Doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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Şeref Türkmen:

A Critical Analysis of the Rule of the AKP Governments in Turkey between 2002 and 2019

Doctoral (PhD) dissertation

Supervisor:

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Budapest, 15 August 2025

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the Ph.D. thesis entitled “A Critical Analysis of the Rule of the AKP Governments in Turkey between 2002 and 2019” is the result of my own research, except where otherwise stated. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part. Any previously published materials that have been used in this thesis, to the best of my knowledge, have been duly acknowledged unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged.

Signature Date:15.08.2025

ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers a critical analysis of the rule of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) in Türkiye between 2002 and 2019, situating the Turkish case within broader comparative debates on democratic backsliding, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian resilience. Employing a qualitative, comparative–historical case study approach, the research traces how the AKP transformed Türkiye's constitutional and institutional framework, eroded checks and balances, and consolidated executive power—culminating in the 2017 transition to a hyper-presidential system. Drawing on theories of illiberal democracy, competitive authoritarianism, delegative democracy, populism, majoritarianism, executive aggrandizement, autocratic legalism, and crisis exploitation, the analysis demonstrates that the AKP's consolidation was achieved not through a single rupture, but via incremental legal–institutional changes punctuated by crises such as the 2007 e-memorandum, the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the December 2013 corruption scandal, and the July 2016 coup attempt. The study finds that populist-nationalist legitimation, societal polarization, and patronage networks enabled a significant segment of the electorate to tolerate or endorse the erosion of liberal-democratic norms, while opposition forces operated under increasingly unequal conditions. Comparative perspectives with cases such as Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela reveal common patterns of electoral authoritarianism, as well as distinctive features rooted in Türkiye's tutelary legacy and sociopolitical cleavages. The dissertation advances the conceptualization of "majoritarian authoritarianism" to describe regimes that dismantle liberal-democratic safeguards under the guise of majority rule, contributing to scholarly understanding of how democracies can be dismantled from within while maintaining electoral legitimacy.

Keywords: Türkiye, AKP, democratic backsliding, competitive authoritarianism, populism, majoritarianism, constitutional change, crisis exploitation

ABSZTRAKT

A disszertáció kritikai elemzést nyújt az Igazság és Fejlődés Pártja (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) 2002 és 2019 közötti törökországi kormányzásáról, a demokratikus visszalépés, a hibrid rezsimek és az autoriter reziliencia globális összehasonlító vitáihoz kapcsolódva. Kvalitatív, összehasonlító–történeti esettanulmány módszerével vizsgálja, miként alakította át az AKP Törökország alkotmányos és intézményi kereteit, miként gyengítette az ellensúlyokat és összpontosította a végrehajtó hatalmat, amelynek csúcspontja a 2017-es „hiper-prezidenciális" rendszerre való áttérés volt. A kutatás az illiberális demokrácia, a versengő autoritarizmus, a delegatív demokrácia, a populizmus, a majoritarizmus, a végrehajtói hatalomkiterjesztés, az autokratikus legalizmus és a válságkihasználás elméleteire támaszkodik. Az elemzés rámutat, hogy az AKP konszolidációja nem egyetlen törésponttal, hanem fokozatos jogi–intézményi változtatások révén valósult meg, amelyeket olyan meghatározó válságok szakítottak meg, mint a 2007-es e-memorandum, a 2013-as Gezi parki tiltakozások, a 2013. decemberi korrupciós botrány és a 2016. júliusi puccskísérlet. A tanulmány megállapítja, hogy a populista–nacionalista legitimáció, a társadalmi polarizáció és a kliensrendszerek lehetővé tették a választópolgárok jelentős része számára a liberális-demokratikus normák leépítésének elfogadását vagy támogatását, miközben az ellenzéki erők egyre inkább egyenlőtlen feltételek között működtek. A Magyarországgal, Oroszországgal és Venezuelával végzett összehasonlító elemzés közös mintázatokat tár fel a választási autokráciákban, ugyanakkor azonosítja Törökország sajátos, „tutoriális" örökségét és társadalmi-politikai törésvonalait. A dolgozat bevezeti a „majoritárius autoritarizmus" fogalmát, amely olyan rendszereket ír le, amelyek a többségi uralom nevében számolják fel a liberális-demokratikus garanciákat, hozzájárulva annak tudományos megértéséhez, miként lehet a demokráciát belülről, választási legitimitás fenntartása mellett lebontani.

Kulcsszavak: Törökország, AKP, demokratikus visszalépés, versengő autoritarizmus, populizmus, majoritarizmus, alkotmányos változás, válságkihasználás

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Stands for	Explanation
AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi	Justice and Development Party, current ruling party
CHP	Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi	Republican People's Party, current main opposition party
DEVA	Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi	Democracy and Progress Party, ex-AKP opposition party
FETO	Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü	Fethullahist Terrorist Organization, an illegal network accused of orchestrating the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey
GP	Gelecek Partisi	Future Party, ex-AKP opposition party
HDP	Halkların Demokratik Partisi	Peoples' Democractic Party, pro-PKK opposition party
HSYK	Hâkimler ve Savcılar Yüksek Kurulu	Supreme Board Of Judges And Prosecutors
IYIP	İyi Parti	Good Party, nationalist opposition party
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê	Kurdistan Workers' Party, a Kurdish seperatist terrorist organization
SP	Saadet Partisi	Felicity Party, Islamic opposition party

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND: THE GLOBAL RISE OF ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

In recent years, scholars and observers have sounded the alarm about a worldwide democratic recession or backsliding of liberal democracy (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Numerous indicators point to this trend: Freedom House (2023) reports that global freedom has declined for seventeen consecutive years; V-Dem (2023) classifies electoral autocracies as now the most common regime type worldwide; and the Economist Intelligence Unit (2024) finds that fewer than half of the world's population now lives in any kind of democracy. Across various regions, a growing number of regimes maintain the form of democracy with regular elections and broad public participation while undermining its liberal safeguards such as checks and balances, civil liberties, and the rule of law: a phenomenon which was famously termed by Zakaria (1997) as the rise of "illiberal democracy"; describing how democratically elected regimes routinely ignore constitutional limits on their power and deprive their citizens of basic rights and freedoms. What was once assumed to be an inexorable global "third wave of democratization" has given way to a "third wave of autocratization", characterized by the gradual erosion of democratic institutions under a legal or electoral façade (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). In the 21st century, democratic decline has become less about abrupt regime change and more about the slow, methodical hollowing out of democratic norms by elected leaders (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In contrast to the blatant coups or totalitarian takeovers of the past, contemporary backsliding often occurs through subtle, incremental steps by elected leaders, in a process called "executive aggrandizement", wherein incumbents legally expand and abuse their powers at the expense of democratic checks (Bermeo, 2016). Authoritarian practices are increasingly cloaked in the rhetoric and procedures of democracy, what Varol (2015) calls "stealth authoritarianism".

Many scholars mention Hungary as an example for this global trend, where Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party have systematically dismantled institutional checks since 2010 by rewriting the constitution, capturing the courts and media, and proudly proclaiming their model an "illiberal democracy" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Scholars describe Hungary's post-2010 trajectory as a "retreating from democracy", a stark U-turn from the liberal norms it once espoused (Kornai, 2015). In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez's elected populist

government early in the 2000s ushered in an era of competitive authoritarian rule, where elections continued but the playing field was skewed through constitutional changes and repression of the opposition (Corrales & Penfold, 2011). Even established Western democracies have not been immune: the United States under President Donald Trump experienced serious challenges to democratic norms and practices. Trump's norm-defying, nationalist leadership – from openly attacking the press and the courts to casting doubt on electoral outcomes – exemplified how even a long-standing democracy could come under strain by an illiberal populist leader (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). By Trump's first term in office, it had become commonplace to observe that global democracy was "in decline", amid a broader context of rising populism and authoritarian-leaning governance across the world (Diamond, 2015). In fact, Freedom House data document 19 consecutive years of decline in global freedom scores, with many more countries seeing democratic deterioration than improvement over the past decade (Repucci, Slipowitz, & Shahbaz, 2023).

Against this global backdrop, Türkiye has emerged as a paradigmatic case of democratic erosion through competitive elections and populist legitimation. Alongside countries like Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Venezuela, Türkiye under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) exemplifies how an elected government can hollow out democratic institutions while maintaining electoral legitimacy. As Brownlee (Brownlee, 2016) observed, Türkiye's authoritarian descent "shakes up democratic theory" by showing that even a relatively wealthy, long-standing multi-party state can swiftly backslide under the right conditions. Indeed, by the late 2010s, many analysts agreed that Türkiye could no longer be classified as a democracy; instead, it had become a "competitive authoritarian" regime, one in which elections occur and some pluralism persists, but the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents through systemic abuse of state power (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016). By around 2014–2016, after years of creeping restrictions on opposition, media and the judiciary, Türkiye had "crossed a threshold, pushing the country below the minimum standards of democracy" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Crucially, this autocratization occurred not through a single cataclysmic event, but through a series of gradual steps by the AKP government and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, often legitimized by electoral victories and appeals to majority will.

1.2. WHY TÜRKIYE AND THE AKP? THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CASE

Türkiye's experience under the AKP is significant for both practical and scholarly reasons. First, Türkiye represents a large, geopolitically strategic nation that was once hailed as a model "Muslim-majority democracy." In the early 2000s, the AKP rose to power as a moderately Islamist yet reformist party, guiding Türkiye toward European Union accession talks and implementing democratic reforms (Öniş Z. , 2013). For a time, Türkiye seemed to be proof that democracy could thrive in a Muslim-majority society and that conservative religious parties could be compatible with liberal democratic norms (Müftüler-Baç & Keyman, 2012). However, over nearly two decades of continuous rule (2002 to the present), the AKP gradually transformed Türkiye's political system into something far different: an increasingly authoritarian order dominated by one party and one leader. Türkiye's democratic backslide has been especially striking because it happened under the watch of a party that won repeated free elections and enjoyed genuine popular support, rather than via a military coup or external imposition. In other words, Türkiye offers a vivid example of "authoritarianism from within" – the erosion of democracy by elected incumbents, not by traditional anti-democratic actors like the military. As such, the Turkish case challenges assumptions that electoral success equates to democratic legitimacy. It forces us to confront how the mandate of the majority can be invoked to dismantle the very freedoms and checks that define democracy.

Second, studying Türkiye is significant for comparative politics scholarship because it straddles multiple categories and defies easy classification. For much of its modern history, Türkiye was a hybrid regime of another kind – often described as a "tutelary democracy" or "guarded democracy", in which secular elites (especially the military) acted as ultimate guardians checking elected governments (Taş, 2015). The AKP's rise effectively broke the old military-bureaucratic tutelage, only to replace it with a new form of dominant-party tutelage. By examining Türkiye's trajectory, we gain insight into how a state can transition from one form of hybrid regime (military tutelage) to another (populist one-party dominance) rather than a linear path to liberal democracy (Castaldo, 2018). Moreover, Türkiye under the AKP features a potent mix of factors seen in various backsliding cases – strong populist rhetoric, religion-infused nationalism, prolonged single-party dominance, and even a dramatic failed coup attempt – all within a country that still holds regular elections and maintains some opposition forces. This makes it an invaluable case to probe questions about institutional resilience versus vulnerability under stress, and about the role of society and ideology in enabling authoritarian practices.

Importantly, this dissertation approaches the Turkish case from a critical stance toward the AKP regime. The analysis is normatively grounded in the conviction that the political changes in Türkiye under AKP rule have amounted to a serious erosion of democracy and freedom – a negative development for Turkish citizens and for democratic ideals generally. Rather than treating the AKP's actions as value-neutral, the study critically interrogates how those actions conflict with principles of liberal democracy, constitutionalism, and pluralism. This critical perspective is not a partisan one, but one rooted in democratic theory and human rights norms. By taking a critical view, the dissertation aims to hold the AKP's record up to scholarly scrutiny, highlighting undemocratic practices and their consequences. At the same time, the goal is to go beyond mere criticism or journalism; the study seeks to explain the AKP's authoritarian turn in a rigorous, scholarly manner – analyzing the underlying causes, mechanisms, and implications. This balanced but openly critical approach serves a larger purpose: understanding how and why a democracy can unravel under elected leadership, so that we might glean lessons for preventing such backsliding elsewhere.

Finally, the significance of the Turkish case extends to broader theoretical debates. Türkiye's slide toward competitive authoritarianism has frequently been cited in comparative studies as emblematic of the contemporary crisis in democracy. While it was not mentioned in Levitsky and Way's 2010 work "Competitive Authoritarianism", Türkiye is mentioned alongside countries like Hungary and Russia in more recent works on the subject (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; V-Dem Institute, 2023). By deeply examining Türkiye, this research will contribute to those debates, testing and refining theories about hybrid regimes, populism, and institutional change. For example, does Türkiye confirm the notion that executive power concentration (as warned by theorists like Juan Linz (1990) in the context of presidentialism) is inherently perilous to democracy? Does it illustrate the phenomenon of "stealth authoritarianism", whereby legal mechanisms are used to stifle opposition (Varol, 2015)? How does Türkiye's experience inform our understanding of the relationship between economic development and democratization, given that it defied the optimistic expectation that a more affluent, globalized society would only democratize further? In grappling with such questions, the dissertation positions the Turkish case as both uniquely instructive (due to its particular history and context) and broadly relevant to global patterns of democratic decline.

1.3. RESEARCH AIM, QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

In light of the trends and significance outlined above, this dissertation's overarching aim is to develop a comparative framework for understanding the rise of illiberal, competitive authoritarian regimes in the 21st century – through the in-depth examination of how Türkiye's AKP regime gained and maintained power via majoritarian appeals and gradual institutional erosion. In essence, the dissertation uses the Turkish case to shed light on the mechanisms by which elected leaders can undermine democracy from within, and to draw lessons that apply to other cases of democratic backsliding around the world.

This dissertation claims AKP consolidated authoritarian control in Türkiye while maintaining electoral legitimacy and suggests Turkish case is an exemplary case demonstrating the mechanisms of democratic backsliding in competitive authoritarian regimes. In accordance, it proposes three interconnected hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: The AKP's transformation of Türkiye's constitutional and institutional framework, particularly through the shift to a presidential system, has systematically eroded checks and balances and consolidated executive power. The 2017 constitutional amendments, which shifted Türkiye to a presidential system, were a capstone in this process, enabling Erdoğan to maintain control over all three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judiciary) and limiting the capacity of opposition forces to challenge his authority. This shift represents a classic case of executive aggrandizement (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018).
- Hypothesis 2: The AKP has utilized populist and nationalist rhetoric to create a "majoritarian authoritarian" regime, whereby electoral legitimacy is framed as a carte blanche for unchecked governance. The AKP's claim to represent "the people" has allowed it to justify authoritarian practices as necessary defenses of the nation's will, especially in moments of crisis. As a result, the electorate has shown significant tolerance for or complicity in the erosion of democratic norms, particularly among conservative and rural sectors. This hypothesis explores how populism operates as both a tool of political consolidation and as a means of framing authoritarianism as legitimate in the eyes of voters, even as democratic institutions are hollowed out.
- Hypothesis 3: Key crises like the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the 2013 corruption scandal, and the 2016 coup attempt functioned as critical junctures that enabled the AKP to accelerate its authoritarian trajectory. These moments of crisis allowed Erdoğan to consolidate power by invoking exceptional measures, including purges, emergency

decrees, and constitutional overhauls. The political responses to these crises represent a form of "autocratic legalism", where the regime uses legal instruments and crisis-induced mandates to consolidate power, bypassing institutional checks and formal democratic processes. This hypothesis posits that crises are not only catalysts for regime consolidation but also key mechanisms through which democratic backsliding is institutionalized.

These hypotheses can be tested by answering five interrelated research questions, each targeting a specific dimension of the problem. Together, they cover the constitutional, institutional, sociopolitical, crisis-driven, and comparative aspects of the AKP's rule:

- Research Question 1: How has the AKP reshaped Türkiye's constitutional and institutional framework – particularly through the shift from a parliamentary system to a presidential system – to erode checks and balances and concentrate executive power? This question examines formal changes to the political system, such as constitutional amendments and reforms, which have enabled power consolidation.
- Research Question 2: To what extent have Türkiye's democratic institutions (e.g. judiciary, electoral system, civil service, media) demonstrated resilience or vulnerability to manipulation by the ruling party, and what mechanisms have facilitated or hindered authoritarian consolidation? Here the focus is on how institutions have functioned in practice under AKP pressure – identifying where institutions bent or broke, and any instances of pushback or survival.
- Research Question 3: How has the AKP employed populist and nationalist discourses to legitimize authoritarian practices, and what factors have made significant segments of the electorate tolerant of (or complicit in) these transformations? This question delves into the role of ideology, propaganda, and societal cleavages in enabling the AKP's rule. It asks why many voters continued to support the party despite clear authoritarian tendencies.
- Research Question 4: How have moments of crisis functioned as critical junctures in the AKP's authoritarian trajectory, enabling institutional restructuring and political repression that accelerated democratic backsliding? This addresses the opportunistic use of crises – whether spontaneous or engineered – to justify extraordinary measures that entrench authoritarian power.

