

SWP Research Paper

*Sinem Adar and Günter Seufert*

# Turkey's Presidential System after Two and a Half Years

An Overview of Institutions and Politics



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
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Centre for Applied Turkey Studies **CATS**

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- Turkey's new Presidential System has failed to realise the goals that it was said to achieve with its introduction despite the disapproval of half the population.
- Contrary to the ruling party's claims in favour of the new governance system, two and a half years after its introduction, parliament is weaker, separation of powers is undermined, the judiciary is politicised, institutions are crippled, economic woes are mounting and authoritarian practices prevail.
- Despite the almost unlimited and unchecked power that the new system grants to the President over institutions, his space for political manoeuvre is, surprisingly, narrower than it was in the parliamentary system.
- Providing the otherwise divided opposition a joint anchor of resistance, the Presidential System unintentionally breathed life into the inertia of Turkey's political party setting.
- The formation of splinter parties from the ruling party, primarily addressing the same conservative electorate, alongside the changing electoral logic with the need to form alliances to win an election, poses a serious challenge to the ruling party and its leader — the President.
- Despite the oppositional alliance's electoral victory in 2019 local elections, it is at the moment unclear whether the forming parties share a common vision for steps towards democratic repair.
- Together with the institutional havoc caused by the Presidential System, the blurry outlook of the opposition requires caution about an easy and rapid positive transformation. While the European Union should be realistic in regard to expectations towards democratic reform, it should also strike a balance between cooperation in areas of mutual benefit and confronting Ankara when necessary to protect the interests of the European Union and its member states.

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## **Turkey's Presidential System after Two and a Half Years. An Overview of Institutions and Politics**

It has been two and a half years since Turkey transitioned into a presidential system. The country's strongman Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won his second term as President on 24 June 2018. In the parliamentary elections held the same day, the alliance between his Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) gained an absolute majority. The two votes also marked the official switch from a parliamentary system to a 'Turkish type' presidential system.

Since 2002 the AKP has ruled Turkey as a single-party government. Meanwhile, not only the party but also Turkey's political system have considerably changed. With the introduction of a new governance system in 2018, President Erdoğan has institutionally sought to secure power through an executive presidency capable of intervening deep into the bureaucracy and judiciary, as well as bringing the military under control. In part, this can be understood as a response to repeated interventions by the highest courts against policies of the AKP (including a case seeking to ban it outright) as well as threats by the army to intervene in the government's politics. The AKP called this the 'tutelage' of a judicial, military and bureaucratic oligarchy over the parliament and its elected government.

Ideologically, the AKP positions itself as a conservative Muslim party that embodies the identity and aspirations of a devout nation constrained by a bureaucratic secularist oligarchy. Erdoğan has often deplored the government's failure to establish cultural hegemony after more than a decade in power. Suppressing the secularist Kemalist ideology and forcing the country's entire population into a conservative corset was an additional motivation to change the form of governance.

Also an influential factor was to gain more control over economic policy. Alongside professional organisations and the courts, the bureaucracy was perceived as a veto power opposing privatisation, public-private partnership projects, allocation of state-owned land to private investors, and relaxation of environmental regulations. A strengthened presidency with the power

to intervene directly in all state institutions would, it was argued, make state action more effective by weakening the bureaucracy, simplifying decision-making processes and shortening chains of command. An executive president independent of parliamentary oversight would also — it was thought — prevent the kind of governmental paralysis experienced particularly during the 1990s under coalition governments with competing party interests.

Have the last two and a half years since the transition proven that the new system actually offers a basis for achieving these objectives? Has the state apparatus become more efficient with more smoothly functioning institutions and a faster growing economy? Has the AKP managed to win hearts and minds to build a devout nation at the expense of excluding secularist nationalist actors from policy-making? Has the new system corroborated the AKP's hegemonic position in Turkish politics by granting greater leeway to the governing party and its leader? Is Erdoğan able to act much more independently from other political players? Has the new governance system left any manoeuvring space for Turkey's opposition parties that are traditionally caught in endless cultural wars?

Bordering Europe, Turkey's political future is of vital importance to the European Union and its member states. On the one hand, prospects for domestic reform and democratic repair will inform the EU's handling of Turkey as far as the country's stalled membership process is concerned. At the same time, Ankara's recently coercive foreign policy poses a serious challenge to individual EU member states and to the Union's cohesion. Ankara is trying to redefine its role in a changing international order, albeit rather incoherently, as the recent efforts to reset relations with the EU and the US suggest. Pulled adrift by domestic power struggles, various ideological currents, geopolitical ambitions and economic realities, Ankara's future strategy towards Europe, Russia and its neighbourhood will likely remain ambiguous.



# The Presidential System: Shape, Political Character, Initial Impacts

The AKP government achieved its wish to establish a “Turkish type”<sup>1</sup> presidential system through a referendum held on 16 April 2017. Following a campaign conducted in the midst of harassment and intimidation, the amendments were accepted with a slim majority of 51.4 to 48.6 percent. For the first time since the 1950s, when Turkey began holding free and fair elections, obstruction, electoral fraud and manipulation reached levels that called into question the legitimacy of the outcome.<sup>2</sup>

## Political and Ideological Background to the Constitutional Amendment

The referendum formed the provisional end point of a constitutional debate that had flared repeatedly since 1982, when the putschists of the 1980 coup had a new constitution approved by referendum before lifting martial law. The 1982 constitution defined nation and state in ethnically Turkish terms and privileged Sunni Islam over other sects and religions. Still, the constitutional commitment to secularist principles remained intact. As a result, the new constitution severely narrowed the space for legal political action and legitimised extra-parliamentary vetoes,

first and foremost, that of the military. In the 1990s, it became a central obstacle to further democratisation.

The AKP government built these criticisms of the 1982 constitution into its campaign to introduce a presidential system, presenting the proposed constitutional amendments as a necessary step to free the elected legislature and executive from the tutelage of the military, bureaucratic and judicial elites. In fact, since the introduction of the multi-party system in 1946, elite intervention in the political process was not uncommon. Three military coups — in 1960, 1971 and 1980 — were directed against conservative governments. In 1997, the military forced the resignation of the Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, and the AKP only narrowly escaped being banned by the Constitutional Court in 2008 — while governing with an absolute majority. Against this background, Erdoğan presented his plans for a presidential system as a means to democratise the country. But it gradually became apparent that Erdoğan’s emphasis on democratisation was largely rhetorical and far from expanding the space for political participation, strengthening the rule of law or protecting the division of powers. In fact, the constitutional amendment skated over the authoritarian aspects of the 1982 constitution, which remained untouched.<sup>3</sup>

According to Erdoğan “more democracy” means a situation where the constitution, state and government — the entire political system — represent the

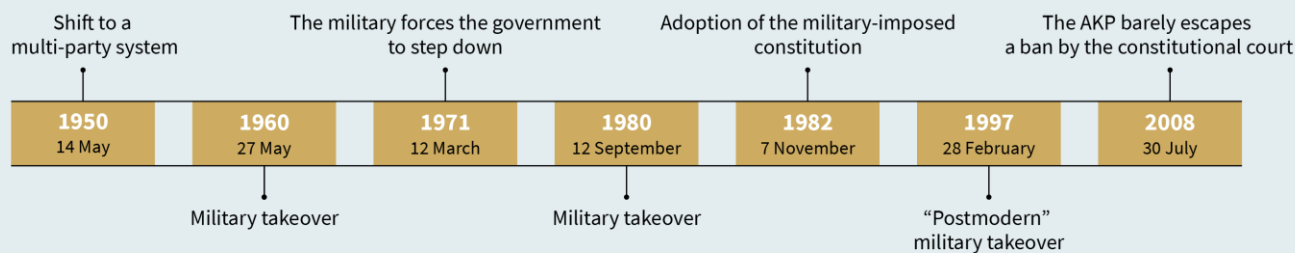
1 “President Erdoğan Affirmatively: ‘A Constitutional Model Turkish Style: The Nation Is Ready’” [Turkish], *Hürriyet* (online), 29 January 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/turk-tipi-anayasa-modeli-millet-hazir-40046600> (if not otherwise indicated, cited media reports accessed on day of publication).

2 “Turkish Referendum: Up to 2.5 Million Votes Have Been Manipulated, Says Foreign Observer”, *Independent* (UK), 19 April 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkish-referendum-million-votes-manipulated-reception-erdogan-council-of-europe-observer-a7690181.html>.

3 Osman Can, “The Baselines of the [Authoritarian] Constitutional Order Remain Unchanged” [Turkish], independent newspaper *Karar* (liberal/conservative newspaper, online), 16 January 2017, <http://www.karar.com/gorusler/prof-dr-osman-can-yazdi-anayasal-duzenin-temel-tercihlerinedokunulmuyor-372515>.

Figure 1

### Military and judicial interventions into the political process



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cultural, moral and religious values of the large conservative section of the population. Previous constitutions had failed to embody 'the nation's values' because, Erdoğan asserted, they had been 'imported' from the West rather than 'grown on this [local] soil'.<sup>4</sup> Erdoğan conceives the Turkish nation in strongly religious and conservative terms, as a Turkish Muslim confessional community (*millet*).<sup>5</sup>

The demand for a culturally authentic constitution has far-reaching political implications. One marker of its 'authenticity' is that the new constitution establishes a system 'based on our long-standing traditions of government',<sup>6</sup> referring to the imperial governance of the Ottomans as Erdoğan reads it. Further, it is asserted, all political powers – executive, legislative, judicial – should reflect the nation's identity and intentions, and should not come into conflict with one another. Erdoğan did indeed note that the old constitution created 'a conflictual rather than a harmonious relationship between the political powers'.<sup>7</sup> The reason for this, he said, was the desire of the old elites to curtail the will of the people – as represented by the elected government – through the judiciary placing tight limits on the actions of the government. From this perspective, the solution lies in ideological and political conformity: 'If the new constitution adopts the spirit of harmony and balance rather than conflict, and if the political powers complement ra-

ther than weaken one another, the problem resolves itself'.<sup>8</sup>

According to Erdoğan, it is, however, not only the old constitution and the old political system that ostensibly lack harmony with 'the nation's values'. The existing laws similarly fail to reflect the will of the people. 'If we had acted pedantically in reshaping Turkey, we would have gotten nowhere', he said, and continued: 'We achieved what we achieved by interpreting the laws as we saw fit. Otherwise, the bureaucratic oligarchy would have come along and laid down the law and our hands would have been tied'.<sup>9</sup>

Five cornerstones identify this worldview. The first is the ideal of a culturally homogenous and thus conflict-free nation, which is in essence a 'confessional community' on the basis of Islam's centrality to its identity. The nation thus defined is the bearer of the country's culture, defining its character and shaping its fate. The second is the postulate of an overriding political conflict between the nation as confessional community, suppressed by an elite alienated from its own culture. Third is the assertion that many existing laws serve primarily to maintain that repression, and therefore lack validity. This applies, fourthly, also to the division of powers, *raison d'être* of which is to perpetuate the conflict between the people and the elite. This conflict can only be overcome, fifthly, by placing power in the hands of an individual who consistently embodies the nation's identity and intentions and – because directly elected – need to share his power with no-one.<sup>10</sup> The constitutional amend-

4 Erdoğan quoted in *Hürriyet*, 29 January 2016 (see note 1).

5 Sinem Adar, "Ambiguities of Democratization: Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity under the AKP Government in Turkey", *Political Power and Social Theory* 25 (2013): 3–36.

6 Erdoğan in *Hürriyet* (see note 1).

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 "This country has a leader. He makes the policies. No-one else is needed for that. The leader makes domestic and

ments reflect this particular perspective on political representation, institutional checks-and-balances, and national identity. They concentrate the powers of the executive in a single person, weaken the parliament's control over the executive, make the president the centre of a competing legislature, and drastically strengthen the executive's influence over the judiciary.<sup>11</sup>

## A New Constellation of Powers

The concentration of executive powers in a single person involves the president simultaneously assuming the powers of the prime minister and the council of ministers (the cabinet), both of which were abolished by the new system (Article 8). Ministers are now chosen not among members of parliament, but from outside; they are appointed and dismissed by the president without the parliament's involvement, and thus are reduced to the status of a political civil servant (Article 106). The President also chooses alone his own deputy and appoints the senior civil servants in all ministries. As such, he directly controls the bureaucracy without the involvement of a cabinet.

Parliament is no longer required to confirm the government. It can no longer hold confidence votes, nor dismiss the government on political grounds (Articles 75–100). Parliamentary questions are addressed to the deputy president and the ministers and answered in writing (Article 98). No minister is required to answer to parliament and no sanctions are provided for failure to respond (Article 98). Parliament only has the possibility to initiate investigations against the president in the case of criminal misconduct, and that requires a three-fifths majority. Launching a criminal prosecution against the president requires a two-thirds majority (Article 105).<sup>12</sup> Otherwise parliament can only force early presidential elections by dissolving itself with a three-fifths

majority. Parliamentary and presidential elections are always held simultaneously.

### The constitutional amendments also water down parliament's legislative monopoly.

The constitutional amendments also water down parliament's legislative monopoly. One tool to this end is the expanded presidential veto: Parliament now requires an absolute majority of its members to override a presidential veto of legislation it has passed, rather than a simple majority of those present.<sup>13</sup> Another instrument is the presidential decrees that – unlike legislative decrees previously issued by the council of ministers – cannot be challenged before the Council of State, the highest administrative court, by any affected citizen.<sup>14</sup> Now cases against presidential decrees can be brought to the Constitutional Court only by the two largest parliamentary groups, or by a group of deputies representing one-fifth of the seats in parliament.<sup>15</sup> Even though the president normally can only use presidential decrees to regulate matters that are not already covered by legislation, this changes under a state of emergency, which the president can now declare on his own. The permissible grounds are extremely broadly couched. Under a state of emergency there are no limits to the scope of presidential decrees, against which no objections can be lodged with the Constitutional Court. Under these circumstances, presidential decrees come into immediate effect without requiring parliament's approval. Parliament can only act retrospectively to cancel them.

Yet, such a parliamentary majority is extremely unlikely in the new system because future presidential and parliamentary elections will be held on the same day. This design aims at ensuring the desired political alignment of executive and legislature, limiting the possibility of a sound power division between them. On a rhetorical level, such a construction renders the government liable to represent the vote as a moment of fate for nation and state, as happened in

foreign policies. Our task and endeavour can only be to support the leader.' Erdoğan's adviser Yigit Bulut on state television, quoted from *Diken* (liberal news website), 15 June 2016, <http://www.diken.com.tr/basdanisman-yigit-bulut-siyaseti-Erdoğan-zimmetledi-baska-kimse-yapmasin/>.

<sup>11</sup> See Christian Rumpf, "Die geplante Verfassungsänderung", RR Lex (Publication series of the Honorary Professor of Turkish Law at Bamberg University), 4 April 2017, 2–15.

<sup>12</sup> "Duties and Powers" of the President as listed on the Website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/presidency/power/>.

<sup>13</sup> As discussed later in the text, such a majority is extremely unlikely.

<sup>14</sup> Rumpf, "Die geplante Verfassungsänderung" (see note 11).

<sup>15</sup> See Article 150 of the amended Turkish Constitution, [https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/anayasa/anayasa\\_2018.pdf](https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/anayasa/anayasa_2018.pdf) (accessed 20 September 2020).

the 2018 elections. Given the depth of polarisation within Turkish society, the AKP most likely assumed that this would almost automatically lead to the victory of the conservative bloc's presidential candidate.

