



Ear to Asia podcast

- Title:** Pandemic politics in Turkey
- Description:** Despite an initial flirt with pandemic denialism, Turkey may well be able to take some pride in its handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Yet, coronavirus continues to impose a huge cost on a nation already grappling with faltering economic growth, deepening existing political and social divides. With us to examine the myriad impacts of COVID-19 on Turkey are Monash University politics and international relations expert Dr William Gourlay and Asia Institute Turkish politics researcher Dr Tezcan Gümüş. Presented by Ali Moore. An Asia Institute podcast.
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- Voiceover:** The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.
- Ali Moore:** Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.
- William Gourlay:** It seems that the measures that the government has taken in response to COVID have tended to favour these big economic players who happen to be the allies of the ruling regime. In that sense, they're sort of looking after their buddies, and it's the small shopkeepers and the bazaar traders, et cetera who are running small businesses who tend to have not had any support.
- Tezcan Gümüş:** The largest federation of workers unions in Turkey have estimated that 16 million will be out of a job by the end of Coronavirus. So that's a massive level of unemployment. There's also research showing that 36% of women that live in urban settings are unemployed now. So it seems to be that women have taken the main hit in terms of loss of jobs.
- Ali Moore:** In this episode, can Turkey claim success in its fight against COVID-19? Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne. Turkey lies at the nexus of Asia and Europe, but while Iran to its east and Europe to its west were grappling with major outbreaks of the SARS-COV-2 virus, in February the Turkish government only declared its first of COVID-19 on March 11. In the following weeks, the number of infections and deaths climbed steeply, and Turkey remains the Middle East pandemic epicentre. But after having one of the fastest growing coronavirus outbreaks in the world, the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says the country's infection curve has now flattened. And its official death rate remains relatively low compared to many European countries.



- Ali Moore: Still, the pandemic has and will continue to impose a huge cost on a nation already grappling with faltering economic growth. And as we've seen elsewhere, the crisis is shining a harsh light on existing divides in Turkish society and politics. With us to examine the impact of COVID-19 on Turkey, a Monash University of Politics and International Relations expert, Dr. William Gourlay. And Asia Institute Turkish politics researcher, Dr. Tezcan Gümüş. Welcome back, Tez, and welcome back, Will.
- William Gourlay: Thank you very much, nice to be here.
- Tezcan Gümüş: It's always good to speak to you, Ali. Thank you.
- Ali Moore: Can we start by going back to early March when Iran, as we said on Turkey's eastern border, was reporting crisis numbers of infections and deaths, and yet Turkey had no official cases. How timely, Tez, was Turkey's acknowledgement of the pandemic within its own borders?
- Tezcan Gümüş: We saw a very quick ban on flights from China, February 2nd or 3rd from my memory. So in that sense they were very quick, but in terms of when you've got a country like Iran next door, being after China was the one that really saw a very quick spread and impact of coronavirus, they were very slow in that terms to close down the borders with Iran, but also with Europe as well, but then eventually they caught up. So in that sense, the country was pretty slow to close down its borders.
- Ali Moore: And during that time, what was the government telling people about Turkey's, well, apparent resistance to the virus?
- Tezcan Gümüş: Well, what you heard, even up til March 25th, the narrative that was coming out of the government and Erdogan was that this will be about two or three week events, and then Turkey will be very quick to get over. So really downplaying it. But I think they were just unaware of how much the impact of it was going to be in the country, but also globally as well. We have to understand, this is a certain unique period in current global history, so they were caught out. But initially, I think Erdogan even March 25th was coming out and saying our Lord's help will be on our side. So very much also saying that inshallah – God willing – we will get over this very quickly.
- Tezcan Gümüş: And I think there was also very much this narrative around really just a general downplaying of the spread and the impact that would have on the country, until it was just undeniable.
- Ali Moore: Will, how do you see those early responses? And I guess when Tez says they were caught off guard, I mean, every country was caught off guard to a point. How do you evaluate the early response of the Turkish government?



