



MIDDLE EAST REPORT

MEB

CONFRONTING THE NEW TURKEY

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COVER İmam Hatip religious school students wave national flags as they wait for the arrival of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during a graduation ceremony in Istanbul. (Murad Sezer/Reuters)

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Since the failed July, 2016 coup attempt, Turkey has weathered a series of measures aimed at consolidating the unfettered power of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). This rather erratic counter-coup has been undertaken through massive purges in the military, judiciary, media and academia—with tens of thousands detained or forced into exile—shuttering many once-independent civic institutions and enshrining virtually unchecked executive power in a new constitution. Despite its electoral popularity, the AKP-led government is facing growing criticism at home and abroad: it has abandoned efforts to peacefully resolve the Kurdish question; its foreign policy lurches from one crisis to another at Erdoğan's apparent whim and its once red-hot economy teeters on the brink of a debt-induced meltdown, conveniently blamed upon any variety of current enemies, real or imagined. As it stands, many consider the government corrupt, unaccountable and intolerant of political opposition.

When the Islamist-leaning AKP first came to power in 2002, Turkey was touted as a shining example of the marriage of democracy and Islam. In its first two terms, the AKP government embraced the liberalizing reforms of the European Union accession process along with IMF conditionalities, which bolstered its legitimacy on the international stage and among a variety of domestic constituencies, tired of the old military-backed order. Fueled by rapid economic growth and rising living standards among previously marginalized communities, the AKP built a broad-based hegemonic bloc that it rode to electoral success. Since that time, however, it has grown clear that neither democratic pluralism nor economic justice is the final destination of Erdoğan's AKP: Turkey is currently characterized by unprecedented social inequality combined with a return to authoritarianism—this time under a party led by a strong individual rather than a military junta.

Turkey's authoritarian turn is often portrayed as a by-product of President Erdoğan's vainglorious personality or as the inherent telos of political Islam. But rather than signifying a stock competition between religion and secularism or between Islam and the West, the current fault lines in Turkey, as in much of the world, are emblematic of a slow-moving structural breakdown and reordering of the global capitalist system and the resurgence of nationalist, nativist and authoritarian politics in response to this.

Erdoğan's executive power grab bears an elective affinity with emerging forms of populist authoritarianism and illiberal democracy, as well as anti-immigrant and anti-globalist sensibilities, that have redrawn the European political map and largely crushed nascent democratic risings across the Middle East. While Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Germany's AfD, the Swedish Democrats and the Danish People's Party illustrate this trend in Europe, examples in the Middle East include General Sisi's military dictatorship, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's reforming mafia state and Israel's naked embrace of a Jewish ethnocracy via its discriminatory nation-state law. Elsewhere, Narendra Modi's militant Hindu nationalism in India, the extreme right-wing populism of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and Rodrigo Duterte's police state in the Philippines confirm a global trend, one comfortably embraced in the US by President Donald Trump.

Continued on page 35.



President Erdoğan addresses supporters in Ankara after his coalition won presidential and parliamentary elections, June 15, 2018. EMIN ÖZMEN/MAGNUM PHOTOS

Turkey's Constitutional Coup

Aslı Bâli

Turkey has undergone a dizzying array of crises over the last five years. Beginning with the repressive crackdown against the Gezi Protests during the summer of 2013, the country has gone from being cited as a model Muslim democracy to taking pride of place on the growing worldwide list of democratic reversals. Pundits now lump Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in with populist authoritarian leaders ranging

from Hungary's Victor Orbán to the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte. On some indices Turkey leads the pack, jailing more journalists than any other country, throttling the independence of the judiciary and establishing a near total stranglehold on the media.

The country's descent into majoritarian authoritarianism accelerated in 2016 with a failed coup attempt followed by the imposition of a state of emergency that lasted two years. With the rule of law all but suspended, Erdoğan's government

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purged perceived opponents, waged a war against the country's Kurdish population and stifled all forms of dissent, marking a fundamental break in the country's political trajectory.

That break has now been institutionalized by means of a constitutional transformation that is perhaps the most audacious gambit of Erdoğan's 16-year rule. Under cover of the state of emergency, with nearly all democratic prerequisites for a constitutional referendum suspended and troublesome members of parliament and constitutional court judges detained, the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) put in place a set of constitutional amendments that effectively repealed the democratic character of the republic. And they accomplished this constitutional coup in the name of saving democracy.

Regular elections may continue under Turkey's amended constitution, but the concentration of power in the executive gives it *de facto* control over both the legislative and judicial branches, eroding the separation of powers and checks and balances that are the basic prerequisites for democratic rule. Turkey now provides a blueprint for how a partially consolidated democracy may be dismantled from within using constitutional tools.

Constitutional Amendments Before 2017

There is considerable debate about whether this tragedy was foretold—that is, whether the AKP came into office in 2002 with the goal of establishing constitutional authoritarianism. From the outset, constitutional reform was an element of the party's political agenda but that was true of almost all parties in the Turkish political spectrum in 2002. The constitution adopted in 1982 was drafted under military rule with deeply illiberal and anti-democratic provisions. Widely seen as an obstacle to democratic consolidation in the country, the 1982 constitution was amended nearly 20 times over three decades (from 1987 to 2017). Most amendments came in the form of packages changing multiple provisions at once and many were adopted by broad coalitions of parties across the political spectrum.

Until 2017, amendments to the constitution largely shared a set of common characteristics: They were designed to liberalize, democratize and civilianize the constitution. More specifically, amendments served three ends: enlarging fundamental rights and freedoms for Turkish citizens; strengthening rule of law guarantees constraining state action; and removing or reducing special privileges set aside for the military. Amendments lifted bans on political parties, eliminated security courts, abolished the death penalty, introduced affirmative action and reduced the military's role in civilian governance.

Once Turkey began to pursue accession to the European Union in the early 2000s, there was broad parliamentary consensus behind adopting liberalizing and democratizing reforms in keeping with EU standards. The earlier amendments routinely earned praise from constitutional experts of the

Council of Europe's Venice Commission for Democracy through Law. There was also widespread consensus, however, that the amendments did not go far enough and that the consolidation of democracy in Turkey would require a new constitution.

But a new constitution was not in the cards. Turkish constitutional identity is marked by two fundamental cleavages that produced an impasse whenever a constituent assembly or constitutional commission was convened to consider wholesale change. Those cleavages—over the status of religion and an ethnic definition of citizenship—mirror the basic polarization in the society between secular and religiously conservative communities and between ultra-nationalists and those who prefer a civic and inclusive definition of citizenship.

The AKP has deftly maneuvered around these cleavages, sometimes exploiting them and sometimes sidestepping them, to press through incremental reforms that have fundamentally redefined the constitutional identity of the republic without entirely replacing its constitution. Six sets of amendment packages were passed under AKP governments prior to 2017. The first four packages prior to 2006 were largely consistent with EU accession requirements, including abolishing the death penalty. In 2007, the AKP embarked on more ambitious structural transformations, which were presented as dismantling anti-democratic elements of the Turkish constitutional order—notably by limiting the role of tutelary institutions put in place by the military junta in 1982 to cabin the authority of the elected branches of government.

But some observers within and outside the country worried that limiting the tutelary role of the military and judiciary—long seen as bastions of secularism and commitment to the founding ideology of the state (known as “Kemalism” after the founding statesman Mustafa Kemal)—might have a double-edged effect, enabling the AKP to erode the Turkish constitutional commitment to secularism. Another source of concern was the ruling party's insistence on an increasingly majoritarian definition of democracy. Then Prime Minister Erdoğan was especially fond of invoking his electoral mandate to silence critics.

The worry that the 2007 constitutional amendment—which introduced direct elections for president in place of an appointed and largely symbolic president—might open the door for an emboldened majoritarian presidency proved prescient. Seven years later, these fears were fully realized in Erdoğan's invocation of a populist, majoritarian mandate to concentrate power in the executive once he became the first directly elected president. But such concerns were given short shrift at the time of the 2007 referendum. Following on the heels of an attempt by the military to block the appointment of the AKP's preferred presidential candidate, the amendment was popular with an electorate fed up with military intervention and passed by a large majority.

More significant concerns were raised with the AKP's 2010 constitutional amendment package, which cobbled together liberalizing changes—enhancing some individual rights and



A protest in support of the daily *Cumhuriyet* and its arrested staff, November 1, 2016. The headline reads, “One more coup against press freedom/NO SURRENDER.”

further restraining the military—with a restructuring of the judiciary that would alter the composition of the bench. Here again, these concerns were largely sidelined due to long-standing grievances over judicial insistence on a restrictive definition of secularism. The judicial system of appointments and promotions imposed an ideological litmus test to ensure that judges would adhere to a strict interpretation of the state’s founding ideology. The de facto effect of the system was to make clear that religiously observant judicial candidates need not apply.

On their face, the 2010 amendments were unobjectionable, removing this ideological constraint and including a greater swathe of the judiciary in the appointment and promotion process. Moreover, a majority of Turks, and especially the AKP’s own constituents, were happy to countenance changes that allowed a more permissive approach to the country’s jurisprudence on secularism. In practice, the amendments would predictably mean that a greater proportion of judges would have ideological affinity to the ruling party, since these

were the very candidates previously excluded. Still, because the amendments were in line with broader democratic practice concerning high judicial councils, they won the support of the Venice Commission.

As a result of the other, more liberal features of the package, the 2010 amendments gained the support of constituencies beyond the AKP’s base, passing with 58 percent of the vote (while the AKP has never garnered more than 49 percent of the vote in a general election). Nonetheless there was good reason to be concerned that the AKP was embracing a form of tactical liberalism to facilitate court packing.

In retrospect, however, it was the AKP that regretted the judicial restructuring of 2010. Having strengthened the autonomy of the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HCJP) and limited the role of the executive in appointments, the government found itself blindsided in December 2013 by a criminal probe into cabinet ministers and their relatives on corruption charges being investigated by the very judges and prosecutors that were ushered in following the amendments.

Treating the investigation as an attempted judicial coup, and declaring that the judiciary had been infiltrated by its opponents from the Gülen movement, the government immediately introduced legislative changes to limit the powers of the Council while simultaneously removing or transferring hundreds of judges and prosecutors, replacing them with more reliable pro-government appointees. This legislation was manifestly unconstitutional and was eventually invalidated by the Constitutional Court, but since such rulings do not have retroactive effect the individuals reassigned or removed were not restored to their positions. Further legislative changes followed, not only reversing the gains in judicial autonomy from the 2010 amendment package, but politicizing judicial elections to the point of abrogating the independence of the judiciary altogether.

In many ways, the 2010 constitutional amendments and their aftermath were the harbinger of the constitutional transformation to come. The AKP of 2002, positioned on the center right of the Turkish political spectrum, included well-known and non-Islamist politicians under a reformist and anti-corruption political platform, with real promise for both economic and political liberalization. But over its first decade in office, many identified with political reform were sidelined while the core of the party's political power coalesced around Erdoğan. Whatever liberalizing potential the party might once have had was extinguished as the party became a vehicle for the ambitions of its leader. By 2013 it was clear that the cumulative effect of the AKP's incremental constitutional reforms had chipped away at democratic norms, clearing the way for Erdoğan's consolidation of power.

Whereas the trajectory of Turkish constitutional amendments from 1987 to 2010 could plausibly be described as democratizing, the Turkish case represents a cautionary tale of how easily stalled democratic consolidation can devolve into democratic reversal. The tools of constitutionalism can be particularly insidious in these cases, providing an appearance of legitimacy to changes that entrench authoritarian control while vaunting the putative democratic pedigree of reform by referendum.

Constitutional Transformation by Coup

The circumstances of the attempted coup of June, 2016 and its aftermath have been well-described elsewhere.¹ What is critical to understand is the degree to which the failed coup represented a “gift from God,” to quote Erdoğan's memorable response, for those seeking a pretext to establish emergency rule and consolidate power. The AKP had made the replacement of the country's parliamentary system with an executive presidency central to its campaign in the general elections of 2015 but the idea received a cold reception even among the party's own base. With a state of emergency in place, however, the AKP seized on the opportunity to reshape the electoral landscape, tilting the

playing field in its favor to realize its constitutional ambitions. Large-scale constitutional change that had faced significant electoral opposition prior to emergency rule was now made possible by suspending the basic prerequisites for a free and fair democratic vote.

The state of emergency included wide-ranging purges of civil servants—including everyone from public university professors to K–12 teachers to appellate court judges, chief prosecutors and senior ministry officials to agricultural inspectors and low-ranking clerks—and the near total prohibition on freedom of assembly other than rallies by the ruling party. The purges all but paralyzed the country's legal system with even ordinary court cases unable to proceed due to the mass firing of judges, while basic procedural protections were denied those languishing in pretrial detention or convicted in summary proceedings. The expropriation and closure of nearly 200 broadcast and print media outlets and the jailing of journalists as well as opposition MPs, too, was made easier (though MPs had lost their parliamentary immunity even before the imposition of emergency rule). But the convening of a referendum to pass sweeping changes to the constitution was by far the most consequential of the measures taken under emergency rule: The constitutional changes ensured the durability of Erdoğan's accumulation of powers beyond any state of emergency.

The dramatic scale and scope of the constitutional transformation achieved by the April 16, 2017 referendum is apparent in the measures adopted.² The 18 articles of the amendment package resulted in modifications to nearly 50 constitutional provisions and the repeal of an additional 21. The net effect of these changes was to end the system of parliamentary government that characterized the Turkish republic from its founding, replacing it with an executive presidency system that undermines the separation of powers and imposes almost no checks other than periodic, and increasingly orchestrated, elections to hold presidential action accountable.

The specific measures that make up this sui generis executive presidency (or “Turkish-style presidentialism,” as AKP officials sometimes describe it) are a hodgepodge of provisions borrowed from earlier precedents and other constitutional systems, cherry-picking features to maximize the concentration of power in the presidency while eliminating the checks that protect against authoritarianism. Kim Scheppele has referred to this method as the “Frankenstate problem”—a system of government “composed from various perfectly reasonable pieces” but rendered monstrous from “the horrible way that those pieces interact when stitched together.”³ The 2017 Turkish constitutional amendments may be one of the starkest examples of such a constitutional gerrymander.

The 2017 referendum, first of all, substantially and dramatically weakens the legislative branch in favor of the executive. The number of deputies was raised from 550 to 600 and the age of eligibility was lowered to 18. The council of ministers (the cabinet) and the prime minister's office were abolished and their



Banners of President Erdoğan hang in the Beşiktaş neighborhood of Istanbul with the words “Big Turkey needs a strong leader,” June 2018.

powers transferred to the presidency. Powers that the cabinet never possessed—notably authority over the armed forces—are also now invested in the president. Parliament no longer has a role in appointing the cabinet. Other traditional parliamentary powers such as setting the annual budget or regulating the state audit authority are likewise transferred to the president. In addition, the president is empowered to veto legislation and while parliament retains the ability to override a veto such action now requires a higher threshold vote. The powers of inquiry and interpellation by the parliament are also starkly limited, with no provision for questioning ministers and an extraordinarily high voting threshold to open an investigation into alleged criminal responsibility of executive branch officials. The only other accountability lever available to the parliament is to call for new elections—effectively dissolving itself but also requiring a new presidential election—but this power, too, is now subject to an extraordinarily high vote threshold of a three-fifths majority.

Moreover, the constitution designates domains inherently related to executive power to be governed by executive decree.

This legislative authority is not delegated by parliament to the executive but rather reserved for the president as a constitutional matter. As a result, there is no need for an empowering legislative framework for presidential decrees, which might have set some limits. While the amendments enshrine the principle that legislation would prevail over presidential decrees in case of conflict, there are reasons to doubt the effectiveness of this principle in practice. With legislative and presidential elections combined on a five-year cycle, and presidential candidates now allowed to be members of political parties, the likelihood that the president will be from the party that commands a majority in parliament is heightened because the president will effectively be running as the top of the ticket in a combined election. If the president's party commands a majority in parliament, the likelihood of legislators overriding an executive decree with countervailing legislation is low. In short, the constitutional amendments in the area of legislative power transfer competencies to the executive and subject parliament to extensive new constraints.

The measures passed in the 2017 referendum establishing the executive presidency represents an even more far-reaching assault on the separation of powers. The reserved areas in which the executive now has law-making authorities effectively create a parallel system of administrative laws with little opportunity for judicial review or other checks. The original legislative power accorded to the president under Turkey's new constitutional system, and the absence of parliamentary checks on that authority, is the clearest example of the excessive concentration of executive power. Moreover, this enhanced power is granted to a partisan officeholder.

The presidency was long deemed neutral, non-partisan and symbolic, but since 2015 Erdoğan has openly disregarded the constitutional injunction that the president must renounce party affiliation. The constitutional amendments remove the requirement of non-partisanship, clearing the way for heads of political parties to run for the presidency, making it more likely that the president will lead a party that wields a majority or plurality in parliament. The partisan president is also free to appoint and dismiss cabinet members at will—they need not be elected officials and are accountable solely to the president. Thus, unlike the council of ministers under the parliamentary system made up of elected MPs accountable to the public, the government now answers exclusively to the president. These officials—vice-presidents and ministers—are not of a fixed number, have no set terms of office, and their portfolios and division of responsibilities is entirely at the discretion of the president. Parliament has no power to approve or veto nominations. The president is also free to select some ministers from parliament, creating a significant patronage opportunity with the legislature.

The powers of the presidency enumerated within the amended provisions of the constitution include: the power to appoint and dismiss vice-presidents, ministers and senior state officials; the power to legislate by presidential decree on executive matters; the power to determine national security policies; the power to appoint the chief of the general staff of the military and the power to appoint, and regulate by presidential decree, the National Security Council; the sole power to declare a state of emergency and the power to issue emergency decrees for its duration; the power to dissolve parliament and call early elections; the power to prepare the state budget; the power to veto laws; the power to address parliament on matters of domestic and foreign policy; and the power to appoint members of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors and to appoint judges to the Constitutional Court. In addition, the constitution now provides that the competencies of the president may be extended by ordinary legislation, which could easily become a formula for nearly unlimited powers, as the Venice Commission has observed.⁴

The only remaining checks on the powers accumulated by the incumbent in office are impeachment, regular elections and term limits. But here, too, the devil is in the details.

The vote thresholds for parliament to initiate impeachment investigations are so high as to render the process all but inoperable except in the unlikely scenario that an opposition party commands a super-majority of seats in parliament. While the president is ostensibly limited to two five-year terms, the amendments also provide that if the parliament dissolves itself prior to completion of the second term, the president may run again for office. If the president's party commands a legislative majority, it would not be difficult to imagine gamesmanship enabling the president to remain in office well beyond the ten years contemplated by formal term limits.

The provisions affecting the judiciary, the final category of changes passed in the 2017 referendum, are less extensive than those reallocating powers between the legislative and executive branches, but are perhaps more devastating. On the bright side, the constitutional amendments completed the project of civilianizing the judicial branch by abolishing military courts—including the appellate military system—other than for purposes of internal discipline. Because the Turkish Constitutional Court (TCC) received two of its members from the appellate military courts, the elimination of these courts reduces the size of the TCC from 17 to 15.

The far more consequential reform, however, is the complete overhaul of what had been the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors. From its structure to its name, arrangements for judicial appointments and promotions were revised. The new Council of Judges and Prosecutors (CJP) is reduced in size (from 22 regular members to 13), with four of its members appointed directly by the president. In addition, the minister of justice and the deputy minister are presidential cabinet members that make up two more seats on the CJP, ensuring that nearly half of the council is comprised of presidential appointees (six out of 13). The remaining seven members are appointed by the parliament. None of the members of the CJP are judges appointed by their peers in the judiciary, as is typical democratic practice. Moreover, if, as is likely, the president's party commands a parliamentary majority, it will be able to control several (or possibly all) of the parliamentary appointees to the CJP, enabling the president to reliably command a majority (if not the totality) of the Council to the detriment of judicial independence. Because the CJP shapes membership in the high appellate courts, which send nominees for appointment to the TCC, the influence of the executive on the constitutional court is also indirectly enhanced by these reforms.

As is evident, "Turkish-style presidentialism" is a system of executive rule virtually free from the constraints of separation of powers. The president has substantial legislative powers, can dissolve the parliament at will, exercises authority over a wide array of domestic and foreign policy matters and wields significant control of judicial appointments and promotions. In the absence of basic institutional checks and balances, the president is accountable only to the ballot box.

