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SUCCESSION—THE MAKE-OR-BREAK MOMENT OF ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES: THE CASE OF ERDOĞAN’S TURKEY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most emergent electoral authoritarian regimes are highly leader-centered. Accordingly, there is little experience in dealing with potential changes in leadership.

The question of leadership succession exposes structural weaknesses in these regimes and casts doubt on their long-term sustainability and the composition of the ruling power coalitions.

Turkey represents a case of a nascent and unregulated succession question. President Erdoğan’s constitutionally mandated final term will end in 2028. The tangible, approaching end of Erdoğan’s era creates uncertainties and leads to internal shifts and rivalries within the ruling coalition.

Repressing external challengers and containing internal power struggles will consume the energies of the government. This dynamic is likely to further decouple Erdoğan and his entourage from the electorate.

KEYWORDS:

Succession, Autocratization, Democracy

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die meisten aufstrebenden Wahlautokratien sind personalistisch geprägt. Es gibt kaum Erfahrungen damit, wie mit einem möglichen Wechsel an der Spitze umgegangen werden soll.

Die Frage der Nachfolge legt die Schwächen dieser Regime offen und wirft Fragen nach der Nachhaltigkeit des Regimes und der dahinterstehenden Machtallianzen auf.

Die Türkei stellt ein Beispiel für eine aufkommende und unregulierte Nachfolgefrage dar. Die verfassungsmäßig letzte Amtszeit von Präsident Erdoğan endet im Jahr 2028. Das näherrückende Ende der Ära Erdoğan erzeugt Unsicherheiten und führt zu Rivalitäten innerhalb der Regierungskoalition.

Die Unterdrückung externer Herausforderer und das Eindämmen interner Machtkämpfe werden einen Großteil der politischen Energie der Regierung binden. Diese Dynamik dürfte Erdoğan und sein Umfeld weiter von der Wählerschaft entfremden.

KEYWORDS:

Nachfolge, Autokratisierung, Demokratie

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THE RISE OF AUTOCRATIZATION

The world has been experiencing a new wave of autocratization. In 2024, 44 countries were affected by autocratization. This was an increase by 9 countries in only one year. While 27 of them were former democracies that descended into electoral authoritarian regimes, the rest were electoral autocracies that turned into closed autocracies (V-Dem Institute, 2025, p. 6).

We are in the midst of a third wave of autocratization. Different from the first wave (1920s–1940s) shaped by the rise of fascism in Europe, and the second wave (1960s and 1970s) characterized by military coups in developing countries, the current third wave of autocratization (Boese et al., 2021; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) has been less defined by the sudden breakdown of democratic regimes, or military or executive coups, but rather by the gradual decline in democratic institutions, processes, and liberties. In most cases, autocratization has come at the hand of democratically elected populist authoritarian incumbents (Laebens & Öztürk, 2020; Svolik, 2019). Elected populist authoritarian leaders and movements have captured the state through constitutional

amendments, the weakening of supreme courts, and the domination of public discourse, eroding democracy from within and turning elections into a winner-takes-all game.

Primary examples are: Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, Turkey under Tayyip Erdoğan, Hungary under Viktor Orbán, Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić, and not least, the US since Donald Trump’s return to the White House in January 2025.

While there is extensive literature on how to define such regimes (see e.g., Levitsky & Way, 2002; O’Donnell, 1994; Zakaria, 1997), the long-term sustainability of such regimes has largely remained unexplored. This trend report examines the stability of emergent electoral authoritarian regimes and highlights the often-overlooked issue of succession as a potential make-or-break moment for regime survival, using Turkey as a case study.

STRONG LEADER—WEAK SYSTEM

Most emergent electoral authoritarian regimes are highly leader-centered systems. Populist authoritarians such as Erdoğan, Orbán, or Vučić have successfully mobilized party

functionaries and the electorate. Personal allegiance, often based on financial dependency or family affiliation, has largely replaced weak or failing ideological movements. Instead, the leader has become the political program. Informal power relations, dependencies, and structures have been a common governing technique. It refers to uncodified interactions that operate outside of officially sanctioned channels (Helmke & Levitsky, 2012). Reliance on informality has undermined the role of formal institutions and processes and helped further concentrate powers in the hands of the leader and his immediate entourage. Informal patronage networks have been instrumental in building an economic and political power bloc that remains tightly bound to the leader.

