

Breaking News from Türkiye

Three Months Since Leading Presidential Candidate İmamoğlu's Arrest

How many operations have been carried out, and how many people have been detained?

The Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office describes Ekrem İmamoğlu as a "suspected crime-ring leader."

İmamoğlu was taken into custody on March 19, one day after **his diploma from Istanbul University was annulled**, and was arrested on March 23 as part of a corruption investigation.

On the day he was arrested, **İmamoğlu was declared the main opposition Republican People's Party's (CHP) presidential candidate, having received nearly 15 million votes**. He was later suspended from his post as Mayor of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (İBB) by the order of the Ministry of the Interior.

The first operation targeting the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality was conducted on March 19. In the **first wave, 94 people were detained, and 54, including Ekrem İmamoğlu, were arrested**.

The **second wave** took place on April 26. In that operation, **52 people were detained**, and 18, including Dilek Kaya İmamoğlu's brother, Cevat Kaya, and Bosphorus Reconstruction Director Elçin Karaoğlu, were arrested.

On May 20, a **third-wave** operation targeting İBB subsidiaries, including Medya AŞ, Kültür AŞ, and Peyzaj AŞ, resulted in **22 detentions and 20 arrests**.

After these three operations, which occurred roughly a month apart, **the fourth and fifth waves followed at one-week intervals**. In the **fourth wave on May 23, simultaneous operations in Istanbul, İzmir, Trabzon, Antalya, Tunceli, and Kocaeli** resulted in 46 detentions; 25 people, including İmamoğlu's security chief, Mustafa Akin, and chief of staff, Kadriye Kasapoğlu, were arrested.

Before the **fifth wave, the number of people arrested stood at 117**. In the last wave, another 22 people were arrested.

bit.ly/4egcKNM



Photo: CHP

We are not being tried, we are being directly punished!

"We are prisoners, subjected to persecution, sent kilometers away. We are being punished based on the slander of people with a criminal past. At the break of dawn, homes are raided by hundreds of police officers. People who would willingly come if summoned are taken from their homes and publicly discredited. The same scenario is repeated over and over again."

I am in this prison because I won İstanbul three times!

"I am here because I have been the guardian of İstanbul. I am here because we implemented a people-centered municipal governance system that served 16 million people without discrimination, with humanity. I am here because, in the last election, I became a presidential candidate with the support of **15.5 million people, an unprecedented figure in the history of global democratic elections**."

<https://bit.ly/4jXp4DC>



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Special report: Three Months Since Presidential Candidate İmamoglu's Arrest

Since March 19th, five waves of operations have resulted in the politically motivated arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoglu and 138 others, exposing an alarming assault on the rule of law in Turkey.

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Ekrem İmamoglu: "We Are Not Being Tried, We Are Being Punished"

Ekrem İmamoglu is being threatened with prison and a political ban for criticizing a politicized judiciary—but he stood strong, declaring in court, "You will not erase me from the people's hearts."

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Zafer Party Leader Özdağ Released

Ümit Özdağ, leader of the Zafer Party, was released from prison after five months charges to incite hatred with anti-Syrian refugee remarks; a conviction he denounced as politically driven and based on flimsy evidence.

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Investigation Over Footage of İmamoglu's Court Hearing

Authorities have launched a criminal investigation into the leaked courtroom footage from Ekrem İmamoglu's latest hearing, highlighting the intense legal and political pressure surrounding his trial.

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Dilek İmamoglu: Our Voice Will Now Be Stronger

Dilek İmamoglu launched a solidarity platform to support families of detained municipal workers, condemning the political nature of the arrests and vowing to fight for justice, freedom, and early elections.

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Istanbul University Seeks More Time in İmamoglu Diploma Case

Istanbul University seeks 30-day extension in İmamoglu Diploma Case, fueling backlash and political Suspicions.

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DEM Leaders Visit İmamoglu

DEM Party co-chairs visited İmamoglu and other detainees at Silivri, saying they remain hopeful and committed to rebuilding democracy and peace in Türkiye.

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İmamoglu's Lawyer Arrested

Ekrem İmamoglu's lawyer, Mehmet Pehlivan, was arrested on criminal charges, prompting outrage from legal groups who say the move threatens the right to defense.

