

Monopolizing the Center: The AKP and the Uncertain Path of Turkish Democracy

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The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-the AKP) has been in power over a period of twelve years, having won three successive general elections and most likely to win a fourth one in 2015. This is a unique achievement for a party in a country dominated by political parties of the center-right tradition. None of the previous center-right parties in Turkey have come close to matching the AKP's electoral achievements over seven decades of multi-party democracy. Consequently, many scholars increasingly use the label, "a hegemonic party" to describe the AKP's unrivalled dominance in the current Turkish political system.¹ The present article tries to highlight the multiple and conflicting faces of the AKP and consider certain possible scenarios for the future as Turkey finds itself at a critical juncture, following the Presidential election of August 10, 2014.² The election itself marks a momentous occasion with the president being directly elected by the people for the first time in Turkish history, constituting a real challenge to the future of Turkish democracy, for the reasons discussed below.

In retrospect, the AKP rule can be usefully divided into three distinct sub-periods. The first phase, which broadly covers 2002 and 2007, can be described as the party's golden age. This period was characterized by high and inclusive economic growth, with an annual average of 7.3 percent during 2002-2007, coupled with significant reforms on the democratization front. Turkish foreign policy based on the notions of soft power and the "zero problems with neighbors." In this era Turkey's role as a mediator in regional and global conflicts was also quite effective. Turkey improved its relations with almost all the countries in its immediate neighborhood. Achievements in the realms of the economy, democratization and foreign policy were mutually re-enforcing processes, all of which were strongly influenced by the process of Europeanization, driven by the prospect of formal EU membership. The AKP of the early, golden age era followed the path of "conservative globalism through the European route."³

The second phase, which spans from 2007 to 2011, represented a period of relative stagnation. Although the Turkish economy managed to weather the storm of the global financial crisis reasonably effectively, economic performance was not as impressive as the previous era,

especially in a less favorable global financial environment, with an annual average around 3.7 percent during 2007-2011. In the sphere of democratization, the performance was again mixed, with elements of progress co-existing with a certain loss of momentum in the reform impetus, closely associated with the stalemate in the formal negotiation process with the EU and the dramatic decline in Turkey's prospects for full EU membership. Foreign policy during this period became increasingly more assertive and independent, with a strong focus on the Middle East. However, the emergent over-activism was clearly conflicting with one of the underlying aims of foreign policy, namely the desire to play an effective mediating role.⁴

The third phase of AKP, from 2011 to 2014, has so far proved to be a period of real decline with the party's performance proving to be deeply disappointing in the three distinct, yet inter-locking policy areas under consideration. The economic performance during the third term of the AKP is much less impressive compared to the earlier phases. Performance indicators gradually point towards a slow and fragile pattern of growth, around an annual average of 4.9 percent with significant risks concerning the prospects of sustainable economic growth. On the democratization front, the overall balance suggests a significant retreat with multiple manifestations of rising authoritarianism. On top of this, the over-ambitious foreign policy joined with the highly volatile regional environment of the Arab Revolutions has brought about a situation where the fortunes of the "zero problems with neighbors" strategy have been dramatically reversed: Turkey experienced severe problems with virtually all its neighbors and found itself increasingly in isolation and encountered serious security risks.⁵

Moreover, Turkey in 2014 is no longer the country that was firmly Western oriented and committed to EU membership at the time of the party's first electoral victory, back in November 2002. Turkey is still part of the Western security structures. Membership of NATO and strategic bilateral ties with the United States continue to be of critical importance. Economic ties to the EU are still important, although the share of the trade with the EU has been in decline in relative terms. However, in identity terms, we no longer observe a firm commitment to the West. Indeed, Russia and China and the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) appeared to have replaced the EU and the West as the new primary reference points. Prime Minister (now the new President) Erdoğan's increasing rhetoric about the possible membership of SCO is not a purely symbolic reaction to the disappointments over the prospects of EU membership. Instead, it represents a real change of mind-set, which we can describe as a new style of conservative globalism - "conservative globalism through the Asian route". This can be interpreted in the present setting as an overriding emphasis on

rapid economic development in the context of a rather minimalistic understanding of democratic rights and institutions. A fundamentally striking point in this context is the durability of the AKP's electoral performance and the extra-ordinary popularity of the (now former) party leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, among significant segments of Turkish electorate, in spite of the serious allegations concerning the decline of the party's performance in major policy areas. It is this puzzle that this article will try to resolve. Looking forward to the future beyond the Presidential elections, our two central concerns are (a) whether the party will be able to sustain its popularity in the face of several interrelated and growing challenges and (b) what will be the prospects for democracy in Turkey in the face of continued AKP dominance.

The Crisis of Turkish Democracy: The Loss of Reform Momentum and Rising Authoritarianism in the post-2011 Era

There is growing evidence of a democratic reversal or backslide taking place in Turkey during the latest phase of the AKP era.⁶ This makes a strong contrast with the early reformist phase of the ruling party, which under the strong impetus of Europeanization, had resulted in a number of important democratization reforms. By mid to late 2000s, Turkey appeared to be making fine progress in a number of key areas of reform ranging from a radical reordering of civil-military relations and recognition of minority rights, the most notable feature of which involved the extension of language and cultural rights for the Kurdish citizens who constitute almost a fifth of Turkey's population. Yet, steadily and rather paradoxically this democratization impulse appears to have been reversed and has been replaced by an authoritarian turn. Not surprisingly, terms like "illiberal democracy", "hybrid democracy" or "competitive authoritarianism" is frequently used concepts to characterize the latest phase of the AKP rule.⁷

