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Summer 2025

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Greetings, Alumni College Students!

I'm excited for the journey we'll embark on together in August! We will explore the complex realities of democratic backsliding, a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly relevant around the world. As we observe elected officials worldwide weakening democratic institutions, attacking freedoms, and displaying authoritarian tendencies, Turkey's experience with democratic decline under Tayyip Erdogan provides valuable insights.

Despite its vibrant economy, civil society, democratic elections since 1950, and strong ties to the West (EU and NATO), Turkey is a puzzling case of democratic breakdown. By analyzing Turkey's trajectory, we will examine how elected officials can cause democratic decline even in the unlikely cases, and explore why citizens would support such autocratic leaders. We will also reflect on what constitutes effective resistance to democratic erosion.

To prepare for our discussions, we will read two books (to be purchased) and a series of essays (attached or available online). Please read them in the following order:

1. S. Cagaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*, IB Tauris, 2017.
2. B. Esen and S. Gumuscu, "How the Coup Failed," *Journal of Democracy*, 2016.
3. B. Esen and S. Gumuscu, "How Erdogan's Populism Won Again," *Journal of Democracy*, 2023.
4. B. Esen and S. Gumuscu, "[After Crackdown, Is Turkey an Autocracy?](#)" *Journal of Democracy*, 2025.
5. S. Levitsky and D. Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, Crown, 2018.
6. F. Langfitt, "[Hundreds of scholars say U.S. is swiftly heading toward authoritarianism](#)," NPR, 2025.

Cagaptay's book provides a comprehensive overview of Turkish politics, spanning from the early republic to 2016. The essays written with my coauthor provide updated analysis on key developments since 2016. Levitsky and Ziblatt and the NPR piece will help us contextualize the Turkish experience within the global crisis of democracy and offer lessons for the U.S.

As you engage with these materials, take notes on the patterns, turning points, and key themes that resonate with you. On our first day, bring examples—past or present—of democratic erosion that intrigue you. What makes them significant? How do they inform our understanding of democracy's fragility?

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JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY

January 2017, Volume 28, Number 1 \$13.00



Britain After Brexit

*Anne Applebaum ■ Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin
Tom Gallagher ■ Adrian Guelke*

The Three Regions of the Old Soviet Bloc

Anders Åslund

Turkey: How the Coup Failed

Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu

Monica Marks on Comparing Islamists
Mona Lena Krook on Political Violence Against Women
M. Steven Fish and Michael Seeberg on Mongolia
Malte Philipp Kaeding on Hong Kong
Oisín Tansey on the Anti-Coup Norm
Srdjan Darmanović on Elections in the Balkans

The Signs of Deconsolidation

Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk

TURKEY: HOW THE COUP FAILED

Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu

***Berk Esen** is assistant professor of international relations at Bilkent University in Ankara. **Sebnem Gumuscu** is assistant professor of political science at Middlebury College and the coauthor (with E. Fuat Keyman) of *Democracy, Identity, and Foreign Policy in Turkey: Hegemony Through Transformation* (2014).*

Since its transition to a multiparty system in 1950, Turkey has witnessed six attempted military interventions in politics. Of these, four (1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997) were successful and two (1962 and 1963) failed. The latest coup attempt made world news late on the evening of 15 July 2016, when fighting broke out in Istanbul and Ankara and it seemed for a time as if the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's leader since 2002, might be falling. Yet as that dramatic midsummer evening and night wore on, something unprecedented happened: For the first time in modern Turkish history, a civilian government was able to call on its own mass following to stop a putsch in its tracks.

Admittedly, this stab at a military coup was weaker from the outset than what has been the norm for Turkey: It was led by midlevel officers rather than top generals, and the putschists' miscalculations were grave. We cannot know how the coup would have fared had it been carried out by more senior figures. What we do know is that it needed popular, political, and media support to convince those fence-sitters both within and outside the armed forces to join it. Thus popular mobilization, along with support for the government from the media and the political opposition, was instrumental in defeating the coup attempt. Aroused Erdoğan supporters in the streets played a role in marginalizing the junta within the Turkish armed forces and blocking the coup organizers' access to strategic sites. The opposition's unified stance against the coup reinforced this popular mobilization, denying the coup plotters badly needed political and media support.

The vehicle for this emergency mobilization was Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Upon examination, its success at beating back the coup turns out to be due to the same features that have enabled the AKP to become the dominant force in Turkey's competitive authoritarian regime. Thanks to its authoritarian side, the AKP has amassed extensive access to public and private resources and control over both conventional and social media. All these undoubtedly increased the party's mobilizational capacity during the crisis. Yet the AKP's competitive side—it has won election after election since 2002, including two separate ballotings in 2015—has clothed both it and Erdoğan with the armor of legitimacy. The reality of competitive elections also gave Turkey's opposition parties an incentive to oppose the coup rather than seek an uncertain future under military rule. Deprived of both political and popular support and lacking access to mainstream as well as social media, the putsch failed.

Although military interventions are far from unknown in the 93-year history of the Republic of Turkey, the July 15 putsch took most analysts by surprise due to the AKP's earlier success at limiting the once-vast political influence of the Turkish military.¹ Founded by former members of the Islamist National Outlook movement, the AKP came to power by winning a majority in the November 2002 parliamentary election. It spent the next few years in a bitter struggle against the two veto players of the secular establishment that have been entrenched in the Turkish political system for decades. These key Kemalist players were the military and the judiciary, whose impact had been institutionalized following the 1960 coup via their claim to embody the legacy of the Republic of Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938). The AKP government found itself opposing these actors (plus their ally the Republican People's Party or CHP) on a wide range of issues including EU membership, UN secretary-general Kofi Annan's plan for Cyprus, and secularism. Some military hard-liners allegedly began contemplating a coup against then-Premier Erdoğan as early as 2003, but moderate generals (so the story goes) restrained them.²

After struggling its way through secularist challenges in the 2007 presidential election and a 2008 legal case aimed at banning it, the AKP teamed with the Islamist network founded by Fethullah Gülen in hopes of outmaneuvering the Kemalists once and for all.³ The AKP also received extensive support from the West and especially the EU (which interpreted the situation through the lens of the liberal-democratic principle that elected civilian officials must be supreme over the military). With that help, plus the power of its own domestic constituencies and those of its new ally, the AKP pared away at the military's political influence and promoted its own agenda. By 2007, the AKP had clearly gained the upper hand, and the military found itself in a state of political retreat.

