

THE MARCH 19 PROCESS

HOW DEMOCRATIC
COMPETITION IS
BEING CRUSHED
IN TÜRKİYE

A VISUAL REPORT ON THE
DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING
AFTER MARCH 19, 2025



DEMOCRACY REQUIRES MORE THAN ELECTIONS

Democracy is not defined by voting alone. It requires free debate, lawful courts, peaceful political competition, independent institutions, free media, and the genuine possibility that power can change hands through elections.

Türkiye is a NATO ally, a G20 economy, and a strategically important country linking Europe, the Black Sea, the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Democratic change in Türkiye therefore has consequences far beyond its borders.

Over the past decade, democratic backsliding in Türkiye has become increasingly visible. Independent institutions have weakened, political competition has grown less equal, space for dissent has steadily narrowed. But the events that began on March 19, 2025 marked a decisive turning point on this path.

This booklet explains why. The March 19 Process was not simply about the detention of one opposition leader, but about reshaping the rules of political competition in, and ultimately the future of, Türkiye.



CHP leader Özgür Özel stands atop a police water cannon during a protest in May 2026 against a court ruling that overturned the party's 2023 congress and effectively removed its elected leadership.

AUGUST 1, 2026:
THE 500TH DAY OF
THE AUTO-COUP D'ÉTAT IN TÜRKİYE

WHAT IS THE MARCH 19 PROCESS?

FROM AUTHORITARIAN COMPETITION TO A CIVILIAN COUP

For years, political competition in Türkiye became increasingly unequal. State resources, media dominance, and growing pressure on opposition parties steadily tilted the playing field in favor of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Yet the opposition recovered, winning the 2024 local elections and emerging as the country's largest political force.

On March 19, 2025, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu (the opposition's leading presidential contender) and more than 100 politicians, municipal officials, advisers, and associates were detained. What followed extended far beyond one criminal investigation.

The March 19 Process marked a decisive turning point. Rather than merely defeating the opposition at the ballot box, it seeks to dismantle the opposition's capacity to compete at all. The emerging model resembles today's Russia, where elections still take place but no longer offer a realistic path to political change. For this reason, many in Türkiye describe March 19 as a civilian coup against democratic politics.

THE GOAL:

Neutralize organized political opposition before the next national election.

THE METHOD:

Investigations, detentions, legal restrictions, administrative intervention, and sustained political pressure.

THE TURNING POINT:

March 19, 2025 - The detention of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and more than 100 others.

THE RISK:

A political system in which elections continue, but only for show, and genuine competition disappears.

**MARCH 19 WAS NOT ONE CASE.
IT MARKED A NEW STAGE IN THE EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC COMPETITION.**

2019: THE FIRST BREACH IN THE WALL

Erdoğan's fear of losing his power did not start in 2024. It started in 2019.

When Ekrem İmamoğlu narrowly won the election, the result was annulled in an unprecedented decision. Yet the rerun produced the opposite outcome: he won again by a much larger margin.

MARCH 31, 2019

İmamoğlu wins İstanbul mayor race by a narrow margin and ends 25-year rule by Erdoğan's parties.

MAY 6, 2019

The Supreme Election Council, in an unprecedented ruling, annuls the mayoral election.

JUNE 23, 2019

Repeat election.

VICTORY MARGIN:

13,729 > 806,014



Ekrem İmamoğlu addresses his supporters after the election results were annulled, vowing to fight back.

Same Envelope, Different Fate

The 2019 İstanbul election produced one of the most controversial decisions in modern Turkish politics. Although voters cast four separate local-election ballots in a single envelope, the Supreme Election Council annulled only the metropolitan mayoral ballot (the one won by opposition candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu) while accepting the other three as valid. Authorities cited procedural irregularities, yet no evidence of organized fraud emerged from subsequent investigations. The decision was widely seen as political rather than legal. When the election was repeated, İmamoğlu defeated the ruling party's candidate by an even larger margin.

