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'The aura of invincibility is gone'

Felix Schmidt in Istanbul on the opposition's triumph, the split in Erdoğan's AKP and Turkey's political future

Read this interview in German.

Opposition candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu (CHP) won the first Istanbul mayoral election at the end of March with 0.2 per cent, just ahead of the government candidate Binali Yıldırım (AKP). But the election was declared invalid and new elections were announced. What happened this Sunday?

In the rerun of the mayoral election in Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu won with 54.03 per cent over the AKP candidate Binali Yıldırım, who received 45.09 per cent. While the difference in the election on 31 March 2019 stood at 13,720, the gap has now widened to 777,581. The turnout among the 10.5 million voters was very high at 84.42 per cent. Other candidates accounted for 0.88 per cent of the votes.

While the number of votes from Yıldırım declined, İmamoğlu received more than half a million additional votes. The way the votes were distributed is particularly important. In 14 municipalities that elected AKP mayors on 31 March, the CHP candidate gained a majority in the current mayoral election. While the CHP was previously considered ineligible for the conservative population dominating these districts, Ekrem İmamoğlu succeeded in overcoming this obstacle. In contrast to the election on 31 March, the CHP now dominates the majority of city districts.

How do you explain the massive increase in votes for the CHP?

The shift in the balance of political power in the short period from 31 March to 23 June 2019 has various causes that will also influence the bigger political impact of this election.

The attempt to prevent a CHP candidate from becoming Mayor of Istanbul has caused the alliance of AKP and the nationalist MHP to lose votes. After repeated requests for a recount, both parties had requested the cancellation of the mayoral election. The High

Electoral Council decided to go ahead by majority vote – but without convincing reasons.

Ekrem İmamoğlu, who until the start of the election campaign in February 2019 was a rather unknown district mayor in Istanbul, relied primarily on reconciliatory tone, on the prevention of waste and the eradication of rampant corruption. Preventing rampage would create funds for numerous social measures. With the decision to repeat the elections for flimsy reasons, İmamoğlu also received a bonus of injustice that which drove many AKP voters into his arms. With his personality, he was acceptable to all parties of the opposition and also increasingly for government supporters.

What strategy did President Erdoğan's AKP pursue?

Until 31 March 2019, the government alliance had insinuated that the opposition parties supported terrorism and were controlled by foreign powers. The central actor in the election campaign was President Erdoğan. After the decision to re-run the elections, however, Binali Yıldırım initially took centre stage.

In the last week of the campaign, the AKP changed its strategy and now again put President Erdoğan in the foreground. The tone was intensified, messages of reconciliation gave way to threats against İmamoğlu.

The AKP's campaign strategy also had two major shortcomings. In view of the social consequences of the economic crisis, many AKP supporters did not feel taken seriously. They either did not vote or cast invalid votes. On the other hand, in particular Kurdish voters in the big cities felt repulsed by the Turkish nationalist tones.

Is it a personal defeat for Erdoğan?

The President's commitment to the campaign has increased his responsibility for the outcome of the election. Istanbul has been ruled since 1994 by the AKP's predecessor parties and then by the AKP itself. In this city, Erdoğan began his career in country-wide politics as mayor. Not least for this reason, we hear about a connection between Erdoğan and İmamoğlu again and again. It's the first election which Erdoğan actually lost. The aura of invincibility is gone.

Will Ekrem İmamoğlu be able to take up its office as mayor without any problems?

All parties have acknowledged the election result and congratulated İmamoğlu for his victory. A new attempt to prevent his inauguration can therefore not be expected. With his reaching out to President

Erdoğan to meet him as soon as possible to solve Istanbul's problems together, Istanbul's new mayor has not only continued his election campaign strategy. In a constructive tone, he implicitly challenges his opponent. İmamoğlu is regarded as a new political factor whose impact extends far beyond Istanbul. Even after this election, the country's political future remains exciting.

Erdoğan once said the now famous sentence: "Whoever wins Istanbul wins Turkey". Is the opposition's election victory an omen for further political developments?

For the AKP and its chairman Erdoğan in particular, this defeat is much more significant than just a lost mayoral election. It will have far-reaching national consequences. The election results show that the government alliance also lost the majority in urban districts that have been dominated by the AKP for decades. Without readjusting its policy, the AKP will continue to lose votes. The loss of the aura of invincibility will strengthen the centrifugal forces in the party. The ever more concrete split in the party will increase and we could soon see the establishment of another national-conservative force in the political landscape that's dissatisfied with the system Erdoğan and will push its limits.

With İmamoğlu's success and the AKP's crisis, snap parliamentary and presidential elections emerge on the political agenda. Even if such a step cannot be expected in the short term, it's not certain anymore that there will be no new elections until 2023.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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