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Erdogan's Turkey: The Rise of the AKP

Camille Rybacki Koch

At the beginning of the 21st century, Turkey was in line to become the model for democracy in the Middle East. A new political party was emerging, guided by the premise that democracy was compatible with Islam. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), was founded by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Today, almost twenty years after the AKP's rise to power, the hopes for a strong democratic Turkey are all but gone. The AKP party's tactics have shifted from democratic erosion to more blatant authoritarian actions. This transition leaves many questions about the mechanisms of democratic decline in Turkey. The following will address these questions, identifying the causes of democratic decline in Turkey and assessing the likelihood of its return. This will be done through an examination of the actions of the AKP party from their formation to present day, highlighting key events, the warning signs of democratic erosion, and discussing the future of democracy in Turkey. The direction the AKP has moved over the past two decades reflects not a sudden reversal of policy, but a continuity with its objectives, which is exemplified by the origins of the AKP.

Kemal Ataturk was the founding father and first president of the Republic of Turkey, who pioneered a project of radical modernization and secularization.ⁱ The Kemalist legacy of secularism left by Ataturk has continued to define politics in Turkey. Islamist parties that have challenged this legacy have been repeatedly struck down by military coups. The 1997 military deposition of the Islamist Welfare Party was instrumental in the formation of the AKP and the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.ⁱⁱ Erdoğan, who was a member of the Welfare Party and mayor of Istanbul, was jailed two years later for reciting an “inflammatory” Turkish poem.ⁱⁱⁱ With the Welfare party banned, Erdoğan, upon his release from jail, sought a rebranding that would prove crucial to his rise to power. This rebranding required Erdoğan to shed the traditional Islamist label and emphasize democratization and liberal ideas. Such a reframing allowed the AKP party

to build a coalition of voters who would not have otherwise supported the party.^{iv} During this time, there were high levels of discontent among the general population with the established parties due to their failure to address the economic crisis and the AKP was able to capitalize on it and gain mass support.^v Having consolidated a power base, the AKP won by a landslide in the 2002 elections, and Erdoğan became Prime Minister.^{vi} While Erdoğan and his AKP party kept many of their initial pro-democracy promises, there were subtle signs of what was yet to come.

Levitsky and Ziblatt are Harvard Professors who have dedicated over 20 years to studying democratic breakdown, together they wrote a book called *How Democracies Die* where they present a litmus test with four indicators of authoritarian behavior.^{vii} Those indicators include: a rejection of the democratic rules of the game, denial of the legitimacy of political opponents, toleration or encouragement of violence, and a readiness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents. They observe that outsider populist candidates frequently test positive for these factors and Erdoğan displayed many populist tendencies, even in the earliest stages of his leadership.^{viii} According to Jan-Werner Müller, a historian and political philosopher at Princeton University, “the core claim of populism is thus a moralized form of anti-pluralism.”^{ix} Candidates make a moral claim to represent the one and true people against the corrupt elite.^x Erdoğan did this by presenting the political establishment as undemocratic.^{xi} Müller also tells us that populism is strong where party systems are weak.^{xii} It was clear in that first election in Turkey that the party system was weak as none of the six established parties reached the required 10% electoral threshold in the 2002 elections.^{xiii} Enjoying massive support both domestically and abroad, the AKP began to exercise more concerning behaviors – which Levitsky and Ziblatt tell us are clear warning signs that were overlooked. Eventually, Erdoğan would display all these factors in full, but there were two of them that he displayed early on. His attacks on the media

and purging of non-loyalists in government positions were evident from the onset of Erdoğan's rule. Erdoğan's government seized Zaman, one of Turkey's biggest newspapers, because their owner had formed an opposition party against the AKP, and increasingly filled government positions with those who agreed with their cause over people who met the qualifications.^{xiv}

The strategy of the AKP employed, embracing democracy as a path to power, worked exceptionally well. With reforms, the economy began to grow at a rapid rate, and with it the goodwill of the people.^{xv} As a group, they broke the traditional model that Islamist parties had used in the past, while “preserving its ideological objectives and ambitions.”^{xvi} This gave the AKP time to consolidate their power and ensure its preservation before moving toward more aggressive reforms. As Erdoğan himself once stated, “for us, democracy is a means to an end.”^{xvii} This path of capturing power in the state was especially apparent between 2007 to 2011. There was a constitutional referendum to reorganize the courts, a purging of military generals, and a rapid increase in the number of journalists incarcerated on questionable charges.^{xviii}