Informal governing techniques typically expand leaders' prerogatives and foster co-dependent coalitions of interests, but they become a vulnerability once the leader falters. In highly personalized regimes with a high degree of informality, the departure of a charismatic strong leader raises questions about regime survival. Kendall-Taylor and Frantz (2016) emphasize succession as the Achilles' heel of authoritarianism.

THE SUCCESSION PROBLEM

Change in leadership can cause uncertainty and turmoil in any regime type. However, while succession in democracies, party dictatorships, and military regimes is typically regulated by institutional mechanisms and formalized

rules and procedures, leader-centered electoral authoritarian regimes remain poorly prepared for succession.

Whereas in most cases, the ruling parties have been too weakened to manage transition, populist authoritarian leaders such as Erdoğan, Orbán, or Vučić have avoided building up a potential successor, fearing that this might create internal competition and could undermine their authority.

In cases of unregulated succession processes, the tangible approaching end of an era is likely to create internal shifts and rivalries within a ruling coalition. Competing factions usually begin coalescing around potential successors.

This trend report focuses on succession as the Achilles' heel of emergent electoral authoritarian regimes. It argues that the issue of succession does not only emerge with a leader's death. However, in highly personalized regimes, the leaders' health issues, age-related physical and cognitive

decline, or the impending end of a constitutionally defined term of office can already have a destabilizing effect. In cases of unregulated succession processes, the tangible approaching end of an era is likely to create internal shifts and rivalries within a ruling coalition. Competing factions usually begin coalescing around potential successors. Their rivalry over power positions and financial resources may further deepen the crisis and weaken the regime. Elite infighting and destabilization can then even lead to the fall of the regime and political transition.

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At the same time, in periods of crisis, authoritarian regimes tend to ensure their survival through heightened repression and the narrowing of spaces for contestation.

After 24 years of uninterrupted rule, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s era in Turkey is nearing an end. Political developments and public debates in 2025 and 2026 are increasingly influenced by a looming succession question.

TURKEY’S SIMMERING SUCCESSION QUESTION

Turkey is a primary example of autocratization at the hands of elected incumbents. Over the last 20 years, the country has gradually transformed from a defective democracy into a competitive authoritarian regime where democratic freedoms are limited, the judiciary is largely brought in line, public discourse is dominated by government-friendly media, state resources are exploited, and elections take place on an uneven playing field.

The constitutional referendum of 2017 on a presidential system confirmed and legitimized the weakening of parliament and political parties and concentrated executive powers in the presidential palace. Regime change has entailed the dismantling of ministries and the emergence of a new palace bureaucracy that is only loyal to the president and his interests. Yet, ironically, the moment at which Erdoğan’s executive powers have reached their apex also marks the point at which the future of the regime he has built is most at stake.

President Erdoğan’s constitutionally mandated last term will end in 2028. Since the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023, when the race for presidency was already relatively tight, Erdoğan’s and the ruling AKP’s (Justice and Development

Party) popularity have declined sharply. Multiple surveys suggest that the main opposition CHP (Republican People’s Party) has already surpassed the AKP (Metabolik Denge, 2025). Surveys on the presidential race indicate that opposition figures such as Ekrem İmamoğlu, the detained mayor of Istanbul and President Erdoğan’s most dangerous political challenger—but also Mansur Yavaş, the mayor of Ankara, and Özgür Özel, the leader of the main opposition party CHP—are polling ahead of Erdoğan (Demokrat, 2025).

Moreover, there are growing speculations about Erdoğan’s health condition. Erdoğan, who turns 72 in February 2026, appeared unstable on his feet and has had difficulty walking on several occasions.

