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Erdogan's Turkey

Politics, Populism and Democratisation Dilemmas

Md. Muddassir Quamar

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Democratisation Dilemmas

MD. MUDDASSIR QUAMAR



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Md. Muddassir Quamar

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ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)
ANAP	Anavatan Partisi (Motherland Party)
AP	Adalet Partisi (Justice Party)
CEC	Commission of the European Communities
CHP	Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party)
CUP	Ýttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti (Committee of Union and Progress)
DGM	Devlet Güvenlik Mahkemeleri (State Security Courts)
DP	Demokratik Partisi (Democratic Party)
DSP	Demokratik Sol Parti (Democratic Left Party)
DYP	Dođru Yol Partisi (True Path Party)
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EU	European Union
FETO	Fethullahçi Terör Örgütü (Fethullah Terrorist Organisation)
HSYK	Hâkimlerve Savcýlar Yüksek Kurulu (High Council of Judges and Prosecutors)
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
IHS	Imam Hatip Schools

IMF	International Monetary Fund
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq)
MGK	Milli Güvenlik Kurulu (National Security Council)
MHP	Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party)
MSP	Millî Selâmet Partisi (National Salvation Party)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
RP	Refah Partisi (Welfare Party)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
TGS	Turkish General Staff or Chief of General Staff of the Republic of Turkey
TSK	Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri (Turkish Armed Forces)
UAE	United Arab Emirates
US	United States
YOK	Yükseköğretim Kurulu (Council of Higher Education)
YSK	Yüksek Seçim Kurulu (Supreme Electoral Council)

INTRODUCTION

Turkey is an important country in West Asia and has been considered a “democratic model” in the Muslim world for its ability to give voice to the people and offer a framework for participatory politics.¹ For a considerable part of its modern history, beginning with the establishment of the republic in 1923, the Turkish political system was dominated by Kemalism and was directly or indirectly ruled by the military. The two important components of Kemalism, nationalism and secularism, were ideas acquired due to exposure to Western political thought that inspired the founders of the Turkish republic after the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. Since the broader Turkish population was yet to be exposed to such ideas, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the architect of modern Turkey, imposed these ideals on the state and society after resurrecting the remnants of the Ottoman Empire as Republic of Turkey.² Kemalism, thus, remained the dominant ideology of the state and politics and was safeguarded by the military till almost the end of the twentieth century.

The rise of moderate Islamists towards the later part of the twentieth century, and especially the coming to power of the Adalet ve Kalkınma

¹ The issue of “Turkey model” has been thoroughly debated among scholars both within and outside Turkey and the early years of Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) rule are considered to be a successful experiment as far as providing a direction for political and economic development in West Asia is concerned. For a detailed discussion, see Meliha Benli Altunısık, “The Turkish Model and Democratization in the Middle East”, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 2005, 27(1–2): 45–63. Also see Md. Muddassir Quamar, “AKP, the Arab Spring and the Unravelling of the Turkey ‘Model’”, *Strategic Analysis*, 2018, 42(4): 364–76.

² Soner Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

Partisi (AKP; Justice and Development Party) in 2002, challenged the Kemalist narrative. Partly, it was a result of the society's aspirations for expression of their cultural ethos and heritage in public life and partly, a degree of fatigue of military coups d'état.³ Moreover, the larger process of democratic consolidation was in a way responsible for the “counter-cultural revolution” that brought the AKP to power. Democratic consolidation created the political space for regular free and fair elections, unlike the general trend in much of the Middle East. Consequently, the two principal groups, namely, secular nationalists and Islamists, accepted the need for elections and rule of law as the way forward towards democratisation.⁴

As Turkey incorporated free and fair elections in the political process, it acquired a unique position in the Middle East for democratisation. The country did not descend into absolutism despite being governed by a “moderate” Islamist AKP and a history of military interventions. Also, the process of democratisation in Turkey set it apart in a region where states and political systems are not known for their democratic credentials.

However, the growing authoritarian behaviour of Recep Tayyip Erdogan—who has ruled the country since 2003, first as prime minister (until 2014) and later as president (2014 till date)—has raised serious concerns about the future of Turkey and the challenges to democratisation. There have been several developments in the 18 years of Erdogan's rule—described by some as a “neo-Ottoman Sultan”⁵—that indicate the growing sense of dissatisfaction among a section of the society. Incidents, such as the Ergenekon trials (2008–13), the Gezi Park protests (2013) and the July 2016 failed coup, underline the disquiet

³ Mehmet Bardakci, “Coup Plots and the Transformation of Civil–Military Relations in Turkey under AKP Rule”, *Turkish Studies*, 2013, 14(3): 411–28.

⁴ Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey*.

⁵ Soner Cagaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017.

among sections of the society, intelligentsia as well as the military. These have led some to underscore the threat of the wheels of history turning back Turkey to the era of political unrest and military interventions.⁶

Unarguably, the AKP government in Turkey has had a significant impact on the democratisation process. In terms of smooth transition of power through elections and the presence of a strong opposition, Turkey has done well as one can witness continued political challenge posed by opposition leaders to Erdogan and AKP's dominance. While the secular nationalist Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP; Republican People's Party) has become weaker, it is far from being an exhausted force—as evident from the 2019 local elections wherein it snatched a number of key mayoral positions from the AKP. In addition, several other political parties have emerged during this period, representing various groups and ideologies and posing challenge to Erdogan's dominance.⁷ Simultaneously, there are other issues, such as stifling of freedom of speech and media, compromising the independence of judiciary, targeting of the opposition and elected Kurdish representatives and increasing concentration of power in one individual.

This posits questions on the future of democratisation in Turkey, a country that has navigated a long and painful process, with the military, the secular elites, the civil society, especially in the judiciary and academia, as well as some Islamists leaders playing a significant role.⁸ If

⁶ Nil S. Satana, "Transformation of the Turkish Military and the Path to Democracy", *Armed Forces and Society*, 2008, 34(3): 357–88.

⁷ Barcin Yinanc, "The Chances for New Political Parties in Turkey", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 11 July 2019, at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/barcin-yinanc/the-chances-for-new-political-parties-in-turkey-144877>, accessed 12 July 2019.

⁸ Rumel Dahiya, "Changing Face of Turkey", *Strategic Analysis*, 2011, 35(1): 17–25; Necip Yildiz, "The Relation between Socioeconomic Development and Democratization in Contemporary Turkey", *Turkish Studies*, 2011, 12(1): 129–48; Ramazan Kiliç, "Critical Junctures, Catalysts, and Democratic Consolidation in Turkey", *Political Science Quarterly*, 2014, 129(2): 293–318.

democratisation, as argued by Laurence Whitehead, is understood “as a complex, long-term, dynamic, and open-ended process” that “consists of progress towards a more rule-based, more consensual, and more participatory type of politics”, then Turkey has a long way to go.⁹ However, if elections and smooth transition of power are considered an important component of democratisation of the polity, then Turkey certainly has made some progress. Since 1982, with a brief interjection in 1997, Turkey has witnessed free and fair elections.¹⁰ At the same time, the constitutional process did gain strength through the 1990s due to the introduction of a number of changes in the 1982 Constitution, leading to bolstering of rule of law, human rights and press freedom.¹¹

A key component of the debate on democratisation is Islamisation. Some argue that the process of democratisation has been strengthened by “incorporating Islam into the secular state structure”.¹² Such arguments underline that the AKP, despite its Islamist leaning, has not tried to alter the constitutional arrangements and has maintained the sanctity of elections. It has also been argued that it is due to the constitutional process and regular free and fair elections, accompanied

⁹ Laurence Whitehead, *Democratization: Theory and Experience*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 22–23.

¹⁰ In recent years, allegations of rigging and manipulation of ballot have been raised, especially during the 2017 referendum and 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections. For details, see Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *ODIHR Election Observation Mission: Final Report: Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, 24 June 2018*, at https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/4/397046_0.pdf, accessed 4 June 2020 and *OSCE/ODIHR Limited Referendum Observation Mission Final Report: Constitutional Referendum, 16 April 2017*, at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/2/324816.pdf>, accessed 4 June 2020.

¹¹ Ergun Özbudun, “Democratization Reforms in Turkey, 1993–2004”, *Turkish Studies*, 2007, 8(2): 179–96.

¹² Yildiz Atasoy, *Turkey, Islamists and Democracy: Transition and Globalization in a Muslim State*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2005, p. 8.

with the rise of moderate Islamists, that one has seen the emergence of a democratic Turkey.¹³

The coming to power of the AKP in 2002 and Erdogan's ability to overcome the military and gain wider support for his government underlined the broadening of the political spectrum and civilian control over the state.¹⁴ However, simultaneously, the changing nature of the AKP rule and the growing authoritarian nature of the government, reflected in continuous assault on press freedom and widespread violations of human rights, threatens democratic slide, probably undoing the years of progress towards democratisation.¹⁵ There are also the questions about the continued marginalisation and increasing assault on the democratic rights of the Kurds who have for long complained of discrimination, with a section of them revolting against the state in the form of the militant Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK; Kurdistan Workers' Party).¹⁶

¹³ Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, "Islam and Democratization in Turkey: Secularism and Trust in a Divided Society", *Democratization*, 2009, 16(6): 1194–213; Istar B. Gözaydin, "The Fethullah Gülen Movement and Politics in Turkey: A Chance for Democratization or a Trojan Horse?", *Democratization*, 2009, 16(6): 1214–236.

¹⁴ Özbudun, "Democratization Reforms in Turkey, 1993–2004"; Ergun Özbudun and Ömer Faruk Gençkaya, *Democratization and the Politics of Constitution-Making in Turkey*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009; Mehmet Ozkan, "Turkey, Islamic Politics and the 'Turkish Model'", *Strategic Analysis*, 2013, 37(5): 534–38.

¹⁵ Yüksel Taskin, "Hegemonizing Conservative Democracy and the Problems of Democratization in Turkey: Conservatism Without Democrats?", *Turkish Studies*, 2013, 14(2): 292–310; Menderes Çınar and Çağkan Sayin, "Reproducing the Paradigm of Democracy in Turkey: Parochial Democratization in the Decade of Justice and Development Party", *Turkish Studies*, 2014, 15(3): 365–85; Fait Muedini, "The Politics between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gülen Movement in Turkey: Issues of Human Rights and Rising Authoritarianism", *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 2015, 12(1): 99–122.

¹⁶ Gokhan Bacik and Bezen Balamir Coskun, "The PKK Problem: Explaining Turkey's Failure to Develop a Political Solution", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2011, 34(3): 248–65; Nil S. Satana, "The Kurdish Issue in June 2011 Elections: Continuity or Change in Turkey's Democratization?", *Turkish Studies*, 2012, 13(2): 169–89.

Then, there are questions about the impact of an erratic neighbourhood policy on domestic politics. Turkey's regional ambitions, described as "neo-Ottomanism", have the potential to pitch it in a complex and insurmountable geopolitical struggle with other regional powers in the Middle East that can undo years of democratisation at home.¹⁷ Many have underlined that though it is important for Ankara to focus on the eastern neighbours for economic development and enhancing regional credentials, the false idea of having a strategic leverage vis-à-vis Syria, Palestine and Iraq has created a major problem for the Turkish republic, pitching it against almost everyone in the neighbourhood.¹⁸ Turkey's regional ambitions have boomeranged in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis, exposing its vulnerabilities, and this poses a significant challenge for its political system and the leadership.

The emergence of "moderate Islamist" AKP and its ability to gain power through a free and fair election in 2002 was considered an important development towards democratisation in Turkey. Subsequently, the AKP was able to return to power in 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2018. Though questions about monopolisation of political

¹⁷ Ömer Taspinar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism", Carnegie Papers, No. 10, September 2008, Washington, DC, at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10_taspinar_final.pdf, accessed 25 July 2017; Shashank Joshi and Aaron Stein, "Not Quite 'Zero Problems'", *The RUSI Journal*, 2013, 158(1): 28–38; Aaron Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order*, London: RUSI, 2014; Fatma Müge Göçek, *The Transformation of Turkey: Redefining State and Society from the Ottoman Empire to the Modern Era*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011; Sejoud Karmash, *The Road to Modern Turkey: The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism*, Lake Forest, Illinois: Lake Forest College, 2012; Ramazan Kilingç, "International Pressure, Domestic Politics, and the Dynamics of Religious Freedom: Evidence from Turkey", *Comparative Politics*, 2014, 46(2): 127–45.

¹⁸ Ömer Taspinar, "The Three Strategic Visions of Turkey", Brookings US–Europe Analysis Series, No. 50, 8 March 2011, at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0308_turkey_taspinar.pdf, accessed 25 July 2017; Emel Parlar Dal, "The Transformation of Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Illusion or Awakening?", *Turkish Studies*, 2012, 13(2): 245–67.

space by the AKP have been raised since 2013, the April 2017 constitutional referendum to change the administration to a presidential system is considered the ultimate sign towards democratic slide. Allegations of rigging of the votes and crackdown on media and civil society, both in the run-up to the referendum as well as the 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, have convinced academics, analysts and observers that Turkey is on the path to authoritarianism.¹⁹ It raises critical questions about Turkey's future, especially taking into account the fact that AKP's rise to power was a result of the democratic opening experienced in Turkey since the 1980s.

However, the autocratic attitude of a leader or a regime would be a narrow way of defining democratisation, whereby the authoritarian turn of the ruling party or individual ruler can be construed as end of democracy. While the process of democratisation might encounter a phase of alteration, the situation can be turned around in case of change in government or leadership that decides to follow a different policy. Given the chequered history of democracy in Turkey, it would be difficult to fathom a quick turnaround, but slow and gradual progress cannot be ruled out.

In this monograph, three factors have been studied to examine the progress or digression in democratisation in Turkey: the strengthening or weakening of political and constitutional institutions; the status of civil–military relations; and the widening or narrowing of public sphere. These three issues acquire more significance in the Turkish case because for greater part of its history, Turkey was under direct or indirect military rule wherein constitutional process had become dysfunctional and political institutions had come under military control. Moreover, increasingly, the questions on assault on press freedom and shrinking of public space underline the need for a systematic analysis of these factors in order to assess the challenges for democratisation in Turkey.

¹⁹ Muedini, "The Politics between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gülen Movement in Turkey"; Yusuf Sarfati, "How Turkey's Slide to Authoritarianism Defies Modernization Theory", *Turkish Studies*, 2017, 18(3): 395–415; Cagaptay, *The New Sultan*.

CHAPTERISATION

Within the framework of contemporary debates on democratisation, the monograph examines the developments in Turkey during the 18 years of AKP's rule (2002–20) and analyses the progress or reversals as far as democratisation of the political system is concerned. Further, it identifies three major challenges that Turkey faces regarding democratisation. Comprising five chapters, including introduction and conclusion, this monograph examines three aspects of Turkish politics in three separate chapters.

After this introductory chapter, Chapter 2, “Politics of Change à la AKP”, discusses the way political system has evolved in the years since the coming to power of the AKP. One of the key aspects it examines is the process of constitutional reforms that has paved the way for Erdogan to concentrate power in his hands and disregard the democratic ideal of checks and balances. The chapter also discusses aspects of religious–secular divide and foreign policy of the AKP that impacts the domestic political situation. It underlines the growing authoritarian nature of the AKP government in addition to other domestic problems that pose serious challenges to democratisation. Nonetheless, the chapter notes that the continued adherence to rule of law, regular free and fair elections and the expansion of the public sphere provide hope for the future.

Chapter 3, “Military, Back in the Barracks?”, examines the evolution of civil–military relations under AKP within the historical context of the influence of the armed forces in politics. It underlines that by successfully pursuing a policy of overcoming the military's influence in politics, the AKP government helped in advancing the democratic process. However, the 2016 coup attempt indicates that the military, or sections of it, remains dissatisfied and has the potential to disrupt the political process.

Chapter 4, “Redefining the Public Sphere”, analyses one of the key aspects of the democratisation dilemma, that is, of a public sphere dominated by one ideology. It reflects on the historical evolution of the Turkish public sphere as state-oriented or state-aligned and how, through coercion and co-option, the AKP has been able to establish a hegemonic public sphere marginalising non-AKP public opinion. The

chapter, however, argues that despite a hegemonic public sphere and concentration of power in the hands of Erdogan, the political system has space for expression of dissenting voices aided by a competitive electoral system.

The final chapter sums up the findings of the study and underlines the three most important challenges to democratisation in Turkey.