Instead of fostering democratic consolidation, as many scholars of Turkish politics expected, these shifts fueled the rise of a competitive authoritarian regime dominated by the AKP.⁴ The ruling party has claimed unprecedented access to public and private resources, utilized state institutions for partisan ends, used the judiciary to target its foes, pressured the media into submission, and curtailed the political arena to curb opposition. Within a regime having both competitive and authoritarian features, of course, the latter are always threatening to eat away at the former. In Turkey, the AKP became so strong that the playing field tilted in its favor and the meaningfulness of electoral competition fell into doubt. Turkey joined the developing world's dubious club of democratic "backsliders."⁵

Yet Erdoğan's eagerness to monopolize power and the general authoritarian turn of the AKP alienated its key partners, most particularly the Gülenists, who had been planning to harvest the fruits of the joint victory over the Kemalist establishment by gaining greater control over the state apparatus. The allies' falling out became an open conflict as the Gülenists tried to undermine Erdoğan's power with graft probes, media attacks, electoral struggles, and finally (according to wide consensus) an armed coup.⁶

The Night of the Tanks

The coup attempt went live around 10 p.m. (all times are local) on Friday, 15 July 2016. At that hour, Turkish Air Force fighter jets took to the skies over Ankara while, 325 kilometers to the west, tanks of the Turkish Army stopped traffic on the bridges that tie together the European and Asian portions of Istanbul. The putschists launched simultaneous raids aimed at seizing a number of key objectives. These included the General Staff Headquarters in Ankara plus the police special-forces base at Gölbaşı near the capital. Also targeted for takeover were military high schools, Istanbul's Atatürk Airport and city hall, the national public-broadcasting station, and facilities critical to controlling the national telecommunications and satellite systems.

At about 11 p.m. came the first official response. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım spoke live on a mainstream news network, calling the ongoing operation an insurrection. Just after midnight, President Erdoğan joined another network via Facetime to charge that a minority within the Turkish armed forces—led, said the president, by Fethullah Gülen and his loyalists—was trying to override the people's will and to "invade" Turkey. Erdoğan called on citizens to rally in public squares and to take back Atatürk Airport. More than eighty-thousand mosques all around the country joined the president's call and urged resistance to the coup. In Istanbul and Ankara, thousands poured into the streets to put their bodies in front of the tanks.

The putschists' reactions were mixed. Some rank-and-file troops gave up their arms rather than fire on civilians. Yet in other episodes, civilians were fatally shot, or even run over by tanks. Violent clashes occurred at strategic sites in Ankara (the political capital) and Istanbul (the country's largest city). As street violence escalated, the coup plotters stepped up attacks on other targets in response. In the early hours of July 16, the coupmakers' forces attacked the parliament building, the National Intelligence Agency, and the Gölbaşı installation, while raiding Erdoğan's hotel in Marmaris, a coastal resort in the far south-western corner of Asiatic Turkey. Erdoğan, however, had already left for Istanbul; he was not captured. By early on the morning of July 16, it was apparent that the bulk of the Turkish armed forces were not behind the coup, and that popular resistance was too intense and widespread to overcome. Hundreds of soldiers surrendered while others were captured by police. The death toll was 5 anticoup soldiers, 62 police officers, and 173 civilians.⁷ The wounded numbered more than two thousand. It had been by far the bloodiest coup in Turkish history.

Almost as soon as the coup failed, mass arrests began. Of 358 generals and admirals in the entire armed forces, 151 were arrested, as were 1,656 colonels (mostly from the Air Force and Gendarmerie) and about 3,500 junior officers.⁸ It became apparent with these arrests that the chief of the general staff, General Hulusi Akar, and the other top military commanders had denied support to the putschists, who were mostly brigadier generals and colonels.⁹ Almost half of all brigadiers involved in the coup attempt had been appointed after 2013,¹⁰ following the purges of secular-Kemalist senior officers during the Ergenekon and Balyoz (Sledgehammer) cases.¹¹

Unlike in previous coups, the putschists did not reveal their identities or name any leaders during the course of the attempted intervention. Instead, they released a statement via the public-broadcasting station. It was in the name of the "Peace at Home Council"—a reference to one of the founding principles of the Republic. In this manifesto, the coupmakers cited mounting terrorism as well as damage to the rule of law and the constitutional order. They vowed to root out corruption, promulgate a new constitution, reinstate law-based rule, and hold the powerful (Erdoğan was not mentioned by name) accountable for their actions.¹² This document is the only direct evidence we currently have regarding the coupmakers' plans beyond stripping Erdoğan of power and possibly arresting him. With so little to go on, it is hard to say what the putschists' long-term goals may have been.

Similarly, the questions of who was behind the coup attempt and why they acted remain murky and hotly disputed. Since the night of July 15, the AKP government has ferociously and repeatedly accused Fethullah Gülen of masterminding the events. His denials have not inhibited the bulk of the Turkish political establishment as well as the mainstream media (including opposition-friendly organs) from accepting the truth of

these charges. The failure, even at this point, of any military figures to emerge clearly as the coup's leadership lends credence to the notion that the plot was conceived outside the armed forces and then handed off to elements of the military that were willing to "go rogue." According to a leading military analyst, the procoup forces were mostly Gülenists, but with several secular and pragmatic anti-Erdoğan officers joining them, while some lower-ranking soldiers took part due solely to blackmail or other forms of pressure.¹³ Investigations continue, and conclusions will have to wait. Yet it must be acknowledged that numerous pieces of evidence, including testimony from General Akar (who was held captive at an air base by procoup forces) and the confessions of several officers allegedly involved in the coup attempt, appear to incriminate the Gülen movement, and possibly Fethullah Gülen himself.¹⁴

Mobilizing the People

The coup failed because the putschists first lost the media battle and then decisively lost the momentum once people took to the streets en masse.¹⁵ It was the latter unforeseen development that undermined the putschists' morale, possibly leading many risk-averse officers to decide against joining them. The same development also contributed to the disintegration of the procoup forces, particularly once the violence began to escalate. That the popular mobilization took the coup plotters by surprise there can be little doubt: Never before had a Turkish coup attempt (even the failed ones) met with such resistance. Civilians standing before the tanks tilted things in favor of the government and gave it an edge in the psychological battle that lasted through the night. How was the AKP able to rally the people against a military intervention in such an unprecedented way?

Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way underscore how important party and state strength are to the resilience of competitive authoritarian regimes. Strong parties, they argue, manage conflicts within their own elite ranks, mobilize support, and win elections, while strong states enhance incumbents' capacity to suppress, outmaneuver, or coopt opponents and critics.¹⁶ Although such regimes are not inherently coup-proof, competitive authoritarianism can be highly effective when a military intervention needs to be resisted. The Turkish case is evidence for this.

The AKP is far and away Turkey's strongest party: It has around 10 million members (out of a total national population of about 80 million), approximately 1.6 million of whom fill activist roles down to the local-precinct level. Registered party members account for fully half the AKP's electorate; the closest rival party on this metric is the CHP, but its official members do not make up even a tenth of its voter base. The AKP's custom of holding neighborhood meetings every week gives it another edge over other parties. District and neighborhood organiza-

tions are linked to a centrally administered communications system that the party has specifically developed for itself since 2001. This arrangement in effect makes top party leaders a presence in the everyday lives of citizens. The ideational and emotional cement of all this is supplied by a conservative-nationalist worldview that draws on Islamic sentiments and Turkish nationalism and looks to President Erdoğan as the natural leader of the party and the nation.

For a decade and a half now, the AKP machine has been brilliant at mobilizing support and winning elections. The party won five general elections, including a snap election, and three local elections to establish its electoral dominance over the opposition.¹⁷ As the AKP consolidated its power and built a competitive authoritarian regime, it learned to add the weight of the robust Turkish state to its own weight as a strong party in order to silence or coopt opposition. The coup attempt challenged this by pitting one part of the coercive apparatus against the government. On the night of July 15, the AKP's elaborate and extensive organization overcame the challenge posed by this fracture between certain segments of the state and the party. Text messages and emergency meetings mobilized and organized the party faithful with lightning speed.