William Gourlay: I think that's true, to consider Erdogan, I mean they were caught off guard, but everyone was caught off guard. It's easy to point fingers with the benefit of hindsight, but I don't know that Turkey was necessarily slower to react than other nation states. But I think there was also another element to the narrative, coming perhaps from the government, but also certain perhaps pro-government voices. And there was this message that well Turkish genes are strong, we're tough, resilient people. And our genetic makeup will actually protect us. And sure, things might be happening in Iran across the border or to the west in Europe, but Turks are strong and we have the innate genetic strength to resist this.

Tezcan Gümüş: This was 9th of March that this panel programme was televised on Turkish television. And it was three academics, two on the professor level, and the headline was "Türk geni koronavirüsten korur mu?", so "Is the Turkish gene immune to the coronavirus?". So this was an actual topic of a panel of three academics. This was a day or two days before the first coronavirus was recorded in Turkey.

Ali Moore: And if you look at how rapidly it spread across the country, clearly that was not necessarily a very realistic proposition, that there was a genetic resistance. But once those first cases were acknowledged, Will, Turkey closed schools and universities, they limited public gatherings. How restrictive were those lock downs?

William Gourlay: We've all had to adapt to different restrictions and lock downs in different circumstances in different countries. It's interesting though that there were sort of, again, different messages being purveyed. And the Diyanet, the religion ministry, which has incredible power within Turkey and it's becoming an increasingly important factor in Turkish society and politics under the AKP regime. They have actually come in for some criticism, because while there were other moves to restrict movement, the Diyanet actually was quite lax in calling for measures to be taken and refused to cancel Friday prayers, which was obviously a very important aspect of religious life in Turkey, indeed across the Islamic world. But while there were other measures being put in places, the Diyanet said, "No, no, you can still gather for prayer," and I guess that ties into that narrative that was being purveyed that Allah will protect the good people and they won't become infected.

William Gourlay: Another measure that the Diyanet has received criticism for was failing to restrict Umrah, which is those who travel to Mecca to carry out the Hajj outside of the normal Hajj season. So there was people still travelling to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. And obviously mingling with others from all around the Islamic world and returning to Turkey, and indeed I think there were large numbers of cases that actually arrived in Turkey through contact through Umrah. So in that sense, the Diyanet playing a more important role



within Turkish society has actually facilitated the spread of the disease, which is counter to what would have been ideal. So that was an important aspect, even though there were voices beginning to say, "Okay, we need to take measures and restrict social interaction, and social distancing measures that we're familiar with and other countries are putting in place as well."

- Ali Moore: Tez, if we look at that Umrah pilgrimage to Mecca, that was quite a key factor, wasn't it? Because they might've closed schools and closed universities, but thousands and thousands of pilgrims returned and they weren't isolated, were they?
- Tezcan Gümüş: So, there was a total of 21,000 Turkish citizens that were on pilgrimage at the time. And this is when Saudi Arabia basically announced that they had found cases of coronavirus in Mecca. And they were very quick to shut down any pilgrimage or any flights in and out of Mecca, so closed the borders very quickly. At the time, Turkey had 21,000 citizens and so Diyanet and the government really played this down and allowed overwhelmingly most of these people to not force them into self isolation, basically make it voluntary. It was only after there was a massive uproar by the opposition, and I guess people in society saying, "Hang on a sec, what the hell is this, there's 21,000 people coming back, likely they are infected, or some of them are." So it was only the last five, six thousand of the pilgrims that were forced into two week quarantine. But the funniest thing that came out of that was that you had their relatives that were trying to bust them out of some of these quarantine centres by trying to pull down the fences and really get into I guess physical conflict with the authorities or police officers that were there guarding those boundaries as well, those fences and perimeters.
- Tezcan Gümüş: And what related research has shown was that the earliest cases spread and deaths attributed to a lot of these pilgrims, and they're basically going back to their homes in various locations in Turkey. So I guess this was a fiasco, the way it was handled.
- William Gourlay: An interesting counterpoint to that was as Tez said, these family members of the people who've completed the Umrah were trying to release them, and coming into contact with local security agency, police or whoever it may be. But it's been quite interesting, there's increasing numbers of talks now or discussion of people being quite over enthusiastic, should we say, or even to the point of there's talk of police brutality in trying to enforce some of these lock down measures now against the general citizenry. And it would be an interesting comparison to see how they reacted to these people who obviously members of the holy observant community, to have the support of the Diyanet and how the police reacted to those people trying to break out their family members. And now how they've sort of swung back the