POLITICS OF CHANGE À LA AKP

The coming to power of the AKP after November 2002 parliamentary elections was no accident. Turkey, by this time, had gone through an arduous and long process of political churn in search of a “harmonious” coexistence between its two seemingly contradictory pasts—Ottoman-Islamic heritage and Kemalist-secular history. The idea was to find a governance model that could lead the republic to political stability, economic growth and social progress. In many ways, the electoral victory of the AKP and coming to power of Erdogan were considered, at least in the early years—precisely, the first two terms of the AKP government—to be the beginning of an era of this elusive “harmonious” coexistence.

With the benefit of hindsight, it was not to be. As argued by many, political developments chart their own course and in the case of Turkey, the political situation seems to be unravelling, as it had on several occasions in the past,¹ to create chaos, abuse of power and suppression of dissent. A variety of factors are responsible for the turmoil, but the most important is the politics of change being pursued by the AKP. Many commentators and analysts have termed this as the “counter-cultural revolution”, while others call it “Islamisation”.²

¹ Turkey has witnessed a number of political upheavals in the past, especially since the first military coup in 1960. The military coups were repeated in 1971 and 1980; a soft coup took place in 1997. Even before, for nearly a quarter century since its foundation, Turkey had remained under one-party rule. For a detailed reading of modern Turkey’s political history, see Fatma Müge Göçek, *The Transformation of Turkey: Redefining State and Society from the Ottoman Empire to the Modern Era*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011; William Hale, *Turkish Politics and the Military*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

² Nur Yalman, “On Cultural Revolutions: Observations on Myth and History in Turkey”, Goody Lecture 2017, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, at <https://www.eth.mpg.de/4663233/>

In addition to sharpening the political divide, AKP's politics of change has led to series of protests, especially by the urban youth. While the AKP tolerated the initial attempts by the "deep state"³ to undermine its government, it became agitated when faced with unrest among the youth. Further, as he gained confidence after two successive electoral victories, Prime Minister Erdogan was no longer ready to accept any form of dissent and cracked down on journalists and academics for being openly critical of his government.⁴ This, in turn, led to allegations of authoritarianism against Erdogan. A number of political developments since 2013 Gezi Park protests provide credence to such allegations.

Notably, the crackdown by the Erdogan government has not succeeded in forcing the opposition into submission. The clearest example of this came in April 2019 municipal elections when the AKP could not retain mayoral positions in several cities. The AKP, which was contesting the elections in alliance with the ultra-nationalist Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP; Nationalist Movement Party), could retain its hold on only 50 mayoral seats out of 81 on the offer in provincial capitals. Significantly, it lost the seat of mayors in three of the largest cities of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir.⁵

Within the debate on democratisation, political developments in Turkey under the AKP underline a picture of stark realities. On the one hand,

Goody_Lecture_2017.pdf, accessed 30 July 2019; Soner Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

³ The deep state in Turkish case comprised of the military, the judiciary and the secular elites. For further reading, see Merve Kavakci, "Turkey's Test with its Deep State", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 2009, 20(4): 83–97.

⁴ Zia Weise, "How did Things Get so Bad for Turkey's Journalists?", *The Atlantic*, 23 August 2018, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/destroying-free-press-erdogan-turkey/568402/> accessed 31 July 2019.

⁵ Yüksek Seçim Kurulu (YSK; Supreme Electoral Council), at <http://www.ysk.gov.tr/en/main-page>, accessed 30 July 2019.

there are allegations of a growing authoritarian leader who has used constitutional amendments to consolidate power in his hands and weaken the institutionalised checks and balances on the executive.⁶ Simultaneously, one cannot deny the fact that the emergence of the AKP was a consequence of the larger process of democratisation and that the AKP, despite the authoritarian turn in Erdogan's behaviour, remains adherent to core principles of the republic and its Constitution.⁷

These stark and opposing realities generate the main dilemmas for the polity and while it is easier to put Turkey within one or the other bracket, it is difficult to understand the complexities of contemporary politics. Therefore, it is important to recognise that the Turkish polity has come a full circle from the days of a “secular cultural revolution” to a “counter-cultural revolution”.⁸ Likewise, it is important to note that the polity has come a long way from the days of a single-party rule to a multi-party system. In the process, three important aspects—political institutions, religious–secular divide and foreign policy—have been seriously affected, casting doubts and raising questions on democratisation.

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

In the last two decades, the political institutions in Turkey—the executive or government; the legislature or Grand National Assembly of Turkey (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi); and the judiciary or higher courts—have gone through reforms and changes to the advantage of the ruling party. The first of the constitutional reforms was approved in 2004. It was largely an exercise in response to the need for reducing influence of military in politics and with regard to restoration of democratic

⁶ Yusuf Sarfati, “How Turkey's Slide to Authoritarianism Defies Modernization Theory”, *Turkish Studies*, 2017, 18(3): 395–415

⁷ Virginia H. Aksan, “Ottoman to Turk: Continuity and Change”, *International Journal*, 2006, 61(1): 19–38.

⁸ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; Yalman, “On Cultural Revolutions”.

rights and constitutional guarantees for the elected representatives.⁹ The most important factor for political reforms pursued during the first term of AKP government (2002–7) was Turkey's quest for European Union (EU) accession, which the AKP had adopted as part of its manifesto and considered significant for economic growth as well as consolidation of its own political gains.¹⁰

However, after returning to power in 2007, the AKP initiated a number of constitutional amendments that pushed a partisan agenda. For example, to resolve the constitutional crisis over candidacy of Abdullah Gul as president, the AKP introduced a constitutional amendment that was approved through a referendum in October 2007, resulting in the provision of direct presidential elections.¹¹ A number of other amendments were introduced subsequently, targeting various aspects of the Turkish polity, but the most important and far-reaching, and hence controversial and polarising, was approved in April 2017.

The reforms introduced in 2017 were significant because the ruling AKP was able to change Turkey's 94-year-old parliamentary system of governance, being followed since 1923, to presidential form.¹² The process had started much earlier when, in the 2007 amendments, the AKP government had introduced the idea of direct presidential elections coming into effect in 2014.¹³ Until then, the president was elected by

⁹ Arzu Guler and Cemal A. Bolucek, "Motives for Reforms on Civil–Military Relations in Turkey", *Turkish Studies*, 2016, 17(2): 251–71.

¹⁰ Vahap Coskun, "Constitutional Amendments under the Justice and Development Party Rule", *Insight Turkey*, 2013, 15(4): 95–113.

¹¹ Ergun Özbudun and Ömer Faruk Genççaya, *Democratization and the Politics of Constitution-Making in Turkey*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009.

¹² Ozan Ahmet Cetin, Muhammed Lutfi Turkcan, Nurhayat Kizilkan, Edebali Murat, Akca Semanur Pekkendir and Muhammed Masuk Yildiz, *Turkey's Constitutional Reform: A Review of Constitutional History, Current Parliamentary System and Proposed Presidential System*, TRT World Report No. 004, February 2017, Istanbul: TRT World Research Centre, p. 3.

¹³ Coskun, "Constitutional Amendments under the Justice and Development Party Rule".

the members of Büyük Millet Meclisi (Grand National Assembly), the Turkish Parliament. The process of transforming the system of government to presidential one was completed after a referendum and came into effect with the election of Erdogan as president in June 2018.¹⁴

PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM

Turkey has had its share of political challenges due to blatant introduction of constitutional amendments to the advantage of the ruling party. However, the 2017 constitutional amendment was unique as it changed the nature of the executive by merging the positions of head of state and head of government into one. Thus putting the power entirely in the hands of one person to be directly elected by the people. Arguably, this was done to facilitate better governance and speedy decision making. The AKP and its supporters underlined that the division of power into two offices—president and prime minister—had been a major hurdle in the economic development of Turkey as it hindered and delayed decision making.¹⁵

This was not a new argument. In the past too, political leaders had expressed the need for reforms to strengthen the executive or government's hands to enable it to take quick decisions on matters of immediate importance. For example, in the 1970s, Necmettin Erbakan-led Millî Selâmet Partisi (MSP; National Salvation Party) which at the time was part of the coalition government had proposed presidential system for a more efficient public administration. Similarly, in 1979, the MHP leader, Alparslan Türkeş, reportedly supported presidential system in his 1979 book.¹⁶ However, with regard to the 2017 constitutional amendment, the opposition and sections of civil society

¹⁴ Umut Uras, "Erdogan Wins Re-election in Historic Turkish Polls", *Al Jazeera*, 25 June 2018, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/erdogan-declares-victory-historic-turkish-elections-180624210756525.html>, accessed 31 July 2019.

¹⁵ Cetin et al., *Turkey's Constitutional Reform*, p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

alleged that the changes would confer extraordinary powers upon one office and that it was basically aimed at fulfilling Erdogan's hunger for power.¹⁷ Thus, it was argued that Erdogan's unwillingness to remain a figurative head was the main trigger for proposing the constitutional amendment.¹⁸

Notwithstanding the fierce debate and strong opposition both within the Grand National Assembly and in the public, the constitutional amendment was approved in the Parliament and the AKP inched ahead to win the referendum on 16 April 2017 by a slim margin, with about 51 per cent votes in favour. However, there were allegations of rigging of votes and unfair practices to the advantage of the ruling party. The most serious issue was regarding the counting of 1.5–2.5 million unstamped ballots, which the opposition demanded should be made invalid as per the law. The Yüksek Seçim Kurulu (YSK; Supreme Electoral Council), however, rejected the claims that such a large number of ballot papers could have been forged, and hence did not invalidate these votes.¹⁹ Given that the margin of difference between the votes in favour and against was less than two million, the issue became controversial, leading many observers to point to chances of electoral malpractice.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁸ Ferhat Gurini, "Changes to Turkey's Electoral Laws have Increased the Potential for Electoral Fraud", *Carnegie Sada*, 21 June 2018, at <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76656>, accessed 20 June 2019; Md. Muddassir Quamar, "Turkish Referendum: Will it lead to Autocratic Rule?", *IDSIA Comment*, 20 April 2017, at https://idsa.in/idsacomments/turkish-referendum-will-it-lead-to-autocratic-rule_mmquamar_200417, accessed 5 August 2019.

¹⁹ "Defence of 'Unstamped votes' by Supreme Election Council Chair, Sadi Güven", *Cumhuriyet*, 17 April 2017, at <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/defence-of-unstamped-votes-by-supreme-election-council-chair-sadiguven-722677>, accessed 17 April 2017.

²⁰ OSCE, *OSCE/ODIHR Limited Referendum Observation Mission Final Report: Constitutional Referendum, 16 April 2017*, at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/2/324816.pdf>, accessed 4 June 2020, pp. 21–22.

Besides, the provisions of the amendment package attracted serious criticism within Turkey, including the opposition party leaders, intellectuals and independent media, as well as from international observers. The criticism pertained to a number of aspects. First, it was argued that the amendment was a bid by Erdogan to stay in power for lifetime. This was not without any basis, especially after Erdogan's election as president under the amended provisions in the 24 June 2018 presidential elections, which he won by a clear margin receiving 52.6 per cent votes.²¹

Second, it was argued that the new system vested extraordinary powers in the presidency. The president would not only be the head of state and of government according to the amendment, but also had the power to appoint and dismiss all government officials, that is, complete control over bureaucracy, and the power to appoint judges, which meant control over judiciary.²² Moreover, the amended provisions gave power to the president to dissolve the Parliament under certain circumstances. The president also had the power to issue decrees in social and economic areas, which meant some legislative powers as well. Though the Parliament had the power to override the decrees in certain circumstances, it did not take away the fact that the new presidency could have almost absolute control over the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. Hence, many termed this as a "super-presidency".²³

These were serious criticisms, but the AKP and its allies countered by arguing that such powers were not unprecedented and were necessary for the president to function effectively as the head. However, in reality, these are difficult to explain in a system which does not provide strong

²¹ Uras, "Erdogan Wins Re-election in Historic Turkish Polls".

²² Oya Yegen, "Constitutional Changes under the AKP Government of Turkey", *Journal of Constitutional Law (TrCR)*, January 2017, 1: 70–84.

²³ Barin Kayaođlu, *A Farewell to the West?: Turkey's Possible Pivot in the Aftermath of the July 2016 Coup Attempt*, The Hague, the Netherlands: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2017, p. 18.

checks and balances for the executive. That is where the third and most important part of the criticism gains relevance. One of the provisions in the amended articles was that the president can be the leader of a political party.²⁴ This effectively changed the longstanding Turkish tradition of the president being the symbol of neutrality and national unity.

The possibility of a party gaining both the parliamentary majority and its nominee getting elected as president was alarming for the opposition groups, intellectuals and analysts.²⁵ This fear came true when Erdogan was elected president in 2018 and the AKP, in alliance with MHP, gained majority in the National Assembly. Currently, President Erdogan is effectively in control of both the executive as president and the legislature as head of the AKP. In other words, after the 2018 elections, Erdogan is at the helm of the state, the government, as well as the Parliament as the leader of the ruling AKP. Thus, the possibility of an autocratic dictatorship, as feared by the opposition and the international community and arguably desired by Erdogan himself, has come to fruition.²⁶

CHANGES IN THE JUDICIARY

Over the years, the AKP government has introduced substantial judicial reforms. For the AKP, the primary motive behind introducing judicial reforms was to neutralise attempts by the opposition and the elites to derail its political ascendance. The opposition and intelligentsia were challenging all major government decisions in the Constitutional Court

²⁴ Sinan Ekim and Kemal Kirisci, "The Turkish Constitutional Referendum, Explained", Brookings, 13 April 2017, at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/04/13/the-turkish-constitutional-referendum-explained/>, accessed 15 February 2019.

²⁵ Yegen, "Constitutional Changes under the AKP Government of Turkey".

²⁶ Soner Cagaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017.

that, allegedly in collusion with the military and the opposition, was ruling against the government.²⁷ For instance, there were questions about judicial activism and collaboration among the Constitutional Court, CHP and military to prevent the election of AKP nominee, Abdullah Gul, as president.²⁸ Though Gul eventually became president, such incidents proved to the AKP the need for judicial reforms and it introduced the first major amendment in 2010. It was a 26-article constitutional amendment package that changed the composition of both the Constitutional Court and the Hâkimlerve Savcýlar Yüksek Kurulu (HSYK; High Council of Judges and Prosecutors) and made provision for an ombudsman to strengthen the rights of individuals and reduce powers of the military in judicial matters.²⁹

Moreover, the 2017 constitutional amendment, approved by the 16 April referendum, introduced further changes in the judiciary. The 18-article package replaced the 76 articles of the previous Constitution. While there were other concerns, the amendment put the independence of the higher judiciary in jeopardy by giving the president extraordinary powers in appointment of judges. The two most important judicial bodies in Turkey are the Constitutional Court, which is responsible for constitutional interpretation and is the highest body of arbitration and prosecution, and the HSYK, which oversees the judicial appointments. Under the new provision, the strength of the HSKY was reduced to 13 from 22, with six of these to be appointed by the president, while the remaining seven were to be appointed by the National Assembly.

On paper, this means a clear division between the executive and the legislature. In practice, especially in the scenario where the party of the president has majority in the National Assembly, the situation is that all

²⁷ Ceren Belge, “Friends of the Court: The Republican Alliance and Selective Activism of the Constitutional Court of Turkey”, *Law and Society Review*, 2006, 40(3): 653–92.

²⁸ Aslý Bâli, “Courts and Constitutional Transition: Lessons from the Turkish Case”, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 2013, 11(3): 666–701.

²⁹ Yegen, “Constitutional Changes under the AKP Government of Turkey”.

13 members will be effectively appointed by the same person. For instance, after the 2018 elections, Erdogan, who is both the president as well as the chief of the AKP which has the parliamentary majority, has a decisive say in the appointment of all 13 members of the HSYK.³⁰ Furthermore, the strength of the Constitutional Court has been changed from 17 to 15 judges; the two judges apportioned from the military were to be phased out after completion of their term. In terms of appointments, the previous provision of appointment of three judges by the National Assembly and 12 by the president has been kept intact, which means, again, the president has an overwhelming say in the composition of the Constitutional Court.

Grand National Assembly

One of the key aspects of changes in the power of the National Assembly introduced in 2017 is that it no longer has control over the executive, as the president who is directly elected has become the head of the government. Though there are provisions for questioning the executive, the constitutional amendment nearly absolves the office of president of any direct accountability to the Parliament. For instance, the members of the National Assembly can only question the government through written communication, and only to the concerned ministers and vice presidents and not directly to the president. Some of the powers of the National Assembly in terms of legislating laws too have been compromised. However, the National Assembly continues to be the only legislative body, despite the powers vested in president, to issue decrees in specific circumstances.

Despite the extraordinary provisions of the constitutional amendment that put the president in control of the political institutions, there are some powers vested in the National Assembly, though in effect they might be difficult to execute. Three aspects are notable in this regard.

