



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

The arrest of Erdoğan's main rival—a risky political calculation



With the **arrest** of the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is exacerbating the political situation in the country in an attempt to improve the shaky position of his AK Party.

The social democratic mayor of Turkey's largest city, the popular İmamoğlu, is a frequent target of police investigations and court cases. In 2022, he was sentenced to two years in prison for insulting the state authorities.

However, his dramatic arrest at his home on Wednesday was the most serious blow yet for the politician, who is President Erdoğan's main rival and is seen by many as the favourite for the next presidential election in 2028.

İmamoğlu has now been arrested on charges of corruption and even supporting terrorist groups, which are serious allegations. The Istanbul Public Prosecutor's Office describes him as the leader of a "criminal organisation" with around 100 suspects and accuses him of bribery and extortion.

Local media also mention İmamoğlu's alleged support for the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is the subject of special proceedings, as a reason for the arrest.

However, İmamoğlu and his friends from the secular Republican People's Party (CHP) have no doubt that the motives for the arrest are political. "We are facing a great tyranny, but I want you to know that I will not be discouraged," İmamoğlu announced in a video message before he was arrested.

CHP party leader Özgür Özel **described** İmamoğlu's arrest as a "coup attempt against our next president."

Political motives

The timing of the police action inevitably gives rise to the suspicion that it is politically motivated.

The CHP party has scheduled its presidential

primary for Sunday, 23 March, in which around 1.5 million members are to vote for a presidential candidate for the 2028 elections, and Ekrem İmamoğlu has the best chances.

His arrest probably does not jeopardise the CHP's decision to choose him as a presidential candidate, but it does hinder his official candidacy for the 2028 elections.

Furthermore, the 2022 judgement against İmamoğlu stipulates a ban on engaging in politics in addition to the prison sentence; following appeals, this process has not yet been finalised.

Istanbul University's decision to revoke İmamoğlu's degree shows that the authorities intend to disqualify him from the presidential race

Istanbul University's **decision** to revoke his degree on Tuesday, the day before his arrest, shows that the authorities still intend to disqualify İmamoğlu from the presidential race.

According to Turkish election rules, a presidential candidate must have a university degree. According to this decision, İmamoğlu's possible candidacy would therefore be called into question even without the subsequent arrest.

Resolving the crisis

The attack on the CHP and its most popular leader is a consequence of the popularity crisis of Erdoğan's ruling AK Party. Last year, it suffered a major blow at the national level in local elections, in which it was around 2% behind the CHP overall.

Opposition lists and candidates won or retained power in most of Turkey's largest cities, including Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. The opposition's growing popularity in Anatolia, where it has traditionally enjoyed the

most support, is particularly worrying for President Erdoğan.

The arrest of Erdoğan's biggest rival could be risky for the Turkish president, especially because İmamoğlu has the chance to gain more supporters as a victim of political persecution.

President Erdoğan had a similar political history, coming out of prison as a political star after his arrest in 1999 when he was mayor of Istanbul. "Arresting İmamoğlu will have the same effect on his brand – catapulting him to political stardom," Soner Cagaptaj, director of the Turkish Research Programme at the Washington Institute, **wrote** on X.

The arrest of the opposition leader also shook the Turkish economy

The arrest of the opposition leader also shook the Turkish economy, whose unenviable situation due to the rising cost of living affects the popularity of the government and the president.

Reuters reported on Wednesday that the Turkish lira **fell** again against the USD, and the BIST index fell by 7%. "There are many reasons for investors' freakout, aside from a general uptick in Turkish political risk. One fear, for example, might be that the moves raise the odds of a more entrenched Erdoğan turning back to the populist economic policies of the past, like favouring unsustainably low interest rates. That would represent a harmful U-turn from investors' perspective, since relatively orthodox monetary policy in recent years has served the economy well," **wrote** Reuters.

How likely are early elections?

One of the risks for Erdoğan is that there is still plenty of time before the presidential elections, i.e., enough time for the opposition and its candidate to make political capital out of the arrests and other forms of pressure.

But this is precisely the reason to place İmamoğlu's arrest in the context of the possible shortening of Erdoğan's presidential mandate and possible early presidential elections.



So far there have been no announcements about possible early presidential elections, but the steps taken by the government point to such a possibility – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

In view of the fact that Erdoğan is serving his second term as president and cannot run again according to the constitution, there have been interpretations that he could still run for a third term in the event of early elections decided by parliament.

"If the Turkish parliament decides to call early elections, it will be possible for the president to run for the presidency for a third time. Let's see, there's still time," Justice Minister Yılmaz Tunç **said** last year in March, regarding President Erdoğan's statement at the time that the local elections would be the last in which he would appear.

So far there have been no announcements about possible early presidential elections, but the steps taken by the government point to such a possibility. The arrest of the mayor of Istanbul, Erdoğan's most serious potential rival, could be part of the ruling party's calculation on how to secure a new success for its leader in the possible early presidential elections.