an amalgamation of a reformed, Islamic, revivalist major vein by the AKP and an ultra-nationalist, anti-Kurdish radical right vein by the MHP, in a nutshell, a Turkish-Islamist synthesis alliance. A second, alternative alliance consisted of politically centrist and urban-secular Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*) with the center-left CHP and a newly founded center-right Good Party (İyi Parti, İYİ). A third significant bloc consisted of the Kurds; non-conformist, leftist Kurdish voters in particular, currently represented by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).<sup>16</sup>

Initially, this tri-polarization trend might seem to be benefiting the People's Alliance first and foremost. After all, Turkey has proven to be a right-wing, conservative society at least electorally since the 1950 general elections. The state-founding CHP lost its single-party status after the transition to multi-party elections in this year, and the CHP, which later evolved into a center-left political identity, could never have the electoral opportunities to win elections and govern decisively. There were a few electoral moments in which the CHP reached electoral peaks earlier, such as the 1973 and 1977 elections, but even back then it did not have enough parliamentary seats to govern as a single party. Furthermore, Istanbul, as a metropolitan, has demonstrated a conservative profile for the last 25 years as right-wing conservatives have been winning since Erdoğan was elected the metropolitan mayor on the RP list in 1994.

While the two right-wing parties were deciding to form the People's Alliance, their leadership cadres most probably hoped that the combination of two parties would create a synergic effect, and one plus one would be making more than two.<sup>17</sup> The traditional vote shares of the two parties, AKP and MHP, have made 60% plus most of the recent elections, after all. However, this alliance created a reverse synergy effect almost immediately, and it was observed at the very early times of the alliance that it would not be sustainable even in the medium run. The leaders of the People's Alliance have promised to people several times that the new partisan presidential system would be a solution to several chronic problems of Turkey over the years, including the economic problems. However, the new system proved to be a failure on almost all fronts due to its extreme centralization and administrative inefficiency.

The previous AKP voters and conservative electorates behaved differently this time also because of their 'conscience' regarding the unfairness of the cancellation of the Istanbul metropolitan elections only. After all, both the regular municipal and repeat-Istanbul elections demonstrated that conservative electorates were sophisticated enough to be able to split their tickets between the CHP's candidate İmamoğlu for the Istanbul metropolitan and the AKP's candidates for their local assemblies in the same election. In short, several conservative voters were observed to differentiate their votes between two adversary parties this extensively for the first time, which was the indicator of a rather not naïve but smart citizenry.

It is this conscience of conservative voters that contributed to the change of long-standing right-wing electoral balance in Turkey towards the political center if not left. The initial signs were observed during the 2017 partisan presidential referendum in which large metropolises and conservative districts of Istanbul voted heavily 'no', which was a strong indicator that not all conservative right-wing voters were on the same page with the People's Alliance. The ticket-splitting electoral behavior in the same electoral regions with the 2019 municipal elections, in a way, reinforced this critical, sophisticated thinking by urban conservative voters in Turkey.

Even the İmamoğlu-Yıldırım televised debate, a first in years, failed to change the electoral waves into a particular direction. Turkish audiences had been used to televised political debates back in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Leaders of political parties have taken their parts in both state and private television channels before parliamentary elections. Similarly, municipal candidates of metropolitan areas like Istanbul and Ankara have participated in televised debates before municipal elections. Nevertheless, the dominant party system period led by the AKP government since 2002 has paved the way for a change in this tradition. The last time then PM Erdoğan participated in a televised debate with Deniz Baykal, the CHP chair and his major opponent at the time, was back in 2002 before the general elections of the same year. Since then, Erdoğan did not participate in any other confrontational debate with any of his political adversaries in televised debates. The İmamoğlu-Yıldırım debate

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<sup>15</sup> The referendum ended up with a weak, barely passing yes vote (51.41%), which was strongly questioned at the time due to the decisions by the High Election Board (YSK) such as allowing the non-stamped ballots, as many as 1.5 million, to be accepted as valid votes. Both the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) criticized the YSK's decision and declared it to be illegal.

<sup>16</sup> *Bianet*, "Bekir Ağırdir: Karşımızda Üç Parçalı Türkiye Var" [There is a Tri-partite Turkey Before Us], June 7, 2018, <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/197955-bekir-agirdir-karsimizda-uc-parcali-turkiye-var>

<sup>17</sup> Esin Işık, *Anadolu Agency*, "Cumhur İttifakı'nın Oyu Yüzde 52'nin Üzerinde Olacaktır" [People's Alliance's Vote will be Above 52 Percent], March 23, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/cumhur-ittifakinin-oyu-yuzde-52nin-uzerinde-olacaktır/1426481>

had its own restrictions, and it did not provoke any controversial debates or witness any major gaffes by the candidates, so it remained far from affecting the repeat elections.

