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By Ulas Atesci

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Turkey's ruling AKP defeated in re-run of İstanbul mayoral election

On Sunday, voters in İstanbul went to the polls in a re-run of the March 31 municipal elections as demanded by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). According to the state-run Anadolu Agency, the People's Alliance between the AKP and the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) suffered a severe defeat. On Sunday evening, People's Alliance candidate Binali Yıldırım issued a statement conceding the election.

Ekrem İmamoğlu, the candidate of the Nation Alliance between the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the far-right Good Party (İYİ), backed by the Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and numerous pseudo-left groups, carried İstanbul. He won 54 percent of the 8.7 million valid votes, while AKP (People's Alliance) candidate Yıldırım obtained 45 percent. Candidates from the Islamist Felicity Party and the Homeland Party as well as several independents also ran.

İmamoğlu won nearly 800,000 more votes than Yıldırım. This marked a substantial increase in the CHP-led alliance's vote. In the initial March 31 election, it led by only 13,000 votes, after which the AKP challenged the results.

Sunday's result was celebrated with demonstrations in the streets of İstanbul. It clearly represents a major blow to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP government, showing growing discontent in the population. The AKP's provocative cancellation of the March 31 result in İstanbul only provoked more opposition and increased anger against the national government.

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The decision to re-run the İstanbul municipal election, taken by Turkey's Supreme Election Council on May 6, was only the latest in a series of authoritarian actions by Erdoğan and his Islamist populist regime.

On April 17, seventeen days after the March 31 local elections, İmamoğlu received the mandate of the electoral authorities, officially making him mayor of Turkey's largest city. But the following month, the YSK canceled the mayoral election on the grounds that some of those supervising the vote were not civil servants, as required by law. It did not, however, annul the other elections held at the same time as the mayoral race, including for the city's various districts, most of which the AKP-led alliance carried.

Immediately after Yıldırım's concession speech on Sunday, İmamoğlu gave a long speech on the results. Extending a friendly hand to Erdoğan, İmamoğlu said: "Mr. President, I am ready to work in harmony with you. I convey from here my request to meet with you as soon as possible."

President Erdoğan subsequently tweeted his acceptance of the results, saying, "I congratulate Ekrem İmamoğlu, who won the election according to the unofficial results."

MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli did not congratulate İmamoğlu, however, but declared, "Turkey should now return to its real agenda and end the election process."

The AKP quickly accepted the election result, apparently calculating that it could not challenge growing popular anger by again overturning an election under conditions of growing economic crisis and war tensions. In the first İstanbul vote, Erdoğan's AKP was clearly hostile to allowing a rival party to control the city, as it faces an explosive international situation with the threatened breakdown of the US-Turkish alliance, compounded by an eruption of class struggle.

Home to one-fifth of Turkey's population and almost a third of its total economic output, İstanbul plays an outsized role in Turkish politics. Erdoğan's own rise to power began with his election as the city's mayor in 1994, and he and his supporters have controlled the city's administration ever since. Erdoğan himself has repeatedly declared that İstanbul plays a decisive role in Turkish politics.

CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu said, "Everyone who believes in democracy is proud of Turkey today. The whole world who believe in democracy are proud of Turkey." He added, "The CHP is now the party of 82 million. It will work to solve the problems of 82 million. The CHP will not marginalize anyone, will respect their religion, ethnicity and

social identity.” His ally Meral Akşener, chairwoman of the Good Party, congratulated İmamoğlu.

Despite direct calls from Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), to be neutral in the İstanbul elections, the Kurdish-nationalist HDP supported İmamoğlu. HDP co-leader Sezai Temelli called on all parties to launch a “constitutional process” and “save the country from destruction created by polarized politics.”

Simone Kaslowski, the chair of Turkey’s leading business federation TÜSİAD, also tweeted congratulations to İmamoğlu. The Koç Holding official, the biggest capitalist in Turkey, had previously made his support for İmamoğlu clear.

Alper Tas, the leader of the petty-bourgeois Freedom and Solidarity Party (ÖDP), who had agreed to run for office in the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul with the support of the CHP and the far-right Good Party on March 31, shared a photo with İmamoğlu. In his Twitter account, he said, “It’s good to win.”

The AKP has reportedly lost in many districts in İstanbul. In the March 31 elections, it won 25 of İstanbul’s 39 districts. This time, however, it led in just nine. Moreover, İmamoğlu increased his vote by almost 600,000, or nine percentage points, compared to the March 31 election, while Yıldırım lost nearly 250,000 votes, or three percentage points.

While the Supreme Election Council’s decision to accede to Erdoğan’s demand for an election re-run was unpopular and widely opposed, it was not the only reason for the AKP’s debacle. There is a mounting discontent over the anti-democratic and increasingly authoritarian policies of the government. The election also took place amid an economic crisis in Turkey, which has seen inflation skyrocket and unemployment rise to 14.7 percent (nearly 25 percent among youth). The economy fell into recession in the fall of last year. Growing sections of the population recognize that the government has no solution to this crisis.

Masses of people are undoubtedly looking for a way out against the dead-end of the government’s policies. However, placing hopes in the CHP-led bourgeois opposition can only produce new disappointments for the working class and youth.

In the run-up to the June 23 election, President Erdoğan used all possible means to secure a victory, even appealing to Öcalan for support. Just two days before the election, Öcalan

declared that he had called on the HDP to be neutral in the election. Erdoğan and MHP leader Bahçeli supported this call, asking Kurdish voters to act accordingly. But the government failed to maintain the support of either Kurdish or Turkish voters, indicating that the government crisis and social opposition among workers and youth will only escalate.

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