Electoral Authoritarianism

Erdoğan's frequent use of referenda as a proxy for the popular will has deftly inverted the very idea of electoral processes as a meaningful check on power. Presenting complex policy decisions or elaborate changes to the structure of the constitution as a single "yes/no" choice to be put to "the people" has enabled Erdoğan to short circuit deliberation and reduce debate about the country's political trajectory to a referendum on his own popularity.

A case in point is the referendum by which the constitutional amendments were adopted in April 2017. All of the amendments were put to voters as a single package, requiring a yes/no vote. During the months leading up to the vote, the choice was largely presented in personalistic terms as a vote for or against Erdoğan. The substantive provisions of the amendments themselves were rarely presented in an accessible way to voters. The polling places themselves featured little by way of information about the content of the amendments. The referendum was approached as an exercise in decisionism rather than deliberation.

The winner-takes-all character of constitutional amendment by referendum means that procedural protections to ensure that the vote is fair are especially important. Voting over significant constitutional changes under a state of emergency is problematic at best. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), for one, suggested that diminished individual freedoms and restrictions on civil society and the media under emergency rule compromised the democratic legitimacy of the referendum.⁵ The OSCE was also scathing about the pro-government media landscape in the run-up to the vote and irregularities on the day of the referendum itself.

The parliamentary debate on the amendments was held at a time when the government had jailed 11 opposition MPs. Throughout the referendum campaign, dozens of journalists were similarly detained, creating an atmosphere of intimidation that limited the scope of public debate. For weeks before the vote, the country was awash in "yes" campaign materials in support of the constitutional amendment package. The "no" campaign was all but invisible with its ability to hold meetings, display posters and access media coverage severely curtailed. Opposition meetings and rallies were subject to intimidation and repression by authorities across the country and controls over traditional and social media meant that only the "yes" campaign received coverage.

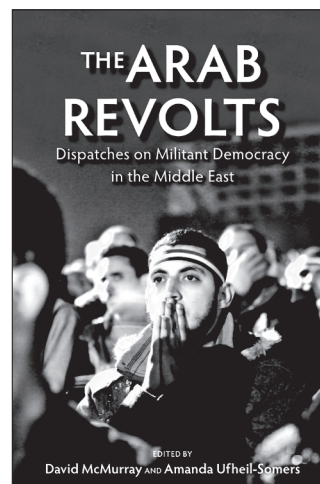
The deeply uneven electoral playing field produced by these measures yielded a contested and exceedingly narrow victory for Erdoğan with 51 percent of the vote (the opposition argued that the referendum was in fact narrowly defeated, but that the government engaged in ballot stuffing to rig the outcome at the margins when it allowed unstamped ballots to be counted). The narrow result

avoided the appearance of crude vote manipulation, though for all intents and purposes the vote was unfree and unfair. With political opponents excluded from contestation, rights of speech and assembly curtailed and the independence of the courts, media and civil society abrogated, it is hard to imagine the ballot box serving as a significant constraint on the president.

The approval of the referendum set the course for Turkey's constitutional transformation, but did not accomplish it directly. While some provisions went into effect immediately—notably, the restructuring of the CJP and permission for the president to join (and lead) a political party—the transition to the executive presidency system would only take effect following combined elections for parliament and the president, originally scheduled for November 2019. Opposition parties vowed that should their candidates win the presidency they would do away with presidentialism and return to parliamentary government.

But fearful that a looming economic crisis might damage the AKP's electoral performance, Erdoğan called snap elections nearly 18 months early, giving opposition parties only a few weeks to mount their campaigns. The early vote was held on June 24, 2018 with emergency rule still in effect. The election campaign witnessed a surprising degree of contestation, with opposition parties from the center-right to the left campaigning actively against the

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Militant Democracy
in the Middle East*

Edited by
David McMurray
and
Amanda Ufheil-Somers

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AKP in the parliamentary elections and fielding presidential candidates.

Despite hopes surrounding the unexpected popularity of opposition presidential candidate Muharrem İnce, Erdoğan secured the presidency. Moreover, Erdoğan's election resets the clock on term limits; the logic goes that this will be his first term as president under the new constitutional order, enabling him to run again in 2023.⁶ A further quirk in the rules on term limits discussed above may even allow him to run a third time. The AKP, for its part, lost some vote share but won a plurality of seats in parliament and joined its traditional coalition partner, the far-right ultra-nationalist National Action Party (MHP), to form a parliamentary majority. Once Erdoğan assumed office following the vote, Turkey's system of parliamentary government was abolished.

L'état c'est lui

The comparative politics literature has a catalog of terms to capture amalgamations of majoritarian politics with authoritarian rule like Turkey's new presidentialism: competitive authoritarianism, illiberal democracy, electoral authoritarianism, hybrid regimes and the like. The comparative constitutional law literature is swiftly catching up, with categories like "populist constitutionalism"⁷ and "autocratic legalism"⁸ that capture the means by which constitutional tools are deployed to subvert democracies from within. What they describe is methods of democratic reversal that place constitutions at the heart of the project of consolidating power. This is not like old-school authoritarianism marked by coups and strongmen seizing power through coercion.

For the new breed of electoral authoritarians, democratic processes themselves are used to incrementally chip away at democratic norms. Understanding constitutions not as a means of limiting government but as a way of amassing power and disabling checks is fundamental to their ambition. Erdoğan is arguably at the vanguard of this phenomenon, having deployed the entire array of legal and constitutional tools to accomplish democratic reversal over the last five years: from the packing of institutions to employing state audit authorities to punish adversaries to using constitutional referenda to translate narrow electoral margins into durable consolidation of power. With the introduction of "Turkish-style presidentialism," Erdoğan has perfected the art of the new constitutional authoritarianism, clearing the way to remain in office nearly indefinitely by disabling most mechanisms of democratic public accountability.

The new constitutional order is one in which the specific powers of ministries, vice presidents, councils, directorates and other state institutions remain very much in flux. The administrative organization of the state is now in

the control of the presidency alone, enabling Erdoğan to establish by presidential decree the structures to support his system of one-man rule. The transition from the earlier order to the presidential system has involved a chaotic reorganization of the executive branch. In some instances, ministries were merged—as with the combined treasury and finance ministries now headed by Erdoğan's son-in-law Berat Albayrak. In other cases, new entities connected directly to the presidency, like the nine councils (representing a merger of what had previously been 65 boards, commissions and committees answerable to parliament), are due to gain significant power, but their powers remain unclear months after their creation. Senior bureaucrats have been removed from their positions en masse, whole ministries and offices have been abolished and existing hierarchies within the civil service have been overturned. Neither the new positions that have been created nor the authorities accorded to new appointees have been clearly defined. Few in the newly created senior administrative positions have a clear enough sense of their authorities to sign documents or issue approvals. The only certainty is that they are all answerable only to the president.

The dismantling of the administrative state has ground the business of governing to a near halt. But in the end, the chaos is quite deliberate—the country that innovated the (now global) trend of paranoid conspiracies about the "deep state" has finally done away with its state apparatus. The uncertainty permeating the administrative state is a reflection of the fact that Erdoğan alone controls all the levers and can change the fundamental organization of the executive together with rules, processes, appointments, promotions and tenure for the civil service on a whim. With neither cabinet approval nor parliamentary consultation to cabin his discretion and the new offices and advisers around him serving solely at his pleasure, the system has all the hallmarks of arbitrary rule. So long as the reins are firmly in his hands, the particular authorities of different offices within the executive cannot define the state. *L'état c'est lui.* ■

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The business and financial district of Levent, Istanbul.

MURAD SEZER/REUTERS

Crisis of Capitalism, Crisis of the Republic

Yahya M. Madra

Today, the crisis of Turkey is both a crisis of capitalism and a crisis of the Republic.

To the extent that it is a crisis of capitalism, of a financialized regime of accumulation, its own internal business cycles are synchronous with the cycles of global capitalism. Even though the current economic crisis takes the form of stagflation (a high inflation rate combined with recession), its driving factor is the increased default risk of the highly-leveraged corporate sector. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), governing an economy fully-integrated to the international financial system since 2002, enjoyed the benefits of global liquidity as it consolidated its hegemony. Today, as the crisis hits corporations and households alike,

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP resort to anti-imperialist jargon to pass the proverbial buck, and cover up their helplessness in the face of the vast scope of the crisis.

At first glance, Turkey's crisis has manifested itself as a currency crisis resulting from capital flight. A deeper look identifies Erdoğan and his quixotic fight with the so-called "interest-rate lobby" as the culprit behind Turkey's currency meltdown. A still deeper examination identifies the offender as Erdoğan's increasingly *dirigiste* (state directed) deformation of the country's financial system, originally established in response to the Turkish economic crisis of 2001 by Kemal Derviş, then a senior economist at the World Bank. The economist Daron Acemoğlu, for example, explains this crisis as a product of "the decline of economic and political

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institutions over the past decade” and calls for a return to the AKP’s early golden years, when “more inclusive economic institutions [were] guaranteed by democratic institutions.”¹ More critical political economists such as Ümit Akçay and Ali Rıza Gürgen, however, contend that this institutionalist analysis does not cut deep enough.² They agree that Turkey’s crisis is structural. But unlike those who see the source of the problem in Erdoğan’s drift away from the neoliberal model of the Derviş reforms upheld by more inclusive political institutions, they argue that the neoliberal model itself is the cause of the crisis.

To the extent that it is a crisis of the Republic, the internal borders (between Muslims and non-Muslims, Turks and Kurds, Sunnis and Alevis) that the Republic has come to govern and manipulate since its establishment in 1923 have spilled over onto the rest of the Middle East, be it in the form of a conflict between Sunni Jihadists and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Afrin, an impasse with the United States over their support of SDF to the east of the Syrian Euphrates, Turkey’s fresh opposition to an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, or a split with Saudi Arabia and its allies over the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and beyond.

Exacerbating the crisis, without a doubt, is Erdoğan’s drive to consolidate power under the new executive presidential system. One can equally argue, however, that Erdoğan’s authoritarian push toward a permanent state of emergency after the failed coup attempt of 2016 was an inevitable response to the failure of the state bureaucracy, split between its Islamist-nationalist “Gülen” and ultra-nationalist “Ergenekon” wings, to hold itself and the Republic together.

The AKP’s Hegemonic Bloc

In the aftermath of the 2001 crisis, the AKP came to power in 2002 and gradually constructed its hegemony through combining a neoliberal institutional architecture with a financialized form of populism.³ The Derviş reforms establishing an independent Central Bank and a whole host of semi-autonomous regulatory agencies and boards, combined with the Erdoğan government’s commitment to fiscal discipline, provided the institutional guarantees for international financial capital to consider Turkey a viable destination for both long-term direct and short-term portfolio investment. This financial infusion provided the conditions under which the AKP, charged by Erdoğan’s political charisma, induced various classes to join its hegemonic project.

Mid-range Anatolian industrialists (both the independent MÜSİAD and the Gülenist TUSKON, dissolved after the abortive coup in 2016), for example, already had strong organic connections with AKP cadres who, by 2002, had gained a decade of experience governing municipalities, including metropolitan Istanbul, Ankara and Bursa, under Necmettin Erbakan’s Welfare Party.⁴ The Istanbul bourgeoisie

and its financial capital (represented by TÜSİAD) were lined up behind the AKP as well. Its economic team (notably, Economics Minister Ali Babacan and Treasury Minister Mehmet Şimşek) remained committed to the IMF-sanctioned export-led growth strategy that aimed to limit corrupt and rent-seeking activities, while consolidating the banking industry towards supporting the “dynamic” sectors of the capitalist class that could compete in international markets and collaborate with international capital.⁵ This strategy required a further commodification of agriculture (through elimination of subsidies) and flexibilization of the labor market (through domestication of trade unions and promotion of subcontracting in the public sector).⁶

The AKP softened the impact of this neoliberal structural adjustment program by reaching the working classes not in the workplace but in their homes, as consumers of public goods and as recipients of aid. Taking control of the national government gave Erdoğan the opportunity to scale up the governmental technologies (the provision of social services through public-private partnerships, family-oriented welfare policies and targeted aid distribution) that AKP cadres had learned and developed through their experience in metropolitan municipalities. To this day, Erdoğan’s hold over vast segments of the population is due to the dense network of supporters that the Party, using municipalities, built in neighborhoods and, especially, among the Turkish-Sunni communities.⁷

In short, Erdoğan and the AKP, by articulating a hybrid of the utilitarian ideology of “service” with the plebian (pan-Islamist) critique of the elitist (Kemalist) Republicanism, secured not only the support of the liberal middle classes to the neoliberal program, but also the acquiescence of the predominantly Muslim and conservative sectors of the subaltern classes.⁸ Finally, those sectors of Kurdish subaltern classes remaining beyond the sphere of influence of imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan’s democratic autonomy movement were taken in by Erdoğan’s promise of a break from the official state discourse on the Kurdish question.

Imperial Aspirations on Borrowed Capital

This hegemonic bloc proved to be resilient in the face of the 2008 crisis, and began to be recognized by the international community as the long-sought-after articulation of political Islam within the framework of neoliberal globalism. In this respect, it was symbolically significant that President Obama’s first visit abroad in 2009 was to Turkey. In his speech at the Grand National Assembly, he alluded to the African-American civil rights movement with an oblique reference to political Islam and the Kurdish autonomy movement as the two dynamic forces that will shape Turkey’s future. In this way, Obama was presenting a politically liberal, economically neoliberal and culturally conservative Turkey as a model for the Middle East. Not long after, the US Federal Reserve’s

expansionary monetary policies began to flood the global markets with liquidity. Consequently, with interest rates at a historical low in advanced capitalist economies, emerging markets such as Brazil, Turkey and Mexico were inundated with capital inflows, even while their composition shifted toward short-term portfolio investment.

With a resilient hegemonic bloc at home financed by global liquidity and backed by the United States, an emboldened Erdoğan made three successive political moves. First, together with the Islamist-nationalist Gülen network, now referred to by Turkish authorities as the Fethullah Terrorist Organization (or FETÖ), which was embedded in the security apparatus and the judicial system, Erdoğan engaged in a struggle with the Turkish Armed Forces and the secular-nationalist network that controlled it through the so-called “Ergenekon” trial. Second, after a major clampdown, also executed by the Gülenist cadres in the security forces, on the legal and paralegal sections of Kurdish political movement during the 2009–2012 period, Erdoğan initiated peace negotiations with Öcalan in 2013. Finally, having secured a ceasefire at home, Erdoğan and his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmed Davutoğlu, attempted to capitalize on the Arab uprisings by trying to position Turkey as the protector of an international coalition of Muslim Brotherhood supporters (spanning Egypt, Gaza, Syria and Turkey). Such a leadership position in the Middle East, Davutoğlu argued, especially given the retreat of the United States from the region under Obama, would enhance Turkey’s regional and global influence.

All these maneuvers triggered adverse reactions along domestic, regional and global fault lines. On the home front, Erdoğan’s lurch toward the Muslim Brotherhood, the dealings of members of his government and family with Iran despite the US-led sanctions, and the negotiations with the Kurdish autonomy movement caused the Gülen network to gradually turn against him from 2010 onward. At the regional level, the alliance between Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to support explicitly Sunni rebels in Syria broke down, and Turkey became isolated as the only government to continue to do so. At a more global geo-political level, Syria became a site of managed partition among the United States and the Kurdish-led SDF to the east of Euphrates, and Russia and Iran behind the Syrian government to the west.

Reading the prospects of even a quasi-autonomous Kurdish-led region in northern Syria, called Rojava by Kurds, as an existential threat to its territorial integrity, Turkey first stalled the peace negotiations. Then, in the summer of 2015, after AKP lost the necessary parliamentary majority to form a government following the June 2015 general elections, the Erdoğan government launched a major military operation on the Kurdish provinces in southeast Turkey. The all-out war against the Kurdish will for autonomy (whether it takes the form of violent clampdown on the municipal democracy experiment in southeast Anatolia, or, later on, the occupation of the Afrin canton of Rojava) quickly became the platform for

Erdoğan’s shift toward an irredentist neo-Ottomanist rhetoric, combined with anti-imperialist nationalist motifs.

This geopolitical turn in the sequence of events swiftly placed Turkey in an unstable equilibrium between the United States and NATO, on the one hand, and Russia on the other. An important turning point was when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet on the Syrian border. In response, Russia immediately imposed a very costly economic embargo on Turkey, damaging not only tourism, but also Turkey’s construction investments in Russia, as well as agricultural exports. This episode revealed the dependence of Turkey’s economy on Russia—especially given that more than half of Turkey’s natural gas imports and nearly a quarter of its oil product imports originate in Russia.

Straddling two geopolitical axes, one traversing the Atlantic (NATO) and the other the Silk Road (Shanghai Five), Turkey began to explore the possibility of using this state of being “in between” as leverage. If the first instance of this was the way Turkey used the plight of Syrian refugees in order to raise the price Europe had to pay for closing off the refugee flow across the Aegean, the second was Turkey’s collaboration with Russia and Iran in Syria (the Astana process), completely excluding the United States from the equation west of the Euphrates.

These tectonic tremors and sharp maneuvers along geopolitical axes coincided with the US Federal Reserve’s decision to begin reversing its policy of quantitative easing. As the US economy grew steadily and unemployment rates dropped, the Federal Reserve decided to gradually raise the interest rate. For an emerging economy like Turkey, burdened with increasing geopolitical risks idiosyncratic to the Middle East, this meant that international finance capital would require higher risk premiums and shorter time horizons. Under these conditions, to prevent currency devaluation, the Central Bank of Turkey also needed to raise interest rates. Whether industrial production is for domestic consumption or for export, Turkey’s economy is dependent upon the importation of energy and intermediate goods—hence the structural trade deficit. For this reason, currency devaluation inevitably translates to price inflation (first in production price indices and then, eventually, in consumer price indices). On the other hand, were the Central Bank to raise interest rates to prevent this undesirable outcome, this would immediately increase the cost of borrowing for both businesses and households, bringing the economy to a grinding halt.

Abandoning the Neoliberal Model?

This double-bind posed a problem for Erdoğan as he needed to hold together an electoral majority (50 percent plus one) through the then-upcoming constitutional referendum on the presidential system on April 16, 2017, and the subsequent (snap) general elections on June 24, 2018. The aborted coup attempt created the conditions under which Erdoğan forged an alliance with the Ergenekon network, initially against the Gülen

network, but more fundamentally against the Kurdish body politic and its allies gathered under the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

In Erdoğan, Ergenekon found a popular leader who could mobilize the masses behind their nationalist project to restore the Republican order to its good old days when the Kurdish will to autonomy was curbed. In contrast, Erdoğan, shedding liberals and a significant majority of Kurdish subaltern classes in the metropolises and aligning with the nationalist discourse of key public figures associated with the Ergenekon network, found not only much needed allies in the bureaucracy and the Turkish armed forces, but also the possibility of an electoral majority to secure the constitutional change toward a presidential system.

Nevertheless, despite all this working for ideological reconfiguration in his hegemonic bloc, Erdoğan still required the levers of redistribution and access to liquidity that secured AKP's hegemony among vast segments of the population. The construction sector has always played a central role in bringing together Erdoğan's electoral coalition. Massive infrastructural investments, essential supports for Erdoğan's vision of "Great Turkey," were now underwritten by Treasury guarantees—a blasphemy to the neoliberal strictures of fiscal discipline.⁹ The housing sector, on the other hand, has always been the gateway through which the financialization of society has taken hold. Through the first decade of AKP rule, household indebtedness increased dramatically (from 1.8 percent in 2002 to 19.6 percent in 2013), and slightly more than half of the household debt is currently in mortgages.¹⁰ An interest rate hike would have stopped all this economic activity and undermined the cohesion of the electoral coalition that Erdoğan brought together through his ultra-nationalist turn.

The change of direction of global flows of liquidity, the tectonic shifts in geopolitics of the Middle East and the exigencies of domestic politics compelled the Erdoğan government to abandon its commitment to the neoliberal model. The proponents of the Atlantic axis in Turkey and abroad invite Erdoğan to return to the neoliberal model. But the currency crisis is not unique to Turkey; Argentina is already struggling with it (and is not necessarily very successful in its efforts even though it is in full cooperation with the IMF), and Brazil is not far behind. Erdoğan, on the other hand, in line with his geopolitical explorations, has been scrambling for an inchoate form of a pro-corporate economic nationalism that highlights the necessity of economic independence; centralization of power under Presidential rule; low interest-rates; bilateral agreements that will diversify Turkey's export markets away from the European Union (the destination of nearly half of Turkey's total exports); replacing the US dollar as the international currency of transactions in cooperation with other emerging economies (BRICS and beyond); and building a national economy with construction, energy, telecommunications and defense as its leading sectors.

