

Electoral Integrity in Turkey: From Tutelary Democracy to Competitive Authoritarianism

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Introduction

Turkey's democracy has always been imperfect. But since 1950 elections have been for the most part free and fair. The system of military tutelage that was institutionalized after the 1960 coup was primarily designed to limit the impact of elections and the influence of elected governments, rather than manipulating the electoral process or predetermining outcomes. The ten per cent threshold introduced after the 1980 coup was one of the few direct tutelary interventions into the electoral system and it was intended to concentrate politics in the central mainstream. As the tutelary actors did not participate in elections, they did not risk being voted out.

Military tutelage came to an end during the 2000s but, despite initial hopes and expectations, this did not lead to democratic consolidation in Turkey. A failed attempt at democratization gave way to a competitive authoritarian regime under a personality-driven one-party rule. By 2011, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) had established itself as the dominant party in Turkish politics. Its efforts to consolidate control over the state and transform Turkey's society intensified socio-political polarization and pushed the regime towards an illiberal path. But unlike the military guardians, the AKP's political hegemony still depended on continuous election victories.

The transformation from a tutelary democracy to a competitive authoritarian regime, via failed democratization, has had a transformative impact on Turkey's electoral institutions. This chapter surveys this transformation by examining the function and integrity of elections under Turkey's tutelary democracy, during its brief "liberal moment" in the 2000s and under the AKP's political hegemony in the 2010s. It also focuses on the repeat elections of 2015 to illustrate how a dominant party operating in an insecure political environment can respond when faced with an election loss.

Elections and Democracy under Military Tutelage

Established as a parliamentary republic, Turkey officially became a multiparty democracy in 1946 and held its first competitive general election in 1950. That election brought to an end the 23-year single-party rule of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP). The victory of the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP) signalled a power shift within the young republic's ruling elite from statist military officers and bureaucrats that for over two decades had dominated the CHP, and therefore the country's socio-political life, towards a coalition of economically liberal and socially conservative landowners and entrepreneurs. The 1950 election set two important precedents. The first of these was the acceptance of defeat by the CHP and the smooth transition of power between two political parties, which created democratic path dependence. Ever since that first competitive vote, Turkey's citizens have regularly expressed their will at the ballot box, rewarding or punishing political parties in largely free and fair elections. Despite Turkey's various other democratic deficits, the public on the whole came to trust the voting process and both victors and losers respected the outcomes.

The second precedent was that the 1950 vote set the stage for successive election victories in 1954 and 1957 that would cement the DP's position as the dominant actor in Turkey's

politics until it was toppled in a military coup in 1960. The DP became the first in a series of popular ‘centre-right’ parties to achieve spectacular electoral success in Turkish politics in the decades to come. Following on the DP’s political tradition and embracing its legacy, the Justice Party of Süleyman Demirel between 1965 and 1971, the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) of Turgut Özal between 1983 and 1991, and the AKP of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after 2002 all succeeded in forming single-party governments carrying significant majorities. In contrast, the diverse actors on the “left” of the political divide failed to produce similar electoral outcomes. To date, no self-defined left party in Turkey has been able to form a single-party government on the basis of a simple parliamentary majority.¹

As the economically liberal, socially conservative centre-right platform repeatedly proved to be the most fertile ground in Turkey’s popular politics, parties and politicians occupying this space emerged as outspoken champions of the sanctity of the ballot box. In practice, however, the centre-right’s emphasis on elections as the sole source of democratic legitimacy often revealed a majoritarian and procedural understanding of democracy. From the DP to the AKP, popular parties of this platform have consistently pushed to strengthen the executive branch at the expense of the legislature and the judiciary (as well as non-democratic tutelary actors) and frequently justified non-deliberative approaches to policymaking by invoking the “national will” as manifested through elections.²

Belge notes that among the statist officers and bureaucrats who saw their fortunes decline under the DP government, there was a strong belief that the transition to multiparty politics was a mistake that would sabotage the modernizing project launched under the republic’s charismatic founder, Kemal Atatürk, by giving power to the people prematurely.³ The CHP’s inability to stem the DP’s rising popularity, the DP’s gradual relaxation of the strict secular rules imposed previously by the CHP, and the government’s increasingly heavy-handed intolerance of dissent, criticism and opposition particularly after the 1957 election reinforced

these suspicions and led a group of left-leaning junior officers to stage the republic's first military coup on 27 May 1960.

The 1960 coup was the first in a series of interventions over the next four decades that steadily assembled a system of indirect military-bureaucratic tutelage over electoral politics. Unlike most of its politicized counterparts in southern Europe, Latin America or Southeast Asia, the Turkish military proved reluctant to rule directly over long periods. While it eventually returned power to civilians after every intervention and allowed for competitive elections, it did so only after legal and institutional adjustments that deepened and expanded the remit of its self-appointed role as the guardian of the republic. Hence, even when it returned to barracks, the military retained significant – but never complete – influence over civilian politics. The resultant system was a hybrid regime; a tutelary democracy where real and meaningful popular contestation of power took place under the vigilant gaze of the guardians.⁴

