

The Republic of Turkey: A Case of Democratic Regression

Kristen Zicarelli

Christopher Newport University
Virginia Zeta Chapter

Vol. 6(1), 2021

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DOI: 10.21081/ax0286

ISSN: 2381-800X

Keywords: democracy, Turkey, government, freedom

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Author contact information is available from tlindblom@alphachihonor.org or kvosevich@alphachihonor.org

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Abstract

The Republic of Turkey's democratic regression represents an unsettling trend of shrinking freedom and greater civilian oppression. The past few years reflect current President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's consolidation of power and increasingly authoritarian policies. Previously hailed as a beacon for democracy in the Middle East, Turkey has presently drawn worldwide attention for alleged human rights abuses, a controlled press, penalties for state criticism and suppression of the Kurdish ethnic minority. Implications of the Turkish situation reach beyond their present politics. Freedom House (2020) reports worldwide democratic decline for fourteen consecutive years, signaling perhaps a more challenging future to improve the human condition. This essay examines the Turkish ascent to democracy and multifaceted factors indicating present democratic regression. In analyzing Turkey's present condition, this essay argues that the erosion of democratic norms in Turkey serves as a warning to countries such as the US that are experiencing extreme partisanship, an increasingly antagonistic environment for journalists and rising incidents of xenophobia.

Keywords: democracy, Turkey, government, freedom

Introduction

“All experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.”

US DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Reconciling individual rights with state authority often rests at the center of vast international conflict. The democratic model, which has risen and fallen in popularity over the decades, grants more power to the will of the people than nearly any other system. The transcontinental country of Turkey has seen a diverse political history, including Ottoman monarchy, Atatürk Westernization, multiple military coups and present regional strife surrounding the Kurdish ethnic minority. After significant liberal reforms in the first few years of the 21st century, the world began to look to Turkey as a beacon for democracy in the Middle East, turning over decades of instability and authoritarianism in favor of vesting state power in the people. Following prominent political scientist Dankwart Rustow’s dynamic model, Turkey’s ascent to democracy seemingly resolved vast political contention, even institutionalizing human rights protections and other liberal measures. However, scholars and witnesses point to tightening state control in the present Erdogan regime as a sign of rising authoritarianism that may have erased all progress made only years before. Current circumstances where Turkish civilians face retaliation for state criticism, the press is subject to state control, and allegations of human rights violations are escalating (halting negotiations for Turkey’s accession into the European Union) point to a case of democratic backsliding with an unclear end in sight.

Any case of democratic erosion worldwide carries important implications for all nations, offering particular lessons for weaknesses that may disintegrate to instability and authoritarianism. For more than 200 years, US democracy has prevailed in the face of diverse struggles, yet the Turkish situation highlights how present trends in the US of extreme partisanship, antagonism towards journalists and nationalism that descends into xenophobia may quickly reverse the direction of a democratic regime. These elements not only hint at the breakdown of toleration and forbearance, but also represent a dangerously eroding faith in the democratic system.

Ascent to Democracy

Like many countries transitioning from authoritarian rule, the Turkish ascent to democracy does not follow a linear pathway or harmonious reorganization of power. A series of political shifts, modernization and switches between civilian and military rule characterize the decades from the country’s independence in 1923 until the early 1980s when the civilian government ratified a republican Constitution explicitly granting sovereignty to the people. With a Bill of Rights promising freedom of expression, religion, and movement, Turkey began promising negotiations for membership in the European Union in the early 21st century. The democratization process entails a breakdown of the old authoritarian regime, installation of a new democratic regime and consolidation of the democratic regime. In evaluating Turkey’s latest democratization, the events and themes of the early 2000s most concisely illustrate their dynamic shift from authoritarianism.

Prior to the 21st century, some progressive reforms, free elections and secularism paved the way for later democratic rule. Characterized by scholars as an “enlightened authoritarian,” 1920-era President Mustafa Atatürk mandated secular rule, insisting on a division between state and religion even in the face of harsh criticism (Mango, 1999). In addition to the enfranchisement of women, he made them equal in legal matters of divorce, property ownership and child custody. In 1950, Turkey held its first free and fair elections, facilitating a smooth, bloodless transition from Atatürk’s Republican People’s party to the winning Democratic party (Selvin, 2016). However, the 1960 military coup led against the Democratic party, subsequent government purges, the 1971 coup by memorandum and the 1980 coup signaled that democracy was not a firmly established practice.

