

Türkiye: How do CHP supporters view the leadership struggle?



The internal crisis within Türkiye's Republican People's Party reveals a political condition that goes beyond the bounds of competition between Ozgur Ozel, who rose to the party leadership after the defeat in the 2023 elections, and Kemal Kilicdaroglu, whom a court ruling has thrust back to the forefront by reopening the file of the 38th General Congress.

The party base's position on this dispute is shaped around confidence in the path that began after the May 2023 elections, then gained broad momentum after the local elections in March 2024, when the party took the lead in the municipal scene and turned major cities into advanced political strongholds for the opposition, rather than around the chairman's name alone or merely the legitimacy of a party congress.

CHP supporters are approaching the current dispute from overlapping angles, including the legal dimension tied to the legitimacy of the congress and the court ruling, the political dimension connected to the party's position in confronting the ruling authorities, and the electoral dimension linked to its ability to protect the gains achieved after Ozel's rise and the emergence of heavyweight municipal figures such as Ekrem Imamoglu and Mansur Yavas.

As such, the party base appears broader than a simple alignment between Ozel and Kilicdaroglu, moving instead according to a logic centered on protecting the party as the main institution of the opposition, with a clear tendency among a significant segment to reject the return of the old leadership whenever it appears imposed from outside the party's natural organizational mechanisms.

The map of division and the three wings

The current crisis reveals a complex internal structure in which more than one political and social current coexists under a single party umbrella. The party, according to Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute, has historically rested on a coalition of three distinct bases, differing in their geographic backgrounds, ideological priorities, and approaches to confronting those in power.

The first base is the traditional secular current, centered primarily in Izmir and along the Aegean coast, and representing the party's historical extension since its founding. This current tends toward the old guard and sees Kemal Kilicdaroglu as a symbol of Kemalist and institutional continuity, although a broad segment within it is wary of his return through a judicial route that weakens the party's organizational mechanisms and opens the door to further questioning of the leadership's legitimacy.

The second base is the Turkish nationalist current, more present in Ankara and central Anatolia, whose political and popular presence is embodied by Ankara Mayor Mansur Yavas. This current views the court ruling as a direct factor in weakening the opposition and paralyzing its largest party, and Yavas expressed this position clearly when he said the aim of the ruling was to divide and disable the largest opposition party.

The third base emerges in the social democratic current, concentrated in Istanbul and the modern major cities, where Ekrem Imamoglu is its most prominent symbol. This current appears the most exposed to the fallout of the crisis after losing its political center of gravity with Imamoglu's arrest, and finding itself facing a broader dilemma over the value of remaining within a party whose leadership has become a constant subject of judicial intervention and internal conflict.

During his leadership period, Ozgur Ozel managed to bring these disparate wings together within a single political framework, benefiting from Imamoglu's rise as a symbol that transcended ideological alignments. But this cohesion remained based more on circumstantial balances and personalities capable of mobilization than on a firm intellectual and organizational consensus. With the file of the 38th General Congress returning to the courts, the fragility of this structure became

apparent, exposing the extent of the latent tension among the party's wings and base.

The effects of the initial shock were visible as soon as the ruling was issued. The party headquarters in Ankara witnessed tense moments after some members tore Kilicdaroglu's picture from the wall, while others chanted against him and accused him of betrayal. This scene captures the scale of the transformation within the party, as the dispute shifted from a debate over programs and leadership to a conflict over legitimacy, trust, and the ability to protect the party institution from disintegration.

Tensions escalated further after the first step Kilicdaroglu took upon being declared interim chairman, when he decided to dismiss the three lawyers tasked with challenging the court ruling and appoint new lawyers who submitted a request to withdraw the appeal. In the eyes of Ozel's supporters, this decision represented a dangerous political signal because it appeared aligned with a path leading to the party's weakening from within and the loss of its legal tools in confronting the judicial ruling.

