

TURKISH VIEWS: CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR TURKEY IN 2023

GÖNÜL TOL & HOWARD EISSENSTAT, EDITORS

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Cover photo: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan addresses the crowd as he attends the Delivery Ceremony of 60,000 residences in Dortyol Square in Esenler, Istanbul, on August 19, 2022. [Photo by Turkish Presidency/Murat Cetinmuhurdar/Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images](#).



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INTRODUCTION

As the Turkish Republic enters its centennial year, it seems to be at an inflection point.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has intensified the role of Islam in the public sphere. Successive purges and crackdowns have resulted in a dismal human rights record. And Turkey, never really a beacon of liberal democracy, has now become one of the most prominent examples of democratic backsliding.

In foreign policy it has made tangible Turkey's long-standing aspirations to play a larger role in the world through trade, diplomacy, and ambitious efforts at intensifying its military profile in the region. At the same time, Turkey's relations with its Western allies are at a nadir; whether in European capitals or in Washington, there are few who still view Ankara as a reliable ally.

Moreover, Turkey's economy is in crisis. The skyrocketing inflation of the pre-AKP era is now back with a vengeance. The standard of living of everyday Turkish citizens has plummeted. Turkey's youth — and especially its most educated young people — are increasingly looking for futures abroad.

All of this means that the AKP, as it prepares for elections in 2023, is facing perhaps its greatest electoral test at a moment of particular vulnerability. At the same time, the breakdown of democratic norms, restrictions on freedom of expression, and the government's near monopoly on broadcast media all mean that the opposition faces a decidedly challenging electoral environment. Experts regularly claim that the next elections may be “the most important.” The 2023 elections in Turkey may well live up to that claim.

What has been the impact of the AKP's rule and how might the opposition change Turkey's direction if they manage to come to power? In this series of papers, seven prominent Turkish scholars weigh in on these questions, thinking about this from a wide variety of perspectives and focusing on a range of specific fields of policy, explaining how we got to the current juncture and where Turkey might go from here.

— Gönül Tol and Howard Eissenstat

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THE STRATEGIES AND STRUGGLES OF THE TURKISH OPPOSITION UNDER AUTOCRATIZATION

SEREN SELVIN KORKMAZ

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Introduction

Turkey has undergone a major economic, social, and political transformation during the two decades of Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) rule. Despite its early democratization efforts during the European Union (EU) accession negotiations and various political and judicial reforms, the AKP has since become the main driver of rising autocratization in Turkey.

Turkey is now categorized as a “competitive authoritarian” regime,¹ where elections are held regularly but the competition among political parties is not free and fair. These regimes have ostensibly democratic elements: Opposition parties occasionally win or almost win elections; there is fierce political competition; the press may publish diverse opinions and statements by opposition parties; and citizens can organize protests.

However, upon closer inspection, cracks soon appear in the democratic facade: Opponents of the government are stifled via legal or illegal means; independent judicial bodies are controlled by pro-government officials; state funds are used for election campaigns without proper oversight; election rules are changed to favor the government and elections may

even be rigged; and press freedom and freedom of expression come under pressure. When these measures fail to deliver an outcome that satisfies the ruling party, members of the opposition may face targeted violence or imprisonment — an increasingly common reality for the Turkish opposition since 2007. Therefore, any opposition victory depends on its ability to successfully develop new ways to mobilize under these difficult conditions.

In competitive authoritarian regimes, opposition parties have a higher chance of winning elections if they form an electoral alliance. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has thus far enjoyed a fragmented opposition and utilized polarization to cement divisions. However, the introduction of a hyper-presidential system following the 2017 referendum and Erdoğan’s 2018 election victory have provided the necessary impetus for the opposition parties to form an alliance. As Turkey experiences a biting economic crisis, polls indicate that voter support for the opposition parties is a threat to Erdoğan and his ally, the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP).

This paper first charts Turkey’s autocratization under AKP rule, before addressing the strategies adopted by its political opposition and the opportunities and risks it faces in the run-up to the June 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections. The opposition’s strategy focuses on creating a strong electoral alliance to ensure a parliamentary majority, nominating a joint

1. Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, “Rising competitive authoritarianism in Turkey,” *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1581-1606, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2015.1135732

presidential candidate, and creating an inclusive platform to draw in AKP and MHP voters who are not happy with the country's recent trajectory. Meanwhile, Erdoğan has attempted to disrupt the opposition by amending the election law and increasingly targeting key opposition actors and journalists, while also taking advantage of the Russia-Ukraine war to position himself as an indispensable international actor. Although Erdoğan's approach to domestic and international politics suggests he is not willing to give up easily, opposition parties appear determined to defeat him.

Autocratization Under AKP Rule

To understand the fundamental problems facing Turkey's opposition, we must first examine how we got here and analyze how the regime has changed over time.

During its first term, the AKP took steps toward democratization by passing political and judicial reforms. However, during its second term, the party began to consolidate control over political institutions and the bureaucracy.² There were already problems regarding judicial independence, but instead of fixing the system, the AKP took politicization of the judiciary to a whole new level. The constitutional reforms ratified in a 2010 referendum significantly undermined judicial independence and increased the government's influence over the judiciary.³

At the same time, Erdoğan leaned into populism and further entrenched existing societal divisions. The government's violent response to the Gezi Park protests in 2013 intensified social polarization and tensions. During the June 2015 general elections, the first elections after the Gezi Park protests, the AKP lost its parliamentary majority; however, the parties were unable to form a government because Erdoğan actively blocked coalition talks and called for snap elections that fall. From June to November 2015, violence escalated across Turkey alongside armed conflict between Turkish security forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK*) in majority-Kurdish cities. At the end of a period marked by growing security concerns, the AKP regained its parliamentary

majority in the November 2015 elections, amid mounting problems over electoral justice and impartiality. Erdoğan had hoped to win the election by capitalizing on a security crisis of his own making and convincing people to vote for stability, and he succeeded.

The coup attempt on July 15, 2016 was another critical moment for the government to consolidate power by further suppressing the opposition and forming a new alliance with the ultranationalist MHP to solidify its parliamentary majority. After the coup attempt, the government declared a state of emergency, during which people from various political factions suffered major human rights violations and all parliamentary authority was effectively transferred to Erdoğan.

Turkey's government system transformed into a de facto semi-presidential system after the constitutional amendments in 2010; after the referendum in 2017, it became a hyper-presidential system devoid of checks and balances. Under the new system, the parliament became dysfunctional as its powers were mainly transferred to the head of the executive branch. This system made it difficult for the opposition parties, in spite of their significant numbers in parliament, to impact governance decisions and conduct oversight of other government branches. This new system only benefited those at the top, including Erdoğan's family, leading AKP officials, and allied businesses. Institutions have been hollowed out under one-man rule, and clientelism and patronage have made the system even more inefficient.⁴

Moreover, ever since the unfavorable results of the June 2015 elections, the government has extended its control over the media and civil society. It has also doubled down on its marginalization of the Kurdish people by declaring the end of the "Kurdish Solution Process" and violently targeting the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP*).⁵ Many HDP legislators, including Co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, as well as many HDP mayors and party activists, have been imprisoned. In response to the HDP's overwhelming victories across Kurdish municipalities in the March 2019 local elections, the

2. Şule Özsoy Boyunsuz and Berk Esen, "Türkiye İçin Yeni Bir Hükümet Sistemi: Hükümet Sistemi Kaynaklı Sorunlar ve Çözüm Önerileri," *İstanbul*, last updated on January 14, 2021, <https://www.istanpol.org/post/t%C3%BCrkiye-i-%C3%A7in-yeni-bir-h%C3%BCK%C3%BCmet-sistemi-h%C3%BCK%C3%BCmet-sistemi-kaynakl%C4%B1-sorunlar-ve-%C3%A7%C3%B6z%C3%BCm-%C3%B6nerileri>

3. Yunus Sözen, "Popular Will against Democracy: Populist Autocratization in Turkey," *Reflektif Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 1 (1):9-29, DOI: 10.47613/reflektif.2020.3.

4. Gönül Tol and Seren Selvin Korkmaz, "The perils of personalizing power: Erdoğan's one-man rule has made him increasingly vulnerable," *Middle East Institute*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/perils-personalizing-power-erdogans-one-man-rule-has-made-him-increasingly-vulnerable>

5. Cemal Ozkahraman, "Failure of Peace talks between Turkey and the PKK: Victim of Traditional Turkish Policy or of Geopolitical Shifts in the Middle East?" *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 4, no. 1 (March 2017): 50-66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798916681332>



Photo above: People walk past election posters of AKP candidate Binali Yıldırım (L) and CHP candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu (R) during campaigning in the re-run of the Istanbul mayoral election on June 01, 2019 in Istanbul. Photo by Chris McGrath/Getty Images.

government struck back with more suppression and purges of HDP mayors, to the extent that most HDP-run municipalities are now run by government-appointed “trustees.”⁶

As a result, over the years, the AKP has created a competitive authoritarian regime that justifies itself with the rhetoric of political populism. As the AKP positioned itself as the sole representative of the nation, it completely disregarded and undermined the legitimacy of many opposition groups, further deepening political and social polarization in Turkey while consolidating its control over the state. Using its parliamentary majority and the hyper-presidential system, it introduced new legislation to stifle political and social opposition and to undermine fundamental rights and freedoms.⁷ Therefore, the opposition faces both deepening polarization and political and legal sanctions.

6. Seren Selvin Korkmaz, “Could Turkey’s opposition provide a model for the defeat of populist authoritarian rule?” *Open Democracy*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/could-turkeys-opposition-provide-a-model-for-the-defeat-of-populist-authoritarian-rule/>

7. “Freedom in the World 2022: Turkey,” *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2022> (Accessed August 12, 2022)

The Opposition’s Main Strategies Under Erdoğan’s Rule

The opposition actors and alliances have also changed throughout the dynamic autocratization process, searching for new strategies and approaches while navigating the slippery terrain of politics. Just as some opposition actors or parties have chosen to build alliances with the AKP, some of the ruling party’s former allies have also joined the opposition’s ranks. As the opposition struggled to operate within an increasingly polarized political landscape and survive amid a crackdown on fundamental freedoms, at times it fell into the pitfalls of polarization while mobilizing voters to amass some political power.

By learning from its past experiences, both successes and failures, the Turkish opposition adopted a new strategy that brought it victory in the 2019 local elections. This strategy has two main pillars: forming electoral alliances to ensure unity against Erdoğan and using new discursive strategies to counter his polarizing discourse.

A. Forging Alliances

Turkey's ruling alliance appears to be rather monolithic due to the ideological similarities between the AKP and MHP in recent years, while the opposition alliance encompasses a broad range of differences stretching across the fault lines of history and identity. The opposition alliance spans across left- and right-wing, Turkish and Kurdish, and secular and conservative politics. While it may seem difficult for this broad opposition bloc to set aside its differences, the parties are united by their common stance on the choice between democratization and autocratization. Opposition actors are well aware that one more election win for Erdoğan will lead to the institutionalization of autocratization. Therefore, the 2023 elections will be a watershed moment for the opposition and the country more broadly.

The opposition has previously failed to unite against the AKP, only successfully forming alliances in the 2019 local elections after much effort, and historically this fragmentation has benefited Erdoğan. Opposition parties began forming alliances against the AKP after the 2011 elections, when the AKP started to consolidate its power after its third electoral victory. For example, the MHP (now an AKP ally) and the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), the main opposition party, agreed to put up a joint candidate, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, for the presidential elections in 2014. At the same time, the HDP and a group of left-wing parties fielded a different candidate under the umbrella of the HDP — a tactic designed to pass Turkey's high election threshold. Despite the fact that these two opposition groups ran joint candidates against Erdoğan, the main driver of the elections was not the formation of alliances. İhsanoğlu's candidacy even caused a major split within the CHP. As a result, rather than unifying against Erdoğan, the opposition has often been hampered by competition and division within its ranks, which has only benefited the AKP.

The opposition parties banded together to vote “no” in the April 2017 constitutional referendum that established the hyper-presidential system, and their current alliance strategy is shaped by the unfair majoritarian electoral conditions created under that new system.

Hyper-Presidential System: An Unexpected Opportunity for the Opposition

The current presidential system, which was expected to consolidate Erdoğan's power, has instead become his Achilles' heel.⁸ Under the new system, the president and his party face an ever-growing list of problems as he has further deepened crises instead of addressing them. Since the presidential system lacks institutional checks and balances, the regime has become increasingly authoritarian and inefficient. The bureaucracy, managed by bureaucrats recruited, promoted, dismissed, or relocated based on their loyalties rather than their merits, has failed to address Turkey's woes. Erdoğan's persistent interventions in monetary policy and changes in the top personnel at the central bank have worsened the country's already-dire economic problems, and his erratic foreign policy decisions, which bypass historically significant diplomatic institutions, have strained Turkey's foreign relations. Now, the bureaucracy has become paralyzed and the party has been rendered dysfunctional. The AKP's political strategy that was once based on building bonds with Turkish society, one of the party's main strengths, has now been undermined by the hyper-centralization of decision-making mechanisms.

The stalemate brought about by this hyper-centralized system has also created opportunities for the opposition. The “50% plus one” rule in the new system has played a key role in bringing opposition parties together in an alliance to secure an electoral victory, as the latest polls suggest that popular support for the hyper-presidential system has fallen below 50%.⁹ While a divided opposition has benefited Erdoğan for many years and perhaps encouraged him to design the current system, his rivals can no longer remain fragmented as the opposition parties are forced to rely on each other to survive in this unjust electoral system. Despite their many differences, the opposition actors agree on the need to push back against hyper-centralization and reinstate the parliamentary system.

8. Gönül Tol and Seren Selvin Korkmaz, “The perils of personalizing power: Erdoğan's one-man rule has made him increasingly vulnerable,” *Middle East Institute*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/perils-personalizing-power-erdogans-one-man-rule-has-made-him-increasingly-vulnerable>

9. “Yöneyem anketi: Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi'ne destek yüzde 28,5,” *Gazete Duvar*, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yoneylem-anketi-3-kisiden-2si-parlamente-sistem-dedi-galeri-1577740> (Accessed August 29, 2022)

Tenuous Alliance in 2018

Following changes to the electoral law in 2018, political parties were allowed to form official electoral alliances for parliamentary elections. Alliances also provide a new option for small political parties to overcome the 10% electoral threshold for parliamentary representation, because if an alliance's votes exceed 10% in total, small parties will automatically pass the threshold. As a result, in order to ensure a majority in parliament, opposition parties formed coalitions for the 2018 elections. However, this collaboration can only be described as a "tenuous alliance." The opposition alliance — known as the Nation Alliance — comprising the secularist CHP, the MHP-split nationalist Good Party (*İYİ Parti*), the Islamist Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*, SP), and the right-wing Democrat Party (*Demokrat Partisi*, DP), was formed only for the parliamentary elections, while each party fielded its own presidential candidate against Erdoğan, instead of putting up a joint candidate. This strategy meant that the opposition parties' presidential candidates had to run against each other, as well as Erdoğan. In the highly polarized political climate, this froze the parties' respective voter blocs, as each party mobilized its own base instead of turning out the vote for a single opposition candidate, and Erdoğan secured victory in the first round with the support of his ally, the MHP. As a result of this fragmentation, the AKP-MHP People's Alliance also won a parliamentary majority in the elections as well.

Strong Alliance in the 2019 Local Elections

The opposition parties learned their lesson after the 2018 elections. For the 2019 local elections, they agreed to nominate joint candidates in metropolitan areas instead of competing against each other. The HDP also implicitly supported the opposition candidates in metropolitan constituencies by not putting up its own candidate. This collaboration led to electoral victories for the opposition and also damaged Erdoğan's reputation as a leader who could not be challenged.

In Istanbul, the ruling alliance contested the opposition's mayoral victory and secured a rerun of the election by using its tight grip on the judiciary. However, the opposition candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, won the second election by an even bigger margin, which positioned the now-united opposition as a potential alternative to the ruling alliance. This important

victory mobilized opposition parties, sparked hope in the country, and laid the groundwork for larger coalitions. For Erdoğan, the opposition victory was a significant loss because of the strategic importance of Istanbul; one of Erdoğan's adages is: "Whoever wins Istanbul, wins Turkey." But despite this victory, the opposition faces more electoral challenges ahead. The AKP's outright rejection of the opposition's victory in Istanbul, as well as the rerun of the election, has heightened the risks of electoral fraud, especially in the upcoming 2023 presidential elections.

These victories in metropolitan municipalities were also significant in that they allowed the opposition to demonstrate how it would rule if it were in power. Erdoğan has consistently singled out the CHP to argue that opposition parties are incompetent at governing. Erdoğan's main talking points about the opposition over the past two decades have focused on the failure of opposition parties since the early years of the republic, turbulent times under coalition governments, and unsuccessful local governments. The CHP's electoral victories, as part of a wider victory for the opposition, gave them a chance to push back against Erdoğan's criticisms. Since the elections, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara respectively, have gained remarkable popularity. These two names also stand out in election surveys as potential presidential candidates who may have a chance of winning against Erdoğan. After scrambling to find a common candidate in 2018, the opposition now has multiple potential presidential hopefuls.

Consolidating a Strong Alliance Strategy

On the eve of the 2023 elections, as Turkish citizens prepare to vote for both parliamentary representatives and the president, the opposition's election strategy is based on forming the broadest possible alliance to win both the presidency and a parliamentary majority.

Recently, the Nation Alliance and two AKP splinter parties, the Democracy and Progress Party (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi*, DEVA) and the Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*, GP), both led by former AKP elites Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoğlu, set aside their differences and together put forward a proposal for a "Strengthened Parliamentary System." At a time when the AKP is exacerbating identity-based polarization in society, this proposal signals the potential for a broader social and political



Photo above: Leaders of the “table of six” opposition alliance attend a presentation on the “Strengthened Parliamentary System” and signing ceremony in Ankara on February 28, 2022. Photo by Baris Oral/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

alliance for the future. For the first time in Turkish history, political parties with diverse socio-political orientations have collaborated to present a unified post-election vision. Leaders of six opposition parties regularly meet to discuss their post-election vision and election security issues. This alliance has been called the “table of six.” As the CHP and the İYİ Parti have larger bases, the other parties like the SP, DEVA, and GP have symbolic importance as potential political homes for disillusioned AKP supporters.

The proposed parliamentary system includes safeguards and checks and balances to prevent the rise of a new Erdoğan. The president’s role under the proposed system is mainly symbolic and representative rather than playing an active role in the executive branch. In comparison to the previous Turkish parliamentary system, the draft eliminates the president’s veto power and limits it to revoking laws passed by Turkey’s Grand National Assembly. The proposed regulations are aimed at creating an efficient and participatory legislative branch; a stable, transparent, and accountable executive branch; and an impartial and independent judiciary.

The pro-Kurdish HDP and five other leftist parties, including the newly emerging populist Worker’s Party of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TİP), have recently formed the Labor and Freedom Alliance. For voters dissatisfied with right-wing-dominated political alliances, this leftist alliance serves as an alternative. The HDP’s regional power provides the main driving force of this third alliance, ensuring that it can maximize its parliamentary seats and have a say in any institutional change. With its potential for winning 10-13% of the vote, this alliance will have a significant impact on the presidential elections because the table of six will need its support to ensure a majority without the risk of running in the second round.¹⁰

B. New Discursive Strategies

Another challenge for the opposition is to develop an inclusive, convincing, and effective discourse to counter the ruling alliance’s polarizing policies. The polarization strategy has

10. “MetroPOLL anketi: Altılı masa, Cumhur İttifakı’nı geçti,” *Medyascope*, <https://medyascope.tv/2022/09/02/metropoll-anketi-altili-masa-cumhur-ittifakini-gecti/> (Accessed September 3, 2022)

played to the favor of the populist authoritarian parties in power, dividing the opposition and ensuring that the majority of votes go to the ruling alliance. The CHP's communication campaigns from 2002 to 2010 were based on negative messaging that capitalized on fear, which managed to mobilize the party's own voter base but alienated AKP supporters. In the run-up to elections in 2018, Muharrem İnce, the CHP's presidential candidate at the time, mobilized his supporters with a revanchist and populist discourse, but also stoked polarization, which mostly benefited Erdoğan.

In the current system, the opposition needs the support of People's Alliance voters to secure victory, which requires a different approach. In the 2019 municipal elections, the opposition managed to attract diverse groups of voters with its positive campaign strategy entitled "radical love."¹¹ Despite all of Erdoğan's attempts, the opposition managed to avoid the pitfalls of polarization. Rather than targeting Erdoğan and the AKP or responding to their accusations, opposition candidates in the local elections focused on their own projects and explained their desire to represent all residents of the city.

This is the biggest challenge for the opposition in the run-up to 2023: embracing an inclusive discourse that attracts supporters of the ruling bloc while keeping its own voters satisfied.

The populists in power have given one clear message to their voters: "If I lose, you lose. If I go, there will be chaos and crisis." By contrast, the opposition has focused on steering outside the ruling bloc's established political grounds, creating new areas for discussion that often lead the AKP astray. For example, by proposing real solutions to everyday problems, instead of emphasizing polarizing identity politics, the opposition has been able to set the agenda, forcing Erdoğan to follow its policy proposals on pressing economic issues, like raising the minimum wage and canceling interest on student loans. It's not easy to maintain this, however.

Challenges Ahead

Although the opposition appears to agree on its strong alliance strategy, there are significant challenges ahead.

First, in the midst of a deep economic crisis, Erdoğan and his party have struggled to appeal to their voters; hence they will stick to polarization strategies to divide the opposition. As Erdoğan stokes fears among his voters that they will lose their status or rights if the opposition wins, the opposition in turn must run a more positive and inclusive campaign that may not completely satisfy its own base. The government will also attempt to divide the opposition by targeting Kurds and potentially including the HDP closure case on its election agenda. Since increasing its nationalist tone by collaborating with the ultranationalist MHP, the AKP has targeted the pro-Kurdish HDP and attempted to associate the party with terrorism by using pro-government media. The Kurdish issue is one of the historical rifts in Turkish politics that divides different camps, and it is one of the most difficult issues to manage for the opposition bloc, which includes right-wing Turkish nationalist parties, liberals, and social democrats. As a result, by focusing on it and bringing any issues involving the HDP to the forefront, the government hopes to both suppress the influential Kurdish political movement and split the opposition bloc. The table of six must overcome such polarization efforts and open a dialogue with the HDP to include Kurds in the opposition.

Second, with the increase in opposition parties and their ideological differences, compromising on certain issues will become more difficult. Furthermore, as the AKP loses power, opposition parties may believe that they can win under any circumstances, leading them to compete against each other instead of cooperating with one another.

Third, the opposition seems to have three possible candidates for the presidency: Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the CHP, and the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş. The process of choosing the candidate to face Erdoğan opens up the opposition to internal division and polarization.

