

DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY

Kilic Bugra Kanat

Penn State University, Erie
SETA Foundation, Washington, DC

Democratization in Turkey has been a long and challenging process. Since the first proper multiparty elections in 1950, the process of democratization in Turkey has been consistently interrupted by military coups and judicial interferences. For decades, the system of tutelage led by the Turkish military and judiciary controlled the political landscape and made decisions on which rights and liberties would be granted to Turkish society at large. In this tutelary system, the judiciary helped the military control the entry into politics and prosecuted politicians and intellectuals that challenged the premises of Kemalism. The military and the judiciary engineered the political system in the country, while the military-controlled media and “civil society organizations” tried to shape public opinion. This tutelage in Turkey created its own middle class of bureaucrats and a crony capitalist system where a small group of businessmen enjoyed special privileges. When the military considered this tutelary system insufficient or when the civilian political sphere was getting “out of control,” it directly intervened in politics through military coups.

While the tutelary system aimed to allow only a minimal degree of democratization in the country, military coups attempted to eradicate the existing political system and design a new one that was conducive to the military’s goals and principles, namely: preserving the state’s Kemalist ideology and protecting it from its citizens, limiting the space for civil society, and excluding conservative Anatolians and Kurds from state institutions. For instance, after the 1980 coup, all political parties were banned in Turkey and all known political actors were prohibited from running for office. The military designed a new constitution that granted it more power and established institutions that would guarantee its continued influence after it transferred power to a civilian government. In fact, the transition to democracy was engineered in such a way that the military would have the final say in every step of the electoral process, including determining which political parties could participate, the candidates that could join the race and the content of campaigns.

The Ozal period represented one of the first attempts to liberalize the economy and the political sphere after decades of military tutelage. Despite rifts between the military and Ozal, the majority of his economic policies were implemented and Turkey witnessed significant changes to its social structure with the emergence of a new middle class. Later called the “Anatolian Tigers,” this new class of businessmen, who mostly owned small and medium-sized enterprises in Central Anatolian cities, started to play a more active role in the economy and politics. While Ozal managed to liberalize the economy, he failed to achieve the same degree of liberalization in the political sphere. Despite some improvements in the freedom of expression and conscience, Turkey continued to have significant problems in terms of human rights

and liberties. The emerging threat of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its activities exacerbated the domestic threat perception in Turkey, leading to the rise of the Kurdish problem and the failure to take meaningful steps to resolve it.

In the 1990s, the political structure formed by the military after the 1980 coup started to create major problems. Political deadlock and failed attempts to form coalition governments led to the emergence of a power vacuum, which was filled by the military and the bureaucracy. Different dynamics also started to emerge during this period. On the one hand, the Kurdish problem started to take the form of a low intensity conflict. The number of violent attacks by the PKK increased and the state reacted by using harsh political and military tactics. During this time, the Kurdish problem was equated with the PKK, while its sociological roots and causes were mostly ignored. On the other hand, the Turkish state started to perceive the rise of the Welfare Party and its conservative leader, Necmettin Erbakan, as well as an increasing effective conservative middle class, as major threats. Once again, the Kemalist establishment neglected the movement's sociological roots and the Welfare Party, as well as different religious and conservative networks, was equated with a fundamentalist organization that threatened Turkey's secularism, Western orientation and democracy. These threat perceptions led to major violations against human rights and freedom of expression and practices that would challenge the basic tenets of democracy in Turkey. While torture and unlawful detention became widespread, conservative segments of the society, especially women who wore headscarves, were not allowed to enter universities or work in the public sector; certain independent religious schools were also banned.

Both the conservative and Kurdish movements in Turkey were natural responses to the structure of the Kemalist state. For years, these actors were kept at the periphery at the expense of the urbanized, statist, educated, secular and Western center. This center-periphery dichotomy had three elements: a geographical dimension, as Kurds and more conservative segments of the society resided in the less urbanized regions of Turkey; a sociological dimension in which both of these groups were considered as the "other" by the Kemalist order; and an economic dimension, as the center was industrialized and educated and the periphery was underdeveloped and less educated. Demographically, the periphery represented the majority of society, while a minority controlled the center. In the 1970s, the geographical dimension of this structure was altered by migration from the countryside to cities. In the 1980s, the rising Anatolian middle class and PKK violence challenged the economic and security dimension of the center. This challenge became more visible during the 1990s, when the existing political system failed to meet the societal demands of a rising middle class and those of ethnic and religious groups.

