



The Program on Governance  
and Local Development  
at Gothenburg



# Beyond the Democratic Paradox: The Decline of Democracy in Turkey

Yeşim Arat

Working Paper  
No. 21 2019

The Program on Governance  
and Local Development



UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG

Beyond the Democratic Paradox:  
The Decline of Democracy in Turkey

Yeşim Arat: araty@boun.edu.tr

Boğaziçi University

Istanbul, Turkey

May 2021

**Front Cover Image:** Bogazici Bridge (Source: Engin Eselioğlu, Unsplash)

## **Abstract**

This paper provides a close look at Turkey's experience with democratic backsliding where electoral majorities that came to power through democratic elections undermined democracy. The paper argues that at different stages of this process, different factors contributed to the decline of democracy in the country. It takes a "synthetic" theoretical approach--one that highlights the role of political actors, economic relations, political institutions and the importance of strategic coalitions, in understanding the gradual process of democratic erosion. While coalitions are important at different stages of the process of backsliding, other factors particularly agential and structural ones, shaped by global and domestic forces contributed to the decline of democracy in Turkey. These structural and agency related factors also help explain not only why coalitions emerge but also how they come apart.

## 1. Introduction

In the first decade of the 2000s, Turkey, was widely perceived as a modernizing country with an emerging economy, a G20 member that was governed by a procedural although a weak democracy. Academics and politicians alike held the country up as a model for Muslim democracy in the Middle East. The Islamic rooted AKP (Justice and Development Party) that had come to power in 2002 with the promise of democratizing the country heralded the “Rise of Muslim Democracy,” as one Middle East scholar argued at the time (Nasr 2005). Yet, the situation changed dramatically over the next decade. In its 2014 Report, Freedom House ranked Turkey’s democracy as “partly free” and its “press not free”. In 2018, Freedom House placed Turkey’s political regime in the “not free” category, citing “a deeply flawed constitutional referendum that centralized power in the presidency, a government that replaced elected mayors with government appointees, arbitrarily prosecuted rights activists and other perceived enemies of the state, and continued its purge of state employees” (Freedom House 2018).

The AKP’s ascent to power and the decline of democracy in Turkey is an example of the democratic paradox, where popular sovereignty at the heart of liberal democracy can damage democracy itself. The electoral majorities that came to power through democratic elections began to suppress minority groups and undermine democratic rule as they manipulated the advantages of their position to maintain their power. The AKP that came to power with 34 percent of the vote in 2002 increased its electoral support to 47 percent by the 2007 general elections. Yet, as the party increased its popular support, its democratizing initiatives came to an abrupt end; 2007, arguably, marked the beginning of Turkey’s democratic decline.

This paper draws attention to the processes and possible causes behind this democratic paradox. How did democracy decline under the leadership of a popularly elected government in Turkey? What were the causes of this gradual, yet unchecked descent into authoritarianism, a process that we will call “democratic backsliding.” The text draws heavily on a book that I co-authored with Şevket Pamuk (Arat and Pamuk 2019). The work we did can best be described as an interpretive study on contemporary Turkey; so this paper, too, is an interpretive exploration of the subject.

Our work focuses on both structural factors and the role of actors in global and domestic contexts to throw light on democratic backsliding. We believe that no single factor best explains the gradual

process of democratic decline in Turkey, but that different factors or their combination seem likely to shed light at different stages. David Waldner and Ellen Lust have cogently analyzed theories that account for backsliding in their article “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding”. They discuss and evaluate agency-based explanations, theories that focus on culture, institutions, political economy, social structure and international forces. They conclude that “a synthetic approach centered on coalitions is the most promising avenue for future research (Waldner & Lust 2018). “Coalitional strength” and “shifts in balances of power” are indeed very important in Turkey’s backsliding as well. Backsliding is a process that takes place over time. This paper holds that while coalitions are critical, at different stages of the process of backsliding, other factors, particularly structural and agential ones, shaped by global and domestic forces contributed to the decline of democracy in Turkey. These structural and agency related factors help explain not only why coalitions emerge, but also how they come apart.