Moreover, the new constitution allows the president to be a member of a political party. Immediately after the referendum, Erdoğan unsurprisingly resumed the AKP leadership, enabling him to control the largest parliamentary party as well as the executive. This combination permits the president and his party to exercise far-reaching influence over the judiciary as apparent in the composition of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors, which appoints judges and prosecutors to the lower courts. Two of its members are the justice minister and secretary of state, who are appointed by the president. The president also appoints another four members, while parliament chooses seven. If no consensus is achieved in parliament, only a simple majority is required — meaning that the governing party (or the group of parties backing the government) can ultimately determine all the members appointed by parliament.<sup>16</sup> The same applies to the composition of the Constitutional Court. Twelve of its 15 members are appointed by the president, three by parliament, if necessary, by simple majority.<sup>17</sup>

## Structure and Expansion of the Executive

On 1 October 2018, in his address at the opening of parliament after the summer recess, Erdoğan noted that he possessed sole executive power, and that all veto powers had been abolished.<sup>18</sup> The president's power over institutions is indeed enormous. He alone appoints all ministers and all senior civil servants in all departments. All the central agencies (generally known as *başkanlık* or 'presidiums') exercising direct control over the bureaucracy, the military, the economy, the media, civil society and public religious life are answerable to him: the State Supervisory Council (DDK), whose inspectors are responsible for investigations throughout the bureaucratic apparatus, includ-

ing the military; the Secretariat-General of the National Security Council (MGKGS) which coordinates promotions within the armed forces; the Presidium of the Defence Industries (SSB) which manages procurement projects; and the Presidium for Strategy and Budget (SBB) which prepares the state budget. The Turkey Wealth Fund (TVF) established in August 2016 bundles the assets of major state enterprises and gives the president a crucial role in investment decisions, while the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DIB) defines the official version of Islam at home and forms the religious flank of Turkish diplomacy abroad.<sup>19</sup>

The president also heads four inter-ministerial "offices" (*ofis*) dealing with the cross-cutting issues of digitalisation, investment, finance and personnel. Together with the aforementioned presidiums they form a kind of parallel administration vis-à-vis the ministries, which they also oversee.<sup>20</sup> In addition to his many advisors, President Erdoğan has surrounded himself with new 'councils' (*kurul*). These institutionalised gatherings of representatives of business, academia, politics and civil society are tasked to develop 'long-term visions and strategies' in almost all policy areas, to monitor the work of the ministries, to prepare 'progress reports' and submit 'policy recommendations'.<sup>21</sup> As such they assume functions that would normally fall in the domain of political parties and parliament. Yet, they serve only the President rather than the political sphere.

### The President's reach extends to the intelligence service as well, whose role has steadily expanded in recent years.

The President's reach extends to the intelligence service as well, whose role has steadily expanded in recent years. An amendment to the Law on State Intelligence Services in 2014 led to the National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) assuming operational tasks, immensely expanding its access to documents

<sup>16</sup> Website of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors, <http://www.hsk.gov.tr/Hakimizda.aspx> (accessed 15 September 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Website of the Turkish Constitutional Court, <https://www.anayasa.gov.tr/tr/mahkeme/yapisi/uyeler-secimi/> (accessed 10 September 2020).

<sup>18</sup> "President Erdoğan in Parliament" [Turkish], *Takvim* (pro-government newspaper), 1 October 2018, <https://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2018/10/01/baskan-Erdoğan-mecliste>.

<sup>19</sup> On DIB see Günter Seufert, *The Changing Nature of the Turkish State Authority for Religious Affairs (ARA) and Turkish Islam in Europe*, CATS Working Paper 2 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2020), [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/CATS\\_Working\\_Paper\\_Nr\\_2\\_Guenter\\_Seufert.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/CATS_Working_Paper_Nr_2_Guenter_Seufert.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Taken from: "New Ministries in the New System" [Turkish], *En son haber* (pro-government website), 9 July 2018, <http://www.ensonhaber.com/yeni-sistemde-yeni-bakanliklar.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Figure 2

## The President as the sole center of power



Sources: <https://www.ensonhaber.com/dosyalar/DhroagNX0AEEdvz.jpg>;  
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 Dsmurat, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emblem\\_of\\_the\\_President\\_of\\_Turkey.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emblem_of_the_President_of_Turkey.svg), "Emblem of the President of Turkey".  
 Colours and proportions changed by SWP, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/legalcode>.

and resources of other agencies, and massively strengthening the criminal immunity enjoyed by its members.<sup>22</sup> Legislative Decree No. 694 of 15 August 2017 further expanded its powers and placed it under the sole control of the president.<sup>23</sup> Where the head of MIT had hitherto been appointed by the president ‘at the proposal of the prime minister, following consultations in the National Security Council’, the president gained the right to make the appointment without consultation; the same also applies to the second and third management tiers.<sup>24</sup>

Another point relates to the expanded influence of the intelligence service among the different elements of the security apparatus. Paragraph 41 of the aforementioned decree authorises MIT to operate within the armed forces and to gather intelligence concerning the military and civilian staff of the Defence Ministry. That power had previously been denied to it, as a legacy of the former institutional autonomy of the military complex and its resulting strong political influence in ‘old Turkey’ – which has now been supposedly overcome. Today MIT’s central role is not restricted to counterterrorism and monitoring the bureaucracy. President Erdoğan apparently also uses it to keep his own party under control. For example, in January 2019 he stated publicly that the National Intelligence Organisation and the Police Intelligence Department would screen the AKP’s candidates for the local elections ‘from head to toe’.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Law No. 2937 of 1 January 1984, legal website *Lexpera*, <https://www.lexpera.com.tr/mevzuat/kanunlar/devlet-istihbarat-hizmetleri-ve-milli-istihbarat-teskilati-kanunu-2937> (accessed 18 March 2019).

<sup>23</sup> PDF of document on website of Turkish official gazette, <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2017/08/20170825-13.pdf> (accessed 18 March 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Cited from Orhan Uğuroğlu, “Davutoğlu, Intelligence Service, Police, Election” [Turkish], *Yeniçağ* (nationalist newspaper, online), 22 January 2019, <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/davutoglu-mit-emniyet-secim-50497yy.htm>.



# Governance under the Presidential System

The last two and a half years have shown that bundling executive power in the hands of the president not only impaired elected bodies such as the parliament and the local government, it has also weakened bureaucracy and the judiciary.

## Parliament Weakened

Stripped of parliamentary immunity, the criminalisation and vilification of deputies is not uncommon. A total of 33 legal proceedings were sent to the parliament on 24 February 2021, including those to remove the immunity of nine deputies from the pro-Kurdish left-leaning People's Democratic Party (HDP).<sup>26</sup> In June 2020, three MPs from the leading opposition party Republican People's Party (CHP) and the HDP were stripped of their immunity.<sup>27</sup> In accord with the rhetoric that the president and his party alone represent the nation, the government again sharpened its tone towards the opposition following the elections on 24 June 2018 as well as ahead of the local elections on 31 March 2019, accusing the CHP of supporting 'terrorist organisations'.<sup>28</sup> Such accusations have since continued. Yet, criminalisation of deputies goes far back. In 2016, the parliament voted (376 out of 550) to lift the immunity of HDP MPs. Since then, many deputies from the HDP have been

arrested and some including the party's co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ were sentenced to jail.<sup>29</sup>

In open violation of the constitution, even speeches before parliament can lead to criminal investigations where laws are interpreted flexibly, and facts deliberately twisted.<sup>30</sup> Political and prosecutorial pressure on opposition deputies is heightened by the executive's intervention against parliament's remaining rights. Turkey's Grand National Assembly, as it is officially called, finds its legislative monopoly gradually hollowed out by excessive use of legislative decrees. This trend began in summer 2016 with emergency decrees under the state of emergency,<sup>31</sup> and continued with presidential decrees. According to the data collected by the CHP, President Erdoğan, since the transition into the new system, wrote and approved 2,229 sections, whereas the parliament discussed only 1,429 sections of legislation.<sup>32</sup>

The National Assembly's budgetary rights are also being further eroded in practice. Already before the transition into the presidential system, one key issue concerning the Assembly's budgetary rights was the

<sup>26</sup> "33 Deputy Proceedings Were Sent to the Commission" [Turkish], *Sözcü* (government-critical newspaper, online), 24 February 2021, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/gundem/33-milletvekili-fezlekesi-komisyonu-sevk-edildi-6279702/>.

<sup>27</sup> "Turkish Parliament Strips Status from Three Opposition MPs", *Middle East Eye*, 4 June 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-parliament-opposition-chp-hdp-mp-immunity-stripped>.

<sup>28</sup> Özgür Mumcu, "What Is [Interior Minister] Soyulu Doing?" [Turkish], *Cumhuriyet* (opposition newspaper), 30 June 2018, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/1013360/Soylu\\_ne\\_yapiyor\\_.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/1013360/Soylu_ne_yapiyor_.html).

<sup>29</sup> "Turkey: Opposition Politicians Detained for Four Years", *Human Rights Watch*, 19 November 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/19/turkey-opposition-politicians-detained-four-years>.

<sup>30</sup> See the response to the speech by Cihangir İslam of the conservative religious Felicity Party (SP) on 31 October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXrE5oN8cfw> (accessed 19 March 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Mehmet Y. Yılmaz, "The New State, Founded by Negation of the Constitution" [Turkish], *Hürriyet*, 29 August 2017, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/mehmet-y-yilmaz/anayasasizlastirilerek-kurulan-yeni-devlet-40564290>.

<sup>32</sup> Pinar Tremblay, "Is Turkey Already Done with Executive Presidency?" *Al Monitor*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/turkey-executive-presidency-proved-to-be-fail-in-two-years.html>.

growing lack of transparency.<sup>33</sup> Similar to 2016 and 2017 budgets in which unspecified expenses were particularly high in ‘payments to construction companies’, the 2019 draft budget, which was the first to be presented by the President’s Office, did not list payments to construction firms for public-private infrastructure projects.<sup>34</sup> This is significant because these projects are especially susceptible to corruption. The executive’s persistent overruns without a supplementary budget also undermine the parliament’s budgetary rights.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, recent legal changes made in October 2020 to the budgetary classification rules also add to the existing ambiguities about transparency and accountability.<sup>36</sup>

The government keeps its cards close to its chest on other issues as well. At the end of August 2018, 435 of 440 parliamentary inquiries to ministries or the President’s Office had received no response within the specified period.<sup>37</sup> The government increasingly refuses even to accept questions, on the grounds that they are formulated in a ‘crude’ or ‘hurtful’ way, particularly referring to the use of expressions such as ‘assimilation’, ‘torture’, ‘discriminatory practices’, ‘Kurdish entity’ (in Iraq), ‘violation of rights of civilians’ or ‘sexual violence’.<sup>38</sup> In another restriction of parlia-

ment’s rights to information and political oversight, the executive withholds relevant information on the activities of the TVF.<sup>39</sup> All this occurs despite the AKP’s control over the parliament — holding as it does the chair of all parliamentary committees<sup>40</sup> — and parliament is unable to pursue any initiative against its will.

## Undermining Local Government

Local government is also not immune to the personalisation and centralisation of power; but increasing control over municipalities preceded the presidential system. A state of emergency decree issued a couple of months after the 2016 coup attempt allowed the government to replace elected mayors in the Kurdish southeast and east by ‘trustees’, who were appointed by the interior minister.<sup>41</sup> By the time local elections were held in March 2019, a total of 95 mayors had been removed from office.<sup>42</sup>

The second step targeted representatives from Erdoğan’s own party. In late summer 2017, he forced seven AKP mayors to resign and instead, had his own personal choices elected.<sup>43</sup> These included the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul, the two largest conurbations with populations of five and 15 million respectively. Moreover, in October 2018 the Interior Ministry dismissed 259 properly elected *muhtars*<sup>44</sup> on the grounds that there was reason to believe that they stood ‘in connection with structures assessed to represent a

33 On this and the following see the report by the secular business organization TÜSIAD, *Observations on the Budget of the Central Administration III* [Turkish] (Istanbul, 2018), 61–65, <https://tusiad.org/tr/yayinlar/raporlar/item/10113-merkezi-yonetim-butcesi-takip-raporu-iii-merkezi-yonetim-2018-mali-yili-birinci-yariyil-butce-uygulama-sonuclari>.

34 Çiğdem Toker, “To Prepare the Budget as a Puzzle” [Turkish], *Sözcü*, 2 November 2018, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2018/yazarlar/cigdem-toker/butceyi-bulmaca-gibi-hazirlamak-2715180/>.

35 Unauthorized overruns in 2017 amounted to 30 billion Turkish lira. TÜSIAD, *Observations on the Budget of the Central Administration of the Past Six Years plus 2018* [Turkish] (Istanbul, 2018), 14, <https://tusiad.org/tr/yayinlar/raporlar/item/10053-tusiad-merkezi-yonetim-butcesi-takip-raporu> (accessed 23 November 2018).

36 Coşkun Cangöz, “What Do the Changes to the Law No. 5018 Bring?” [Turkish], *TEPAV*, October 2020, [https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/mce/2020/notlar/5018\\_sayili\\_kanundaki\\_degisiklik\\_ne\\_getiriyor.pdf](https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/mce/2020/notlar/5018_sayili_kanundaki_degisiklik_ne_getiriyor.pdf).

37 “Out of 440 Parliamentary Inquiries of the Opposition Only 5 Received Answers” [Turkish], news website T24, 29 August 2018.

38 Meral Daniş Beştaş, “Treatment of Parliament and Its Function in the New Period” [Turkish], *Düvar* (liberal news website), 27 October 2018, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com>.

[tr/forum/2018/10/27/yeni-donem-parlamento-pratigi-veyasama-organinin-islevi/](https://forum/2018/10/27/yeni-donem-parlamento-pratigi-veyasama-organinin-islevi/).

39 “Report on Wealth Fund Provided to Parliament Only as Classified Document” [Turkish], t24 (liberal news website), 20 October 2018, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/turkiye-varlik-fonuyula-ilgili-denetim-raporu-gizli-damgasiyla-mecliste>, 728168.

40 “The Parliamentary Committees” [Turkish], parliament website, <https://komisyon.tbmm.gov.tr/> (accessed 23 November 2018).

41 Fehim Taştekin, “Some 40 Million Turks Ruled by Appointed, Not Elected, Mayors”, *Al Monitor*, 12 March 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/turkey-becoming-land-of-trustees.html>.

42 “Trustees Report: August 2019-August 2020” [Turkish], HDP, 19 August 2020, <https://www.hdp.org.tr/tr/1-yillik-kayyim-raporumuzu-acikladik/14545>.

43 Supposedly to improve the party’s position in the parliamentary and presidential elections in June 2018.

44 *Muhtars* are the elected heads of villages and urban quarters.



danger to national security'.<sup>45</sup> Neither proper disciplinary proceedings nor court rulings preceded their removal from office.

### **Erdoğan made it clear that he would be choosing the AKP's candidates for the 2019 local elections.**

Erdoğan also made it clear that he would be choosing the AKP's candidates for the 2019 local elections.<sup>46</sup> He announced that in the Kurdish areas he would prevent HDP candidates who had been put forward 'in coordination with the terror organisation' (referring to the PKK) from standing. As such, he usurped responsibility for decisions that are actually the prerogative of the Supreme Electoral Council (YSK), which is theoretically an independent institution. If need be, he said, such individuals would again be replaced by 'trustees' after the election.<sup>47</sup> After the local elections of March 2019, the Interior Minister removed the mayors of 47 of the 65 municipalities in which the HDP came out as the winner and replaced them by trustees once more.<sup>48</sup>

Even though a similar system of trustees was not applied to the opposition-won municipalities in Istanbul and Ankara, the central government has since then either 'generated decrees to return much of the metropolitan municipalities' powers to the ministries, or – like in Istanbul – the AKP-led Metropolitan Municipality council has managed to take over the decision-making power'.<sup>49</sup> Opposition-run municipalities were even prohibited by the Ministry of Interior from collecting donations at the beginning of the

COVID-19 pandemic after Erdoğan had announced a national donation campaign, mimicking similar campaigns initiated by the Istanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipalities. Criticising the CHP-run municipalities for failing to provide services, Erdoğan signalled on 20 August 2020 the preparation of local governance reform to solve the 'chronic problems' of municipalities.<sup>50</sup> Last but not least, a presidential decree legislated on 21 January 2021 allows further cuts to budgetary funding allocated for debt restructuring and public debts.<sup>51</sup>

### **Increasing Dysfunctionality of the Judiciary**

Not even the judiciary can escape the President's concentrated power. In February 2016 Erdoğan became the first Turkish president to publicly reject a ruling of the Turkish Constitutional Court.<sup>52</sup> That rebuke prepared the ground for Istanbul's 26th High Criminal Court in January 2018 to ignore a ruling by the Constitutional Court requiring detained writers and journalists to be released. Instead, the High Criminal Court ordered that they remain in detention. Neither the Justice Minister nor the Council of Judges and Prosecutors protested against this violation of legal hierarchy, which made a complete mockery of legal security.

