

Introduction

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No history of Turkey will ever be complete without an analysis of the AKP's years in power. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's charismatic and politically resourceful leadership has already made him one of the country's longest-serving and most influential leaders. His streak of successes at the ballot box is unprecedented in Turkish political history. While in the Turkish multi-party electoral system any governing party is expected to lose popular support, the AKP has actually managed to consolidate a crushing 40–50% loyal social base. For better or worse, Erdoğan's and his party's leadership have fundamentally transformed the country's politics and society (Hermann 2014). The collection of articles in this issue contributes to our understanding of the various dimensions of this transformation in Turkish society, politics, and the AKP itself.

On the fateful night of July 15, 2016, at the height of the failed coup attempt, I accompanied my father on Istanbul's highways to stand against a military takeover and to support the democratic process. The following day's dismissal of almost 3000 judges and prosecutors, even before the coup was completely brought under control, signaled the beginning of a long process of purges in every sector of the bureaucracy and society, one that consciously targeted any opposition groups from the Gülenists to the Kurds and liberals.¹ These purges sealed Erdoğan's dominance over the traditional power houses of secularism as well as all democratic checks and balances.

In domestic politics, the AKP had started out as a coalition-building group that sent a message of inclusivity to liberals, reformists, democrats, minorities, and Kurdish moderates (Yavuz 2006). It steadily consolidated its popular base through directing polarizing rhetoric against all domestic or foreign enemies who were constantly depicted as posing an existential threat to the nation (Özbudun 2014). Every election campaign also meant finding (or creating) and attacking an enemy: military tutelage or the secularists, the Gülen Movement or the Kurds, Israel or Holland. While this self-

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victimization proved successful at the ballot box, it deepened polarization domestically and hurt Turkish diplomacy in international relations.

In foreign policy, the AKP initially launched a dynamic vision of multidimensional diplomatic peace initiatives and an aspiration for regional leadership. President Abdullah Gül's leadership of the EU accession process and Prime Minister Ahmet Davudoğlu's diplomacy for "zero problems with neighbors" helped direct the domestic coalition building process and garner a growing international recognition that led to increased economic development (Stein 2016). The Arab Spring and the ensuing Syrian civil war posed a major challenge to this vision and eventually forced the AKP to abandon its idealistic initiatives (Sözen 2010). As Gül and later Davudoğlu were pushed aside and Erdoğan gained full control of foreign policy, Turkey increasingly used rapidly shifting alliances to pursue nationalistic and populist gains through an anti-western discourse and military involvement in Syria. These dramatic changes have compelled the contributors to explore the various dimensions of the AKP's leadership and its effects upon Turkish society and politics.

Philip Dorroll addresses the religious-secular divide in Atatürk's Republic. He challenges the commonly accepted view that these two spheres are diametrically opposed to each other by drawing upon theoretical approaches to argue that Kemalist secularism and Islamic discourse have interacted with and shaped each other. In order to trace the transformation of the Islamic reformist discourse in Turkey, Dorroll looks into the late Ottoman and early Republican discussions on Islam's role in the public sphere. He traces the thread of what he calls, the "Sharia reformism" through late Ottoman intellectual discussions, early Republican reforms, and the transformed religious institutions of modern Turkey (i.e., the Directorate of Religious Affairs and the divinity schools). Islamic modernism was most deeply rooted in the influential Divinity School of Ankara University, which produced almost all of the directorate's heads. Through these institutions, the reformist idea that the Sharia's social aspects, but not the essentials of the faith, can be reinterpreted to serve human welfare spread throughout society, a development that transformed the discourse among the pious Muslim masses (White 2014). Consequently, Dorroll attributes the current emergence of individualized Islam not to the AKP's rise, but to the century-old reformist discourse that developed in dialogue with Kemalist secularism.

Mustafa Gürbüz and Şeyma Akyol's article focuses on the AKP's "democratic opening" vis-à-vis the Kurdish question and argues that how the process is framed determines which side will gain which benefits. It recommends that any "opening" should ideally be developed within a democratic and human rights framework, as this would help decrease violence and make the "opening" more effective in terms of devising a peaceful political solution. If this does not occur, the end result may be further violence and strengthened terrorist organizations. The article builds on Timur Kuran's "ethnification" perspective to emphasize the skepticism and lack of trust between ethnic groups. It details the AKP's democratic opening process by identifying four frames through which it was interpreted: the PKK, Turkish nationalism, the AKP's democratization, and critical frame. The authors make a significant contribution to the literature by suggesting that such ethnic reform processes would be best if "de-ethnification" were to be conducted through an all-inclusive frame in order to eliminate ethnic-based mistrust. If neither an open and genuine dialogue nor the introduction of reforms in the democratic and human rights frame can overcome this mistrust, the

overall process is bound to fail and lead to further violence and deepening ethnic rifts. Indeed, by June 2015 the “democratic opening” with the Kurds ended after a bombing campaign launched Kurdish militants; by early 2017, most of the elected Kurdish parliamentarians were languishing in jail.