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**Transatlantic Reflections
on Turkey's Democratic
Backsliding:
March 19 and Beyond**



Berk Esen



Gönül Tol



Orçun Selçuk

June 22

10:00–11:00 AM EST
5:00–6:00 PM TRT

Join via Zoom

Scan the QR
code to attend
the panel
online





Yusuf Can
MODERATOR

Demirtaş and Özdağ Unite in Democracy

Opposition leaders Demirtaş and Özdağ, from opposing camps, unite in condemning political detentions and call for fair trials and democratic solidarity against authoritarianism.

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Europe's Reluctant Reset with Türkiye

Europe is shifting its approach to Türkiye, prioritizing military cooperation over democratic reforms amid rising global tensions. This pragmatic move highlights a tough choice between security needs and upholding democratic values.

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Amnesty Urges Investigation Into Police Abuse During March Türkiye Protests

Amnesty International is calling for urgent, independent investigations into widespread police violence during protests across Türkiye between March 19 and 26, 2025.

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Select Publications of Panel Participants:

- "Trump Is Erdoğan on Steroids", Gonul Tol, Persuasion, May 16, 2025
- "After Crackdown, Is Türkiye an Autocracy?", Berk Esen & Şebnem Gümüştü, Journal of Democracy, March 2025
- The Authoritarian Divide: Populism, Propaganda, and Polarization, Orçun Selçuk, Notre Dame Press, July 2024

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Ekrem İmamoğlu: “We Are Not Being Tried, We Are Being Punished”



Photo: bianet.org

bit.ly/4k0oSDR

The charges stem from remarks made during a January 20 panel titled “Modern Law and the Politicization of the Judiciary,” where Ekrem İmamoğlu criticized Istanbul’s Chief Public Prosecutor Akın Gürlek for how CHP Youth Chair Cem Aydın was detained. He accused the judiciary of trying to intimidate people. His remarks sparked a criminal case, and he now faces charges of threatening, insulting a public official, and targeting someone involved in counterterrorism.

Prosecutors are requesting a prison sentence of 2 years and 8 months to 7 years and 4 months, plus a political ban under Article 53 of Türkiye’s Penal Code.

This second court hearing took place at Silivri prison, with CHP Chair Özgür Özel, other opposition MPs, supporters, and İmamoğlu’s family present. Supporters chanted: “Türkiye is proud of you” and “Everything will be beautiful.”

Three days before the hearing, prosecutors submitted their final opinion. In court, İmamoğlu responded powerfully, saying: “We’re not being tried, we’re being punished because we won elections. This is not justice.” He called out the erosion of judicial independence and said his social media and photo visibility have been restricted. “You won’t erase me from the people’s hearts. I promise a just future for all,” he said.

Things got tense when gendarmes tried to remove him during a recess. İmamoğlu refused, saying, “Take me by force if you must,” and sat back down.

Zafer Party Leader Özdağ Released After Five Months in Prison



Photo: bianet.org

bit.ly/45rGF3d

Ümit Özdağ, chair of the Victory (Zafer) Party, was released from prison. He was first sentenced to 2 years, 4 months, and 3 days for “inciting the public to hatred and hostility” under Article 216 of Türkiye’s Penal Code. The case stems from his anti-Syrian refugee remarks, which a court ruled helped incite an attempted pogrom in central Türkiye in 2024.

Özdağ was jailed for nearly 5 months in Silivri, where the sentence was delivered. The courtroom was filled with prominent political figures and supporters.

Özdağ’s 15-page defense called the case politically motivated, arguing that the prosecution’s evidence was based on an unsigned and unverified police report and social media posts made by others. “If I were a pro-government politician, I wouldn’t be standing here,” he told the court.

The court ultimately found him guilty but did not impose the complete sentence sought; instead, it ordered his release after a brief recess.

The case follows two major investigations. One after Özdağ’s 2024 speech targeting President Erdoğan, and another over his remarks during an anti-Syrian unrest in Kayseri. The case remains one of the most high-profile legal actions against anti-refugee rhetoric in Türkiye.

