

The leadership battle: How the Turkish Republican People's Party crisis escalated



In headquarters of the Republican People's Party in Ankara, tear gas filled the corridors that for decades had hosted the meetings of one of Türkiye's oldest political parties. Chairs and sofas were turned into barricades, the main gate was forced open, and water cannons were unleashed at those holed up inside the building, as chants rose in the surrounding streets from supporters of Ozgur Ozel's leadership and backers of Kemal Kilicdaroglu's return.

That is how the Republican People's Party, founded by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923 and long a fixture of Turkish political life, found itself facing its most serious internal test in many years. The party, which surged in the 2024 municipal elections, and succeeded in presenting itself as the most serious alternative to Justice and Development Party rule, entered a phase of open confrontation this May between two leaderships, two visions, and two competing sources of legitimacy after the Ankara Court of Appeals issued a ruling annulling the party's 38th general congress, held in November 2023, which had resulted in Ozgur Ozel's election as party chairman, and assigning Kemal Kilicdaroglu to manage a temporary transitional period to organize a new congress within 40 days.

The party thus found itself caught between two rival legitimacies: the legitimacy

of the party congress that brought Ozel to the chairmanship, and the legitimacy of the court ruling that temporarily brought Kilicdaroglu back to the forefront after nullifying the results of that congress.

The judicial ruling came at the height of a long period of internal tension that began after Kilicdaroglu's loss in the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, when voices within the party grew louder in demanding change, accountability, and a rebuilding of the leadership. Out of that moment emerged Ozgur Ozel, backed by a broad wing within the party and by the political momentum of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, before the March 31, 2024 local elections gave him additional strength after the party won major municipalities, foremost among them Istanbul and Ankara. But that electoral victory did not turn the page on the internal conflict.

The disagreements remained embedded in the party's structure and later turned into court cases and accusations of buying delegates' votes and offering promises of positions and jobs.

On the surface, the crisis revolves around who has the right to sit in the chairman's seat. Ozel says only the delegates put him there, while Kilicdaroglu relies on a court ruling that restored him to the leadership pending the final legal outcome. At its core, however, the crisis goes beyond personal rivalry to a broader question about the future of Türkiye's opposition, the relationship between politics and the judiciary, and the Republican People's Party's ability to preserve its cohesion at a moment when it was seen as the force most capable of challenging President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his party after more than two decades in power.

Ozel described the court ruling as a "judicial coup" against the will of the party, and refused to hand over the headquarters or relinquish the chairmanship, arguing that the target went beyond his person to striking the opposition and depriving the Turkish public of a candidate, a party, a leadership, and hope. Ozel found his strongest card inside parliament, after 110 of the 138 lawmakers in the Republican People's Party bloc re-elected him as parliamentary group leader, in defiance of the judicial track.

The sensitivity of this moment is heightened by the fact that the internal dispute intersects with broader pressures the party has faced for years, especially after the arrest of Ekrem Imamoglu and the widening investigations targeting Republican People's Party officials and elected representatives.

The battle over the party headquarters in Ankara therefore appears to be part of a larger political picture, one in which pressure from the authorities overlaps with divisions among party elites, tensions within its popular base, and an intensifying

struggle over who will lead the next phase.

While Ozel's wing sees what is happening as an attempt to reshape the opposition through the judiciary, Kilicdaroglu's wing treats the ruling as an opportunity to restore discipline to the party and address what it sees as flaws in its last congress.

Dissecting the split: The war of factions and its tools

The conflict inside the Republican People's Party reveals a crisis deeper than a personal rivalry between Kemal Kilicdaroglu and Ozgur Ozel. It reflects a prolonged ideological, organizational, and strategic fracture within the party, and a sharp disagreement over how to confront President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, regain voters' trust, and redefine the party's place in Turkish political life after a long series of defeats, partial victories, and missed opportunities.

At the heart of this conflict stands a reformist wing that formed around Ozel and draws much of its strength from Ekrem Imamoglu's broad popularity. This current believes the Republican People's Party has reached a moment that requires sweeping renewal in its discourse, leadership, and political methods. In its view, the party's previous failures were tied to the stagnation of the old leadership and its weak ability to speak to younger generations, the rising middle class, and voters seeking an opposition that is more dynamic, flexible, and capable of winning.

This wing starts from the conviction that the judicial decisions targeting Ozel's leadership and the congresses that brought it to power cannot be separated from an organized attempt to return the party to the pre-change era, whether through legal tools or through undeclared alliances between the old current and centers of influence within the state.