A recent example of the increasing dysfunctionality and politicisation of the judiciary is the Kafkaesque trial of the philanthropist Osman Kavala. On 18 Feb-

45 Akif Beki, "Do the Muhtars Have No Right to Protect Their Offices?" [Turkish], *Karar*, 27 October 2019, <https://www.karar.com/yazarlar/akif-beki/gokceke-var-da-muhtarlara-yok-mu-8262#>.

46 Abdülkadir Selvi (journalist close to Erdoğan), "Now They Are Coming for the Mayors" [Turkish], *Hürriyet*, 20 August 2018, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/abdulkadir-selvi/degisim-sirasi-belediye-baskanlarinda-40933393>.

47 Abdülkadir Selvi, "[MHP Leader Devlet] Bahçeli has the Formula for the [Party] Alliance" [Turkish], *Hürriyet*, 17 September 2018, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/abdulkadir-selvi/ittifak-formulu-bahceliBe-40958179>.

48 "Trustees Report" (see note 42).

49 Pinar Tremblay, "Is Turkey's Opposition Losing Istanbul to Erdoğan?" *Al-Monitor*, 25 August 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/turkey-akp-grabs-authority-of-mayors-with-chp-istanbul-chora.html>.

50 "From Erdoğan to the CHP Municipalities: Garbage, Mud ... All Has Again Become a Nightmare, We Will Bring the Local Government Reform to the Agenda" [Turkish], *Gazete Duvar*, 20 August 2020, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/politika/2020/08/20/erdogandan-chpli-belediyelere-cop-camur-yeniden-kabus-oldu-yerel-yonetimler-reformunu-gundeme-getirecegiz>.

51 Presidential Decree #3431 published in the *Official Gazette*, 21 January 2021, <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2021/01/20210121-1.pdf>.

52 "Erdoğan: I Have No Respect for the Ruling of the Constitutional Court" [Turkish], *BBC Türkçe*, 28 February 2016, [https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/02/160228\\_erdogan\\_dundar\\_aym](https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/02/160228_erdogan_dundar_aym). The Court had ordered the release of the journalist Can Dündar, who was in fact freed. Erdoğan's confidence in his influence over the judiciary is reflected in his assertion during a state visit to Berlin in October 2018 that Dündar would be in prison if he was still in Turkey. To that date no Turkish court had issued such a ruling.

bruary 2020, Kavala, together with eight other defendants, was acquitted from charges of attempting to ‘overthrow the government’ in connection with the Gezi demonstrations in 2013; only to be retaken into custody the same day on charges of attempting to ‘overthrow the constitutional order’ in connection with the 2016 failed coup attempt. In a speech he delivered on 19 February, the President noted that Kavala’s acquittal was due to the manoeuvres of some groups within the judiciary and that the court’s decision would not change the perceptions of ‘our people’ that the ‘Gezi events were a heinous attack targeting the people and the state, just like military coups’.<sup>53</sup>

It remains unclear whether Kavala’s acquittal was simply a legal tactic to circumvent the European Court of Human Rights ruling for his immediate release, as was the case also for Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-leader of the HDP.<sup>54</sup> It is also unclear whether the decision to acquit and then to re-detain were both related to a struggle within the judiciary, and how much Erdoğan knew in advance and controlled the process. This ambiguity about motivations and actors driving the decision-making process constitutes in and of itself a proof of the erosion of the judiciary’s institutional legitimacy.

### **Fear of acting independently of the President increases the hesitation of judges and prosecutors during the decision-making process.**

In 2020, new legislation, accepted in parliament on 11 July 2020 through the votes of the AKP and the MHP, introduced a multiple bar system. The new system allows the two parties increasing control over bar associations by interfering in their elections, on the one hand, and in the selection of association heads, on the other hand.<sup>55</sup> As such, the judiciary today suffers from high levels of politicisation. By

summer 2018, the state prosecutor was prepared to investigate anyone who criticised the economic situation.<sup>56</sup> Fear of acting independently of the President increases the hesitation of judges and prosecutors during the decision-making process. The criminal investigation started by the Council of Judges and Prosecutors on the judges who ruled for acquittal of the defendants in the Gezi trial is in this respect telling.<sup>57</sup>

Still, political instrumentalisation is not the only difficulty with which the Turkish judiciary must contend. The extent of the transformation within the judiciary was starkly revealed by the purges of the bureaucracy following the failed coup. The turmoil of recent years calls into question the proper functioning of the courts as a whole. About four thousand judges and prosecutors have been dismissed since the attempted coup, more than one-third of the total. Around seven thousand new officials were appointed in their place, many of them novices.<sup>58</sup> Even in the higher courts many judges now lack requisite experience.<sup>59</sup> The Turkish judiciary was already chronically overstretched before these events, and the quality of jurisprudence was deteriorating rapidly. Little more than one quarter of the population still trusts the judiciary,<sup>60</sup> and even state agencies increasingly ignore legal rulings where it suits their interests.<sup>61</sup>

53 “President Erdoğan on Gezi Trial: They Attempt to Acquit Him with a Maneuver”, independent news website *Bianet*, 19 February 2020, <https://bianet.org/english/politics/220275-president-erdogan-on-gezi-trial-they-attempt-to-acquit-him-with-a-maneuver>.

54 Başak Çalı, “Byzantine Manoeuvres: Turkey’s Responses to Bad Faith Judgments of the ECtHR”, *Verfassungsblog*, 19 February 2020, <https://verfassungsblog.de/byzantine-manoevres/>.

55 Mehveş Emin, “The Defense Takes to the Streets”, *Duvar English*, 2 July 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/columns/2020/07/02/the-defense-takes-to-the-streets/>.

56 “Senior Public Prosecutor’s Office Intervenes” [Turkish], *Sabah* (pro-government newspaper, online), 13 August 2018, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2018/08/13/bassavcilik-harekete-gecti-ekonomik-guvenligi-tehdit-edenlere-sorusturma>.

57 “Council of Judges and Prosecutors Permits Investigation against 3 Judges of the Gezi Trial” [Turkish], *HaberTürk*, 19 February 2020, <https://www.haberturk.com/son-dakika-haber-hsk-davanin-3-hakimi-icin-sorusturma-izni-verdi-2589069>.

58 Citing Justice Minister Abdülhamit Gül: “About 4,000 FETÖ Judges and Prosecutors Dismissed” [Turkish], economy daily *Dünya*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.dunya.com/gundem/yaklasik-4-bin-fetocu-hakim-savci-meslekten-ihrac-edildi-haberi-410349>.

59 “Opening the Judicial Year: Without Atatürk and the Opposition, with Sayings of the Prophet Instead” [Turkish], *Cumhuriyet*, 3 September 2018, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/aturksuz-muhalefetsiz-hadisli-adli-yil-acilisi-1072551>.

60 “Are the Courts and Judges Trusted?” [Turkish], website of polling firm *Konsensus*, January 2018, <http://www.konsensus.com.tr/yargiya-mahkemelere-guven-duyuluyor-mu-yoksa-duyulmuyor-mu/> (accessed 15 January 2018).

61 President of the Court of Cassation in “Opening the Judicial Year” (see note 59).

## A Largely Paralysed Bureaucracy

Ever since coming to power in 2002 the AKP has complained about the ‘cumbersome’ and ‘ineffective’ bureaucracy, which was perceived as a hindrance to the government’s ambitious plans.<sup>62</sup> Among the motivations to introduce the presidential system was to jolt the bureaucracy into action and slim down the state.<sup>63</sup> Yet, bureaucracy has grown under the AKP government, with the number of public employees rising from 2.7 per 100 population to 4.2 between 2003 and 2018.<sup>64</sup> Despite the decline in overall employment, public sector employment has continued to increase since that time. As of June 2020, a total of 4,767,286 Turks hold public service jobs.<sup>65</sup> Despite such rapid growth of the public sector, the administration appears paralysed for a number of reasons.

The first is purging the actual or putative supporters of the preacher Fethullah Gülen — who the government blames for the attempted coup in 2016 — and the subsequent appointment of new staff to the vacant posts. The extent of this restructuring is enormous, constituting the biggest purge in the history of the Republic of Turkey: 559,064 people have been investigated, 261,700 have been detained, and 91,287 have been remanded to pre-trial detention.<sup>66</sup> Yet, the process seems to be ongoing, with arrests continuing to occur and civil servants still being removed. Secondly, a reconfiguration of the executive’s nerve centres is under way. The Prime Minis-

ter’s Office was dissolved, as officials took up their posts in newly created institutions in the more than one thousand offices of the Presidential Palace. At the same time — supposedly to streamline decision-making — the number of ministries was reduced from 26 to 16, leading to further wrangling and major reshuffles. Thirdly, dissatisfaction is proliferating within the civil service. Central personnel management is hopelessly overstretched. In the immediate aftermath of the transition into the new system, large numbers of officials found themselves in limbo, relieved of their former function but not yet assigned to a new responsibility.<sup>67</sup> It was primarily to AKP deputies that unhappy officials turned, warning that frustration over the difficulties of the transition threatens to morph into open rejection of the new system,<sup>68</sup> especially given the sketchy justification for the deep restructuring.

A fourth factor negatively impacting the state institutions is the high level of politicisation that they have been subject to. According to a report by the US State Department, purges have often been conducted ‘on the basis of scant evidence and minimal due process’.<sup>69</sup> Their character is thus highly arbitrary and political, generating a climate of fear within the bureaucracy. New appointments are generally decided not by qualifications and suitability but by extraneous loyalties such as membership in religious networks, political parties and closeness to Erdoğan and his family. From 2003, shortly after it first took office, the AKP — whose own cadre of appropriately trained candidates was quite thin — paved the way for supporters of Fethullah Gülen and graduates of his schools to join the civil service, especially the police, judiciary, intelligence service and military.<sup>70</sup> Since the failed coup, adherents of extreme conservative religious orders and members of the MHP have been

62 Erdoğan, according to “New AKP Objective: The Cumbersome Bureaucracy” [Turkish], pro-government newspaper *Vatan*, 30 September 2004, <http://www.gazetevatan.com/akp-nin-yeni-mucadele-hedefi-hantal-burokrasi-37112-gundem/>.

63 “Erdoğan: Despite All Our Reforms of the Past 15 Years the Bureaucracy Is Still Bloated” [Turkish], pro-government newspaper *Milliyet*, 24 October 2017, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/erdogan-gectigimiz-15-yilda-yaptigimiz-ankara-yerelhaber-2357613/>.

64 İbrahim Kahveci, “Ostentatious, Pompous and Bloated” [Turkish], *Karar*, 25 October 2017, <http://www.karar.com/yazarlar/ibrahim-kahveci/sasaali-debdebeli-hatta-bir-de-obeze-5278>.

65 “No Employment Decrease in Public Service 68 Bin 345 New Jobs since the Start of the Pandemic” [Turkish], Left-liberal newspaper *BirGün*, 15 August 2020, <https://www.birgun.net/haber/kamuda-istihdam-gerilemiyor-pandemide-68-bin-345-kisi-artti-312042>.

66 Ali Yıldız and Leighann Spencer, “The Turkish Judiciary’s Violations of Human Rights Guarantees”, *Verfassungsblog*, 9 January 2020, <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-turkish-judiciarys-violations-of-human-rights-guarantees/>.

67 “Chaos in Public Administration: Officials without Superiors” [Turkish], *Duvar*, 23 August 2018, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/politika/2018/08/23/duvar-arkasi-kamuda-karmasa-donemi-artik-amir-de-yok/>.

68 Okan Müderrisoğlu, “On McKinsey, the IMF and the Crisis Discourse” [Turkish], *Sabah*, 9 October 2018, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/muderrisoglu/2018/10/09/mckinsey-imf-ve-kriz-soylemi-uzerine>.

69 Yıldız and Spencer, “The Turkish Judiciary’s Violations” (see note 66).

70 Bülent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, “State, Institutions and Reform in Turkey after July 15”, *New Perspectives on Turkey* 59 (2018): 135–57 (142).

occupying the newly vacant posts en masse.<sup>71</sup> In fact the opening of the bureaucracy — especially the police and intelligence service — to members of the MHP forms the basis of the party's alliance with the AKP.<sup>72</sup> Correspondingly poor is the quality of the new recruits, whose institutional activities tend to lack objectivity and adherence to rules. Politicisation of bureaucracy as such blurs the boundaries between party membership and public office.

Alongside suspected adherents of the Gülen movement as well as liberal and secular actors, AKP cadres who fail to convey an impression of unconditional personal loyalty to the President have also been excluded. Personal loyalty to the President and loyalty to the AKP's original objectives are no longer synonymous. This largely explains the apparent paradox that 'pro-reform and mostly pro-AKP conservative elements in the bureaucracy have largely been either purged, intimidated or side-lined, and the higher echelons have once again been filled by pre-2010 nationalist/secularist elements that saw the post-July 15 purges as a second chance to resuscitate their "entitlement" to power'.<sup>73</sup>

Even before the official introduction of the presidential system in June 2018, pro-AKP members of the bureaucracy were complaining about a 'weakening' or even 'collapse' of the institutions.<sup>74</sup> A 'triangle' of President's Office, Interior Ministry and Ministry of

Justice, it was asserted, determined the entire activity of the government and closed itself entirely to influence from any other political actor. Even at that time, formally independent economic and financial regulators such as the Competition Authority (RK), the Central Bank (TCMB), the Energy Market Regulatory Authority (EPDK), the Banking Regulation and Supervision Board (BDDK) and the Capital Markets Board (SPK) were finding it hard to contradict the President's orders.<sup>75</sup> The transition made this situation worse. A climate characterised by power struggles, party proportionality, deep mistrust and an expectation of absolute loyalty is anything but conducive to recruiting personnel with real qualifications. It stifles initiative and leads to procedural rules, decrees and laws being interpreted and applied with a degree of partiality, rendering predictable and reliable institutional activity impossible, as the following section demonstrates.

### Deteriorating Quality of Institutions: Examples

Examples of institutional deterioration in terms of lacking objectivity and political neutrality abound, extending from the very top down to local administrations. The Turkish Wealth Fund is one primary example. In September 2018, Erdoğan appointed himself chair of its executive board with a presidential decree, and chose as his deputy his son-in-law Berat Albayrak, who resigned from his post at the Fund on 27 November 2020. Managing resources worth around US\$33.5 billion and amounting to 40 percent of the central budget, the Fund has become a political and financial instrument in the hands of the President (and until recently also his family), arbitrarily regulating and using state-owned economic assets.