other way and they've been very over enthusiastic and abusive to people who they now deem not complying with social distancing measures.

Ali Moore: When we look at these restrictions, in terms of the way that the police have handled them and how responsive people have been, can you tell us a little bit more, Tez, about how these restrictions were enforced and just what they involved? I know that there were bans on interstate and international travel, there was a lock down and there has been a lock down for people over 65, and indeed 20 and younger. Can you tell us a little about the restrictions, and indeed why the targeting of young people?

Tezcan Gümüş: So a lot of the city municipalities that are opposition held now, so Istanbul, Ankara, Esme, were pushing the government to enforce greater lock downs for a long time. And it was only on April 10th that the government announced very last moment, like two, three hours before, that the country was going to go into complete lock down on that weekend, so Friday night. And so you saw this massive pandemonium on the streets, people trying to access goods, buy food and bread. And just the basic necessities, stock up for the weekend. It was counterintuitive because it just caused panic and there was no social isolation. If you think that 10th and 11th was the first case that Turkey had detected its coronavirus, to nearly a month later that there was very strict weekend curfews.

Tezcan Gümüş: And then we also have at that same time 65 year olds plus were I guess due to them being the most susceptible to catching this disease, and the impact on them individually given their age. Now the under 20 year olds, I have to say I'm not sure either, I can't find any reasoning for it. But what I know is there was a blanket under 20 year olds, but then there was an uproar about that so what the government said was, "Okay, then anyone that has a job that's under 20 is allowed to go on the street and go to work." Now, my rationale would be that given that the youth do get around and do hang out with one another in groups, play sport, whatever it is, that the government was trying to minimise those activities.

Ali Moore: We talked a little bit about restrictions on Friday prayers, and against the backdrop of these broader restrictions. We are recording this interview four days after the end of Ramadan. How different have the celebrations been in Turkey under the lock down? And as I understand it, we're now at the end of a very specific four day lock down.

Tezcan Gümüş: Yes, so the governments ... I think the initial hope was leading up to it, given that the figures showed that Turkey had plateaued, death rates had dropped, so the hope was that there would be a loosening up, especially for the end of Ramadan, so Eid or Bayrami as what we call in Turkey, but the three, four days festivities, which is normally what you would do is go out and visit family members, elders, very socially vibrant time in Turkey around

this period. That was the hope, but the government came out and said no, it's going to be actually the opposite, it's going to be a four day lock down, so no one can visit their family and so forth. And there's no travel given that there's also no travel between cities already. So people were forced to sit at home and really spend that time, again, in isolation away from their families where the usual would be that you would go out and the streets would be full of people, and homes would be very vibrant given the visits from family, neighbours, kin and so forth.

William Gourlay: So it's quite a big impact, too, because it's a big family event. I mean, it's akin to our Christmas celebrations where families traditionally come together. A large aspect of Turkey's socioeconomic makeup is that many people move around the country and move to big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Esme, etc. to find work, but these are the sort of events where they pack their bags and head home to the village. All those travel opportunities have been entirely restricted, so it's going to have a really big impact from that sense. The sense of family reunion and celebration of the end of Ramadan for the annual Seker Bayrami, which was the sugar holiday, you come together and eat and feast together as a family after the strictures of Ramadan. So there's going to be a considerable impact on families and communities as a whole.