Nevertheless, these neo-mercantilist dreams of delinking do not hold up under reality testing. Neither Turkey's economy,

with its deeply interwoven links (i.e., trade agreements, supply chains and financial commitments) to the European Union, nor Turkey's defense industry, with its strategic links to the United States and NATO, will allow for such a shift in axis without a major geopolitical earthquake. The outcome of these dalliances with economic nationalism is likely to be out-of-control inflation (due to the delayed interest-rate hike) and deep stagnation (due to the dramatic hike that the Central Bank was forced to implement once Erdoğan realized that he had no other choice): a prolonged stagflation.

This crisis of capitalism, combined with the crisis of the Republic, may unleash significant changes in the class composition of the country. Wage and salary earners will either lose their jobs, or their purchasing power will erode due to chronic inflation. Youth and women would be most adversely affected from the deterioration of the conditions of labor market. The bursting of the construction sector bubble will mean a sudden spike in unemployment rates among the most precarious sections of the working classes (i.e., Kurds and Syrians). The thick hegemony of Turkish Sunni nationalism will then most probably further entrench itself around the figures of the Kurd as the "enemy of the state" and the Syrian refugee as the "parasitic guest." Moreover, the Erdoğan regime, given its sovereign power to decide which corporations are to be bailed out and which are not, will attempt to use the crisis as a context to re-shape the capitalist classes to its own liking.

In short, it is quite plausible to expect that Erdoğan, whose authoritarian grip on the society is now nearly complete after the last general election, may be welcoming the crisis as he is groping for another way to reorganize capitalism in Turkey. Whether he will succeed or not depends not so much on the capacity of the opposition (which is either in prison or in total disarray), but rather on the limitations and weaknesses of the one-man regime he has constructed. ■

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A banner reads "Coup leaders can't put Mursi on trial" at a protest in support of former Egyptian President Muhammad Mursi, Istanbul, 2015. YAĞIZ KARAHAN/REUTERS

The AKP's Foreign Policy as Populist Governance

Evren Balta

Turkish foreign policy throughout the Cold War was limited and largely predictable: narrowly focused on national security and preserving the sanctity of its borders while hewing to a predominantly Western orientation.¹ Turkey's foreign policy reflected the constraints of the bipolar international system, which granted little room for smaller powers to adopt independent policies. As such, Turkey pursued membership in key Western multilateral frameworks (the Council of Europe 1949, the OECD 1948 and NATO 1952) in order to improve its negotiating capacity; to enhance its security and status; and to compensate for its relative lack of an independent foreign policy.² Membership in these Euro-Atlantic institutions also enabled Turkish policymakers to assert their affiliation with Western culture.³

The end of the Cold War in 1989 granted Turkey the opportunity to pursue a more independent policy, yet it remained predominately Western-oriented until the late 2000s, including the first five years of rule by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government led by Prime Minister Erdoğan—a party

with roots in an anti-Western tradition of political Islam. The AKP initially followed a liberal internationalist path, seeking European Union (EU) membership and adopting reforms aiming to democratize Turkey's political system in conjunction with the EU's "harmonization packages." The party also remained committed to the NATO alliance, the defining feature of Turkey's relationship with the West since World War II.

Beginning with the AKP's second term in 2007, however, Turkey veered sharply away from its Western orientation, as asserting a hegemonic role in the Middle East replaced integration with the West as the central goal of Turkish foreign policy. AKP foreign policy, moreover, became activist, controversial and unpredictable. To date, the AKP's foreign policy framework has evolved through three distinct phases: the phase of liberal internationalism characterized by a commitment to the EU and multilateralism (2002–2007); the phase of civilizational expansionism characterized by an overly confident, pan-Islamist and expansionist foreign policy (2008–2014); and the current phase of ultra-nationalism, anti-Westernism and the reprioritization of containment regarding the Kurdish issue.⁴

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Such dramatic reorientations and abrupt policy shifts in a country that once was firmly embedded in Western multilateral institutions and Western cultural identification, nevertheless, defy readings of AKP foreign policy as simply reflecting its pro-Islamist ideology or simple pragmatism. The dramatic shifts and abrupt reorientations of AKP foreign policy over the past decade, rather, illustrate the subordination of Turkish foreign policy to the AKP's and, increasingly, Erdoğan's populism: foreign policy deployed as tool of governance to mobilize popular support for the AKP, tarnish its enemies, divert attention from its failures and adopt whatever policy is necessary at the moment to keep the AKP in power.

Turning from the West

Turkey's turn away from its historic Western orientation was triggered by a combination of global, regional and domestic factors that came together following the AKP's rise to power in 2002, culminating in a more revisionist foreign policy after 2008.

A major factor in this turn was the souring of Turkish Europhilia after the EU formally initiated accession negotiations with Ankara in 2005, partially as a result of the 2004 Greek Cypriot rejection of the Annan plan to settle the long festering Cyprus problem, coupled with a firmer anti-Turkish stance taken by some European politicians to block Turkey's full membership after EU constitutional referendums in France and the Netherlands.⁵ As Turkish expectations of swift approval for EU membership declined, Western economies were hit by the economic crisis of 2008, which challenged the Western-dominated model of globalization, revived national initiatives and made smaller powers like Turkey less concerned about engaging with multilateral institutions.⁶

In addition, the relative withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East under the Obama administration—removing its ground forces from Iraq at the end of 2011 and curtailing its overseas commitments—created a power vacuum, giving rise to greater Turkish state interest in regional competition and reshaping alliances. Transatlantic membership in institutions such as NATO began to be questioned by some members of the political elite.⁷ Finally, the EU harmonization process eliminated the military's constitutional prerogatives, which had given it an oversized influence in the country's politics. A series of trials of high-profile army officers for alleged coup plots following these constitutional changes effectively ended the army's influence over the formulation of foreign policy, transferring full authority to the ruling AKP by 2008.⁸

Now firmly in control, the AKP adopted a more independent and revisionist foreign policy that became known as the Davutoğlu Doctrine after AKP foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, which outlined a vision of Turkey as an independent global power asserting influence in its own neighborhood, the previously neglected Middle East. Davutoğlu's successive tenures as foreign minister (2009–2014) and then prime minister (2014–2016) were characterized by an increasingly

assertive foreign policy and a pan-Islamist vision.⁹ Turkey dramatically increased its regional initiatives, adopted a “zero problems with neighbors” policy and increased its trade with the region, while at the same time more frequently employing a populist anti-Western rhetoric.¹⁰

Fueled by appeals to both nationalist and religious sentiments among the electorate, highlighted by President Erdoğan's confrontation with Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos and national outrage over the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, when Israeli commandos killed nine Turkish activists on a state-owned aid ship bound for Gaza, Turkey began to assert itself more forcefully as an active and independent regional power in the Middle East.

The period after 2009 was the golden era for the AKP's new foreign policy, as the government enhanced mutual economic and political cooperation with Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and signed bilateral agreements with Syria, Libya, Yemen, Lebanon and Jordan.¹¹ After withdrawing its long-held opposition to the formation of an autonomous Kurdistan in Iraq, relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) flourished and Iraq became Turkey's second-largest market for exports.¹² Turkey also played an active role in solving regional disputes, becoming a mediator between Syria and Iraq as well as between Syria and Israel; promoting conflict resolution in Lebanon, Iraq and Sudan; and initiating development assistance programs, becoming the third largest donor after the United States and Great Britain in 2013.¹³ The AKP administration also strengthened its transnational links with the Muslim Brotherhood as it involved itself deeper in regional politics.

This newly assertive foreign policy has been described variously as “neo-Ottomanism,” “Islamic Realism,” the “trading state,” or as “sub-hegemony.”¹⁴ Some contend that this new policy orientation was a “non-colonial, non-formal empire,” in which Turkey's active engagement in the Balkans, Caucasus and Middle East would enable the transformation of the country into a key regional power.¹⁵ Others argue that in this vision, Turkey is positioned to act as an “order setting agent” because of its shared historical, cultural and religious ties to the Middle East and Balkans, dating back to the Ottoman Empire.¹⁶ This shared history legitimized the imperial engagement of Turkey with these regions by making a non-coercive appeal of “like us” rather than “part of us,” which has been dubbed “civilizational geopolitics.”¹⁷

An undeniably attractive byproduct of this new orientation for the AKP was that it opened up new markets to Turkish capital, making foreign policy a backbone of its economic success story.¹⁸ Turkey became one of the most attractive emerging economies for foreign investment after the 2008 financial crisis. Surging global liquidity boosted economic growth and allowed the government to launch ambitious projects to improve the country's aging infrastructure and social services.¹⁹ Moreover, its foreign policy became a major instrument for gaining a competitive edge in domestic politics, enhancing the AKP's popularity. The government also sought to resolve the country's perennial Kurdish conflict by initiating



Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, right, speaks at a news conference with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in Baghdad, Iraq, 2014.

several peace processes with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), realizing that in order to enhance its regional role and attract investment, it needed to resolve its domestic disputes.

The Fall of Neo-Ottomanism

The 2011 Arab uprisings presented an ideal opportunity for AKP-led Turkey to shape the economic and geostrategic make-up of the new Middle East, while also affirming Turkey's new role with the West as a major power. Two critical developments in the region, however, undermined Turkey's assertive "neo-Ottoman" policy, eventually leading the AKP to adopt a new, much darker and inwardly focused foreign policy.

The coup against the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt on July 3, 2013 struck a major blow to Turkey's regional ambitions by undermining the AKP's reliance upon the transnational Muslim Brotherhood network as an ally and proxy, as well as its alignment with Qatar in the rivalry with Saudi Arabia for regional influence after the Arab uprisings. The coup damaged Turkey's influence not only in Egypt but also in Syria, allowing other regional actors to gain ground.²⁰ Prime Minister Davutoğlu described how the new regional alignment fostered by the coup, and the subsequent embrace of the Saudi-led coalition by Egypt's new leader General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, undermined their Syrian policy:

There are three forces in the international community. First there are those that favor a democratic transition and support democratic groups: Turkey and several moderate democratic forces. Second are those political actors that are scared of democracy. These states prefer autocrats to govern their country: Saudi Arabia, UAE, and the Gulf Countries, except for Qatar. The third group is countries that are sectarian, like Iran. Before, the first two were united against Iranian influence, so they worked together against Assad. However, after Sisi, that coalition has collapsed.²¹

The second development undermining Turkey's hegemonic ambitions was the rise of ISIS and the surge of transnational Kurdish activism resulting from the collapse of Syria. Syrian government forces withdrew from its Kurdish region early in the Syrian civil war, enabling the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) to transform itself into a major regional actor, introducing the possibility of a second autonomous Kurdish region, ruled by the PYD, which the Turkish state believed to be organically linked to the PKK. Initially, Turkey tried to counter this development by supporting anti-Assad opposition forces and Kurdish factions who opposed the PYD—a strategy Ankara believed to be complementary to its regional hegemonic aspirations.

However, the rapid territorial gains and atrocities ISIS subsequently perpetrated against populations under its control in Iraq

and Syria put into question Turkey's anti-PYD strategy, while strengthening the transnational ties of Kurds.²² Kurdish opposition to ISIS spilled over into Turkey in early October 2014 during the ISIS assault on the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane. Tens of thousands of Kurds in Turkey's Southeast protested AKP's Syrian policy by proclaiming that "Kobane is Diyarbakir," demanding the government open its border to the refugees and allow Iraqi Peshmerga forces to cross through Turkey to assist Syrian Kurds. Protests then spread across the country, including Ankara and Istanbul, leaving 42 people dead.²³ What had been perceived as an external problem that could be contained in Syria thus became an internal problem. More importantly, the mobilization of Kurds against ISIS received support from the United States, leading to active cooperation between the PYD and the US military, further heightening Turkish security concerns.

By the beginning of 2015, then, the coup in Egypt and the trans-nationalization of the conflict in Syria made it impossible for the AKP government to advance its hegemonic vision for the Middle East or even maintain a consistent regional policy, while also jeopardizing the country's alignment with the US. More importantly, the visibly Islamic bias of the government both in domestic and foreign politics fueled anti-government opposition, most notably the Gezi movement of 2013.

Embracing Ultra-Nationalism

Facing a major crisis of governance, an ultra-nationalist discourse resurfaced within AKP government circles, pushing aside Turkey's neo-Ottoman aspirations and imperialist dreams of muscling into new markets. The official demise of Turkey's neo-Ottoman period was formally recognized when President Erdoğan asked Prime Minister Davutoğlu to resign in May 2016, two months before the July 2016 coup attempt that would significantly damage Turkey's relations with the West.

At the time of the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, the government was already on an ultra-nationalist path, with a steep decline in democratization. The coup attempt accelerated those tendencies. What proved most unsettling for Turkish foreign policy was the intensification of the Erdoğan government's anti-Western rhetoric, already a prevalent discourse after the Gezi protests of 2013. Erdoğan accused Western countries of meddling in Turkey's internal affairs, promoting a crisis of governance and even staging the July 15 coup attempt. The government's conspiratorial thinking projected the causes for the crisis (whether economic or political) onto external, primarily Western, actors.

The decline in Turkish-Kurdish relations was both a cause and effect of this broader decline in AKP fortunes and its adoption of a more stridently nationalist foreign policy. In early 2015, representatives of the AKP government, led by Davutoğlu and Kurdish politicians, announced a short-lived ten-point peace plan.²⁴ In the June, 2015 elections, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) received 13.1 percent of the vote, contributing to the AKP government losing its majority in the assembly, and disrupting its ability to form a single-party

government. A week after the June 7 elections, moreover, PYD/YPG forces seized Tell Abyad in Syria, establishing a security corridor from the Iraqi border to Manbij on the eastern side of the Euphrates river, which Ankara had previously declared to be its red line.²⁵ As a result of these developments, in June 2015 the AKP government abruptly shifted its Kurdish strategy, once again completely securitizing the Kurdish issue as violent clashes between Turkish forces and the PKK were renewed, concentrated along the Syrian border provinces and aiming to cut the links between Kurds in Turkey and in Syria.²⁶

As relations with the West soured further, Turkey advanced economic and military relations with Russia. The two countries established and formalized their cooperation in Syria, together with Iran, through the Astana peace talks. In exchange for Turkey's promise to cut its support to opposition groups in Syria, Russia gave a green light to Turkey's direct military operations in Syria, such as Euphrates Shield, undertaken to limit PYD influence.²⁷ The active cooperation with Iran and Russia put Turkey further at odds with the US. The government's deal to purchase Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile systems was further interpreted as a sign of Turkey's orientation away from the trans-Atlantic alliance and its declining commitment to Western security institutions.²⁸ The picture worsened after Washington sanctioned two AKP ministers involved in the detention of US pastor Andrew Brunson, who was charged with supporting the failed coup.

A Populist Foreign Policy

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP's foreign policy has been flexible and shape-shifting, driven less by the party's stated ideology than by its opportunistic adaptation to changing international and regional dynamics, domestic constraints and intense elite conflict. Throughout the AKP's three phases of liberal internationalism, civilizational expansionism and ultra-nationalism, Turkey has exhibited the key social and political elements of a populist vision. Populism is a thinly centered ideology which typically construes politics as a contest between two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," and populist political parties often display greater flexibility and pragmatism in their adoption of various ideological orientations.²⁹

Not unexpectedly, as a populist political party, the guiding factor driving AKP's foreign policy has been its flexibility and opportunism.³⁰ Like other populist parties, the AKP engaged with multilateral institutions when party elites saw immediate material benefits, and became pro-Western when positive relations with Europe favored their interests. Foreign policy has played an important role in the growing popular appeal of the AKP as Erdoğan was able to present the country's international status in terms of other states' perception of it. AKP supporters believe that the government has restored the country's status and honor in the West, which was damaged during the republican era. They further cite jealousy as the main reason why

foreign countries might oppose Turkey.³¹ Moreover, the party emphasizes that the country's international status is explained not on the basis of values and norms such as human rights and democracy, but on the basis of its infrastructure investments, such as bridges, roads and airports.

The AKP has utilized foreign policy, particularly after the setbacks of 2013–15, as a governance technique to project blame onto external actors for its failures on both the international and domestic front. More recently, the AKP expanded its populist notion of fighting against a corrupt elite to include financial centers, foreign governments and international institutions—virtually any external actor that challenges or criticizes the AKP government. Coupled with nationalism, a populist rhetoric of blame attribution upon “corrupt outsiders” has allowed the AKP to ask its base to tolerate policies that fail to improve their own quality of life, and to forgive government failures.

Erdoğan has been especially skillful in reframing who is “them” and who is “us,” and who is an “enemy” and who a “friend”—which has become an increasingly effective strategy in the face of Turkey's economic crisis, questionable interventions in Syria's civil war and rising Kurdish transnationalism. As Turkey has faced sharp reversals in its foreign policy positions, the electorate has responded rapidly and emphatically to Erdoğan's charismatic leadership. According to results of a survey on foreign policy conducted by Kadir Has University, those who stated that “Turkey has no friends” increased from 17.2 percent to 22.5 percent in one year.³² In the same period, those who think that the United States is a hostile country increased from 10 percent to 16.2 percent, while those who define relations with Russia as positive and cooperative increased from 18.1 to 46.5 percent.

The AKP's populist vision has also rested on a direct connection between the leader and “the people” without a need for intermediaries. Parallel to the restructuring of domestic politics, the executive branch and Erdoğan's personality now dominate foreign policy decision-making. Prior to the AKP, foreign policy was largely determined by its powerful armed forces and foreign ministry professionals. Currently, reflecting both the structural transformation of the international system and the loosening of domestic constraints, Ankara's foreign policy has grown ever more executive-oriented with few oversight mechanisms that would give more room to inter-agency consultation. Along with Turkey's drift to authoritarianism, personal relationships between leaders now play a crucial role in determining its policies. One can argue that the most powerful determinant of Turkish alliance behavior has become the calculation as to which outside power is most likely to do what is necessary to keep the current regime in power.

In the last decade, Turkey has gone from being promoted as a model Islamic democracy to a model for authoritarianism; from Westernization to anti-Westernization; from “zero problems with neighbors” to a crisis-prone foreign policy. The concept of a populist foreign policy is the most useful tool for explaining these dramatic transformations and abrupt shifts

under the rule of the same party. Foreign policy is not what makes a political party populist, but populist political parties use foreign policy more aggressively as a technique of governance to remain in power, thereby creating a more unstable, unpredictable and conflict prone foreign policy, with grave consequences for regional and global stability. ■

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A Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) pre-electoral rally in Diyarbakir, 2018.

AYLIN KIZIL/NAR PHOTOS/REDUX

The Failed Resolution Process and the Transformation of Kurdish Politics

Cuma Çiçek

On March 21, 2013 in the symbolic Kurdish city of Diyarbakir, on the symbolic new year's day of Newroz, in front of a crowd composed of almost a million people and broadcast live by most Turkish news channels, a letter from the imprisoned Kurdistan Worker's Party's (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan was read. The letter urged Kurds to end their nearly 30-year armed struggle against the Turkish state and open a new page for democratic politics within the framework of Turkish sovereignty:

Today a new era is beginning. The period of armed struggle is ending, and the door is opening to democratic politics. We are beginning a process...based on democratic rights, freedoms, and equality is growing.¹

Five years later, after unprecedented negotiations between the Turkish state, led by Prime Minister Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and Öcalan, mediated by the leftist and pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the negotiations known in Turkey as the "Resolution

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Process" have ground to a violent halt, with the Kurdish issue once again framed by the Turkish state as "terrorism." Following the AKP's decisive victory in the Turkish elections of 2018, Erdoğan accused the HDP as being "those who bless terrorists" and implicitly threatened the opposition Republican Peoples Party (CHP) for supporting the HDP's campaign to join parliament:

Turkey is a powerful state. The state knows whom to show compassion, as well as whom to thump with its velvet-lined iron punch. Those who bless the terrorists will never escape the state's grasp. Those who have supported them to be part of the parliament will also pay the price.²

Öcalan's peace offering and Erdoğan's threats effectively illustrate the radical change in Kurdish-Turkish political relations over the last five years. Öcalan's call for ending the armed struggle in 2013 and working within the framework of Turkish sovereignty was a major break in the history of the Kurdish movement. After 30 years of violent conflict, the overall leader of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK)—the

umbrella organization for various Kurdish parties including the PKK—had ordered his organization to adopt a political and democratic solution to the Kurdish issue within Turkey. Likewise, the Turkish state under AKP rule had taken unprecedented steps to start negotiations with Öcalan as part of its “Kurdish opening,” which gained ground after 2012.

