



SHAPING TURKEY'S DEMOCRATIC FUTURE

IS THIS THE END OR THE BEGINNING OF DEMOCRACY?

IN COOPERATION WITH THE DEFENSE MINISTRY BMLV.

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SUMMARY:

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Turkey has entered a new phase of autocratization

Autocratization has seized Turkey from 2010s on, but with the arrest of Ekrem Imamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul and President Erdoğan's major contestant, Turkey has entered a new phase of autocratization. The AKP regime has understood it cannot win elections and set out to secure its survival by crushing the opposition.

2 There is a strong democratic tradition

Different from other authoritarian systems, in Turkey democratic opposition and resistance has been strong. Unlike Russia or Hungary, Turkey is not a new democracy. Popular sovereignty is very important to people. In elections the opposition can win, and it did so in 2015 and in local elections in 2019 and 2004. There is strong civic resistance to autocratization.

3 2003 elections were a turning point

These were not fair elections, and the government used all elements of the authoritarian playbook; disinformation, use of economy at the cost of economic decline. In fall 2004 a new phase began. The government began to prepare ground for attacks on the opposition. Included the passing of laws that give the government powers to confiscate businesses.

4 The international Context

The electoral win of Donald Trump has created an environment that is conducive to autocratization. Erdogan does not need to fear any sanctions from the US or the EU which is interested in collaboration regarding migration management. However, any strategic approach would need to take the opposition and its strength into account.

5 The Kurdish Peace Process is designed to divide the opposition

Politically The government has defined the CHP (Republican People's Party) as its primary enemy. In order to weaken unity in the opposition the government initiated the peace processes. It helped silence pro-Kurdish voices.

6 Turkey currently goes through a war of attrition

Both sides, the government and the opposition movement are determined. Democratic resistance will remain very strong whatever happens in Turkey. The international community needs to take this into account when it thinks about its relations with Turkey.

WICHTIGSTE ERKENNTNISSE

1 Die Türkei ist in eine neue Phase der Autokratisierung eingetreten

Die Türkei erlebt seit den frühen 2010er-Jahren einen Prozess der Autokratisierung. Die Verhaftung von Ekrem Imamoğlu, dem Bürgermeister von Istanbul und wichtigsten Herausforderer von Präsident Erdoğan hat eine schwere politische Krise ausgelöst. Das AKP-Regime sieht sich durch die Hauptoppositionspartei CHP ernsthaft bedroht. Durch Repression und politische Manöver sollen oppositionelle Persönlichkeiten aus dem Weg geräumt und die CHP zerschlagen und geschwächt werden.

2 Es gibt eine starke demokratische Tradition

Im Gegensatz zu anderen autoritären Systemen wie Russland oder Ungarn hat die Türkei eine lange demokratische Tradition, verfügt über eine starke Opposition und es gibt einen starken zivilgesellschaftlichen Widerstand. Die Opposition kann bei Wahlen gewinnen – das zeigte sich 2015, sowie bei den Kommunalwahlen 2019 und 2004. Das Wahlrecht ist den Menschen aus allen Lagern sehr wichtig. 2023 lag die Wahlbeteiligung bei 90%.

3 Die Wahlen von 2023 waren ein Wendepunkt

Die Präsidentschaftswahlen 2023 waren nicht fair, und die Regierung setzte das gesamte autoritäre Repertoire ein: Desinformation und taktische wirtschaftliche Maßnahmen auf Kosten des wirtschaftlichen Wohlstands. Dies trug zum Wahlsieg der Opposition auf lokaler Ebene bei. Seitdem dominiert die CHP die Großstädte und damit auch die lokalen Wirtschaftsnetzwerke durch die Vergabe von Aufträgen. Ab Herbst 2024 begann das Regime, den Boden für Angriffe auf die Opposition zu bereiten - zum Beispiel durch Gesetze, die es ermöglichen, Unternehmen zu beschlagnahmen.

