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## Inception, Legitimization, and Preservation of Competitive Authoritarian Regimes in Turkey

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# INCEPTION, LEGITIMIZATION, AND PRESERVATION OF COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES IN TURKEY

ZACHARY ANDREWS

This article seeks to synthesize prior works on the rise of competitive authoritarianism regimes at large using the case study of Turkey over the last 20 years. It does this by presenting markers of competitive authoritarian regimes and explaining how they come to power and maintain it thereafter. The paper then moves into the case study of Turkey and by using the aforementioned markers, explains why competitive authoritarianism is the most apt regime descriptor for Turkey at the present time. This is analyzed more thoroughly in the way that Erdoğan and the AKP have cemented their rule over the last two decades. This paper serves to flag different indicators inherent to the consolidation of an autocratic state and act as a collection of current scholarship on competitive authoritarianism in order to give it a more holistic grounding.

## PART I – INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1990s, the world began to experience a new political phenomenon known as competitive authoritarianism. Competitive authoritarian regimes have risen parallel to the wave of democratization that swept across the globe following the end of the Cold War, as strictly authoritarian regimes became more taboo and unacceptable without the support from either of the two superpowers — the United States and the Soviet Union. According to Levitsky and Way, in 2020 there are 32 regimes classified as competitive authoritarian, a decrease of only three since 1995.<sup>1</sup> Of these 32 regimes, there is only a carry-over of sixteen competitive authoritarian regimes from the original 35 in 1995; fifteen additional regimes have democratized, and four have regressed even further into authoritarianism. This means that in the last 25 years, sixteen new competitive authoritarian regimes have arisen. But how has this trend continued with the seeming democratic hegemony that the West promotes, and most importantly, how have competitive authoritarian regimes maintained their status once achieving it?

There are numerous reasons as to how a competitive authoritarian regime comes to exist in the modern era. These include, but are not limited to, the presence of a populist leader, weak democratic institutions, interplay between business interests and political interests, the decline of the western liberal democratic hegemony, and — most decisively — subtlety and the existence of a democratic pretense to political moves. Whilst these are the

primary reasons as to how competitive authoritarian regimes come into power, they maintain and consolidate power through equally lucrative actions and opportunities: infighting amongst their political opposition, corruption of informal institutions, and neutralization of formal democratic institutions. All actions taken by aspiring autocrats are done in order to skew the political playing field in their favor, a trending theme throughout competitive authoritarian regimes.

One of the most prominent cases of the democratic decline into competitive authoritarianism that has continued throughout the previous two decades is that of Turkey. The Turkish case shares all of these contributing factors, and thus is a perfect case study to exemplify the inception and preservation of competitive authoritarian regimes in the international and national contexts. This paper uses the Turkish case to highlight competitive authoritarian trends that can lead to the deterioration of democratic institutions and general negative influence on democratic backsliding at large.

PART II – IDENTIFYING COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

A key component of the new wave of authoritarian regimes is the “pretense of democracy.”<sup>2</sup> The pretense of democracy is one of the most prevalent factors in distinguishing a full-blown authoritarian regime from a competitive one. Under the guise of democracy, competitive authoritarian regimes come about through relatively peaceful, electoral means, rather than in violent takeovers as they “legitimize themselves through multi-party elections and referenda.”<sup>3</sup> A competitive authoritarian system would also continue to use the guise of democracy by allowing universal or near universal suffrage whilst using other methods to aid in electoral victories. Gilbert and Mohseni identify competitiveness, tutelary interference, and civil liberties as, “the three dimensions that are important for regime classification today.”<sup>4</sup>

Keeping this in mind, we can then base our identifying markers of competitive authoritarianism into affecting one or more of these three categories that in turn determine regime typology. Svobik goes further than this, confining democracy to two fundamental aspects: “(1) free and competitive legislative elections and (2) an executive that is elected either directly in free and competitive presidential elections or indirectly by a legislature in parliamentary systems.”<sup>5</sup> However, Svobik rejects the idea of hybrid regimes outright, and adheres to a strict dichotomy of either “democratic” or “authoritarian” regime types. This paper refutes Svobik’s premise, providing evidence that a simple democratic-authoritarian dichotomy does not grasp intermediary regime positions and aptly classify them. Furthermore, Svobik uses democracy and dictatorships as broad categorizations of regime types that this study treats as a multitude. Narrowing regime types to this dichotomy allows for less nuance in regime descriptors and could allow for misinterpretations of a regime’s attributes.