By just after midnight, as Erdoğan was going on television to rouse resistance, AKP members and sympathizers were already gathering at provincial and district party offices.¹⁸ According to a survey conducted in Istanbul on July 26, among those who took to the streets prior to Erdoğan's call, 57 percent were party members and 83 percent had voted for the AKP in November 2015.¹⁹ After the president's speech, the latter number rose to 90 percent. The head of the AKP district office in Mamak, Ankara, reported that an urgent conclave of party cadres gathered within fifteen minutes of the first news about a coup attempt.²⁰ Within half an hour, the district representatives had already reached out to 105,000 party members via text messages and social media. The tanks at the army base in Mamak never even made it out the gate—thousands of people were blocking their way.

The media's role. The AKP has a long record of confrontational and repressive dealings with the media. Since 2002, the party had asserted increasing control over the press and mainstream broadcast networks while orchestrating the rise of a progovernment media established by loyal businessmen.²¹ By 2014, such interventions, as well as sustained pressure on social media, had caused Freedom House to rate Turkey as "Not Free" in terms of press freedom.

On the night of the coup attempt, ironically, mainstream news networks and social media would prove the government's mainstays. Erdoğan appeared on CNN Turk, though its owner, Doğan Media Group, had been a frequent AKP target in the past. But going on its airwaves was a crucial move since it allowed Erdoğan to reach out beyond his

own supporters. Soon after, the putschists raided CNN Turk's studios and the offices of the Doğan-owned newspaper *Hürriyet*, but it was too late. That one of Turkey's few remaining bastions of media independence had handed Erdoğan precious airtime was a strong blow in the war of nerves. It made it far less likely that the putschists would be able to win support from the president's secularist-minded opponents.

Social media played a major role as well.²² The AKP leadership used text messages and Twitter to rally its followers in just a few hours. In the absence of reliable media coverage, citizens' posts from different quarters of Istanbul and Ankara provided invaluable information on the scale of repression and facilitated further popular mobilization. Twitter traffic rose to 35 times its normal volume as users posted half a million tweets with various anticoup hashtags between midnight and 4 a.m.²³

The Diyanet. Competitive authoritarian regimes always abuse state institutions for partisan goals.²⁴ While the coup was underway, the government relied heavily on the organizational apparatus of the Diyanet (Directorate) of Religious Affairs to mobilize the masses. Established by the Kemalist elite in 1924 to oversee the administration and maintenance of mosques, the Diyanet until recently was above mixing in day-to-day politics, and had played no role in any previous coup. Following Erdoğan's appeals, however, top Diyanet officials told imams in more than 86,000 mosques to say the *salah* prayer—traditionally used to announce funerals—as a statement of defiance against the coup.²⁵ Most imams followed this order by taking to their mosques' minarets in order to recite the prayer repeatedly via loudspeaker, and by calling on citizens to defend their country and government “for the love of God and the Prophet.”²⁶ Never before in Turkish history had mosques played such a visible role during a political event. As Mahmut Kar, the media chief of the international Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir in Turkey, summed it up,

The role of Diyanet against the coup attempt is crucial, because from midnight till dawn we heard the sala prayers from the mosques. . . . People love Erdoğan, not because of democracy but because of Islam. Now everyone saw [that] against the power of believers, tanks and bullets are meaningless.²⁷

The Diyanet's active involvement partly explains the predominance of people in Islamic religious attire among the anticoup crowds. By tapping into Turkey's extensive network of mosques—whose loudspeakers can be heard throughout countless neighborhoods—the government in effect spoke directly to millions of citizens and with little effort or expense stirred them to action.

The Diyanet's progovernment stance during the putsch reflected its cooptation by the AKP. This shift occurred in 2010, when Erdoğan

named as its new chief Mehmet Görmez, who has since acted like an AKP operative. The change came as the party was tightening its grip on various state agencies and the judiciary. Since then, the Diyanet has lined up with the AKP agenda, defending its Twitter and YouTube bans, using religious rhetoric to denounce critics of the party, and allowing major AKP figures to campaign in mosques. Chairman Görmez, meanwhile, has come to enjoy elevated official status and other perks, while his agency's budget and payroll have grown dramatically.²⁸

Public and private resources. A defining feature of competitive authoritarian regimes is the massive edge that incumbents enjoy in access to resources both public and private. Over the past fourteen years, the AKP has become able to draw on public resources in a way that no previous Turkish ruling party ever could, even as it has forged close ties with progovernment business interests. On the night of the coup, the putschists found their road movements stymied in Istanbul, Ankara, and a number of other cities by trucks and heavy equipment owned and moved into blocking positions by local authorities loyal to the AKP. First in the city of Uşak and later in other places, municipalities put a check on mobilization in support of the coup by simply parking construction equipment athwart the gates of military bases.²⁹ In Istanbul alone, various local authorities were quick to deploy a staggering six-thousand trucks or earthmovers as mobile barricades to close off access to roads, helipads, and communications facilities. The sheer amount of coordination and organizational capacity that such efforts bespeak was more than the coupmakers were prepared for, and more than they could handle.

The AKP-aligned private sector got involved as well. The chairman of the Heavy Equipment Manufacturers' Association reported that his group answered President Erdoğan's call by deploying twenty-thousand pieces of heavy equipment (half of all the equipment deployed in cities at the time) against the putschists, stopping their tanks and trucks at spot after spot.³⁰ During the night, the coup forces killed two operators of these blockading machines.

The Opposition's Choice

In contrast to previous coups, the putschists seem not to have made contact with opposition parties prior to the coup, nor did they try to round up opposition leaders once it started. This may mean that the coup was aimed specifically at Erdoğan and his administration rather than the entire political establishment. On the night of July 15, the opposition was as surprised as anyone. The putschists reportedly called the headquarters of two opposition parties—the CHP and the right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP)—from the chief of the general staff's

office to say that a putsch was underway in accord with orders from the military chain of command.³¹ Indeed, the portions of the coup manifesto that refer to the need to preserve Turkey's unity as a state, to Kemalist and nationalist principles, and to the rule of law can be read as efforts to appeal to the CHP and MHP.

Then it became the opposition's turn to surprise: Instead of seizing on the coup as a chance to topple Erdoğan, all three opposition parties with seats in parliament vehemently denounced the putsch and publicly supported democracy. They reiterated this support during an extraordinary overnight session of parliament that was called to allow AKP and opposition deputies to denounce the putsch as one united group.³² It was arguably this open defiance that pushed the coupmakers to bomb the parliament building after midnight.

