

A Different “Turkish Model”

Exemplifying De-democratization in the AKP Era

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Introduction

The 2002 coming to power of the newly formed Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) invoked optimism among many domestic and foreign observers hoping that Turkey smooth out its somewhat jittery path toward democracy. Although Turkey transitioned to a multiparty system in 1950, a combination of military interventions, restrictions on civil liberties such as freedoms of speech and religion, and a brutal campaign against Kurds and Kurdish identity prevented Turkey from being considered a fully consolidated democracy. Moves to address each of these issues, particularly in the AKP’s first term, led observers to herald the sum of the party’s accomplishments as a “Turkish model” that could be exported to other parts of the Muslim world.¹ Although the term lacked specificity—did they mean a model of economic development, a mix of Islam and democracy, civilianization of the military, something else entirely?—the new party’s professed commitment to conservative democratic values, European Union membership, and neoliberal growth strategies promising enough to replicate. In particular, AKP members’ explicit eschewing of the label “Muslim democrats,”² despite their own experiences coming up through the ranks of Turkey’s most prominent Islamist movement, along with their championing of clean government—the *ak* in the party’s preferred moniker *Ak Parti* means “pure/white,” a term carrying a moral connotation of “uncontaminated”—provided a reassuring alternative for many who were concerned about threats to secularism and frustrated with rampant corruption. Finally, the AKP’s parliamentary majority, achieved through a combination of a 10% electoral threshold and disillusionment with previous parties’ inability to avoid economic

¹ On the debate surrounding Turkey as a “model,” see Meliha Benli Altunışık, “The Turkish Model and Democratization in the Middle East,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 27, nos. 1–2 (2005): 45–63.

² See Vali Nasr, “The Rise of Muslim Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 2 (2005): 13–27.

crisis, provided much needed political stability as well as an opportunity to push through the democratizing reforms the party advocated.

Those initially optimistic observers have now had to admit that, despite initial signs of what seemed to be democratic progress, under later terms of AKP rule Turkey regressed significantly. In Charles Tilly's formulation, identified as nonlinear pathways of democratization and de-democratization, Turkey is now firmly on a de-democratizing trajectory.³ At the time of writing, the AKP has been in power for over twenty years, Turkey is governed through a highly centralized presidential system ruled by a hypermasculine nationalist populist, and the 2023 elections were neither free nor fair.⁴ Although Turkey's traditionally fragmented opposition showed signs of being able to forge ties around local elections, as they did to win the Istanbul and Ankara mayoral election in 2019, they are struggling to do so ahead of the next round of local elections scheduled for 2024. Opposition officials are also hampered in their ability to govern at the local level by interference from Ankara. Thus, while prominent former AKP members, including Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoğlu, formed their own parties to offer new challenges to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP, the question of whether elections truly matter anymore is unresolved.

Far from being a "model" for political tolerance, Turkey after two decades of AKP rule exemplifies in microcosmic form many of the processes of de-democratization seen across the globe. Common authoritarian consolidation practices in AKP-era Turkey included institutional takeover in the judiciary and the security forces, processes that accelerated and expanded following the 2016 coup attempt via purges and strategic placements. The post-putsch state of emergency also augmented the executive presidency's heavy-handed use of decrees, amounting to "rule by law." A significant degree of media capture further allowed the AKP to control narratives, silence criticism, and vilifying opposition⁵ and created a regime-stabilizing culture of self-censorship in the process. As an obvious example, Turkey held the infamous title of being the world's largest jailer of journalists for several years. From a political economy perspective, a complex network of holding groups with interests in construction, mining, real estate, and other industries gives the AKP powerful influence over 90%–95% of Turkey's media outlets. Also seen in other cases of de-democratization, freedom of assembly was drastically curtailed. In the Turkish case, peaceful protests against issues such as environmental destruction, unsafe labor conditions, civilian casualties in the Kurdish southeast, and violence against women, faced

³ Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴ Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, "How Erdoğan's Populism Won Again," *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 21–32.

⁵ Bilge Yeşil, "Authoritarian Turn or Continuity? Governance of Media through Capture and Discipline," *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 239–257.

harsh crackdown by security forces. In view of these and many other, similarly antidemocratic factors, Turkey has often been classified as competitive authoritarian,⁶ but the illusion of competitiveness may in fact be a constitutive component of the AKP’s regime durability.⁷ Given the immense role Erdoğan’s own background and persona play in inspiring support among those who see him as their unimpeachable “Captain” (*Reis*), the equally immense decision-making power he commands in both domestic and foreign policy realms, and the pervasive belief among many observers that no AKP successor could match his level of charismatic legitimacy, the dynamics of the Turkish case under Erdoğan might also be classified as a personalistic authoritarian regime.⁸

Whichever term we settle on, what explains this case of rapid regime change? Turkey’s story of democratic breakdown is as puzzling as it was quick. As will be obvious throughout the chapter, Erdoğan’s role looms large in accounting for the shift from democratization to de-democratization, but focusing on the motivations, actions, and influence of one individual gives us only part of the story. A frequent debate within Turkey’s highly fragmented opposition, for example, revolves around who saw through AKP leader Erdoğan’s authoritarian ambitions first, who objected to them most vocally, and thus who could have saved Turkey from democratic demise if only the world had heeded their warnings. The purpose of this chapter is not to engage this debate, nor to answer the age-old question of whether Erdoğan planned his rise to supreme authority early in his political career or whether absolute power corrupts absolutely. What this chapter focuses its efforts on instead is the interrelated processes by which Turkey’s system of governance slides so quickly and drastically from democratization to de-democratization, resulting in what in practice is equivalent to one-man rule at the national level.

Because these processes are intricately linked, the analysis of how they led to democratic breakdown could be framed in a host of different ways. A focus on the use of economic tools to ensure loyalty to the party even in the face of antidemocratic practices, for example, links directly to co-optation and control of the media via the political economy of Turkey’s mega-holding groups, as mentioned above, but also links to the role the construction industry played in the AKP’s consolidation, and abuse, of power. An illustrative example serves to demonstrate the point.

⁶ Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey,” *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1581–1606.

⁷ Meral Uğur-Cinar, “Elections and Democracy in Turkey: Reconsidering Competitive Authoritarianism in the Age of Democratic Backsliding,” *The Political Quarterly* 94, no. 3 (2023): 445–451.

⁸ See Mark Gasiorowski, “The Political Regimes Project,” in *On Measuring Democracy: Its Consequences and Concomitants*, 3rd ed., ed. Alex Inkeles (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2006).

The economic reforms undertaken in the early years of AKP rule contributed to Turkey's growth as a whole, garnering the party widespread support, while particularly supporting the rise of a conservative middle class of small and medium enterprise owners, nicknamed "Anatolian Tigers." The growth these reforms fueled in turn enabled Erdoğan to preside over massive building projects, such as a third bridge over the Bosphorus, a metro-accessible tunnel under it, a new airport, and thousands of mosques, including the Çamlica Mosque, which stood as Turkey's largest upon its completion in 2016. These construction projects served to impress many Turks excited to see tangible markers of the development Erdoğan promised to continue from his days as Istanbul's mayor from the Islamist Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*) in the 1990s. When I asked why they voted for the AKP, numerous blue-collar workers cited these projects, along with other, less showy but more functional forms of infrastructure. Their common response was "Look what Tayyip [Erdoğan] did! What did the others do?"

Each of these projects was controversial, however, and can be seen as intricately linked with Turkey's de-democratization. For AKP opponents the mushrooming of construction sites was evidence not of modernization and development but rather of corruption, environmental degradation, and human rights abuses. The unprecedented Gezi Park protests of 2013, which grew into nationwide mobilization against the AKP's increasingly authoritarian rule, began as a small demonstration to protect one of Istanbul's remaining green spaces from being paved over to build a shopping mall and Ottoman-style barracks. Protests over the construction of what is now the Istanbul New Airport centered around massive deforestation and evidence that the consortium that won the construction tender was bullied into buying a failing pro-AKP media outlet,⁹ as well as intolerable labor conditions.¹⁰

To tie together economic development, the construction industry, and factors indicating de-democratization, including violations of human rights and freedom of speech, these megaprojects that garner electoral support from impressed and employed voters are acquired and financed through sweetheart deals that favor party loyalists willing to overlook violations of democratic norms. Specifically, those invested in the construction of the new airport had little incentive to object to the arrest of protesting workers, nor to improve their unsafe working conditions; official statistics cite the number of construction

⁹ Andrew Finkel, "Corruption Scandal Taints Turkish Construction," *Financial Times*, May 6, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/68196132-cc98-11e3-ab99-00144feabdc0>. For an overview, see Fikret Adaman, Bengi Akbulut, and Murat Arsel, eds., *Neoliberal Turkey and Its Discontents: Economic Policy and the Environment under Erdoğan* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).

