

# Introduction:

## Democratization Betrayed—Erdogan’s New Turkey

Kumru F. Toktamış and Isabel David

History will remember your wiles to stay in power, your clandestine coups, your manhunt and rejection of differences, the victims of your tortures and the deaths on your conscience, in all the regions of Turkey.

— Kamel Daoud

Turkey’s president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has already established his place in history books, but the nature and the meaning of his legacy will be determined by researchers, intellectuals, scholars, and activists—people who observe, record, and study his leadership. In this special issue of the *Mediterranean Quarterly*—“Critical Crossroads: Erdogan and the Transformation of Turkey”—we attempt to join the arduous task of documenting and analyzing the decline of a twenty-first-century, democratically elected government into a domestically punitive and regionally aggressive authoritarian regime.<sup>1</sup>

The Justice and Development Party (AKP), an Islamist conservative party with staunch neoliberal aspirations, was created in 2001, came to power in 2002, and has continuously held a majority of the seats in the Turkish parliament ever since. Similar to the cases of many modern authoritarianisms

1. The opening quote is from Kamel Daoud, “Lettre Ouverte à Erdogan,” *Kassataya*, 24 February 2018, [kassataya.com/2018/02/24/kamel-daoud-lettre-ouverte-a-erdogan/](http://kassataya.com/2018/02/24/kamel-daoud-lettre-ouverte-a-erdogan/), translation by the authors.

Kumru F. Toktamış is associate professor at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York. She is the coordinator of the cultural studies minor in the Department of Social Sciences and Cultural Studies.

Isabel David is assistant professor at the Institute of Social and Political Sciences and research fellow at the Orient Institute at the University of Lisbon (Universidade de Lisboa), Portugal.

since the “Age of Anxiety” of 1918–38, Erdogan’s leadership is marked by his popular appeal and the majoritarian support of his party. However, unlike twentieth-century authoritarian regimes, the AKP rose to power as an explicit challenge to the statist nationalism of the old guard embodied in the authoritative ranks of the Turkish military. Its unambiguous conflict with the guardianship of the *laicist* establishment and resolute position against the military tutelage, coupled with its explicit intention to reorganize state institutions, were initially perceived as moves toward democratization of the country and caused many left-liberal segments of the Turkish intelligentsia to give tacit and critical support to the rise of the AKP, resulting in polarized positions on the Left.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of a viable democratic opposition, the AKP became a regional, national, and, to a certain extent, global political force to reckon with, given the opportunities created by the ongoing strife in the Middle East.

Mechanisms of de-democratization often resemble mechanisms of democratization. As Charles Tilly states, “Bureaucratic containment of previously autonomous military forces . . . appears to come close to a necessary condition for democratization, but it also has significant effect on the capacity of government, the likelihood of civil war, the level of domestic violence, and even the prospect that a given state will engage in international war.”<sup>3</sup>

The presumed prospects for democratization in the new Turkey soon soured into authoritarianism marked by the AKP’s oppressive treatment of all forms of opposition, contemptible disregard for the rule of law, hostile attacks against freedom of expression, and violent repression of ethnic conflicts at home and across the country’s borders. Starting with the violent clampdown on the 2013 anti-AKP demonstrations that started from Taksim Gezi Park and turned into country-wide protests,<sup>4</sup> the AKP’s undemocratic behavior continued with punitive political measures to marginalize and criminalize representatives of the Kurdish minority in 2015.<sup>5</sup> This was followed by mas-

2. See Duygu Ersoy and Fahriye Ustuner, “Liberal Intellectuals’ Narration of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey,” *Turkish Studies* 17, no. 3. (2016): 406–28.

3. Charles Tilly, “Mechanisms in Political Processes,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001): 21–41.

4. See Isabel David and Kumru F. Toktamış, eds., *Everywhere Taksim: Sowing the Seeds for a New Turkey at Gezi* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

5. Stephen Starr, “Pro-Kurdish HDP Party Incapacitated as Politicians Imprisoned,” *Irish Times*, 24 August 2017, [www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/pro-kurdish-hdp-party-incapacitated-as-politicians-imprisoned-1.3196158](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/pro-kurdish-hdp-party-incapacitated-as-politicians-imprisoned-1.3196158).