Why would the opposition in a competitive authoritarian regime support the incumbents instead of jumping on the coup bandwagon? In Turkey in recent years, every mainstream opposition party has raised concerns about the AKP's authoritarian path. In 2013, the Gezi Park protest movement revealed the depth of discontent with Erdoğan and his governance across important swaths of Turkish society, while 2015 had seen the unheard-of drama of two intensely contested parliamentary elections, with Erdoğan forced to maneuver hard to maintain the AKP's primacy in the legislature.³³

Each opposition party, when criticizing the AKP's authoritarian drift, has based its appeal on the supreme need to defend democracy and the parliamentary system. This has been especially so for the main opposition party, the CHP, which after a leadership change in 2010 moved away from reliance on extraparlimentary veto players such as the military.³⁴ Instead, CHP leaders have stoutly defended democratic accountability and the rule of law against the government's encroachments on civil liberties. The CHP's response to the coup attempt reflected this position. Party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu heard about the putsch around 11 p.m., as a plane that he was on was landing at Atatürk Airport. Reportedly, he approached the AKP's deputy chairman, who happened to be on the same flight, in order to express his opposition to any attempt to change the government by irregular means.³⁵ Later that night, the CHP as a party released a public statement condemning the coup and sent its lawmakers to voice this message from the floor of parliament.

The two smaller opposition parties in parliament took the same stand. The leader of the ultranationalist MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, denounced the coup unequivocally and backed Prime Minister Yıldırım with a televised message of support.³⁶ The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which the coupmakers never contacted, produced on the morning of July 16 a short but clear press release condemning the plot. The streets of Diyarbakır and other population centers in the predominantly Kurdish southeast did not see the large crowds that congregated

elsewhere in the country, but the mood was overwhelmingly against the coup. Unlike the CHP and MHP, the HDP's leaders also went out of their way to make it clear that their stand against the coup attempt should not be seen as support for the AKP government.

The uneasy position that HDP chairman Selahattin Demirtaş found himself in—needing to remain critical of the AKP while backing it against an attempted putsch—typifies the dilemma that opposition parties face under competitive authoritarian regimes. On the one hand, the opposition strives to defend the competitive features of the regime in hopes of promoting democratization; therefore, it upholds the elected government's right to stay in power. On the other hand, the opposition must strain to stay legitimate, viable, and autonomous by ensuring that its *procedural* support for the government cannot be taken as tacitly endorsing the incumbents and their authoritarian ways. It was surely with this dilemma in mind that CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu penned a ten-point manifesto reiterating his party's defense of democratic principles against executive takeovers as well as military interventions.³⁷

What was a predicament for the opposition was clearly a boon to the AKP: It benefited from the partly open nature of the political regime—its “competitive” as distinguished from its “authoritarian” side—because the presence of opposition parties and a semi-free media allowed Erdoğan critics who remained committed to democracy to protest the armed intervention. Both groups sided with the government despite its growing illiberalism, and rejected an uncertain authoritarian option. In a departure from what had happened during other coups in Turkish history, opposition elites did not endorse the toppling of the civilian government and instead publicly sided with the incumbents. This drastically cut short the coup's potential for gaining popular support. Had the opposition parties abandoned him and backed the coup, Erdoğan would have found it hard to appeal to broader segments of Turkish society at the critical hour. The media's role was especially important during the coup attempt. Conventional as well as social media remained unrestricted on July 15, and the government used them effectively to share information with the public, seek support, and project an image of control that held down the putschists' morale.

What Comes Next?

It is far too early to assess the coup's full effects, but we can offer a preliminary analysis of several postcoup scenarios. According to Levitsky and Way, competitive authoritarian regimes can follow any one of three distinct paths leading to three very different outcomes: 1) democratization, 2) unstable authoritarianism, and 3) stable authoritarianism.³⁸ Ever since the popular Gezi Park protests during 2013, when hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets to counter Erdoğan's policies, AKP

rule had been showing signs of political weakness and elite discord even while maintaining much of its popular support. The measures that the AKP has taken since the coup attempt are likely to stabilize what had previously been an unstable authoritarian regime. Intensifying crackdowns on the opposition, the remaining bastions of critical media, and independent voices in civil society, coupled with renewed popular support for the AKP, signal a transition to a consolidated—albeit more hegemonic—authoritarian regime.

Faced with a number of serious opposition challenges, ranging from its break with the Gülen movement to the Gezi Park protests, the AKP regime in recent years looked like a case of unstable authoritarianism. The Gezi Park protests, so called because they broke out over government plans to develop one of the few remaining “green spaces” in downtown Istanbul, brought hundreds of thousands of people into the streets from May through September 2013. The AKP seemed shaken at first, but was able to call on Turkey’s potent internal-security forces to repress the demonstrations. The 2013 graft probe that targeted the children of several government officials, including Erdoğan’s son Bilal, forced four cabinet ministers to resign. Yet the AKP went on to win the 2014 local and presidential elections, and in June 2015 it remained parliament’s largest single party despite losing its majority. The AKP’s subsequent push for a snap election in November 2015 succeeded, and it won that balloting handily. The 2016 coup attempt can thus be seen as one in a series of challenges to AKP rule that have rolled forward over the past few years. But far from toppling the AKP, these challenges now seem to have been the catalyst for the consolidation of a full-fledged authoritarian regime in Turkey, albeit with some continuing competitive features.

There are already signs that the government has begun deepening the authoritarian features of the regime. Having described the putsch as a “gift from God,”³⁹ Erdoğan has purged his opponents (especially anyone suspected of Gülenist leanings) from the state bureaucracy and the military with massive waves of arrests and firings. According to Reuters, as of 6 October 2016, the government had removed or suspended slightly more than a hundred-thousand state officials, imprisoning close to a third of them.⁴⁰ Many journalists, academics, and businessmen suspected of having Gülen ties have been detained as well. These postcoup arrests have swelled the prison population beyond capacity.⁴¹ Moreover, Amnesty International has claimed that detainees are being subjected to beatings and torture in detention centers across the country.⁴² Scores of universities, television and radio stations, newspapers, professional associations, civil society organizations, and publishing houses have been closed on grounds of alleged links to the Gülenists or other “terrorists.”

Needless to say, such sweeping purges of the civilian and security bureaucracy will undermine state strength, a critical element of any viable competitive authoritarian regime. Gülen’s cadres were in fact an

important “force multiplier” for the AKP: They allowed it to combine state strength with its own organizational power as a party to defuse opponents during the AKP’s second term in power. Now the AKP will need to recruit new cadres who are competent and also unquestionably loyal, an effort sure to involve much time and difficulty. That said, the failed coup attempt also allowed the ruling party to amass an unprecedented level of support and legitimacy across society, not least by using the national media and extensive mobilization of supporters via the “democracy vigils” held throughout the first month after the coup.

As public support for the government grows, the space for oppositional politics shrinks. By choosing not to cooperate with the opposition parties that had backed the government during the coup attempt, the AKP missed a historic opportunity to strengthen democratic institutions. Instead, Erdoğan chose to crack down on opposition groups to consolidate power and buttress his challenged authority. Official pressure on the academy, the media, and numerous opposition groups reached exceptional levels after July 15. The purges expanded to include not only the coup planners and civilians with alleged ties to the Gülen movement, but also a long list of government critics, including many Kurds, Alevis, and leftists. Most recently, several HDP legislators have been arrested, including the party’s two cochairs. This followed the Turkish government’s decision to take control of 34 HDP-run municipalities in the southeastern part of the country. In such a climate the opposition parties, already limited in organizational capacity and access to resources, will find it hard to expand their bases.