Electoral Integrity in Tutelary Democracy

In the Turkish tutelary democracy, the guardians on the whole allowed the electoral process to take its own course, without manipulating the vote or tempering outcomes.⁵ The military maintained no exclusive institutional link to any single political party (including the CHP, which was outlawed for over a decade after the 1980 coup) but rather sought to cultivate a 'cooperative' relationship with all elected governments. Needless to say, this was an unequal relationship that favoured the guardians over elected politicians. Even in those rare instances when senior generals openly expressed a preference for a party ahead of elections – such as junta leader Kenan Evren's support for the short-lived Nationalist Democracy Party, which was headed by a retired general, in the first competitive general election after the 1980 coup – they did not campaign or attempt to fabricate a victory on their behalf. On the contrary, military statements of party preference often backfired as the electorate routinely voted against the

generals' wishes and brought to power those leaders and parties least favoured by the guardians. When faced with undesirable election results, the generals did not contest, annul or attempt to overturn the outcomes.⁶ Elections thus served as an effective popular counterbalance to the tutelage of the military-bureaucratic elite.

In any case, the guardians did not need to manipulate elections as they did not participate in them and run the risk of being voted out. In fact, they had an interest in the maintenance of electoral integrity. Reasonably free and fair elections constituted a central pillar of the Turkish hybrid system, serving a legitimizing function not only for elected governments but also the tutelary actors, which typically justified their interventions as unfortunate but necessary acts to preserve and “restore democracy”, in the wake of abuses by self-serving, unpatriotic and inept politicians.⁷ These justifications were not only meant for domestic consumption, but also addressed at Turkey's strategic allies in NATO, which supported the military's guardianship role during the Cold War as a bulwark against Soviet expansionism.⁸

The tutelary system was not designed to tamper with or predetermine the outcome of elections, but rather to limit their impact on politics and society by making sure that elected governments acted within the boundaries established by the guardians. The hybrid institutional structure separated the affairs of the state (*devlet*) from the affairs of government (*hükümet*). The latter indicated the realm of everyday socio-economic policy that could be entrusted to elected politicians and debated publicly. Matters pertaining to the country's national security, geopolitical orientation or core constitutional characteristics fell within state affairs, in which the tutelary actors had the first and the final word.⁹

The key institutional mechanisms through which the guardians maintained this hierarchy of power included the National Security Council (NSC), in which the military top brass could present governments with warnings and ultimatums disguised as “recommendations”,¹⁰ the Presidency, which the 1982 Constitution equipped with veto powers over the legislature,¹¹ and

the Constitutional Court, which had the power to dissolve political parties and ban or imprison politicians on grounds of acting against the constitution.¹² Additionally, in the post-Cold War neo-liberal environment of the 1990s, which rendered direct coups more costly in terms of macroeconomic stability and therefore less politically expedient, the military increasingly turned to nurturing close ties with private media and civil society organizations to manufacture public consent. Instead of a direct military takeover, the so-called ‘post-modern coup’ of February 1997 featured all of the mechanisms above to oust the Islamist-led coalition government of the time. An intense media and civil society campaign against the government was waged, followed by a presidential warning and an NSC ultimatum, and finally a decision by the Constitutional Court to ban the Islamist Welfare Party.

If the guardians were on the whole uninterested in intervening directly in the voting process, they did not shy away from re-engineering the election system after military interventions. Two examples stand out in particular. The first was the replacement of the winner-takes-all voting system used in the 1950s with the D’Hont method of proportional allocation of parliamentary seats after the 1960 coup.¹³ While the former system awarded the first party (in this case the DP) with a considerably higher number of deputies compared to its overall share of the vote, the D’Hont method tended to favour coalitions over single-party governments.¹⁴ The second was the introduction of a ten per cent national threshold for a party to win seats in the parliament following the 1980 coup. The common justification for setting such a high bar was that it would stabilize parliamentary democracy by preventing party fragmentation. Proportional representation without a national threshold had allowed for a significant pluralization of party politics in the 1960s and the 1970s, enabling smaller parties to gain parliamentary representation and act as kingmakers in volatile coalition governments.

The threshold was intended to weed out “fringe” parties – namely socialist, far-right nationalist, Islamist and, from the 1990s onwards, regional nationalist (i.e. ethnic Kurdish)

parties that the guardians perceived as threats to the regime and sources of instability – and limit government to more “cooperative” mainstream parties. Although junta leader Evren’s expressed desire to transform Turkish politics into a two-party system in the US mould did not come to be, with the party spectrum once again fragmenting and leading the way to coalition governments in the 1990s, the threshold has remained a mainstay of Turkish politics.¹⁵

The End of Military Tutelage and Failed Democratization

The tutelary system that was established gradually after 1960 came undone in the 2000s and the early 2010s. Initially this process took place in the framework of Turkey’s accession process to the European Union and the political and economic harmonization packages it entailed. Starting in the late 1990s, there was consistently high public support in Turkey for EU membership, seen as an escape from the cycle of chronic economic crises, political instability and military coups. The “liberal democratization” project was supported by successive governments, the business community and an increasingly vocal liberal intelligentsia at home, as well as both the EU and the US abroad. Coming to power in a snap election on the heels of a financial crisis that discredited all the major parties of the 1990s, the newly founded Justice and Development Party took on the mantle of change after November 2002.