The Wealth Fund is exempt from the oversight of the Court of Auditors and subject to independent auditing. Yet, the independence of the procedure is highly questionable. The auditing in 2018 was conducted by the State Supervisory Council, members of which are appointed by the President.<sup>76</sup> Conclusions

<sup>71</sup> Even Hüseyin Besli, a long-standing associate since Erdoğan's time as mayor of Istanbul, has complained about the conservative religious orders: "Not to Say: What Does That Have to Do with Me!" [Turkish], *Akşam* (pro-government newspaper), 10 November 2016, <https://www.aksam.com.tr/huseyin-besli/yazarlar/bana-ne-demeden-c2/haber-565027>.

<sup>72</sup> According to Nagehan Alçı, a journalist close to Erdoğan: "What Happens If the AKP/MHP Alliance Collapses?" [Turkish], *HaberTürk*, 26 October 2018, <https://www.haber-turk.com/yazarlar/nagehan-alcı/2192233-cumhur-ittifakibiterse-ne-olur>. See also Pinar Tremblay, "Why Erdoğan Is Unhappy with Return of Nationalist Student Oath", *Al Monitor*, 7 November 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/11/turkey-erdogan-fighting-in-the-student-oath-debate.html>. Verbal reports suggest strong Islamist leanings in the special units of the Gendarmerie.

<sup>73</sup> Quoting a bureaucrat from Aras and Yorulmazlar, "State, Institutions and Reform in Turkey after July 15" (see note 70), 145.

<sup>74</sup> This and the following after Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "Who Is the Regime?" [Turkish], *Cumhuriyet*, 6 August 2017, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/797155/Rejim\\_kim\\_ola\\_.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/797155/Rejim_kim_ola_.html).

<sup>75</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "What Is to Be Done?" (Turkish), *Cumhuriyet*, 24 May 2018, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/981703/Ne\\_yapmali\\_.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/981703/Ne_yapmali_.html).

<sup>76</sup> Çiğdem Toker, "Not Only Arbitrary But Also Irresponsible: Wealth Fund" [Turkish], *Sözcü*, 22 June 2020, <https://>

of the auditors were only discussed at the National Assembly in June 2020. Neither the board members (excluding the general manager) nor the managers were present during the discussion.

### **State institutions' collapse into crony networks – and the influence of the President and his family – is expansive.**

State institutions' collapse into crony networks – and the influence of the President and his family – is expansive. In October 2018 it became known that the President's appointee as director-general of the state-owned electricity generator EAÜS AG was a partner in a firm whose customers included the power company. That is, the new director-general can direct public orders to his own private company.<sup>77</sup> The Turkish Statistics Institute's deputy director responsible for determining the rate of inflation had to vacate his desk around the same time after announcing the latest figures – which were far higher than the forecasts announced by then Finance Minister Albayrak. A close associate of the minister replaced the official.<sup>78</sup> In early November 2018 the deputy chair of the Court of Accounts resigned 'at his own request'. In October the press had discussed reports addressing profligacy in the Presidential Palace and extensive corruption in government agencies.<sup>79</sup> Transparency International called on the Turkish judiciary to follow up the Court of Accounts reports with legal investigations. In July 2019, the Central Bank governor, Murat Çetinkaya, was dismissed by Erdoğan because he did not lower interest rates in line with the President's request. Only 14 months later, on 7 November 2020, the newly appointed CB governor, Murat Uysal, was also ousted after the lira plunged to record lows.

Examples of institutional deterioration are not limited to the economic realm. In October 2016 an

emergency decree stripped state universities of their already restricted right to choose their own rectors, with the power passing instead to the President.<sup>80</sup> Since then there have been increasing reports of university rectors acting as AKP representatives or even personal emissaries of the President.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, with a new law legislated in April 2020, the Supreme Council of Education was given new duties including the power to shut down universities which have been temporarily inactive.<sup>82</sup> Şehir University, which was founded by Ahmet Davutoğlu – former prime minister and the founder of Gelecek Party – was shut down in June 2020. The new governance system also allows the President to launch university faculties without any consultation with the university administration.<sup>83</sup>

## **Emigration and Capital Flight**

Unsurprising in this atmosphere of deteriorating quality of state institutions is that certain societal sections are already 'voting with their feet'. Even though emigration peaked in the aftermath of the coup attempt with the number of emigrants – Turkish citizens and foreigners without refugee status – growing by 42.5 percent from 2016 to 2017, to almost

<sup>80</sup> Section 85 of Legal Decree 676, see *Official Gazette*, <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/10/20161029-5.htm> (accessed 19 March 2019).

<sup>81</sup> The rector of Harran University, who was appointed by Erdoğan, declared on television at the end of October 2018: 'Under Islam it is an absolute religious duty to obey the president. Opposing him is a transgression comparable to desertion during war'. Video of television appearance on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3VEhTfHcVE> (accessed 17 March 2019). For similarly biased appearances, see: "Swear Obedience to Become Rector" [Turkish], *BirGün*, 1 November 2018, <https://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/biat-eden-rektor-oluyor-235384.html>.

<sup>82</sup> "What Does the New Law Bring?" [Turkish], the news website for state officials *Memurlar.Net*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.memurlar.net/haber/900032/yuksekokretim-kanununda-neler-degist.html>.

<sup>83</sup> "Turkish President Takes Action at Protest-rocked University", *Independent*, 6 February 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/turkish-president-takes-action-at-protestrocked-university-university-recep-tayyip-erdogan-president-university-president-b1798543.html>.

[www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/yazarlar/cigdem-toker/hem-keyfi-hem-sorumsuz-varlik-fonu-5887384/](http://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/yazarlar/cigdem-toker/hem-keyfi-hem-sorumsuz-varlik-fonu-5887384/).

<sup>77</sup> "He Will Award Contracts to Himself" [Turkish], *Cumhuriyet*, 14 October 2018, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/ekonomi/1111485/Kendine\\_is\\_verecek.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/ekonomi/1111485/Kendine_is_verecek.html).

<sup>78</sup> Erdoğan Sözer, "Inflation Costs Bureaucrat His Head" [Turkish], *Sözcü*, 6 October 2018, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2018/ekonomi/enflasyon-canavari-burokratin-basini-yedi-2665149/>.

<sup>79</sup> "Deputy Head of Court of Accounts Resigns" [Turkish], *t24*, 6 November 2018, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/sayistay-baskan-yardimcisi-gorevinden-ayrildi,741019>.



254,000,<sup>84</sup> it still continues, albeit at a slower pace. A recent survey shows that one in every two Turkish citizens wants to live abroad and even one in three voters for the AKP wants to leave Turkey.<sup>85</sup> According to official statistics, 330,289 people left Turkey in 2019.<sup>86</sup> Among these, those aged between 25 and 29 made up the highest proportion. Since the 2016 failed coup attempt, the number of Turkish asylum-seekers has grown continuously, with a cumulative total of more than 35,000 applying in EU member states.<sup>87</sup> Rather than leaving immediately, others have been making thorough preparations. In 2016 and 2017 about two thousand Jewish Turkish citizens acquired Portuguese nationality as their entry ticket to the EU.<sup>88</sup> After Chinese and Russians, Turkish citizens represent the third largest group acquiring a five-year residence permit for Greece by investing at least €250,000.<sup>89</sup> Between 2016 and 2018 the number of Turkish applications for an American Green Card also rose by 65 percent.<sup>90</sup>

Capital is fleeing as well. In 2018, the year in which Turkey was also hit by a severe currency crisis, the country lost about 10 percent of its billionaires, the highest rate among the top ten countries accord-

ing to the net outflow of wealth.<sup>91</sup> In 2019, a total of \$2.8 billion in long-term investment left the country. In 2019, foreign direct investment flows declined by 35 percent, to nearly 8.4 billion.<sup>92</sup> International firms are putting investments on hold, with many planning to move existing production facilities to neighbouring countries in South-Eastern Europe. For instance, in July 2020, Volkswagen announced abandoning plans to build a factory in Turkey.<sup>93</sup>

**84** “More than 253,000 Leave the Country in One Year” [Turkish], *BirGün*, 6 September 2018, <https://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/bir-yilda-253-binden-fazla-kisi-ulkeyi-terk-etti-229439.html>.

**85** “Why Does Every Second Turkish Citizen Want to Leave Turkey” [German], *Tagesspiegel*, 16 February 2021, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/der-realitaetsverlust-des-receptayyip-erdogan-warum-fast-jeder-zweite-tuerke-die-tuerkei-verlassen-will/26909602.html>.

**86** “The Age Group between 25 and 29 Leave the Most” [Turkish], *BirGün*, 17 July 2020, <https://www.birgun.net/haber/goc-istatistikleri-aciklandi-en-fazla-25-29-yas-arasi-goc-etti-308663>.

**87** Ibid.

**88** Nimet Kirac, “Dramatic Demographic Changes Loom for Turkey, Experts Warn”, *Al Monitor*, 1 October 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/09/turkey-dramatic-demographic-changes-loom.html>.

**89** “Turks in Third Place of Those Acquiring Residency by Purchasing Homes” [Turkish], *Diken*, 23 September 2018, <http://www.diken.com.tr/yunanistanda-ev-alip-oturma-izni-elde-edenler-turkler-ucuncu-sirada/>.

**90** “Number of US Green Card Applications Grows 65 Percent in Two Years” [Turkish], *Diken*, 28 August 2018, <http://www.diken.com.tr/son-iki-yilda-turkiyeden-abdye-yesil-kart-basvurusu-yuzde-65-artti/>.

**91** *Global Wealth Migration Review 2019* (AfrAsia Bank, April 2019), [https://e.issuu.com/embed.html?u=newworldwealth&d=gwmr\\_2019](https://e.issuu.com/embed.html?u=newworldwealth&d=gwmr_2019).

**92** *World Investment Report 2020: International Protection beyond the Pandemic* (UNCTAD, 2020), [https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/wir2020\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/wir2020_en.pdf).

**93** Ozan Demircan, “VW Stopped Plans for New Factory in Turkey” [German], *Handelsblatt*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/unternehmen/industrie/nach-corona-schock-vw-stoppt-plaene-fuer-neues-werk-in-der-tuerkei/25965900.html?ticket=ST-6913435-UqEgFTO3XMUmOvIxCMrb-ap2>.

# The Fate of the Governing Party under the Presidential System

No political system, even one with high levels of personalised and centralised power, can survive without legitimacy and an appeal to the will of the people. Electorally the new presidential system builds on an alliance between Erdoğan's AKP and the far-right MHP as junior partner, known as the 'People's Alliance' (*Cumhur İttifakı*). The two parties joined forces to campaign for the presidential system before the January 2017 referendum, and mobilised jointly for Erdoğan in the most recent presidential ballot in June 2018. What are the prospects of these two parties continuing to achieve majorities in the coming years? What are the political implications of the alliance for the AKP and the President given that he now — unexpectedly — has to rely on the MHP?

Even if President Erdoğan has expanded his power further than any other civilian Turkish politician, it would be hard to argue that he has achieved his original political objectives. Today the question of what kind of substantive political programme he is pursuing is completely overshadowed by the struggle to retain power. The AKP's former transformational agenda is a thing of the past. This applies not only to the party's early rhetoric about democratisation, inclusive citizenship and membership in the European Union. Gone is likewise the hope of resolving the Kurdish conflict by integrating Kurds into a more pronounced Muslim Turkish nation. Since the June 2015 elections, Kurdish civil and political rights are systematically curtailed.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, Erdoğan's critics had always argued that these topics played only a

tactical role for him. Yet, even political objectives that fit seamlessly with the party's conservative Muslim identity seem to have been left aside. The vision of 'zero problems with the neighbours' and the soft power approach of the 2000s have withered away.<sup>95</sup> Today, the government uses almost solely military means to establish Turkey as the decisive power in the MENA region.<sup>96</sup> Ironically, this comes at the expense of strengthening the esteem of the armed forces.

In addition, neither the economic outlook nor social prospects are promising. Turkey's foreign debt stock continues to grow due to the lira's sharp depreciation in the last couple of years.<sup>97</sup> The current recession means that even in 2023 — the centenary of the Republic — Turkey will not make it into the world's ten leading industrial nations. The attempt to turn the country's entire population into a thoroughly pious Muslim nation has also remained unsuccessful, despite great state pressure on the secular elements of society. According to a poll conducted by KONDA in 2019, people aged 15 to 29 described themselves as less 'religiously conservative' than older genera-

<sup>95</sup> See Günter Seufert, *Foreign Policy and Self-image: The Societal Basis of Strategy Shifts in Turkey*, SWP Research Paper 12/2012 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2012), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkey-foreign-policy/>.

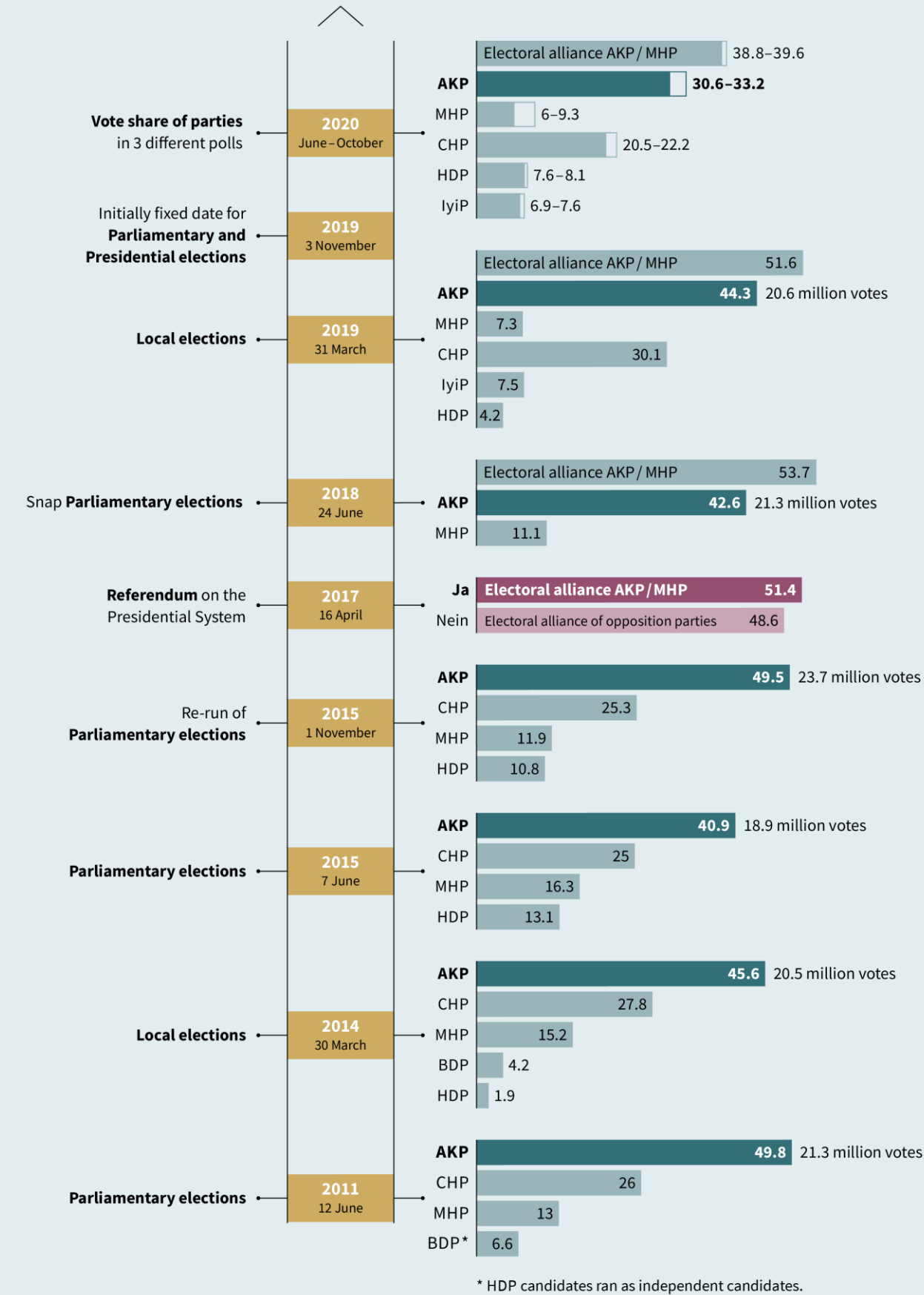
<sup>96</sup> Sinem Adar, *Understanding Turkey's Increasingly Militarized Foreign Policy*, APSA MENA Politics Newsletter 3, no. 1 (Spring 2020), <https://apsamena.org/2020/11/10/understanding-turkeys-increasingly-militaristic-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>97</sup> Mustafa Sönmez, "Family Silver Next in Line in Turkey's Debt Crunch", *Al-Monitor*, 24 August 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/turkey-economy-external-debt-crunch-family-silver-will-next.html>.