With the battered Gülen movement in disarray, the 62-year-old Erdoğan faces little prospect that anything can limit his hold on power, at least in the short term. Under different conditions, Western governments might be able to push the AKP in a more democratic direction, but the current regional situation (the war in Syria plus Europe’s reliance on Turkey to stop mass refugee and migrant flows) gives Erdoğan the upper hand. The global wave of right-wing authoritarianism, not to mention Donald Trump’s recent election to the U.S. presidency, will almost certainly create favorable space for the kind of regime that Erdoğan has in mind for Turkey.

On 21 July 2016, parliament passed an emergency law (extended for another three months in October) that set the stage for a crackdown such as Turkey has never before seen. This law and a number of executive decrees shelve the European Convention on Human Rights and wrap a cloak of legal immunity around executive actions. Erdoğan now sits atop a *de facto* presidential system, bringing him that much closer to his long-term goal of institutionalizing his power in the form of a strong executive presidency. That is supposed to come via a constitutional referendum that will require the support of at least fourteen non-AKP members of parliament in order to reach the 330 votes needed to

send a constitutional amendment to the voters. Prime Minister Yıldırım announced on November 11 that the AKP and MHP had agreed to put the presidential system to a popular vote despite strong rank-and-file opposition to presidentialism within the latter party.⁴³

Presidentialism has a history of polling poorly in Turkey, so Erdoğan plans to use the postcoup outpouring of popular support to make the changeover happen by early 2017. The CHP might try to stand in the way—it is on record as opposing the shift—but it has the support of only a quarter of the voters. Nonetheless, if Erdoğan's push for presidentialism triggers a confrontation, the resulting turmoil could hurt the already shaky economy and corner the AKP government, which might then resort to still more crackdowns on dissidence. The prospect of military rule was averted in 2016, but Turkey's democratic political institutions remain at risk, and the country may soon find itself faced with another kind of authoritarian rule that will surely prove very hard to end.

NOTES

The authors wish to thank Zeki Sarigil for the valuable and constructive suggestions that he made regarding an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Zeki Sarigil, "The Turkish Military: Principal or Agent?" *Armed Forces and Society* 40 (January 2012): 168–90.

2. Ersel Aydinli, "Ergenekon, New Pacts, and the Decline of the Turkish 'Inner State,'" *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 2 (2011): 227–39.

3. Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941), is a Muslim cleric from Erzurum Province in eastern Turkey who since 1999 has lived in self-imposed U.S. exile in a compound in rural Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania. In 1966, he created the Hizmet (Service) youth movement to counteract secular and socialist tendencies that he feared were gaining ground in Turkish society. Following the 1980 military coup, he and his disciples set up hundreds of Islamic-oriented schools, media companies, civil society groups, and businesses both inside and outside Turkey including in Central Asia, Africa, and North America. Gülen also sought quietly to place his followers in Turkey's state bureaucracy. In 2004, the National Security Council (the body through which the Kemalist military exerted much of its political influence) formally identified the Gülen movement as a threat to state security. The Council cited intelligence reports, Gülen's leaked sermons, and testimony from former members of his movement. The AKP pocketed the Council's recommendations, yet for years took no action. It moved on them only after falling out with Gülen in late 2011. See M. Hakan Yavuz, *Toward an Islamic Enlightenment: The Gülen Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

4. Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1581–1606.

5. Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26 (January 2015): 141–55; Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Myth of Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26 (January 2015): 45–58.

6. For Gülen's rejection of coup allegations, see www.nytimes.com/2016/07/26/opinion/fethullah-gulen-i-condemn-all-threats-to-turkeys-democracy.html. For more on the Erdoğan-Gülen conflict, see Ruşen Çakır and Semih Sakallı, *100 Soruda Erdoğan Gülen*

Savaşçı [The war between Erdoğan and Gülen in 100 questions] (Istanbul: Metis, 2014). See also www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/akp-gulen-conflict-guide.html.

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10. Kadri Gursel, "Turkey's Failed Coup Reveals 'Army Within an Army,'" *Al-Monitor*, 22 July 2016.

11. The Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases accused retired and active-duty members of the Turkish armed forces of conspiring to overthrow the AKP government by colluding with the media, universities, and civil society groups. Hundreds of generals went to jail in these waves of trials.

12. The memorandum aired on public television. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcrYJb5eEew.

13. www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/turkey-coup-attempt-basic-cause-was-premature-birth.html#ixzz4MdDy5kU9.

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How Erdoğan's Populism Won Again

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Journal of Democracy, Volume 34, Number 3, July 2023, pp. 21-32 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.a900430>



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HOW ERDOĞAN'S POPULISM WON AGAIN

Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu

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In an election widely seen as its best chance in years to vote out autocratic populist president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Turkish opposition came up short. The incumbent, burdened by his record of economic mismanagement and a poor response to catastrophic February earthquakes, had seemed surprisingly vulnerable before the 14 May 2023 first round against a field of three challengers, including longtime opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu.

But Erdoğan came out on top in the first round with 49.5 percent and won the mandatory runoff (no first-round candidate above 50 percent) with 52.2 percent of the vote based on 84 percent turnout (voting in Turkey is compulsory though not strictly enforced). His rule dates to 2003, making him longer-tenured than other populist autocrats such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán, India's Narendra Modi, Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, and Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro (though the Chavista regime in Caracas goes back to the late 1990s). Backed up by the majority that his coalition has long held in the Grand National Assembly, Turkey's unicameral 600-seat parliament, Erdoğan has been able to capture the state bureaucracy, erode institutional checks and balances, and limit media freedoms. After more than two decades in power, the 69-year-old president and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have become expert at using the intertwined bureaucratic and party networks of the "Frankenstate" to outmaneuver and override opponents.¹

For a time, opposition prospects had looked good. The economy was struggling with 60 percent inflation, a plunging lira, dwindling foreign-currency reserves, growing poverty, and high youth unemployment. In early February, the powerful quakes that struck the southeast took more than fifty-thousand lives and left millions homeless. Erdoğan's urban-

development policies—especially a 2018 “construction amnesty” to retroactively accept structures not built to code—were partly to blame for the high death toll, and there were massive failures in relief and rescue efforts.² Finally, the usually fragmented opposition had agreed on Kılıçdaroğlu as its unity candidate, and some polls had even placed him ahead of Erdoğan. In the days leading up to the election, expectations for a “liberalizing electoral outcome” rose.³

Still, Erdoğan prevailed. This was his third presidential election, and the first time that he had failed to win a majority in the first round. Erdoğan’s intense stoking of an already polarized electorate won him victory and his coalition a renewed parliamentary majority even though his own AKP dropped 27 seats (to fall to 268) while the main opposition party added 23 seats.

Erdoğan’s win despite economic troubles and a questionable governance record underlines the colossal challenge of unseating a populist autocrat who wields strong control over political and judicial institutions and dominates the media against his opponents. Faced with policy failure and crisis, such an incumbent can maintain a diverse coalition by handing out public and private resources to key groups while bullhoring negative partisanship and ethnonationalist appeals through a tame media to change the subject. Erdoğan offset his losses in big cities with strong support among religious and conservative voters in smaller towns and rural areas. And while the opposition coalesced, it still gave way to enough infighting to ruin its efforts in a contest where its margin for error was tiny.

