



Erdoğan as Autocrat: A Very Turkish Tragedy

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SUMMARY

- In just over a decade, the Republic of Turkey has gone from a period of promising political liberalization to fast-approaching one man rule under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.
- A serious democratic erosion has been underway for several years, but repression has expanded dramatically following the failed coup of July 2016. If Erdoğan's proposal for an executive presidency is approved in the April 16 referendum, meaningful limits on his rule may disappear.
- The AKP's ties to a deeply illiberal Turkish state tradition hampered its role as an agent of democratization.
- The effectiveness of the AKP political machine, coupled with its increased political control of key institutions, has led to a virtual one-party state in Turkey.
- Turkey's economic success was closely tied to its liberalization; the current authoritarian trajectory undermines that success.
- Whatever the outcome of the April referendum, the damage done to Turkey's institutions, economy, and social fabric by the breakdown of rule of law and rights protections will not be repaired easily. Further consolidation of power under President Erdoğan is likely to worsen instability.

INTRODUCTION

In just over a decade, the Republic of Turkey has gone from a period of promising political liberalization to fast-approaching one man rule under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The party he leads, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002 promising a more tolerant, inclusive Turkey. Its "political brand" was stability, economic prosperity, and good governance.

After early progress, today this brand is discredited. Erdoğan, who became prime minister in 2003 and was elected president

in 2014, remains remarkably popular among his tens of millions of supporters, about half of the population. But terrorism now rocks the country, and Turkey's once healthy economy is in danger. Most opposition has been cowed or imprisoned. Governance is increasingly autocratic.

A state of emergency imposed after last July's attempted coup has led to the jailing of tens of thousands of government critics (and presumed critics) and the summary purging of more than 100,000 people from their state jobs. On April 16, Turkey will

hold a referendum on whether to change the constitution to create an executive presidential system that would remove meaningful limits on Erdoğan's power and enable him to remain in office until 2029. Whatever the outcome of the vote, Erdoğan's new thousand-room palace has already replaced Turkey's venerable parliament as the center of political power. It is a telling symbol of the country's descent into autocracy.

Erdoğan and his party, once viewed as a potential vanguard for a democratic wave in the Middle East, are now more often framed as part of the rising global tide of authoritarianism. Obviously the retreat of rule of law and the weakening of democratic institutions is not unique to Turkey. But the fact that Turkey's liberalization and its spiral into authoritarianism were undertaken by the same political leadership is striking. What went wrong?

Some early critics of the AKP believed from the outset that its professed liberalism was a ploy—that at its core, the party sought to achieve not democracy, but some sort of Islamist authoritarianism. As Michael Rubin argued in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2006:

While democrats fight for change within a system, Islamists seek to alter the system itself. This has been the case with the AKP. [...] Erdoğan has spoken of democracy, tolerance and liberalism, but waged a slow and steady assault on the system. He endorsed, for example, the dream of Turkey's secular elite to enter the European Union, but only to embrace reforms diluting the checks and balances of military constitutional enforcement.¹

Such comments now seem prescient. By and large, however, these critics came to the right conclusion for the wrong reasons. They tended to turn a blind eye to abuses by Turkey's military and other secularists while overstating the role that religion played in AKP governance.² The core of the problem did not lie with the AKP's ties to political Islam.

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Instead, as this paper illustrates, two other factors were more important in making the AKP a flawed vessel for democratization. First, the party was unable to cut its ties to a deeply illiberal Turkish state tradition: an obsession with centralized control, an overly politicized bureaucracy, weak rule of law, and a jealous blend of religion and nationalism honed by Turkey's military rulers after the 1980 coup. The path to a truly democratic Turkey would have required a clearer break from this past than the AKP leadership was willing to make. Second, the AKP's domination of the political system—and Erdoğan's domination of the AKP—have centralized political power to a degree that is unprecedented since the death of the founder of the Republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1938. The state has become largely an extension of the ruling party and of Erdoğan's power.

1 Michael Rubin, "Mr. Erdoğan's Turkey," *Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 2006, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116121690776497100>.

2 Erdoğan has been consistent in his belief that a devout Muslim nation is best served by secular institutions. He made this argument, to the consternation of his hosts, when he visited Egypt in 2011. He made it again on a trip to Croatia in 2016 and most recently on a trip to the Gulf in February 2017, when he argued that rather than seeing secularism as "anti-religious," one should see it as a system by which "the state guarantees freedoms to all groups, without privileging one over the other. That is our understanding of secularism." "Erdoğan to Al Arabiya: We Will Eradicate Terrorism with GCC Support," *Al Arabiya English*, February 17, 2017, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/02/17/Erdogan-to-Al-Arabiya-We-need-GCC-support-on-fighting-terrorism-.html>.



EX13/FLICKR

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's imposing new palace in Ankara, built at an estimated cost of more than \$615 million. The palace has more than 1,100 rooms.