³⁰ Alan Makovsky, "Erdogan's Proposal for an Empowered Presidency", Center for American Congress, 22 March 2017, at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/03/22/428908/erdogans-proposal-empowered-presidency/>, accessed 23 July 2019.

One, the National Assembly, through a three-fifth majority, can dissolve the Parliament and call for early parliamentary and presidential elections. Though there is a provision for the president as well for dissolving the National Assembly and calling for early election, this would also mean calling for an early presidential election, which can be a deterrent as, effectively, it would mean that if the Parliament is dissolved by the president, s/he too will have to face the electorate.³¹ However, there is a catch here: in a situation when the president is also the leader of the majority party in the National Assembly and if the party enjoys three-fifth majority, the president can get it dissolved through a parliamentary motion without having to face an election.

Second, the National Assembly can initiate an impeachment motion against the president in case s/he is accused of treason or of indulging in a crime that bars a candidate from running for presidency. Though the motion can be initiated by one-third of the members for removal, a majority of three-fourth of the members is required for impeachment. Nonetheless, the process is long and arduous and the final removal depends on the case being investigated by a parliamentary committee. If found guilty, the parliamentary committee can send the president to the Constitutional Court through a three-fifth majority and only when the court finds the president guilty, the incumbent can be removed.³²

Third, the National Assembly gets certain powers over the president in terms of passing of an act as law. While the president can legislate through decrees, there are certain checks that put the National Assembly in a stronger position. For example, the presidential decrees are largely limited to political, social and economic aspects, but they cannot overturn or contradict laws passed by the National Assembly or that limit basic freedoms guaranteed by law. Further, decrees cannot be issued in areas that as per the Constitution need legislation by the National Assembly, such as on issues of basic rights and freedom. More importantly, the National Assembly can legislate to overturn presidential

³¹ Cetin et al., *Turkey's Constitutional Reform*, pp. 19–25.

³² Makovsky, “Erdoğan’s Proposal for an Empowered Presidency”.

decrees if they are in violation of the Constitution or overlap the legislative prerogative of the National Assembly, which can be considered an important check on the presidential power. Essentially, the National Assembly remains the main legislative body, though its executive powers have ended.

RELIGIOUS—SECULAR DIVIDE

The politics of change being pursued by the AKP since coming to power has sharpened the religious—secular divide in the country. The issue of religious—secular divide in Turkey is not new. In fact, it is as old as the Turkish republic itself. The foundation of Turkey was laid on the basis of the idea of *laïcism*, which strictly prohibits any involvement of religious dogma in state affairs and most importantly, discourages any religious influence in policy formation.³³ Atatürk, the founding father of modern Turkey, conceived this as the most important ideal for the new republic for it to be able to shed its identity as the “sick man of Europe” after Ottoman defeat in the First World War and adopt modernity and Westernisation as a way for social progress, political stability and economic prosperity.³⁴

Resultantly, all forms of religious influence on the state, such as the office of the Caliphate and real and symbolic expressions of religiosity in public sphere, including Arabic call for prayer (*eşan*), headscarf (hijab) and skull cap (fez), were banned.³⁵ Religious education in school as well as *medresas* (cleric-run religious schools) was prohibited and the informal religious network of mosques and clerics was brought under state control by creating a religious bureaucracy, the Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Presidency of Religious Affairs, commonly referred to as Diyanet). The Diyanet replaced the Ottoman departments responsible for the religious and endowment affairs under the auspices of the

³³ Yildiz Atasoy, *Turkey, Islamists and Democracy: Transition and Globalization in a Muslim State*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2005.

³⁴ Çağaptay, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey*.

³⁵ Göçek, *The Transformation of Turkey*.

office of the Grand Mufti (Shaikh ul-Islam).³⁶ This created a sense of discontent among the religious sections of the predominantly Sunni Muslim population; however, any political expression of this discontent was not allowed.

Following the formal end of one-party system in 1946 and the beginning of the era of multi-party politics in the 1950s, some political expression of religiously inclined constituency started to emerge, but the deep state represented by the military, the judiciary and the urban secular elite did not allow any serious expression of religiosity in public life. Nonetheless, leaders such as Necmettin Erbakan and Turgut Ozal, who were not explicitly secular in public life and were known to be representing the religious sections, were popular due to their ability to build coalitions and manoeuvre within the constitutional provisions.³⁷ Before the advent of the AKP and Erdogan, the Ozal period (1983–93) can be considered a time when several restrictions on religious expression, especially the question of religious education and headscarf, were relaxed through constitutional amendments. However, the state and polity remained deeply engrained in the idea of laicism and averse to religious expression in public life.

The emergence of AKP changed the power dynamics. A number of factors were responsible for this, but the paradigm shift was in the economic sphere that had begun under the Ozal government. Through neoliberal reforms, the government had allowed the rise of a new business class from the Anatolian hinterland which was religiously inclined and eventually, formed the support base that not only brought the AKP to power but also provided the engine of growth during the first 10 years (2003–13) of its rule. While the initial cautious approach of the AKP and its successes in economic and foreign policy domains provided a semblance of political stability, the issue of religious–secular divide remained a key political issue. The AKP was able to consolidate

³⁶ Emir Kaya, *Secularism and State Religion in Modern Turkey: Law, Policy-making and the Diyanet*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2018, pp. 49–52.

³⁷ Cagaptay, Islam, *Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey*.

power through regular electoral victories and constitutional amendments and succeeded in bringing an end to the military's interference in politics. This could be achieved through political consensus as there was overwhelming public support for Turkey's bid for EU accession that necessitated constitutional and institutional reforms to end military's influence in politics.

However, this did not completely bring to an end the religious–secular confrontation and in a number of instances, the divide created serious tensions and public debates. On issues that were seen as soft Islamisation, no consensus could be achieved and different political actors continued to pull in different directions. For instance, the 2004 issue of change in Turkish Penal Code whereby the government introduced the clause attempting to criminalise adultery created a serious uproar and the secularist opposition alleged that the AKP was trying to introduce “Islamic sharia” to replace the secular Constitution. The AKP denied this and withdrew the bill, but the debate on AKP's intentions on cultural expression was never accepted by the secularists who were anyways sceptical of its agenda.³⁸ Similar controversy erupted on the eve of the 2007 parliamentary elections. After the opposition alleged that many of the candidates on AKP list are too Islamist to be allowed to be members of the Grand National Assembly, the AKP replaced several of them to avoid legal intervention after election.

Beside the political controversies, the two most important issues through which this religious–secular divide was expressed in public, historically as well as during the AKP's rule, are headscarf and religious education.

Headscarf

The controversy over allowing use of headscarf by women in public life has been one of the most contentious issues for a long time. Broadly, the secularist argument is that it symbolises Islamic identity and should

³⁸ Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, “Islam and Democratization in Turkey: Secularism and Trust in a Divided Society”, *Democratization*, 2009, 16(6): 1194–213; Kaya, *Secularism and State Religion in Modern Turkey*.

not be allowed for women holding public offices or those studying in public universities.³⁹ On the contrary, the religiously inclined argue that it should be a matter of individual choice and not allowing headscarf is not only a violation of individual's rights but it also restricts the movement of those women who wish to use headscarf and participate in public life at the same time.⁴⁰ Initially, the headscarf, like other religious symbols, was banned by the state, but this did not prevent women in the hinterland, or occasionally even in cities, to continue using the traditional attire to cover their heads.

Since not many women in urban areas and political and education institutions used hijab, it did not become a major issue of political debate until the 1970s.⁴¹ However, in the 1980s, headscarf generated serious political debate, especially in the context of banning the hijab for female students in the universities by the newly formed Yükseköğretim Kurulu (YOK; Council of Higher Education), under the military rule after the 1980 coup.⁴² Though in the 1982 Constitution there was no specific law to ban headscarf in public, the state interpreted use of headscarf as “against the principles of secular state” and banned women from attending higher education institutions wearing headscarf.⁴³

This led to some discontent but the ban remained in place throughout the 1980s. Attempts to formulate legislation for allowing women to wear headscarf while attending universities were made by the Ozal government, but were thwarted either by President Kenan Evren or

³⁹ Hilal Elver, *The Headscarf Controversy: Secularism and Freedom of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Anna C. Korteweg and Gokce Yurdaku, *The Headscarf Debates: Conflicts of National Belonging*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014.

⁴⁰ Korteweg and Yurdaku, *The Headscarf Debates*.

⁴¹ Elver, *The Headscarf Controversy*.

⁴² Korteweg and Yurdaku, *The Headscarf Debates*.

⁴³ Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France and Turkey*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 188.

by the Constitutional Court. Another attempt to allow headscarf for female students through a law passed by the National Assembly was made in 1990. This time, though approved by Ozal who had become president in 1989, it was challenged in the Constitutional Court by the opposition CHP. The court did not annul the law, but interpreted it as not allowing headscarf in universities. However, as a result of this constant political battle in the 1990s, many universities did not strictly follow the imposition of “no headscarf” ruling.⁴⁴ This was also the time when many new private universities had started to come up. Some of them were funded by Islamist capitalists and hence, were not strictly following the ban on headscarf. This changed after the 1997 soft coup when the new government started to strictly impose the ban. Nonetheless, as a result of the public spat on the use of headscarf, it became an emotive issue, sharply dividing the religious and secular public opinion.⁴⁵

After the AKP government came to power, it tried to reverse the ban on headscarf in universities. The first attempt was made in 2004 when Prime Minister Erdogan proposed that though the ban on headscarf can continue in public universities, it should not be imposed in private universities. However, this proposal was met with serious opposition and Erdogan did not push it to avoid confrontation with the deep state. However, the coming to power of the AKP brought up a new issue related to headscarf. While educational institutions continued to ban headscarf, the issue of use of headscarf by spouses of officials and ministers in public, especially during official ceremonies, raised a new debate. Prime Minister Erdogan's wife also used headscarf and appeared along with him in public places and for official ceremonies wearing it.⁴⁶ Many in the opposition and among the secular elites, including women, called this a violation of the secular principles of the republic and argued for banning the use of headscarf even for spouses

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Elver, *The Headscarf Controversy*.

⁴⁶ Angel Rabasa and Stephen F. Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2008, pp. 60–63.

of officials, ministers and those holding public offices during official ceremonies.⁴⁷

This became a major controversy and led to a constitutional crisis in 2007 over Abdullah Gul's presidential candidacy as his wife wore headscarf.⁴⁸ When the AKP declared Gul as its presidential nominee and it became clear that the National Assembly will vote for him, the main opposition, CHP, appealed in the Constitutional Court challenging the idea of fulfilment of quorum in the National Assembly, which was controversially accepted by the court, thus annulling the ballot for Gul's election.⁴⁹ It led to a constitutional crisis, but did not prevent Gul from becoming president as the AKP regained majority in the 2007 parliamentary elections and through the help of MHP and other parties, eventually got Gul elected. In response, the AKP government, as discussed earlier, brought a constitutional amendment for direct presidential elections to avoid judicial intervention in the election of president.

In 2008, the government brought a bill to amend two articles of the Constitution: Equality before the Law (Article 10) and Right and Duty of Training and Education (Article 42). Though this did not directly interfere with the ban on use of headscarf, it was used by the YOK, which was now headed by an AKP nominee, to suggest to universities that women with headscarf be allowed to attend classes.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, not many universities complied and the situation went back to the 1991–97 period when individual universities and departments, based on their own ideological convictions, either allowed or disallowed women with headscarf to attend classes.⁵¹ But the religious–secular

⁴⁷ Korteweg and Yurdaku, *The Headscarf Debates*.

⁴⁸ Coskun, "Constitutional Amendments under the Justice and Development Party Rule".

⁴⁹ Yegen, "Constitutional Changes under the AKP Government of Turkey".

⁵⁰ Elver, *The Headscarf Controversy*.

⁵¹ Rabasa and Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, pp. 60–63.

divide on the matter remained sharp and was extensively debated and discussed in the media.⁵²

Finally, in 2013, the AKP succeeded in bringing an end to the effective ban on use of headscarf in public through a constitutional amendment package pertaining to individual and democratic rights. Accordingly, the National Assembly approved the legislation which “allowed women to wear headscarves except for those working in the courts, the police and the military”.⁵³ Though the political divide over the issue did not die and the opposition criticised the lifting of the ban and termed it as another attempt towards Islamisation by the AKP, it did effectively bring to an end the era of ban on headscarves and became one of the symbols of counter-cultural revolution under the AKP. Erdogan, on passing of the legislation, termed it as “coming to an end” of an era of darkness and suffering.⁵⁴

Imam Hatip School

Another old and polarising issue was the imparting of religious education in public schools and recognition of graduates of religious schools for training of clerics, known as Imam Hatip Schools (IHS), for university admission and jobs. Under Atatürk, all religious instructions in school and public education had been abolished and the state had taken over the training of clerics in IHS as well as administration of and appointments in mosques.⁵⁵ As political opposition to the one-party rule began to spread and gained ground in the late 1950s, the CHP government introduced a number of reforms to allow some

⁵² Marvine Howe, “Turkey Today: Headscarves and Women’s Rights”, *Middle East Policy*, 2013, 20(3): 121–33.

⁵³ Sumantra Bose, *Secular States, Religious Politics: India, Turkey, and the Future of Secularism*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 203.

⁵⁴ Humeyra Pamuk, “Turkey Lifts Generations-old Ban on Islamic Head Scarf”, *Reuters*, 8 October 2013, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-headscarf-ban-idUSBRE99708720131008>, accessed 25 July 2017.

⁵⁵ Kaya, *Secularism and State Religion in Modern Turkey*.

religious instruction in primary schools; however, this was optional and was allowed only as additional classes to compulsory school curriculum.⁵⁶

Under the Adnan Menderes government (1950–60), public spending on religious education and other religious activities through the Diyanet increased significantly, including the incorporation of the religious instruction in primary school curriculum.⁵⁷ This was partly a factor for the military’s resentment towards the Menderes government, which grew rapidly as the religious–secular divide widened and led to violent confrontations across Turkey, resulting in the first coup d’état in May 1960. For the next two decades, not much changed in terms of religious education.

The situation began to change during the three years of military rule (1980–83) after the 1980 coup, and then during the Ozal period in the 1980s. While the 1982 Constitution remained rooted in the idea of Kemalist secularism, it adopted a softer approach towards religious education. Article 24 of the 1982 Constitution stated the need for inculcating “religious culture and morals” among the younger generation.⁵⁸ During this period, for the first time, religious education became a compulsory part of school curriculum and the revised curriculum, overseen by Ozal’s Education Minister Vehbi Dincerler, emphasised on the need for making students aware of the religious and cultural history of Turkey.⁵⁹ The political divide over religious education and curriculum sharpened during the 1990s and led to serious polarisation.

While the IHS received support under the Ozal government leading to increase in their enrolment, after the 1997 coup, the military-backed

⁵⁶ Soon-Yong Pak, “Cultural Politics and Vocational Religious Education: The Case of Turkey”, *Comparative Education*, 2004, 40(3): 321–41.

⁵⁷ Kaya, *Secularism and State Religion in Modern Turkey*.

⁵⁸ *Constitution of the Republic of Turkey*, 1982, at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5be0.html>, accessed 31 January 2017.

⁵⁹ Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*.

government, through the YOK, brought some changes to the system. First, all IHS graduates were barred from taking any job in the police and armed forces; and second, the secondary school system in these religious schools were eliminated. Third and most controversially, it was made difficult for secondary school graduates in a specific stream to take admission in another stream in the university entrance examination. This made it nearly impossible for IHS graduates to take admission in any department other than theology in case they wanted to pursue higher education.⁶⁰ This led to an uproar among the religious section of the population who preferred their children to go to IHS for religious education but did not want it to restrict their access to higher education and jobs. On the other hand, it was justified by the secularists as a measure to restrict Islamisation of education and bureaucracy.⁶¹

A key agenda of the AKP government after it came to power in 2002 was to bring an end to the discrimination against IHS graduates. As a result, in 2005, the Ministry of Education issued an order that allowed IHS students to pursue parallel course through correspondence to be able to qualify for non-theology faculties. However, the YOK objected to the regulation and it was eventually suspended by the Council of State in 2006.⁶² This did not end the attempts by the AKP to change the status quo, and in 2011, a new government decision was issued to provide equal opportunities for IHS graduates for admission in higher education. It effectively undid the 1997 regulation to extend preferential treatment for students for specific stream if they choose to attend higher education in same stream.⁶³

⁶⁰ Rabasa and Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, pp. 63–64.

⁶¹ Henry Rutz, “The Rise and Demise of *Imam-Hatip* Schools: Discourses of Islamic Belonging and Denial in the Construction of Turkish Civil Culture”, *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 1999, 22(2): 93–103.