The 1980 Turkish coup d’état saw military takeover, imprisonment, torture and a provisional Constitution granting the military nearly unlimited power. General Kenan Evren proclaimed an end to factional violence at the cost of civil liberties and democratic political activity. The replacement Constitution of 1982 vested sovereignty in the “Turkish nation” and stated that the aim of the nation was “to safeguard the independence and integrity of the Turkish Nation, the indivisibility of the country, the Republic and democracy.” However, the document retained some restrictive measures on political activity and defined citizenship as “being

a Turk,” which many believe excludes the Kurdish minority (“Constitution of the Republic of Turkey 1982,” 2017). In 1983, the National Security Council, exercising military rule, was dissolved and Motherland Party leader Turgut Özal became the 26th Prime Minister (later President in 1989). Following the landslide victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, the state saw a new wave of democratic policies, including the consolidation of the military, restrictions on the judiciary from intervening in politics and more inclusive rules towards the Kurds. Voters supported AKP constitutional changes in referendums that strengthened women and children’s rights, granted greater freedoms for religious and Kurdish minorities and relaxed restrictive labor laws (Sloat & Kemal, 2019). The reforms further limited the military’s role in political affairs, abolished the death penalty, granted greater protection for ordinary citizens and encouraged the formation of democratic institutions. While these measures were tied to Turkey’s strides to join the European Union, waning citizen support for EU membership was not necessarily correlated with enthusiasm for more liberal policies. The 2003 European Commission report detailed that the Turkish government relaxed their position towards the Kurdish minority: “judicial procedures and administrative sanctions against petitioners for optional Kurdish language courses at university level have been dropped; various cultural festivals with the participation of Kurdish music groups have taken place and a wide range of religious books and cassettes in Kurdish have been provided by publishing companies.” Beginning in the early 2000s, these reforms were accompanied by significant economic growth and worldwide attention to Turkey as a model for democracy in the Middle East.

Turkey’s ascent to democracy follows the democratization process theorized in Rustow’s Dynamic Model. In detailing how countries become democratic, he insists on a background condition of national unity, explaining that “the vast majority of citizens in a democracy-to-be must have no doubt or mental reservations as to which political community they belong to” (Rustow, 1999). Using 1940s Turkey as a case study, Rustow (1999) describes how Atatürk’s rule initiated a “process of Turkization” that overcame the old Ottoman identity and preceded democratic elections in 1950. While such measures of unity must precede democratization, Rustow (1999) contends that the timing is ultimately irrelevant; therefore, the unity from the 1940s certainly may

act as a precursor to the preparatory phase in the early 1980s and 2000s.

Initiating the process of democratization is a “prolonged and inconclusive political struggle,” according to Rustow (1999). Turkey’s military coup of 1980 intensified conflicts between left- and right-wing factions, highlighting the frustrations of many citizens, who reportedly welcomed military rule as an end to rampant political strife. While the resulting Constitution gave power to civilians, it was not written by a legislative assembly; therefore, its weak legitimacy indicates unsettled disputes. Rustow (1999) clarifies that “the serious and prolonged nature of the struggle is likely to force the protagonists to rally around two banners... Hence polarization.” Turkish people were divided along several factions, namely on political lines, but also Islamists vs. secularists, civilian vs. military establishment and industrialization vs agricultural developers.

Rustow (1999) contends that the decision phase is “a deliberate decision on the part of political leaders to accept the existence of diversity in unity and, to that end, to institutionalize some crucial aspect of democratic procedure.” The AKP’s five reform packages in 2003 and referendums to ratify them represent a genuine choice to integrate democracy into society by deferring to the people’s choices. Even if leaders’ motivations also stemmed from the purpose of gaining EU membership, these newer liberal measures encouraged public participation in politics, putting more power in the hands of the people. Finally, the habituation phase comprises the learning process and acceptance of the new normal, which Rustow (1999) defines as the “inclusive compromise.” Even though present-day scholars and observers characterize the past few years after these reforms as democratic regression, the government did temporarily integrate measures such as enhanced freedom of expression, such as releasing prisoners “sentenced for the non-violent expression of opinion” (“2003 Regular Report on Turkey’s Progress towards Accession,” 2003). Additionally, the government established a parliamentary committee for human rights violations investigations in 2003, which actively inspected and reported on police stations throughout the country. While neighboring nations of Spain and Greece may have undergone more radical democratization processes, these social and political strides are significant for Turkey in turning over decades of instability and authoritarianism. As one scholar noted about the events of 2002, “it appeared like

Turkey was a ‘least likely’ case for democratic backsliding” (Whiting, 2016).