4 Der internationale Kontext

Der Wahlsieg von Donald Trump hat ein Umfeld geschaffen, das Autokratisierung begünstigt. Erdoğan muss keine Sanktionen der USA oder der EU fürchten, die vielmehr an einer Zusammenarbeit in der Sicherheitspolitik und Migrationspolitik interessiert sind. Jegliche langfristige strategische Planung der Beziehungen sollte jedoch die innenpolitische Krise bzw. die Stärke der Opposition und der Zivilgesellschaft berücksichtigen und nicht nur auf Erdoğan und das Regime setzen.

5 Der kurdische Friedensprozess dient der Spaltung der Opposition

Die Regierung hat seit 2023 die CHP (Republikanische Volkspartei) als ihren Hauptgegner definiert. Der Friedensprozess geht nicht unbedingt mit einer Demokratisierung einher, vielmehr scheint es darum zu gehen, das anti- Erdoğan Lager zu schwächen.

6

Die Türkei befindet sich derzeit in einem Abnutzungskrieg

Beide Seiten - die Regierung und die Oppositionsbewegung - zeigen sich entschlossen. Der demokratische Widerstand wird auf jeden Fall stark bleiben. Die Türkei wird noch für einige Zeit von Instabilität, Unsicherheit und Repression geprägt sein. Es bleibt abzuwarten, ob sich das Regime wirtschaftlich und politisch durchsetzen kann oder ob der Kipppunkt erreicht wird. Das Gleiche gilt für die Demokratiebewegung und die Oppositionspartei CHP. Ihr Erfolg hängt davon ab, ob sie trotz massiver Einschränkungen und Repressionen ihre Arbeit und den Kontakt zur Protestbewegung aufrechterhalten kann.

Introduction

From the 2010 years on, Turkey has experienced gradual autocratization. Autocratization intensified after the failed coup attempt of 2016. Opposition electoral successes in the 2019 and 2024 local elections have also incited increasingly repressive government action. March 19, 2025, marked a turning point in Turkish history. The detention of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul and President Erdoğan's main political challenger, has been seen termed by the oppositional CHP (Republican People's Party) as a coup against democracy — or what remains of it. İmamoğlu's arrest triggered the largest protests in years. Starting from universities, thousands of people have taken into the streets. The government has responded with police repression and legal prosecution. Students, journalists, members of the local administrations and critics have been arrested ever since. However, the regime's repressive measures have so far led to more rather than less public fury and protest. And the main opposition party CHP has been able to keep the momentum and channel resistance to new areas, such as an economic boycott of pro-government enterprises and a mass signature campaign demanding İmamoğlu's release and early elections.

To consider what all of these factors mean for the future of democracy in Turkey, the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip) alongside the Kreisky Forum hosted a panel discussion on the 29th of April, 2025 entitled "Turkey at the Crossroads—Is this the End or Beginning of Democracy?". The discussion was the first in a joint series with the Kreisky Forum called "Shaping Turkey's Democratic Future." Panelists included Sebnem Gumuscu, an associate professor at Middlebury College who has

written extensively on Middle Eastern politics, democratic backsliding, and political parties; Seren Selvin Korkmaz, co-founder and co-director of Istanbul-based think tank Istanbul Institute and researcher at the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies; and Murat Somer, professor of political science and international relations at Koç University and Ozyegin University. The panel was moderated by oiip director Cengiz Gunay.

Who is the government in Turkey?

With the shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system, Turkey's governing structures have become increasingly opaque. Murat Somer argues that, although the centrality of Erdogan in the government structure is well-established, we still do not know very much about the inner workings of his government. Sebnem Gümüşçü in turn emphasizes that there are two visible political actors in the current system; Erdogan and his AKP and the ultranationalist MHP. Their alliance was formed in 2015, and it paved the way to the presidential system. This coalition is built on a synthesis of Turkey's Islamic and nationalist identities. Erdoğan has traditionally built his legitimacy and large popular support, the ultra nationalist MHP not necessarily. They have rather relied on the strategy of infiltrating the state apparatus. They have a particular understanding of the state and its national and international role. While Erdoğan claims to represent the people, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli claims to represent the state.