⁶² Rabasa and Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, pp. 63–64.

⁶³ Alan Makovsky, “Re-educating Turkey, AKP Efforts to Promote Religious Values in Turkish Schools”, Center for American Congress, December 2015, at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/09115835/Re-EducatingTurkey.pdf>, accessed 23 July 2019.

In March 2012, a new law was passed to restructure the education system. Under the new system, popularly referred to as “4+4+4”, the public school education was split into three levels, that is, elementary, middle and high schools, including for all vocational schools.⁶⁴ This meant that even the IHS, which according to government regulations were considered vocational schools and had been rid of middle-level classes under the 1997 regulation, were able to reinstate the middle-level classes. Further, religious courses were introduced as electives for students of public school system. This led to serious uproar among the secular opposition groups who accused the AKP of Islamisation of the education system,⁶⁵ but they could not prevent the government from implementing the reforms. Consequently, the IHS witnessed vast expansion both in terms of enrolment and establishment of new schools. For example, in the six years between 2012 and 2018, the total number of students studying in IHS increased from about 250,000⁶⁶ to 700,000, constituting about 10 per cent of total public school students.⁶⁷

The growing number of IHS and its graduates and more religious curriculum in general schools led to growing allegations of Islamisation of education against the AKP. Erdogan, however, remained unruffled and argued that it was necessary to raise a “pious generation” for Turkey’s future through imparting religious education in schools.⁶⁸ In

⁶⁴ Muhammet Fatih Genc, “Values Education or Religious Education?: An Alternative View of Religious Education in the Secular Age, the Case of Turkey”, *Education Sciences*, 2018, 8(4): 1–16.

⁶⁵ Barcin Yinanc, “Rise in Imam-Hatips Shows AKP’s Favoritism for Religious Education”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 11 August 2014, at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/rise-in-imam-hatips-shows-akps-favoritism-for-religious-education-70225>, accessed 25 July 2019.

⁶⁶ It was a mere 65,000 in 2003 when the AKP came to power. Though before the new 1997 regulation, nearly 500,000 students studied in IHS.

⁶⁷ Genc, “Values Education or Religious Education?”.

⁶⁸ Demet Lüküslü, “Creating a Pious Generation: Youth and Education Policies of the AKP in Turkey”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2016, 16(4): 637–49.

September 2017, during a ceremony to rededicate his alma mater in Istanbul after its redevelopment and renaming after him, Erdogan said: “The joint goal of all education and our teaching system is to bring up good people with respect for their history, culture and values.”⁶⁹ This, in a way, strengthened the fear among his critics that the AKP government was pursuing a policy of counter-cultural revolution to Islamisation of the Turkish society and take it away from secularisation that was the thrust of the foundation of the Turkish republic.

Foreign Policy

One of the key aspects of the changes witnessed in Turkish politics under the AKP has been in the foreign policy domain. It has been largely reoriented from United States (US) and Eurocentric to the immediate neighbourhood in West and Central Asia. The driving force behind this reorientation has been the desire within the AKP and its support base to rediscover the glory of Turkey’s Ottoman past. Critics of this policy have termed it as “neo-Ottomanism”.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, the early years of AKP’s rule were considered to be a foreign policy success because Turkey’s relations with its traditional allies was strengthened and at the same time, new relationships were established with countries in the Middle East.⁷¹ The most important aspect of the recalibration of the foreign policy was the doctrine of “zero-problem with neighbours”, an idea outlined by Ahmet Davutoglu, a well known academic, who later served as Foreign Minister (2009-14) and Prime

⁶⁹ Daren Butler, “With More Islamic Schooling, Erdogan Aims to Reshape Turkey”, *Reuters*, 25 January 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-education/>, accessed 25 July 2018.

⁷⁰ Sejour Karmash, *The Road to Modern Turkey: The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism*, Lake Forest, Illinois: Lake Forest College, 2012; Ömer Taspınar, “Turkey’s Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism”, *Carnegie Papers*, No. 10, September 2008, Washington, DC, at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10_taspinar_final.pdf, accessed 25 July 2017.

⁷¹ Ali Askerov, “Turkey’s ‘Zero-Problem with Neighbours’ Policy: Was it Realistic?”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 2017, 4(2): 149–67.

Minister (2014-16), in his book, *Strategic Depth*, written during his days as professor of international relations at Beykent University in Istanbul.

During the early period (2003–10), Ankara not only improved relations with Syria and Iraq but also established robust trade ties with oil-rich Gulf countries, which in turn helped local trade and economy. The AKP made serious efforts to improve relations with Europe and the Balkans and succeeded in starting EU accession negotiations in 2005 in accordance with the Copenhagen political criteria.⁷² According to Soli Özel, professor of international relations at Kadir Has University in Istanbul, the AKP worked “on a platform of unabashed and unconditional pursuit of EU membership despite its Islamist pedigree”.⁷³ In addition, efforts were made to improve relations with Cyprus, Greece and Armenia, despite the historical problems between Turkey and these countries. The AKP even went on to establish strong economic ties and political understanding with the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq despite the domestic Kurdish problem. These early successes notwithstanding, during the second term of the AKP government, Turkey’s foreign policy started to face challenges.

Analysts and critics attributed this to the pan-Islamist agenda followed by the AKP and it was argued that Erdogan had started to see himself as “neo-Ottoman sultan”, with dreams to revive the glory of the Ottoman Empire as the leader of the Islamic world.⁷⁴ The first country with which Turkey’s relations began to sour was Israel. The AKP, as part of its pan-Islamist policy, started becoming more vocal in criticising Israeli policy in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This did not go down well with Israel and eventually led to a series of serious spats: first, during the Operation Cast Lead of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)

⁷² Sule Toktas and Umit Kurt, “Turkish Military’s Autonomy, JDP Rule and the EU Reform Process in the 2000s”, *Turkish Studies*, 2010, 11(3): 387–403.

⁷³ Soli Özel, “A Passionate Story with Europe”, *European Security*, 2008, 17(1): 47–60.

⁷⁴ Cagaptay, *The New Sultan*.

in the Gaza Strip in 2008–9; and second, during the Mavi Marmara incident in May 2010. This led to deterioration in the bilateral relations and Israel and Turkey came to the brink of ending diplomatic ties.⁷⁵

The biggest challenge that AKP's foreign policy agenda faced was after the Arab Spring protests, which started in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread like wildfire in the Arab world. Ankara was faced with the dichotomy of choosing between two of its newly adopted principles of “zero-problem” and “pan-Islamism”.⁷⁶ Erdogan chose the latter, and this boomeranged on Turkey as its relations with the neighbourhood became complicated and Turkish foreign policy faced criticism from all quarters. For example, Ankara chose to back the protesters in Syria, causing serious deterioration in ties with Bashar al-Assad regime. This also put Turkey against two important regional and extra-regional powers, namely, Iran and Russia, with which the AKP was trying to mend relations. Further, Ankara hedged its bets by gambling on the rise of Muslim Brotherhood, particularly during 2012–13 when Mohamed Morsi was in power in Egypt, to expand its regional influence in the Middle East. However, the policy faced resistance from the Arab regional powers, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who grew wary of the rise of Muslim Brotherhood.

Ankara made a U-turn in its Syria policy after 2015. It was compelled to change its approach towards the Syrian crisis because it found itself completely isolated; and it grew suspicious of the consolidation of the Kurdish groups in northern Syria in the region bordering Turkey. Ankara then started to coordinate with Russia and Iran, with the hope that it

⁷⁵ Semih Idiz, “More than Meets the Eye in Turkish–Israeli Ties”, *Al-Monitor*, 22 February 2013, at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/sites/almonitor/contents/articles/originals/2013/02/mavi-marmara-flotilla-turkey-israelrelations.html>, accessed 25 July 2019.

⁷⁶ Md. Muddassir Quamar, “The Turkish Referendum and its Impact on Turkey's Foreign Policy”, *E-IR*, 22 May 2017, at <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/05/22/theturkish-referendum-and-its-impact-on-turkeys-foreign-policy/>, accessed 30 July 2019.

will bring stability in the beleaguered country and joined the Astana Peace Process. In the meantime, its relations with the US and the EU continued to deteriorate over differences on the handling of the crisis in Syria and the refugee influx from Iraq and Syria, as well as the US support for the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).⁷⁷ Domestic problems within Turkey also contributed to damaging relations with the EU, especially the growing repression of dissenting voices and media, manifested in targeting of journalists, press and civil society. This eventually led to the EU parliament voting to end accession talks with Turkey in March 2019.⁷⁸

In recent years, Turkey's relations with the US, one of its strongest traditional allies, has witnessed significant deterioration due to differences on various issues, including Syria policy and the US support for Syrian Kurds, as mentioned earlier, tensions over the US refusing to deport Fethullah Gulen to Turkey to face trial in the 2016 coup attempt case in which he was allegedly the primary conspirator, and the Turkish decision to purchase S-400 missile system from Russia disregarding the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) objections.⁷⁹ Moreover, Turkish policy over the Qatar crisis in 2017 and an aggressive posture adopted over the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi have led to deterioration of ties with the Arab Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The aggressive security policies pursued in the Horn of Africa and Libya have also led to tensions between Turkey and Egypt and its regional allies.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Burak Cop and Ozge Zihnioglu, "Turkish Foreign Policy under AKP Rule: Making Sense of the Turbulence", *Political Studies Review*, 2017, 15(1): 28–38.

⁷⁸ "European Parliament Votes to Suspend Turkey's EU Membership Bid", *Deutsche Welle*, 13 March 2019, at <https://www.dw.com/en/european-parliament-votes-to-suspend-turkeys-eu-membership-bid/a-47902275>, accessed 13 March 2019.

⁷⁹ Kerim Has, "Turkey, Russia, and the Looming S-400 Crisis", Middle East Institute, Washington, DC, 10 July 2019, at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-russia-and-looming-s-400-crisis>, accessed 12 July 2019.

⁸⁰ Md. Muddassir Quamar, "Turkey's Growing Strategic Inroads in Africa", *Africa Trends* (MP-IDSA), 2017, 6(2): 4–7.

One of the key problems of the later years of AKP rule has been the effort of the Erdogan government to use foreign policy as a vehicle for bolstering its domestic image and gain electoral support. This has seriously complicated Ankara's foreign policy choices and made it inflexible and non-pragmatic. Erdogan has adopted an increasingly confrontational and combative foreign policy laced with nationalist vitriol and construed as a neo-Ottoman "grand strategy". This has led to a situation wherein Turkey, which aspires to be recognised as a rising power in global politics, has hurt its ties with a number of critical countries, including the US, Europe and regional powers in the Middle East.

ERDOGAN'S AUTHORITARIANISM

The politics of change pursued by the AKP has brought Turkey to the cusp of falling into the trap of an authoritarian government. Erdogan is increasingly described as autocratic and dictatorial because of his complete hold on power and unwillingness to accommodate any difference of opinion. He has also been consolidating power in his hands through constitutional amendments and electoral victories. However, the issue of Erdogan's authoritarianism cannot be seen in isolation of the political history of modern Turkey. Notably, Erdogan is not the first Turkish ruler to become authoritarian. Under the founding President Ataturk, who ruled with an iron fist until the 1950s, Turkey could not become a multi-party polity. Subsequently, all elected Turkish governments were interrupted by military coups that did not allow democracy to take root. Elected rulers too had to take recourse to "strong actions" to stamp their authority as well as avoid being overthrown by the deep state. There is no doubt that after Ataturk, Erdogan is the first leader who has effectively neutralised most of the constitutional checks and balances as well as effectively neutralised the military and the judiciary. He has also been targeting any resistance from intellectuals, media or leaders of opposition.

The process of Erdogan's authoritarian turn can be divided into three stages. In the first stage, he avoided direct confrontation with the deep state and established elites to eschew overthrowing of his government and followed a policy of gradual democratic reforms to strengthen democratic rights. His target was to reinforcing the AKP's religious

support base that has been historically marginalised despite being a majority and EU accession that required constitutional guarantees in terms of rule of law, equality, rights and non-intervention of military in politics. This stage continued roughly during the first two terms of the AKP government (2002–11). In the second stage, Erdogan adopted a more belligerent approach in pursuing the agenda of the AKP and defied opposition to his policies. He started the process of targeting the civil society and media, including arbitrary arrests of journalists, and cracked down on protestors, such as during the Gezi Park protests in 2013. Roughly, this stage continued until the failed coup attempt of July 2016.

The purging of military and bureaucracy and targeting of media, civil society and political opposition post-July 2016 signalled a new authoritarian turn in Erdogan's rule. This also, in a way, culminated the process of constitutionally paving the way for Erdogan to become a lifetime ruler of Turkey after the April 2017 referendum that approved the constitutional amendment passed by the National Assembly changing the system of government. One of the key issues after the 2016 coup was the targeting of the Gulen movement, founded by Fethullah Gulen, a Pennsylvania-based preacher, allegedly with vast influence in educational and religious bureaucracy as well as a strong presence in the security agencies in Turkey. Initially, the Gulen movement worked with the AKP and helped enhance AKP's reach within the bureaucracy as well as the military. It was also instrumental in Turkey's approach to enhance soft power abroad, especially in the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and other parts of the Muslim world, through education cooperation and cultural exchanges. However, the group was accused by Turkey to be the perpetuator of the July 2016 coup attempt and was termed as Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü (FETO; Fethullah Terrorist Organisation). A large number of sympathisers, supporters and members of the FETO have been purged and targeted by the AKP government since then.

Erdogan and the AKP's hold on power for near two decades has created a new normal in Turkish politics and society. It has led to marginalisation of secular opposition. The AKP, which in the early stage of its rule was considered to be a force that will further democratisation, strengthen rule of law and pave the way for an inclusive

government, has lately pursued a divisive political agenda. In many ways, it has fallen into the same old trap that, in the past, had created deep political and social divisions. The most important aspect of this has been the return to a one-man rule.

MILITARY, BACK IN THE BARRACKS!

The military in Turkey has played a significant role in the foundation and modernisation of the state. It has acted as the guardian of the nation and has, on several occasions, intervened in politics with the objective of “saving” the state and the nation from descending into chaos. In the years since the establishment of the republic, the military has ousted four civilian governments, in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997. After the 1960 coup, the military had amended the Constitution to legalise and institutionalise its role in politics.¹ In the words of Istanbul-based journalist and researcher Gareth Jenkins, “Over the past 70 years, the Turkish military has consistently regarded itself not only as the guarantor of domestic stability and the guardian of the official ideology of Kemalism but also as the embodiment of the soul of the Turkish nation.”²

Scholars have underlined the significance of the “Young Turks” movement which was crucial in the formation of modern Turkey and in strengthening the military’s influence in politics. For example, Turkish historian M. Sükrü Hanioglu notes that the Young Turks Revolution:

...prompted the re-emergence of the military as a major power broker in politics alongside the parliament and the press. Unlike the Janissaries the new military, following a period of transition between 1908 and 1913, started enforcing the policies of a new institution, a political organization which referred to itself as the

¹ Metin Heper, “Justice and Development Party Government and the Military in Turkey”, *Turkish Studies*, 2005, 6(2): 215–31.

² Gareth Jenkins, “Continuity and Change: Prospects for Civil–Military Relations in Turkey”, *International Affairs*, 2007, 83(2): 339–56.

sacred committee (*cemiyet-imukaddese*) and churned out *fatwas* of a new type, the “central committee decrees”.³

During the second constitutional period (1908–18), the Young Turks became increasingly central to the affairs of the Sublime Porte. Many prominent progressive officers and members of the committee rose to powerful positions in the security apparatus and along with the members of the *Yttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Committee of Union and Progress [CUP]),⁴ started playing a significant role in politics, to the extent that the main actors, that is, the sultan and Royal Court, became marginalised in the day-to-day decision making.

The process of military's dominance in politics gradually became a norm after the formation of the republic. Though they shunned uniform before joining politics, the political leadership largely comprised of retired military generals. The military was formally kept out of politics, but it took upon itself the task to overlook the transformation of the new republic into a modern state.⁵ Ataturk, a veteran himself, ruled Turkey till his death in 1938 and Turkey remained a one-party system till 1946 when, for the first time, multi-party elections were introduced.

Until then, even though the military was not directly ruling Turkey, indirectly it dominated politics based on the secularist and modernist ideals held dear by Ataturk, which later came to be defined as Kemalism. Ataturk was significantly influenced by the German ideal of nationalism and the French ideal of *laïcité*, that is, a complete separation of state

³ M. Sükrü Hanioglu, “Civil–Military Relations in the Second Constitutional Period, 1908–1918”, *Turkish Studies*, 2011, 12(2): 177–89.

