

Case study
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The rise of the far right: Turkey

Introduction

Recep Erdoğan's Turkey has been described as "a capitalist nightmare: a triad of neoliberal economics, political despotism, and Islamist conservatism".¹ In 2002, when the newly formed Justice and Development Party (AKP) swept to victory with a two-thirds parliamentary majority, it pledged to take swift action to resolve the country's deepening financial crisis and the accompanying problems of political instability and corruption that had plagued the Turkish state for years. Yet, the AKP's economic policies did not differ much from what came before. Continuing with the IMF-backed austerity measures that had been adopted by the preceding coalition, the AKP embarked on a rapid programme of economic liberalisation that included privatisation of state assets, contractionary monetary policy and labour-market flexibilisation. These measures, coupled with Erdoğan's swift diplomatic overtures to the EU and US, were geared towards attracting foreign capital and integrating Turkey's export economy into the world market.

In the first 15 years of AKP rule, Turkey experienced an influx of FDI and thousands of foreign companies and entered the OECD's 'Privatisation Top 10' list for its large-scale sale of state assets. Capital flows into the country, along with access to cheap credit, also helped to fuel new patterns of consumption, urbanisation and a huge construction boom. The AKP's neoliberal transformation of the economy produced a period of high growth, leading commentators to make favourable comparisons between Turkey and the BRICS.²

However, this 'economic miracle' rested on shaky foundations. To begin with, the model was heavily dependent on rocketing capital inflows to support private speculation, with banks and big firms borrowing heavily in foreign currency to sustain their chase for quick profits. It was also based on a consumer boom fuelled by an explosion of household debt. This helped to mask what was a period of jobless growth, marked by falling wages and rising inequality. Another cushion was provided through the widening of social welfare measures to cover hitherto excluded sections of the working class, complemented by the expansion of social assistance offered by religious charities.³ These policies were implemented in parallel with a broader process of dispossession, involving the retrenchment of access to land and housing and the commodification of the commons.⁴

In the case of Turkey, as elsewhere across the globe, the country's economic transformation was based on the creation of a disciplined, low-cost and disposable labour force with limited rights and little recourse to collective trade union action. The persistence of high unemployment generated the economic conditions in which large numbers of people could

¹ Gündüz ZY (2015). "The 'new Turkey': fetishizing growth with fatal results". *Monthly Review*, 1 June 2015. Available at: <https://monthlyreview.org/2015/06/01/the-new-turkey-fetishizing-growth-with-fatal-results/>.

² Tansel C B (2020). "National neoliberalism in Turkey". *Dissent* (summer 2019). Available at: <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/national-neoliberalism-in-turkey>; Gündüz, *op cit*.

³ Akçay Ü (2018). *Neoliberal Populism in Turkey and its Crisis*. Institute for International Political Economy Berlin, Working Paper No. 100/2018, pp 10–12.

⁴ Dorlach T (2018). "Retrenchment of social policy by other means: a comparison of agricultural and housing policy in Turkey". *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, vol 21, no 3, pp 270–86; Gündüz, *op cit*.

be forced into low-paid, informal and non-unionised work.⁵ Laws enacted in the first decade of the Erdoğan era promoted greater labour flexibility and informal hiring practices (subcontracting, agency work etc) while strengthening the previous government's restrictions on collective bargaining and the right to strike. As well as outlawing strikes for economic, political, sympathy and solidarity reasons, these laws empowered the state to postpone any strike for 60 days. The impact on workers and trade unions is plain to see: collective bargaining coverage more than halved from 11.9 per cent in 2002 to 5.4 per cent in 2012; trade union density plummeted from 29.4 per cent in 2001 to a low of 6.3 per cent in 2013; and labour's share of national income fell by 25 per cent in the same period.⁶

By the 2010s, the story of Turkey's economic success, democratisation and political stability had started to unravel. A fresh economic crisis revealed the underlying fragility and unsustainability of Turkey's model, not least its dependence on foreign capital inflows. With escalating social unrest came moments of acute political crisis. 'Dependent financialisation' and liberalisation of the Turkish economy has nonetheless continued apace, drawing the country further into volatile financial systems and generating a pattern of recurring economic and political turmoil.⁷ Faced with these challenges, the AKP has come to rely on increasingly authoritarian, repressive and violent modes of governance. Erdoğan has also sought to define a new form of Turkish conservatism that satisfies the AKP's base and appeals to enough right-wing nationalists to give him the 50 per cent+ majority needed to win presidential elections and secure key constitutional changes.