Last, by introducing amendments to the election law in March 2022, the AKP and the MHP aimed to divide the larger opposition alliances.¹² The 2018 amendment made it possible for small parties that did not meet the 10% threshold to win seats in parliament if they ran as part of an alliance. Although

11. F. Michael Wuthrich and Melvyn Ingleby, "The Pushback Against Populism: Running on 'Radical Love' in Turkey," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 2 (April 2020): 24-40, DOI: 10.1353/jod.2020.0034

12. Nevzat Devranoglu and Ali Kucukgocmen, "Turkish draft law dampens early election talk," *Reuters*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/turkeys-ruling-parties-draft-law-suggesting-vote-more-likely-next-year-2022-03-14/>

the new amendment lowered the threshold to 7%, it also changed the overall regulation, which would hurt small parties and force them to join the elections as part of bigger parties like the CHP and the İYİ Parti. In this way, the government may aim to prevent AKP voters from defecting to DEVA and GP by forcing them to vote under the CHP and İYİ Parti banners. However, recent discussions show that the opposition is well prepared for these changes and may adopt flexible strategies to maximize its seats in parliament.

Potential Scenarios for the 2023 Elections

It appears that the opposition has a better chance of winning the presidency than a parliamentary majority, as the ruling coalition is using the latest legislative changes to hamper the opposition's parliamentary efforts.

A scenario in which the opposition loses both the presidential seat and the parliamentary majority will mean a looming risk of further autocratization in Turkey. Furthermore, losing an election at a time when victory seems so near may lead to major disillusionment among the opposition parties' bases.

If the table of six only wins the presidency, a defeat for Erdoğan still means a huge blow to the ruling bloc, and the opposition may then move toward democratization through parliamentary negotiations with the AKP. In this scenario, the AKP could also support reinstating the parliamentary system after losing control over the executive body.

If the opposition only wins a parliamentary majority, Erdoğan will once again solidify his image as an "invincible leader." Moreover, in the event of any dispute between the legislative and executive bodies, the AKP will try to lay the blame on the pluralistic and therefore fragmented nature of the opposition. The opposition will have to carefully navigate this scenario and avoid polarization.

If the government loses both the presidential seat and a parliamentary majority, it can always resort to electoral fraud. The electoral law amendment contains provisions that could jeopardize election security. Because the judiciary is dominated by pro-government officials, any decision regarding electoral security runs the risk of favoring the government over the opposition. To prevent electoral fraud, the opposition,

regardless of formal electoral alliances, should work together at the local level to ensure a transparent and fair process, and international observers should closely monitor the elections.

Erdoğan and the AKP have transformed Turkish politics and state institutions over the course of their two decades in power, while the opposition parties' strategies, ideological positions, and leadership have been highly dynamic. Understanding the opposition's shift will be critical for gaining a better understanding of Turkish politics. While there are various scenarios for how the 2023 elections might play out, recent polls clearly show Erdoğan losing ground. As Erdoğan and his party face a severe economic crisis and elite division within the ruling coalition, Turkey's opposition has learned from its mistakes and developed strategies to combat populist authoritarianism in a politically polarized environment. The Turkish opposition's tactics and struggles are thus not only crucial to understanding Turkish politics, but will also be added to the international playbook of democratic opposition strategies for opposing populist autocrats.

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RELIGION, NATIONALISM, AND POPULISM IN TURKEY UNDER THE AKP

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Introduction

When Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited the country's largest Kurdish-majority city, Diyarbakır, during the 2015 election campaign, he held a Kurdish-language version of the Quran while addressing the audience with the following words: "Nobody could dare to divide the motherland and the nation, and destroy the flag," and he invited Kurds to unite behind "one nation, one flag, one motherland, and one religion."¹ Five years later, in 2020, the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*)² delivered the first Friday sermon in Hagia Sophia following its reconversion into a mosque — after serving as a museum since 1935 — while holding a sword that represents the Turkic/Islamic tradition of conquest.³

Similar performances melding religious symbolism and political agenda are common in Turkey's political scene

1. Bilge Yabanci, "Fuzzy Borders between Populism and Sacralized Politics: Mission, Leader, Community and Performance in 'New' Turkey," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 92–112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2020.1736046>.

2. Diyanet is a state institution established in 1924 as the highest religious authority after the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate. It is now totally instrumentalized by the AKP.

3. Upon the conquest of Constantinople, the landmark church of the Eastern Roman Empire was converted into a mosque by the Mehmet II. As a symbol of Turkey's secularization, in 1935, during Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's presidency, it was declared a museum. "Turkey's top religious authority head delivers Friday sermon at Hagia Sophia with a sword in hand," July 24, 2020, *Duvar*, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/politics/2020/07/24/turkeys-top-religious-authority-head-delivers-friday-sermon-at-hagia-sophia-with-a-sword-in-hand>.

under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). They combine appeals to national identity, religious tropes, and emotional rhetoric that are mapped onto the collective memory. Such manifestations make the AKP's relationship with religion perplexing for many. They also divide society as for many secular voters, religion's increased visibility in politics means Turkey has become estranged from the republic's foundational values, while others see their values and lifestyles represented more than ever.⁴ However, there is more to the AKP's relationship with religion than the oft-cited secular-pious cleavage. This short analysis aims to shed light on this complex relationship through the lens of nationalism, populism, and performance as a means of political mobilization.

Erdoğan's Politics as Performance

How does religion affect the current state of state of governance in Turkey? Over its two decades in power, the AKP has shaped relations between different social groups based on religious belonging. It altered people's perceptions of national identity by making "being a Muslim Turk" more appealing for many at home and abroad, and created new public spaces and

4. For instance, Hagia Sophia has different historical and symbolic importance for different audiences. For staunch conservative and Islamists, it is a symbol of "a glorious past" of conquest and racial-religious superiority. For secular Turks, Hagia Sophia's status as a museum represented not only Turkey's secularization and Western-style modernization but also its global connectedness and cultural heritage that appeal to an international audience.

collective memories embellished with national heroism that is itself sacralized by religious references. The AKP's increasing resort to religious-nationalist appeals and symbols over the last decade has turned politics into a manifestation of a religious-like mission built onto — besides Ottoman nostalgia — a constant state of crisis fed by conspiracies.

President Erdoğan is the chief promoter of this missionary politics. When the current economic crisis began, Erdoğan called on people to fight against the “economic war” launched by “foreign enemies,” implying “the non-Muslim West.” He also stated that “there is no difference between the attack on our economy and the attack on our prayer and our flag. The aim is the same: to enslave the Turkish nation.”⁵ Such claims are designed to create the impression in the public mind that the current government is engaged in a timeless struggle beyond the material concerns of governing today. The AKP prescribes a single response to these “existential threats and crises”: an eventual redemption through an ever-stronger bond between the Muslim-Turkish nation and the revered leader.

Given this existential crisis, Erdoğan asks people to tolerate the current failures of the day-to-day governance of the economy, unemployment, social welfare, the environment, or other salient issues for the sake of a greater mission that is still under construction. In fact, Erdoğan's performative style in politics as a man of the mission and personalized power are crucial in keeping AKP supporters mobilized. Erdoğan relies on similar cultural codes, historical heroes, and nationalist and religious imagery from the well-known history of nation-building to create and rally a communal identity. By doing so, he not only efficiently conveys an ethnoreligious message to the public but also engenders a sense of privilege and pride among his supporters both at home as well as among the Turkish diaspora, particularly in Europe.⁶ Integrating ethnoreligious references into politics helps him create an alternative and more effervescent sense of participation among the AKP's supporters beyond “banal” civic or political participation. For example, during a 2014 presidential campaign rally, he addressed the crowds with the following statement:

“We are people. We are the grandchildren of Alparslan, Süleyman Shah, Osman I. We are the heirs to Mehmet the Conqueror, Selim II. We are the ones cherishing the memory of Mustafa Kemal, Menderes, Özal, and Erbakan. We are the followers of martyrs who created a legend by sacrificing their blood.”

While the AKP undermined constitutional rights, democratic institutions (both procedural/deliberative and participatory ones), and the independent media and judiciary in incremental but determined steps, Erdoğan has created a unique performative style in politics that kept a large constituency engaged through affect. All politics and politicians engage in performance to a certain extent, even in liberal democracies.⁷ When performance dominates, however, it makes politics vulnerable to sacralization and autocratization.⁸ A system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that “demand faith” in the mission and leader replace the political, economic, social, and cultural agenda of everyday governance. Party programs, electoral manifestos, and policy proposals are less important than the personal promises of the leader. Political and civic participation is replaced by “mass spectacles” where “audiences see themselves in the action. They are pulled in; they identify” with a promised glorious future in the making.⁹

The AKP and Erdoğan seem to have created a “success story” in terms of politics as performance. This success cannot be properly evaluated without focusing on: 1) the historical entanglement of religion and nationalism in Turkey, and 2) the AKP's populism that capitalizes on this history to morally valorize “the people and its will” against “the elites and enemies.”

The Entanglement of Religion and Nationalism in Turkey

Modern Turkey's emergence is often depicted through a strict antagonism between a secular republican Kemalist elite that rejected any role for Islam in public life and the pious masses. However, the relationship between Islam and state-sanctioned secularism has always been more of a symbiosis and mutual accommodation.

7. Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power* (OUP USA, 2011), 85.

8. Emilio Gentile and Robert Mallett, “The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 2000): 18–55.

9. Alexander, *The Performance of Politics*.

5. “Erdoğan: Attack on Economy Same as Attack on Call to Prayer,” August 21, 2018, *Al-Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com>.

6. Bilge Yabanci, 2021, “Home State Oriented Diaspora Organizations and the Making of Partisan Citizens Abroad: Motivations, Discursive Frames, and Actions Towards Co-Opting the Turkish Diaspora in Europe,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 21 (2): 139–65.



Photo above: Ali Erbas, the head of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate, is seen at the minbar with a sword to deliver the Friday Sermon during the first Friday Prayer in 86 years in Hagia Sophia on July 24, 2020 in Istanbul, Turkey. Photo by Directorate of Communications/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire faced the threat of slow disintegration driven by several nationalist movements. The initial response was the promotion of "Ottomanism," a new state ideology that aimed to cultivate an overarching Ottoman identity to keep the various elements of the empire intact.¹⁰ As the non-Muslim subjects of the empire were the first ones to gain independence, the Abdulhamit II era (1876-1909) witnessed the emergence of proto-Islamism as a tool to legitimize political power in the crumbling empire, which was later sustained by constitutionalists of the Young Turk revolution in 1908.¹¹ The ruling cadres decided that non-Muslims had been prioritized at the expense of Muslims.¹² In this new ideology, Muslimhood became the core aspect determining identity and citizenship.

10. Gökhan Çetinsaya, "Rethinking Nationalism and Islam: Some Preliminary Notes on the Roots of 'Turkish-Islamic Synthesis' in Modern Turkish Political Thought," *The Muslim World* 89, no. 3-4 (1999): 350-76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1999.tb02753.x>.

11. Howard Eissenstat, Alexei Miller, and Stefan Berger, "Modernization, Imperial Nationalism, and the Ethnicization of Confessional Identity in the Late Ottoman Empire," *Nationalizing Empires*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014.

12. Haldun Gülalp, "Using Islam as Political Ideology: Turkey in Historical Perspective," *Cultural Dynamics* 14, no. 1 (2002): 21-39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09213740020140010201>.

Following World War I and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the pressing question for the republican elites was to "invent" a modern nation and its traditions. Except for a brief and failed search for purely secular ethnonationalism that emphasized pre-Islamic Turkish society and culture,¹³ the modern nation-building effort in Turkey was built upon religious morals and tradition as an inalienable part of the national identity and culture. The ruling elites and pro-republic intellectuals of the era gave Islam a new cultural and civilizational meaning. According to this cultural Islam perspective, Turks have assumed the characteristics of a real nation under Islam. At the same time, intellectuals of the era also claimed that Turks' pre-Islamic lifestyle and culture were suitable for Islamic requirements, hence Turks found their "true self" and realized their potential as "a great people" only after they consensually accepted Islam.¹⁴ In this view, Islam's modernization was to contribute to the new national unity. It was also believed that a nationalized

13. Hugh Poulton, *The Top Hat, the Grey Wolf, and the Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic*, First Edition (Washington Square, N.Y: NYU Press, 1997).

14. Çetinsaya, "Rethinking Nationalism and Islam."

and modernized Islam in Turkey would guide or lead the Islamic world by example.

This understanding of Islam as a source of national identity had three long-lasting consequences. First, a strictly governed public religion emerged on two pillars: the state-organized Diyanet and the oppression of ideas outside the official line of state Islam. Second, it entailed re-interpreting “the West” as a technological and scientific role model while repudiating the (non-Muslim) cultural side of it. The motivation was to “catch up with” the scientific and economic advances by emulating “the West,” while “the authentic culture and traditions” of Muslim Turks were considered superior in all aspects of social life.¹⁵ Third, this early invention of the nation as an ethnoreligious community created enmity toward the remaining non-Sunni Muslim and non-Turkish minorities as “eternal enemies within” and justified state and communal violence against them.

These three long-lasting consequences have shaped conservative and right-wing political ideologies in Turkey up until today. The transition to a multi-party system gave rise to new actors that promoted “a nationalist-conservative ideology” from the 1950s onwards. This ideology endorsed a top-down cultivation of society (especially youth), anti-Western and anti-Semitic, conspiracy-driven historiography, and Ottoman nostalgia.¹⁶ This ideology was not unique to a single party but claimed and fashioned by several nationalist, conservative, and Islamist movements and political parties to promote the further unity of ethnic nationalism and Islam.

Turkey’s Islamist parties (the long lineage started with the National Salvation Party), as well as the far-right nationalist parties (the largest one is the Nationalist Action Party [*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP], which is currently in coalition with the AKP), empowered themselves out of this nationalist-conservative fusion. Due to the secular state’s suspicion of “radical Islamism” as a challenge to the secular republic, mainstream Turkish Islamism has grown not against but out of the statist tradition that defines Islam in cultural terms as a part of national identity. Equally interesting, in this same period, ultranationalists (*ülküçüler* as they call themselves) expelled

“pure Turkists,” the defenders of Turkishness based on racial and ethnic determinants, among the party ranks and defined themselves as “uncompromising Muslims and conscious Turkish nationalists.” At the same time, Islamist parties promoted “Islamic nationalism” by making references to Turkey as “the greatest and the most glorious nation” of Islam.¹⁷

The 1980 coup further entrenched the nationalist-conservative ideology through a policy known as the Turkish-Islam synthesis.¹⁸ A state-controlled indoctrination of society with *the Turkish-Islam synthesis* introduced compulsory religious teaching at public schools, the expansion of nationalist historiography and Quran courses, and the use of mosques by the Diyanet. The 1997 military intervention that removed the right-wing coalition from power was not an exception to the ideal of an ethnoreligious nation but an attempt to defend it against the perceived threat of different and more radical interpretations of Islam. For the AKP, this available script of a fusion between ethnic nationalism and Islam provided a strong discursive and political agenda that would easily resonate with large segments of society. However, as the next section discusses, the AKP also added populism to the equation.

The AKP’s Populism and Ethnoreligious Borders of “the People”

Before the AKP came to power in 2002, the national-conservative ideology remained mostly a right-wing intellectual tradition. Political parties that capitalized on it had been divided and received around 35% of the vote at most. The AKP has made it a key strategy to unite diverse right-wing voters by injecting populism. Populism is a political strategy that claims an incessant antagonism between “the people” and “the elites and enemies.”¹⁹ It morally valorizes the people, who are considered a homogenous and organic community. However, it has a “chameleonic” nature that allows adaptation to changing political and social conditions.²⁰ Depending on the changing conditions, different

17. Çetinsaya, “Rethinking Nationalism and Islam.”

18. Erkan Akin and Omer Karasapan, “The ‘Turkish-Islamic Synthesis,’” *Middle East Report*, no. 153 (1988): 18–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3012127>.

19. Kurt Weyland, “Populism as a Political Strategy: An Approach’s Enduring — and Increasing — Advantages,” *Political Studies* 69, no. 2 (May 1, 2021): 185–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217211002669>.

20. Paul Taggart, “Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics,” in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

15. Tanıl Bora, *Türk Sağının Üç Hali [The three phases of Turkish right]* (Istanbul: İletisim, 1998), <https://www.iletisim.com.tr/kitap/turk-saginin-uc-hali/7288#>. WtrP5C-B2qA.

16. Yüksel Taskin, *Milliyetçi Muhafazakâr Entelijansiya [Nationalist-Conservative Intelligentsia]* (Istanbul: İletisim, 2007).

social, ethnic, class, and religious groups can be “made” and “unmade” a part of “the people” by populists.

During its formative years, the AKP’s self-proclaimed ideology of “conservative democracy” already incorporated a populist plea. The party defined politics through an antagonism between “the Muslim-Turkish people” and “the Kemalist secular elite.”²¹ Although the AKP has combined various and sometimes conflicting ideological approaches, it capitalized on an established tradition that defined the nation as an ethnoreligious community. However, the way that ethnoreligious references are utilized to determine “the people” shifted. Initially, the AKP followed “politics of co-optation” and then switched to “politics of exclusion.”

The early reconciliation initiatives toward Alevi and Kurdish minorities exemplify the AKP’s earlier politics of co-optation. In 2007, the AKP attempted to integrate Alevis — a religious minority combining elements of Sufism and Shi’a Islam — within the Muslim-Turkish nation. Alevis have been subjected to discrimination and state and communal violence since the Ottoman era. The government proposed the establishment of an “Alevi Directorate” under the prime minister’s office similar to the Diyanet and the provision of state funds for *cemevis* (Alevi sites for religious practice).²² The AKP representatives emphasized the common culture and coexistence between the Alevi and Sunni communities. The AKP’s message was that Alevis were Muslims and they could be incorporated into the nation as such. The Alevi demands for equal status and legal recognition for *cemevis* and exemption from compulsory religious classes at schools that prioritize Sunni Islam were effectively ignored. Recently, another attempt at reconciliation was launched during the Alevi holy month. Yet, for many Alevi associations, the AKP’s attempt remains top-down and assimilatory.

Similarly, the early Kurdish reconciliation initiative emphasized common religion as a basis for national unity between Turks and Kurds. In fact, the Kurdish reconciliation policy was later renamed “the national unity project” by Erdoğan. The AKP emphasized that Islam can overcome divisions based

on ethnicity and create a collective identity. The party elites harkened back to the Ottoman policy of categorizing the population according to religious belonging (the *millet* system), whereby Kurds and Turks would belong to the same nation, as a key solution to incorporate Kurds into “the people.”

Politics of co-optation sought to define “who belongs to the people” by incorporating more elements into the people from the margins. It was rejected by Alevis and Kurds because the AKP’s core policy was top-down and autocratic, aimed at asserting the party’s role as “the representative” of all groups. After the 2007 electoral victory and the 2010 constitutional referendum, the AKP adopted a more exclusive version of populism. With “politics of exclusion,” the AKP now focuses more on “who do not belong to the people” through ethnoreligious criteria. Instead of referring to Islam as a unifying element across ethnic and sectarian lines, Islam is given a nationalist character in defining “the people” or the ideal citizen, particularly after the 2013 Gezi protests and the 2015 June elections.²³ The government’s motto “one state, one nation, one flag, and one religion” emerged during this period, marking the shift from politics of co-optation to politics of exclusion. The AKP also established a close alliance with the far-right nationalist MHP, facilitated by the shared ideological roots discussed previously.

More importantly, the AKP has sought to micro-manage an ideal citizenry loyal to both national unity and faith. This approach has found its concrete substance in policies for youth and education as well as women and family. The youth policy has been crystallized in the goal of “cultivating religious generations.”²⁴ Erdoğan later entrenched the goal by emphasizing the “July 15 youth” — referring to the date of the July 15, 2016 coup attempt — and pitting them against “the Gezi youth” or “the LGBT youth.”²⁵ The “July 15 youth” have been praised as national heroes “who were on the streets for the flag and prayer” while youth who participated in protests are often labelled as “traitors” and “terrorist youth.”²⁶

23. Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks*, Updated edition with a new afterword (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

24. “Dindar Gençlik Yetiştireceğiz [We Will Raise a Pious Generation],” February 2, 2012, *Hürriyet*, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dindar-genclik-yetistirecegiz-19825231>.

25. Bilge Yabancı, “At the Intersections of Populism, Nationalism and Islam: Justice and Development Party and Populist Reconfiguration of Religion in Politics,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* online first (2021): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1972794>.

26. “Turkey’s Erdoğan Denounces LGBT Youth as Police Arrest Students,” February 2, 2021, *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55901951>.

21. Kürşad Ertuğrul, “AKP’s Neo-Conservatism and Politics of Otherness in Europe-Turkey Relations,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 46 (March 2012): 157–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0896634600001540>.

22. “AKP Alevileri Asimile Etmeye Çalışıyor [AKP Aims to Assimilate Alevis],” November 25, 2007, *Radikal*, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=239791>; Murat Borovalı and Cemil Boyraz, “Turkish Secularism and Islam: A Difficult Dialogue with the Alevis,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 40, no. 4–5 (2014): 479–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453714522476>.



Photo above: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan makes a speech during the grand finale of the holy Quran recitation contest in Istanbul, Turkey on April 27, 2022. Photo by Murat Kula/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

The AKP adopted a similar approach of polarization and marginalization in its women and family policy. Mothers and family-oriented women are praised as ideal citizens who protect the nation by being “primarily responsible for raising healthy individuals and future generations.”²⁷ Religious references to chastity and morals and the importance of motherhood in Islam are widely employed to legitimize the AKP’s gender politics targeting women’s reproductive capacities to ensure the sustainability of the nation. Meanwhile, minority sexual orientation, cohabitation, and single motherhood are declared immoral. Abortion, birth control, and C-sections have been declared as plots “to wipe out the nation” by Erdoğan himself. Working women, compared to stay-at-home mothers, were labelled as deficient and shunned for neglecting children and family.²⁸ In fact, Erdoğan encouraged women to raise at least three children on several occasions, while blaming feminists for being alien to the nation’s authentic culture and traditions.