This process ushered in a “liberal moment”, wherein Turkey looked like an increasingly viable candidate for EU membership, with a fast-growing economy, vibrant civil society and a democratically-elected “moderately Islamist” government that seemed capable of steering a process of liberal reform without picking a self-destructive fight with the secular establishment. Many of the key institutional prerogatives of the military – such as its influence over policy making through the NSC and legal impunity of officers – were rolled back in this process. But the “liberal moment” turned out to be brief and its promise fleeting. The lack of appetite already

visible in the EU countries towards Turkish accession in the mid-2000s turned into hostile opposition as socio-economic crisis engulfed Europe after 2008. In tandem with the loss of the EU as the main external engine of Turkey's democratization and the end of the global liquidity boom that had enabled the country's impressive growth, political contestation took a divisive zero-sum turn, played out as a vicious struggle for survival between the elected government and the tutelary actors.

That power struggle defined the second term of the AKP government (2007–2011), featuring a military ultimatum and a Constitutional Court attempt to block the election of the government's presidential nominee, then foreign minister Abdullah Gül in 2007, the subsequent revelation of two aborted high-level coup plans back in the early 2000s, and a failed case in the Constitutional Court to outlaw the AKP in 2008. In response, the AKP government initiated far-reaching reforms aimed at breaking the hegemony of tutelary actors in the judiciary, including a constitutional referendum in 2010 and two major investigations into coup allegations launched in 2008 and 2010. Carried out through the government's associates in the police force and the judiciary, linked to the Hizmet movement of US-based Sunni cleric Fethullah Gülen,¹⁶ these highly politicized trials saw the arrest and imprisonment of hundreds of acting and retired officers, including, for the first time, a former chief of staff alongside journalists, academics and civil society activists with close ties to the guardians or outspoken opposition to the ruling party.

Coinciding with these trials was the referendum of 12 September 2010, which proposed a wide range of amendments to the junta-crafted constitution of 1982 on issues such as freedom of expression, protection of individual privacy and labour rights in line with the EU requirements. The reform package provoked controversy mainly over its proposals to restructure the civilian judiciary. The proposed amendments were intended to break the tutelary control over the judiciary by granting greater authority to the president and the parliament in

the appointment of judges and prosecutors. This, some critics argued, risked undermining the democratic separation of powers in a non-democratic setting, merely replacing one set of politicized judges and prosecutors with another and enabling single-party governments to pack the courts with their own supporters.¹⁷ Scheduling the referendum on the 30th anniversary of the 1980 coup, the government framed it as a vote between the authoritarian “old Turkey” and the democratic “new Turkey”. The package was approved with 58 per cent of the electorate voting in favour on the day.

Although the AKP had largely established itself as the dominant party in Turkey by 2011, the power struggle that enabled this feat had a detrimental impact on Turkey’s unconsolidated democratic transition, gradually relegating civil liberties and the rule of law to calculations of political hegemony and revanchism.¹⁸ This trend intensified after 2011, as the ruling party set out to tighten its grip over state institutions, while embarking on a project to transform Turkey’s society in the image of its charismatic leader, Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who declared his determination to “raise a religious youth”.¹⁹

Advocating a conservative Sunni morality on one side, and thereby increasingly alienating non-Sunni or non-religious citizens, the government pressed on with a construction-based neo-liberal growth agenda on the other.²⁰ Relying on its parliamentary majority, the AKP decision makers routinely ignored objections to their policies and passed legislation without engaging in a meaningful dialogue with the opposition parties or civil society organizations. Controversial privatization deals and environmentally-damaging mega construction and energy projects were tendered to a small group of contractors close to the ruling circle often despite the opposition of local stakeholders and at times in violation of court rulings.²¹

In the growing absence of a space for public deliberation that could serve as an outlet for critical views, anti-government protests (and heavy-handed police responses), became the norm. The most prominent and internationally visible of these were the nationwide

demonstrations triggered after the police attempted to violently disperse a small group of environmental activists protesting the privatization of a public green space at the centre of Istanbul's Taksim Square in June 2013. Spreading across many of Turkey's urban centres, the Gezi Park demonstrations soon turned into a general outpouring of anger at the government's neo-liberal economic and neo-conservative social agenda. Framing the events as a coup attempt against his government, Prime Minister Erdoğan took a tough stance against the protestors, calling them "looters and marauders" while praising the security forces, which human rights groups condemned for using disproportionate force on unarmed demonstrators, for their "epic service to the nation".²² With Gezi, Turkey's simmering socio-political polarization burst to the surface. Far from mending the divide, the violent suppression of the demonstrations deepened this polarization and the growing crisis within a substantial portion of society that felt increasingly disenfranchised and marginalized by the ruling party. At the same time, it further pushed the government along the path of establishing a police state in order to safeguard its interests.

Contributing to this deepening polarization and sense of crisis was the rapid personalization of power within the ruling party by Erdoğan, who handpicked AKP candidates for parliament for the 2011 election and announced his plan to replace Turkey's parliamentary system with a presidential one. Declaring the institutional separation of powers as the "main obstacle" to political expediency, Erdoğan and his advisors appealed for a "super presidency" equipped with the power to dissolve the parliament, govern through executive decrees and appoint senior judges and bureaucrats without parliamentary approval.²³ Surrounded by loyalists who called him "the Great Master" (*Büyük Usta*) and owed their political status to the leader, a personality cult started to form around Erdoğan that alienated him from his former allies.