Erdoğan is not strong enough to dictate his terms on Turkish society; he needs an ally. Now it is the MHP, before that it was the Gülen Movement. Therefore, the question is whether they agree on further autocratization or not.

Somer contends that the ultimate difference

between democracy and dictatorship is transparency. In recent years we see the rise of a new actor: the presidency (or the palace bureaucracy). Erdoğan has 35 advisors. The public knows little to nothing about these people and there are economic interests involved. The ruling AKP was a strong mass movement, but it has been disempowered. We see in Turkey, similar to developments in the US, the rise of an oligarchic regime. An opaque regime with very powerful persons who are not elected. They are even afraid of elections.

Why now?

International political conditions have been conducive since Donald Trump's return to the White House. However, the new phase of autocratization was already initiated in fall 2024, before Trump's return to the White House. Murat Somer refutes the argument that Erdoğan has not become more authoritarian because he is weakened. He holds that Erdoğan's authoritarian leanings are not new. After all, as early as 2013 people protested in the Gezi Protests against authoritarian governing practices. Somer also highlights that currently Erdoğan's rule is not really threatened. He won an electoral majority in 2023 - even though elections were not fair - the government used disinformation - they were free of large-scale manipulations and the next presidential elections are only due in 2028. Therefore, there is no requirement of being repressive to maintain power. He rather asserts that there is an authoritarian will behind it that thinks that authoritarianism is a better way to govern and there is also certainly self-interest. The economic costs are tremendous. Until April 2025 the Central Bank lost 55 billion Dollars to balance exchange rates. At the same time, people are in the streets and Turkey is in turmoil. Somer says that Erdoğan has taken this into account.

Gümüşçü links the timing of the coup with the

Kurdish Peace Process. She highlights that the peace process comes with tremendous political costs to the ruling alliance of the AKP and the MHP. Korkmaz highlights that this was a move of the government to divide the opposition.

The CHP - a threat to Erdoğan's rule?

Turkey is in constant crisis. Crisis is an instrument of the government to manage the country and the diverse and complex interests. Although, the Turkish opposition has been relatively strong and it has been an important element of resistance against autocratization for many years, the it was not able to develop effective strategies against government policies and develop alternative narratives. As Korkmaz points out, in the past, the main opposition party has sometimes even - consciously or unconsciously contributed to autocratization. An important example was the opposition's consent to the lifting of the immunity of some members of parliament. This affected mainly Kurdish MPs and led to the arrest of personalities such as Selahattin Demirtaş, the former leader of the pro-Kurdish parts. The CHP was also rather hesitant to criticize the question of the deposition of mayors of the pro-Kurdish HDP. Now this falls back on the CHP. Its own mayors are now threatened to be deposed.

For years, the CHP saw itself as a pillar of the Kemalist state and had a rather problematic relationship with social movements and protest movements. However, in the last years, the CHP has tremendously changed. It has now replaced the AKP as a popular movement. This was also reflected in the local elections of 2024 in which the CHP won almost all large cities. All of sudden new personalities were catapulted in local governance positions.

The shift to the presidential system has foregrounded personalities. Elections have become

less about parties, but about personalities. Ekrem Imamoğlu proved his charisma. He has been very popular across social classes and ages, and he has proven that he can win elections and even gain votes in former AKP strongholds. Since the electoral victory in the local elections of 2024, the CHP's staff reserves have increased. There are now several charismatic personalities such as for instance the mayor of Ankara Mansur Yavaş. CHP local governments have proven to be able to be democratic, inclusive and to deliver social services.

Korkmaz holds that Erdoğan's new target is not the pro-Kurdish movement, but the main opposition party which has become a real threat to his rule. Polls show that the CHP and Imamoğlu would win elections if they were to be held now. Gümüşçü emphasizes that any assessment of the last wave of autocratization - the coup - needs to consider what the government has not been able to achieve- because of the people's backlash and the CHP's resistance. The government had planned a much broader attack which went much beyond the arrest of Ekrem Imamoğlu and also included the appointment of a trustee as mayor of Istanbul, but also the annulment of the party congress of the oppositional CHP - due to alleged irregularities - and the appointment of a trustee as party chair. There is also an economic dimension to it- after all Istanbul is an economic powerhouse.

