

The CHP Crackdown: Turkey's Slide Into One- Party Rule

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On May 21, an appeals court in Ankara [annulled](#), nearly three years after the fact, the 2023 leadership elections of Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP). This effectively removed party leader Ozgur Ozel and the party's elected leadership from their positions, weakening the CHP's ability to run against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in looming elections. This latest intervention in Turkey's political and judicial institutions underscores that democratic backsliding is no longer an adequate description of Turkey's trajectory; that process has largely run its course. What is now unfolding is a more consequential phase: Turkey is moving beyond democratic erosion and toward the institutionalization of authoritarian rule.

Shortly after the CHP's 2023 congress, former Hatay mayor Lutfu Savas – who had previously been a member of Erdogan's AKP before switching to the CHP – and several former CHP party delegates alleged that some delegates had been swayed to vote through financial incentives, benefits, or promises of political appointments. On that basis, they [filed civil lawsuits](#) seeking to annul the congress, arguing that the voting process had been improperly influenced and that the election of the party leadership was therefore invalid. The Ankara 42nd Civil Court [initially rejected](#) the annulment claims, finding that the allegations were not supported by concrete evidence sufficient to affect the election outcome and that the case had effectively become moot. The Ankara Regional Court of Appeal overturned the lower court's ruling. It annulled the 2023 congress and all subsequent congresses and decisions, suspended Ozgur Ozel and the current leadership, and ordered the restoration of the pre-congress leadership under Kemal Kilicdaroglu.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan insists that the [government has nothing to do](#) with the legal proceedings, describing the case as an internal CHP matter and noting that the plaintiffs themselves are party members. Yet the prospect of removing a leadership team that has elevated the CHP to roughly [35 percent in the polls](#) – surpassing Erdogan's AKP – and replacing it with former leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, who [lost 12 consecutive elections](#) to Erdogan, is an outcome that appears remarkably convenient ahead of national elections expected in 2028, if not sooner. In a country where judicial independence has considerably eroded, few are likely to view the timing or consequences of the case as coincidental.

Pro-Kurdish parties in Turkey have long been targets of state efforts to marginalize Kurdish political demands and limit their influence within the country's political system. After the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party's (HDP) [breakthrough performance](#) in the June 2015 elections, the AKP government responded by dismantling the party's political gains. Thousands of party officials were arrested, dozens of elected mayors were removed and replaced by state-appointed trustees, and the party's co-chairs were imprisoned. A decade later, the government is pursuing a peace process with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and hopes this will disincentivize the HDP's successor, the Peoples' Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party, from confronting the government's assault on the main opposition party.

So far, this strategy has not worked. The DEM Party was the [first opposition party to visit Ozgur Ozel](#) and express its solidarity following the court ruling.

Just like HDP before it, CHP was targeted by Erdogan after it started performing well in elections. Following the CHP's victories in major cities such as Istanbul and Ankara in the 2019 municipal elections, the founding party of the Turkish Republic has increasingly found itself in Erdogan's crosshairs. The most prominent example is Ekrem Imamoglu, the popular mayor who won Istanbul in both 2019 and 2024 and emerged as the opposition's most likely presidential challenger to Erdogan. The stakes are particularly high because the next presidential election will not only determine who governs Turkey after Erdogan reaches his constitutional term limit, but also whether he can find a path (legal or otherwise) to extend his rule or install a loyal successor who can shield him from legal and political accountability once he leaves office. Since March 2025, [Imamoglu has been imprisoned](#) on such bogus corruption and terrorism-related charges that even [AKP figureheads in the media](#) find them hard to defend.

After assuming the leadership of the CHP, Ozgur Ozel has distinguished himself from the CHP leaders Turkey has grown accustomed to over the past two decades. Within the generally illiberal landscape of Turkish politics, Ozel has emerged as a genuine advocate of civil liberties and democratic norms. His predecessors, the late Deniz Baykal and Kemal Kilicdaroglu, often fell into the familiar pattern of prioritizing state interests and nationalist reflexes when Erdogan moved against Kurdish political actors and dissent, both within Turkey and beyond its borders. Ozel, by contrast, has adopted a more consistent rights-based approach, including [criticizing Erdogan](#) for not doing enough and dragging his feet on the current peace process between Turkey and the PKK.

Ozel's leadership has been instrumental in expanding the CH's electoral appeal to a level that poses a genuine threat to the AKP's hold on power for the first time in more than two decades. Under his stewardship, the party has evolved beyond its traditional coastal, urban, and secular base, making significant inroads among rural and religiously conservative voters who had long been considered a cornerstone of AKP support. Equally important, the CHP has demonstrated an increasing ability to coordinate with the pro-Kurdish DEM Party at critical political moments, helping to forge a broader opposition coalition. Together, these developments have transformed the CHP from a perennial opposition force into a credible contender for national power. It is precisely for this reason that targeting individual opposition figures is no longer sufficient for the current Turkish president. By reversing the outcome of the CHP's 2023 congress and restoring the party's previous leadership, Erdogan appears intent on reshaping the CHP into a weaker and more predictable version of itself – one less capable of mounting a serious challenge in the next presidential election. Who better to do this than a guy who has already lost twelve?

Kilicdaroglu has already signaled a willingness to accept such an outcome. Three days after the ruling, he stood by as [riot police forcibly removed](#) Ozgur Ozel from CHP's headquarters and escorted Kilicdaroglu's team into the building. In one of his first statements after being reinstated as party leader, Kilicdaroglu [did not commit to an immediate extraordinary congress](#) that would allow party members to choose their leadership anew. Instead, he spoke of the need to "[cleanse the party](#)" of corruption, language that suggested he may seek to consolidate his position before returning the question of leadership to the party's delegates. For a politician who spent much of his career criticizing Erdogan's influence over the judiciary, embracing a court ruling that so conveniently advances his own political prospects is, at best, deeply ironic and, at worst, profoundly cynical.

Having lit the fire Erdogan now stands to benefit as the CHP is drawn into a debilitating internal struggle rather than challenging the government's political and economic mismanagement, which has fueled inflation, weakened the rule of law, and deepened concerns about Turkey's economic future. While Erdogan has often succeeded in dividing opposition parties and preventing them from coalescing into a

durable political coalition, this is the first time he appears poised to redesign the main opposition party from within. The move reflects both his concern about the durability of his political dominance and the extraordinary degree of influence he now exercises over the institutions of the Turkish state.

Turkey's political trajectory has come full circle. The republic began as a one-party state, transitioned to multi-party politics with the country's first competitive elections in 1946, and for decades maintained a system in which governments could be voted in and out of office despite periodic military interventions and persistent democratic shortcomings. Under Erdogan, however, Turkey gradually evolved into a system characterized by elections that remained largely free but increasingly unfair, with opposition parties competing on an uneven playing field shaped by government control over the media, judiciary, and state institutions. The latest intervention into the CHP's internal affairs suggests that even this model may be giving way to something more restrictive. If the state can determine not only who governs but also who leads the opposition, Turkey risks returning to a de facto one-party system – one in which elections continue to be held, but the possibility of genuine political alternation becomes increasingly remote.