In particular, the very public falling out at the end of 2013 between two erstwhile Islamist allies, Erdoğan and Fethullah Gülen, triggered another no-holds-barred battle for survival at the top of the state hierarchy, featuring high-level corruption allegations and indictments, led by Gülen-affiliated police officers and prosecutors, against then Prime Minister Erdoğan's family and key AKP figures, to which the government responded with the purge of suspected Gülenists from the police force and the judiciary to enhance the executive's control over them,²⁴ as well as a crackdown on businesses and media associated with Gülen's Hizmet movement.²⁵ The scope and intensity of these arrests and crackdowns grew spectacularly after the failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016, blamed by the government on Gülen-affiliated military officers, in which fighter planes attacked the parliament, more than 300 people were killed and President Erdoğan himself narrowly escaped capture or worse.

These developments took place against the backdrop of a volatile geopolitical environment that turned steadily against the AKP's regional interests. Initially praised as a potential model for the Middle East after the Arab Spring, the ruling party's ambition to become the order-setting agent in a region where popular Sunni movements came to replace secular dictatorships ground to a halt with the rising sectarian war in Syria and the military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013. The Turkish government's active participation on behalf of various Sunni actors in these countries in turn exacerbated ethnic and sectarian rifts within Turkey and strained its ties with its Western partners. By mid-2015, the Syrian war had crept up inside Turkey with a massive refugee influx, frequent terror attacks in urban centres and a return to intense violence following the collapse of a two-and-a-half-year peace process with the PKK, a Kurdish militant group.²⁶

Admitting no responsibility and publicly blaming both the regional turn of events and the domestic setbacks on a sinister plot designed by a "higher intelligence" to stop Turkey's spectacular rise under Erdoğan's leadership,²⁷ the ruling party abandoned much of what was

left of its commitment to the rule of law and civil liberties. After a 13-year hiatus the Kurdish provinces were once again put under a state of exception in 2015, effectively suspending parts of the constitution and democratic rights of the citizens.²⁸ Following the coup attempt in 2016, these measures were imposed nationwide, without a clear end in sight.

Electoral Integrity under the AKP's Competitive Authoritarianism

A growing number of scholars and observers have noted Turkey's authoritarian slide since 2011, with some arguing that the country under President Erdoğan could no longer be categorized as a democracy, but rather as a rising competitive authoritarianism.²⁹ Levitsky and Way define as competitive authoritarian those regimes where "although elections are regularly held and are generally free of massive fraud, incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate electoral results."³⁰ Brownlee observed that the "example of Turkey under premier-then-president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan presents a potentially theory-busting specimen of a highly developed democracy going authoritarian."³¹ Freedom House declared in April 2016 that Turkey's democracy was at a "breaking point". Against this backdrop, the coup attempt of July 2016 and the subsequent mass purges and arrests of a diverse range of dissidents under the state of exception measures were the straw that broke the camel's back.³²

Bermeo argues that Turkey under Erdoğan serves as "an illustrative example" of democratic backsliding "legitimized through the very institutions that democracy promoters have prioritized," namely, an elected executive that systematically weakens democratic checks balances and engages in long-term strategic manipulation of the electoral process.³³ Indeed, elections have been integral to both the process of undoing military tutelage and the construction of an illiberal system based on a personality-driven populist one-party rule. In turn, this shift from tutelary democracy to competitive authoritarianism, via a failed attempt at

democratization, has had a transformative effect on the function and integrity of elections in Turkey.

Unlike the guardians, the AKP's political hegemony depends on its ability to continually win elections and rule without sharing power. In Erdoğan's popular discourse, the ballot box serves as the source of the "national will" (*milli irade*). Winning elections is deemed the necessary – and, crucially, the *sufficient* – condition to embody this will and speak and act on behalf of the nation, which is exclusively made up of those who support the winning party. In this formulation, the will of the millions who vote for other parties is effectively discounted and the wide range of opposition groups can be labelled as "enemies of the nation's will" or simply "anti-national".³⁴ If this logic appeared benign, or even "democratizing", when argued from a position of weakness against the interventions of powerful tutelary actors in the 2000s, in a post-tutelary democratic setting, it became the blueprint for establishing a new type of authoritarianism.

Taking place during moments of heightened tension with the military guardians, the referendum of 2010 and the general election victories in 2007 and 2011 served to bolster the AKP's position vis-à-vis their tutelary opponents. In particular, the early election in April 2007 served not only as a verdict on the AKP's first term in government, but also as a plebiscite on the presidential crisis. Securing a larger than expected victory, the AKP re-nominated as its candidate Abdullah Gül, who was subsequently elected by the newly-formed parliament against the guardians' wishes and earlier interventions. An official election monitoring team from the OSCE praised the vote as "a notable achievement against a background of political tensions," demonstrating "the resilience of the election process in Turkey, characterized by pluralism and a high level of public confidence."³⁵