## **2. Turkey’s Experience with Democracy**

The Republic of Turkey (established in 1923 after the WW1), began its experiment with multiparty democratic rule in 1950. Its democracy, mostly illiberal, always had restrictions on civil rights and freedoms, a necessary if not sufficient condition of democratic rule. The Republic had been established on the remains of a multi-ethnic, multicultural Muslim empire, but it was staunchly secular and nationalist from its inception. Hence there were restrictions on the practice of Islam and any expression of Kurdish ethnic identity, both of which were deemed as threats to the secular, “westernizing” Turkish nation-state that the Republic cultivated. The procedural democracy that enabled regular elections was interrupted by military coups in 1960, 1971, 1980. There was also a so called proxy (postmodern) coup in 1997 against the coalition in power led by the predecessor of the AKP, before the AKP came to power in 2002. While the 1960 coup led to an expansion of civil liberties and the establishment of political institutions such as a Constitutional Court and a two-tiered Parliament to reinforce separation of powers, the 1980 coup encouraged majoritarian rule, restricted civil rights, and encouraged politicization of Islam to control the left.

The AKP came to power in the context of the post 1980 political developments, most importantly the fragmented party system and economic liberalization that precipitated economic crises in the 1990s, but this is a subject of a different paper.

### **3. AKP in power 2002-2007**

In its first term in power, the AKP was successful. The government continued to implement the IMF-supported economic recovery program its predecessors had initiated. In line with the dictates of this program, it practiced fiscal discipline and used revenues from the privatization of major state enterprises to reduce the public debt. With budget deficits under control, annual inflation rates dropped below 10 percent for the first time since the 1960s.

In line with the overwhelming support among the public for pursuing the EU conditions for membership, including among its closest economically, the newly emerging local/pious bourgeoisie, the AKP expanded the EU inspired democratization process that had begun in 1999. It abolished state security courts that restricted freedoms, diminished the power of the military (NSC) over civilian politics, abolished death penalty, recognized broadcasting in Kurdish. Turkey was formally accepted as a candidate for EU membership in 2004.

Economic growth picked up even more after 2004. There was an increase in exports and foreign direct investment. Average incomes rose by about 35 percent between 2002 and 2007. Economic stability and growth improved the standard of living for large segments of the population, including lower income groups. Government spending in education, healthcare and infrastructure increased. Large sectors of the population thus received services in health care, transportation, subsidized housing, in kind support to the poor that they did not have before.

### **4. The process of democratic decline: The agential factors**

After AKP's first term in power, democratic decline began. This was a period of increasing levels of income, high rates of growth and successful short term macroeconomic performance, factors that are usually correlated with democratization rather than backsliding. Backsliding began at a time when inflation rates were at their lowest, income disparities decreasing and income levels increasing in the country.

At this stage, agential factors were important in triggering the process. Mutual distrust between the secular and Islamist groups led the two sides to make choices which threatened their coexistence. The AKP government had been careful not to antagonize the secularist establishment during its first term

in power. Yet, the opposition remained vigilant on its staunch secularism. The political parties, the military, the constitutional court and secularist civil society associations all tried to circumscribe the political space the government had and to prevent the government from exercising power.

The controversy over the presidential race in 2007 brought the tensions between the two camps to the surface. Under Turkey's parliamentary system, the political party that had the majority in the parliament often determined who the president of the country would be. The AKP nominated Abdullah Gül, as its candidate. Gül was at the time the foreign minister, and his wife covered her hair with an Islamic headscarf. The opposition parties of the center right and the center left, outraged by the prospect of a pious couple in the Presidential House, boycotted the first round of voting in the parliament. On the same day, the military issued a statement on its official website intimating an overthrow of the elected government to protect secularism, if that became necessary.

Meanwhile, a number of civil society organizations, almost 600 of them, mostly secular and nationalist, some led by retired generals, organized mass rallies to protest the increasing visibility of Islam in public life. The rallies took place in the major cities—Istanbul, Ankara, and İzmir—and in smaller ones such as Manisa, Çanakkale, and Samsun. Over one million people attended these events, referred to as Republican rallies (Cumhuriyet mitingleri), insinuating that they were organized to protect the Republic as conceived by the founding fathers. Even though disparate groups participated in the protests for different reasons, the common denominator was the fear of an Islamist threat to the Republic that they believed would be posed by a religious president with a headscarved wife.

The main opposition party in parliament escalated the dispute by taking the first round of polling, which they had boycotted, to the Constitutional Court. According to the Constitution, a two-thirds majority was necessary for the president to be elected in the first two rounds of parliamentary voting. The opposition claimed that a two-thirds quorum was necessary for the polling to begin, even though such a quorum had not been sought in previous presidential elections. The constitutional court ruled in favor of the opposition, generating a controversy not only amongst constitutional court experts, but also amongst a large segment of the secular public about the fairness of the decision.