In a nutshell, a number of developments have raised serious question marks about the nature and quality of Turkish democracy in recent years. As the AKP under Erdoğan's leadership has steadily moved from the periphery to the center of the Turkish political system, it appears to have progressively monopolized power, leaving little opportunity for forces of opposition to contest its power and hegemony in a genuinely open political order. Turkey's growing democratic deficits are evident in a number of different, yet interrelated spheres. There seems to be a steady decline in freedom of expression and media freedoms showing a deep lack of

tolerance for any kind of active opposition. This is coupled by the growing use of excessive physical force on the part of the police and security apparatuses to clamp down organized protests. The judicial system has been heavily politicized and deep question marks are raised concerning the implementation of justice as many court cases appear to be biased, with individuals being detained and kept in prison for long periods without proper justification. More recently, serious charges of corruption have been leveled at key AKP figures, suggesting that Turkey's new elites are increasingly benefiting from asymmetric access to state resources, which seem to confer tremendous advantages to individuals and groups within the business community and the bureaucracy that are connected to higher ranks of the party apparatus.

It is possible to argue that the "new post-Kemalist Turkey" in the later phase of the AKP rule has moved to a new mode of "illiberal democracy", where formal institutions of democracy exist, but a civilian majority, with the religious conservatives as its dominant constituent element, increasingly monopolizing power and restricting the space for the rest of the society in an unequal political contest. This contrasts with the "old Kemalist Turkey" where the secular economic and political elites maintained their dominance under a system of military tutelage.

Analysts of Turkish politics tend to differ on the origins of this authoritarian turn during the AKP. Perhaps, it is more sensible to identify a series of turning points rather than a unique one in this context. The party closure case against the AKP in the midst of Europeanization reforms was perhaps a major factor. It was only a split decision by the Constitutional Court in March 2009 that prevented the closure of the AKP. With the benefit of hindsight, this might have exercised a serious impact on the minds of Erdoğan and other leading party figures that if the opportunity is given, the old secular establishment will use all resources at their disposal to dismantle the AKP. This may also explain the strong revanchist attitude displayed in the context of the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials where a large number of high ranked military figures were imprisoned for long periods and tried, raising considerable skepticism about the fairness of Turkey's judicial system.⁸ Yet another key turning point was the constitutional referendum of September 2010 where Erdoğan was able to claim 58 percent of the vote in favor of changing the constitution with the help of the liberals.⁹ On top of this, the party's ability to claim a record share of the 50 percent of the total vote in the general elections of June 2011 helped to create huge confidence on the part of the AKP leadership, clearly creating environment where they thought they had the national mandate to rule in the way that

lacked, without taking into consideration the real demands and concerns of the remaining half of the electorate. Given that groups with very different identity configurations constituted the remaining half, they were naturally unable to present a unified front.

The presence of an increasingly dominant party system is not the central problem here. There exist many examples of dominant political parties ranging from Social Democrats in Sweden to the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan where parties have been in power for long periods, but without undermining the foundations of liberal democracy. The problem in the Turkish context concerns the co-existence of an increasingly hegemonic party system with the absence of appropriate mechanisms of checks and balances. Both the institutional context and the overriding political culture seems to have contributed to a process whereby political power is increasingly concentrated at the center, leaving those located in the periphery increasingly marginalized in terms of their voice and effective participation in the political system.

Certain institutional features of the Turkish political system such as the notorious ten percent electoral threshold, one of the highest in the world, is undoubtedly a key factor in limiting both intra-party and inter-party competition. Given the extent of the electoral threshold, the incentive to form new parties is extremely limited. Party members who deviate from the party line typically find themselves excluded, with limited chance of returning to politics via the route of a new party. Clearly, this is a tendency that leads to excessive leader domination, a characteristic of not only the ruling party, the AKP, but also of other principal opposition parties. It is not surprising therefore that in a leader dominated system, a strong and charismatic leader such as Tayyip Erdoğan could play such a dramatic role in terms of influencing the fortunes of Turkish politics and democracy over the course of the past decade.

Erdoğan's understanding of democracy, in turn, has been confined to a narrow vision of democracy based on an extreme understanding of majoritarianism. This effectively means that if you have the mandate of the electorate that grants you a comfortable majority in the Parliament, and then you effectively have the right to govern without any notion of checks and balances. Clearly, this kind of rule creates the period of excessive polarization and deepening mistrust among key groups as those who form the majority benefit excessively from the policies of the ruling party, whilst others feel increasingly disgruntled, unfairly treated and marginalized. Certainly, this is the feeling of wide segments of society who are more secular and Western-oriented and who feel increasingly marginalized in the midst of the

AKP style social and political engineering, which has a deep effect in terms of placing restrictions on their every day existence and life-styles.

It is quite obvious that Turkey needs a new constitution to replace the old constitution of 1982, which was crafted by military regime and contains a number of authoritarian elements. The new constitution is necessary to guarantee the rights and freedom of various groups that make up the Turkish society ranging from religious conservatives to the secularists, Kurds, Alawites and other minorities.¹⁰ Clearly, the formulation of such a new Constitution presents a formidable challenge, given that it requires a considerable degree of compromise and consensus, rather than a majoritarian worldview that favors the position of one dominant group over the others. At the moment the constitutional process appears to have been shelved, but could come into the picture again as part of a push to move Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system. This is clearly what Erdoğan wants and would like to push forward as part of his new Presidential role. A move in this direction, however, would be unfortunate. The shift to a presidential system in the absence of appropriate checks and balances will inevitably accentuate the authoritarian bias and contribute to further monopolization of power at the center. The type of constitutional change that Turkey needs is a change in the opposite direction, which leads to de-concentration of power and forms the basis of a genuinely pluralistic political and social order.