¹⁰ Emma Sinclair-Webb, "Construction Workers at Istanbul's New Airport Jailed for Protesting Work Conditions," *Human Rights Watch Dispatch*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/21/construction-workers-turkeys-new-airport-jailed-protesting-work-conditions>.

deaths during airport construction as fifty-five,¹¹ but an opposition lawmaker filed a formal inquiry over reports claiming it is as high as four hundred.¹² While impossible to judge the real number from afar, workers’ dubbing of the construction site as the “the cemetery” is worth noting.¹³ The link between AKP-led development and infringements on labor rights and free speech is also seen in the 2014 Soma mining disaster in which three hundred workers died due to lack of safety oversight; an iconic photo shows a man protesting the government’s handling of the disaster being kicked by Erdoğan’s aide.¹⁴ The role of crony capitalism in exacerbating death and destruction in the February 2023 earthquakes—via amnesty permits that enabled buildings out of line with code to remain, transportation hubs built in “no-go” zones on top of fault lines, and the lack of experience and preparedness among many of those working in the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency—is a particularly devastating recent example.¹⁵

Clearly, the AKP’s use of economic tools played a role in the power consolidation that produced democratic breakdown. As Esen and Gümüşçü argue from a different political economy angle, the politicization of state financial and judicial organs that could target and punish those in the opposition was also a key element of the AKP’s ability to erode democratic practices.¹⁶ One could also focus on the consequences of promoting a narrative that replaced gender equality with gender justice¹⁷ and sought to protect “family values” at the expense of women’s and LGBTQ+ rights,¹⁸ on the rise of violent pro-government groups self-tasked with vigilante justice,¹⁹ or on the decreasing prospects that

¹¹ Umut Erdem, “55 Workers Died during Istanbul Airport’s Construction: Minister,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 18, 2019, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/55-workers-died-during-istanbul-airports-construction-minister-140600>.

¹² “3. Havalimanında 400 İşçi Hayatını Kaybetti’ İddiası Meclis Gündeminde,” *HaberSol.org*, February 13, 2018, <http://haber.sol.org.tr/toplum/3-havalimaninda-400-isci-hayatini-kaybetti-iddi-asi-meclis-gundeminde-228335c>.

¹³ Tim Nelson, “Why Workers Are Calling Istanbul’s New Airport ‘The Cemetery,’” *Architectural Digest*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/why-workers-are-calling-istanbuls-new-airport-the-cemetery>.

¹⁴ Alexander Christie-Miller, “Miners Say Safety Declined after Turkey Privatized Mine,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 15, 2014, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2014/0515/Miners-say-safety-declined-after-Turkey-privatized-Soma-mine>.

¹⁵ “Çiğdem Mater ‘Depremi’ Sordu, Mücella Yapıcı Yanıtladı,” interview published on Kısa Dalga site, February 16, 2023, https://kisadalga.net/haber/detay/cigdem-mater-depremi-sordu-mucella-yapici-yanitladi_57137.

¹⁶ Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, “Building a Competitive Authoritarian Regime: State-Business Relations in the AKP’s Turkey,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20, no. 4 (2017): 349–372.

¹⁷ Çağla Diner, “Gender Politics and GONGOs in Turkey,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2018): 101–108.

¹⁸ Evren Savcı, *Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

¹⁹ Howard Eissenstat, “Uneasy Rests the Crown: Erdogan and ‘Revolutionary Security’ in Turkey,” *Project on Middle East Democracy Snapshot*, December 20, 2017, <https://pomed.org/pomed-snaps-hot-uneasy-rests-the-crown-erdogan-and-revolutionary-security-in-turkey/>.

EU membership incentives or other forms of external pressure could prompt democratization.²⁰

In this chapter I examine three processes in which the AKP engaged that are inextricably linked to these other dynamics: (1) the reshaping of the institutional playing field to remove what I define as identity obstacles to the party's rise, (2) the rhetorical vilification of opposition actors to justify their marginalization, and (3) the unprecedented manipulation of the electoral system. These processes are sequentially and constitutively linked, in that the first allows the second and the second allows the third. The AKP would not have had the power necessary to declare the (first) 2019 Istanbul municipal election null, for example, without first co-opting the Supreme Electoral Board and declaring through pro-government media that opposition "terrorists" rigged their win via an "electoral coup."²¹ Before examining these three processes, the chapter proceeds by briefly sketching Turkey's experiences with democratization and de-democratization prior to the AKP. The next two sections examine the processes of institutional consolidation and vilification of the opposition in depth. The conclusion takes on the electoral manipulation that has been made possible by these processes while considering prospects for the future of Turkey's opposition.

Democratization Interrupted

What makes Turkey's democratic breakdown such a puzzling case is not just the rapidity with which it took place but also the progress along Tilly's democratization trajectory the country had taken in recent years—even including the first term of AKP rule. Turkey also took some significant democratizing steps early on, especially compared to other Western countries. In 1930, just seven years after the founding of the republic, women gained the right to vote; this move toward gender equality, along with many Westernizing and secularizing reforms, including switching from the Arabic to the Latin script and banning the fez, was part of founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's nation-making project. After crushing rebellions such as the Kurdish-Islamist Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925 in the name of establishing security within the boundaries of the new republic, Atatürk viewed the role of his Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk*

²⁰ Tanja Börzel and Bidzina Lebnidze, "The Transformative Power of Europe' beyond Enlargement: The EU's Performance in Promoting Democracy in Its Neighborhood," *East European Politics* 33, no. 1 (2017): 17–35.

²¹ See the pro-government claim in Ibrahim Karagül, "A Coup Was Conducted through Elections on March 31," *Yeni Şafak Gazetesi*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/columns/ibrahim-karagul/a-coup-was-conducted-in-turkey-through-elections-on-march-31-feto-terrorists-were-used-for-a-project-targeting-istanbul-the-first-moves-for-post-july-15-plans-have-been-made-so-elections-in-istanbul-should-be-re-held-2046998>.

Partisi, CHP) as presiding over cultural, political, and economic modernization during a period of single-party rule. Institutionalizing a “responsible, though not responsive” political system thus took precedence over democratization.²²

Following one brief attempt at political pluralism in 1930 with the creation of the Liberal Republican Party (Serbest Cumhuriyet Fırkası) as a check on the CHP, which scholars point to as a signal of Atatürk’s intentions to democratize Turkey before his untimely death in 1938,²³ and another with a two-party election tilted heavily against the challenging Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP) in 1946, 1950 marked the beginning of generally free and fair multiparty elections. The 1950 contest was remarkable in the sense that the incumbent CHP unexpectedly lost to the DP but quickly handed over power. This partial democratic transition is due largely to party leader, “national chief” (*milli şef*), and president İsmet İnönü’s commitment to democracy, the influence of the Turkish Armed Forces (*Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri*), and relatedly, the post-World War II environment. Dictatorial regimes had been disgraced, and the prospect of NATO membership to secure Turkish interests against Soviet aggression incentivized domestic change.²⁴

Following the transition, however, Turkey experienced moves along Tilly’s continuum in fits and starts. In 1960, for example, the DP-led government that so unexpectedly unseated the CHP was overthrown by a military coup, and three of its leaders were hanged. Holding various forms of control following various degrees of intervention, the military also removed democratically elected governments in 1971, 1980, and 1997. Although threats to the principle of secularism enshrined in all of modern Turkey’s constitutions (1924, 1961, 1982) are often cited as the main reason for the military’s interventions, other destabilizing and antidemocratic factors also played powerful roles. These include rampant mismanagement leading to economic crisis and seizure of state resources (1960, 1971) and street clashes between radical leftists and (state-aided) right-wing ultranationalists that devolved into terrorist attacks and civil war-like conditions (1971, 1980). The 1997 intervention, however, dubbed a “postmodern coup” because no physical act of force was used, centered directly on the military’s belief that Turkey’s secularist state was under siege. In the beginning of what would become known as the “February 28 process,” the National Security Council delivered an ultimatum to Turkey’s first Islamist prime minister, Necmettin

²² See Kemal H. Karpat, “The Republican People’s Party, 1923–1945,” in *Political Parties and Democracy in Turkey*, ed. Metin Heper and Jacob M. Landau (London: I. B Tauris, 1991): 42–64.

²³ See, for example, Walter F. Weiker, “The Free Party, 1960,” in Heper and Landau, *Political Parties and Democracy in Turkey*, 85.

²⁴ See Hakan Yılmaz, “Democratization from Above in Response to the International Context: Turkey, 1945–1950,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 17 (1997): 1–37; Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1993), 102–120. On İnönü, see Metin Heper, *İsmet İnönü: The Making of a Turkish Statesman* (Boston: Brill, 1998).

Erbakan. The demands ultimately forced Erbakan's Welfare Party to resign from the coalition government it led; the party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court in 1998. As part of the February 28 Process, religious schools were closed, headscarves were banned on university campuses, and hundreds of individuals in the military and civil service suspected of Islamist leanings were fired. These events are detailed here as they powerfully shape the AKP's approach to institutional reconfiguration discussed in the next section.

Of these military interventions, each justified by "the need to reestablish or safeguard democracy and/or the state,"²⁵ the military actually took the reins of governance only in 1980. The military's intended goal may have been to reshape the country's political system such that "a viable democracy could take root,"²⁶ but the means used to do so not only were brutal but also in some ways impeded democratization in the long term. Political violence, including disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial killings, targeting leftists and Kurds, combined with bans on union activity and other associational restrictions decimated the country's social democratic basis for mobilization. As a scholar of Turkey's center-left notes, "[F]rom the left's point of view . . . the coup was specifically targeted to crush the CHP and the leftist movement."²⁷ From a civil society perspective, much of the explanation for why Turkey's opposition has been unable to mobilize sufficiently to topple Erdoğan's AKP can be traced to the legacies of the 1980–1983 military-led regime. Intra-opposition feuds over the meaning of social democracy, the limits of secularism, and the Kurdish question continued to divide those otherwise united in their desire to oust the increasingly authoritarian AKP throughout the 2010s.