Ali Moore: And will an impact on family celebrations, but going on the most recent reported infection numbers, would you say it's a fair assessment that it would seem this lock down has been pretty effective? It's worth noting, isn't it, that if you look at the official number of deaths, that's lower than the official number of deaths in Germany, which is a comparable sized country.

William Gourlay: Turkey can take considerable pleasure in the fact that measures undertaken have been very successful. I think the current death toll is around four and a half thousand, or thereabouts, which as you say compared to European states of similar sizes is relatively small. Some people call into question the validity of those numbers. They're numbers that are purveyed by the health ministry, or wherever they might come from. And it's probably wise to regard those figures with some scepticism, but it's clear that the numbers are much lower than would've been anticipated. And I for one when it happened, I had grave concerns, I was thinking that the death toll would be considerably higher than it is, or I thought it would be of similar scale to those in European states. This is when Italy was having enormous numbers of deaths every day and I was thinking well, Turkey is likely to have similar death toll. So in that sense, the measures undertaken have been effective. The media, I mean, they've been quite up front in presenting a death toll every day but they're also very keen to promote the numbers of recoveries. But I wonder whether we need to take those numbers with some scepticism as well.



- Ali Moore: Tez, do you agree with that? And if you do, how key here is the Turkish health system? Because I understand that Turkey actually has one of the highest numbers of ICU beds per capita in the world. If they've done better than you might have thought, is that potentially one of the reasons?
- Tezcan Gümüş: Given that Turkey's some form of authoritarian system, there is no transparency accountability at a central government level. So it sort of feeds to some sort of scepticism, and the opposition have sort of challenged these numbers. But by and large it looks like there is some level of truth to these figures. The reason for that is yes, Turkey has in terms of Europe the largest number of ICU beds per capita. This has a lot to do with the privatisation of the health system on the AKP, where when they first got into government to improve the healthcare system in Turkey, they started privatising health. So you saw a massive growth in private hospitals. And these private hospitals are very technologically advanced. And so when this coronavirus hit, the government basically ordered these private hospitals to open their doors free of charge for anyone that was showing coronavirus symptoms.
- Tezcan Gümüş: So the average citizen was able to benefit from this very advanced technology, ICU wards or beds. 60% of the intensive care unit beds in Turkey are provided by these private hospitals. So Turkey was very quickly able to really look after anyone that was showing coronavirus symptoms, or people with coronavirus, and to be able to care for them with the best technology and to ensure that they survived through this. That's one reason given for the low death rates.
- Tezcan Gümüş: You've also got Turkey's median age is 30 years old, so it's relatively very young compared to the EU's 43.1 median age. So you've got those mass differences, a very young population. You've also got cultural issues as well, where Turks do not give their elders into care homes. So a lot of them either look after them, or if they have the means, if they're from more middle to upper class families, those elderly family members can live on their own in their own apartments. And we know that when we look at figures coming out of western Europe in terms of spread and death rates, a lot of these stem from around aged care homes as well.
- Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a note to listeners that Asia Institute has launched a new online publication on Asia and its society's politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review, it's free to read and it's open access at MelbourneAsiaReview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website. Which again you can find at MelbourneAsiaReview.edu.au.