To be fair, there is one important realm where striking progress has been achieved in the latest phase of the AKP era. The AKP and Erdoğan, in particular, have played an important role in instigating the “Kurdish peace process” through direct talks with the imprisoned Kurdish leader Öcalan of the Kurdish Worker’s Party, the PKK. In the short-term, the peace process appears to have worked in terms of leading to a ceasefire and the termination of the armed conflict between Turkish armed forces and the PKK in southern Turkey, with such costly consequences in humanitarian process. It remains to be seen, however, whether this process will be firmly institutionalized, leading to a durable peace in the long-term. Again this brings us back to the constitutional discussion. A central challenge is whether the democratic demands of the Kurds, especially on the issue of self-autonomy within a federal structure, will be accommodated through the new constitution. If the Kurdish peace process is simply a tactical move on the part of Erdoğan and the AKP, in terms of changing the constitution towards a presidential system and counting support of the Kurds in the process, this will not be the recipe for achieving a durable peace. In other words, the current situation with the

Kurds represents a kind of fragile equilibrium, which is likely to backfire, if the process is not accompanied by genuine reforms to extend the political rights of the Kurdish citizens.¹¹

Reactions from Below: Do the Gezi Park Protests Represent a Real Turning Point?

The Gezi uprisings in the early summer of 2013 stand out as one of the most dramatic episodes in Turkey's recent democratization experience. What started out as a small-scale environmental protest to prevent the demolition of a city park, evolved within few days into a massive civil revolt involving millions of people. The protests started in Istanbul and Ankara and then spread to other parts of the country. What precipitated the process was the over-reaction on the part of the government and the excessive use of police force. As a result, Gezi was a spontaneous uprising that became a symbol of resistance to the rising authoritarianism of the Erdoğan government. It is possible to approach the significance of the Gezi protests from a variety of different perspectives, which illustrate both the significance of the process in terms of representing a genuine turning point, as well as highlighting the limits of "resistance from below" in terms of its ability to transform the underlying fabric of Turkish politics.¹²

Several elements point towards the Gezi protests as a critical turning point in Turkish politics. First, the protests showed that significant resistance had already been accumulated against Erdoğan and AKP over the past decade, which then burst out and manifested itself as a spontaneous uprising. Second, the process developed independently of organized politics. Social media was extensively used as a tool of communication and mobilization as in other similar protest movements. Indeed, one could claim that it was the very weakness and fragmentation of the opposition parties like the CHP that created the original vacuum from which spontaneous uprisings from below emerged. The third element was that the Gezi clearly displayed the discontent of secular members of society, especially young people from the Western-oriented, urban and middle class backgrounds in Turkish society with the growing conservatism of Turkish society and the compression of the social and political space as a result of deliberate social and political engineering on the part of the AKP. Gezi reflected the fears of an important segment of Turkish society that the avenues available for them to express their grievances and to practice their own preferred life-styles were being increasingly taken away from them.

Hence, the protests were more than simply a deep concern for the environment or a desire for reclaiming urban public space. Underlying the protests were broader concerns about the direction of Turkish politics and the increasing constraints placed on the practice of genuine pluralism, based on mutual respect of different groups towards one another. At the same time, the Gezi process was important in bringing people from different ethnic, class and cultural backgrounds together. Although the young secular urban groups constituted the over-riding majority, people from religious-conservative backgrounds also took active part. Among the participants, were rather hybrid and unusual groups such as the “Islamic non-capitalists,” which appeared transcending traditional boundaries such as “conservatism versus secularism” or “right versus the left”. Consequently, the protests generated certain optimism that artificial boundaries or divisions in Turkish society could be overcome by growing human interaction at the grassroots level.

What was also interesting about the Gezi process was that it was a local movement, highlighting deep conflicts over identity, which at first sight appeared to be rather unique to the Turkish setting. At the time, it was very much part of a broader global movement of social solidarity and resistance, very much in the spirit of the movements giving rise to the Arab upheavals as well as its developed country counterparts such as the Occupy movement and other similar forms of resistance to neo-liberal globalization in the United States, Western Europe and elsewhere. Indeed, the Brazilian protests, which took place later in the same summer of 2013, although originated more from economic and distributional demands as opposed to divisions over identity and life-styles, often used Gezi as a reference point. The global nature of Gezi protests was also evident from the fact that protests attracted widespread attention outside Turkey, especially in the Western media. Clearly, they helped to popularize resistance to the AKP government and also helped to undermine the popularity of Erdoğan and the AKP, built up in the broader international community in the early reformist phase of the government.

For the students of politics, a central question to ask is whether the protests have indeed made a durable impact on Turkish politics. For the secular segments of Turkish society, Gezi is represented as a landmark, a genuine point of departure in Turkish politics. For representatives of the left, there is also the growing optimism that Gezi style spontaneous revolts or protest movements project the new image of progressive politics, at a time when organized forms of political opposition such as the established social democratic parties find themselves in a process of dramatic decline. For such groups, Gezi represents part of a

broader bottom-up process of building solidarity and protest the layers of established politics, imposed from above. Hence, its significance transcends the local. It is part of a genuinely global phenomenon, where local movements are deeply inter-connected, with far reaching implications for democratization beyond the local or the national spheres.¹³

A more balanced perspective suggests, however, that we should be careful about over-estimating the impact of Gezi events on the broad contours of Turkish national politics. Certainly, the outcome of the protests failed to make an impact on the electoral standing of the principal political parties. The main opposition party, the CHP, which is arguably the party most sympathetic to the spirit of Gezi Park protests, failed to capitalize on the process in terms of turning it to its own electoral advantage. Similarly, the AKP's national standing was not deeply affected by these massive protests, given the strength and durability of its underlying support base. The outcome of the local elections of March 2014, the first real electoral context after Gezi, showed a marginal shift in the relative standings of individual parties, two and a half years after the general election of 2011, from which the AKP had emerged as a clear winner.