27. AKP, “Party Programme,” n.d., <https://www.akparti.org.tr/parti/parti-programi/>.

28. Rose Troup, “Turkey’s President Reckons Women Are ‘Deficient’ Unless They Have Children,” 2016, *BuzzFeed News*, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/rosebuchanan/women-without-children-are-incomplete-says-turkish-leader>

The AKP’s attempts to micro-manage “the ideal citizenry” have not remained limited to a discursive polarization with religious and nationalist references. On the policy side, the AKP collaborates with resourceful government-oriented youth and women’s organizations in charge of reaching out to target groups across Turkey. These organizations initiate and implement projects in line with the ethnoreligious ideal. Youth organizations engage youngsters from primary school to working age through what can be termed “politicized leisure.” They run various educational, social, and sporting activities through school clubs, summer camps, and extra-curricular training within close-knit communities at city or district branches. During these politicized leisure activities, youngsters are imbued with nationalist-conservative views. To give some examples, youngsters are taught the Islamic value of self-sacrifice, the role of non-Turkish and non-Muslim minorities in the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, an essentialist and anti-Semitic civilizationism, as well as current domestic and foreign politics in line with the AKP’s agenda (such as Turkey’s military excursions in northern Syria or the constitutional referendum). While cultivating the youth with religious values is the oft-cited

goal of these organizations, their aim is not only to convince youngsters to practice religion in their private lives. Indeed, religion is important to the extent that it defines the self-perception of youngsters as equally proud Muslims and Turks.²⁹

Similarly, pro-government women's organizations promote an alternative gender perspective by combining Islamic principles and random concepts from post-colonial feminist theory.³⁰ Government-oriented women's organizations have become the major interlocutors for the Ministry of Family and Social Policy in pre-legislative consultations. For many controversial legal changes that undermine women's gained rights, these organizations prepare public opinion by forming a counter-bloc to feminist women's organizations to legitimize proposals with references to traditions and values.³¹ For example, during debates about legal changes that provide *muftis* — state religious officials employed by the Diyanet — with the authority to conduct civil marriages, pro-AKP women's organizations argued that the practice would encourage civil marriages in rural areas. Similarly, during heated debates about granting amnesty to men for marrying underage girls, pro-AKP women's organizations argued that the government sought to strengthen traditional family union because such marriages might have the mutual consent of the parties.³² They also defended Turkey's eventual withdrawal from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (known as the Istanbul Convention) by arguing that it was hijacked to promote LGBTQ+ propaganda and that traditional family values in Turkey would provide the basis for a better national framework for the protection of women.

Impending Post-Autocratic Transition: The Role of Opposition and Civil Society

Does the public endorse this marriage of populism, Islam, and nationalism? Can we foresee a post-autocratic transition that would reverse and replace the dangerous mixture of nationalism, religion, and populism? There is no unified public opinion given the stark polarization in Turkey. Undoubtedly, the AKP has created a significant group of proud "Muslim Turks" by generating a sense of nostalgia and pride with references to a glorified "national history." The AKP claims a historical tradition — the rapport of nationalism and religion — and crowned it with populism. The AKP still skillfully uses the learned anxieties toward those who are non-Muslim/non-Turkish and the cultural pretexts of nation-building to create or amplify socio-political polarization. Ethnoreligious identity, imagery, symbols, and narratives marginalize and even criminalize groups and individuals who do not fit into the Muslim-Turkish ideal citizenry. Beyond the search for material benefits, the affective force of nationalist-religious appeals and missionary politics performed by the leader maintain the enthusiasm of AKP voters.

This template resonates well with the right-wing, nationalist, and conservative audience that constitutes the majority of the electorate. For staunch AKP supporters, nationalists, and Islamists, the ethnoreligious boundaries of the nation are natural and define one's *true* belonging to Turkey. They support the government not necessarily because of clientelist ties like the conservative business elite, who thrived under the AKP through corruption. Instead, they are motivated by an affective attachment to the ethnoreligious imagination of the nation modelled on an imagined past.

The marriage of religion, nationalism, and populism is, however, not without limits. A strong oppositional civic space is alive and kicking, opening up new channels of mobilization and alliances with the political opposition, despite violence and judicial harassment targeting civil society and activism. These alliances seek to overcome polarizing and marginalizing scripts of nationalism-religion-populism fusion. Perhaps more unexpectedly, counter-mobilizations and narratives have also arisen from self-identifying devout Muslims. One example is the mobilization of Muslim feminists. They challenge the AKP's

29. Bilge Yabancı, "Work for the Nation, Obey the State, Praise the Ummah: Turkey's Government-Oriented Youth Organizations in Cultivating a New Nation," *Ethnopolitics* 20, no. 4 (August 8, 2021): 467–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2019.1676536>.

30. Selin Çağatay, "Varieties of Anti-Gender Mobilizations. Is Turkey a Case?," January 9, 2019, *LSE Gender Studies* (blog), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/01/09/varieties-of-anti-gender-mobilizations-is-turkey-a-case/>.

31. Bilge Yabancı, "Compliance and Push-Back: Politicization of Turkey's Civil Society and Interest Groups under Autocratization," *APSA Newsletter* 19, no. 3 (2021): 16–22.

32. The Turkish Federation of Women's Associations notes that the total number of such consensual marriages that includes one minor party is merely 264. In contrast, according to the Ministry of Justice statistics, between 2010 and 2018, there were more than 150,000 court cases of sexual assault and harassment concerning minors. "Adalet Bakanlığı istismar verilerini açıklamadı [Ministry of Justice did not publicize abuse statistics]," 2019, *Evrensel*, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/389176/adalet-bakanligi-istismar-verilerini-aciklamadi?a=83133>.

instrumentalization of Islam (particularly the headscarf issue), male theologians' hegemony in interpreting Islamic texts, and the use of these interpretations to justify discrimination and violence against women.³³ Another example is the Muslim-left movement in Turkey that brought together leftist and (ex-)Islamist circles through several informal networks and solidarity organizations. They contest the AKP's use of Islamic and nationalist references such as fatalism and sacrifice to justify precarity and work accidents. More importantly, they seek to overcome Muslim-secular, left-right cleavages in the long term.³⁴

Civic and grassroots democratic mobilizations from various corners of society can entrench civic participation and active citizenship, and eventually bridge the old and new cleavages. They might be an effective antidote to the mobilizing power of populism-religion-nationalism and the obvious undemocratic repercussions by highlighting the importance of civic citizenship and human rights, and by inventing new localities and means of alternative democratic demands and channels.

The role of political opposition is also crucial. However, for political actors, the temptation of using the potent combination of ethno-religious appeals in Turkey is omnipresent as being historically embedded and mainstream. Except for the People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), no other major opposition party openly denounces or avoids the use of ethnoreligious references. The current opposition coalition that will run against the AKP-MHP alliance in the forthcoming elections includes — besides the main opposition party Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) with Kemalist roots — three small parties with Islamist/AKP backgrounds, one party that split from the far-right nationalist MHP, and one tiny right-wing party. Although nationalism and religion are not priorities for the opposition coalition at the current stage, their leaders have engaged with ethnoreligious ideas to different degrees and in different ways in the past. More worryingly, when it comes to disadvantaged groups and minorities, such as Kurds and refugees/migrants, they staunchly continue to do so. Only persistent and organized mobilization by civil society could make them denounce

parochialism and adopt a civic, egalitarian, and democratic conception of “the people” in an impending post-autocratic transition period. In this sense, the major opposition coalition has a lot to learn and emulate from grassroots citizens' initiatives and rights-based organizations.

In short, Turkey's impending re-democratization (or better democratization) depends on the extent to which civic and political opposition empower each other and incorporate previously excluded and subaltern groups. However, those familiar with the Turkish context can recognize the limits of this recipe. When the AKP came to power, it rallied millions on this exact promise of giving a voice to the previously voiceless masses, namely mostly conservative and religious groups but also other minorities. The AKP is a perfect cautionary tale that claims to represent previously excluded groups can evolve into an exclusionary populist political project. We have no a priori warrant to believe that any single political or civic actor can promise or “install” democracy. Democracy can and should acquire social significance through a collective effort based on: 1) delineating the limits of power and powerholders under a strong and democratic new constitution that protects freedoms and pluralistic participation; 2) promoting and respecting the rights of all groups, including minorities and non-citizens (migrants and refugees), without privileges granted to Turkish and Sunni-Muslim identity; and 3) building socio-economic justice by eliminating inequalities associated with the neoliberal obsession with economic growth and exploitation of labor and natural resources.

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33. Bilge Yabancı, “Acts of Compliance and Tactful Contention: The Polarized Terrain of Women's Organizations in Turkey under Authoritarian Pressure,” in *Lobbying the Autocrat*, ed. Max Grömping and Jessica Teets (Michigan University Press, 2022).

34. Bilge Yabancı, “Civil Society and Latent Mobilisation Under Authoritarian Neoliberal Governance,” in *Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Resistance in Turkey: Construction, Consolidation, and Contestation*, ed. İmren Borsuk et al. (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 211–34, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-4213-5_10.



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CAN ERDOĞAN SURVIVE WITHOUT THE KURDISH QUESTION?

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Introduction

The Justice and Development Party's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) steps to normalize Kurdish identity by introducing reform packages in its early years as it sought to join the European Union (EU) helped the party's leader, then Prime Minister and now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to win the hearts of the Kurds. Although the AKP's reforms were part of the EU accession process and were also designed to undermine the military's influence over politics, these steps indirectly ameliorated the status and conditions of Turkey's Kurdish population. For many Kurds, the AKP was more inclusive than other opposition parties because of its reformist energy. When the peace process began in January 2013, many Kurds believed that Prime Minister Erdoğan and the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan*, PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, would reach an agreement to end the violence. The PKK had started an armed struggle against the Turkish state in 1984, including carrying out terrorist attacks on civilians, to pursue a secessionist agenda on behalf of the Kurds. In the following years, the clashes between the military and the PKK increased sharply and turned into a bloody conflict. The confrontation between the PKK and the Turkish army left no room for a political solution, which is why the launch of the peace process in 2013 was regarded as such a revolutionary step by the Kurdish public.

Nevertheless, the negotiations ultimately failed to produce a sustainable peace between the parties. This was due to the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party's (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) decision to run in the elections on June 7, 2015 as single party instead of as independent candidates. The AKP was expecting to gain more seats in Kurdish districts with the help of the electoral system if the HDP nominated independents, and this would mean fewer HDP deputies in parliament and the continuation of the AKP's single-party government. According to Erdoğan, the Kurds had to ensure that the AKP would win the elections for the sake of the peace process. The HDP argued, by contrast, that the peace process would be successful only if the AKP viewed the HDP as a legitimate political actor and tolerated its political interests. At the end of the day, the HDP managed to cross the 10% threshold for electoral representation in parliament, winning 80 seats in the June 2015 elections. The HDP's success changed the composition of parliament and the AKP lost its majority for the first time since coming to power in 2002. Following the AKP's electoral setback, clashes between Turkish security forces and the PKK began again in the summer of 2015.

Since Erdoğan adopted a nationalist and militarist approach to reverse the results of the June 2015 elections, the Kurdish political movement has faced immense pressure. The line between the PKK and other non-violent political actors has blurred in the eyes of the elites in Ankara. The co-chairs of

the HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, and seven other deputies were arrested in November 2016 and jailed. The government has removed 48 HDP mayors and appointed trustees to govern their municipalities instead.¹ In addition, the HDP has been demonized in the media, which is mostly funded and controlled by the government, and isolated from other opposition parties.

The similarities between Erdoğan's attitude toward the Kurdish question, which refers to the political, cultural, and economic problems of the Kurds in Turkey, after the June 2015 elections and the Turkish military's security paradigm before the AKP came to power in 2002 have led some scholars to argue that Erdoğan has surrendered to the nationalist line on the issue. To them, resorting to arms to deal with the Kurdish question indicates how Erdoğan lost his reformist energy and started to cooperate with the secularist establishment to remain in power. Other scholars, however, argue that the launch of the Kurdish peace process and Erdoğan's decision to abandon it were part of the same strategy, and both moves were aimed at consolidating his power.

This paper aims to understand the motivation behind Erdoğan's approach to the Kurdish question within the framework of the above-mentioned debate among scholars, as this has two key potential implications for the upcoming elections, set to be held in June 2023. If Erdoğan has surrendered to the establishment, he is unlikely to deviate from his current policy of criminalizing the legitimate Kurdish opposition and preventing the other opposition parties from cooperating with the HDP. If he is motivated by political pragmatism, however, he may well take steps to attract Kurdish voters and attempt to divide the opposition front. Scholars of Turkish politics are familiar with Erdoğan's pragmatism over the past two decades; he is known for his policy making style rather than his ideology. Thus, it is unrealistic to assume that Erdoğan will maintain his ideational commitment to a nationalist line if it means losing the presidential elections. He might not make a radical U-turn as he has done in the past, but that does not mean that he will insist on using nationalist language and criminalizing the opposition. He is no doubt aware that such a strategy would lead Kurdish voters to support the opposition bloc. On the eve of the elections, he might

develop a new strategy based on eliminating the differences between the government and the opposition regarding the Kurdish question. This would require Erdoğan to cooperate with ultra-nationalist figures in the opposition and Öcalan, the jailed leader of the PKK, to poison the harmony between the opposition parties and Kurdish voters.

Has Erdoğan Surrendered to the Establishment?

The Kurdish question has been the most controversial issue facing Turkey since the inception of the republic in 1923, undermining the country's efforts at nation-building and state-making. The founding fathers of modern Turkey aimed to establish a nation-state similar to those in Europe. They attempted to create a nation based on equal citizenship and common identity under the tenets of secularism and sovereignty. Accordingly, all citizens within the borders of Turkey were identified as Turks and ethnic minorities were expected to adopt "Turkishness" as a common identity. Things did not go entirely to plan, however, and this created many complexities in the following years. The Kurdish question is regarded as the most prominent symbol of the failure of this approach by many intellectuals. They view it as the inevitable outcome of the problematic social contract signed in 1923 and explain the deficiencies of Turkish democracy by emphasizing the discontent of the Kurds. That is why they argue that Turkey has to solve its Kurdish question to become a consolidated democracy. In other words, they regard the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish problem as a precondition for democracy.

This emphasis on the Kurdish question has been closely linked to the role of the military in the political system. Before the AKP came to power, Turkish democracy was under the tutelage of the military and the judicial bodies that it backed. In line with the definition laid out by Shils, a group of elites has the right to restrict democratic competition and civil liberties for the sake of political stability, economic development, and social transformation. The elite believe that democracy might result in a corrupt, unstable, and economically backward regime in the absence of a mature political community. Therefore, the elite intervene to create the necessary social and economic conditions for democracy to prosper in the future.² This elite was embodied by the

1. "HDP left with six municipalities out of 65 it won in March 2019 elections," October 2, 2020, *Duvar*, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/politics/2020/10/02/hdp-left-with-six-municipalities-out-of-65-it-won-in-march-2019-elections>.

2. Edward Shils, 1960, "Political development in the new states," *Comparative studies in society and history*, 2(3), 265-292.



Photo above: A man flashes a V sign as members of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) take part in a protest against the detention of HDP members, in Istanbul, on September 25, 2020. Photo by YASIN AKGUL/AFP via Getty Images.

military in Turkey. With the help of the National Security Council (*Millî Güvenlik Kurulu*, MGK), the army had a monopoly on determining national security issues and dictated policies to the government. As Cizre argues, the MGK acted as a shadow cabinet because other issues, ranging from the economy to education, were easily linked to national security. This enabled army officers to have a say over issues that were supposed to be the responsibility of cabinet members.³

Since the military regarded itself as the guardian of the republic and its founding principles, it perceived the Kurdish question as a security issue that threatened the survival of the state and prevented political parties from developing alternative strategies to resolve the issue peacefully. Any political party that attempted to do so would jeopardize its survival because all parties had to develop national security policies that were compatible with the MGK's paradigm. Otherwise, they would be purged from the political system. For example, Kurdish parties,

including the People's Labor Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, HEP), the Freedom and Democracy Party (*Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi*, ÖZDEP), the Democracy Party (*Demokrasi Partisi*, DEP), the People's Democracy Party (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*, HADEP), the Democratic People's Party (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*, DEHAP), and the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP), which were identified as threats to the nation-state character of Turkey, were all banned.

There is no doubt that the military's engagement in politics and its attitude toward the Kurdish question contravened the spirit of democracy. Nevertheless, the MGK's approach was quite consistent and predictable because the army was immune from political pressure. It positioned itself as being above the political system and did not seek to gain popular support or approval. It should be noted that the army had right to identify threats to national security and determine how to eliminate them. This meant that the army's security understanding was the main criteria for the legitimacy of political parties: Those that confirmed the MGK's policies toward the Kurdish question were regarded as legitimate, while those that viewed the

3. Ümit Cizre, 2007, "Prime Movers, Specific Features and Challenges of Security Sector Reform in a 'Guardian State': The Case of Turkey," *Geneva Center for the DCAF*, Report No: 17.

Kurdish question as a political issue and suggested political solutions were deemed illegitimate and excluded from the political system. That is why politics was very competitive among the political parties confirming the MGK's national security paradigm before the AKP. No single party was allowed to consolidate its power and eliminate its rivals in an autocratic way, as the AKP has done since 2002.

The military's control over the MGK ended as a result of the democratization reforms carried out by the AKP government in its early years, in line with its effort to join the EU. After this, the AKP, as the civilian government, gained a monopoly on determining national security policy and this has led to a congruence between party and state in the absence of fundamental democratic institutions, such as an independent judiciary, a constitution that guarantees citizens' basic rights, and free media. The new MGK, which is dominated by the civilian members of the cabinet, has turned into an instrument in the hands of Erdoğan to criminalize the opposition using the language of national security. Moreover, Erdoğan has arbitrarily changed Turkey's national security priorities to suit his political needs. This explains how he could advocate both striking a deal with the PKK and fighting against it as a national security requirement in the same year without facing any legal sanction.

When Erdoğan made a U-turn on the Kurdish question after the June 2015 elections and adopted a nationalist and militarist discourse, the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, who is regarded as the champion of national security, saw an opportunity to pursue closer ties with the government. After the AKP lost its parliamentary majority largely thanks to the rise of the pro-Kurdish HDP, Erdoğan cultivated an alliance with the ultra-nationalist MHP. This alliance would help him to centralize power. The MHP, for its part, saw cooperation with the AKP as an opportunity to resume a heavy-handed military approach to the Kurdish question. Furthermore, Bahçeli advocated Turkey's transition to a presidential system on the basis of national security and declared his party's support for amending the constitution. Unlike HDP Co-chair Demirtaş, who did not allow Erdoğan to exploit the peace process to smooth the transition to a presidential system, Bahçeli has paved the way for Erdoğan to build a personal regime. Surprisingly, Bahçeli did not bargain with Erdoğan to gain seats in the cabinet or share power. Instead, he insistently argued that the very survival of Turkey depended on the transition to a presidential

system. In doing so, he has positioned himself as above the political fray, much as the MGK did before the AKP, acting like a higher authority that has made political sacrifices for the sake of national security. Bahçeli has been an indispensable component of Erdoğan's national security machine and has repeatedly justified his autocratic methods in the fight against the PKK, the HDP, and the Gülenists⁴ in the name of nationalism and safeguarding the state against "domestic and foreign enemies."

The coalition behind Erdoğan looks like a national security alliance, including nationalist elements of the bureaucracy and politics. In reality, it actually comprises a group of politicians, businessmen, journalists, bureaucrats, and mafia leaders who exploit national security concerns for personal gain. Beginning in the spring of 2021, a series of Youtube video confessions by mafia boss Sedat Peker have revealed how the national security discourse is used to intimidate the opposition and hide illegal business activities, including drug trafficking, bribery, and extortion, by politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, and organized crime figures.⁵ That is to say, there is a substantial difference between the traditional security paradigm backed by the military before the AKP came to power in 2002 and Erdoğan's national security state after the June 2015 national elections. The military undemocratically securitized the Kurdish question and restricted the space for policy-making by political parties. However, this was not to compete with them. The military was not a political player aspiring to attract votes or gain popularity. The primary driver of its Kurdish policy was to preserve the unitary nature of the Turkish state, making the generals' Kurdish policy predictable and straightforward. Erdoğan's Kurdish policy, by contrast, has changed depending on his domestic strategy to consolidate his rule. He views national security priorities through the prism of his domestic political concerns and uses the national security discourse to intimidate his rivals and silence civil society. This makes him the master of national security, not a prisoner of it.

4. The followers of the U.S.-based Islamic cult leader Fethullah Gülen.

5. Suzan Fraser, "Turkish mafia boss dishes dirt, becomes YouTube phenomenon," June 7, 2021, *AP News*, <https://apnews.com/article/sedat-peker-turkey-crime-boss-youtube-6868c1563a1152712bd2b2191445da95>.

Erdoğan's Dance with the Kurdish Question

During its early years, the AKP not only competed with other political parties but also challenged the national security regime backed by military. When the AKP initiated peace talks with the PKK in 2013, this was regarded as a revolutionary step by domestic and international academic, intellectual, and political circles. To them, this was a deviation from the traditional understanding of national security in Turkey, which regarded the Kurdish question as a security issue rather than a political problem. The AKP became the first government in the history of the republic to suggest that the Kurdish question could be solved through political means instead of military measures. The traditional security paradigm even targeted peaceful activities and civil society actors and organizations that rejected violence. In other words, in the eyes of the Turkish security elite, non-violent advocates of the Kurdish case were indistinguishable from terrorist groups. That is why recognizing the PKK's leader as a legitimate counterpart in the peace process was a revolutionary step and pointed to a deviation from the traditional line.

Nevertheless, the return to armed conflict after the June 2015 elections showed how fragile the process was and how peace was instrumentalized for political gains. During the peace process, the AKP asked the HDP not to run in the elections as single party and Erdoğan contended that, "If we want the presidential system, then we have to give 400 lawmakers. If we want the resolution process to continue, we have to give 400 lawmakers so that a strong party can come to power to realize it." Erdoğan's message to the Kurds was quite clear. He asked the HDP to nominate independent candidates and not to run an aggressive campaign so that the AKP could amend the constitution to transition to a presidential system with the support of 400 MPs. In other words, he conditioned the continuation of the peace process on the Kurds' approval for the presidential system.⁶

Such an instrumentalization of policy is not unique to Erdoğan. The elites in Ankara have exploited the Kurdish question to gain an upper hand against their rivals in the political arena throughout the country's history, starting from the early

years of the republic. For example, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha, banned the rival Progressive Republican Party, led by Kazım Karabekir, a hero of the Liberation War, and suspended the publication of newspapers in Istanbul after the Sheikh Said rebellion erupted in Kurdish villages in 1925. This paved the way for the establishment of single party rule in Turkey. Similarly, Nihat Erim, the prime minister of the cabinet of technocrats formed and backed by the military in 1971 after the "coup by memorandum," advocated the military's intervention, saying that Kurdish secessionists were cooperating with extreme right-wing and extreme left-wing groups before the military forced the elected government to resign. Cizre argues that the securitization of the Kurdish question helped the military to shadow civilian governments after the rise of PKK terrorism in the 1980s. In her eyes, the military prevented political parties from developing creative solutions to the Kurdish question and restricted their policy-making room for security reasons.⁷

However, such an instrumentalization strategy was not a political tactic and it was fully compatible with the founding principles of the republic until Erdoğan reversed this. Thus, the state's policy toward the Kurds did not fluctuate under the military's mandate. By contrast, the AKP initially dealt with the Kurdish question through a discourse based on peace and democracy, helping it to eliminate its domestic rivals in the name of such values. For example, those involved in the 2013 Gezi Park protests were labeled as privileged, secular white Turks who were unhappy with the peace talks between the government and the Kurds ongoing at the time. Similarly, the AKP elite defined the graft probe conducted by Gülenist prosecutors in December 2013 as an effort to sabotage the peace process.⁸ Erdoğan labelled critics of the peace process bloodthirsty vampires and left no room for public debate.⁹

Erdoğan's pragmatism was revealed when his party lost its majority in parliament in the June 2015 elections. During the

7. Ümit Cizre, 2009, "The emergence of the government's perspective on the Kurdish issue," *Insight Turkey*, 1-12.