- Ali Moore: I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by international relations expert, Dr. William Gourlay of Monash University, and Turkish politics researcher, Dr. Tezcan Gümüş of Asia Institute. We're talking about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Turkey. Going beyond just the health system in Turkey, one of the interesting factors has been Turkey sending personal protective equipment, or PPE, to other countries including the UK, which does seem a little strange given that China says it's been sending equipment into Turkey. Will, can you tell us a little bit about these exports of protective equipment and how they sit within the context of the needs of Turkey itself.
- William Gourlay: It demonstrates a clash between Turkey's domestic constraints and its international perspective, or the way it sees itself in the world. So I think it's an element of Turkish soft power, for want of a better term. So Turkey is purporting to be a world leader in saying, "Look, this is the way that Turkey conducts itself in the international sphere, we're prepared to make donations and make efforts or take measures to support others who may be in less fortuitous circumstances." So I think it's particularly focused I suppose on its near abroad or the former Ottoman territory, so particularly in the Balkans, north Africa, and I've read recently also they've delivered PPE to I think Tajikistan so some of these central Asian republics.
- William Gourlay: But again, it's a way of the government and I think Erdogan is probably key to this, or Turkey demonstrating itself as a leader within the Islamic world, or the Muslim majority countries. And Turkey certainly has aspirations in that area, to portray itself as the leader of the Muslim world, and this harks back to its history as the centre of the Ottoman Empire, which was a dominant state for so long. It hasn't all been beer and skittles, it has to be said, and there were some claims that some of the PPE gear that was delivered to the UK was actually substandard and didn't meet required standards that the British health ministry would determine to be necessary safety features. I mean, I saw a report on the BBC and The Guardian and then TIT being the Turkish state broadcaster actually published an article the following day saying, "No, actually the British were thrilled and they've taken it all." So again, you need to take some of these arguments with a grain of salt. It's an example of Turkey sort of trying to step up as a global player and demonstrate its place in the global hierarchy.
- Ali Moore: And parallel to those exports, Tez, what's the position of equipment in Turkey, and what's the government been doing to help people? Have they issued masks, for example, as Singapore has?
- Tezcan Gümüş: This was very inconsistent policy by the government. When this first happened, they announced that they're not going to allow any of their citizens to buy masks. And we will be the ones providing masks. And the way they were doing this was if you are a Turkish citizen, you would get a message on your phone. So basically a lottery, a daily lottery. And once you



got this message saying that your citizenship number indicates that you are now allowed to go to the nearest chemist, show this message and receive your masks.

Tezcan Gümüő: But over time, it was just inefficient. It just wasn't getting to enough people on a daily basis, so you'd have certain family members getting this message, going out and getting I think five masks and coming home, and their other family members wouldn't get this message at all. Even though the chemists and shops had these stocks, they were banned from selling to people. So you've got some people could access it, but at the same time you've got this law now that says that you can't hit the streets without a mask. And people that need those masks can't even buy those masks and have no way to access them, and they just have to sort of wait for these messages.

Tezcan Gümüő: And then what the government said was, "Okay, we're removing this ban, we're not going to send these messages out, just go out to your local chemist and start buying these masks." So it was a very inconsistent policy and messaging.

Tezcan Gümüő: You've also got a large number of expats living there that aren't Turkish citizens and they had no way of accessing these surgical masks either, so the journalists that I follow on Twitter were constantly saying, "This is bad because I can't leave the house without a mask, but there's no way I can get a mask because I'm not a Turkish citizen." There was a lot of gaps in who was able to have access to these masks until very recently. And at the same time, you've got the government sending out these PPEs to 55 different countries, including Spain, a very developed country itself, and using it as a propaganda strategy to say, "Look, we're even able to supply these deemed to be high developed European countries. Look, we are providing them help and we don't need anyone's help."

Ali Moore: Even with those inconsistencies though, Turkey's health minister, Fahrettin Koca, is also a doctor. Has that affected public perception of how he's handling the crisis? Because it seems that within the country he's quite popular.

Tezcan Gümüő: Yes, Fahrettin Koca's popularity is immensely searched during this coronavirus episode. He actually is doing a very good job in terms of PR and in managing this in the public sphere. He's on TV consistently every single day giving live telecasts of the numbers, what needs to be done, constantly following this same principle line of people need to self isolate, social distance, stay at home, stick to these very strict hygiene practises, and so forth. And he is a doctor, he's not a politician in his history, so he's an expert, a health expert as a doctor and being given this role at this time. This has really increased his popularity. But also put a veneer of legitimacy to the



government's messaging as well. Because he seems like ... he comes across as a very transparent and very principled doctor in his messaging.

Ali Moore: Let's turn to the economic impact now. Going into this, Tez, how strong was the Turkish economy?