The Uneven Playing Field

Turkey has a long history of competitive multiparty politics. Since 1950, Turkish governments have come to power through elections, even if parliamentary rule was interrupted by brief bouts of military rule in 1960, 1971, and 1980. Just a few years after legal authorities had forced Erdoğan out of the Istanbul mayoralty and sent him to jail for Islamist rhetoric, the AKP won the November 2002 parliamentary election (with a huge seat bonus thanks to a 10 percent vote-share threshold that shut smaller parties out of parliament) and made him prime minister. The AKP has been the majority party or the head of the majority coalition ever since, racking up more electoral wins starting in 2007. The map of recent results shows the AKP carrying nearly all jurisdictions aside from big cities, coastal areas in the west, and the Kurdish southeast.

After 2011, Erdoğan began using this consistent electoral dominance to subvert democracy. Every election since then has been less free and fair as critical safeguards of democratic politics have fallen under his control. He has packed the courts, politicized state institutions, and turned the vast bulk of private as well as public media into mouthpieces

for himself and his party.⁴ Not only the urban poor but many businesses look to him for partisan largesse with public resources.

Erdoğan's win despite economic troubles and a questionable governance record underlines the colossal challenge of unseating a populist autocrat who wields strong control over political and judicial institutions and dominates the media against his opponents.

In 2023, access to media was grossly unequal. A handful of pro-opposition outlets aside, television aired Erdoğan's messages while shutting out Kılıçdaroğlu. The state broadcaster, TRT, is supposed to be impartial and independent, but during the campaign it gave Erdoğan 32 hours of airtime and his rival 32 *minutes*.⁵ Erdoğan's friendly interviewers contrasted strikingly with the hard questions that Kılıçdaroğlu had to face during his few times on the air.

Exploiting his media control, Erdoğan vilified the opposition and positioned himself along two major fault lines in Turkish politics. First is the

question of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish-separatist group that Turkey, the European Union, and the United States officially designate a terrorist organization. Erdoğan several times accused the opposition coalition of having terrorist ties. At several rallies he even showed a doctored video that portrayed PKK leaders singing along with Kılıçdaroğlu's campaign song.

Second, Erdoğan played on the Islamist-secularist cleavage to evoke the Islamic sentiments of an increasingly conservative Turkish society. Kılıçdaroğlu leads the Republican People's Party (CHP)—founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—whose secular reforms in the 1920s and 1930s Islamists see as anti-Islamic. Erdoğan has been denouncing the CHP's legacy of authoritarian secularism for years, and calling its leaders out of touch with the values of the Turkish people. He accused CHP supporters of being against Islam and "pro-LGBT," often appearing at Istanbul's grand mosques to join prayers and urge a new "conquest" via the ballot box.

There was violence against the opposition on the campaign trail and during election day. Security forces stood by as opposition leaders, activists, and offices were attacked. The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) was the main target, though in Erzurum (a conservative-nationalist stronghold in eastern Anatolia) Erdoğan supporters threw rocks at a CHP vice-presidential nominee, causing multiple injuries.⁶

Erdoğan used his control of the courts to sideline foes. In June 2021, in a blatant case of "autocratic legalism,"⁷ the public prosecutor moved to shut down the HDP. Five years prior, the party's charismatic leader Selahattin Demirtaş had been arrested and sent to prison, where he remains

despite a 2018 European Court of Human Rights ruling that the detention violates his rights. The shutdown case dimmed the HDP's electoral prospects even further. Its candidates had to run under the name and logo of the Green Left Party (YSP)—a serious problem given that many HDP voters are older Kurds who are among the roughly 3 percent of adult Turkish citizens who cannot read. The national election authority then denied the HDP any seats on the local ballot councils that oversee the casting and tallying of votes. Many seats went instead to the AKP.

Istanbul's CHP mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, the target of the Erzurum rock-throwers, was also victimized by politically motivated legal charges. Considered a major presidential contender, he was hit with a criminal case claiming that he had defamed the national election authority. In late 2022, he was convicted and banned from politics. He appealed, but in the meantime the verdict made his candidacy so uncertain that the opposition could not risk nominating him. Erdoğan had neutralized another rival.

The Elections

The Turkish electoral process is well designed and administered, and Erdoğan likes to impress foreign and domestic observers with the idea that he respects the people's will, so there were (as of this writing in June 2023) no conclusive signs of systematic vote-rigging in the May 2023 elections. As Nancy Bermeo reminds us, only amateurs steal an election on election day,⁸ and Erdoğan is no amateur. On both May 14 and May 28, the AKP was as usual well organized to mobilize its supporters and protect their votes. It sent rafts of poll watchers to the voting stations and was a disciplined, dominating presence on the ballot councils in both rounds. The opposition's poll watchers also showed up, but in the first round at least, AKP activists outnumbered them.

In contrast with the campaign period, the May 14 voting was generally peaceful. Long, orderly lines formed at polling places, with some people waiting for hours to cast their votes. Except for irregularities in a few provincial towns and villages in the east and southeast, the counting process was clean. In those areas, the banned Kurdish party is the AKP's only effective opposition, so the integrity of the electoral process was at risk there. Journalistic accounts tell of ballot-box stuffing as well as bloc voting by tribal leaders and village heads.

In the second round, the opposition mobilized thousands of volunteers to ensure electoral integrity. This threatened the AKP's dominance over election proceedings and caused tensions during the runoff. Fights broke out at polling places as pro-Erdoğan poll watchers harassed volunteers. When opposition activists showed up in problem areas to observe the runoff, some were beaten by the locals for enforcing legal requirements. In all, irregularities are unlikely to have affected the election outcome by more than two percentage points. Since Erdoğan won the runoff by

more than that (albeit not by much more), it is unlikely that irregularities can explain the opposition's defeat. Economic troubles and weak government performance should have given Kılıçdaroğlu a path to victory, but they did not.

Why Erdoğan Won

Defying expectations, the president on May 28 added 1.5 million votes to his 2018 total, while his party and its People's Alliance captured a comfortable majority in parliament. Economic downturns, it seems, need not always hurt competitive authoritarian regimes.⁹ Most Erdoğan supporters remained loyal. What explains this success?

Erdoğan is not only an autocrat, he is a popular one. Millions of voters support him. There are several reasons for this popularity. First, Erdoğan is still what James D. Fearon calls a "good type"—that is, a politician whom voters trust to "act on their behalf independent of re-election incentives."¹⁰ Rather than punishing him for his weak economic record in recent years, his core supporters see him as the only able leader the country has to govern it going forward. This is partly due to Erdoğan's long tenure, during some of which he did deliver economic growth, improved social services, and infrastructure development.

Second, Erdoğan shifted the election's focus from the economy to national security.¹¹ In this, he got a boost from Turkey's geopolitical situation, which involves one war to the country's south (in Syria, where thousands of Turkish troops are occupying border zones) and another to its north (between Russia and Ukraine). Using his media monopoly, Erdoğan framed the race as an existential battle between "the people" and its "enemies," both internal and external. Citing Kurdish support for the opposition, his campaign claimed that the PKK would prevail, its leaders would be released, and Turkey would lose its territorial integrity if Kılıçdaroğlu was elected. Erdoğan's interior minister called the May 14 election a "political coup attempt" and claimed Western complicity.¹² In the end, Erdoğan consolidated his base and appealed to independents by painting Kılıçdaroğlu as a PKK ally. Security concerns topped economic issues.

