



The limits of institutionalizing predominance: understanding the emergence of Turkey's new opposition

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Abstract

This article offers an institutionalist assessment of the more recent chapters of political opposition in Erdoğan's Turkey. There is good reason to suppose that the institutional features of a given regime can explain the performance of opposition parties to a significant extent. That said, the case of Turkey provides impressive evidence that there are striking limits to institutionalizing political predominance, to undermining political oppositions by institutional means, and to explaining the performance of opposition parties with the prevailing institutional resources and constraints. Specifically, attempts at institutionalizing a predominant power status carry particular risks of generating inverse effects, including increased political vulnerability. However, there are no automatic effects. Rather, as the Turkish experience suggests, reasonably vigorous actors to become politically relevant must seize the particular (if usually limited) opportunities arising from advanced institutional autocratization.

Keywords Autocratization · Erdoğan · Institutions · Institutionalism · Political opposition · Turkey

Introduction

Much of what outside observers associate with contemporary Turkish politics centers on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the long-term leader of the country's predominant party, former prime minister and current president. The view from within is not

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fundamentally different. Scholars have long begun to discuss the defining features of an ongoing “Erdoğanization” (e.g., Selçuk et al. 2019) of Turkish politics. On the face of it, there is little, if any, space for political opposition in this regime, either in normative or empirical terms. However, as this article seeks to uncover, there is more to political opposition in Turkey than meets the eye. In theoretical terms, we develop our research question and argument in the course of a critical appraisal of the institutional approach to studying political oppositions, which bind together the individual papers of this symposium (see Helms, in this issue).

While opposition is essentially a particular set of behavior and activities, institution-centered approaches have figured prominently in the comparative study of political oppositions. For example, scholars have put forward an “opposition power index” that seeks to capture the status of parliamentary oppositions in different parliamentary democracies in terms of the institutional devices available to them (Garritzmann 2017). The basic idea behind an institutionalist approach to studying political oppositions is that institutional opportunities and constraints are likely to shape the performance of opposition actors. Importantly, the institutions with particular pertinence to the status and room for maneuver of the political opposition in a given regime are not necessarily specific “opposition rights.” Electoral systems, the form of government, and the type of political regime, more generally, all tend to leave their mark on the life—and death—of political oppositions. Other things being equal, parliamentary democracies operating PR electoral systems with no or a low threshold, and a set of parliamentary devices available to the minority, provide the most favorable conditions for political opposition parties in terms of representation and power (Helms 2008).

Applied to Turkey in the Erdoğan era, this institutionalist logic generates a clear-cut expectation: in institutional terms, the replacement of the parliamentary system by a “super-presidential” regime in 2017—designed to settle the predominance that Erdoğan (re-)acquired in the course of the failed coup of 2016—seemed suitable to keep the opposition out of the game, and for good. Interestingly, this is not what happened. Rather, the opposition has staged a stunning comeback with its unexpected victory of the 2019 municipal elections in Istanbul, Turkey’s largest and most cosmopolitan city, and several other major cities—an event that displayed clear parallels to the derailed 2019 local elections in Budapest, Hungary (see Ilonszki and Dudzińska, in this issue).

We take this as evidence of the limits of purely institutional explanations of oppositional performance, and inquire why this is the case. The Turkish case suggests that the amassment of institutional power resources may have inverse effects and generates particular vulnerabilities, in particular when power-holders evince advanced forms of heroism and ruthlessness (for a more general outline of this argument, see Helms 2019). We contend that, even in tightly controlled regimes, politics remains utterly contingent, and agency can make all the difference. Still, and importantly, acknowledging the inherent limits and possible unintended side effects of advanced institutional autocratization, is not the same as to say that institutions do not matter.

The next section provides a brief sketch of the key features of Erdoğan’s institutional power base and Turkey’s increasingly manifest political and state crises, which formed the background of the catalytic event of the 2019 municipal elections.



The third section offers a re-assessment of this event and its aftermath with a particular focus on the changing parameters of political opposition. The conclusion resumes the theme of the quasi-paradoxical twists and turns of political opposition in Erdoğan's Turkey.

Erdoğan's institutional power base and Turkey's political and state crisis

An institutional approach goes a long way in explaining Erdoğan's predominant status in Turkish politics. A recent study by Arslantaş et al. (2020) powerfully contends that the very nature of Turkey's predominant party system—with Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) at its core—results largely from particular features and effects of the Turkish electoral system. These include not just an unusually high nationwide threshold of 10 per cent, but also a widespread, institutionally induced, fear of a wasted vote, which both work to the benefit of large parties. More indirectly, the system also fosters high turnout and advanced levels of polarization among competing parties.