Coming on the heels of the so-called "coup trials", the party's third successive election victory in 2011 solidified the elected officials' triumph over the appointed guardians. Yet the

zero-sum nature of that power struggle had already started taking a toll on the long-term integrity of elections, in particular with the government assuming an increasingly intolerant stance toward dissenting views represented in the media. While noting the diverse and lively media landscape in Turkey, the OSCE raised concerns over the “high number of arrested and convicted journalists, and the alleged control by the government over some influential media.”³⁶ In October 2012, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that at least 61 journalists were jailed “in direct reprisal for their journalism”. At the end of 2013, the same organization declared Turkey the “world’s worst jailer of journalists for second year in a row.”³⁷

The picture deteriorated markedly during subsequent election periods, as both Erdoğan’s pursuit of political hegemony and the opposition to it took a more intense and irreconcilable turn. Interpreting both the Gezi protests and the corruption investigations of 2013 as a coup attempt against his government, in a similar vein as the Egyptian coup of the same year, Erdoğan apparently decided to leave nothing to chance.³⁸ For instance, despite being the clear favourite in the race for the presidency in 2014, the prime minister benefited substantially and unfairly from the administrative resources of his office and the lack of an institutional framework to provide transparency and accountability in campaign financing.³⁹ In the two-week period before the municipal elections of March 2014, the state broadcaster TRT devoted 89 per cent of its airtime to the governing party.⁴⁰ TRT’s tone and coverage remained steeply biased in favour of Erdoğan and the AKP in the run-up to the 2014 presidential poll and the two general elections of 2015 as well.

Repeat Elections of 2015: The “Fig-Leaf” of Authoritarianism

The June 2015 general election constituted a critical moment not only for the AKP, which faced diminishing popular support in its first campaign without Erdoğan at the head of the party, but

also for Turkey's democracy. In a largely unexpected move, the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) took the decision to participate in the election as a party, rather than having its members run as independent candidates in order to circumvent the ten per cent threshold, which remained in place under successive AKP governments. Having previously challenged Erdoğan in the presidential vote, the HDP's charismatic co-chairman Selahattin Demirtaş emerged during this process as a popular figure who was able to combine a message of pluralistic and inclusive democracy and minority rights, with an effective criticism of Erdoğan's single-minded pursuit of power. This was a message that appealed to a wider electorate beyond the Kurdish movement's traditional base. If the HDP managed to pass the threshold and enter the parliament, they could deny the AKP the majority to form a single-party government. If they failed, the AKP could conceivably reach the super-majority necessary to change the constitution and introduce the super-presidentialism Erdoğan had been advocating.

With much at stake, the AKP launched an intensive campaign that targeted the HDP with an aggressive religious-nationalistic rhetoric that would pass as hate speech in a liberal democracy.⁴¹ In breach of his constitutional obligation to act impartiality, President Erdoğan personally joined the campaign in favour of the AKP.⁴² The electoral playing field was not only tilted against opposition parties in terms of campaign finance and media bias, but also physical security. During the campaign period, the HDP offices and members became frequent targets of physical attacks and intimidation by nationalist mobs. Many of these attacks went unpunished, bolstering the sense among the opposition that critics of the ruling party could be targeted with relative impunity.⁴³ Reflective of these trends, and of Turkey's deepening social polarization, a nationwide pre-election survey found that public trust in the electoral process had been deteriorating: only 48 per cent of the respondents thought the elections would be conducted fairly (comparable to the trust in elections in Russia), down from 70% in 2007 (on

par with the United States).⁴⁴ The lack of trust in electoral institutions and the growing fear of fraud among opponents of the AKP led to the rise of popular civic initiatives to monitor the voting process and the vote count on election day.⁴⁵

Although the AKP emerged from the June election as the first party, its share of the vote dropped by nearly ten percent from 2011 and the party lost its parliamentary majority for the first time since 2002. Surpassing most predictions, the HDP received 13 per cent and won a record 80 seats in the parliament. The result had two immediate implications. In the first place, it was a major setback for the AKP government and Erdoğan's presidential ambitions. Secondly, it ushered in a new and uncertain era, in which Turkey would once again be governed by coalitions. The fact that the AKP could lose power in an election where no significant manipulation had been detected on polling day initially appeared as a hopeful sign for procedural democracy's persistence in Turkey. But the five-month period that followed the June election proved such assessments false and suggested that elections in Turkey under the AKP had become a "fig leaf" masking an authoritarian one-party regime.⁴⁶

From the outset, President Erdoğan made no secret of his desire to renew elections instead of settling for a coalition government. When the AKP declared after a 60-day period that it had failed to form the government, instead of giving the task to the leader of the second largest party (in this case, the CHP) as is customary, the president called for fresh elections in November. In the meanwhile, intense fighting resumed between security forces and the PKK, turning Kurdish-dominated urban areas into battle zones reminiscent of neighbouring Syria. At a time when suicide bombings killed hundreds of pro-HDP supporters in Suruç and Ankara, the president, together with a cohort of shadowy ultra-nationalist supporters and the pro-government media, stepped up the campaign to marginalize the HDP, label its supporters as

“terrorists” and “traitors” and systematically silence and intimidate critical media and journalists.⁴⁷

