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Erdogan's Coup

The True State of Turkish Democracy

By *Erik Meyersson and Dani Rodrik*

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Supporters hold up a portrait of Erdogan during an election rally in Istanbul, March 23, 2014. (Murad Sezer / Courtesy Reuters)

Western depictions of Turkish politics have finally begun to catch up with the authoritarian reality. As late as May 2012, Steven Cook, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, could state confidently that “the Justice and Development Party has done everything that it can” to forge “a more democratic, open country.” A year-and-a-half later, Cook would bemoan Turkey’s “democratic mirage,” citing Erdogan’s penchant for “using the institutions of the state for retribution and political intimidation” and manipulating the judiciary for “his own political ends.”

Given Erdogan’s behavior, the course correction is fully justified. But unfortunately, the West’s new narrative suffers from several weaknesses and omissions of its own. Turkey’s authoritarian turn is typically portrayed as a recent one, following on the heels of what are commonly described as significant democratic reforms in the last decade under Erdogan. With the latest turnaround blamed squarely on Erdogan, it is a relatively short jump from there to optimism about democracy’s prospects after him. That is the sentiment reflected in the MIT economist Daron Acemoglu’s recent article for *Foreign Affairs*, “[The Failed Autocrat](#).”

We agree with many of Acemoglu’s points, especially with regard to the potential of a populace that seems ever “thirstier for political participation and democracy.” But his account conflates democratization with what was essentially a power shift away from the secular elite. It also

underplays institutional decline under Erdogan, which will leave a problematic legacy for any successor. Furthermore, it neglects the contributions of many other actors to this legacy, including Erdogan's one-time allies, the Gülenists. When these factors are taken into account, a different picture of the democratic challenges Turkey faces, with or without Erdogan, emerges.

To begin with, Turkey's [institutional deterioration](#) is not a recent matter. It started long before Erdogan's manifestly heavy-handed and polarizing responses to the Gezi protests of the summer of 2013 and to the corruption probe in winter 2013. The harsh crackdown on the media over the last year is but the latest phase in an ongoing process of repression of independent press. And Erdogan and the Gülenists have long manipulated the judiciary, using it to harass and jail opponents on charges ranging from the flimsy to the fabricated.

Ever since Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2003, executive discretion has crept into the public procurement process, leading media owners to hold back criticism of the government for fear of losing lucrative business contracts. And when the media has still spoken out of turn, the government has resorted to arbitrary tax penalties, for example the enormous fine it levied in 2009 on the [Dogan Holding](#), publisher of the leading independent daily newspaper, *Hürriyet*. Litigation against private citizens has been another channel of repression; by 2005, two years into his term, Erdogan had already [pulled in roughly \\$440,000](#) from slander lawsuits. And Erdogan's government has been a leading jailer of journalists. Between 2007 and 2011, Turkey's world ranking in terms of [press freedom](#) fell from 101 to 148 out of around 180 countries. Since then, it has fallen another six places.

As Acemoglu rightly points out, the Turkish judiciary was never fully independent. Historically, it has acted as an instrument of secular elites and has been hostile to groups beyond those adhering to Kemalism -- a significant component of the country's traditional democratic deficit. When the AKP came to power in 2003, the party did not have its own cadres to replace the secular groups that had dominated the bureaucracy and judiciary. So Erdogan relied on the Gülen movement, which was all too willing to cooperate, having pursued a long-term strategy of placing its sympathizers in the state apparatus. The Gülenist police and judiciary, which in the later part of last decade, ran the [notorious](#) anti-military (Ergenekon and Balyoz) and anti-Kurdish (KCK) court cases, had a free hand until Erdogan decided to part ways with the movement. Anyone who took a close look at these political trials, even [early on](#), would have been under no illusion that they had any relation to the rule of law. Between 2007 and 2011, Turkey's [global ranking](#) in judicial independence fell from 56 to 83 of around 140 countries, and would fall an additional two places by 2014.

Along with deteriorating press freedoms and judicial independence, the Turkish state has sharply increased imprisonments under AKP; according to figures from the Justice Ministry, under the first ten years of AKP rule, the imprisoned population in Turkey doubled. It now towers over corresponding figures from the 1990s. A significant fraction of the increase is due to citizens detained under AKP-amended anti-terror laws. These terrorism-related imprisonments, furthermore, have occurred without a commensurate uptick in actual terrorist attacks in Turkey.