#### 4. How the CHP-led municipalities and Istanbul could lead democracy in Turkey

Given the electoral defeat of the AKP in municipal and repeat Istanbul elections, new political trends and developments are experienced in Turkish politics. First and foremost, the AKP gave birth to two new, splinter parties. One of these two splinter parties came from the leadership of Ali Babacan, the former minister of state in charge of the economy in the previous AKP administration. The other came from the former Prime Minister and former foreign affairs minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as the AKP's PM (2014-2016) earlier but was suspended from his PM position with conspiracy in 2016. The Babacan-led group united under the Democracy and Progress Party (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi*, DEVA), whose abbreviated title DEVA is a reference to the term 'remedy'. Davutoğlu's group formed the Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*) in December 2019 and DEVA followed a few months later in March 2020. Future Party gives the impression of a parallel conservative-Islamist alternative to the AKP while DEVA has strived to provide a moderate, liberal-democratic, even secular, center-right profile. Both parties and leaders have criticized strongly and challenged both President Erdoğan and the AKP over the months.

How these two parties will eventually reshape the future of elections, politics and democracy in Turkey is yet to be seen. All in all, these two parties are expected to hurt the unity of the AKP's electoral base one way or another. Some experts are also voicing the potential challenging nomination of Ekrem İmamoğlu as a quite strong alternative to Erdoğan in the next presidential elections, but the current times are too early for such predictions. What İmamoğlu and the CHP need now is a success story in municipal politics for long-term credibility for leading Turkey's democratic turn in the upcoming years, with utmost patience for slow steps.

Apart from potential new developments in Turkey's party politics, the Istanbul metropolitan municipality in particular has captured a rare opportunity it should not waste after quarter century. The last time this party tradition achieved a widespread electoral victory in Turkey was the 1989 municipal elections, but this opportunity was wasted badly back then. This older experience of the CHP is known as the '1989 trauma', and the CHP chair Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu recently mentioned that, as a warning.<sup>18</sup> The CHP's predecessor, the SHP, had a big win back in the 1989 municipal elections, by securing victory in the three metropolises of Turkey, İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir. However, a series of bad policies and corruption scandals ruined the SHP's popularity in the following elections later. Eventually, the 1989 win turned into a big loss of opportunity in later years. In a way, the 2019 municipal election is a replica of the 1989 elections with the same big electoral victories, 30 years later for the first time. Therefore, this opportunity must be carefully used with good and effective municipal policies, also by taking lessons from the recent past.

Of course, what a municipal government could do is more restricted than what a central government could in national politics and policy making. After all, the clout of a mayor's office is hardly comparable to that of the actors in control of the executive offices in general, and of President Erdoğan in particular. However, the position of the Istanbul metropolitan chair is still hard to underestimate. With significant and radical changes towards democratic local governance and successful social policies the mayor's office can accomplish, both İstanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipalities as well as other urban municipalities (İzmir, Antalya, Adana, etc.) possess the potential to contribute to both municipal governance and democratization in Turkey.

In fact, the municipalities possess the potential to influence social policy at least in their area of influence if not national politics. Therefore, successful policies in Istanbul, Ankara and elsewhere are naturally expected from new local administrations, a must for changing the course of Turkey's electoral history and political future. Of course, one of the very initial priorities is good and effective public service, which applies to a variety of public domains. These domains include technology and infrastructure, easing traffic problems, health and education/training services, reduction of excessive spending, employment opportunities, youth and sports services, arts and cultural activities, support of women's activities and facilities, as well as humanitarian welfare programs and ecology-friendly urban planning.

Independent of good social policy and public services, the CHP-led Istanbul municipality and İmamoğlu could sow the seeds of a new type of left-progressive politics in Turkey, which has long been lacking in the country. This novel left path of politics should be all-embracing, innovative, depolarizing and narrative-breaking. In the context, the priorities of this new politics must include: (1) an objection to neo-liberal mentality and policy in urban politics, (2) pursuing ecological directions in civic actions, and (3) prioritizing services for women, youth as well as the Kurdish and Alevi communities. These three routes are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they overlap largely in the context of a carefully planned set of progressive policies in harmony.