Parties within the opposition read these developments within a broader context of political attrition. Political analyst Ahmet Erdi Ozturk of London Metropolitan University believes President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has succeeded in dividing most of the opposition blocs against him, and that the CHP itself has now split into two camps. Ozturk adds that the ruling party has encouraged successive defections within the opposition in recent years, one of the latest being the move by Afyonkarahisar Mayor Burcu Koksal, elected on CHP lists, to the Justice and Development Party in May 2026, in a scene announced personally by Erdogan as he pinned the party badge to her chest.

The party's legitimacy before the leader's legitimacy

The stance of CHP supporters shows that broad segments of the base do not view the absolute nullification ruling as a limited organizational dispute within the party. Rather, sections of the base received it as part of a broader confrontation targeting the opposition, more than as a judicial measure detached from its political context.

This perception helps explain the public's behavior. When voters feel their party is being subjected to outside intervention, they tend to temporarily suspend their internal disagreements and rally around the symbol of elected legitimacy. From this perspective, Ozgur Ozel emerged, in the eyes of a broad segment of the base, as the representative of the path produced by the will of the congress and consolidated by the local election results, while Kemal Kilicdaroglu's return came burdened by the image of a leader who left the helm after a crushing defeat to

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, then returned by court ruling rather than through new party elections.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu still retains a significant standing within the CHP. He led the party for 13 years, broadened its discourse toward conservatives, Kurds, Alevis, and liberals, and fought a difficult electoral battle against Erdogan in 2023. Among older segments or those more tied to the party's traditional structure, he still enjoys the image of a calm politician with a message of social reconciliation.

But this historical standing does not necessarily translate into popular desire for his return to the leadership. The 2023 presidential defeat left a deep mark on the base because it came after broad mobilization and a heightened sense that change was possible. With Ozel's rise and the party's success in the local elections, a broad public became convinced that the party had begun to move beyond the cycle of repeated defeats. From this perspective, Kilicdaroglu's return appears to many as a return to a phase that some voters want to move past, however much respect and standing he still retains.

By contrast, Ozgur Ozel reached the CHP leadership after a broad wave of frustration within the opposition. His rise was tied to an implicit promise to move the party from a position of permanent defense to one of political initiative. The 2024 local elections reinforced this image after the party succeeded in retaining Istanbul and Ankara and expanded its presence in cities and provinces with important political and social significance.

For a broad audience within the party, Ozel represents new energy more than a fully formed leadership. Much of his strength derives from his connection to three main elements: municipal results, Imamoglu's presence as a potential presidential candidate, and Mansur Yavas's position as a symbol capable of speaking to nationalist and conservative voters. For that reason, the base supporting Ozel is not driven by personal loyalty to him, but because it sees this camp as the path most capable of turning the CHP into a governing alternative.

The possibility of vote fragmentation

The fragmentation of CHP supporters' votes remains a possibility, but at this stage it does not appear to be the inevitable outcome of the crisis. The party has a relatively disciplined electoral base compared with other currents within the opposition, and a significant portion of its supporters vote for it as the historical political extension of republican secularism and one of the most important tools of balance against the Justice and Development Party. For that reason, the traditional voter tends to avoid options that could hand the party's rivals a direct electoral advantage.

But this discipline does not grant the leadership, whatever its name, an open-

ended mandate. There is a clear difference between accepting a temporary internal dispute that can be contained through party mechanisms and accepting a path that the base feels is rearranging the leadership through the courts rather than through organizational ballots. If the crisis drags on, if a new congress with convincing legitimacy cannot be convened, or if the confrontation between the camps shifts into expulsions, defections, and mutual accusations, then electoral discipline may gradually erode, especially among voters less attached to the party's organizational identity.

If the crisis moves toward a full split, votes will most likely move in four main directions:

A first direction will remain within the CHP as the historical institution, especially among traditional voters, organizational cadres, and groups that see preserving the party name as a guarantee of political stability. A second direction will move toward any new formation if it includes prominent figures such as Ozgur Ozel, Ekrem Imamoglu, and Mansur Yavas, because this camp may present itself as an extension of electoral and municipal legitimacy.