Authoritarianism and right-wing nationalism

It is difficult to determine a particular date when Erdoğan's authoritarianism became evident. But the government's brutal reaction to the 2013 Gezi Park protests, which began as a small campaign against the destruction of a public park before mushrooming into a nationwide cycle of mass demonstrations involving millions of people, can be seen as a critical turning point. The authorities responded to the protests by deploying the police, which used live ammunition, tear gas, plastic bullets and beatings, resulting in over 3,000 arrests, 8,000 injuries and six deaths in the space of a few months.⁸ These events coincided with the increasing repression of labour through harassment, intimidation and the arrest of trade unionists under false accusations of terrorism.⁹ As the Gezi Park protests spread, Erdoğan used the opportunity to purge moderating influences from key positions, including the then President Abdullah Gül. Erdoğan replaced Gül as the AKP's candidate for Turkey's

⁵ Toksöz G (2008). Decent Work Country Report – Turkey. ILO Report, Geneva, 2008. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_359818.pdf.

⁶ Özkiziltan D (2019). "Authoritarian neoliberalism in AKP's Turkey: an industrial relations perspective". *Industrial Relations Journal*, vol 50, no 3 (2019), pp 224–5.

⁷ Akcay Ü and Güngen A R (2019). The Making of Turkey's 2018–2019 Economic Crisis. Institute for International Political Economy Berlin, Working Paper No. 120/2019.

⁸ Amnesty International (2013). Gezi Park Protests: brutal denial of the right to peaceful assembly in Turkey. London.

⁹ Bamford S (2014). "502 trade unionists in court after protest crackdown". *Stronger Unions*, 17 January 2014. Available at: <https://strongerunions.org/2014/01/17/502-turkish-trade-unionists-in-court/>.

first direct presidential election in 2014, winning an outright majority with 52 per cent of the vote. This was one sure sign of his ambition to convert Turkey's government into a presidential system.¹⁰

This period beginning with the Gezi Park protests was marked by an escalation of violent security policies designed to intimidate and suppress dissenting civil society organisations, opposition political groups and social movements. Following the AKP's loss of its parliamentary majority in the June 2015 elections, the pressure on opposition forces intensified and the playing field was more explicitly altered in the AKP's favour. Significantly, the government dissolved its 'resolution process' for a negotiated settlement to the Kurdish question and launched a military offensive against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which had declared autonomy in the Kurdish region. These security operations were backed up by a right-wing nationalist discourse, encouraging further attacks by nationalist and state forces on Kurdish politicians and citizens in the lead up to the snap election of November. According to the HDP, between July and November there were 200 attacks on HDP premises, 10,000 people were detained and close to 3,000 of them arrested; 11 cities and 45 towns where the HDP had received a large number of votes were declared as emergency areas; and 322 civilians were killed.¹¹ Moreover, the criminalisation of independent journalists and media outlets became much more widespread in these months, with Bianet reporting a spike in the censoring of news reports and social media accounts, along with a significant increase in attacks and arrests.¹² This "purposefully created climate of violence and fear" enabled the AKP to regain its parliamentary majority while establishing greater control over the institutions of security and state power.¹³