The resulting Resolution Process, however, collapsed after the Turkish general elections in June 2015 and armed clashes erupted in several urban areas of the Kurdish provinces, with the number killed reaching 904 in 2015, 1063 in 2016 and 714 in 2017.³ Fighting between KCK militants and Turkish military forces persist within the borders of Turkey and in trans-border areas between Turkey and Iraq and Syria. Erdoğan has also made good on his threat against HDP members by jailing dozens of elected parliamentarians under anti-terrorism charges, stifling legal Kurdish political expression in Turkey.

Yet, while the resolution process has been replaced by a return to violent conflict between Kurds and the Turkish state reminiscent of the dark period of the 1990’s, the nature of Kurdish-Turkish politics has been transformed significantly by the last two decades of geopolitical transformation and dialogue initiatives and Kurdish politics has been transformed even more dramatically, with uncertain implications for the future of the struggle.

Changing Kurdish Socio-Political Space

The current impasse in the Kurdish-Turkey conflict cannot be understood without taking into account the significant transformation of the Kurdish socio-political space in Turkey since 1999.⁴

The year 1999 was a breaking point for three reasons. First, Öcalan was captured by Turkish forces on February 15, 1999 in Nairobi, provoking a substantial transformation of the PKK’s ideological and political orientation, strategic goals and organizational structures. Second, the legal Kurdish parties’ local administrative experience within Turkey began after the local elections held on April 18, 1999, paving the way for the PKK’s hegemony in several Kurdish provinces. Finally, Turkey was accepted as a candidate country for European Union (EU) membership on December 10, 1999. Since that time, the social basis of the Kurdish struggle has shifted from being mostly rural, illegal and institutionally weak in the 1990s to becoming progressively more urbanized, legal and institutionalized. Moreover, Kurdish socio-political space has become transnational and internationalized, moving from stages which can be characterized as Europeanization (1999–2005), to Kurdistan as a whole (2005–2012) and finally to Rojava (2012–2018).⁵

Turkey’s accession to the EU—and Europeanization—became the principal macro dynamic framing Turkish and Kurdish domestic socio-political spaces and initiatives between 1999–2005. The AKP, for example, used the EU membership process as a lever to bypass obstacles such as the military and civil bureaucracy’s tutelage over politics to build control over

policy and politics. Similarly, the leading Kurdish movement also used the EU process to reframe the political basis of the Kurdish issue as one of democracy and multiculturalism rather than national self-determination and statehood.⁶ Öcalan, for example, publicly reinterpreted the Kurdish issue as part of the “democratic republic project,” proposing a general democratization process at the Turkish national level, along with decentralization and multiculturalism, as the basis to resolve the Kurdish issue.⁷

The establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the stabilization of the Kurdish region after 2005, however, radically altered the principal parameters of the Kurdish issue from Europeanization to geopolitics.⁸ In other words, the interactions between the Kurdish sociopolitical spaces in terms of states and non-state actors in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran become the determinant dynamic framing the Kurdish issue. After the establishment of the KRG in 2005, the KCK, as an umbrella organization unifying various PKK-affiliated parties across the broader Kurdish regions, began to re-frame the Kurdish issue in terms of “status,” calling for power-sharing in the Kurdish regions of Turkey closer to that of Kurds in Iraq.

As a result, in 2007, the leading Kurdish movement shifted from proposing a “democratic republic” to proposing “democratic autonomy” for Kurds within Turkey. Despite criticism regarding the ambiguous nature of autonomy, the “democratic autonomy” project refers to the recognition of the collective cultural rights for Kurds, and power-sharing between local and regional governments and the central government.⁹ Community-based local democracy was offered as the best alternative for the resolution of the Kurdish issue, and also for new policies that could accommodate ethnic/national and religious/secular identities within Turkey more generally, along with gender and class-based equality.

The principal dynamic behind this transformation to a geopolitical frame was growing interaction at multiple levels among Kurdish communities, political groups, municipalities, religious groups, commercial actors and NGOs within Turkey and Iraq. In addition, the growing political and economic cooperation between the KRG and the AKP government after 2007 legitimized both the KRG and pro-Kurdish politics among the Kurds who supported the AKP. This process contributed to the development of a second kind of political Kurdishness, comprising pro-Islamist, conservative and liberal tendencies, alongside the secular, left-wing, gender-sensitive political Kurdishness represented by the HDP. Thus, in 2005–12 the nature of the Kurdish issue shifted from being influenced solely by Europeanization to being shaped by dynamics across the broader terrain of historic Kurdistan.

In 2012, following the Syrian anti-government uprisings, Kurds in Syria now controlling their cities and regions began to build Rojava as a de facto autonomous region in northern Syria under the political and military leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the sister organization of the PKK. The



Kurds in Suruç, Turkey watch the battle in Kobane, Syria, 2014.

JOERG BOETHLING/ALAMY

establishment of Rojava in Syria as another geopolitical factor influencing the evolution of Kurdish socio-political space was even more concerning to Turkey than that of the KRG for several reasons. The political leadership in Rojava, unlike the KRG, is a KCK-affiliated organization and the KCK has mobilized its human and organizational resources not only in Turkey, but also in Europe to support Rojava. Likewise, the Kurds of Syria speak Kurmancî, the same dialect the majority of Kurds in Turkey speak. Moreover, economic ties and cultural interactions between the Kurds of Turkey and Syria are traditionally stronger than those between the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq. Rojava did not change the framework adapted by the leading Kurdish movement, which remained democratic autonomy. Yet, the establishment of Rojava functioned as the second geopolitical break for the Kurdish issue in Turkey after that of the KRG. Therefore, the years after 2012 can be considered the years of Rojava.

The Evolution of Turkish-Kurdish Dialogue

A remarkable evolution of Turkish-Kurdish dialogue and the emergence of political initiatives has transformed the terms of the conflict since 1999. Three major dialogue processes for the resolution of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey took place, influenced by the broader transformations of Kurdish socio-political

space discussed above: the İmralı Process (1999–2004) in the years of Europeanization, the Oslo Process (2008–2011) in the years of Kurdistan and the Resolution Process (2013–2015) in the years of Rojava.

The İmralı Process, named after the island where Öcalan has been imprisoned since 1999, was a major opportunity to end the Kurdish conflict in Turkey for several reasons. With his imprisonment, the state could finally contact Öcalan directly, opening talks. The PKK declared its loyalty to its leader's call for peace and withdrew its armed groups from Turkish border regions, dramatically reducing the conflict between 1999 and 2004. Moreover, the PKK significantly revised its ideology, political goals and method of struggle, privileging “internal political resolution,” “peaceful ways” and “dialogue and negotiation” with Turkish state authorities. Lastly, the broader context of Europeanization had important effects on both sides.

Despite its promise, the İmralı Process failed for several reasons. Internal divisions within the PKK, along with the departure of many members from the Party, including from the presidency council, eroded a common position. The Turkish economic crisis in 2001 marginalized mainstream political parties, leading to the rise of the AKP as a new political force in the general elections of 2002. And finally, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the establishment of the KRG dramatically changed the geopolitical context of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, Syria and Iran.

The Oslo Process beginning in 2008 had even more potential to resolve the Kurdish conflict: It was a more institutionalized process because the Turkish state was negotiating directly both with Öcalan on İmralı island and the KCK's top-ranking representatives in Oslo. In addition, an international organization participated in the meetings as a mediator, which encouraged both the Turkish state and the PKK to fulfill their commitments by producing an "audience cost" as well as recording all stages of the process. Moreover, the process was partially open to public opinion: For the first time the government announced to the people that it had initiated a political process to resolve the Kurdish issue, creating a public reference for all future negotiations. Both sides arrived at a stage where they prepared some basic protocols for further negotiations, including practical steps that each side should take.

The Oslo Process also failed, largely due to the gap between the primary goals of both sides: The AKP government was focused on disarming the KCK, limiting the resolution of the Kurdish issue to the partial recognition of individual cultural rights, while the KCK advocated power-sharing and collective cultural rights within the framework of a democratic autonomy project. In addition, the divided internal power structure of the KCK—Öcalan, the main KCK base in the Qandil mountains and the diaspora in Europe—created obstacles to building a common agenda and decision-making mechanisms among Kurdish actors. Moreover, the legal pro-Kurdish party in Turkey was not included in the process. Like the İmralı Process, the Oslo Process remained limited to a dialogue process between the state and top-ranked KCK leaders, never becoming a true societal negotiation or reconciliation process.

The last initiative, referred to as the Resolution Process, was the most socialized dialogue process, closely followed by the public. Beginning officially on January 3, 2013 and publicly announced by Öcalan's letter on Newroz in Diyarbakır, the dialogue was essentially between Öcalan and the state delegation. The state allowed Öcalan to communicate with both the KCK and the public via a delegation composed of senior politicians from the HDP. The AKP government framed the issue within the Turkish democratization process, focusing on disarmament, while the KCK insisted on power-sharing, collective cultural rights and the recognition of Rojava by the Turkish state.

This process also failed, like the previous two initiatives, because the two sides were unable to build consensus on the negotiation agenda and processes, on the terms of Kurdish disarmament and how to address the trans-border aspects of the Kurdish issue, Rojava in particular. Despite its relative openness to public opinion, the process excluded both parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition groups, with no identifiable mechanism allowing opposition groups to monitor the two sides and build democratic pressure for peace building. The AKP refused to open up the process to third-party mediation, while the KCK insisted on mediation and recommended the US for the role several times. In sum, the two sides never transcended the space between their

political agendas to build a horizon for a common future. The government concentrated solely on disarmament, while the KCK refused to disarm without any clear roadmap for power-sharing or recognition of the collective rights of the Kurds through constitutional reforms.

The Turkish state was especially threatened by the introduction of Rojava into the negotiations, which it interpreted as an existential threat to the Turkish state and nation. With the establishment of Kurdish autonomous regions in Iraq and Syria, the state's efforts to frame the problem as its "internal Kurdish issue" had been transformed into a "trans-national Kurdistan issue," reigniting Turkish narratives about threats to its national existence and security in any post-agreement era. This intransigence was reinforced by strident objections to the process aired by the Gülenist movement, ultra-nationalists, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and the conservative wing of the Republican People's Party based on Turkish nationalist discourses that opposed recognizing Kurdish rights beyond narrow individual or cultural frameworks. These objections also influenced many AKP supporters who subscribed to Turkish nationalist values.

As a result, the AKP proposal was quite limited. This *alla turca* (Turkish style of) resolution project was announced as *yerli* (local) and *milli* (national). By pushing an *alla turca* project, the AKP aimed to limit the negotiation agenda to individual cultural rights and a limited administrative decentralization, as well as excluding international actors and the application of international norms.

On the Kurdish side, the fragmented power structure of the leading Kurdish movement prevented it from building a coordinated process, which remained elitist and exclusive not only at the national level, but also within the Kurdish region, as the movement limited the negotiation process to a small number of top-rank leaders. While Kurdish politics in Turkey is now far more urbanized, legalized and institutionalized than it was in 1999, the internal power structure of the movement remains as it was before 1999: Öcalan and the KCK still constitute the central powers of the movement, while the legal organizations remain in the periphery. As Hamit Bozarslan describes it, Öcalan and the KCK are "the referential actor," while the periphery assumes "the representative actor" role.¹⁰ A political resolution of the Kurdish issue needs to reconstruct the internal power structure of the movement in order to succeed at peace-building: The legal organizations led by the HDP should be re-organized as the new referential actor and take the KCK's central place, which would gradually retreat toward the periphery.

Such a transformation, however, lies beyond the current Kurdish movement and its leaders. Kurdish politics suffers from the lack of an effective opposition: despite the existence of five pro-Kurdish political parties, they are mostly small groups and lack the capacity to build common ideas, shared interests and joint institutions. Moreover, critical public debate in the Kurdish region is quite limited. Most of the NGOs and media

are identified with either the leading Kurdish movement or the government. Alongside the NGOs and media, Kurdish intellectual productivity and criticism are also limited. The urban conflicts which occurred after the failure of the Resolution Process is a recent example. Despite the loss of nearly 3,000 people, the forced migration of 500,000 people and the massive destruction of the cities, there exists very limited public criticism of the politics of both the KCK and the HDP.

Continuity and Change in Kurdish Politics

Since the failure of the Resolution Process, Turkey has been rocked by a major socio-political crisis and several traumatic events that have directly and negatively affected the prospects for a political resolution of the Kurdish issue: the urban conflicts between Turkish security forces and Kurdish militants in August 2015 and May 2016; the failed coup attempt against Prime Minister Erdoğan on July 15, 2016; the ensuing state of emergency rule since July 2016; Turkey's interventions in Rojava (Jarablus in August 2016, Afrin in January 2018); and the constitutional referendum on April 16, 2017, which ended the parliamentary system and approved a "Turkish style" authoritarian presidential system. After such instability, where does the Kurdish issue stand now?

The geopolitical context of the Kurdish issue has changed significantly due to the establishment of the KRG and Rojava and the significant gap that has emerged between Turkey and most international powers concerning the Kurdish issue, particularly in Syria. The US had historically supported the Turkish government position concerning the Kurdish issue, but today it collaborates with the Kurds in Syria under the leadership of the KCK's sister political and military organizations, which is a critical change for Kurdish politics. Given the trans-national quality of the KCK and the impact of geopolitics on the Kurdish issue in Turkey, the collaboration between the US and the Kurds in Syria exerts significant influence not only on the armed mobilization of the Kurds, but also their ideas, interests and institutions beyond the Syrian border.

The Kurdish conflict has often been subordinated to the broader, and sometimes shifting and contradictory, policy goals of Turkish domestic and foreign policy, which is clearly the case today. The AKP government's attempt to build up its regional economic and political power in the hinterland of the Ottoman Empire led to its pursuit of a political resolution to the Kurdish conflict prior to 2015. But AKP foreign policy failures have triggered the government's push to limit negotiations to narrow "national" and "local" negotiating frameworks, and brought about the return of a security and "terrorism" based approach. Within the domestic arena, the Kurdish issue was instrumentalized by the Kemalist powers to undercut the AKP during the İmralı Process. During the Oslo and Resolution Process, these sides switched as the AKP government and the Gülenist movement instrumentalized the issue. The government's current

security-based approach is yet another instrumentalization of the Kurdish issue to further the establishment of a more authoritarian executive presidential system.

In fact, the executive presidential system envisioned by AKP is itself a new obstacle to establishing a Kurdish peace, as democratic standards have decreased considerably. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, Turkey's rank tumbled dramatically after the coup attempt: Turkey is now considered to be a hybrid regime (4.88/10), falling somewhere between an authoritarian regime (0–4) and a democracy (6–10) in 2017.¹¹ It is also widely believed that state violence played a critical role in the radicalization of Kurdish politics and the emergence of the PKK in the 1980s. Now, despite the relatively peaceful and reformist period of 1999–2015, the state of emergency and harsh security-based approach to Kurdish political expression has the potential to provoke a new wave of radicalization.

More broadly, the social, cultural and political space of Kurdish politics has been radically transformed. The Kurdish conflict is no longer located solely in rural areas, as recent fighting shows that the KCK has been able to spread the conflict to urban areas. Moreover, the conflict between the KCK and Turkish security forces is not restricted to the Kurdish region in Turkey, but now includes Rojava in Syria. One can even argue that the central space of the conflict has been Rojava since 2015. There has also been a significant increase in the transnational interaction between Kurdish communities in the bordering countries (Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran) since the establishment of the KRG and then Rojava. The boom in satellite-based Kurdish TV channels, internet and social media, as well as direct individual and collective interactions at multiple levels, have all played critical roles in the formation of "a Kurdistan community" taking shape beyond these borders. This interaction has arguably transformed "the internal Kurdish issue" in the four countries to a single "Kurdistan issue."

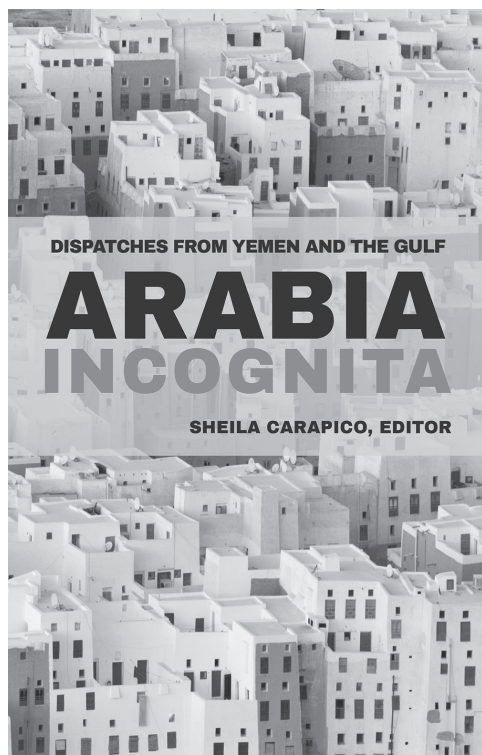
Internally, there has also been a transformation in the relationship between the leading legal pro-Kurdish parties and the PKK (and then the KCK) since 1999. While the PKK/KCK remains the central power within the leading Kurdish movement, and the legal political parties and organizations remain representative actors in the periphery, the movement has faced a new challenge since 2014. Until the 2014 Turkish presidential election, the legal pro-Kurdish political parties received only around 4–7 percent of the votes. Since the establishment of the HDP there has been an extraordinary increase with the HDP receiving nearly 11–13 percent of the votes today, posing a major challenge to the internal power structures of Kurdish politics.

Finally, one can argue that a second form of political Kurdishness has emerged since 2002. The political identity of Kurdishness, traditionally represented by the dominant Kurdish movement's embrace of secularism, left-wing politics, gender-based transformation and armed struggle, is now being joined by a new type of political Kurdishness that is conservative, pro-Islamist

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and reformist. In addition to geopolitical changes, the AKP's partial recognition of Kurdishness opened up a public space for Kurdish cultural identity, encouraging the emergence of this second form of Kurdishness. This second Kurdishness has been an essential factor increasing HDP's votes, in addition to a large number of non-Kurdish voters backing the HDP in the major metropolitan cities.¹² Similarly, support for the AKP in the Kurdish region is based on this second Kurdishness. People supporting the AKP mostly share HDP's core demands such as democratization, decentralization and the right to education in one's mother tongue. In addition, several political groups, including Azadi and the Free Cause Party (HÜDA-PAR), claiming to be both pro-Kurdish and pro-Islamist, have been established in recent years. Where this second Kurdishness and its influence on political actors leads Kurdish politics remains to be seen.

Kurdish politics have been transformed significantly despite the failure of the 2013–2015 Resolution Process and the return to armed conflict and Turkey's security-first policies. Over the last two decades, developments within Turkey and the broader regional environment have transformed the Kurdish struggle for rights and recognition from a country-specific issue to a regional and even international concern. While continuities remain—particularly the subordination of the Kurdish issue to the foreign and domestic interests of various regional states—the new sociopolitical space of Kurdish politics, the establishment of Kurdish autonomous zones and the internal challenges to historic Kurdish political power centers, may yet produce a new opening, but one that may not look anything like what has come before. ■

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4 The Kurdish socio-political space refers to the multiple Kurdish socio-political mobilities that build a fluid space in terms of geography and culture beyond the Kurdish region (where Kurds constitute the majority) in Turkey.

5 Rojava means "west" in Kurdish, referring to the western part of the cross-bordering greater Kurdistan. After the Syrian civil war, the leading Kurdish movement in Syria used Rojava to name the Kurdish region in Syria, and it became popular among Kurds living in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, and the Kurdish diaspora.

6 I use the leading Kurdish movement to designate the socio-political mobilization in Turkey which is led by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and the Democratic Party of Regions (DBP) in Turkey and the Kurdish region respectively; including women's movements, youth movements, trade unions, Kurdish media, local governments, local assemblies, cultural centers, NGO networks; the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) as the unitary structure representative of this complexity of multiple organizations in the Kurdish region and the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK) and the organizations affiliated to it; as well as sister organizations in Iran, Iraq and Syria and networks that are widespread and active in the diaspora.