This secularist challenge had a boomerang effect. Rather than circumscribe the AKP, the opposition empowered it. The AKP government called for an early general election in July 2007 and increased its votes from 34 to 47 percent (Çarkoğlu 2008). Back in power with more electoral support than before, the AKP again nominated Gül as its candidate for president and this time successfully had him elected. In addition, threatened by the attempts of the Republican elites to change the rules of the political system to suit their own interests, the AKP introduced a constitutional amendment whereby the president of the country would be elected by popular vote rather than by the parliament, even though his duties and powers would not be constitutionally enhanced or otherwise changed. The result had long-term consequences for Turkey's fragile democracy. Before the amendment, the parliament held the seat of power while the president was constitutionally expected to play a primarily symbolic role. When both the prime minister and the president were elected by popular vote, the president could claim more powers; the popular vote would confer a greater legitimacy to his office. This created a dual-legitimacy problem, leaving the parliamentary system structurally impaired. The authoritarian implications of this constitutional change manifested themselves after the 2014 presidential elections, when the president began to overstep the authority granted to him by the Constitution.

The second controversy between secularist and Islamist actors involved the headscarf issue. In 2008, when the government sought to change the Constitution so that the headscarf ban could be lifted and pious female students could attend universities wearing a headscarf, the public prosecutor filed a suit against the AKP in the Constitutional Court for undermining secularism. By then, opinion surveys indicated that about 80 percent of the population favored abolishing the ban, far more than the 47 percent that had voted for the AKP. The Court found the AKP guilty of anti-secular activities and imposed a financial penalty. This was a warning to the AKP that even though it had received almost half of the electoral vote, the secular elites would not allow the party to expand religious freedoms or allow a broader definition of secularism. The AKP learned the lesson that it had to take preemptive action to free itself from the constraints of the secular elites.

## **5. The Emergence of an Authoritarian Regime: Coalitions, Economic and Political Institutions**

As the AKP increased its popular support, it tried to eliminate the secularist opposition that sought to confine its power and threatened its existence. The process of containing the secular elites came along with backsliding. The incremental decline of democracy began as the separation of powers between the executive, the legislature, the judiciary, and the media, the fourth pillar of power, eroded. There were three critical interventions in this process. First, the government weakened the politically intrusive military. Then it attacked the mainstream media in opposition. Finally, it controlled the judiciary.

## **6. Weakening the Military and Instrumentalizing the Judiciary**

To prevent the military from meddling in politics and curbing the power of the elected government, the AKP collaborated with the Islamist Gülen community whose associates it had helped secure high-ranking positions in the police and the judiciary. The AKP-Gülen coalition was critical particularly in weakening the military tutelage over politics. Gülenist prosecutors, with the help of their allies in the police, accused the military of plotting a coup and staged two pivotal purge trials, named Ergenekon and Sledgehammer, to cleanse the army of its high ranking secularist officers. The Ergenekon case began in June 2007. More than 300 people including opposition politicians, journalists, policemen and high level generals were arrested. The verdict, delivered in August 2013, convicted more than 250 people, including the former commander of the Turkish armed forces, İlker Başbuğ. The Sledgehammer case began in 2010 and, in 2012, 331 of the accused received jail sentences (European Stability Initiative 2014).

Both cases exhibited arbitrariness. The indictments were full of inconsistencies, made use of forged documents showing coup plans that had been prepared on backdated computers and using software that did not yet exist at the time the plot was allegedly hatched (Doğan & Rodrik 2010). Officers who were away on duty outside the country were charged with active collaboration that assumed their physical presence on site. Ergenekon and Sledgehammer were compared to the Soviet-style show trials that had been used to mute the opposition (Tisdall 2012). Yet, the prime minister himself endorsed the trials, despite widespread knowledge about fabricated evidence, declaring himself “the personal prosecutor of these cases”.

In 2014, after the AKP- Gülen coalition broke down over power sharing, the Constitutional Court ruled that, in both trials, the rights of the defendants had been violated. All were released from prison, only to be retried and then they were duly acquitted. While greater civilian control of the military by the elected government would normally democratize a polity, in this case, it was a pyrrhic victory.

Both the military and the judiciary, in different ways, became victims of the rigged trials. The military was weakened as an institution and the high-ranking Kemalist officers were replaced by Gülenist officers who later led the coup attempt of July 2016. The trials also undermined the legitimacy of the judiciary which soon became a tool of the government. Trust in the judiciary was shaken. Without the threat of an interventionist military, and with a friendly judiciary, the government could ignore rule of law more easily.

