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## **The “New Turkey” under President Erdoğan: Authoritarianism reloaded**

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Turkish democracy has always been a defective one, but the “New Turkey” under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) is rapidly steering in the direction of an electorally secured autocracy. It is electorally secured because at least half of the Turkish population backs the current government; President Erdoğan is still popular. Further support comes from the ultra-nationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), which actively supports the current authoritarian course. The contention that Turkey increasingly meets the criteria of an autocratically led country is supported by a number of empirical democracy indexes. Freedom House, for example, classifies Turkey as “unfree,”<sup>1</sup> and the Transformation Index of the German Bertelsmann Foundation classifies the country as out of balance because the separation of powers is steadily diminishing.<sup>2</sup>

The New Turkey has long since abandoned the concept of liberal democracy based on the rule of law. In the meantime, the separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary and the protection of fundamental rights, above all the freedom of the press, expression and assembly, have been eroded. Most important of all is the fact that the mass media has been brought under state control, while the political opposition, especially the Kurdish HDP (People's Democratic Party), has been marginalized to some extent. Taken together, the above developments have fostered a climate of fear, inner tension, and polarization.

Turkey's hyper-nationalist course has been legitimized by supposedly existential threats to the nation, including that of continuing domestic terrorism. It has been underpinned by a strategy of provocation and aggression. While this course continues to this day, at the expense of social peace, President Erdoğan presents himself as a strong president, a guarantor of stability, and the protector of Turkey and the Turkish nation.

### **Essential developments on the way to autocracy**

Since the brutal suppression of the Gezi protests during the summer of 2013, Turkey has rapidly followed an escalating course of increasing authoritarianism under President Erdoğan. This has been marked by hyper-nationalism, the undermining of the judiciary, the

degradation of fundamental rights and the separation of powers, as well as aggressive official rhetoric and state repression. Since then, Turkey's democratic foundations have gradually been dismantled.

Under President Erdoğan, the AKP government has capitalized upon the electoral success of the Kurdish HDP in the June 2015 parliamentary elections and the ongoing conflict against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) to successfully delegitimize the HDP and carry out comprehensive purges of Kurds across the political spectrum and throughout civil society. Since then, numerous arrests and bans have taken place, not only at the level of the national leadership but locally as well; thousands of activists have been arrested, and more than 90 HDP mayors have been arbitrarily deposed and placed under state administration. Since November 2016, party leader Selahattin Demirtaş<sup>3</sup> co-president Figen Yüksekdağ, and other HDP MPs have been jailed and face years of imprisonment.

Even before the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, the AKP government had largely gained control over the press and media, so that critical reporting was hardly possible and the flow of information was mostly in line with government policy. Even before the failed coup attempt, human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch<sup>4</sup> and Amnesty International<sup>5</sup> suffered serious democratic setbacks. Reporters Without Borders<sup>6</sup> attested to raids, attacks and obstructions against media critical of the regime, comprehensive state control of influential media and the effective abolition of freedom of the press. These developments have also been documented by the European Union's progress reports on Turkey, which arbitrary and selective application of the law and collective punishment justified by accusations of terrorism and threats to national security.<sup>7</sup>

The failed coup attempt in July 2016 dramatically accelerated the ongoing process of monopolizing state power. The coup attempt was followed by several waves of mass purges and arrests, bans, suspensions and dismissals. Those affected were not limited to the suspected putschists of the Fethullah Gülen movement and Kurds, but instead hailed from all walks of Turkish civil life. They included critical voices from the judiciary, the military, the security forces, and members of business, science, art, culture, and civil society sectors. Measures, such as the closure of newspapers, television stations, and Internet sites, and the arrest of critical journalists and scientists, are an expression of this increasing autocratic government action.

With the presidential and parliamentary elections of June 2018, the monopolization of power through control and personalization reached its climax with the transition to the new presidential system. Now, the concentration of power in the hands of the president was now firmly cemented. Arguably, abuses of power are now inevitable, because there are no mechanisms in place to enforce effective checks and balances. In April 2017, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe criticized the constitutional amendments to the introduction of the presidential system submitted for referendum on the grounds that the proposed changes would not in fact follow the model of a democratic presidential system.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the constitutional amendments are a dangerous setback for democracy. The Venice Commission warned against a "one-person regime" and the danger of sliding into an

authoritarian system.<sup>9</sup> The new presidential system introduced with the presidential and parliamentary elections of June 2018 cements this state of affairs.