The AKP's Liberalization...and Its Limits

Although the celebratory language of Turkey as a “Muslim model for the Middle East” common in the Western (and of course, Turkish) media during the AKP’s early years in power may have been overblown, it was not baseless. For a while, the party and Erdoğan delivered. Between 2002 and 2007, Turkey’s real GDP grew by an average of 6.8 percent annually; the annual inflation rate dropped from a staggering 54.2 percent in 2001 to 8.8 percent in 2007.³ Foreign direct investment surged. The middle class grew accordingly.

The AKP also tangibly expanded political freedoms. It progressively pushed the military out of politics. It completed the abolition of the death penalty initiated by the previous government and curtailed (but never fully ended) torture. Restrictions on wearing the headscarf were rolled back. And in a country where acknowledgement of diversity and minority rights traditionally had been seen as akin to treason, the AKP took theretofore unthinkable steps to acknowledge Kurdish identity and to respond to some grievances of Turkey’s non-Muslim communities.⁴ These reforms were significant and helped the AKP expand its support well beyond its devout base.

3 Mihai Macovei, “Growth and Economic Crises in Turkey: Leaving Behind a Turbulent Past?” *European Commission – DG ECFIN Economic Papers* no. 386 (October 2009), 12, http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/pages/publication16004_en.pdf.

4 Sultan Tepe, “Turkey’s AKP: A Model “Muslim Democratic Party?” *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 3 (2005): 69–82. An estimated 15 to 20 percent of Turkey’s population is Kurdish.

Yet even in its most “progressive” early phase, the AKP never truly freed itself from Turkey’s extraordinarily illiberal nationalist traditions. By 2007, the AKP’s enthusiasm for democratic reforms was already waning. In part, the AKP came to realize that certain progressive stances were poor electoral politics; in part, the AKP leadership did not realize how deeply they would need to break from entrenched Turkish political traditions for their reform agenda to succeed. In 2008, for example, the AKP effectively sacrificed further outreach to minorities in return for the support of the nationalist, right-wing National Action Party (MHP) for a law ending the decades-long ban on wearing headscarves in universities.⁵ Writing at that time, I offered a muted assessment of the AKP’s human rights record, concluding that its “commitment to human rights, while real, is limited and contingent.”⁶ Subsequent events proved me far too optimistic.

Never Truly Secular: The Republic as Turkish-Muslim Nation

The question of religion and minorities in Turkey serves as a useful window into the limitations of the AKP’s liberalization program.

As noted, the party made important overtures to Turkey’s embattled non-Muslim communities. In 2005, despite obstruction from secularist prosecutors, some hysterical coverage in the press, and considerable dissent within the AKP itself, a historic conference on the Armenian Genocide was held at Istanbul’s Bilgi University. Then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül sent a letter of support; then Prime Minister Erdoğan declared, “I want to live in a Turkey where freedoms are enjoyed in their broadest sense.”⁷ Turkey continues an official international campaign of denial to this day, but since 2010 public commemorations of the genocide have been held annually in central Istanbul’s Taksim Square and elsewhere

in the country. The government also returned to the Armenian community some properties that had been expropriated in past decades. As recently as 2015, the Gedikpaşa Armenian Protestant Church Foundation was able to regain control of Camp Armen, which Turkish authorities had confiscated in 1982.

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But such steps, though laudable, were relatively easy ones for the AKP to implement—and were hardly the party’s top priority. For the AKP, the rights of its own pious base, most notably the right of women to wear the headscarf in state institutions, were always most important. Outreach to non-Muslims burnished the AKP’s international reputation without fundamentally changing the dynamics of domestic politics. While the symbolic importance of Turkey’s non-Muslims is considerable, their demographic weight is minor. The number of Christian and Jewish citizens of Turkey today hovers around 150,000, or about 0.2 percent of the population. Moreover, the AKP’s acceptance of non-Muslim communities within a fundamentally Muslim nation echoed the party’s own narratives regarding Turkey’s Ottoman legacy, which emphasize both the Islamic character of the Ottoman Empire and its reputation of “tolerance” of non-Muslims. A true break from the past would have required going beyond symbolic gestures to Turkey’s remaining non-

⁵ The Constitutional Court eventually struck down a constitutional amendment reversing the headscarf ban and it was only in 2010 that the ban was finally lifted.

⁶ Howard Eissenstat, “Human Rights in the Era of the AKP,” *The Immanent Frame*, October 23, 2008, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/10/23/human-rights-in-the-era-of-the-akp/>.

⁷ Amberin Zaman, “Armenian Forum Stirs up Turkey,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 2005, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/sep/25/world/fg-turkeyarmenia25>.

Muslims and making clear that all citizens—regardless of faith—had equal claim to the nation. That was a break the AKP was simply not prepared to make.

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Treatment of the Alevi was a vital test of the AKP's commitment to a liberal and inclusive Turkey. It is a test that the party failed.