- Research Question 5: How does the Turkish case of democratic backsliding under the AKP compare to other cases of competitive authoritarianism (such as Hungary, Russia, or Venezuela), and what insights does it offer for theories of hybrid regimes and electoral autocracy? This question explicitly places Türkiye in a comparative context, aiming to identify common patterns and unique features, thereby contributing to generalizable knowledge about illiberal regimes.

These questions collectively guide the research through multiple levels of analysis – from the macro-structural (constitutional system) to the micro-political (voter attitudes and discourse), and from historical events (crises) to cross-national comparison. By answering them, the dissertation seeks to build a comprehensive explanation of Türkiye's democratic backsliding and to propose analytical tools that can be applied to similar cases elsewhere.

1.4. APPROACH AND INTERDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORK

Testing the above hypotheses by answering the mentioned research questions requires an approach that is grounded in comparative politics but also transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries. The dissertation adopts a comparative-historical case study strategy, using Türkiye as an in-depth case to generate insights for broader theory (in line with qualitative case study methods of theory-development (George & Bennet, 2005)). The methodology involves extensive literature analysis and process-tracing of political developments in Türkiye, combined with a comparative assessment against other country cases in the final analysis. Crucially, the research design is iterative and inductive – following a snowball approach in exploring sources, where initial readings lead to further sources, until reaching saturation in understanding each sub-topic.

What sets this study apart is its explicit interdisciplinary integration of political science with political theory and history. While rooted in the comparative politics literature on hybrid regimes, authoritarianism, and democratization, the analysis also draws on political theory and philosophy to illuminate deeper patterns and normative implications. For example, the project bridges classic theoretical warnings about democracy's vulnerabilities with the empirical realities of modern Türkiye (Linz, 1990; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Zakaria F. , 1997). Political theorists since Alexis de Tocqueville have cautioned about the "tyranny of the majority" – the danger that unconstrained majority rule can trample minority rights and rule of law. Tocqueville wrote that it is a "detestable maxim that the people have a right to do anything" if not checked

by justice (Tocqueville, 2000). This insight underpins the dissertation's concept of "majoritarian authoritarianism" – the idea that the AKP cloaked its autocratic moves in majoritarian democratic legitimacy. Likewise, the German legal theorist Carl Schmitt's (2005) notion that "sovereign is he who decides on the exception" resonates with the AKP's behavior of declaring states of emergency and bypassing laws during crises. Schmitt argued that by invoking an extraordinary threat, a leader can step outside normal legal bounds – a dynamic disturbingly evident in Türkiye after the 2016 coup attempt, when Erdoğan ruled by decree under emergency law for two years. By incorporating such theoretical perspectives, the dissertation examines Türkiye not just as a case of institutional change, but as an instance of broader phenomena concerning sovereignty, legitimacy, and the erosion of liberal norms.

On the empirical front, the dissertation's theoretical framework will clarify key concepts and typologies relevant to Türkiye's regime. These include:

- Illiberal democracy: systems with competitive elections but severe deficits in civil liberties and checks and balances (Zakaria, 1997). This term captures regimes like Türkiye that retain formal democracy (elections) while undermining liberal principles.
- Competitive authoritarianism: regimes that are essentially authoritarian in outcome, yet maintain a façade of democratic competition (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Türkiye is analyzed within this rubric, which helps distinguish it from both full democracies and outright dictatorships.
- Delegative democracy: As described by O'Donnell (1994), electoral regimes where a leader, once elected, claims an unchecked mandate to govern as they see fit, with weak horizontal accountability. Early AKP Türkiye (especially under Erdoğan's style) has been described in these terms – a presidency or premiership that governs in a plebiscitary fashion, marginalizing institutional oversight.
- Electoral authoritarianism: another strand of theory outlining how elections occur in autocratic contexts but are "the menu of manipulation", heavily rigged in favor of incumbents (Schedler, 2002; 2006)). This concept helps analyze Türkiye's elections that continued under AKP but grew increasingly unfair (e.g. media bias, intimidation, arrest of opposition leaders).
- Populism: the dissertation employs insights from theorists like Cas Mudde (2004) and Jan-Werner Müller (2016) to understand populism as a "thin-centered" ideology that pitches a virtuous "people" against corrupt or alien "elites". Populism is inherently anti-

pluralist – it claims exclusive representation of the people – and thus often becomes a tool for illiberal leaders to justify concentrating power (Müller, 2016). In Türkiye, Erdoğan's populist narrative (nationalist, Islamist-inflected) has been central to legitimizing the AKP's dominance, and this study analyzes it in depth. Mudde's (2004) concept of the "populist zeitgeist" and Müller's (2016) work on populism's threat to democracy provide a lens for interpreting AKP discourse.

- Majoritarianism: a belief that electoral majority support (50%+1) entitles the government to act with virtually no checks or compromise. Scholars note that the AKP leadership, especially Erdoğan, embraced a strong majoritarian view of democracy – equating winning elections with carte blanche to govern unencumbered (Özbudun, 2014). This ethos is contrasted in the study with liberal-democratic notions that majority rule must be bounded by rule of law and minority rights.
- Institutional theories: The framework also draws on theories of institutions and constitutionalism. For instance, "constitutional capture" or "authoritarian constitutionalism" (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018) are concepts used to interpret how the AKP systematically rewrote rules to entrench itself. Juan Linz's (1990) classic thesis on "perils of presidentialism" – that presidential systems can foster winner-takes-all politics and gridlock, potentially destabilizing democracy – is considered in context of Türkiye's 2017 switch to a hyper-presidential regime. Additionally, the idea of "tutelary powers" and legacies of military guardianship are invoked to understand Türkiye's starting conditions.
- Historical institutionalism: To situate critical turning points, the project employs a historical-institutionalist approach, identifying critical junctures (Cappoccia & Kelemen, 2007) and path-dependent processes. Selected crisis moments in Türkiye is analyzed as a potential critical juncture that altered the path of the regime, consistent with the notion that conjunctural events can radically reshape institutional trajectories.

By blending these diverse theoretical strands, the dissertation transcends a single-disciplinary analysis. It treats the Turkish case not only as a political development to be explained, but as a prism through which to explore enduring questions about democracy: How do ideas about the "will of the people" get weaponized against liberal democracy? What institutional safeguards are most essential to prevent elected autocracy? How do social and cultural factors (like religion or polarization) interact with formal institutions in democratic erosion? The approach is thus

holistic, examining legal structures, political behaviors, ideologies, and historical contingencies in tandem.

Methodologically, the research rests on qualitative analysis of texts and events. It engages extensively with academic literature, including prior studies on Turkish politics and general theories of democratization and authoritarianism. It also analyzes primary sources such as constitutional texts, legal documents, speeches, party manifestos, and international reports (e.g. EU progress reports, Freedom House assessments, OSCE election observation reports) to substantiate claims about institutional changes and conditions in Türkiye. By comparing these findings with secondary accounts from other countries' experiences, the dissertation ensures that its conclusions about Türkiye are informed by – and contribute to – a global understanding of illiberal regimes.

1.5. SIGNIFICANCE AND ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

Understanding the case of Türkiye under the AKP is not just an exercise in documenting one country's political decline; it carries broader theoretical and practical significance. This dissertation aims to push the boundaries of existing knowledge in at least three interconnected areas: theories of hybrid regimes, the role of populism in democratic erosion, and the strategic use of crises by incumbents. In doing so, it offers several original contributions:

First, the dissertation proposes a new conceptual framework termed "majoritarian authoritarianism". This framework encapsulates how an elected regime can systematically dismantle liberal-democratic checks and balances under the guise of majority rule. Türkiye's AKP regime serves as the template for this concept: it claimed to embody the "national will" of the (religious conservative) majority, and used that claim to override institutional safeguards and oppositional voices. This contribution refines existing typologies of competitive authoritarianism by highlighting the centrality of majoritarian legitimation. Traditional competitive authoritarian theory has emphasized uneven playing fields and institutional manipulation; the majoritarian authoritarianism concept adds nuance by showing how invoking democratic legitimacy (elections, referenda, the rhetoric of "the people's choice") can be just as powerful a tool for autocrats as outright coercion (Levitsky & Way, 2010). This idea builds on and extends earlier notions like delegative democracy and illiberal democracy, synthesizing them into a cohesive framework that can be applied to any case where electoral victories are

used to justify authoritarian behavior. By formalizing this concept, the dissertation provides scholars a sharper lens to analyze other cases where democracy erodes amid claims of majority mandate.

Second, the detailed empirical demonstration of the nexus between populist governance and institutional backsliding. While scholars like Mudde (2004) or Müller (2016) have asserted in theory that populism poses a threat to democracy because of its anti-pluralist stance, this study gives concrete shape to that claim through the Turkish case. It shows step-by-step how populist discourse and polarization facilitated the weakening of institutions: for instance, how branding opponents as enemies of the people made crackdowns appear acceptable, or how framing independent media as "traitors" paved the way for censorship and takeovers. By weaving together Türkiye's socio-political narrative with its institutional changes, the dissertation illustrates precisely how populism can normalize authoritarian practices in the eyes of a significant portion of the population. This goes beyond generic statements about populism's dangers – it uncovers the mechanisms of consent and acquiescence in democratic erosion. The Turkish evidence thereby enriches broader populism studies, suggesting that we must pay attention not only to populist leaders' rhetoric but also to its reception among citizens and its use in justifying institutional reforms. In sum, the research contributes to democratic theory by empirically validating the often-theorized but under-documented process by which "populist legitimation" erodes liberal-democratic norms.

Third, the analysis of crisis exploitation as a driver of regime change. The dissertation systematically examines how the AKP government leveraged critical moments – mass protests, corruption scandals, security threats, a coup attempt – to introduce extraordinary measures that permanently altered Türkiye's institutional equilibrium. It conceptualizes a pattern wherein each crisis becomes a catalyst for what Scheppele (2018) term "autocratic legalism" – using legal tools in exceptional times to fortify authoritarian rule. Türkiye's timeline provides a near textbook example: the 2016 failed coup was immediately followed by a state of emergency and the groundwork was laid for an executive presidency (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Freedom House, 2017). By comparing these tactics to similar ones abroad, the dissertation posits a more generalizable "crisis exploitation theory": aspiring autocrats often wait for (or even manufacture) crises to justify steps that would otherwise be politically or legally unacceptable (Fish, 2005; Scheppele K. L., 2018; Somer, 2016). This insight adds to the literature on democratic backsliding by highlighting that backsliding is not always a steady, gradual process;

it often proceeds in lurches, with inflection points at moments of national stress. The original contribution here is twofold: empirically, a richly documented account of crisis-enabled autocratization in Türkiye; and theoretically, a proposed model of how critical junctures can accelerate or "lock in" authoritarian shifts – a model that could apply to other cases and inform early-warning criteria for democratic breakdown.

Lastly, in addition to these specific points, the dissertation's approach itself – blending empirical political science with normative political theory and historical perspective – is a contribution in demonstrating how crossing disciplinary boundaries can yield new insights. By engaging thinkers like Tocqueville, Gramsci, or Schmitt in conversation with contemporary data, the study offers a richer understanding of phenomena like majority tyranny or state of exception in a real-world context (Gramsci, 1971; Tocqueville, 2000; Schmitt, 2005). This synthesis produces insights that are not only analytical but also normative: it prompts reflection on the conditions that allow a free society to slide into authoritarianism, and on what might prevent or reverse such a slide. While primarily diagnostic, the study implicitly speaks to pro-democratic strategies – for instance, the importance of maintaining judicial independence, media pluralism, and civil society strength as bulwarks against would-be autocrats. By examining where those bulwarks failed in Türkiye, it indirectly suggests how they might be reinforced elsewhere. In this sense, the dissertation contributes to the broader discourse on democratic resilience. It underscores that democracy's survival depends not just on formal institutions, but on political culture, leadership norms, and informed citizenry. The warning from the Turkish case is clear: democracies can die in plain sight, through the ballot box and legal decrees, unless constitutional liberalism and minority rights are actively defended (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Zakaria F. , 1997). Recognizing this reality is the first step toward addressing it.

In sum, by critically dissecting the Turkish experience, this study offers fresh perspectives on how we conceptualize and respond to the contemporary crisis of democracy. Its contributions – a refined framework of majoritarian authoritarianism, an empirical mapping of populism's impact on institutions, and a theory of crisis-driven autocratization – are intended to advance scholarly debates on hybrid regimes and to inform policymakers and citizens committed to safeguarding democracy. Understanding why and how Türkiye's democracy was lost holds lessons that extend far beyond Türkiye's borders, illuminating the vulnerabilities of other democracies facing the illiberal tide.

1.6. ROADMAP OF THE DISSERTATION

After setting the stage by outlining the research problem, context and approach, the dissertation will continue with a "historical background" section which will provide a concise political history of Türkiye under AKP from 2002 to 2019. It will chronicle the AKP's rise from a reformist newcomer to the dominant force in Turkish politics, highlighting key turning points. By recounting crucial events, historical background part sets up the empirical basis for subsequent analysis, illustrating how Türkiye went from a "flawed democracy" in the 2000s to what Freedom House (2023) now rates as "Not Free" or effectively an electoral autocracy by the late 2010s. This historical context will be continually referenced in later chapters to anchor theoretical arguments in real developments.

As the third chapter, the theoretical framework will follow. This chapter lays out the conceptual lenses and scholarly literature that inform the study. It defines and differentiates the key regime concepts relevant to Türkiye's case: illiberal democracy, competitive authoritarianism, electoral (or hybrid) authoritarianism, and delegative democracy, drawing on theorists like Zakaria (1997), Levitsky & Way (2010), Schedler (2006), and O'Donnell (1994), the chapter engages with debates on where Türkiye fits within these typologies. It also explicates the concepts of populism and majoritarianism as central ideological dimensions of the AKP's rule, referencing Mudde's (2004) and Müller's (2016) works to describe populism's hallmark features and citing Turkish scholars on the AKP's majoritarian understanding of democracy. Additionally, theoretical framework section integrates political theory perspectives: it discusses Tocqueville's (2000) warning about the tyranny of the majority in democratic systems, and Carl Schmitt's (2005) theory of sovereignty and exceptions, to provide a philosophical context for Türkiye's experience. It touches on Juan Linz's (1990) critique of presidentialism – to frame the significance of Türkiye's system change – and on Gramscian notions of cultural hegemony insofar as the AKP has sought to reshape Türkiye's cultural narrative (e.g. neo-Ottomanism, religious conservatism) (Gramsci, 1971). By assembling this interdisciplinary theoretical toolkit, theoretical framework establishes the foundation for analyzing empirical findings in later chapters. It ensures that the analysis is grounded in existing knowledge while also identifying gaps – for example, noting that existing hybrid regime theory has not fully accounted for the role of populist legitimation, a gap this dissertation aims to address.

Then comes the literature review, which offers a critical review of scholarly literature specific to Türkiye's democratic backsliding and related themes. Organized thematically, it surveys

debates and findings from academic studies, thus situating the dissertation within the scholarly discourse. First, it starts with reviewing how different authors have classified Türkiye's regime trajectory. It contrasts works that saw the early AKP era as a "diminished democracy" or "delegative democracy" with those that later labeled Türkiye as a competitive authoritarian regime once unfair practices became entrenched. It highlights the timeline of shifting scholarly consensus regarding Türkiye's journey towards authoritarianism. This discussion ties Türkiye into the broader literature on hybrid regimes and democratic backsliding globally. Second, literature review focuses on the AKP's majoritarian political ethos and how prolonged one-party dominance eroded institutional checks while giving counterarguments on the same point of view, suggesting additional factors at play in Türkiye. The section reviews literature on what those factors were. The concept of "stealth authoritarianism" is introduced here to frame how legal and procedural means were used to subvert democracy behind a façade of normalcy. Third, it focuses on works studying the AKP's populist narrative and public opinion. It covers scholarly interpretations of Erdoğan's rhetoric as a blend of religious populism and Turkish nationalism that divides society into "the people" vs. "enemies". The literature review synthesizes findings on why a large segment of voters tolerated or supported the AKP's illiberal turn. Additionally, studies that compare Turkish populism to other cases like Kirchner's Argentina are reviewed to underline unique and common elements of the AKP's appeal. This section shows consensus in the literature that populist legitimation was a crucial "soft power" aspect of Türkiye's authoritarian shift – enabling coercive moves to be more readily accepted by much of the public. Fourth, comes the analyses of specific crises in Türkiye's 2010s and their effect in accelerating authoritarian trends. References are made to comparative works that note how would-be authoritarians often capitalize on crises to grab power, reinforcing that Türkiye fits a broader pattern. By reviewing these studies, literature review highlights the scholarly understanding of crises as enablers of autocratization and sets up the dissertation's own analysis of those episodes. Lastly, the literature review concludes with a brief look at works explicitly comparing Türkiye to other cases of democratic backsliding. These comparisons in the literature underscore common patterns (populist nationalism, media capture, etc.) and help identify what aspects of Türkiye's case require further explanation. Overall, literature review establishes what is already known in academia about Türkiye's political changes and where debates lie, providing a springboard for the dissertation's subsequent original analysis. It ensures that the research is built upon a solid foundation of prior scholarship and clarifies the contribution of this study relative to existing knowledge.