Following this clarification, we can now use the preceding stipulations on regime type to better identify competitive authoritarianism. The suspected competitive authoritarian regime must then have come to power through democratic means, consolidating power through repeated electoral victories and allowing some semblance of universal, adult suffrage, moderately competitive elections, and some protected civil liberties in order to meet our criteria. Levitsky and Way put it quite succinctly: “[s]uch regimes are competitive in that opposition parties use democratic institutions to contest seriously for power, but they are not democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents. Competition is thus real but unfair.”<sup>6</sup>

Using Tóth’s framework as a basis, competitive authoritarian regimes can be identified through two sets of indicators: first-order and second-order markers of competitive authoritarianism. Both sets of markers are identical in name to their counterparts, but operate in distinctly different ways to achieve the same outcome. First order markers are the most fundamental and blatant form, “detected in either constitutional norms or practices of an authoritarian system.”<sup>7</sup> The second-order markers create a normative justification for authoritarianism by manipulating constitutional tools to create norms and practices that feign democracy while furthering authoritarian agendas. This second set of markers are typically more discreet than the constitutional and political changes of first-order markers. These indicators of competitive authoritarian regimes can include a pseudo-constitution, hegemonic voting practices, imitation of institutional checks, a superior executive, and restriction of fundamental rights.

A normal, democratic constitution is typically the “ultimate legal control on political processes,”<sup>8</sup> which limits the arbitrary use of power. In contrast, authoritarian constitutions are merely a facade in order to give “democratic legitimation” to the actions of autocrats. Aspiring authoritarians would then seek to manipulate constitutions to benefit their polity, primarily through majoritarian referenda or executive powers. A secondary effect of constitutional change, or pseudo-adoption, is the normalization of radical or exorbitant changes to the political framework of a nation.

Similar to the democratic legitimation provided by pseudo-constitutions, hegemonic voting practices use legal norms and practices to ensure the dominance of the ruling party as well as modified forms of clientelism. In their research, Gandhi and Lust-Okar found that one of the primary reasons for maintaining elections under authoritarian regimes is to ensure loyalty of elites and provide domestic and international facades of democracy, thus “[t]he issues at stake, the incentives for participation, and the resulting electoral behavior are strikingly different.”<sup>9</sup> This serves to reinforce hegemonic voting practices to either further entrench the incumbent regime, or dissuade prospective opponents. A second-order hegemonic voting practice marker is when a competitive authoritarian regime uses a majoritarian voting system —

utilizing both first-past-the-post and a proportional representation voting system—that is manipulated through external voting laws in order to produce a hegemonic order. This hegemonic order then allows the ruling party to win a majority of legislative seats whilst receiving less than what would be required to achieve such a feat.<sup>10</sup> Voting practices within regimes are key determinants of their classification. However, the extent to which voting practices are encouraged or discouraged determines a regime type. Gilbert and Mohseni argue that if a regime shifts from “competitive” multi-party elections to noncompetitive or single-party elections, it is more akin to authoritarianism than competitive authoritarianism, making the necessity of hegemonic voting a crucial component in competitive authoritarian regimes.<sup>11</sup>

The imitation of institutional checks works jointly with the pseudo-constitution to give the illusion of democracy and therefore further the powers of autocrats. All three branches of government remain, but they no longer operate as checks and balances and rather are neutralized so they can no longer perform their intended function. Imitating institutional checks allows the ruling party to invoke a “we the people” rhetorical narrative that gives legislative elected bodies more credibility than judicial bodies — turning legal authority into political authority — as it is, in theory, representative of the desires of the people.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of the constitutional checks and balances either being nonexistent or unenforced by the judiciary, the executive branch — typically just the chief executor — is left with unchecked superior power. The broad and ill-defined powers of an executive allow it to gain a superior foothold in the political landscape in contrast to the two other branches of government. For example, during a democratic or national crisis that would constitute a declaration of emergency, the chief executor could then use whatever means they deem “necessary” to quell said emergency. This would not directly seem endemic to authoritarianism, but would allow an executor to use extrajudicial means to institutionalize their executive power without the constraints of the law.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, as a consequence of the constitution’s lack of enforcement, fundamental rights can be restricted despite provisions to protect them within the constitution. Human rights are then subject to violation without repercussion. As opposed to normal authoritarian regimes, a competitive authoritarian regime may use mass capture of the media in order to restrict free speech or create costly and discriminatory requirements for the registration of civil societies in order to dissuade their existence. The restriction of fundamental human rights as a second-order marker requires the ruling regime to paint certain injustices above others, which would then allow them to restrict the people’s right to the former. Tóth offers the example of freedom of speech as opposed to human dignity. The argument stems from whether the freedom of speech takes precedence over one’s dignity. A

competitive authoritarian regime would claim that this idea of dignity could expand to encompass the dignity of a demographic group, or even a nation; thus the dignity of a nation is more important than the freedom of speech.<sup>14</sup> Both first-order and second-order markers are necessary in understanding how competitive authoritarian regimes differ from outright authoritarianism and democracy.