The AKP picked up some 4.5 million votes at the 2015 November election, including scores of votes from the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). A number of wider factors played a role in driving the AKP's drift towards right-wing nationalism and increasing authoritarianism. First, souring relations with the EU dampened Erdoğan's appetite for democratic reforms and enabled him to adopt an increasingly nationalist and anti-EU discourse. Second, there was a rapid deterioration of Turkish-Syrian relations against the backdrop of the Syrian uprising and Turkey's ambitions in the Middle East. As the uprising descended into civil war, the AKP began to instrumentalise Sunni Islamic identity and give support to jihadist groups including al-Qaeda and ISIS. Not only did this directly inflame political Islam in Turkey, but it resulted in a 'blowback' effect whereby the conflict crossed the border and became increasingly entangled with the Turkish government's war on the

¹⁰ Kirişçi K and Sloat A (2019). *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracy in Turkey: implications for the West*. Foreign Policy at Brookings Policy Brief, February 2019, pp 2–3. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FP_20190226_turkey_kirischi_sloat.pdf.

¹¹ Toktamis KF and David I (2018). "Repression and resistance: fragments of Kurdish politics in Turkey under the AKP regime". *Turkish Studies*, vol 19, no 5, p 663.

¹² Önderoğlu D (2015). "Increasing pressure on press: democracy in question". *Bianet (English)*, 19 October 2015. Available at: <https://bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/168464-increasing-pressure-on-press-democracy-in-question>.

¹³ Yılmaz Z and Turner BS (2019). "Turkey's deepening authoritarianism and the fall of electoral democracy". *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol 65, no 5, pp 694–5.

Kurds.¹⁴ Finally, and relatedly, the arrival of 3.4 million Syrian refugees came at a time when Turkey was already struggling with economic inequality, social unrest, sectarian tension and political instability. Grievances among the populations of the big cities in particular were ripe for politicisation by radical nationalists.¹⁵

Another major turning point in the consolidation of presidential power came after the alleged military coup of July 2016. Erdoğan told supporters that the failed coup was “a gift from God”, which he exploited to stir up nationalist sentiments and justify a wide-ranging clampdown on opponents. The government quickly declared a three-month state of emergency to grant Erdoğan the power to introduce laws by decree without the approval of parliament. This was renewed seven times before officially ending on 18 July 2018. In total, during the state of emergency the president introduced 32 emergency decrees and made approximately 300 amendments to 150 laws, many of which remain in force to this day.¹⁶

During the state of emergency, nearly 152,000 public servants including teachers, police and military officials, doctors, judges and prosecutors were dismissed or suspended with little or no right to appeal. The authorities also detained over 150,000 people, including 78,000 under draconian anti-terrorism laws. Among those arrested were at least 87 mayors, nine MPs from the HDP, 300 journalists and 570 lawyers. Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International documented reports of widespread beatings, torture and other forms of ill-treatment. In addition, some 166 media outlets and 1,719 NGOs were closed down by executive decree. These attacks on freedom of expression extended to the internet and social media, with over 100,000 websites blocked and Twitter receiving more than 7,000 censorship requests from the courts and state in 2017 alone. Freedom of assembly also deteriorated sharply as the authorities used the state of emergency to issue blanket bans on demonstrations, including a ban on May Day for the fourth consecutive year and the banning of five large-scale strikes.¹⁷

The formal consolidation of Erdoğan’s power came in the midst of this turbulent period. In April 2017, a referendum was held to replace the parliamentary system of government with one based on presidential rule. The vote was proposed by a coalition of the AKP and MHP parties. In the event, citizens voted by a narrow margin of 51 to 49 per cent to approve a series of far-reaching changes to the constitution. These reforms abolished the office of prime minister and gave new powers to the president, including the right to issue decrees, control the national budget, appoint cabinet ministers and state officials, and appoint senior judges and prosecutors. In the aftermath of the vote, Trump called President

¹⁴ Hinnebusch R (2015). “Back to enmity: Turkey-Syria relations since the Syrian Uprising”. *Orient: Journal of the German Orient Institute*, vol 56, no 1, pp 14–22.

¹⁵ Kirişçi and Sloat, *op cit*, p 7.

¹⁶ UNISON (2018). *Workers’ and Human Rights in Turkey: a UNISON campaign briefing*. November 2018, p 6. Available at:

https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2018/12/25370_Workers_rights_Turkey_REPORT_OV.pdf.