A second dimension of Erdoğan's institutional environment, and one of even more immediate relevance to his power status as political chief executive, concerns the nature of Turkey's power-concentrating governmental system. By 2015, Turkey had become an extremely rare example of a parliamentary regime displaying the features of a "delegative democracy"—that peculiar type of regime, famously conceptualized by O'Donnell as ranging between representative democracy and authoritarianism, and generally considered to be confined to the family of presidential systems (Hakkı Taş 2015). After the failed coup in 2016, Erdoğan utilized his regained authority and power to pursue a major constitutional reform, which was eventually approved by a constitutional referendum held in April 2017. This reform created a highly centralized presidential regime with few, if any, checks and balances, marginalizing the legislature and the opposition in particular (Yılmaz 2020). In retrospect, these events stand out as a particularly impressive showcase of "populist constitution making," designed to consolidate the institutional power status of a populist leader (Landau 2018).

Yet not only was the creation of the new Turkish presidential system an act of populist self-empowerment, the newly created constitutional order also fueled an ever more populist leadership style of President Erdoğan, whose beginnings date back more than a decade (Aytaç and Elçi 2019). For much of the Erdoğan era, and well preceding the major constitutional reform of 2017, Turkey's single most important opposition party, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), desperately sought to fight fire with fire. Ultimately, those populist attacks against Erdoğan helped the latter to consolidate his own base of supporters. Therefore, the CHP conspicuously failed to make any substantive inroads into the camp of AKP supporters. It also failed to overcome fragmentation and disunity among the larger family of non-governing parties. The overall performance of the political opposition from 2002 to 2018 marked a glaring case of "opposition failure," in



a context of well-established one-party dominance and advanced populism (Sayari 2016).

While the creation of the presidential system further weakened the opposition in institutional terms, it proved, however, largely unsuccessful in helping to overcome Turkey's latent, and increasingly manifest, political and state crisis. In fact, the dismantling of the old system and the creation of the presidential one created confusion and gave rise to wide-ranging de-institutionalization dynamics within the state structure. Presidential authority with a set of overlapping roles among appointed ministries, administrative offices, and policy councils has sidelined the bureaucracy. Further, large-scale de-institutionalization created operational deficiencies and, as a result, caused direct interventions in institutions, eroding the final remnants of their autonomy. This has resulted in a vicious circle of governance failure. Added to this, there is also no role for civil society in this government-led survivalist political atmosphere; unless actors follow a pro-government course, they face the serious danger of retribution (Sawae 2020).

Set in this “hegemonic turmoil,” the 2019 municipal elections in Istanbul and several other major cities became the beginning of a new chapter in the post-2002 history of political opposition in Turkey. It seems important to note that these developments indicated a more general “shift of arenas”—away from the parliamentary arena (whose status was reduced by institutional reform) and toward the electoral arena, with a larger room for new forms of “entrepreneurial opposition.”

The structure of the new opposition

The nation-wide municipal elections of 31 March 2019 and the re-run elections on 23 June 2019 in Istanbul showed that there is a strong, vibrant opposition against Erdoğan and the AKP in Turkey. The opposition parties' strong electoral performance in the country's major metropolitan cities—Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, among others—came as a major surprise to international pundits and even to many seasoned analysts in Turkey. Although there were predictions that Erdoğan may lose Ankara (which he did by a modest margin), the loss of Istanbul by more than 800,000 votes in the re-run election of 23 June¹ became a significant personal defeat for Erdoğan, who started his rise in Turkish politics as the city's mayor in 1994. Which parties constitute this new opposition wave in Turkey, and how did they manage to increase their vote in the municipal elections?

The opposition in both the March 2019 and the June 2019 elections, the Nation Alliance, consisted of the CHP and the Good Party (*İYİ Parti*, IP). Other opposition parties that participated in the elections were the People's Democratic Party

¹ CHE candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu won by 13,000 votes in the election held on 31 March 2019, which the Supreme Electoral Council annulled following various charges launched by AKP officials. In the election held on 23 June, İmamoğlu received 806,014 more votes than AKP candidate Binali Yıldırım, which (accounting for some 68,000 votes cast for other candidates) marked a 54.2 per cent share of the total vote.



(*Halkin Demokrasi Partisi*, HDP) and the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*, SP). The HDP and SP supported the Nation Alliance through strategic voting in the cities that they had no chance of winning on their own. This clearly suggested that these parties,² notwithstanding their fundamental differences, are driven by a shared commitment, namely putting an end to Erdoğan's rule in local and national politics (Esen and Gümüşçü 2019).