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<sup>18</sup> Nergis Demirkaya, "Kılıçdaroğlu: '89 Travmasını Yaşamak İstemiyoruz [We Do Not Want to Experience the '89 Trauma], *Gazete Duvar*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/politika/2019/06/26/kilicdaroglu-89-travmasini-yasamak-istemiyoruz/>

One of the legacies of the AKP-led municipalities, particularly in Istanbul, is the destruction of Istanbul's urban fabric with neo-liberal policies. The over-dominance of the AKP in Istanbul with consecutive municipal electoral victories (five absolute wins in five-year elections in 1994-2019) encouraged the AKP mayors and PM then President Erdoğan to take bolder steps with regard to urban planning and architecture. This destruction demonstrated itself in several ways including but not limited to the commodification of the formerly informal settlements, displacements of residents in urban-gentrified regions<sup>19</sup>, destruction of the city's green lungs with extreme concretation and building complexes, as well as the creation of an excessive consumer society with new shopping malls.

Urban gentrification processes led by the AKP municipality in Istanbul paved the way for the eviction of disempowered people, mostly minorities and disadvantaged groups such as Roma of Sulukule and Kurds of Tarlabası. The transformed areas were housed or redesigned with extremely upscale dwellings only to be afforded by wealthy people, not the original residents who were often entirely cut off from their authentic living areas and social connections. The residents were driven away from the city centers and also passivized. This was often done with the mentality, rather mythology that slum dwellers are 'evil people' and criminals.<sup>20</sup>

The AKP's not very ecology-friendly policies including the plan to establish the Artillery Barracks (*Topçu Kışlası*) in the middle of Taksim created a major social backlash back in 2013, which was later called the 'Gezi protests' process. This Gezi process uncovered the authoritarian face of PM Erdoğan at the time and the critical disagreements among the AKP leading figures such as Abdullah Gül, the president and Bülent Arınç, the deputy PM of the time. These events also demonstrated to the international public opinion the true authoritarian instincts of PM Erdoğan back then owing to his extremely intolerant attitude towards the protesters, the supporters as well as the international media. All in all, Istanbul was swung towards a new type of authoritarianism in its history including both Islamist (i.e. Taksim Mosque) and neo-Ottomanist (Artillery Barracks) tones.

İmamoğlu needs to change the course in this long-going context of neo-liberal and anti-ecology urban politics. This is not an easy task. One strategy could be reverting from single-handed decisions to the creation of shared wisdom with the help of consultancy by the epistemic communities (universities and colleges, ecology-conscious academics), non-academic experts and relevant civil society organizations such as the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (*Türk Mühendis ve Mimar Odaları Birliği*, TMMOB). A second alternative strategy could be 'enlightening the society' or spreading the word on democratic and human-centered ways of urban planning and architecture with a right to return for the displaced citizens. This is doable with conferences, panels, hearings and scientific presentations organized for large masses in all districts of Istanbul.

A third strategy could include developing an agenda of a new type of municipalism and give it a convincing name, like 'Social Democratic Municipalism' (*Sosyaldemokrat Belediyecilik*). This new left-wing municipalism should fight the neo-liberal agenda and develop an alternative set of clear-cut municipal policies for the people and with humanitarian purposes. These policies could include 'democratic urban transformation' for the residents only (instead of upscale newcomers), creation of green 'breathing' areas at urban centers rather than shopping malls, and provision of new services for not only women and youth (i.e., employment opportunities) but also Kurdish and Alevi communities (i.e., opening Kurdish language training centers, recognition of Cemevis, the Alevi prayer houses). İmamoğlu is experienced about green areas with his former experience at the Beylikdüzü district of Istanbul, and more recently he spoke quite positively about social services for both the Kurdish and Alevi communities. Therefore, there are reasons to be hopeful at this early stage.

There are, however, certain challenges awaiting the new CHP-led municipalities, first and foremost the Istanbul metropolitan municipality. The initial challenge is the potential maneuvers of obstructionism by President Erdoğan and the politics of the People's Alliance. As a reaction to İmamoğlu's popularity and two consecutive wins, President Erdoğan gave signals of potential obstructionism when he likened his municipal power to 'lame duck' (*topal ördek*) politics.<sup>21</sup> As several Istanbul voters engaged in split-ticket behavior by voting for CHP-İmamoğlu for the metropolitan but for the AKP's district candidates and local assemblies, the provincial and district assemblies are still controlled by the AKP. So, Erdoğan underestimates İmamoğlu's and other CHP mayors' clout and means they would have to take every step by persuading the AKP-controlled assemblies.