8. In December 2013, pro-Gülen police chiefs and public prosecutors started to investigate how ministers in the AKP cabinet were bribed by an Iranian businessman in return for helping to break sanctions on Iran. According to the indictment, the Turkish banking system was used to organize illegal flows of money. The AKP government, however, deemed the investigation as an attempt to subvert the government by members of the Gülenist cult.

9. "Erdoğan: Gençlerin Kanından Beslenen Vampirler Rahatsız Oldu [Vampires sucking the blood of the Youth are Disturbed]," March 27, 2014, *Yeni Akit*, <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/erdogan-genclerin-kanindan-beslenen-vampirler-rahatsiz-oldu-14080.html>.

6. Burak Bilgehan Özpek, 2019, "The State's Changing Role Regarding the Kurdish Question of Turkey: From Consistent Tutelage to Volatile Securitization," *Alternatives*, 44(1), 35-49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375419854599>.



Photo above: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (R) meets Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli (L) at the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara on November 19, 2019. Photo by Murat Kula/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

peace process, critics of his policy were labeled as enemies of democracy, while after the election he began to call critics of his militaristic strategy enemies of the state. This change in approach follows a consistent pattern, which is the needs dictated by Erdoğan's political survival. That is to say, he seems to have no ideational commitment to either peace and democracy or war and national security.

Possibilities and Limitations

Erdoğan's pragmatism vis-à-vis the Kurdish question was on full display on the eve of the 2019 Istanbul municipal elections. Osman Öcalan, the brother of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, appeared on the state-run TV channel TRT Şeş, which broadcasts in Kurdish. He called on Kurdish voters not to vote for opposition mayoral candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu and to instead boycott the elections.¹⁰ An academic from Munzur University, Ali Kemal Özcan, was subsequently allowed to visit

Abdullah Öcalan and received a letter from him. Özcan shared the letter, which called on HDP voters to remain neutral in the elections, with members of the press.¹¹ Even MHP leader Bahçeli endorsed the letter and advised HDP voters to listen to Öcalan instead of HDP Co-chair Demirtaş, who supported the opposition candidate İmamoğlu.

This attempt points to an obvious friction between Öcalan and Demirtaş in the Kurdish movement. The PKK's terrorist attacks and declaration of self-rule in southeastern Turkey after the end of the peace process in June 2015 triggered a resumption of conflict after the June 2015 elections. The PKK's strategy undermined the HDP's political legitimacy and narrowed its policy-making room. The clashes ended up putting more power in the hands of Erdoğan and the PKK. Erdoğan could initiate a rally around the flag and attract nationalist voters in the November 1, 2015 snap elections, while the PKK consolidated its monopoly over the Kurdish question. Equating the Kurdish question with PKK terrorism helped the AKP government to win

10. Pinar Tremblay, "All is fair to sustain Erdogan's reign," July 9, 2019, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/07/turkey-why-did-state-television-interview-a-wanted-man.html>.

11. Amberin Zaman, "Kurdish academic who met with jailed PKK leader speaks out," September 20, 2019, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/09/ocalan-turkey-pkk-kurdish-peace-process-ozcan.html>.

the snap elections, regain its majority in parliament, suppress civilian actors, undermine the HDP's legitimacy, and weaken the opposition front by isolating the HDP from other opposition parties. Such an equation confirms that the PKK is the only representative of the Kurdish question.

The government prefers to proceed with Öcalan as an interlocutor in the peace process because he has a pragmatic personality and his imprisonment makes him more likely to negotiate on Erdoğan's terms. He can ignore Erdoğan's autocracy, absence of rule of law, and human rights violations as long as he is recognized as the representative of the Kurds and gets some degree of autonomy. Demirtaş, by contrast, aims to transform the HDP from an ethnic party into a populist-left one that attracts all the minority groups and deprived elements within Turkish society, such as Alevis, Armenians, the LGBT community, students, and the working class. His opposition to Erdoğan's centralization of power played a key role in the party's ability to expand its base to non-Kurdish, pro-democracy segments of society and thus its historic victory in the June 2015 elections. By defining the Kurdish question as a problem of a democratic system, Demirtaş challenged the liberal argument that the Kurdish problem has to be resolved for Turkey to be a full-fledged democracy. Instead, Demirtaş views Turkey's democratization as a pre-condition for the resolution of the Kurdish question. That is why he strives for more democracy before negotiating for Kurdish cultural and political rights.

The obvious friction between Öcalan and Demirtaş provides both possibilities and limitations for Erdoğan. He could negotiate with Öcalan behind closed doors, divide the Kurdish movement, and prevent some Kurdish voters from supporting the opposition candidate in the 2023 general elections. Some Kurds, especially those living in southeastern Turkey, might boycott the elections if Öcalan were to once again call for them to do so. But it is not possible for Öcalan to attract all Kurdish voters. Kurds living in major cities are experiencing harsher economic conditions than those in rural areas, and the young Kurdish generations are more secular and liberal than the previous ones. These Kurdish circles could be attracted by the political line of Demirtaş and lend support to the opposition candidate in the upcoming elections. In this scenario, Erdoğan would likely be able to divide the Kurdish vote and undermine the opposition front.

However, this friction has also limitations. Given the current economic situation, Öcalan's possible call to boycott the elections might have limited influence because Kurds are the segment of society hardest hit by the economic crisis. Furthermore, Erdoğan's coalition includes nationalist and militarist hardliners such as MHP leader Bahçeli, Minister of Interior Süleyman Soylu, ultra-nationalist Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*, VP) leader Doğu Perinçek, and some well-known remnants from the deep state. Thus, Öcalan's call would not offer cause for optimism on either economic or political grounds and would merely serve as a test of loyalty to his leadership among the Kurds.

Nevertheless, Demirtaş might also lose credit in the eye of Kurdish voters if the Supreme Court decides to close the HDP and the other opposition parties remain silent. Although he is in jail, Demirtaş is still able to influence the political environment through his letters and articles. In these pieces, he strongly points out the need for a united opposition front and calls on Kurdish voters to remain in solidarity with the other opposition parties against Erdoğan. The blank check given by Demirtaş to other opposition parties might backfire if the parties, and especially the staunchly nationalist Good Party (*İyi Parti*, İYİ), endorse the Supreme Court's decision. Under this scenario, Erdoğan would need to rely on three political segments: pro-Öcalan ethnic Kurdish nationalists, ultra-nationalists led by Ümit Özdağ's Victory Party (*Zafer Partisi*, ZP), and ultra-Kemalists led by Muharrem İnce's Homeland Party (*Memleket Partisi*, MP). Ultra-nationalists and ultra-Kemalists are expected to support the Supreme Court's decision to close the HDP and accuse the opposition parties of betraying nationalist and Kemalist voters if they do the opposite. Such criticisms from marginal but effective parties might lead the CHP and İYİ to refrain from showing solidarity with the HDP, and this inaction could prepare the ground for Öcalan to call for a boycott.

Given the turmoil within the HDP and Erdoğan's potential strategic calculations, opposition parties are likely to maintain a moderate distance from the HDP. This makes sense as the credit they provide could be manipulated by pro-Öcalan figures in the HDP to increase Öcalan's bargaining power against Erdoğan, enabling the PKK leader to convert the opposition parties' support into more gains from Erdoğan. This has happened before: In the run-up to the 2019 local elections, the AKP government knocked on Öcalan's door given the HDP's

support for the opposition candidate, prompting Öcalan to write a letter calling on Kurdish voters not to back him. This means that the more cooperation there is between the HDP and other opposition parties, the more the AKP government needs Öcalan.

Moving forward, the other opposition parties should maintain a moderate, measured distance from the HDP and avoid using similar language to the government, which regards all Kurdish politicians, rights advocates, and intellectuals as extensions of the PKK. If they adopt the same approach as the government, they might lose Demirtaş's support altogether, which could influence many HDP voters. For the opposition parties to avert any potential pragmatic moves by Erdoğan in the run-up to the elections, they need to emphasize the distinction between Demirtaş and Öcalan, avoid using nationalist rhetoric, and criticize Demirtaş's imprisonment on the basis of the principle of the independence of the judiciary. Such a strategy could preserve the strength and unity of the opposition bloc and open a new chapter for efforts to address the Kurdish question in the post-Erdoğan era.

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THE TURKISH ECONOMY UNDER THE PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM

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Introduction

Over the past decade, Turkey has been on a steadily downward trajectory both economically and politically. The deterioration in its macroeconomic indicators started in 2011, became visible in 2013, led to apparent authoritarianism in 2016, turned into an economic crisis in March 2018, and became a full-blown depression in March 2020, as the pandemic hit economies around the world. Throughout this long period of turmoil the government has pursued a range of different economic policies, most of which were inconsistent with one another, and the frequent changes have proven a challenge for companies and investors alike. However, all of the government's policies have two key common traits: They aim to promote economic activity and maintain the financial soundness of the banking system.

The current presidential system, claimed to be unique to Turkey, places an enormous amount of power in the hands of the president without any effective checks and balances. The system was approved by a narrow majority in a referendum in April 2017 and was officially implemented starting in July 2018. However, when tracing the development of the system, a better starting point is July 2016, when, after the failed coup attempt on July 15, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began to enact sweeping decrees without considering their constitutional validity.

This paper begins by laying out the current state of the Turkish economy. To highlight the shifts in economic policy over time, it examines the earlier periods of Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) rule, before exploring the transition to the presidential system and examining the system's economic properties. The paper concludes with a discussion of the economic outlook for Turkey and potential solutions to the current crisis, as well as the opposition's role and ability to implement them, with an eye to the upcoming elections scheduled for June 2023.

This paper argues that the presidential system under Erdoğan has had a disastrous impact on Turkey's economic institutions and their decision making. The lack of consistency, continuous uncertainty, weak communication, and repeated mistakes have resulted in the loss of confidence by all economic actors — domestic and foreign, individuals and companies alike. Prosperity has been lost and institutionalism eroded. Without a comprehensive overhaul of the system and its administrators, there is no chance of a sustainable recovery for the Turkish economy. Public approval, business support, and suitable international conditions are also essential as well.

The Current State of the Turkish Economy

Turkey's current economic situation is dire. The country is heavily indebted to international investors — to the tune of \$451 billion, according to the latest data.¹ The short-term external national debt is \$185.3 billion.² Due to high energy and commodity prices, exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, Turkey has a persistent current account deficit, although depreciation of the local currency has not reduced this. This means the higher cost of imported goods has not curbed demand sufficiently and the lower cost of the Turkish labor force has not provided domestic industry with enough of a competitive advantage to improve the current account deficit.

Mega-projects built through public-private partnerships (PPPs) have created additional conditional liabilities estimated at around \$160 billion. The net official reserves held by the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey (CBRT) when swap agreements are removed declined to \$-52.3 billion in 2022, down sharply from \$71.1 billion in 2011.³ The Treasury and the CBRT have also introduced a costly mechanism to provide foreign exchange (FX) protection and guarantees for Turkish lira (TL) deposit account holders; as of late September 2022, FX-protected deposits totaled around \$75.34 billion.⁴

Moreover, GDP calculations were significantly revised upward in both 2008 and 2016 and the new series are not considered reliable. Therefore, the ratio of the hard currency-denominated liabilities of the central government, central bank, and non-financial real sector to GDP figures may be underestimated. This means that when it comes to external borrowing, the Turkish economy is classified as only slightly better off than Sri Lanka and Lebanon, falling

into the same group as Egypt and Pakistan. The credit rating for Turkey's long-term FX-denominated sovereign debt is B3 according to Moody's, which is the lowest it has been in the last 30 years, when the first credit assessment started.⁵ The major problem on the horizon for foreign states and investors will be Turkey's ability to redeem its external debt on time without running into problems.

Turkey's potential GDP growth rate is about 3-3.5%, while its population growth rate is 1-1.5%. Bad infrastructure investment decisions, the poor quality of the education system, inefficient use of the government budget and state bank credits, and low confidence in the future limit the country's growth potential in the long run. Turkey is in an inflationary spiral: The current official inflation rate is 83.45%, the highest level in 24 years, and it could hit triple digits if there is a new currency shock.⁶ The natural unemployment level is 10% and this exceeds 20% when discouraged workers are included. Two-thirds of employees earn around the minimum wage, equivalent to about \$300 per month. Poverty is broad and given limited prospects, the youth population is determined to emigrate, particularly the best educated. To sum up the situation, sustainable growth and prosperity will be difficult to achieve, society is losing optimism about the future, and this has triggered a rush of young people looking to move to developed countries. International policymakers should take into account the possibility that Turkey will remain socially unstable throughout the 2020s.

From Crisis to Recovery and Back Again: Economic Developments from 2001-16

The AKP came to power in 2002 in the aftermath of one of the most economically difficult periods in modern Turkish history. February 2001 was the nadir of the deepest depression the country has experienced since it opened up its economy under President Turgut Özal in the 1980s. The central government ran into difficulties with fresh borrowing and the credibility of the banking system evaporated. The total collapse of the financial system and government finance was prevented by an International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreement and stability

5. Trading Economics, Turkey - Credit Rating, Accessed September 14, 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/rating>

6. Turkish Statistical Institute, Consumer Price Index, Accessed October 10, 2022, <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Tuketici-Fiyat-Endeksi-Eylul-2022-45798>

1. Ministry of Treasury and Finance, External Debt Statistics, Accessed September 14, 2022, <https://en.hmb.gov.tr/public-finance>

2. Central Bank of Republic of Turkey, Short Term External Debt Statistics, Accessed September 14, 2022, <https://www.tcmb.gov.tr/wps/wcm/connect/EN/TCMB+EN/Main+Menu/Statistics/Balance+of+Payments+and+Related+Statistics/Short+Term+External+Debt+Statistics/>

3. Central Bank of Republic of Turkey, International Reserves and Foreign Currency Liquidity, Accessed September 14, 2022, <https://www.tcmb.gov.tr/wps/wcm/connect/en/tcmb+en/main+menu/statistics/balance+of+payments+and+related+statistics/international+reserves+and+foreign+currency+liquidity>

4. Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency, Weekly Banking Sector Data, Accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.bddk.org.tr/BultenHaftalik/en>



Photo above: An electronic board displays exchange rates information at a currency exchange bureau in the Eminönü district of Istanbul on September 20, 2022. Photo by Erhan Demirtas/Bloomberg via Getty Images.

program favoring free markets. Financial stability was achieved and a new period of growth began after global worries over the dotcom bubble and the impact of the 9/11 attacks passed. After years of coalition governments, one-party rule under the AKP starting in 2002 was one of the main pillars of stability in this period. However, the IMF program lacked a development pillar and the economic model was highly sensitive to portfolio inflows, meaning that any sudden outflow could be a critical threat to economic activity and financial stability.

Throughout the first period of AKP rule between 2002 and 2007, the government had a good record of growth figures and supported its fiscal targets by substantial use of privatization revenue from the sale of state-owned enterprises. However, strong demand among households for imported goods and the need by private manufacturers for imported intermediate goods led to a large trade deficit and external debt soared. As a result, the Turkish economy became increasingly dependent on the risk appetite of international investors. In 2007, Turkey was presented with a difficult test of its economic stability when the sub-prime mortgage crisis emerged in the U.S., and

output contracted sharply the following year. Though the need for external finance increased, the IMF stand-by agreement was not extended.

One unexpected outcome of the global financial crisis was an unprecedentedly large monetary expansion that prompted hard currency funds to invest in risky assets, including emerging markets more broadly and TL-denominated assets more specifically. This enabled Turkey to finance its massive current account deficit, the third largest after the U.S. and the U.K. in 2011, without receiving any assistance from the IMF. The country's dependence on hot money became clear, however, and it soon began to be referred to as one of the "fragile five" emerging markets, along with India, Indonesia, Brazil, and South Africa. When Ben Bernanke, then the governor of the U.S. Federal Reserve, announced the beginning of monetary contraction in May 2013 after years of cheap money, investors woke up from the temporary lull provided by portfolio inflows. This reduced their appetite for high-yield emerging markets assets, especially Turkish ones, given concerns over the extent of the country's external financing needs and reliance on short-term funding.

Around the same time, Turkey's political stability was severely hit by the Gezi Park protests and the split between the AKP and the Gülenist movement, the followers of the U.S.-based Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen, identified as a terrorist in Turkey. Amid the growing domestic turmoil, the major focus for the Erdoğan government became surviving by winning elections. The main economic tools employed in this effort were the use of state banks to boost aggregate demand and the financing of mega-projects through the public budget to further support growth. The PPP mechanism was widely used to finance these projects, as the resulting financial burden was not accounted for as a direct government liability, leading to an overestimation of the government's fiscal strength. These policies reduced the efficiency of the growth rate, but they were good enough to save the government's approval rating in the March 2014 local elections and win the snap parliamentary elections in November 2015.

The year 2016 was the main breaking point, and a state of emergency was proclaimed in July 2016 after the failed coup attempt. This time President Erdoğan officially and his son-in-law Berat Albayrak covertly were able to intervene in both setting macroeconomic policy and deciding on appointments to key posts. This put the institutional strength of macroeconomic administration in danger. Despite accommodative monetary and fiscal policies, the Turkish economy was about to enter a recession in late 2017. A credit guarantee fund was the key tool used to restart economic growth; not only state banks but also private ones became eager to lend more as the government promised to cover defaults, up to an extent. This created a sharp increase in credit growth — and thus in economic activity — and enabled the approaching economic crisis to be postponed.

In March 2018 some of Turkey's main business conglomerates were no longer able to pay back their hard currency debts and chose to apply for restructuring. This triggered an avalanche and the depreciation of the TL became inevitable. The government realized that this shock was stronger than the prior ones and would not be easy to overcome, and therefore snap elections were called. Erdoğan's credibility was strong enough to deny the approaching full-fledged currency crisis and assert himself as a savior. The June 2018 elections were a big victory for Erdoğan, his party, and its far-right ally, the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP). Nonetheless, Turkey was diving deeper and deeper into

economic crisis and the government was still underestimating its destructive potential.

General Economic Properties of the Presidential System

The defining characteristic of Turkey's new presidential system is one-man rule, meaning critical decisions on economic matters, as in many other areas, are made by the president and advisers in his inner circle. Convincing Erdoğan or his son and son-in-law is enough to change the decision of the state bureaucracy and thus the media financed by them. As a result, policies can easily be changed without any official announcement or approval from the public. Inconsistencies crop up frequently and sharp policy shifts are not broadcast in advance.

The president does not have to obey bureaucratic term limits when making new appointments, even when it comes to institutions with autonomy. Since the beginning of the economic crisis in March 2018, four different figures have served as governor of the central bank.⁷ There is no long-term strategy, even though frequent references to far-off targets like 2053 or 2071, well into the next generation, give that appearance. The government has fallen far short of reaching targets for 2023, announced in 2018, such as the promise of increasing GDP to \$2 trillion; in reality, as of 2021, GDP was just \$815 billion.⁸ Instead of planning for the long term, the government's main goal is much more immediate: keeping the economy afloat for the next elections.

Foreign policy maneuvers or compromises are one potential means of obtaining additional external funding to this end, as Ankara's recent outreach to the Gulf, and especially to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has illustrated. Relations with Russia, at a time when the Western world has cut ties, are also pragmatic and aimed at obtaining financial support in terms of cheap gas and oil or suitable payment schemes. Foreign trade is a priority and bilateral problems cannot override it; for example, Turkey

7. "Revolving Door: Turkey's Last Four Central Bank Chiefs," October 8, 2021, *Reuters*, Accessed September 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/revolving-door-turkeys-last-four-central-bank-chiefs-2021-10-08/>

8. Sibel Kurtoglu, Etem Geylan, and Kenan Irtak, "Turkey aims to double current growth by 2023: Erdogan," April 21, 2018, *Anadolu Agency*, Accessed September 14, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkey-aims-to-double-current-growth-by-2023-erdogan/1124659>

has maintained strong trade relations with Israel despite numerous political clashes.

The government is business-friendly, although the fluctuations caused by frequent policy changes can undermine the benefits of this approach or even destroy them altogether. The use of unconventional policy tools is the new normal and there are attempts to address their side effects through temporary measures. Public expenditures on PPPs, salary increases for minimum wage earners, social transfers to the poorest households, state-owned bank credit growth, and a low central bank policy rate are the main mechanisms used. These will be implemented consistently to support the real sector until there is a shock in the financial markets.

An external balance-of-payments crisis or an inability to redeem external debt or pay for imported goods will eventually be a red line to stop these policies. The other red line is the soundness of the banking system. However, these rules can be broken unconsciously as clashes with international financial funds and foreign powers are common. There is no public or business confidence in the administration of the economy, nor in the reliability of the data released by the government. Erdoğan's rule under the presidential system looks like a struggle to survive in challenging international and domestic economic conditions. Long-term development or material economic success is not the goal; instead, the aim is to maintain the electorate's support until the next election through media manipulation aimed at hiding the real reasons for the country's worsening economic crisis. Erdoğan is quite pragmatic and his followers can easily adapt to his radical policy shifts. However, his insistence on a low interest rate policy is not flexible — he has stuck to his unorthodox views on the matter, despite the substantial economic costs⁹ — even though soaring global inflation and the looming risk of recession have created headwinds to the growth trajectory of developing countries. As a result, a new financial shock will inevitably occur and reveal the real economic consequences of his rule under the presidential system. For the moment, however, those consequences are still largely unknown and unfelt. The critical question is whether the coming financial shock will occur before or after the next elections.

9. Onur Ant and Lynn Thomasson, "How Erdogan's Unorthodox Views Rattle Turkish Markets," November 25, 2021, *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/how-erdogans-unorthodox-views-rattle-turkish-markets/2021/11/23/a6da3826-4ce0-11ec-a7b8-9ed28bf23929_story.html.

Economic Developments Since 2018

Officially, the first day of the presidential system was on July 9, 2018 when Erdoğan unveiled his 16-minister cabinet.¹⁰

Erdoğan's son-in-law Albayrak was appointed as the minister of Treasury and finance in July 2018. He was the first minister to take control of both public finance and the Treasury since 1980. He was also influential in making appointments for the central bank and the banking and capital markets supervisory bodies. In short order, he became the country's most powerful minister and took on responsibility for managing its economic affairs, despite his limited experience. There was widespread apprehension about this given his vocal support for interventionism as a columnist at a government-aligned newspaper and his perceived overconfidence in his abilities. Albayrak's direct control of the economy was a major shift from previous periods of AKP rule.