Erdoğan vowed to defeat "un-Islamic" forces and said that Turkey needed a world leader such as himself at the helm. He stressed Turkey's growing military-industrial complex.¹³ He was photographed visiting a combat-drone base in a military-style flight jacket, and campaign posters showed him wearing it, as well as aviator sunglasses, against a backdrop featuring a warship, drones, the Turkish flag, and a slogan asking voters to "stay on track with the right man." He peppered his speeches with talk not only of the drones, but of the new fighter jet and main battle tank that Turkey is building. In April, he commissioned the *Anadolu*, the Turkish Navy's first aircraft carrier.

Even as he talked up security, Erdoğan took steps to alleviate the hardships caused by high inflation and the weak lira. In the months before the election, he passed an early-retirement program, expanded government hiring, gave businesses cheap credit and homeowners subsidized gas, promised new public-housing projects, and raised pensions, the minimum wage, and civil-service pay. This free-spending largesse cushioned many AKP supporters from harsh economic conditions and helped Erdoğan to keep his voter base intact, particularly in the provinces. After the earthquakes, the ruling party prioritized its own partisan strongholds when directing relief efforts. Extensive patron-client networks gave the president the tools to shield his followers from the economy and natural disasters, and in doing so shield his own electoral prospects.

Fear, loyalty, nationalism, and polarization fueled record turnout among Erdoğan supporters. The strong party organizations of the AKP and its junior partners were key to mobilization, illustrating the central role that Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way ascribe to such organizations in competitive authoritarian regimes.¹⁴ Through both rounds the AKP rank-and-file worked tirelessly, overwhelming opposition cadres and sparing no effort to turn out ruling-party voters.

Why Kılıçdaroğlu Lost

In competitive authoritarian regimes, opposition parties have strong incentives to unite to defeat the incumbent. After 2018, the year Erdoğan moved Turkey to a hyperpresidential system with limited checks and balances, the center-left CHP began working with the nationalist-leaning Good Party (İYİP) to field joint candidates for the 2019 mayors' races across the country. In the lead-up to 2023, this alliance expanded to include an array of parties ranging from the opposition-mainstay CHP and the İYİP to four minor right-wing parties (including two AKP splinter parties). They united in opposing Erdoğan's rule and pledging to return Turkey to strengthened parliamentarism, expanded political freedoms, and better economic policies.

Avoiding the ethnic and religious cleavages that Erdoğan played on, the opposition aimed to rally ethnically and ideologically disparate voters on the side of democracy versus authoritarianism.¹⁵ The opposition bloc focused in the first round on an inclusive message of "hope and change," while promising voters concrete material and policy gains, too.

Months of talks produced a common six-party platform, a single presidential candidate, and joint parliamentary-candidate lists. Presidential nominee Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the 74-year-old CHP leader, spearheaded the alliance, while leaders of the other five parties became candidates for vice-president (a president is allowed to appoint one or more vice-presidents). Mayor İmamoğlu and Ankara's mayor were added to the list

of vice-presidential nominees as well. Kılıçdaroğlu drew support among the Alevi religious minority (he is a member), from Kurds, and from some Turkish nationalists, meanwhile prying away enough conservative voters in larger cities to surpass the incumbent there.

Yet he failed. Anti-incumbent sentiment was strong, but not enough for a majority. Despite the presence of the nationalist İYİP in the alliance, the government's linkage of Kılıçdaroğlu to the PKK limited his nationalist appeal. So did growing sentiment against migrants and refugees.

Moreover, Kılıçdaroğlu carried political baggage that made reaching out to Erdoğan supporters difficult. The CHP head is an uncharismatic figure who has led the main opposition party since 2010 despite poor showings in elections that stretch back to the 2009 Istanbul mayor's race. Erdoğan and his press have had years to slander Kılıçdaroğlu and slather him in negative coverage; a short campaign period marked by limited media access could never reverse that. As an Alevi, the challenger belonged to a heterodox religious group within Islam that many devout Sunni voters view with coldness and even suspicion. Erdoğan's polarizing religious discourse was aimed at them. Kılıçdaroğlu tried to counter this with a short video addressed to young voters in which he said that he was an Alevi and a Muslim, and asked them to look beyond "identities" that cannot be chosen in favor of a choice for freedom and prosperity. The video racked up tens of millions of views online.¹⁶ Its impact on Erdogan supporters, however, remained limited.

Third, the opposition campaign suffered from infighting. As chances of defeating the incumbent seemingly improved, parties started to lean away from "do what it takes to win" and toward "position ourselves to benefit from the win." The CHP had dibs on the presidency and major cabinet posts, but İYİP and its right-wing rivals began jockeying and jostling, while other parties worried about being sidelined altogether. The net effect was a loss of focus and unity as parties began changing their messages and strategies on the assumption that election day would bring a coalition victory and subsequent division of spoils.

Without clear institutional channels to work through, opposition leaders postponed critical decisions. The naming of seven vice-presidential candidates and the failure to publish a joint cabinet list typified this spirit of "deciding not to decide." Looking on, voters worried about the alliance's ability to govern. Erdoğan, ever alert for signs of weakness, began associating the opposition alliance with the shaky and ineffective coalition governments of the 1990s.

Fourth, the opposition wasted crucial time by not choosing a joint presidential candidate until just ten weeks before election day. In a competitive authoritarian system, a unified opposition must pick a standard-bearer who is popular enough to defeat the incumbent and trustworthy enough to honor a power-sharing agreement after victory. In Hungary

in 2022, rivalries inside the coalition produced a low-key lead candidate who lost to Orbán. In Malaysia in 2020, the refusal of joint opposition candidate Mahathir Mohamad (who was 94 years old at the time) to step down as prime minister two years after his election victory led to the new government's collapse.

Turkish opposition parties needed a joint candidate who could rally voters across ethnic and ideological lines, and who would be willing to give up the vast powers of the presidency (tailored for himself by Erdoğan) in favor of a transition back to parliamentarism. Kılıçdaroğlu had seniority, bureaucratic experience, and status as head of the biggest opposition party. Party cadres and opposition elites liked him—they thought that he was the best person to hold the alliance together and scrap hyperpresidentialism—but mass appeal was another story. The years that Erdoğan had spent calling him an incompetent and a terrorist sympathizer did not help.

Fifth, the opposition lacked focus and policy cohesion. It spent months writing a 244-page program, but voters showed little interest in it and opposition leaders failed to highlight its important parts. Instead, leaders' campaign statements on key foreign and domestic matters contradicted one another. Kılıçdaroğlu made numerous personal pledges on the campaign trail that undermined his alliance's agenda. While Erdoğan highlighted a few simple (and polarizing) messages in his speeches, the opposition failed to stress key themes and promised populist measures such as canceling credit-card debt and airing football matches on state television.

Erdogan's traditional-media monopoly forced his rivals into excessive reliance on social media to get their message out within a too-short timeframe. Kılıçdaroğlu made brief videos in his modest kitchen, and used Twitter to share his political views and reactions. Mostly he was preaching to the converted, however, reaching those who already backed him (often younger voters more prone to use social media) while Erdoğan dominated the public print and airwaves on top of a digital AKP campaign. The incumbent, in other words, had more messaging "bandwidth" than his opponents did.

