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ARGUMENT

Turkish Democracy Is Still Alive

And the Istanbul elections show how.

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People in a restaurant watch a televised live debate between mayoral candidates Binali Yildirim and Ekrem Imamoglu in Istanbul on June 16. BURAK KARA/GETTY IMAGES

On June 23, somewhere between 8 and 9 million residents of Istanbul will go to the polls to elect their mayor—again. The leading contenders are [Ekrem Imamoglu](#), a dynamic young former district mayor from the Republican People's Party (CHP), and [Binali Yildirim](#), a seasoned politician and former prime minister from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Imamoglu already [won this vote once](#), on March 31. The result should have ended 25 years of AKP rule in Istanbul—and Imamoglu did serve as mayor of Istanbul for 18 days. But following a series of recounts and dubious AKP complaints, Turkey's embattled Supreme Election Council canceled the outcome of the election and decided to hold it again.

There are two ways to interpret the cancellation of the previous result and the vote on Sunday. According to one [narrative](#)—common [among Turkey observers](#) and analysts—this chain of events represents yet another turn in the downward spiral of Turkish democracy. By hook or crook, Yildirim (and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan) will prevail, which will bring the country closer to full-fledged autocracy under Erdogan.

In this story, Turkey is yet another victim in a [global democracy crisis](#). Turkey's authoritarian drift exemplifies [how democracies die](#), and it contains some lessons for preventing such declines from happening

elsewhere, including the United States. This story is not necessarily wrong, but it is incomplete.

A closer look reveals a much more nuanced and interesting story. Rather than being an example of how democracies die, Turkey showcases the fact that they don't die all that easily. The ascendance of authoritarianism triggers an equally strong pro-democratic reaction. And the case of the Istanbul rerun offers insights into how such impulses may be able to succeed against polarizing and populist authoritarian politics.



Observers severely underestimated the authoritarian potential of the AKP. In the post-9/11 world, liberals the world over were preoccupied with Islam, democracy, and interreligious peace. For good reason, they wanted to convince cynical publics that not all Muslims were Islamists and not all Islamists were fanatical. The AKP was more than ready to present itself as an example.

As late as May 2013, the then-leader of the socialists in the European Parliament, Hannes Swoboda, condemned a Turkish opposition leader for calling Erdogan dictatorial. Yet two weeks later, millions of people joined in massive protests in Istanbul and throughout the country opposing AKP authoritarianism.

By now, of course, it is commonplace for international media to decry Erdogan's autocracy and lament the end of Turkish democracy. But this time around, observers may be underestimating Turkey's democratic resistance while overestimating the AKP's power and popular support.

To be sure, authoritarianism and disregard for the rule of law are far worse today than in 2013. But there are now more reasons to be hopeful. Turkish society has not given up on active and passive resistance, and so far it has refused to accept autocracy as normal. Meanwhile, the AKP and Erdogan are weakened by declining popularity and legitimacy and by growing internal divisions.

By themselves, the AKP's problems and popular outrage would not be enough to restore democracy; they may even deepen authoritarianism. But combined

with the fact that the opposition has begun to produce new kinds of leaders and discourses, and has developed new mobilization practices, change might be coming.

To see how, remember that, for a long time, the AKP had a strong reformist impetus that rekindled Turkey's EU accession process, expanded civil liberties, helped subdue the meddlesome military, and gave culturally conservative constituencies a new sense of inclusion. To be sure, the party's authoritarian potential was always there, and its vilification of resistant state institutions, [Faustian bargains](#) with various Islamist movements and opportunists who gradually staffed state institutions and took over media, and increasingly open polarizing rhetoric that divided society [pushed](#) its transformation. However, the party's decisive authoritarian turn was neither entirely predetermined nor necessarily inevitable.

Meanwhile, Turkey's fragmented opposition, which initially included elites from the military and judiciary, saw the warning signs and reacted forcefully—but in ways that only reinforced social and political polarization. Opposition groups tried mass protests in 2007 and 2013, threat of military intervention in 2007, judicial interference in 2008, and numerous election campaigns that predominantly targeted the government's Islamism, corruption, Erdogan's personal wrongdoings, or all of the above. These tactics antagonized AKP voters while making the opposition look strong at times but also angry and reactionary.

But the March 31 elections, as well as elections in June 2015, were different. First, the main opposition party, the CHP, and the newly founded Good Party formed an electoral alliance, called the Nation Alliance. The grouping has also won outside support from a small Islamist party, the Felicity Party, and the main pro-Kurdish party, the Peoples' Democratic Party. The Nation Alliance has slated mainly centrist candidates who talk about their own solutions to Turkey's economic woes instead of the AKP or Erdogan. And rather than going to the courts or organizing mass protests, they have focused on electoral mobilization and face-to-face contact with voters.

Imamoglu, for example, has run a campaign that appeals to voters' emotions and to personal trust. He has focused on explaining what he wants to do rather than on criticizing what the AKP is doing wrong. Such statements disarmed the AKP, which has long mobilized its own constituency by whipping up fears that the opposition would concentrate on punishing the AKP for its misdeeds rather than governing. Avoiding personal attacks, Imamoglu even started his campaign by visiting Erdogan.

Most polls suggest that Imamoglu should win on Sunday. To be sure, fears of vote rigging and another repeat election are rife. And the election will be a fierce battle on an uneven playing field. But Turkey has a strong legacy of rotation of power through elections, and, for all their flaws, Turkish parties are not paper tigers but vast organizations with millions of dedicated members. In the last elections, the opposition parties guarded the ballots and the counting with tens of thousands of party representatives and civil society volunteers. Opposition groups also put in place their own digital system to announce the results of the vote to counteract possible disinformation by pro-government media.

If Imamoglu does win, it will not make Turkey democratic overnight—many challenges lie ahead. However, over the weekend, Istanbulites will be able to jump-start a process that could eventually lead to a stronger and more inclusive democracy than the one that preceded the AKP and the one the AKP initially tried to build.

Throughout the last century, the Western world has mostly seen in Turkey what it wants to see. In the 1920s, the country represented the transformation of a Muslim and Eastern empire into a Western-looking and secular nation-state. In the 1950s, it was an example of successful transition to multiparty democracy and socio-economic modernization. In the 2000s, it was supposed to show how Islamism can reconcile with democracy. If Imamoglu wins on June 23, Turkey may become an example of how democracy can begin to prevail against [polarizing politics](#), unfettered [populism](#), and religious nationalism—this time, and hopefully, for real.

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