## **7. Controlling the Media**

The second crucial step in Turkey's backslide was the attack against the mainstream media. Structural factors were crucial in the replacement of the secular media owners by the newly emerging pro-AKP bourgeoisie. Economic relations between the media owners and the state precipitated the control of the former by the latter. After the 1980s, a few large holding companies had come to own the major media outlets in the country. These large holdings had diverse business interests and depended on government credits or tenders for their profits. Media barons benefited from the opportunities the privatization projects and the public procurement process provided and struck profitable deals. In 2012, for example, the government issued 46 billion dollars' worth of contracts for which holding companies with media outlets also bid.

A major paradigmatic change in control over the media occurred when the government paralyzed the largest media group in the country, the Doğan group, one that was also in the energy, retail, industry and tourism sectors (Corke et al. 2014). In 2008, the Doğan group began exposing an Islamist embezzlement case that involved the illegal transfer of charity funds worth millions of Euros to the party and the Islamic movement. The prime minister intervened in the case with a vengeance and urged the public to boycott the Doğan media, including its *Hürriyet* newspaper, the most popular daily in the country. In 2009, the Treasury levied a half-billion dollar penalty for alleged tax evasion by the Doğan group on the 2006 sale of an asset carried out under the supervision of German and Turkish regulators. As a result, the group was forced to sell two of its newspapers, *Milliyet*, a highly popular

daily at the time, and *Vatan*, to pay its tax bill (Hürriyet Daily News 2009). Erdoğan Demirören, a government protégé, in energy, mining, construction, industry, tourism sectors bought both newspapers.<sup>1</sup>

In 2007, the *Sabah* newspaper was similarly sold to an AKP client because the owners were not able to produce a legal document dating back to 2001. The bid to buy *Sabah* was subsidized by state banks, and the CEO of Çalık Holding that bought the newspaper, was the prime minister's son-in-law. When the Çalık group wanted to re-sell the same newspaper, Prime Minister Erdoğan asked businessmen who received contracts from the government to “pool their resources” and buy the daily, and they complied, not to generate profits from the dailies but to use them for currying government favors. Since then, the pro-government newspapers have been referred to as the “pool media” by opposition groups. The pool media slavishly supported the government in return for protection and business privileges for the owners.

Besides the economic structure of the government-media relations, Prime Minister Erdoğan took it upon himself to cull unfriendly journalists and reshape the media. He would personally persecute journalists who criticized him or his party, and phone and instruct media owners, including those in the “pool media” he helped create, to fire them. Newspaper owners who sought government favor thus fired numbers of journalists and public opinion leaders because Erdoğan instructed so, including some who had supported Erdoğan as he made his way to power (Aydıntaşbaş 2009).<sup>2</sup> As the government controlled the media barons, the numbers of journalists in jail also hiked up. In this whirlwind of coercion and intimidation, journalists who had escaped being fired censured themselves in order to survive. The decline of free media obstructed any criticism of the government, which also meant the decline of civil liberties and accountability.

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2018, the Doğan group was pressured to sell the daily Hürriyet as well as all its other media assets to the Demirören group, thus bringing an end to mainstream media in the country.

<sup>2</sup> The journalists who were fired from their positions included prominent names such as Haluk Şahin, Nuray Mert, Can Dündar, Hasan Cemal, Kadri Gürses, Ruşen Çakır and Hidayet Tuksal.

## 8. Undermining the Secular Judiciary

The third step in backsliding was the increased government control over the judiciary. The judiciary, especially its high courts, was a meritocratic secular establishment rather than a more inclusionary representative institution (Belge 2006). The Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (Hakim ve Savcılar Yüksek Kurulu<sup>3</sup>, that was responsible for appointments and personnel affairs of the judiciary) recruited the majority of their members, based on merit, from the high courts, namely the Court of Cassation and the Council of State. Their members were not political appointees. This particular institutionalization of the judiciary had prevented majoritarian abuse in politics, but the high court judges upheld a narrow, contested interpretation of secularism and nationalism. In the 1990s, the Constitutional Court adjudicated on the publicly disputed closure of Islamic-rooted and Kurdish nationalist parties (Koğacıoğlu 2004). Later in 2008, it fined the AKP for attempting to repeal the ban on the wearing of headscarves in public institutions. Both the Council of State and the Constitutional Court handed down decisions in favor of the headscarf ban in Turkey.