PART III – WHY COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM? THE TERMINOLOGY

Now that we understand what constitutes competitive authoritarianism, the next step is to determine why this is the most apt terminology in describing this regime type. In the same work by Tóth, they compile a comprehensive list of others’ works to provide three primary aims in which to identify a regime:

1. An aim to characterize a system that merges two opposite systems (Hybrid/Mixed System).
2. An aim to characterize the system from a democratic lens as it holds more traits akin to a democratic system (Defective Democracy, Populist Democracy, Leader Democracy, etc.).
3. An aim to characterize the system from an authoritarian lens as it holds more traits similar to an authoritarian system (Semi authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism, electoral authoritarianism, etc.).<sup>15</sup>

Seen through Tóth’s terminological scope, Wigell’s work pertaining to the identification of hybrid regimes is also relevant. Wigell insists that we must approach the topic of hybrid regimes through a two-dimensional typology rather than one-dimensional: mapping regimes in a chart with “electoralism” increasing along the *y* axis and “constitutionalism” increasing along the *x* axis. Wigell’s more nuanced terminology displays the fluidity of regime types that allow us to place competitive authoritarianism in the first quadrant, as it uses electoralism as its primary means of legitimation and shies away from constitutionalism.<sup>16</sup> Gilbert and Mohseni expand on this multi-dimensional regime classification by their use of levels of competitiveness (*x*-axis), tutelary interference (*z*-axis), and civil liberties (*y*-axis) as regime classifiers, allowing us to better understand regimes on a case by case basis. This multi-dimensional classification exceeds Wigell’s two-dimensional typology, creating a four-dimensional model built off the three aforementioned classifiers. However, they also note that the classification of regimes does not reflect true reality, as classification systems are social constructs, but “the further clarification of regime classification is both necessary and possible.”<sup>17</sup>

For the purposes of this study, we will be using the third aim of identification presented by Tóth as it is most suitable in matching with our case study at the markers that constitute it; as the first aim is too vague and does not account for the nuance that is achieved through more specific

terminology and the second aim lends too much credit towards the pseudo-democratic institutions that exist in Turkey to be used. Following Gilbert and Mohseni's cubic model of regime classification, Turkey would, as of 2020, fall close to "Illiberal Tutelary Hybrid Regime," with a slight inching toward "Authoritarian." This would make Turkey competitive, like in an "Illiberal Tutelary Hybrid Regime," but with even more limited rights than typically found in a regime of this classification.<sup>18</sup> This falls in line with the recent trend, referring to regimes that meet a certain criteria as subsets of authoritarianism rather than democracy, or a more obscure "hybrid" terminology.<sup>19</sup> Competitive authoritarianism is the most appropriate term to use to describe both the Turkish case and the factors that constitute the regime type being discussed. The nuance behind this terminology accurately accounts for both competitive authoritarianism's electoralism and lack of constitutionalism that allows for abuses of the electorate and consolidation of executive power.

#### PART IV – HOW COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES COME TO POWER

In their investigation of this post-Cold War phenomenon, Levitsky and Way's "Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," identify areas that are unfavorable to democracy and are consequently susceptible to authoritarian regression such as low income, little to no democratic tradition, weak institutions and rule of law, underdeveloped private sectors and civil societies, and feeble opposition parties.<sup>20</sup> However, with the authoritarian transition of Turkey, and similar nations like Hungary that counter these claims, it forces both us and the aforementioned authors to reconsider factors that may be most prevalent in determining what causes competitive authoritarian regimes to arise. The key factors attributed to the rise of a competitive authoritarian regime are populism, weak democratic institutions, corrupt business relationships with governments, decline of western democratic hegemony, and subtlety of policy implementation. Regimes do not require all of the previous factors in order to transition into competitive authoritarianism, but the more that are present would theoretically increase the likelihood of transition. Aspiring autocrats may not even be directly aware of their desire to transition from a democracy into a competitive authoritarian government. Their primary goal is to tilt the playing field in their favor in order to aid or even guarantee future electoral victories; this could be done completely unwittingly of the future descent into competitive authoritarianism.