Faces behind the bars: Elif Atayman

- The former general manager of the Istanbul Municipality’s media company
- Arrested on March 19 and held in **solitary confinement for 72 days**.
- **Transferred 300 miles** from Silivri to Afyon; moved in **handcuffs for 7.5 hours** inside a **1 m² sealed compartment**.
- In Afyon, **forced to sleep on the floor** for days.



Photo: bianet.org

Faces behind the bars: Murat Çalık

- Opposition **mayor** of Beylikdüzü (CHP), jailed since the 19 Mar 2025
- Survived **leukemia** (1999) and **lymphoma** (2006), leaving him **immunocompromised**.
- He has **lost 33 lb** during 75 days behind bars.
- **Transferred 350 miles** from Silivri to İzmir, far from his doctors, lawyers and family.



Photo: Sputnik TR



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Investigation Launched Over Footage from İmamoğlu's Court Hearing



Photo: TV5 Haber

<http://bit.ly/4kXd4Uk>

A criminal investigation has been launched into the unauthorized filming and distribution of footage from the latest court hearing of detained İstanbul (İBB) Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu.

İmamoğlu appeared before a judge, facing accusations that he targeted İstanbul Chief Public Prosecutor Akin Gürlek and his family. Video and audio taken during the hearing later surfaced on social media, triggering legal action.

According to ANKA News Agency, the Silivri Chief Public Prosecutor's Office has begun probing those who recorded and distributed the footage without permission.

The inquiry is based on Article 286 of the Turkish Penal Code, which states that anyone who records or transmits audio or video from judicial proceedings without authorization can face up to six months in prison.

In Türkiye, the dissemination of courtroom recordings is politicized and the law is applied arbitrarily. Authorities are now working to identify and charge those responsible for the leak.

This episode underscores both the strict legal boundaries around trial documentation and the heightened political scrutiny directed at opposition figures like İmamoğlu.

Faces behind the bars: Murat Ongun

- Chair of İstanbul Municipality's media company
- Arrested on March 23.
- Moved secretly from Silivri to Çorlu Prison during the night of April 12.
- His lawyers were detained; his wife, Gözdem Ongun, was taken into custody during the second wave.
- Even his children's piggy bank was seized—showing the process has become collective punishment of the entire family.



Photo: Türkiye Today

Dilek İmamoğlu: Our Voice Will Now Be Stronger



Photo: BirGun

<http://bit.ly/4I9ZLiJ>

Dilek Kaya İmamoğlu, the wife of İstanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, announced the formation of the "Solidarity Platform with Families of Detainees". She spoke on behalf of the families of detained İstanbul Municipality staff. The platform aims not only to support effected families but also to be active in the field and give a voice to all detainees.

She emphasized their support for the "Freedom for Ekrem İmamoğlu and Early Elections" petition campaign. Mrs. İmamoğlu highlighted that Ekrem İmamoğlu, the CHP's presidential candidate and elected mayor of İstanbul, and his close colleagues have been unjustly detained for 90 days.

She described the arrests as politically motivated and condemned the use of unsubstantiated allegations, secret witnesses, and slander to separate people from their families. Many detainees have been transferred to distant prisons as a form of pressure. Women, particularly mothers, have suffered harsh treatment, being shackled tightly, transported for hours in cramped vehicles, and made to sleep on the floor, also limiting access to lawyers and family.

Dilek İmamoğlu stated they are facing a major injustice and accused authorities of now targeting families of detainees as well. She concluded by saying their voices are now stronger, and they will persist in their struggle for justice and freedom for their loved ones.

Faces behind the bars: Kadriye Kasapoğlu

- İmamoğlu's Chief of Staff
- **Re-detained and arrested** on May 27 (4th wave); had previously been released under judicial control.
- **Her cell was changed five times in five days**—family calls this "psychological torture."
- **The arrest took place on her son's birthday. She is a single mother** raising him alone.
- Has been in Silivri for three weeks; indictment still not prepared.