Such a shift was so difficult because the AKP was deeply embedded within a nationalist tradition that interwove Islam and Turkishness. The AKP indeed has expanded the role of Islam within the public sphere, but in most ways, its merger of national and Islamic symbols represents an extension of this tradition. Turkish “secularism” has never been truly secular in the sense of maintaining state neutrality towards religion. The Directorate for Religious Affairs was established under Atatürk in 1924 and has continued to govern Muslim religious affairs ever since. Turkish imams are state employees and the Friday sermon is written in Ankara, to be delivered in mosques throughout the country. Rather than being “neutral” towards religion or “separate” from it, the Turkish state attempted to closely *manage* Islam, channeling it and bending it to the state’s use. Turkish nationalism consistently has conflated Turkish and Muslim identities in its rhetoric and sometimes in state policy.⁸ Especially following the 1980 coup, this tendency was intensified through the state’s embrace of the so-called Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, an ideological approach that featured Islamic symbols within nationalist rhetoric.⁹

Although the AKP proved more flexible than its Kemalist predecessors in implementing some positive changes for non-Muslim minorities, the same could not be said for its relations to the Alevi population. Alevi are a heterodox Muslim group related to, but distinct from, the Alawites of Syria. Representing perhaps 15 percent of Turks, Alevi are a much larger group than non-Muslims. But their hybridity *as Muslims* represented an important challenge to the AKP’s conception of a “Muslim Turkish nation.” Bigotry and myths regarding the Alevi abound among devout Sunni Muslims (and thus among the AKP base). Treatment of the Alevi was thus a vital test of the AKP’s commitment to a liberal and inclusive Turkey. It is a test that the party failed.

Even before the AKP came to power, Alevi faced discrimination. They have no official standing. Alevi (and non-religious) children are not allowed the exemption from religious education that non-Muslim children are, meaning that they are obligated to study Sunni Islam as part of their public school education.¹⁰ Alevi *cemevi*, or prayer houses, are not recognized by the state as religious sites, but only as cultural institutions. In 2007, the AKP floated the idea of an “Alevi opening” to address many of these concerns. But when the party failed to gain any significant increase in Alevi votes in the 2007 elections, this outreach was aborted.¹¹

As a result, the Alevi community’s grievances have intensified under the AKP. This is in part due to the increasingly vocal place of Sunni Islam in the public sphere, but it is also a by-product of the sectarianism of the Syrian civil war. For many Alevi, that war, the AKP’s support for the largely Sunni Syrian opposition, and their own diminished place within Turkish

8 I describe this process at length in “Metaphors of Race and Discourse of Nation: Racial Theory and State Nationalism in the First Decades of the Turkish Republic,” in *Race and Nation: Ethnic Systems in the Modern World*, ed. Paul Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2005), 239–256.

9 Sam Kaplan, “Din u Devlet All Over Again: The Politics of Military Secularism and Religious Militarism in Turkey Following the 1980 Coup,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 1 (2002): 113–127; Étienne Copeaux, *Espace et temps de la nation turque: Analyse d'une historiographie nationaliste, 1934-1993* (Paris: Éditions CNRS, 1997).

10 As must agnostics and atheists.

11 Şener Aktürk, *Regimes of Ethnicity and Nationhood in Germany, Russia, and Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 186–187.



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Pro-Kurdish party HDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş in December 2015. Demirtaş is currently in pretrial detention, facing charges that could result in more than 100 years in prison.

society are all of a piece. Alevi continue to fear for their future as a distinct group in Turkey. The potential for civil unrest is significant.

The Opening and Closing to the Kurds

Arguably the most significant element of the AKP's liberalizing reforms was its repeated attempts to address the question of Kurdish rights. The reluctance of successive Turkish governments to address the concerns of the Kurdish population has plagued the Republic since its founding. On the whole, the state's solution has been a combination of brute force and denial. Since 1984, Turkey has been scarred by an on-again, off-again war with the outlawed Kurdish Workers Party, or PKK, which has cost perhaps 40,000 lives. The AKP at one time saw itself as well positioned to

revise that record through promoting a shared Muslim identity between Kurds and Turks and, not incidentally, to profit from electoral support in mostly Kurdish southeastern Turkey. (The AKP enjoyed electoral success in that region in 2002, 2004, and 2007.) Under the AKP, Kurds who had been forcibly relocated during the PKK-state violence of the 1990s were quietly allowed to return to their villages. And, starting in 2009, the AKP government engaged with the PKK through secret negotiations in Oslo and with the PKK's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan.¹²

Yet, the AKP never seemed to envision a "Kurdish Opening" that went beyond "cultural rights." The AKP leadership never abandoned the Kemalists' focus on retaining the central government's absolute control. In Turkey,

¹² Marlies Castier, Joost Jongerden, and Nic Walker, "Turkey's Kurdish Movement and the AKP's Kurdish Opening: A Kurdish Spring or Fall?" in *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*, ed. Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2013), 137–138.

“federalism” of any sort is often seen as the first step towards the disintegration of the Republic. This view, rooted in memories of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, resulted in a passionate rejection of any suggestion of regional autonomy. While the AKP clearly hoped to end the Kurdish conflict, it never questioned the basic Kemalist assumption of a unified, centralized state. The easiest response to Kurdish concerns—greater regional autonomy and stronger local governance—remained anathema to Erdoğan and his party.