The oppositional electoral coalition in the 2019 elections aimed to minimize the victories of the rival People's Alliance. Despite their differences, HDP supporters voted for the Nation Alliance candidate in big cities, particularly in Istanbul. The Nation Alliance did not openly acknowledge a deal or understanding with the HDP, out of fear of alienating their nationalist voter base. The HDP on their part did not bother, as their overriding strategic goal was, and continues to be, a weakening of Erdoğan and his grip on power.

Mainstream opposition

The mainstream opposition (CHP, İP and HDP) adopted a soft, inclusive but substantive rhetoric against Erdoğan in the 2019 municipal races and beyond. What changed in Turkish politics that enabled the secular opposition to challenge Erdoğan, who won all local and national elections in Turkey from 2002 until 2019, and even to reach out to his supporters? One important possible factor relates to the recent constitutional reform, which subtly altered the political playing field. In addition to his electoral victories, Erdoğan had unwound what he called bureaucratic tutelage within the state apparatus, namely controlling its bulwarks in the judiciary and the military (Kaygusuz 2018). The presidential system created a new regime in Turkey bridging the gap between state and politics through redesigning them around a powerful "executive president." The major impact of this restructuring is the fact that mainstream political parties lost their chance to rely on the guardianship roles of the military or judiciary. The overall result of the constitutional reform of 2017 has not been the emergence of an efficient executive-centered system but rather a dysfunctional and confusing regime whose inherent weaknesses have been aggravated by the AKP's continuous attempts to suffocate the opposition. Thus, the only option for the opposition parties to stay in the political competition, and win ground, would

² The CHP is a center-left party with a secular and Kemalist identity and a strong proponent of a return to the parliamentary system in Turkey. It had been close to the military establishment, which acted as the guardian of the Turkish Republic until the recent transformation to presidential rule (Ayan 2010). The İP is a centrist-nationalist party led by a charismatic leader, Meral Akşener, who founded the party together with a group of defectors from the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) in late 2017 and elites from former center-right parties (Parti 2019). The HDP, a pro-Kurdish and staunchly socialist party, was founded in 2012. It has lately tried to broaden its appeal among secular groups and moved to campaign on a platform of promoting democracy, egalitarianism, freedom of worship, feminism and LGBT rights, worker's rights, minority protections, and environmental justice (Celep 2018). The SP is a descendent of past political Islamist parties, from which the founding cadres of Erdoğan's party defected after their opposition to Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the first Islamic parties in Turkey. SP politicians blame Erdoğan in particular for abandoning moral, Islamic values.



depend on finding new ways to challenge the hegemonic AKP (Aras and Yorulmazlar 2018).

Another element of change, which is a natural corollary of the multiple parties' search for widening their voter base, is the lowering of the barrier between the center and the periphery of Turkish politics (Mardin 1973). The center of Turkish politics was traditionally occupied by secular and republican segments of Turkish society, while the periphery was dominated by the rural masses associated with pluralist demands and Islam. Ekrem İmamoğlu, the CHP mayor of Istanbul, and Mansur Yavaş, the CHP mayor of Ankara, reached out to this periphery during the 2019 elections, visited conservative corners of the city, and broke their fast during Ramadan with families in poor neighborhoods. İmamoğlu even recited the Quran in a mosque. This kind of opposition from among the ranks of the secular establishment is unique and unprecedented.

In the 2019 elections, the Nation Alliance was apparently more aware of the changing nature of the electoral competition than Erdoğan and his People's Alliance. Erdoğan and his coalition partner, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, launched a vigorous campaign, using the rhetoric of national survival and blaming the opposition for damaging vital national interests and collaborating with terrorist groups. In contrast, the opposition prioritized more substantive propositions including commitments to good governance, improving cities' economies and transportation infrastructure, helping students and elderly people, and providing cheaper water and natural gas. Thus, overall, the opposition focused on micro-level policy options, while the ruling coalition relied on macro-level political schemes of national survival, identity politics, and regime security.

Normally, the HDP does not ally with other parties, since their ideology is not compatible with the programmatic and ideological stances of the three other major parties—the AKP, CHP, and MHP. However, in the 2019 local elections, the HDP refrained from fielding an own candidate in metropolitan cities and joined forces with the center-left CHP to challenge the dominant AKP, for control over Istanbul and Ankara in particular. The jailed former co-chair of the party, Selahattin Demirtaş, called for the support of the Nation Alliance candidate in Istanbul. In opposition to this, the media published a letter from jailed PKK leader and founder Abdullah Öcalan one day ahead of the elections. Öcalan, who has been serving a life sentence in prison since 1999, released a note that Kurdish politicians should remain neutral on the domestic political front. This was perceived as a call to support the People's Alliance in the Istanbul re-run elections. However, the HDP base disregarded Öcalan's call and voted for the CHP candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu. This electoral alliance worked conspicuously well on that occasion, though it is unclear whether it will be able to challenge the AKP-MHP bloc in the next presidential elections, currently scheduled for June 2023, in a similarly impressive way.