Facing the runoff, Kılıçdaroğlu opted for a nationalist turn. This was a bid to attract people who had voted on May 14 for Sinan Oğan, the right-wing nationalist who had won almost 5.2 percent (or about 2.8 million votes) that day. Kılıçdaroğlu failed to gain the support of Oğan himself, but the CHP leader did win the backing of another ultranationalist politician by signing a pledge to send millions of Syrian migrants back across the border. Collecting an ultranationalist's endorsement without pushing away crucial Kurdish voters was difficult; intensified rhetoric against immigrants seemed like a way to solve the dilemma. Opposition street rallies and a YouTube show on which Kılıçdaroğlu spent nearly all night fielding young people's questions were meant as

responses to Erdoğan's vilifications. But there seems to be little doubt that the Turkish-nationalist tone adopted in the two weeks between the rounds ended up alienating some Kurdish voters.

Trying to come from behind—in runoffs, the top vote-getter from the first round usually wins—Kılıçdaroğlu sought to take the fight directly to the president, charging him with doctoring videos and demanding a televised debate. Erdoğan sidestepped, ignoring the attacks and acting as if he was “above the fray.” Kılıçdaroğlu's decision to pivot to immigration had handed the government a pass on the economy, provided cover for voter suppression in heavily Kurdish provinces on May 28, and generally left the opposition discredited. Since persuading Erdoğan voters in two weeks was not a realistic goal, the opposition tried to mobilize its voters by denouncing pro-AKP media bias. On May 28, this strategy worked to maintain high voter turnout in opposition strongholds, but it was not enough to beat the president.

Whither Turkey?

Given Erdoğan's win, what awaits Turkey? Will the country descend further into autocracy? The answer depends on the opposition forces and Erdoğan's political calculus going forward. Turkish prodemocracy forces are resilient and consolidated, although they have had a hard time breaking the wall that Erdoğan erected between the opposition parties and his supporters.

External factors are likely to matter less given the overall reluctance of the international community to uphold democratic values and norms plus the transactional approach that governments and international institutions take in dealing with Erdoğan amid the migration crisis and the war in Ukraine.¹⁷ To use Levitsky and Way's terms, Western linkages to and leverage over Turkey's competitive authoritarian regime are weak, and the regime is consequently more resilient.

Unable to look to the West for much help, Turkey's prodemocratic forces must rely on their own resources and organizational capacities to stop further autocratization. The game now is Erdoğan's maneuvers to maintain his ruling coalition versus the opposition's ability to learn from its mistakes and grow its ranks. Oppositionists may feel demoralized, but they control eleven of Turkey's biggest economic and cultural centers and govern more than half the electorate. Mayors such as İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş enjoy wide popular appeal; even some backers of the AKP and its junior partners laud these mayors' administrative skills. Municipalities give the opposition means to reach a mass public via social programs, and Erdoğan's own career attests that big-city elected office can be a springboard to national politics. It is no wonder that the president has sought to obstruct municipal services in opposition-governed cities and that İmamoğlu—seen by many as the

president's most serious rival—has been mired in a court process that may ban him from politics.

Finger-pointing after a defeat is inevitable, but opposition elites should worry lest too much infighting dishearten their voters and leave the electoral field to Erdoğan's coalition. If that happens, Turkey could slide deeper into authoritarianism. Since 2014, the year then-Prime Minister Erdoğan won his first presidential election, Turkey has consistently and sharply declined on several indices (such as V-Dem) that grade countries on democracy and the rule of law. Given the opposition's continued electoral strength, what motive does the president have for continuing to allow multiparty electoral competition? What instruments can and will his regime use against its opponents in the presidential and parliamentary term now beginning?

There are strong reasons to expect Turkey's competitive authoritarian regime to remain robust at least until the upcoming March 2024 local elections, rather than follow the path of Belarus, Nicaragua, and Venezuela by rendering elections meaningless. First, Erdoğan faces major structural weaknesses and vulnerabilities that will limit his capacity to curtail political space. There are strong signs that the current policy of low interest rates will further devalue the lira and trigger a balance-of-payments crisis. Lacking rich natural resources to sell, Erdoğan needs financial resources to keep his cross-class coalition together and business supporters in his corner. The earthquakes' terrible economic toll will also act to restrict patronage opportunities. A recent study estimates US\$39 billion as the sum it will take to repair or replace damaged and destroyed apartment buildings alone.¹⁸ Erdoğan is currently presiding over an economic catastrophe. Swap deals and handouts from Azerbaijan, the Gulf states, and Russia (Putin gave subsidized natural gas) helped to keep the economy going through the campaign period, but the campaign is over. With more migrants in his country than any other head of government in the world has to deal with, Erdoğan may also find it hard to manage the millions of Syrians living in Turkey if the economic crisis worsens.

As his capacity to deliver economic well-being shrinks, Erdoğan is likely to pursue a more divisive and repressive identity politics targeting groups such as women, Kurds, and LGBTQ persons. His increasingly fragmented ruling coalition and the AKP's decline relative to its junior partners will reinforce this trend. This coalition now includes different strands of far-right Turkish nationalists as well as Kurdish and ethnic-Turkish Islamists. As the president struggles to maintain his parliamentary coalition with fewer material means to do so, far-right nationalist and Islamist parties may extract policy concessions from him. One contentious policy change concerns the secular civil code that protects women's rights in marriage, divorce, and child custody. In his May 28 victory speech, he denounced opposition leaders, Turkey's LGBTQ community,

and the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish movement (amid chants from the crowd demanding the latter's execution). Erdoğan's hawkish messages gave clues to his future autocratic steps. The resilience of Turkey's democratic forces will determine whether he will succeed.

Looking at the vigor of the campaigning and the genuine uncertainty surrounding the outcome, many postelection commentators have claimed that Turkey is still a democracy after all. They are mistaken. Democracies, as defined by Robert A. Dahl, minimally require free, fair, and regular elections; universal suffrage; a wide right to run for office; and freedoms of expression, information, and assembly.¹⁹ Turkey has elections that are competitive despite being neither free nor fair. Erdoğan's control of private and public resources—including the national media—tilt the playing field heavily in his favor. His regime systematically violates the freedoms of expression, information, and assembly while using lawfare to strip key rivals of their right to run for office. This is not to say that Turkey is a full-fledged authoritarian regime—it is not—or that it is the same as electoral autocracies such as Lukashenka's Belarus, Putin's Russia, or Maduro's Venezuela, where electoral outcomes are no longer in doubt. Erdoğan does not steal votes on election day, but neither does he allow free and fair competition for those votes before election day.

In the end, Turkey's regime still qualifies as competitive authoritarian since elections remain meaningful despite the unlevel playing field. The opposition can win, as it did in the 2019 local elections. Few authoritarian regimes that allow competitive elections endure over the long haul, but Erdoğan's rule has survived mass protests, a major corruption probe, a coup attempt, and the loss of the AKP parliamentary majority. The Turkish case indeed represents the "new face of competitive authoritarianism."²⁰ It relies on sophisticated strategies and popular mobilization, usually with an ethnoreligious theme.

NOTES

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