Photo: BirGun



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Istanbul University, Which Annulled İmamoğlu's Diploma, Asks the Court for Extra Time to Collect Evidence

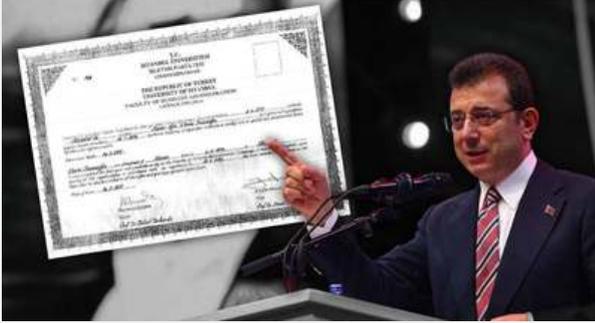


Photo: T24

<https://bit.ly/4n7MPf7>

On June 13, in the case challenging the cancellation of Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu's 31-year-old diploma, Istanbul University requested an additional 30 days. The university indicated they need more time to collect the documents ordered. The court had requested 36 pieces of evidence from four institutions; 23 were to be provided by the University.

The request has drawn ridicule and suspicion. Critics point out that the University voided İmamoğlu's diploma on March 18, branding it "null" due to alleged procedural errors. They say the University is only now scrambling to find evidence to support its own decision. The delay has intensified doubts about the case's legitimacy, with commentators asking: "Did the University cancel the diploma without any evidence at all?"

Because the annulment could bar İmamoğlu, who has been jailed since March 23 and is seen as the opposition's strongest presidential contender, from holding office, the extension is widely viewed as further evidence that the proceedings are not about academic integrity but about neutralizing a political rival.

DEM Leaders Visit İmamoğlu in Silivri, Urge Accelerated Peace Talks



Photo: Gazete Oksijen

<http://bit.ly/44ouD9G>

On June 19, pro-Kurdish DEM Party co-chairs Tülay Hatimoğulları and Tuncer Bakırhan spent almost five hours with jailed Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor and CHP presidential candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu at Marmara Prison in Silivri. They also met several other political detainees. After the visit, the duo told reporters that the prisoners were "healthy, optimistic, and fully committed" to the newly revived peace dialogue underway in Türkiye.

Bakırhan said inmates want "speedier, fairer trials, an end to political cases and a justice system free of partisan pressure," adding that their readiness to support negotiations left the delegation "hopeful and encouraged."

Hatimoğulları conveyed İmamoğlu's core message: "Discrimination does not suit Türkiye; we must heal every place that suffers." The mayor urged all sides to seize what he sees as a "historic opportunity" to resolve the Kurdish question and other conflicts.

Both co-chairs stressed that a settlement would make Türkiye "far stronger," pledging to push for faster talks while keeping the detainees' optimism alive.

Faces behind the bars: F. Pınar Türker

- General Manager, Istanbul Municipality's media company
- Arrested in the **March 19** operation.
- **Indictment still not prepared.**
- **Transferred 185 miles** to Düzce Prison on June 5.
- Her **two young daughters** are now being **cared for** at home by their **80- and 85-year-old grandparents.**



Photo: Gazete Birlik

Faces behind the bars: Elif Güven

- Public Relations Manager, Istanbul Municipality's media company
- **Pro-government media labeled her a "fugitive."** When a warrant was issued, she **voluntarily returned to Türkiye** within three days and was detained at Sabiha Gökçen Airport.
- On June 5, **unlawfully transferred 210 miles** to Bolu Prison.



Photo: Telgraf.net



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İmamoğlu's Lawyer Has Been Arrested



Photo: BBC Turkish

<http://bit.ly/4kRO3JX>

Mehmet Pehlivan, the lawyer representing Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's suspended mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, was arrested on June 19 following new charges by the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office. The arrest warrant accused him of being a member of a criminal organization and organizing legal support to obstruct ongoing investigations.

Authorities claimed that Pehlivan coordinated which lawyers would represent the suspects in the case to access confidential testimony and manage legal strategies aligned with the alleged group activities. He had previously been released on judicial control after being detained in late March. He had also announced in May that another investigation was opened against him for allegedly threatening a cooperating witness.

Pehlivan's arrest sparked widespread criticism. He denied all accusations, stating on social media that his only affiliation was with the Istanbul Bar Association and Türkiye's Bar Union. CHP leader Özgür Özel emphasized the sanctity of the right to defense, while Istanbul Bar and CHP officials denounced the investigation as a violation of the legal profession.