Ozel's supporters therefore see accepting these rulings as a surrender of the delegates' will, and as handing the party over to those who want to keep it weak, manageable from the outside, and incapable of turning its municipal victories into a national governing project.

On the other side stands a traditional wing close to Kilicdaroglu, which believes the party's crisis cannot be reduced to leadership or strategy alone, but is also tied to extremely difficult political conditions and a broader climate of mounting government pressure on the opposition. Supporters of this wing fear that rapid and radical change could cause the Republican People's Party to lose its historic identity and weaken its connection to its traditional base of secularists, democratic nationalists, and voters attached to the Kemalist republican legacy.

This current insists that respecting court rulings is part of the party's identity as a

defender of the rule of law, even when those rulings are troubling or politically costly. From its perspective, a party that declares its commitment to the rule of law cannot pick and choose which judicial rulings suit it and reject those that harm its interests.

Kilicdaroglu's supporters therefore push for dealing with the ruling as a legal reality that must be managed carefully, not as a pretext for pushing the party into an open confrontation that could accelerate its internal disintegration.

The intellectual and organizational disagreement has turned into an existential battle in which most available tools of conflict have been used, from legal appeals, extraordinary congresses, and maneuvering within party bodies, to popular mobilization, media campaigns, mutual accusations, and reliance on conflicting readings of law and legitimacy.

Each side presents itself as the true representative of the party's will: Ozgur Ozel's camp says legitimacy is made by delegates' ballot boxes and party congresses, while Kilicdaroglu's camp responds that party legitimacy is incomplete if tainted by legal or organizational suspicions.

Amid this battle, Ekrem Imamoglu looms as the most influential absentee. The man, who has been in prison since March 2025 on corruption charges he denies, was widely seen as the most prominent potential challenger to Erdogan in the next presidential election and as the most important electoral asset of the change wing. His historic victory in the 2019 Istanbul mayoral race marked a watershed moment in the trajectory of Türkiye's opposition, after he broke the Justice and Development Party's dominance over the country's most politically, economically, and symbolically important city, then reinforced his standing by winning again in 2024.

Imamoglu's absence from the scene is therefore no marginal detail in the crisis; it strikes one of the pillars of Ozel's project within the party. Imamoglu had given the change current a popular legitimacy that extended beyond the organization itself, and electoral momentum capable of bringing together disparate groups of voters, from traditional secularists to disgruntled conservatives, and from urban youth to middle classes searching for a convincing political alternative.

In his absence, the reformist wing has lost a vital artery of its mass legitimacy, while his case has become an additional symbol of the struggle between the opposition, the judiciary, and the authorities.

The essence of the internal dispute can be summed up as a struggle between the "change current" led by Ozel and the "establishment current" linked to Kilicdaroglu. The former includes a broad segment of the party's youth, a number of mayors, foremost among them Imamoglu, and focuses on modernizing the

party's discourse, strengthening internal democracy, and broadening its base toward conservative and undecided voters through wider and more flexible alliances.

The latter includes figures who fear that excessive openness and rapid shifts could dilute the party's secular identity, and who believe change should happen gradually in a way that preserves the party's historic balance and old organizational networks.

The dispute within the Republican People's Party has taken four overlapping forms. First, a leadership split between an old guard tied to Kilicdaroglu's long years as chairman and a change current born after the 2023 defeat and consolidated with Ozel's election and Imamoglu's backing.

Second, a split over the meaning of legitimacy itself: Is it determined by the delegates who changed the leadership in 2023 and later reaffirmed it, or can the judiciary redefine it if suspicions of corruption emerge — or are said to have emerged? Third, an organizational split between the party center in Ankara and the network of major municipalities that formed the backbone of Ozel's political rise. Fourth, a narrative and media split between the story of a judicial coup and the story of correcting a legal flaw.

The party base is no longer a single homogeneous bloc. The scenes of May 24, with chants against Kilicdaroglu and marches backing Ozel, showed that a broad part of the organizational and parliamentary base sees the former leader's court-backed return as confiscating the choice for change made by the delegates, the street, and the municipal elections. Yet Kilicdaroglu still possesses historic capital, an internal network of relationships, and long experience in managing party balances.

His acceptance of the ruling and call for calm also resonate with a segment more afraid of the party collapsing from within than of the man's return itself.

The Republican People's Party crisis therefore lies within the base itself, within the elites, within the organizational institutions, and within the very meaning of the party as the carrier of Türkiye's republican opposition project.