Taking place in a “climate of violence and fear,”⁴⁸ the November re-election brought the AKP back to power as a single-party government and allowed the president to press on with his ambitions.⁴⁹ In a Machiavellian turn of events, the president was able to manipulate conditions of conflict and crisis and then present the AKP as the only solution to these ills, making good of Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan’s statement on the day after the June election that “the process ahead will make everyone better understand that the AKP is the only guarantor of security and stability” in Turkey.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Turkey’s transition from tutelary democracy to competitive authoritarianism has had a direct and detrimental impact on the function and integrity of its elections. Whereas elections served as the democratic counterbalance to the non-democratic guardianship of the military in the Turkish hybrid regime, in the post-tutelary setting they have become the building block of a one-party dominant system. Under the AKP, the majoritarian view that elections give the winners the right to impose their will on society at large with little regard for the concerns and interests of losers, has proven to be a recipe for socio-political conflict and polarization. Yet Turkey could still qualify as a procedurally democratic country, had Erdoğan and the AKP chose to abide by this principle even when elections turned out against their interest.

The critical lesson of the repeat elections of 2015 was that, when faced with an unfavourable election result, the Turkish president effectively chose to ignore and suppress the democratic “will of the nation”, which he had regularly invoked after every election victory of the AKP since 2002. He did not do this overtly, such as by tempering the vote count or cancelling the outcome, but rather through strategic electoral manipulation, which Bermeo has

identified as a common feature amongst countries experiencing democratic backsliding. “Strategic manipulation,” she notes, “differs from blatant election-day vote fraud in that it typically occurs long before polling day and rarely involves obvious violations of the law. It is ‘strategic’ in that international (and often domestic) observers are less likely to ‘catch or criticize’ it.”⁵¹

The repeat elections of 2015 portend a dangerous new era in Turkey’s multiparty politics, where elected officials can refuse to share or give up power through the ballot box, thereby violating the most basic requirement of procedural democracy.⁵² When key oppositional actors or large sections of a society think that those in power have ceased to play by the basic rules of democracy, the chances of non-democratic interventions into politics also increase. That possibility, in turn, intensifies the siege mentality of the rulers, creating conditions for a self-fulfilling prophecy and give new life to the vicious cycle between illiberal populism and tutelary elitism that has held Turkey’s politics captive for over seven decades. A manifestation of this self-fulfilling prophecy, the bloody coup attempt of July 2016 and its heavy-handed aftermath confirm that Turkey has yet to break free from this captivity.

¹ An ever-contested term, “the left” in mainstream Turkish politics has broadly indicated a movement advocating state interventionism to transform society and economy, typically in line with the project of secular nationalization launched under Atatürk and often without an overt reference to Marxism or class struggle. After a decade in opposition, the CHP attempted to remodel itself as a left-of-centre party during the 1960s and the 1970s. Yet even at the height of its popularity as a democratic mass party under the reformist leadership of Bülent Ecevit in the 1970s it was unable to establish the kind of electoral hegemony achieved by the DP, ANAP or the AKP, and had to contend with governing through coalitions with the right.

² For a critical study of democracy under the DP, see Güliz Sütçü, “Playing the Game of Democracy Through the Electoral Mechanism: The Democratic Party Experience in Turkey”, *Turkish Studies*, 12:3 (2011), pp. 341-356.

³ Murat Belge, *Militarist Modernleşme: Almanya, Japonya ve Türkiye* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2011), pp. 617-618.

⁴ Karabekir Akkoyunlu, “The Rise and Fall of the Hybrid Regime: Guardianship and Democracy in Iran and Turkey”, PhD Thesis, London School of Economics (July 2014).

⁵ For a detailed discussion on defining electoral integrity, see Pippa Norris “Does the world agree about standards of electoral integrity? Evidence for the diffusion of global norms”, *Electoral Studies*, 32 (2013), pp. 576 – 588.

⁶ In the 1983 election, the MDP came a distant third to Turgut Özal’s ANAP. The election victories of the AKP in 2002 and 2007 can also be seen as a snub against the military, which had overthrown the AKP’s Islamist predecessor in the so-called “post-modern coup” of February 1997 and published a memorandum against it in 2007.

⁷ “Turkey’s Military Leader Vows to Restore Democracy”, *New York Times*, 6 January 1981.

⁸ Karabekir Akkoyunlu, Kalypso Nicolaidis, and Kerem Öktem, “The Western Condition: Turkey, the US and the EU in the New Middle East”, SEESOX Paper Series on Turkey (February 2013) pp. 44-51. Available at <https://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/thewesterncondition.pdf> (accessed 31 March 2016).

⁹ Mikael Wigell, “Mapping Hybrid Regimes: regime types and concepts in comparative politics”, *Democratization*, 15:2 (2008), p. 238.

¹⁰ Established after the 1960 coup, the NSC became “the embodiment of the bureaucracy’s primacy over the popularly elected parliament”. Founded as a governmental advisory body regularly bringing together the military high command and the president with the prime minister and cabinet ministers, the NSC functioned as a key tutelary institution, where the military’s recommendations to the government carried the weight of official edicts. Ümit Cizre, “The Anatomy of the Turkish Military’s Political Autonomy”, *Comparative Politics*, 29:2 (1997), p. 157.

¹¹ Until 2014, presidents were elected by the parliament for a single seven-year term, and until 2007 all presidents were either former military generals, bureaucrats with solid tutelary credentials or civilian politicians whom the generals thought they could control.