His first challenge was to address the currency crisis that started shortly after his appointment. Even though the CBRT was not under his direct control, he ordered it not to hike interest rates by using President Erdoğan's authority. The fragility of the Turkish economy was clear and U.S. President Donald Trump wanted to use this to his advantage as he sought to extradite Andrew Brunson, an American pastor held in Turkish prison on charges of aiding terrorism. President Erdoğan resisted and in return President Trump openly threatened to ruin the Turkish economy.¹¹ This led to a sharp rise in volatility in the Turkish financial markets, which reached levels seen during the global financial crisis, and depreciation in the TL topped 50%. These developments forced Erdoğan and Albayrak to retreat. The CBRT made a dramatic policy rate hike in September 2018 and a Turkish court released Brunson in October 2018.¹² This helped to calm the financial markets, but it was too late to avoid a recession due to the broader loss of purchasing power among the population.

10. "Turkish President Erdogan Unveils 16-Minister Cabinet," July 9, 2018, *Anadolu Agency*, Accessed September 14, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/turkish-president-erdogan-unveils-16-minister-cabinet/1199348>

11. Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, "Trump Doesn't Want to Be 'Responsible for Destroying the Turkish Economy.' Good Grief," October 16, 2019, *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/16/trump-doesnt-want-be-responsible-destroying-turkish-economy-good-grief/>.

12. Natasha Turak, "Lira Jumps After Turkish Central Bank Hikes Rates in a Bid to Save Tumbling Currency," September 13, 2018, *CNBC*, Accessed September 14, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/09/13/lira-jumps-as-turkish-central-bank-hikes-rates-to-24-percent.html>



Photo above: Berat Albayrak, Turkey's Treasury and finance minister, center, applauds following a news conference in Istanbul on October 9, 2018. Photo by Kostas Tsironis/Bloomberg via Getty Images.

As a result, Albayrak lost the full support of investors and the public at the very beginning of his term. This pushed him to use unconventional monetary policy tools before the politically significant local elections in March 2019. He indirectly gained control of the CBRT's international reserves through a protocol, in violation of the laws governing the central bank. He then ordered that these foreign exchange reserves be sold to the financial markets covertly via state banks. This unprecedented move helped to achieve temporary financial stability at the cost of depleting Turkey's foreign exchange reserves — reserves that would likely be needed in a more important situation down the line. Despite the government's loss of a number of key municipalities in the local elections,¹³ Albayrak and his team continued to use the same mechanism. State banks were also forced to expand credit and new mega-projects were tendered. Private and foreign banks faced pressure to pursue credit growth, first through verbal warnings and then by regulatory actions. By exceeding his power and

using regulatory and supervisory repression against market participants, Albayrak largely gained control over both the CBRT's policy interest rate and the Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency's banking regulations.

The external economic environment was about to get much worse, however, as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 created a sudden and harsh financial shock around the world. Since Turkey was structurally in need of external financing, its remaining FX reserves began to be used to offset the massive exodus of capital. Investors were in a panic and had no confidence in Albayrak's economic management. Net FX and gold reserves declined to \$-48 billion when swap agreements were omitted. There was one more round of currency depreciation, as the CBRT failed to raise rates to calm investors. This part of the saga ended with a big surprise: First the CBRT governor and then Minister Albayrak were sacked.

Both posts were filled by pro-market names, Naci Ağbal and Lütü Elvan, respectively, who were members of former governments. Conventional monetary policies were

13. Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, "A New Political Landscape Out of Turkey's Municipal Elections," April 2, 2019, *The German Marshall Fund*, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/new-political-landscape-out-turkeys-municipal-elections>.

implemented immediately and markets reacted positively. President Erdoğan was pragmatic enough to make such a sudden change, although he remained fixated on cutting interest rates. Therefore, the period of market optimism did not last long and ended abruptly when CBRT Governor Ağbal was sacked without any convincing explanation. In a single but extremely volatile trading week, foreign investors lost up to 30% in the markets. This was the moment when they grasped that the Erdoğan administration could not provide sustainable stability. Even when global markets and international politics are calm, Turkish domestic politics or simply Erdoğan's erratic decisions can lead to unnecessary shocks, creating waves that can even affect the soundness of the global financial system.

Ağbal's replacement as CBRT governor, Şahap Kavcıoğlu, favored negative real interest rates, which means a lower policy interest rate compared to the realized and expected inflation rate. This generated the worst market volatility in the last 40 years over two months and the dollar/lira exchange rate doubled in just a few weeks' time. The minister of Treasury and finance was also sacked and Nureddin Nebati, a political scientist, businessman, and AKP member, was appointed to replace him. He had previously served as Albayrak's deputy and had no background in economics as an academic, market professional, or state bureaucrat. His appointment ushered in the second round of unconventional policies.

The depreciation of the lira stopped suddenly and the local currency began to gain value after President Erdoğan announced the introduction of a new mechanism for FX-protected deposits in late December 2021. The major aim of this mechanism is to provide a guarantee to bank depositors who keep their savings in TL in case of further depreciation of the local currency, with the Turkish Treasury or CBRT paying the excess between the change in the exchange rate and the yield. Furthermore, the sale of FX reserves started to support the appreciation of the lira as well. Once again market stability was maintained; however, it came at an extremely high cost, as the state undertook efforts to shore up the stability of the currency by using budget revenues. Moreover, this late stability did not create conditions that were good enough to support more real sector investments. Despite much lower interest rates compared to the inflation rate, investment confidence vanished, discouraging efforts to increase manufacturing output. To address this, state banks were once again called upon and renewed lending spurred economic activity. The most

adverse effect of these policies was the start of an inflationary spiral and the loss of confidence in the CBRT's will and ability to fight inflation.

External factors also played an important role too, as the beginning of the war in Ukraine in late February 2022 raised the cost of imports, causing energy and commodity prices to soar. While harsh depreciation did not promote exports as expected, the import bill rose and the external surplus target became impossible to achieve. The complete lack of confidence in the management of the economy resulted in looming expectations of inflation and prompted people to keep their savings in hard currencies. Tourism revenues did not offset the capital outflow and Turkey's external debt position became extremely fragile.

Restricting capital mobility became compulsory as the use of foreign exchange and capital outflows increased. Exporters are now forced to sell 40% of their net FX incomes to the CBRT. Their access to cheap TL-denominated rediscount loans is conditioned on not buying any foreign exchange. Standard bank loans, which are relatively cheaper owing to the low interest rate policy, are provided to large corporations if their foreign exchange assets are less than 10% of annual sales and total assets.¹⁴ Banks are pressured to convince their clients to use FX-protected deposits through the imposition of penalties if they have a high ratio of FX deposits. Interest rates for commercial loans are effectively limited to 30%. Required reserves for foreign exchange saving accounts have been increased so as to transfer most of the FX liquidity to the CBRT, while the same regulation is eased for TL deposits. State-owned enterprises are banned from accessing the market for FX purchases; instead, they are directed to knock on the door of the CBRT when they need to pay their import bills. All of these strict regulations have slowed down the dollarization of savings and the exodus of capital. However, there are growing rumors about the potential imposition of harsher capital controls, and both banking institutions and real sector enterprises are tired of adjusting their financial policies. The real sector's demand for loans to finance new investments is declining and private banks' appetite for new lending is weak. Credit conditions are getting tighter, and for this reason economic activity is cooling off.

14. Laura Pitel, "Turkish Bank Regulator Limits Lira Loans for Firms Holding Foreign Exchange," *Financial Times*, June 24, 2022, Accessed September, 14, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/3af3d25a-a6bf-427f-bfa5-7dc537b6eb8a>

Outlook for the Turkish Economy

The current stability in the Turkish economy relies on FX-protected deposits and FX sales by state banks. Both instruments are unsustainable and have clear weaknesses in the form of strong capital outflows and a growing current account deficit. External finance channels are still open but costs are high and maturities are short. The tendency to keep savings under the pillow is an ongoing trend, albeit at a slower pace. The war in Ukraine and its global inflationary consequences are also working against Turkey's economic stability. A new financial shock is likely, and the next one will be more damaging than its predecessors. The soundness of banking institutions and public finance could be at risk this time.

However, the government still has additional tools at its disposal, such as changes in foreign policy, achieved with the UAE and in progress with Saudi Arabia, to obtain funding to support external deficits. When there are no more tools left, the natural outcome will be either policy normalization or stricter capital controls. The first one will require the government to admit it made a major mistake, while the second one will come as a shock to foreign and domestic investors. The AKP's economic policies can be changed swiftly due to Erdoğan's notorious pragmatism; therefore, it is difficult to say where this story will end. The fact is under the current government and economic system, it is impossible to have financial stability, job-creating growth, reductions in inflation, and steady domestic and foreign policies at the same time.

Turkey's balance-of-payment crises in 1958 and 1978 ended with military interventions in 1960 and 1980, respectively. The last major crisis, in 2001, resulted in the collapse of the three parties in the coalition and the two parties in the opposition. There is only one case in Turkey's multi-party political history of the ruling party remaining in power after years of economic depression; it was after just World War II in 1946 and the democratic quality of the elections in question was dubious. A change in the government is thus likely if free and fair elections are held. Alternative scenarios involving social unrest and a financial crash should also be considered, however.

Solutions to the Current Economic Depression

Whoever is in government, their first task should be to preserve financial stability and control rising inflation. Without addressing these two issues, there will be no opportunity to create strong growth and improve economic well-being. Accommodative fiscal policy is also a must, as mass poverty and financially weak small businesses cannot be ignored either. For an economy like Turkey's that is heavily indebted in terms of hard currency, achieving this balance will be a very challenging task indeed. Realizing medium-term development targets will require addressing issues beyond the economy, such as education and foreign policy. IMF funds are an option for the opposition, but not for the Erdoğan government because of his unwillingness and the veto of the United States as part of the sanctions imposed under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). International investors and markets will watch not only the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2023, but also the local elections in March 2024 to be convinced that a new and more stable era is beginning.

If the opposition parties win in the 2023 elections, short-term policy normalization and confidence-building will be a relatively easy task as they already have a consensus on this. Their alliance will not have any difficulty realizing these short-term targets. Their harmony and unity will still be questioned and their potential success in the 2024 local elections will be a critical test of their cohesion and policy continuity. However, achieving medium-term targets will be significantly more difficult for the opposition since they will be handed a very financially weak state budget and a startling foreign debt. In addition, after more than four years of economic depression, society will have great expectations on a variety of fronts, which will be impossible to achieve at the same time. Though the economic policies of the opposition parties do not differ dramatically in the short run, their approach to policies regarding lending by state banks and provision of welfare could cause an intense debate. Thus, a new government should be viewed as a temporary truce instead of a permanent peace when it comes to debates over Turkey's economic policies.

The current government does not want to implement policy normalization, and even if it were to do so, it would likely

have only a limited impact due to the lack of confidence in its policy continuity. Its vision does not include solutions to the country's medium-term economic problems and instead merely puts more pressure on them. In the event that Erdoğan wins in next elections, the government is likely to introduce tighter capital controls for foreign currency deposit accounts or look to build new financial ties by making compromises in the foreign policy arena. The government will not have enough room to implement structural reforms, thus it will likely try to eliminate the symptoms of the problem by harshly restricting free markets. Cheap labor and loans will be the main tools used to keep the economy working and public pressure will likely be ramped up to make the people obey.

Whoever emerges victorious in 2023, whether it is the current government or the opposition alliance, they will have to struggle for a better economy amid tough international financial conditions. The leading central banks of the Western world started their policy normalization after the COVID-19 pandemic. Inflation rates are at the highest levels in the last 40 years and this will increase the cost of external funding for Turkey. The European Union and British economies, which account for nearly half of Turkey's exports, are on the brink of recession. A mild recession for the U.S. is also likely in 2023 due to Federal Reserve's policy of monetary contraction. The Chinese economy, too, is losing its growth momentum, and other commodity-importing emerging markets, such as Sri Lanka and Lebanon, are already facing major balance-of-payments crises. Turkey is declining to the bottom among emerging markets and getting closer to the group of countries — including Pakistan, Tunisia, and Egypt — where foreign lenders are highly skeptical about their ability to pay debts back on time. Therefore, the right policies and strong public support will not be sufficient to achieve medium-run goals in this challenging international environment. Regardless of what happens in June 2023, Turkey faces a difficult road ahead economically.

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THE NEW CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN TURKEY

NIL S. SATANA

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Introduction

The July 15, 2016 coup attempt, which left over 200 civilians dead, put an end to the military's prestige and popularity in Turkey and ushered in a new era in civil-military relations (CMR), with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) asserting full civilian control over the Turkish Armed Forces (*Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri*, TSK). Back in 1999, when Turkey obtained candidate status to accede to the European Union, the prerequisite of attaining democratic consolidation required, first and foremost, achieving the demilitarization and civilianization of the state. But after 2016, while the TSK was stripped of its reputation and traditionally dominant role in society and politics, the AKP government simultaneously solidified into a populist, authoritarian regime.

The following paper introduces the military's traditional role as the "guardian" of Turkish politics before the AKP came to power in 2002. It then argues that three factors paved the way for the new CMR between 2002 and 2016. First, this study discusses how the EU harmonization packages imbued legal and institutional changes that dwarfed the military's role in politics. Second, it discusses how the lack of a military victory against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan*, PKK) weakened the Armed

Forces' hand. Third, it reviews the unearthing, in 2007, of Ergenekon, an allegedly military-linked organization tied to ultra-nationalist circles and accused of carrying out various assassinations and bombings in Turkey. Hundreds of military officers were ousted or arrested as a result of the uncovering of this plot. The subsequent Ergenekon trials, despite being based on fabricated evidence, became a milestone, leading for the first time to a questioning of the Turkish military's political motives. Finally, the paper reviews how the 2016 coup attempt became an opportunity for the AKP and its leader, now-President Erdoğan, to further eliminate all opposition from different factions of society and politics, including the military.

Overall, this study argues that while the military's tutelage over Turkish politics was gradually replaced with the AKP's control over the TSK, the 2016 failed coup finalized the process, paving the way for a personalistic regime lacking rule of law and accountability. If the AKP stays in power, the TSK will remain under the regime's grip, acting as Erdoğan's private army. If the opposition wins the upcoming 2023 elections, however, a reworked system of CMR, wherein the TSK remains under democratically accountable civilian control, could finally allow Turkey to advance on its path to democracy and rule of law. The paper concludes with a discussion of the Turkish political opposition's current stance on CMR.

CMR Until 2002

Turkey's military has historically enjoyed a guardianship role in the country; however, CMR have evolved over time due to changes in agency and political circumstances. For example, between 1923 and 1960, the military was under the civilian control of a government run by the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) — the founding party of the republic and currently the main opposition faction under AKP rule. Despite efforts to establish a multi-party democracy by the country's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey remained a one-party regime until 1946. Internal Service Act (*İç Hizmet Kanunu*) No. 35 of 1935, which subsequently became the most important justification for military interventions, officially assigned the guardianship role to the military.

At first, Atatürk's adoption of elitism and prioritization of a top-to-bottom modernization/Westernization project positioned the Armed Forces as a tool of civilian rule. However, this changed after the 1960 coup, undertaken by young officers, following the rise of political Islam and a series of economic crises. The 1960 coup effectively put an end to the civilian control of the military in Turkey until 2016. Between 1960 and 2001, as the watchdog of the Kemalist¹ regime, the military intervened in politics either through coups (1960 and 1980) or memoranda forcing the resignation of elected governments (1971 and 1997). Although when it came to security issues, the TSK cadre appeared to be made up of professional technocrats, the military routinely exploited internal threats, such as Kurdish nationalism and political Islam, to limit politicians' policy alternatives and shape public opinion.²

Moreover, the TSK presented itself as the only competent organization "to bring order and Kemalist democracy to the country that 'incompetent' civilian governments could not achieve."³ The rise of the PKK in 1984 and the political

discourse positioning the Kurdish issue as a security threat consolidated the military's control. The fight against the PKK not only increased the army's prestige but also resulted in it being deemed, by the people, an institution capable of solving the country's other problems.⁴

Turkey's radical secularist break from its Ottoman legacy made defending the nation and the republic against political Islam a *raison d'être* for the military, which became the country's most widely trusted institution according to all polls. On Feb. 28, 1997, the Turkish National Security Council (*Milli Güvenlik Kurulu*, MGK) issued a list of measures against the Islamists, pressuring the government into establishing state control over public religious expression. Wearing headscarves, for example, was banned in public institutions. This "post-modern coup," later labeled the "February 28 process," became the new norm in CMR, whereby the military threatened to act if civilians stepped outside the prescribed bounds.

In 1999, Turkey received official candidacy status for EU membership, and the security services captured the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Together, these developments created a unique opportunity for the ruling coalition government to pass three democratization packages without much pushback from the military. Then, the 2002 early elections brought the AKP to power, starting a new era in CMR.

CMR in Flux Between 2002 and 2016

Liberal scholars argue that Turkey's CMR transformed into a liberal democratic model in the first decade of the AKP's reign.⁵ This was mainly the result of then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's pragmatic approach to politics, including when it came to relations with the military. The changing balance of power between the AKP and the TSK was due to various factors: the democratization/demilitarization process triggered by Turkey's EU candidacy during 2001-04; the sense of security that success in multiple elections granted the AKP; recovery following the 2001 global economic crisis; weak opposition from Kemalist and nationalist parties; the military's perceived

1. Kemalism is the official founding ideology of Turkey, which includes the main pillars of secular modernization and reform that Atatürk set as a goal for the Turkish republic and society. Kemalist factions in the TSK strictly followed these principles (republicanism, laicism, populism, revolutionism, etatism, and nationalism) and perceived themselves as the guardian of the Turkish state and people.

2. For a discussion of the use of internal threats at the expense of Turkish democracy, see Nil S. Satana and Tijen Demirel-Pegg (2020), "Military Counterterrorism Measures, Civil-Military Relations, and Democracy: The Cases of Turkey and the United States," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43, 9: 815-836. Abul-Magd, Akca, and Marshall argue these perceived threats became justifications for the military's involvement in politics, which helped protect its vested economic interests. Zeinab Abul-Magd, Ismet Akca, and Shana Marshall, "Two Paths to Dominance: Military Businesses in Turkey and Egypt," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, June 3, 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/06/03/two-paths-to-dominance-military-businesses-in-turkey-and-egypt-pub-81869>.

3. Nil S. Satana, (2008), "Transformation of the Turkish Military and the Path to

Democracy," *Armed Forces & Society* 34, 3: 357-388, 365.

4. For a detailed analysis, see Ahmet Kuru (2012), "The Rise and Fall of Military Tutelage in Turkey: Fears of Islamism, Kurdism, and Communism," *Insight Turkey* 14, 2: 37-57.

5. For a discussion of how the AKP is a secular and conservative-democratic party, see William Hale and Ergun Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey: The Case of the AKP*, Routledge, 2010.



Photo above: People holding Turkish flags in Taksim Square in Istanbul watch and listen to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on TV as he delivers a speech during a press conference after the National Security Council and Cabinet meetings on July 21, 2016. Photo by Arif Hudaverdi Yaman/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.

inability to bring the PKK to heel; as well as an aggressive and populist foreign policy — implemented with the use of the TSK — that was supported by Turkish Islamists and nationalists. Finally, a critical juncture remains the aforementioned Ergenekon trials (2008-13), which tried hundreds of officers in civilian courts and opened a public debate for the first time about the political and economic ambitions of the military.

Three of these factors merit further discussion. First, EU candidacy was a driver for adopting one of the most important institutional changes that curbed the TSK's power: the seventh harmonization package, of 2003, which substantially adjusted the composition, duties, and functions of the MGK. This reform transformed the MGK into an advisory body and eliminated the chief of staff's hold on the president to convene and make decisions under the TSK's direction. Moreover, state institutions such as the Council of Higher Education (*Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu*, YÖK) and the Radio and Television Supreme Council (*Radio ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu*, RTÜK) civilianized, thus eliminating the TSK's direct influence in education and media. Military expenses received more oversight by the Court

of Accounts, with an attempt to make defense and military expenditures accountable to the Turkish Grand National Assembly — at least in theory. Another crucial change was the AKP assuming control over decisions by the Supreme Military Council (*Yüksek Askerî Şûra*, YAŞ), which determines military promotions and dismissals. These and several other institutional and legal reforms to the TSK's role gradually demilitarized the country.

Despite occasional objections, the military cooperated with the civilian authorities for the sake of EU accession/Westernization, while the inner struggle continued. The AKP, however, had an advantage that no other government enjoyed. Many factions in the society coalesced to push for an end to military tutelage and supported the AKP. Liberals who wanted more democracy, Kurds who needed more political space, and civil society groups and big business organizations such as the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (*Türkiye Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği*, TUSİAD) or the Anatolian conservative bourgeoisie business owners (Anatolian Tigers) that longed for a better economy and more opportunities, all supported

the AKP's efforts to civilianize the regime. This kind of societal backing for a transformation in CMR was unprecedented. Moreover, Turkey's Western allies, including the U.S. and EU, also supported the AKP government⁶ and its attempts to demilitarize/civilianize the regime.

Second, the public started questioning the military's professionalism for the first time after the devastating PKK attacks in 2007-08. This became clear during the 2007 presidential elections. When the AKP nominated Islamist Abdullah Gül to run, the TSK issued an e-memorandum (*e-muhtıra*) on its website and tried to manipulate public opinion through the media to prevent his presidency. These efforts failed. Both the EU and U.S. renounced the Turkish military's interference in politics.⁷ Consequently, the 2010 referendum on constitutional amendments effectively marked the end of military tutelage. Several constitutional changes further normalized CMR, including the restriction of military courts to rule on military offences and a requirement that military personnel stand before civilian courts in cases involving civilian matters. Moreover, changes to the structure and election of the members of the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (*Hâkimler ve Savcılar Yüksek Kurulu*, HSYK) granted the government more control over judiciary processes and eliminated the military and Kemalists' extant influence on it. In 2011, Chief of Staff Işık Koşaner resigned when Erdoğan and Gül ignored his recommendations on military promotions, instead of issuing a memorandum.

Third, the Ergenekon purges changed the internal structure of the TSK. Unprecedentedly, former Turkish Chief of the General Staff Gen. İlker Basbuğ was arrested in 2012 following the arrests of high-level commanders such as Gen. İbrahim Fırtına and Gen. Çetin Doğan and Adm. Özden Örnek in 2011. Internal Service Act No. 35, which had cemented the military's guardianship role, was abolished in 2013. Despite the controversy surrounding the Ergenekon allegations, these developments broke the mental barriers for many in the society to hold the military accountable for its undemocratic actions, including but not limited to coup plots.

6. "Europe hails AKP victory in Turkey," November 4, 2002, *CNN*, <https://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/europe/11/04/turkey.elections/>, last accessed on May 25, 2022.

7. Ian Traynor, "EU warns army in Turkey dispute," May 2, 2007, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/may/03/turkey.eu>, last accessed on May 26, 2022.