**THE FIRST TEST OF WHETHER ELECTION RESULTS WOULD BE RESPECTED.
WHEN THE BALLOT BOX SURVIVED, OTHER METHODS FOLLOWED.**



2019–2024: PRESSURE ON OPPOSITION MUNICIPALITIES

After losing Türkiye's largest cities in 2019, Erdoğan's government sought to ensure it would not happen again.

Rather than accepting the new political balance, it subjected opposition-run municipalities to years of financial, administrative, legal, and political pressure, to portray them as ineffective and incapable of governing.

Yet the strategy failed. Opposition mayors continued to deliver public services, expanded their public support, and in 2024 the CHP became Türkiye's largest political party nationwide, first time since Erdoğan took office.

HOW PRESSURE WAS APPLIED



Delayed budgets and transfers



Blocked borrowing and credit approvals



Delayed or rejected project approvals



Municipal assets taken under central control



Smear campaigns in pro-government media



Repeated investigations and lawsuits



Administrative inspections and audits



Political threats and intimidation

LOCAL ELECTIONS: 2019 vs. 2024

Despite five years of pressure, **CHP** finished first nationwide.

2019



2024



The expansion of red areas illustrates CHP's nationwide gains, while the contraction of yellow areas reflects AKP's electoral decline.

AFTER 2024: FROM POLITICAL RIVALRY TO POLITICAL ELIMINATION



The 2024 local elections showed that sustained pressure on opposition municipalities had failed.

Instead of adjusting its policies, the government opted to escalate its strategy.

The objective shifted from defeating the opposition in elections to weakening its ability to compete at all.



ESCALATION OF THE STRATEGY

- 2024**
CHP wins the local elections.
- Late 2024**
Investigations and legal cases intensify.
- February 2025**
Presidential primary announced.
- Feb 25, 2025**
Erdoğan: "The opposition must be shaken."
- Mar 18, 2025**
İmamoğlu's university diploma annulled.
- Mar 19, 2025**
Mass detentions.
The March 19 Process begins.

Under Turkish law, presidential candidates must hold a university degree. Just days after Ekrem İmamoğlu formally declared his intention to run for president, his university diploma, issued in 1994, was annulled in 2025 by a university board that critics argue lacked the legal authority to make such a decision. This effectively prevented him from meeting one of the constitutional requirements for the presidency.

The following day, he was detained.

**THE GOAL WAS NO LONGER TO WIN THE NEXT ELECTION.
IT WAS TO SHAPE WHO COULD COMPETE IN IT.**

THE WEEK THAT CHANGED THE RULES

MARCH 18–23, 2025

Within six days, Türkiye witnessed one of the most consequential political crises in its modern history. As the state escalated its intervention, millions of citizens responded through elections, protests, and public demonstrations.

**15.5
MILLION**

**PEOPLE PARTICIPATED IN THE
CHP PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY**



WHAT THE STATE DID



**MARCH 18
DIPLOMA ANNULLED**
İmamoğlu's university diploma from 1994 was annulled by Istanbul University.



**MARCH 19
MASS DETENTIONS**
İmamoğlu and 100+ others were detained in a nationwide operation at dawn.



**MARCH 19–22
PROTEST BANS**
Demonstrations were banned in major cities and public gatherings were restricted.



**MARCH 19–22
INTERNET RESTRICTIONS**
Social media and messaging platforms faced slowdowns and access limitations.



**MARCH 23
PRE-TRIAL DETENTION**
İmamoğlu was formally arrested and sent to pre-trial detention.

VS.

HOW THE PEOPLE RESPONDED



**MARCH 19–23
UNIVERSITY PROTESTS**
Students organized rallies and walkouts at universities in many cities.



**MARCH 19–23
MASS DEMONSTRATIONS**
CHP wins the local elections.



**MARCH 23
15.5 MILLION VOTE**
Citizens across Türkiye participated in the CHP presidential primary in a historic show of support.



**MARCH 19–23
VOICES EVERYWHERE**
Citizens used every channel available to share information and express their opposition.

