

ERDOĞAN'S MOVE AGAINST KEY RIVAL PLUNGES TURKEY INTO FRESH CRISIS



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Erdoğan's move against key rival plunges Turkey into fresh crisis Fears grow that arrest of Istanbul mayor heralds increasing authoritarianism

AYLA JEAN YACKLEY - İSTANBUL ANDREW ENGLANO - LONDON For months, events at home and abroad appeared to be moving in Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's favour. Years of fraught relations with Europe were warming as Ankara's importance as a Nato ally was reinforced by US President Donald Trump's pivot to Moscow; Turkey's runaway inflation was cooling; and interest rates were finally falling. There were even signs that a 40-year insurgency by Kurdish separatists might be coming to an end. But the darker side of Erdoğan's rule was simmering in the background with a crackdown on his political opponents, while the leader hit out at an "opposition problem that poisons democracy". The crackdown reached an extraordinary climax on Wednesday with the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu, mayor of Istanbul and the most potent politician to challenge Erdoğan since the president came to power in 2002. In one swoop, the successes Erdoğan could point to over the past 18 months were thrown into jeopardy amid fears that İmamoğlu's arrest marked a dangerous turning point even in a nation that has grown used to years of authoritarianism under his rule. "He has crossed the Rubicon," said Suat Kınıklıoğlu, a former MP. "There is no going back from here for him." Investors, who had crept back into Turkish markets since Erdoğan abandoned the unorthodox monetary policies that had plunged the country into crisis, reacted with equal shock. The lira hit a record low against the dollar, as fears grew about Erdoğan's commitment to the rule of law and economic reforms led by finance minister Mehmet Şimşek. The benchmark Bist 100 index fell almost 9 per cent. Capital Economics said İmamoğlu's arrest raised concerns about "the broader reform agenda" and suggested that "political rather than economic concerns may be starting to dominate President Erdoğan's thinking". Galip Dalay at Chatham House said İmamoğlu's arrest risked denting Ankara's hopes of using strengthened defence ties with Europe to develop a broader relationship with the continent. "The mayor of Istanbul is the second most important elected post in the country after the president," said Dalay. "The trouble is what we see now is going to poison the relationship." Ankara's new importance to European defence, coupled with Trump's White House return, might have been the factors that emboldened Erdoğan, a ruthless political operator, to move against his main rival, analysts said. Seda Demiralp, a professor of political science at Istanbul's Işık University, said the US had made "turning this corner easier" by signalling it can "work with the people we call strongmen". İmamoğlu, who came to prominence after defeating Erdoğan's candidate to become Istanbul's mayor in 2019, is one of few politicians who appeals to a broad range of voters, including Kurds, conservatives and secularists. His centrist, secular Republican People's party (CHP) inflicted the worst election defeat on Erdoğan's AKP in local elections last year. But he has faced several criminal probes in a country where Erdoğan, who has dominated Turkish politics for more than two decades, wields vast power over state institutions, including the judiciary. His arrest — in relation to alleged links to "terrorism", as well as corruption — came just days before the CHP was set to name him as its presidential candidate for elections due by 2028. Justice minister Yılmaz Tunç insisted the judiciary had acted independently and called the opposition's claim that the detention was a "coup" against İmamoğlu "extremely dangerous". But for Kınıklıoğlu the moves were "a clear sign that Erdoğan does not want to take any risks" before the election. Other political rivals to Erdoğan are behind bars. Selahattin Demirtaş, a Kurdish opposition leader who challenged Erdoğan for the presidency, has been in prison since 2016, despite a European Court of Human Rights ruling that he was wrongly incarcerated for his political speeches. Ümit Özdağ, leader of the small ultranationalist Victory party, was jailed in January on charges that he insulted Erdoğan and "incited hatred" with anti-refugee social media posts. But İmamoğlu represents a new frontier: never before has Erdoğan moved so decisively against the mainstream opposition. His critics have long believed the creeping authoritarianism has been driven by one factor: his determination to remain in power. Erdoğan acquired sweeping powers over the state in a contentious referendum in 2017, while his allies have been

Street backlash: students defy a ban on demonstrations to protest yesterday against the detention of Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, below left Um» Bektas/Rculerv Erdem Sahn/EPA-€FE/ShuffirstocJt campaigning to change the constitution to let him run for a third term in 2028. Under existing rules, he could contest another election if parliament called for one before its term ends, or if the constitution was amended. But that would