



Did Istanbul show the world how to beat populists?

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The decisive win by Turkey's opposition in last month's Istanbul mayoral election rerun might lay out a potential fix not just for Turkey, but for any country dealing with the ravages of populism, said analyses in two major Western news outlets.

When Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu won the March 31 municipal elections by a small margin, it was the biggest surprise of a night of serious shocks for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which lost mayoral votes in four of Turkey's five largest cities.

İmamoğlu, a little-known district mayor, had beaten the AKP's former prime minister, Binali Yıldırım, with an inclusive campaign strategy diametrically opposed to the ruling party's aggressive, populist tactics, and gained control of the country's economic powerhouse.

The CHP mayor repeated his success on June 23, after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan forced through a rerun with claims of electoral fraud. The landslide victory triggered speculation among analysts that İmamoğlu's success could be the beginning of the end for the AKP after 17 years in power.

"For liberals everywhere, the Istanbul mayor's landslide victory was a starburst in a dark decade, during which their side has groped for a winning strategy against populist politics. Many will now parse the result for lessons that can be applied elsewhere," columnist Bobby Ghosh wrote on Monday for Bloomberg.

Erdoğan has perfected the populist narrative in recent years, Mustafa Akyol, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, wrote for Foreign Policy on Monday.

The Turkish leader says he is making the country great and Muslim again, and that all those he says are working against him, from protesters to the CIA, Mossad and George Soros, are terrorists and traitors, said Akyol, adding that this rhetoric has reshaped the government, particularly the judiciary.

"This grim scene in Turkey shows how far populism can go, especially in countries with weak institutions, deep divisions, and an illiberal political culture," said Akyol.

Ghosh pointed out that some of the conditions that enabled İmamoğlu's win were particular to Turkey, such as the troubled economy and high inflation and unemployment, as well as Erdoğan's mistake of calling for a rerun, which rallied sentiment around the opposition.

Yet Istanbul's new mayor deserves credit for avoiding blunders and running a smart campaign that stressed positivity and marked a shift away from Turkey's traditional conservative vs. secularist political dynamic.

"With his very own persona, İmamoğlu bridged the long-standing secular-versus-religious divide that has been the most fundamental fault line in Turkish politics for about a century," said Akyol, pointing to İmamoğlu's strong Islamic faith.

"İmamoğlu was also wise to disarm Erdoğan's game, which is polarisation, by refusing to be a part of it," Akyol said.

Both analysts pointed to his election slogan, "Everything will be just fine," and his campaign that stressed "radical love".

"İmamoğlu campaigned hard in many of Istanbul's most religious neighbourhoods, long considered lost causes for secular parties," said Ghosh. "Between the first and second votes, he was able to win over several traditionally pro-AKP districts."

Indeed, on June 23, İmamoğlu delivered a major defeat to Erdoğan and his brand of populism, in large part by eroding the ruling AKP's traditional conservative base.

One of the most striking aspects of the opposition's 800,000-vote margin of victory was the series of religious and conservative districts where a majority voted for İmamoğlu. The CHP mayor was the winner in districts like Fatih and Eyüp, usually AKP strongholds.

Akyol saw possible lessons for Americans and others looking to counter populism. "The right strategy may be not mimicking the combative rhetoric one sees in the far-right, but rather using a rhetoric of moderation and civility," and claiming the lost centre rather than going too far left, he said.

We now have a sense, said Akyol, of how Turkey's experiment with extreme populism is likely to end.

"Will the İmamoğlu playbook work against other populists?" asked Ghosh. "We won't know until it's been tried. But given the scale of his victory, liberals elsewhere might give it a shot."