Demirtaş and Özdağ Unite in Defense of Democracy & Rule of Law



Photo: Egedesonsoz

<http://bit.ly/4earzRX>
<https://bit.ly/447RtkG>

Prominent opposition leaders Selahattin Demirtaş and Ümit Özdağ have both spoken out against the pretrial detention of elected officials and political dissidents, reflecting a broader political shift in Türkiye.

Sozcu reported that Demirtaş, the imprisoned former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish HDP, called for democratic unity and demanded the release of detained mayors and bureaucrats, urging that they be allowed to face trial without incarceration. Özdağ, leader of the nationalist Zafer Party, voiced similar concerns during a televised appearance, condemning the imprisonment of figures like Ekrem İmamoğlu, Osman Kavala, and Can Atalay. Despite ideological differences with Demirtaş, Özdağ underscored the universal right to a fair and prompt trial, drawing on his own experience with unjust detention. He criticized the state's misuse of high-security prisons and legal delays, calling them unlawful and detrimental to state legitimacy.

These converging statements reflect a growing realignment in Turkish politics, which is no longer dominated by traditional left-right ideologies, but by a deeper divide between proponents of democracy and defenders of authoritarianism.

Together, Demirtaş and Özdağ's remarks highlight a shared commitment to restoring the rule of law and safeguarding political rights for all citizens, regardless of political affiliation.

Faces behind the bars: Elçin Karaoğlu

- Head of the Bosphorus Reconstruction Branch, İBB
- On June 5, transferred from **Silivri to Çorlu** Karatepe High-Security Prison (25 miles).
- **Stopped multiple unlawful buildings along the Bosphorus.**
- Married, father of two.



Photo: Aydinlik.com.tr



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Europe's Reluctant Reset With Türkiye



illustration: Peter Schrank

<http://bit.ly/3TzEEL2>

Amidst growing global tensions, Europe is recalibrating its relationship with Türkiye, not with enthusiasm, but out of necessity. With President Erdoğan's leading opposition figure incarcerated, the EU faces a dilemma. Its strategic reliance on Türkiye's military capacity (drones, armoured vehicles, and warships) has become too critical to ignore. The Turkish armed forces now play a pivotal role in Europe's security architecture, particularly in broader NATO objectives.

The EU's policy shift isn't a renewal of membership ambitions but a pragmatic pivot. The long-standing freeze on Türkiye's EU accession, stemming from human rights concerns, democratic backsliding, and rule-of-law deficits, remains firmly in place. While Europe seeks Türkiye's help on issues such as Ukraine and Black Sea, it is stepping back from demanding democratic reforms and instead prioritizing military and strategic cooperation.

Critics argue this marks a sobering moment as Europe puts aside its democratic values to make practical deals based on strategic interests. The EU is giving up its core values in exchange for strategic benefits: a "reluctant reset" that strengthens military ties while ignoring Erdoğan's growing authoritarianism. The article warns that although Europe gains security support from Türkiye, it is turning a blind eye to the country's decline in democracy.

In summary, Europe's turn toward Türkiye underscores a stark choice: bolster security by accommodating an authoritarian ally or uphold democratic principles at the cost of regional stability.

"I Cannot Breathe": Amnesty Urges Investigation Into Police Abuse During March Türkiye Protests



<http://bit.ly/4fXlzh>

Amnesty International is calling for urgent, independent investigations into widespread police violence during protests across Türkiye between March 19 and 26, 2025. The protests were sparked by the arrest and pre-trial detention of Istanbul's Mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu. In its report, "I Cannot Breathe", Amnesty documents numerous incidents of unlawful use of force by police against largely peaceful demonstrators in cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, and Kocaeli.

Amnesty researchers collected 17 testimonies from protesters and lawyers, reviewed 36 judicial rulings, and verified 53 videos from media and social media platforms. The evidence revealed protesters were beaten, kicked, dragged by police, and targeted with tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets—often at close range and aimed at the head or upper body, resulting in serious injuries.

At least 32 detainees told Criminal Judgeships of Peace they had been subjected to mistreatment while in custody, including abusive handcuffing and physical violence while restrained. Many of the victims were young, first-time protesters who later expressed fear of retaliation, job discrimination, or legal repercussions if they pursued complaints.