Moreover, the Turkish government never fully committed to negotiations and refused to negotiate openly with the PKK. This limited the political risk for the AKP, but also meant that its civilian Kurdish interlocutors had little leverage or capacity to deliver on promises. Perhaps even more important, the AKP made no concerted effort to sell the peace process to a distrustful public. Having never expended political capital on the talks, the AKP was always free to walk away from the negotiating table.

The AKP did walk away, repeatedly, whenever the negotiations proved electorally inconvenient. In March 2009, the Kurdish Democratic Society Party, or DTP, performed better than expected in municipal elections. The following month, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire; the next day, Turkish police carried out raids in 13 provinces, arresting hundreds, including more than 50 DTP leaders.¹³ History repeated itself in January 2015 when the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP) announced it would attempt to surpass the 10 percent electoral threshold and enter parliament in the next general election. As the two main opposition parties opposed Erdoğan’s plan to replace Turkey’s parliamentary system with a strong presidential system, the HDP seemed the most likely political ally for the AKP. It was perhaps with this in mind that Erdoğan allowed the Turkish government to negotiate a road map

for a final peace deal with HDP representatives, the so-called Dolmabahçe agreement of February 2015. As Freedom House’s Nate Schenkkan dryly notes,

“On March 17, the co-leader of the HDP Selahattin Demirtaş said that there would be no grand bargain, announcing the *de facto* slogan for the HDP’s parliamentary campaign: “We will not make you president.” It was five days after that when Erdoğan announced his opposition to Dolmabahçe.”¹⁴

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Today, much of the democratically elected Kurdish leadership is in jail; the charismatic Demirtaş faces criminal charges that could result in a 143-year prison sentence. Imprisoned HDP leaders have begun a hunger strike. Meanwhile, AKP “caretaker governments” have taken control of HDP municipalities. More than 2,500 people have been killed since July 2015 and perhaps 500,000 have been displaced by the resurgent violence in southeastern Turkey. The state’s anti-insurgency operations have destroyed whole city centers, while Kurdish militants are again carrying out attacks in the heart of Istanbul and Ankara. Turkey and its Kurdish citizens are as far from a deal today as they ever were.

The AKP came to power with real ambitions for resolving the question of Kurdish identity.

13 Alexander Christie-Miller, “The PKK and the Closure of Turkey’s Kurdish Opening,” *Middle East Research and Information Project*, August 4, 2010, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero080410>.

14 United States Cong. House Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats. Hearing on *Turkey: Political Trends in 2016*, Feb. 3, 2016. 114th Cong. Statement of Nate Schenkkan, Freedom House, “Turkey in a Time of War,” <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA14/20160203/104368/HHRG-114-FA14-Wstate-SchenkkanN-20160203.pdf>.

It showed flexibility that no previous Turkish government had mustered. The process failed because of real differences over policy, but perhaps even more because the AKP proved unwilling to move away from traditional Kemalist views on the unitary state or to sacrifice electoral advantage for the national good. The suppression of Kurdish identity has been the source of Turkey's worst repressive measures for decades: torture, abuse, collective punishment, and suppression of the press. The AKP promised to end this vicious cycle; instead, it has renewed it.

Kadrolaşma: Machine Politics with a Turkish Accent

The AKP's continued reliance on a patronage system, along with its own remarkable capacities as a political machine, also has stymied liberalization. Economists Murat Üçer and Daron Acemoğlu argue that one key reason for the AKP's early economic success was the emergence of an "institutionalized, rule-based policy framework." As the AKP's control over state structures expanded, however, Turkey witnessed "amplifying corruption and arbitrary, unpredictable decision-making."¹⁵ The country's increasingly lackluster economic development, they contend, was one outcome of this breakdown of institutions.

In a sense, the authors were highlighting the extent to which the AKP had increasingly engaged in a core element of Turkish political culture: *kadrolaşma*—literally, the making of cadres, or providing jobs for political loyalists. The tradition is rooted in the early Republic, when serving the state and serving the party were one and the same. Even after the transition to electoral democracy in 1950, the inclination of political leaders to reward loyalists with jobs remained part and parcel of Turkish politics. The dangers of this tradition, however, were somewhat mitigated by the fact that Turkish governments were almost always formed by weak coalitions and thus

typically were short-lived. The bureaucracy was politicized, but frequently-changing coalition governments ensured that many parties had "a piece of the pie."

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Kadrolaşma was transformed through the AKP's absolute dominance over the political system since 2002. The merging of the bureaucracy and government became different not just in scale but in kind. AKP membership is not a formal requirement for state positions, but party loyalists clearly receive preference in hiring and promotion. Former opposition parliamentarian Aykan Erdemir recounts that when he was teaching at Middle East Technical University, Alevi students regularly voiced frustration at the process of interviews for government jobs:

If the students came from cities with large Alevi populations, like Sivas, Erzincan, Amasya, or Tokat, they were asked, "Where's your hometown [*Memleket neresi*]? What neighborhood? What village?" This always ended with the question, "Isn't that an Alevi village?" This ensures that not a single Alevi is hired!¹⁶

Corruption watchdog Transparency International found in its 2016 assessment of Turkish institutions that the AKP government's dominance over "other institutions, such as the legislature, judiciary, ombudsman, and media, demonstrates a considerable undermining of the rule of law and the

15 Daron Acemoğlu and Murat Üçer, "The Ups and Downs of Turkish Growth, 2002–2015: Political Dynamics, the European Union, and the Institutional Slide," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 21608, October 2015.