Further, the draconian Constitution promulgated by the military in 1982 remains in place. A 2017 report submitted by a Turkish NGO to the High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that the Constitution reflected an antidemocratic perception in which individual freedoms were viewed as a threat to the continuity of the state.²⁸ Although the Constitution was amended several times through referenda (2007, 2010, 2017), reforms focused more on consolidating power in ways that advantaged the AKP and Erdoğan's personal control as president than on addressing key grievances citizens raised. Multiple attempts at a new constitution, including convening demographically

²⁵ Frank Tachau and Metin Heper, "The State, Politics, and the Military in Turkey," *Comparative Politics* 16, no. 1 (1983): 17–33.

²⁶ Üstün Eder, "The Motherland Party, 1983–1989," in Heper and Landau, *Political Parties and Democracy in Turkey*, 152.

²⁷ Sinan Ciddi, *Kemalism in Turkish Politics: The Republican People's Party, Secularism, and Nationalism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 69.

²⁸ Journalists and Writers Foundation, "Shrinking Civil Society Space," submission to the OHCHR, 2017, <http://jwfw.org/jwfw/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Shrinking-Civil-Society-Space-.pdf>.

representative “wise men” committees, came to naught.²⁹ In 2011, for example, then–Prime Minister Erdoğan made the drafting of a civilian constitution a campaign promise to Kurdish voters hoping to see exclusionary references to the “Turkish nation” removed; comparative constitutional law experts suggested the more inclusive term *Türkiyeli*, meaning “of Turkey,” as it carried no ethnic criterion for membership.³⁰ However, this and other democratizing efforts aimed at Kurds collapsed along with the government’s negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK) in 2015. After unexpected votes for the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) in June 2015 elections threatened the AKP’s parliamentary majority for the first time since 2002, and conflict with the PKK resumed, the AKP turned to court Turkey’s ultranationalists to replace the electoral support it could no longer count on from Kurds.

Turkey’s Kurdish question is largely regarded as the country’s “most important problem.”³¹ Kurdish issues are deeply intertwined with democratization and human rights concerns, and not just the security concerns that the AKP and other previous governing actors have emphasized. At various periods in Turkey’s history Kurds have faced repressive measures such as forced migration,³² bans on the Kurdish language and alphabet³³ and Kurdish media,³⁴ and the state’s co-optation of Kurds’ Spring Newroz celebrations as the refashioned Turkish Nevruz (without the banned letter “w”).³⁵ Kurds also disproportionately experienced the effects of various periods of emergency rule,³⁶ and tens of thousands of Kurdish civilians were killed, disappeared, imprisoned, tortured, and displaced since the initiation of conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state, particularly in the “lost years” of the 1990s. Although the AKP took steps toward extending cultural rights to Kurds—coinciding with the ramp-up of Turkey’s European Union

²⁹ See Onur Bakiner, “How Did We Get Here? Turkey’s Slow Shift to Authoritarianism,” in *Authoritarian Politics in Turkey: Elections, Resistance, and the AKP*, ed. Bahar Başer and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017): 21–46.

³⁰ Hakan Kolcak, “A New Constitution for a Stable Nation: A Constitutional Study on the Long-Running Kurdish Question in Turkey,” *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015): 29–48.

³¹ Henri Barkey and Direnç Kadioğlu, “The Turkish Constitution and the Kurdish Question,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, report, August 1, 2011, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/08/01/turkish-constitution-and-kurdish-question-pub-45218>.

³² Ayşe Betül Çelik, “I Miss My Village! Forced Kurdish Migrants in Istanbul and Their Representation in Associations,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 32 (2005): 137–163.

³³ Welat Zeydanlıoğlu, “Turkey’s Kurdish Language Policy,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 217 (September 2012): 99–125

³⁴ Ece Algan, “Local Broadcasting as Tactical Media: Exploring Practices of Kurdish Activism and Journalism in Turkey,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 12 (September 2019): 220–235.

³⁵ Lerna Yanık, “‘Nevruz’ or ‘Newroz?’ Deconstructing the ‘Invention’ of Contested Tradition in Contemporary Turkey,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42 (August 2006): 285–302; Lisel Hintz and Allison Quatrini, “Subversive Celebrations: Holidays as Sites of Minority Identity Contestation in Repressive Regimes,” *Nationalities Papers* 49 (March 2021): 289–307.

³⁶ Zafer Üskül, *Olağanüstü Hal Üzerine Yazılar* (Istanbul: Buke Yayınları, 2003).

accession bid in the early years of AKP rule—and initiated a peace process (*çözüm süreci*) with the PKK in 2012, the breakdown of the ceasefire in 2015 and the AKP's subsequent nationalist turn marked another case of democratization interrupted. The AKP's rhetorical vilification of Kurdish political actors as terrorists, discussed below produced numerous undemocratic outcomes. To list a few, the overwhelming majority of the pro-Kurdish HDP mayors democratically elected in 2019 were removed and replaced by AKP trustees,³⁷ former HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş and other leading party members were jailed,³⁸ and the party faced dissolution by the Constitutional Court.³⁹

Other key issues related to civil liberties and political freedoms that had held Turkey back from higher democracy scores historically included restrictions on freedoms of speech and assembly. The infamous Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code prohibiting speech and acts denigrating Turkishness, the Republic, or institutions of the state, for example, was cited in criminal investigations opened against author Elif Şafak and assassinated Armenian journalist Hrant Dink for referring to the massacres of Armenians in 1915 as a genocide.⁴⁰ Although the wording was revised several times during the AKP's early years of democratizing reforms, the law is still objectionable to the European Court of Human Rights and still being cited; in May 2018 a case was opened against Armenian HDP member Garo Paylan for comparing the killings of Kurdish civilians and imprisonment of HDP MPs to the 1915 genocide.⁴¹ Although these charges are being brought under the rule of a party that has deep roots in political Islam rather than that of a military regime, the use of legislation to silence opposition looks remarkably the same.⁴²

Indeed, it is precisely the AKP's resort to a familiar politics of oppression to maintain power that most frustrates those initially optimistic about the party's proclaimed big-tent democratic aspirations. To understand how Turkey's regime went from fast progress on Tilly's democratization path to even faster movement toward de-democratization, what remains of this chapter applies an identity politics lens to democratic breakdown. To add new insight to the many

³⁷ Zeynep Kaya and Matthew Whiting, "The HDP, the AKP, and the Battle for Democracy," *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 1 (2019): 92–106.

³⁸ Ödül Celep, "The Moderation of Turkey's Kurdish Left: The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)," *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 5 (2018): 723–747.

³⁹ "Top Prosecutor Repeats Call for Closure of HDP," *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/top-prosecutor-repeats-call-for-closure-of-hdp-169755>.

⁴⁰ Bülent Algan, "The Brand New Version of Article 301 of Turkish Penal Code and the Future of Freedom of Expression Cases in Turkey," *German Law Journal* 9, no. 12 (2008): 2237–2252.

⁴¹ "Garo Paylan Being Investigated for 'Insulting Turkishness,' under Turkey's Notorious Article 301," *Armenian Weekly*, May 17, 2018, <https://armenianweekly.com/2018/05/17/garo-paylan-being-investigated-for-insulting-turkishness-under-turkeys-notorious-article-301/>.

⁴² Hakan Övünç Ongur, "Plus Ça Change . . . Rearticulating Authoritarianism in the New Turkey," *Critical Sociology* 44, no. 1 (2018): 45–59.

excellent studies of power consolidation and opposition marginalization cited above, the following two sections examine the role competing understandings of Turkishness played in these two processes. Briefly, I argue that Erdoğan was able to secure his place as the most powerful individual in Turkey since Atatürk—indeed, openly challenging the founder’s legacy by putting in place a “New Turkey” undergirded by a fundamentally different understanding of what it means to be Turkish. Specifically, I examine how (1) the weakening and reconstituting of *Republican Nationalist* institutions that served as obstacles to the AKP’s *Ottoman Islamist* understanding of national identity and (2) the rhetorical vilification of those in the opposition facilitated the AKP’s rise to and hold on power.

Institutional Transformation: Removal of Identity Obstacles

This section seeks to identify, trace, and interrogate the channels through which the AKP consolidated institutional power. Specifically, I focus on the weakening and transformation of institutions that previously defined parties in the AKP’s tradition of political Islam—the National Outlook Movement, *Milli Görüş Hareketi*—as threats. As this section highlights, many of the civil-military, judicial, and other reforms that were implemented under the AKP served to neutralize secularist threats to its own tenure rather than more broadly institutionalizing democratic norms and processes. Judicial reforms, for example, while in line with EU accession criteria, also helped reconfigure the personnel makeup of institutions responsible for blocking the rise of *Milli Görüş* actors in the past.