Furthermore, the Gezi protests created a kind of backlash in the religious conservative segments of Turkish society, which the Prime Minister Erdoğan could very effectively turn to its own advantage. Media representations of Gezi in newspapers close to government circles are interesting to document in this respect. The image of Gezi in such media outlets is quite the opposite of the picture presented of Gezi as a progressive social movement with the potential to extend the boundaries of democratization in Turkey. What is often stressed in such media accounts is the representation of Gezi as an attempt by the secular minority to regain their stronghold in Turkish politics and remove the gains made by the religious-conservative majority in terms of their political rights as well as economic standing. Hence, the way that Gezi is perceived depends very much from the vantage point that these series of events are viewed, which in turn is illuminating in terms of highlighting the deep divisions and lack of mutual trust that exists among key segments of Turkish society. Totally different reactions to the police violence, fierce use to clamp-down the protests constitutes yet another striking piece of evidence pointing towards these conflicting perceptions and the underlying lack of trust as a key missing ingredient and a major constraint in the process of democratic deepening in Turkey.

A final observation, in this context is that grass root movements, even if they have strong international support, are unlikely to have a lasting impact if they fail to influence the policies of key political parties. In other words, the middle layer, i.e., the national institutional context mediating the local and the global, matters. There is an irony here: It is the very weakness of the political party system in Turkey, namely the asymmetry in the power of the dominant party and the weakness of the parties in opposition that gave rise to the protests in the first place. Yet, unless these protests are connected with the key layers of the established party system, namely “politics from above,” their substantive impact in terms of accomplishing genuine political change is likely to be rather limited.

Reactions from Outside: Why the External Anchors or the Reputation Effects are not working?

The final term of the AKP government constitutes a real test case for the effective functioning of external anchors or reputation effects in the process of reversing democratic decline and revitalizing the process of democratic deepening. There is strong evidence that among the political elites and the policy establishments of the United States and the EU there is a growing disillusionment with elements of rising authoritarianism in Turkey. A number of reports have been published to highlight the dramatic weakening of the democratization impulse in Turkey over the past few years.¹⁴ Criticism has become particularly vocal after the Gezi Park protests. The overly violent and aggressive reaction on the part of Erdoğan and the AKP government at large has generated widespread media coverage and criticism in Western circles. What is quite striking, however, is that the growing criticisms coming from the external world has so far made a very limited impact in terms of counteracting the rising tide of authoritarianism in Turkey’s domestic political sphere.

Several explanations may be offered to account for this apparent paradox. First and foremost, the issue of EU membership has lost its credibility both in Europe and in Turkey. There has been a dramatic loss of support for EU membership in Turkey as indicated by several public opinion surveys.¹⁵ Even the most ardent supporters of Turkey’s EU membership bid feel that the best deal that Turkey can obtain is a “special partnership” and this hardly constitutes an exciting prospect given that Turkey is already a “special member” being a part of the Customs Union and the NATO as well as being a participant in many of EU’s research and educational programs. There is also widespread consensus in Turkey that even if Turkey

undertakes all the required reforms and fulfills the conditionality requirements, at the end of the day its application bid is likely to be rejected in referenda in key European countries such as France, where there exists deep-seated skepticism considering Turkey's European identity. Culturally bounded visions of the European Union, where Turkey is considered to be an important outsider rather than a natural insider, have accentuated nationalist sentiments and a parallel sense of Euro-skepticism in Turkey.¹⁶

Secondly, a distinct factor in this context concerns the decline in the appeal of the EU following the euro area crisis with its severely negative consequences in the European periphery, which previously identified as singularly successful examples of EU-driven economic and dramatic transformation. Both Eastern Europe and Southern Europe have been severely affected by the euro crisis. Turkish policy-makers felt all the more confident by the fact that Turkey continued to experience economic expansion and emerged from the global financial crisis in a relatively robust fashion at a time, especially when its neighbor Greece found itself in a dramatic crisis, with its dramatically negative economic and social consequences. The fact that the economic crisis in Europe itself has fuelled islamophobia and anti-immigration sentiments, giving rise to the growing popularity of radical right wing movements in many Western and Eastern European member states appeared to confirm the well-established fears that Turkey would be rejected on cultural or identity grounds, even if Turkey were to satisfy all elements of the Copenhagen criteria. Hence, the first and the second elements should be seen as interdependent, mutually re-enforcing tendencies, which collectively tend to undermine the enthusiasm for EU membership at home and, which, as a result, help to reduce in a rather dramatic manner, the EU's soft power over Turkey. The contrast is particularly marked in comparison to the early years of the previous decade- the first years of the AKP era- when the EU played a tremendously important role in Turkey's transformation and reform process. Overall, the perception of Europe, which is increasingly pre-occupied with its own economic and identity crises and, therefore, unable to act effectively in the context of major international crises in its immediate neighborhood, such as the crises in Syria and Ukraine, looks increasingly less attractive as a primary target for its foreign policy initiatives, especially in a context where the membership option appears to be less and less credible.