Democratic Regression in the Erdogan Regime

In the past decade, Turkey has drawn worldwide attention for both policies and events that signal a shift towards authoritarianism under current President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Elected in 2014, Erdogan became the first “executive President” after a 2017 referendum that shifted the presidency to a Head of State and Government, in contrast with its previous ceremonial title. Scholars and observers point to Erdogan’s consolidation of power by limiting freedoms and civil rights after an attempted coup in 2016, along with regime response to the 2013 Taksim Square Demonstrations and collapse of a ceasefire with the Kurdish minority. The 2020 Freedom House data classified Turkey as “not free” and measured its political and civil liberties as 16/40 and 16/60, respectively, with an overall total of 32/100. Since 2017, this particular statistic has declined six points, evidenced by a consolidation of Turkey’s authoritarian nature.

The Turkish state’s violent response to the peaceful 2013 Taksim Square Mass Demonstrations (also known as the Gezi Park protests) left thousands critically injured and many more journalists, doctors and lawyers jailed because of their jobs. Representing clear discouragement of civic engagement, along with abusive police action against protesters, the government passed several bills expanding their control over the internet. Additionally, they criminalized the banging of pots and pans and eventually denied a solidarity group’s demands, which included a statement reading “We want it known that we are diligently working towards a climate in our society where not a single person is physically hurt, where democratic demands can be expressed without tension” (Amnesty International, 2013). Accompanying harsh police response, the Turkish state’s censorship hid protests from media promotion; Amnesty International (2013) states that “CNN Türk’s decision to air a pre-scheduled two-hour documentary on penguins during the first weekend of mass protest across Turkey became a symbol in the eyes of many protestors and the wider public for self-censorship in the national media in general.” Public outrage intensified in the context of the initial protesters’ campaign to preserve a major green space in Istanbul that the government had plans to redevelop. Spokesperson for the Office of the High

Commissioner for Human Rights Cécile Pouilly called on Turkish authorities to stop the violence and ensure freedom of assembly (UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, 2013).

Three years after the Gezi Park protests, a faction within the Turkish Armed Forces (the suspected Islamist Gulen movement) attempted a bloody and violent coup against Erdogan’s government and institutions. With more than 200 civilians murdered and 2,000 wounded, ordinary citizens were key figures in the opposition to the coup, ensuring that the resistance did not overtake the Erdogan regime. One day following the attempted coup, Erdogan’s government declared a state of emergency “to be able to remove swiftly all the elements of the terrorist organization involved in the coup attempt” (Al Jazeera, 2017). In fulfilling this goal, the state arrested tens of thousands of people allegedly linked to the Gulen movement, shut down dozens of media outlets and initiated measures for state appointment of university rectors. They defended these measures as necessary to “root out all coup supporters from the state apparatus” (Al Jazeera, 2017). International media and country response to this suspension of rights and freedoms were not particularly effective in halting Erdogan’s suppression. Aside from indicating expansive state control, the government’s measures eroded independent institutions and eventually weakened the Turkish economy.

Scholars and observers point to the Turkish state’s exclusion of the Kurdish minority as a significant indicator of democratic regression. After decades of conflict dating to 1984, the 2013 Kurdish-Turkish peace negotiations failed two years later at the onset of armed conflict and between both forces. Although sources dispute the definite attack that ended the cease-fire, reports indicated that in July 2015, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) killed four Turkish policeman and Turkish forces bombed PKK targets alongside their attacks of Islamic State jihadists in Syria (“The Truce between Turkey and Kurdish Militants Is Over,” 2015). After the 2016 attempted coup and subsequent state of emergency, the Turkish were able to suppress pro-Kurdish media and journalists by alleging their links to the terrorism. In recent years, escalating tensions and violence have drawn attention from human rights groups, raising alarm over alleged torture and extrajudicial killings in the region. In the same year, Turkey dismissed the UN’s claim that they denied researchers in the pro-Kurdish South East region after growing sources reported over one hundred

people were burned to death in buildings overseen by security forces. While Erdogan seemed more pragmatic towards the Kurdish question in his previous role as Prime Minister, the actions of his presidency represent anti-Kurdish nationalism that is not consistent with democratic equality or widespread civil liberties.