The AKP thus perceived these courts as a potential threat to its existence and an impediment to its exercise of power. In the context of EU conditionality and with the imperative to democratize the country, the government prepared a constitutional amendment that provided for a radical restructuring of the composition of the CC and the HCJP and which was taken to a referendum in 2010. The new restructuring would allow for the greater influence of popularly elected governments rather than professional experts, namely the secular meritocracy, in these courts; hence, it could be seen as a democratizing act. The EU approved and promoted the amendment as democratic. In a lopsided campaign, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan used all the state resources at his disposal to advocate his case. He also intimidated those who opposed him, including the secular big-business association TUSIAD, for not making its vote public, warning that those who remained neutral would be “castaside” (Radikal 2010). The 2010 referendum, where 58% voted in favor of the change, was a turning point in the government’s relationship with the high courts and provided it the opportunity to pack the courts and undermine separation of powers (Kalaycıoğlu 2012).

The referendum opened the way for three critical changes. First, new laws would restrict tenure in the Constitutional Court to twelve years rather than until retirement age, thus making the judges more

---

<sup>3</sup> The name “High Council of Judges and Prosecutors” in 2017 became the “Council of Judges and Prosecutors”.

amenable to political influence. Second, the number of judges in the CC increased from 11 to 17 and those in the HCJP from 5 to 22. Third, lower-level judges and popularly elected majorities in the parliament or the government would have the power to decide on who would occupy these new seats. The members Court of Cassation and the Council of State appointed would be in the minority and the governments and parliamentary majorities would have more say in shaping these courts.

What began as an ostensibly democratizing move in the 2010 referendum was soon instrumentalized as a means of controlling the judiciary. After the referendum, Erdoğan duly placed his pious allies, some of whom were Gülenists, in the CC and the HCJP. The infamous coalition once again helped Erdoğan exploit the institutional weakness of the judiciary. With sitting judges outnumbered, he succeeded in eroding not only the secularist presence in the top judiciary, but also the separation of powers.

## **9. Escalating Challenges and Deepening Authoritarianism**

With these three critical interventions, the AKP neutralized the military, the media and the high courts. During the 2011 national elections, couched in this new political setting where coalitions, economic factors and the weaknesses of institutions mattered, the AKP claimed nearly 50 percent of the vote (Çarkoğlu 2012). In its third term in office, there was no independent state or civil society institution left to counterbalance its power. Erdoğan responded to the challenges coming from the political opposition (as manifested in the Gezi park occupation and, later that same year, from its former ally, the religious Gülen community), by encroaching on civil liberties, bolstering his own power in the process and progressively becoming more authoritarian.

In 2013, Erdoğan decided to replace the Gezi park in the central square of Istanbul with a shopping mall. The mall would also be a replica of the Ottoman military barracks that had been demolished during the early years of the Republic. There was a decision from the High Council for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage and also a court order against the project. Environmentalists, middle class youth, Alevis, feminists, LGBT groups, anti-capitalist Muslims, nationalist Kemalists and others who opposed the increasingly majoritarian and exclusionary rule in the country stood side by side and occupied the park. The government used brutal force to disperse the protestors. As the protests continued and spread across the country, eleven people died, close to 10 thousand were injured, and more than 3

thousand protesters were arrested. The protestors were persecuted; youtube and twitter were shut down, even if briefly.

Meanwhile, the AKP-Gülen coalition split over power-sharing within the state. They differed in their views on the Kurdish issue and Gülenists attempted, unsuccessfully, to prosecute the head of the National Intelligence Agency that, at the time, Erdoğan had instructed to initiate talks with Öcalan. In a pre-emptive move, the AKP government decided to close down the preparatory courses/centers for university entrance exams that Gülenists owned. These were an important source of revenue and places where the Gülenists cultivated new recruits. The Gülenists responded in time.

About six months after the Gezi protests, the Gülen affiliates in the police and the judiciary exposed a bribery case that implicated high-level bureaucrats, four cabinet ministers (who subsequently had to resign) and even the prime minister himself. The police confiscated millions of dollars in the houses of the accused. Erdoğan did not explicitly deny charges of bribery, but immediately attacked the Gülenist prosecutors and the police that he had once promoted. The ensuing war against Gülen further intensified arbitrary rule and institutional decay. Coalition with the Gülenists which helped unravel the military and the judiciary had initiated the process of democratic decline; breakup of the coalition deepened arbitrary rule.