Following, comes the first analytical chapter regarding constitutional and institutional transformation under AKP rule. It examines in depth how the AKP altered Türkiye's formal institutional framework to consolidate power. The chapter documents the stepwise constitutional changes and key legal reforms that have incrementally concentrated authority in the executive branch. It starts by detailing major constitutional interventions that allowed AKP to have a powerful presidency through popular mandate and more control over judiciary. Then beyond these formal constitutional changes. This chapter also delves into legislative and administrative measures that the AKP used to reconfigure the state, namely "neutralization of the military" which systematically removed the Turkish Armed Forces as a political veto player; "judicial capture", how the judiciary was purged and packed, leaving courts largely submissive to the executive; "civil service and bureaucracy", how the AKP gradually politicized the bureaucracy, replacing technocrats and non-partisan officials with loyal cadres; "control of regulatory institutions and state agencies", institutions like the Central Bank, broadcasting regulator, election board, and state media being brought under executive influence, ensuring that formal "independent institutions" could no longer serve as checks. The chapter references to comparative examples to show Türkiye's place in a global pattern.

Next, the dissertation shifts focus from formal constitutional structure to the actual performance of Türkiye's democratic institutions under AKP rule with Chapter 6. It investigates which institutions proved most vulnerable to manipulation and which showed any signs of resilience, thereby painting a detailed picture of how authoritarian consolidation occurred (or was contested) in practice. The chapter is structured by institutional sectors: "the judiciary and rule of law", seeing how judiciary stopped serving as checks; "elections and electoral integrity", examining whether elections continued to serve as a genuine democratic check; "media and civil society", documenting the shrinkage of independent media and the pressures on civil society and academia; "parliament and political opposition", how the Parliament's constitutional powers diminished. By analyzing each of these institutional domains, Chapter 6 identifies which guardrails of democracy failed and how: the judiciary was subjugated, the media muzzled, the civil service politicized, etc., through deliberate AKP strategies. It also isolates factors that slightly mitigated complete authoritarian consolidation, allowing the opposition to survive. Essentially, it paints the picture of a regime that became dominant but not omnipotent, able to crush dissent in many arenas but still contending with electoral politics and societal pushback to a degree. This sets the stage for deeper exploration of why a segment of society went along and how the regime handled critical challenges.

After that, the coming chapter focuses on populist legitimation and the people's tolerance of authoritarianism, turning to the ideological and sociological underpinnings of the AKP's enduring support. It analyzes how the AKP's populist and nationalist discourse legitimized its authoritarian measures, and why a significant portion of Türkiye's electorate accepted or even endorsed the erosion of liberal-democratic norms. The chapter combines discourse analysis with insights from surveys and political sociology to unravel this puzzle. The chapter begins by dissecting the content of Erdoğan and the AKP's populist rhetoric over time; then ties this discourse to populism theory, noting how populists claim exclusive representation of a homogenous "people" and delegitimize all opponents as corrupt or anti-people. Then moves on to factors driving popular acceptance; the core of Chapter 7 is an analysis of why large segments of the Turkish population found the AKP's narrative convincing and remained loyal even as the regime's authoritarian tendencies became clear. It explores several factors like "identity and values", "performance legitimacy and economic benefits", "fear and security", "information domination and media", "sociopolitical cleavages". Interweaving these factors, Chapter 7 argues that the AKP's sustained popular support was co-produced by society in a sense. Authoritarian changes were not imposed top-down against a uniformly unwilling populace; rather, a sizable constituency was actively or passively on board, due either to conviction or convenience. This complicity of a segment of the citizenry is a hallmark of modern populist-authoritarian regimes and is crucial to explaining their longevity. The chapter underscores that democratic backsliding is not purely an elite-driven process; it often involves populist mobilization and the consent of a significant portion of the governed. The chapter concludes by noting that of course not all Turks supported the AKP, roughly half of society remained opposed, forming a deeply polarized landscape. It touches on how this polarization meant that each side (pro- vs anti-AKP) lived in different realities, entrenching the divide. The findings in Chapter 7 ultimately show that the AKP's populist legitimation strategy, combined with certain socio-economic conditions, succeeded in neutralizing mass resistance and even enlisting popular approval for authoritarian moves. This dynamic is a key piece of the puzzle of how the AKP got away with dismantling democracy while still winning elections.

Then comes pivotal moments in the AKP's authoritarian trajectory, focusing on the role of critical events and crises in accelerating or consolidating the AKP's authoritarian grip. It provides a chronological, case-by-case analysis of major crises, examining how each was leveraged by the ruling party to justify extraordinary measures or institutional changes that furthered democratic backsliding. Starting with 2007's "e-memorandum" and presidential

succession crises, it covers all crucial moments which were instrumental to AKP's power grab and tightening grip over state institutions until 2017's constitutional referendum and the shift to presidential regime and by linking those to two related theories, points out the authorization pattern and compares this pattern with the other cases abroad, suggesting that the Turkish case exemplifies a common script in populist authoritarian regimes.

As the last analytical chapter, Chapter 9 broadens the dissertation's lens to explicitly tackle Research Question 5, comparing Türkiye's experience under the AKP with other prominent cases of democratic backsliding and hybrid regime consolidation. The goal is to identify both common patterns and unique idiosyncrasies, thereby situating what we've learned from Türkiye into the wider theoretical map of contemporary authoritarianism. The chapter focuses on a few main comparative cases, notably Hungary (Orbán), Russia (Putin), and Venezuela (Chávez/Maduro) with references to others like Poland or India where relevant. The chapter compares these regimes on several aspects like how they eliminated checks in various fields from jurisprudence to media while maintaining a façade of democracy; the narratives and ideological justifications they used; how critical junctures and international contexts affected each regime; degree and style of personalization of power and regime; and outcomes and signs of resilience or change. Summarizing across cases, Chapter 9 extracts broader theoretical insights.

Finally, the conclusion chapter synthesizes the findings and reflects on their implications. It revisits the research questions and hypotheses; then summarizes how each was answered:

- How the AKP systematically concentrated power by rewriting rules and capturing institutions;
- The (limited) resilience and significant vulnerabilities of Türkiye's institutions;
- How populist discourse and societal cleavages enabled the authoritarian turn;
- How critical crises served as catalysts in the process;
- Türkiye and its common patterns with other cases.

The conclusion then discusses the theoretical implications of the Turkish case. It highlights the original contributions of the dissertation (as outlined above) and how they add to academic discourse. The dissertation concludes on a normative and forward-looking note. It reflects on what Türkiye's story means for the "broader quest of safeguarding democracy" in the 21st century. The tone is sober – Türkiye's case is a warning that democracy can die by a thousand

cuts with popular applause – but also cautiously optimistic in that understanding these dynamics points to potential remedies. In essence, the dissertation ends by framing Türkiye's experience as both a cautionary tale and a lesson plan: it starkly illustrates democracy's vulnerabilities in our age, while also informing the strategies that might help protect or revive democratic governance moving forward.

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF AKP RULE (2002–2019)

2.1. AKP'S ASCENDANCE AND EARLY REFORMS (2002–2007)

The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) came to power in Türkiye's 2002 general elections amid a climate of political and economic upheaval. A devastating financial crash in 2001 had discredited the long-ruling coalition parties and opened space for a new force. The AKP, founded in 2001 by reformist ex-Islamists including Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, won 34% of the vote in 2002 – enough for a two-thirds parliamentary majority due to Türkiye's high electoral threshold and the collapse of other parties (Çarkoğlu, 2002). This sweeping victory brought to power a party with Islamist roots but a professed commitment to democratic reform and EU accession. In its early years, the AKP indeed pursued a range of liberalizing changes aligned with European Union norms. Major reforms between 2002 and 2005 curtailed the military's influence in civilian politics and expanded civil liberties: for example, the AKP government limited the army's role in the National Security Council and abolished the state security courts, introduced new protections for Kurdish cultural and language rights, and lifted some restrictions on religious expression (including easing the unofficial ban on headscarves in universities) (Müftüler-Baç & Keyman, 2012; Öniş Z. , Sharing power: Turkey's democratization challenge under the AKP hegemony., 2013). Many of these steps were lauded internationally as evidence of democratization. The EU formally opened accession negotiations with Türkiye in October 2005, crediting Ankara's progress on meeting the "Copenhagen criteria" for democracy and human rights (Öniş Z. , Sharing power: Turkey's democratization challenge under the AKP hegemony., 2013). For a time, Türkiye was hailed as a model "Muslim-majority democracy", and the AKP held up as proof that a conservative religious-oriented party could govern in line with liberal democratic norms (Müftüler-Baç & Keyman, 2012).

Beneath these democratic reforms, however, the seeds of an eventual majoritarian turn were present. The AKP's leadership, enjoying broad public support, increasingly saw itself as the embodiment of the "national will." Early in its tenure the party cultivated a broad coalition of Islamists, center-right conservatives, business liberals, and even some reform-minded liberals – groups eager to break the grip of Türkiye's old secular elite (Yavuz, 2006). The secular establishment, consisting of the military, high judiciary, and bureaucratic cadres, had long acted as guardians of the Republic's Kemalist order. Initially, the confrontation between the AKP and

these tutelary powers was muted: then-Prime Minister Erdoğan emphasized the party's pro-Western, pro-EU stance and avoided overt Islamization of policy. Nonetheless, as the AKP entrenched itself, tensions with secular institutions mounted. By 2007, Türkiye's long-standing "tutelary democracy",a system in which elected leaders governed under the watchful check of the army and courts was giving way to a new power dynamic (Taş, 2015). The AKP's popular mandate emboldened it to challenge those unelected veto players, setting the stage for a series of confrontations that would profoundly reshape civil-military and state-religion relations.

A pivotal showdown came with the presidential succession in 2007. Traditionally, Türkiye's presidency had been held by staunch secularists (often ex-generals or high court justices) who provided a check on governments. When President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's term ended, the AKP's decision to nominate Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül – a party co-founder with an Islamist background – was met with fierce resistance from secularist forces. The prospect of an AKP figure (and an openly devout Muslim whose spouse wore the headscarf) assuming the presidency galvanized the opposition. Huge "Republican rallies" erupted in spring 2007, with hundreds of thousands of secular-minded Turks demonstrating against what they perceived as an Islamist encroachment on a sacrosanct secular post (Çınar, 2008). Behind the scenes, the military leadership signaled its alarm. On April 27, 2007, the Turkish General Staff posted an unusual midnight memorandum on its website – immediately dubbed the "e-memorandum" – declaring the army's readiness to act as "the absolute defender of secularism" and warning against any erosion of the Republic's core values (Villelabeitia, 2009). This implied threat of a coup (albeit delivered electronically) sought to derail Gül's election. Simultaneously, the opposition Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) appealed to the Constitutional Court, which in late April invalidated the first round of the parliamentary vote for president by upholding a procedural requirement (the 367-quorum rule) that had never before been applied (Yazıcı, 2017). With the presidential vote effectively blocked by judicial ruling and military pressure mounting, Türkiye plunged into a serious regime crisis.

Erdoğan responded by calling an early general election for July 2007, framing it as a referendum on civilian democracy versus military tutelage. The gambit paid off: the AKP rode a wave of public sympathy and outrage over the military's intervention, campaigning on the slogan "the national will" against unelected elites. The party won an even more resounding victory – 46.6% of the vote, translating to 341 of 550 seats in Parliament (Aydın-Düzgit, 2012). Voters from the conservative heartland in particular viewed the e-memorandum and court maneuver as illegitimate attempts by the old guard to subvert their elected government. As one observer

noted, “the army’s e-coup was answered by the people’s memorandum on Election Day” (Kaya & Cornell, 2008). Buoyed by this mandate, the AKP quickly secured Gül’s election as president once the new parliament convened. Gül took office on August 28, 2007, marking the first time an AKP figure (and former Islamist) assumed one of the republic’s two top offices (Aydın-Düzgit, 2012). The confrontation of 2007 thus ended with the AKP politically stronger than ever. Erdoğan cast the outcome as a triumph of democracy over tutelary forces, declaring that the voters had “delivered their memorandum” to those who would block the elected government (Yabanci, 2016).

Emboldened by victory, the AKP moved swiftly to preempt future challenges from the establishment. In fall 2007, it proposed constitutional amendments to change how presidents are chosen – shifting from a parliamentary vote to direct popular elections. This reform was aimed squarely at preventing episodes like the 367-quorum crisis from recurring. When the existing President (Sezer) vetoed the amendment, the government took it to a referendum in October 2007, where it passed with 69% approval (Özbudun, 2015). Though the new system would not take effect until the next scheduled presidential election, its political message was clear: the AKP was reallocating power from elites to “the people”, reinforcing its majoritarian interpretation of democracy. The years 2002–2007 thus saw the AKP achieve electoral hegemony and begin leveraging it to dismantle the military–bureaucratic tutelage that had constrained Turkish democracy (Müftüler-Baç & Keyman, 2012). However, as later events would show, breaking the traditional elite’s grip did not translate into liberal consolidation. Rather, it cleared the way for the AKP to assert its own dominance over state institutions, often at the expense of pluralism and checks and balances. In the aftermath of the e-memorandum crisis, Türkiye’s trajectory veered away from a guarded democracy overseen by soldiers and judges, toward a new form of dominant-party rule anchored in popular legitimacy and a charismatic leadership.

2.2. CONFRONTATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL SHOWDOWN (2008–2010)

No sooner had the AKP weathered the 2007 battles than it faced a new assault from the secular establishment – this time through judicial means. In March 2008, Türkiye’s Chief Prosecutor filed a case in the Constitutional Court to ban the AKP on the grounds that its actions were undermining secularism. This lawsuit harkened back to Türkiye’s history of shutting down Islamist parties (the AKP’s Islamist predecessor had been banned in 1998), and it represented

an extreme attempt by the judiciary to reverse the AKP's election victories. The catalyst was the AKP's move to lift the long-standing ban on headscarves at universities – a reform viewed by secularists as anathema to the secular order. The Constitutional Court had sweeping powers to outlaw parties deemed anti-secular, and in July 2008 it came harrowingly close to dissolving the ruling party. Six of the eleven justices voted in favor of banning the AKP – just one vote short of the supermajority required (Özbudun, 2015). While the court ultimately spared the AKP, it issued a stern warning by levying a financial penalty (cutting the party's state funding) and declaring the AKP guilty of being "a focal point of anti-secular activities." The narrow escape was a sobering moment for Erdoğan's government: a single judge's vote preserved the party's existence. The former Army chief, Gen. Yaşar Büyükanıt, even crowed that the Court's ruling "justified" the military's concerns, noting that the judiciary's finding validated the 2007 e-memorandum's alarm over the AKP's Islamist tendencies (Göknar, 2020).

The 2008 closure case was a critical juncture. Having narrowly survived, the AKP leadership emerged both chastened and resolved to permanently curb the judiciary's ability to overrule the elected government. In public, Erdoğan adopted a victimization narrative that painted the AKP as the democratic choice of the people continually under siege by undemocratic elites. The party began to speak of a "national will versus tutelage" struggle, framing the Constitutional Court and other unelected bodies as tools of an old guard unwilling to accept the AKP's popular mandate. This period also witnessed the AKP cultivating a narrative of conspiracy and existential threat – a theme that would recur in subsequent crises. Erdem Göknar (2020) observes that after the 2008 closure attempt, the AKP started disseminating melodramatic conspiracy theories in pro-government media, portraying its opponents as part of shadowy plots against the "national will". These narratives included allegations of a "deep state" cabal (dubbed Ergenekon) of ultra-secularist officials, mafias, and military officers conspiring to topple the AKP government. In essence, stung by the near-death experience in the Court, Erdoğan and his allies began justifying extraordinary measures to strike back at purported clandestine enemies of democracy.