#### POPULISM

A common theme in most competitive authoritarian regimes, and something that can be instrumental to their rise, is the presence of a populist leader or party. Populism and populists exist in contention with the formal democratic institutions of the current regime as they rise to power through anti-establishment rhetoric, creating an 'us' vs. 'them' divide, and once in

power adhere to their anti-establishment basis by attacking existing horizontal institutions.<sup>21</sup> Populists gain power through electoral means and can be accompanied or backed by a majoritarian presence in the legislation which would enable them to make sweeping institutional changes. The election of a full populist can trigger constitutional crises depending on their level of aggression towards other formal institutions like the judiciary.<sup>22</sup> Populism is not a requirement of competitive authoritarianism, but acts as a catalyst for authoritarian actions in regimes.

#### WEAK DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND THE DECLINE OF WESTERN LIBERAL HEGEMONY

The presence of weak democratic institutions, primarily tutelary democracies, that are not actual consolidated democracies but only give the appearance as such, provide an opening for aspiring autocrats to take hold and manipulate the current system as long as they are able to circumvent the veto-players.<sup>23</sup> Veto-players – the judiciary and the military – are the only institutional defenders of the constitution within countries that have weak informal democratic institutions. A majoritarian electoral victory can pave the way for the rise of a new competitive authoritarian regime. The decline of the Western liberal hegemony internationally, coupled with the rise of China and Russia provided the opportunity for the rise of competitive authoritarian regimes.<sup>24</sup>

Following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, a wave of democratization and partial democratization swept across the planet. This resulted in the creation of a number of unstable democracies that have either continued to democratize or reverted towards authoritarianism, depending on their continual linkage and desire for linkage to the West.<sup>25</sup> For newly democratized central and eastern European states, the most prominent form of Western linkage is the presence of the European Union (EU). Through the EU accession process, states such as Hungary and Turkey had incentives to continue their democratization process or maintain a certain level of democratization, typically a tutelary one.<sup>26</sup> As the Western liberal hegemony has seen a slow downturn in recent decades, Russia and China have risen to replace them. While these new global powers have not fought as ardently as their predecessors to establish similar regimes internationally, their prominence continues to be relevant on the international stage. Acting as a substitute for the market provided by the western hegemony, states with authoritarian inclinations no longer must uphold democratic institutions to continue business with the West. As of 2019, of the 32 competitive authoritarian regimes in the world, "six were [once] high-linkage countries in the Americas and East-Central Europe and two additional high-linkage countries, Nicaragua and Venezuela, are now fully authoritarian."<sup>27</sup>

This transition represents a shift in the international community, one that had previously been staunchly in opposition to forms of authoritarianism. Now that there are alternative market and allyship options, an authoritarian

## Andrews: Inception, Legitimization, and Preservation of Competitive Author

regime no longer has the same consequences that it once had.

### SUBTLETY AND THE DEMOCRATIC PRETENSE

The mode by which leaders and their parties change policy, legislation, etc. in order to consolidate power in autocratic means is key to their rise. Subtlety is necessary to the rise of any competitive authoritarian government. Aspiring autocrats must reform their constitutions, ending horizontal accountability (i.e. checks and balances) in order to gain substantial power to rule unhindered, but if this is done too bluntly it can result in international or national backlash. These actions must come about under the guise of democracy, typically under the pretense of majoritarianism, that constitutional checks such as the judiciary or constitutional limitations are antidemocratic as they don't adhere to the majority of the population's politics as argued by the aspiring autocrat.<sup>28</sup> Through the amalgamation of a democratic pretense and the transition into quasi-constitutionalism, competitive authoritarianism arises as it claims to abide by democratic principles with authoritarian outcomes.

### PART V – HOW COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM PERSEVERES AND EXPANDS ITSELF

Following the establishment of a competitive authoritarian regime, their primary goal, like all regimes, is to maintain their status and expand or consolidate their power. A majority of the preservation and expansion periods are merely continued processes undertaken in order to gain power in the first place. The two central pillars continue to be the neutralization of formal democratic norms and institutions as well as the corruption of informal institutions: through non-legislative methods, civil societies, and the creation of pro-regime business blocs. In addition to these two components, infighting amongst opposition parties can also be credited in maintaining a competitive authoritarian regime. This list is non-exhaustive but seeks to explain the most prominent reasons that competitive authoritarianism is allowed to continue and, in some cases, thrive.

### NEUTRALIZATION OF FORMAL NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS

Once established, an authoritarian regime must continue to neutralize democratic norms and institutions through constitutional and legislative reform in order to consolidate power and end horizontal accountability. This is done through continuous majoritarian victories in the legislation to keep legislative power coupled with executive power in order to render the judiciary useless.<sup>29</sup> This key feature is one of the most distinguishing differences between classic authoritarianism and competitive authoritarianism. The ascent of competitive authoritarianism is not as swift as a military coup—as many autocrats come to power—but is stretched throughout multiple terms in the electorate that serves to legitimize its rule in a casual manner as to not arouse suspicion of the intent behind majoritarian legislation.<sup>30</sup> Gilbert and Mohseni identify turnover as a prime indicator in this process, establishing “at

least four consecutive electoral cycles or twenty years in either the presidency or the legislature” as the requirement to avoid autocratic consolidation.<sup>31</sup> Once formal institutions have been neutralized, it allows for the ruling party to begin an assault on informal institutions that would have been protected by the now inadequate formal institutions.

