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Turkey


Democracy hanging by a thread

ISTANBUL

President Erdogan is trying to neuter the opposition

THE REPUBLICAN PEOPLE'S PARTY (CHP), Turkey's main opposition party, dodged a bullet on October 24th. A court in Ankara, the capital, threw out a lawsuit that could have ousted the party's leader, Ozgur Ozel, and replaced him with a trustee. The case rested on claims that the convention in 2023 where Mr Ozel was elected as chair of the CHP had been tainted by vote-buying. It was widely seen as a ploy backed by the government of Turkey's autocratic president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Despite the court decision Mr Ozel warns it is no time for complacency. "What mattered in this case was the process, not the result," he says, speaking at his party headquarters in Istanbul a few days after the verdict. "They did this to wear down the CHP."

Turkey's stockmarket greeted the news with its biggest rally in weeks. But the open season on the CHP shows no sign of ending. On October 27th the authorities is- 

► sued new arrest warrants on suspicion of espionage against Ekrem Imamoglu, the party's presidential candidate, and his former campaign director. Police also arrested the editor of a pro-opposition television network. Hours later, a state trustee was appointed as the station's new boss.

Mr Imamoglu is already behind bars, having been arrested in March on trumped-up charges and removed as mayor of Istanbul. The new ones will keep him there even longer. Worse may be to come for the CHP if the latest probe transforms into a terrorism investigation. That could allow Mr Erdogan and his Justice and Development (AK) party to wrest control from the CHP of the city Mr Imamoglu had run since 2019.

With annual GDP amounting to some \$400bn, Istanbul accounts for almost a third of Turkey's economy. Mr Ozel thinks it unlikely that Mr Erdogan would seize control of it so brazenly. "This would cause irreversible damage to the economy, Turkish society, and politics," he says. "They would not dare to do it."

Turkey's oldest party has been facing an unprecedented attack. Since March hundreds of CHP members, including the mayors of some of Turkey's biggest cities, have been detained. Such is the crackdown that when Mr Imamoglu appeared in court in September, to hear charges related to his university diploma, his lawyer had to join the hearing via video link. He too had been arrested, and was speaking from prison.

There are signs that Mansur Yavas, the mayor of Ankara, presumed to be the CHP's back-up candidate for the presidency, could be next. Prosecutors recently indicted 14 people, including current and former Ankara municipal officials, on embezzlement charges. They now want to open an investigation against Mr Yavas.

Such operations will probably pick up pace ahead of general elections, scheduled for 2028 but expected to take place earlier. Mr Erdogan's government seems determined to turn the CHP into what Mr Ozel refers to as "his majesty's opposition". But it cannot afford to get carried away. A dramatic uptick in repression risks triggering mass protests and a market backlash.

"The new Turkey needs a new opposition," Mr Erdogan said in 2014. What sounded then like a suggestion that his AK deserved a worthy opponent now sounds like a threat. The president seems to be making good on it, one court case at a time. But pruning the CHP has not so far delivered the expected results. "If the government could push opposition voters to apathy or disappointment, that's a big danger," says [Seda Demiralp](#), a professor at Isik University in Istanbul. "But it's not happening. And Ozel deserves credit, because they feel somebody's fighting for them, so it's not over yet." ■