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<sup>19</sup> Fred Paxton, "Istanbul: the Neo-Authoritarian City in the Age of Neoliberalism", *The Protocity*, June 15, 2016, <http://theprotocity.com/7855-2/>

<sup>20</sup> David Harvey, "Interview Tarlabası Istanbul", October 1, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfZ3IrM6E7M>

<sup>21</sup> *Turkish Minute*, "Erdoğan Calls İmamoğlu a 'Lame Duck,' Says Sunday's vote is Symbolic", June 20, 2019, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2019/06/20/erdogan-calls-imamoglu-a-lame-duck-says-sundays-vote-is-symbolic/>

Furthermore, there were initial legal attempts by the AKP government to restrict the authority of municipal decision-makers, which gave the impression that Erdoğan would not let the CHP mayor even rule comfortably.<sup>22</sup>

A second challenge for the CHP-led alliance of the opposition parties together with İYİ, HDP and SP is that this is a politically heterogeneous bloc, and these parties cannot agree and coordinate on each and every national issue or problem. For instance, these four parties have diverging positions on the most salient issue in Turkish politics, the Kurdish issue. While HDP is the most prominent representative of the Kurdish people and Kurdish identity, İYİ would probably be the most distant actor to a potential Kurdish resolution and peace politics among the opposition bloc. CHP would have a cautious yet constructive attitude while the SP would most probably embrace a positive attitude. Another issue of divergence could be the LGBT issue, and the political demands of sexual minorities in Turkey. While HDP and CHP would align with the cause of these groups, İYİ and SP would most probably stay away due to their not very social liberal agenda. Plus, these issues could well be used by the AKP and MHP, and the Erdoğan-controlled media in Turkey for dividing and provoking the opposition parties one way or another. For this reason, these four opposition parties should 'agree to disagree' on some issues for solidarity, while holding their common agenda together with regard to system change from the current partisan presidentialism to parliamentarism with rule of law and well-established checks and balances.

## 5. A new left municipalism benefiting from the past and constructing the future

In a recent interview, Ulaş Bayraktar, a former academic at Public Administration Department at Mersin University, argues that 'inheriting a wreck' from the AKP is no excuse for the CHP municipalities today. In Bayraktar's words, what the CHP municipal actors could do includes transparency for all the municipal decision-making processes, construction of a common future with people, recording peoples' preferences and demands neighborhood by neighborhood, processing these demands into strategic targets and organization of people for pursuing their demands.<sup>23</sup> According to Bayraktar, the new municipalities should create new public spaces and new ways of organizing people at the grassroots levels for democracy.<sup>24</sup> It is obvious that Bayraktar points to a new left, democratic municipalism by the CHP municipalities in the light of past experience with a progressive edge for the future.

In fact, the concept of 'left municipalism' in Turkey is not purely novel. The CHP had an experience with this type of 'communal municipalism' (*toplumcu belediyeçilik*) back in the 1970s, the 'golden years' of the party with a young Bülent Ecevit as the new chair (1972-80). More than that, Turkey also had experience with socialist municipalism with the Fatsa and Ovacık examples in its early and recent past.<sup>25</sup> The entire experience with left municipalism got seriously halted, however, together with all other leftist political experiences (labor movements, socialist youth organizations, etc.) because of the 1980 coup and its harshest pressures on the left during the junta period (1980-83). Back in the 1970s, the priority of the CHP-led municipalities was about the housing problem in general and the *gecekondu*<sup>26</sup> in particular, within the larger context of connecting the long-standing party of the center with the periphery. These dwellings belonged to new and low-income migrants of large provinces like Istanbul around the non-inhabited areas without permission from state and local authorities. Aligning with these groups was a part of political and municipal leftism back then.

However, what was meant by left municipalism at the time included more than the dwelling problem. The document entitled 'Communal Municipality' (*Toplumcu Belediye*), written by Ankara municipality experts (1977), defines the purposes as democratic-ness, openness to people's participation in municipal matters, productivity for inexpensive services for the working classes, organization of consumption, unionism, development of inter-municipal organizations and resource creation. In Batuman's words, the unionism and resource creation components are directly related to the political conflicts between the center-left CHP-led municipalities and the center-right AP-led national government back then (Batuman, 2010: 232). Despite these two parties' centrist