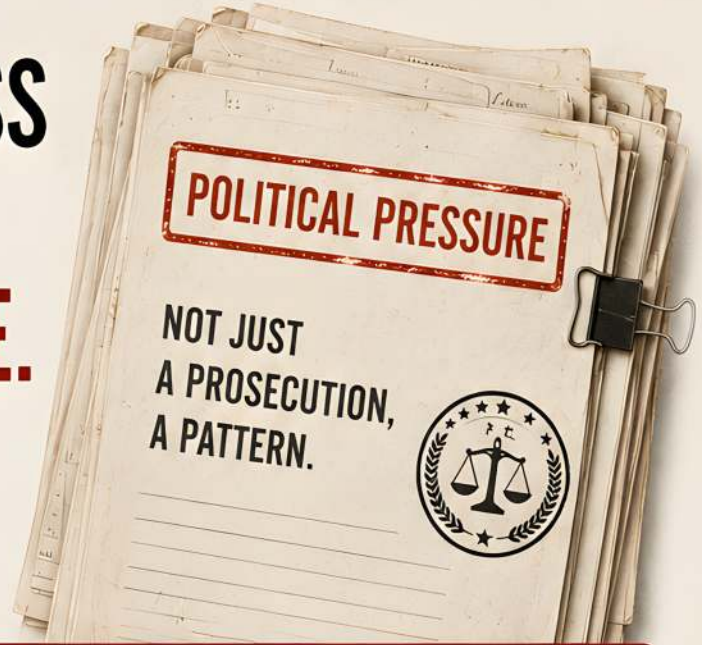


**MARCH 19–23
INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION**
The events drew widespread attention from global media, governments, and organizations.

**WHAT WAS INTENDED TO END A CAMPAIGN
BECAME A MASS DEMOCRATIC MOBILIZATION**

WHEN LEGAL PROCESS BECOMES POLITICAL PRESSURE.

The March 19 Process did not rely on a single case. It combined dozens of investigations, overlapping prosecutions, prolonged detention, and legal uncertainty into a sustained form of political pressure.



LEGAL TOOLS USED AGAINST EKREM İMAMOĞLU



1. 2,430+ YEARS

Combined prison sentences sought across dozens of cases against Ekrem İmamoğlu.



2. DOZENS OF INVESTIGATIONS

Investigations have ranged from corruption and terrorism allegations to highly technical municipal procedures, including claims about construction measurements and procurement decisions.



3. THE "AHMAK" CASE

In December 2022, İmamoğlu was sentenced to prison and a political ban after repeating Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu's own "fool" remark back to him. The verdict remains under appeal.



4. LAWYERS TARGETED

Lawyers representing İmamoğlu and other officials have been subjected to searches, detentions, and investigations for their professional activities.



5. MUNICIPAL STAFF TARGETED

Operations increasingly targeted not only elected officials but also senior municipal administrators and technical staff, disrupting the day-to-day functioning of local government.



6. OVERLAPPING CASES

Multiple investigations were pursued simultaneously, creating continuous legal uncertainty even when earlier cases remained unresolved.



Many defendants spent extended periods in detention before indictments were finalized, while investigations often expanded faster than courts could review earlier cases.

HOW LEGAL PRESSURE WAS SUSTAINED.

The March 19 Process was not sustained by a single indictment. It was maintained through repeated mechanisms that prolonged uncertainty, shaped public perception, and kept pressure on political actors over time.



KEY MECHANISMS THAT SUSTAINED LEGAL PRESSURE



1. PRESSURE TO BECOME A WITNESS

Some detainees reported being offered release or lighter treatment in exchange for statements implicating other suspects.



2. PROLONGED PRE-TRIAL DETENTION

Many detainees remained imprisoned for months before indictments were completed or trials began.



3. BROAD AND WEAKLY SUPPORTED ALLEGATIONS

Many indictments relied heavily on anonymous witnesses, hearsay, or indirect claims rather than publicly presented material evidence.



4. OVERLAPPING INVESTIGATIONS

New investigations often began before earlier cases concluded, extending legal uncertainty indefinitely.