Civilian Control of the Military Post-2016

Any remaining informal influence the military held in politics as well as its popularity within society ceased after the 2016 coup attempt. The attempt was allegedly carried out by Gülenists, namely the followers of the U.S.-based Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen, who was a close ally of the AKP and Erdoğan between 2002 and 2013.⁸ His assistance then was particularly important for the AKP's election efforts as he had disciples in the military, police, judiciary, bureaucracy, media, universities, and civil society organizations.⁹ Furthermore, Gülenists were pivotal in prosecuting Kemalist military factions during the Ergenekon trials. However, Erdoğan and Gülen eventually found themselves at odds over "the control of key government positions and the allocation of resources."¹⁰ The infighting was revealed when, in December 2013, Gülenist prosecutors instigated a graft probe against Erdoğan's cabinet ministers and family members. Erdoğan claimed he was "conned and deceived" by Gülenists and managed to remain in power. Thus, when the president immediately blamed the 2016 coup attempt on Gülen, political and academic circles bandwagoned. High-ranking Kemalist officers came out publicly to oppose the coup.¹¹ The AKP government declared a state of emergency and suspended legislative and judiciary processes in the wake of the attempted overthrow of the regime. Tens of thousands of military officers and civil servants linked to the Gülen movement were purged. The Gülen movement was declared a terrorist organization, *Fethullah Gülen Terör Örgütü* (FETÖ). Soon afterwards, the AKP began to use accusations of affiliation with FETÖ to persecute Kurds, leftists, and liberals.¹²

8. The Gülenist *Hizmet* ("Service") movement has been working in Turkey and abroad as a civil society association providing mainly education. See Gönül Tol, Matt Mainzer, Zeynep Ekmekci, "Unpacking Turkey's Failed Coup: Causes and Consequences," August 17, 2016, *Middle East Institute*, https://www.mei.edu/publications/unpacking-turkeys-failed-coup-causes-and-consequences#_edn9, last accessed May 27, 2022, for an assessment of the movement and the coup.

9. Rusen Cakir, "Gülen Cemaati: Nereden nereye?" *Al Jazeera*, August 10, 2016, last accessed June 4, 2021, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/gorus/gulen-cemaati-nereden-nereye>

10. M. Hakan and Rasim Koç, 2016, "The Turkish Coup Attempt: The Gülen Movement vs. the State," *Middle East Policy*, 23: 136-148, 139.

11. Kemal Gursel, "Turkey's failed coup reveals 'army within an army,'" July 22, 2016, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/07/turkey-coup-attempt-shows-army-within-army.html>, last accessed June 5, 2022.

12. Kareem Shaheen, "Turkey arrests pro-Kurdish party leaders amid claims of internet shutdown," November 4, 2016, *The Guardian*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/04/turkey-arrests-pro-kurdish-party-leaders-mps>, last accessed on May 31, 2022.

The Turkish military was at last tamed. The generals who once refused to send troops to Syria when Erdoğan pushed hard cooperated after 2016 in order to secure their positions. As Erdoğan's calls for the extradition of Gülen from the U.S. went unanswered, the president retaliated by declaring his plans to buy an S-400 air-defense missile system from Russia.¹³ Despite U.S. and NATO protests and U.S. sanctions, the Turkish military did not try to prevent this move, which ultimately resulted in Turkey's removal from the F-35 program in 2019.¹⁴ And though the military had previously rejected repeated efforts to place the General Staff under the control of the Ministry of National Defense, in 2018, the TSK stayed silent as this reshuffle was carried out.

In 2017, Turkey's parliamentary coup investigation commission released a report on the events of July 2016, but it failed to convince international audiences that FETÖ was responsible for the attempted overthrow of the Erdoğan government. For example, the head of Germany's foreign intelligence service, Bruno Kahl, declared, "Turkey has tried to convince us of that at every level but so far it has not succeeded."¹⁵ However, Turkish polls show that FETÖ is considered a real and imminent danger to the nation and is seen as the culprit behind the failed coup.¹⁶ Moreover, AKP deputies openly accused the U.S. and NATO of instigating the coup attempt, and public polls also support this notion.¹⁷ Once the most trusted public institution in the country,¹⁸ the Turkish military has lost its prestige and popularity.

Civilian control of the military, however, was not enough for Erdoğan. On April 16, 2017, he held a referendum and changed

the political system from a parliamentary to a presidential republic. While this change had been in the making since 2011, Erdoğan pushed his agenda further after being elected president in 2014. That said, it took a failed coup and the support of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) to finally rewrite the constitution. As the Gülenists had previously hurt so many factions within society, particularly during the Ergenekon trials, Turkey's opposition parties said nothing when the 2016 purges kicked off; but after the constitutional change, it became too late to stop Erdoğan. For example, both the CHP and MHP voted in favor of the government's decision to lift the Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party's (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*, HDP) parliamentary immunity from prosecution for having ties to the PKK. In the absence of opposition, and backed by popular support, Erdoğan consolidated power, replacing military tutelage with a populist, authoritarian strongman regime.

The Opposition, CMR, and the Future of Turkish Democracy

Turkey is now part of a broader global trend of competitive authoritarianism arising in former pluralist democracies, characterized by a "weakening of political institutions and the erosion of rule of law by leaders who had initially come to power through the ballot box."¹⁹ In 2022, Turkey scored 32 out of 100 in the Freedom House index and was considered "not free."²⁰ Thus, with the erosion of the rule of law under the AKP, a complete normalization of CMR clearly failed to bring about greater democratization. Can political opposition reverse this trend inside Turkey?

Economic decline presents an opportunity that the opposition can and must seize upon to reinstate Turkish democracy.

According to various polls from 2022, the AKP's popular support has dropped to around 30%, while the CHP and the Good (*İYİ*) Party could, together, stand to win more than 40% of votes cast.²¹ An opinion survey from 2020 found that 52.3%

19. Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu (2016), "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 37, 9: 1581–1606, 1582.

20. "Freedom in the World 2022. Turkey" <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2022>, last accessed August 23, 2022. Turkey scored a 54 and was considered partly free in 2015. See https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/01152015_FIW_2015_final.pdf, last accessed August 23, 2022. In 2001, before AKP came to power, Turkey was deemed partly-free due to the military's influence but its freedom scores presented an upward trend. See https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Freedom_in_the_World_2001-2002_complete_book.pdf, last accessed August 23, 2022.

21. "2022 seçim anketleri! Anket şirketleri tüm seçim anket sonuçları ve son

13. Turkey and Russia's relations were tense in 2015-16, following the shooting down of a Russian aircraft by a Turkish F-16 near the Turkish-Syrian border. After the attempted coup, the two Turkish Air Force pilots involved in the downing of the Russian jet were arrested for alleged ties to FETÖ, which helped ease the tensions with Moscow.

14. "S-400: Türkiye'nin Rusya'dan satın aldığı, ABD'yle krize yol açan füze savunma sistemi," September 27, 2021, *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-58709766>, last accessed on June 1, 2022.

15. "German spy agency chief says does not believe Gulen behind Turkey coup attempt," March 18, 2017, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-germany/german-spy-agency-chief-says-does-not-believe-gulen-behind-turkey-coup-attempt-idUSKBN16POLQ>, last accessed on May 8, 2022.

16. A SETA poll undertaken shortly after the coup attempt shows AKP, MHP, and CHP voters hold FETÖ responsible and believe the U.S. aids FETÖ. http://file.seta.org/Files/Pdf/20160804165732_15-temmuz-darbe-girisimi-toplumsal-algı-arastirmasi-pdf.pdf, last accessed on May 31, 2022.

17. See for example "15 Temmuz'un dış mihrak listesi," July 13, 2017, *Euronews*, <https://tr.euronews.com/2017/07/13/15-temmuzun-dis-mihrak-listesi>, last accessed on May 28, 2022.

18. For the results of various polls on the TSK's popularity, see Zeki Sarigil, 2009, "Deconstructing the Turkish Military's Popularity," *Armed Forces and Society* 35, 4: 709-727.



Photo above: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan chairs a meeting of National Security Council at the Presidential Complex in Ankara on September 28, 2022. Photo by Mustafa Kamaci/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

of those who voted for the AKP-MHP alliance in previous elections later changed their minds due to the downturn in the economy and the rising cost of living.²² The economy has further worsened since then, accelerating the devaluation of the Turkish lira. Moreover, Erdoğan's professed ideal of raising a "pious generation" has polarized society.²³ Youth that grew up with the stories of the Gezi Park protests of 2013 demand a more democratic country.²⁴ Kurds have had enough failed peace processes to know that Erdoğan will not solve the

seçim anketleri burada! Kronolojik sırayla CB, seçim anketi, anket sonuçları," October 13, 2022, *Haberler.com*, <https://www.haberler.com/haberler/2020-2021-son-anketler-anket-sirketlerinin-tum-14567816-haber/>, last accessed October 16, 2022.

22. "Covid-19 sonrası anket: En büyük sorun ekonomi, AK Parti'ye destek yüzde 35" June 16, 2020, *Euronews*, <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/06/16/covid-19-sonras-anket-en-buyuk-sorun-ekonomi-ak-parti-ye-destek-yuzde-35>, last accessed June 5, 2022.

23. Carlotta Gal, "Erdoğan's plan to raise a 'pious generation' divides parents in Turkey," June 18, 2018, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-election-religious-schools.html>, last accessed June 3, 2022.

24. In May 2013, what started as a sit-in at Istanbul's Gezi Park to save it from demolition became a symbol of a budding democratic culture when millions of people took to the streets to protest the government's reluctance to stop police violence. Özge Zihnioğlu, "The Legacy of the Gezi Protests in Turkey," October 24, 2019, *Carnegie Europe*, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/10/24/legacy-of-gezi-protests-in-turkey-pub-80142>, last accessed on June 1, 2022.

Kurdish problem. Leading advocates of political and cultural rights for the Kurds have been imprisoned since 2015. Liberals who wholeheartedly supported the AKP in 2002 are, today, disgruntled or imprisoned. The Kemalist, nationalist, and conservative opposition is trying, against the odds, to seize this opportunity and remain united in a heavily Erdoğan-controlled environment that discourages political competition. The next year will determine what awaits Turkey for decades to come; but what will CMR look like if the opposition beats the AKP at the ballot box?

A review of the opposition parties' stances on CMR shows that particularly the two major parties, the social-democrat CHP and the nationalist İYİ Party — both Kemalist — do not explicitly discuss CMR, individually or with one another.²⁵ When they mention the military at all, it tends to be only in passing, as a foreign policy instrument in cross-border operations, and not as a major actor in politics — as used to be the case. Yet the

25. Empirical data is scarce on the opposition's stance regarding CMR likely because the media in Turkey is heavily monopolized and self-censored. This section is based on the analysis of the party group meeting reports published by the newspapers *Cumhuriyet*, *Sozcu*, and *Evransel* between January and May 2022.

İYİ Party and CHP differ in their stances regarding the extent of this role. While the former supports a more expansive role for the Armed Forces, including carrying out international operations, the latter follows the traditional republican foreign policy of sticking to Turkey's national borders and avoiding the loss of territory. Moreover, the program of 10 principles agreed upon by CHP, the İYİ Party, and four other smaller parties in the opposition mentions the TSK only as a deterrent force in foreign policy.²⁶ This, by itself, is an indication of the perceived irrelevance of the Turkish military to the opposition's political program; whereas, in the past, the Armed Forces would have been a critical actor in the decision-making, let alone the discussion, of such matters.

The İYİ Party and CHP, however, agree that the military's reputation should be restored to what it was prior to the 2016 coup attempt.²⁷ Meral Akşener, the leader of the İYİ Party, believes that the TSK, the Ministry of National Defense, and the National Defense University need to be restructured. In June 2018, for example, Akşener accused Erdoğan of "fighting with buildings instead of FETÖ," as war academies and military schools were shut down after 2016;²⁸ in 2021, she promised to re-open them to fix the current flaws in military education.²⁹ These statements make one wonder if civilian control of the military may be reversed if the İYİ Party has enough clout in a coalition government. Despite her reluctance, in 1997, while minister of the interior, to stand up to the military during the February 28 process, Akşener is not pro-military. For instance, she reacted harshly when, in April 2021, 104 retired admirals issued a memorandum criticizing Erdoğan's plans to build a new canal in Istanbul, bluntly calling it "silliness" and stating that the military has no business in politics and should stay in their lane or bear the consequences.³⁰ Similarly, CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, another avid Kemalist, has at times harshly criticized the

military and promised the "new CHP" would stand up to military interference in politics.³¹

Overall, the two main opposition parties as well as the other four small parties that they are in coalition with — three of which are led by Islamists/conservatives, including former AKP ministers — have very little to say on CMR. Nevertheless, institutional changes that installed civilian control over the military before and after 2016 will be difficult to reverse under a coalition government, which will have to work on a new constitution to return Turkey to a parliamentary system. Since none of the parties are expected to secure the numbers needed to form a majority government alone, even if one faction fails to persevere against any potential interference from the TSK, the other parties in the coalition will likely stand firm. More importantly, the "new" military, disgraced and restructured, has shown no sign of interest in politics since 2016.

In sum, the case of modern-day Turkey shows that democracies cannot be consolidated without strong institutions and a democratic culture to protect the rule of law — a normalization of CMR is necessary but not sufficient. In the absence of robust institutions to protect the state not only from the military but also populist authoritarian leaders, civilian control of the Turkish military gave way to civilian authoritarian rule. It is now up to the opposition to put Turkey back on track by winning the 2023 elections and cementing legitimate democratic control over the military.

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26. Mert Öz, "Altı parti lideri 10 ortak ilkeye imza attı," May 30, 2022, *Sozcu*, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2022/gundem/alti-parti-lideri-10-ortak-ilkeye-imza-att-7163491/>, last accessed June 5, 2022.

27. "Meral Akşener: Beli çökertilmiş denilen ordu Türkiye'yi kurtarıyor," January 25, 2018, *Sozcu*, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2018/gundem/meral-aksener-beli-cokertilmis-denilen-ordu-turkiyeyi-kurtariyor-2189318/>, last accessed June 3, 2022.

28. "Akşener'den Erdoğan'a: Abdülhamit Han'ın kurduğu harp okulunu kapattın," June 16, 2018, *Diken*, <https://www.diken.com.tr/aksenerden-erdogana-abdulhamit-hanin-kurdugu-harp-okulunu-kapattin/>, last accessed June 3, 2022.

29. "Akşener yeni sistem önerisini açıkladı," May 26, 2021, *Cumhuriyet*, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/aksenerden-erdogana-daha-ne-kadar-sessiz-kalacaksin-1839293>, last accessed June 4, 2022.

30. "İYİ Parti Genel Başkanı Meral Akşener: 104 emekli amiralin yaptığı bildiri zevzekliktir," April 4, 2021, *CNN Türk*, <https://www.cnnturk.com/video/turkiye-iyi-parti-genel-baskani-meral-aksener-104-emekli-amiralin-yaptigi-bildiri-zevzekliktir>, last accessed June 5, 2022.

31. "Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan TSK'ye sert tepki ve özeleştirisi," May 8, 2012, *Cumhuriyet*, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/kilicdaroglundan-tskye-sert-tepki-ve-ozelestiri-340928>, last accessed June 5, 2022.



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THE COSTS OF A PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM: THE IMPACT OF HYPER-CENTRALIZATION ON TURKEY'S EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

TUĞBA TANYERI-ERDEMİR

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Introduction

Since 2016, thousands of purged Turkish academics have lost not only their university positions, but also their benefits, pensions, and passports. Since 2017, Osman Kavala, one of Turkey's leading philanthropists and human rights advocates, has been held in solitary confinement at a maximum-security prison following his arrest on trumped-up charges. Since 2021, hundreds of academics at Istanbul's Boğaziçi University, one of the country's top public universities, have been standing in the main quad every day to protest the loss of academic freedoms brought about by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's unilateral imposition of new university leadership. These alarming developments epitomize the devastating impact that a hyper-centralized presidential system has had on Turkey's educational and cultural affairs.

The growing malaise in Turkey's educational and cultural fields stems from two critical shortcomings resulting from hyper-centralization: the erosion of the rule of law and due process and the ensuing arbitrary rule by an all-powerful president. The fragility of academic and media freedoms in the country and the lack of legal and cultural norms

guaranteeing freedom of speech compound the problem. The complicity of many academics in these purges — and the cowed silence of others — has had a chilling effect on Turkey's academic and cultural life, exemplified by the ongoing exodus of dissident academics and intellectuals, who have increasingly sought refuge in the West to continue their critical work and advocacy without fear of persecution.

The presidential system's devastation of the educational and cultural fields has also spilled over into the economic domain, as Turkey continues to miss its narrow demographic window of opportunity to transition from a low value-added economy into a knowledge economy well-positioned in global supply chains. Among the OECD countries, Turkey has the highest ratio of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET).^{1,2} The academic and cultural impoverishment of the country not only pushes youth outside lifelong learning opportunities but also fails to equip those enrolled in secondary and tertiary educational institutions with the skills

1. "Turkey has the highest NEET rate among OECD countries," May 20, 2021, BIA News, <https://bianet.org/english/labor/244360-turkey-has-the-highest-neet-rate-among-oecd-countries>.

2. "Youth not in unemployment, education or training (NEET) (indicator)," 2022, OECD, <https://data.oecd.org/youthinac/youth-not-in-employment-education-or-training-neet.htm>, Accessed on July 22, 2022.

required to succeed in today's global economy. In Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, Turkish students remain below the OECD average in all three tested areas, namely, mathematics, reading skills, and science.³ The steady decline of Turkish institutions in world university rankings is yet another indicator of the significant headwinds Turkey will face when competing against other countries that cherish fundamental rights and freedoms, nurture academic and cultural creativity, and are thus able to take advantage of the ongoing digital, technological, and AI revolutions.⁴

Exacerbating all these problems is the refusal within Turkey's ruling Islamist-ultranationalist coalition to recognize the country's troubling trajectory, despite the tell-tale signs of brain drain, capital exodus, devaluation, and hyperinflation. What domestic and foreign investors see as Turkey's key shortcomings as an investment destination, Erdoğan's inner circle of loyalists view as a successful consolidation of power and eradication of dissent. As the ruling elite continues to demonize the scholarly achievements and cultural capital associated with academic and cultural fields as a technocratic threat to their majoritarian rule, they also cherish the impoverishment of the intellectual climate as the culmination of their long sought-after cultural hegemony. For the Islamist-ultranationalist coalition, the ascendancy of a religio-nationalist discourse and supremacist values over a cosmopolitan ethos associated with the West is an important win for its nativist socio-cultural engineering project.

Manifestations of Hyper-Centralization

Purging Turkey's Academia

In January 2016, more than a thousand academics from over 80 universities, collectively named the Academics for Peace, signed a petition protesting human rights abuses against the Kurds in southeastern Turkey.⁵ The petition condemned the Turkish government's heavy-handed military operations against the militants of the Kurdistan Workers'

Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK*), which the Turkish government, the U.S., and the EU have designated as a terrorist group. The operations condemned in the petition resulted in heavy civilian casualties and the destruction of entire neighborhoods. The signatories also demanded an end to human rights violations in southeastern Turkey and called for resuming peace talks with the PKK.

The petition incurred Erdoğan's wrath, who slammed its signatories as traitors.⁶ The Turkish president also demanded that universities open disciplinary investigations against these academics. Within a week, the Turkish police detained 27 signatories, charging them with engaging in terrorist propaganda.⁷ Following Erdoğan's call, a brutal crackdown ensued. Thirty-nine universities denounced the petition and launched disciplinary investigations, suspending or dismissing hundreds of academics. Prosecutors across Turkey launched criminal investigations, detaining hundreds of academics and arresting three.^{8 9} Over 800 signatories faced trial, 100 of whom received prison sentences ranging from 15 to 36 months. Ultimately, all but 12 sentences were deferred and many petitioners were acquitted.¹⁰ As of April 2022, 90 trials were still ongoing.¹¹

The second big wave of academic purges came following the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. In the immediate aftermath, the government declared a state of emergency, suspending the rule of law and due process, and ruling by emergency decree. A massive crackdown on a wide spectrum of dissidents ensued, the speed and scale of which were unprecedented. Ultimately, some 150,000 civil servants, including academics, were purged.

The failed coup attempt provided a pretext to suppress universities and academics allegedly linked to the secretive

6. "Erdoğan: Sözde akademisyenlerin haddini bilmesi lazım," January 12, 2016, *BBC Türkçe*, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/01/160111_Erdoğan_akademisyen_aciklama.

7. Matthew Weaver, "Turkey rounds up academics who signed petition denouncing attacks on Kurds," January 15, 2016, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/15/turkey-rounds-up-academics-who-signed-petition-denouncing-attacks-on-kurds>.

8. Academics for Peace, "Davalar/Lawsuits," *Barış İçin Akademisyenler*, <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/431>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

9. Zülal Koçer and Eylem Nazlier, "Erdoğan işareti verdi, barış isteyen akademisyenler tutuklandı," March 15, 2016, *Evrensel*, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/274971/Erdoğan-isareti-verdi-baris-isteyen-akademisyenler-tutuklandi>.

10. Tansu Pişkin, "First Verdict of Acquittal in Trial of Academics for Peace After Constitutional Court Ruling," September 6, 2019, *BIA News*, <https://bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/212708-first-verdict-of-acquittal-in-trial-of-academics-for-peace-after-constitutional-court-ruling>.

11. Academics for Peace, "Davalar/Lawsuits," *Barış İçin Akademisyenler*, <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/431>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

3. Esra Ülkar, "Significant improvement in all education fields, but Turkey still below OECD average, PISA results show," December 4, 2019, *Hürriyet Daily News*, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/students-improve-scores-in-global-academic-test-in-turkey-149426>.

4. Lale Akarun, "Why do Turkish Universities fall in International Rankings?" December 29, 2021, *Yetkin Report*, <https://yetkinreport.com/en/2021/12/29/why-turkish-universities-fell-in-rankings/>.

5. Academics for Peace, "We will not be a party to this crime! (In English, French, German, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, Greek)," January 10, 2016, *Barış İçin Akademisyenler*, <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/63>.



Photo above: Turkish riot police detain protesters on September 14, 2017 outside Ankara's Courthouse during the trial of two Turkish teachers who went on a hunger strike over their dismissal under a government decree following last year's failed coup. Photo by STR/AFP via Getty Images.

religious network of Fethullah Gülen, an Erdoğan ally-turned-archnemesis living in self-imposed exile in the United States.¹² In the two weeks following the coup, Turkish authorities not only suspended or fired some 9,000 police officers and 3,000 members of the judiciary, but also targeted schools and universities. Some 21,000 private school teachers and 21,000 Ministry of Education officials were suspended or fired alongside more than 15,000 education staff members.¹³ The European University Foundation (EUF) and the European University Association (EUA) issued a statement condemning the forced resignation of over 1,500 university deans in Turkey.¹⁴ ¹⁵ By the end of July, the Turkish

government canceled 50,000 passports belonging to civil servants, including those of academics.¹⁶

Making use of the state of emergency provisions, the Erdoğan government issued executive orders to fire university staff. Waves of purges continued, and by October 2016, over 100,000 people were sacked or suspended, including thousands of academics.¹⁷ The precarious employment situation for state employees continued even after the state of emergency was lifted.¹⁸ ¹⁹ As of April 2022, some 6,000 academics lost their positions, retirement and

12. Ben Hubbard, Tim Arango, and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Failed Turkish coup accelerated a purge years in the making," July 22, 2016, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/23/world/middleeast/failed-turkish-coup-accelerated-a-purge-years-in-the-making.html>.