Last, but certainly not the least, major influence concerns the impact of domestic political change in Turkey. A process of profound economic and political transformation has accompanied the AKP era. New conservative economic and political elites, once very much

situated in the periphery, now find themselves occupying the very center of Turkish politics.¹⁷ There is now doubt that key segments of “new Turkey” whose influence and power has been growing as part of the AKP’s social engineering through education and media are not committed to the West in cultural and identity terms, as it was the case for the previously dominant secular elites. Their approach to Europe or the West is more pragmatic based on economic and security consideration, as opposed to a deep-seated commitment in terms of identity or life-style. It would not be an exaggeration to say that a major component of the new elites is that they tend to be more oriented towards the Middle East and the Islamic world. They are also increasingly more receptive to growing economic opportunities in Asia, Africa and even Latin America, in a rapidly changing global environment. Hence they can be described, as more are “Euro-Asian” and “global” rather than “European in their broader outlook.”¹⁸

The emerging “new Turkey” of the AKP era will continue to be important to the West, in a region characterized by instant turmoil. In spite of recent challenges, Turkey continues to be an important regional actor based on its economic and democratic credentials, especially judged by the standards of the Arab Middle East and the non-EU members of wider Europe. What is important in the present context is that the relationship is more likely to take the form of a loose, flexible partnership. Given the nature of domestic political shifts, coupled with the rise of BRICS and other emerging powers in the changing global context, mean that the West will no longer be the primary anchor or reference point of Turkey’s external relations. Assuming that the AKP continues to maintain its hegemony in domestic politics, Turkish foreign policy will be increasingly multi-dimensional with the West being an important, but not necessarily the pre-dominant component. The result is that the ability of Western actors to have a deep impact on Turkey’s domestic politics will be severely restricted, especially in an environment where EU conditionality appears to have lost its practical relevance.

Looking back, Turkey’s Western allies and especially the EU should accept a certain degree of self-criticism regarding Turkey’s recent democratic reversals. The EU, in particular has failed to help Turkey at critical junctures of reform. Certainly more effort on the part of the key EU states in helping to resolve the Cyprus issue could have created a more favorable environment for Turkey to fulfill the EU’s conditionality requirements. The lack of effective and credible incentives meant that the EU could not continue to play the critical transformative role, which it had effectively played in the early stages of the reform process. There is now a need to think of creative ways of revitalizing Turkey-EU relationship, which is

to the long-term advantage of both parties. Given the nature of the current political landscape in Turkey, the major impetus for change needs to come from the EU. What appear to be needed to reignite the process is important new incentive mechanisms, which would clearly have impact on the Turkish policy makers. The examples that come to mind are a strong willingness to resolve the Cyprus dispute, a major decision regarding the relaxation of visa restrictions on Turks travelling to Europe, or a decision to include in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) as a member of the customs union.

Is the Continuing Dominance of Erdoğan and the AKP a Paradox? The Notion of Gated or Bounded Communities

One of the great puzzles of recent Turkish politics has been the continuing popularity of Erdoğan and the AKP, in spite of the fact that the performance of the party has been less impressive on all counts during the third term in office. There was a growing expectation on the part of the opposition that the municipal elections of March 2014 would prove to be a real turning point in both the Erdoğan and the AKP's fortunes, based on the possible negative ramifications of the chain of events starting with the Gezi Park protests in May-June 2013 and culminating with the splits between the Party and the representatives of the Gülen Movement, a religious civil society network, culminating with the serious allegations of corruption involving the Prime Minister and other leading AKP figures in December 2013. In spite of the serious decline in the international popularity of Erdoğan and the AKP at large, the party's overall performance did not seem to have been seriously harmed in the March elections, which turned out to be more of a proxy national election than a local election. Admittedly, there was some decline of the party's popularity from 50 percent in 2011 to 43 percent in 2014. However, 43 percent was still enough to maintain a comfortable majority in Turkish Parliament.¹⁹

There are several explanations of this paradox. First, the economic success of the AKP era benefited large segments of the population. New middle classes prospered under the AKP rule. At the same time, large segments at low levels of income also benefited from a combination of high growth and low inflation. The AKP era was arguably the period where any center-right government displayed the best economic performance over an extended time span,

without encountering a serious economic crisis on the way. The benefits of economic expansion and inclusive growth were spread across the country and were inevitably translated into political support for the AKP. The economic impact of the AKP era was evident in a number of different respects whose manifestations were concrete and visible. Particularly striking were the developments in health, education, transport and communications and the provision of public services, particularly at the local level. Growth in the later era was perhaps not as impressive as in the early years of the AKP. Nevertheless, as long as growth continued and people continued to benefit from economic expansion, there were no serious setbacks in the party's popularity. This image of economic improvement during the AKP era was bolstered by the negative perceptions of the pre-2002 era, which was a period of economic and political instability and successive financial crises with costly consequences. That being said, one should not over-exaggerate the economic performance of the AKP governments because, similar to other rapidly emerging economies, economic exclusion went hand in hand with rapid inclusive development. Accordingly, poverty still remains as one of the salient features of Turkish political economy, despite modest improvements in inequality indicators.²⁰ Turkey also approaches to middle income trap, which necessitates more proactive and inclusive policies in order not to get stuck in the middle-income threshold for a long period of time.²¹