Binnur Özkeçeci’s article addresses the AKP’s foreign policy shifts. She argues that internal security challenges and the Arab Spring caused the demise of its initial “zero-problems with neighbors” policy. Özkeçeci pinpoints 2009 as the date when the party’s Islamization of foreign policy became visible. The foreign policy challenges reached a height in 2011 with the rise of the Arab Spring and Turkey’s idealistic stand with the Arab street, as opposed to its pursuit of pragmatic flexibility in the face of rapidly shifting power centers. Indeed, domestic security faced serious challenges: a series of terrorist bombings, a coup attempt, and major anti-PKK operations in southeast Turkey. Turkey saw increasing tension with its neighbors and became entangled in the Syrian civil war. Prime Minister Davudoğlu, the mastermind of the “strategic depth” policy, was practically ousted from his post by Erdoğan in May 2016. While the AKP’s strategists claim that changes in foreign policy have been for the better, the earlier diplomacy-oriented policy has clearly been replaced by a more hawkish, pragmatic, and constantly shifting foreign policy alignment that carries both Islamist and nationalist characteristics (Aral 2015).

Elvan Aktaş analyzes the Turkish financial market based on the economic figures for the last decade. Similar to Özkeçeci, he points out the “golden years” of Turkish economy under the AKP (2003–08) and argues that since 2011 the economy has declined (Waldman and Caliskan 2017). Indeed, the US dollar was equal to 1.5 Turkish Liras in 2011; in 2017, it is equal to 3.7 TL. Aktaş argues that this decline is primarily due to Ankara’s isolationism in international relations and exclusiveness in domestic politics. Aktaş not only exposes the ups and downs of the economy, but also suggests a path for economic recovery, namely, democratization and reviving the EU accession process.

Etga Uğur’s article on Islamic actors and democratization is strongly grounded in the literature on regime transition and Dankwart Rustow’s model of democratization. It identifies four periods of AKP politics: survival, non-confrontation, offense, and hegemony. Uğur argues that the initial emphasis of reform represented the AKP’s effort to survive by building coalitions with other reform-minded groups and elite against military tutelage. After 2007, the party went on the offensive against the military and the judiciary, which attempted to target the AKP. He considers the Gezi Park protests of June 2013 the AKP’s shift toward a more divisive domestic politics, explores the increasing rift between the Gülen movement (Barton et al. 2014) and the AKP in the state bureaucracy in that process, and proposes the need for vertical and horizontal accountability so that democratic players can keep the checks and balances in the system as the country continues to democratize.

Berna Turam’s article on Turkey’s urban ethnography under the AKP is based on six years of research. She identifies a “split city” (e.g., a sociological rift in an urban setting) as exemplified in Gezi and later in the AKP-led political protests, and “schisms in the state” (e.g., a bureaucratic split in the state offices), which later erupted in the coup attempt of July 15, 2016. Turam focuses on how these rifts impacted social unity or division. According to her, the Republican marches of 2007 were more divisive along Islamist-secularist lines, whereas the Gezi Park protests were unifying, because

people from various ideological, class, and ethnic backgrounds came together to raise their voice in support of freedoms and rights. Turam also describes the changes in the urban setting under AKP rule, which contributed to the frustration that culminated in these very protests. In terms of “schisms in the state,” she details the Gülen movement’s rise and growing influence in the state bureaucracy. While tracing the increasing rupture between the movement and the AKP, she also looks into the failed coup attempt as a junction where the “schisms in the state” cracked and the protests created a new urbanism.

Written by respected and established scholars on Turkey in their respective fields of expertise, these articles present a consistent picture of the AKP’s leadership. By analyzing the party’s economic, domestic, and foreign policy, the reformist, inclusive, and democratic elements of its earlier years in power are revealed. The contributors also consistently identify the moment when the AKP’s leaders changed their attitude: the Ergenekon court cases of 2007 (Uğur), the Gezi Park protests of 2013 (Turam), the Arab Spring of 2011 (Özkeçeci), and the economic slowdown that began in 2011 (Aktaş). It was exactly in 2011 that Erdoğan scored his third general election victory and declared the beginning of his “mastery period” (yet another indication for the wisdom of the United States’ two-term presidential limit).

Regardless of when this “turning point” was actually reached, sometime between 2007 and 2013 the AKP began to move away from its initial democratic, reformist, and inclusive vision and steadily toward a more exclusivist and polarizing set of policies. The failed coup in 2016 constitutes another turning point: that of Erdoğan asserting his absolute control over all state institutions and civil society through systematic purges, human rights violations, and suppression of any real, potential, or perceived sources of opposition. The articles in this issue, for the most part, attest to and elucidate this transformation and how it is changing Turkey.

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