These actions fit neatly into Ozan Varol's conception of stealth authoritarianism. Varol, who is originally from Turkey is a law professor at the Lewis and Clark School and is best known for his work on democratic coups. Stealth authoritarianism is a strategy adopted by regimes in a post-Cold War world “which utilizes formal legal mechanisms for anti-democratic purposes.”^{xix} A key advantage of this strategy is that governments can avoid many of the costs of outwardly oppressive authoritarian practices.^{xx} Varol presents a list of tactics frequently used in this endeavor, including: libel lawsuits, changes in electoral laws, charging dissidents with non-political crimes, and surveillance laws. The actions taken by the Erdoğan government in this early period attempted to maintain the veneer of democracy and largely avoided outright violence against opposition parties. In the early days, the AKP was careful to keep their actions

palatable to the public but in 2013 Erdoğan began to drop the stealth component of his authoritarianism.

The protests over plans to add commercial and residential buildings in the Gezi Park greenspace marked a turning point in Erdoğan's leadership. A small protest from a group of environmentalists eventually became a nationwide uproar of over 3 million people in 79 cities.^{xxi} The protests brought together a diverse movement within Turkish society, prompted by the extreme violence that the government used against those protesting. Five people died and over 8,000 individuals were injured.^{xxii} It was at this moment that Erdoğan clearly revealed his "authoritarian nature" to a broader audience, and further demonstrated Müller's populist logic, saying of the protesters, "If you gather 100,000, I will gather 1,000,000."^{xxiii}^{xxiv} This statement not only shows the us-them mentality perpetuated by Erdoğan, but also reinforces the idea that he represents the majority. Unfortunately, the Gezi Park Protests of 2013 did nothing to prevent the election of Erdoğan to the presidency in 2014. This election was significant not only because it was Erdoğan's first term as the president, but because it was the first time the president was elected by a direct popular vote.^{xxv}

The other major event that contributed to the democratic backsliding was the 2016 coup d'état. To understand the coup and the impact that it had on Erdoğan's consolidation of power, we must consider the AKP's split from the Gulen movement. The Gulen movement, known as Hizmet, which is Turkish for service, is a wide-reaching group created by Fetahullah Gulen.^{xxvi} The group's focus is on both education and community engagement. It was largely considered to be apolitical but was a close ally to the AKP. Tensions began to rise between the two groups in 2010, but the full break occurred in December of 2013.^{xxvii} Just a month before, Erdoğan's government had announced their intentions to close several tutoring centers run by Hizmet. In

response, a group of prosecutors closely associated with the movement revealed a corruption investigation into Erdoğan's government.^{xxviii} They attempted to arrest one of Erdoğan's sons, shattering their long-held facade that they were not involved in politics, and placing them solidly in the political arena.^{xxix} Erdoğan now saw Gulen's networks in the police, military, and judiciary as a substantial threat to his power. Despite the benefits their alliance had brought, this presented a clear and present danger. Prompted by this incident, Erdoğan began purging Hizmet members that remained in positions of power; this effort culminated in the 2016 coup.^{xxx}

The great irony of the failed 2016 coup in Turkey is that it was branded a triumph for democracy, but instead resulted in a consolidation of Erdoğan's power.^{xxxi} Historically, the military in Turkey acted as the guardian of democracy and Kemalism, a practice that can be traced back to the original designs of Ataturk. However, as time progressed, military interference in the country was viewed as increasingly illiberal and an unwelcome method of protecting democracy.^{xxxii} After almost 14 years of being hollowed out by the AKP, the military staged a coup led by Hizmet members.^{xxxiii} Some argue that the coup was a test of the military's power; if this was the case, they failed miserably as not a single opposition party chose to support the military in this effort. In a calculus between the threat of Erdoğan and the threat of the military, Erdoğan was regarded as the lesser of two evils.^{xxxiv}

What is especially remarkable is why the coup failed. As previously mentioned, the military received no external support from the political parties, but Erdoğan also rallied mass support to fight for democracy. In a seminal moment, Erdoğan appeared over facetime on the news to call on the citizens of Turkey to go out into the streets to fight for democracy.^{xxxv} Not only did police and loyalist soldiers come out to fight the military, but thousands of Turkish citizens flooded the streets to resist. This response did not come without heavy casualties, as 241

people were killed and 2,194 were injured.^{xxxvi} In the three weeks that followed, citizens continued to come into public squares to participate in “democracy watches.”^{xxxvii} This helped the government further solidify those resisting the military as morally right and ideal citizens.^{xxxviii}