In retrospect, however, the AKP managed to appeal to large segments of society through a mixture of conservative values and visible expansion of economic benefits. Significant element of the population from the rising Anatolian hinterland conceived of the AKP as their primary vehicle for social and economic mobility and to overcome their underdog status in a society previously dominated by the secular economic and political elites. It is this element, which the Prime Minister Erdoğan effectively used to justify his fierce reactions to Gezi Park protests. His primary argument, which was effectively effective among the backbone of the AKP supporters that the Gezi protests represented an attempt by the secular minority to regain their privileges and remove the rights obtained by the majority of Turkish people in the realm of religious freedoms. Erdoğan capitalized on the fears that the secular elites might come back and reestablish their stronghold in Turkish society and politics, with negative consequences for the vast majority of Turkish people. Following the Gezi incidents, Erdoğan also made frequent references to the Egyptian coup in July 2013 in his public pronouncements, drawing attention to the cases of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood being ousted from power, in spite of the fact that they had the majority of the vote. According to Erdoğan, the Egyptian example

clearly illustrated what might have happened in the Turkish case, if there was an initially a weak or lenient response to Gezi Park protests.²²

This point also illustrates the fact that Erdoğan's leadership added an additional dimension, which clearly extended AKP's electoral popularity. His "strong leader" image clearly appealed to ordinary voters. The AKP's pro-active and assertive foreign policy of the recent era, in which Erdoğan together with Foreign Minister Davutoğlu played an instrumental role, paid handsome dividends in domestic politics. Even the mishandling of the Syrian crisis has not resulted in any major loss of popularity. Clearly, the majority of the electorate has been deeply impressed by the image of an increasingly strong and assertive Turkey, which takes an active role in regional conflicts, in spite of the fact that some of the moves have been counter-productive in terms of Turkey's own national interests or international standing. The language that Erdoğan has used in his political campaigns has been often aggressive and divisive, creating deep-seated resentment among his opponents. At the same time, however, it has been effective in terms of consolidating his support among his own constituency. In a political environment, where consensus politics appears to be interpreted as a sign of weakness, these tactics seem to have worked quite handsomely. The negative side, however, is that these tactics have contributed to further polarization in an already divided society and helped to strengthen mutual distrust among the competing blocs. The result has been inevitably counterproductive in terms of overcoming these divisions and moving towards the goal of accomplishing a genuinely pluralistic political order.

In analytical terms, the concept of the "bounded" or "gated" communities appears to be a useful concept in terms of understanding and highlighting the major democratization dilemmas in Turkey. In extreme versions of bounded communities, a version of tribal politics, leaders are not open to serious criticism from within. The concept of gated communities, for example, is useful in terms of explaining why serious allegations of corruption failed to make any impact on Erdoğan's or the AKP's popularity in the electoral contest. The key point is that members of the community are not willing to punish a leader who is an insider to the community, especially in an environment where material benefits for all group members are expanding. The central logic is that if the leader is penalized and the party members vote for outsiders, the losses to be accrued would be significantly higher. Thus intra-group trust emerges as a key variable. In extreme versions of bounded or gated communities, group members only trust insiders- members of their own group- whilst there is a total lack of trust towards outsiders. In such an environment, even if there were evidence of corruption or

malpractice, group members would refrain from taking such allegations seriously let alone punishing them through their choice in the ballot box, since they would be afraid of losing their hard earned economic and cultural rights as a group during the course of the AKP era.

The notion of gated communities also applies to the principal opposition parties. “Hard-line” secular Kemalists, for example, constitute the hardcore of the CHP. Many members of this group entertain a vision of Turkey, which is strongly oriented towards the West. Such people tend to display a deep skepticism towards conservative-religious segments of society in terms of their life-styles and their basic political and foreign policy orientations. Consequently, these groups are also quite skeptical of more encompassing strategies designed to appeal to religious conservatives, the Kurds or other segments of the Turkish society.²³ Examples of these closed identities become mutually reinforcing and bloc paths towards dialogue and interaction among different segments. In the short-term, the leader of the group uses this situation to his electoral advantage, as Erdoğan clearly illustrated in March and August 2014. In the longer-term, however, the consequences of this kind of behavior and interaction are detrimental for the performance of the system as a whole, as opposed to its constitutive parts.

Benign versus Pessimistic Scenarios for the Future of Turkish Democracy: the Post-Presidential Election Era

The future of hybrid regimes is characterized by a significant degree of uncertainty. It is possible that they may evolve in the direction of democratic deepening and the consolidation of liberal democratic norms. At the same time, it is perfectly possible for such systems to move in the opposite direction and to degenerate into “competitive authoritarianism.”

Following the Presidential elections of August 2014, marking a historic occasion in the sense that the President elected for the first time in Turkish history by popular vote, the state of uncertainty lingers. It is possible to come up with both pessimistic and optimistic scenarios for the future.

There exist considerable grounds for pessimism, following the comfortable victory of Prime Minister Erdoğan, claiming 52 percent of the popular vote, which enabled him in the midst of a relatively low turn out to win the Presidential race during the first round.²⁴ Turkey continues to be highly divided and polarized, as it was also the case in the municipal elections of March

2014. Whilst large segments of the Turkish society greeted Erdoğan's victory with great enthusiasm, an equally large part of the Turkish society, especially the more secular and Western-oriented segments feel deeply disappointed and have fundamental concerns regarding the future course of Turkish democracy. On the part of the opposition, there is also the natural fear that Erdoğan will not be the old-style president acting in a consensual style. It is more likely that he will be a highly pro-active and interventionist President who will use all the powers at his disposal to control his party with the obvious consequence that he will continue to shape the future of Turkish politics and foreign policy. It is perfectly possible that his presidential term may be accompanied by even greater concentration and monopolization of power at the center, which effectively means increasing marginalization of opposition and voices of dissent in Turkish society. The likely outcome of this scenario is an increasingly conservative and homogenized Turkish society, through widespread social and political engineering at even more extensive scale than has previously been the case, with the natural implication that major segments of the population feel increasingly alienated and have little role in shaping Turkey's political future in a pluralistic order.