sive purges of civil servants and imprisonment of people in the wake of the July 2016 attempted military coup.<sup>6</sup> In turn, the democratically elected AKP regime rapidly vanished into one of majoritarian control through which Erdogan claimed his legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> Ostensibly defending democratic institutions against its former ally, the Gulen movement,<sup>8</sup> the AKP regime dismissed, and even imprisoned, judges, teachers, civil servants, intellectuals, journalists, politicians, and academics who are known non-Islamic members of the dissent. According to Human Rights Watch, twenty-eight thousand teachers were dismissed for being Gulenists following the 2016 coup attempt, although eleven thousand of them were actually “guilty” mainly of being members of the left-leaning union Egitim-Sen.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, many of the 160 media outlets that were shut down after the coup attempt were targeted not because of their participation but simply because they were Kurdish. Erdogan notoriously referred to the failed coup attempt as “a gift from God” and immediately started ruling the country through emergency decrees used to silence his opposition.<sup>10</sup> With the leadership of the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP) jailed in massive numbers, the main opposition parties in the parliament, the left-nationalist Republican People’s Party and right-nationalist National Action Party, became complicit in Erdogan’s plans for

6. Kerem Oktem and Karabekir Akkoyunlu, “Exit from Democracy: Illiberal Governance in Turkey and Beyond,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 469–80.

7. Paul Kubicek, “Majoritarian Democracy in Turkey: Causes and Consequences,” in *Democratic Consolidation in Turkey: Micro and Macro Challenges*, ed. Cengiz Erisen and Paul Kubicek (London: Routledge, 2016), 123–43; Meltem Muftuler-Baç and E. Fuat Keyman, “Turkey’s Unconsolidated Democracy: The Nexus between Democratization and Majoritarianism in Turkey,” in *Global Turkey in Europe III: Democracy, Trade, and the Kurdish Question in Turkey-EU Relations*, ed. Senem Aydin-Duzgit, Daniela Huber, Meltem Muftuler-Baç, E. Fuat Keyman, Michae Schwarz, and Nathalie Tocci (Rome: IAI, 2015), 121–9.

8. The Gulen movement (also known as Hizmet or Cemaat) is a transnational Islamic movement created by Turkish imam and preacher Fethullah Gulen in the 1960s. The movement has operated in the fields of education, intercultural dialogue, culture, media, business, and charity work, with a presence in over 100 countries. See Joshua D. Hendrick, *Gülen: The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam in Turkey and the World* (New York: NYU Press, 2014); and Caroline Tee, *The Gulen Movement in Turkey: The Politics of Islam, Science, and Modernity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

9. Human Rights Watch, “Turkey: Events of 2016,” in *World Report 2017* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017), [www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/turkey](http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/turkey).

10. Marc Champion, “Coup Was ‘Gift from God’ for Erdogan Planning a New Turkey,” *Bloomberg*, 17 July 2016, [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-07-17/coup-was-a-gift-from-god-says-erdogan-who-plans-a-new-turkey](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-07-17/coup-was-a-gift-from-god-says-erdogan-who-plans-a-new-turkey).

a new Turkey.<sup>11</sup> They actively participated in postcoup demonstrations and declared support for Erdoğan's cross-border military interventions in Syria.<sup>12</sup>

The AKP's shifting alliances in a protracted antiestablishment struggle and efforts to institute its counterhegemony can be considered a "war of position," in Gramscian terms.<sup>13</sup> It is our contention that the AKP has formed pragmatic and manipulative political alliances, manipulated rule of law and state institutions to consolidate its power, and resorted to coercion whenever necessary if legal means are not effective. The "war of position" means that the party has been using cultural and political resources to build its hegemony while dealing with the challenges of its opposition, including the instrumentalization/reshaping of existing cultural and political resources (namely, the Kemalist institutions). It was the AKP's official position that its restructuring of Turkey was a "Silent Revolution."<sup>14</sup> In other words, it was not an insurrection, as in "war of maneuvering" in Gramscian terms, but a protracted series of political struggles and cultural negotiations during which general economic, cultural, and social conditions become "trenches."<sup>15</sup> Turkey's de-democratization is a contingent outcome of political and cultural

11. The HDP claims that as many as five thousand of its party members have been detained, including parliamentarians, mayors, and local party officials. See Ece Toksabay, "Jailed Head of Turkey's Pro-Kurdish Party," *Reuters*, 17 January 2018, [www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-court-kurds/jailed-head-of-turkeys-pro-kurdish-party-acquitted-of-insulting-minister-idUSKB1F6296](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-court-kurds/jailed-head-of-turkeys-pro-kurdish-party-acquitted-of-insulting-minister-idUSKB1F6296). On the complicity of other parties, see Burak Bilgehan Ozpek, "Turkey Today: Democracy without Opposition," *Turkey Analyst*, 28 February 2017, [www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/577-turkey-today-a-democracy-without-opposition.html](http://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/577-turkey-today-a-democracy-without-opposition.html).