<sup>94</sup> See Günter Seufert, *The Return of the Kurdish Question: On the Situation of the Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey*, SWP Comment 38/2015 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2015), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/the-return-of-the-kurdish-question/>.

Figure 3

The rise and decline of the AKP  
Election results in percentage terms





tions.<sup>98</sup> Realisation among the party's conservative base that corruption and nepotism do not disappear automatically if only devout Muslims take over the government and control the institutions is especially bitter. It comes as little surprise to find great disenchantment among AKP voters — and within the party itself — and a significant loss of dynamism which became for the first time salient during the municipal elections in 2019.

## Creeping Loss of Voters and the Growing Share of Undecided Voters

It is a good nine years since the AKP reached its zenith. At the parliamentary elections in June 2011, it was able to garner the support of almost half the voters: 21.3 million votes amounting to 49.8 percent of the total. Since then, the party has experienced alternating decline and stagnation at the ballot box. And even though Erdoğan won the 24 June 2018 presidential election in the first round against four rivals, with an absolute majority of 52.6 percent — one percentage point more than he gained in 2014, when he was first directly elected president — in the 2018 elections he had to rely (as he did in November 2015 snap elections) on the votes of the nationalist MHP.

In 2014, the MHP still strictly rejected the presidential system and called on its supporters to vote for one of the opposition candidates. In 2018, the AKP vote alone was no longer sufficient: in the simultaneous parliamentary elections the party gained only 42.6 percent, with voter surveys showing that about one presidential vote in five was attributable to the MHP. Adding insult to injury, in the 2019 local elections the AKP lost Istanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipalities to the National Alliance's candidates, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş.

Crucial in the defeat was the changing nature of electoral politics in Turkey. The transition to the presidential system introduced the alliance logic as the new parameter in electoral rivalry because in the new system any candidate requires at least 50 percent +1 of the votes to be elected as president in the first round.

<sup>98</sup> "Turkish Students Increasingly Resisting Religion, Study Suggests", *The Guardian*, 29 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/turkish-students-increasingly-resisting-religion-study-suggests>.

Even the strategy to replace declining AKP votes with MHP support has run its course with growing signs of decreasing support, especially in major and coastal cities and among young people. In the 2018 parliamentary elections the AKP lost almost one in ten of its voters to the MHP.<sup>99</sup> In a speech MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli delivered after the elections, he noted that the 'Turkish nation has not only brought his party to a key position within the parliament, it also gave the MHP a major responsibility to balance power'.<sup>100</sup> Even though Erdoğan won the presidency, the MHP — the AKP's alliance partner — continues to wield significant political influence, sometimes even to the disadvantage of the President and the AKP.

In the 2019 local elections, for instance, the AKP paid heavily because of its alliance with the MHP and, relatedly, due to the framing of the elections as a matter of the country's territorial integrity and survival.<sup>101</sup> This rhetorical tactic, firstly, worked in favour of the AKP's extreme nationalist partner MHP, which won eleven municipalities, up from the eight municipalities it had captured in the previous local elections in 2014. Moreover, of these 11 municipalities, seven were taken from the AKP. The alarmist propaganda, secondly, turned the local elections into a de facto referendum on the People's Alliance. Losing the major metropolitan municipalities to the opposition was thus a major loss for the AKP.

## Conservative Criticism of the Policies of Recent Years

The mounting dissatisfaction within the AKP milieu — and even within its organs and branches — is greater than its still relatively strong electoral support would suggest. The most recent sign of this is the formation of two splinter parties, DEVA, led by Ali Babacan, one

<sup>99</sup> The AKP lost another 10 percent of its voters to the CHP as well as to the newly established Good Party (İyiP). See Sedat Ergin, "Which party lost to whom on 24 June" [Turkish] *Hürriyet*, 4 July 2018, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sedat-ergin/24-haziran-analizi-7-kim-kime-ne-kadar-oy-kaybetti-40885639>.

<sup>100</sup> "The Party That Leaves Its Mark in the 24 June Elections: MHP" [Turkish], *BBC*, 25 June 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-43821144>.

<sup>101</sup> Sinem Adar and Yektan Türkyılmaz, *Erdoğan's March 31 Elections: A Fiasco of Tactics and Rhetorics*, *ResetDialoguesOnCivilizations* (12 April 2019), <https://www.resetdoc.org/story7/Erdoğans-march-31-elections-fiasco-tactics-rhetorics/>.

of the AKP's founding members who later served as minister for economy and finance as well as foreign minister, and Gelecek headed by the former foreign minister and short-lived prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, whom Erdoğan forced to resign from the post of prime minister in May 2016. Both parties have increased their membership numbers since their respective founding in March 2020 and December 2019. As of 12 January 2021, DEVA has 15,862 registered members, whereas Gelecek has 18,281.<sup>102</sup> These new parties constitute a considerable challenge to the AKP due to their potential to offer an alternative to the AKP's disillusioned religiously conservative voters. In addition, they also risk disintegrating the party. Former AKP members such as Mustafa Yeneroğlu, ex-interior minister Beşir Atalay, Selçuk Özdağ, Ayhan Sefer Üstün and Abdullah Başcı resigned and joined the new parties. So did former AKP mayors and provincial heads who were dismissed from duty. Aware of the challenge that these splinter parties might cause, President Erdoğan not only occasionally attacks them but also reportedly work towards preventing further departures from the party. The President's recent moves for rapprochement with the Muslim conservative SP and the Nationalist Outlook movement should be interpreted within this context.

The growing discontent is, however, not new and definitely not confined to the formation of new parties. Kemal Öztürk, former advisor to Erdoğan, former chair of the supervisory board of the state news agency, *Anadolu Agency*, and a former columnist at the pro-Erdoğan *Yeni Şafak*, criticised in his column in May 2019 the Supreme Election Council's decision to rerun the Istanbul elections: 'Ekrem İmamoğlu will become an important political figure as someone whose mayorship was taken away'.<sup>103</sup> When *Yeni Şafak* refused to publish the piece, Öztürk announced that he would suspend writing for a while and shortly after joined the monthly Islamist *Sebilürreşâd*.<sup>104</sup>

One of the earliest signs of dissatisfaction within the AKP milieu was the establishment in April 2015

of the newspaper *Karar*<sup>105</sup> to constructively criticise the party and its leadership, emphasising the importance of rule of law and economic reforms. Its columnists state that 'collective decision making' (as opposed to personalisation and centralisation of power) had once made Turkey into a country that the 'democratic world' had lauded as a model for the entire region.<sup>106</sup> *Karar*'s authors, including theologians, regularly argue against viewing Islam as the basis for a political programme, or instrumentalising it to legitimise an authoritarian style of governance.<sup>107</sup> Most of its columnists had previously been marginalised in the pro-government press or had already been shown the door. In 2018, the editorial board of *Karar* issued a statement noting that since the establishment of its print version the newspaper had faced an unofficial advertising boycott, subjecting firms that buy space to government pressure and risking loss of business.<sup>108</sup>

### Discontent is proliferating even among the Islamists.

Discontent is proliferating even among the Islamists. Abdurrahman Dilipak, chief ideologist of the radical newspaper *Yeni Akit*, has for a while now been criticising Erdoğan for believing he could decide everything on his own and, thus, for making mistakes. Dilipak castigates the greed and profligacy that have taken hold in the AKP and criticises the presidential system for blurring the boundaries between bureaucracy, the AKP's provincial organisation and municipalities.<sup>109</sup> The sharpest criticism from the conserva-

<sup>102</sup> Taken from the website of the Supreme Court Prosecutor's Office on 1 March 2021, <https://www.yargitaycb.gov.tr/kategori/109/siyasi-parti-genel-bilgileri>.

<sup>103</sup> "Yeni Şafak Did Not Publish Kemal Öztürk's Piece" (Turkish), T24, 8 May 2019, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/yeni-safak-kemal-ozturk-un-yazisini-yayimlamadi,820283>.

<sup>104</sup> "Kemal Öztürk Has Found Himself a New Address" [Turkish], Kemalist news website *Oda TV*, 10 May 2020, <https://odatv4.com/kemal-ozturkun-yeni-adresi-belli-oldu-10051918.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Website of the paper <http://www.karar.com>. It started first as an online newspaper and later, in March 2016, also became available in print.

<sup>106</sup> Mehmet Ocaktan, "Why No New Success Stories?" [Turkish], *Karar*, 24 September 2018, <http://www.karar.com/yazarlar/mehmet-ocaktan/neden-yeniden-bir-basari-hikayesi-yazilmasin-ki-7995>.

<sup>107</sup> See contributions by theologians such as Ali Bardakçı and Mustafa Çağrıncı, as well as the newspaper's editor-in-chief, İbrahim Kıras.

<sup>108</sup> The paper publicly complained about this on 12 November 2018: "A Necessary Statement to Our Readers and the Public" [Turkish], *Karar*, 12 November 2018, <http://www.karar.com/guncel-haberler/kamuoyuna-ve-okurlarimizazaruri-bir-aciklama-1027209>.

<sup>109</sup> See Abdurrahman Dilipak's contributions in *Yeni Akit* on 15 August 2018, 6 October 2018, 8 October 2018, 2 February 2021.

tive religious camp was formulated in early November 2018 by Cihangir İslam, when he was still an MP for the SP. He said the AKP had to be held accountable for having illegally shared out the state and bureaucracy with the followers of the preacher Gülen. In those days, he said, the AKP was using the fight against 'FETÖ' to muzzle any opposition.<sup>110</sup>

## Degrading the AKP to the President's Electoral Machine

Party members can certainly no longer express such criticisms publicly. Decisions are made by a small circle around Erdoğan. This circle also decides the fate of mayors of AKP-governed cities. The 'election' of the Extended Central Executive Committee (MKYK) at the sixth party conference in August 2018 clearly showed where the buck stops: on the basis of a single list presented by the leadership, 60 percent of the members were replaced without discussion.<sup>111</sup> When it came to nominating candidates for parliament, no democratic pretence was required at all, with applicants placed on the lists quite officially by the party leadership. Although this practice is not exclusive to the AKP and is used by most of its rivals, a party leadership that sees no need to pay the slightest heed to internal balance but can instead change its candidates for parliament at will and — as before the last election — replace about half of them is unusual even in Turkey.

**110** Onur Ermen, "Do the Investigations against Felicity Party Deputy Cihangir İslam Violate the Political Immunity of Deputies?" [Turkish], *BBC Türkçe*, 2 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-46073105>. Having resigned from SP in March 2020, İslam continues to be a vocal critic of the AKP. In a recent interview with the online platform Medyascope in November 2020, he noted that the AKP was divided between those aspiring to Turkey's democratisation and those encouraging the party's alliance with the MHP, and that he did not foresee that the AKP's pious and conservative constituency would continue their support any longer. See Interview with Cihangir İslam [Turkish], *Medyascope*, 27 November 2020, <https://medyascope.tv/2020/11/27/ankara-gundemi-74-istanbul-milletvekili-cihangir-islam-dindar-ve-muhafazakar-secmenin-akp-ile-uzun-sure-yol-yuruyecegini-zannetmiyorum/>.

**111** "Changing the Guard at the AKP" [Turkish], *Cumhuriyet*, 20 September 2018, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/1089186/AKP\\_li\\_baskanlar\\_gidici.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/1089186/AKP_li_baskanlar_gidici.html).

Ali Babacan, Ahmet Davutoğlu and Beşir Atalay, all of whom are said to be close to former President Abdullah Gül, who had been widely expected to stand against Erdoğan for the presidency, were not on the candidate list.<sup>112</sup> Deputies suspected of erstwhile contact with the followers of the preacher Gülen were also excluded, along with, interestingly, the two chairs and four members of the parliamentary commission that investigated the attempted coup of 2016, which the government blames on the Gülenists. Kurdish deputies who had engaged in the AKP explicitly in order to contribute to resolving the Kurdish question were also weeded out, including Mehmet Metiner, Orhan Miroğlu and Galip Ensarioğlu. Interesting to note here is that exclusion of Kurds from political representation is not only limited to the party but also extends to the bureaucracy.<sup>113</sup>

Erdoğan had already liberated himself almost completely from party influence on his policies after his first election as president in August 2014. Today he again decides the fate of the AKP as party leader — but has cut himself and his government completely free of the party. In this way the party is degraded to his electoral tool and loses its function as a channel for political participation. Even though Erdoğan does not face overt challenge from within the party, there are signs of intra-party struggle among cliques for wider influence within the AKP.<sup>114</sup> The popularity of Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu and of Defence Minister Hulusi Akar has recently been on the rise.

In an obvious move to counter inner-party rivals and to reaffirm his grip on the religious-conservative part of the electorate, President and party leader Erdoğan most recently is working towards the co-optation of persons and organisations from the so-called Milli Görüş movement. The movement is known as the traditional undercurrent of Turkey's overtly Islamist parties in which Erdoğan started his political career and from which he separated himself when establishing the AKP in 2001. In preparation for the AKP's

**112** This and the following after "Who's Out, Who's In?" [Turkish], *t24*, 22 May 2018, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/kimler-geldi-kimler-gecti-iste-Erdoğanın-hazırladığı-akp-listesinde-dikkati-cekenler,634340>.

**113** İrfan Aktar, "Turkish State" [Turkish], *Gazete Duvar*, 8 June 2020, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2020/06/08/turk-devleti/>.

**114** "Berat Supporters", 'Soylu Supporters', and 'Bilal Supporters' [Turkish], *Cumhuriyet*, 2 December 2018, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/beratcilar-soylucular-ve-bilalciler-krizi-1158265>.

seventh regular party conference, scheduled for 24 March 2021, Erdoğan announced Nuri Kabaktepe as the new head of the AKP's most influential provincial organisation, that is, Istanbul. A former member of the religious-conservative SP, Kabaktepe served as an active member in various conservative foundations and is currently the deputy chairman of the Maarif Foundation's board of trustees.<sup>115</sup> Erdoğan presented Kabaktepe's tenure as an attempt to 'reach our 2023 goals with the spirit of 1994', when Erdoğan was elected as the mayor of Istanbul on the ticket of the Islamist Welfare Party (RP).<sup>116</sup> Besides Kabaktepe, four former SP members joined the board of the Istanbul organisation.<sup>117</sup>

Given the AKP's weakening influence as a political party and its decreasing voter share, these moves are arguably in line with the President's efforts to revitalise the party's support base. The ease with which Erdoğan is able to not only determine appointments in the party but also manipulate the party's ideological profile, clearly shows that the AKP has gradually turned into the President's electoral machine.

**115** "Who Is Osman Nuri Kabaktepe: What Does the Change in the AKP's Istanbul Organization Mean?" [Turkish], *BBC News*, 23 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-56158396>.

**116** "Osman Nuri Kabaktepe Is Elected" [Turkish], the website of the AKP, 25 February 2021, <http://www.akpartiistanbul.com/index.asp>.

