

Perspectives on Democracy

| From Hope to Authoritarianism: What Factors Led to the Decline of Democracy in Turkey?

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This essay examines the erosion of democracy in Turkey, challenging the common assumption that economic prosperity leads to the democratisation of national politics. The paper focuses on three key identifiers of Turkey's democratic backsliding: weak democratic institutions, the political manipulation of financial crises, and the effective use of rhetoric to marginalise opposition.

Turkish President Erdoğan is a skilled politician who can manipulate his political environment to consolidate his hold on power. He is not unique in this regard. Turkey serves as a reminder to the world that democratic institutions can be gradually dismantled through the misuse of democratic processes. By examining Turkey's recent political trajectory toward autocracy, the once assumed reality that economic prosperity brings political liberalisation is no longer guaranteed.

As democratic nations and their safeguards begin to buckle under mounting pressures, the consequences of institutional neglect and decay are serious. Ultimately, the Turkish case highlights the importance of safeguarding democratic norms, even in ostensibly stable and economically successful countries.

Introduction

The rise of populism has increased concern for the welfare of democratic nations. This uneasiness is reflected in the numerous and diverse publications, as both academic and non-academic fields discuss this phenomenon. The contemporary populist movement poses a challenge to democratic nations because its leaders frequently espouse an autocratic style of leadership (Weyland, 2020). Populist rulers in different parts of the globe, including the current Turkish leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have succeeded in dismantling democracy. The Turkish example is particularly relevant to study as it runs contrary to the belief that wealthier democracies are protected from dictatorship.

According to this maxim, as Turkey became wealthier, its citizens should have been able to keep their leader in check. Economic data indicate that the reverse has occurred in Turkey; as the country's GDP has grown, authoritarian rule has also intensified (Brownlee, 2016). Academic scholars provide three main reasons for the dismantling of democracy in Turkey: the weakness of democratic institutions, the manipulation of an economic crisis by its authoritarian leader to gather popular support, and the use of rhetorical strategies to discredit the opposition. Turkey's erosion of democracy under Erdoğan illustrates that even economically prosperous democracies are not immune to authoritarianism when institutional measures are weak, and populist leaders manipulate crises and public perception.

Leading Arguments

A democratic government may slide into authoritarian rule when weakness in its democratic institutions leaves it open to manipulation. According to Przeworski et al. (1996),

parliamentary governments are more stable than presidential ones because their stronger checks and balances help constrain populist leaders in their bid for power. They argue that democracies endure longer than presidential systems due to the nature of the parliamentary system. One of the key reasons that presidential governments fall into autocracy and authoritarianism is that presidents typically have more power than prime ministers (Przeworski et al., 1996). Turkey is a prime example of how a country that appeared to be heading towards democracy and liberalisation fell short and has now retreated to a unitary presidential republic.

According to Weyland (2020), near-democratic institutions may be fragile because their constitutions are relatively flexible, making them more susceptible to legal transformation and dismantling. Weak democracies tend to share several common characteristics; following Levitsky and Way's (2002) argument, horizontal accountability is one of the key traits of a weak democracy. By having subpar checks and balances on government overreach, executives can exploit the system and exhibit abusive, powerful, strongman tendencies. Evrensel (2024) highlights similar concerns raised by observers about Turkey's constitution, specifically the inadequate checks and balances, restricted parliamentary oversight, and diminished judicial independence.

Levitsky (2002) also emphasises that divisions among ruling elites significantly contribute to the collapse of democracy. When elites lack a shared understanding of commitment to democratic practices, they may fail to support and maintain democratic institutions. Some elites view excessive bureaucracy and unnecessary regulations as obstacles to economic, political, and social progress. As a result, they may advocate for the removal of such things, a move that heralds the beginning of democracy's downfall. As McLauren and Cop (2011) note,

In Turkey, the failure to develop an elite settlement on key issues – including the functioning of Turkish democratic institutions, the very controversial issue of the role of religion and rights of religious groups and the treatment of ethnic minority groups – has meant elite disagreement on the basic rules of the regime and unwillingness to defend democratic rules. (p. 514)

In contrast with Turkey, Spain and Greece have both recently experienced periods of authoritarian rule. [EP1] As a result, when these countries faced economic crises, their citizens were more cautious about supporting radical political parties, aware of the dangers such choices could pose. This historical awareness may have contributed to their full transitions into stable democracies. Unlike Spain and Greece, McLauren and Cop argue (2011), Turkey lacks a shared national memory of traumatic authoritarianism:

Turkish elites and ordinary citizens do not share the same widespread historical memory of brutal civil war followed by severe government repression that the Spanish elites and citizenry share, nor do the elites themselves have a shared experience of repression, as in the case of Greece, and this is likely to have produced widely varying levels of willingness to compromise to save democracy. (p. 502)

According to scholars, another key factor in the shift from democracy to authoritarianism is a regime crisis, which can generate popular support for authoritarian leaders while highlighting the “weakness” of democratic leadership in managing the crisis (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Time and again, democratic countries face political and economic crises that lead to widespread frustration with the government in power. Extreme political parties, normally on the fringe, thrive in these environments. As people grow desperate for a solution, extremist parties, both left

and right, garner support as they advertise themselves as the party with the only viable solution. The authoritarian leader may succeed in overcoming acute, severe crises such as an economic crisis. This gives populist leaders broad popular support and helps them remove the remaining obstacles to power (Weyland, 2020).