16 Aykan Erdemir, personal interview with author, April 8, 2017.



Erdoğan in September 2011 with then-foreign minister (and later prime minister) and top AKP figure Ahmet Davutoğlu (right). Davutoğlu resigned from the prime ministership in May 2016.

functioning of democratic processes.”¹⁷ The expansion of the police force and the creation of hundreds of new university positions were especially visible examples of this phenomenon. A departing AKP official complained, “Necmettin Erbakan University [a new state university founded in 2010 and named after one of the Islamist forbearers of the AKP] is being used like [the AKP’s] backyard.”¹⁸ At Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University (founded in 2006) job advertisements were accidentally published with the names of individuals to be hired already listed.¹⁹ Judicial independence has suffered as well. The government has reorganized the Constitutional Court and

the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (which oversees judicial appointments) to ensure that they are controlled by allies. Over fifteen years of AKP rule, the effect of this sustained support for political loyalists has been striking as government ministries have become extensions of the party.

FROM FAILED LIBERALIZATION TO NEAR DICTATORSHIP: ERDOĞAN’S PARTY

This paper has focused so far on the extent to which longstanding Turkish political traditions, along with the party’s own sense of electoral self-interest, blunted the capacity of the AKP to move forward with political liberalization

¹⁷ The assessment notes that “of the 15 institutions assessed, 11 were classified as ‘weak’ and only four rated as high as ‘moderate.’” Uluslararası Şeffaflık Derneği [Transparency International], *National Integrity System Assessment*, April 2016, 12, <http://aciktoplumvakfi.org.tr/pdf/turkiye-seffalik-sistemi/national-integrity-system-assessment-turkey.pdf>.

¹⁸ “İstifa eden AKP’liden kadrolaşma iddiası: AK Parti, yozlaşmanın eşigine gelmiş demektir,” *T24*, December 30, 2014, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/istifa-eden-akp-kadin-kollari-baskanindan-iliginc-tespit-ak-parti-yozlasmanin-esigine-gelmis-demektir;282125>.

¹⁹ Meltem Özgenç and Dinçer Gökçe, “Üniversitede skandal ilan,” *Hürriyet*, August 2, 2013, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/universitede-skandal-ilan-24438857>.

and truly democratize the system. The result of this failure, however, was not simply a return to the status quo ante. Turkey's overall human rights environment is in many ways markedly worse than it was in the decade preceding the AKP's coming to power.²⁰ Politics is also more centralized around the whims and ambitions of one man: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has consolidated power around his person in a way that no Turkish political leader has done since Atatürk.

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The AKP initially fashioned itself as a party of the center-right and, over time, successfully monopolized that part of the Turkish political spectrum. Its emphasis on Islam-tinged nationalism and economic growth, its ability to mobilize and win elections, and its early record for effective government sucked away support from previous powerhouses of the center-right like the Motherland Party and the Democrat Party. In a country that has been dominated by parties of the center-right for decades, this is no small thing.

The AKP's only other rival on the right, the MHP, has been reduced to a virtual subsidiary. With the help of a compliant judiciary, whose ruling prevented a party congress from taking place in May 2016, the AKP stepped in to stifle

a rebellion within the MHP, allowing the more accommodating party leader Devlet Bahçeli to retain power. The central figure challenging Bahçeli, Meral Akşener—described as “the only Turkish politician to rattle Erdoğan”—was drummed out of the MHP, and the pro-AKP press vilified her.²¹ Bahçeli, for his part, has proven a reliable parliamentary ally since the coup and has campaigned in favor of the upcoming referendum.

The center-left, while still strong in some regions of Turkey, has had difficulty winning national elections since the 1980 coup. Its standard bearer today, the Republican People's Party, or CHP, has been mostly sclerotic and poorly led. In the nine nationwide elections held since 2002, the CHP has garnered approximately 25 percent of the national vote but has struggled to extend its support beyond that. It is split between a nationalist and a progressive wing and has been unable to reach out to its natural allies on the left, the HDP. At this point, however, it is unclear that even strong CHP leadership could dislodge the AKP machine. CHP is opposed to the AKP, but has no positive political agenda beyond its opposition to Erdoğan and nostalgia for the Kemalist past.

Turkey still has elections, but they are not undertaken on a level playing field. Nearly all of the broadcast media has come under the effective control of the government, a step that was painfully clear by the time massive anti-AKP “Gezi Park” protests erupted in May 2013. In the first days of nationwide protests in which millions of Turks took part, television news obstinately ignored this major event; when they eventually did cover the demonstrations it was

20 In its 2014 *Annual Report on Turkey*, Amnesty International noted, “Following the 2013 Gezi protests and the rupture with former [Erdoğan] ally Fethullah Gülen, the authorities became more authoritarian in responding to critics. They undermined the independence of the judiciary, introduced new restrictions on internet freedoms and handed unprecedented powers to the country's intelligence agency. The rights of peaceful demonstrators were violated and police officers enjoyed near-total impunity for the use of excessive force.” Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2014/15—Turkey*, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/54f07d8715.html>.