Erdoğan accused the Gülenists of infiltrating the judiciary and the police with the aim of establishing a parallel state. He vowed to rid the state of “FETÖ”, his acronym for what he called the “Fethullah [Gülen] terrorist organization.” The government quickly amended the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors law eliminating whatever democratic features the 2010 version might have had and transferring the council’s powers to the minister of justice who re-appointed judges and began investigating those who were involved with the operation (Özbudun 2015, Esen 2016). Close to three thousand judges and prosecutors changed their position in 2014. The judiciary was thus deinstitutionalized and politicized as inexperienced and unqualified judges replaced others whose minimum tenure in their jobs had not even ended.

A similar purge took place within the police force. By the end of February 2014, about ten thousand police officers were re-assigned throughout Turkey. Others, like the Istanbul deputy police chief, were

dismissed. Institutional norms and rules eroded through these erratic transfers that were part of a feud between these coalition partners in power.

As the rule of law deteriorated, the state encroached on individual rights in new realms. In the spring of 2014, the parliament hastily passed a law which gave license to the National Intelligence Agency to engage in operations that would intrude on privacy, including through extended wiretapping rights, and provide the agency legal immunity in the encroachment of civil rights. Journalists who publish leaked intelligence would be liable to extended prison terms, thus restricting freedom of communication and weakening state accountability. Any judicial review of the Agency would require the consent of the prime minister.

Erdoğan was an important political actor in deepening democratic decline, and there was no countervailing institution within the state to check his power. The political opposition was also institutionally very weak with an inability to build the coalitions necessary to aggregate interests as a political party is expected to do. The main opposition party, the CHP, (Republican People's Party) vacillated between secularist nationalism and social democracy in defining its own ideology. Kemal Kılıçdaroglu, an ex-bureaucrat who led the party after 2010, could neither unify the dissenting groups within the party nor establish strong ties to organized civil society in a way that would help him mobilize a larger following among the electorate. It was unable to reach the young voters and its ambivalence towards the Kurdish issue enervated its stance. The party was not able to develop and present a credible economic program that would rival the one offered by the AKP. As a result, it was neither able to exploit the increasing authoritarianism of the AKP government, nor provide a well-conceived program of action to persuade the voters.

It was under these conditions that in 2014, a presidential election in Turkey's parliamentary system took place by popular vote. According to the Constitution, the powers of the president had to remain symbolic, but the institutions that could check the president had eroded. Under these conditions, Prime Minister Erdoğan was elected with almost 52 percent of the vote as the president of Turkey.

## **10. The Process of Institutionalizing One-Man Rule**

Erdoğan refused to be the symbolic president that the Constitution and the parliamentary system in Turkey at the time, expected him to be and he continued to be an important political actor, thus

institutionalizing his own personal rule. From the first day in his new position in 2014, he worked to change the parliamentary system into an authoritarian presidency. Exercising the powers of an elected prime minister rather than a president of a parliamentary system, he succeeded to do so in the referendum of April 2017.

After assuming the role of president of a parliamentary democracy in 2014, Erdoğan hand-picked Ahmet Davutoğlu for prime minister and personally designated several members of Davutoğlu's cabinet. He dictated the AKP platform for the 2015 general elections around the promise of a new constitution that would establish the presidential system Erdoğan envisaged. He campaigned in the June 2015 general elections as an AKP politician, using the resources and privileges of his new position rather than taking the non-partisan, neutral stance, stipulated by the Constitution.

Erdoğan had initiated a peace process with Kurds in 2009, and had taken for granted that Kurds would support his plan to move to a presidential system, with the expectation that he could advance their interests more swiftly if he were a president with executive power. However, he had mistakenly assumed that the pro-Kurdish HDP (People's Democracy Party) would support the authoritarian presidency he envisaged. The pro-Kurdish HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş publicly refused to support Erdoğan's bid for a presidential system and succeeded in curbing the Kurdish votes that the AKP was able to capture in previous elections as well as some secular CHP votes. The results were critical for the AKP as the HDP secured 13 percent of the vote, well above the 10 percent threshold, necessary to get into the parliament and the AKP votes dropped to a plurality of 41% making a coalition government a necessity.

Yet, Erdoğan prevented the AKP from forming a coalition with any party after the June 2015 elections to prevent his party from having to give concessions and lose even more votes in the near future. While he engineered a political impasse to force another election to regain the votes his party lost, he also benefited from a wave of terrorist activity by the PKK and ISID and the influx of Syrian refugees into Turkish cities that people expected a strong government to handle. In November, he called for another round of elections. In this atmosphere of political instability and violence, the AKP regained its 49.5 percent voter support. As an astute politician he had successfully strategized not to build a coalition that could lead to a loss of power. By then the elections were getting more and more skewed in favor of the incumbents. He continued his war against the media, the Gülen community, the Kurds,

the academics, and the secular middle class that could neither form a strong coalition nor institutionalize their opposition.