The long-term impact of the failed coup would be swift and devastating for the very democracy the people were trying to defend. Seizing the opportunity presented by the crisis, the government declared a state of emergency, giving the executive a virtually unchecked mandate to make decisions without oversight. According to Human Rights Watch, 2,167 judges and prosecutors were jailed while another 2,147 were removed while also issuing decrees to close multiple media agencies, schools, hospitals, and clinics that were believed to be associated with the planners of the coup.^{xxxix} Erdoğan also used this moment to shift his rhetoric, emphasizing the importance of having a strong unified executive to promote stability. With this momentum, a package of constitutional reforms was proposed in December 2016, to be voted on the following April. The package included 18 different amendments to the constitution. Most notably, it abolished the position of prime minister and granted the powers previously held by that office to the president. It also drastically increased the power of the president to declare a state of emergency, while eliminating the Grand National Assembly’s ability to root out corruption or check the actions of the president.^{xl} The referendum was widely criticized, but the government poured extensive resources into their support for the “Vote Yes” campaign, and even supporters of the AKP government admitted that there was no real chance for the public to consider the ramifications of the vote. There were also claims of fraud and ballot stuffing, especially after it was determined that the resolution only passed with 51% of the vote.^{xli}

By 2018, the authoritarian practices of Turkey had now become overt. Erdoğan called snap elections and moved them forward by almost a year to try and capitalize on the country's nationalist sentiments.^{xliii} It was also the first year that Freedom House listed Turkey as “not free,” citing the expansion of emergency powers, abuse of vaguely worded terrorism laws, pretrial detention without due process, and the increase in disappearance and torture of political opposition.^{xliiii} A final devastating blow to elections came in 2019 when the High Election Board ruled that municipal elections would be rerun in Istanbul, where the AKP had lost. This shattered any illusions that free elections were still being held in Turkey.^{xliiv} However, this fit with the model the AKP had been pursuing all along. As the BPI put it, “the political system that the leaders of the AKP are working to implement is distinctly illiberal and autocratic, treating public support for their rule as a formality to be engineered in elections that may be free but certainly not fair.”^{xlv}

Moving into 2021, Erdoğan has made no sign that he intends to stop his campaign to give more power to the executive. Recent trends in polls have shown that the AKP is declining in popularity, down from 42% to 36%.^{xlvi} From the AKP’s perspective, this is especially concerning because they build their legitimacy through elections. With support declining, new actions are needed. In typical authoritarian fashion, instead of changing their policies to appeal to the people, Erdoğan is pursuing changes to election laws. While the government did not specify exactly what those changes would be, a member of the government suggested that they would be creating new districts, gerrymandering the boundaries to help the AKP stay in power.^{xlvii} Another recent blow to democracy were calls by Erdoğan to ban the HDP party. He claimed that they were associated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), designated a terrorist organization by many countries including Turkey and the US. This is widely seen as a reaction to

the HDP's growing popularity, which has been attracting former supporters of the AKP.^{xlvi}
Despite the continual onslaught on the opposition, there are still groups fighting for democracy.

The Middle East Institute points to three groups as agents of democratic resilience: political parties, youth disillusionment, and non-co-opted civil society.^{xlix} Even with brutal crackdowns on the opposition, and a continued effort by Erdoğan to rewrite election laws in his favor, opposition parties are still forming and building coalitions against the AKP. These opposition parties were able to win several municipal elections in 2019, and are looking abroad to try and learn from other resistance parties such as those in Hungary or Poland. The second factor MEI points to is youth disillusionment and, according to poll data, many of the young people in Turkey are seeking new political strategies to protect the things most important to them. Youth in Turkey face high levels of uncertainty, unemployment, and constant changes to their education system. At the beginning of 2021, hundreds of students came out to protest Erdoğan's decision to personally appoint his own rector of Bogazici University in Istanbul. Calling the move undemocratic, students protested to show their discontent for the current political climate.¹ The final point MEI highlights are civil society organizations.

The Center for American Progress reports that since the early 2000s civil society has grown at a high rate with a nearly 50% increase in the number of people participating in various organizations.^{li} Islamic organizations in particular have risen dramatically. This can be partially attributed to the fact that as the AKP has been friendlier and more focused on Islamist issues.^{lii} However, this is also because of the strategy Turkey employs when it comes to civil society-containment and appropriation.^{liii} Containment refers to the limitation and suppression of organizations that pose a threat while appropriation allows the government to co-opt organizations to foster closer ties with their voter base. Specifically, they accomplish this by

making funding and other benefits more readily available to those groups that enforce the AKP's agenda and goals.^{liv}