The 1997 military intervention, known as the "post-modern coup," was another attempt by the military to design politics and "realign democracy." After the National Security Council (NSC), which was dominated by the military, released a memorandum, the media, civil society and business groups pressured the

government to resign. The judiciary then launched its own campaign to close the Welfare Party. After the Welfare Party was shut down, a military solution to the Kurdish problem was prioritized. Turkey underwent a major democratic reversal after the military's intervention.

It was under these circumstances that the Justice and Development Party (AKP or AK Party) was formed and rose to power in 2002. The AK Party was brought to power largely due to the Anatolian middle class' increasing demands for a more inclusive and representative government, and society's frustration the existing political parties' inability to deal with the political and economic problems in the country. The AK Party's electoral victory, which came only a year after it was established, was also a social response to the military and judiciary tutelage that designed politics between 1997 and 2002.

The AK Party rose to power during a very significant juncture of Turkish politics. First of all, Turkey was recovering from the most devastating economic crisis in its history. The devaluation of the Turkish lira and the banking sector crisis, together with high inflation, crippled the Turkish economy in 2001. During the November 2002 elections, Turkey was still experiencing the after-effects of this crisis. Secondly, the 1997 military intervention and tutelary regime placed constraints on basic freedoms and liberties, which significantly lowered the standards of democracy in the country. Lastly, an external factor emerged with Turkey's European Union candidacy. After many years of negotiations, Turkey was accepted as an official candidate country to the EU and there was great enthusiasm to speed up the process. This was particularly challenging for the military in Turkey because the tutelary system had always considered Westernization as a source of legitimacy for its rule against the backward periphery. Now, Westernization necessitated democratic reforms that would challenge the military's authority in the country.

For the AK Party, the only way to overcome this impasse was to extend freedoms and liberties in the country in order to meet society's demands and guarantee a more secure political order. The European integration process was significant in allowing the party to pass important reform packages regarding the freedom of expression, thought and organization under the tutelary system. The AK Party government met the conditions to launch accession negotiations with the EU, which guarantee the rule of law, democracy, human rights and liberties. Meanwhile, the AK Party continued to exercise extreme discipline in public spending, reaching every stated budget target and managing the economic reforms that were outlined in the IMF standby agreements. During this period, the economy began to grow rapidly. The success of its economic reforms and political opening resulted in the AK party's victory in subsequent general and local elections. Economic success during this period enlarged the middle class, increasing its influence in politics.

However, the process of political reform was not a smooth one. The Turkish military made several attempts, which were later uncovered, to overthrow the AK Party government. Most significantly, in April 2007, the military posted a memorandum

online in order to interfere with the presidential election process. In response, the government rebuked the military and called early elections in July 2007, resulting in another landslide victory for the AK Party and an increase in their portion of the seats in the parliament. The election results openly demonstrated society's reaction to the military's intervention in politics.

The end of military tutelage and active civilian control over the military was one of the most significant achievements of the democratization process under the AK Party's rule. However, this did not completely end the system of tutelage. In 2008, the AK Party faced the judicial tutelage. The Prosecutor General in Turkey launched a lawsuit to close the AK Party and ban its leadership from running for office based on the charge of being the focal point of anti-secular activities. The Turkish judiciary has always been a very influential player in the continuation of the system of tutelage and has shut down many political parties in the past. This time, the Constitutional Court decided against closing down the AK Party by just one vote.

The AK Party responded to these attempts by launching a new reform process that brought important amendments to the constitution, including: a) eliminating the articles that provided protection for coup leaders; b) the right to collective bargaining for government employees; c) changes regarding the election of the members of the Constitutional Court and Higher Council of Judges and Prosecutors; and d) the right of individuals to file a petition to the Constitutional Court. The opposition parties did not agree with these amendments and voted against the reforms in parliament. In 2010, in order to institute these constitutional changes, the AK Party called for a popular referendum to decide on the constitutional reform package. After a hotly contested referendum, nearly 58 percent of the electorate voted for the judicial reforms. The opposition parties actively campaigned against these amendments.