⁴ A secret committee formed by progressive intellectuals and prominent members of the civil society, mainly representing the medical fraternity, in Istanbul in 1889 to organise the opposition to advocate for reforms. The CUP aligned with the Young Turks movement and contributed to the foundation of the Turkish republic.

⁵ Hanioglu, “Civil–Military Relations in the Second Constitutional Period, 1908–1918”.

and religion. He was so enamoured by the secular ideals of the French Revolution that he banned any public display of religiosity in Turkey. Secularism and Westernisation formed the two main pillars of the “democratic reforms” introduced by the state. Atatürk did not allow any opposition to his leadership and sought to eliminate any dissent, including from some of his close associates in the military, such as Ali Fuat Cebesoy, who had started to harbour political ambitions after the formation of the republic.⁶

Despite Turkey adopting a parliamentary system, given the personality of Atatürk, the position of president was all-powerful, with full power resting in his hands. The Chief of the General Staff or the Turkish General Staff (TGS) was the main lynchpin who acted to implement the rule of law, making him the most powerful institution after the president.⁷ This arrangement was considered important for modernisation and secularisation of the newly established state. Atatürk’s use of the military as a lynchpin for implementing the new ideals of the republic laid, down a precedence for military to play the role of guardian of the state in future. William Hale, renowned scholar of Turkish political history, notes:

Atatürk’s government sought to use the army as an instrument of education, social mobilization and nation building. Virtually all young men were required to perform military service, normally lasting eighteen months for the infantry, but up to three years for other sections of the service.⁸

⁶ William Hale, *Turkish Politics and the Military*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994; Bill Park, *Modern Turkey: People, State and Foreign Policy in a Globalised World*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 12–13.

⁷ Ali L. Karaosmanoglu, “Transformation of Turkey’s Civil–Military Relations Culture and International Environment”, *Turkish Studies*, 2011, 12(2): 253–64.

⁸ William Hale, “The Turkish Republic and its Army, 1923–1960”, *Turkish Studies*, 2011, 12(2): 191–201.

After the end of the one-party rule and as a result of the first real multi-party elections, the Demokratik Partisi (DP; Democratic Party) led by Adnan Menderes (1899–1961) came to power in 1950. In 1949, the office of the TGS was brought under the Ministry of Defence, making it subordinate to the Council of Ministers. On top of it, Prime Minister Menderes took measures to cut the privileges enjoyed by the military rank and file, which created unrest among them. “For the army, the end of single-party state broke its symbiotic relationship with the regime. At first, the military leaders tried to adapt themselves to the new situation, but by the late 1950s this effort had broken down.”⁹ Although arguable, some of the short-sighted and populist policies pursued by the Menderes government too were responsible for the growing unrest among the military brass.¹⁰ The TGS felt ignored and marginalised in political decision making, and hence sought to maintain its influential position.¹¹

After a decade of tussle between the political and military leadership, on 27 May 1960, the military moved to topple the Menderes government and amid growing public unrest, the first military coup took place leading to the removal of the Menderes government. The coup, however, led to internal fissures within the military for control of the state. The young officers behind the coup were unhappy with the senior generals who refused to leave after the coup and were hobnobbing with the political parties for sharing power. “The split between field grade hotheads and the more conservative generals witnessed a time of intense plotting by officers of all ranks” and led to

⁹ Ibid., p. 197.

¹⁰ Jenkins, “Continuity and Change”, p. 341.

¹¹ Linda Michaud-Emin, “Restructuring of the Military High Command in the Seventh Harmonization Package and its Ramifications for Civil–Military Relations in Turkey”, *Turkish Studies*, 2007, 8(1): 25–42.

¹² George S. Harris, “Military Coups and Turkish Democracy, 1960–1980”, *Turkish Studies*, 2011, 12(2): 203–13.

a situation where “some 90 percent of the general officers retired to open the way for promotions from the lower ranks”.¹² Eventually, the military was able to restore order within the rank and file and focus on politics. The new leadership decided that the legislative system and its structure required a complete overhaul and there was need for promulgation of a new constitution for restoring the Kemalist ethos of the state.

In 1961, the leaders of the former government, including Prime Minister Menderes, were executed; a new constitution was promulgated; and the Parliament was made bicameral with a new senate with the “power to delay execution of laws”.¹³ The nature of the lower house was changed to have proportional representation system wherein the political parties were allotted seats based on the per cent of vote they would receive in the general elections. A Constitutional Court was instituted with the power to overrule the Parliament on legislation and the Milli Güvenlik Kurulu (MGK; National Security Council) was formed to maintain the civil–military relations; but, eventually, the MGK came to wield more power than the elected government. Many argue that Turkey, in the aftermath of the 1960 coup, started to slide towards a “militocracy”.¹⁴

The new constitution sought to institutionalise the role of military in politics and administration. Constitutional changes “aimed to reinforce the powers of the government against threats to national unity, public order, and national security on the one hand and to increase the autonomy and freedom of action of the commanders on the other”.¹⁵ More importantly, the role of the MGK and authority of the minister of defence was enhanced, while the civilian courts were stripped of the power to review actions of the military. With the October 1961

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Zeki Sarigil, “The Turkish Military: Principal or Agent?”, *Armed Forces and Society*, 2014, 40(1): 168–90; Metin Heper, “Civil–Military Relations in Turkey: Towards a Liberal Model?”, *Turkish Studies*, 2011, 12(2): 241–52.

¹⁵ Harris, “Military Coups and Turkish Democracy, 1960–1980”, p. 206.

elections failing to provide a clear majority to any single party, a coalition government of nationalist parties was formed under the leadership of the head of the Kemalist CHP, Ismet Inonu.

The Inonu-led government could not end the unrest in the country and the problems continued, leading the military to again dismiss the civilian government and take over in 1971. The latest intervention also emanated partly from the power struggle and unrest within the military. Constitutional amendments brought in by the new government made the MGK more powerful, with its recommendations made mandatory for the government. This situation continued until 2002, when the AKP came to power. During 1960–2002, the military, by and large, shaped the politics and “re-structured” it when “deemed it necessary”.¹⁶

Throughout the 1970s, Turkey was faced with the twin challenges of political instability and economic hardship. While internal security challenges were increasing due to growing clashes among left- and right-wing student activists, the elections were largely unable to provide a stable government. The minority civilian coalition governments were under pressure to revive the economy and maintain political stability on the one hand, and the military exerted pressure to maintain security, national unity and the Kemalist ideals of the state on the other. The military had grown suspicious of Suleyman Demirel, who headed the Adalet Partisi (AP; Justice Party)—a party that had descended from DP after the execution of Menderes—as he had the ability to obtain electoral support and form coalitions, thereby gaining control of the civilian government. Another major concern of the military was the growing popularity of Islamist-leaning parties, such as the led by Necmettin Erbakan.¹⁷

¹⁶ Heper, “Civil–Military Relations in Turkey”, p. 248.

¹⁷ Harris, “Military Coups and Turkish Democracy, 1960–1980”, p. 209.

This was significant for the military as it wanted to protect the secular ideals of the state under all circumstances. The MSP was allegedly able to have a significant impact on the government's education and foreign policy, much to the dismay of the military. Besides, "the civilian failure effectively to combat separatist agitation and violence in south eastern Turkey created the impression that the system could not respond to crisis."¹⁸ Simultaneously, the government had failed to stabilise the polity and revive the economy. This led the public to increasingly look towards the military for a more stable and strong administration. The military enjoyed legitimacy based on its historical role in the formation and steering of the country and therefore, the masses looked at the military to provide solution for the ills facing it.¹⁹ The situation in Turkey remained tense throughout the 1970s as the military continued to wield power through its legally institutionalised role as the guardian of the state. It led to continued weakening of the civilian leadership, eventually stamping military superiority over the civil administration with complete takeover by the military in 1980.

Although the direct rule of the military proved short-lived, a new Constitution was promulgated in 1982, further strengthening the military's stranglehold over politics. For example, the MGK was rid of civilian representation, given more power and its recommendations were made mandatory by stating that its decisions will be afforded "priority consideration" by the cabinet. The office of the president, who by the constitutional amendment of 1971 had to be drawn from the military, was made powerful by granting it the authority to overturn laws passed by the National Assembly. The president was also accorded the power to appoint the TGS, convene the MGK and declare martial law. This meant that the military rule was institutionalised in such a way that even after the resumption of the multi-party elections and restoration of the Parliament, the military had strong control over the civilian government.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Yavuz Cilliler, "Popular Determinant on Civil–Military Relations in Turkey", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 2016, 38(2): 500–20.

In 1983, when Ozal became prime minister, he tried to challenge the military leadership in various ways, but could not undermine it completely.²⁰ It proved difficult because:

during the military junta period of 1980–83, the military enjoyed great power. It ruled the country with very limited civilian political input, because political parties and the NGOs were banned in 1981. Before returning to a multi-party system, a number of amendments further weakened future political parties.²¹

Despite the failure to completely overcome the dominant role of military in politics, the Ozal government (1983–89) started to assert the importance of civilian government, which led to occasional tensions between the military and government. Indeed, several important and defining developments in terms of the future of civil–military relations in Turkey can be attributed to this period.²²

First, a referendum was held to determine whether former politicians should be allowed to rejoin politics as per Article 4 of the 1982 Constitution. Despite the military and the ruling party favouring continuation of the article, the opposition won by a narrow margin, allowing many former politicians to revive their political activism. Second, the government lifted the restriction on defections by deputies, which had limited the options for formations of new parties. Third, the government took decision on “extending the authority of the civilian cabinet to the area of internal security”.²³ Military liaison officers

²⁰ Robert Kaplan, “At the Gates of Brussels”, *The Atlantic*, December 2004, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/12/at-the-gates-of-brussels/303623/>, accessed 11 June 2020.

²¹ Nilufer Narli, “Concordance and Discordance in Turkish Civil–Military Relations, 1980–2002”, *Turkish Studies*, 2011, 12(2): 215–25.

²² Angel Rabasa and Stephen F. Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2008, pp. 38–39.

²³ Narli, “Concordance and Discordance in Turkish Civil–Military Relations, 1980–2002”, p. 219.

appointed in each ministry were replaced by civil administrators, thus overturning a number of steps taken by the military after the 1980 coup to take control of public administration.²⁴

While gradually challenging the stronghold of the military, Ozal also introduced new economic policies which paved the way for integration of Turkey into the global economy. He was instrumental in introduction of economic reforms recommended by the world financial bodies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). His ability to find a balance between reducing the military's control on civil administration without critically changing the status quo and introducing liberal economic reforms to revive Turkey's economy, which was struggling due to multiple crises in the 1970s, was significant in providing a semblance of stability and growth to Turkey that had remained elusive since the 1960 military coup. It also strengthened his position vis-à-vis the opposition as well as the military, which helped him get elected as president in 1989. Some would argue that the "neoliberal" policies negatively impacted the Turkish economy in the long run by destroying the indigenous and local industries,²⁵ but undoubtedly, Ozal was instrumental in the revival of the Turkish economy, providing political stability and challenging the military's stranglehold over the state.

Ozal's contribution in streamlining the civil–military relations as prime minister (1983–89) and as president (1989–93), with an aim to establish civilian authority, is significant. In fact, many argue that he was instrumental in creating the framework which helped subsequent leaders to break the cycle of military's authority over the civil administration. He "tried to establish civilian control of the military and security-related

²⁴ Gerassimos Karabelias, "Dictating the Upper Tide: Civil–Military Relations in the Post Özal Decade, 1993–2003", *Turkish Studies*, 9(3): 457–73.

²⁵ Ziya Öni, "Turgut Özal and His Economic Legacy: Turkish Neo-liberalism in Critical Perspective", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 2004, 40(4): 113–34.

decision making”.²⁶ In August 1987, he overruled the military high command in appointment of the TGS and went ahead with his choice of General Necip Torumtay; later, he locked heads with General Torumtay over supporting the US-led war against Iraqi annexation of Kuwait, which eventually led to Torumtay’s resignation in December 1990. Undoubtedly, Ozal was not able to end military’s control over the civil administration, but he was able to challenge it. Ozal’s death and subsequent political instability, however, provided the opportunity for the military to reassert itself.

The 1990s witnessed a significant rise in Kurdish militancy in the south-eastern region of Turkey and this led the military to try to regain its prominence in security-related decision making. Ozal’s successors could not maintain the political stability he had been able to provide, leading to frequent changes in the prime minister’s office. Attempts by Prime Minister Tansu Ciller (1993–96) to find a civilian solution to the Kurdish problem was stonewalled by the military, which adopted a strong security-oriented policy creating a civil war-like situation. In the meanwhile, general elections since 1991 underlined the trend of the rise in share of Islamist-leaning parties. For example, in the 1995 general elections, the Refah Partisi (RP; Welfare Party) led by Erbakan gained 21 per cent of votes, winning 158 seats, and emerged as the largest party in the National Assembly. However, the secular coalition of Dogru Yol Partisi (DYP; True Path Party) and Anavatan Partisi (ANAP; Motherland Party) formed the government. The coalition collapsed in June 1996 and led to the formation of the coalition between the RP and DYP, led by Erbakan. With growing militancy in the south-east, rising economic concerns and increasing threats from the rise of political Islam, the military again decided to intervene in politics, without taking over power directly, and in June 1997 forced the resignation of the Erbakan government.

²⁶ Narli, “Concordance and Discordance in Turkish Civil–Military Relations, 1980–2002”, p. 219.

The 1997 “soft coup” re-established military’s supremacy in politics and posed challenges for the political leadership. The military was able to control the civil administration in areas of internal and external security and foreign affairs. It also exerted power to have legislative and judicial oversights.²⁷ On top of it, the military started to assert its role in determining the economic policy of the state, leading to a peculiar situation. Nonetheless, the 1990s also witnessed growing pressure from external sources, especially the EU and to some extent, even from the US, for democracy and reducing the role of military in politics.

Hence, after the AKP came to power with an overwhelming support and clear majority in the 2002 general elections,²⁸ it faced the serious challenge of ending military’s role in politics and its control over the civil administration. With the promise of democratisation and aspiration for EU membership, the AKP’s task was cut-out to recalibrate the civil–military relations and assert civilian control without losing the sight of the larger democratisation process. This forced the AKP to pursue a “careful and balanced policy towards the military”, without being too critical, but at the same time not losing a chance to assert the civilian “superordinate” position vis-à-vis the military.²⁹

CIVIL–MILITARY RELATIONS UNDER THE AKP

The AKP’s rule is credited with decisively curtailing the role of military in politics. This has been done through constitutional amendments and by establishing the superiority of the civilian government over the military. Since 2002, the military has refrained from direct intervention in civil affairs, while the government has allowed priority to military’s advice on matters related to security. There have been attempts to undermine this, the latest being in July 2016, but they have not succeeded

²⁷ Karabelias, “Dictating the Upper Tide”.

²⁸ The AKP won 34.17 per cent of the popular vote and 361 seats in the 550-member Grand National Assembly.

²⁹ Heper, “Justice and Development Party Government and the Military in Turkey”, p. 223.

and the military brass has come out in defence of the civilian rule. This could be because of the “increased reluctance on the part of the military to intervene in politics since the 1980s, on the one hand, and the gradual adoption by the religiously oriented parties of a system-oriented, that is, a pro-democratic stance”.³⁰ There is also the factor of the government and military wanting to “conform to the EU’s *acquis communautaire* so as to enable that country to become a full member of the EU”.³¹

Legal Reforms

Significantly, to adhere to the EU standards of democratisation, a number of reforms were introduced in the political system, affecting most prominently the institutionalized role of the military in politics. This process of reform and constitutional amendments had started before the advent of the AKP. One of the earliest steps was the change in the structure of the Devlet Güvenlik Mahkemeleri (DGM; State Security Courts) that had come into effect after the promulgation of the 1982 Constitution and had replaced the military courts to try cases related to threats to the security of the state. As part of the need to counter security threats, the DGM was dominated by military-appointed judges, who generally had a military background. In June 1999, these military judges were removed from the DGM.³² The DGM had increasingly come under criticism from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and hence, as part of the 2004 constitutional amendment package, the DGM was entirely abolished. It was transformed into courts for specific trial of individuals involved in organised crimes and terrorism, while cases related to state security were to be tried in military discipline courts.