5. MEDIA LEAKS

Confiscated phones, private conversations and investigation materials frequently appeared in pro-government media before being examined in court.



6. LEGAL PRESSURE AS A PROCESS

Rather than a single prosecution, multiple simultaneous investigations created continuous legal, political and psychological pressure.

THE CYCLE OF SUSTAINED PRESSURE

DAWN OPERATION



Early morning raids and detentions.



DETENTION



Custody based on allegations, not evidence.



MEDIA LEAKS



Selective materials appear in pro-government media.



LONG PRE-TRIAL DETENTION



Months in prison before indictment or trial.



NEW INVESTIGATION



A fresh case begins while the previous one remains unresolved.



This is not about justice — it is about maintaining control. When legal tools are used repeatedly, broadly, and preemptively, they stop being instruments of law and become instruments of political pressure.

BEYOND THE COURTROOM

For many detainees, imprisonment marked the beginning—not the end—of a broader process affecting their families, health, livelihoods and daily lives.



FAMILY

- Families are separated for months or years.
- Detainees are transferred to prisons hundreds of miles away.
- Relatives travel for hours—sometimes 8–12 hours each way—for short visits.
- Threats against detainees often target their spouses, children or elderly parents.



HEALTH

- Access to adequate medical care is delayed or denied.
- Malnutrition and stress worsen existing conditions.
- Many detainees lose significant weight.

DETAINED



EMPLOYMENT & LIVELIHOODS

- Salaries are suspended.
- Many are dismissed from their jobs.
- Household income disappears overnight.
- Families are forced to sell homes, cars and savings to survive.

THE CASE OF MURAT ÇALIK



- Held in pre-trial detention despite serious medical conditions.
- He has lost more than 20 kg (44 lbs) since his detention.
- Reports indicate risk of life-threatening complications.
- Medical requests have been repeatedly delayed.



PRIVACY & DIGNITY

- Phones and computers are confiscated.
- Private messages and photos are leaked to pro-government media.
- Smear campaigns are used to publicly destroy reputations.

THE LONG JOURNEY TO A SHORT VISIT



Leave home before dawn



Travel for hours



Hundreds of miles away



20–30 minutes behind glass



Return home late at night

For many families, prison visits mean a full day of travel for less than half an hour with their loved one.



IMPRISONMENT AFFECTED FAR MORE PEOPLE
THAN THOSE HELD IN CUSTODY.

THE CONDITIONS OF DETENTION

Systematic practices inside prisons raise serious human rights concerns.



1. OVERCROWDING

- Prisons are operating far beyond capacity.
- Cells designed for two or three people often hold many more.
- Many detainees are forced to sleep on floors, mattresses or with no bedding.



2. ISOLATION & SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

- Detainees are subjected to isolation for long periods to break their will.
- Prolonged isolation causes severe psychological harm.



3. STRIP SEARCHES

- Detainees—including women—are subjected to strip searches.
- These practices are degrading, humiliating and violate basic human dignity.
- Such searches are used routinely, even without any concrete security justification.



4. HEALTH & MEDICAL NEGLECT

- Medical care is delayed or denied. Chronic illnesses worsen.
- Malnutrition and weight loss are widespread.
- Multiple serious medical conditions—such as in the case of Murat Çalık—are ignored.
- Significant weight loss and risk of life-threatening complications are common.
- Requests for release for treatment are ignored.



5. PRESSURE & THREATS

- Detainees are pressured to give false statements.
- Prosecutors threaten detainees with harm to their children or elderly relatives.
- Such pressure undermines fair trial rights and the right to remain silent.



6. TRANSFERS TO DISTANT PRISONS

- Detainees are transferred to prisons far from their families.
- Visits become costly, exhausting and extremely difficult.
- These transfers isolate detainees and punish families.



7. UNFAIR CO-DETENTION

- Many pre-trial detainees—who have not been convicted—are placed in the same wards as convicted criminals.
- Including those sentenced for ordinary offenses.
- This practice increases risk, pressure and psychological harm.