One such measure was the launch of massive prosecutions against military officers and secular elites accused of plotting coups. Starting in 2008, the AKP government – initially in cooperation with prosecutors and judges associated with FETO– initiated the "Ergenekon" trials. Hundreds of suspects, including retired generals, journalists, and academics, were detained and charged with involvement in an alleged ultranationalist secret network preparing to overthrow the government (Aydın-Düzgit, 2012). In 2010, a second investigation (nicknamed

"Sledgehammer") led to the indictment of active-duty officers for a supposed 2003 coup plot. These trials, which ran through 2012–2013, ultimately convicted top military brass and were heralded by AKP supporters as the triumph of civilian democracy over the once-invincible "Pashas." Civil-military relations were fundamentally transformed: the military's political influence was drastically curbed as the fear of judicial consequences and internal purges kept officers in check (Aydın-Düzgit, 2012). However, while the Ergenekon/Sledgehammer process did help to finally bring the armed forces under civilian authority – arguably resolving the old problem of praetorian interference – it did so in ways that raised serious rule-of-law concerns. Evidence in the trials was often flimsy or fabricated, and fair trial standards were widely seen as compromised (Özbudun, 2015). What mattered politically was that the old secular-military establishment was being neutralized. By 2011, Türkiye's once-guardians had become the targets of the AKP's state power, and the balance of power had shifted decisively in favor of the elected government for the first time in the republic's history.

At the same time, the AKP undertook formal constitutional reform to cement its control of state organs. Key was the 2010 constitutional referendum on a package of 26 amendments. Passed in September 2010 with 58% support, the reform was sold by the AKP as a democratic "civilianization" of the 1982 Constitution (a charter born from a military coup) (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012). Indeed, the amendments contained several liberal-sounding changes: they enhanced individual rights, allowed civilian courts to try military personnel for coup plots, and made it harder to ban political parties (that particular amendment, however, was dropped during parliamentary debate). Crucially, the package also restructured the judiciary – specifically the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (Hakimler ve Savcılar Yüksek Kurulu, HSYK) – in ways that increased the government's influence over judicial appointments (Özbudun, 2015). The number of Constitutional Court justices was expanded and new appointment powers given to the President and parliament (dominated by the AKP). The HSYK, which oversees judicial discipline and appointments, was enlarged and its member-selection process altered such that the AKP and its ally (the FETO judicial bloc) could secure a majority of seats. Opponents decried these changes as an attempt to "pack" the courts with AKP loyalists. The AKP countered that reform was needed to democratize a judiciary that had historically been an unelected bastion of Kemalism – pointing to the 2008 closure case as evidence of judicial overreach. In the end, the referendum's passage enabled the AKP to effectively take over the high judiciary: within months, many new judges and prosecutors deemed sympathetic to the AKP (or aligned with FETO) were appointed to the bench, tilting

the balance away from old-regime holdovers. The OSCE and EU observers, while praising elements of the reform, also quietly noted concerns that the judiciary's independence could be eroded by giving the ruling party greater appointment authority (Özbudun, 2015).

In retrospect, the 2008–2010 period was a turning point in Türkiye's democratic backsliding. The AKP, having twice been targeted by what it depicted as undemocratic forces (the military in 2007 and the high courts in 2008), used its popular support to radically reorder the institutional landscape. Through the Ergenekon trials and 2010 referendum, the party removed or weakened nearly all autonomous checks on its power: the military was cowed, the judiciary politicized, and the constitution changed to favor the incumbents. It was also during this time that Erdoğan's rhetoric shifted into a more populist and polarizing register. He cast the AKP as the true representative of the people's will, besieged by elites and conspirators. Anyone opposing the government's agenda – be it judges, journalists, or generals – could be branded as part of an illegitimate "deep state" or a pawn of foreign anti-Turkish forces. This narrative served to justify extraordinary measures (arrests, purges, legal amendments) in the name of safeguarding democracy from its internal enemies (Dinçşahin, 2012; Göknar, 2020). Thus, by 2010, Türkiye was still a multiparty democracy with regular elections, but its institutional checks and societal pluralism had begun to erode. The stage was set for an era in which the AKP would face fewer constraints – and would increasingly govern in a majoritarian, at times heavy-handed, fashion.

2.3. FROM PREDOMINANCE TO CRACKDOWNS (2011–2013)

In June 2011, the AKP won its third consecutive general election, securing nearly 50% of the popular vote – an unprecedented level for a Turkish party in the multi-party era. By this point, the AKP had entrenched itself as the predominant party in Türkiye's system (Gümüşçü, 2013). Its electoral appeal in the 2000s rested on a combination of steady economic growth (averaging 5-7% annually), visible public infrastructure projects, and broad-based social assistance that endeared the party to working-class conservatives (Buğra & Savaşkan, 2014). Erdoğan's personal charisma and populist connection to "Anatolian" (heartland) values contrasted with the CHP's elite and secular image, enabling the AKP to monopolize the political center. Having achieved a near super-majority in Parliament in 2011, Erdoğan spoke on election night of drafting a totally new civilian constitution to replace the 1982 coup-era document, a move that, if consensual, could have further democratized Türkiye. In practice, however, the constitutional rewriting stalled by 2013 due to partisan disagreements (especially over a switch to a

presidential system that Erdoğan quietly favored even then). The opposition, reduced to about one-third of parliament, had limited ability to check AKP initiatives. Still, between 2011 and 2013, there were glimmers of a more reformist agenda: notably, the AKP government launched a "Kurdish Opening", initiating secret talks with the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan to end the long-running Kurdish insurgency. This peace process (disclosed publicly in late 2012) suggested that the AKP, at the height of its power, might use its mandate for conflict resolution and further inclusion of a marginalized minority.

Yet, even as Erdoğan projected confidence, critics were warning of authoritarian tendencies. The media environment had begun to deteriorate: independent journalism faced growing pressure through lawsuits and corporate takeovers. One notorious episode occurred in 2009 when the Doğan Media Group (then the largest, somewhat independent media conglomerate) was slammed with a massive tax fine after its newspapers reported on AKP corruption allegations (Yabanci, 2016). This was widely seen as punishment and a warning to media owners. By the early 2010s, many prominent journalists were fired or intimidated for being critical of the government, fostering self-censorship. Civil society, too, encountered subtler constraints. For example, through bureaucratic harassment of NGOs and selective enforcement of laws against government critics. Still, Türkiye in 2012 remained, in form, a competitive democracy: opposition parties campaigned freely, the judiciary (though reconfigured) occasionally ruled against the government, and vibrant social movements operated in the public sphere. That façade of normalcy was shattered in mid-2013 by an unexpected wave of protest that revealed the depths of polarization and the AKP's hardening response to dissent.

In late May 2013, a small environmental sit-in to save Istanbul's Gezi Park from redevelopment sparked a heavy-handed police crackdown – a spark that ignited nationwide protests. The Gezi Park protests, which swelled through June 2013, saw millions of mostly young, urban Turks demonstrating against what they viewed as the AKP's increasingly authoritarian and majoritarian style. The grievances quickly expanded from anger at police brutality and loss of green space to broader discontent with Erdoğan's domineering leadership, restrictions on lifestyle (such as alcohol sales and dress codes), and the perceived erosion of secular freedoms. What began as a peaceful youth protest in Istanbul's Taksim Square turned into the largest mass demonstrations in Türkiye's modern history, spreading to dozens of cities. The government's response was uncompromising. Erdoğan denounced the protesters as "çapulcu" (looters) and cast the events as an illegitimate attempt by fringe elements to topple a democratically elected government. He and pro-AKP media advanced a conspiratorial framing – claiming that the

protests were instigated by foreign agents, "interest rate lobbies" (a coded reference to Western financiers), and even a nebulous international network bent on sabotaging Türkiye's success (Göknar, 2020). This narrative sought to delegitimize genuine civic discontent by portraying it as part of a plot against Türkiye's national will. State media largely ignored the protests, while pro-government outlets vilified participants as traitors or puppets of George Soros. On the ground, the AKP deployed riot police in force. Over two weeks, authorities used tear gas, water cannons, and plastic bullets to disperse crowds; in clashes, at least 8 protesters were killed and over 8,000 injured. Thousands more were detained. Rather than seeking dialogue, Erdoğan held mass counter-rallies of his supporters and thundered that those "who dared menace Türkiye" would be dealt with. The Gezi events marked a definitive break: civil society's most vibrant challenge to the AKP was met not with accommodative reform, but with repression and populist defamation. While the protests eventually subsided, the government's hard line shocked many observers and signaled that Türkiye was "crossing a threshold… below minimum standards of democracy" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Freedom of assembly and expression took a drastic hit, as afterward the regime tightened laws on public protests and punished participants. In later years, several leading activists (including businessman-philanthropist Osman Kavala) were arrested and accused of orchestrating Gezi as part of an international conspiracy; indictments ludicrously claimed they aimed to overthrow the government, despite no evidence of such plotting (Human Rights Watch, 2019). These moves underscored how dissent was reinterpreted as treason in the AKP's worldview.

The Gezi upheaval also exposed fissures within the ruling elite. Notably, then-President Abdullah Gül and Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç – both co-founders of the AKP – struck a more conciliatory tone toward the protesters, implicitly criticizing Erdoğan's confrontational approach. There were rumors of an internal split between Erdoğan's hardliner camp and more moderate figures who felt the government was mishandling the situation. Though Erdoğan ultimately prevailed internally (and Gül would soon exit politics), the episode hinted at cracks in AKP's upper echelons. More significantly, Gezi heralded the full emergence of Erdoğan's Islamist–nationalist populism as the regime's guiding narrative: he depicted himself as the embodiment of the virtuous majority, under siege from unpatriotic secularists, global elites, and terrorists (Yabanci, 2016). This "us vs. them" mindset would intensify and find new targets in the months to come.

Barely six months after Gezi, the AKP was rocked by another crisis – this time emanating from within its own former allies. In December 2013, a far-reaching corruption investigation led by

prosecutors and police became public, with stunning dawn raids on December 17 against the sons of three AKP ministers, prominent businessmen, and officials in Erdoğan's circle. They were accused of bribery, money laundering, and gold smuggling in schemes involving Iran sanctions-busting – revelations accompanied by leaked tapes that even implicated Erdoğan (then Prime Minister) in directing illicit transactions and urging his son to hide vast sums of cash. This 17–25 December 2013 corruption scandal was unprecedented in scale, detailing tens of millions of dollars in graft. It posed an existential threat to the AKP's image of pious, clean governance. Erdoğan's response was immediate and fierce: he denounced the probe as a "judicial coup" carried out by a "parallel state" within the bureaucracy – referring to the network of followers of FETO, an Islamic cleric and former AKP ally living in the U.S. (Selçuk O. , 2016). The AKP had in fact long benefited from FETO cadres in the police and judiciary (who helped prosecute Ergenekon), but now Erdoğan claimed these same elements were traitorously turning against him at the behest of foreign powers. Dismissing the corruption evidence as either fake or insignificant, Erdoğan purged the state apparatus: within weeks, more than 2,000 police officers were dismissed or reassigned and dozens of prosecutors and judges shuffled (Reuters, 2014). By early 2014, the government had reassigned or sacked thousands of law enforcement officials and launched investigations into those involved in the corruption case, effectively quashing the probes. It also blocked websites and Twitter to halt the spread of leaked tapes that kept emerging online. In public rallies, Erdoğan turned the tables, accusing FETO's network of spying, corruption, and sedition. By framing the corruption scandal as an orchestrated "operation" by a nefarious parallel structure, Erdoğan successfully shifted attention away from the alleged crimes and towards questions of loyalty and conspiracy (Göknar, 2020).

This episode completed the rupture between the AKP and FETO. Once close partners united against the secular establishment, the two wings of Türkiye's Islamist camp had diverged as FETO prosecutors challenged AKP politicians. After December 2013, Erdoğan was determined to destroy the FETO clout. He accelerated efforts to cleanse their influence: shuttering their preparatory schools (a financial base for the movement), and creating lists of suspected FETO personnel in state bodies for removal. By mid-2014, hundreds of FETO sympathizers in the judiciary and police were detained or expelled on charges of espionage or forming an illegal organization. The corruption affair thus catalyzed an internal purge and the definitive emergence of a new "enemy within" in the AKP's narrative. No longer constrained by their erstwhile alliance with FETO, Erdoğan and the AKP openly labeled the movement as a

"Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü, FETO)" (though this branding was formalized later) and claimed it was acting as a tool of foreign (often Western) intelligence. The purges in 2014 were only a harbinger of a far more massive onslaught against the FETO after 2016.

By early 2014, Türkiye had thus entered a new phase of competitive authoritarian rule. The period from 2011 to 2013 saw the AKP's dominance put to the test by both bottom-up popular mobilization and internal fractures, and in each instance the party responded by doubling down on repression and loyalist consolidation. Democratic institutions and norms further eroded: peaceful protest was criminalized, media freedom curtailed, and the independence of corruption investigations annihilated. Nevertheless, the AKP's winning streak at the ballot box continued. In the March 2014 local elections, held in the shadow of the corruption scandal, the AKP again emerged victorious nationwide (around 43% of the vote), though it lost a few big-city mayoralties (Letsch, 2014). Later that year, in August 2014, Erdoğan capitalized on the momentum and ran for president in Türkiye's first direct presidential election (the 2007 constitutional change having come into effect). Campaigning as the tribune of the people against foreign plots and internal traitors, Erdoğan won the presidency with 51.8% in the first round (Selçuk O. , 2016). This elevated him from prime minister to head of state – a post traditionally above politics, but which Erdoğan had no intention of keeping ceremonial. He signaled that he would exercise the presidency to its full extent and beyond, effectively shifting power to that office even before any constitutional change. Indeed, with a loyal figure (Ahmet Davutoğlu) stepping in as the new prime minister, Erdoğan remained the de facto center of power.

In sum, by the end of 2014, Türkiye under the AKP had transformed from a promising democratizer into a hybrid regime characterized by intense polarization and increasingly unfair competition. Regular elections and a semblance of pluralism persisted (opposition parties still contested vigorously), but the "playing field" was now heavily skewed in the AKP's favor through control of media, politicization of state institutions, and stifling of dissent. Scholars began explicitly labeling Türkiye a "competitive authoritarian" regime around this time (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016), noting that by about 2013–2014, the country had "crossed the threshold" into democratic breakdown (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). The AKP had managed to hollow out liberal democracy while maintaining a façade of electoral legitimacy. The most alarming aspect was that each autocratic lurch was justified to a significant segment of the electorate via populist, majoritarian rhetoric: Erdoğan convinced many Turks that extraordinary measures (be

it jailing demonstrators or purging prosecutors) were necessary to defend the "national will" against various perceived existential threats. This narrative of permanent siege would soon reach new heights in the wake of an actual violent coup attempt – an event that would allow Erdoğan to complete the construction of an even more centralized authoritarian regime.

2.4. CRISIS AND COUP: AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION ACCELERATES (2015–2017)

The year 2015 became one of the most tumultuous in modern Turkish politics, ultimately serving as a springboard for the AKP to consolidate power further. It began with hope for peace: the AKP's talks with the PKK had yielded a de facto ceasefire since 2013, and in early 2015 the government and Kurdish representatives jointly announced the Dolmabahçe Accord, a tentative 10-point road map to end the conflict. However, President Erdoğan, wary of ceding any credit (and concerned the process might undercut nationalist support for the AKP), repudiated parts of the accord. This coincided with a critical electoral test: the June 2015 parliamentary elections. For the first time since 2002, the AKP lost its single-party majority, dropping to 40.9% of the vote and 258 seats (out of 550). The surprise outcome was due largely to the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), which ran as a party and surged above the 10% threshold to win 13% of votes and 80 seats (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020). The HDP's charismatic leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, explicitly sought to unify liberal, leftist, and minority voters to block Erdoğan's ambitions for an executive presidency – and, in June, that strategy succeeded. The AKP's electoral setback was hailed by opposition factions as the end of its unchecked rule and a chance to reverse backsliding. However, what followed illustrated the AKP's resolve to retain power at all costs. Coalition talks with opposition parties went nowhere (and there are credible claims that Erdoğan never intended for a coalition to form). Instead, Türkiye was put on course for a snap re-election in the fall.

In the interim, the country's security situation deteriorated dramatically, which played into Erdoğan's hands. In July 2015, following an Islamic State suicide bombing that killed 33 activists in Suruç, the PKK (accusing the state of complicity or indifference) resumed attacks on Turkish security forces. The government responded by abandoning the peace process entirely and launching military operations against PKK militants in Türkiye's southeast and airstrikes on PKK camps in Iraq. A de facto civil war reignited in several Kurdish-majority towns, with heavy clashes, curfews, and substantial civilian displacement in the latter half of 2015. Meanwhile, Türkiye was struck by the worst terror attack in its history: in October 2015,

twin suicide bombings (linked to ISIS) at a peace rally in Ankara killed 109 people, many of them Kurdish and leftist activists. These events created an atmosphere of fear, nationalism, and instability – which Erdoğan swiftly capitalized on. He posited a stark choice to voters: AKP "strong single-party rule" or chaos. In speeches, he painted the June outcome as having produced a dangerous power vacuum exploited by terrorists, and implored citizens to return the AKP to majority for the sake of "stability." The strategy worked. In the November 2015 snap election, the AKP staged a dramatic comeback, regaining a parliamentary majority with 49.5% of the vote (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020). Many nationalist voters who had drifted to other parties in June returned to the AKP amid the renewed PKK violence. The HDP vote fell back below 11%, barely clearing the threshold under the pall of conflict and government smear campaigns tying it to "terrorists." International observers noted that the vote occurred in a climate of "mounting tension and violence", and that media coverage overwhelmingly favored the AKP while opposition rallies were sometimes disrupted by intimidation (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023). Indeed, between the elections, the government had stepped up pressure on critical media: in October, police trustees took over several media outlets of the Koza-İpek Group (linked to FETO) and shut down two opposition TV channels. Erdogan's gamble – in effect, leveraging conflict to win votes – revealed a cynical use of crisis exploitation that would become a hallmark of his consolidation strategy. As one analysis bluntly summarized the November result: "Violence wins… Turkish politics since June has been marred by intimidation and violence, by design or by effect, benefiting the ruling party" (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020).