### **Turkish Authoritarianism: Historical continuity in a new guise**

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the tendency towards authoritarianism in Turkey's defective political system is not essentially new, but represents a historical continuity and the reproduction of traditional patterns of authoritarian governance. For decades, the Kemalist founding elites and their descendants acted in this way in order to shape the Turkish state and society according to Kemalist ideological values and to gain absolute power. The AKP has adopted these structures, but fills them with their own values. For example, one of the main goals of the Kemalist elites was to attract a so-called "Kemalist" youth, while the AKP under President Erdoğan wanted to breed a so-called "moral" youth. What these two goals, from seemingly opposing political sides, have in common is an authoritarian claim to align state and society according to ideologically guided values.

The causes of the tendency towards authoritarianism lie in the historically grown systemic defects of Turkish democracy and in the ideological self-image of the AKP. At the level of values, these systemic defects include a historically developed, authoritarian understanding of the state, a political culture shaped by authoritarianism, an internally limited democratic constitution of parties, and an inability to react to social pressure so as to adapt to political innovations. Ideologically, these defects date back to the founding period of the modern Republic and lie in the primacy of rigid Turkish nationalism.

This was, and is today, associated with an authoritarian understanding of the state and the nation, which in essence regards the state as unassailable and omnipotent and the individual as serving the state. In the past, the continuation of this authoritarian state tradition was made at the expense of massive restrictions on basic democratic freedoms, above all the freedoms of opinion and assembly, and at the expense of the protection of minority groups such as the Kurds. From the beginning of the Republic, restrictions on fundamental rights were justified by ostensible threats to "unity and the nation." This construct is used just as massively today under President Erdoğan and his AKP government. The authoritarian state tradition also led to the alleged formation of diverse and sometimes competing coalitions composed of senior members of the non-elected establishment, whose purported aims were to protect the state against all threats as they defined them, even against elected governments. The Turkish term "Derin Devlet" ("deep state") represents this tradition and is a direct result of the authoritarian reading of the Turkish state.

While Turkey has indeed undergone social change over the years, the historically developed authoritarian tradition of the state has not been resolved at its core. Although strict Kemalists continue to stand for the protection of this authoritarian tradition, the socialization of the collective with these values has permeated all state institutions and structures and formed a political culture that is not democratically founded in its basic features.

At its core, the authoritarian course of government under President Erdoğan remains embedded in the state tradition described above; it is now merely being reproduced under different auspices. First and foremost, President Erdoğan and his AKP government

perpetuate the authoritarian state tradition in order to maintain and expand their own power. The primacy of rigid Turkish nationalism plays a decisive role here. It is an ideological core element of the AKP, and in fact represents the common denominator between that party and the Kemalists and (ultra-)nationalists. This is precisely the point of continuity for a key element of the Kemalist political system, which is also indispensable for Erdoğan's "New Turkey:" the establishment of a strong, unassailable and omnipotent state and its dominance over society.

Thus, even under the AKP government, the traditional principle of the indivisible unity of state, territory, and nation, which secures the claim to power of an omnipotent state and its ideology, is state-supported. This principle is constitutionally unchangeable. To protect the principle of indivisible national unity, fundamental rights - such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly - may be arbitrarily restricted. This has been done consistently in the past and is currently also happening under the AKP government.

In addition to hyper-nationalism, there are two other core ideological elements of the AKP: Sunni (pan)-Islamism and neo-Ottomanism. The return to the imperial Ottoman-Islamic past implies an "Ottoman approach" in the AKP's political strategy, which strives for a consolidation and expansion of power both internally and externally. As it retains the traditionally developed authoritarian understanding of the state and a religious-conservative image of society, at best it permits only limited internal democratization.

The ideological embedding of the "New Turkey" and the measures taken by the AKP government under President Erdoğan cement an authoritarian, omnipotent state, which is Turkish-nationalistic, Sunni-Islamistic, and neo-Ottoman in character. The presidential system secures Erdoğan, as president, atop the central position of power. If the authoritarian state tradition cannot be overcome in favor of democratic value systems and democratic institutions, the danger of authoritarianism - whether with or without President Erdoğan - remains.