**117** "AKP's Istanbul Administration Is Complete" [Turkish], *Sabah*, 25 February 2021, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2021/02/25/son-dakika-ak-parti-istanbul-il-yonetimi-belli-oldu-dikkat-cekten-3-isim>.

# A New Power Factor: The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)

Turkish nationalism has always been an important component of the self-understanding of the country's pro-Islamic parties,<sup>118</sup> which have remained ideological rivals to the MHP, while cooperating on specific issues. For example, in the second half of the 1970s, one of the AKP's predecessors, the National Salvation Party (MSP), joined the MHP in the Nationalist Front (MÇ) governments led by the conservative Justice Party (AP). And in the 1991 parliamentary election the RP joined forces with the MHP to overcome the 10 percent hurdle. Most recently the AKP and MHP were the respective first choice for voters disappointed by the other.<sup>119</sup>

Despite these aspects of cooperation, political competition predominated, flaring into open hostility when the AKP government negotiated with the Kurdish PKK (2013–2015) and Erdoğan launched his first initiative to introduce a presidential system. During that phase, the MHP's leader Devlet Bahçeli accused the AKP leader of wanting a completely free hand in order to grant the Kurds autonomy. This, he said, was tantamount to dividing Turkey – and thus, high treason.<sup>120</sup> Consequently, the MHP forged an anti-AKP

alliance with the secularist Republican People's Party for the August 2014 presidential election. The CHP and MHP nominated a joint candidate, who fell far short of expectations, gaining only 38.5 percent of votes and unable to prevent Erdoğan's progression to the presidency. However, the June 2015 parliamentary elections – when the AKP could not gain enough votes to form a single-party government due to the pro-Kurdish HDP's passing of the 10 percent threshold and entry into the parliament – were a game-changer paving the way for a possible AKP–MHP rapprochement. Bahçeli's refusal to partake in a coalition government and the subsequent failure of the AKP and the CHP to build a coalition led to snap elections five months later. The AKP gained 49.5 percent of the vote thanks to the support it garnered from the MHP electorate and formed a single-party government.

## From Adversary to Enabler of the Presidential System

The 2016 coup attempt emboldened the rapprochement between the AKP and the MHP. Just a few months after the attempted coup, Bahçeli proposed to Erdoğan that the parliament should discuss the AKP's proposals to alter the constitution and introduce a presidential system, despite his earlier stark opposition to such a system. The MHP was ready, Bahçeli said, to let the nation decide: his party would support the proposal in parliament in order to open the way for a referendum.<sup>121</sup> Three months later, in January

**118** These were not competing pro-Islamic parties, but a historical series of parties each of which was founded after the previous had been banned.

**119** See Günter Seufert, *Turkey, a Nation Stuck in Politicized Primordial Worldviews* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 20 February 2018), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2018/02/20/446774/turkey-nation-stuck-politicized-primordial-worldviews/>.

**120** Erdoğan also wanted, Bahçeli said, to establish dynastic rule by his family and put an end once and for all to corruption investigations against them. See video on the website of the newspaper with statements made by Bahçeli between 20 January 2015 and 5 January 2016, [https://www.sozcu.com](https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2017/gundem/devlet-bahceli-baskanlik-sistemi-icin-neler-demisti-1613318/).

[tr/2017/gundem/devlet-bahceli-baskanlik-sistemi-icin-neler-demisti-1613318/](https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2017/gundem/devlet-bahceli-baskanlik-sistemi-icin-neler-demisti-1613318/).

**121** “Bahçeli Takes Initiative for Presidential System” [Turkish], NTV, 11 October 2016, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/>



2017, the Grand National Assembly adopted the proposal for constitutional amendments with the votes of both parties. The proposal was approved in April 2017 with 51.4 percent of the votes in a popular referendum where the AKP and MHP campaigned jointly for the proposal.

Bahçeli's assistance to Erdoğan did not end there. In January 2018, he declared that the MHP would not nominate a candidate of its own for the upcoming presidential election but instead called on its supporters to vote for Erdoğan. In return, the AKP agreed to an electoral alliance that guaranteed the MHP parliamentary seats. On 24 June 2018 the alliance achieved an absolute majority with 53.7 percent of the votes. MHP's electoral performance was undoubtedly one of the main surprises. Beating the forecasts of almost all pollsters, the party gained 11.1 percent of the votes, preserving its vote share in the November 2015 snap elections. This came as a surprise especially because of the formal split within the MHP in 2017 when Meral Akşener and several other dissidents left to form the İYİP which was expected by many to divide the nationalist vote. Important to note here, as will be further discussed in the next section, is that the MHP's votes have since then been declining, whereas the İYİP has steadily increased its vote share.

What persuaded the MHP leader to make this U-turn? When he first mooted his proposal in October 2016 — at a point when Erdoğan was already president but the presidential system still a long way off — Bahçeli himself said that he was concerned for rule of law. Although the office of president required its holder to display neutrality and reserve, he said, Erdoğan was continuing to govern the country as if he were still prime minister, and although he had stepped down as leader he was still acting as if he were the head of the AKP.<sup>122</sup> If it was not possible to show the President the limits of his powers and force him to obey the constitution, Bahçeli said, then the constitution had to be changed. As absurd as that thought must sound under the premise of restoring the rule of law, the worry Bahçeli followed it up with — again cryptically — was real. He said that continuous violations of the constitution set the political leadership at odds with the constitutional order and made the state vulnerable, exposing Turkey to great risks.

bahceliden-baskanlik-sistemi-cikisi,c1WeUw7SfUaRhJHd\_4gJlAQ.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

It was indeed the question of preserving the state (*devletin bekası*) that drove Bahçeli, and it still continues to do so. His concern is not democracy and rule of law; but preserving the state within the existing parameters of an (ethnically and culturally) Turkish republic that keeps non-state religious actors in check and excludes cultural or political concessions to its Kurdish citizens. Already in October 2016, Bahçeli asserted that after the coup attempt Turkey was 'fighting for its very existence'.<sup>123</sup> Before the 2017 referendum on the constitutional amendment, he put it in a nutshell: The MHP supported the proposal for the sake of 'the nation, the state and Turkishness'.<sup>124</sup>

## The Threat Perception

For Bahçeli, the failed coup was the writing on the wall and nothing would ever be the same as it was on 14 July: a warning that the state bureaucracy had been infiltrated by a religious secret society.<sup>125</sup> As well as being part of a mysterious international network, the group was also closely allied with the AKP, which Bahçeli believed had just placed dynamite underneath the foundations of the state by conducting negotiations with the PKK to resolve the Kurdish question and potentially calling into question the unitary character of the state and its nation. Large parts of the military, the security apparatus and the bureaucracy shared this perception, including numerous small — but in certain sectors well-established — secularist nationalist groups with Eurasian inclinations. For these actors, both the AKP's policies and the presence of Gülen's followers were a threat to the state, and restoration of the safeguards that enabled an independent state bureaucracy to rein in dangerous experiments by the government was necessary.<sup>126</sup> Commenting about the 2018 elections, Alaattin Çakıcı, an organised crime leader who was released from prison in 2020 in the context of a selective amnesty that the MHP demanded and politically put through, expressed the underlying worldview much more explicitly than Bahçeli: 'Those who cast their vote for the People's

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> "Will Bahçeli Refuse? MHP Declaration", *Hürriyet* (online), 14 April 2017, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/mhp-hesabindan-evet-paylasimi-40426856>.

<sup>125</sup> "Bahçeli Takes Initiative for Presidential System" (see note 121).

<sup>126</sup> See Aras and Yorulmazlar, "State, Institutions and Reform in Turkey after July 15" (see note 70), 150.

Alliance did not vote primarily for Erdoğan but for the survival of the state that faced existential threats'.<sup>127</sup>

The timing was auspicious for Bahçeli as the attempted coup had weakened the AKP and its leadership. This granted the MHP unexpected leeway and an opportunity to exert lasting influence on the governing party's policies given the massive purges in the bureaucracy that pressured the AKP on two fronts. Given that the AKP's voters and Gülen's followers came from the same social milieu, the purges in the bureaucracy were inevitably going — sooner or later — to negatively affect support for the governing party. And the removal of countless government officials created a vacuum into which MHP members and supporters could move or even return. In a speech he delivered in 2003, Bahçeli had complained that around 70 percent of the bureaucrats who were dismissed by the AKP upon coming to power worked at the ministries with the most MHP cadres.<sup>128</sup> The coup attempt enabled Bahçeli to reclaim these lost positions.

Bahçeli's political U-turn took place in this context. The MHP's support for the new system opened the door for its cadres to enter the state bureaucracy, where they — together with anti-Western secularist forces and members of religious orders — filled the newly vacated posts. This has granted the MHP a degree of political influence much greater than its numerical representation in parliament because MHP cadres fit in easily with the bureaucracy's deeply rooted authoritarian tradition. At the same time, Erdoğan and his AKP needed the alliance with the MHP to preserve electoral majority and remain in power. As a result, while the MHP developed into an overwhelmingly decisive political force, Erdoğan and his party found themselves on the defensive for the first time in years.

**127** "From Alaattin Çakıcı to Erdoğan: You Are Not the Owner of the State" [Turkish], left-wing newspaper *Evrensel*, 27 June 2018, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/355717/alaattin-cakicidan-erdogana-devletin-sahibi-sen-degilsin>.

**128** Press Statement by Devlet Bahçeli [Turkish], MHP website 1 March 2003, [https://www.mhp.org.tr/htmldocs/genel\\_baskan/konusma/183/index.html](https://www.mhp.org.tr/htmldocs/genel_baskan/konusma/183/index.html).

# A Newly Evolving Political Setting

In fact, Erdoğan and the AKP have taken a big risk with the introduction of the presidential system. On the one hand, the new system has strengthened, at least as far as the immediate future is concerned, Erdoğan's dominance over state institutions, his own party and the economy. At the same time, however, all too certain of their dominance of the electorate, Erdoğan and his party have unintentionally worked havoc upon the political setting that enabled their long-lasting rule and created strong electoral support.

In the parliamentary system, the AKP won a firm grip on the reins for the foreseeable future. The Turkish electorate's deep polarisation along religious and ethnic lines turned — to a large degree — the political parties into representatives of different cultural constituencies.<sup>129</sup> In this setting, the AKP was the largely unquestioned representative of the religiously conservative part of the population — Turkish and Kurdish alike. The CHP's main base consisted of secular Turks. The MHP relied on the support of those for whom Turkishness as an ethnic identity is the decisive cultural and political marker, and the HDP gathered most of the left-leaning secular Kurdish votes.

To a large extent frozen into these cultural 'camps', the electorate's voting behaviour remained more or less stable. Even though the AKP's legitimacy was gradually put under question since the Gezi demonstrations in 2013, the ability of Erdoğan and his party to transfer resources to their constituencies — at both the mass and the elite level — continued to be central to their electoral success.<sup>130</sup> The national 10 percent

threshold required for single parties' entry into parliament additionally contributed to the seeming inertia of the party system.

This situation changed for the first time in the June 2015 elections with the HDP's leader Selahattin Demirtaş's cue 'We are not going to make you President'. These words became emblematic for the party's campaign around the idea of forming a 'grand centre-left coalition that would prevent Erdoğan from establishing his hyper-centralised presidential system' and resulted in the HDP's success in passing the 10 percent threshold. A second turning point was the 2017 foundation of the İYİP by former MHP cadres who rejected the MHP's U-turn to support Erdoğan and the presidential system, as mentioned earlier. Even though the mounting vocal resistance within the opposition to the new governance system could not prevent its launch, overwhelming personalisation of power and institutional deterioration still offered the otherwise divided opposition a common opponent — Recep Tayyip Erdoğan — and a shared concern: their rejection of the presidential system. Thanks to the changing rules of the electoral game with the introduction of alliance politics, ahead of the 2018 elections the İYİP, the CHP, the Islamist SP and the Democrat Party (DP) formed a common front: Nation's Alliance. Although formally excluded from the alliance, the HDP directed its electorate to cast their vote with the opposition alliance, thereby contributing to challenging the AKP and Erdoğan.

**129** Afife Yasemin Yılmaz, "The Codes of Turkey's Frozen Politics: Understanding Electoral Behavior via the Decision-Tree Method" [Turkish], *KONDA*, July 2017, [https://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/KONDA\\_Turkiyede\\_Donan\\_Siyasetin\\_Sifreleri\\_Temmuz2017-1.pdf](https://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/KONDA_Turkiyede_Donan_Siyasetin_Sifreleri_Temmuz2017-1.pdf).

**130** Melanie Cammett and Davide Luca, *Unfair Play: Central Government Spending under Turkey's AK Party* (Washington, D.C.:

Brookings, 20 June 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/06/20/unfair-play-central-government-spending-under-turkeys-ak-party/>.



Map 1

## 2019 Local election results

Overall vote share of the elected mayors representing the indicated parties



The infographic is best viewed in colour.

Source: <https://secim.haberler.com/2019/yerel-secimler/>.  
Translation and adaptation: 2021 Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

## New Electoral Dynamics Unfold: The Local Elections of March 2019

The 2019 local elections served as a proof of the new system's impact on Turkey's future electoral development.<sup>131</sup> The AKP considered gaining full command over municipalities the crowning finish in taking unlimited control over the country. Even though the AKP and MHP converted the local elections into a fateful struggle for the sheer survival of nation and state, the majority of the electorate in Turkey's metropolitan and coastal cities cast their vote for the opposition alliance's candidates. In four out of five of Turkey's largest metropolitan areas (Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Adana) the CHP candidates emerged victorious, and in two of them AKP mayors were ousted. The areas with local administration now run by the CHP make up 40 percent of the population. Among these, Istanbul alone contributes one third of the country's economic output. Moreover, for the first time since the AKP's ascent to power, the opposition not only defended the coastal areas of the Aegean and the Mediterranean but stormed the town halls of the Anatolian municipalities surrounding the capital Ankara.

The results put an end to the apprehension that the opposition would entirely fail to challenge the AKP at the ballot box due to its ideological differ-

ences. In their rhetoric of a necessary return to democracy, the CHP and İYİP limit themselves to reintroducing parliamentarism in what they call an 'enhanced version'.<sup>132</sup> What exactly constitutes this proposed new form of parliamentarism and what would be the main points of compromise among the parties constituting the Nation's Alliance is at the moment of writing still unclear, at least publicly. The CHP and İYİP overwhelmingly stress the absence of meritocracy in state bureaucracy, deterioration of rule of law, and poor economic governance.<sup>133</sup> However, both parties — to shield themselves against the People's Alliance vilification attempts and arguably not to scare off their voters — tend to sweep under the carpet the decisive role that Kurdish votes played in their success in the municipal elections. The splinter parties, DEVA and Gelecek, also share these concerns. Both CHP and İYİP also emphasise their commitment to the republican foundations of Turkey and to the figure of Atatürk as a distinct secular ruler. Yet, the leaders of both parties recently also seem to be paying special attention to not falling into the trap of culture wars concerning religion, at least in their rhetoric.

<sup>131</sup> See T. Deniz Erkmen, *Stuck in the Twilight Zone? March 2019 Municipal Elections in Turkey*, SWP Comment 21/2019 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2019), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019C21/>.