Besides, the MGK was also reformed. In October 2001, a constitutional amendment was passed by the Parliament to change Article 118 pertaining to the structure of the MGK. Accordingly, the justice minister

³⁰ Ibid., p. 216.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Mehmet Bardakci, “Coup Plots and the Transformation of Civil–Military Relations in Turkey under AKP Rule”, *Turkish Studies*, 2013, 14(3): 411–28.

and deputy prime minister were made ex-officio members of the MGK, which was dominated by military generals. This led to an increase in civilian representation in the council.³³ The same amendment changed the provision of “priority consideration” of the recommendations of the MGK by the Council of Ministers which had been introduced in the 1982 Constitution. The phrase “priority consideration”, which had made the MGK recommendations mandatory for the cabinet, was replaced with “notified”. This significantly changed the dynamics by making the MGK an advisory body, whose recommendations have to be taken into account without being mandatorily followed. In the earlier system, the mandatory nature of MGK recommendations and its composition being heavily in favour of the military had made the elected subordinate to the unelected MGK.

More reforms in the structure and composition of the MGK were introduced by the AKP government in July 2003. First, the requirement that the secretary general of the MGK be a serving military officer was done away with and provisions were made to increase the number of civilian workers in the MGK secretariat. Second, the frequency of the MGK meeting was reduced to once in two months from the earlier monthly meetings, thus making it difficult for the TGS to use the MGK “as an instrument of sustained pressure” on the Council of Ministers.³⁴ The restructuring of the MGK was hailed by many, including the EU, as an important step in reversing the trend of military’s control over political affairs. A report by the Commission of the European Communities (CEC) noted that the constitutional amendments and restructuring of the MGK “further shifted the balance of civil–military relations towards the civilians and encouraged public debate” over the issue.³⁵

³³ Yaprak Gursoy, “Final Curtain for the Turkish Armed Forces?: Civil–Military Relations in View of the 2011 General Elections”, *Turkish Studies*, 2012, 13(2): 191–211.

³⁴ Jenkins, “Continuity and Change”, p. 347.

³⁵ CEC, *Regular Report on Turkey’s Progress towards Accession*, Brussels, 6 October 2004, at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/sec/com_sec\(2004\)1201_/com_sec\(2004\)1201_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/sec/com_sec(2004)1201_/com_sec(2004)1201_en.pdf) accessed 15 October 2017.

The constitutional amendments which effected the restructuring of the MGK were part of the early constitutional reforms started by the AKP, known as harmonisation laws, and were passed through nine reform packages to amend the existing laws related to criminal and security-related violations as well as the penal codes. The implementation of these harmonisation laws, promulgated in order to comply with the EU's Copenhagen Criteria for accession, was a significant development in terms of redefining the civil–military relations.³⁶

Government–Military Relations

In addition to the constitutional reforms, the AKP government also started reviewing the relations with the military top brass and gradually began asserting its authority over the military. The government and its ministers gave due respect to the military's views not only on matters of internal security but also on issues of society and foreign policy. It was a deliberate and careful decision to not antagonise the military brass on any matter sensitive to them and at the same time, not completely become subservient. For example, on the issue of joining the 2003 US military intervention in Iraq, the government underlined that the view of the military was important even though the final decision would be made by it.³⁷ Similarly, on the issue of allowing headscarf in university campuses, while the AKP and its legislatures were pushing for allowing it, the government remained careful to not completely ignore the sensitivities of the military that was against it. Thus, both the military and the government were careful to not cross boundaries and find a working atmosphere to run the affairs of the state without impinging on the other's areas of control.

³⁶ Michaud-Emin, “Restructuring of the Military High Command in the Seventh Harmonization Package and its Ramifications for Civil–Military Relations in Turkey”.

³⁷ Ankara allowed the use of Turkish airbase to the US Air Force but refused to allow stationing of US forces inside Turkey for launching of the attack on Iraq.

Despite these careful efforts towards maintaining a cordial relation, there were occasions when the members of the government or the AKP, directly or indirectly, countered military's views and underlined the constitutional superiority of the elected government. For example, in April 2003, reacting to media reports about problems between the military and the government, Minister of Justice Cemil Cicek said that the MGK is not an arena of fighting gladiators'. Alluding to the government not being accountable to the military but the elected Parliament, he said:

The general impression is that in the MGK meetings politicians give an account of their policies and deeds to officers for the latter's approval. That is not what happens. The Constitution make clear who is responsible to whom. As a minister, I am politically accountable to Parliament and, if I commit a crime punishable by law, as a parliamentarian would be accountable to the judiciary. *I am not accountable to the MGK in any of my capacities.*³⁸

Similar sentiments were expressed by other members of the government. Even Prime Minister Erdogan, at times, made reference to the military being an organisation that was responsible for its own affairs and, constitutionally, the government had the duty of consulting the security apparatus on issues related to its affairs but was not bound by its views on other issues, including the civil bureaucracy.³⁹ On some issues, the government did try to enact laws to please its constituency despite opposition of the military, such as on the question of allowing IHS graduates to join universities at par with graduates of other schools. Eventually, albeit temporarily, the government shelved the idea due to the continued opposition of the military and pressure from secular groups. Both the government and the military wanted to avoid public confrontation not only because the EU accession process was in

³⁸ Heper, "Justice and Development Party Government and the Military in Turkey", p. 224; emphasis added.

³⁹ Ibid.

progress but also because the AKP leadership did not want to risk its future by antagonising the military top brass.

Prime Minister Erdogan also worked on building a cordial relation with the TGS, General Hilmi Ozkok, who had taken over in August 2002, despite occasional differences on domestic and foreign policy issues. Within the armed forces, this had led to some unrest among the younger officers who wanted to see a tougher and more stringent attitude from their chief over the government's policies and decisions on issues that were considered anomalous to the secularist ideals. The headscarf row, issue of religious education reforms, contention over Turkish support for the US attack in Iraq and the subsequent concerns over Cyprus and Iraqi Kurds created doubts in the minds of the young officers. However, Ozkok was more considerate because of two factors: (i) negotiations on EU accession process were in progress and there was hope that formal negotiations on accession would soon start (it eventually started in October 2005); and (ii) the growing popularity of the AKP which had improved its vote share in the 2004 municipal elections to 41.7 per cent.⁴⁰

Military's Attitude towards Politics

While the constitutional reforms and relations between elected representative and military top brass helped in reversing the trend of military's control over politics, the behaviour of the military towards politics also underwent a transformation during the period under examination. This was especially visible in the way the military chiefs handled the Kurdish question in consultation with the government and did not impinge on it to take a security-oriented view of the issue.⁴¹ It is a different matter that after years of prospects for peace and political

⁴⁰ "Past Election Results", *Daily Sabah*, at <https://www.dailysabah.com/election-results>, accessed 15 May 2019.

⁴¹ Nil S. Satana, "Transformation of the Turkish Military and the Path to Democracy", *Armed Forces and Society*, 2008, 34(3): 357–88; Ersel Aydinli, "Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey", *Middle East Journal*, 2009, 63(4): 581–96.

negotiations, the situation came to a naught after the peace talks failed consecutively. Eventually, in 2015, the government, due to political compulsions and alliance with the ultra-nationalist MHP, re-adopted a security-oriented policy vis-à-vis the Kurdish issue.⁴²

The military also did not try to undermine the AKP government's foreign policy or make their differences public despite some obvious diversions. For example, the military was perturbed by the growing problems in relations with Israel, especially during the second term of the Erdogan government—after the 2008–9 Operation Cast Lead and the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident—but was not ready to publicly challenge the policy decisions of the government.⁴³ Likewise, the differences over extending support to the US war in Iraq did not come out completely in public.

The AKP government also took significant interest in urging the military to transform the behaviour of the rank and file towards politics and civilian control. This was done both through maintaining a balanced relation with the leadership on sensitive issues and by bringing the issue to the public domain and generating public debate on the need for strengthening democracy through changing the trend of military intervention in politics. The AKP worked towards this by changing the recruitment process and broadening the pool of those who were taken into the military both at the level of officers and soldiers. Further, the military finances were brought under civilian control and the issue of military's inspection of universities and media was altered. The military adopted these changes and worked towards sensitising its rank and file to the need of keeping away from political intervention.

⁴² Cemal Ozkahraman, "Failure of Peace Talks between Turkey and the PKK: Victim of Traditional Policy or of Geopolitical Shifts in the Middle East?", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 2017, 4(1): 50–66.

⁴³ Semih Idiz, "More than Meets the Eye in Turkish–Israeli Ties", *Al-Monitor*, 22 February 2013, at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/sites/almonitor/contents/articles/originals/2013/02/mavi-marmara-flotilla-turkey-israelrelations.html>, accessed 25 July 2019.

Public Attitude towards Military

Turkey has a long history of the military enjoying an extraordinary position in terms of its socio-political role and this led to a situation where the military enjoyed an elevated position in the eyes of the people. The Turkish society trusted the military more than its politicians and expected the generals to come to the “rescue” of the state in times of political crises. These notions developed over a period of time because of the role played by military in the foundation of modern Turkish republic as well as the policy of mandatory conscription. Nonetheless, the armed forces turned this trust into an institutionalised system wherein even minor political unrests led to military intervention. This situation continued without any challenge for most part of Turkish history and was only challenged with the emergence of political Islam as a socio-political force. The period coincided with an increasing aspiration in Turkey for joining the EU and the coming to power of the AKP government.

The process of social–political–constitutional reforms pursued by the AKP affected the public perception and attitude towards the military. People started to believe in the democratic system and argued for the need to keep the military away from politics.⁴⁴ This change in perception became evident during the Ergenekon trials⁴⁵ that started in 2008 and was strengthened during the 2016 failed coup attempt. The five years of legal proceedings in the Ergenekon trials kept the Turkish polity on the boil and in this period, a new phenomenon was witnessed for the first time, that is, the unsympathetic public perception towards the armed forces’ intervention in politics. Though the trials also evoked

⁴⁴ Aydinli, “Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey”; Umit Cizre, “Disentangling the Threads of Civil–Military Relations in Turkey”, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 2011, 22(2): 57–75.

⁴⁵ A series of high-profile court cases involving military officers, journalists and political leaders who allegedly were part of a secretive group that plotted a military coup in Turkey in late 1990s. See Ersel Aydinli, “Ergenekon, New Pacts, and the Decline of the Turkish ‘Inner State’”, *Turkish Studies*, 2011, 12(2): 227–39.

sentiments of victimisation of political opponents,⁴⁶ and many of the accused were acquitted by the courts, it cannot be denied that the antagonistic sentiments against the military were visible in public sphere for the first time.⁴⁷

The 2016 Coup Attempt

In addition to the Ergenekon trials, the failed coup attempt in July 2016 underlined the changing nature of civil–military relations. The large outpouring of public support that Erdogan received against the coup attempt underlined how far the Turkish society had moved from the erstwhile enchantment with military’s role as protector of the state and society. The growing disenchantment with the direction of the AKP government did not prevent the people from coming out in support of the civilian government and condemning the coup attempt.

What followed in the aftermath, in the way Erdogan reacted in terms of public humiliation of the soldiers and rounding up of the entire military rank and file, however, was not appreciated by the people. It also underlined the perceptible unrest within the military rank and file over the direction of Turkish politics; and this is significant as it opens the path for revival of the past whereby the military acquired the role of the “guardian of the state”. Nonetheless, the change in public attitude towards the role of military in politics underlines the maturing of democratic ethos among the public whereby despite facing political crises, the people no longer want to see the military takeover of the state, rather strive for change through political process.

The nature of civil–military relations in Turkey has undergone a significant transformation in the years since the coming to power of the AKP. Constitutional amendments, assertion of the elected government, change

⁴⁶ Guney Yildiz “Ergenekon: The Court Case that Changed Turkey”, *BBC Turkish*, 5 August 2013, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23581891>, accessed 25 July 2018.

⁴⁷ Aydinli, “Ergenekon, New Pacts, and the Decline of the Turkish ‘Inner State’”.

in attitude of the military generals towards politics and change in public perception of the military indicate a paradigm shift in the civil–military relations during the AKP rule. However, the coup attempt in June 2016 underlines the possible pitfalls of the changing authoritarian nature of the elected government on the fragile nature of the civil–military relations. What needs to be underscored here is that for a healthy civil–military relation to sustain itself, strengthening of democratic process is necessary. Also, any digression from democratisation and turn towards authoritarianism can rekindle the problems faced by Turkey during the pre-AKP period when the country regularly faced military coups due to its self-appointment as the guardian of the state. This was a view not only confined to the military but the public opinion too was favourable to the military role and intervention in politics. While the gains made during the AKP rule on this aspect of democratisation are strong, the 2016 coup attempt demonstrates that these gains can be reversed as well.

REDEFINING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The nearly two decades of AKP rule has significantly impacted Turkey's public sphere to evolve into one dominated by the conservative Islamists. Not that there is no space for the secularists, but they have been marginalised often by employing state power, which, increasingly, has been concentrated in the hands of a few. In many ways, this completes a cycle from early days of the republic when the secularists dominated the public sphere and the Islamists were marginalised. There is an uncanny similarity in the way this process has come to fruition. The AKP came to power with the objective of giving voice to those who had been marginalised and committed itself to following an inclusive policy, but as it was increasingly challenged by its ideological opponents, it employed state machinery to silence any voices of dissent. The result has been a complete dominance of the public sphere by the AKP and its ideological offshoots. However, there is one remarkable difference: the continued vibrancy of electoral politics and plurality of voices contesting elections, in contrast to the first three decades of the Kemalist republic, when Turkey was formally a one-party polity.

The process of marginalisation of secularist voices in the public sphere has been dubbed by many as AKP-led “counter-cultural revolution”. Jeremy Salt, an Ankara-based professor of political science, states:

Erdogan's creeping counterrevolution has already destroyed much of “old Turkey.” Some of it needed destroying (the stranglehold of the military), but in its interventionist authoritarianism, the

¹ Jeremy Salt, “Turkey's Counterrevolution: Notes from the Dark Side”, *Middle East Policy*, 2015, 22(1): 137-38.

“new Turkey” duplicates the old while replacing a progressive vision of society with one that many Turks regard as regressive and reactionary.¹

Nur Yalman, a Turkish anthropologist based in the US, underlines:

Turkey could have escaped this poisonous conundrum [throttling of political freedom]. It is to be regretted that it has instead been thrown into the irresistible vortex of this vast international “clash of civilizations.” The cultural revolution has now tilted against the secularist liberal elements in favour of the reactionaries.²

Others agree with the fact that the AKP has tried to create a counter-hegemonic system against Kemalist Turkey, but argue that this might not be sustainable in the long run.³

Notably, one of the key aspects of this counter-revolution has been changing the nature of the public sphere and there are some important aspects that need to be examined to understand the process and the factors responsible for the emergence of AKP as the dominant voice. One of the key aspects is the monopolisation of media and muzzling of the voices in civil society that started soon after the re-election of the AKP for a second term in 2007 and intensified post-Gezi Park protest in 2013. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, the AKP turned its attention to state bureaucracy and military to rid it of any elements that posed a threat to the hegemonic aspirations of President Erdogan. This attack on civil society, media and bureaucracy has created a situation whereby Erdogan has been able to concentrate power in his hands, leading to the creation of an

² Nur Yalman, “On Cultural Revolutions: Observations on Myth and History in Turkey”, Goody Lecture 2017, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, p. 22, at https://www.eth.mpg.de/4663233/Goody_Lecture_2017.pdf, accessed 30 July 2019.

³ Kemal Ciftci, “The Kemalist Hegemony in Turkey and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as an ‘Other’”, *L’Europeen Formation*, 2013, 367: 143–69.

authoritarian system of governance. Ironically, as explained in Chapter 1, the process has been completed through constitutional amendments and this poses a serious challenge for Turkey's future.

TURKISH PUBLIC SPHERE

Turkey has a strong legacy of public sphere. Ever since the advent of the multi-party system in 1946 that started to flourish since the 1950s—though frequently interrupted by military's interventions—Turkey created a strong public sphere whereby various hues of opinion could coexist. Nonetheless, it was never completely flawless and transparent as Islamists faced marginalisation, and at times persecution, at the hands of the government and the deep state. In fact, the academic debates on Turkish public sphere often underline the alignment of the public sphere with the state. Yasushi Hazama, a Japanese scholar who studies Turkish society, states:

It is one thing to say that the state in *de facto* terms controls the public sphere but quite another to say that the state controls the public sphere *de jure*. The latter point is more precise and therefore easier to deny than the former. What is puzzling for Turkey is that the latter argument has become accepted as a fact by both the supporters and opponents of the state-controlled public sphere.⁴

The process of this “state-controlled” or “state-oriented” public sphere remained largely unchallenged until the ascendance of the AKP in 2002. The AKP employed growing international criticism of Turkey as an authoritarian state system to assert its ideology and present different opinion on issues of public interest.⁵ This was ably supported by the growing middle class which had benefited from the neoliberal economic

⁴ Yasushi Hazama, “The Making of a State-centered Public Sphere in Turkey: A Discourse Analysis”, *Turkish Studies*, 2014, 15(2): 163–80.