Tezcan Gümüş: It wasn't in a healthy state by any means, and this episode, from what experts say, has really caused a fastening of the economic deterioration. And a very impending long term financial crisis the country will live through. And this has a lot to do with the dropping lira, in its value compared to the US dollar. And the money that the government was already spending in its treasury to maintain the lira to a certain level. Now the government is even spending more of those reserves to maintain the economy at some sort of level.

Tezcan Gümüş: But also the government hasn't really given financial incentives to individuals. What's basically done is postponed taxes, and also suspension of national insurance payments for many sectors for six months, it's actually just stopped or minimised this payment of taxes, or reduced the level of taxes for certain goods and services, but has not gone out and really put in the pockets of individuals. So a lot of these stimulus packages have been said to only benefit the medium to large businesses, whereas it's the smaller shopkeepers, or smaller businesses, around two million of them, have been heavily impacted and some aren't even open afterwards, these are cafes, shops, supermarkets, restaurants, bars, and so forth.

Tezcan Gümüş: And also along with that you've got individuals as well, every day sort of citizens that have been heavily impacted. So the government has not really looked at supporting or stimulating the bottom end of town as we've called it.

William Gourlay: And this in some ways is a reflection of the AKP political model. To a large degree it's a sort of clientelist model, so it's government contacts or people with connections to the AKP that tend to win the big contracts, including the recent building of the new airport, etc. etc. And so it seems that the measures that the government has taken in response to COVID have tended to favour these big economic players who happen to be the allies of the ruling regime. In that sense, they're sort of looking after their buddies, and as Tez notes, it's the small shopkeepers and the bazaar traders, etc. who are running small businesses who tend to have not had any support. In that sense, it's sort of accentuating the divide or the socioeconomic political divide within the country that already exists, and has been exacerbated throughout the recent ... certainly recent years of AKP rule.

William Gourlay: I guess another aspect to consider from an economic point of view is the tourism industry. Obviously tourism is a very important aspect of Turkey's



economy and accumulation of foreign revenue. Obviously tourism is going to be impacted across the board, but Turkey will be subject to exactly the same sort of restrictions, or if the industry collapses it's going to have a particularly negative implication for Turkey. And I think there's already talk among some government figures of trying to rekindle the tourism industry because they realise how important it is. But how feasible those measures are going to be is difficult to determine at this point because we're not sure how international travel is going to be resurface once all of this is over.

William Gourlay: Another aspect of the economic angle, too, is the fact that after measures to lock things down, the government seemed most keen to first open up shopping malls. But again, it tends to be the AKP buddies who are the ones who are running the shopping malls, so there's this suggestion that the AKP said, "Well, we need to get the shopping malls running because these are our guys, we need to be able to let them resuscitate their businesses and make their profits again." So there's more focus on that rather than the mums and dads who are running the corner shops and the bakkal and the various little shops, which are kind of the lifeblood of Turkish urban life, to some degree. I mean, that's a really important aspect of community life. Everybody knows their local corner shop, everyone has a tab behind the counter, and they go in and they buy their yoghurt and their butter and it gets put on the tab and then they come back and pay it later. But it's those sort of businesses that haven't been receiving any support from the government. And so that's going to have a flow on effect throughout neighbourhoods, communities, towns, cities, etc. etc.

Tezcan Gümüş: I just want to also highlight just the impact on the economy following on from what Will was saying. Chamber of Accounts in Turkey, so Civil Society Network Union of Accountants have estimated there will be 10 million out of a job by the end of this. But also DISC, who is the largest federation of workers unions have estimated that 16 million will be out of the job by the end of coronavirus. So that's a massive level of unemployment. At this point in time there's also research showing that 36% of women that live in urban settings, so urban cities are unemployed now. So it seems to be women have taken the main hit at this point in time in terms of jobs or loss of jobs.

Ali Moore: Tez, what about the four million refugees that Turkey hosts? You mentioned earlier that expats, for example, are not registered and they've been unable to get masks, but where do those refugees sit in this, both those in camps and those living in the cities? Do they have access to support?