In contrast to the previously dominant understanding of national identity rooted in founding father Atatürk’s principles of secularism, modernization, and Western orientation—what I refer to as “Republican Nationalism”⁴³—the AKP’s Ottoman Islamism as a competing proposal for Turkishness is based on Sunni conservatism, patriarchal state-society organization, and a regional leadership role for Turkey legitimized by its imperial legacies. Laying the content of these identities side by side, it is clear that there are points of contestation between them, and that supporters of one proposal would logically seek to defend its principles against the threat of incursion by the other. Republican Nationalists’ attempts to do so included explicitly inserting conservative clauses into the current constitution, as discussed above. Article 4 states, for example, that Articles 1 through 3, which deal with characteristics of the republic such as its language

⁴³ Lisel Hintz, “‘Take It Outside!’ National Identity Contestation in the Foreign Policy Arena,” *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 2 (2016): 335–361.

and its citizens' loyalty to Atatürk, "cannot be amended and no amendments can be proposed." Article 68 states that political parties and their platforms "may not be contrary to the democratic and secular principles of the Republic"; Article 69 states that parties violating this clause will be subject to dissolution.⁴⁴

The AKP was established as successor to a string of parties that shared an Ottoman Islamist identity and that had been removed from power and/or shut down by institutions established to safeguard Republican Nationalist principles, only to reopen under a new name each time. Party founders Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül, and others learned from this history, acting pragmatically and cautiously upon coming to power in 2002. Its leadership worked under the knowledge that policies seen to threaten secularism domestically or to alter Turkey's historically Western foreign policy orientation could be seen as provocation by the military and thus cause for intervention and possible overthrow of the government. The fate of Necmettin Erbakan, the founder of the *Milli Görüş* movement in which Erdoğan cut his political teeth, served as a cautionary tale of the potential outcome of such provocation.

Erbakan had seen his National Order Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*) and National Salvation Party (*Milli Selâmet Partisi*) dissolved by the Constitutional Court following Turkey's 1971 and 1980 coups, respectively, and had been banned from politics himself. By reorganizing and mobilizing the extensive and extremely efficient networks of *Milli Görüş* around his newly founded Welfare Party, however, Erbakan achieved what was unthinkable and intolerable for Republican Nationalists in becoming Turkey's first Islamist prime minister in 1996. His success was quite short-lived, as the Ottoman Islamist direction in which he took Turkey—including an increased presence of Islam in the educational system, civil society, and the business community; personal appeals by Erbakan for the instatement of sharia law; a state visit to Libya; Arab sheiks visiting the Prime Ministry; and the explicit rejection of a Western orientation for Turkey in favor of membership in an international Islamic Union—prompted a predictable Republican Nationalist reaction. On February 28, 1997, the very powerful National Security Council delivered a set of eighteen directives to Erbakan's cabinet designed to roll back what the Turkish Armed Forces perceived as encroachments on Turkey's inviolably secular nature. Erbakan's Welfare Party-led coalition government collapsed on June 18, 1997, and the Constitutional Court dissolved his party in 1998.

The purges of those with suspected ties to political Islam that followed as part of the February 28 Process exemplify the immediate factors underlying much of the AKP's cautiousness. The constitutive effect the process had on former

⁴⁴ Turkish Grand National Assembly, Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, accessed October 16, 2023, <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/anayasa/anayasa82.htm>.

Welfare Party members held particular resonance for Erdoğan, who as a party-affiliated mayor of Istanbul was arrested for reciting a poem that, it was claimed, incited religious hatred. He spent four months in prison and was temporarily barred from politics, delaying his assumption of Turkey’s premiership until 2003, despite his party’s coming to power in 2002. As a cumulative lesson learned from personal and party organization-level experiences, in their first years in power Erdoğan and other AKP leaders emphasized that the term “conservative democrat” best encapsulated the identity that shaped their political platform, explicitly eschewing terms such as “moderate Islamist” and even “Muslim democrat” to insist “[W]e are against politics based on religion.”⁴⁵

Also helping to defuse fears based on the AKP’s Milli Görüş heritage, and in a 180-degree departure from the “Islamic Union” foreign policy orientation pursued by Erbakan, the AKP immediately declared Turkey’s membership in the EU to be a primary pillar of foreign policy. With its parliamentary majority the party started working diligently to implement political and economic reforms that were in line with the accession criteria of the EU’s Copenhagen Agreement, as if trying to prove to skeptics that the AKP was completely different and that its intentions were genuine. Republican Nationalists doubted the AKP’s commitment to EU accession, just as they doubted its professed commitment to democratization, pointing to numerous public speeches made by Erdoğan during his time as Welfare Party mayor of Istanbul just five years earlier. His statement that “for us, democracy can never be a goal” but merely a “vehicle” is exemplary of the sources of these doubts.⁴⁶

Reasons to doubt the AKP’s commitment to both democratization and EU membership have come to light in its subsequent terms (2011–present), although divining initial intent is methodologically challenging, as is attributing intention to an entire party. Nevertheless, the so-called liberals who initially viewed the AKP as a positive corrective to Turkey’s history of military tutelage and human rights “taboos” later came to criticize the party, if not to directly admit that they were wrong in trusting the party in the first place. Among these liberals were well-known journalists, public intellectuals, and others who came to be known as *Yetmez Ama Evetçiler*, “Those who say ‘It’s not enough but yes,’” because of their willingness to vote yes on the AKP’s constitutional amendments in the 2010 referendum that many now cite as a turning point in the party’s consolidation of power. That temporary support from this group of intelligentsia helped facilitate this consolidation is a particularly bitter sticking point for ardent Republican Nationalists who believed they knew best all along. An EU ministerial official

⁴⁵ “Erdoğan: Din Üzerinden Siyasete Karşısız,” *Hürriyet Gazetesi*, January 10, 2004, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/erdogan-din-uzerinden-siyasete-karsiyiz-38556005>.

⁴⁶ “Erdoğan: Demokrasi Amaç Değil, Araçtır,” *Hürriyet Gazetesi*, March 6, 2011, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/erdogan-demokrasi-amac-degil-aractir-17197745>.

I interviewed made clear the lack of connection between the reforms the AKP had been pushing through and the EU accession process, stating that a particular constitutional amendments package had nothing to do with the EU; it was already on the ministry's desk and needed to be justified as part of the EU process.⁴⁷

In the same way, the AKP was able to target obstacles to its pursuit of Ottoman Islamist hegemony by shifting the arena of contestation to the EU process. By engaging ardently in EU negotiations and citing the need to prove Turkey's commitment to accession, the AKP was able to justify the need for civil-military and judicial reforms, thus taking on the most powerful obstacles to Ottoman Islamism in an arena in which the military and the courts could not compete. By adhering to the civil-military reforms necessitated by the EU's Copenhagen Agreement during its first few years in power, for example, the AKP was able to institutionalize civil authority over the military and remove its "special status," legislating a total of nine harmonization packages between 2002 and 2004. In its 2004 Regular Report, the European Commission noted that "over the past year the Turkish government has shown great determination in accelerating the pace of reforms," enthusiastically approving of reforms targeted toward "civilian control of the military."

Arguably the most effective step toward reducing threats from an autonomous, staunchly Republican Nationalist institution was taking control of the National Security Council. This was the body that issued an ultimatum forcing the Welfare Party to step down from its governing coalition in 1997, and the "main tool for shaping politics" in the pre-AKP era. The influence of this previously powerful body was greatly constricted through these reforms, to making recommendations to the Council of Ministers in a "purely consultative function." Before these reforms, Article 118 of the 1982 Constitution had stipulated that the government would give priority to decisions made by the National Security Council. Further, the body was removed as a member of the Council of Higher Education and the Supreme Board of Radio and Television, shrinking the power it wielded over university life and curricula and the content broadcast by the media, respectively. In critically evaluating the impact these EU-mandated changes would have on the military's influence over the people of Turkey, a Republican Nationalist blogger warned that the army was being "liquidated" along the path to EU democracy.⁴⁸

The reforms also included making a civilian the head of the National Security Council for the first time and increasing the number of civilians within the

⁴⁷ Parts of this section draw on Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 104–110.

⁴⁸ The blogger headlined a section "AB demokrasisi yoluyla ordu tasfiye ediliyor." Filiz Doğan, "Böl-parçala, AB'ye uy," *Turksolu*, May 26, 2003, <http://www.turksolu.com.tr/31/dogan31.htm>.

institution, changing its makeup as well as its influence. The 2007 EU Progress Report—published at the beginning of the AKP’s second term in power—praised the Council’s “new role,” the drastic reduction in its overall size, and the halving of the number of military personnel in the institution. Tellingly, those areas in which successive reports have criticized a lack of progress, including civilian control over the gendarmerie and civilian oversight over defense expenditures, involved issues that did not constitute direct threats to AKP rule. The report also criticized the Turkish military’s statement against AKP Islamist presidential candidate Abdullah Gül in 2007, a move that could have posed a threat to the AKP in the past, when the military had stronger influence over politics. Gül’s conservative upbringing, career in the Milli Görüş tradition of political Islam, and, particularly, his wife’s wearing of the headscarf represented red lines for Republican Nationalists’ social purpose of protecting Atatürk’s principle of secularism. That nothing came of the military’s famous “e-memorandum” warning of a possible intervention if the candidacy of Gül was not rescinded, that soldiers stayed in their barracks instead, testifies to the AKP’s success in reducing the role of a Republican Nationalist institution through foreign policy channels.