<sup>132</sup> "What Is an Enhanced Parliamentary System" [Turkish], *Deutsche Welle Turkish*, 24 November 2020, <https://www.dw.com/tr/güçlendirilmiş-parlamentar-sistem-nedir/a-55701191>.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

## Declining Vote Share of the AKP/MHP Alliance

As a whole, electoral prospects for the AKP/MHP appear to be increasingly uncertain. According to the polls, the AKP's voter share has been fluctuating within the 28.5–35 percent range since early 2020, whereas the MHP's share has remained within the window of 6.7–8.5 percent.<sup>134</sup> Meanwhile, the percentage of undecided voters remain high. In the most recent polls, the opposition alliance seems to be gathering more sympathy among voters than the People's Alliance.<sup>135</sup>

The ruling alliance's electoral flexibility is increasingly limited. Even as bold a political move as the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque in July 2020 was, for instance, not enough to trigger a lasting upward effect in vote share. This also applies to foreign policy decisions that keep nationalist sentiments high and rally the opposition around the flag; but seem to fail to generate a long-lasting impact on reviving support for the AKP/MHP. The ruling alliance's electoral performance in the monthly polls is best defined by a steady downturn that is every now and then interrupted by short-term upward fluctuations driven by political events or statements. Secondly, COVID-19 seems to have worsened electoral support for the AKP/MHP. In the pollster MetroPoll's November 2020 survey, for instance, 63.7 percent noted that Turkey was on a negative track, whereas 21.5 percent expressed optimism towards the future.<sup>136</sup> Unsurprisingly, those surveyed said that economic concerns constituted the most important challenge facing Turkey at the current moment.

The Turkish economy was already ailing even before the COVID-19 crisis erupted, due to the combined effect of a weakening currency that was hit particularly hard during the 2018 crisis, a high current account deficit (one of the highest in the world<sup>137</sup>)

and last but not least, a maturing debt, more than half of which has been accrued during the last two decades by the private sector.<sup>138</sup> Turkey entered the pandemic without having fully recovered from the 2018 crisis. The unemployment rate within the non-agricultural sector increased from 11.8 percent in January 2018 to 14.7 percent in September 2020.<sup>139</sup> Lockdown measures during the first three months of the pandemic led to a significant decrease in labour force participation. With awareness of the high amounts of debt accrued by these enterprises and the growing rate of bad loans risking bankruptcy, in October 2020 the AKP announced the most comprehensive debt restructuring package in recent history.<sup>140</sup> There is an urgent need for an influx of foreign capital to foster economic growth and credit expansion.

## Talk of Reform in Economy and Law

Against this backdrop of increasing competition by the opposition, the AKP/MHP alliance's declining voter share, and last but not least, an ailing economy and pressing need for foreign capital, on 11 November President Erdoğan announced a new era of economic and legal reforms to improve the credibility and reliability of the Turkish economy.<sup>141</sup>

The announcement of upcoming reforms followed two rather dramatic events. Less than a week before this writing, on 6 November the governor of the Cen-

turkey-fell-from-investment-darling-to-junk-rated-emerging-market.

**138** Mağfi Eğilmez, "External Debt Report" [Turkish], *Notes to Myself* (personal blog of the author), 13 December 2020, <https://www.mahfiegilmez.com/>.

**139** Seyfettin Gürsel, "Labor Force Participation Increases, Openly Unemployed Decrease, Potentially Unemployed Watch the Markets" [Turkish], *T24*, 12 December 2020, <https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/seyfettin-gursel/istihdam-artiyor-acik-issiz-sayisi-azaliyor-potansiyel-issizler-piyasayi-gozluyor.29022>.

**140** "A New Package Is on Its Way! A Total of 500 Billion Debt Accrued by 4 Million People Will Be Restructured" [Turkish], *Milliyet*, 18 October 2020, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/galeri/son-dakika-Erdogandan-flas-talimat-4-milyon-kisinin-500-milyar-borcu-yapilanacak-6332977/1>.

**141** "President Erdoğan's Message about Economic and Legal Reforms" (Turkish), *HaberTürk*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.haberturk.com/son-dakika-cumhurbaskani-Erdogan-dan-ekonomi-ve-yargi-sistemi-reformu-mesajlari-haberler-2866439>.

**134** "Turkey's Pulse: Analysis of Domestic Politics, Economy and Foreign Policy in Turkey", *MetroPoll*, November 2020, <http://www.metropoll.com.tr/research/turkey-pulse-17/1877>.

**135** "Alliance Survey by MetroPoll: Nation's Alliance Is Drawing Away from the People's Alliance" [Turkish], *Birgün*, 6 February 2021, <https://www.birgun.net/haber/metropoll-den-ittifak-anketi-millet-ittifaki-arayi-aciyor-333273>.

**136** "Turkey's Pulse" (see note 134).

**137** "How Turkey Fell from Investment Darling to Junk-rated Emerging Market", *The Economist*, 19 May 2018, <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2018/05/19/how>

tral Bank was sacked after the lira fell more than 30 percent against the dollar despite a series of interest rate hikes since August.<sup>142</sup> He was replaced by Naci Ağbal who served as the Secretary of the Finance Minister between 2009 and 2015 and as the Finance Minister between 2015 and 2018, and as head of the Presidency of Strategy and Budget after the transition into the presidential system.

Still, if it were not for the rather unexpected and unconventional resignation two days later of Berat Albayrak, Erdoğan's son-in-law, from his post as the Minister of Finance and Treasury, the ousting of the Central Bank's head, which happened for the second time in 16 months, would alone have perhaps not signalled a major change in economic governance. Since the beginning of 2020, criticism has openly targeted Albayrak as the opposition leaders strongly connected economic woes to the personalisation of power and direct involvement of Erdoğan's family.<sup>143</sup> During Albayrak's tenure as the finance minister since 2018, the Central Bank net reserves hit negative as the bank is estimated to have sold over 100 billion dollars in the last year.<sup>144</sup> Albayrak was replaced by Lütfi Elvan, a former bureaucrat between 1989 and 2007, and the Minister of Transport, Maritime and Communication from 2013 to 2015.

Since the appointment of the new leadership, the lira has appreciated by nearly 11 percent.<sup>145</sup> The Central Bank increased interest rates from 10.25 percent to 15 percent – the largest increase since June 2018.<sup>146</sup>

**142** "Erdoğan Fires Central Bank Head after Lira Hits Record Low", *Bloomberg*, 7 November 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-06/turkey-s-erdogan-removes-central-bank-governor-amid-lira-rout>.

**143** "Every Turkish Citizen Got Poorer by \$6,000 during Albayrak's Tenure as Finance Minister, Says Future Party", *DuvarEnglish*, 30 November 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/every-turkish-citizen-got-poorer-by-6000-during-albayraks-tenure-as-finance-minister-says-turkeys-future-party-news-55263>.

**144** "Goldman Sachs: Turkey FX Interventions top \$100 Billion Year-to-date", *Reuters*, 5 November 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-cenbank-goldmansachs-int-idUSKBN27L258>.

**145** "Rebuilding Turkey's Monetary Credibility Will Take Time", *Fitch Ratings*, 20 November 2020, <https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/rebuilding-turkey-monetary-policy-credibility-will-take-time-20-11-2020>.

**146** The Central Bank of the Turkish Republic Press Release on Interest Rates, 19 November 2020, <https://www.tcmb.gov.tr/wps/wcm/connect/EN/TCMB+EN/Main+Menu/Announcements/Press+Releases/2020/ANO2020-68>.

Meanwhile, the new Finance Minister together with the Justice Minister held meetings in November and December with different stakeholders including the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD), Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB) and the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (MÜSİAD) to discuss and consult about the scope of necessary economic and legal reforms.<sup>147</sup> Important to note here is that in the months leading to the announcement of reforms, TÜSİAD called on Ankara to respect the rule of law in order to boost Turkey's economic credibility.<sup>148</sup> Yet, these efforts seem to have fallen on deaf ears as Central Bank's new governor Ağbal was sacked on 20 March. Hitting the markets and investors as a big surprise, the decision led to a 15 percent fall in the lira.<sup>149</sup>

## Cracks within the Ruling Alliance

Still, further economic deterioration during Albayrak's tenure and the mounting pressure by economic interest groups are arguably not the only reasons behind his resignation and its acceptance by the palace. Already for a couple of years now, there has been criticism within the AKP against Albayrak's increasing influence over the President and the party at the expense of sidelining senior AKP members, while at the same time competing against Süleyman Soylu, the Interior Minister, who joined the AKP in 2012.<sup>150</sup> Through his positions as the finance minister and the deputy chairman of the Turkey Wealth Fund, Albayrak held considerable power, and was also able to transfer public resources to cronies and loyalists. His influence seems to have extended beyond the party

**147** "Turkish Officials, Businesspeople Meet on Reform Agenda", *Anadolu Agency*, 4 December 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkish-officials-businesspeople-meet-on-reform-agenda/2065511>.

**148** "We Shall Not Compromise on Rule of Law", Interview with the chair of TUSIAD, 17 October 2020, <https://www.tusiad.org/tr/basin-bultenleri/item/10645-anayasa-ustunlugu-i-lkesinden-taviz-vermeyelim>.

**149** "Turkish Lira Falls 15 Per Cent after Bank Governor Sacked", *BBC*, 22 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56479702>.

**150** "Discomfort within the AKP about Berat Albayrak: What Am I in This Situation?" [Turkish], *Cumhuriyet*, 22 May 2017, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/akpde-damat-berat-albayrak-rahatsizligi-bu-durumda-ben-ne-oluyorum-745547>.

and reached to the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the media.<sup>151</sup> Albayrak is often associated with the so-called *Pelikan*, a network of militant journalists and opinion leaders, at the centre of the controversy that led to Ahmet Davutoğlu's resignation in 2016 as prime minister.<sup>152</sup> The same network was also influential in the decision to rerun the Istanbul municipal elections.<sup>153</sup> Further, Albayrak is reportedly supported by the so-called *Istanbul Grubu*, a clique within the judiciary.<sup>154</sup> This is the reason why some journalists even claimed in the immediate aftermath of the reform announcements that the announced legal reforms were essentially about eliminating Albayrak's reach within the judiciary.<sup>155</sup>

Even though it is difficult to know the exact reasons behind the resignation and its acceptance by the President, discussions following the incident demonstrate that the cracks within the ruling alliance entered a new era at the beginning of November, and the balance of power seems to have been further tilted in favour of the MHP. This has been clear in the subsequent discussions about whether legal reforms should involve substantive changes concerning issues such as lengthy pre-trial detentions and the politicisation of decision-making in judiciary. Critical comments by senior AKP members such as Justice Minister Abdülhamit Gül<sup>156</sup> and AKP's founding member Bülent Arınç<sup>157</sup> of existing practices, such as in the

cases of Selahattin Demirtaş and Osman Kavala, were met with harsh response from not only Bahçeli<sup>158</sup> but also Erdoğan. The spat ended with the resignation of Arınç from his role as a member of the Presidential Supreme Consultation Board.

### **Devlet Bahçeli seems to be pulling the wires within the People's Alliance in shaping the limits of policy, especially concerning law and order issues.**

Taken together with the Constitutional Court's ruling on 29 December 2020 that Osman Kavala's imprisonment did not constitute a violation of his right to individual freedom and security,<sup>159</sup> and Erdoğan's criticism about a week earlier against the European Court of Human Rights ruling for an immediate release of Selahattin Demirtaş,<sup>160</sup> Devlet Bahçeli seems to be pulling the wires within the People's Alliance in shaping the limits of policy, especially concerning law and order issues. At the same time, he also works towards moulding the AKP after his own image. Erdoğan is on the defensive, as he had to sacrifice his son-in-law and loosen his grip on the economy. These increasingly visible and tense cracks render Turkey's ruling alliance vulnerable and prevent stabilisation of the new governance system.

<sup>151</sup> Serpil Yılmaz, "Economy, Judiciary and the Media Are Being Restructured after Albayrak" [Turkish], *Sözcü*, 17 November 2020, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/yazarlar/serpil-yilmaz/albayrak-sonrasi-ekonomi-hukuk-ve-medya-sekilleniyor-6128378/>.

<sup>152</sup> "Pelikan's War for Istanbul" [Turkish], *Birgün* (Interview with Barış Terkoğlu), 4 July 2019, <https://www.birgun.net/haber/pelikancilarin-istanbul-savasi-252259>.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Yılmaz, "Economy, Judiciary and the Media" (see note 151).

<sup>155</sup> Gökçer Tahincioğlu, "Promotion or Demotion of Status: What Does the Appointment of Istanbul and Ankara Public Prosecutors to the Court of Cassation Mean?" [Turkish], *T24*, 27 November 2020, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/terfimi-tenzil-i-rutbe-mi-istanbul-ve-ankara-bassavcilarinin-yargitay-a-atanmalari-ne-anlama-gelir-917428>.

<sup>156</sup> "Justice Minister Gül: What Is Essential for Just Treatment Is to Avoid Detention during Trial" [Turkish], *EuroNews*, 12 November 2020, <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/11/12/adalet-bakan-gul-magduriyete-neden-olmamak-icin-aslolan-tutuksuz-yargi-lamad-r>.

<sup>157</sup> "Arınç's Comments about Selahattin Demirtaş: He Can Be Evacuated" [Turkish], *Sözcü*, 20 November 2020, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/gundem/arinctan-selahattin-demirtas-cikisi-tahliye-olabilir-6132831/>.

<sup>158</sup> "Bahçeli's Comments about Arınç: Idiocy" [Turkish], *Sözcü*, 24 November 2020, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/gundem/Bahceliden-imamoglu-sert-sozler-6138828/>.

<sup>159</sup> "Constitutional Court's Decision about Osman Kavala" [Turkish], *Cumhuriyet*, 29 December 2020, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/son-dakika--anayasa-mahkemesinden-osman-kavala-karari-1802239>.

<sup>160</sup> "From Erdogan to the ECHR: Demirtaş Decision Is Political" [Turkish], *GazeteDuvar*, 23 December 2020, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/erdogandan-aiihmye-demirtas-karari-siyasi-haber-1508095>.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the new system of governance has produced anything but encouraging results for the AKP. It is far from the objective of creating a more effective bureaucracy. Even after the sweeping purges of actual and supposed followers of Gülen, the administration appears no less politicised than before. As a rule, the replacements were chosen not by qualification and suitability, but for their membership in religious networks and political parties. Public employment continues in the new governance system to be a partisan tool for infiltration into the state. At the same time, it has also become a vehicle for favouring loyalists regardless of their merit and credentials. Even AKP members complain that long-serving party cadres are forced out of leading positions because absolute loyalty to the President is demanded.

Yet, Erdoğan's political options are severely constrained despite the enormous institutional power that the presidential system affords him. This is largely a consequence of the new alliances that he willingly formed as his cooperation with Gülenists came to an end. The MHP has been able to extract a high price in exchange for the support it gave the presidential system. After the failed coup of 2016, the AKP had to buy the MHP's support by opening wide the bureaucracy to its cadres.<sup>161</sup> This applies primarily to the intelligence service and the police, but also to the judiciary. There are growing signs that the AKP is still a long way from full control of the security bureaucracy. Strengthened in this way the MHP is increasingly in a position to (co-)determine the

President's policies. Once again, the administration becomes a breeding ground for cadres with rival loyalties, also leading to the re-emergence of informal networks that are difficult for the President to detect and control. As a result, the bureaucracy, particularly outside of law enforcement, oversight and intelligence service operations, appears paralysed and inefficient.