Following the 2011 general elections, the Turkish government launched another reform process, which aimed to resolve one of the historical problems of Turkish politics: the Kurdish insurgency. Even in its first party platform in 2001, the AK Party expressed a willingness to depart from the mainstream approach to the Kurdish problem by recognizing the cultural differences and ideational dimension of the problem. This was a clear difference from the mainstream approach, which recognized the issue solely as a security/terror problem caused by economic underdevelopment in the region. However, during its first term in the government, the AK Party avoided confronting the problem mainly because of the possible reaction of the military. Later, in 2009, the Turkish government launched a Kurdish language TV channel and Kurdish language and literature departments were established in universities. Finally, after 2011, the resolution process was launched in order to resolve the Kurdish problem peacefully in Turkey. If both sides succeed in negotiating terms, implementing them and saving the process from potential spoilers, the development will be very instrumental in the democratization of Turkey and the increasing rights and liberties of the minorities in the country.

Turkish government has faced significant crises on its path to democratization since the 2011 general elections.. First, the Gezi Park protests that took place June 2013 created a major crisis in Turkey. Despite several attempts by the administration to calm the demonstrators, the protests turned into anti-government rallies, propelled forward with the involvement of opposition parties and marginal leftist groups. Some of these groups even attempted to break in to the prime minister's offices in Istanbul and Ankara. A few months after the protests, the government faced a politically motivated corruption scandal that centered around the release of controversial government tapes. The release of one such tape leaked sensitive discussions of foreign policy in Syria among Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu, intelligence chief Hakan Fidan and the Army's deputy chief of staff; by releasing such sensitive information, what was a mere political move turned into a matter of national security. Both of these crises slowed down the democratization and reforms of Turkey.

The Future?

Despite concerns regarding the status of democratization in Turkey, the track record of the AK Party as well as the social and political changes Turkey has undergone indicate that there will not be a democratic reversal that will bring Turkey back to authoritarianism.

First, what has made democratization possible in the last ten years has in part been the rise of a middle class that demands more inclusive and representative governance in Turkey. This new and growing social class has opposed any top-down approach in government and has challenged the political and social engineering of previous decades. This class now is almost 50 percent of population in Turkey. According to economic forecasts, this middle class will only continue to grow in the coming years and will continue to wield influence over Turkish politics. If this class believes that the AK Party cannot meet their political and economic demands, it will most likely look to another party that can. Therefore, this social class will vocally assert its needs and keep Turkey from regressing into an illiberal democracy or authoritarianism.

Second, rapid economic growth in Turkey has also created a more educated youth that is globally integrated, particularly due to their use of social media. This demographic is less homogenous culturally and more cosmopolitan than previous generations. The broad-based use of technology among this group makes it possible for the youth to mobilize effectively against the policies they deem not democratic. This youth and their mobilization is impossible for political parties in a democracy to ignore. The demands of these youth are also growing and will be extremely influential in shaping the future trajectory of the Turkish democracy. It is again highly unlikely for this youth to allow the emergence of a more authoritarian Turkey in the future.

Third, the AK Party government has also recognized the structural problems in Turkish democracy and signaled that it will act in order to improve the current system. Statements by Turkish ministers in recent months, including the latest vision statement by PM Erdogan, indicate that there will be a major reform package after the presidential elections in August. PM Erdogan has even made democratization one of the three pillars of his presidential political platform and has constantly referred the concept of an “open society.” Erdogan’s speech has also signaled a more pluralistic approach to democracy that will recognize cultural, ethnic and religious differences in the country as well as equal citizenship rights for everyone.

The AK Party’s track record over the last ten years demonstrates that its eagerness to address the most significant problems in Turkish democracy, including the Kurdish question and the military’s intervention in politics. The party’s devotion is made clear in its recent statement of condolences to the Armenian community for the events of 1915 as well as in its apology to Alawites for the events in Dersim in the 1930s. Furthermore, the current government has also realized that it is politically expedient to favor democracy; every political reform the government has promoted has increased the strength of the AK Party and contributed to its electoral victories. Even if solely for its self-interest, the AK Party government would continue to promote Turkey’s democratization.