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Educators Nuriye Gülmen and Semih Özakça went on a hunger strike in Ankara after being dismissed from their jobs.

ÇİĞDEM ÜÇÜNCÜ/NAR PHOTOS/REDUX

Turkey's Purge of Critical Academia

Muzaffer Kaya

Academic freedom has always been limited and under threat by the state in Turkey. But since the beginning of 2016, academic freedom in Turkey—and the broader field of higher education—has been subject to a sustained campaign of state repression that is unprecedented in the history of the Turkish Republic.

The crackdown on academia undertaken by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party

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(AKP) began in early 2016 with the repression of the group of anti-war university professors and scholars who became known as the “Academics for Peace.” It was followed by an all-out government purge of higher education—including the mass expulsion of more than 6,000 academics and the prosecution of hundreds more, university closures and institutional restructuring—during the emergency rule that followed the failed July 2016 coup attempt against President Erdoğan. Authorities also routinely interfere with student protests on campus and monitor academic research on sensitive topics.

The unprecedented government intervention since 2016 has caused irreparable damage to higher education, creating a climate of fear and self-censorship, which will have long-term effects on education and critical thought in Turkey. This catastrophic assault on academia was driven by a number of factors: most importantly, the return to war politics regarding Turkey's Kurdish question, the power struggle between the AKP and its former partner the Gülen organization and, ultimately, Erdoğan's ambition to establish a fundamentally new regime in Turkey that controls all the institutions of power, including the education system.

The Political Evolution of Turkish Academia

The most significant previous period of Turkish government repression of academia followed the harsh 1980 military coup, but even this period does not reach the levels of post-2016 repression.

The military coup leaders placed great importance on taking control of the universities, which they viewed as the main source of anti-establishment and subversive ideas and organizations. The military rulers abolished the relative autonomy and democratic procedures of the universities, introduced strict disciplinary regulations against students and faculty members and centralized higher education under the command of the Higher Education Council (YÖK) established after the coup. They imposed the conservative ideology known as the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" on universities. 148 faculty members were expelled and many more resigned due to political and administrative pressure.¹ Arrest and imprisonment of academics only occurred in exceptional cases, unlike the current purge.

The authoritarian regulations of the 1980s were followed by the neoliberal restructuring of higher education in the 1990's through their commercialization via the establishment of private universities, the privatization of university cafeterias, security and cleaning services and an increase in hourly-paid contract work for staff.² Neoliberal restructuring continued after the AKP came to power in 2002, with a boom in the number of universities after 2006. Under the motto "one university for each province," the government opened new public universities in many small and medium sized Anatolian cities, which, unsurprisingly, constitute the AKP's electoral support base. In the same period, private entrepreneurs, including many religious sects, notably the Gülenist organization, began to invest in the increasingly profitable "university sector" by establishing new universities. Between 2005 and 2015, the number of universities increased from 94 to 221 and the number of faculty members increased from 79,555 to 147,969. During this period, private universities increased from 28.7 percent to 41.2 percent of the total number of universities.³

In this context, three different types of universities emerged as the norm within Turkish higher education: a small number

of higher tier public and private universities in the metropolises; lower tier private universities that serviced the lower classes mostly located in the metropolises; and lower tier public universities located mostly in smaller and middle-sized cities. The last two types of institutions became popularly known as "signage universities" (*tabela üniversiteleri*) due to their prominent advertising but lack of necessary infrastructure and staffing. The academic positions in the latter two categories were often filled by those close to the AKP government and the religious sects, regardless of merit.

Before it came to power in 2002, the AKP had promised to abolish YÖK in order to democratize higher education. After coming to power, taking control of YÖK became the party's main priority. The election of Erdoğan's second in command, Abdullah Gül, as Turkey's president in 2007, brought YÖK under AKP control because the majority of its board members were appointed by the president. YÖK's priority during this period was lifting the head-scarf ban in universities, a continuous source of dispute between secularists and Islamists since the 1980s. The 2010 constitutional referendum enabled the government to reconfigure and dominate higher judicial bodies, breaking the resistance against abolishing the head-scarf ban, the only act by YÖK that improved freedom in higher education. Scholars who conducted research in sensitive issues like the Kurdish question or took an overtly political stance with their academic work, however, continued facing repression by university administrations and the government.⁴

Cracking Down on Academics for Peace

On January 11, 2016, a petition titled "We Will Not Be a Party to This Crime!" signed by 1,128 academics was released by the Academics for Peace Initiative.⁵ The petition strongly criticized human rights violations by Turkish security forces taking place during renewed fighting in Kurdish cities in the southeast, and urged the AKP government to resume peace negotiations with the Kurdish movement that had collapsed after the June, 2015 elections. The Turkish military had just launched a major assault upon several Kurdish cities, resulting in more than 100 civilian casualties—including babies, children and elderly people—as well as the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish people and the total destruction of several urban areas.⁶

The petition for peace had a tremendous impact at a time when anti-war opposition in the western part of the country was silenced by state repression and ISIS attacks on Kurdish communities.⁷ A day after its announcement, Erdoğan accused the signatories of treason and supporting terrorists. Public prosecutors and university administrations quickly started investigations, and the pro-government media launched a smear campaign against the Academics for Peace. Despite these assaults even more Turkish academics signed it, raising the number of signatories from 1,128 to 2,122. In solidarity, 2,279 foreign academics also signed the petition.

Soon after the petition was released, a number of signatories were suspended in several universities and forced to resign from their administrative positions; others were threatened by ultra-nationalist groups inside and outside the campuses. The suspensions began in private universities where employment was more insecure. In some cities, criminal investigations were launched by public prosecutors resulting in home raids and detentions of signatories. The four academics who read a second press release against these investigations and dismissals were imprisoned for 40 days and a criminal case was filed against them for spreading “terrorist propaganda.” Approximately 100 Academics for Peace signatories were dismissed from their positions before the state of emergency was declared in July 2016.⁸

Post-Coup Purge

The growing repression within academia significantly worsened after the state of emergency was declared on July 21, 2016, following the failed military coup attempt against Erdoğan. The coup leaders were alleged to have secret relations with the Gülen organization, which had invested heavily in universities and had developed a considerable network of support institutions in the education field, both within Turkey and abroad. The Gülen organization had been closely allied with the AKP until 2013 and had taken over key positions in the state bureaucracy (primarily in education, the judiciary, the army and police) in return for their political allegiance. In fact, academics affiliated with this organization had actively supported the purge of both Academics for Peace and leftist academics until they too were eliminated by Erdoğan after the failed coup.

The state of emergency lasted for two years—from July 21, 2016 to July 19, 2018. During this period nearly 150,000 civil servants were expelled through emergency decrees without any juridical oversight. The largest share of this enormous purge took place in the educational field: 41,705 employees (30 percent of total expulsions) were expelled from educational institutions.⁹ 6,081 academics and 1,427 administrative staff from 122 universities including 300 graduate students studying abroad with state scholarships were also dismissed.¹⁰ 15 private universities were shut down. 2,808 academics working in these universities lost their jobs and 64,533 students were transferred to other universities.¹¹ Even though the majority of expulsions were of civil servants accused of association with the Gülen organization, many Academics for Peace, civil servants associated with the Kurdish movement, trade unionists and leftist activists were also added to the expulsion lists. A total of 407 Academics for Peace signatories were dismissed from their positions by the emergency decrees, bringing the total number who lost their jobs to 519.¹²

The dismissal of so many academics during the state of emergency was a chaotic and arbitrary process without any

judicial oversight. The “to be expelled” lists were prepared by the university administrations.¹³ The few universities where massive dismissals did not take place were the ones who did not submit any “to be expelled” lists to the YÖK. The majority of university rectors, however, submitted “to be expelled lists” with great eagerness in order to ingratiate themselves with the government.

Those dismissed by the emergency decrees were both prohibited from working in another public institution and unable to work in the private sector due to an inscription on their insurance register. They were effectively banned from travelling internationally because their passports were invalidated. In the words of a pro-government columnist, they were sentenced to “civil death.”¹⁴ In some cases, however, this “civil death” led to the literal termination of lives: 37 of the expellees committed suicide out of despair due to these unjust and severe sanctions.¹⁵

The persecution of the Academics for Peace has not been limited to academic expulsion. 434 academics are facing charges for “terrorist propaganda,” with more on the way.¹⁶ Although signing the petition for peace was a collective action, prosecutors have sought to isolate each signatory by opening individual investigations in different courthouses, beginning in December, 2017. 33 signatories have been sentenced to prison for 15 months, which was delayed through a conditional process called “the deferral of the verdict” that requires the acquitted to refrain from breaking the law for five years, at the end of which the sentence is annulled.¹⁷

In addition to mass expulsions, additional laws and regulations were enacted to increase the recruitment of government loyalists to the academy. Perhaps the most effective procedure to ensure political conformity is the new obligatory “security clearance” required for all academic appointments, granted by the National Security Department only if the person in question is not considered to be a security threat. Furthermore, an emergency decree issued in October, 2016 gave the president direct authorization to appoint university rectors and, in some cases, to bypass the academic qualifications historically necessary for such appointments. For example, Yusuf Tekin, the former undersecretary of the Ministry of Education of the AKP, who had been a professor for only one month, was appointed rector of a newly established university in Ankara.

Moreover, an amendment to the law of higher education in December 2016 subjected faculty to strict disciplinary codes and directives, such as the directive to not “make statements or give information to the press, news agencies, radio and TV channels without having been assigned an authority.”¹⁸ The new disciplinary code and regulations make it nearly impossible for academics to inform the public about social problems or to conduct scientific research that may have a critical tone. This policy forces

dissident academics who have not yet lost their positions into silence and self-censorship; many dissident academics have simply moved abroad.¹⁹ Students have been adversely affected due to the decrease in the overall quality of education and an increase in police violence on campuses. Boğaziçi University, one of the most autonomous and top-tier universities in Turkey, has experienced the routinization of police violence on its campuses. Students protesting against supporters of the Turkish military invasion of the Kurdish city of Afrin in Syria in March, 2018 were arrested, tortured and imprisoned for three months; 22 await pending trials.²⁰ The Boğaziçi University rector appointed by Erdoğan issued a declaration condemning his own students rather than supporting their freedom of speech.²¹

Resisting Academic Expulsion

Despite government repression and the criminalization of many individuals within academia, academics are engaged in ongoing and often courageous struggles to protect their own professional values and academic freedom. The collective efforts of expelled academics to survive, to continue their professional work and to support the struggles for peace and democracy in Turkey should also be taken into consideration when considering the repressive crackdown on the field of higher education.²²

Most of the Academics for Peace signatories continue to defend their stand for peace and democracy, including those behind prison bars and in the courts. Against the isolation policies of the government, they have organized collective resistance with the support of other democratic social forces. They formed a coordinating body to collectively follow the individual cases in order to counter the prosecutors' isolation tactics.²³ They established solidarity networks to provide their expelled colleagues economic and legal support, in which the teachers union Eğitim-Sen has played a vital role. Academics for Peace members also established alternative educational centers under the name of "Solidarity Academies" in eight cities where they have been dismissed in large numbers. They organize open lectures, conferences, workshops and summer schools. Despite their limited financial resources, with international support "Solidarity Academies" may be able provide a new institutional framework where critical thinking purged from the universities can flourish, though they face considerable challenges.²⁴

With Erdoğan and the AKP establishing a one-man constitutional dictatorship through the newly enshrined "Turkish-style presidential system," it appears that universities are being restructured to reflect and uphold this new system. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy, always weak in Turkey, have now been wiped out completely. The expulsion of the Academics for Peace and other independent scholars signifies the possible elimination of critical

thought from academia in Turkey. Although different, the purges against alleged Gülenist academics are also part of the broader intimidation of academia and society by the state. This intimidation seems to have worked so far. The academics whom Erdoğan favorably defines as "domestic and national" are currently those occupying the administrative bodies of Turkish higher education. At the present, the government has absolute control over the universities. The struggle, however, continues and the outcome is far from determined as academics create new spaces to produce critical knowledge and practices. ■

Endnotes

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New housing in Karakuyu village, near Diyarbakir, Turkey.

SERPIL POLAT/NAR PHOTOS/REDUX

Unequal Turkey Under Construction

Volkan Yılmaz

Turkey has undergone major socio-economic transformations that have generated numerous contradictions since the 1980s. One of the most significant has been Turkey's transformation from a predominately rural and agrarian society to a largely urban society as it enters the new millennium. The fast pace of urbanization, coupled with a decrease in agricultural employment and an increase in service sector employment transformed Turkey into a largely working-class society by the mid-2000s. This unprecedented urban and socio-economic development has in turn generated, and

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in some cases heightened, pressing social and economic problems such as unemployment, stark income inequality and restricted access to adequate housing.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis promising to bring both rapid economic growth and social justice, including improved income distribution, in order to address these pressing social and economic problems.¹ The centerpiece of the AKP's economic program since 2002 has been the promotion of market-led strategies for economic development and growth, especially in the booming housing and construction sectors,

as the main provider of employment and social welfare more broadly. The promise of becoming a homeowner society was one of the bedrocks of this program.²

If measured solely through the narrow lens of economic growth, the AKP economic program has been fairly successful. By achieving a 5.6 percent average annual growth rate in its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the AKP improved Turkey's ranking from the twenty-first to the seventeenth largest economy in the world according to GDP between 2000 and 2018.³

But the success of market-based initiatives in producing broader social welfare depends significantly upon a more equal income distribution. Reviews of comparative data indicate that the benefits of economic growth have not fallen evenly across Turkish society. Turkey still has one of the most unequal income distributions among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries.⁴ While Turkey's GINI score—which refers to the degree of income distribution inequality in a country—significantly decreased between 2005 and 2007, it currently exceeds the level of the pre-AKP period.⁵ Battered by the recent devaluation of the Turkish Lira and soaring inflation, this inequality will continue increasing unless more significant preventive action is taken.

Thus, while the AKP has unquestionably overseen rapid economic growth during its decades-long rule, it has largely failed to deliver on its promise of social justice. The AKP's overreliance upon state-supported marketization, which is perhaps most glaring in its approach to the housing and construction sectors, illustrates key elements of the economic and social policy mix that various AKP governments have pursued and how these policies have often heightened income inequality, indebtedness, housing insecurity and health risks for workers, rather than producing social justice.

Failures of Market-Based Housing

In the context of the state's longstanding historical failure to develop a social housing policy, despite its fast-paced urbanization experience, buying a house (or building one as in the case of squatter housing or *gecekondu* and getting its title deed) has long been one of the key welfare strategies for households in Turkey. Yet while Turkey has a well-developed and rapidly growing housing construction industry, with large numbers of new units coming on the market each year, supply has not been able to meet growing demand, particularly when it comes to more affordable housing for lower income buyers.

Changes in people's living arrangement preferences in Turkey are one factor driving the increasing demand for housing. Average household size, for example, has decreased from 4.5 in 2000 to 3.5 in 2016 despite a roughly 1.5 average annual population growth rate.⁶ Parallel to this change, the share of single person households increased from around 5 percent in 2000⁷ to more than 15 percent in 2017.⁸

But while the formalization process for formerly built *gecekondu*s still continues—nearly 4 million people have applied to obtain their title deeds—acquiring a house for those without one, however, has become more difficult for two reasons.⁹ First, housing prices increased 2.6 times from 2010 to 2017,¹⁰ at a time when Turkey became the country with the highest decline in wage share in GDP among other emerging market economies.¹¹ Second, *gecekondu* construction was made a criminal offense with a punishment of five-year imprisonment in 2004.¹²

In response, the AKP government has adopted a market-based strategy to support the housing sector by offering low-interest housing credits to people with the aim of increasing homeownership. As a result, the annual number of housing credit holders has increased from roughly 11,000 in 2002 to approximately 475,000 in 2016.¹³ The ratio of housing loans in GDP, which was 1.3 percent in 2003, increased to 7.1 percent by 2014.¹⁴ Despite sales of almost 5 million housing units between 2013 and 2016,¹⁵ the owner-occupancy rate actually decreased 1 percent during the same period.¹⁶ These figures demonstrate clearly that the housing boom did not succeed in responding to changes in people's living arrangement preferences or in transforming Turkey into a homeowner society. While 60 percent of households occupy houses that they own, roughly one-fourth of households are tenants.¹⁷

The government has also employed a residualist strategy—directly providing services and support only to the very poor without challenging the centrality of a market-based strategy for the society at large—through building low-cost housing units for the economically deprived. The Public Housing Administration (TOKİ) has become the main actor in this strategy. Controlling a significant portion of public land stock and using it for private sector housing construction, TOKİ finances social housing from the revenues of its for-profit projects. Among its different housing project types, “low-income housing” comes closest to the idea of social housing. Households without any real estate and with a maximum monthly net household income that falls two times below the minimum wage are eligible to apply to these projects. TOKİ allocated only 19 percent of its annual average of 50,000 housing units to this group.¹⁸ While these projects continue to attract interest from non-owners and help a considerable, yet limited, number of people become homeowners, they do not sufficiently increase the overall owner-occupancy rate or reach low and irregular-income households.

Due to the inadequacy of this model in reaching lower income households, the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, in collaboration with TOKİ, launched a new ad hoc social housing program that targets people living in poverty and without social insurance or formal employment. Between 2012 and 2016, roughly 30,000 ministry-financed housing units were built by TOKİ as part of the new

initiative.¹⁹ This program has been, on the one hand, a clear break from market-based strategies but its tight targeting and one-off project strategy does not sufficiently establish a reliable alternative to enable low-income people access to housing. Even this limited provision of social housing, a novelty in the Turkish context, might have created satisfaction among the beneficiaries, fostering the aspiration of homeownership for others, had it been expanded.

In sum, the AKP government's reliance on a market-based housing strategy with a residualist social policy has largely failed to deliver its promise. Today, the largest expenditure item for households (one-fourth of the total income) in Turkey is housing costs, including rent, which has increased its share since 1990.²⁰ Nevertheless, the government's housing strategy transformed home ownership into a financial investment vehicle, which has likely contributed to the stark increase in wealth concentration and inequality in the 2010s.²¹

Perils of Unregulated Construction Growth

Another area where primarily market-based growth strategies have not improved overall social welfare can be found in the employment conditions in the booming housing and infrastructure construction sector. Recent worker protests at the construction of Istanbul's new airport reveal widespread dissatisfaction with working conditions in this sector.²²

To be sure, the number of workers employed in this sector has doubled and the share of construction workers in total employment has sharply increased in the last decade.²³ The construction sector currently constitutes 9 percent of the Turkish economy, employing nearly 8 percent of the working population (more than 2 million people).²⁴

High rates of growth in this sector, however, have not brought about better working conditions, nor have they provided improved social security provisions. More than one-third of construction workers are still unregistered, which excludes them from the formal social security system and leaves them unprotected when injuries occur on duty.²⁵ In addition, average daily earnings in this sector are considerably lower than other sector's averages.²⁶ Trade union membership in this sector is less than 3 percent and thus collective bargaining covers less than 4,000 workers.²⁷

Moreover, economic growth in construction has come with significant increases in preventable human suffering. Despite the ratification of the Occupational Health and Safety regulation in 2012, state regulation capacity remains limited. Occupational health and safety inspections in 2016, for example, could only reach around 175,000 workers, which indicates an insufficient capacity to impose health and safety regulations in a dynamic sector with a high worker turnover.²⁸ As a result, Turkey ranks the highest among the upper-middle income countries in fatal occupational injuries per 100,000 workers in the construction sector.²⁹

Unfulfilled Promises

The AKP's market-based policy orientation in the housing and construction sectors is illustrative of its broader economic and social policy approach. While the economic success of this strategy in terms of rapid growth has generated new employment, the failure to regulate the construction sector to protect workers has not only undermined its potential benefits but has also cost human lives. The market-based approach to housing has mainly served the interests of investor classes and speculators, leading to a growing concentration of wealth and social inequality rather than producing social justice. The luminous promise of homeownership has largely turned into a dark reality for households facing high levels of indebtedness and increasing expenditures on rent. Residualist and ad hoc social housing initiatives of the AKP, although breaking with market dogma and directly aiding the poor, offer little hope for reversing this negative trend. ■

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The Dilovasi region is one of the most polluted areas in Turkey.