¹² Established with the 1961 Constitution, the Constitutional Court played a particularly active tutelary role after the 1980 military coup. While between 1963 and 1980 it outlawed only six political parties, 19 parties were banned between 1980 and 2008. Outlawed parties were almost exclusively from the leftist, ethnic Kurdish or Islamist backgrounds. “Anayasa Mahkemesi 44 Yılda 24 Parti Kapattı”, *Bianet*, 21 November 2007, <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/103054-anayasa-mahkemesi-44-yilda-24-parti-kapatti>, accessed 1 April 2016.

¹³ Law 306 dated 25 May 1961 on the Election of Parliamentary Deputies. Despite numerous adjustments and amendments, including the introduction of a nationwide threshold, the D’Hont method has remained in place since 1961.

¹⁴ In the 1950 election, for example the DP won 408 of the 487 seats despite securing 53.3 per cent of votes.

¹⁵ Burak Cop, “Yüzde 10 barajının öyküsü”, *NTV*, <http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/yuzde-10-barajinin-oykusu.3xMZ-FVFNkWjU9mAPgxf9g>, accessed 1 April 2016. Ironically, the threshold has also been instrumental in the rise of the AKP as a dominant party that disassembled the tutelary system in the 2000s. The AKP was able to form a single-party government in 2002 securing two-thirds of the seats in parliament, despite having won only 34 per cent of the overall vote, as it was one of only two parties (the other being the CHP, which had 19 per cent) that had crossed the 10 per cent threshold, leaving nearly 50 per cent of the electorate who cast their ballot for other parties unrepresented in the new parliament.

¹⁶ The Hizmet (Service) Movement represents one of the two main branches of political Islam in Turkey, known as *Nurculuk*. This branch seeks to reconcile western modernity with Islam, encourages social and economic entrepreneurship over political activism and is sometimes referred to as the pragmatic or ‘business-friendly’ alternative to the more openly political and ideologically confrontational *Milli Görüş* (National View) tradition, from which Erdoğan and the AKP emerged. The rivalry between the two branches in the 1990s was such that Gülen actually supported the coup against Turkey’s first *Milli Görüş*-led government in 1997, even though the coup makers then turned against Gülen himself, who subsequently fled to the US. In the early 2000s, the AKP’s declared departure from the political legacy of *Milli Görüş* brought the party and the Gülenists together and Hizmet’s cadres in the judiciary and police force proved instrumental in the AKP’s battle against the tutelary actors. This marriage of interests, however, broke down amidst a new power struggle soon after the tutelary system had been disassembled.

¹⁷ Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, “Kulturkampf in Turkey: The Constitutional Referendum of 12 September 2010”, *South European Society and Politics*, 17:1 (2010), pp. 1 – 22; Can Yeğinsu, “Turkey Packs the Court”, *The New York Review of Books Blog*, 22 September 2010.

¹⁸ A dominant party system is one in which there is "a category of parties/political organisations that have successively won election victories and whose future defeat cannot be envisaged or is unlikely for the foreseeable future.” Raymond Suttner, “Party Dominance ‘Theory’: Of What Value?”, *Politikon*, 33:3 (2006), p. 277.

¹⁹ “Religious youth”, *Today’s Zaman*, 12 February 2012; “Turkey passes school reform law critics view as Islamic”, *Reuters*, 30 March 2012.

²⁰ “PM Erdoğan unveils long-awaited ‘crazy project’ as Kanal İstanbul”, *Today’s Zaman*, 27 April 2011; “Turkish dam threatens town that dates back to the bronze age”, *Guardian*, 20 May 2011; “PM announces construction of giant mosque in Istanbul”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 31 May 2012; “İstanbul’s new bridge, highway, canal threaten city’s northern forests”, *Today’s Zaman*, 11 August 2013.

²¹ “İstanbul’s income earned by a few construction groups during AKP rule“, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 14 April 2014. “Turkish firm must scrap olive grove coal plant, says government”, *Guardian*, 11 November 2014.

²² “Erdoğan: Polis Taksim’de destan yazdı”, *Milliyet*, 24 June 2013.