⁵ Ciftci, “The Kemalist Hegemony in Turkey and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as an ‘Other’”.

policies pursued by the state since the 1970s and had accumulated capital and become rich. However, in terms of their views on social issues, the new middle class had largely remained engrained in Ottoman, Anatolian and Islamic traditions and heritage. After coming to power, the AKP, though introspective in terms of taking decisions that might anger the deep state, started to shape a new public sphere, allowing this constituency to express their voices freely and take centre stage in the public sphere.

In the early stages, the changes brought about by the AKP opened the Turkish public sphere to a new dynamic whereby a cross-section of opinion was expressed. This was primarily done through constitutional amendments to adhere to the EU standards of rights and democratic process, as well as through the established method of floating new media networks to express a certain type of public opinion.⁶ Hence, many new capitalists aligned with the AKP-established media houses that gave voice to those with Islamist and conservative leanings. For example, the Turkuaz Group, a venture of the Calik Holding, partly owned by Berat Albayrak, Erdogan's son-in-law, entered the media landscape in a big way in 2008, and eventually took over the Sabah group, and as of 2019, runs one of the largest media conglomerates with a strong inclination towards the AKP. This was certainly not liked by the secularist elites who found this new situation to be unacceptable and in a way, a threat to the state.⁷

Gradually, the AKP and Erdogan, who during the first term of their rule had championed the cause of free media and an open public sphere,⁸ started to return to what had prevailed earlier in the Turkish

⁶ Hakan Tuncel, "The Media Industry in Turkey", International Association for Media and Communication Research, 2011, at <https://iamcr.org/medindturkey-2>, accessed 31 July 2019.

⁷ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

⁸ Zia Weise, "How did Things Get so Bad for Turkey's Journalists?", *The Atlantic*, 23 August 2018, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/destroying-free-press-erdogan-turkey/568402/>, accessed 31 July 2019.

political history—a situation of state-aligned or state-oriented public sphere. A key aspect of this redefinition of the public sphere was coercion and crackdown on civil society and media. The response of the opposition group did not really help in changing the situation; rather, it facilitated a discussion which was entrenched in suspicion, accusation and conspiracy theories. Further, some political developments, such as Gezi Park protests and the 2016 failed coup attempt, did not help the matter. The changing international global dynamics and regional order in the Middle East also contributed to the sharpening of political divide to take over the public sphere. Currently, the AKP, being in control of the state, more or less has succeeded in defeating the opposition to control the public sphere.

CRACKDOWN ON MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY

A key aspect of creating a hegemonic public sphere under the AKP has been the crackdown on media and civil society. Analysts trace the first instance of crackdown to the Ergenekon trials, which started in 2008 in response to the seizing of a large cache of arms and ammunitions in the Umraniye area, a large working district of Istanbul, in June 2007.⁹ Police investigations found this to be linked to a larger conspiracy, against the AKP government, which became known as Ergenekon operation. This resulted in alarm bells ringing in the AKP think tank and it was decided to start a court trial against those involved in the conspiracy. The trial, which continued for roughly five years, was accompanied by a parallel media trial outside the court and a large number of journalists, authors, academics, educationists and military officers, with known Kemalist-nationalist inclinations, were detained and accused of being co-conspirators in the Ergenekon operation.¹⁰

⁹ Guney Yildiz, “Ergenekon: The Court Case that Changed Turkey”, *BBC Turkish*, 5 August 2013, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23581891>, accessed 25 July 2018.

¹⁰ Ciftci, “The Kemalist Hegemony in Turkey and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as an ‘Other’”.

After that, the secularist civil society and media in Turkey were increasingly targeted to create an AKP-dominated public sphere. At times, these crackdowns were justified in the name of bursting of conspiracies against the state or the involvement of journalists and academics as co-conspirators in threatening the state. This facilitated closure, suspension or self-censorship of newspapers or websites giving voice to dissenting opinion.¹¹ On other occasions, the pro-AKP capitalists took over the existing media houses using their financial power and active state support to neutralise anti-AKP voices. The other method employed as part of the policy to target media and civil society opposed to AKP's policies was filing of defamation cases against magazines and newspapers and cancellation of government accreditation of journalists who reported on contentious issues in a manner that was unfavourable to the AKP.¹²

Some of the media houses were targeted for critical reporting on government policies and actions by imposing huge fines on them. For example, the Dogan Group was fined in April and September 2009 for tax evasion and this not only throttled their sources of income but also imposed huge financial costs on them.¹³ Furthermore, media reports indicated that the government had been using the surveillance method of phone tapping to crack down on the main opposition CHP's mouthpiece, the daily *Cumhuriyat*, in 2009, and this was carried out without court approval.¹⁴ Gradually, the crackdown on media and

¹¹ Tuncel, "The Media Industry in Turkey".

¹² Ciftci, "The Kemalist Hegemony in Turkey and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as an 'Other'".

¹³ Daren Butler and Ece Toksabay, "Sale of Dogan Set to Tighten Erdogan's Grip over Turkish Media", *Reuters*, 22 March 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-dogan-holding-m-a-demiroren/sale-of-dogan-set-to-tighten-erdogans-grip-over-turkish-media-idUSKBN1GY0EL>, accessed 31 July 2018.

¹⁴ Pen International, *Surveillance, Secrecy and Self-Censorship: New Digital Freedom Challenges in Turkey*, 2014, at <https://pen-international.org/app/uploads/archive/2015/12/Surveillance-Secrecy-and-Self-Censorship-New-Digital-Freedom-Challenges-in-Turkey-.pdf>, accessed 31 July 2019.

civil society started to intensify. In 2010, for example, more than 100 journalists were arrested and over 30 were jailed on a variety of charges, from defamation to espionage.¹⁵

Some of the Kurdish-language media or pro-Kurdish newspapers, such as the daily *Ozgur Gundem*, were also targeted by the government for either sympathetic reporting on the PKK or calling for protection of rights of the Kurdish minorities.¹⁶ This was the time when the government had made overtures to the PKK to begin negotiations for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and the AKP had become extremely sensitive of reporting on the issue for fear of reprisal from its Turkish nationalist constituency. In January 2011, the AKP government passed an amendment to the press law allowing for suspension of television broadcast in “cases of emergency or threats to national security”.¹⁷ Likewise, in May 2011, Article 26 of the press law was approved by the Constitutional Court, which made it easier for the government to prosecute media houses and journalists.

Crackdown on media and civil society continued and as the verdicts in Ergenekon trials started to come, it led to sharp political divisions, protests and counter-protests, providing an opportunity for the AKP to intensify targeting of media and civil society belonging to the opposition groups.¹⁸ According to one estimate, as of 2012, nearly 600 media professionals were facing court cases and trials and were under detention in Turkey.¹⁹ One of the key factors for the AKP

¹⁵ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2011 - Turkey*, 10 August 2011, at <https://www.refworld.org/country,,FREEHOU,,TUR,,4e4268bec,0.html>, accessed 30 July 2019.

¹⁶ Ciftci, “The Kemalist Hegemony in Turkey and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as an ‘Other’”.

¹⁷ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2012 - Turkey*, 31 August 2012, at <https://www.refworld.org/publisher,FREEHOU,TUR,504494de22,0.html>, accessed 5 August 2019.

¹⁸ Pen International, *Surveillance, Secrecy and Self-Censorship*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

government to intensify the crackdown on opposition groups and civil society was the overwhelming victory it achieved in the 2011 parliamentary elections. It “came with an erosion of institutional checks and balances on the executive power, a weakening of the distinction between state and party and restrictions on civic freedoms.”²⁰

The advent of Arab Spring and Erdogan’s policy of supporting the Islamists and presenting Turkey as a model for reform and democratisation for the Muslim world further complicated the matter.²¹ Increased domestic discontent and misplaced foreign policy priorities had, by this time, started to evoke criticisms of the AKP and Erdogan in international media. This further enraged the pro-Erdogan public opinion and instead of choosing to introspect, people started to blame the West and Westernised media, along with the AKP’s domestic opponents, of conspiring to remove the legitimately elected government and threatening the national security and unity of Turkey. Such a narrative extended legitimacy to Erdogan’s throttling of dissenting voices in the eyes of the pro-AKP public opinion, and this suited Erdogan’s ambitions of monopoly over the public sphere.

Gezi Park Protests

Though targeting of media and civil society had started earlier, the Gezi Park protests and how they were handled by Erdogan and the AKP brought the issue of authoritarian behaviour into the international mainstream debate. Turkish dissident journalist Burak Bekdil captured this in the context of a statement made by Marc Pierini, head of the EU delegation to Turkey between 2006 and 2011: “the [AKP] government’s polarizing rhetoric during the Gezi protests was the true

²⁰ Joost Jongerden, “Conquering the State and Subordinating Society under AKP Rule: A Kurdish Perspective on the Development of a New Autocracy in Turkey”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 2019, 21(3): 260–73.

²¹ Quamar, “AKP, the Arab Spring and the Unravelling of the Turkey ‘Model’”.

wake-up call for the West.”²² Bekdil added that the West “must have been in deep coma, not just a sleep before Gezi,” to not have noticed the earlier crackdown on media and civil society by the AKP government. Bekdil might be right in his assessment, but what is true is that before the Gezi Park protests, the targeting of media and journalists by the AKP government had remained largely a domestic issue.

The Gezi Park protests started over a seemingly apolitical urban development plan. The AKP government and Istanbul municipal council had proposed a plan for redevelopment of the Gezi Park, adjacent to the Taksim Square in the old area of Istanbul, to rebuild the Ottoman-era military barracks (*Taksim Kışlası*) which were razed in 1940 to create the Gezi Park, accompanied by a shopping mall, a luxury residential complex and a mosque. A large number of environmental activists in the city were against the proposed project and, in December 2012, petitioned the local council and government to cancel the plan.²³ As a result, in January 2013, a committee for cultural preservation rejected the redevelopment project. The municipal authorities appealed the verdict in a higher committee appointed by the government and the plan was cleared in May 2013. Those against the plan started an online petition to garner support and, eventually, called for a sit-in at the Taksim Square to protest the redevelopment plan arguing that this will take away the only green space in the Old City.

The sit-in started on 27 May and gained wide online support, leading to an increased number of protestors joining the group in the next

²² Burak Bekdil, “How Gezi Protests ‘Unmasked’ Turkey”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, n.d., at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/burak-bekdil/how-gezi-protests-unmasked-turkey-56652>, accessed 31 July 2019.

²³ Though seemingly it was an environmental protest, at the core, the protestors were expressing a political opinion against going back to the Ottoman past or revival of the Ottoman heritage, which is one of the key components of the AKP ideology of embracing the Ottoman Islamic heritage. The secularists, in contrast, think that this is a divisive agenda and goes back on the Kemalist idea of Turkish nationalism.

two days. On 30 May, the protest site was surrounded by a strong police build-up. The protestors were asked to leave and eventually, as the situation started to escalate, the police broke the demonstration by using tear gas and removing the tents pitched by the protestors.²⁴ The news of police raid on the protestors led to a sudden upsurge in protests throughout the country and people, mobilised through social media, akin to the Arab Spring protests, started demonstrations in other cities, including Izmir, Ankara, Hatay and so on. The government's response of dismissing the protestors as "looters" further enraged the public opinion and the AKP, after a long time, felt the pressure from the public sphere on one of its policies.²⁵ Until then, the AKP had been able to term all opposition to its policies and programmes as a conspiracy by the "deep state" to dislodge the government for its Islamists leanings. This was the first real instance that the decade-old AKP government faced a serious challenge from the public sphere.²⁶

The police action and government's response galvanised the protests. Though Prime Minister Erdogan continued to be defiant and argued that the redevelopment plan was part of AKP's effort to rediscover Turkey's lost heritage and that the government would go ahead with the plan,²⁷ many in the AKP, including President Abdullah Gul and Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc, struck a reconciliatory note and apologised for the excessive use of force by the police. Nonetheless, the damage, in terms of escalation of demonstrations, could not be contained and according to some estimates, nearly 90 cities witnessed protests and demonstrations in the next two months over the issue.

²⁴ Amnesty International, *Gezi Park Protests: Brutal Denial of the Right to Peaceful Assembly in Turkey*, October 2013, at <https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/eur440222013en.pdf>, accessed 31 July 2019.

²⁵ Yaprak Gursoy, "Turkish Public Opinion on the Coup Allegations: Implications for Democratisation", *Political Science Quarterly*, 2015, 130(1): 103–32.

²⁶ Constanze Letsch, "Turkey Protests Spread after Violence in Istanbul over Park Demolition", *The Guardian*, 1 June 2013, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/31/istanbul-protesters-violent-clashes-police>, accessed 31 July 2019.

According to estimates by international organisations, during the three months when the Gezi Park protests raged in Turkey, over a dozen people lost their lives in either police action or in the violence caused due to the protests and over 8,000 people were injured.²⁸ Moreover, nearly 5,000 were arrested on charges related to creating public unrest and conspiracy against the state for participating in the protests.

Police action and prosecution of those allegedly involved in organising the protests continued ever since, with journalists and members of civil society facing charges and remaining under detention for their role in the Gezi Park protests.²⁹ Despite international criticism, the government did not stand down from its policies of targeting the media and civil society; rather, it intensified action against critics of the AKP and Erdogan. The situation worsened after the failed coup attempt of July 2016, which led to the dismissal of nearly 150,000 military personnel and civil servants by the government in the next three years. In 2019, for example, Turkey ranked 157 in the *World Press Freedom Index*, published by Reporters without Borders, and scored 31 out of 100 (considered most free) in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report.³⁰ In December 2017, a report published by the Committee to

²⁷ “Turkish PM Erdoğan Calls for ‘Immediate End’ to Gezi Park Protests”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 7 June 2013, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-pm-erdogan-calls-for-immediate-end-to-gezi-park-protests—48381>, accessed 29 July 2019.

²⁸ Amnesty International, *Gezi Park Protests*.

²⁹ Daren Butler and Ali Kucukgocmen, “Turkey Escalates Crackdown on Dissent Six Years after Gezi Protests”, *Reuters*, 19 March 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-gezi/turkey-escalates-crackdown-on-dissent-six-years-after-gezi-protests-idUSKCN1R00EN>, accessed 31 July 2019; “Turkey Seeks Life Term for Suspects over 2013 Gezi Park Protests”, *Al Jazeera*, 20 February 2019, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/turkey-seeks-life-term-suspects-2013-gezi-park-protests-190220161306624.html>, accessed 31 July 2019.

³⁰ Reporters without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index*, 2019, at <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>, accessed 31 July 2019; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World*, 2019, at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2019>, accessed 31 July 2019.

Protect Journalists noted that for the second consecutive year, Turkey remained on the top in terms of jailing of journalists and media professionals.³¹ The report stated: “The number of journalists imprisoned worldwide hit another new record in 2017, and for the second consecutive year more than half of those jailed for their work are behind bars in Turkey, China, and Egypt.”³²

Post-2016 Purges

In July 2016, the AKP government in Turkey faced one of the biggest challenges to its rule in the form of a coup attempt. This brought back the memories of the era of military coups d'état that had frequently disrupted civilian governments since the first military intervention in 1960. A key aspect of the failed coup attempt was the outpouring of mass public support for the AKP government and President Erdogan on the streets.³³ It generated significant sympathy for the civilian government and against the coup plotters, and this emboldened the government to thwart the attempt and take action against those involved. What happened subsequently, however, was the complete opposite of what people had expected and the AKP had promised. Many commentators and political parties had called for unity at a time of national emergency, but the policies and actions of the government after the coup attempt led to divisions and creation of an autocratic system, where the rule of law and due process was ignored to target anyone who had the mildest of views against government policies.

The coup attempt started on the evening of 15 July 2016, when a section of the Turkish Armed Forces (Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri [TSK]) first took over two of the main bridges over Bosphorus—Bosphorus

³¹ Elana Beiser, “Record Number of Journalists Jailed as Turkey, China, Egypt Pay Scant Price for Repression”, Committee to Protect Journalists, 13 December 2017, at <https://cpj.org/reports/2017/12/journalists-prison-jail-record-number-turkey-china-egypt.php>, accessed 31 July 2019.

³² Ibid.

³³ “Turkey Timeline: Here’s How the Coup Attempt Unfolded”, *Al Jazeera*, 16 July 2016, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/turkey-timeline-coup-attempt-unfolded-160716004455515.html>, accessed 31 July 2019.