In the economic sphere, Erdogan has reined in the independent regulatory agencies (in finance, telecommunications, competition policy) that he inherited from the former economic minister Kemal Dervis' reforms in 2001. New regulations and political appointments, meanwhile, have practically abolished the autonomy of scientific bodies and of universities. Comparative data from global agencies show that Turkey's institutions now look more like those of Russia and Iran than those of members of the European Union, to which the country once aspired to join.

Although Erdogan bears primary political responsibility for Turkey's drift, he had the help of allies and other actors, many of which will *outlive* him. The institutional decline was the result of AKP practices as well as the erection of a state apparatus staffed largely by Gülenists. Even though Erdogan has now purged thousands of suspected Gülenists from the judiciary and police, the movement's opacity and cloak-and-dagger tactics mean that Gülenists could remain powerful in the bureaucracy and that any future government will have to reckon with (or perhaps even be beholden to) them.

In addition, Erdogan's regime is sustained by a large network of cronies, who feed on state largesse

and corrupt business deals. Although corruption has always plagued Turkish politics, the magnitude suggested by recent revelations boggles the mind of even the most jaded political observers. These networks of rent-seeking and patronage will not disappear overnight once Erdogan leaves. The recent [Soma tragedy](#), in which 301 coal miners lost their lives, opened a devastating window on AKP's economic model, which relies on workers inches from slavery and highly questionable practices involving business owners and state officials.

It is certainly true that Erdogan remains popular among a large segment of the Turkish population. He has presided over a period of significant upward social and economic mobility among the previously disadvantaged poor and pious. He has allowed some Kemalist taboos to loosen, facilitating freer public discussion of such matters as Kurdish rights and the Armenian genocide. But even Erdogan's hot and cold behavior during the Kurdish peace process, evidently driven by political expediency, shows that his motives are opportunistic rather than principled. Moreover, other divisions have deepened under Erdogan. The AKP's rhetoric has exacerbated the [Sunni-Alevi divide](#) and spawned xenophobia. Open [anti-Semitism](#) in pro-government media has reached levels not seen for a long time.

Acemoglu characterizes the destruction of the Kemalist elites as a necessary institutional rebalancing on the way to full democracy. But it is important to distinguish real democratization from a shift in power from one set of autocratic elites to another. One test is whether the power transition is achieved in a manner that conforms to democratic values -- or, alternatively, is antithetical to it. Erdogan and his Gülenist allies have badly failed this test. The massive [violations of the rule of law](#) in the political-military trials that helped him consolidate his power over the old guard and the pervasive tactics of censorship and harassment that have helped silence his critics in the media -- these were all strong indications that democracy was never the end goal. Instead of moderating the past authoritarian excesses of Kemalist secularists, these tactics have magnified them and entrenched them further within state practices. (Indeed they are now being used against Gülenists.)

It is therefore questionable whether "Erdogan's drift from democracy is a lamentable, but almost predictable, stage of Turkey's democratic transition," as Acemoglu suggests. It is difficult to view Erdogan's centralization of power, economic populism and identity politics as a strengthening of inclusive institutions on the way to democracy. These developments have simply produced different, and in many ways more pernicious authoritarian structures. They do not move the country closer to democracy; nor were they inevitable.

Even if Erdogan should fall from power, recent events in Cuba and Venezuela show that successors to authoritarian rulers are often willing to pick up the instruments of repression in order to protect the status quo. And the state of internal democracy within the AKP does not bode well for whom it might select to lead the party in the future. The concentration of power under Erdogan has squeezed out all but yes-men. The key components of a successful democratic system have largely bled out during his rule. If and when Turkey emerges as a democracy, it will do so despite, rather than because of, what has transpired under Erdogan's watch.

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Keep Calm, Erdogan

Steven A. Cook

(Umit Bektas / Courtesy Reuters) When Recep Tayyip Erdogan was mayor of Istanbul in the mid-1990s, he did what successful big city mayors do -- he made life a little easier for the millions of residents of his beautiful, maddening

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