Themes of Democratic Dismantling

The gradual yet severe process of democratic regression in Turkey indicates heightened consolidation of state control affecting nearly every sector of society. Harvard University Political Scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) model the democratic dismantling process in three distinct stages, initiated by rising tensions and retaliations between a “norm breaking leader” and the political establishment. Beginning with harsh and provocative words, a menacing atmosphere can be the impetus for suppression of free speech, attacks on journalists and the dangerous possibility of protests or a coup. Many media and scholarly outlets explain Turkey’s democratic backsliding in the context of Erdogan’s authoritarian attitudes and actions. While his election to the Presidency in 2014 may not have had an outwardly retaliating tone against an establishment or any opposition, his regime’s actions (particularly after the 2013 protests) have created an unfriendly atmosphere towards dissent. The attempted coup in 2016 represents disagreeing factions resorting to violent measures and the eroding acceptance for minority viewpoints. While the Turkish may not have built an atmosphere of mutual understanding and toleration comparable to established Western democracies, their liberal reforms were significant milestone representing an upward trajectory towards more institutionalized democracy before 2014.

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that the actualization of threatening rhetoric and provocative words further dismantles democracy. Violent measures or attempts to overcome opposition demonstrate lack of faith and belief in the democratic system, particularly when leaders seek to target and destroy their opponents. The 2016 attempted coup and Erdogan’s subsequent suppression represent lack of faith from both ‘sides’ in the democratic process and the promise of turnover. Rather than view their opposition as legitimate authority, the Turkish National Guard sought to eliminate them, implying greater incentive to work outside current “norms” than operate within the rules. Magnified by severe po-

larization, secularists and Islamists ultimately view each other’s ideology as incompatible and virtually abandon tolerance in an effort to win and enforce their principles. Ziblatt and Levitsky (2018) describe how unhealthy polarization does not typically sustain mutual tolerance: “when societies grow so deeply divided that parties become wedded to incompatible worldviews ... stable partisan rivalries eventually give way to perceptions of mutual threat.” Erdogan’s widespread arrests of Gulen associates and media censorship surpass principles such as mutual tolerance or institutional forbearance, multiplied by the threat towards his presidential office. Both the rhetoric and actualization underscore the devastating results from opposing factions viewing each other as long-term threats rather than short-term rivals.

The final stage, according to Ziblatt and Levitsky (2018), involves “changing the rules of the game.” For an authoritarian to consolidate his or her power, he or she may reform entire existing institutions, change the electoral system or reform the Constitution entirely. Turkey’s democratic dismantling has seen concrete legislation and executive mandates intended to bypass the rules, most notably after the attempted 2016 coup and actions against the Kurdish minority. The government’s widespread arrests were largely permissible due to an elastic definition of terrorism in their rule of law. In particular, a state measure outlawing the appointment of university rectors from within the institution itself transfers that power to President Erdogan. A tighter link between the state and information dissipation represents a significant shift that upends nearly all of societal norms, with potential to further magnify state authority as time passes.

At the start of a new decade, scholars and observers worldwide are noting the rise in authoritarianism in Erdogan’s presidency, Turkey’s economic decline and the virtual standstill in their EU membership negotiations. Erdogan has reportedly staffed his administration with more conservative, Islamist EU-skeptics, as countries such as Germany and Austria grow increasingly wary of the prospect of Turkish membership (Sloat & Kirişçi, 2019). In 2019, Erdogan threatened the EU in response to criticism of the state’s Kurdish offensive, saying, “Hey EU, wake up. I say it again: if you try to frame our operation there as an invasion, our task is simple: we will open the doors and send 3.6 million migrants to you” (Oliphant, 2019). Accompanying such harsh rhetoric is a pervading atmosphere of intolerant nationalism, victimizing the EU and Kurdish minority in particular.

As authoritarianism rises in Turkey, the rest of the world seems largely skeptical of a turnaround in the near future.