With the AKP back securely in power and enjoying a parliamentary majority, Erdoğan lost no time further advancing his long-held goal: transforming Türkiye's governance system to concentrate more power in his own hands. Although the AKP lacked the two-thirds supermajority to change the constitution outright, Erdoğan was undeterred in steering the system toward a presidential model. In late 2015 and early 2016, he made clear he would not stay within the traditional nonpartisan bounds of the presidency. He regularly convened and dominated cabinet meetings, publicly lambasted court decisions he disliked, and continued as de facto leader of the AKP. This created a "dual legitimacy" problem with Prime Minister Davutoğlu, who, despite being Erdoğan's appointee, showed occasional independent streaks. By mid-2016, Erdoğan pushed Davutoğlu out – the Prime Minister resigned in May under pressure – and hand-picked loyalist Binali Yıldırım as the new premier. The message was that Erdoğan would brook no constraints, even informal ones, on his personalized rule (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b).

Then, on the night of July 15, 2016, Türkiye experienced a failed military coup attempt that became the most consequential turning point in the country's political evolution since 1980. A faction of the military, consisting of mid-level officers linked (according to later indictments) to FETO alongside some secularist elements, launched an ill-coordinated attempt to seize power. Tanks rolled onto the streets of Ankara and Istanbul, fighter jets bombed the parliament and security headquarters, and rebel soldiers took control of some infrastructure. Crucially, top military commanders and a critical mass of units did not join the plot, and the president avoided capture. Erdoğan famously Facetimed into a live TV broadcast calling people to the streets to resist. Thousands of citizens did confront the putschists, blocking tanks – a courageous display that, alongside loyal police and military units, foiled the coup within hours. Over 250 people (civilians and loyalist forces) were killed in the conflict that night. For the first time in Türkiye's history, an attempted coup was repelled by a combination of public mobilization and intra-military splits, rather than succeeding or being averted behind closed doors. This outcome, as Berk Esen and Sebnem Gümüşçü (2017a) argue, was in part a reflection of how the AKP's competitive authoritarian grip had permeated state and society: the government's control of media and its Islamist-conservative networks enabled rapid mobilization of supporters, while opposition parties – however much they disliked Erdoğan – chose the regime's survival over an unknown military junta. In the immediate aftermath, there was a brief sense of cross-partisan unity; all major parties condemned the coup attempt, and millions rallied in subsequent nights to "defend democracy." This unity, however, was soon eclipsed by Erdoğan's next move: using the coup as a "God-given" opportunity (as he reportedly told an aide) to purge and refashion the state on an unprecedented scale.

On July 20, 2016, the government declared a nationwide state of emergency, which would end up lasting two years. Ruling by emergency decree, Erdoğan oversaw a purge of staggering breadth aimed primarily at the suspected FETO "parallel state", but also encompassing Kurdish activists, liberal dissidents, and other opponents. Over the next several months: approximately 150,000 civil servants (including military officers, judges, prosecutors, teachers, and bureaucrats) were summarily dismissed or suspended from their jobs – often on nebulous accusations of links to terrorism; around 50,000 people were arrested and jailed pending trial, among them journalists, academics, and opposition figures (Amnesty International, 2017). Every institution was affected. The armed forces saw nearly half of its generals and admirals discharged. The judiciary lost a third of its judges and prosecutors overnight. Universities were purged of thousands of scholars; passports of academics were revoked to prevent flight.

Alongside individuals, hundreds of entities were shut down by decree: media outlets (over 150 newspapers, TV and radio stations, news agencies), NGOs and foundations (over 1,400 associations, including human rights groups), and even businesses allegedly connected to FETO. These purges and closures were justified under blanket allegations of aiding the coup or belonging to FETÖ. In many cases, little or no evidence was presented; the emergency decrees did not require due process, and those fired were blacklisted from future public or even private employment. The sheer scale was described by Amnesty International (2017) as a "professional annihilation" of an entire class of people deemed disloyal to the regime. In effect, the coup attempt furnished Erdoğan with carte blanche to recompose the state with AKP loyalists. Thousands of new judges were appointed to replace those purged, ensuring a pliant judiciary. Military academies were abolished and the armed forces restructured under tighter civilian (and presidential) control. By cementing the narrative that FETO (and by extension anyone tagged as such) were existential enemies of the state, the AKP faced remarkably little domestic backlash to these measures – save from the pro-Kurdish HDP, which itself soon suffered crippling blows (in late 2016, authorities arrested a dozen HDP lawmakers including its leader Demirtaş on charges of supporting terrorism). The post-coup crackdown thus eliminated most remaining independent or opposition voices within state structures and frightened much of society into silence (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2021). Freedom House (2017), which had rated Türkiye as "Partly Free" in 2016, downgraded it to "Not Free" thereafter, as basic political rights and civil liberties were now profoundly curtailed.

Importantly, Erdoğan also leveraged the post-coup environment to push through his long-desired constitutional overhaul. With the opposition reeling (and many parliamentarians in jail or intimidated), the AKP struck a deal with the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP) – which had become fiercely anti-FETO and rallied around Erdogan's security agenda – to support a switch to an executive presidential system. In January 2017, the AKP-MHP bloc rammed a set of constitutional amendments through Parliament that abolished the office of Prime Minister and concentrated all executive power in a president who could also lead a party. Despite the state of emergency (or perhaps thanks to it), Erdoğan felt confident enough to submit these transformative changes to a popular referendum on April 16, 2017. The campaign for the 2017 constitutional referendum was manifestly unfair: media coverage was overwhelmingly one-sided, with pro-government media dominating the airwaves and casting "No" supporters as traitors, while emergency rule restricted freedoms of assembly for opposition rallies (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). European election observers later noted the vote

took place on an "unlevel playing field" and in an environment where fundamental freedoms were curtailed (Shaheen, 2017). On voting day, allegations of irregularities arose when the Supreme Election Council (YSK), stacked with AKP appointees, made a last-minute decision to count unstamped ballots (contrary to the law) – a move affecting up to 1.5 million votes, in a contest the "Yes" side won by only about 1.1 million votes. The opposition cried foul and protested the result, to no avail. Officially, the amendments passed with 51.4% in favor, fundamentally altering Türkiye's political system (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). The narrow outcome, achieved under such coercive conditions, showed that a significant portion of Turkish society still resisted Erdoğan's project. But under emergency rule, objections did not matter – the new constitution would take effect after the next elections.

The period from 2015 to 2017 thus completed Türkiye's descent into authoritarianism by accrual and acclamation. Each crisis served as a catalyst: the resumption of conflict with the Kurds and the specter of terrorism helped Erdoğan rally nationalists and regain parliamentary supremacy; the coup attempt provided justification to purge enemies wholesale and rule by decree; and the engineered "rally 'round the flag" atmosphere enabled fundamental constitutional change in the guise of restoring order. Scholars Karabekir Akkoyunlu and Kerem Öktem (2016) observed that Türkiye's regime change was "not a sudden rupture but a gradual process punctuated by crises, each deepening the authoritarian trajectory". Indeed, what might have been endpoints for other governments – Gezi-level unrest, massive corruption scandals, a major electoral defeat, even a bloody coup attempt – were for Erdoğan mere way stations on the path to consolidating personal power. By mid-2017, nearly all institutional checks and balances had been eliminated or neutralized. The military was firmly under civilian command (and packed with new loyal officers), the bureaucracy had been purged and repopulated with AKP cadres, the judiciary and electoral authorities toed the government line, and the legal framework was reshaped to formalize what was already true in practice: that Erdoğan was the paramount decision-maker.

Türkiye at this point was widely characterized as a textbook competitive authoritarian regime – elections continued and the opposition still existed, but the "menu of manipulation" used by the AKP skewed competition at every stage (Schedler, 2002). This menu included: control of media (90% of media by 2018 was owned by pro-AKP businessmen, especially after the Demirören Group's government-backed purchase of the last major independent media chain, Doğan Media, which "confirmed the death of media pluralism" as Reporters Without Borders noted (2018); misuse of state resources and public funds for party campaigning;

gerrymandering and tinkering with election laws to disadvantage opponents; imprisonment or legal harassment of key opposition figures. While outright ballot-stuffing remained limited, subtle fraud like the YSK's handling of the referendum showed even electoral procedures could be bent when the stakes were high. In effect, by 2017 the AKP had – as one opposition CHP parliamentarian put it – achieved "yargı, yürütme, yasama tek elde" (judiciary, executive, legislature all in one hand) (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). Erdoğan himself reveled in the new power distribution: after the April referendum, he told crowds that the changes meant a strong leadership unfettered by unwieldy coalitions or judicial meddling, frequently intoning that only a "one-man rule" could safeguard the nation (a phrase the opposition ironically used to criticize him). With the constitutional framework in place for a presidential system, all that remained was to hold an election to formalize Erdoğan's executive presidency – something originally slated for November 2019, but which the AKP opted to call early, in June 2018, to ride the momentum of nationalist fervor and preempt emerging economic troubles.

2.5. THE NEW PRESIDENTIAL REGIME AND ITS CHALLENGES (2018–2019)

On June 24, 2018, Türkiye held simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections, inaugurating the new governance model approved in the 2017 referendum. Erdoğan, running now as the de jure executive president candidate of the People's Alliance (AKP plus the ultra-nationalist MHP), won the presidency with 52.6% in the first round. He faced a divided opposition field: the main challenger, CHP's Muharrem İnce, obtained 30.6%, while the imprisoned Demirtaş of HDP got 8% and others split the rest. In the parliamentary race, the AKP's vote share slid to 42.6% (down from 49.5% in Nov 2015), but thanks to its alliance with the MHP (11% votes), the People's Alliance secured a narrow majority of seats. The opposition collectively polled nearly half the votes, with the CHP at 22.6% and the pro-Kurdish HDP again passing the threshold at 11.7%. These results highlighted that while Erdoğan remained the most popular politician, a significant portion of Turkish society was arrayed against his rule. The election itself, according to international observers, featured heavy media bias and misuse of state resources favoring the incumbents, though the voting process on the day was largely orderly (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2021). It underscored the by-then familiar pattern: Türkiye's elections were genuine but not genuinely fair.

Upon victory, Erdoğan wasted no time in implementing the presidential system. The office of Prime Minister was formally abolished; Erdoğan became both head of state and head of

government, concentrating executive authority. Within days he issued a flurry of presidential decrees restructuring the entire administration: ministries were merged or redefined, and critical bodies like the national intelligence agency and the military general staff were brought under the presidency. The new constitution allowed the president to appoint cabinet ministers (now no longer elected MPs), senior bureaucrats, and judges to high courts virtually unilaterally. Erdoğan packed the cabinet with loyalists and family – notably appointing his son-in-law Berat Albayrak as Minister of Finance, indicative of the growing patronage and nepotism in AKP governance. He also gained the power to issue decrees with force of law (on many issues) without needing parliamentary approval, drastically weakening legislative oversight. The Parliament's capacity to scrutinize the executive was further curtailed by changes that made it harder to interpellate ministers or launch inquiries. In effect, after 2018 Türkiye had a de facto one-man rule codified by law: an executive presidency unchecked by a strong parliament or independent judiciary. The transition drew comparisons to other cases of "authoritarianization via constitutional reform" (cf. Hungary's 2011 constitution or Russia's 2020 amendments), where an elected leader legally rigs the system to extend and personalize power (Özbudun, 2015; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

However, the post-2018 era also presented new governance challenges for Erdoğan and the AKP. With great power came great responsibility for mounting problems, especially on the economic front. By 2018, Türkiye's years of high growth (fueled by credit and construction booms) had given way to instability: the Turkish lira currency entered a steep crisis in summer 2018, losing nearly 40% of its value against the dollar amid investor fears over Erdoğan's unconventional monetary ideas and political uncertainty. Inflation spiked into the double digits (and in later years, far higher). The new presidential system centralized economic decision-making in Erdoğan's hands, but his response – pressuring the central bank to cut interest rates to spur growth – arguably exacerbated the troubles. By late 2021 to 2022, Türkiye would experience inflation above 80% (officially) and repeated currency shocks (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2023). These economic woes eroded the AKP's performance legitimacy, given that its first decade of support was built significantly on delivering prosperity to its base.

Moreover, the AKP's hegemonic aura suffered an important symbolic blow in the March 2019 local elections. In a major setback, the opposition managed to wrest control of several key mayoralties, including the capital Ankara and – most stunningly – Istanbul, Türkiye's largest city and economic powerhouse. Opposition candidates from the CHP (in alliance with other parties) narrowly won in these metropolitan areas. Istanbul's initial result saw CHP's Ekrem

İmamoğlu defeat AKP's candidate (former PM Binali Yıldırım) by a razor-thin margin of about 0.2% (Dalay, 2019). The AKP, shocked at losing Istanbul for the first time in 25 years, leaned on its influence over the electoral board (YSK) to void the Istanbul vote citing dubious claims of irregularities (such as a few non-civil servant polling staff). This annulment was widely criticized as politically driven and showed the lengths to which the AKP would go to avoid conceding power even at the municipal level. However, the gamble backfired: the re-run election in June 2019 became a referendum on fairness, and İmamoğlu won a landslide, garnering 54% to the AKP's 45%. Yıldırım conceded quickly on election night to avoid deeper embarrassment (Al Jazeera, 2019). The opposition's ability to win in Istanbul – despite the stacked deck – demonstrated that competitive authoritarian regimes can still lose major contests when opposition unity, public fatigue, and electoral vigilance converge. As one AKP figure famously said during the campaign, "Whoever loses Istanbul loses Türkiye"; while that proved exaggerated, the loss undeniably dented Erdoğan's invincible image and deprived the AKP of a huge source of patronage (Istanbul's budget). Indeed, analysis suggests the loss of Istanbul and other big cities cut off significant rent distribution networks the AKP had long used to reward supporters. It also energized the opposition: a new "democracy-authoritarianism cleavage" appeared to be superseding old secular vs. religious divides, as disparate parties (secularist, nationalist, Kurdish-friendly) found common cause in defending what remained of democratic space (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020). This led to sustained cooperation among opposition forces, who by 2021 formed a broad "Nation Alliance" explicitly geared toward unseating Erdoğan and restoring parliamentary democracy.

The AKP government's reaction to losing cities was two-fold: legally hamstring the opposition mayors, and double down on nationalist rhetoric to shore up its base. Dozens of elected HDP mayors in the southeast were removed on terrorism pretexts and replaced by state "trustees" (as had been done during the emergency) (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020). Even CHP mayors in Ankara and Istanbul found central authorities obstructing their projects and budgets. Erdoğan intimated he would not let municipalities become power centers for the opposition, at one point warning Istanbul's new mayor against "overstepping." Meanwhile, foreign policy and military ventures became a new frontier for AKP's nationalist-populist legitimation. In 2019–2020, Türkiye undertook major operations in Syria against PKK and projected power in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean. Erdoğan's messaging increasingly emphasized Türkiye's revival of its "historic greatness" and resistance to foreign plots. This had the effect of rallying nationalist sentiment and somewhat blunting criticisms of domestic governance. It also coincided with an alliance

realignment: since 2016, the AKP had partnered with the hard-right MHP, and this "People's Alliance" drove policies in a more nationalist-authoritarian direction.

Throughout this period, Türkiye's media and civil society remained largely under siege. By 2020, as noted, over 90% of media outlets were owned by pro-government businesses or directly controlled, ensuring a near-monopoly of the pro-AKP narrative on television (still the primary news source for much of the population). Social media grew as an alternative sphere but faced increasing crackdowns: new laws required platforms like Twitter and Facebook to appoint local representatives and comply with takedown requests, leading to content removal and self-censorship online. Journalists critical of Erdoğan continued to be jailed on spurious terrorism or defamation charges – Türkiye ranked among the world's top jailers of journalists throughout the late 2010s. High-profile civil society figures, such as Osman Kavala and the Gezi 7, were subjected to Kafkaesque prosecutions (e.g. being accused of trying to overthrow the government by financing the 2013 protests) (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Essentially, repression of opposition voices became routinized – an everyday feature of the regime rather than an exceptional state-of-emergency measure. This had a chilling effect: by early 2020, open criticism of the president or government carried significant risks, from social backlash to criminal investigations (notably, Erdoğan had tens of thousands of people prosecuted for "insulting the President" since 2014) (Freedom House, 2020)[73][74].