Emboldened by these institutional reforms mandated by the AKP’s EU-oriented foreign policy, which made possible the election of Gül despite the open objection of the military, supporters of an Ottoman Islamist proposal went further in applying EU democratization criteria to the military obstacle. One of the most sweeping instances of this is the investigations and prosecutions over the course of 2008–2012 that comprised the *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* trials, labeled by media outlet *Al Jazeera* as “Islamists’ revenge against the army.” The hundreds of individuals charged in these cases—including serving and former military personnel, journalists, and politicians—were accused of forming a clandestine secularist organization that sought the overthrow of the AKP government by inciting terror throughout society. Including indictment titles such as “Plan to Intervene in Democracy” (*Demokrasiye Müdahale Planı*), the two cases centered around the claims that those accused were part of a “deep state” organization plotting to create chaos through bombings and assassinations. These attacks, the indictments argued, would show the public that the AKP was unable or unwilling to provide for the security of its opposition and thus would justify a military coup against the democratically elected government. Prosecutors attempted to draw links among attacks, such as the 2006 assassination of a Council of State judge and the bombing of the *Cumhuriyet* (Republic) newspaper, and evidence of planned assassinations of navy admirals, the Greek patriarch, and non-Muslim minorities.

Initially heralded as a step forward in the democratization of civil-military relations by applying the rule of law even to former chief of general staff and president of Turkey Kenan Evren, the trials came to be seen as a way of obviating

the threat of powerful individuals, as well as tarnishing the institutional credibility of the armed forces, secular newspapers, and other disparate institutions and individuals united only in their opposition to the AKP. Signs that evidence used in the trials was illegally gathered and even manufactured—supposedly damning CDs containing plans written during the Balyoz coup plot in 2003 were written in Calibri, a font Microsoft released only as part of Windows 2007—also pointed to the cases serving more as a platform for political targeting than for the objective application of due process. The strong presence of members of the Gülen movement (a brotherhood, or *cemaat*, led by exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen, who has recently become one of Erdoğan's arch rivals) in the police and the judicial institutions responsible for gathering evidence and prosecuting the cases also raised suspicions about the motivations behind the trials.

Also as part of its EU foreign policy, the AKP pushed through judicial reform that ended the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians and abolished the State Security Court used to try crimes against the state, including violations of the principle of secularism. It was the State Security Court that had sentenced Erdoğan to prison for reading an allegedly Islamist reactionary (*irticai*) poem and had him temporarily banned from politics. The Constitutional Court, another looming obstacle to the AKP's pursuit of hegemony for Ottoman Islamism, also became a target of the judicial reforms carried out in line with EU accession criteria. The AKP began to move forward in these reforms after its amendment meant to override the decisions of university rectors, discussed below, and guarantee the right of university students to wear the headscarf was overturned by the court in 2008. Further, the party barely survived a closure case—a move likened to a military coup—in the same year thanks to the last-minute vote of the court's new president and then AKP sympathizer Haşim Kılıç.⁴⁹ While the AKP gained an automatic advantage when Gül became president, as the president selects all the members of the Constitutional Court, the AKP strove to quickly change the makeup of the court by proposing seventeen regular justices rather than the existing eleven regular and four substitute justices. While the reform was in “harmony” with the EU standard of delimiting justices' term limits to twelve years, this set up the AKP to rotate out justices nominated by previous Republican Nationalist president Ahmet Necdet Sezer and replace them with AKP-friendly justices.⁵⁰ Further, all justices continue to be selected by the president or by the heavily AKP-majority Parliament. These institutional reforms, ostensibly taken

⁴⁹ See “Ak Parti'yi Kapatma Kararı Askeri Darbeden Farksız Olur,” *Yeni Şafak Gazetesi*, May 10, 2008, <https://www.yenisafak.com/yerel/ak-partiyi-kapatma-karari-askeri-darbeden-farksiz-olur-116288>.

⁵⁰ See Serap Yazıcı, “Turkey in the Last Two Decades: From Democratization to Authoritarianism,” *European Public Law* 21, no. 4 (2015): 635–656.

in pursuit of EU membership, also greatly advanced the AKP’s prospects for transforming institutional identity obstacles.

As an illustration of how civil-military and judicial reforms subsequently facilitated the AKP’s transformation of other institutions, I also briefly examine the understudied role of universities and their leadership. The sequence is important here, as the AKP became better equipped to tackle the obstacle of university rectors because it first tackled the obstacle of the military. By swiftly reducing the role of the military in politics through EU-mandated reforms, the AKP facilitated the confirmation of Gül as president, despite the now weakened military’s objections. The formerly Republican Nationalist institution of the presidency, another key identity obstacle, has the authority to appoint the head of the Council of Higher Education, the council responsible for both state and private universities, as well as to appoint heads of the former. By clearing the way for an Ottoman Islamist president through EU reforms, the AKP thus ensured that, at least for the time being, a supporter of its identity proposal would wield a significant amount of power over Turkey’s university rectors. Gül’s tenure as president, while largely symbolic in terms of actual decision-making authority, broke the taboo of having an Islamist politician with a headscarfed wife in the role, paving the way for Erdoğan himself to move into the position, one in which power would be much more heavily concentrated.

Upon becoming the first popularly elected president in 2014, Erdoğan actively used his authority in choosing rectors to weaken the Republican Nationalist domination of the influential institution of the university rector. As one columnist put it, university rectors became the “next domino in Erdoğan’s path” toward eliminating dissension and filling these powerful positions with supporters willing to implement his wishes.⁵¹ Although this institutional restacking of the deck has been particularly prominent since the July 2016 coup attempt, multiple instances of Erdoğan hand-selecting university rectors occurred prior to the state of emergency. Overriding majorities cast by “social democrats,” Erdoğan instead appointed individuals supported by the “conservative” (*muhafazakar*) segment of votes at prominent universities across Turkey.⁵² The AKP further facilitated the spread of Ottoman Islamism in universities by restricting the autonomy of “board selection in private universities, tenure and promotion reviews, and granting of equivalency to degrees obtained abroad.”⁵³ Notably, with Executive

⁵¹ Mustafa Akyol, “Turkish Universities Latest Domino in Erdoğan’s Path,” *Al Monitor*, November 7, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/originals/2016/11/turkey-erdogan-took-full-cont-rol-of-universities.amp.html>.

⁵² Sinan Tartanoğlu, “Cumhurbaşkanı Kendi Rektörünü Seçiyor,” *Cumhuriyet Gazetesi* 20 (March 2015), http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/232935/Cumhurbaskani_kendi_rektor_unu_seciyor.html.

⁵³ A. Kadir Yıldırım “The Slow Death of Turkish Higher Education,” *Al Jazeera*, July 10, 2014, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/232935/Cumhurbaskani_kendi_rektorunu_seciyor.html.

Order 676 as one of many preventative/punitive measures taken following the coup attempt, Erdoğan institutionalized complete control over the administration of higher education in Turkey in the executive by granting the president the power to appoint private as well as state university rectors. Further, the intra-university vote was eliminated in public universities; the president now chooses whomever he wishes without input from the faculty.

Thus the AKP transformed the previously Republican Nationalist institutions of the military, the judiciary, university rectors, the presidency, and more by weakening and or reconstituting them in the name of democratization and EU accession. Having neutralized these identity obstacles, the party creates space for marginalizing opposition actors with a reduced fear of recrimination through institutional checks. The following section details the strategies of rhetorical vilification used to delegitimize those opposed to the AKP's consolidation of power and justify crackdowns against them.

Rhetorical Vilification of Opposition

In February 2019, renowned criminal turned Erdoğan supporter Sedat Peker gave a speech in which he advised “good” people to arm themselves with guns as “insurance” against opposition members in the run-up to the local elections to be held in March.⁵⁴ With deep mafia links, Peker is no stranger to violence, but he recently brought his solution to problems from the private to the public sphere. In pro-AKP rallies (before launching a YouTube campaign to expose governmental corruption), he called for the beheading of academics that signed a peace petition and once declared, “[W]e will spill barrels of blood and shower in the blood” of those who protest killings of Kurdish civilians in the military's campaign against the PKK in Turkey's southeast.⁵⁵ Peker was by no means alone in advocating or threatening violence against those who express criticism. Pro-AKP writer Cem Küçük seems to have made a career out of menacing public appearances in which he singles out individuals he states must pay a price for betraying their nation.⁵⁶ Explicit death threats, like the ones sent to primetime TV anchor Fatih Portakal after he speculated on air that Turkey might experience protests similar to France's “Yellow Vest” demonstrations,⁵⁷ are a common

⁵⁴ “Sedat Peker'den ‘Silahlanın’ Çağrısı,” *Bianet*, February 4, 2019, <https://bianet.org/bianet/diger/205171-sedat-peker-den-silahlanin-cagrisi>.

⁵⁵ “Notorious Criminal Threatens Academics Calling for Peace in Turkey's Southeast,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 13, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/notorious-criminal-threatens-academics-calling-for-peace-in-turkeys-southeast-93834>.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Post Medya, “Cem Küçük'ten Can Dündar, Arzu Yıldız, ve Fatih Yağmur'a Ölüm Tehdidi,” YouTube, September 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHv2k9s2Oow>.