21 Mehul Srivastava, “Meral Akşener: The Only Turkish Politician Who Rattles Erdoğan,” *Financial Times*, July 8, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/285ea9e8-4447-11e6-b22f-79eb4891c97d>. In recent weeks, Akşener has been a vocal part of the “no” campaign in the April 2017 referendum. On March 30, 2017, Turkey's Supreme Election Board (YSK) rejected her attempt to stage a rally in the central Anatolian city of Isparta against Erdoğan's proposed constitutional changes. This happened again when she attempted to hold a rally in Ankara. In other rallies, her supporters have been attacked by organized thugs. See “Bu kez Kocaeli: Akşener'in 'Hayır' etkinliğine saldırı,” *Diken*, March 18, 2017, <http://www.diken.com.tr/bu-kez-kocaeli-aksenerin-hayir-etkinligine-saldiri/>.



Prime Minister Erdoğan in March 2014; he would become Turkey's first popularly-elected president in August 2014.

always through a pro-government narrative lens. In the lead up to the 2016 referendum opposition party leaders and rallies have been attacked by AKP supporters. The full weight of the state machinery works to support the ruling party in elections.²²

Moreover, the AKP itself has transformed and no longer evinces significant divisions or conducts outreach beyond its base. Instead, it has become an extension of Erdoğan's own ambition and vision. Erdoğan's genius as a politician, his flair for rhetoric, his capacity to mobilize his base, and his sense of himself as a "man of history" have all served to put him at the center of Turkish politics for more than a decade. His populism is effective in large part because it is heartfelt. At the same time, he is capable of shockingly cynical calculations

in the name of political survival. Although Erdoğan was always the "star" of the AKP, its most charismatic and politically talented figure, it is worth remembering that he was once merely first among equals. The AKP's early success was as a *coalition* of factions—Islamist, reformist, and pro-business. The party also once enjoyed a number of important figures, with real political credentials and real ambition—Abdullah Gül, Bülent Arınç, Cemil Çiçek, Ahmet Davutoğlu—as well as a long list of technocrats who joined the AKP at its founding.

Beginning in 2007 with Gül's move from foreign minister to president (at that time a more ceremonial post), these figures grew increasingly marginal, unable or unwilling to challenge Erdoğan's control. Through the use

²² Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), International Election Observation Mission, "Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions: Republic of Turkey, Early Parliamentary Elections, November 1, 2015," <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/196351?download=true>.

of party rules, control of the party rolls for parliamentary candidates, and other means, Erdoğan slowly pushed these key figures from power. He demonstrated a remarkable capacity to punish perceived enemies. By the time Erdoğan became president in 2014, his consolidation of power in the AKP was complete. From the moment when Ahmet Davutoğlu became prime minister in August 2014, it was clear that all real power resided with President Erdoğan. Davutoğlu's frustration at the limits of his power was a main reason he resigned (or was pushed out) in May 2016. Some former party figures, such as former Justice Minister and Speaker of Parliament Cemil Çiçek, recently have voiced (mostly mild) criticism of Erdoğan, but his power over AKP levers is now too well entrenched for this to make any difference. Ignoring the current constitutional requirements for the president to serve above politics, Erdoğan has maintained all the levers of control. Only individuals with proven loyalty have been retained.

Even if Erdoğan had not managed to assert this monopoly over the party apparatus, it is unlikely that the AKP would have been able to deliver on all of its initial promise. Nonetheless, the party's consolidation under Erdoğan's sole control has had dire consequences. At the core of Erdoğan's political character is his sense of himself as a fighter against the odds, as a representative of the "heart" of the nation. He is capable of compromise, but he would rather fight. When others in his party counseled outreach to the opposition, as Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç and Abdullah Gül did during the massive 2013 Gezi Park protests, Erdoğan instead vowed defiance and a harsh crackdown. Since becoming president, he has surrounded himself with sycophants who reinforce these inclinations. The usual political concerns about broadening the base

or reaching out to potential allies are gone. With all the levers of the state in his hands and the media cowed, today's Turkey looks more and more like a traditional authoritarian state, complete with a grandiose palace, a kleptocratic inner circle, and repression as a tool of everyday control.

TURKEY AFTER THE ATTEMPTED COUP: FROM BAD TO WORSE, AND LIKELY TO KEEP GOING THAT WAY

Repression has been the watchword for many Turks in the months following last July's attempted coup. We still do not have a full picture of who conducted the coup, how broad the coalition was that carried it out, or even what its long-term goals were.²³ Publicly, the government holds the U.S.-based religious leader Fethullah Gülen and his followers responsible. Gülen-supporters were almost certainly part of the coalition that engaged in the coup, but the extent of their role, and the involvement of Mr. Gülen himself, remain unclear.²⁴ What is clear is that the coup attempt was a desperate ploy, a last attempt to reverse Turkey's current trajectory. Had it succeeded, it would have almost certainly resulted in civil war. Instead, the episode has led to the further weakening of any possible opposition to Erdoğan's ambitions to centralize power and legitimized the purge of adversaries.