Tezcan Gümüş: The refugees were given access to Turkey's healthcare system from very early on. Of course if we are to scratch that surface, the level of access compared to a Turkish citizen and the way they're treated in hospitals might vary depending on their context. But by and large, refugees, Syrian refugees were given access to the health system. And also in refugee camps where



tens of thousands of Syrian refugees are housed along the southeastern Turkey, apparently the government has created a stronger sort of healthcare system there to combat any issues with coronavirus, or outbreak of coronavirus, so they've really fortified, increased the resources for the health system, and hospitals, and medical centres in those camps as well.

Tezcan Gümüş: The only thing that seems to be the really dire position that the refugees are in due to coronavirus is because a lot of them work in the informal sector, so very menial jobs. And now you've got these two issues, now they're not able to work. And they're already on very low wages anyway. So you've got them losing their jobs very, very quickly in this period. But also at the same time those businesses that have refused to shut, construction sector, cleaning and so forth, that normal Turks have refused to do because of this outbreak, the Syrian refugees are forced to do them because of their economic condition, again, exposing them to risk of coronavirus simply due to their economic situation.

Ali Moore: Let's go back to President Erdogan and the ruling AKP party. And Tez, to what extent are they politicising the virus? And particularly I ask that question in the context of what the Turkish opposition parties have been doing, what role they've been playing, particularly in Istanbul and Ankara?

Tezcan Gümüş: Yeah, so we definitely see the government trying to leverage this pandemic to score points against the opposition. We know that last year's local elections, the opposition parties had outstanding victories against the AKP, and they were able to recapture Istanbul, Turkey's largest city, and also economic hub. Also Ankara as well, the capital city, so Turkey's pretty much second largest city, and then along with other major cities around the coast. So the opposition were able to win these large municipalities that a lot of the industry comes from as well, a lot of the economy GDP stems from. These municipalities held by the CHP, so the Republican People's Party, were very proactive quickly in terms of trying to fill the gap where the government was unable to.

Tezcan Gümüş: So they undertook a very unified policy in their municipalities, beginning these campaigns to fundraise to help the neediest in these cities who had suffered economically from this outbreak, so loss of jobs and so forth. And what the government do was immediately once these campaigns was announced, pretty much seize these bank accounts that the funding from people were going into. So immediately seize them. And then call this illegal act, these councils were trying to create a state within a state, or parallel state. And really basically saying that they're there to undermine the unity of the state by enacting their own policies. The central government is able to contain this virus and meet the needs of its citizens, councils don't have to go and do that, it's only because they're trying to cause friction in the country itself.



Tezcan Gümüş: So they really used this to stigmatise the actions of these opposition held municipalities. But the municipalities did in return was, okay, cool, if you're going to seize these bank accounts, what we're going to do is we're going to ask the citizens who are in most need and can't pay their utility bills to post them up on this internet platform that they created, and those generous citizens that can in these cities pay for these utility bills. So at this point in time, in Istanbul alone, 150,000 bills have been paid, which accounts to over 20 million lira, Turkish lira. Over 35,000 money cards have been given to the most needy families. And 12,000 counselling sessions have been provided for those that are impact psychologically due to the economic situation. So this is in Istanbul alone.

Tezcan Gümüş: And the outcome of this is Yavaş, who's a municipal now of Ankara, so the capital city of Turkey, has seen his popularity surge above Erdogan's. So it's created this attack of Erdogan's legitimacy, and also broadened the appeal of the opposition party. So mainly the Republican People's Party. So it definitely is this inefficiency and the mixed messaging of the government has allowed these opposition held municipalities' mayors to really step in.