### CORRUPTION OF INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS

Conjoined with the subversion of formal institutions is the corruption of informal institutions; which allows a regime to use civilian or non-legislative means to consolidate their power. Due to the expansive field that makes up informal institutions, there are a litany of ways that a government can interfere in informal democratic institutions: clientelism, corruption, putsch threat, civil disobedience, and custom law.<sup>32</sup> By participating in these tactics, a government weakens the democratic base of a state.

A prominent mode of corrupting informal democratic institutions is to create illicit relationships between autocratic parties and domestic businesses (clientelism) which greatly contributes to the preservation and expansion of competitive authoritarianism. Both Levitsky and Way<sup>33</sup> and Esen and Gumuscu<sup>34</sup> point to the importance of building a pro-government business class, which is then used by incumbents to expand their parties and even government's resources and call in favors depending on the business type. With informal control over large sectors of private business, the ruling party is then allowed to gain an upper hand and continue to skew the playing field in their favor.

### INFIGHTING AMONGST OPPOSITION GROUPS

One factor that is not engendered through the state's actions is the historical existence of infighting between opposition groups. Since competitive authoritarian regimes still maintain an electoral element, opposition parties are able to still win legislative seats despite actions taken against them; however, when opposition parties refuse to work together to create coalition parties, it markedly buffets their ability to gain electoral victories.

All the actions of a competitive authoritarian regime are done in order to tilt the electoral playing field in favor of the party in power. The aforementioned factors that work in the perseverance of an already established competitive authoritarian regime visibly manifest themselves in politicized state institutions, violation of civil liberties (media, expression, and assembly), and uneven access to resources. All three of these manifestations are overwhelmingly present in modern Turkey under current president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party or Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP).

### PART VI – COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM IN TURKEY: 2001–PRESENT

Turkey's current status as a competitive authoritarian state has come

about in the last two decades, following the rise of Erdoğan and the AKP. According to the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index (pictured on the following page), Turkish democracy peaked in 2006 at .71, but has been on the decline since then. It crossed beneath the democratic threshold of .5 in 2014, and as of 2018 it sits at .32. Following an almost identical trajectory are civil liberties and freedom of expression.<sup>35</sup> In fact, prior to its current regime it was recognized as a fairly stable democracy, despite its tutelary attributes. Turkey had a long multiparty democratic tradition, a stable mid-level income, status within the EU, and proliferation of resources.<sup>36</sup> In the following section, the distinguishing elements of the Turkish regime will be reviewed and explained as to why it is currently labeled as competitive authoritarianism. However, prior to that discussion, it is important to note the prevailing factors that prevent Turkey from being labeled as a complete authoritarian regime. These include the fact that there is universal suffrage and the authority of elected officials are not restricted by tutelary powers.<sup>37</sup> There are an abundance of examples of competitive authoritarian activity in the Turkish case, but for our efforts, we will focus primarily on those that best highlight Turkey's current status. Conversely, the other defining traits of competitive authoritarianism that are present in Turkey are politicized state institutions, violation of civil liberties, and uneven access to resources. All of these factors work jointly to skew the electoral playing field in order to maintain the incumbent powers of Erdoğan and the AKP.

#### THE RISE OF ERDOGAN AND THE AKP

The current president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was first elected to public office in 1994 as mayor of Istanbul where he served until 1998. He was then imprisoned and temporarily banned from politics after reciting an Islamist militant poem. In 2001, Turkey underwent a major financial crisis where the GDP dropped 4.49% and 7.18% from 1999 to 2001.<sup>38</sup> As a result, a majority of its citizenry became dissatisfied by the major political parties of the time, which allowed Erdoğan and the AKP to come to the forefront of the political stage, adhering to a similar path laid out by Levitsky and Loxton.<sup>39</sup> In the past, as recently as 1998, the constitutional court upheld its historic Kemalist ruling on Islamist parties by closing the Welfare Party (WP).<sup>40</sup> The AKP altered its platform from an Islamic conservatism to moderate democrats in an attempt to gain more support. Erdoğan and the AKP's outsider status paired well with their newfound populist platform and ushered them into office with 34% of the vote.<sup>41</sup>