⁵⁷ “Turkey's Fox TV Anchorman Portakal Says He Has Received a Death Threat,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, December 20, 2017.

phenomenon for journalists, academics, lawyers, and others who do not toe the government's line.

Importantly for this chapter's analysis, death threats and ominous messages often follow public statements from Erdoğan that draw attention to those deemed in need of being reminded where “their place” is. The threats received by TV newsmen Portakal—a popular theme included Turks stabbing oranges, as *portakal* means “orange” in Turkish—followed a typical rebuke from Erdoğan: “Know your place, and if you don't know, the people of this country will smack you [*enseni patlatır*].”⁵⁸ The Turkish president used similar language about main opposition CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu after the latter encouraged workers and union members to protest Yellow Vest–style. Again equating being in the opposition with something akin to treason, Erdoğan stated, “There are Yellow Vests in France, and the CHP is also there. There were Gezi Park protests and Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu was also there. There preparations once again, but you are waiting in vain. We will make you pay a heavy price.”⁵⁹ With the passing of a 2018 government decree interpreted by many to encourage vigilante justice, a “skyrocketing” rise in both gun sales and gun deaths over the past three years,⁶⁰ and the post-coup establishment of pro-government militias that train members in weapons use,⁶¹ the threat of deadly violence toward those who feel deputized into action by their leaders' words leaves today's Turkey closely resembling the widespread street wars of the 1970s.

Aside from the very real security concerns, do menacing words by a leader matter when assessing the level of democracy in a country? Can violence-themed rhetoric, whether acted upon vigilante-style or not, contribute to suppression of freedom of the press, and perhaps even the erosion of the rule of law? Turkey's journalist advocacy groups such as Reporters Without Borders and the Journalists' Union of Turkey certainly think so.⁶² In grappling with these questions in the context of democratic breakdown in Turkey, this section of the chapter explores the various rhetorical devices the AKP government and its

⁵⁸ “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan FOX TV Fatih Portakal'a Sert Sözler!,” *Haber7*, December 18, 2018, <http://www.haber7.com/medya/haber/2785607-cumhurbaskani-erdogandan-fox-tv-fatih-portakala-sert-sozler>.

⁵⁹ “Opposition MP Blasts Erdoğan for Threatening CHP Leader Kılıçdaroğlu,” *Ahval News*, December 17, 2018, <https://ahvalnews.com/chp/opposition-mp-blasts-erdogan-threatening-chp-leader-kilicdaroglu>.

⁶⁰ “Turkey's Umut Foundation Calls for Gun Ownership Reform as Violence Toll Soars,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 9, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkeys-umut-foundation-calls-for-gun-ownership-reform-as-violence-toll-soars-131554>.

⁶¹ See Howard Eissenstat, “Uneasy Rests the Crown: Erdoğan and ‘Revolutionary Security’ in Turkey,” Project on Middle East Democracy, Washington DC, 2017, <https://pomed.org/pomed-snapshot-uneasy-rests-the-crown-erdogan-and-revolutionary-security-in-turkey/>.

⁶² “Turkish Media Groups Reps. Express Concern over Erdoğan's Targeting of News Anchor,” *Ahval News*, December 18, 2018, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkish-media/turkish-media-group-reps-express-concern-over-erdogans-targeting-news-anchor>.

supporters use to marginalize and delegitimize those who express opposition to its rule. Verbal and written rants do not inherently constitute a violation of democratic norms—indeed some could argue wars of words should be embraced in democratic regimes as part of freedom of expression and a marketplace of ideas. As I discuss here, however, AKP leaders’ targeting of opposition members with vilifying terms promotes alienation that is contrary to the spirit of democracy, exacerbates us-versus-them tensions that lead supporters to seek vigilante justice, and justifies the use of state violence and punishment. The most significant inflection point in this use of vilification, in terms of the scope of those being targeted and the international attention brought to it, occurred during the 2013 Gezi Park protests but would be honed and wielded later. Initially begun as a small environmental demonstration to protect a park off Istanbul’s central Taksim Square from being converted into a shopping mall and Ottoman-style barracks, the Gezi protests exploded into nationwide mobilization against the AKP government following viral images of police beating protesters and torching their tents with people still in them. Media silence by Turkish news outlets following multiple incidents of police violence against peaceful demonstrators added to protesters’ grievances and fueled their momentum to continue turning out into the streets despite the injuries and deaths. While police beatings continued to produce casualties, most were due to the disproportionate and reckless use of tear gas canisters that were fired at head-level.

In what follows in this section, I analyze how the AKP literally added insult to injury to demobilize and discredit its opposition using Gezi as a mini case study. To do so, and to contribute to wider discussions of us-versus-them dynamics used by government in painting opposition actors as threats that need quashing, I identify three mechanisms of rhetorical vilification: naming, blaming, and framing. By “naming,” I mean the use of derogatory and belittling terms used repeatedly by AKP members and spread through government-influenced media outlets to identify Gezi protesters as a hostile “other” to be feared and condemned. This mechanism serves to criminalize the actions of protesters and thus justify harsh measures used against them, while fueling a societal polarization of “us” (good government supporters) versus “them” (bad opposition agitators) that would have lasting consequences. Blaming consists of focusing on rare occurrences of violence and, much more often, fabricating antisocial and even immoral behavior for which Gezi protesters must be held accountable. Finally, the mechanism of framing enabled the AKP rhetorically to situate the behavior of the protesters into preexisting frames with negative connotations. This further solidified beliefs in its supporters’ minds that Gezi protesters were miscreants with ulterior, and often externally supported, antigovernment motives.

The AKP’s use of naming as a mechanism to delegitimize and “other”-ize those supporting the Gezi protests was quite explicit in its marginalization of the

extent of antigovernment opposition. Indeed, although the millions of peaceful protesters represented diverse backgrounds ranging from nationalist soccer fans and LGBTQ+ activists to Anti-Capitalist Muslims,⁶³ the government’s use of rhetorical vilification attempted to paint them all as disruptive ne’er-do-wells. The AKP Istanbul governor initially reacted to the uprisings on his watch as the work of a few ‘marginal groups’ (*marjinal gruplar*),⁶⁴ a theme Erdoğan repeated many times. By declaring the protesters to be marginal, the AKP was able to both reduce public perceptions of the number of people protesting and relegate their grievances to the category of minor or even illegitimate. The AKP’s practice of naming protesters with derogatory language took many other forms, some of which directly engage Turkey’s tumultuous history with terrorism. By calling anyone who went to the streets to express their discontent with the government a terrorist (*terörist*), a term most vocally applied by then-EU Minister Egemen Bağış, the AKP identified Gezi protesters as inherently dangerous to Turkey.

The word “terrorism” in Turkey immediately evokes images of the PKK, the Kurdish nationalist militant group that has waged a violent struggle against the Turkish state for over thirty years and against which many Turkish families fear their sons will be conscripted to fight. “Terrorist” also has leftist connotations dating from Turkey’s deadly political struggles in the 1960s and 1970s and often associated with Turkey’s (non-Sunni) Alevis, who were targeted with violence by ultranationalists. Berkin Elvan, a fourteen-year-old Alevi child who was shot in the head with a tear gas canister while out to buy bread in his neighborhood, was called a terrorist by Erdoğan in several public speeches.⁶⁵ In another vilifying act of naming, EU Minister Bağış tweeted that those who attended Berkin’s funeral were “necrophiliacs” (*nekrofiller*); perhaps sensing he had gone too far even for his party’s supporters, he later softened his epithet to “provocateurs.”⁶⁶

In perhaps the most widely reported form of naming as a mechanism of vilification, Erdoğan frequently termed Gezi participants *çapulcu*, a word meaning “looter” or “hooligan.” Similar to how U.S. president Donald Trump used the racially charged word “thug” to vilify Black Lives Matter protesters mobilizing in the wake of the police killings of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others,⁶⁷ Erdoğan’s use of the term *çapulcu* immediately evokes images of

⁶³ See Isabel David and Kumru Toktamış, eds., *“Everywhere Taksim”: Sowing the Seeds for a New Turkey at Gezi* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

⁶⁴ “Vali Mutlu: Müdahale Fevkalade Düzgün,” *Cumhuriyet Gazetesi*, 15 June 2013: <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/vali-mutlu-mudahale-fevkalade-duzgun-428036>.

⁶⁵ “Erdoğan Berkin Elvan’ı Terörist İlan Etti,” *Cumhuriyet Gazetesi*, March 14, 2014, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/video_haber/50741/Erdogan_Berkin_Elvan_i_terorist_ilan_etti.html#.

⁶⁶ “Nekrofil’i Sildi ‘Provokatör’ Dedi,” *Hürriyet Gazetesi*, March 13, 2014.