In the aftermath of a deadly coup attempt, extraordinary measures to ensure the security and stability of the state were not only justified, but required. From the first days, however, it was clear that the government was capitalizing on the crisis to consolidate its own power, trampling the rights of hundreds of thousands of its citizens in the process. The AKP, which came to power promising to undo the repressive measures of the 1980 military

23 See, for example, Ümit Cizre, "Turkey in a Tailspin: The Foiled Coup Attempt of July 15," *Middle East Information and Research Project*, August 10, 2016, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero081016>; Gareth A. Jenkins, "Post-Coup Narratives and Turkey's Curious Coup," *The Turkey Analyst* (blog), July 22, 2016, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/562-post-putsch-narratives-and-turkeys-curious-coup.html>; Aaron Stein, "Inside A Failed Coup and Turkey's Fragmented Military," *War on the Rocks* (blog), July 20, 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/07/the-coup-operation-and-turkeys-fractured-military/>

24 Elements of the Gülen movement worked hand-in-hand with the AKP for many years, but tensions between the two began to escalate in the summer of 2013, culminating in a series of leaked tapes aimed at bringing down the government in December of that year. The attempt failed and the Gülen movement has been targeted ever since.



MISTYSLAV CHERNOV

Erdoğan supporters rally in Istanbul on July 22, 2016, one week after he survived a bloody coup attempt.

coup, has in many ways reenacted them in its response to the 2016 coup attempt.

Under the state of emergency declared after July 15 and renewed every three months since then, individuals can be held without charge for up to 30 days, their choice and access to counsel limited, and their communications with their lawyers monitored. The government can impose curfews and ban public meetings, close media outlets and non-governmental organizations at will, and detain people for up to 30 days without charge. The state has confiscated passports and imposed travel bans on those under investigation and on their family members. There are multiple accounts of government officials threatening family members still in Turkey as leverage against those who have left the country since July.

Citizens of foreign countries who are detained are often denied access to diplomatic staff.

Although hard numbers are difficult to come by, the sheer scale of the purge is staggering, with approximately 47,155 arrested and over 100,000 detained so far, according to a recent statement from Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu.²⁵ More than 125,000 people have been sacked from civil service positions. Tens of thousands of teachers have had their licenses revoked. The day after the attempted coup, the government suspended nearly 3,000 judges and prosecutors, with more removed in the following months as the purge expanded. It was obvious that the lists of those targeted for suspension had already been drawn up. In the judiciary, as elsewhere within the state, the coup provided the AKP with cover to complete

²⁵ "47,155 People Arrested in Gülen Probe Since Coup Attempt: Interior Minister," *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 3, 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/47155-people-arrested-in-gulen-probe-since-coup-attempt-interior-minister.aspx?pageID=238&nID=111530&NewsCatID=509>.

a merger of state and party which had been underway for many years.

Assets of those detained are routinely frozen. Hundreds of businesses purportedly owned by Gülenists have been seized. The government makes no attempt to demonstrate individual wrongdoing in the vast majority of these cases; vague “affiliation” is enough. When a court ruling recently released 21 journalists and others in one case (after many months in pretrial detention), the chief prosecutor objected; by evening all were back in jail. The three judges who heard the case were then themselves suspended from their positions. Perhaps most alarming, torture has once again become widespread.²⁶

In a sense, the coup attempt and the purge that has followed represent an ugly last chapter to the consolidation of power under the AKP. The press and judiciary—the very institutions that are meant to check abuses of power—are now under ever fuller ruling party control. Avenues for peaceful opposition are closed and criminalized. The basic structures of a once vibrant civil society are being systematically dismantled.

Most polls suggest an uncertain outcome for the April 16 referendum, but the heavy hand of the state is clearly on the scales in favor of the “yes” campaign. The intimidation and lack of equal air time that marked the 2015 parliamentary election campaign is even more evident in the referendum campaign. The Supreme Election Board, or YSK, has rejected the application of many election observers from the CHP and HDP, and it no longer has the ability to levy fines on media outlets for unequal coverage, which has been overwhelmingly in favor of the “evet” (yes) vote.²⁷ Violence has broken out at some opposition rallies while others have been dispersed by the police. Other “no” rallies have

been outright banned by AKP governors. It is clear that the AKP has no intention of contesting the referendum on an even playing field.

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Few experts predicted the coup attempt of 2016 precisely because any attempt to dislodge Erdoğan was so unlikely to succeed. The fact that it was attempted at all suggests the utter desperation of those out of power.

Despite this, polling numbers suggest a close vote. Even if the referendum were to result in a no vote, there is no clear path left for Turkey to return to democratization. Basic institutions are broken and cannot be repaired easily. Purges have eradicated what little remained of the institutional independence of the bureaucracy and courts. Universities have been significantly weakened. In the 1990s and 2000s, Turkish universities had become powerful engines of innovation and political liberalization. Now, many of the best minds have been purged or are desperately searching for opportunities abroad.