¹⁷ *Ibid*; Amnesty International (2017). *Amnesty International Report 2016/17: the state of the world’s human rights*. London, pp 367–71. Available at: https://frantic.s3.amazonaws.com/amnesty-fi/2017/02/Amnesty_Annual_Report_2017.pdf.

Erdoğan to congratulate him.¹⁸ Erdoğan officially became the first head of this new system in June 2018, after installing his new presidency and winning snap elections. Yet, just as the referendum exposed the strength of opposition to Erdoğan, the June general election required a formal coalition of the AKP and MHP to secure an overall parliamentary majority, demonstrating the former's growing dependence on radical nationalism. At one pre-election rally, Erdoğan even went as far as to make the hand gesture of the Grey Wolves, a neo-fascist organisation that is widely regarded as the MHP's paramilitary wing.¹⁹

Continued deterioration

Events since the referendum have showed a continued deterioration of the situation in Turkey, further exposing the limitations of the AKP's political dominance and ability to rule by consent. In recent years the regime has pursued a political strategy that combines right-wing nationalist rhetoric, anti-Kurdish aggression and a confrontational foreign policy with measures to placate the AKP's traditional core base of religious conservatives. Efforts to construct a common Turkish identity fused with Islam have involved everything from a renewed state focus on specific events of historical importance to the ideological reorientation of education and popular culture. Erdoğan's attempt to remake his country's image using religious symbolism and public spectacles has drawn comparisons with aspects of Narendra Modi's ethnonationalist project in India.²⁰ Turkey's aggressive foreign policy, manifested most violently by its interventions in Syria and Libya, has utilised the framing of 'injustice' to present its position. The labelling of rivals as 'others' links the government's foreign policy to its domestic objective of forging an exclusivist national identity.²¹

Refugees, along with the Kurds, have been among the main victims of the AKP's radical nationalist turn and a concerted media effort to portray them as terrorists and criminals.²² Resentment towards refugees has been growing steadily in recent years and turned increasingly violent amid deepening economic malaise. The Turkish authorities are believed to have illegally deported large numbers of refugees last October, and a sordid deal signed with the EU back in 2016 is now unravelling as the Turkish government has announced that it will no longer prevent refugees from entering the EU at the Greek border.

While the AKP has helped to mainstream hardline nationalist currents, this has not had the desired effect of consolidating its position or legitimising Erdoğan's rule. Last year's municipal elections, held at the height of an economic crisis, resulted in the AKP and MHP

¹⁸ Renton, D (2018). *The New Authoritarians: convergence on the right*. London, p 6.

¹⁹ "Erdoğan makes 'grey wolf' sign at rally". Ahval, 10 March 2018. Available at: <https://ahvalnews.com/recep-tayyip-erdogan/erdogan-makes-grey-wolf-sign-rally>.

²⁰ Sheran Y (2020). "The end of the secular republic". *The Atlantic*, 13 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/08/modi-erdogan-religious-nationalism/615052/>.

²¹ Zorlu B (2020). "Tensions rising in the Mediterranean: the interplay of domestic and foreign policy and Turkey". PSA Blog, 7 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.psa.ac.uk/psa/news/tensions-rising-mediterranean-interplay-domestic-and-foreign-policy-turkey>.

²² "Media in Turkey: 5 thousand 515 instances of hate speech in a year". Bianet (English), 18 September 2020. Available at: <https://bianet.org/english/media/231141-media-in-turkey-5-thousand-515-instances-of-hate-speech-in-a-year>.

losing control of key cities such as Ankara and Istanbul to the opposition.²³ These results were a reflection of growing social discontent generated by the regime's failures of economic policy as well as the (irretrievable) loss of significant Kurdish support. When the coronavirus pandemic hit, it plunged Turkey into a crisis of even greater severity than the last, dashing any hopes that an economic recovery would come to Erdoğan's aid. The government's subsequent poor handling of the pandemic has led to falling approval ratings, intensifying social antagonisms and an emboldened opposition. With the AKP increasingly reliant on the MHP to get anything done, the latter has been able to exert greater influence over government policy, even securing the premature release of 'fascist hitman' and Mafia boss Alaattin Çakıcı, a former member of the Grey Wolves and MHP supporter who had been given a 16-year sentence for murder.²⁴