Despite these adverse conditions, the opposition persisted and even scored minor victories. In addition to the 2019 municipal wins, opposition parties used their control of large city governments to showcase an alternative governance style (transparent tenders, social aid without partisanship, etc.). They also tactically coordinated: for example, the CHP and allied parties refrained from running candidates in areas where the HDP was strong, to avoid vote-splitting, and vice versa.

As of end of 2019, Erdoğan's Türkiye stands as a consolidated competitive authoritarian regime. The AKP has now been in power for almost two decades, outlasting its early democratic promises and transforming the polity in fundamental ways. The constitutional and institutional changes enacted – especially the shift to a presidential system – have entrenched a framework that heavily favors the incumbent. Formal electoral legitimacy remains the AKP's bedrock: it continues to win (or narrowly win) elections and uses that mandate to legitimize its rule, both at home and in the eyes of foreign partners. This regular resort to the ballot box, paradoxically, has been a key instrument in the democratic backsliding process. As scholars note, Türkiye

exemplifies how an elected leadership can "dismantle democracy with the tools of democracy" – leveraging popular support to change laws and constitutions, using referendums and plebiscites to confer legitimacy on authoritarian moves, and claiming each electoral victory as carte blanche for further power grabs (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b; Somer, 2016). The AKP has masterfully maintained a core electorate through a mix of patronage (extensive social aid networks, public housing and jobs for loyalists), identity appeals (religious-conservative and nationalist rhetoric that binds its voters on emotional and ideological grounds), and institutional engineering that skews competition (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2021). At the same time, Türkiye's opposition – though more coordinated than before – continues to operate under severe constraints. Critical media are nearly extinct, prominent opposition figures (like İstanbul's mayor İmamoğlu) face politically motivated court cases that could sideline them, and civil society remains largely cowed by the risks of repression.

Nevertheless, the story of 2002–2019 is not one of unchecked descent without resistance. At several junctures, Turkish society pushed back: be it the millions protesting in 2013 for more accountability, the voters in 2015 denying the AKP a majority (albeit briefly), or the opposition alliances in 2019 mounting serious challenges at the polls. These episodes of resistance have so far been either co-opted or crushed by Erdoğan's ruling apparatus, yet they indicate that an oppositional democratic ethos survives under the surface of the competitive authoritarian veneer. The regime's maintenance of electoral legitimacy – while giving it strength – also leaves open a legal pathway for change should the opposition ever break through. In the meantime, however, the trend of the past two decades is clear: the AKP has systematically concentrated power through constitutional change, institutional erosion, crisis exploitation, and populist legitimation. What began in 2002 as a reformist government operating within a pluralistic system has, by late 2019, become a hegemonic regime where genuine political competition and liberal-democratic freedoms are gravely impaired. Türkiye's experience under AKP rule thus offers a paradigmatic case of democratic backsliding: a slow-motion erosion where each critical turning point – from the e-memorandum to the coup attempt – was deftly utilized by incumbents to fortify their authority, culminating in an "electoral autocracy" that endures into its third decade.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The term illiberal democracy captures regimes that combine free (or at least nominally free) elections with deficits in liberal rights and constitutional checks. As coined by Zakaria (1997), an illiberal democracy is a system where rulers derive legitimacy from ballots but then govern in illiberal ways – undermining the very democratic essentials of constitutionalism and individual liberty. In an oft-cited formulation, Zakaria described illiberal democracies as democratically elected regimes that "ignore constitutional limits on their power and deprive citizens of basic rights" (Zakaria, 1997). Such regimes hold elections that are not outright fraudulent and thus achieve a veneer of popular consent, but they fail to uphold the liberal component of liberal democracy – i.e. the rule of law, separation of powers, and protection of freedoms (Zakaria, 2003). In short, they are "democratic" in form but not in substance.

Illiberal democracies stand in contrast to the ideal of liberal democracy, which marries majority rule with strong protections for pluralism, minority rights, and rule-bound governance. In illiberal democracies, by contrast, leaders often claim that winning an election grants them virtually unlimited mandate to act in the "people's" name, unchecked by courts, legislatures, or constitutional constraints. This erosion of liberal norms can lead to what Larry Diamond termed "hybrid regimes" or "pseudo-democracies" – political systems that are "ambiguous blends of democratic and authoritarian features" (Diamond, 2002). Indeed, Zakaria's concept helped spark a wider discussion in the early 2000s about a spectrum of gray-zone regimes that proliferated after the Cold War (Carothers, 2002; Diamond, 2002). In these systems, elections take place and are sometimes competitive, but citizens lack genuine civil liberties and governments bypass institutional checks, effectively hollowing out democracy from within (Diamond, 2015).

Notably, some leaders have embraced the illiberal democracy label as a badge of honor. Hungary's Viktor Orbán famously proclaimed in 2014 the goal of building an "illiberal state" that maintains democratic elections but rejects Western liberal principles (Kornai, 2015). This open championing of illiberal democracy highlights how the concept has moved from analytical descriptor to political project. In Türkiye, while Erdoğan does not use the term "illiberal democracy" explicitly, his leadership exemplifies its logic: the AKP government has consistently emphasized its electoral victories as the sole source of legitimacy while infringing

on media freedom, opposition rights, and judicial autonomy (Bechev, 2014; Özbudun, 2014). Scholars have thus situated Türkiye's regime in the illiberal democracy camp especially during the 2010s, as the space for dissent shrank despite regular multiparty elections (Öktem & Akkoyunlu, 2016). Freedom House's democracy index accordingly documented Türkiye's decline from "Partly Free" toward "Not Free" over this period, reflecting the collapse of liberal safeguards even as elections continued to occur (Freedom House, 2018).

In theoretical terms, illiberal democracy underscores a core tension in democratic governance: the potential divergence between electoral majoritarianism and constitutional liberalism. Zakaria (2003) warns that simply holding elections – the democratic element – does not guarantee liberty or good governance if the elected authorities then undermine the rule of law. For analysts of democratic backsliding, the illiberal democracy concept usefully names the syndrome where ostensibly democratic governments legally and institutionally entrench illiberal rule. It serves as a reminder that "democracy" is not just about who rules (input legitimacy), but also how they rule (constraints, outputs, protection of rights). In the Turkish context, framing the discussion in terms of illiberal democracy allows us to see the AKP's trajectory as part of a broader pattern in which elected regimes chip away at liberal-democratic norms from within. The next sections refine this understanding by looking at more specific regime typologies and theories explaining how such erosion is carried out and justified.

3.2. COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM AND ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM

One influential framework for categorizing illiberal or hybrid regimes is competitive authoritarianism. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010) introduced this term to describe regimes that are formally democratic (with regular elections and opposition parties) but substantively authoritarian due to systematic abuses of state power. In a competitive authoritarian regime, elections are real and contested – the opposition can, in theory, win – but the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents through unfair advantages, harassment of opponents, and institutional manipulation. Levitsky and Way famously defined competitive authoritarianism as a regime in which meaningful democratic institutions exist yet incumbent authorities routinely violate the rules so as to ensure that the competition is not fair. In other words, there is competition (unlike in outright dictatorships) but it occurs in an authoritarian environment that undermines actual democratic accountability (Levitsky & Way, 2010; 2020).

Competitive authoritarianism is part of the broader universe of "hybrid regimes" that emerged especially after the end of the Cold War. During the 1990s and 2000s, many regimes in post-communist Eurasia, Africa, and elsewhere held multiparty elections for the first time, but many did not evolve into liberal democracies. Instead, they settled into ambiguous forms where elections coexisted with repression. Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that competitive authoritarianism became a common post–Cold War regime type because outright dictatorship lost legitimacy globally, yet many incumbents were unwilling to relinquish control. By allowing elections (to placate domestic and international pressures) but manipulating them sufficiently to avoid losing, leaders could enjoy a "best of both worlds" – the facade of democracy without its risks. Typical features of competitive authoritarian regimes include: unequal access to media, misuse of state resources for incumbents' campaigns, harassment or legal persecution of opposition candidates, and in some cases outright electoral fraud. However, unlike fully authoritarian regimes, opposition forces in competitive authoritarian systems are not completely banned – they continue to operate and sometimes even win significant votes or offices, which keeps the competition alive albeit unfair (Levitsky & Way, 2010; 2020).

A closely related concept, often used interchangeably in the literature, is electoral authoritarianism. Andreas Schedler (2006) defines electoral authoritarian regimes as systems that "practice authoritarianism behind the institutional facades of representative democracy", holding regular multiparty elections while "violating liberal-democratic minimum standards in systematic and profound ways". In Schedler's framework, electoral authoritarianism is the modal form of dictatorship in the modern world: rather than overt military juntas or one-party totalitarian states, most contemporary autocrats maintain the veneer of elections and pluralism, all the while subverting them through censorship, intimidation, and legal maneuvers (Schedler, 2013). The "menu of manipulation", as Schedler (2002) memorably called it, can include tactics like muzzling the press, gerrymandering, vote-buying, barring strong opposition candidates, and stacking electoral commissions – all ensuring that elections do not truly threaten the incumbents' hold on power.

The distinction between "competitive" and "electoral" authoritarianism is subtle: both describe hybrid forms. Generally, competitive authoritarianism highlights that meaningful competition exists but under unfair conditions (emphasizing the possibility of opposition victory under rare conditions), whereas electoral authoritarianism emphasizes that the regime is fundamentally authoritarian behind a democratic facade (implying that the competition is more illusory). In practice, authors often use the terms in overlapping ways. What matters is that these concepts

capture regimes that are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic, but somewhere in between – maintaining enough electoral competition to appear democratic, yet tilting the field enough to avoid genuine uncertainty in outcomes (Schedler, 2013; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

The case of Türkiye has increasingly been analyzed through this lens. For much of the 2000s, Türkiye was classified as a democracy (albeit with some deficits) by mainstream indices. However, as the AKP government became more dominant and repressive in the 2010s, a number of scholars began describing Türkiye as a competitive authoritarian regime (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Özbudun, 2014). By around 2014 – following events like the Gezi Park protests crackdown and corruption scandals – observers noted the systematic unfairness in Türkiye's political arena: media largely under government sway, jailed journalists and opposition figures, judiciary under executive influence, and an electoral system skewed by harassment of the HDP and other opposition parties (Özbudun, 2015). Although elections continued and were formally contested (the AKP even lost its parliamentary majority briefly in June 2015, only to regain it in a snap repeat election), the "playing field" was clearly uneven. Esen & Gümüşçü (2016)documented how the AKP leveraged state resources and coercive apparatus to tilt elections, while Özbudun (2015)characterized Türkiye's drift as one towards "competitive authoritarianism" especially due to the collapse of judicial independence and other horizontal accountability mechanisms. In sum, Türkiye by the late 2010s met the criteria of a competitive/electoral authoritarian regime: multiparty elections that are real but not fair, and an incumbent that uses the organs of the state to maintain power in the guise of democratic form (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; 2021).

Framing Türkiye as a competitive authoritarian case situates it in comparative perspective with countries like Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, Russia under Putin, or Hungary under Fidesz – all regimes that evolved into hybrid forms. Indeed, Chávez's Venezuela is a classic competitive authoritarian case, where elections were held and sometimes closely contested, but the chavista government's control of institutions ensured an uneven field (Corrales J. , 2015). Scholars Levitsky and Loxton (2013) even draw parallels between Latin American populist-authoritarians and cases like Türkiye, noting the blend of elections with authoritarian practices. Recognizing Türkiye as a hybrid regime rather than a full democracy is important for our theoretical framework, as it underscores that the "backsliding" in Türkiye did not result in the outright cancellation of elections or open dictatorship; rather, it produced a system consonant with what theory predicts for competitive authoritarianism – a system balancing between democratic and authoritarian elements. The next section turns to a related concept that was

initially applied to new democracies like Türkiye before the full emergence of competitive authoritarian traits: delegative democracy.

3.3. DELEGATIVE DEMOCRACY

Guillermo O'Donnell's concept of delegative democracy offers another lens for understanding democracies that fall short of full institutionalization. Writing in the early 1990s about Latin America's new democracies, O'Donnell (1994) observed that many elected presidents were governing in a manner that concentrated power and bypassed institutional checks, yet without abolishing elections. He termed this pattern "delegative democracy" – a system where the populace, by electing a president, is seen as having delegated virtually all power to that leader for the duration of the term, with few constraints or accountability in between elections. In delegative democracies, the president governs as if he has a personal plebiscitary mandate to act on behalf of "the people", and institutions like legislatures, courts, and watchdog agencies are viewed as nuisances or impediments to the majority's will. Accountability to other institutions and power-sharing are minimal; instead, there is an expectation that the president "embodies" the nation and should be allowed to rule unimpaired. As put by himself, delegative democracy is "more democratic, but less liberal, than representative democracy" – it upholds the act of voting and majority empowerment, but it downplays liberal norms of constraint and negotiation. Delegative democracy is "strongly majoritarian", resting on the idea that a clear electoral victory entitles the winner to govern as they see fit, even if that means sidelining institutional checks (O'Donnell, 1994).

In a delegative system, once elections are over, citizens are expected to be passive: they have entrusted the leader to deliver results and will judge him or her in the next election. Meanwhile, the leader often claims a direct, almost personal relationship with the masses ("I represent you, not these meddling institutions"). O'Donnell (1994) noted that presidents in delegative democracies often display an authoritarian leadership style – concentrating decision-making in the executive and his inner circle, and treating agencies like parliament or judiciary as rubber stamps at best. However, crucially, delegative democracies are still democracies in the minimal sense: elections occur regularly and can be competitive, and there is no outright suppression of opposition parties as long as they do not actually constrain the executive's ability to rule.

This concept was initially used to describe countries like Peru under Fujimori, Argentina under Menem, or Russia in the Yeltsin era – cases where charismatic presidents enacted sweeping

changes with little horizontal accountability (O'Donnell, 1994). Delegative democracy provided a way to explain why some new democracies were failing to consolidate liberal-democratic institutions: cultural and structural factors led populations to seek strong leaders who would "get things done", even at the cost of weakening institutional checks. O'Donnell's insight was that these democracies were not necessarily in transition to authoritarianism; rather, they represented a distinct mode of democratic governance where vertical accountability (elections) existed but horizontal accountability (checks and balances) was feeble.

Türkiye's experience in the 2000s has been described by some analysts in delegative terms. For example, Hakan Taş (2015) argues that Türkiye evolved "from tutelary to delegative democracy" in the early AKP period. After decades of tutelary democracy – where unelected guardians like the military and secular establishment constrained elected officials – the 2000s saw civilian elected leaders (the AKP) free themselves from the old tutelage. However, rather than developing robust liberal institutions, the AKP under Erdoğan increasingly fit a delegative pattern: ruling through a highly centralized executive power with weak checks. Indeed, Erdoğan's leadership style – especially after 2007 – has often been cited as quintessentially delegative or plebiscitarian (Özbudun, 2014; Taş, 2015). He explicitly equated electoral victory with a mandate to override bureaucratic or judicial objections, frequently framing his authority as stemming directly from "the national will." O'Donnell's (1994) description of presidents who feel "accountability to institutions is an unnecessary impediment to their full authority" resonates strongly with Erdoğan's approach. During the 2010s, as Erdoğan accumulated more personal power (first as prime minister, then as president after 2014), scholars noted that Türkiye had many characteristics of a delegative democracy: executive dominance, personalization of power, and a marginalization of opposition voices in day-to-day governance (Özbudun, 2014; Selçuk O. , 2016).

It is important to clarify the relationship between delegative democracy and competitive authoritarianism in Türkiye's context. Delegative democracy can be seen as one stage or interpretation of Türkiye's regime before it crossed a threshold into more overt authoritarianism. In the late 2000s, one could argue Türkiye was still a democracy but of a delegative kind – the AKP was hegemonic, Erdoğan's government often bypassed institutional consultation yet elections were still genuine and the playing field, while tilting, had not completely locked out the opposition. By the mid-2010s, however, as repression intensified, many analysts shifted to labeling Türkiye as competitive authoritarian. In other words, Türkiye's trajectory can be seen as moving from a delegative democracy (when liberal

institutions eroded but the system was still fundamentally democratic) to a competitive authoritarian regime (when the accumulation of power and unfairness reached a point that the regime could no longer be called a democracy, even delegative). Indeed, Özbudun (2015) notes that after 2013-2014, the collapse of horizontal accountability (e.g., subjugation of the judiciary) meant Türkiye was better characterized as no longer a democracy at all, but a hybrid authoritarian regime. Thus, delegative democracy is a useful concept to analyze the AKP's mode of governance especially in its first decade, illuminating how Erdoğan's rule emphasized majoritarian legitimacy over liberal process. It also connects to the next topic – populism – since delegative leaders often rely on populist legitimation. As O'Donnell (1994) pointed out, delegative democracy is "more democratic but less liberal", essentially a majoritarian distortion of democracy, which dovetails with populist ideology.

