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*SHORT COMMENTS*

*Ekrem Imamoglu, Mansur Yavas and the Turkish Elections of 2023*

*By As. Professor Konstantinos Travlos*

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## **Ekrem Imamoglu, Mansur Yavas and the Turkish Elections of 2023**

**By Konstantinos Travlos, Assistant Professor at Özyeğin University\***

There is a lot of interest in who the opposition parties in Turkey (CHP, IYI Party, HDP) might support to run against the incumbent President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the scheduled 2023 double elections in Turkey<sup>1</sup>. Internationally a lot of the focus has fallen on Istanbul's (Constantinople) Mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu who is presented, and also strives to present himself, as a politician friendly to “*Western*” sensibilities. Within Turkey, equally of interest is Anakra's Mayor Mansur Yavas. Poll wise both politicians seem to lead Erdogan in a second round of presidential election. If we take as a benchmark the polls by companies giving Erdogan as the winner, Imamoglu loses on average by 4.4 points, while Yavas by 5.9. This can be seen as an indicator of how much pro-government sources perceive them as a risk. The reality is that since May 2021, CHP Party Leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu and IYI Party leader, Meral Aksener also tend to out-poll Erdogan<sup>2</sup>. In other words the unique advantage the two Mayors had within opposition circles that is their higher likelihood of winning a second round, does not seem to exist anymore.

This means that the need to choose them to run for the opposition parties, as well as incentives to do so on their own part, might not exist by the time of the elections, everything else being equal considered. Both candidates do have some vulnerabilities. Imamoglu shares a social background similar to Erdogan's. He is from the Karadeniz (Black Sea region) like Erdogan. Both have a religious family background. Both of their families have connections to the rough and tumble construction sector of Turkey. Within Turkey over the last year Imamoglu's rhetoric style has begun to have similarities with that of Erdogan, tapping in a populist style of speech, heavy in sardonic and sarcastic turns of phrase. In other words, Imamoglu might very well be typecast, or he might even seek to present himself, in a role similar to a younger Erdogan as an underdog struggling against an adversarial central state, and as a champion of the common people against entrenched interests. Even the rhetoric that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.setav.org/en/turkeys-2023-elections-candidates-or-principles/>

<sup>2</sup> See summary of polls at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion\\_polling\\_for\\_the\\_2023\\_Turkish\\_general\\_election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_2023_Turkish_general_election)

seeks to assuage those with “*Western*” sensibilities might be seen as a repetition of Erdogan’s liberal openings in his early career. Imamoglu has noticeably become more accommodating rhetorically to elements of the Islamist rhetoric in Turkey (issues like the turning of Aya Sophia to a mosque, celebrations of 1453)<sup>3</sup>. Yavas, on the other hand, is burdened by his past as an ideological Turkic nationalist, which is seen as a possible reason for Kurdish voters not to vote for him.

Both Mayors exhibit managerial competence and enmity to graft, with both of them centering their anti-government rhetoric on local examples of what they see as being wrong in the country. In the case of Imamoglu that being the Istanbul Canal project and for Yavas the Ankara Dinosaur Park Project. Of the two, Yavas appears to be the one with the better image for competency and hard work.

The question thus is whether it makes strategic sense for either to be put forward as candidates by a potential united opposition (talks are ongoing between HDP and CHP-IYI Parties but we cannot be sure if they will lead to a successful outcome due to the toxic character of the Kurdish issue in Turkish politics<sup>4</sup>). First of all, neither of them might be interested to run as candidates, thus giving up the possibility of still holding on to the two most symbolically important municipalities of Turkey. Considering that the opposition is united in their wish to change the political system to a parliamentary one, where the position of President will be less important, if it is not relegated to ceremonial role, they might not be willing to play that role. The leadership profile carefully built by the two Mayors ill fits a ceremonial role as Head of State<sup>5</sup>. Both are relatively young in political time, and have tenures that run up until 2024. With the other opposition politicians seemingly outpolling Erdogan, there may be no incentive to seek the nomination barring an unforeseen collapse in opposition

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/istanbul-mayor-supports-hagia-sophia-conversion-move-as-long-as-it-benefits-turkey-156527>

<sup>4</sup> <https://bianet.org/english/politics/251510-hdp-visits-main-opposition-chp-shares-its-declaration>

<sup>5</sup> <https://bianet.org/english/politics/251450-six-opposition-parties-discuss-roadmap-for-return-to-parliamentary-system>

chances that could lead to another tenure for Erdogan, and that in consequence, might threaten their re-election as Mayors<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, with their leaders polling well, the two main opposition parties might also not have an incentive to sacrifice their hold on Istanbul and Ankara seemingly guaranteed by the presence of the two Mayors, just for an extra chance to oust Erdogan. There is also the question of the independence of the two Mayors. What happens if they win and then refuse to go along with the attempt to change the Presidential System to a Parliamentary one? The level of distrust in Turkish politics should not be underestimated, and the “*Ince*” saga left a bad aftertaste. My hunch is that the opposition parties will see how their polling goes, both on party and leadership level, and if victory seems likely might seek to run a candidate that would fit more the role of a symbolic President, and not necessarily carry the baggage that Yavas and Imamoglu have. A lot will depend on the results of CHP’s largely under the radar electoral efforts in the Kurdish areas of Turkey, as well as on what kind of compromise will be reached with HDP.

Another key aspect is the Kurdish conservative voters. This group of once stable AKP voters seems to have increasingly become disillusioned. While Islamists and opposed to the secular Kurdish nationalism of HDP, they still seek recognition of a Kurdish identity within the Turkish state and feel that Erdogan has failed them<sup>7</sup>. Again like the CHP ground level political effort at expansion into Kurdish areas, the defection of Kurdish Islamists from AKP is going on under the radar. These voters are unlikely to be enticed by any of the possible existing candidates of the opposition, and an open accommodation of Kurdish nationalism within a Turkish context by CHP and IYI Party is probably unlikely right now. Rhetoric has changed of course, with multiple references by opposition politicians that Kurdish concerns

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.duvarenglish.com/istanbul-mayor-ekrem-imamoglu-open-to-all-positions-to-change-turkey-in-future-video-59120>

<sup>7</sup> <https://research.sharqforum.org/2015/11/01/kurdish-islamist-nationalists-new-actors-in-turkeys-kurdish-politics/>

<https://www.duvarenglish.com/30-percent-of-undecided-non-voters-are-from-ruling-akp-base-poll-shows-news-58569>

must be accommodated via a peaceful and democratic process within a parliamentary system<sup>8</sup>. But something as open as suggesting establishing Kurdish as a protected minority language while not impossible, is unlikely.

The safest estimation right now is that Imamoglu and Yavas will not seek the candidacy, nor will the opposition parties seek it. Their role as Mayors for the opposition is currently and, for the foreseeable future, more important.

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Konstantinos Travlos is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Özyeğin University, Istanbul, Turkey. He has a PhD in Political Science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a MA from the University of Chicago, and BA from Panteion University, Athens, Greece.

His research focuses on interstate managerial coordination and the formation of international order, the Greece - Turkey interstate rivalry, peace and conflict studies and diplomatic history broadly defined.

\* Disclaimer: The document reflects the personal view of the author, and in no way the views of Özyeğin University or the Department of International Relations.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.duvarenglish.com/chp-could-solve-turkeys-kurdish-issue-with-hdp-kilicdaroglu-says-news-58877>