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- ²³ “Separation of powers an obstacle, says Erdoğan”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 18 December 2012.
- ²⁴ Constitutional law scholar Ergun Özbudun, who was appointed by the AKP to draft a new democratic constitution back in 2007 but has since turned critical of the government’s illiberal policies, notes that “in Turkey the year 2014 can be described as a period when the governing AKP made a sustained and systematic effort to establish its control over the judiciary by means of a series of laws of dubious constitutionality.” Ergun Özbudun, “Turkey's Judiciary and the Drift Toward Competitive Authoritarianism”, *The International Spectator*, 50:2 (2015), pp. 42.
- ²⁵ “Turkish opposition newspaper turns pro-government after state takeover”, *Reuters*, 6 March 2016.
- ²⁶ Cihan Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism* (London: Verso, 2016).
- ²⁷ Mustafa Akyol, “Unraveling the AKP's 'Mastermind' conspiracy theory”, *Al Monitor*, 19 March 2015.
- ²⁸ Much of the Kurdish Southeast had been ruled by a state of exception from 1987 until 2002, when it was finally lifted by the newly elected AKP government.
- ²⁹ Özbudun, “Turkey's Judiciary and the Drift Toward Competitive Authoritarianism”; Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey”, *Third World Quarterly*, 19 February 2016.
- ³⁰ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism”, *Journal of Democracy* 13:2 (2002), p.53.
- ³¹ Freedom House, “Turkey: Proposal to Annul Citizenship Threatens Fundamental Rights”, 6 April 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/turkey-proposal-annul-citizenship-threatens-fundamental-rights> (accessed 7 April 2016).
- ³² Brownlee’s definition of a “highly developed” country is one whose non-oil GDP per capita exceeds USD 8,045. Jason Brownlee, “Why Turkey’s authoritarian descent shakes up democratic theory” *Washington Post*, 23 March 2016.
- ³³ Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”, *Journal of Democracy*, 27:1 (January 2016), p. 6.
- ³⁴ “Erdoğan: The winner of the election is national will and democracy” *Yeni Safak*, 10 August 2014; “Erdoğan: Milli irade istikrardan yana tecelli etti”, *Hürriyet*, 2 November 2015; Levent Gültekin, “Milli irade kimin, neyin iradesi?”, *Diken*, 30 January 2016, <http://www.diken.com.tr/milli-irade-kimin-neyin-iradesi/> [accessed 10 April 2016].
- ³⁵ OSCE/ODIHR, Election Assessment Mission Report, Republic of Turkey, Parliamentary Elections 2011, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/77703> [accessed 10 April 2016].
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Turkey's Press Freedom Crisis”, Report, October 2012, <https://www.cpj.org/reports/2012/10/turkeys-press-freedom-crisis-assault-on-the-press.php>. Committee to Protect Journalists, “Turkey worst jailer of journalists for second year in a row”, Press

Release, 18 December 2013, <https://cpj.org/2013/12/turkey-worst-jailer-of-journalists-for-second-year.php>, accessed 10 April 2016.

³⁸ “Like any movement that does not include the nation, the Gezi uprising also fizzled out. When this method failed, they pushed the button for a more sinister operation. The parallel gang of treason [*i.e. the Gülen network; KA*] targeted in my person the great projects of our country. Mind you, this operation also did not have the nation in it. And so with the help of Allah and support of my nation we overcame this attack too.“ From Erdoğan’s speech to lawyers, “Erdoğan'dan Davutoğlu'na gönderme: Neymiş, akademisyenler tutuksuz yargılansınlarmış!”, *T24*, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-avukatlara-hitap-ediyor,334990>, accessed 10 April 2016.

³⁹ OSCE/ODIHR, Election Assessment Mission Report, Republic of Turkey, Presidential Election 2014, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/119672> [accessed 10 April 2016].

⁴⁰ “TRT'den AK Parti'ye 13 saat muhalefete 48 dakika”, *Radikal*, 13 March 2014.

⁴¹ Pinar Tremblay, “Could AKP's negative campaign strategy backfire? “, *Al Monitor*, 4 June 2015.

⁴² OSCE/ODIHR, Election Assessment Mission Report, Republic of Turkey, Parliamentary Elections, 7 June 2015, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/153806> [accessed 10 April 2016].

⁴³ Efe Kerem Sözeri, “HDP'ye yapılan saldırılar ve cezasızlık sistemli mi?”, *Platform 24*, 17 May 2015.

⁴⁴ Ali Çarkoğlu and S. Erdem Aytaç, “Public Opinion Dynamics Towards June 2015 Elections in Turkey”, Sponsored by the Open Society Foundation, Koç University and Ohio State University, 5 May 2015. <http://www.aciktoplumvakfi.org.tr/medya/presentation.pptx>. [accessed 10 April 2016].

⁴⁵ Karabekir Akkoyunlu, “Ahead of Turkey’s Crucial Election, Citizens Take Action to Protect Their Vote”, *Huffington Post*, 20 May 2015.

⁴⁶ Pippa Norris, Richard W. Frank, and Ferran Martínez i Coma, “Assessing the Quality of Elections”, *Journal of Democracy*, 24:4 (October 2014), p. 135.

⁴⁷ Karabekir Akkoyunlu “Old Turkish demons in new faces?” *Open Democracy*, 23 October 2015.

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<http://www.dw.com/en/prominent-turkish-journalist-government-critic-attacked/a-18753296>

[accessed 10 April 2016].

⁴⁸ Pippa Norris, Richard W. Frank, Alessandro Nai and Ferran Martínez i Coma, “The Electoral Integrity Project: The Year in Elections, 2015”, 22 February 2016,

<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2753416> [accessed 10 April 2016]

⁴⁹. OSCE/ODIHR, Election Assessment Mission Report, Republic of Turkey, Parliamentary Elections, 1 November 2015, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/186031> [accessed 10 April 2016].

⁵⁰ “Yalçın Akdoğan: HDP bundan sonra çözüm sürecinin ancak filmini yapar,” *Hürriyet*, 8 June 2015.

Karabekir Akkoyunlu, “AKP’s Machiavellian Victory: How It Happened and What It Means for

Turkey”, *Centre for Policy and Research on Turkey (Research Turkey)*, 4:10 (November 2015), pp.26-33.

⁵¹ Bermeo, *Democratic Backsliding*, p. 13.

⁵² Akkoyunlu, “AKP’s Machiavellian Victory”.