12. Burhanettin Duran, "Yenikapi Spirit: The New Political Trend," SETA, 9 August 2016, [setadoc.org/yenikapi-spirit-new-political-trend/](http://setadoc.org/yenikapi-spirit-new-political-trend/); Gareth Jones, "Turkey's Ruling and Opposition Parties Rally Together after the Coup," *Reuters*, 24 July 2016, [www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security/turkey-ruling-opposition-parties-rally-together-after-coup-idUSKCN1040K7](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security/turkey-ruling-opposition-parties-rally-together-after-coup-idUSKCN1040K7); Ipek Ozbey, "Afrin Operation Should Not Expand to City Center, Says CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 12 February 2018, [www.hurriyetcailynews.com/afrin-operation-should-not-expand-to-city-center-says-chp-leader-kilicdaroglu-127150](http://www.hurriyetcailynews.com/afrin-operation-should-not-expand-to-city-center-says-chp-leader-kilicdaroglu-127150).

13. While Antonio Gramsci's concepts of "war of maneuver" and "war of position" are aimed at subverting state power and bringing about a new political order that is favorable for the masses, they are conceptualizations of social and political change that may or may not directly flow from the political economy. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

14. Ayhan Simsek, "Turkey's 'Second Silent Revolution,'" *Deutsche Welle*, 17 September 2013, [www.dw.com/en/turkeys-second-silent-revolution/a-17093332](http://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-second-silent-revolution/a-17093332).

15. Marlies Glaisius, "Gramsci's Trenches: Civil Society as Warfare," *International Studies Review* 14, no. 4 (2012): 670–3.

struggles within the country's polity that incorporate strategic interactions among all political actors.

Teleological explanations claiming that this de-democratization is the result of a long and carefully planned move often fail to capture the historical contingency of social change. The AKP's authoritarian turn can best be accounted for by understanding the following:

- Its political and cultural confrontations with the Kemalist establishment (for example, attempts to close the AKP during 2007 presidential elections)<sup>16</sup>
- Its power-sharing clashes with its former ally, the Gulen movement, including the 2016 putsch<sup>17</sup>
- Most important, its response to collective actions, such as the Gezi protests as well as the HDP's crossing of the 10 percent electoral threshold, which prevented the AKP's absolute majority in the June 2015 elections

Each of these multifaceted factors needs to be carefully examined to understand the dynamic trajectories of social and political change in Turkey since the AKP first came to power. To serve to this end, rather than questioning the intentions of AKP leadership in general, and Erdogan in particular, our contributors undertake the arduous task of revealing the underlying “war of position” that enables and constitutes the foundations of the AKP regime and its “New Turkey.”

This special issue of the *Mediterranean Quarterly* is a product of the conference “Turkey at Critical Crossroads: Dynamic Trajectories for Society, Politics, and Culture,” held in Lisbon, Portugal, on 1–3 February 2017. Five dozen academics gathered there to discuss the current predicaments of Turkish politics and society. The issue opens with Nikos Christofis's essay, “The AKP's ‘Yeni Türkiye’: Challenging the Kemalist Narrative?” on the AKP's attempt to establish hegemony through a counternarrative (Yeni Türkiye) to the Kemalist one. This narrative lies in the Ottoman imperial past, which

16. Nora Onar, “Kemalists, Islamists, and Liberals: Shifting Patterns of Confrontation and Consensus,” *Turkish Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007): 273–88.

17. Omer Taspinar, “The Failed Coup and Turkey's Gulenist Predicament” (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 9 August 2016), [www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-failed-coup-and-turkeys-gulenist-predicament/](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-failed-coup-and-turkeys-gulenist-predicament/).

provides the platform for identity formation and nation building. Christofis frames the AKP method as one in which remembering and forgetting are conducted selectively and history and myth are interchangeable. The author argues that the new national identity is being built through four instruments: (1) the dismantlement of Kemalist noninterventionism in foreign policy, (2) the deconstruction of the image of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, (3) the Islamization of secular leadership concepts, and (4) the emulation of selected aspects of Kemalism.

