



Erdoğan has been in power in Turkey for 22 years. During that time, he has tightened his grip on the nation and pulled it in an increasingly autocratic direction. Now, there are demonstrations against the arrest of his political rival.

”If you take Erdoğan out of the picture, it is possible that the whole system will collapse”

On Thursday night, protesters in Turkey's largest city, Istanbul, were met with tear gas from the local police.

Several thousand people took to the streets despite the government's ban on protesting. The protests were a reaction to the arrest of Istanbul's mayor and Erdoğan's biggest political rival, Ekrem İmamoğlu, on Wednesday. Since Wednesday, several people have been arrested for what the Istanbul police call provocative posts on social media.

The arrest of İmamoğlu is just the latest in a series of arrests of critics of the country's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – including other opposition politicians and journalists. But according to Seda Gürkan, a professor of international politics at Leiden University, the arrest of Erdoğan's biggest political rival is historic:

"The extent of this is quite shocking for the population. It has a huge impact on Turkish voters' belief that it is possible to overthrow Erdoğan."

Erdoğan has responded to the demonstrations by saying: "The demonstrators are so out of balance that they are capable of attacking our police and hurling threats at our judges."

It was expected that İmamoğlu would be elected as the presidential candidate for the largest opposition party CHP at Sunday's primary election. He is being held until Sunday, when it will be announced whether he will be charged or not.



- A university student holds a Turkish flag during a demonstration in Istanbul after the city's mayor was arrested on Wednesday morning. Photo: Umit Bektas/Ritzau

"Who will stop him?"

When Turkey goes to the polls no later than the spring of 2028, it will have been 25 years since Erdoğan came to power. Back then, it was as prime minister, and in 2014, he transitioned to the presidency.

According to the constitution, a president can serve a maximum of two terms, so time is running out for Erdoğan, who is currently in his second term. Erdoğan has expressed that he

would like to run again, "if the people want it."



Foto: Florion Goga/Ritzau Scanpix

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

He has been the president of Turkey since 2014. Prior to that, he was the prime minister from 2003 to 2014.

From 1994 to 1998, he was the mayor of Turkey's largest city, Istanbul.

There was a failed military coup against him in 2016. It resulted in extensive purges in the military, judiciary, and other public institutions, which strengthened Erdoğan's power.

He is the founder and leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Karabekir Akkoyunlu, a professor of political science at Soas University of London, dismisses this formulation:

"He justifies his actions by claiming that it is the will of the people. It is a classic populist tactic used by autocratic leaders from Putin to Trump."

Recently, Erdoğan's party has been engaged in peace negotiations with the Kurdish Workers' Party PKK, which is on the EU's and Turkey's terrorist list. On March 17, two days before İmamoğlu was arrested, the negotiations resumed.

The negotiations with PKK have led some to speculate whether Erdoğan is trying to secure Kurdish votes to support a constitutional amendment that would allow him to run for a third term.

But Karabekir Akkoyunlu doubts that a constitutional amendment is necessary.

"He can come up with an excuse to run again. Who will stop him, the legal system?"

It is not surprising to Karabekir Akkoyunlu that the arrest and the negotiations with PKK are happening simultaneously:

"Erdoğan expects that these negotiations will paralyze the Kurds and split the opposition."

The Kurdish party DEM's Istanbul branch has on Friday urged its voters to participate in the demonstrations in front of the town hall, which according to Karabekir Akkoyunlu suggests that Erdoğan's strategy is not working.

The Autocrat's Dilemma

Seda Gürkan sees it as a sign of weakness that Erdoğan's government is taking such drastic measures to stop the opposition. But she still believes one should be cautious about ruling him out because Erdoğan is good at playing groups in society against each other, and the opposition depends on him not succeeding in dividing them.

"He has been very successful in consolidating his voter base, and he is still loved in large parts of society. On the other hand, his way of governing does not benefit Turkey," she says.

According to Karabekir Akkoyunlu, Erdoğan has painted himself into a corner. Akkoyunlu describes it as the autocrat's dilemma. Over the past 20 years, Erdoğan has centralized power around himself and created a system that is so dependent on him as a person that it is a weakness because it makes it very difficult for him to step down.

"Turkey's national interests, the ruling party's interests, and the president's inner circle's own interests have become almost inseparable. If you take Erdoğan out of the picture, it is possible that the whole system will collapse, so he has to continue to govern," says Karabekir Akkoyunlu.

When Erdoğan first came to power in Turkey, it seemed that he would steer the country in a democratic direction. His government brought Turkey closer to EU membership, implemented liberal democratic reforms, and removed power from the military. But as Erdoğan gained more power, he changed, according to Karabekir Akkoyunlu.

"Erdoğan showed that his intention was not to democratize the country but to introduce his own illiberal nationalist and Islamist worldview in the country," says Karabekir Akkoyunlu.

He explains that Erdoğan has been very patient in this process and over the past decade has step by step led Turkey in a more autocratic direction.

"Turkey's democracy has been dying a slow death in the past decade. The latest developments could be the final blow," says Karabekir Akkoyunlu.