GÜLŞİN KETENCI/NARPHOTOS/REDUX

The Contradictions of Turkey's Rush to Energy

Sinan Erensu

The Turkish energy sector—companies involved in the exploration and development of oil or gas reserves, drilling and refining, or integrated power utility companies including renewable energy, coal or nuclear power—has experienced major and systemic transformation and growth since the early 2000s under the rule of consecutive Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments.

The state's monopoly over energy distribution and retail sale has been broken and taken over by private companies, creating substantial privatization revenue for the treasury.

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Electricity generation capacity has grown almost three-fold as market forces have been allowed—and encouraged through a variety of incentives—to build and run private power plants and sell electricity to third parties.¹ State-owned power plants have been privatized as the state withdrew from energy production, except for a few strategic facilities. Mining rights in many coalfields have been leased to private management in return for fixed royalties. Following the enactment of the Renewable Energy Law (No. 5346) in 2005, renewables have attracted sizable private investment, resulting in delayed yet notable additions, particularly in small-hydro, geothermal and wind power.² Last but not

least, the country's long-awaited first nuclear power plant was launched in 2018, bringing five-decade-long dreams of state elites closer to realization.

Turkey's rush to energy, however, is more than a story of a burgeoning energy market and the rapid expansion of the country's infrastructural capacity. The field of energy has been central to the AKP's hegemonic strategy in myriad material and symbolic ways as the party consolidated its rule, in part through a heavy emphasis on infrastructure provision. Opening up the energy industry created a new accumulation opportunity for shrinking sectors and struggling capital owners in the aftermath of the 2001 financial crisis. 82 of the 100 richest business people in Turkey have become active in energy, which was largely state-owned a decade ago.³ Energy has become a sector not just for big business and the well-connected, but also for a wide-range of small players, including garment manufacturers, municipalities, soccer clubs and retired bureaucrats.

The energy boom also provides the government a new source of control over owners of capital through its allocation of production and distribution licenses. Expansion in electricity consumption and production consolidates both the country's attractive emerging market image and the AKP's reputation as the great reformer. Distribution of free coal to the needy is an integral part of the AKP's welfare politics and emblematic of the party's pro-poor rhetoric. New pipelines transiting through Turkey to connect Caucasus oil and gas to Europe are touted by the government as proof of Turkey's rising status as a global power. Ribbon cutting ceremonies of power plants are regularly attended by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself, broadcast live on national television. It is no accident that AKP's rising star, and Erdoğan's son-in-law Berat Albayrak, entered politics as the energy minister right after he was elected to the parliament in 2015.

Boosting the government's image as an able service provider, chaser of energy-independence and a business-friendly sovereign, the rush to energy may seem a winning strategy. It is also fraught, however, with ambiguity, contradictions and risks. It provokes resistance, especially in the countryside by those whose lives and environment are disrupted. Government incentives make good business, but only if the forecasted growth rates are achieved and primary energy resources are supplied without the interruption of droughts, workplace accidents or local protests, for example. Becoming an "energy player" is a step-up in the global arena, yet this new status comes with responsibilities, such as active involvement in global efforts to mitigate climate change. Understanding how the rush to energy that has been so central to the AKP's hegemonic success comes loaded with heavy socio-environmental costs and risks is central to unwrapping the techno-authoritarian package of energy politics and begin working for alternative energy horizons that are clean, democratic and fair.

Energized Dispossession

One harmful social by-product of the AKP's much touted drive for energy growth and independence is that energy infrastructure expansion often leads to the dispossession of local landholdings and, subsequently, livelihoods. To build a power plant, investors must first secure often valuable rural land located either by a coastline or riverbank, or near an existing transportation network. In the business-friendly environment proudly provided by the AKP government, vacant or forest land, or river sections, are often generously leased by the state at low cost for periods up to 49 years. But in a country with sizable rural communities scattered across the countryside, tripling the installed electricity generating capacity is not merely a technical matter, but a matter of ownership and livelihood when land needed for projects belongs to rural residents and is collectively used for social gatherings or as pasture. When accumulation opportunities in energy dictate displacing locals in one form or another, infrastructure projects inevitably face resistance, which has been growing across Turkey over the past decade.⁴

Energy companies aggressively bargain with locals over rural land, often offering bids significantly above market rate. But when they fail to convince farmers to exchange well-kept family land for a one-time lump sum, which often happens, projects stall and investors turn to the state for support. In such cases, the government increasingly resorts to an aggressive land appropriation procedure called Urgent Expropriation (UE). What makes UE a hardy legal tool is that rather than the long and cumbersome legal process of the traditional expropriation procedure, UE is an administrative decision, agreed upon and signed off by the council of ministers, and now by the president alone since the April 2017 constitutional referendum transferred vast powers to the executive. Land transfers are finalized within seven days of a signed UE decision. The property owner is compensated at fair market value but only learns of the seizure after a lump sum is deposited in an account in a state-owned bank that is opened in their name. The state becomes the owner of the property and can then lease it to private entities.

The AKP's use of UE far exceeds its original intent as an exceptional wartime measure enacted in 1940 to give the government a procedure to confiscate private land and property for military purposes under the imminent threat of World War II. Only nine UE cases were approved by cabinets prior to 1990, and six in the 1990s, but UE decisions have skyrocketed under AKP rule, reaching a whopping number of 834 between 2002 and 2014.⁵ By the early 2010s, the UE procedure had almost entirely replaced the ordinary expropriation procedure in cases of energy related investments. According to one study, hydropower plants top the charts, corresponding to 30.6 percent of the 704 UE decisions signed by the cabinet from 1983 to 2015.⁶ The cumulative share of energy related UE decisions amounts to 61 percent.

Contemporary environmentalism in Turkey, which today has a strong rural component in contrast to its largely urban-based history, is heavily rooted in these growing land-use disputes. This is one reason why ecological sensitivities in Turkey, which was a pronounced theme of the Gezi Park protests in 2013, has greater appeal and a broader base in Turkey today.⁷ It is also clear that the rapid expansion of the country's energy infrastructure central to the AKP's popularity now appears to be one of the party's greatest potential political weaknesses.

Vulnerabilities of Energy Economics

Environmental activists who struggle against power plants intruding into rural livelihoods and land dispossession in the countryside correctly blame the AKP's neoliberal privatization and deregulation policies as well as greedy corporations. But while investing in energy promises significant accumulation opportunities, profits are not a given. The boom in energy infrastructure is subject to broader and sometimes unfavorable macro and micro-political and economic forces, which can become major sources of vulnerability and possible political resistance.

Critical economists have long pointed out that the so-called Turkish economic miracle that mesmerized international investors throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, was to a large extent fueled by debt, thanks to ample global liquidity available for emerging markets.⁸ The majority of this debt is owned by private companies, placing a significant financial burden on the shoulders of the private sector, and is often cited as a dangerous risk factor for Turkey's economy. The real problem many argue, however, is that this debt is often channeled into unproductive sectors such as real estate or speculative large-scale infrastructure endeavors.

While power plants are not unproductive per se (and they potentially lower the trade deficit) the success of private power plants depends on a number of factors, including local community acceptance, a healthy resource flow (e.g., cheap coal or sustained precipitation) and sustained economic growth (i.e., growing demand for energy). Investments in energy infrastructure can yield great returns when they meet these requirements and are actually built to match demand. In the presence of burgeoning grassroots activism, and more recently economic stagnation, however, projects are getting delayed, and delays in a debt-ridden economy pose huge risks for companies investing with borrowed foreign currency.

A noteworthy example of this macro and micro-level vulnerability is the dramatic decline in the investment to profit ratios in the hydropower sector since the early 2010's. With the passing of the Market Law to deregulate this sector in 2001 and the distribution of new private energy licenses picking up speed in 2007, this industry was in its heyday until 2010, with investment payback periods as low as five to seven months for a small size hydropower plant. But with the emergence of opposition movements and administrative court cases, this period

doubled in the early 2010s, and it even tripled in regions where resistance and/or drought was stronger. Several companies went bankrupt as a result, and numerous energy licenses changed hands, empowering more established players with a stable cash flow. The Energy Market Regulatory Authority (EMRA) has cancelled over 100 production licenses due to inaction. Companies have already poured millions of dollars into these projects, yet they are deemed infeasible due to problems with cash flow, local resistance, drought, or in preparation for an impending economic crisis.

The number is only expected to increase, given that since January 2018 the Turkish currency has lost roughly 40 percent of its value against all major currencies and some companies operating on foreign loans have already begun to declare bankruptcy. Worsening economic conditions and possible stagnation would not only bring the energy-led accumulation model into a halt, but also provide a painful reminder that the expansion of the industry has been based on speculation as much as a desire for energy-independence.

Shirking Climate Change

A final contradiction of Turkey's energy boom is between its desire to be a major player in the global energy field and the increasingly global expectation of climate stewardship to forestall climate change, about which Turkey has been surprisingly resistant and laggard. Turkey remains remarkably hesitant about the global climate change regime and has failed to achieve meaningful domestic progress. Despite attending the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, which launched the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC), it took Turkey 12 years to sign it, becoming the one hundred and eighty-ninth participant country. Turkey signed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol only in 2009 amidst major pressure from the European Union and the international community.

Even when Turkey became a party to global climate change frameworks, it refrained from binding commitments, negotiating to secure a special status. Turkey's hesitation sounds similar to many countries in the Global South: As an emerging market economy, Turkey believes it is neither fair nor viable to expect from a developing country the kind of environmental commitment developed countries should undertake. This developmentalist stance, however, puts Turkey in a unique position in global climate change politics as the sixteenth largest economy and a founding member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Under UNFCCC Turkey remains the only Annex I party without mitigation commitments. When OECD and European Union (EU) countries agreed to form the Annex II bloc to financially support non-Annex I countries in their efforts to reduce emissions, Turkey's "special circumstances" were recognized by its counterparts and the country was omitted from the new bloc.

To what extent Turkey can keep playing the developing country card and remain a mere observer in global climate

change politics without incurring global or domestic criticism and without addressing the real climate impacts that could affect its development? To be fair, having contributed only 0.7 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions between 1850 and 2010, Turkey's historical responsibility in climate change is insignificant.⁹ Yet, with its 110 percent increase in total GHG emissions between 1990 and 2013, it has the highest rate of emission rate increase among Annex I countries.

The new trajectory of global climate change governance renders Turkey's special circumstances stance untenable.¹⁰ With its target to limit global warming significantly below 2 degrees celcius, and if possible to 1.5 degrees celcius by the end of this century, the 2016 Paris Agreement demands a more dedicated and sustained commitment from all nations. It also terminates the developing vs. developed country duality and demands that parties adhere to mitigation goals and set for themselves a strict review mechanism, which compels nations to negotiate more actively and take part in alliances with comparable, like-minded counterparts.¹¹ Turkey's continuing resistance—it has yet to ratify the agreement—positions the country as an outcast in the global climate change regime. This position is neither sustainable anymore—given the new regime set by the Paris Accord—nor desirable, considering the climate change-related environmental troubles Turkey is and will be facing, such as droughts and revived coal-related air-pollution in metropolises.

Energy Justice, Not Energy Independence

In addition to the vulnerabilities and costs that bedevil the AKP's embrace of energy sector growth and independence as a major element of their hegemonic strategy, a deeper contradiction underlies the energy sector boom: Turkey imports more than three quarters of its primary energy—mostly natural gas and oil—from its neighbors. This amount has not changed much in the last decade. It has even slightly increased since 2010, despite the aggressive expansion in installed capacity and the degradation of the rural fabric and the environment that has accompanied its rush to energy. Public engineers have struggled to discover new deposits of raw energy resources, but there is little to be found inside Turkey. To make matters worse, to lower its dependency on foreign natural gas, Turkey invested in coal power only to see an increase in coal imports by

40 percent because domestic coal cannot compete with cheap foreign coal. Nuclear power is presented as the solution, yet the country's first-ever power plant in Akkuyu will be constructed, run and partially owned by Russia.

Environmentalists rightfully point to renewables and conservation; yet these, too, rely on foreign technology, which is harder to sell now given the recent currency crunch. Smart policies and technologies could certainly improve life and possibly lessen energy dependency. Ultimately, rather than continuing to pursue the mirage of energy independence, countries like Turkey must strive towards energy justice, whereby citizens take part in energy politics and decide on the kind of environment they want to live in, on their own.¹² This requires engaging in conversations about rural development, smallholding farming, the future of agriculture, regional autonomy, workplace safety and environmental commons and making them integral to energy talk. If the rush to energy has been both a foundation for, and a symptom of, a new authoritarian Turkey, the way out of this impasse includes making energy part of everyday politics, not remaining aloof from it. ■

Endnotes

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Editorial continued from page 1.

Contributors to *Confronting the New Turkey* disentangle and analyze the social, political and economic factors that led to the manifestation of this global trend in Turkey by tracing the country's evolution under the AKP and Erdoğan's leadership over the last sixteen years. How Mr. Erdoğan accomplished this opens a window on the electoral autocrat's handbook for the 21st century: instead of cancelling or faking elections, authoritarians are learning to control the

conditions so tightly that no one else can win. Contributors also, however, illuminate lines of resistance, vulnerabilities and contradictions within the New Turkey over which the AKP now presides: crippling debt and rising inequality, rural environmental resistance, youth alienation, gendered dissent, resilient academic rebels, heterodox religiosity and the still unwritten history of the Gezi Park protests, which, for a moment, revealed a new anti-authoritarian, multi-cultural and democratic Turkey that is yet to come. ■



Karakuyu village.

SERPIL POLAT/NARPHOTOS/REDUX

The Politics of Family Values in Erdoğan's New Turkey

Hikmet Kocamaner

Often peppered with religious references, “family values” rhetoric has become a trademark of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. His frequent encouragement of early marriage and criticism of childless women illustrate an ever-expanding repertoire of conservative pronouncements regarding gender, reproduction and the family. During an iftar dinner in 2014, for example, Erdoğan urged female college students not to be picky in selecting a prospective spouse “because our dear prophet advised us to get married and to procreate, so that he could take pride in the sizable presence of the ummah in the afterlife in comparison to other [religious] communities.” At a ceremony hosted by the Women and Democracy Association in 2016, he claimed that “A woman who abstains from maternity by saying ‘I have a job’ means that she is actually denying her femininity ... She is lacking, she is an incomplete person, no matter how successful she is in the business world.”

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Although most of its founders were members of the frequently banned pro-Islamist Welfare Party (RP) in the 1990's, the AKP defines its ideology as “conservative” rather than Islamist. This distinction illustrates the AKP's awareness of the historic difficulty of directly challenging the secular state project—known as Kemalism, initiated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk at the founding of the Turkish Republic—which forbids Islamic reasoning in law, policymaking, economics or policing. Talking about gender, reproduction and the family provides AKP politicians an outlet to articulate their conservative social vision without necessarily trespassing secularism's boundaries. Due to the common misconception that such intimate and private issues are not within the domain of politics, AKP leaders have not shied away from religious references while expressing their views on these issues.

Erdoğan's critics often downplay these religiously inflected pronouncements as either diversions from its policy failures or indicative of the AKP government's ulterior agenda to Islamize Turkish society by imposing religiously inspired norms. Rather than simply a rhetorical sideshow or shorthand for covert

Islamism, however, Erdoğan and the AKP's emphasis on strengthening family values and promoting conservative views on reproduction and gender are central to the AKP government's broader demographic, social service and welfare policies predicated on neoconservative, neoliberal and neo-patriarchal rationalities. Moreover, the AKP's politics of family values is at the core of its long-term strategy to rebuild a "New Turkey" by recuperating from the alleged damages to the social fabric and strength of the nation perpetrated by the formerly hegemonic Kemalist oligarchy.

Governing the Family, Governing the Nation

The AKP and Erdoğan's invocation of "family values" rhetoric is rooted in its broader vision about the family's central role in confronting Turkey's political and economic challenges in the new millennium: The AKP has placed "strengthening the family" at the center of its social policy vision since its founding in 2001. Its party program states that "the family constitutes the foundation of society," and "despite all the negative developments and economic problems," Turkish people owe their "survival as a nation to [their] strong family structure."¹

AKP policies aimed at "strengthening the family" are justified by government officials not by Islamic precepts but rather because they ensure the economic productivity and welfare of the nation. In 2013, Erdoğan underlined the role strong families play in confronting the challenges imposed on Turkish society by globalization, modernization and urbanization: "a family that has weakened, decayed and lost its essence as a result of the changes in our world is a threat to both our future and humanity If we would like to become a strong nation, we need to have strong families." Erdoğan and his party claim that the Turkish family is in crisis and its values deteriorating, generating socio-economic problems such as poverty, homelessness, addiction and crime.

The AKP's "family crisis" discourse illustrates a logic of governance in which the family is both the cause of an individual's disorderly conduct and the site of its containment and correction. For the AKP, society would be facing fewer problems if the family fulfilled its function in disciplining and policing the conduct of its members. In short, while "family crisis" discourse situates the family as the source of risks that threaten the integrity of the Turkish nation, "strengthening the family" is offered as the primary solution to these problems, thereby obscuring structural factors producing societal problems such as income inequality, unemployment and lack of affordable housing.

Growing the Family, Growing the Economy

Erdoğan and other AKP politicians promote a strong pro-natalist stance in speeches and proclamations, expressing distaste for reproductive rights and a desire to strictly regulate citizens' reproductive behavior in favor of larger families.

Erdoğan, in particular, frequently encourages early marriage and having at least three children. He is also an ardent critic of abortion, referring to it as murder, as well as criticizing caesarean delivery for allegedly impeding women's future productivity and lowering population growth, thus hampering the nation's development.

Religious sensibilities certainly play a role in shaping Erdoğan and other AKP politicians' political rhetoric, but their pro-natalist and anti-birth control stance is shaped by their contentious view on global family planning policies as well as demographic and economic rationales that inspire concrete national population policies. Previous Turkish governments made family planning a priority: They promoted contraceptives and birth control, and eventually legalized voluntary abortions in 1983. These anti-natalist population policies reflected a global trend equating overpopulation with economic instability and underdevelopment. Erdoğan and the AKP cadre, by contrast, see birth control methods promoted by US aid agencies and the UN Population Fund as a Western conspiracy against the Turkish nation aimed at curtailing its productivity, development and prosperity.²

The AKP government promotes pro-natalist population policies because it believes that population growth is necessary for economic growth: A larger and younger labor force attracts more foreign investment and helps improve Turkey's competitive advantage in the global market. Zafer Çağlayan, the former AKP minister of finance, for example, claims that Europe is losing its productivity due to its aging workforce and that investors would prefer to outsource production to Turkey rather than other Asian countries because of its dynamic young population and its relative proximity to Europe. Moreover, Erdoğan often refers to India and China, G-20 countries with larger populations and high economic growth, as illustrating how population growth ensures a competitive edge in the global market. When critics questioned whether Turkish families were affluent enough to afford to raise three or more children, Erdoğan responded: "Do you think these countries have better livelihood conditions than ours? No! Only a certain segment of their population is well off but the majority has worse living conditions than ours." According to this rationale, the well-being and uplift of Turkey's poor is secondary to the role their cheap labor plays in attracting foreign capital.

Although Turkey has a large and growing population—census data indicates that the population grew at a rate of 1.3 percent to 78.7 million in 2015—anxiety about population decline and an aging population is not completely unfounded.³ The government predicts that improved economic conditions will lead to an increase in life expectancy, which, combined with a decreasing fertility rate, will eventually lead to stabilization and decline in the overall population growth rate. While the median age was around 31 in 2014,⁴ it will likely rise to 34 in 2023 and around 43 in 2050.⁵ As a result, Erdoğan claimed that the twenty-first century will be "the century of the elderly," as the elderly population of

6 million in Turkey will increase to 9 million in 2025 and 18 million in 2050. The fertility rate has also decreased by almost 50 percent during that last 40 years.⁶

But convincing couples to have at least three children is a tall task in a country where the desired number of children per household reflects the national average (approximately two children per family) and delayed marriage, divorce, contraceptives and abortion are widespread.⁷ Taking up this challenge, Erdoğan asked the ministries of finance, health, labor and family and social policies in 2013 to develop recommendations to increase the national fertility rate. In 2015 former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu announced the “Project for the Protection of the Family and Dynamic Population Structure.”