As the AKP took power in the legislature, Erdoğan was selected as the new prime minister in the 2002 elections. Now that he had gained power, he once again began to use the anti-establishment, populist rhetoric he had previously toned down. An additional safeguard that aided Erdoğan was his alliance with the EU. This legitimized his status internally and internationally, allowing him to fight against the establishment without resorting to

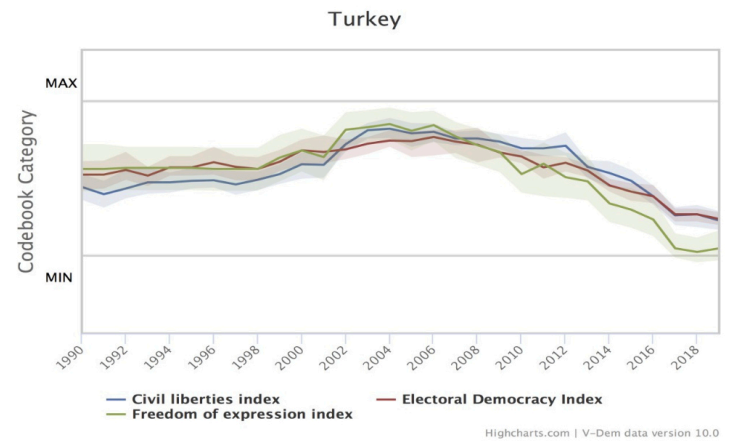


Figure 1: Turkey's scores on the V-DEM Civil Liberties Index, Freedom of Expression Index, and Electoral Democracy Index, shown from 1990–2018

plebiscitary strategies that would almost certainly bring about the intervention of the Kemalist tutelary institutions. Throughout the rest of this legislative term, Erdoğan and the AKP continuously butted heads with the judiciary and military institutions, which boiled over during the 2007 election cycle. After triggering an institutional crisis following his denial of all secularist candidates and implementation of plebiscitary methods, the military and judiciary attempted to step in and unseat him. However, backed by the ideas held by international democratic institutions, Erdoğan denounced any judicial or military action as antidemocratic and held early voting for the presidential and parliamentary elections. The AKP won 57% of the vote in parliament while Abdullah Gül—the AKP's presidential candidate—won with 70% of the vote.<sup>42</sup> A majority legislative and executive win gave Erdoğan and the AKP near complete control of the government. Erdoğan then used this win to institute sweeping reforms of the judiciary system, pacifying the last veto-player in Erdoğan's way, which began Turkey's descent into competitive authoritarianism.

The AKP and Erdoğan continued to consolidate power through the coming elections and in 2014, Erdoğan was elected president. As president and leader of the party, he effectively gained control of both the legislature and executive branches of the government—since the judiciary had been rendered useless by previous constitutional reforms—and virtually unchecked power. In 2016, after a failed coup attempt by the military, Erdoğan ushered in a set of constitutional reforms that led to “ultra-presidentialism,”<sup>43</sup> consolidating even more powers within the office of the chief executor. Erdoğan reportedly referred to the attempted coup as “a gift from god.”<sup>44</sup> This reform was

permitted due to the failings of opposition parties as well as a surge of support for the government. However, in recent years the outstanding support for the Erdoğan regime has begun to diminish. In the snap elections of 2018, Erdoğan was reelected, but only with 52.9% of the vote. Similarly, in the parliament, the AKP lost 7% of its total vote compared to 2015 which brought its overall percentage to 42.56.<sup>45</sup>

POLITICIZED STATE INSTITUTIONS

A common theme dealt with by both populists and competitive authoritarians is the politicization of state institutions, or the fusion of state and party. This is extremely evident in Turkish politics. Only focusing on the election cycle of 2015, we find numerous violations of state-party relations. Throughout 2015, Erdoğan used public openings of state projects to hold campaign rallies. These public events allowed the AKP to conduct political propaganda and gain visibility at the taxpayer's expense. AKP-appointed provincial governors distributed goods to voters, whilst promoting the party during official functions. Most notably, the government used state employees, particularly police forces, to both work on AKP electoral campaigns and to undermine the efforts of the opposition. State employees were documented removing opposition campaign posters and confiscating anti-government propaganda materials. One of the more notable instances of police interference took place in May 2015, when Turkish security forces blocked the entrance of a Secularist Republican People's Party's (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) election vehicle to a public square. As a result of the blockade, the CHP was forced to campaign in severely less populated areas of town. In a similar vein, opposition forces were constrained to campaigning within their electoral strongholds, rather than incumbent strongholds or battleground areas.<sup>46</sup> Limiting the permissible areas that a party can campaign severely affects their ability to expand their electorate, by constricting their reach, and locking in their previous constituency as their prescribed voting bloc. While this does not directly limit the suffrage of the electorate, it completely skews the extent at which an opposition party can reach potential voters in order to appeal to them or flip their vote.