⁶⁷ Nicole Chavez and Ray Sanchez, “Trump Calls Protesters ‘Thugs’ Despite Peaceful Demonstrations in Tulsa and Much of the US,” CNN, June 20, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/20/us/nationwide-protests-saturday/index.html>.

wanton, unruly destruction that requires a law-and-order response. In a speech marking the opening of an Ottoman archives building, Erdoğan declared, “[W]e won’t be frightened off by the provocations . . . of a couple of *çapulcu*.”⁶⁸ Such statements, however, were far from the largely peaceful, environmentally friendly political culture that demonstrators created (and even self-policed when necessary, as I observed in rare instances of deviation from the predominant norms of behavior). In a creative and spirited effort to counteract such disparaging acts of naming, protesters began defiantly calling themselves *çapulcu*, using the term in witty riffs on AKP policies to which they objected.⁶⁹ In a critique of Erdoğan’s call for all women to have at least three children, one woman held a sign reading, “I’ll have three kids, I promise,” which included stick-figure drawings of children named ÇapulCan, ÇapulNaz, and ÇapulNur—adding common Turkish names to the *çapulcu* insult.⁷⁰ A photo reprinted in a volume titled *A Çapulcu’s Guide to Gezi* shows the phrase “you banned alcohol, we sobered up” spray-painted on a wall in response to newly imposed restrictions on alcohol sales.⁷¹ While the humorous co-optation of the insult temporarily bolstered morale and helped to foster bonds of solidarity among disparate groups of protesters all facing the same insults and injuries,⁷² the AKP’s rhetorical vilification—particularly when distributed through media sources with complex government links⁷³ while other outlets were being censored—instilled fear of and animosity toward protesters among AKP supporters.

A related government strategy of highlighting those rare occasions in which Gezi protesters deviated from the peaceful norms of protest the great majority attempted to enforce, as well as falsely blaming protesters for incidents of violence and destruction, also served effectively to paint all those engaging in antigovernment opposition demonstrations with the vilification brush. Blaming Gezi protesters not only for damage done to storefront windows but also for the decline in these stores’ business, Erdoğan declared that shopkeepers were legally justified in using violence against demonstrators.⁷⁴ In one instance of false blaming much publicized by the AKP, protesters were accused of drinking

⁶⁸ “Başbakan Erdoğan, Üç Beş Çapulcu’nun, Tahrıklarine Pabuç Bırakmayız,” speech, YouTube, June 2, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrli7hJ3iW0>.

⁶⁹ See *Çapulcu’nun Gezi Rehberi* (Istanbul: Hemen Kitap, 2013).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁷¹ *Çapulcu’nun Gezi Rehberi*, 13.

⁷² Lisel Hintz, “The Might of the Pen(guin),” *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/06/10/the-might-of-the-penguin-in-turkeys-protests/>.

⁷³ “The Turkish Media Muzzle,” *Al Jazeera*, April 2, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2013/04/201342104340948788.html>.

⁷⁴ “Erdoğan: Esnafın Palalı Eylemi Hukuk Çerçevesinde,” *Yurt Gazetesi*, July 8, 2013, <http://www.yurtgazetesi.com.tr/politika/akp-esnafin-palali-eylemi-hukuk-cercevesinde-h38095.html>.

alcohol in a mosque—behavior considered inexcusable and immoral for pious AKP supporters. *Yeni Şafak* correspondent Süleyman Gündüz, who was present at the mosque when the supposedly alcohol-consuming protesters sought shelter from the tear gas being used by police, countered this claim by stressing that not only was alcohol not consumed but that those entering “took off their shoes” as a sign of respect.⁷⁵ Although the mosque’s imam corroborated the journalist’s story, the rhetorical damage was done for many who repeated the story long after the supposed incident.

Finally, the government’s strategic use of framing placed those who supported the Gezi movement in subversive company with foreign agents recognizable in Turkey as plotting the country’s downfall. A common narrative stressed by AKP leaders was that foreign “lobbies”—from an interest rate lobby (*faiz lobisi*)⁷⁶ to an Israel/Jewish lobby (*İsrail/Yahudi lobisi*)⁷⁷—were conspiring to prevent Turkey from becoming the powerful regional leader it deserved to be. In a country in which conspiracy theories are immensely popular (and often at least half-true), the idea that Gezi protesters—already named hooligans and blamed for immoral behavior—could be organized and/or funded by scheming external forces proved too tantalizing to resist. Interviewees cited foreigners’ presence during the protests—some of whom were deported—as evidence that Western agents were infiltrating Turkey in the hopes of creating enough instability to provoke a coup and thus unseat the AKP.⁷⁸ Given the U.S. involvement in previous cases of regime change in Turkey, the frame of Western-sponsored military coups proved effective in bringing the true motives of the protesters into question. Devastating economic crises exacerbated by currency speculators and the AKP’s stoking of anti-Semitic flames during its rule in Turkey created plausible and logically coherent frames into which the opposition manifested during the Gezi protests could be placed.

Adopting a broader perspective, we see the social polarization that has ossified in the wake of the Gezi protests. The AKP’s vilifying rhetoric has gained tremendous momentum, targeting many different forms of opposition and cementing antagonistic us-versus-them relations along multiple identity lines. A terrifying sentiment following the Ankara terrorist bombings in October 2015 in which more than one hundred Kurds, leftists, and others who had gathered for a peace march were killed was that they had in coming; if they were Kurds or leftists, so

⁷⁵ “Erdoğan ‘Camiye İçkiyle Girdiler’ İddiasını Tekrarladı,” *Hürriyet Gazetesi*, June 10, 2013, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/23468860.asp>.

⁷⁶ Barış Balcı, “‘Gezi’ mi Faiz Lobisinden, Faiz mi Gezi’den?,” *Hürriyet Gazetesi*, June 11, 2013, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gezi-mi-faiz-lobisinden-faiz-mi-gezi-den-23476867>.

⁷⁷ “GEZİ Senaryosunu Yahudi Lobisi Yazdı, Yahudi Sermayesi Finans Etti,” *Yeni Akit*, June 13, 2013, <http://www.yeniakit.com.tr/yazarlar/mehtap-yilmaz/gezi-senaryosunu-yahudi-lobisi-yazdi-yahudi-sermayesi-finanse-etti-bes-1803.html>.

⁷⁸ Author’s interview with AKP official, Eskişehir, August 2013.

this thinking goes, they were probably terrorists anyway. Despite such worrisome outcomes, naming, blaming, and framing—related but distinct mechanisms in how they function—seem to have gained currency among supporters as legitimate practices. When the power struggle between the AKP and its former close allies in the Gülen movement erupted into an all-out war, for example, Erdoğan coined the nickname of the movement's leader Fethullah Gülen as *Pensilvanya*.⁷⁹ This evocation of Gülen's exile in the United States, which rapidly spread among AKP supporters, cast him and his "parallel structure" (*paralel yapı*) as foreign and thus inherently suspect. Following the July 15, 2016, coup attempt, the blame for which Erdoğan places squarely on Gülen and his supporters, the shadowy parallel structure reference was dropped and replaced with FETÖ—Fethullahçı Terrorist Organization. The term FETÖcu, or member of the organization, is now used widely to characterize anyone with remote, and often fabricated, links to Gülen. The application of this label has been wielded in justifying the purges and arrests of hundreds of thousands of Turkey's citizens, an aspect considered in this chapter's concluding discussion of challenges facing the country's opposition.

From a broader perspective, the term "terrorist" has been wielded to marginalize and justify the arrest of opposition actors from university students⁸⁰ to vegetable vendors.⁸¹ What cohered as a countermobilization strategy against Gezi protesters has evolved into everyday politics in Turkey. Although rhetorical vilification should not be seen as a sole causal factor in the dissipation of demonstrations, its uses in justifying harsh measures against protesters carry over into methods of delegitimizing anyone who voices criticism. Today those using xenophobic insults against AKP opponents are lauded;⁸² those using injury are rewarded with political promotion.⁸³ When examining the mechanisms by which democratic and hybrid regimes can slide along the path of de-democratization, the long-term, society-wide consequences of naming, blaming, and framing play a key role.

⁷⁹ "Erdoğan'dan Paralel Yapı Açıklaması," *Takvim*, October 11, 2014, <http://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2014/10/11/erdogandan-paralel-yapi-aciklamasi>.

⁸⁰ Lisel Hintz, "Why Recep Erdogan Is Calling Turkish Students Terrorists," *Washington Post*, April 12, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/04/12/what-turk-eyes-president-wanted-to-achieve-when-he-called-students-terrorists/>.

⁸¹ "Turkish President Erdoğan Launches War on Food Price Terror," *Hürriyet Daily News*, February 11, 2019, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-president-erdogan-launches-war-on-food-price-terror-141168>.

⁸² "Erdoğan Attends 'Ak Troll' Wedding, Chats with Suspect," *Hürriyet Daily News*, June 15, 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-attends-ak-troll-wedding-chats-with-well-known-suspect.aspx?pageID=238&nID=84013&NewsCatID=338>.

⁸³ "Controversial Former AKP MP in Anti-*Hürriyet* Protests Promoted to Deputy Minister," *Hürriyet Daily News*, December 18, 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/controversial-former-akp-mp-in-anti-hurriyet-protests-promoted-to-deputy-minister.aspx?pageID=238&nID=92693&NewsCatID=338>.

Conclusion: Electoral Manipulation and the Challenges of Turkey’s Opposition

The transformation of institutions that could formerly serve as a check on the power of Erdoğan and his AKP opened the space for vilification that served to marginalize Turkey’s opposition actors as well as justify the purges, arrests, and other antidemocratic actions against them. In both processes, identity contestation lies at the heart of Turkey’s de-democratization. Of course, these processes of institutional transformation and opposition vilification are aided by other variables that more traditionally receive focus in studies of democratic breakdown. Turkey’s complex networks of media influence, the preexisting fractures among its opposition, the political economy of patronage, and many more factors mentioned above and elsewhere combine to ease power consolidation and limit rebellion against it.