## **11. The Coup Attempt- Opportunity Space for Backsliding**

Meanwhile, the breakup of the AKP-Gülen coalition had implications for further decline of democracy in 2016. Gülenist officers who had infiltrated the military in earlier decades embarked on a failed coup d'état against the government on the evening of July 15, 2016. Those in senior positions in the military who were responsible for organizing and leading the coup attempt had replaced the top-level secular officers that had been convicted during the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer purge trials initiated by Gülenist prosecutors in 2007 and 2010 and defended by Erdoğan (Ergin 2016). After the coup attempt, the minister of defense announced that investigations undertaken by his ministry showed that for the past 14 years, military academy exam questions had been stolen by the Gülenists, a claim that Erdoğan had vehemently denied at the time. The Gülenists who had been allies against the secularist enemy came to be called as the Fetullah Terrorist Organization or FETÖ in its Turkish acronym.

After the coup attempt, the government declared a state of emergency which lasted until after Erdoğan changed the parliamentary system in 2017 and had himself elected the first president under the new regime in 2018. The state of emergency gave Erdoğan the opportunity to persecute not merely the Gülenists, but all opposition groups including academics and Kurds. About 10 thousand officers were discharged from the military, and more than 110 thousand civil servants, including police officers, were dismissed and banned from civil service for life. Close to 6 thousand academics, many without any links to Gülen, were expelled from their universities. 500 of these had only signed the Academics for Peace petition that urged the government to stop the war that escalated after the fall of 2015, many others were liberals or progressive scholars (Bilim Akademisi 2017).

The Ministry of National Education purged more than 30 thousand civil servants, including teachers and administrators. Acclaimed journalists who had long positioned themselves against the Gülen community, such as those in the secularist opposition newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, were arrested on charges of supporting not only FETÖ, but also the PKK. Eighteen TV channels, 24 radio stations, 15 press agencies, more than 50 newspapers, some of which supported the Kurdish cause but had no connection to the Gülen community, and numerous publishing houses were also closed down. Individuals who unwittingly happened to place part of their savings in the Gülenist-owned Bank Asya

were detained and investigated. The state seized nearly one thousand companies worth billions of dollars, because they were suspected to be associated with Gülen. The government also appointed trustees to replace elected mayors in 89 Kurdish municipalities. Amongst the more than 50 thousand people arrested after the coup attempt were the two co-leaders and eight other MPs of the Kurdish HDP (People's Democratic Party) and one MP from the main opposition CHP. In addition, the government cancelled the passports of at least 140 thousand individuals. Decrees with the force of law that could not be contested under the state of emergency thus allowed the executive branch to carry out a large-scale purge against its opposition, the secularists, the Kurds, as well as Gülenists.

The referendum of April 2017 that changed the parliamentary system in the country with a presidential system that gave extensive powers to the president took place under this state of emergency and widespread allegations of electoral fraud. Erdoğan won with a narrow and highly contested margin of 51 to 49 percent of the votes. The new constitution is incompatible with a liberal democracy because it has practically no institutional checks over the executive. The president as the chief executive in the country will form and supervise the cabinet, prepare the budget, appoint and remove high level civil servants, rule by decree orders, initiate emergency rule and call for new general elections when he wants. Most importantly, he will control the judiciary, by appointing the majority of the members of the high courts and the Council of Judges and Prosecutors. The parliamentary and presidential elections will have to take place on the same day to increase the chances that the same political party would win both the presidency and the parliament. In June 2018, with the first elections in the new presidential system, Erdoğan was elected president.

The war against his former coalition partner helped Erdoğan legitimize his increasingly illiberal measures to become the new president. During the state of emergency, he cultivated a new coalition with the nationalist party, MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi) and its leader Bahçeli that helped Erdoğan reach his goals both in the 2017 referendum, when regime change was brought to referendum and in the 2018 Presidential elections. In the fall of 2016, Erdoğan and Bahçeli agreed to act together to replace the existing parliamentary system. Later in April 2018 Bahçeli and Erdoğan moved the presidential/general elections scheduled for November 2019 forward to June 2018 hoping to get a quick victory before the impending economic crisis triggered by overspending, "growth at all costs prior to elections" and interest rates that were kept low on Erdoğan's orders. The new coalition Erdoğan had

with the nationalists helped him reach his goals. During summer of 2018, the economic crises hit the country.