VIOLATION OF CIVIL LIBERTIES (MEDIA, EXPRESSION, AND ASSEMBLY)

The violation of civil liberties is the most prevalent and invasive trait of competitive authoritarianism. The violations of liberties most exemplified by the Erdoğan regime are the suppression of media, expression, and assembly. The Human Rights Watch has denigrated Turkey's government, saying in a 2014 report, "In office for twelve years under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan the AKP has shown increasing intolerance of political opposition, public protest, and critical media."<sup>47</sup> The violations of civil liberties by the Turkish State registered by the courts between 2011 and 2013, indicted them "for frequent violations of the right to a fair trial, property rights, and the right to liberty and security."<sup>48</sup> This began to change in 2014, when violations of

freedom of expression ranked third in violations after the right to liberty and security and the right to a fair trial. Using the V-DEM civil liberties and freedom of expression indexes graph on page 14, we can quantify this decline by election cycles: in 2002—when Erdoğan first came to power—civil liberties were rated at .68, they later peaked in 2004 at .76, and have been on the decline since then, dropping to .66 in 2010, .53 in 2014, and .32 in 2018.<sup>49</sup>

An overall contributing factor to censorship, propaganda, and the violation of civil liberties has been the continuous AKP intervention within the media landscape in Turkey. The AKP created a government friendly media by disciplining mainstream media via intimidation, mass firings, imprisonment of journalists, and bribing media owners. The AKP would then use the National Broadcasting Authority (RTUK) to control media outlets, like Dogan Media or the Gülen Movement.<sup>50</sup> The RTUK would order closure of broadcasting stations, fine companies for alleged tax evasion, raid stations, and even detained station executives, journalists, and other media workers. In order to keep TV stations and newspapers in line, the government has appointed pro-regime managers and journalists to them that work as government representatives and supervisors that alter news content at the behest of the state.

The years of 2011 through 2013 witnessed three major waves of mass media firings: in June 2011 when the AKP won its third term; December 2011 when the Turkish air force killed 34 smugglers mistaken for Kurdish insurgents; and in 2013 during the Gezi Park protests, resulting in the firings or resignations of 143 journalists. In 2014 alone, 339 journalists lost their jobs, and in addition, politicized trials aimed to disassemble opposition parties and jail journalists that dared to report on it.<sup>51</sup> In 2002, Turkey ranked 99th on the press freedom index by Reporters without Borders, but by 2014 their ranking had declined to 154th, which remains the same ranking as of the year 2020.<sup>52</sup>

Mirroring an almost parallel path taken with Turkish media, in the last decade the AKP has ramped up its repression of expression; most notably through laws restricting access to social media and other websites. After a corruption scandal came to light in December 2013, the government blocked both YouTube and Twitter until the March 2014 elections. Earlier in that same year, in February the legislation amended the Internet Law (Law No. 5651) which expanded the Telecommunications Authority's (TIB) jurisdiction. A now deleted civil initiative that tracked digital intervention by the Turkish government found that the total number of blocked websites as of 2016 could amount to as much as 103,625.<sup>53</sup> Succeeding the Gezi Protests in 2013, approximately 5500 protesters between the years of 2013-2016 have been charged with "terrorism, participating in unauthorized demonstrations, resisting the police, and damaging public property."<sup>54</sup> This is a clear-cut example of the Turkish government's overreach in an effort to quell public dissent and dissuade further anti-regime protests.



The federal government used lawsuits to target journalists, artists, actors, and a number of other civilians, including underage students, for dissent and a litany of other charges. Just in 2015, 460 people were investigated simply for insulting Erdoğan. Of these investigations, 50 were journalists and 281 were members of opposition parties. In an increasingly corrupt manner, Erdoğan has made 1,031,243 Turkish lira as a result of 207 defamation lawsuits since 2011 (as of 2016).<sup>55</sup> The AKP regime has continuously, and without relent, breached the Turkish people's rights to self-expression by silencing journalists and regular citizens alike in order to maintain its stranglehold on the public discourse within Turkey.

As support for the AKP has dwindled over the last decade, the regime has begun to use violence in order to maintain control of both the public narrative of the country and protection of their electoral status. This has been done through a rampant increase in state brutality of protestors, opposition parties, and political and ethnic minorities alike. The three prime examples of this have been in response to the 2013 Gezi Protests, the ongoing conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and the government backlash after the 2016 coup attempt.