8. SURVEILLANCE & LEAKS

- Phones and personal devices are confiscated.
- Private communications are monitored or leaked to pro-government media.
- Private messages and photos of detainees and their families are published to discredit and intimidate.



PRE-TRIAL DETENTION BECAME
A **LIVED EXPERIENCE**, NOT JUST A **LEGAL STATUS**.

These practices violate Türkiye's
constitution and international
human rights obligations.

MAIN OPPOSITION UNDER ATTACK

Since the 2024 local elections, the Republican People's Party (CHP) has become Türkiye's largest political party, representing millions of voters across the country. Instead of seeking to regain public support through electoral competition, the government has intensified judicial and administrative pressure on the party, targeting its mayors, leadership, municipalities, and organizational structure.

A SYSTEMATIC CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE OPPOSITION



INVESTIGATIONS

Hundreds of investigations opened against elected officials and party members.



DETENTIONS

Mayors, party officials, and staff have been detained or arrested.



TRUSTEE THREATS

Government seeks to impose trustees (kayyum) on municipalities and party bodies.



FINANCIAL PRESSURE

Fines, asset freezes and audits are used to paralyze local governments and party organizations.



POLITICAL BANS

Elected officials face potential bans and charges that could remove them from public life.



FOUNDED IN 1923

Türkiye's oldest political party



WON 35 OF 81

provinces in the 2024 local elections, including Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Antalya, Adana and more.



REPRESENTS TENS OF MILLIONS

of citizens across the country.



MANAGES 14

metropolitan municipalities and hundreds of district municipalities.

THE "ABSOLUTE NULLITY" CASE

On **May 21, 2026**, a court lacking jurisdiction issued a ruling of "absolute nullity" to annul the 38th Ordinary Congress held three years earlier in **2023**.

- At that congress, no one expected it at the time, the challenger candidate defeated the long-time leader and a young, reformist team took over.
- Within months, CHP became the first party in the country in the local elections.
- When the March 19 Process failed to bring CHP to its knees, the government turned to the courts to remove the elected leadership.
- The court declared the 2023 congress void—erasing the will of the delegates—and imposed the return of the old leadership to the party.



WHO CAN STILL RUN?

Democratic elections require real competition. But step by step, potential opponents are removed from the field—long before election day.

A SHRINKING FIELD OF CHOICES

**CANDIDATE A**

Independent

**CANDIDATE B**

Mayor

DISQUALIFIED

Political ban requested

**CANDIDATE C**

Party Leader

ARRESTED

Detained pending trial

**CANDIDATE D**

Municipality Official

UNDER INVESTIGATION

Investigation ongoing

**CANDIDATE E**

Lawyer

POLITICAL BAN

Banned from political life

**INCUMBENT**

In power

HOW THEY ARE REMOVED

**POLITICAL BANS**

Preventing individuals from running for office.

**CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS**

Broad and vague charges to justify pressure.

**DETENTIONS & ARRESTS**

Pre-trial detention used as a form of punishment.

**TRUSTEE APPOINTMENTS**

Replacing elected bodies with government-appointed trustees.

**MEDIA PRESSURE**

Smear campaigns and leaks to shape public perception.

**PROTEST RESTRICTIONS**

Limits on the right to assemble and express dissent.

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THE MARCH 19 PROCESS

THE WORLD IS WATCHING

From Europe to North America, international institutions and leaders have raised serious concerns about democratic backsliding in Türkiye.



WHAT THE INTERNATIONAL ACTORS HAVE SAID



EUROPEAN UNION
European Commission

Said the detention of Mayor İmamoğlu raises serious questions about Türkiye's commitment to its democratic traditions and the rule of law.

Joint Statement • 19 March 2025



COUNCIL OF EUROPE
Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Condemned İmamoğlu's detention as "an assault on democracy" and called for his immediate release.

Statement • 21 March 2025



EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Held an urgent debate on the detention and later adopted a resolution condemning democratic backsliding and the erosion of the rule of law in Türkiye.