### **The permanent challenge of democracy**

Turkey's future promise is predicated on the interpretation of the relationship between state, individual and society on the basis of democratic values, where the model of liberal, constitutional democracy will serve as the basis for social and political action. Yet, at present there is not sufficient political will to finally make the necessary break with the authoritarian understanding of the state and the authoritarian state tradition, a phenomenon not unique to the present AKP government but in fact applied to the totality of those that preceded it. Perhaps one day, Turkey will see a democratic turnaround that overcomes ideological barriers in favor of inculcating a democratic and pluralistic canon of values, but that day is far away indeed.

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<sup>1</sup>Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2019. Turkey" <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/turkey>, (Accessed: June 6, 2019)

<sup>2</sup>"BTI Project", <https://www.bti-project.org/de/ergebnisse/global/>, <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/TUR/>, (Accessed: June 7, 2019); Tom Schmidtgen, „Demokratie-Index: Die Türkei ist kurz davor, sich in eine echte Autokratie zu verwandeln“, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 22.3.2018, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/bertelsmann-studie-tuerkei-auf-weg-in-echte-autokratie-15507578.html>, (Accessed: June 7, 2019)

<sup>3</sup> Since November 2016 Selahattin Demirtaş has been imprisoned in a high security prison at the Turkish-Greek border in the city of Edirne. He is accused of terrorist propaganda, membership of a terrorist group and incitement to violence. He is facing a whole series of trials and up to 142 years in prison. In September 2018 he was sentenced by a Turkish court to four years and eight months imprisonment. As recently as November 2018, the European Court of Human Rights declared the detention on remand illegal and demanded the release of Demirtaş. The duration and circumstances of the detention are politically motivated and his detention aims to stifle pluralism and limit the freedom of political debate. Although Turkey, as a member of the Council of Europe, is bound by the ECHR rulings, President Erdoğan declared the ruling null and void and shortly afterwards a court in Ankara at the end of November 2018 rejected Demirtaş' release and confirmed his conviction.

<sup>4</sup> "Turkey events of 2015", Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/turkey>, "Turkey events of 2018", Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/turkey>, (Accessed: June 9, 2019)

<sup>5</sup>"Türkei 2016 - 2017 - 2018", Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.de/jahresbericht/2016/tuerkei>, <https://www.amnesty.de/jahresbericht/2017/tuerkei>, <https://www.amnesty.de/jahresbericht/2018/tuerkei>, (Accessed: June 9, 2019)

<sup>6</sup>Turkey-Report, September 22, 2016, Reporter without Borders, <https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/nc/themen/laender-und-themenberichte/meldung/repression-in-ungekanntem-ausmass/>, (Accessed: June 10, 2019)

For more information on state control through economic interdependence see: Media Ownership Monitor Türkei, <https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/mom/projektlaender/tuerkei/>, (Accessed: June 10, 2019)

<sup>7</sup>EU progress reports on Turkey of 6 November 2016 and 17 April 2018, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release MEMO-16-3639\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-3639_en.htm), [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release MEMO-18-3407\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release MEMO-18-3407_en.htm), (Accessed: June 11, 2019).

<sup>8</sup>In the constitutional referendum of 16 April 2017 on the introduction of a presidential system, a narrow majority of 51.41 percent voted in favor, 48.59 percent voted against. Together with the ultra-nationalist MHP, the AKP government presented a draft that was approved by parliament and submitted to a referendum despite strong reactions from the opposition party.

<sup>9</sup>Expert Report of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe of 13 March 2017, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2017\)005-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2017)005-e), (Accessed: June 12, 2019), [https://www.coe.int/de/web/portal/news-2017/-/asset\\_publisher/StEVosr24HJ2/content/venice-commission-proposed-constitutional-amendments-in-turkey-would-be-a-dangerous-step-backwards-for-democracy](https://www.coe.int/de/web/portal/news-2017/-/asset_publisher/StEVosr24HJ2/content/venice-commission-proposed-constitutional-amendments-in-turkey-would-be-a-dangerous-step-backwards-for-democracy) (Accessed: June 12, 2019)