3.4. POPULISM AND MAJORITARIANISM

Populism has become a central concept in explaining democratic backsliding, as many of today's backsliding leaders – including Erdoğan – are described as populist in their rhetoric and governing style. While definitions of populism vary, a widely accepted formulation by Cas Mudde (2004) describes populism as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people". In essence, populism pitches a virtuous, presumably unified populace against an established elite or "others" who are portrayed as enemies of the people. Populist leaders claim to represent the true people's will, often dismissing institutional norms and pluralism as obstacles to that will. Jan-Werner Müller (2016) further emphasizes that populism is anti-pluralist at its core: populists contend that they, and only they, represent the legitimate people, labeling all opponents as illegitimate or part of a conspiracy against the people. Thus, when in power, populists often govern as if any dissent or check on their authority is a betrayal of the people. This has direct implications for liberal democracy – populist governance tends to erode checks and balances under the justification of fulfilling the majority's mandate.

Majoritarianism is closely linked to populism in this context. Majoritarianism is the belief that majority public opinion (usually ascertained through elections or referenda) should have virtually unchecked authority to make decisions, with little regard for minority rights or institutional constraints. Populists typically embrace a majoritarian view of democracy: they equate winning an election with a license to govern unencumbered. The idea of a "tyranny of

the majority", warned about by Alexis de Tocqueville (2000) in the 19th century, becomes a real risk under populist-majoritarian regimes. Tocqueville noted that in a democratic system, unlimited power of the majority could threaten freedom and minority rights if not moderated by law and norms – a prophetic insight for the dynamics we observe today. Populist leaders often reject this warning; they explicitly claim that checks and balances only serve to undermine the majority's will, a stance which leads to the concentration of power.

Erdoğan's Türkiye exemplifies the fusion of populism with majoritarian democracy. From early on, the AKP under Erdoğan employed populist discourse: positioning the pious Muslim "Anatolian people" as righteous and long-suppressed by a secular, Westernized elite (which included bureaucrats, military officers, and urban intellectuals). This "us vs. them" narrative painted the opposition and critical media as not just political rivals but as enemies of the people's national will (Dinçşahin, 2012; Yabanci, 2016). The AKP's repeated electoral successes (it won general elections in 2002, 2007, 2011, etc., often by large margins) were framed as the authentic voice of the people finally prevailing over secular elitism. Consequently, Erdoğan and his party increasingly argued that having the people's support entitled them to override other constraints – a classic majoritarian ethos. As one AKP slogan put it, "Sandık ne derse o" ("whatever the ballot box says, that is it"), encapsulating the notion that electoral victory justifies virtually any policy or change thereafter.

Scholars like Ergun Özbudun (2014) have described this tendency in Türkiye as a drift toward majoritarianism or "electoral majoritarian authoritarianism". Özbudun specifically analyzed the AKP's "majoritarian drift", noting that the party grew over-confident in its electoral mandate and began to treat winner-takes-all as the governing principle. According to Özbudun (2014), Erdoğan adopted an "excessively majoritarian conception of democracy" wherein those who win elections gain the right to rule without meaningful consultation or compromise with the losers. This was starkly demonstrated after the AKP's 2011 election landslide: the government pushed through constitutional amendments and major legislation often unilaterally, dismissing opposition concerns. In Erdoğan's own words, frequently repeated, the ballot box provided the only accountability that mattered – other institutions (courts, media, regulators) should not override "the national will" as expressed by the majority.

Populist majoritarianism also manifests in Türkiye's use of referendums to bypass institutional opposition. For example, the 2010 constitutional referendum, which reorganized the judiciary, was campaigned by the AKP as a matter of empowering "the people" to cleanse the judiciary

of undemocratic elites (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012). Similarly, the critical 2017 constitutional referendum that established an executive presidency was justified by Erdoğan as giving Türkiye a system that "the people want", concentrating power in an elected president as a supposed reflection of popular will – notwithstanding that the referendum itself passed by only a slim margin amid a highly unequal campaign (2017b). In both cases, appeals to populist majoritarian legitimacy were used to overcome concerns about separation of powers.

Comparative politics research indicates that populism can indeed erode liberal democracy by assaulting the idea of legitimate opposition. Müller (2016) argues that once populists in power identify themselves exclusively with the people, they delegitimize any criticism as "anti-people" and often engage in authoritarian measures under the guise of defending the people's interest. This has been seen in countries from Hugo Chávez's Venezuela to Orbán's Hungary, and in Türkiye as well: Erdoğan has frequently labeled his opponents – whether secularists, liberals, FETO or Kurds – as traitors or threats to the nation, thereby rationalizing crackdowns as necessary to protect the majority's will (Selçuk O. , 2016; Yabanci, 2016). The populist playbook of demonizing critics and undermining independent institutions (like the press or courts) is a major factor in democratic backsliding. (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012) note that while populism can in some contexts mobilize neglected groups and invigorate democracy, in practice populists in power often weaken checks and balances, especially when paired with a majoritarian interpretation of their mandate.

In sum, populism and majoritarianism form an ideological and strategic package that provides justification for illiberal and authoritarian measures in a democracy. Populism supplies the narrative (a virtuous people vs. corrupt elites) and majoritarianism supplies the principle (majority rule with little restraint). Together, they challenge the liberal notion that democracy is as much about minority rights and rule of law as it is about majority preference. The theoretical implication is that democratic erosion often has an electoral and popular face: it is not always a stealthy bureaucratic coup, but can be driven by leaders who enjoy genuine mass support and claim to act on the people's behalf. Türkiye's backslide was heavily enabled by this dynamic – many voters continued to support Erdoğan even as he eroded checks, precisely because his populist majoritarian framing convinced them that he was democracy's true champion (representing the people against "elitists" or "enemies") and that institutional checks were expendable. The next section will consider an institutional aspect that amplified this dynamic in Türkiye: the shift to a presidential system and the dangers it entailed, as presaged by classical theory on the perils of presidentialism.

3.5. THE PERILS OF PRESIDENTIALISM

A significant theoretical perspective on democratic stability concerns the choice of political system – parliamentary vs. presidential. Juan J. Linz's seminal work "The Perils of Presidentialism" (1990) argued that the presidential form of government poses particular risks to democratic consolidation, especially in societies with deep political cleavages. In a presidential system, the head of government (the president) is directly elected and holds fixed-term executive authority separate from the legislature. Linz identified several perils: (1) the dual legitimacy problem – both president and legislature claim democratic mandates, which can lead to deadlock or conflict; (2) the zero-sum nature of presidential elections – the winner-take-all contest for a single powerful office can exacerbate polarization and leave no incentive for power-sharing with the losers; and (3) the potential for personalization of power – a president, as a singular national figure, can more easily style himself as the embodiment of the people, sometimes undermining institutional checks and behaving in a plebiscitarian manner (Linz, 1990). Moreover, the rigidity of fixed terms means that a deeply unpopular or controversial president cannot be easily removed (short of impeachment or coup), unlike a prime minister in a parliamentary system who could be ousted via a no-confidence vote, raising the stakes of each election and potentially leading to crises if the president loses legitimacy.

Empirically, Linz observed that many presidential democracies in Latin America and elsewhere had a higher tendency to break down compared to parliamentary ones. Parliamentary systems foster coalition-building and flexible majorities, whereas presidentialism often produced winner-take-all politics and confrontation. Subsequent research has debated Linz's arguments – noting, for example, that the success of the United States as a presidential democracy suggests that contextual factors (like strong institutions or two-party systems) matter. Nevertheless, the core warnings of Linz remain influential: presidentialism combined with polarization and weak institutions can be a dangerous mix for democracy (Linz, 1990). The executive aggrandizement by elected presidents can more readily lead to authoritarian outcomes because a president concentrates both the ceremonial and governing authority, and if he subverts checks, there are fewer power centers to resist.

Türkiye provides a near textbook example of Linz's concerns, especially after its 2017 transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system. For most of its republican history (1923–2017), Türkiye was a parliamentary democracy (with the peculiar additional feature of military tutelage for long periods). Under parliamentary rules, the AKP government already

displayed authoritarian tendencies, but there were at least formal possibilities of no-confidence votes and a ceremonial presidency with limited powers. However, in April 2017, via a tightly contested referendum, Türkiye adopted a new constitution that created a "Turkish-style" executive presidency. This reform, which took effect after the 2018 elections, abolished the prime minister's office and concentrated executive power almost entirely in the hands of the president (Erdoğan). The new system gave the president authority to issue decrees with force of law, control the budget (in practice), appoint ministers and high officials without parliamentary approval, dissolve parliament (by calling early elections), and more – with only minimal checks. Effectively, it codified and enhanced Erdoğan's one-man rule in legal terms (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b; Bâli, 2018).

From a theoretical standpoint, this move exemplifies the perils of presidentialism in a polarized, illiberal context. By adopting presidentialism, Türkiye moved to a political structure that Linz would predict to be less stable and more prone to authoritarian concentration of power. Indeed, critics at the time argued that Türkiye's presidential shift would "formalize competitive authoritarianism" by removing even the pretense of executive-legislative balance (Özbudun, 2015). The presidential election that followed (June 2018) saw Erdoğan elected president with sweeping new powers, while the parliamentary elections occurred simultaneously – essentially ensuring a unified AKP/Erdoğan dominance of all institutions. Since then, Türkiye's system has exhibited many of Linz's (1990) red flags: a winner-take-all presidency with Erdoğan at the apex, no coalition government (the president can rule alone or through decrees even if his party lacks a majority, thanks to new rules), and a marginal legislature. The political discourse also became even more personalized around Erdoğan as "reis" (leader), reinforcing the notion of a singular national will embodied in one person.

Linz's theory would suggest that such a scenario is ripe for democratic breakdown. Türkiye's democracy indeed further deteriorated post-2017, sliding in indices from "Partly Free" to "Not Free" and being described as a full-blown electoral authoritarian regime. The dual legitimacy issue in Türkiye is less about president vs. parliament (since Erdoğan's alliance controls parliament too) but more about the president vs. other institutions: for example, the president and his party have clashed with local governments won by the opposition, removing and overriding elected mayors (notably in Kurdish-majority cities) – a phenomenon of central executive overriding other elected mandates. The fixed-term nature of the presidency (five years) also means that unless Erdoğan is voted out (which is challenging under unfair conditions), there is no constitutional mechanism to check him in between elections. This

rigidity can be seen as contributing to democratic erosion because it grants the incumbent time and security to entrench power without fearing legislative dismissal.

It is instructive to contrast that prior to 2017, there was at least a theoretical chance that parliament or an intra-party shift could curtail Erdoğan's power (e.g., the June 2015 election where the AKP briefly lost majority showed parliamentary leverage). Presidentialism eliminated such possibilities. The perils of presidentialism argument would thus hold that Türkiye's shift to presidentialism significantly increased the likelihood of a sustained authoritarian outcome by centralizing authority and removing many of the checks inherent in parliamentarism. In Linz's words, presidentialism's zero-sum nature appears validated in Türkiye: Erdoğan's narrow victory in the 2017 referendum (51% Yes) fundamentally restructured the regime in his favor, essentially locking in an authoritarian tilt that a more consensual or flexible parliamentary system might have mitigated.

In summary, Linz's (1990) theoretical warning about presidential systems, especially "strong presidents and weak institutions provides a crucial piece of our framework (Selçuk O. , 2016). It helps explain why Erdoğan's accumulation of power reached a zenith with the formal constitutional changes: the very institutional design now favors long-term executive dominance. This sets the stage for examining the concrete mechanisms through which a leader like Erdoğan can entrench authoritarian rule under democratic facades. We turn next to those mechanisms – specifically how executives concentrate power (executive aggrandizement), use the law to kill democracy (autocratic legalism), and take advantage of crises to fast-track their agenda (crisis exploitation).

3.6. EXECUTIVE AGGRANDIZEMENT

Modern democratic backsliding often occurs not through dramatic coups but through a gradual executive aggrandizement – the incremental expansion of executive power at the expense of checks and balances, carried out by elected leaders. In the typology of backsliding mechanisms, Bermeo (2016) identifies executive aggrandizement as a principal mode of erosion in the 21st century, contrasting it with the more abrupt seizures of power seen in earlier eras (e.g., military coups). Executive aggrandizement "occurs when elected executives weaken checks on their power one by one, undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the ability of opposition forces to challenge power". These changes are often legal and subtle – constitutional amendments, new laws, personnel purges, or regulatory tweaks – each perhaps justifiable on its

own, but cumulatively they concentrate authority in executive hands and undermine the competitive equilibrium of democracy.

Huq and Ginsburg (2018) similarly discuss how democracies can be subverted via what they term "constitutional retrogression", encompassing practices very akin to executive aggrandizement. They note that contemporary would-be autocrats typically operate under the veneer of legality, using their electoral mandate to step-by-step remove or weaken veto players and oversight institutions. Importantly, executive aggrandizement is usually constitutional or legal in form: instead of overtly breaking the law, leaders change the law (or reinterpret it) to empower the executive. This might involve, for example, altering judicial appointment procedures to pack courts with loyalists, changing electoral laws to disadvantage opponents, extending term limits or removing them, creating new emergency powers, or bringing independent agencies (like election commissions or media regulators) under executive control. Each step might be passed by parliament or endorsed by a referendum, giving it a sense of legitimacy, even as the net effect is to dismantle democratic accountability.

Türkiye's democratic decline is a prime example of executive aggrandizement in action. Over the AKP's years in power, Erdoğan and his party systematically chipped away at institutional constraints. Early on, some of these moves could be framed as democratizing (for instance, reforms that curbed the military's political role in the 2000s), but as time went on, the direction became one of accumulating unchecked executive authority. Key moments included: the 2010 constitutional amendments, which, inter alia, altered the composition of the high judiciary (the Constitutional Court and High Council of Judges and Prosecutors) allowing the government greater influence over judicial appointments (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012); the sidelining and eventual purging of internal party rivals and coalition partners (such as the 2013 break with FETO, which was followed by purges of FETO officials from bureaucracy and judiciary on accusations of a "parallel state"); and the aforementioned 2017 constitutional overhaul creating a hyper-presidential system. Each of these steps was pursued through formal procedures – constitutional referendums, parliamentary votes, legal investigations – rather than raw force. Thus, they exemplify executive aggrandizement as a legal slow-motion coup: power was accumulated not by sending tanks to dissolve parliament, but by passing bills in parliament (where AKP's majority was used to push through changes) or by putting questions to a popular vote under conditions favorable to the government.

By 2018, observers noted that Türkiye's executive had effectively "aggrandized" itself to the point of near-hegemony over all branches of government (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2018). The judiciary's independence had been eviscerated – through a combination of legal changes and purges (especially post-2016 coup attempt) – turning courts increasingly into an arm of the executive. The legislature had been tamed, first by the AKP's internal discipline and large majorities, and later by the constitutional change that made the president the central figure (with powers to rule by decree). The media and civil society were also muzzled or co-opted, often via regulatory laws or politicized prosecutions. Each individual action (say, a new media law tightening internet regulation, or an anti-terror law used to jail journalists) might have had a legal rationale, but collectively they neutralized sources of criticism. In theoretical terms, Türkiye demonstrated how an elected leader can hollow out a democracy from within through a series of incremental moves – "boiling the frog" of democracy, so to speak, by raising the heat gradually.

A critical aspect of executive aggrandizement is that it is usually justified by the executive as necessary reforms or responses to problems. In Türkiye, the AKP often couched power-consolidating changes as either reforms (e.g., cleaning up a corrupt or "biased" judiciary by restructuring it) or security necessities (e.g., giving the executive emergency powers to fight terrorism after the coup attempt). By doing so, they maintained a narrative of legitimacy even as they entrenched executive dominance. This highlights a key analytical point: executive aggrandizement usually wears the cloak of legality and even democratic rhetoric. It is a usurpation of power "by inches", which can be harder to spot and resist than a blatant power grab, because each step might appear minor or justifiable (Bermeo, 2016).

In comparative perspective, many other cases of backsliding follow the executive aggrandizement script. For instance, Hugo Chávez's Venezuela saw the progressive concentration of power in the presidency via constitutional changes in 1999 and afterward (Corrales & Penfold, 2011). Poland and Hungary in the 2010s likewise experienced ruling parties using legislative majorities to undermine judicial independence and media freedom – effectively empowering the executive branch at the cost of checks (Kornai, 2015; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). What Türkiye shares with these cases is the pattern of legally restructuring the state to advantage incumbents. Thus, executive aggrandizement is a cornerstone concept for understanding Türkiye's democratic decay. It directs us to examine in detail the formal changes and institutional rearrangements the AKP undertook. This concept also ties directly into the

next one, autocratic legalism, which is essentially the strategy that enables executive aggrandizement under the guise of legality.