As crises build up over time; often crises appear to come out of nowhere when, in fact, they are a result of longstanding neglect and denial. As Levitsky and Way (2002) explain, "A third path to competitive authoritarianism was the decay of a democratic regime. In these cases, deep and often long-standing political and economic crises created conditions under which freely elected governments undermined democratic institutions " (p. 61).

According to Castaldo (2018), another reason why populist figures succeed in crises is that they present themselves as separate from the ruling elites. The authoritarian leader may use a crisis, such as an economic crisis, as a way to appeal to the populace by presenting himself as 'one of the people' and 'anti-establishment', which makes him look strong, in comparison to the lost credibility of the democratic establishment due to economic crisis, which makes the democratic establishment look weak (Castaldo, 2018, p. 474)

When countries face a crisis, it is not uncommon for populations to lose faith in democratic institutions and seek alternative forms of leadership. Crises can undermine confidence in existing governments, paving the way for authoritarianism by increasing the appeal of strong, decisive rule. A clear example of this is the Weimar Republic. Faced with severe economic hardship and a dysfunctional government, the German people sought a replacement regime that would restore national pride and stability (Ziegler, 2022). In doing so, they created the conditions for Hitler and his party to rise to power, ultimately plunging Germany

into one of the darkest chapters of its history. As Tansel (2018) points out, Turkey is no exception to this pattern; Turkey's embrace of authoritarianism was also fueled by economic turmoil.

Capitalising on this discontent, Erdogan employed populist strategies that included the promise of economic revival. Turkey experienced a major financial crisis in 2001 and, “by 2002, the dominant precepts of centrist party politics were exhausted and the public showed no inclination to further support what was a failing economic and political programme” ... “voters were ready to embrace an alternative which the recently established AKP would come to represent” (Tansel, 2018, p.201).). In Turkey's history, the rise of the AKP has marked the beginning of a new era. It exhibits patterns of 'delegative democracy', characterised by strong personalised rule, weakened institutional checks and crisis-driven legitimacy (Taş, 2015, p. 777). Erdogan has made highly effective use of these economic crises to label any sign of opposition “a matter of national security” and to weaken laws and “separation of powers” (Taş, 2015, p. 778).

Scholars such as Hintz (2016) discuss another strategy used by Erdogan to transition from democracy to authoritarian rule, specifically through the marginalization of opposition and dissident social groups. In Turkey, rhetorical strategies with abusive and disparaging speech were used to marginalise, demobilise, and discredit the opposition. Anyone who expressed discontent (e.g., Gezi protesters) was identified as inherently dangerous to Turkey. Anyone opposing the authoritarian leadership was labelled a “terrorist”. Authoritarians in Turkey also employed conspiracy theories about a Western-supported coup to bring the motives of protestors into question (Hintz, 2016).

Marginalising opposition groups and dissident social groups is a hallmark of an authoritarian government. Stalin, Mao, Hitler, Pol Pot, and various colonial powers have relied on oppression to maintain control over their populations. In many authoritarian societies, criticism of the ruling body is not tolerated. President Erdogan solidified his authority by centralizing control over the government, weakening and dividing the opposition, and increasing pressure on the media and civil society (Weyland, 2020). This intolerance to dissent became especially pronounced after the Gezi Protests in 2013. "Intolerance to criticism and the increasing securitisation of dissent reached a new dimension as a result of the Gezi Protests in 2013" "In 2015, the AKP-controlled parliament passed a new security law that expands the power of the police and further limits the right to demonstrate and assemble" (Gunay, 2016).

In extreme instances, power-hungry leaders may portray themselves as divine and superior to everyday citizens and therefore have the unique privilege of following the law only when it suits them. Throughout history, monarchies and oligarchies have claimed that their rulers possessed a divine lineage or were chosen by the gods. Umar (2024) states that Kingship in the Ancient Near East was regarded as divinely ordained. Any form of question or opposition to what the ruler(s) wished could be deemed treason against the state and therefore against the gods. Although Erdogan does not claim divine power, Yilmaz et al. (2023) argue that Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) uses religion to legitimize its repressive policies and discredit the opposition by framing it as a security threat. Erdogan presents himself as the true voice of the nation's key interests. "In delegative democracies the political ruler is projected as 'the embodiment and interpreter of the high interests of the nation.... Any opposition to the ruler then, is apt to be interpreted as treason.'" In Erdogan's discourse, all opposition figures are dehumanised, demonised and excluded from the Turkish nation (Taş, 2015, pp. 784 - 785).