A main challenge that Turkey’s opposition now faces both defines Turkey’s de-democratization and facilitates it. The increasing presence of electoral manipulation from the most local to the most national level constrains the ability of parties challenging AKP rule through established channels. While the AKP had consistently won elections since coming to power in 2002, the March 2014 elections that followed the nationwide Gezi protests were the first clear indication that electoral manipulation had entered the party’s playbook. Legislative changes instituted prior to the election shifted the boundaries and makeup of metropolitan municipalities to distort voting in a manner that significantly advantaged the AKP and disadvantaged the CHP.⁸⁴ On polling day itself, from power outages during vote-counting blamed on a cat to districts with over 100% turnout to reports that Ankara mayoral candidate Mansur Yavaş received no votes in his own district,⁸⁵ the elections set a precedent for victories plagued by irregularities. The March 2014 local elections are thus an important turning point in considering the constriction of space for political contestation through party challengers.

In addition to legislative changes such as redistricting and day-of manipulation of voting conditions on the ground, the AKP’s increasing influence over institutions as discussed above made its presence clear in the electoral sphere in 2017. The stakes of Turkey’s April 2017 referendum were particularly high, as the outcome would decide whether to institute the presidential system Erdoğan so stridently advocated, a shift that would greatly consolidate power in, presumably, his own hands. While forensic analysis shows evidence of on-the-ground

⁸⁴ Cenk Aygül, “Electoral Manipulation in March 30, 2014 Turkish Local Elections,” *Turkish Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016): 181–201.

⁸⁵ “Ankara’da Oy Sayımı İçin Büyük Mücadele!” *Haber*, April 1, 2014, <https://haber.sol.org.tr/dev-let-ve-siyaset/ankarada-oy-sayimi-icin-buyuk-mucadele-haberi-90295>.

interference such as ballot-stuffing and voter intimidation,⁸⁶ the referendum's "yes" vote's very narrow win (51.4%) came after the Supreme Electoral Board (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu, YSK) declared late in the day that ballots missing the official stamp would be counted.⁸⁷ Opposition MP Bülent Tezcan summed up the frustrations of those in the "no" camp: "The YSK is paving the way for us to enter an unfortunate period that accepts the principle of elections under judicial manipulation rather than under judicial supervision. . . . [E]lections will face a serious legitimacy problem."⁸⁸ Although Tezcan was referring to the controversy surrounding the referendum, his words presage the politicization of the electoral and judicial systems that was to come.

In the race for the position of the presidency itself in 2018, opposition actors overcame their discombobulation at the move of the presidential election along with parliamentary elections from November to June and, at least temporarily, their skepticism about the unevenness of the playing field to rally behind CHP candidate Muharrem İnce. However, despite the unexpected boost they gained when Erdoğan told his supporters he would step down from leadership if the nation said "Enough" (*Tamam*), spurring a humorous *Tamam*-themed campaign that brought hope and enthusiasm to opposition voters,⁸⁹ Erdoğan's early declaration of victory based on "unofficial results" on election night seemed to function as a *fait accompli*. The YSK made this result official soon after, despite ongoing ballot counting. Erdoğan supporters had already streamed into the streets, while İnce disappeared from media view for hours. Documented cases of electoral violence, discarded ballots, voter list irregularities, and polling stations moved just before polls opened also cast doubt on the integrity of the elections.⁹⁰ Despite such doubts, Erdoğan's influence over the media, the YSK, and the judiciary allowed his declaration of victory to go relatively unchallenged. Any major challenge the opposition might have raised was effectively nullified by İnce's (possibly inadvertent and still puzzling) midnight concession on live television as a news anchor read a personal text message from the candidate stating,

⁸⁶ Peter Klimek, Raul Jimenez, Manuel Hidalgo, Abraham Hinteregger, and Stefan Thurner, "Election Forensic Analysis of the Turkish Constitutional Referendum 2017," arXiv preprint, arXiv:1706.09839, June 29, 2017.

⁸⁷ "Turkey's Supreme Election Board Says Unsealed Ballot Papers Accepted in Vote," *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 16, 2017, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-supreme-election-board-says-unsealed-ballot-papers-accepted-in-vote--112087>.

⁸⁸ CHP MP Bülent Tezcan, quoted in Barın Kayaoğlu, "Erdoğan's Referendum Win No Clean Sweep," *Al Monitor*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/turkey-ref-erendum-passes.html>.

⁸⁹ Pinar Tremblay, "Turkish Opposition Motto Comes from Unexpected Contributor: Erdogan," *Al-Monitor*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/05/turkey-best-opposition-motto-provided-by-erdogan.html>.

⁹⁰ See the Election Observation Mission Final Report of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "Republic of Turkey: Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections 24 June 2018," Warsaw, September 21, 2018.

“[T]he guy won.”⁹¹ Opposition election observers abandoned their posts, sealing Erdoğan’s victory.

When even the AKP’s multiple institutional levers of influence are insufficient in producing the desired results, as was the case in İmamoğlu’s victory over AKP candidate and former prime minister Binali Yıldırım in a rerun of the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election, the ruling party uses other measures to limit the power of opposition actors. Examples include the sentencing of CHP Istanbul chair Canan Kaftancıoğlu, a key player in organizing Kurdish votes for İmamoğlu, to nearly ten years in prison for her tweets,⁹² and the appropriation of political and financial decision-making and even land from the CHP-led metropolitan municipality to the AKP-dominated city council and to national ministries.⁹³ Attempts to curtail the opposition’s ability to govern and mobilize following election victories are even starker in Kurdish-majority municipalities, where the arrests and replacements of HDP majors with AKP trustees left the HDP in 2020 in control of just one-fifth of the cities it won in 2019.⁹⁴ Kurdish areas are targeted with the highest levels of interference in both election processes and outcomes—a case of disproportionately regional de-democratization supported by the AKP’s institutional takeover of the judiciary and the rhetorical vilification of HDP members as engaging in “terrorist” activities.

It is worth noting that both the 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections and the April 2017 referendum were held under a state of emergency that had been in place since the July 15, 2016, coup attempt. Despite the official lifting of emergency measures shortly after Erdoğan’s victory, some of which were institutionalized into law by presidential decree,⁹⁵ the AKP’s power over elections and their outcomes remains formidable. This power is not, however, unshakeable.

İmamoğlu’s victory in the election rerun may have signaled much of what can challenge the AKP in the future: the unification of generally contentious opposition groups behind one candidate, the eschewing of identity politics in favor of condemnation of antidemocratic and corrupt practices, and more.⁹⁶ Whether the political space for such a challenge from the opposition remains

⁹¹ “İnce ‘Adam Kazandı’ Dediğinde Halk TV,” YouTube, March 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLFo9Khy14U&t=0s>.

⁹² “CHP Istanbul Chair Sentenced to Nearly 10 Years in Prison,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/chp-istanbul-chair-sentenced-to-nearly-10-years-in-prison-146355>.

⁹³ “İBB’nin Varlıkları AKP’li Belediyelere Bedelsiz Olarak Verildi,” *Finans Gündem*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.finansgundem.com/haber/ibbnin-varliklari-akpli-belediyelere-bedelsiz-olarak-verildi/1453385>.

⁹⁴ Ayla Jean Yackley, “Turkey’s Crackdown on Mayors Amounts to Coup, Says Opposition Party,” *Al Monitor*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/turkey-crackdown-opposition-mayors-coup.html>.

⁹⁵ Kaya and Whiting, “The HDP, the AKP, and the Battle for Democracy.”

⁹⁶ F. Michael Wuthrich and Melvyn Ingleby, “The Pushback against Populism: Running on ‘Radical Love’ in Turkey,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 2 (2020): 24–40.

open following the AKP's 2023 win depends greatly on Erdoğan himself, given his personalization of politics and consolidation of power in the executive over which he presides. It also depends heavily on the opposition's ability to unite despite the intra-coalition and intra-party tensions that plagued them in the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, and continue to create divides in the run-up to local elections scheduled for March 2024. Similarly, whether Turkey democratizes or de-democratizes under any potential constellation of new leadership in the future will rest heavily on the choices made by those entering into such a highly consolidated system. The influence of the conservative right that supported the AKP's heavy-handed governance in the past would likely remain strong in any coalition. Although objection to the presidential system that the AKP's power consolidation became a rallying point for six traditionally contentious opposition parties in the run-up to the 2023 elections, whether this would have become a policy priority had the opposition won was not guaranteed.

The fact that some opposition leaders at least initially moved away from the polarizing identity politics that facilitated prolonged AKP rule may serve to strengthen Turkey's chances for democratization in the long run. The softening of red lines against engaging with pro-Kurdish political actors was instrumental in wresting Istanbul from AKP control—but also alienated nationalists who might otherwise have voted for the opposition coalition in 2023. If continued with strong political will in the face of such inevitable nationalist backlash, this outreach could open the space for future coalitions that are better poised to erode divisiveness and resolve conflict. If combined with engagement with other groups marginalized in the AKP and previous eras, including women's and LGBTQ+ platforms, non-Muslim minorities, and Alevis, Turkey can more firmly shift its de-democratizing trajectory in the other direction.