

Crunch time for Turkey

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In the early hours of Wednesday morning 106 suspects, including the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoğlu, were detained in two investigations launched by the Istanbul public prosecutor's office. Imamoğlu was accused of corruption and support for terrorism. The reaction was not long in coming.

Emma Sinclair-Webb, Turkey director for Human Rights Watch, [condemned](#) the move as “a blatant political manipulation of the judiciary and of detention powers”. Nacho Sánchez Amor, the European Parliament's Turkey rapporteur, [signalled](#), “Full speed towards a complete authoritarian state”. Two years ago The Economist already [concluded](#) Turkey could be on the brink of dictatorship.

As Imamoğlu said before he was taken away, [“We are facing a great tyranny but I want you to know I will not give up”](#).

The mayoralty of Istanbul with nearly a fifth of Turkey's population and 30 percent of its GDP plays a key role in Turkish politics. The maxim “Whoever wins Istanbul wins Turkey” holds true. Turkey's President Erdoğan had been mayor from 1994 until 1998 and from 2004 until 2019 it had been held by the governing AKP (Justice and Development Party). In the local elections in 2019 Erdoğan's candidate was beaten by Imamoğlu from the opposition CHP (Republican People's Party) by 13,000 votes. Following a complaint by the AKP, the result was annulled, but in a re-run Imamoğlu won with 54 percent of the votes.

In the 2023 presidential elections Imamoğlu, who is a unifying figure, was [blocked from running](#), but in the local elections in March 2024 Imamoğlu was re-elected as mayor of Istanbul with 51 percent of the vote against his AKP rival's 40 percent, much to Erdoğan's disappointment.

The CHP's leader, Özgür Özel, has called Imamoğlu's arrest [“an attempted coup against our next president”](#), which is how it is regarded in Turkey outside government circles and internationally.

The day before Imamoğlu's arrest, Istanbul University [annulled](#) his university degree, which disqualifies him from being president. This is ironic because there earlier has been cast doubt on [the authenticity](#) of President Erdoğan's own degree.

A month ago the Economist also [warned](#) a new crackdown is gathering strength in Turkey, where all kinds of opponents are being targeted, but with Imamoğlu's detention the step has been taken further. What began in May 2013 as a protest against the demolition of a small park in Istanbul developed into [a nationwide protest](#), driven mainly by [well educated young people](#), against Erdoğan's intolerant regime. The protests were brutally suppressed, and the protests in Turkey against Imamoğlu's arrest show signs of developing into a threat to Erdoğan's autocratic rule.

Although demonstrations were banned, thousands took to the streets in Istanbul and outside the city hall under the slogans "[There is no salvation alone – all together or none of us](#)" and "no surrender to the coup". The demonstrations continued in Ankara and other cities throughout Turkey.

Hundreds of demonstrators have been [detained](#) and access to social media platforms has been [restricted](#). Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya has [stated](#) 261 suspects have been detected by the Cyber Crime and Security Department because of their social media posts and 37 have already been detained.

On Sunday the CHP held a nationwide vote for members to elect Imamoğlu as its presidential candidate for the 2028 elections, and at the 5,600 polling stations in Turkey's 81 provinces "solidarity boxes" were available for non-members to give their support.

CHP chairman Özel [announced](#) that 14,850,000 votes had been given to Imamoğlu (1,653,000 out of CHP's 1,753,000 members, and 13,211,000 solidarity votes). From Silivri prison Imamoğlu shared this message: "15 million of our citizens voted. Tens of millions of people in this country, who were hurting by the tyranny of the government, the destroyed economy, lack of merit and lawlessness, rushed to the polls. Enough is enough."

There have already been [repercussions](#). On Wednesday the Turkish lira and the stock market plummeted and it cost the Central Bank almost 12 billion dollars in backdoor interventions to save the lira from a nosedive. The economy is Turkey's Achilles heel and foreign investors are heading for the door.

The current outburst is the product of accumulated anger at the way Erdoganomics has beggared Turkey and impoverished millions of Turkish families. Former finance minister Mehmet Şimşek, who was reinstated after the 2023 presidential election, has struggled to restore '[rational](#)' economics, but although February's inflation is touted to have fallen to 39 percent, [independent economists](#) reckon it is the double.

Although it began as a grass roots movement, the AKP is now considered [the party of the rich](#) and, if challenged by Imamoğlu, [Erdogan could be toppled](#). Imamoğlu could, like other critics of the regime, for example, [Selahattin Demirtaş](#) and [Osman Kavala](#), be held for years in pre-trial detention, which would undoubtedly lead to his replacement by an AKP-appointed trustee. This is another feature of AKP rule which has been used to [remove legally elected mayors](#). In turn, the CHP could itself be banned.

Present developments not only undermine Turkey's credibility but also its standing internationally. Turkey is intent on an update of the customs union with the EU and access to Schengen, and foreign minister Hakan Fidan took part in the recent [London meeting](#) to form a "coalition of the willing". He has also indicated [Turkey's readiness](#) to be part of Europe's new security architecture.

But as Sinem Adar, a research associate at the SWP in Berlin, recently [noted](#), geopolitical urgencies and global uncertainties make it more difficult to implement a values-based foreign policy. This is the challenge that the new head of EU's foreign affairs, Kaja Kallas, faces.

As Adar points out, it remains crucial for the European Union to have a strategic understanding of what kind of relationship it wants to establish with Turkey in the long term. Otherwise, there will be a conflict between short-term interests and fundamental commitments to values.