Bridge and Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge—linking the two parts of Istanbul and closed it for the public. This caused serious traffic snarls in Istanbul and subsequently, fighter jets were noticed hovering over Ankara and Istanbul and occasional firing was reported. Soon after, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim announced, through a television broadcast, that “unauthorised” military activity had been reported and this was a coup attempt. He appealed for public calm and imposed a no-fly zone over Turkey. The rebellious soldiers then took over the state broadcaster, TRT Network, and the TSK headquarters in Ankara, as well as took Hulusi Akar, the chief of staff of the armed forces, hostage.

Erdogan, who was reportedly convalescing within Turkey, returned to Ankara post-midnight and took to media to appeal to people to come out on the streets and oppose the coup. A reported attempt on his life while in air was thwarted by the military aligned with the government.³⁴ Pitched battles were then reported on the streets of Istanbul and Ankara and media reports indicated that the coup plotters had bombed the Grand National Assembly building in a bid to take over the state. Eventually, hours after the start of the coup, killing of nearly 60 plotters and arrest of over hundred, the coup attempt was defeated and hundreds of soldiers who participated in it surrendered near Taksim Square.³⁵

The domestic and international reaction to the coup attempt was supportive of the government. The main opposition parties, media and civil society, as well as the majority within the armed forces in Turkey, condemned the coup attempt as against democratic principles and being unconstitutional. The international reaction too was supportive

³⁴ Humeyra Pamuk and Orhan Coskun, “At Height of Turkish Coup Bid, Rebel Jets had Erdogan’s Plane in their Sights”, *Reuters*, 17 July 2016, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-plot-insight/at-height-of-turkish-coup-bid-rebel-jets-had-erdogans-plane-in-their-sights-idUSKCN0ZX0Q9>, accessed 11 June 2020.

³⁵ “Turkey Timeline: Here’s How the Coup Attempt Unfolded”.

as Erdogan received statements of support from all major countries, including the US, the EU as well as India.³⁶ However, what ensued post the failed coup became a major point of criticism against the AKP government, especially for its disregard for any constitutional process and rule of law. The government accused the Fethullah Gulen-led movement, Hizmet, often referred to as Gulen movement of being the mastermind behind the coup attempt and the organisation was termed as a terrorist organisation. Its members, supporters and sympathisers, even those without any direct or indirect links with the coup plotters, were targeted and jailed after flimsy court trials.³⁷

According to reports, in the three years since the coup attempt, nearly 150,000 of Turkey's civil servants were dismissed from their jobs for reportedly having secularist leanings. The AKP government allegedly used the failed coup to target civil servants, journalists, media professionals, academics, human rights activists and opposition leaders who it thought were against the government. Turkey Purge, a group monitoring the post-coup crackdown on civil society, reported that since 15 July 2016, over 150,000 officials and government employees, including bureaucrats, diplomats, academics and school teachers, had been dismissed from their jobs. Further, over 500,000 had been reportedly investigated for involvement in the coup plot; nearly 100,000 were under arrest; 3,000 educational institutions had been closed; 6,000 academics had lost their jobs; 4,500 judges and prosecutors had been dismissed; and over 189 media outlets had been closed, while nearly 320 journalists had been arrested.³⁸

³⁶ "Turkey Coup Attempt: Reaction from Around the World", *Al Jazeera*, 16 July 2016, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/turkey-coup-attempt-reaction-world-160715215141043.html>, accessed 31 July 2019.

³⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Lawyers on Trial: Abusive Prosecutions and Erosion of Fair Trial Rights in Turkey*, 10 April 2019, at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/04/10/lawyers-trial/abusive-prosecutions-and-erosion-fair-trial-rights-turkey>, accessed 31 May 2020.

³⁸ Turkey Purge, "Turkey's Post-Coup Crackdown", 4 March 2019, at <https://turkeypurg.com/>, accessed 31 July 2019.

Moreover, in the aftermath of the failed coup, several thousands of soldiers and junior officers, allegedly affiliated with Gulen movement (Hizmet) or with a sympathetic attitude towards it, were rounded up and sentenced to life imprisonment. Given the lack of fair trial and targeting of those with links to Hizmet or with secularist credentials, serious disenchantment in the military rank and file cannot be completely ruled out. The generals and the military high command, however, have refrained from any public intervention in government affairs. With the change in form of government, the president has formally become both the head of state and the government and has acquired significant powers, at the cost of judiciary and the legislature. The military, however, has continued to extend its support to Erdogan, perhaps due to fear of upsetting the AKP's support base.

CONCENTRATION OF POWER BY ERDOGAN

One of the key factors that contributed towards the redefining of the public sphere under AKP rule was the concentration of power in the hands of one person, President Erdogan. The process of this concentration of power was achieved through constitutional amendments and marginalisation of the military from influence in politics. However, one of the major processes that led to this concentration of power was the redefining of the public sphere to become a monopoly of the AKP. This was aided by mobilising the Islamist and nationalist support base of the AKP, partly because this section believed in the leadership of Erdogan and partly because they were the beneficiary of this concentration of power in terms of allocation of state largesse.

Studies on Turkey's descent into authoritarianism under the AKP and concentration of power in the hands of Erdogan suggest that, along with coercion, co-optation of civil society and media has played an important role. Yusuf Sarfati argues:

The democratizing qualities of civil society and middle classes emanate from their supposed autonomy vis-à-vis the state power and their ability to become a check on monopolization of power. Hence, if state authorities co-opt these societal forces through politics of patronage, civil society and middle classes are also

stripped from their democratic qualities, and can effectively turn to tools of authoritarianism.³⁹

Sarfati's argument aptly explains the current question of authoritarianism in Turkey. Erdogan's ability to redefine the public sphere and co-opt the media and civil society has created a situation whereby they have become willing partners in perpetuating the reversal of the democratisation process.

Erdogan has successfully utilised his electoral popularity to concentrate power in his hands and redefine the Turkish public sphere to be dominated by the AKP ideology. Nonetheless, some of the recent trends underline the growing unrest and disenchantment of the voters with the AKP. This was on display during the June 2019 mayoral and municipal elections where the AKP, though maintaining its lead over the opposition, lost a number of key mayoral seats, including in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. It is not only the electoral reversals that are important. One of the key factors of this electoral reversal has been the exodus of a number of main figures and founding members of the AKP, including Abdullah Gul, Ahmet Davutogly and Ali Babacan, to form smaller political parties to fill the liberal Islamist space that the AKP has preferred to leave to acquire the conservative Islamist political space.⁴⁰ This also means that despite its ability to redefine the public sphere where the secularists are a marginalised minority, Erdogan has not been able to completely take over the public sphere and continues to face newer challenges and dissenting voices coming from a cross-section of the society.

³⁹ Yusuf Sarfati, "How Turkey's Slide to Authoritarianism Defies Modernization Theory", *Turkish Studies*, 2017, 18(3): 409.

⁴⁰ Barcin Yinanc, "The Chances for New Political Parties in Turkey", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 11 July 2019, at <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/barcin-yinanc/the-chances-for-new-political-parties-in-turkey-144877>, accessed 12 July 2019.

CONCLUSION

The coming to power of the AKP is one of the defining moments in the history of modern Turkey. Here was a party committed to its Islamic and Ottoman roots, yet pledged to “modern” ideas of democracy and freedom. Importantly, it was able to come to power through democratic means, despite Turkey’s chequered history of democratisation. The immediate political divisions and fractious politics of Turkey, with the withering away of the secular–liberal–nationalist coalition of the Demokratik Sol Parti (DSP, Democratic Left Party), ANAP and MHP that had governed the country since 1997, along with the poor management of a severe economic crisis facilitated AKP’s win in the elections. People were looking for a party that could govern well. The AKP mayors, particularly in big cities including Istanbul, had provided better administration during those trying times. Moreover, the memories of 1997, when Erbakan’s government was forced out, and of 1999, when Erdogan was jailed for reciting a poem, were fresh in peoples’ mind. The sympathy was with the AKP and the newly formed centre-right moderate Islamist party capitalised on that.

Notwithstanding the immediate factors, the coming to power of the AKP was hailed as one of the key markers of democratisation. Despite the detractors of the AKP not being convinced, the larger public opinion, both within Turkey and outside, was appreciative of the political developments. During the first two terms of its rule, the AKP was able to deliver on the promises of strengthening democracy, enhancing the rule of law and expanding the rights and freedom enjoyed by the people, by introducing new laws and constitutional amendments and by promoting social inclusiveness. Moreover, the AKP government worked on ending the military’s influence in politics. These were no small achievements given the historical evolution of Turkey. During this period, the AKP government did not indulge in electoral manipulation, adopted a conciliatory approach towards opposition and did not push any agenda that was non-consensual.

Gradually, however, the situation started to unravel. It would be wrong to put the entire blame on the AKP which constantly saw itself being pushed to the wall, despite back-to-back electoral victories, by those it thought were representing the interests of the “deep state” and entrenched elites. This led to a situation where the AKP started to hit back using the government machinery to isolate, marginalise and coerce those it identified as the enemy of the people and the state and opposed to the AKP continuing in power, thereby creating a politics of friction, division and polarisation. The AKP and its leadership used all their power to strike at those who were creating dissent against its rule.

What ensued in the process was a democratic slide and concentration of power in the hands of a few through constitutional amendments and redefining of the public sphere. This resulted in the revival of an authoritarian state system whereby any form of dissent started getting muzzled, and even silenced, in the name of national interest. Formally, this process of creating an authoritarian state structure was completed through the April 2017 constitutional amendment that changed the system of government from a parliamentary form to presidential one. The amendment package significantly weakened the judicial and legislative checks on the executive and reduced the accountability of the executive to the legislature.

This process of formalisation of an authoritarian state structure is the leading challenge for democratisation in Turkey. The politics of change pursued by the AKP government has created a new normal in Turkish politics. It has led to a situation wherein the dissenting voices have been silenced, rule of law weakened and political divide sharpened, reminiscent of the older days of authoritarian governments. Another aspect of AKP's politics has been the marginalisation of the military from politics. This is a significant development, especially given the political history of modern Turkey in which the military has played a crucial role in the foundation and stability of the republic, as well as maintaining its secular credentials. The challenge going forward is to find a balance between non-intervention of armed forces in politics and non-humiliation of soldiers by the political class. What ensued during and in the aftermath of the July 2016 coup attempt shows that the military has the potential to try and intervene in politics. At the

same time, the farcical trials and public humiliation of soldiers can reignite public opinion favourable to the role of armed forces in politics.

The other challenge for democratisation is the creation of a hegemonic public sphere by the AKP. The AKP, through coercion and co-option, has been able to redefine the Turkish public sphere into one that allows the expression of only pro-government opinion. The AKP has fallen into the same trap which it had promised to challenge when it had first come to power. The inability to give shape to a democratic public sphere is one of the major failures of the AKP government and going forward, this is an important challenge for democratisation. Nonetheless, there are signs, such as the Gezi Park protests and the 2019 municipal election results, which underline that all is not lost as far as public sphere is concerned and that the opposition in Turkey has been able to create a counter to the hegemonic public sphere created by the AKP.

CHALLENGES

There are, thus, three challenges for democratisation in Turkey: (i) authoritarian state structure controlled by Erdogan; (ii) maintaining the changed dynamics of civil–military relations; and (iii) upending the hegemonic public sphere created by the AKP.

Authoritarian Political Structure

As discussed in the earlier chapters, the AKP, using the electoral politics, political polarisation and constitutional reforms, has been able to establish an authoritarian political structure with President Erdogan at the helm. This is not an unprecedented situation for Turkey, but the test for the polity and its democratic roots will be in altering this authoritarian state structure without descending into chaos or ensuing large-scale political violence. This cannot be achieved without creating a consensus for return to a democratic system, free from any autocratic tendencies, and evolving strong checks and balance for future governments. This will need a cross-section of ideologies, including liberal nationalists, Kurds and moderate Islamists, to come together to challenge Erdogan's stranglehold on power. Given the current political dynamics, this looks like an improbable scenario. However, political alignments and realignment cannot be ruled out and that is an encouraging sign.

Civil–Military Relations

As visible during the failed coup attempt in July 2016, despite the complete reorientation of civil–military relations during the AKP's rule with subordination of the military to the elected government, the tendency of the soldiers to think of themselves as the guardians of Turkish state and national politics is not dead. The civil–military relations are of profound importance for democratisation and the ability of the AKP to send the military back to the barracks is a major achievement. However, if the AKP continues to take the country on the path of democratic slide, the possibility of the military to strike back cannot be completely overruled. This means that for the future of democracy, it is important that the nature of civil–military relations achieved during the AKP government is maintained and no scope for military's intervention in politics is allowed. This can only be achieved based on evolving a politics of consensus and not through military coups.

Hegemonic Public Sphere

The AKP has been able to create a hegemonic public sphere to silence all voices of dissent and marginalise all non-AKP public opinion. This is one of the biggest challenges for democratisation and though there are signs of revival of a more pluralistic public sphere, it will not be an easy task to reverse the current trend of hegemonic public sphere created under Erdogan's watch. It will require creating a counter-narrative to AKP's narrative of going back to Islamic and Ottoman roots. The current liberal secularist voices, to a large extent, have been delegitimised in the larger public opinion because of their support to elements that advocate marginalisation of Turkish history. It would require a reinvention of liberalism and secularism within the context of Turkish political history.

Turkey is at a critical juncture in its history. Though the AKP's rule, at least in the early stages, strengthened aspects of democratisation, in recent years it has created a major challenge through the authoritarian rule of President Erdogan. This poses a serious dilemma for Turkey in near future, and how the Turkish polity and the electorate reacts to the entrenchment of AKP's power politics will decide the fate of the polity. It can lead to perpetuation of the one-man rule or this can be challenged

through electoral politics and by pursuing politics which are not divisive and not based on hatred. The examples on the way forward can be taken from Turkish history itself, which is full of incidents that either perpetuated the authoritarian governments and pushed Turkey towards democratic slide or helped strengthen values that paved the way for democratisation and consensus-based politics.

POLICY RELEVANCE FOR INDIA

Turkey is historically recognised as a middle power and an important regional country located at the cross-section of Europe, Central Asia, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Though traditionally ignored by New Delhi because of its geographical distance, India's relations with Turkey have witnessed some improvement, especially in the economic sphere, in the past two decades. With Turkey being a member of G-20 and a country looking for fast economic growth, there is potential for furthering the commercial ties. Simultaneously, it is also a vocal, global Islamic country with strong relations with Pakistan and therefore, India can no longer ignore Turkey. In recent times, Erdogan has highlighted internal political issues of India in international forums and issued statements against India, much to the chagrin of policymakers in New Delhi. This makes it even more important for India to understand the Turkish political situation and the behaviour of its leadership. Besides, there are issues related to Turkey's growing foreign policy moves in its neighbourhood that might have implications for India.

This monograph does not specifically look at the policy implications for India and focuses only on the internal political developments and challenges in Turkey. However, it has relevance for policy formation as it underlines the political changes in Turkey under Erdogan and the challenges that the country is facing. It is important to understand that the authoritarian turn in Erdogan's rule and the growing opposition from the secular political parties and civil society need to be taken into account in policy formation. The current phase of political developments is indeed crucial for the future turn of events in Turkey. This monograph also provides the ideal platform to build on and understand Turkish foreign policy behaviour and its implications for India, which is the topic for my next research project.

The nearly two decades of Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (AKP; Justice and Development Party) rule has raised a number of questions on the advancement or reversal of democratisation in Turkey. Besides the partisan debate on increasing authoritarian behaviour of Erdogan, there have been limited attempts to comprehensively examine the way AKP has shaped the Turkish politics in the context of the democratisation debate. An analysis of three key components of contemporary politics—political institutions, civil–military relations, and the public sphere—underscores the key challenges facing Turkish democracy. Erdogan's authoritarian style and power politics poses serious dilemmas for Turkey's future. Turkey is staring towards perpetuation of the one-man rule that can only be challenged through electoral politics.



Md. Muddassir Quamar is Associate Fellow in the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. He holds a Ph.D. in Middle East studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University. His areas of interest include politics and societies in the Gulf, Middle East strategic affairs, and political Islam. His research papers have appeared in leading international journals including Asian Affairs, Strategic Analysis, Contemporary Arab Affairs, etc. He has contributed chapters for edited volumes and regularly writes opinion pieces for national and international websites and magazines. His co-authored book *India's Saudi Policy: Bridge to the Future* was published in 2019 by Palgrave Macmillan.



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Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg,
Delhi Cantt., New Delhi - 110 010
Tel.: (91-11) 2671-7983 Fax: (91-11) 2615 4191
E-mail: contactus@idsa.in Website: <http://www.idsa.in>