Lastly, the EU integration process will continue to play an important role in Turkey’s domestic politics and democratization in the coming decades. Despite the declining enthusiasm of the Turkish public, mostly due to the discouraging statements made by European leaders regarding Turkey’s potential membership, the EU process is still considered the most significant foreign policy dimension of Turkish politics. The EU is Turkey’s largest trading partner and will remain so for the near future. In order to avoid any disruption of its political and economic relations, the Turkish government and society will not allow its democratic standards to fall short of the Copenhagen Criteria and the EU *acquis*.

In the coming years, there are some important challenges that need to be addressed by the government in order to improve Turkey’s democratic standards. However, most of these challenges are structural ones, which may require more time and energy and necessitate the contribution of other parties. One of the most significant is the formation of democratic institutions that will protect past democratic achievements. Institution-building should be considered a major dimension of democratic consolidation, alongside political will and societal demands for democratization. As demonstrated by recent events in Turkey, an independent, impartial and credible judiciary is needed to consolidate the process of democratization and strengthen the rule of law. The judiciary has always been a major political actor in Turkey, and until recently, it was considered as another pillar of tutelage that was responsible for the protection of the state ideology. The referendum and legal reforms in Turkey alleviated part of this problem, but left others, such as the question of impartiality, unsolved. Therefore, public trust of the

judiciary is lower in Turkey compared to other democratic states. The fact that recent events were considered an attempted judicial coup by the majority of Turkish society demonstrates how people in Turkey perceive the role of the judiciary. If Turkey wants to consolidate its democracy and achieve higher standards in this realm, the judiciary needs to exercise judicial prudence and gain the status of an impartial and independent body.

Second, various attempts to amend the current constitution demonstrated that it would be easier to pursue democratization with a new and civilian constitution. In the last ten years, the government has proposed different reform packages and multiple changes to the constitution. However, partial improvements on democratic principles and human rights within the current constitution may no longer be sufficient to meet the desired democratic standards. A new civilian, pluralistic, and democratic constitution is needed. The process of drafting of this new constitution needs to be inclusive and pluralistic and respond to the demands of different segments of Turkish society.

Third, Turkey also needs a more powerful opposition that can connect with the middle class with a more democratic, inclusive and representative vision. The 2011 general elections and the 2014 local elections demonstrate that Turkish democracy suffers from the lack of a credible opposition. The main opposition parties failed to present a new and democratic perspective and become a viable alternative to the AK Party. The opposition's inability to creatively address national issues transformed these parties by restricting their bases to only certain regions, while their support evaporated in others. While this situation renders the AK Party as the only party that can produce policies, it creates mistrust among political parties in the anti-AK Party camp, which fuels street politics.

Another important challenge is the necessity of balancing freedom and national security. The fact that two of Turkey's neighbors are in the midst of a civil war that may have spillover effects and the fact that Turkey was vulnerable to espionage activities, which was revealed in recent leaks, demonstrate that Turkey will have to take steps in the coming months to strengthen its national security. However, these steps need to be taken in such a way that it will not challenge basic freedoms and liberties in the country. We have had this debate in the U.S. for the last fifteen years and we know that the delicate balance between freedom and security may be difficult to handle in certain instances.

To sum up, the democratization process in Turkey has been a long and convoluted one. Democratization has also been a moving target in Turkey, as the growing middle class and globally integrated youth are always coming up with new demands. When you take into account the residue of decades of illiberal politics in Turkey, and the actors and institutions of a tutelary regime that resist democratization, it becomes clear that there may be challenging episodes ahead. However, as mentioned above, when societal demands for these rights combine with political will, the system enters into an irreversible path towards

democratization. As Turkey has already entered an irreversible trajectory, the next steps need to be towards democratic consolidation through institution-building, a civilian, democratic and pluralistic constitution, and a government that can respond to the new demands of a transforming society that is connected to the rapidly changing global system.