Lessons for the US

During the hearings of the 1787 US Constitutional Convention, a woman asked Ben Franklin “what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?” He answered, “A republic, if you can keep it.” Since the inception of the US presidency itself, Americans have demonstrated a relatively skilled balancing act that has kept government, powerful factions and demagogues from overtaking the republic and destroying the democratic process. After the US has spent nearly 250 years as a democratic republic, present-day lessons from countries experiencing such a decline should guide US citizens and policymakers alike towards solutions that uphold democratic process above all else.

The erosion of democracy in Turkey underscores the importance of maintaining a free press to operate as the watchdog of all government administration. Tension between government leadership and media is not necessarily unhealthy when each institution respects each other and accountability to one another does not become threatening; however, recent years have seen a shift for the press. A 2019 index report by Reporters without Borders downgraded the US as a “problematic” rather than “satisfactory” place for journalists, citing isolated physical attacks on journalists and the 2018 Capital Gazette mass shooting. The report indicates a worsening atmosphere for journalists under both the Obama administration’s aggressive use of the Espionage Act to indict whistleblowers and the Trump administration’s accusations of ‘fake news’ and declarations that normalize assault against journalists online and in-person (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). While the situation in the US does not approach the vast state-sponsored Turkish press, it is important to note that a free press has potential to erode if tensions worsen and agendas are prioritized over forbearance and respect.

In a similar manner, the Turkish situation highlights the danger in escalating antagonism between rival factions in politics and society. In the US, the 2018-2019 prolonged government shutdown, presidential impeachment efforts and passing of substantially less legislation in recent years magnifies the perception that opposing parties are finding less common ground. Ziblatt and

Levitsky (2018) explain that “when socioeconomic, racial, or religious differences give rise to extreme partisanship, in which societies sort themselves into political camps whose worldviews are not just different but mutually exclusive, toleration becomes harder to sustain.” In the dawn of the Civil War, the Charles Sumner incident of violence on the Senate floor is a powerful reminder that intolerance in US politics once escalated to physical harm, rising to permeate even places and people that seem most dignified. Uncompromising stances from politicians and citizens on nearly every issue represent extreme partisanship *and* eroding faith in the democratic system. Without increasing incentives to compromise and genuine efforts from both parties to find common ground, the “reasoned discourse” may certainly give way to divisions and disunity in a path towards democratic dismantling. Ultimately, deterring polarization calls for greater commitment to finding common ground and re-focusing political agendas in the name of one’s constituents rather than external interests.

The Erdogan regime’s suppression of the Kurdish minority and disparaging rhetoric towards the EU illustrates how nationalism may descend into intolerance and xenophobia. Nationality is an often-inerasable part of one’s identity that has empowered people to accomplish great measures out of pride for their country. However, the exclusive nationalism of the Erdogan regime demonstrates how intolerant sentiments give way to evil and tragic actions against others. The phenomenon in Turkey, combined with monumental historical examples of democratic regression at the hands of xenophobic dictators calls for the need of fundamentally inclusive nationalism that celebrates one’s principles rather than superiority over others.

Looking Ahead

In 2020, Freedom House reported grim data: 2019 marked the 14th consecutive year of declining global freedom. With significant declines in China and a substantial drop of democratic ratings in India, the report highlights state human rights violations and discrimination of minorities as evidence of increasing authoritarian rule. The report states that “more than half of the countries that were rated free or not free in 2009 have suffered a net decline in the past decade” (Freedom House, 2020). Yet despite the numbers, research also shows that citizen protests and change movements

are not waning. People worldwide desire democracy and are taking steps to overcome their struggles for freedom and peace. While they need more institutional and regional support, a spirit of self-governance and engagement (essentially, that the people themselves “will” their democracy) may be the driving force against attempted democratic regression and authoritarian threats. Few statements other than the following clause in US Declaration of Independence illustrate the obstacle to overcoming a tolerable, yet despotic status quo: “all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.” More importantly, these words illustrate that perhaps the most significant barrier in overcoming authoritarianism and maintaining democracy lies within ourselves. Empowerment of the ordinary citizen has been unfortunately absent in long periods of world advancement, yet the promise of genuine self-governance and civic engagement may be the root of our most inspirational stories and accomplishments in history.

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