Whilst a continued drift towards institutionalization of "competitive authoritarianism" remains a serious possibility, there are also reasons to be more optimistic about the future of Turkish democracy in the medium term, based on the following set of propositions. First, Erdoğan could not win the Presidential race by a sufficient margin to be able to engineer a constitutional reform through the Parliament in the direction of a Presidential system. Given the difficulties of accomplishing a new Presidential system under a new Constitution or constitutional amendment, he is more likely to be forced to operate within the parameters of the existing Parliamentary system. This, in turn, will act as a constraint on his interventionist powers. Second, his ability to control his party from a distance will be curtailed. He will have to work with a new party leader as the new Prime Minister. This may create unexpected problems of conflict and the necessity of power sharing. In the post-Erdoğan phase, it is possible that the AKP may be exposed to new rivalries and growing intra-party competition. It is possible that this may change the course of the party in a more moderate direction, under a different leadership, rather reminiscent of the early reformist era of the AKP rule. Change originating from within the AKP is probably likely to be the most important avenue for revitalizing Turkish democracy, given that the AKP is likely to remain the hegemonic force in Turkish politics for some time to come, barring the possibility of a major economic crisis.

On top of this, Erdoğan in his presidential role may adopt a different perspective. Since he no longer has any elections to win, he could concentrate his energy on issues, which could have widespread appeal to large segments of society, beyond his own electorate. Institutionalizing the Kurdish peace process and achieving a durable peace is likely to emerge as one of his priority objectives in this context. The Presidential office could also be the medium for reconstructing his international popularity, which he seems to have lost in recent years and projecting of a leader who is not simply a successful politician, but display the qualities of a statesman in terms of his ability to resolve major domestic and regional conflicts. This brings us to a central point that currently there is a gap between Turkey's internal democratic deficits and its ambition to play a major democracy promotion role as a leading regional power. Over time, this may lead to a growing realization on the part of Erdoğan and the AKP elites that Turkey's ability to fulfill its potential as a role model will seriously demand, on the ability to establish and consolidate liberal democracy at home, irrespective of whether this is accompanied by full EU membership.

Last but not least there is growing evidence that the opposition parties, especially the CHP and the HDP are changing in a positive direction. The choice of the liberal-conservative figure of Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu on the part of the CHP, as a presidential candidate in the recent elections was a sign that the party, in spite of strong internal criticisms from some circles, displayed a willingness to reach out to wide segments of Turkish society, clearly representing an attempt to transcend the gated communities that characterized Turkish politics in recent era. Similarly, the emergence of Selahattin Demirtaş, as another presidential candidate, who presented himself not simply as a representative of the Kurds in Turkish society, but as a left of center, Kurdish voice in the context of broader Turkish politics also constituted a landmark. The fact that a leader of Kurdish origin could stand as a Presidential candidate, and could obtain about ten percent of the vote, was a significant element in its own right. All these factors suggest that new leadership styles may be able to overcome the deep polarization that characterizes the present juncture and move in the direction of a genuinely pluralistic and liberal political order.

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Endnotes

¹ On the emergence of the dominant party system in the AKP era see, Şebnem Gümüşçü, “The Emerging Predominant Party System in Turkey,” *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (2013): 223-244; Meltem Müftüler-Baç and E. Fuat Keyman, “The Era of Dominant Party Politics,” *Journal of Democracy* 23 no.1 (2012): 85-99; Ali Çarkoğlu, “Turkey’s 2011 General Elections: Towards a Dominant Party System?,” *Insight Turkey* 13, no.3 (2011): 43-62.

² The present study builds on two earlier contributions. Ziya Öniş, “The Triumph of Conservative Globalism: The Political Economy of the AKP Era,” *Turkish Studies* 13 no.2 (2012): 135-152; Ziya Öniş, “Turkey’s Democratization Challenge in the Age of the AKP Hegemony,” *Insight Turkey* 15, no.2 (2013): 103-122..

³ For the details of the democratization reforms under the strong impetus of EU membership see Meltem Müftüler-Baç, “Turkey’s Political reforms and the Impact of the European Union,” *South European Society and Politics* 10, no.1 (2005): 16-30. On the broad contours and dilemmas of democratization in Turkey in the post-1980 era see Carmen Rodriguez, Antonio Avalos and Hakan Yılmaz, eds., *Turkey’s Democratization Process* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁴ See Ziya Öniş, “Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East,” *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 2 (2014): 203-219. For a broad assessment of political change in the AKP era and its impact on Turkey’s changing regional and global role see E. Fuat Keyman and Şebnem Gümüşçü, *Democracy, Identity and Foreign Policy in Turkey: Hegemony Through Transformation* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2014).

⁵ Ziya Öniş, “Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East,” *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 2 (2014): 203-219.

⁶ Ergun Özbudun, “AKP at the Crossroads: Erdoğan’s Majoritarian Drift,” *South European Society and Politics* 19, no.2 (2014): 155-167.

⁷ Particularly relevant in this context are Larry Diamond, “Thinking about Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no.2 (2002): 21-35 and Stephen Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no.2 (2002): 51-65.