Amnesty stated that in several cases, police actions may amount to torture or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, which is prohibited under international law. Despite repeated requests, Turkish authorities had not responded to Amnesty's findings at the time of publication.

Amnesty urged Türkiye to uphold its legal obligations and ensure accountability for police abuse, warning that failure to act would further erode human rights protections and public trust.

Despite multiple outreach attempts, Amnesty received no response from Turkish officials before publication.



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Selected Publications from Panel Contributors

To deepen the conversation around Türkiye's democratic crisis and its global parallels, we are highlighting recent publications by our panel participants. These works offer critical insights into authoritarianism, democratic resilience, civil society, and political polarization, both within Türkiye and across the world. We invite attendees to engage with these publications as a foundation for informed dialogue during the panel and beyond.

"Trump Is Erdoğan on Steroids", Gonul Tol, Persuasion, May 16, 2025

Gonül Tol, a scholar of Turkish politics, reflects on her early optimism about Erdoğan's reforms, which promised to fight corruption and expand freedoms, a stance she now recognizes as a tactic to dismantle democratic institutions from within. She draws a disturbing parallel with the United States under Trump, arguing that in contrast, "Erdoğan systematically eroded checks and balances over the course of two decades; Trump is accomplishing comparable authoritarian groundwork within just four months." Tol highlights how Trump has begun reshaping the military by ousting top brass, weaponizing the Department of Justice (pardoning January 6 participants, purging ethics and national security officials), and aligning critical regulatory bodies, the media, and business elites behind his agenda. She warns that America's traditional democratic safeguards are under assault. She is urging early and collective resistance, through protests, strategic midterm campaigns in 2026, and pressure from universities, businesses, and civil society, to prevent a rapid slide into autocracy.

Tol's central argument: authoritarianism isn't gradual, it's iterative and emotionally reinforcing. Her call to action underscores that safeguarding democracy isn't just a political task, but a shared civic imperative.

"After Crackdown, Is Türkiye an Autocracy?", Berk Esen & Şebnem Gümüşçü, Journal of Democracy, March 2025

Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü analyze the March 19, 2025 arrests of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and key opposition figures as a dramatic escalation of authoritarian rule in Türkiye. They argue that Erdoğan has systematically subverted democratic institutions, manipulating courts, media, and bureaucracy since 2003, culminating in the hyper-presidential system of 2018. The corruption charges against İmamoğlu are a clear strategy to disqualify him from contention and destroy opposition leadership. Despite this "authoritarian Rubicon," the public has responded with protests featuring students, pensioners, and union members, showing continued civic resilience. International reaction has been muted, especially from the U.S., further emboldening Erdoğan's power grab.

The authors conclude that Türkiye is at a crossroads: it faces either full-fledged autocracy or potential re-democratization, hinging on sustained domestic resistance and external pressure.

Transatlantic Reflections on Turkey's Democratic Backsliding: March 19 and Beyond

June 22
10:00-11:00 AM EST
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Join via Zoom

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The Authoritarian Divide: Populism, Propaganda, and Polarization, Orçun Selçuk, Notre Dame Press, July 2024

In *The Authoritarian Divide: Populism, Propaganda, and Polarization*, Orçun Selçuk examines how modern populist leaders, such as Türkiye's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, and Ecuador's Rafael Correa, erode democratic norms through what he terms "effective leader polarization." Rather than dividing societies along traditional ideological lines, these leaders construct a binary of loyalty vs. betrayal, using emotional appeals, identity-based rhetoric, and media control to build unwavering support.

In Chapter 4, Selçuk writes, "The leader becomes the sole vessel of national unity, while critics are labeled traitors to be silenced, not debated."

Through comparative case studies, he demonstrates how public spectacles, such as Erdoğan's "Muhtar meetings" and Chávez's "Aló Presidente," help **personalize power, delegitimize opposition, and circumvent institutional oversight**. By combining political psychology with media and authoritarian studies, Selçuk argues that **emotional polarization creates a self-perpetuating cycle of fear, loyalty, and erosion of democracy**.



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