Debate • 25 March 2025
Resolution • 8 May 2025



HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

Described the detention as part of a pattern of politically motivated prosecutions and urged İmamoğlu's immediate release.

Statement • 24 March 2025



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Said the crackdown represents an assault on political participation, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Türkiye.

Statement • 24 March 2025



SOCIALIST INTERNATIONAL

Adopted a resolution calling for İmamoğlu's release and publicly expressed solidarity during its Council meeting in Istanbul.

Resolution • 24 May 2025



VENICE COMMISSION
(Council of Europe)

In its October 2024 opinion on Türkiye, warned that the use of anti-terror legislation and pre-trial detention is increasingly disproportionate and undermines democratic standards.

Opinion • 18 October 2024

Pedro Sánchez, Prime Minister of Spain and President of the Socialist International, holds a "Free İmamoğlu" placard during the Socialist International Council meeting in Istanbul, Türkiye, in May 2025, expressing solidarity with jailed Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu.

WHY THESE STATEMENTS MATTER



These are not isolated opinions. They come from institutions that monitor democracy, human rights and the rule of law across the world.



Repeated and consistent concerns from international actors strengthen calls for accountability and action.



Democratic backsliding in a NATO member and key regional actor has wider implications for Europe, security and global democratic norms.



Silence in the face of democratic erosion elsewhere undermines the credibility of the rules-based international order for everyone.

Ekrem İmamoğlu
Turkish
Opposition
Leader



A FAMILIAR PATTERN

- Widely popular.
- Accused of multiple offenses.
- Investigated and arrested on politically motivated charges.
- Considered the regime's main political challenger.
- Targeted as part of efforts to silence dissent and consolidate power.

Alexei Navalny
Russian
Opposition
Leader



WHY TÜRKİYE'S DEMOCRACY MATTERS BEYOND TÜRKİYE

Türkiye's democratic trajectory affects not only its own citizens, but regional security, international alliances and the rules-based international order.

WHY THE WORLD SHOULD CARE



NATO ALLY

Türkiye is a key NATO member with the second largest army in the Alliance.



BLACK SEA SECURITY

Türkiye borders a region at the center of the Russia-Ukraine war and wider geopolitical tension.



MIGRATION

Türkiye hosts millions of refugees and plays a critical role in managing migration flows to Europe.



TRADE & ECONOMY

Türkiye is a major economy and trade partner. Democratic decline undermines investor confidence and economic cooperation.



ENERGY CORRIDORS

Major energy routes from the Caspian and Middle East to Europe pass through Türkiye.



REGIONAL STABILITY

Instability in Türkiye would impact the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean.



UKRAINE & BEYOND

A stable and democratic Türkiye strengthens collective security efforts and support for Ukraine and the wider region.



RULE OF LAW & STANDARDS

Democratic backsliding weakens the rules-based international order and sets a negative precedent.



RUSSIA SHOWED THE RISK.

When a strong country moves away from competitive democracy toward authoritarianism, the consequences can spiral far beyond its borders. We have seen this in Russia.

RUSSIA: WHAT HAPPENED



Independent opposition weakened and criminalized.



Elections continued, but competition was hollowed out.



Institutions captured; judiciary and media brought under control.



Aggressive foreign policy and regional destabilization.

THE WARNING FOR TÜRKİYE



Main opposition figures prosecuted and detained.



Elections continue, but the playing field is being distorted.



Judiciary independence undermined; media and civil society face intense pressure.



Risk of unpredictable behavior in the region grows.

Türkiye shouldn't follow Russia's path.

The warning is clear: when elections remain while meaningful competition is dismantled, democratic decline can become harder to reverse.



WHAT WE NEED FROM YOU

Preventing Türkiye from moving further down this path requires international attention, solidarity and principled engagement—before today's warning signs become tomorrow's reality.

YOUR VOICE. YOUR SUPPORT. OUR DEMOCRACY.

DEMOCRACY REQUIRES MORE THAN ELECTIONS

It requires independent
institutions, genuine political
competition and the rule of law.

It also requires international solidarity.



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VERSION WITH SOURCES

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