Former AKP opposition

Following the 2019 local elections, two former high-ranking AKP politicians joined in the opposition against their old party and previous fellow leaders. The first is Ali



Babacan, who served as Minister of Economics, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Deputy Prime Minister in the AKP cabinets until his gradual breakaway from the party. Although his active role in the AKP ceased in late 2015, he resigned from the AKP only in July 2019, which arguably helped him to survive a tense period of political warfare in Turkey. Despite being part of the previous AKP nomenclature, Babacan advocates the creation of a liberal market and open economy with a priority to increase foreign direct investment (FDI). He is also a proponent of liberal democracy, rights, and freedoms. According to Babacan, a market economy and foreign direct investment with greater freedom of speech, media and movement would be possible and worth pursuing (Çevik 2020).

The second senior figure is Ahmet Davutoğlu, who started his career in the AKP government in 2002 when he was appointed chief advisor to then Prime Minister Abdullah Gül and later to Prime Minister Erdoğan. In 2009, he was appointed foreign minister, even though not being an MP; in that post he spent most of his energy on changing Turkey's rather inactive foreign policy in the Middle East to what he called the "zero problems" policy (Aras 2009). In 2014, he succeeded Erdoğan as the chairman of the AKP and prime minister. According to Erdoğan and his allies, Davutoğlu and his team tried to isolate Erdoğan and turn him into a figurehead president with merely symbolic powers—which was in fact the constitutionally prescribed role of the Turkish presidency at that time. He soon came to face the same isolation as Babacan did before him and was eventually forced by Erdoğan to leave his post as prime minister in May 2016. Although he kept silent for a while, in 2019 he started to openly criticize Erdoğan's policies. As a result, he was expelled from the AKP, together with a group of associates, in September 2019. While it took Babacan until March 2020 to establish his Democracy and Progress Party (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi*, DEVA Partisi), Davutoğlu's Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*, GP) was established as early as December 2019.

Both the GP and DP have enrolled former politicians, bureaucrats, and certain cadres of the AKP into their ranks. Within the previous AKP governments, Davutoğlu and Babacan had worked together in harmony and have been able to maintain good relations ever since (Yetkin 2020). Why they have formed different parties instead of one party together has loomed large in Turkish political circles. Indeed, the initial expectation was that they would form a single party and pool their resources to challenge Erdoğan and the AKP. There are three different explanations as to why Babacan and Davutoğlu established different parties. One reason is that Abdullah Gül, the former president, singled out Babacan as Turkey's next leader-in-chief. Gül put some distance between himself and Davutoğlu after the latter's refusal to invite Gül to run for parliament after the end of his term as president in 2014. Gül has played a behind-the-scenes role in Babacan's party and may officially join the party or gain its support for his presidential ambitions, which failed to materialize in June 2018.

The second reason is a disagreement over the leadership roles in the party. Both wanted to lead a new party and could not agree on a leadership formula that would accommodate both of them. A third reason concerns the major differences in world-views and policies. Babacan pursues a liberal and secular line of thought in his policies, while Davutoğlu has more conservative and right-wing-oriented projections for



his party, which in effect cherishes the golden era of the AKP with an extension of civil rights and the consolidation of popular democracy. Although there is still hope in some political circles that they may come together, Babacan and Davutoğlu seem to have parted ways and have already taken different paths to unseat Erdoğan and prevail in Turkish politics.

Davutoğlu and Babacan's departure from the AKP gives an idea of what could happen to any "intra-party oppositionists" (Demirtaş 2019). So far, Erdoğan has not spared any of his former allies. It is ironic to observe that Erdoğan is a remarkably successful coalition and alliance builder—up to the point where he considers such relationships to become a challenge to him. From 2004 to 2008 and 2008 to 2012, he focused on liberal groups and Gülenists respectively. Between 2012 and 2015 his attention temporarily centered on Kurdish groups, before he eventually turned to the MHP and Eurasianists. Erdoğan's alliances with all these parties and groups ended in recrimination and animosity, his coalition with the MHP and ultra-nationalist Eurasianists marking the only major exception for the moment (Yetkin and Cagaptay 2019).