William Gourlay: So in that sense it sort of invigorated the political sphere to some degree, as Tez notes. It's the opposition party who have been innovative and got on the front foot. That was Erdogan's modus operandi for so long. He was always forward thinking in the early years, and actually made reforms and was able to reach out to the electorate and became enormously popularly. So in that sense, these guys, İmamoğlu and Yavaş, are doing the same thing now, albeit from a different political perspective. In that sense it's invigorated the political sphere, but in so doing, it sort of created fear within the AKP I would argue. And that's why they've come out with these things, Erdogan saying, "Well we can't have a state within a state," and I think he made some comment at some point talking about ... broadly speaking how Turkey needs to combat the coronavirus, but we also have a political virus. By that, he's obviously implying opposition run municipalities that have been successful, he's demonstrating his fear that these guys ... I shouldn't say guys all the time, but they tend to be male politicians, enacting important measures that are effective, but in so doing they're winning support and undermining the AKP support.

William Gourlay: And it's worth keeping in mind, too, that the AKP is under siege, perhaps, from a point of view of the tanking economy, which Tez touched on before. But also there's a number of breakaway parties that have emerged from former AKP cadres within the last six or eight months, Davutoğlu and Babacan who have created their own political parties because they were former AKP members and stalwarts to the party but they see themselves as been pushed aside. So in that sense the political sphere has been polarised to some degree, but also invigorated from these new measures and these new political actors who are emerging.



- Ali Moore: So Will, does that mean that you do see the opportunity for lasting change from this pandemic in Turkey?
- William Gourlay: I would say there is the opportunity, but it depends on how the government reacts. And recent experience demonstrates that a key tool in the AKP toolbox now, or perhaps specifically Erdogan's is polarisation works to his benefit. And we've seen that consistently, he's become increasingly dismissive or making negative comments about the opposition, there's more accusations of treachery, of terrorism. So these have become sort of tools within his armoury, cast aspersions on the opposition, "I'm the strong guy who can hold the country together, you need to vote for me and rally around the flag as I'm doing."
- William Gourlay: So I would expect, and it's always unwise to make predictions, but I would expect that Erdogan's polarising rhetoric and his polemic is going to heighten, and that's a reflection of his fears of losing power and the increasing popularity of opposition politicians.
- Tezcan Gümüş: It also has a lot to do with the way the opposition parties interact with Erdogan's accusations. So the one thing that made the opposition campaign, and winning those key cities in the municipality elections, was that they did not engage in any of this rhetoric with Erdogan, so it actually defused the situation and the AKP and Erdogan, they had no fuel to feed off. I think that if the opposition can continue down this path, and not just attack Erdogan, but just reach out to his traditional electorate in terms of listening to them and being inclusive of them, and see how they can help them and their issues, and their needs, and their grievances, I think we will see a gradual expansion in the popularity of the opposition.
- William Gourlay: İmamoğlu's campaign outlook in Istanbul has been described as extreme love, so Erdogan might be polarising and accusing people of treachery or creating a state within a state, or being a terrorist, but İmamoğlu was about inclusivity, and he wanted to reach out to everybody, and obviously that struck a chord with large portions of the Turkish electoral, the Istanbul electorate, and that's why he won the election so convincingly. So in that sense it's invigorated the Turkish political sphere, but again, I think it depends on how Erdogan reacts both from his rhetoric, but also on how he uses the levers of power, because he so firmly has a grip on all of them at present.
- Ali Moore: It is going to be absolutely fascinating to watch as Turkey comes out the other side of this, as it is to watch so many other countries, but I'm incredibly grateful for your insights and for your time, and no doubt we will talk about this again in the coming months. So Will and Tez, thank you so much for talking to Ear to Asia.



William Gourlay: Thank you very much, Ali, it was a great pleasure again.

Tezcan Gümüő: Always a pleasure, Ali, thank you very much for the time.

Ali Moore: Our guests have been Asia Institute Turkish politics researcher, Dr. Tezcan Gümüő, and international relations expert, Dr. William Gourlay of Monash University. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Make sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or Sound Cloud. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. Of course let your friends know about us on social media. This episode was recorded on the 27th of May, 2020. Producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons, copyright 2020, the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore, thanks for your company.