Throughout the Gezi Protests in 2013 (a response to government plans to replace the Gezi Park with a mall and a military barracks) riot police "punished" protestors with "extensive and unlawful" amounts of tear gas. Reports on the injuries and casualties of the protest range from 5-6 individuals killed, and more than 9,000 injuries, including "severe eye and head injuries."<sup>56</sup> Protests commenced on the anniversary of the Gezi protests and were met with continued suppression tactics.

The HDP and PKK have systematically been the victims of human and civil rights abuses for years at the hands of the Erdoğan regime after their initial amiable relations. Between March and June 2015 there were 176 attacks on the HDP, resulting in five deaths and 522 injuries. Following the June 2015 elections, in July a suicide bomber targeted a group of HDP activists in Suruc that killed 33. Later that same year, in October, there was a similar attack on an HDP peace rally in Ankara which killed 102, injuring 400 more. While the AKP government was not directly responsible for the attacks, their anti-opposition rhetoric and slow action or even inaction in bringing justice to the perpetrators of the attacks has acted as a stimulant.<sup>57</sup>

Not even a year later, following the 2016 coup attempt, the Turkish government harshly stepped up their repressive actions and purged public offices, media, law firms, and other parts of the private sectors of dissidents. According to a report by Nate Schenkkan of Freedom House, 50,546 people were arrested; 103,824 were dismissed from public service—with an additional 33,824 suspended; 166 journalists were taken into custody as well as hundreds of lawyers; more than ten billion dollars' worth of private companies were seized; 150 media outlets were closed by decree; and 1,000

non-governmental organizations were closed by decree. Of the opposition, two leaders and nine parliamentarians of the HDP and the leader of the CHP were jailed. In addition to the incarcerations, dozens of elected mayors in Kurdish municipalities were replaced with AKP appointees.<sup>58</sup>

#### UNEVEN ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Following the 2015 election, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) released a report on the uneven access to media within Turkey. They found that state-owned media, Turkish Radio and Television (TRT), devoted 46% of its airtime to the AKP with additional time reserved for Erdoğan. Even private media outlets, such as NTV and ATV, allocated 1/3 of their airtime to the AKP. In total, the largest opposition party, CHP, only received 19% of political ads. This is not only a result of politicized government institutes, but also the disproportionate resource allocation between the ruling party and the opposition. The AKP bought 91% of all political ads that aired on TRT, and simultaneously TRT refused to air CHP campaign ads.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to access to extra-monetary resources, one of the crucial traits of the AKP is its vast wealth. Three of the most notable cases that demonstrate both the corruption and unevenness of the AKP have been Deniz Feneri, TURGEV, and Sivil Dayanisma Platformu. Deniz Feneri was a charity based in Turkey — with branches in Germany as well — that gained notoriety in 2008 after collecting about €41 million for earthquake relief in Indonesia; however, 16 million of those euros were actually funneled to the AKP. German Courts indicted the charity on embezzlement charges, stating that the charity had close connections with the AKP elite.<sup>60</sup> TURGEV, a foundation actually established by Erdoğan and his family, were revealed to have direct links with pro-AKP businessmen, the majority of which were recipients of government contracts. In 2014, in response to a CHP inquiry, the speaker of the government confirmed that it had collected millions in donations.<sup>61</sup>

The final of the three major actors was the Sivil Dayanisma Platformu (Civil Solidarity Platform), which was established as a network of civil society organizations with close ties to the Erdoğan regime. The society lobbied on behalf of Erdoğan following corruption scandals in December 2013. It went on to place ads supporting the prime minister, at the time, in 4000 different locations throughout Istanbul prior to the March 2014 elections — the costs of which were covered by regime-friendly businessmen.<sup>62</sup>

#### PART VII – CONCLUSION

Since the AKP first came to the center stage of Turkish politics in 2001, we have witnessed a continual downward spiral in regard to protection of civil liberties, a fair and equitable playing field in regard to electoral politics, and outright oppression by the state. It is due to these contributing factors that Turkey's once tutelary democracy has taken a swift downturn towards

competitive authoritarianism, and is on track to a fully autocratic regime in the coming years. While the AKP has grown with formidable efficiency in the past two decades, since 2018 we have seen a continuance in this regressive trend toward unmitigated authoritarianism following their repeated decline in national support. The following years will be pivotal in adjudicating the extent of Erdoğan's willingness to maintain power in an unstable political climate that is slowly unraveling.

As we have seen through the Turkish case, competitive authoritarianism has become increasingly more prominent in one of the world's largest countries, as Turkey's continued degeneration of democratic institutions and civil liberties has been met with relatively little substantive international backlash. Turkey's current brand of competitive authoritarianism threatens democratic stability globally, paving the way for other regimes to follow in the footsteps of Erdoğan and the AKP.

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