⁸ A large number of military generals and officers as well as other major civilian figures, were convicted on conspiracy charges over their involvement in an alleged coup against the Turkish government. Critics see this as an attempt to further repress anti-government voices, whilst the proponents see as a natural attempt to bloc the path of military involvement in politics. Whilst the fairness of the court case and the trial process, is heavily contested, there is no doubt that these trials have helped to reduce the weight of the military in Turkish politics, leaving greater space for the AKP at the center of the political system. See Ersel Aydınli, “Ergenekon, New Pacts, and the Decline of the Turkish’ Inner State’,” *Turkish Studies* 12, no.2 (2011): 227-239.

⁹ Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, “Kulturkampf in Turkey: Constitutional Referendum of September 10 2010,” *South European Society and Politics* 17, no.1 (2012): 1-22. Kalaycıoğlu highlights the fact that the referendum clearly brought out the deep divisions and polarization in Turkish politics. The fact that Erdoğan could claim a clear victory in the referendum also increased his confidence and shaped his vision for the future. An important point to note, however is that many social democrats and liberals, who would not normally vote for the AKP, voted in favour of constitutional change, for the simple reason that it was important to remove the authoritarian legacy of 1982. Yet, the impact of this group was important in tilting the balance towards Erdoğan’s favour.

¹⁰ On the nature and difficulties of the constitutional process in Turkey see, Firat Cengiz, “The Future of Democratic Reform in Turkey: Constitutional Moment or Constitutional Process,” *Government and Opposition*, ifirst version, published online (May 2014): 1-22.

¹¹ For a critical account of the handling of peace process with particular reference to the split among liberal perspectives see, Burak Bilgehan Özpek, “A Peace That Frightens Liberals: How to Solve the Kurdish Question in Turkey?,” unpublished manuscript.

¹² The Gezi protests have already generated a large literature. For a small sample see Erdem Yörük, “The Long Summer of Turkey: The Gezi Uprising and its Historical Roots,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no.2 (2014): 419-426, Nilüfer Göle, “Public Space Democracy,” *Eurozine* (2013) available at www.eurozine.com/pdf/2013-07-29-gole-en.pdf (accessed on August 10, 2014); Umut Özkırımlı, ed., *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey & Occupy Gezi* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2014).

¹³ Nilüfer Göle, “Public Space Democracy,” *Eurozine* (2013) available at www.eurozine.com/pdf/2013-07-29-gole-en.pdf (accessed on August 10, 2014).

¹⁴ Freedom House, for instance, changed Turkey’s position from “partly free” to “not free” in its 2014 press freedom index on the ground that in Turkey, “dozens of journalists were forced from their jobs in apparent connection with their coverage of politically sensitive issues.” See, Freedom House, Freedom of the Press 2014, <http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2014> (accessed on August 16, 2014). In fact, EU’s

increasingly critical stance was evident after 2011 general elections. For example, 2012 Progress Report published by the European Commission had a much sterner tone regarding setbacks in democratization. One of the leading members of the governing party, Professor Burhan Kuzu, even threw the report into the dustbin on air. See, Simon Disdall, "Turkey Accused of Pursuing Campaign of Intimidation against Media," *The Guardian*, October 24, 2012.

¹⁵ The recent public opinion poll of the PEW Research Centre demonstrates that only 25 per cent of the population have favourable views of the EU. See, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/30/turks-divided-on-erdogan-and-the-countrys-direction/> (accessed on August 14, 2014).

¹⁶ For a discussion, see Bahar Rumelili, "Turkey: Identity, Foreign Policy, and Socialization in post-Enlargement Europe," *Journal of European Integration*, 33, no.2 (2011): 235-249.

¹⁷ On the new elites which increasingly prospered during the AKP era under direct government support and clientilistic ties to the AKP, see Ayşe Buğra and Osman Savaşkan, *New Capitalism in Turkey: The Relationship between Politics, Religion and Business* (London: Edward Elgar, 2014). On political change and the rise of conservatism in Turkey see Ali Çarkoğlu and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *The Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁸ Turkish big business, which is secular and western-oriented in its outlook and represented by institutions such as TÜSİAD continues to be supportive of Turkey's EU membership process. Whilst the European market remains of central importance for their activities, they are also increasingly more global in their operations.

¹⁹ Ali Çarkoğlu, "Plus ça Change Plus C'est La Meme Chose: Consolidation of the AKP's Predominance in the March 2014 Local Elections in Turkey," *South European Society and Politics* 19, no.2 (2014): 169-192.

²⁰ For a discussion on the positive and negative aspects of the AKP's economic performance, see Ziya Öniş "The Triumph of Conservative Globalism: The Political Economy of the AKP Era," *Turkish Studies*, 13, no.2 (2012): 135-152.

²¹ Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, "Rising Powers in a Changing Global Order: The Political Economy of Turkey in the Age of BRICs," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no.8 (2013): 1409-1426.

²² See "How Turkey's Leaders are Exploiting Egypt's Coup," available at <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/world-report/2013/07/09/egyptian-overthrow-of-morsi-helps-turkeys-erdogan> (accessed on August 10, 2014).

²³ On the perennial hard-line nationalist versus the liberal divide in the CHP which is clearly undermining the party's capacity to act as a coherent opposition force see Barış Gülmez, "The EU Policy of the Republican People's Party under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu: A New Wine in an Old Wine Cellar" *Turkish Studies* 14, no.2 (2013): 311-328.

²⁴ For an analysis of future prospects on the eve of the Presidential elections see Ali Çarkoğlu, "Electoral Constellations towards the August 2014 Presidential Elections in Turkey," *GTE Policy Brief (Istituto Affari Internazionali)*, no. 17 (2014).