Evaluating the Research

This study identifies that scholars highlight the need to critically examine Turkey's decline from a relatively wealthy democracy to authoritarianism. The explanations offered by scholars for the decline of democracy in Turkey are compelling and can coexist; they are not mutually exclusive. All three theories have gained widespread currency amongst scholars and are discussed in a variety of academic papers. The two most commonly occurring reasons given for the dismantling of democracy and transition to authoritarianism in Turkey are the role of acute crisis and institutional weakness. The third reason given is the use of rhetoric by authoritarian leaders to marginalise their opponents, appears less often in the papers reviewed. Weyland (2020) suggests that it is necessary for both the institutions within a democracy to be weak and for the country to be undergoing a severe crisis for its government to slide from democracy to authoritarianism. "This wide-ranging investigation shows that populist efforts to dismantle democratic institutions and promote authoritarianism succeed only under special conditions. Two sets of factors need to coincide" (Weyland, 2020, p. 390). The use of pejorative rhetorical language by authoritarian leaders may be a common occurrence but is not as frequently cited as a reason for Turkey's democratic demise.

As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) point out, most present-day democracies are not destroyed through violent overthrows of authority. Instead, democratic institutions are gradually dismantled. Turkey, with its slow erosion of democracy, is a prime example of this occurrence; Erdogan used his position of power and his electoral popularity to dismantle Turkey's democratic institutions. As Weyland (2020) aptly states, he "misuse(s) democracy to abolish democracy" (p. 390). Weyland (2020), McLaren and Cop (2011), and Levitsky and Way (2002), all discuss the weakness present in certain democratic institutions and the ability of autocrats to circumvent the

legislature. Weyland (2020) provides several clear examples of institutional weakness in Turkey, including the lack of effective sanctions for rule breakers and the removal of obstacles to constitutional change.

Levitsky and Way (2002) do not refer to Turkey directly in *The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism*, but do discuss commonalities of competitive authoritarian regimes, such as the malleability of institutions present in weak democracies. Levitsky and Way (2002) argue that weak democracies have fewer checks and balances and are therefore more vulnerable to abusive, power-hungry leaders. Weyland (2020), and McLaren and Cop (2011) refer to the same characteristics of weak democracies and apply them specifically to Turkey. Levitsky and Way (2002) further highlight the use of political and economic crises by democratically elected leaders to strengthen autocratic practices. Weyland (2020), Levitsky (2002), Castaldo (2018), Tansel (2018), Taş (2015), and Baykan (2018) all point to Erdogan's manipulative use of crises in his bid to consolidate power, with Baykan providing detailed examples of Erdogan's strategy. Authoritarian leaders, like Erdogan, understand the importance of projecting an image of strength. Leaders who successfully navigate a crisis may enhance their popularity and their reputation for trustworthiness. By emphasising their achievements and disparaging democratic institutions, they can cement their grip on power.

Placing the Turkish case within a broader global context, as Weyland (2020) does, is crucial and contributes significantly to the importance of his paper. Autocrats worldwide employ similar strategies to dismantle democratic systems. Early identification of these strategies is crucial as it makes democratic breakdown easier to combat (Levitsky, 2018).

Conclusion

It is widely believed that wealthy democracies are immune to authoritarian rule. Yet Turkey's recent political trajectory challenges this belief. The three commonly cited reasons for Turkey's democratic decline are the institutional weakness of its democracy, the impact of an acute economic crisis, and President Erdoğan's strategic use of divisive rhetoric to marginalise opposition. Scholars studying Turkey agree that the institutional fragility of its democracy and financial turmoil are central to the fall of Turkey's democracy, with some scholars highlighting rhetorical manipulation as a significant contributing factor. None of the arguments presented by the scholars in my research contradict each other; the absence of major disagreement among scholars makes these explanations particularly compelling.

While Turkey's transition may appear unusual, it is far from inexplicable. On the contrary, it is well understood by political scholars. Researching countries like Turkey is crucial to understanding how democratic regimes can erode from within. Democratic backsliding is not a relic of the past; it is a present and ongoing risk. The widespread belief in the invulnerability of democratic institutions fosters complacency in governments and citizens, gradually undermining the democratic principles they are meant to protect. Often, the warning signs of democratic erosion become evident only after considerable damage has occurred. Populist leaders who claim to be the "true" voice of the people can accelerate this damage by eroding institutions and deepening divisions within society. History shows us that overconfidence among the political elite rarely ends favourably. Turkey's case not only exposes the internal weaknesses that can undermine a democracy but also serves as a warning. It reminds us that vigilance, institutional strength, and public awareness are essential to safeguard democracy and prevent the slow rise of authoritarianism.

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