

Democracy and opposition in turkey: an introduction to the special issue

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1 The elections in Turkey 2023

Since 2013, the level of Turkish democracy has steadily declined (Çınar 2023, pp. 505–514). The power struggle within the state apparatus, the further victimization of large segments of society in terms of basic human rights practices, and the deepening social crisis led Turkey to move further away from the modern world. On 15 July 2016, Turkish politics witnessed a failed coup attempt by a religious group (*Fettullahists*) organized within the military (Duman 2016, pp. 103–118). In the period following July 15, state and social life changed radically.

The first consequence of the coup attempt was that the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) changed its bloc. The MHP, which had been playing politics from an anti-AKP position, chose to cooperate with the AKP with the reflex of protecting the state. This move continues to have consequences as the most important element of Turkish political life since July 15th. When we look at the results of the May 2023 elections, in which the opposition failed, we see how critical the MHP's support for the AKP regime is. Because in the parliamentary elections, the ruling party received only 268 deputies against 35.6% of the vote. For a parliamentary majority, 301 deputies are needed. Without the MHP, which is represented in the parliament with 50 deputies with 10% of the vote, the Erdoğan regime would lose its parliamentary supremacy. A similar picture emerged for the presidential election. The MHP, which supported Erdoğan by not fielding a candidate, determined the outcome of the election. By the way, it should be noted that the MHP's shift from

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the opposition bloc to the side of the government was effective not only in the last election but in all elections and referendums held since 2016.

The MHP's defection led to a renewal of the AKP's eroded power. Within the state apparatus and society, this move had a series of further effects. Nationalists were appointed to the positions vacated by members of the Fettullahist organisation. The state's shift to an Islamo-nationalist position pushed currents outside this main political direction to an even more illegitimate ground. In this context, it can be said that the Kurdish movement has suffered a serious loss and its political visibility has decreased significantly. The state of emergency regime implemented under the name of the fight against terrorism has severely repressed not only the Kurdish movement but also almost all opposition elements. In the last seven years, Turkey has drifted into a political superficiality where the opposition has been increasingly confined to parliamentary politics.

Another important development is the rapprochement between the AKP and some Kemalist groups. The purge of the sectarian cadres and the influence of the MHP in the geometry of power have pushed the AKP leadership's criticism of Atatürk and Kemalism into the background. In this new era, Erdoğan has begun to play the role of a leader who is trying to realize Atatürk's ideal of a fully independent Turkey against foreign powers.

In the period following 2016, the state apparatus was restored according to the wishes of the conservative-nationalist bloc and the state's capacity to use force increased tremendously. With the transition to a presidential system, the separation of powers became *de facto* non-functional. Today's Turkey has a state order in which the legislature and the judiciary have become subdivisions of the executive. Moreover, the state apparatus has grown by almost half. The increase in the number of state personnel and the increase in the state budget shows that the strong state tradition that marked the social structure of Ottoman-Turkish society is reproducing itself in a new way. Perhaps the only positive aspect of this process is the increased civilian control over the military. Thus, perhaps for the first time in Turkish modernization, the military ceased to be an element that could influence political life.

Following the 2019 local elections, the opposition's chances of success in changing the electoral authoritarian structure have increased. The transfer of local power from the AKP to the CHP in two of the country's largest cities, Istanbul and Ankara, and the experience of the Millet Alliance between the CHP and opposition right-wing parties raised expectations that the 2023 elections could bring about a change in the more than 20 years of Erdoğan's rule. However, the two rounds of elections in May 2023 led to a complete defeat for the opposition. Erdoğan once again won the election, but the parliamentary majority remained with the People's Alliance parties.

At this point, it can be argued that the 2023 elections, which almost completely exhausted the hopes of restoration in Turkish democracy, resulted in a repeat of the 2022 Hungarian elections. Namely, just like in Turkey, in Hungary, the opposition united around a table of six to build a counter-historical bloc against the populist government. Despite the unity of many opposition parties, the joint candidate Peter Marki-Zav suffered a heavy defeat against Orban (Şar 2022). This result was largely due to the fact that the most popular politician of the opposition bloc, Budapest mayor Gergely Karacsony, was not nominated. A similar situation occurred in

Turkey. The mayors of Istanbul and Ankara had a better chance of winning than the opposition's joint candidate. Nevertheless, the CHP leader stood against Erdoğan. In the period following the defeat, this decision accelerated the fragmentation of the opposition bloc. As of the end of 2023, a large portion of the opposition electorate believes that Kılıçdaroğlu was the wrong candidate and that the CHP abused its leadership position to impose its own candidate on the public despite all his disadvantages.