The political warfare between the Gülenists, followers of Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen, and the AKP (which reached a climax after the failed coup of July 2016) as well as the recent conflicts between the AKP and Kurdish politicians and liberal elites, are examples of the inherently problematic nature of Erdoğan's past alliances. Still, this is the first time ever that Erdoğan has faced serious opposition from his previous inner circle, and he appears more likely to attempt to marginalize or even neutralize them before they gain a level of support sufficient to challenge him successfully. As such, the growing criticism against Erdoğan's rule from within the ranks of former AKP cadres has become a major part—and perhaps the centerpiece—of Turkey's new opposition.

Conclusion

From an institutional perspective, the recent rise of the political opposition in Turkey comes as a stunning surprise. Just as the Erdoğan regime had further tightened its grip on the state and society by overcoming a major coup attempt and installing a quasi-autocratic presidential system that institutionalized Erdoğan's reasserted and expanded power status, the opposition awoke to a new dawn. In theoretical terms, these developments remind us that institutions may shape but never really determine the performance of political actors and their interactions. Specifically, attempts at institutionalizing predominance can backfire. Advanced levels of institutional deprivation and the creation of mounting institutional obstacles—such as, in the Turkish case, the need to win a 50 percent-plus majority in the municipal and presidential elections, the national 10 percent-threshold, and their desperate status in the post-reform Grand National Assembly—can motivate other actors to break the mold by resorting to genuinely new strategies. This is exactly what happened at the municipal elections of 2019 (see also Wuthrich and Ingleby 2020). Specifically, rather than undermining the confrontation between regime supporters and challengers, the



rising democracy-authoritarianism cleavage fueled the race and eventually incentivized opposition parties to coordinate (Selçuk and Hekimci 2020).

A closer look into the depths of Turkish politics and history suggests that the recent developments, and our findings, are not fundamentally at odds with sceptical scholarly assessments of the institutional foundations of the Erdoğan regime. In an article published a few months after the coup attempt of 2016, Akkoyunlu and Öktem contended that “Erdoğan’s domination of Turkey’s institutions (...) would not guarantee hegemony in politics and society” (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016: 520). They concluded that “under the conditions of (...) aggravated insecurity, the consolidation of a stable authoritarian regime appears unlikely, reducing the possible scenarios for Turkey’s immediate future to a weak and contested authoritarian arrangement or further escalation of conflict and instability” (ibid: 505).

To provide a more general argument, and to stimulate further research along these lines, it seems important to place these findings in the wider context of comparative institutions and regime analysis. While Turkey’s political history certainly includes highly particular features that foster insecurity and instability, the Turkish experience is conspicuously in line with a more general pattern identified by scholars of comparative political regimes. Other things being equal, semi-democratic or semi-autocratic regimes tend to be significantly more vulnerable and less durable than both established democracies and established autocracies (Knutson and Nygård 2015). As to the overall importance of institutions in such regimes, it is again possible to relate the Turkish experience to the wider picture. Rulers committed to turning (more or less) democratic regimes into (more or less) autocratic regimes often proceed by de-institutionalizing the extant order, and while they create these new institutions to consolidate their power status, these rulers do not really derive their power from those institutions. These dynamics also establish what institutions in such regimes mean to regime opponents, both in terms of legitimacy and incentives to act. *Ceteris paribus*, the more institutions are imposed from above, the less legitimacy those institutions are likely to enjoy among minorities and opponents to the regime. However, importantly, the power of institutions, in particular with regard to their coercive dimensions, does not depend on the degree of legitimacy they command among those actors. Political oppositions in particular have to live with the institutions they face, however unfair and illegitimate they may seem to them (for a case study on the political opposition in Putin’s Russia see Semenov, in this issue). That institutional tightening up and autocratization may, nevertheless, generate powerful inverse effects, is one of the magic features of opposition politics in different types of political regime.

It will be fascinating to see what lessons the key actors on either side will take from these recent developments in Turkey. For the time being, Erdoğan remains a uniquely placed predominant figure in Turkish politics. It is difficult to gauge how much political capital Erdoğan has actually spent or lost over the past three or four years of his increasingly autocratic reign. For all that has appalled many observers of recent developments, Erdoğan’s unique role in the historic transformation of Turkey’s status on the international stage continues to command respect even among many of his critics. Still, Erdoğan’s regime seems to have reached, and arguably passed, its peak. This obviously does not imply its outright implosion anytime soon.



However, even in the absence of any sweeping power shifts, the next chapters of Turkey's unfolding political history are likely to be written by the country's government *and* oppositions.

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