REGIME INFIGHTING AND DEEPENING AUTOCRATIZATION

Signs of an emergent succession issue include intra-elite rivalries for succession reported in Turkish media. Reportedly, there is growing rivalry between supporters of Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and factions that support Erdoğan’s son Bilal and another potential successor, Selçuk Bayraktar, Erdoğan’s son-in-law. Bayraktar is a member of the Bayraktar family, which owns different military technology companies (Deutsche Welle, 2025). Raids on pro-government media outlets and the detention of allegedly pro-Fidan journalists have been interpreted as contingency preparations and positioning of the Bilal Erdoğan camp. At the same time, the regime tries to control insecurity through the further narrowing of democratic rights and freedoms. Ekrem İmamoğlu’s detention, the crackdown on journalists, business leaders, and civil society, and not least, efforts to oust the leadership of the CHP through a lawsuit based on alleged vote-buying are emblematic of intensified

autocratization in anticipation of political transition in view of the approaching, unmanaged succession question.

A STABLE TREND TOWARDS AUTOCRATIZATION AND ITS EFFECTS

Turkey’s protracted succession issue points in the near future to a stable trend towards further autocratization. The government’s waning popular support and President Erdoğan’s weakening health situation are likely to deepen autocratization. This involves repression and crackdowns on the opposition and civil society. At the same time, the regime will attempt to control and moderate intra-elite rivalries. Repressing external challengers and containing internal power struggles will consume the energies of the government. This dynamic is likely to further decouple Erdoğan and his entourage from the electorate. Despite his weak health, Erdoğan is unlikely to designate a successor. He might, however, intensify efforts to amend the constitution to grant him a third term. The ongoing peace talks between the government and the Kurdish movement need to be assessed in this light.

EFFECTS ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

Turkey is of high geopolitical relevance. The regime has leveraged the country’s geostrategic position domestically as well as in its foreign relations. Although geostrategic leverage has functioned as an insurance policy for regime survival—Erdoğan has been able to develop close ties to Trump and Putin and he is of importance to the EU’s migration and border policies—growing insecurity and uncertainty about the future of the regime can foster volatility and contradictory foreign behavior. In light of a looming succession

issue, rival elite factions might pursue diverging foreign policy interests. In times of regime insecurity, the government might also seek to deflect domestic problems by escalating external conflicts. Although from today’s perspective the trend towards deepening autocratization, induced by a looming succession question, seems stable, there are also potential trend breakers ahead.

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TREND BREAKERS FOR FURTHER AUTOCRATIZATION

Erdoğan’s unlikely and unexpected resignation, early elections, Ekrem İmamoğlu’s release from prison, public unrest after the breakdown of the economy, or collapse of the informal coalition with the ultra-nationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party) would suddenly change the course of developments. There are also rumors about early elections to break the stalemate and challenge the constitutional limitations. The international context, including President Trump’s support for Erdoğan and his engagement in peace negotiations between Russia, Ukraine, and the United States, does not point to increased international pressure for democratization. On the contrary, there is a strong trend towards international political and economic cooperation between ruling cliques including Erdoğan’s Turkey.

CONCLUSION

Autocratization has seized most parts of the world, making liberal democracies the least common regime type (V-Dem Institute, 2025). A rising number of countries can be defined as electoral authoritarian regimes. While the degree of authoritarianism may vary from one regime to the other, most of them are characterized by a high level of personalization of power and the informalization of power relations. Low institutionalization provides leaders with flexibility and prerogatives, but it turns out to be a weakness when a succession question emerges.

Turkey is not only one of the early examples of gradual autocratization and personalization of power, but now, after 25 years of uninterrupted rule and with Erdoğan’s second and constitutionally guaranteed last term as President ending in 2028, the country has been facing a succession crisis.

The looming succession crisis threatens the Erdoğan family’s and their allies’ political and economic power interests and puts the survival of the competitive authoritarian regime at risk. Turkey is likely to be dominated in 2026 by the effects of ongoing intra-elite rivalries and the government’s aim to control the process by shutting down oppositional voices and preventing any external challenges to the regime. In this context, Turkey offers a salient case of how a looming leadership succession and the resulting uncertainty over regime survival can accelerate autocratization. Developments in Turkey therefore serve as an early warning for the future trajectories of other emerging electoral authoritarian regimes.

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