Overall, CIVICUS rates Turkey's civil society as being repressed.^{lv} However, in a true testament to democratic resilience, containment and repression have not stopped the people from coming together to resist. Over 23,000 groups in Turkey are focused on research and advocacy for social and political issues.^{lvi} One important group, Vote and Beyond, uses grassroots efforts to mobilize tens of thousands of people to monitor elections across the country.^{lvii} However, monitoring and even winning elections will not be enough to save democracy in Turkey; that will require a much larger "emancipatory democratic project."^{lviii} Especially considering the large institutional upheaval the country has gone through over the past 20 years. The damage done by Erdoğan will not be undone once he leaves, but every day in Turkey, people show that they are not willing to give up their freedoms without a fight.^{lix}

The discussion around democracy in Turkey often portrays a shining example gone astray. However, this hope may have been a false one from the start, merely a projection of western "aspirations and values onto foreign leaders with their own objectives."^{lx} The AKP, from its formation, utilized democratic rhetoric and ideals to gain support so that they could push through their own agenda. In an analysis of the rhetoric used by the AKP throughout their time in office, the authors found that, "...the AKP does not champion inclusivity unless it benefits the party's conservative constituents and as long as there is no possibility of a coup by the military or closure by the Constitutional Court."^{lxi} In the normal fashion of stealth authoritarians, they used the disguise of democratic practices and reforms to mask their actions. Despite this, there were warning signs. Even before the 2016 coup, Erdoğan had all the markings of an anti-establishment populist who met every indicator of the authoritarian litmus test. Through the

changes made in the 2007 constitutional referendum, he made apparent his desire to solidify electoral legitimacy and his lack of respect for democratic rules. His anti-establishment and populist tendencies showed a clear denial of the legitimacy of political opposition. Toleration or encouragement of violence is one area that, at least early on, he was not overt about. However the events of the Gezi Park protests showed that he was willing not only to tolerate but also perpetrate violence. The last category - attacks on civil liberties - was where Erdoğan struck the earliest and the most often. He actively undermined the media and sought restrictions on the opposition. Additionally, the fact that Erdoğan espoused the moral logic of populism as described by Müller should be seen as harmful to democracy. Populism and democracy are not complementary; one cannot be both anti-pluralism and pro-democracy. Looking back, it is easy to point at certain actions as clear warning signs, but even at the time, these actions could have been identified.

Erdoğan summarized his time in the political sphere in three phases. He called his time as a member of the Islamist Welfare party and mayor of Istanbul his “apprenticeship,” his time as prime minister his “journeyman,” and his time as president his “mastership.”^{xii} Throughout this paper, we have been examining Erdoğan’s rise to power and his systematic breakdown to Turkey’s democracy. This research supports the argument that Erdoğan was headed down a path of autocracy from the start. Learning from the mistakes of former Islamist parties, Erdoğan was able to successfully rebrand not only himself, but his entire party. He did so by methods of stealth authoritarianism. Through the co-optation of democratic ideals and values, he was able to build a broad coalition that allowed him to entrench his power.

With this understanding, the change by the AKP in Turkey was not a sudden reversal, but a natural continuation of the values espoused by their leader. The framework provided in *How*

Democracies Die, shows how Erdoğan passed all the initial tests for a potential authoritarian. He also fit Müller's conception of a populist candidate. Erdoğan repeatedly showed a lack of respect for democratic norms, vilified his opponents, and repeatedly attacked civil liberties, with particular contempt for the media. His initial success was built off of his appeal by promising to create something new and succeed where his opponents had not. Early on, many of his actions were written off or ignored because they were contrasted with the beneficial things he was doing. By the time the Gezi Park incidents occurred, and Erdoğan's nature was more fully revealed, he had already broken-down institutional protections and horizontal accountability. Thus, the outpouring of protests was not enough to overcome what had been entrenched over the past 12 years. Furthermore, the failure of the military coup in 2016, while celebrated as a triumph for democracy, was the marker of its downfall. The coup also seemed to remove much of the lingering restraint on the President. Seizing on the opportunity, Erdoğan was able to pass a constitutional referendum, allowing him to crack down on those that opposed him, effectively, moving himself from stealth authoritarian to outright autocrat. The road ahead for democracy in Turkey will not be an easy one. Even if the opposition parties manage to oust Erdogan in an election, it will be a long process to undo the damage that has been done. However, the opposition in Turkey has shown that they will not give up democracy quietly. The AKP was brought into power almost 20 years ago through the promise of democracy, coalition building, and grassroots organizing committed to change. Yet those may be the very actions that remove them from power.

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