Upholding the domestic and foreign policy goals that the President used to formulate for Turkey seems to be a growing challenge despite the constant outcry to do so. The AKP originally saw itself as representative of a Muslim nation excluded by the state apparatus, while the MHP regards itself as the protector of the Turkish state. Where the AKP originally claimed to transform the authoritarian state into a conservative democracy, the MHP is working to restore it and the President plays along. In its current alliance with the MHP, the AKP and its leader Erdoğan act upon the traditional threat perceptions in the Turkish state, especially with regard to the Kurdish question and lately, to Greece and Cyprus in the context of the Eastern Mediterranean conflict. Here the MHP's position overlaps with factions within the military and security bureaucracy of different ideological and partisan orientations that fundamentally opposed the early concessions to the Kurdish population made by the AKP government in the area of culture (language and education) and in their negotiations with the PKK from 2013 to 2015. Confluence with these forces in the state apparatus permits the MHP to exert political pressure on its larger partner and rhetorically force it into the defensive. In October 2018, for instance, MHP leader Bahçeli was able to call the AKP government's talks with the PKK a 'step towards the disintegration' of Turkey, without Erdoğan feeling able to admonish him.<sup>162</sup> The MHP's party newspaper has smeared lead-

<sup>161</sup> In a survey at the end of 2017 supporters of the MHP were more likely than supporters of any other party to self-assess as having especially good prospects in the labour market. Bilgi Üniversitesi, *Investigation of the Extent of Polarisation in Turkey* [Turkish], (February 2018), 21, <https://goc.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2018/02/05/bilgi-goc-merkezi-kutuplas-manin-boyutlari-2017-sunum.pdf> (accessed 15 December 2019).

<sup>162</sup> "Statement by MHP Leader Bahçeli on the Student Oath" [Turkish], *HaberTürk*, 20 October 2018, <https://www.haberturk.com>.



ing AKP politicians as ‘crypto-Gülenists’, ‘Kurdish nationalists’ and ‘enemies of the Turks’.<sup>163</sup>

Even though the People’s Alliance started as a union of mutual benefit, the MHP’s political strength and rhetorical roar weaken the AKP’s remaining influence as a party in the new system — where it finds itself degraded to the status of the President’s electoral machine. Engagement and internal dynamism have already fallen off noticeably, and approval rates for the party and the President are in decline especially among the youth.<sup>164</sup> Financial woes and structural economic difficulties that became even more accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, along with ongoing emphasis on Turkey being under siege from both inside and outside as a means to manufacture consent, seem to have exhausted the electorate. The combined vote share of the AKP and the MHP is below 50 percent in the latest polls.

Meanwhile, the country’s political society outside the AKP (and the MHP) is finally seeming to come together around an opposition to the presidential system and advocate a return to the parliamentary system. Criticism is centred around personalisation of power, deterioration of rule of law and poor economic governance. Moreover, opposition leaders especially since the March 2019 local elections often appear careful not to fall into culture wars concerning religion despite constant provocations by pro-government pundits and AKP politicians. Together with the new electoral dynamics imposed by the presidential system, this opens at least the opportunity for a viable opposition to emerge. Still, there are substantive challenges in this scenario.

First and foremost, an overt and detailed public discussion is currently missing around a return to parliamentary democracy, especially concerning concrete reforms bolstering individual rights and liberties, on the one hand, and the exact configuration among the institutional pillars of the state, on the other. Second, and relatedly, opposition actors

still seem hesitant to pursue an open conversation about a potential resolution of the Kurdish question. Such hesitation could be a tactic designed not to scare their electoral base especially at a time when Ankara is waging war against the PKK in Northern Iraq and actively struggles against the dominance of PYD/YPG in Northeastern Syria. Given the increasing stigmatisation of Kurdish politicians and curtailment of Kurdish political representation the most recent examples of which are stripping a HDP deputy of his parliament seat on 17 March 2021 and the lawsuit filed shortly after to shut down the party, the lack of an overt discussion about the Kurdish question might risk intensifying mistrust between the HDP and other opposition parties, and thus losing Kurdish votes, which were decisive in the opposition’s victory in the 2019 municipal elections.

A third challenge facing the opposition is Ankara’s foreign policy adventurism. Since the 2016 coup attempt, Turkish foreign policy has become increasingly aggressive and unilateral. Turkey today militarily engages in various fronts from Syria to Libya, from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Caucasus. Except for Libya, these activities find wide support among the opposition parties (except the HDP). Enabling the President to invoke the ubiquitous threat to state and nation at a time when his political options and popularity are getting narrower, these foreign policy adventures help shift the attention away from internal or external demands for more democracy and rule of law. Since one of the main premises underlying Turkish foreign policy today is the need to be on par with the US and the EU, any opposing voice is easily labelled as pro-Western and against an independent Turkey that redefines its role in a changing international order.

## Responses from European Institutions and EU States

The introduction of the new system of government marked the provisional end of a development extending over several years, and as such a turning point in the history of Turkey. This marks the unhappy end — for both Turkey and the EU — of a long period of reforms.

The European institutions and individual EU states reacted very differently to the dismantling of democracy and rule of law in Turkey. In 2016, the European Parliament called on the Commission to temporarily

haberturk.com/mhp-lideri-Bahçeli-den-andimiz-aciklamasi-2186593. In 2013 Bahçeli even spoke of ‘treachery’ in this connection. *YouTube*, 1 December 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N\\_OmLnVXh2Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_OmLnVXh2Y) (accessed 15 November 2018).

**163** Yıldırım Çiçek, “The Crypto-Gülenists [in the AKP] Dance for Joy” [Turkish], *Türkçün* (MHP party organ), 24 October 2018, <https://turkgun.com/kriptolar-mutlu-zil-takip-oyuyorlar/>.

**164** See “Turkey’s Pulse” (see note 134).

freeze accession talks on account of Turkey's repressive measures under the state of emergency.<sup>165</sup> The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe decided in April 2017 to place Turkey under monitoring again, pending action on the part of the country to adequately address the Council's concerns over human rights, democracy and rule of law.<sup>166</sup> Just three months later, in July 2017, the European Parliament struck a sharper tone, calling on the Commission and the EU member states to officially suspend the accession talks if Ankara implemented the planned constitutional reform amendments.<sup>167</sup> Although the governments of the member states have to date shied away from this step, the European Council noted on 26 June 2018, two days after official introduction of the presidential system, that Turkey had moved further away from the EU and the accession talks had de facto come to a standstill. It had neither been possible to open or conclude accession chapters, nor was it planned to begin talks about modernising the EU-Turkish Customs Union.<sup>168</sup> On 20 February 2019, the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee voted to suspend the accession talks.<sup>169</sup>

EU-Turkey relations have since then further deteriorated. Turkish invasion of parts of Northeast Syria in October 2019 incited harsh reaction from the EU. On 14 October 2019, the EU Council issued a joint statement condemning Turkey's military action and agreement by the member states to restrict arms exports to

Ankara.<sup>170</sup> Shortly after, the MEPs called for sanctions against Turkey.<sup>171</sup> Turkey's decision on 28 February 2020 to open its border with Greece for the passage of refugees was another point of escalation in the relations. In a joint press statement in Greece on 3 March, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen emphasised that the Greek border was 'also a European border' and that EU leaders went to Greece 'to send a very clear statement of European solidarity and support to Greece'.<sup>172</sup> Most recently, the relations were further strained over the escalating tensions between Greece and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean. On 28 August 2020, the EU warned Turkey that it could face fresh sanctions unless it took steps to deescalate.<sup>173</sup> The European Council Conclusions on 1 October formalised this warning, while at the same time offering Turkey a positive agenda conditional upon the termination of aggression until the December meeting. No significant sanctions came out of the December meeting and the offer of positive agenda continued. Even though March 2021 Conclusions continued along the same path, the language was much more carefully crafted offering Turkey the prospect of a positive agenda as long as it continues de-escalation concerning the Eastern Mediterranean and Cyprus, on the one hand, and using the threat of sanctions in case of escalation. Since the end of 2020, Turkey has been in a charm offensive both against the EU and the US under the influence of Joe Biden's election into the White House and deepening economic woes. Statements by various government officials in Turkey including the President himself following the US elections underlined Ankara's willingness to work together with the Biden-Harris administration, whether towards resolving the S-400 issue or cooperating in containing Russia, and a willingness to improve relations with the EU.

**165** *European Parliament Resolution of 24 November 2016 on EU-Turkey Relations*, European Parliament website, 25 November 2016, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2016-0450+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN> (accessed 19 March 2019), item 1 of the resolution.

**166** "PACE Reopens Monitoring Procedure in Respect of Turkey", Council of Europe website, 25 April 2017, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=6603&lang=2>.

**167** *European Parliament Resolution of 6 July 2017 on the 2016 Commission Report on Turkey*, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2017-0306+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN> (accessed 19 March 2019).

**168** *Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process: Council Conclusions*, website of the European Council, 26 June 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf> (accessed 19 March 2019), item 36 of the Conclusions.

**169** "Turkey Condemns European Parliament Committee Call to Suspend Accession", *Reuters*, 21 February 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-eu-idUSKCN1QA0MJ>.

**170** "Foreign Affairs Council", European Council, 14 October 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2019/10/14/>.

**171** "MEPs Call for Sanctions against Turkey over Military Operation in Syria", 24 October 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20191017IPR64569/meps-call-for-sanctions-against-turkey-over-military-operation-in-syria>.

**172** "EU-Turkey Relations in Light of the Syrian Conflict and Refugee Crisis", European Parliament Briefing, March 2020, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649327/EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)649327\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649327/EPRS_BRI(2020)649327_EN.pdf).

**173** "EU Threatens Turkey with Sanctions over Mediterranean Drilling", *Deutsche Welle*, 28 August 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-turkey-sanctions-mediterranean/a-54746538>.

As EU-Turkey relations continue to crumble due to the deterioration of rule of law in Turkey, on the one hand, and the mounting discomfort within the EU about Turkey's increasingly militaristic foreign policy, on the other hand, the governments of the member states are taking different positions vis-à-vis Turkey. Since the end of 2019, developments in Libya and in the Eastern Mediterranean have brought together France, Greece, Cyprus and Austria in their advocacy for a harsh and even military stance against Turkey. Italy, Spain and Germany, on the other hand, are seeking to avoid confrontation in order not to jeopardise economic relations with Turkey and cooperation over migration management.<sup>174</sup> As far as Turkey is concerned, modernisation of the Customs Union, continuation of EU financial support for refugees and visa-free travel for its citizens in the Schengen area seem to be the main demands.<sup>175</sup>

### Little Basis for Politics beyond Transactionalism

Moves by the Turkish government back towards democracy and rule of law are difficult to imagine in the coming years, still less reforms in the scope of the accession process. There are two great obstacles to efforts of this ilk. On the one hand, Erdoğan and his circle are deaf to European admonishments on liberalisation and rule of law, and refuse to grant the opposition greater leeway. On the other hand, the threat perception of the MHP and broad circles in the bureaucracy obstructs liberal reforms. In accord with the country's authoritarian state tradition — which the AKP in its early years heavily criticised and vowed to transform — the latter two actors automatically equate democratic liberties and political rights (and even just acknowledgement of cultural plurality) with undermining the foundations of the state. Moreover, the rivalry and latent tension between the two elements of the government camp (Erdoğan/AKP and MHP) suggest that the current deliberate strategy of

polarisation and invocation of one new foreign threat after the other will continue, and the strongly anti-Western tone in Turkish politics will consolidate.

Although more determined than ever to bring an end to the presidential system, the parliamentary opposition faces significant challenges. Even though the defeat of the AKP in the 2019 local election was an important boost for the opposition, a rapid and smooth transition to democracy is not easy at the very least because the existing power relations are there to stay for the coming years, certainly until the next elections in 2023. Another reason is the rapid deterioration of state institutions. Those are poor prospects for a European policy that makes deeper cooperation conditional on progress on democratisation — which is a stance that increasingly amounts to nothing more than rhetoric. The EU cannot force Turkey into reforms. Democratisation presupposes a favourable climate and relevant political currents. Both elements are currently weak.

Against this backdrop and given that the populations of important EU member states harbour critical attitudes towards Turkey, the EU and its member states have little short-term alternative in their dealings with Turkey than to use cooperation with Ankara to pursue shared economic and security interests. And, given that Europe can have little interest in an economically unstable Turkey, the economic relationship needs to be secured in the medium to long term and the country's ongoing access to the Single Market guaranteed. To this end, a modernised Customs Union might serve as a useful instrument.

The EU also needs to think fundamentally about whether and how Turkey's accession process should continue. Certainly, candidate status grants Europe legitimacy to demand that Ankara abide by particular standards of democracy and rule of law and to support Turkish civil society. And, as is repeatedly asserted, it secures Turkey's 'ties' to Europe. Yet, the faltering accession process has long become a dialogue of the deaf in which Ankara regularly rebuffs European expectations as interference in its internal affairs. As such the deadlock in the accession process generates anti-European sentiment in Turkey, while in Europe it upholds the illusion that Brussels could both block the process and at the same time use it to incentivise reforms. And even if Turkish accession is unlikely, this does not prevent the topic being exploited by populist movements, as seen in the campaign for the 2016 Brexit referendum. This continues to poison the Turkish-European relationship.

<sup>174</sup> Günter Seufert, "Prüfstein Türkei: Brüssels Umgang mit Ankara ist ein Realitätstest für die geopolitischen Ambitionen der EU", *Internationale Politik* 1 (2021): 32–34.

<sup>175</sup> Sinem Adar et al., *Customs Union: Old Instrument New Function in EU-Turkey Relations*, SWP Comment 48/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2020), [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2020C48\\_CustomsUnionEU\\_Turkey.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2020C48_CustomsUnionEU_Turkey.pdf).



Still, given the decreasing voter share of the ruling AKP/MHP and the increasingly visible cracks within their alliance, the EU should keep membership talks as a normative instrument for the long run — if and when Turkey begins to pursue democratic repair. In the meantime, the EU should also continue supporting civil society actors who are committed to improving rule of law, inclusive citizenship and democracy. Important in this regard is that Europe should voice stronger criticism of Ankara's repression of its citizens. While first and foremost a matter of principle, calling Ankara out is also in the EU's own interests. While European policy-makers have often enough prioritised stability over democracy in relations with authoritarian states, that logic is associated with two problems in the case of Turkey. For one thing, it is unclear whether an authoritarian but stable Turkey would cooperate harmoniously with the EU.

Even more importantly, the stability of authoritarianism in Turkey is uncertain for several reasons. First, Turkey's economic capacity depends heavily on popular consent, in particular because the country lacks the kind of natural resources that can be exploited through coercion. Second, the country's sociopolitical diversity makes it difficult for the AKP to thoroughly penetrate the civil sphere; future protests are highly likely. Finally, the personalisation of power and the tensions within the ruling alliance make the government vulnerable. While the EU certainly cannot force Turkey into democratic reforms, it can and should hold Turkey more accountable — especially at a time when Ankara is turning to the EU for economic support.

## Abbreviations

AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)
AP	Adalet Partisi (Justice Party)
BDDK	Bankacılık Düzenleme ve Denetleme Kurulu (Banking Regulation and Supervision Board)
CHP	Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party)
DDK	Devlet Denetleme Kurulu (State Supervisory Council)
DİB	Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Presidency of Religious Affairs)
EPDK	Enerji Piyasası Denetleme Kurulu (Energy Market Regulatory Authority)
HDP	Halkların Demokratik Partisi (Peoples' Democratic Party)
İYİP	İyi Parti (Good Party)
MÇ	Milliyetçi Cephe (Nationalist Front governments)
MGKGS	Milli Güvenlik Kurulu Genel Sekreterliği (Secretariat-General of the National Security Council)
MHP	Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party)
MIT	Milli İstihbarat Teskilatı (National Intelligence Organisation)
MKYK	Merkez Karar ve Yönetim Kurulu (Extended Central Executive Committee)
MSP	Milli Selamet Partisi (National Salvation Party)
PKK	Partiye Karkeren Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
RK	Rekabet Kurulu (Competition Authority)
RP	Refah Partisi (Welfare Party)
SBB	Strateji ve Bütçe Başkanlığı (Presidium for Strategy and Budget)
SP	Saadet Partisi (Felicity Party)
SPK	Sermaye Piyasa Kurulu (Capital Markets Board)
TCMB	Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Merkez Bankası (Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey)
TVF	Türkiye Varlık Fonu (Turkey Wealth Fund)

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