13. "Turkey coup: Purge widens to education sector," July 19, 2016, *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36838347>.

14. "Statement condemning the forced resignation of university deans in Turkey," July 20, 2016, *European University Foundation*, <https://uni-foundation.eu/statement-condemning-the-forced-resignation-of-university-deans-in-turkey/>.

15. Ben Hubbard, Tim Arango, and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Failed Turkish coup accelerated a purge years in the making," July 22, 2016, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/23/world/middleeast/failed-turkish-coup-accelerated-a-purge-years-in-the-making.html>.

16. Lizzie Dearden, "Turkey coup attempt: Government cancels 50,000 passports as global concern grows over crackdown," July 30, 2016, *The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-coup-attempt-Erdogan-latest-government-cancels-50-000-passports-amid-international-concern-over-crackdown-a7163961.html>.

17. Humeyra Pamuk, "Turkey sacks 10,000 more civil servants, shuts media in latest crackdown," October 30, 2016, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-dismissals-idUSKBN12U04L>.

18. Kareem Shaheen, "Turkey dismisses 4,400 public servants in latest post-coup attempt purge," February 8, 2017, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/08/turkey-dismisses-4400-public-servants-Erdogan-trump-phone-call>.

19. Associated Press, "Turkey fires thousands of state employees in anti-terrorism purge," July 8, 2018, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/08/turkey-fires-thousands-of-public-servants-in-anti-terror-purge>.

health benefits, passports, and any prospect of finding employment in Turkish universities, public or private.²⁰ These purged academics were not only placed on blacklists, preventing their gainful employment by other institutions, but were also ostracized by their peers.

The dismissal and prosecution of academics based on unfounded allegations or conducted without due process have created a climate of fear, significantly limited academic freedoms, and curbed the scholarly community's ability to teach and express and publish criticism.²¹ This climate has led not only to self-censorship but also an exodus from Turkey. The purges of academics, first with the Academics for Peace trials and then the post-abortive coup dismissals, contributed significantly to Turkey's brain drain, leaving the future of the country's higher education system in doubt.^{22 23}

The Witch Hunt Continues: The Saga of Osman Kavala

Erdoğan's relentless crackdown following the failed coup attempt extended to settling scores beyond the public sector and universities. The Turkish president also used this opportunity to crack down on the philanthropic field, going after leading public figures active in education, arts, and culture. The highest-profile victim of this campaign was Osman Kavala, who has been held in solitary confinement at a maximum-security prison on the outskirts of Istanbul for the past five years. He was arrested on fabricated charges in late 2017, including financially supporting the 2013 Gezi Protests, masterminding the 2016 failed coup, attempting to overthrow the government, and espionage.

Kavala is one of Turkey's leading philanthropists, known for his generous support for cultural and educational projects promoting democracy, pluralism, gender equality, and ethnic, religious, and sexual minority rights. He is the founder and

20. "Turkey's post-coup crackdown," *Turkey Purge*, updated January 26, 2022, <https://turkeypurge.com/>, Accessed on July 22, 2022.

21. "Turkey: Government Targeting Academics," May 14, 2018, *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/14/turkey-government-targeting-academics>.

22. Suzy Hansen, "'The Era of People Like You Is Over': How Turkey Purged Its Intellectuals," July 24, 2019, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/24/magazine/the-era-of-people-like-you-is-over-how-turkey-purged-its-intellectuals.html>.

23. Humeyra Pamuk and Ece Toksabai, "Purge of academics leaves future of Turkish universities in doubt," March 1, 2017, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-academics/purge-of-academics-leaves-future-of-turkish-universities-in-doubt-idUSKBN1684DE>.

board chair of the Istanbul-based nonprofit organization Anadolu Kültür, which is a major promoter of arts and culture in Turkey and abroad.²⁴ Kavala contributed to the establishment of numerous progressive NGOs and served on the boards of directors of the Turkish Foundation of Cinema and Audio-visual Culture (*Türkiye Sinema ve Audiovisual Kültür Vakfı*, TÜRSAK), the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (*Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı*, TESEV), the History Foundation, the Truth Justice Memory Center, and the Association for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (*Kültürel Mirası Koruma Derneği*, KMKD).^{25 26 27 28 29} Kavala received the European Archaeological Heritage Prize in 2019 for efforts to preserve the heritage of Turkey's religious minorities and promote peace and inclusion.³⁰ He has also been a pioneer in peacebuilding and reconciliation projects, including on Turkish-Kurdish and Turkish-Armenian relations. There is no doubt that Kavala's lifelong commitment to progressive causes motivated his arrest. For Erdoğan and his allies, Kavala is the embodiment par excellence of a pro-Western, secular, and liberal cosmopolitanism whose promotion of pluralism and social inclusion negates the nativist and supremacist tenets of Turkey's Islamist-ultranationalist ruling bloc.

In February 2019, after a 16-month pretrial detention, the prosecutor issued Kavala's indictment. Until then, Kavala and his lawyers had been denied access to his file and had no information about the charges that led to his arrest. Alongside 15 other defendants, prosecutors accused Kavala of organizing and financing the 2013 Gezi protests with the intent to overthrow the government.³¹ The indictment, full of conspiracy theories, failed to provide any credible evidence.³²

24. Anadolu Kültür, <https://www.anadolukultur.org/EN/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

25. Türsak [Turkish Foundation of Cinema and Audio-Visual Culture], <https://www.tursak.org.tr/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

26. TESEV [Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation], <https://www.tesev.org.tr/en/home/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

27. Tarih Vakfı [History Foundation], <https://tarihvakfi.org.tr/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

28. Hafıza Merkezi [Truth Justice Memory Center], <https://hakikatadalethafiza.org/en/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

29. KMKD [Association for the Protection of Cultural Heritage], <http://kmkd.org/en/homepage/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

30. "European Archaeological Heritage Prize 2019," *European Association of Archaeologists*, 2019, https://www.e-a-a.org/EEA/Navigation/Prizes_and_Awards/Heritage_Prize_2019.aspx, Accessed July 25, 2022.

31. "Fact Sheet – Turkey's Absurd Gezi Trial," *Project on Middle East Democracy*, December 2019, <https://pomed.org/fact-sheet-turkeys-absurd-gezi-trial/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

32. Howard Eissenstat, "Civil Society on Trial in Turkey," *Project on Middle East Democracy*, July 17, 2019, <https://pomed.org/civil-society-on-trial-in-turkey/>.

The Gezi defendants, including Kavala, were acquitted in February 2020. While eight other defendants walked free, Kavala was slapped with a new charge within hours, and immediately rearrested. In October 2021, prosecutors launched a new case against Kavala and 50 other Gezi defendants, combining two cases related to the Gezi protests.³³ In April 2022, the Turkish courts sentenced Osman Kavala to a life sentence without parole, while seven other Gezi defendants received prison sentences of 18 years.³⁴

The victimization of Kavala has had a chilling effect on Turkey's progressive arts, culture, and education fields, further impoverishing intellectual and cultural life and prompting the exodus of creative classes and cultural institutions. Kavala's plight demonstrates how the concentration of power in the hands of an authoritarian president and the ensuing domination of the judiciary by the executive branch have undermined not only the rule of law and due process, but also done irreparable damage to the country's arts, culture, and education scene.

The Erosion of the Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions

In 2016, Erdoğan issued a presidential decree giving himself the authority to appoint university rectors from candidates nominated by the Council of Higher Education (*Yükseköğretim Kurulu*, YÖK), an institution already under his tutelage. Previously, Turkey's public universities held democratic elections for faculty members to choose the top three rector candidates, one of whom would then be appointed by the president. The president was expected to appoint the candidate with the most votes, but Erdoğan showed his willingness to disregard the will of the academics by appointing candidates with the fewest votes. Although existing problems associated with the appointment of university rectors and YÖK's incessant meddling in all aspects of academic life were already significant obstacles to any real exercise of academic freedoms in Turkey, Erdoğan's decree excluding the input of academics on the appointment of university rectors erased any semblance of autonomy.

What ultimately brought the sorry state of Turkish universities to the world's attention, however, was the upheaval at Istanbul's Bogazici University. As one of Turkey's top universities and an internationally acclaimed research institution, Boğaziçi was largely untouched in the previous stages of the purge. On January 1, 2021, Erdoğan appointed rectors to five universities through presidential decrees, one of which was Boğaziçi.³⁵ Melih Bulu, whom Erdoğan appointed as rector, was not even a member of the Boğaziçi faculty at the time of his appointment. His main qualification appeared to be running as a parliamentary candidate within the ranks of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) back in 2015.

The appointment of an unqualified political figure provoked outrage among Boğaziçi academics and students. Three days after Erdoğan's decree, faculty and students gathered to protest Bulu's appointment, called for his resignation, and demanded the right to choose their rector through elections.³⁶ The police attacked the peaceful demonstration using excessive force, tear gas, and water cannons.³⁷ Early the next morning, special operations teams carried out targeted raids on 17 student houses. Over the following weeks, demonstrations in solidarity with Boğaziçi University spread to 38 cities. The authorities detained over 500 protesters. While many were ultimately released, most detained students received travel bans, preventing them from pursuing exchange programs or graduate studies abroad.

One of Bulu's first policies as rector was to shutter Boğaziçi's LGBTI+ Studies Club.³⁸ Among other student clubs, the LGBTI+ Studies Club was an active participant in the protests, particularly because of the concerns of its members that the new rector would not offer them a safe space on campus. One of the many protest-art pieces exhibited during the demonstrations later became a key point of contention. Erdoğan's supporters claimed that the piece, combining images of the Kaaba and LGBTI+ colors, was an attack on Islamic values.³⁹ These

35. "Issue Number 31352: Appointment Decisions," January 2, 2021, Official Gazette of the Republic of Turkey, <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2021/01/20210102-7.pdf>.

36. Carlotta Gall, "Prestigious Istanbul University Fights Erdoğan's Reach," February 1, 2021, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/01/world/asia/turkey-boğaziçi-university-protests-erdogan.html>.

37. "Turkey: Student Protesters at Risk of Prosecution," February 18, 2021, *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/18/turkey-student-protesters-risk-prosecution>.

38. Yiğit E. Korkmaz, "Bull after shutting down the LGBTI+ Club: 'I'm an LGBT rights advocate,'" February 3, 2021, *Kaos GL*, <https://kaosgl.org/en/single-news/bulu-after-shutting-down-the-lgbti-club-i-m-an-lgbt-rights-advocate>.

39. "Boğaziçi University's LGBTI+ Studies Club closed by the appointed rector,"

33. Ali Kucukgocmen, "Turkish court opens re-trial in merged Gezi protest cases," October 8, 2021, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-court-opens-re-trial-merged-gezi-protest-cases-2021-10-08/>.

34. Kareem Fahim, "Turkish philanthropist sentenced to life term after widely criticized trial," April 26, 2022, *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/25/osman-kavala-turkey-erdogan/>.



Photo above: Students hold placards during a demonstration against Melih Bulu's direct appointment as rector of Boğaziçi University on January 6, 2021. Photo by Resul Kaboglu/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images.

blasphemy accusations helped demonize the Boğaziçi protesters and made them targets of religious extremists.

Ultimately, Bulu's term as rector was cut short when Erdoğan replaced him with another loyalist, Naci İnci, in August 2021.⁴⁰ İnci intensified the crackdown at Boğaziçi by dismissing deans from their positions and issuing orders preventing certain academics from entering campus.^{41 42}

Since January 4, 2021, a vast majority of the Boğaziçi faculty, dressed in their academic gowns, has been gathering in the main quad each day to protest in silence, by turning their

February 2, 2021, *BIA News*, <https://bianet.org/english/lgbti/238535-Boğaziçi-university-s-lgbt-studies-club-closed-by-the-appointed-rector>.

40. Daren Butler and Ali Kucukgocmen, "Turkey university protests not over despite rector's dismissal," July 16, 2021, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-university-protests-not-over-activists-say-2021-07-16/>.

41. "Boğaziçi University's appointed rector fires three elected deans," January 20, 2022, *Duvar English*, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/Boğaziçi-universitys-appointed-rector-naci-inci-fires-three-elected-deans-news-60183>.

42. "Dismissed academic prevented from entering Boğaziçi University by appointed rector's orders," October 11, 2021, *Duvar English*, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/dismissed-academic-can-candan-prevented-from-entering-Boğaziçi-university-by-appointed-rectors-orders-news-59155>.

backs on the rector's office. This ongoing protest is a somber reminder of the loss of the last vestiges of academic freedom and autonomy under the hyper-centralized presidential system. The highly publicized case of Boğaziçi University is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the near-complete domination of academic institutions and processes across the country.

The Way Forward

The hyper-centralization of political power remains Turkey's key challenge. Although the country's transition to the presidential system has exacerbated hyper-centralization, the consolidation of one-man rule predates this shift in governance. Erdoğan's first decade in power led to not only his gradual elimination of dissenting voices within the AKP but also a weakening of accountability and transparency in national politics as well as a worrying rise in arbitrary rule. The erosion of separation of powers, checks and balances, the rule of law, and due process became evident for all to see in the aftermath of the Gezi protests.

Turkey's big tent opposition bloc, which now includes two splinter parties from the AKP in addition to other parties spanning the entire political spectrum, is unified in its commitment to rolling back the presidential system and institutionalizing an enhanced parliamentary system. Although a victorious opposition bloc's return to a parliamentary system and the ensuing power-sharing arrangement would contribute to reinstitutionalizing polyarchy, these steps alone would still not suffice to tackle Turkey's hyper-centrist political disposition.

Unless the opposition also launched a robust decentralization program devolving powers to municipalities and local institutions in accordance with the subsidiarity principle, the Turkish bureaucracy's deeply ingrained impulse to hoard all administrative power in Ankara could reinvent hyper-centralism in new forms. So far, the opposition bloc has not articulated such a program and many members of the opposition share a similar aversion to decentralization as members of the ruling coalition.

When it comes to the educational and cultural fields, a key challenge is to abolish or roll back YÖK and provide universities with the administrative, financial, and academic autonomy required to govern themselves and ensure academic freedoms. YÖK, a relic of the 1980 military government, has proved itself to be a resilient institution that has survived numerous left- and right-wing coalitions and can once again reinvent itself in the post-Erdoğan era to amass further resources and power.

One major test for the opposition will be to see if they are willing to let universities, together with their various stakeholders, including academic and non-academic staff, students, municipal governments, and other for-profit and non-profit partners, govern themselves with limited meddling from Ankara. This will prove a significant challenge in the Kurdish-majority provinces, where the Turkish ruling elite's exclusivist prejudices and security concerns could provide pretexts for sustaining a heavy-handed bureaucratic domination over higher education.

Turkey's cultural climate will continue to suffer from a relative lack of freedom of expression, right of assembly, and media and academic freedoms unless key anxieties around ethnic, religious, and gender identities are removed from the purview of Turkey's heavy-handed law enforcement system

and desecuritized. Such a desecuritization process requires not only an institutionalization of rights and freedoms in accordance with Turkey's commitments under the Council of Europe, but also a comprehensive judicial reform and a scaling back of Turkey's oversized security bureaucracy to core security issues bound by strict legal limits.

While the opposition will face significant structural and ideological challenges to rolling back the hyper-centralized system adversely affecting academic and cultural fields, the reelection of Erdoğan and Turkey's Islamist-ultranationalist coalition would exacerbate existing problems to an unprecedented level. An Erdoğan win would do away with the last traces of rights, freedoms, and semi-autonomy, and speed up the presidency's amassing of all forms of power, thereby aggravating arbitrary rule. Such a dystopian trajectory would greatly accelerate the current brain drain from academic and cultural fields, while exacerbating complicity and indifference among academics and intellectuals who remain. The near-total securitization of academic and intellectual activities would also lead to a suffocating atmosphere by undermining the oases of freedom and hope that opposition-run municipalities manage to provide at the local level. This, in turn, would make it even more challenging for a future opposition government to contemplate, articulate, and implement a decentralization policy. Ultimately, such decentralization is the most effective way to tackle Turkey's deepening malaise in educational and cultural affairs.

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TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY AFTER PRESIDENTIALISM

İLHAN UZEL

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Introduction

Since transitioning to the presidential system in mid-2018, the existing problems in Turkey's foreign policy have intensified and new issues have emerged. Turkey has become more nationalist, more authoritarian, more anti-American and anti-Western, more confrontational, more isolated, and more pro-Russian, and its foreign policy has been militarized.

Turkey has become involved in a number of military engagements in recent years: It carried out three large-scale incursions and one limited military operation inside Syria, established a growing military presence in northern Iraq, got involved militarily in the Libyan proxy war through military advisers and drone warfare, and participated in an interstate war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It has also become entangled in numerous regional geopolitical disputes, becoming a party to the conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE (including deploying troops to Qatar), entering into naval competition with NATO allies like France and Greece, and establishing its largest overseas military installation in Somalia. Ankara has adopted new and more aggressive tactics as well, instrumentalizing refugees, using foreign nationals to blackmail the EU and the U.S., and purchasing a ground-to-air missile system from Russia despite U.S. objections. It has seen wars, conflicts, military operations of all sorts, the rise and fall of a short-lived strategic doctrine, sanctions and embargos (including

those imposed by the U.S., Canada, the EU, and several European countries like Britain and Sweden), the disruption of relations, and the transformation of neighbors into rivals that have then gone on to form alliances among themselves.

For almost a decade, Turkey did not have ambassadors in Cairo, Damascus, or Tel Aviv and had problems in its relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia and troubled ties with Greece, France, and the U.S. Under domestic and external strains, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government has had to take conciliatory steps to fix its broken relations with neighbors and former friends, but on the whole the outcome has been mixed. While Israel agreed to a formal exchange of ambassadors and Saudi Arabia and the UAE responded to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's pleas to mend ties, Egypt and Syria have a list of preconditions that Erdoğan finds hard to accept.

The roots of Erdoğan's authoritarianism at home and assertiveness abroad lie in the domestic alliances he made and the close ties he established with former U.S. President Donald Trump. Erdoğan allied with the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) to form a government after the AKP lost its majority in parliament in the June 7, 2015 elections, and allied with the Eurasianists after the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016.¹ The Trump administration's policy

1. Eurasianism is a political movement represented by the Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*) that has a limited voter base but remains influential in the security bureaucracy; it

of reducing its commitment to the Middle East and the former U.S. president's tolerant approach toward autocrats also gave the Erdoğan government more room to act assertively in the region. As will be discussed below, while Erdoğan was trying to consolidate his power, he had to satisfy the various nationalist elements within Turkey. His Islamist-nationalist coalition has always been more aggressive in its foreign policy thinking, driven by a defensive-offensive logic that Turkey has been under constant threat and has to be assertive to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The AKP has adopted different political identities and ideologies since it came to power in 2002. The founders of the AKP were inculcated in closed Islamist circles with an anti-Western and anti-Israel outlook, and the party's adoption of a liberal, Western-oriented identity in the first decade of its rule represented a dramatic transformation. The formerly anti-European Union (EU) Islamists, defining themselves as "conservative democrats," sought membership in the EU, had no problem developing ties with Israel, and pursued a liberal foreign policy dubbed "zero problems with neighbors."²

It has since become clear that the AKP leadership instrumentalized Turkey's EU membership bid to transform the Turkish political scene to fit its broader political design. The "moderate Islamists," as they were called at the time, were coming from an anti-Western political tradition and in their first phase they had to prove to the domestic and Western power centers that they had transformed their Islamist ideology and now espoused liberal ideas. However, after Erdoğan garnered 49% of the vote in the 2011 elections, up from 34% in 2002, he realized that he no longer needed the support of liberal circles, and the EU's requirements for membership, which include reforms in the areas of rule of law, human rights, and democratization, became more of a hindrance than a help. At that point Erdoğan had already achieved most of his objectives, such as forcing the powerful military into submission by using the EU requirements, breaking the intransigence of the secular establishment, and controlling the majority of the media. The Erdoğan government unilaterally declared that it would not cooperate with the liberal intellectuals and broke up with them, jettisoning its democratization efforts and respect for human rights, and entered into a new authoritarian period.

In its second phase, starting with the onset of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, the AKP government moved to a policy of Islamism domestically and Neo-Ottomanism abroad.³ Under the influence of Ahmet Davutoğlu, then the foreign minister and later the prime minister, the AKP leadership considered the fall of secular autocratic regimes across the Middle East as a historical opportunity to install its ideological brethren in power in countries like Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Turkey tried to take advantage of the political turmoil in the Middle East and forged close ties with members of the Muslim Brotherhood across the Arab world in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, and with the opposition in Syria, which led to the beginning of the divide in Turkish-Saudi relations. The idea was that Erdoğan would become a regional leader and Turkey a Middle Eastern hegemon, relying on its influence stretching from Tunisia to northern Iraq. Initially, such a goal seemed possible to the ideologically driven AKP leadership since Turkey was economically more powerful, the U.S. was withdrawing from the Middle East, and the resulting power vacuum might be filled by a stronger Turkey. However, after the Arab Spring collapsed in Egypt following the military coup in July 2013, and partly in Tunisia with the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood-backed Ennahda coalition government, and then descended into bloody civil war in Libya, Yemen, and most importantly Syria, there was little space for Turkey to reclaim its previous position in the region.

The third and ongoing phase in the evolution of the AKP's identity is its nationalist/Eurasianist turn since June 2015, and especially after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. In keeping with his long-established pattern, Erdoğan shifted his alliance once again, this time allying overtly with the nationalist MHP and covertly with the pro-Eurasianist Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*) along with elements within the military that previously served jail sentences in the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases.⁴ Since 2015-16, Turkey has become politically even more authoritarian, ideologically more nationalist, more Eurasianist in its foreign policy orientation, and more militarized in its security policy, and all of these traits have been heightened and accentuated since Turkey transitioned to a presidential system in 2018. While Ankara's previous foreign policy orientation was Neo-Ottomanist and it tried to dominate the region by relying on the various

demands alignment with Russia and China and the severance of ties with the West.

2. Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy," May 20, 2010, *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/>.

3. Neo-Ottomanism is an expansionist thinking espoused by Islamists that aims to re-institute Turkey as a regional leader.

4. Following the latter trials in 2008-11, leading civilian and military personalities were sentenced to jail for their alleged membership in a clandestine deep state network known as Ergenekon and for plotting to overthrow the AKP government.