Resistance and Opposition

The protests started at the universities. They became the largest protest movement since the crackdown on the Gezi Protests in 2013. Imamoğlu's detention was certainly a trigger, but it is not the main reason why young people started protests. The protests came as a surprise to many and also the government. Korkmaz presented research results that highlight that the main motivation behind youth protests were uncertainty about future - economic future and

the quest for freedom. Youngsters were critical of the CHP, but the opposition party functioned as an umbrella which helped protect them against police violence. However, the opposition now faces a dilemma: It has capitalized on the protest movement and increased its popular support, but at the same time it needs to control and manage the protest movement to avoid any political violence. Korkmaz concludes that there are advantages and risks for the opposition. Özgür Özel, the leader of the CHP has been able to manage the relationship with the protest movement. Özel also assumed a more confrontational tone against the government. According to Korkmaz, this has however contributed to polarization and helped the government gain back some of the popular support. Undecided voters turn back to their parties. The CHP tries to control protests and keep the momentum.

Gümüşçü highlights that different from the Gezi Protests, now Kurds are hardly represented. The Gezi protests were more diverse and more civil society driven. Ever since, civil society has been severely weakened. This time around, the protests are more political. Another difference is that now, there are no pro-Erdogan protests either. However, Gümüşçü emphasizes that it is difficult to keep the momentum for weeks and months, but so far, the opposition has managed to do so. Time is working in Erdogan's favor. Swift change such as in Egypt or Tunisia was only able because of total mobilization- including the workforce. In Turkey, this has not been the case. In Turkey, it is rather a war of attrition.

Will the Regime compromise?

The success of the opposition is a threat to the government. Murat Somer asserts that authoritarian governments tend to make mistakes when they feel at ease and not when they are under stress. He also held that the protests have not lost momentum. Many people continue to express their protest despite bans and police repression.

The opposition has been organizing weekly protests in provincial towns and in Istanbul. The more the opposition resists, the more repression is likely to grow. If the opposition can maintain non-violent resistance, the government or some people in government might be willing to sit down and talk with the opposition.

Gümüşçü asserts that Ekrem Imamoğlu will finally win. And despite repression many people in Turkey believe that they will win this fight for democracy. Because, either they win or this is the death of Turkish democracy. She highlighted that there is a very long tradition of free elections in Turkey and elections are of particular importance to Turkish citizens. It is one of the few moments where they live democracy. Therefore, Gümüşçü emphasizes the "sacredness" of elections in the Turkish context. There are usually extremely high turnouts. In the 2023 elections the voter turnout was 90%. Over the last years, a large civil society sector that has been specialized in ensuring electoral integrity by monitoring evolved. People know what is at stake. Therefore, Turkish people are determined to defend democracy. She also concludes that the regime does not have the capacity to repress the entire opposition. She also highlights that the Turkish armed forces are now a black box, but that there are some analysts who state that despite purges and new appointments the government has not been able to establish full control over the military.

Korkmaz in turn, does not believe that Ekrem Imamoğlu will not be released before the next elections. The government hopes that people will forget about Imamoğlu in the meantime. She highlights that there is hope within the opposition that there will be frictions between the AKP and its coalition partner MHP. Although, this seems unlikely, any shift in the political alliance setting would radically change realities. The government aims to design a new constitution. The process might lead to a systemic change as the current presidential system has turned out to be dysfunctional in many ways. This does not mean that President Erdoğan is willing to give away powers.

Another potential scenario is that President Erdoğan can utilize external developments / threats for nationalist mobilization, however, the ongoing economic crisis is a serious constraint.

Speakers overall agreed that an authoritarian government in Turkey will constantly face the threat of a democracy movement.

What role for the international community?

Somer held that this is not specifically about Turkey. We are facing a global democracy crisis. Turkey is an early example. What happens in Turkey will also determine developments in other countries. The response of organizations such as NATO cannot be punishing Turkey, because this would affect everybody in Turkey. Europe needs a Turkey that is stable and stability comes from democracy not autocracy.

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