Another possible lesson to be drawn from the Hungarian example in terms of the Turkish elections is the tension between the center and the provinces. In Turkey, as in Hungary, the lower and lower middle classes of the society and the provincial geography are more pro-government, while the upper-middle classes and big cities are under the influence of the opposition. However, in the post-2016 period, the opposition has failed to create a meaningful increase in political motivation to close the gap between the center and the periphery and take over power.

As a final observation, it can be noted that the lost elections accelerated the dissolution of the opposition front and democracy in Turkey has regressed to pre-2019 conditions, at least in terms of the state of the opposition. In this context, in the six months following the May elections, the Millet Alliance front disintegrated, opposition to Kılıçdaroğlu, who lost the election, emerged within the CHP, and the decisive position of the People's Alliance led by the AKP on Turkish political life was further strengthened. The 2024 local elections are ahead of us and the opposition parties seem to have lost the cooperative nature they had prior to the presidential elections. These elections will be critical for the relationship between the government and the opposition forces and for the ongoing development of Turkish democracy. If the opposition can continue its success in the previous local elections and win most of the metropolitan cities, this could serve as an important engine for the opposition to regroup. In this case, it could unleash new potentials within the opposition.

2 Overview of the contributions

In the summer of 2022, the German Journal of Comparative Politics (ZfVP) graciously accepted our proposal for a special issue that would focus on recent political developments in Turkey, especially in terms of democracy and the relations between government and opposition, and we were able to start working on this project. Many researchers responded to our Call for Papers. Some of these articles are published in issue 4/2023 and some in an upcoming issue in 2024. In this issue, we have included a total of six contributions which address the political developments in recent Turkey from different perspectives.

In this context, *Armağan Öztürk* (2023) first addressed the different forms of populism debate in the theoretical field. The main aim here is to outline an explanatory conceptual framework from the theoretical populism debate. Then, defining AKP populism as right-wing authoritarianism, Öztürk focuses on the discourse developed by the party, particularly neo-Ottomanism, and draws attention to its Islamo-nationalist character and thus its non-pluralist monist character. Öztürk concludes that the populism developed by the AKP is generally in line with the frameworks of analysis

of populism, but also emphasizes the widespread presence of xenophobia as a fundamental exception. *Seren Selvin Korkmaz* (2023), on the other hand, focuses on the unifying discourses and strategies developed by the opposition in the face of AKP's right-wing authoritarianism, pointing to the role of opposition parties, especially the CHP (Republican People's Party), in both the autocratization process and the efforts against it, and subjects the CHP's election campaigns from 2002 to 2019 to a discursive analysis in this respect. In this sense, Korkmaz determines that the CHP has developed a discourse strategy that aims to move from an exclusionary content to an inclusionary one and explains its success in the 2019 local elections in this way. *Levent Görüşük* (2023) analyzes the politics of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan based on Michael Oakeshott's critique of rationalism. Görüşük argues that Oakeshott's critique of rationalism in the political sense is based on the reduction of politics or broad and comprehensive political projects such as modernization to rational, technical and abstract principles and ideologies, and argues that both periods or political movements have some authoritarian and anti-democratic characteristics in this respect.

Hatice Karakuş-Öztürk (2023) analyzes Ziya Selçuk's media (twitter) outlook during his tenure as Minister of Education in Turkey between 2018 and 2020. She studies Minister Selçuk's social media posts and makes an impact assessment by subjecting these posts to content analysis. Karakuş-Öztürk draws attention to the high interaction rates of the Minister on social media and concludes that she has a very dynamic media outlook that takes into account various groups and situations. *Zeynep Direk* (2023) analyzes the Istanbul Convention, one of the achievements of the feminist women's movement in Turkey, and the anti-feminist family discourse and populist policies of the AKP government, which decided to withdraw from this convention. The Istanbul Convention sets the basic goals of protecting women against male violence in the family and ensuring gender equality and obliges the member states of the Council of Europe to develop measures and policies to achieve these goals. Direk links the AKP government's decision to withdraw from the convention to the content of the convention as well as to the fact that it began to see the feminist women's and LGBTI+ movement as a threat to the family and Muslim culture, emphasizing that family and gender issues have thus become the main source of conflict. Finally, *Ayhan Bilgin* (2023) studies the relationship between democracy and clientelism through the case of Turkey. After discussing the studies on clientelism in the academic field at the conceptual level, Bilgin gives a brief summary of the historical development of clientelism in Turkey. In doing so, he focuses on clientelism, which has become quite widespread especially during the AKP period and emphasizes the process of democratic erosion as one of the most important consequences of this widespread clientelism.

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