Turkey’s instability has further undermined its economy. The AKP, whose brand has always been seen as pro-business and pro-growth, increasingly is floundering in these very areas. In September, the ratings firm Moody’s downgraded Turkey’s credit to “junk” status, arguing in part that “the large-scale suspensions in the civil service raise doubts over the capacity of Turkey’s policy-making institutions to make meaningful further progress in both legislating and implementing the reform program.”²⁸

26 Human Rights Watch, *Turkey: Emergency Decrees Facilitate Torture*, October 25, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/25/turkey-emergency-decrees-facilitate-torture>.

27 According to the opposition *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, TRT, Turkey’s state television, offered between March 1 and March 22, 2017, 4,113 minutes of coverage for President Erdoğan and AKP officials, 219 minutes for the opposition CHP, and one minute for the HDP. “TRT yasa tanımıyor,” *Cumhuriyet*, March 28, 2017, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/708739/TRT_yasa_tanimiyor.html.

28 Ayla Jean Yackley, “Moody’s Cuts Turkey’s Credit Rating to ‘Junk,’” *Reuters*, September 24, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-economy-moodys-idUSL8N1C006Z>.



YMPHOTOS/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

AKP and MHP flags supporting a yes (“evet”) vote in the April 16 constitutional referendum on creating a presidential system, Istanbul, March 2017.

Turkey is not a rentier state: it is not oil-rich, nor can it depend on largesse from foreign governments to prop up its economy. It needs investment and industry to succeed. As a regime, the AKP could survive a long period of economic weakness through clientelism and control of the media. But Turkey cannot thrive in these circumstances. Moreover, the weakness of opposition parties and the growing willingness of the AKP to crush any dissent make political stability unlikely. Few experts predicted the coup attempt of 2016 precisely because any attempt to dislodge Erdoğan was so unlikely to succeed. The fact that it was attempted at all suggests the utter desperation of those out of power.

Turkey is still a long way from the rampant political violence that shook the nation in the 1970s, but popular violence is likely to grow under current conditions. AKP loyalist groups like the Ottoman Hearths, or *Osmanlı Ocakları*, have gained prominence and seem to hearken to a long Republican tradition of right-wing political parties recruiting young toughs to act as a paramilitary force.²⁹ The failure of the “Kurdish Opening” was so spectacular, the sense of betrayal so great, and the subsequent violence so horrific that it may well be a generation before peace can once again be sought—as it inevitably must be—as at the negotiating table. Alevi consternation at the increasingly large role of Sunni Islam in the public space, coupled with demographic shifts

29 Suraj Sharma, “Turkey’s Ottoman Hearths: Menacing or Benign?” *Middle East Eye*, December 11, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/analysis-turkey-s-ottoman-hearths-menace-or-benign-grouping-1499886208>

stemming from the resettlement of (mostly Sunni) Syrian refugees in Turkey, is likely to intensify already simmering sectarian conflicts. Seldom covered in the international news, some working-class Alevi neighborhoods witness street battles between youths and security personnel almost nightly. It would be wrong to see this violence as purely or even primarily political, but the seeds of wider conflict are there.

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It is possible that outside actors—including international human rights organizations and Turkey’s Western allies—could have played a more positive role in supporting Turkey’s liberalization had they been more critical of rights abuses, sooner. For example, in 2008, the government initiated a mass prosecution of Kemalists, alleging a vast conspiracy to overthrow the government. Whatever actual crimes might have been committed in the so-called Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases, however, were lost in a flood of manufactured evidence and false accusations in what were little more than show trials.³⁰ Turkey’s Western allies and human rights organizations were largely silent about clear abuses of justice when these trials were happening. The AKP

was given a pass on basic issues of rule of law at precisely the moment that the party was most concerned with maintaining its positive international standing. By the time foreign criticism finally became acute (when Erdogan cracked down on the 2013 Gezi protests), it was too late. The AKP’s taste for liberalization was already gone.

CONCLUSION

As rich as its promise once was, the AKP was not able to sustain its early reforms. It carried with it too many of the traditions of Turkey’s own illiberal past, it became too fully dominated by the figure of Erdoğan, and outside parties were too tolerant of abuses when they were still in a position to influence Turkey’s direction. Whatever the outcome of the referendum on April 16, the damage done to Turkey’s institutions, economy, and social fabric by the breakdown of rule of law and rights protections is unlikely to be repaired fully or easily. It is difficult to imagine trends of growing illiberalism and authoritarianism being reversed in the foreseeable future.

One of the core arguments that President Erdoğan has offered for expanding his power through constitutional reforms is that further centralization of authority will increase stability. Yet the experience of the past ten years has demonstrated that the opposite is true. Without reestablishing rule of law and the independence of state institutions, without creating opportunities for those out of power to participate in their own political futures, the instability that has rocked the country over the past five years likely will intensify. The tragedy of Turkey’s failure is immense.

30 Dexter Filkins, “Show Trials on the Bosphorus,” *New Yorker*, August 13, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/show-trials-on-the-bosphorus>.



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