The repression of criticism and political opposition has continued unabated throughout the pandemic. For instance, the government has expanded an auxiliary police force and granted a new 20,000-strong security agency dubbed the 'night guard' the right to use weapons. Under the guise of combatting 'fake news', 'incitement' or 'spreading fear and panic', the authorities detained more than 500 social media users, 12 journalists and several doctors in the first few months alone of the pandemic. Repression against Kurdish political representatives has continued, and there have been military incursions into Kurdish areas along the southern Turkish border. The government has also blocked or cut financing and borrowing for opposition-controlled municipalities in a bid to force them into implementing austerity measures. Government figures and their allies have directly contributed to an escalation of right-wing rhetoric, sparking increased violence against LGBT+ people, Kurds and the Armenian community. This has been accompanied by a spike in violence against women, just as the AKP is considering withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention due to its negative impact on 'family values'.²⁵

As Erdoğan looks toward the next presidential election, due to be held some time before 2023, his country appears to be on a perilous, downward spiral. Even before the pandemic hit, Human Rights Watch (HRW) had pointed to "deepening human rights crisis over the past four years with a dramatic erosion of [Turkey's] rule of law and democracy framework".²⁶ In support of HRW's assessment, a major study into the political rhetoric and governing practices of ruling parties has established that the AKP, Fidesz and Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have fast become the most autocratic right-wing regimes in the

²³ Ülgen S (2019). "Turkish democracy is the winner in these momentous local elections". *Guardian*, 3 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/03/turkey-democracy-local-elections-akp-erdogan>.

²⁴ Kayserilioğlu A (2020). "Turkey's mainstream opposition is squandering the coronavirus crisis". *Jacobin*, 24 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/09/turkey-coronavirus-covid-erdogan-akp-istanbul>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; Amnesty International (2020). *Turkey: Stifling free expression during the COVID-19 pandemic*. 16 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/06/turkey-stifling-free-expression-during-the-covid19-pandemic/>; Buyuk HF (2020). 'Istanbul convention's fate splits Turkish president's supporters', *Balkan Insight*, 10 August 2020. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/10/istanbul-conventions-fate-splits-turkish-presidents-supporters/>.

²⁶ Roth K (2020). *Human Rights Watch World Report 2020 – Turkey*. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/turkey>.

world, with Trump's Republican Party not far behind.²⁷ Reporters Without Borders (RSF) notes that Turkey is now "the world's biggest jailer of professional journalists", who commonly spend more than a year in jail before trial and often receive long sentences. As with Hungary, Turkey has slid down the World Press Freedom Index over the past few years, from 149th (out of 180) in 2015 to 154th today.²⁸ Similarly, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has identified Turkey as one of the 10 worst countries for workers, noting that trade unions have been operating "in a climate of fear and under the constant threat of retaliation" since the 2016 coup attempt.²⁹ The list goes on. Turkey is well on the way to becoming a right-wing dictatorship, but Erdoğan's rule is far from stable. Herein lies the potential for the regime's overthrow and/or for its continued radicalisation.

²⁷ Lührmann A, Medzihorsky J, Hindle G and Lindberg SI (2020). *New Global Data on Political Parties: V-Party*. V-Dem Institute Briefing Paper No 9, 26 October 2020. Available at: https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/b6/55/b6553f85-5c5d-45ec-be63-a48a2abe3f62/briefing_paper_9.pdf.

²⁸ RSF World Press Freedom Index, Turkey. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/taxonomy/term/145>.

²⁹ ITUC (2020). *2020 ITUC Global Rights Index: the world's worst countries for workers*. Brussels. Available at: https://www.itucsi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc_globalrightsindex_2020_en.pdf.