As for the third direction, it may look for nearby opposition alternatives, such as the Good Party or smaller leftist and nationalist parties, particularly among voters angry with both sides of the crisis. A fourth direction may turn to abstention or protest voting, which is the most electorally costly path because it reduces the opposition's ability to turn general discontent into political gains.

Current indicators suggest that the largest bloc within the CHP's support base leans toward the camp that combines the legitimacy of the congress, the success of the municipalities, and the presumed ability to contest the coming elections with better odds. In that sense, Ozel, along with Imamoglu and Yavas, holds a political and moral advantage among broad segments of the base. But that advantage remains contingent on how the crisis unfolds.

If Ozel remains within the party and succeeds in imposing a new congress that enjoys broad acceptance, this advantage could become a tool for repairing internal unity. But if he leaves for a new party, the base will find itself facing a difficult test between attachment to the historical institution and calculations of electoral victory.

The impact of internal disputes is not limited to the party's immediate base. The most sensitive space lies at the party's edges, where undecided voters stand — those who gave the CHP a chance in the local elections, or who are considering voting for the opposition because of the economy, declining purchasing power, and accumulated political fatigue. These voters do not possess solid ideological loyalty to the party; rather, they are looking for competence, reassurance, and

the ability to govern.

For this audience, the crisis presents two conflicting images. In the first, the CHP appears as a force under political and judicial pressure because it has become a serious electoral competitor, which may generate a degree of sympathy for it. In the second, the party appears incapable of managing its internal disputes and liable to squander the opportunity the opposition has accumulated because of the struggle among its leaders. This image may push some undecided voters toward abstention or back toward the option of stability, especially if the impression takes hold that the party is troubled and unprepared to govern.

The ordeal of trust

CHP voters view the internal disputes with deep concern and anger because they come at a moment when a broad segment of the base believes a rare political opportunity emerged after the local elections. They fear that a return to the logic of old conflicts will squander this capital and weaken the party's and the opposition's ability to turn municipal gains into a national political project. At the same time, the CHP's historic name remains strong enough to prevent a rapid collapse or an immediate fragmentation of votes, especially among voters most attached to the party's organizational identity.

Most likely, the largest bloc will remain within the party framework if the crisis is contained through a new congress that grants the leadership a clear and acceptable mandate. But if the confrontation turns into a full organizational split, broad segments of the base will gravitate toward the side that combines political legitimacy and electoral capacity more than toward the legal stamp alone.

In the current scene, the moral and political advantage appears closer to the camp associated with Ozel, Imamoglu, and Yavas, while a significant traditional bloc remains attached to the party's name and institution regardless of changes in leadership.

The danger of the crisis is not confined to the possibility of votes shifting from one side to another. It also extends to shaking confidence in the opposition's ability to turn local superiority into a national alternative. If the CHP can turn the shock into a clear congress and renewed legitimacy, it may emerge from the crisis more cohesive and better able to organize its ranks. But if the dispute drags on and turns into a war of competing legitimacies, its rivals will find before them an opposition with a broad presence on the street but incapable of unifying its political decision at the decisive moment.

The history of the CHP lends this reading a measure of balance. The party, which has endured for decades in Turkish political life and succeeded in regaining momentum after periods of severe decline, possesses considerable institutional

resilience. But that resilience alone is not enough to win elections in a sharply polarized political environment, where judicial, organizational, media, and electoral calculations overlap. The voter giving the party a new chance is looking for a leadership capable of managing disagreement, building trust, and presenting a convincing governing alternative.

The coming weeks will determine the extent of the damage the crisis leaves on the party's electoral base. If the leadership succeeds in containing the dispute within clear organizational mechanisms, the erosion may remain limited to the margins, especially among voters who drew closer to the party because of Imamoglu's and Yavas's presence more than through an organic attachment to it.

But if the conflict continues and expands into open splits, the crisis may turn into a long-term source of exhaustion, weakening the party's ability to attract undecided voters and bringing back to the fore the image of an opposition consumed by its internal struggles.