Berna Öney's essay, "Constitutional Debate in Turkey: From Dominant Party Heresthetical Strategy to Single-Party Hegemony, Quantitative Text Analyses," provides the first quantitative analysis of the positions of Turkish political parties in parliament on the 2009–11 constitutional debate and the 2013 constitutional draft proposals. The author uses a Wordfish algorithm to explain how the AKP evolved from a heresthetical to a hegemonic actor between 2009 and 2013. The research shows this was done in two ways: first, by introducing and manipulating a new political cleavage—democratizers versus antidemocratizers—in the 2009–11 constitutional debate, through which the AKP became a dominant party; and second, by using the 2013 constitutional debate to introduce changes aimed at controlling the judiciary, the legislative, and the executive power via the presidential system, through which the AKP became a hegemonic party.

Zafer Yılmaz's essay, "Revising the Culture of Political Protest in Turkey after the Gezi Uprising in Turkey: Radical Imagination, Affirmative Resistance, and the New Politics of Desire/Dignity," centers on the 2013 Gezi protests' contribution to the creation of political processes and resistance practices structured around "new forms of togetherness" that are unrelated to class structure and "political group habitus." This fact helped transform Turkish politics. As the author shows, the protests uncovered AKP's latent authoritarianism, because these "new forms of political becoming" attacked the very basis of AKP hegemony, built on the exploitation of political cleavages between the people and the elite, between the antidemocratic Kemalists and conservative democratic Sunni Muslims. Having eliminated class-based conflict, the Gezi protests slashed these carefully constructed narratives, crafting an alliance among such disparate groups as Kemalists, nationalists,

anticapitalist Muslims, Kurds, football fans, Alevis, feminists, socialists, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, and intersexed groups.

In “News Media Consolidation and Censorship in Turkey: From Liberal Ideals to Corporatist Realities,” Murat Akser provides a media studies–based contribution to understanding Turkey’s descent into authoritarianism. It explores the mimetic symbiosis between Turkish media moguls and the AKP government’s tactics since 2009 through the creation of media conglomerates by both pro- and anti-AKP sides. Akser argues that government censorship operates on the basis of threats to the economic interests of media conglomerates critical of the AKP. He exposes three instruments of control used by the government: (1) legal (court orders and censorship by the state telecommunications agency), (2) economic (transfer of ownership to progovernment businessmen), and (3) political (direct attacks on critical media by AKP politicians to turn public opinion against them).

Marién Durán’s essay, “Dual Presidentialization and Autocratization: Turkey at a Critical Crossroads,” introduces the concept of *dual presidentialization* to explain how the personalization of politics operates in the new Turkey. This occurs both via institutional changes, such as the 1982 constitution, the 2007 amendments to the constitution, and the 2017 referendum on the presidential system, and via informal factors, such as the nature of the executive power and the personalization of the electoral process. Durán subsequently demonstrates how dual presidentialization has accelerated Turkey’s descent into authoritarianism via control of the judiciary, of public freedoms, and of freedom of the press.

The issue concludes with Tiago Ferreira Lopes’s “Is Erdogan’s Postcoup Turkey Suffering from Civilizational Incompetence?” Lopes applies Piotr Sztompka’s concept of *civilizational incompetence* to the new Turkey, as Erdogan’s instrumentalization of the Ottoman past hinders modernization. Lopes identifies the three causal mechanisms that confirm civilizational incompetence in the Turkish context: (1) direct indoctrination (propaganda), (2) totalitarian control (use of coercion through the state apparatus), and (3) defensive patterns (lowered respect for legal frameworks, distrust in authorities, and glorification of tradition).

These essays capture some of the major dynamics currently at work in Turkey, covering the cultural and institutional instruments used by the AKP

to secure a hegemonic position in Turkish society and politics.<sup>18</sup> They unveil some of the mechanisms behind the AKP's ongoing hegemonic strategies. As the Gezi events and the attempted 2016 coup demonstrated, the AKP needs to pursue a "war of position" on multiple fronts unrelentingly, as its quest at usurping (rather than dismantling) Kemalism and securing its own hegemony is always susceptible to being contested and opposed by counterhegemonic actors.

18. Our forthcoming special issue of *Turkish Studies*, dedicated solely to the AKP and Kurdish politics, is presently under review.