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<sup>22</sup> Marian Demir, "Ankara and Istanbul Mayors Stripped of Their Power by (pro-Erdogan) Municipal Assemblies," *Asia News*, 26 June 2019, [http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Ankara-and-Istanbul-mayors-stripped-of-their-power-by-\(pro-Erdogan\)-municipal-assemblies-47390.html](http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Ankara-and-Istanbul-mayors-stripped-of-their-power-by-(pro-Erdogan)-municipal-assemblies-47390.html)

<sup>23</sup> İrfan Aktan, "Ulaş Bayraktar: Muhalefetteki Belediyeler Terzi Fikri'nin Fatsa'sından Daha mı Fakir?" [Ulaş Bayraktar: Are the Opposition-led Municipalities Poorer than Fikri the Tailor's Fatsa?], *Gazete Duvar*, May 4, 2019, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2019/05/04/ulas-bayraktar-muhalefetteki-belediyeler-terzi-fikrinin-fatsasindan-daha-mi-fakir/>

<sup>24</sup> Aktan, "Ulaş Bayraktar"

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion on radical left, socialist municipal experiences with Fatsa (1979-1980) and Ovacık (2014-2019) districts, please see Fidan Kılavuz and Cihan Yüksel, "Yerel Yönetimler Maliyesi Çerçevesinde Toplumcu Belediyeçilik: Fatsa ve Ovacık Örneği" [Communal Municipalism in the Framework of Local Administrative Finance: Fatsa and Ovacık Cases], *Toplum ve Demokrasi*, 11 no. 23 (2017): 121-138.

<sup>26</sup> The term *gecekondu* (*built-at-night*) refers to houses put up quickly without proper permissions, a squatter's house or shanty.



identities, the 1970s truly witnessed the left-right polarization in Turkey under the shadow of the Cold War and Turkey's traditional fear of Communism. These two parties not only refrained from cooperation or coordination at national or local politics but also accused one another of extremism on their opposite sides of the political spectrum. Batuman thinks the democratization of local political decision-making mechanisms and the direct participation of local communities in municipal decision-making must also be included in this left municipal political agenda (Batuman, 2010: 232).

After a series of recent complaints about the CHP municipalities' alleged favoritism (i.e., appointing family members and relatives at municipal positions), the party authorities have become quite cautious about the subject matter and even proposed legislation against it at the national legislature.<sup>27</sup> Most recently, the CHP-led mayors met in a workshop in Sandıklı, Afyonkarahisar in Turkey for the purpose of drawing a common future for these municipalities. In this workshop, the party chair Kılıçdaroğlu laid out seven principles for its municipalities. In brief, these principles are: not otherizing anybody, embracing all people with their diversity; not engaging in clientelism and favoritism; positive discrimination of municipal services for needy neighborhoods and disadvantaged groups including women and the handicapped; protection of human dignity and not exposing people in municipal assistance for the poor; transparency and financial discipline in municipal expenditures; maintaining meritocracy in the appointment of municipal personnel and administrators and avoiding partisan policies; protection of people's and employees' rights, legal equity and justice.<sup>28</sup>

Ruşen Çakır, a well-acclaimed journalist in Turkey, believes that the CHP municipalities have attained a historical opportunity with the 2019 municipal elections. In Çakır's opinion, what the CHP municipalities should not do is to disconnect from the existing social groups that the formerly AKP-led municipalities have established connections with. They should maintain the existing connections while making new connections with its own base too for the provision of social services. The CHP must take a decisive, clear-cut stand against favoritism, and maintain connections with all Istanbul people including those outside its traditional electoral base, such as the pious and the Kurds.

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<sup>27</sup> *Evrensel*, "CHP'li Belediyeler Eş-dost Atamalarına Karşı Teyakkuzda" [CHP Municipalities at Alert Against Appointments of Kith and Kin], July 30, 2019, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/383941/chpli-belediyeler-es-dost-atamalarına-karsi-teyakkuzda>

<sup>28</sup> *Yeni Asya*, "Kılıçdaroğlu CHP'li Belediye Başkanlarının Uyacağı 7 Temel İlkeyi Açıkladı" [Kılıçdaroğlu Announced the 7 Principles the CHP Municipalities Are to Observe], July 27, 2019, [https://www.yeniasya.com.tr/politika/kilicdaroglu-chp-li-belediye-baskanlarinin-uyacagi-7-temel-ilkeyi-acikladi\\_499410](https://www.yeniasya.com.tr/politika/kilicdaroglu-chp-li-belediye-baskanlarinin-uyacagi-7-temel-ilkeyi-acikladi_499410)

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