## 12. Conclusion

Coalitions played a major role in democratic backsliding, but at different stages, different factors seem helpful in explaining democratic decline in Turkey. Agential factors, namely, provocative moves secular actors made, played a key role in activating the process of democratic backsliding. The secular and Islamist elites did not trust one another and acted to undermine each other. Later, political coalitions were crucial as the AKP-Gülen alliance allowed the AKP government to prevent the military from political intervention. Next Erdoğan dismantled the media that could surveil the government. At this stage, economic factors, namely the economic structure of the government-media relations seemed to be the dominant factor explaining the fall of the media, its censure and eventual control. Similarly the new “pool media” could replace the older more critical secular media holdings because of economic ties they had with the government and the economic factors that allowed them to become political actors under conditions of economic globalization. Finally, the weaknesses of the judiciary as a political institution, with a meritocratic membership, can help explain its fall under an alleged challenge for further democratization. Ironically, the collapse of the AKP-Gülen alliance also contributed to further backsliding in the Turkish case, as both the corruption scandal exposed by the Gülen police and judges as well as the coup attempt of its military officers provided the AKP government the opportunity for legitimizing further illiberal measures. Finally, Erdoğan cultivated a coalition with the nationalist MHP to secure the 2017 and 2018 victories for his authoritarian turn.

The Turkish case shows that political actors, economic relations, strategic coalitions and weakness of political institutions, including the opposition parties and the judiciary, all contributed to democratic backsliding. Reversal of backsliding is not in sight. The fragmented opposition has to form coalitions, uphold charismatic political actors, offer a viable economic program, cultivate institutions, both to mobilize the electorate and entrench separation of powers, for any democratic gain. A period of muddling through is what is in sight.

## References

- Akademisi, Bilim, "Bilim Akademisi Akademik Özgürlükler Raporu, 2016-2017", August 9, 2017.
- Arat Yeşim and Şevket Pamuk, *Turkey Between Democracy and Authoritarianism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Aydıntaş, Asli, "Turkey's war on the Press", *Wall Street Journal*, September 18, 2009.
- Belge, Ceren, "Friends of the court: The republican alliance and selective activism of the constitutional court of Turkey." *Law & Society Review* 40, 3, 2006, 653-692.
- Çarkoğlu, Ali, "Economic evaluations vs. ideology: Diagnosing the sources of electoral change in Turkey, 2002–2011", *Electoral Studies* 31, 3, 2012, 513-521.
- Çarkoğlu, Ali, "Ideology or economic pragmatism: profiling Turkish voters in 2007", *Turkish Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2008, 317–344.
- Corke, Susan, et al., "Democracy in Crises: Corruption, Media and Power in Turkey", A Freedom House Special Report, February 2014, p.8, <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Turkey%20Report%20-%202014-3-14.pdf>
- Doğan, Pınar and Dani Rodrik. "How Turkey Manufactured a Coup Plot." *Foreign Policy* 6, 2010.
- European Stability Initiative, "Kafka's World and the Trial of Mehmet O." 24 July 2014, [https://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document\\_ID=153](https://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=153). Last accessed August 22, 2018.
- Ergin, Sedat, "O Albaylar gitti, darbeciler geldi" *Hürriyet*, July 23, 2016; Ezgi Başaran, "Thinking Gülen is a peaceful scholar is a huge mischaracterization", *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 28, 2016.
- Hürriyet Daily News*, "Pure and simple attack on the press in Turkey" February 19, 2009.
- Kalaycıoğlu, Ersin, "Kulturkampf in Turkey: the constitutional referendum of 12 September 2010", *South European Society and Politics*, 17, 1, 2012, 1-22.

Koğacıoğlu, Dicle, "Progress, unity, and democracy: dissolving political parties in Turkey", *Law & Society Review* 38, 3, 2004, 433-462.

Nasr, Vali, "The Rise of" Muslim Democracy" *Journal of Democracy* 16.2, 2005, p. 23.

Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2018*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>.

Özbudun, Ergun, "Turkey's Judiciary and the Drift Toward Competitive Authoritarianism", *The International Spectator* 50, 2, 2015, 42-55; Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü. "Rising competitive authoritarianism in Turkey", *Third World Quarterly*, 2016, 1-26.

*Radikal*, "TUSIAD'a Uyarı: Bertaraf Olursunuz", August 18, 2010.

Tisdall, Simon, "Turkey's Sledgehammer Court Verdict: Justice or Soviet Style Show Trial", *Guardian*, September 25, 2012.

Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. "Unwelcome change: Coming to terms with democratic backsliding." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 93-113.