What to expect? Scenarios for the next phase

The Republican People's Party stands before a phase open to more than one path, and each path carries its own political, organizational, and electoral costs. The crisis, which began with a court ruling challenging the legitimacy of the party's general congress, quickly turned into a broad test of the largest party in Türkiye's opposition and its ability to protect its internal unity and manage its conflict between judicial legitimacy and party legitimacy, and between the logic

of the old establishment and the demand for change that gained force after the 2023 elections and the 2024 local elections.

The first scenario is for the party to comply with the court ruling and head to a new congress within the 40-day deadline. On paper, Ozgur Ozel enters this path from a position of strength, relying on a clear majority within the parliamentary bloc, enjoying the support of about 110 of 138 lawmakers, in addition to a broad network of mayors and cadres who rose with the wave of change. These factors make it likely that he could win again if the contest returns to the delegates and the party ballot box.

Yet an Ozel victory in a new congress would not automatically close the crisis, as the losing wing could return to the courts, relying on the same appeals or new ones challenging the congress procedures and the legitimacy of the delegates. The party could thus enter a long tunnel of reciprocal appeals, where every congress becomes a prelude to a new lawsuit, and every organizational decision becomes additional fuel for the legal conflict.

For that reason, a new congress will not be a real way out unless it is tied to an internal political understanding, or to an explicit reconciliation between the wings that sets limits to the conflict and restores recourse to party rules as the final reference point. So far, however, such reconciliation appears difficult in a climate charged with accusations and with the cost of retreat rising for both sides.

The second scenario is the continuation of the tug-of-war between two rival leaderships: Ozgur Ozel, who refuses to comply with the ruling and clings to his political and parliamentary legitimacy, and Kilicdaroglu, who seeks to cement his return through the judicial track and the tools of institutional control. In that case, the party would enter a state of organizational paralysis, unable to produce a unified decision, present a clear message, or wage a coherent political battle against the authorities.

The danger of this scenario lies in turning the Republican People's Party from a rising opposition force into an arena of internal attrition. Instead of focusing its efforts on early elections, the presidential candidate file, and issues of the economy and freedoms, the party would find itself preoccupied with defending the legitimacy of its leadership, arranging the loyalties of its cadres, responding to appeals, and managing divisions in parliament, the municipalities, and the central headquarters.

In the short term, this appears to be among the most damaging scenarios for the party's image, because it sends voters a message of disorder and weakness in its ability to govern, at a moment when the opposition needs to project discipline, confidence, and readiness.

The third scenario is a full or near-full split, which is the most dangerous in the long run. If reconciliation fails and the conflict turns into an organizational rupture, the party could find itself facing two rival entities or fronts: a reformist current led by Ozel and drawing on Imamoglu's capital and the municipal network, and a traditional current led by Kilicdaroglu or figures close to him, drawing on the old organizational guard and the party's historic networks.

Such a split would carry a heavy electoral cost, as the two currents would be addressing almost the same social base and competing for the same voters, giving the Justice and Development Party a clear advantage in any upcoming contest. Turkish political experience offers harsh lessons in this regard, as divided parties have often paid for their fragmentation by losing electoral weight and turning from a potential governing alternative into a scattered component within a broader political map.

Even if no formal split occurs, the continuation of two parties within one party could in practice lead to the same result: weak mobilization, unclear leadership, and declining voter confidence.

The immediate repercussions for the party

The immediate repercussions of the crisis appear starkly clear. The first is a shake-up of the leadership pyramid. By its history and internal bylaws, the Republican People's Party is built around the general congress, the chairman, the party council, and the executive and disciplinary bodies. When a court ruling strikes this entire chain at once, the crisis shifts from a dispute over the person of the chairman to a crisis in the structure of the leadership as a whole, and in the body that holds decision-making authority within the party.

The second repercussion is dual power. There is a temporary legal legitimacy embodied in Kilicdaroglu's return to headquarters by court order, and, in contrast, a political and parliamentary legitimacy retained by Ozel within the parliamentary bloc and among broad sectors of the base and the municipalities. This duality creates an extremely complex situation: Who signs in the party's name?

Who speaks for it? Who decides its strategy? And who has the right to call a congress, discipline cadres, or make disciplinary decisions?

The third is the disruption of electoral strategy. The party had been trying to turn its municipal momentum into a national project, push for early elections, and place Ekrem Imamoglu's case at the center of the next presidential battle. But now it has become compelled to defend the legitimacy of its leadership before defending its political program.



This shift consumes time, energy, and resources that were supposed to be directed toward building a unified electoral message, expanding alliances, and capitalizing on declining confidence in the government on some economic and political issues.

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