The government has developed a variety of financial inducements and other targeted policies to encourage larger families. Between 2015 and 2016, the government sent more than 450 million Turkish liras (TL) directly into the bank accounts of the mothers of more than a million newborn babies.⁸ Believing that delaying marriage delays having children, the government also helps young couples waiting on marriage due to economic difficulties by canceling student loans and offering interest-free loans of up to 10,000 TL for newlyweds.⁹ The government has even proposed providing part-time working options for pregnant women, prolonging maternity leave from 16 to 24 weeks and offering free childcare services in government buildings and private companies based on the view that the fertility rate of employed women tends to be lower than that of housewives.¹⁰

In addition, AKP government policies encourage the use of assisted reproductive technologies. The government increased the legally mandated maximum number of in-vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments covered by state insurance from two implementations per family, to three.¹¹ And the Ministry of the Family and Social Policies signed a protocol with Acıbadem, the largest private hospital chain, to offer funding, payment plans and discounts for IVF to low-income families.

Finally, although the government withdrew its plans to further limit legal abortion after thousands of feminists staged widespread demonstrations in 2012, the Ministry of Health pressures state hospitals make it difficult for women to have abortions.¹² The ministry has reportedly introduced an insidious follow-up system for pregnant women whereby the hospital would release positive pregnancy test results to their family members without their consent, which many see as a ploy to discourage abortion.¹³

Care-Giving Families

Over the past few decades, economic recessions, rural-to-urban migration, the transition from extended to nuclear families and increasing divorce rates have weakened the caregiving functions of the family.¹⁴ But rather than addressing these

transformations at the level of national social welfare policy, the AKP government has sought to revitalize the family as the central site for caregiving by providing direct financial and social service support to families who home-care their elderly, disabled and children formerly dependent on state care. This targeted support constitutes the bulk of welfare provisions in recent years. By consigning the responsibility of care to the family, the government reduces spending on care for its needy citizens because institutional care is costlier than these small cash transfers.¹⁵

AKP politicians blame Turkish families’ alleged negligence of their duties and responsibilities toward their elderly parents on the Kemalist modernizers’ promotion of the nuclear family model over the traditional extended family. According to a 2013 demographic survey, 70 percent of the Turkish population now lives in nuclear families.¹⁶ By contrast, AKP politicians valorize the patriarchal three-generational extended family, in which the elderly live with their children and grandchildren and benefit from their support and care. While promoting the extended family reflects the AKP’s conservative view that the elderly transmit traditional moral values to younger generations, the government’s neoliberal social care strategy is largely aimed at mitigating state provision of care for children and the elderly.

Since 2005, an AKP government initiative has sought to return children placed in orphanages and other childcare facilities—such as government owned apartments known as *sevgi evleri* (houses of affection) where children live under the supervision of social workers—to their families or place them with foster parents under the premise that home care provides children a more nurturing environment with a parental role model.¹⁷ There were around 12,200 children living under such government care in 2015.¹⁸ The initiative, known as the “Return to the Family and Familial Support” program, presumes that the primary reason parents send their children to state-run facilities is economic hardship, while ignoring that some children were conceived during previous marriages, from unwanted relationships, or by rape. The Social Services and Children’s Protection Agency also provides financial assistance to parents who agree to remove their children from institutional care and bring them back home.¹⁹

Similarly, the government encourages home care for the elderly and the disabled by providing direct monetary support to their families.²⁰ AKP politicians discourage citizens from sending parents to nursing homes by presenting home care as a moral duty or even religious obligation, while also emphasizing the overall social benefit. Speaking to the UN-initiated International Day of Old Persons in 2014, former Minister of the Family and Social Policies Ayşenur İslam suggested that families should take care of their elderly not only because “old people are happiest and most peaceful when they are with their family members,” but also because “benefiting from the experiences of the elderly is both a societal gain and a social duty.”

Unmaking Kemalism, Upholding Patriarchy

Erdoğan and the AKP government's emphasis on strengthening families, and its intrusive promotion of conservative policies on reproduction and gender, are, therefore, central to the government's political, social and economic vision for the "New Turkey" that it seeks to build. These policies reflect a logic of governance and not simply diversionary theatre or covert Islamism.

At the same time, the AKP's focus on strengthening, growing and re-centering families is also a critical element of its broader project to overturn the legacy of Kemalism. The AKP believes that Kemalist modernization undermined the traditional Turkish family, which it sees as the root cause of social and economic problems that the AKP's population, social care and welfare policies aim to reverse by embracing family values. Rather than condemning Kemalist modernizers' anti-natalism as un-Islamic, they see anti-natalism as detrimental to Turkey's economic development and its national strength. AKP politicians also lament the eradication of the extended family structure—in which elders live with their children and grandchildren—by Kemalist modernizers not merely because elders are transmitters of religious and traditional values, but also because they consider the nuclear family to be responsible for the gradual loss of the social protection and caregiving function of the family, causing dependent populations, such as children, the elderly and the disabled, increasingly rely on state care.

Whether or not such policies will actually rectify any of the alleged damages wrought by Kemalism, such policies are particularly problematic due to the challenge they present to women's rights and advancement by reinstating patriarchal norms. The transformation of the Ministry of Women's Issues and the Family into the Ministry of the Family and Social Policies, for example, positions women's rights as a policy issue solved by strengthening the family, rather than through reformulating state policies or fighting patriarchy. The disappearance of "women" from the name of the ministry suggests that its services would be allocated to women regardless since their gender identity is predicated upon their traditional roles in the family as mothers and wives. Through this slight linguistic switch, the ministry has effectively excluded from its jurisdiction unmarried women and single mothers who do not live in the same household as their parents or other family members.

Nearly all of the AKP's population and welfare policies associate women with motherhood and their traditional reproductive, childrearing and caregiver roles, and thereby render their position in patriarchal Turkish society more vulnerable and precarious. The emphasis on early marriage may prevent some girls from pursuing higher education and may exacerbate the problem of underage marriages, which constitute almost one third of all marriages in Turkey.²¹ Expecting at least three children and discouraging (and limiting access to) birth

control also imposes restrictions on women's reproductive rights and their participation in paid labor.²² Most Turkish women tend to leave their jobs after major life events such as engagement, marriage, pregnancy and childbirth.²³ In fact, some government policies already encourage women's retreat from employment: The labor law promises a severance payment to newly married women who leave their job within a year after their wedding.²⁴ Furthermore, government welfare policies that offer cash transfers to families conditional upon having more children or providing home care to dependent members may lead to more full-time stay at home moms and caregivers rather than encouraging them to pursue careers and acquire financial independence.

In short, while the AKP's family-related policies are not likely to turn Turkey into an Islamic state, they reinforce and reinstate a patriarchal social structure in which women are confined to their homes to fulfill their reproductive, nurturing and caregiving roles rather than participating in the public sphere as economically independent and self-reliant individuals. ■

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A student takes a selfie during the opening ceremony of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan İmam Hatip School in Istanbul, 2017.

MURAD SEZER/REUTERS

The AKP's Problem with Youth

Ayça Alemdaroğlu

Government-funded religious İmam Hatip schools have expanded considerably across Turkey since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power in 2002: from 84,000 students in 450 schools in 2002 to 1.3 million students in over 4,000 schools by 2017.¹ The Ministry of National Education (MEB) justifies this expansion as a natural response to what they claim to be “high demand from parents” but recent reports reveal that these schools draw about 50–60 percent less students than their capacity each year.²

The extraordinary, though largely unsolicited, expansion of religious schools, along with the conversion of many public schools into İmam Hatips, has generated growing public criticism, especially among parents and students who are left with no other public schooling option in the vicinity of their homes. The Turkish education system, moreover, is facing major deficits in terms of equal access and quality at all levels of schooling.³ Since these under capacity schools educate only about 10 to 15 percent of Turkey’s students, and their growth does little to address pressing needs within the Turkish education system more broadly, why then is Turkey’s government investing so many of its scarce educational resources in them?

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The Challenge of Turkish Youth

The AKP’s rapid rise to political dominance since 2002 has polarized contemporary Turkey between those supporting Erdoğan’s program to create a “New Turkey” and those opposed to it. The fact that Erdoğan has been able to garner winning coalitions of over 50 percent of the electorate is due partly to the AKP’s redistributive policies that grant previously marginalized citizens access to state resources and contracts, and partly to Erdoğan’s polarizing discourse which frames politics as a hostile clash between economic/state elites and the repressed majority, and between “secularist anti-democratic forces” and “Muslim democratizers.”⁴ Over time, this coalition has become the support base for the AKP’s wide-ranging reorganization of the state and the society, which has enabled the AKP to achieve unmatched power, spreading conservative and Islamic references and practices into everyday life across Turkey.

But one of the most significant obstacles to the AKP fully realizing its hegemonic objectives in Turkey is the widespread disaffection of Turkish youth with the AKP. Despite its national electoral popularity, the AKP has been significantly less successful in attracting youth support for its campaigns. The AKP’s youth vote (among those 18–25) is generally 5 to 10 percent below its national support level and compares poorly with other political parties such as a pro-Kurdish and leftist

Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and the ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP).⁵

Many young people, moreover, are not only less inclined to vote for the AKP in comparison to their parents, they are actively critical of its policies. The nationwide protests in summer 2013 that were sparked by the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, for example, highlighted the growing discontent of Turkish youth with the direction that the country was taking under Erdoğan.

The magnitude of the 2013 protests, especially in the aftermath of youth-led Arab uprisings that toppled long-time rulers in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, deepened the AKP government's insecurities about the threat to its hegemony posed by the country's youth. Though the government criminalized and violently repressed the protesters, it could not silence dissent. Yet another uprising began in 2015 after the breakdown of the peace process between the government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This time, Kurdish youth organized under the banner of the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H) built barricades and trenches, and took up arms to fight the Turkish military in asymmetric urban warfare, leading to 900 deaths, including 350 security personnel, and the destruction of entire city quarters, furthering the disillusionment of Kurdish youth with AKP rule. Government persecution of student dissent has also increased: as of 2018, there are 70,000 students in jail and over 100,000 facing trial.⁶

In addition to political alienation and overt dissent, Turkish youth also represent a major cultural and moral challenge to the AKP's conservative and religious agenda. In its 2016 report, the pro-government Social, Cultural and Economic Research Center (SEKAM) warned that the country's youth was engaged in high levels of alcohol and drug consumption and sexual activity while also noting their low level of religious morality and social trust, and a strong desire among many to emigrate. More recently, a wave of media reporting and anonymous confessions about growing atheism and deism among youth from conservative and pro-AKP families suggests increasing alienation from the orthodox Sunni Islam that the AKP propagates.

Raising a Religious Generation

Given that more than half of Turkey's population is under 30 years old, the challenge Turkish youth present to the AKP's effort to consolidate and reproduce its power is a problem too large to be ignored. Thus, in 2012, amid student protests and criticism about the AKP's education policies, Erdoğan declared that the goal of his party was to raise religious youth.

Erdoğan's declaration marked a significant break from the Republican myth of youth as the guardian of the secular Republic, propagated by its founding statesman Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.⁷ It was also a break from the first two terms of the AKP, during which time the party avoided overt identification with Islamist politics, defining its ideology as "conservative democrat" on par with European Christian democratic parties. Some interpreted Erdoğan's declaration about raising religious youth as a tactic to

divert public attention from the AKP's contentious policy agenda or government scandal. In hindsight, however, it was actually an expression of AKP policies that were well underway by this time.

Religious education has been the subject of vehement political contention ever since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The transition from the Ottoman Empire to Republican Turkey was marked by a steadfast secularization policy that limited the role of religion and Islamic organizations in Turkish politics and society, while placing all religious activity under the control of the secular state. The Unification of the Education Law of 1924 banned over 479 Ottoman madrasahs, abolished religious curricula in all schools and brought all religious and regular schools under the rule of the MEB, while also establishing İmam Hatips as vocational schools in 1924 for training prayer leaders and preachers to disseminate state-sanctioned religion to support the new Republican regime.

Although İmam Hatip schools were closed down in 1931 due to the lack of students and political commitment, they reopened after Turkey's transition to multi-party system in 1946 and flourished in the following decades: by 1996, the number of schools and students had doubled to 601 schools with 511,502 students.⁸ And while the schools kept their status as vocational schools, they became an appealing alternative for religious and conservative families, where girls could wear headscarves and single-sex education in classrooms was permitted.

The 1997 memorandum "coup" by Turkey's military, the self-declared guardians of Atatürk's secularism, forced the pro-Islamist Welfare Party-led coalition government to strengthen secularism, stalling the expansion of religious education in Turkey beyond existing İmam Hatips and mandatory religion classes in all other schools as stipulated in the 1982 constitution written under military tutelage after the 1980 coup d'état. The government was compelled to introduce a schooling system that required eight years of uninterrupted primary education, leading to the closure of middle sections of high schools, including those of İmam Hatips. The reform aimed to keep students in secular schools longer, making them less vulnerable to religious inculcation. Regulatory measures were also introduced that significantly disadvantaged vocational school students if they pursued higher education in fields outside their vocational training, making it difficult for İmam Hatip graduates to attend four-year colleges other than divinity schools, preventing them from pursuing careers in engineering, medicine or law. Both measures led to a significant decline in the number of İmam Hatip students: from 511,502 in 1997 to just 77,392 in 2002.⁹

Religious Education As Political Mobilization

The AKP has taken direct aim at these restrictions as part of an unprecedented expansion of religious schooling in Turkey since coming to power in 2002. Consecutive AKP governments have rescinded regulations limiting İmam Hatips and have made resources and opportunities available to them and their graduates. The MEB under the AKP has granted Islamic civil society

organizations such as ENSAR, İlim Yayma and ÖNDER, a more prominent role in nationwide education governance.¹⁰ These organizations build the majority of İmam Hatip schools and dormitories and then transfer them to the MEB on the condition that they are used solely for religious education.¹¹ This partnership is an attractive model for the AKP not only ideologically but also economically by increasing the role of private investment in education and philanthropy in welfare provisioning.

İmam Hatip schools provide Erdoğan and the AKP an important platform to spread influence and consolidate power in the new Turkey under construction, and reach the country's younger generation. For one, İmam Hatip provide human and social capital for the state bureaucracy. Much of the stunning growth in the budget of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, from 600 million YTL in 2002 to 8 billion in 2018, surpassing the growth of the Ministry of Education budget in the same years,¹² is allocated for personnel growth, creating further job opportunities for the schools' graduates. With a curriculum that includes both regular school math, science and social studies classes as well as religion and Arabic courses, a large majority of graduates enter business, law and politics. Many AKP politicians, including Erdoğan and his key bureaucrats are proud alumni. In the aftermath of the failed 2016 coup attempt, İmam Hatip filled the space previously occupied by schools affiliated with Fethullah Gülen, whom the Turkish government holds responsible for the attempted coup.

İmam Hatip schools also provide the AKP a platform for political mobilization of the youth population. Teachers, students and parents form a tight-knit community connected to the party and the government institutions through a network of schools and civil society organizations. This network is an important vehicle of the AKP's clientelistic distribution of government contracts and jobs to schools' affiliates. The party structure has been a significant path for empowerment and upward mobility, especially for disadvantaged youth.¹³ The network also cultivates young people's hearts and minds by providing a collective identity, which meshes piety with a sense of moral superiority and resentment founded in the experience of marginalization by secular institutions. This sense of resentment and moral superiority ties the community together by estranging it from the rest of the society, while informing the social bases of the political polarization in Erdoğan's Turkey.¹⁴

Organizing Youth for the Party

Erdoğan's project of raising a religious generation through religious schooling across Turkey is the core element of the AKP's youth strategy but İmam Hatip schools are only one part of a more systematic strategy undertaken by the AKP to confront its youth problem and consolidate its rule more generally.

Since 2012, Erdoğan's family and friends have funded and organized a number of youth-oriented NGOs, the most prominent of which include TÜGVA (Turkey Youth Foundation) and TÜRGEV (Turkey Service to Youth and Education Foundation).

Both organizations run student dormitories and organize educational and cultural programs. They have grown exponentially both in Turkey and abroad since 2012 through large donations from unidentified domestic and international sources. For example, in April 2012, TÜRGEV received 100 million dollars from abroad via Erdoğan's son, Bilal Erdoğan who was at the time on the board of trustees of the foundation. The opposition members of parliament made a number of futile inquiries asking the government to reveal the source of funding.¹⁵

TÜRGEV was also caught up in the corruption scandal that exploded in December 2013 involving government ministers, Erdoğan and his family members as well as the Iranian-Turkish businessman Reza Zarrab. Zarrab was recently charged in US District Court in New York, for laundering money and helping the Iranian government circumvent US economic sanctions with the help of Halk Bank, owned by the Turkish state. According to Erdoğan, however, TÜRGEV is being attacked because the organization aims to raise youth who knows their religion, history and culture, who are productive, who are dedicated to its country."¹⁶ Between 2013 and 2018, TÜRGEV increased the number of its dormitories from eight in Istanbul, Bursa, Artvin and Konya to 68 in 34 Turkish cities, and a number of them in London, Boston, New York, Chicago and Washington, DC.

Turkey's growing and often rebellious youth population is both a significant obstacle to AKP hegemony as well as an opportunity for it to fully consolidate its power well into the future. The activities of proliferating youth-centered organizations, together with the massive investment in İmam Hatip schools indicate the scope of the AKP's systematic effort to shape and control youth through amicable means. While the party's record in recruiting youth to its cause has been poor thus far, the future will show whether the extraordinary funding and efforts the Party directs to religious schools and pro-government youth organizations will affect that record. Regardless of the outcome, the strength and resilience of Turkey's authoritarian regime should be traced as much to these efforts in consent-building as to its more well-known reliance upon coercion and clientelism. ■

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President Erdoğan offers prayers during a commemoration of the second anniversary of a botched coup attempt, Istanbul, July 15, 2018. EMRAH GÜREL/AP PHOTO

The Crisis of Religiosity in Turkish Islamism

Mucahit Bilici

In 2017 İhsan Fazlıoğlu, an Islamist professor of philosophy at Istanbul Medeniyet University, was visited by a group of concerned teachers and parents from the İmam Hatip high school (a government-funded secondary school that trains Muslim preachers) he once attended. The visitors wanted his advice on the growing trend of deism and atheism among young people and what was to be done about it. The professor responded with a shocking observation of his own: In the past year, of the many religious students who came to consult with him, no fewer than 17 women had confided that although they continued to wear a hijab (headscarf) they had left Islam and considered themselves atheists.

With Fazlıoğlu's public recounting of this anecdote in 2018, a controversy that had been welling up in Turkey's religious underworld finally burst into the consciousness of the conservative mainstream. Coupled with the findings of a local study on the religious beliefs of İmam Hatip students from the conservative city of Konya, it ushered in a vociferous debate in the media and among politicians about the crisis of faith among the younger generation. The BBC covered the debate under the headline, "The Young Turks Rejecting Islam,"¹ while the Islamist *Gerçek Hayat* published a story with the title, "Mom, I Became a Deist."² Newspaper columns with attention-grabbing headlines about "hijabi atheists" drew swift denials and condemnations from the religious authorities.

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Yet the problem, it appeared, was real: A flurry of anonymous confessions, newspaper interviews and personal observations confirmed the existence of a growing phenomenon among Turkey's religious youth who, repulsed by institutional religion, sought refuge in either deism—a monotheism shorn of its institutional trappings—or in atheism. Fazlıoğlu himself believes that the common cause of all these departures from institutional religion is "the behaviors of those on the stage claiming to represent religion." While avoiding direct criticism of the regime, which could have unpleasant repercussions, he is clearly gesturing toward the moral failure of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) elites and the civilian religious authorities. "The matter is serious," he observes, "Unless we confront these outcomes, in about thirty years we will be talking about totally different things."³

The growing attraction of deism and atheism for religious youth in Turkey, emerging as it does during the peak political dominance of religious conservatism in Turkey, under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP, points—surprisingly—to an internal collapse of religiosity among the new generation of pious Turks. Most religious communities harbor dreams of a "golden generation," and Erdoğan and the AKP were no exception: Upon coming to power in 2002, they implemented their own project to create a "pious generation." During his 16 years in power, President Erdoğan has revamped the educational system to serve this purpose, dramatically increasing the number of İmam Hatip

high schools and making them the mainstream and preferred public schools for all.

Yet even as the AKP's dream of political dominance has come to fruition, the dream of creating a "pious generation" seems to be slipping from their grasp with the turn to deism among young people from pious families; representing what may be a Pyrrhic victory for Erdoğan and the AKP. More than that, it reveals a deeper set of transformations, most notably the emergence of a new and organic secularization and the transition from a *cemaat* (community)-centric religious culture to a politically administered one.