Photo above: Libyan military graduates loyal to the Government of National Accord take part in a parade marking their graduation, a result of a military training agreement with Turkey, at the Omar Mukhtar camp in Tajoura, southeast of Tripoli, on November 21, 2020. Photo by MAHMUD TURKIA/AFP via Getty Images.

branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, in this new phase Turkey has adopted a nationalist and militarist course, aiming at intimidation rather than domination.

The Turn in the Decision-Making Process

The primary consequence of the transition to the presidential system is, as expected, the accumulation of power in the hands of the president and his close entourage. This has created a number of problems as the new governing model has eliminated all checks and balances. The personification of the decision-making process and the exclusion of traditional mechanisms has led to the weakening of institutions. Especially hit hard is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which has traditionally been a Western-oriented institution with a highly capable staff of career diplomats known for its professionalism. The presidential system has dealt a serious blow to this once well-functioning, bipartisan institution that prioritized merit over party loyalty.

Under a presidential decree issued in 2018, the MFA was re-organized according to the principles of the presidential system, the most important of which was to allow pro-AKP public officials from other government offices to be employed in the ministry's lower ranks. The Erdoğan government has already increased the number of AKP members that are not career diplomats serving as ambassadors, reaching a total of 25. This has resulted in a hollowing out of the country's most institutionalized ministry. The consequences have been severe, including low morale among the traditional career diplomats responsible for the main functioning of the ministry, a decline in the quality of the diplomatic corps, and the weakening of the role of the MFA in making foreign policy. With the personification of decision-making, the role of the MFA diminished and the control and accountability of decisions by the Turkish parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee declined sharply. Many former diplomats point to a decline in the traditional functions of the MFA, like contributing to decision making, providing counsel, and conducting contingency planning.⁵ Senior diplomats have

5. Namık Tan, "Dışişleri Bakanlığı; Yeniden," December 27, 2021, *Ankara Politikalar Merkezi*, <https://apm.org.tr/2021/12/27/disisleri-bakanligi-yeniden/>.

been sidelined in international meetings, while Erdoğan relies on his own advisers in bilateral meetings, excluding experienced diplomats. In the two meetings held between Erdoğan and U.S. President Joe Biden in 2021 on the margins of international summits, no diplomats accompanied Erdoğan and notes were taken by inexperienced staff from a family with close ties to the president.

Erdoğan's Palace has risen to prominence in decision-making, while there has been a concomitant decline of the MFA institutionally. A new Council on Security and Foreign Policy was formed by presidential decree. In many cases, the spokesperson for the Presidency, İbrahim Kalın, has also assumed a role in foreign and security meetings, emerging as the counterpart of U.S. national security advisers.⁶

The Alliance with Nationalists and Eurasianists

Although Erdoğan's informal coalition with the nationalists and Eurasianists began in mid-2015, its impact on Turkish politics and foreign policy has become more visible in the wake of the transition to the presidential system. Three interrelated developments have marked Turkey's presidential turn. Domestically, democratic backsliding has gained new momentum and this has had serious implications in terms of human rights violations. Ideologically, the new Islamist-nationalist coalition has promoted nationalism and laid the groundwork for a more assertive foreign policy. As a consequence Turkey has tilted toward Eurasianism, enhancing energy cooperation and expanding trade and tourism with Russia, while Erdoğan has formed a strong bond and personal rapport with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Most critically, Turkey purchased the S-400 missile defense system from Russia despite strong U.S. objections and warnings that it would lead to a disruption in relations with Washington and Turkey's exclusion from the F-35 fighter jet project.

The most important transformation in Turkish foreign and security policy has been Ankara's involvement in many of the crises and conflicts within the broader Middle East and the Caucasus. At no time in its history has Turkey been involved in

6. "Statement by NSC Spokesperson Adrienne Watson on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Meeting with İbrahim Kalın, Spokesperson and Chief Advisor to the President of Türkiye," October 2, 2022, *The White House*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/02/statement-by-nsc-spokesperson-adrienne-watson-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan's-meeting-with-ibrahim-kalin-spokesperson-and-chief-advisor-to-the-president-of-turkiye/>.

so many crises and conflicts all at the same time. From Libya to Nagorno-Karabakh, from Qatar to the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey has either been part of ongoing crises or the instigator of disputes. Turkey's nationalist/Eurasianist turn has resulted in the militarization of its security policies. A nationalist, state-centric, and security-focused mindset has long dominated the core of the Turkish state, and those who share this view believe Turkey has been under constant threat by foreign powers. Since the 1980s, the Kurdish issue and the support given to Kurdish politics, and especially to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), a Kurdish separatist group that has fought against Turkey since early 1980s, by some of Turkey's allies have nurtured this perception of an existential threat. During the 2010s, the nationalists and Eurasianists argued strongly that Turkey has been encircled by the U.S. in the south, i.e., the U.S. protection of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD) in northern Syria, which is the Syrian arm of the PKK, and by the EU in the eastern Mediterranean. Eurasianist thinking converged with already strong nationalist politics and ushered in a return to a traditional security-focused mindset reminiscent of the 1980s and 1990s. In order to break the perceived encirclement, Turkey began to use its military to project power across borders and even overseas. Thus, Turkey's military operations in Syria were justified on the grounds that Ankara had to divide the so-called unified Kurdish state in northern Syria, while its militarization of the eastern Mediterranean and involvement in the Libyan civil war were aimed at protecting its rightful maritime claims.

Turkey's three incursions in Syria, in August 2016, January 2018, and October 2019, were militarily successful, and Ankara also waged a limited military operation in February 2020 against Syrian forces near Idlib after a major attack on Turkish troops in the area. For the first time in its history, the Turkish military used foreign jihadists quite effectively in its military operations. Ankara not only removed the PYD, which Turkey lists as a terrorist organization, from these areas in northern Syria, but it also set up administrative mechanisms appointing local governors.

In the eastern Mediterranean the AKP government, along with its Eurasianist allies, pursued an assertive naval policy dubbed "Blue Homeland."⁷ Claiming that Turkey has been

7. İlhan Uzgel, "Turkey and the Mediterranean Imbroglio: the Story of an Aspiring Regional Power," *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, November 2020, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/17494.pdf>.

encircled in the Mediterranean, the Eurasianists developed a more aggressive strategy to defend its maritime rights. In line with this new naval doctrine, which envisaged the protection of its maritime zones by force if necessary and promoted maximalist claims of sovereignty in a larger sea zone, Turkey deployed its drillships to carry out seismic surveys in contested waters, accompanied by naval vessels. On one occasion, a Turkish warship collided with a French naval vessel,⁸ and the Turkish navy blocked and chased drillships exploring the maritime areas claimed by the Republic of Cyprus (RoC). This has had strong repercussions, especially for the EU, but also for the U.S., since such disputes have weakened NATO's southern flank. Turkey's second move in the Mediterranean was the conclusion of a memorandum of understanding on the delineation of maritime zones in November 2019 with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, followed by a military agreement.⁹ Since then, Turkey has formally become part of the ongoing conflict in Libya. It sent its armed Bayraktar TB2 drones, leading to the world's first drone war in the skies over Libya against the forces of Gen. Khalifa Hifter, supported by the UAE, Russia, and France.

Turkey's bold moves in the eastern Mediterranean and the deterioration of its relations with many countries helped foster the formation of new security ties in the region. Greece-RoC-Israel and Greece-RoC-Egypt have initiated trilateral summit meetings and expanded defense cooperation, and both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have developed defense ties with those eastern Mediterranean countries, including carrying out joint military exercises, a first in the region. The formation of the East Med Gas Forum in late 2019,¹⁰ which excluded Turkey, a country with one of the longest coasts in the eastern Mediterranean, highlighted the extent of Turkey's isolation in the region, which Presidency Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin optimistically dubbed "precious loneliness."¹¹

8. Alexandra Brzozowski, "NATO opens probe into France-Turkey naval incident in Mediterranean," June 18, 2020, *Euractiv*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/nato-opens-probe-into-france-turkey-naval-incident-in-mediterranean/>.

9. Daren Butler and Tuvan Gumrukcu, "Turkey signs maritime boundaries deal with Libya amid exploration row," November 28, 2019, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-libya/turkey-signs-maritime-boundaries-deal-with-libya-amid-exploration-row-idUSKBN1Y213I>.

10. Sergio Matalucci, EastMed Gas Forum fuels energy diplomacy in troubled region, October 10, 2020, *DW*, <https://www.dw.com/en/eastmed-gas-forum-fuels-energy-diplomacy-in-troubled-region/a-55206641>.

11. David Gardner, Turkey's foreign policy of 'precious loneliness,' November 15, 2015, *The Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/69662b36-7752-11e5-a95a-27d368e1dd7f>.

Turkey's relations with the EU had already been stalled well before its recent foreign policy shift; the AKP government had lost interest in seeking membership, while the EU, under pressure from rising right-wing populism across the continent, also preferred a Turkey that was less enthusiastic about membership. Ties between the two sides evolved, especially after Erdoğan discovered the EU's vulnerability in the face of a pressing refugee problem, made abundantly clear by the 2015 European migrant crisis. In March 2016 he struck a deal with the EU to keep Syrian and other refugees from crossing into the EU in return for economic assistance,¹² though he has since occasionally pushed refugees to the border to penalize the EU.

On any number of issues, disputes, conflicts, and an inward-looking mentality have dominated the thinking of the government, which has disseminated conspiracy theories implying that a "supreme mind" is working to undermine it and Western powers, fearful of a rising Turkey, are trying to stop a would-be regional hegemon.¹³ This has led to the rise of anti-Western and anti-American sentiment among the public and the spread of the unfounded idea that Western powers are jealous of Turkey's success. This is coupled with the perception that the U.S. is encircling Turkey in northern Syria and the Aegean and that the West intends to set up a Kurdish state stretching from northern Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea.

End of a Dream

Turkey is a mid-sized country with a dynamic but dependent economy. Erdoğan's growing authoritarian trajectory has adversely affected investments, triggering an outflow of capital, leading to the cancellation of some investment plans, and exacerbating the volatility of the Turkish lira. Since 2017 Erdoğan has consolidated his power politically but the country has weakened economically. Turkey is isolated regionally, its military is overstretched, and its efforts to play Russia off against the U.S. while keeping the EU at arm's length are not sustainable. Turkey remains the only isolated country in a volatile region — the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East — while its rivals have developed close partnerships driven by security, diplomacy, and energy. Military overstretch

12. James Kanter, "European Union Reaches Deal With Turkey to Return New Asylum Seekers," March 18, 2016, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/19/world/europe/european-union-turkey-refugees-migrants.html>.

13. Cengiz Candar, "Why weakened post-coup Turkey may drift from the West," August 22, 2016, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/08/turkey-power-vacuum-pkk-exploit.html>.



Photo above: The Blue Homeland-2022 exercise held in the Black Sea, Aegean Sea, and eastern Mediterranean by the Turkish Naval Forces Command in Mugla on April 21, 2022. Photo by Durmuş Genç/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

also brings its own vulnerabilities, a fact made clear by the February 2020 attack on Turkish forces near Idlib, Syria, which killed 34 troops, and the strike on al-Watiya Air Base in Libya in June 2020 after Turkish-backed forces captured the site, which injured several Turkish officers. Military involvement in cross-border areas and in the eastern Mediterranean have also resulted in confrontation with some of Turkey's allies (like Greece, France, and the U.S.), as well as regional players (such as the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Egypt) and major powers (like Russia). Confronting all of these powers at the same time on various fronts has been militarily and economically costly. U.S. and French military and diplomatic support for Greece has disrupted the strategic balance between the U.S., Turkey, and Greece in the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean, and has been a huge strategic setback for Turkey.

In this period, the Trump administration's plans to scale back U.S. involvement in the Middle East helped Turkey to gain more leverage in the region. Trump stated that he admired strong leaders, and Erdoğan found an opportunity to pursue leadership diplomacy and establish close ties with him. But

Trump's election defeat in 2020 was a blow to Erdoğan. The U.S. was already disturbed by Turkey's unilateral actions in northern Syria and the S-400 deal with Russia, which led to the imposition of sanctions pursuant to the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in December 2020.¹⁴ When the Biden administration came into office, it was determined to institutionalize relations and the leadership diplomacy came to an end. Even more dramatic for the Erdoğan government was that the EU and the U.S. took a common position against Turkey. For the first time in its history, Turkey was sanctioned by both the EU and the U.S., and for the first time in Turkish-U.S. relations both sides of the aisle in the U.S. Congress turned against Turkey. In December 2020, the EU Council called Turkey's actions in the eastern Mediterranean provocative, accused Ankara of escalating the situation, and declared¹⁵ that it would coordinate with the U.S. on matters relating to Turkey and the situation in the eastern

14. Michael Pompeo, "The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA 231," December 14, 2020, *U.S. Department of State*, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-united-states-sanctions-turkey-under-caatsa-231/index.html>.

15. "European Council, 10-11 December 2020," December 11, 2020, *European Council*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2020/12/10-11/>.

Mediterranean. Confronting both the U.S. and the EU at the same time was beyond Turkey's capacity, especially when it was suffering from an economic downturn and the government was losing popular support.

Consequently, the Erdoğan government had to revise its overambitious foreign policy posture. Its new policy is called a "problem-free circle" and the government has gradually taken a conciliatory position, beginning with the eastern Mediterranean, ending its seismic searches, withdrawing its drillships, and agreeing to start exploratory meetings with Greece.

In its second round, the AKP government has tried to fix relations with Egypt, Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. However, as Turkish policy in the region has proved, it is usually easier to damage relations than to fix them. While the UAE, with its new policy line of engaging a multitude of actors, agreed to mend relations, Egypt came up with a list of preconditions, including Turkey's withdrawal from Libya, extradition of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the termination of their media activities. Israel has been proceeding gradually, sending its president for an official visit in February 2022 and agreeing to restore full diplomatic ties in August.¹⁶ While Turkey showed interest in entering a new round of reconciliation talks with Armenia, the Saudis were hesitant about taking a similar step, demanding that Ankara first dismiss its case against the perpetrators in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. Turkey eventually acquiesced and transferred the court case to the Saudi authorities, paving the way for Erdoğan to pay an official visit to the kingdom in May 2022, with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman travelling to Ankara the following month.¹⁷

Facing severe criticism from the U.S., and realizing that the Biden administration was keeping its distance, the Erdoğan government has tried to prove that it is a valuable ally in a critical region, avoiding disputes with other U.S. partners and attempting to curry favor with the Biden administration. Unable to develop a personal relationship with Biden, even though the two leaders know each other, Erdoğan's first move was to try to take over the running of Kabul airport after the U.S.

withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. Nevertheless, despite Turkey's efforts, its bid ultimately failed due to the Taliban's intransigence. The outbreak of war in Ukraine following Russia's invasion in late February 2022 has provided a new opportunity for the Erdoğan government to emphasize Turkey's strategic position. Ankara was quick to call the occupation a war, enabling the government to implement the Montreux Convention of 1936, which regulates the conditions under which vessels may pass through the Turkish Straits.¹⁸

So far, the Erdoğan government's efforts to reset relations with its neighbors and allies have not yielded the expected results. There are a range of reasons why Turkey's moves have not received a warm welcome. The first is the issue of trust. With so many zig-zags over the years, Erdoğan is not considered a reliable ally, partner, or counterpart. Second, Turkey's vulnerabilities are well-known, and it is the Erdoğan government that has been isolated and is in dire need of repairing broken relations. This has pushed Turkey into a weaker position diplomatically, and many of Ankara's rivals and neighbors are slow in responding to its initiatives.

The Way Ahead

Erdoğan is trying to make a new deal with the Biden administration and the EU. He is offering a somewhat trouble-free relationship, cooperation on regional issues, and close ties with U.S. allies in the region, in exchange for a free hand in domestic politics. This would be a win-win situation for him: getting the support of the U.S., reviving a stalled relationship with the EU, and giving him an opportunity to continue his authoritarian style in domestic politics and thereby increase his chances of winning the next elections, set to be held in June 2023.

If Erdoğan wins the upcoming elections, he will most likely maintain his adept transactional style in foreign policy, as demonstrated by his negotiations with Sweden and Finland over their NATO membership bid. Erdoğan used the opportunity to strike a hard bargain with both the two aspiring NATO members and the U.S., trying to secure the purchase of F-16 fighters and remove the ongoing U.S. court case over Halkbank's alleged breach of Iranian sanctions.¹⁹

16. "Turkey, Israel to restore full diplomatic ties," August 17, 2022, *France 24*, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220817-turkey-israel-to-restore-full-diplomatic-ties>.

17. "A new era: Saudi Arabia's MBS in Turkey as nations mend ties," June 22, 2022, *Al-Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/22/saudi-crown-prince-mbs-visits-turkey-as-countries-normalise-ties>.

18. "Turkey to implement pact limiting Russian warships to Black Sea," February 28, 2022, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-implement-international-pact-access-shipping-straits-due-ukraine-war-2022-02-27/>.

19. Amanda Macias, "NATO reaches a deal with Turkey to admit Sweden and Finland,

Over the past two decades of dealing with serious setbacks and ordeals, Erdoğan, as a seasoned leader, has gained insights about the vulnerabilities of his counterparts. He has realized the degree of EU sensitivity over any refugee flows and has effectively played on its fears. He has used the members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Turkey as a bargaining chip to ameliorate relations with Egypt and his government's ties with Hamas to fix relations with Israel.

The problem with a possible continuation of Erdoğan's rule is that many of Turkey's allies have lost trust in his government after so many changes and reversals in foreign policy. Erdoğan has alienated many of his allies, both in the West and in the region. Even if the government can repair its troubled relations with neighbors and allies, some of the strategic losses will endure. Turkey's recent use of hard power has disrupted the balance of forces in the eastern Mediterranean. Israel has already given guarantees to Greece that their cooperation will not be affected by a restoration of Turkish-Israeli relations.²⁰ The U.S. has terminated a long-term arms embargo on the RoC and intensified its military and defense ties with Greece. Turkey has no exit strategy in Libya or Syria, nor does it seem to have a plan for how to handle Idlib or get rid of the S-400 missiles that have been such a roadblock in relations with the U.S.

After it failed to dominate the region by pursuing a neo-Ottomanist ideology and using soft power instruments during the Arab Spring, the AKP government, through its alliance with nationalist/Eurasianist forces, adopted a militarized approach exerting regional influence through hard power instruments, mainly its military, which led Turkey to drift away from its Western orientation. Between 2016 and 2020, Turkey reached the physical and material limits of what it could achieve through a militarized foreign policy, and its second bid for regional influence once again failed under strong and united Western pressure. Erdoğan's push to launch a new military operation in northern Syria in the summer of 2022 to unite the two separate Turkish-dominated areas was resisted by both the U.S. and Russia. Alienated from the West, isolated regionally, with an economy in free fall, it was too risky a move for Erdoğan to pursue as he prepared for the upcoming 2023 presidential elections.

The Biden administration has been adamant about keeping its distance from the Turkish government, and Erdoğan had to put the regional house in order, mend ties with Israel to burnish his tarnished image in Washington, and restore relations with the Saudis and Emiratis to attract much-needed foreign currency to slow the depreciation of the Turkish lira. However, his recent moves to fix relations with many U.S. allies have been perceived as a mere "charm offensive." The Turkish president's ups and downs have already made many of his former supporters and allies wary, giving rise to "Erdoğan fatigue" in a number of Western capitals.

Turkey needs a reset and a new paradigm, not only in its foreign and security policies, but also in politics in general. Many of the problems the country faces are a direct result of misjudgments, poor decision making by unqualified staff, and putting domestic electoral concerns above national interests. Turkey is associated with radical Islamists jihadists in Syria, seen as the protector of the region's Islamists (including members of the Muslim Brotherhood), and has become known for blackmailing Western countries through arrests, a textbook tactic of rising authoritarian regimes in the 2010s. A fresh start and a new mentality based on democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law, and secular politics are desperately needed. This would restore Turkey's place in the region and the world. In foreign policy, instead of trying to balance great powers against one another, Turkey needs a more a balanced overall approach, normalizing relations with neighbors, returning to the use of soft power, and maintaining good ties with the U.S. and the EU as well as rising powers, but without too much entanglement.

What Would an Opposition Victory in 2023 Mean?

The AKP has been gradually losing ground at home due to the economic downturn, and Turkey's opposition parties are closer to an election victory than they have been in the last 20 years. However, in terms of foreign policy, the opposition in general is either too opaque in its vision or follows Erdoğan's path on some critical issues. Any new government will have to expend considerable time and energy to end Turkey's regional isolation and mend ties with the U.S. and the EU. Moreover, it will probably take over a ruined economy and will desperately need foreign currency flows as it tries to recover and rebuild.

secretary-general says," June 28, 2022, *CNBC*, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/28/nato-reaches-deal-with-turkey-to-admit-sweden-and-finland-secretary-general-says.html>.

20. Israel's president heads to Greece to calm ally ahead of Turkey visit, February 24, 2022, *i24*, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy/1645686204-israel-s-president-heads-to-greece-to-calm-ally-ahead-of-turkey-visit>.

In the event of an opposition victory in the 2023 elections, the first task should be to reorganize decision making, restoring professionalism and meritocracy, and re-arranging the various overlapping government institutions involved in implementing foreign policy. This can be handled relatively easily since Turkey still has significant, well-educated human capital.

The main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), historically places special importance on regional stability and cooperation. If it comes to power, it may be expected to re-establish diplomatic ties with the Assad regime as the party has already reiterated its position publicly. Moreover, the CHP has envisaged the formation of a "Middle East Security and Cooperation Organization" in an effort to enhance cooperation among Turkey's neighbors. Any new government will definitely face a dilemma between maintaining Turkey's military presence in northern Syria and pursuing normalization with the Assad government.

Any alternative government would likely reorient Turkish foreign policy toward the West since there is a growing discontent, especially among the urbanized sections of Turkish society, regarding "over-Middleeasternization" and Islamization of Turkish domestic and foreign policy. The country's young generation is pro-EU, with more than 70% support for membership, even though relations with Brussels are stalled.

In the case of a new government, Turkey is expected to establish a greater distance in its ties with Russia, replacing Erdoğan and Putin's close personal ties with a more institutionalized relationship. The opposition parties have in general been critical of the AKP government's decision to purchase the S-400 missiles and would try to find a reasonable solution to the issue that would restore Turkey's involvement in the F-35 fighter jet project.

Turkey under the AKP government is considered an unreliable, unpredictable, and untrustworthy country by many of its allies, friends, and neighbors. The most critical task going forward will be to restore Turkey's image, position, and place in a turbulent world.

dismissed by a presidential decree in 2017. He has taught and written extensively on Turkish foreign policy and regional issues. Since his dismissal, he has been a commentator and op-ed writer on foreign policy issues for various internet sites, Gazete Duvar, Kısa Dalga, national daily Birgün, and on national TV channels.

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