Declaring War on Deism

The immediate response by official religious authorities and pro-government clerics to media reports about a crisis of faith among religious youth was denial and condemnation. Such a development was impossible; but even if it were true, it was attributed to missionaries, the internet and conspiracies fomented by foreign governments. Deism and atheism were rejected and demonized as unnatural, foreign ideologies. In an emblematic series of statements, Ali Erbaş, the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), initially denied the turn towards deism, then later, after accepting its existence, condemned it: "No member of our nation can be interested in such a perverse, false notion."⁴

Despite these denials and the Erdoğan government's obvious displeasure with the story, discussion and debate persisted in the Turkish media, as more and more religious parents and young people found the courage to talk about it. Thus, after first vehemently rejecting reports of the so-called plague of deism, *Diyanet* conceded its existence a few months later, convening a consultative body to discuss the problem. Taking place on September 11, 2018, it explicitly named the enemies: "Deism, Atheism, Nihilism, Agnosticism." According to the only journalist invited to the meeting, the pro-government *Yeni Şafak* columnist Kemal Öztürk, almost all of the 70 participants hailed from the religious and educational bureaucracy or were academics from theology schools. Following the official line, participants argued that deism belongs to a European context and as such cannot be found in Turkish society. Frustrated by this conclusion, even Öztürk was moved to ask his readers: "If no such deism exists in Turkey, then what is the name for the problem we are discussing?"⁵

The participants nevertheless conceded that youth seemed to be drifting away from religion and *Diyanet* launched a survey to investigate the existence and scope of deism and similar ideas in Turkish religious schools. About two weeks after the meeting, the media reported that *Diyanet* had "declared war on deism."⁶ In the meantime, a group of individuals declared on October 15, 2018 that they had created a formal organization, the Deism Society. In its launch statement, Özcan Pali, a founding member, said, "Because we do not belong to any religion, we were insulted and our dignity was wounded. People in the government called us 'psychos'. But we are like Adam and Eve. Like us, they were

not following any religion. We too are like them. If they call us deviant, they are calling Adam and Eve deviant, too."⁷

An Organic Secularization?

The odd occurrence of the highest religious authority in Turkey declaring war on such an otherwise obscure belief as deism, at the height of political dominance by the conservative-religious AKP, suggests an unexpected turn in Turkey's modern history: Turkey, it seems, is undergoing a new and deeper process of secularization. This process, it should be emphasized, has little to do with Kemalist *laïcité*, the state-led secularization project of founding statesman Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Rather, it is an organic secularization, entirely civic and happening not at the behest of, but in spite of, the state. It is the consequence of a local, indigenous enlightenment, a flowering of post-Islamist sentiment. Disillusioned by their parents' religious claims, which they perceive as hypocritical, the younger generation is choosing the path of individualized spirituality and a silent rejection of tradition.

While some have called it "religion fatigue" and others downplay it as a temporary fad, the trend should be viewed from a broader perspective. Released from its decades-long victim status under the Kemalist secular regime, Turkey's religiosity has begun to breathe free—and its newfound political power has, in turn, deprived it of its former excuses. As a result, Turkish religiosity has been put to the test, and while it has succeeded politically, it has failed spiritually in the eyes of many in the new, internet-literate generation. The political success of Islamist movements has paradoxically turned religion into a tool in the hands of the politicians. The political class has maintained its claim to piety, while the clerical class has endorsed and supported their corrupt politics. Many pious youth, seeing in this a betrayal of religious ideals, have concluded that religion has always been instrumentalized by politicians and clerics and become disillusioned, not only with institutional religion, but with faith as a whole.

Increased religious literacy and access to expertise and knowledge that historicizes Islam among this generation has also played a role in this trend. Both comparative knowledge of other faith traditions and disenchanting explorations of the origins of a range of Islamic practices have rendered mainstream religion less able to attract and sustain belief. Young Muslims today are exposed not only to the polemical anti-Islamic content generated by non-Muslims, but also to legitimate critiques of Islam produced by once-marginal Muslims themselves, and to the striking diversity of voices within the larger Islamic canon. In an increasingly connected world, religions no longer enjoy the luxury of isolation (or of isolating their followers) from outside influences.

Exposure to intra-Islamic debates surrounding the authenticity of hadiths and the increasing popularity of the "Qur'an-only" movement and historicist school of theology (exemplified by such authors as İhsan Eliaçık, Mustafa İslamoğlu, Edip Yüksel,

Mehmet Okuyan, Caner Taslaman and Mustafa Öztürk) have significantly undermined the credibility of Sunni orthodoxy. Although not, perhaps, potent or resourceful enough to offer full-blown alternatives to that orthodoxy, their criticisms chip away at the received wisdom of traditional religion. Individuals like Edip Yüksel, who utilize the power of social media to expose inconsistencies in the hadith literature and practices of the *ulema*, can launch attacks on Sunni orthodoxy that garner followings in the thousands. Popular exposure to marginal yet startling bits of information about early Islamic history, and newfound access via social media to critical theological perspectives previously accessible only to Islamic scholars, have all transformed the landscape.

Institutional Illegitimacy

Turkey's religious institutions are also confronting new challenges that contribute to the search for alternatives among Turkey's youth. The Kemalist Republic in Turkey was characterized by the rise of *cemaat* (religious community) structures, which provided rural-to-urban migrants a refuge and platform for religiosity and appealed to socially disenfranchised people from conservative backgrounds. Despite the general repression of religion at the time, the *cemaat* thrived under a sort of pluralism derived from their very exclusion and enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy, both from the state and other religious groups.

Today these structures are suffering a crisis of legitimacy. The party claiming to represent them, the AKP, attained power and under Erdoğan's leadership revolutionized Turkish politics: Turkey has, arguably, undergone a second founding and produced what could be called the Religious Republic.⁸ Now, however, under the Religious Republic, these institutions are—willingly or unwillingly—engulfed in politics and find themselves under the direct control of the government. Their regime-regulated dissolution within the larger, newly religious society has been coupled with a loss of respect fueled either by their patently self-interested opposition to the AKP (as in the case of the Gülen movement), or their unstinting obedience to Erdoğan. In sum, *cemaat* structures are experiencing a Pyrrhic victory of their own: As they benefit from privileges granted by the party, their constituencies are enlisted by the government for either political militancy or the AKP's nation-building project. The *cemaats'* grip on their own people is weakening.

In tandem with the growing visibility of religious society in Turkey, moreover, a number of scandals have tarnished the image of trusted religious institutions such as the Qur'an schools for minors known as Kur'an Kursu. Instances of pedophilia and sexual abuse among religious communities (e.g., the Ensar Vakfi scandal) have surfaced and caused outrage. Things once passed over in silence have begun to be discussed openly.

There is also growing disillusionment with religious leaders whose suppression by and exclusion from the secular public sphere had until recently kept their more irrational and immoral behaviors local. Now that the secularist pressure on these figures has lifted, the Turkish public has witnessed an

outpouring of religious fanaticism. Newfound confidence on the part of parochial religious figures allows them to share their archaic, entirely unacceptable and embarrassing opinions with ever larger audiences. Ranging from the truly horrific (defenses of child marriage and spousal abuse) to supremely silly (the supposed sinfulness of mixed-gender elevators), the claims of these anachronistic preachers and leaders, who include İhsan Şenocak, Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca and Nurettin Şirin, to name but a few, all take their turn in the 24-hour news cycle, much to the mortification of the educated and highly globalized younger generation. In some instances, the Erdoğan regime itself—which is notoriously anti-intellectual and has, in general, bogged down Turkey's public discourse in patriotic hucksterism and endless conspiracy theories—feels sufficiently embarrassed by these figures that it is regulating their media appearances in response to public outcry.

Crisis of Religiosity in the Religious Republic

Turkey is witnessing a flight from organized religion on the part of its younger generation. The destination is frequently labeled—by them and by their critics—as “deism,” a concept from another age, to be measured against a textbook definition. This tendency, which amplifies the foreignness and threatening nature of the phenomenon, is also convenient for the religious establishment, which desires to discredit it. But the use of the term has made it hard for all parties to appreciate the trend's organic and indigenous nature. Labeling youth disaffection with foreign concepts allows political actors to demonize and de-authenticate a strand of thought which is a natural outgrowth of contemporary Muslim experience, and one which is sure to shape the future of Islam in Turkey.

With the rise of the Religious Republic, Turkish modernization is entering a new phase. The Anatolian masses, freed from poverty and political repression, are beginning to experience modern selfhood. They embrace economic rationality and adopt political pragmatism, all the while nurturing their resentment against the secular elite and the former Kemalist state. This is why, while religiosity seems to be in the ascendant, it is also forced to transform itself from a culture of “community” to one of “society”—a distinction made by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, who explains the modernization process as a transition from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*. In some sense, what is happening beneath the political clamor of partisan sniping and massive housing projects is the birth of a “society” of the religious—and thereby of a new radical individuality.■

Endnotes

- 1 Selin Girit, “The Young Turks Rejecting Islam,” *BBC News*, May 10, 2018.
- 2 Emeti Saruhan, “Anne ben deist oldum,” *Gerçek Hayat*, April 2, 2018.
- 3 İhsan Fazlıoğlu, “Mesele ciddi, başörtülü ateistler var,” *T24*, March 19, 2018.
- 4 “Diyanet İşleri Başkanı Erbaştan flaş ‘Deizm’ açıklaması,” *Sabah*, April 12, 2018.
- 5 Kemal Öztürk, “Deizm akımı yoksa, peki sorunuz nedir?” *Yeni Şafak*, September 12, 2018.
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On the nineteenth day of the Gezi Park protests people continue to gather, June 2013.

GÜLŞİN KETENCİ/NARPHOTOS/REDUX

"It is still early to write the history of Gezi"

An Interview with Mücella Yapıcı

Mücella Yapıcı is an architect and activist, known for her work against urban renewal projects and environmental destruction in Turkey. She is the secretary and spokesperson of the activist group Taksim Solidarity, which was one of the leading organizations during the June 2013 Gezi Park protests. MERIP editorial committee member **Elif Babül** spoke to Yapıcı on June 22, 2018 in Istanbul at the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects, shortly before the 2018 presidential elections took place. The interview has been edited and condensed for publication.

What are the broader circumstances that led to the Gezi Park protests in June 2013?

Turkey's economic and social policies underwent a serious transformation starting from the late 1970s. What are known as the June 24 decisions, that were announced right before the September 1980 military coup, foresaw the reorganization of the Turkish economy according to neoliberal principles. This transformation, which was pushed by the World Bank, led to a specific urbanization process triggered by the conversion of urban and agricultural lands into real estate.

The neoliberal restructuring of the Turkish economy continued after the AKP came to power. Under the guise of urban renewal projects, historical neighborhoods such as Tarlabaşı and buildings such as Emek and Majik cinemas were all being demolished to erect shopping malls. These shopping malls would all have underground lots. Taksim is a protected urban area where you cannot dig underground but the AKP government issued law 5366 to overcome those barriers.

All of a sudden in 2011, we heard talk of rebuilding the artillery barracks in Taksim square as part of a larger project to pedestrianize the area. We got together with a group of architects, engineers and city planners to examine the project and concluded that they were trying to open up underground service roads to benefit the new shopping malls they planned to build in Siraselviler and Gümüşsuyu streets. When the plans were finally declared in February 2012, we gathered with representatives of the Chamber of Engineers and Architects and the Chamber of Urban Planners and decided to take the project to the court.

In addition to the lawsuit, we organized an information meeting and invited a wide range of civil society organizations, neighborhood boards, unions, political parties and individuals. No one from the AKP showed up. There was already a group called the Taksim Platform, composed of architects and intellectuals who lived in the area and were organizing campaigns to protest these projects. We spent a long time debating and discussing together.

In our meeting, we sensed something special happening and wanted to give it a form. We decided to call ourselves Taksim Solidarity and started working on a declaration. We formed a coordination committee and elected two secretaries. I am still serving as one of the secretaries and the spokesperson for Taksim Solidarity. We decided to arrive at decisions via consensus. We did not want to vote on anything. We wanted to talk through any objections and give everyone the chance to persuade others. It took 15 days to write a half page document because we wanted to compose something that everyone could agree upon.

We declared the manifesto and invited everyone who agreed with it to come join us. We stood guard in Taksim every evening for the whole year. We explained to people what was going on and collected over 100,000 signatures in person—not on the internet. As a result of all this work,

a network was formed. In the meantime, the lawsuits were all going well and we were feeling very positive. The May 1 gathering was held in Taksim, even though Erdoğan tried to ban it at first. An amazing crowd showed up, joined by LGBTQ people and others. It was an extraordinary time of organizing.

How did the actual protests begin?

Although we won a number of lawsuits, the company started construction even though the court decision did not allow them to touch Gümüşsuyu and Siraselviler streets, nor Gezi Park. Suddenly on May 27 we received a phone call at the Chamber informing us that bulldozers had arrived at the park. We all rushed there. They had already started taking down the trees. We asked the workers to show us their permit and of course it was missing. They shut down the bulldozers and went away, but we spent the night at the park because they might come back at any time. The workers came back around 10 am the next day but by then, we had already formed a large and strong network. We tweeted the news and asked people to start gathering at the park. We tried to explain to the workers that they could not take down the trees without a permit.

All of a sudden, 30 or so men appeared out of nowhere and lined up in front of us with their backs turned. Afterwards, someone brought vests to make them look like municipality officials. Eventually, the police showed up and started pushing us, spraying us with teargas. We started hugging the trees, climbing on top of the bulldozers, all the while being gassed. They shut down their equipment and left. People started to set up small tents to spend the night. Around midnight, we woke up to a very violent police raid where they started burning down the tents. That was the start of the Gezi events. Everyone poured down to the park.

We were already organized and connected, but while we were occupying the park, an amazing natural organization sprang up. There were 2,500 people responsible for cleaning the park. We started holding solidarity meetings every night open to everyone who wanted to join. We again arrived at decisions by consensus, by persuading one another. We started holding forums which spread to the surrounding cities. We started to get the decisions of those other forums and took them into consideration.

To sum it up, it was the most colorful, non-hierarchical organization that I have ever witnessed in my life. Everybody listened to one another. It is not common to see groups so different from one another coming together to defend a public space. Nobody tried to dominate the platform. There was a spokesperson, on whom everybody agreed. We all agreed on the declarations we made. Turks and Kurds came together for the first time, because it was all built on trust; there was no hierarchy. Our only job was to facilitate the discussions and to make sure that all decision-making was

done properly—in a peaceful, lawful and anti-violent manner. Those were the principles that we all agreed upon. People from all over the world came to witness it. It was wonderful.

Were there any meetings or negotiations with the state?

When the protests first broke out, the state claimed that there was no one to talk to. After discussing among ourselves at Taksim Solidarity we said that we are here. We asked for an appointment with the president, who at the time was Abdullah Gül, and said that we had demands we'd like to communicate to him.

Did Taksim Solidarity ask to meet with Erdoğan?

We did not ask to meet with Erdoğan, who at the time was the prime minister. He got furious when the Gezi protests first began. He declared that he personally gave the orders to demolish the park, and he kept saying that he would build both a shopping mall and the artillery barracks there, no matter what. Afterwards, his office invited some select individuals to a meeting. Some people who were in Taksim Solidarity went to that meeting in their individual capacity.

We demanded a meeting at the level of the president and we ended up meeting with Bülent Arınç, the deputy prime minister. We communicated our demands, which were very clear and concrete. One: We demanded Gezi Park remain a public park. An official statement must be made to ensure that no construction efforts, including the artillery barracks project, would be pursued in the park. Two: Demolition of the Atatürk Cultural Center must be stopped. Three: All officials—including the governor and police commissioners who prevented people from using their democratic rights and caused hundreds of injuries and two deaths, who gave oppression orders, who executed these orders and who caused several injuries—must resign immediately. Four: The use of gas bombs and related materials must be banned. Five: All those who were detained across Turkey during protests must be released immediately and an official statement must be made to ensure that they will not face any prosecution. Six: All public demonstration bans especially in Taksim and Kızılay Squares, but also throughout Turkey, must end. All obstacles against freedom of expression must be removed.

Arınç made some elusive comments and it became clear that it all depended on Erdoğan's will. Nothing would happen if he did not agree.

From where we stand today, it is important to remember the scale and significance of Gezi. It spread everywhere across the country except for the city of Batman. It was incredible. We lost eight of our children in the meantime. Ali İsmail was beaten to death in Eskişehir. As far as we know, 8,900 people lost either an eye or another organ. 36 people lost an eye. Many people got sick because of teargas.

One of the most important developments attributed to Gezi was the formation of a new political repertoire and a new generation of political subjects. After five years following the Gezi events, where can you see the effects of that repertoire and subjectivity?

We see the humorous tone of Gezi currently on the campaign trails, winning followers to the Republican People's Party (CHP) presidential candidate Muharrem İnce; the power of humor, laughter, joke, togetherness, love. We see today that some CHP followers say they will consider voting for the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) for the parliamentary elections, or some Kurdish friends consider voting for the CHP's candidate for president. Gezi changed the way people from the two geographies look at each other. People came together and organized for the first time for a park, for a space that was not their personal property, a place that they may never visit in their life. They came to the realization that the symbolic value of the park was much more than those three trees. And I believe this had a lasting effect that continues today.

Right after Gezi, everybody was wondering what would come out of it. A party? A revolution? But no, this was a completely unique kind of event that was very loosely organized, nonhierarchical, where everybody could express themselves, and everybody could stand together. People learned how to do that in peace, love and empathy for one another. As they learned to shout "everywhere is Taksim" together, they also realized the necessity to shout "everywhere is Lice" too. When people involved in Gezi saw how the mainstream media misrepresented them, they started questioning how the media may have misrepresented the Kurdish issue. They learned to open their ears and hearts to the Kurdish regions. The Kurds, too, realized that not everyone here is their enemy. They realized that there are people here who can feel their pain. A group called the anti-capitalist Muslims also came into being. I think Gezi had a huge effect on the religious groups.

If you ask me, it is still early to write the history of Gezi. We see the remnants of Gezi everywhere, but it will take a while for it to take form.

At the current moment, an individual solution is not possible for any country. This is a global situation, not just a Turkish problem. The world has shrunk. It does not take long for the world's oppressed, precarious, laborers and intellectuals to find one another. The unabashed violence of capital is ruining the ecology of the planet. This is not only a matter of humanity anymore. This is an issue of the soil, of the water, the fish, the climate: There is crisis everywhere. That is why fascist governments keep coming to power following capitalist crises. But I truly believe that this is the darkness before the dawn. Just like in the saying—the darkest hour comes before the light. I believe that the world is at the verge of the dawn. I am hopeful, maybe not for myself, but for the younger generation. ■

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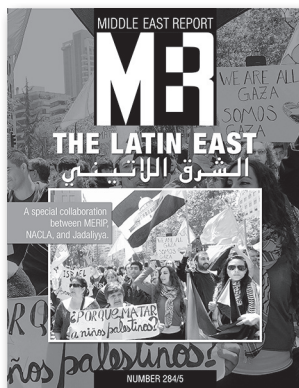
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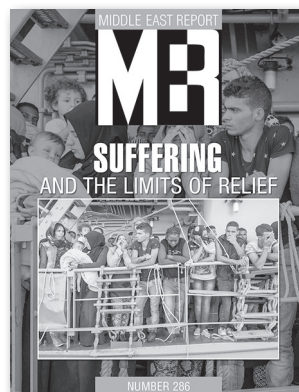
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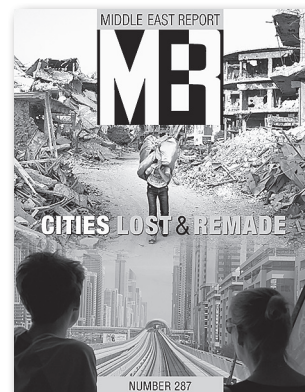
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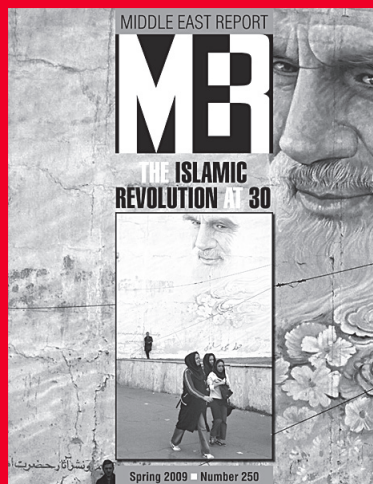
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