3.7. AUTOCRATIC LEGALISM

Confronted with the puzzle of how modern autocrats subvert democracy while following the law, legal scholar Kim Lane Scheppele (2018) coined the term autocratic legalism. Autocratic legalism refers to a governing strategy in which incumbents systematically use, twist, or selectively enforce laws to entrench their own power and disable opposition, all while maintaining a veneer of legal legitimacy. Scheppele (2022) observed that in countries like Hungary, Russia, Venezuela, and Türkiye, leaders did not typically abolish constitutions or rule by open fiat; rather, they "push their illiberal measures with electoral backing and use constitutional or legal methods to accomplish their aims". In other words, they govern by law rather than outside the law, but they reshape the law into a tool of authoritarian rule. This often involves changing constitutions to remove checks, passing new laws that constrain civil society or media under lofty pretexts, selectively applying anti-corruption or anti-terrorism laws to jail opponents, and in general weaponizing the legal system against the opposition while protecting allies.

Autocratic legalism is closely related to what Ozan Varol (2015) calls "stealth authoritarianism", wherein authoritarian practices are cloaked under the apparent normalcy of legal procedures. The advantage of this approach for autocrats is twofold: domestically, it can defuse resistance by making changes seem rule-bound and procedurally legitimate (citizens see laws being passed by parliament or approved in referendums, which seems normal in a democracy); internationally, it blunts criticism since outside observers often hesitate to condemn actions that are technically legal or constitutional. Scheppele (2018) points out that international watchdogs and institutions sometimes fail to react strongly to autocratic legalism because it doesn't present as a blatant breach of democracy like a coup would – instead it's a slow "rule-of-law" rot from within.

In practice, autocratic legalism can be seen in a number of techniques:

- Constitutional revision: rewriting the constitution or amending it to grant more powers to the executive, eliminate term limits, change judicial appointment processes, alter electoral systems, etc., all with the effect of locking in the incumbent's dominance (e.g., Hungary's 2011 new constitution, Türkiye's 2017 amendments).

- Legal harassment: passing vague or broad laws (on terrorism, defamation, NGO registration, etc.) that can be used to harass opposition figures, activists, media, and businesses not aligned with the regime. Because these are laws, their enforcement can be framed as "rule of law" rather than repression – even if they are selectively enforced.

- Judicial capture: using legal means to take control of the judiciary (for instance, expanding the number of judges and appointing loyalists, using disciplinary or criminal proceedings to remove independent judges). Once the courts are controlled, virtually any government action can be rubber-stamped as legal, and opposition recourse is limited.

- Election rule manipulation: changing electoral laws (e.g., gerrymandering districts, altering thresholds, curbing campaign finance for opposition, etc.) to structurally advantage the ruling party, all through the legal legislative process.

Türkiye under AKP rule provides a near-comprehensive case study of autocratic legalism in action. The AKP government repeatedly leveraged legal tools, often during or after moments of crisis, to consolidate power. For example, following a tumultuous confrontation with judicial and military elites in 2007 (the so-called "e-memorandum" crisis), the AKP championed a constitutional amendment (in 2010) to reform the judiciary. Publicly sold as a democratization aligning with EU norms, the reform in practice allowed the government greater say in appointing judges and prosecutors (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012). This legal change laid groundwork for later using the courts to go after opponents. Similarly, in response to the mid-2010s security challenges (PKK conflict resurgence, ISIS attacks) and especially the 2016 failed coup, the government declared a state of emergency and then proceeded to rule by decree for two years – an emergency power which was itself legal under the constitution, but which enabled a flood of decree-laws purging tens of thousands from the bureaucracy, shutting down media outlets, and reconfiguring institutions (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017a). All of these actions were later given retroactive parliamentary approval, and then many were entrenched by permanent laws after the emergency ended. What we see is a pattern: crisis -> use legal authority (emergency decrees) -> implement authoritarian measures -> codify them into ordinary law. This is autocratic legalism par excellence.

Scheppele's (2018) notion captures how Erdoğan's administration frequently pointed to legal formalities to justify its moves. When media outlets were seized or closed, it was on the basis of court orders or regulatory agency decisions citing legal violations. When opposition

politicians were arrested, it was under anti-terrorism laws passed by parliament. The government's framing was that "we are enforcing the laws and protecting national security / public order." Detractors, of course, noted that those laws had been tailor-made by the AKP to criminalize and stifle legitimate democratic activities. The 2017 constitutional referendum itself was a constitutional, legal process – one that changed the state's structure in a way that one could argue effectively ended Türkiye's previous democratic order, but done via a legal vote.

One vivid illustration of autocratic legalism is how Viktor Orbán in Hungary operated, which parallels Türkiye. Orbán had a two-thirds majority in parliament and pushed through a new constitution and many cardinal laws that cemented his party's control – all by legal votes. Scheppele (2018) noted that Orbán's Hungary became a Frankenstate, stitched together from legal parts that individually might look normal but together formed an authoritarian machine. Türkiye's legal transformations are similar in effect. By the late 2010s, Türkiye had a host of new laws – on internal security, on internet regulation, on NGOs, on the judiciary – that collectively allowed the government to restrict freedoms and dominate the political arena while claiming full compliance with constitutional procedures (with the caveat that the constitution itself had been altered to permit these moves).

In theoretical terms, autocratic legalism challenges the classic notion of the rule of law. It shows that law can be both the sword and shield of autocratizing regimes: a sword to strike down opposition (using laws against them) and a shield to fend off criticism (claiming legality). This is particularly relevant to Türkiye's case because of its aspirations (at least initially) to meet EU legal standards and maintain international legitimacy. The AKP learned to package its power grabs in reformist or defensive legal language, a strategy that delayed stronger external reactions in some instances.

Understanding autocratic legalism in Türkiye also helps explain why democratic backsliding can become so entrenched: once authoritarian practices are embedded in laws and constitutions, it's harder to reverse them than if they were mere temporary abuses. The inertia of law means succeeding governments or opposition movements face legal hurdles to undo the damage, often needing supermajorities or facing judicial blocks (stocked by the ancien régime's appointees). Thus, Türkiye's entrenchment of AKP's preferences into the legal fabric (from constitutional changes to long-term appointments of loyalists) represents a consolidation of authoritarian measures that is difficult to unwind without a major political turnover.

3.8. CRISIS EXPLOITATION

No analysis of Türkiye's path toward authoritarianism would be complete without examining the role of crises – and how the regime exploited those critical moments to accelerate autocratization. A pattern observed in many cases (including Türkiye) is that would-be autocrats often "never let a serious crisis go to waste", seizing on wars, terrorist attacks, coup attempts, economic meltdowns, or large protests as opportunities to consolidate power (to borrow an adage famously attributed to Winston Churchill and used by modern politicians). We term this dynamic crisis exploitation, meaning the strategic use of real or manufactured crises to justify extraordinary measures that further authoritarian ends.

Crises can serve as critical junctures – moments when the normal rules are suspended and significant institutional change becomes possible (Cappoccia & Kelemen, 2007). In democratic backsliding, crises are frequently used to rally public support around the leader, marginalize opposition (who may be labeled as disloyal in a time of danger), and bypass ordinary democratic deliberation under the guise of urgency. As political scientists have noted, states of emergency or crisis often lead to a "ratchet effect": temporary measures enacted during the crisis end up permanently increasing executive power even after the crisis passes (Goderis & Versteeg, 2012). Scholars of autocratization have observed that leaders like Russia's Putin used the Chechen wars, and later other security threats, to recentralize authority and crack down on dissent (way beyond what those conflicts strictly required) (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Similarly, Orbán in Hungary capitalized on the 2015 refugee crisis and later the COVID-19 pandemic to bolster his emergency powers and rule-by-decree capabilities (Scheppele K. L., 2022).

Similarly, Türkiye's recent history is punctuated by crises that the AKP government adeptly turned to its advantage (which are to be detailed in following chapters); like alleged coup plots by military officers starting from 2007 (Ergenekon, Sledgehammer, "E-memorandum") which were forged to create a fear of a "deep state" conspiracy; the Gezi Park protests in 2013 which were framed by Erdoğan as a foreign-backed insurrection and an existential threat; the December 2013 corruption scandal which implicated AKP ministers and even Erdoğan's family in corruption was labeled by Erdoğan as a "coup attempt" by FETO elements in the judiciary and police; and most significantly the July 2016 coup attempt which immediately allowed Erdoğan to declare a national state of emergency with broad public support across the spectrum. By the end of the emergency in 2018, Türkiye had been transformed. The crises had passed, but virtually none of the extraordinary powers were surrendered; instead, they were

institutionalized. This exemplifies the lock-in effect of crisis exploitation: actions taken in exceptional times create a new normal (Cappoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Scheppele K. L., 2018).

Weaving this into theory, crisis exploitation can be seen as a catalyst for executive aggrandizement and autocratic legalism. Often, the most extreme legal changes or power grabs occur during or right after crises, when the public is fearful or mobilized and opposition is disoriented. Crises provide the justification needed to override objections – people are told "we have no choice but to do X given the emergency." Additionally, during crises, institutions may temporarily yield power to the executive (even in democracies, executives get more leeway in emergencies). Autocrats ensure that "temporary" measures never fully go away. Scheppele (2018) notes that autocratic legalism frequently "uses legal tools during emergencies to entrench power" – a synergy clearly seen in Türkiye. The state of emergency allowed governing by decree (a legal tool), which entrenched new authoritarian policies (e.g., mass purges, restructuring of agencies). The fact that these were done under legal forms meant they could be codified rather than reversed.

Comparatively, the idea of crisis-driven autocratization has been discussed by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and others who observe that would-be authoritarians often wait for crises, or even manufacture a sense of crisis, to implement their agenda. For instance, declaring a "war on terror" or hyping up external threats can unify public opinion and silence critics. In Türkiye, external and internal enemies were frequently invoked (the country faced a real PKK insurgency and terrorist threats, but the government's narrative often blurred legitimate opposition or civil dissent with these security threats, effectively putting the whole society on a quasi-war footing). This constant "narrative of crisis" helped legitimize strongman tactics.

In summary, crisis exploitation is a crucial theoretical construct for Türkiye's case: each major crisis in the AKP era – whether a political showdown, protest wave, corruption scandal, or violent coup attempt – served as a critical juncture that was leveraged to ratchet up authoritarian controls. It suggests a model in which democratic erosion is not a steady linear process, but one that proceeds in spurts coinciding with crises (Somer, 2016). After each crisis, the regime emerges more authoritarian than before, and the new baseline is normalized until the next crisis allows another leap. The dissertation later will analyze specific crises in detail; here, the theoretical point is that aspiring autocrats use crises as opportunities (and sometimes create opportunities) to undermine democracy under the guise of necessity.

Finally, it is worth noting the concept of the "state of exception", as discussed by Carl Schmitt (2005), who argued "sovereign is he who decides on the exception" meaning that the true power of a sovereign is revealed in his ability to declare an emergency and override normal law. While a philosophical notion, it resonates with how Erdoğan (and other leaders) have effectively placed themselves above normal constitutional constraints by declaring exceptions like emergency rule. Schmitt's warning is that in modern politics, claiming an existential crisis can allow a leader to accrue extraordinary authority – exactly what we observe in crisis exploitation scenarios (Schmitt, 2005). Thus, Türkiye's experience can also be viewed through this lens of sovereignty and exception: Erdoğan's consolidation of power was consummated in the exceptional period after the 2016 coup attempt, when constitutional norms were suspended – and in doing so, a new constitutional order was eventually constructed that permanentized that exceptional power.

3.9. SYNTHESIS AND APPLICATION TO TÜRKIYE'S TRAJECTORY

Having delineated the key theoretical constructs – illiberal democracy, hybrid regimes (competitive/electoral authoritarianism), delegative democracy, populism and majoritarianism, presidentialism's risks, executive aggrandizement, autocratic legalism, and crisis exploitation – we can now integrate these insights to form a cohesive analytical lens for Türkiye under the AKP. Each concept illuminates a particular facet of Türkiye's democratic backsliding; together, they provide a robust framework for interpreting how and why Türkiye's democracy eroded and what kind of regime has emerged in its place.

In broad strokes, Türkiye's evolution can be seen as a textbook case of a democracy shifting into illiberal and authoritarian territory via largely legal, internal processes. The AKP initially rose to power in 2002 through free elections, and for a time Türkiye was hailed as a "model" Muslim-majority democracy. However, as the AKP entrenched itself, Türkiye displayed the hallmark features of illiberal democracy: elections continued and in fact were ardently contested, but liberal safeguards decayed. By analyzing Türkiye as an illiberal democracy, we underscore the simultaneous presence of democratic form and authoritarian content. This concept set alerts us to look for things like: attacks on the press, political freedoms curtailed, rule of law weakened – all under an elected government. Indeed, chapters to come will document these in Türkiye's case, echoing Zakaria's (1997) observations globally.

The debate in the literature on whether Türkiye is a "diminished democracy" or outright "competitive authoritarian" can be informed by our theoretical review (Özbudun, 2015; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016). Through the lens of competitive authoritarianism, Türkiye post-2014 clearly falls in the hybrid regime category – meaningful elections but fundamentally unfair conditions and systematic abuse of state power to favor incumbents. Recognizing Türkiye as competitive authoritarian aligns with global patterns where many backsliding cases land in a grey zone rather than full dictatorship (Levitsky & Way, 2010). On the other hand, considering delegative democracy highlights that even before Türkiye crossed into formal hybrid regime status, its governance style under AKP was eroding horizontal accountability – a warning sign that competitive authoritarianism was on the horizon. In fact, one could argue the AKP's Türkiye was a delegative democracy in the 2000s and then became a competitive authoritarian regime in the 2010s. This showcases how these theoretical constructs can be chronologically applied to Türkiye's trajectory.

The ideological engine driving Türkiye's backslide has been populism fused with majoritarianism. Our framework emphasizes that Erdoğan's populist rhetoric – portraying himself as the voice of the pious majority against various "enemies" – was not just campaign fluff; it translated into a governing approach that de-valued pluralism and enabled drastic steps that undermined democracy while retaining public support from a core constituency. Populism explains the persistence of Erdoğan's legitimacy in the eyes of many Turks even as liberal democracy eroded: many believed he embodied the national will, thus his actions (however illiberal) were justified, a classic populist mindset (Mudde C. , 2004; Müller, 2016). Meanwhile, majoritarian democracy thinking (Tocqueville's nightmare of the tyranny of majority) took root: elections became seen as a purity test of loyalty, and 50%+1 of the vote was taken as carte blanche for total control. The concept of "majoritarian authoritarianism" emerges here to describe Türkiye's regime – essentially a competitive authoritarian system buttressed by continual electoral victories and majority mobilization (as highlighted in the conclusion of the research). In other words, Türkiye illustrates a subtype of hybrid regime where authoritarian consolidation is achieved not just through coercion and elite pacts, but significantly through repeated popular endorsement and populist legitimation (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2021). This is a critical insight our synthesis offers: combining populism/majoritarianism with competitive authoritarianism yields "electoral autocracy" with a mass base – which is exactly what Türkiye represents today.

Institutionally, the perils of presidentialism provide another integrative thread. The adoption of an executive presidency in 2017 can be seen as the culmination of executive aggrandizement – literally rewriting the rules to formalize one-man rule. Linz's (1994) theory gives a structural explanation for why Türkiye's democratic institutions, once reconfigured in a presidentialist-personalist mold, have struggled to provide any checks. It also helps compare Türkiye with other cases: e.g., in Latin America, personalist presidents often drove delegative democracies into crises. Türkiye similarly saw a personalist president (Erdoğan) accumulate power, and once the system was bent to a strong-president model, the remaining institutional shields fell away. Thus, in our framework, presidentialism's risks intersect with the other factors: a populist strongman in a presidential system with weak checks is a recipe for competitive authoritarianism, as evidenced by Türkiye (and analogously Venezuela).

Executive aggrandizement and autocratic legalism in our synthesis explain the mechanics of how Türkiye's transformation was carried out. They direct attention to the specific legal-institutional maneuvers by which the AKP dismantled democratic checks piece by piece – from judicial reconstitution to media takeovers to purges of the civil service. These concepts highlight the importance of process: Türkiye's regime change was not a single event but a sequence of cumulative changes. By viewing those changes through the concept of executive aggrandizement, we recognize them as part of a deliberate strategy rather than isolated responses. The notion of autocratic legalism further underscores that legality itself was weaponized: Türkiye's story is not one of lawlessness, but of laws used to produce illiberal outcomes (Bermeo, 2016). This provides an important nuance – any analysis of Türkiye's backsliding must grapple with the fact that much of it happened via legal mechanisms. Our theoretical framework, by including autocratic legalism, equips us to interpret those legal documents (constitutional amendments, emergency decrees, etc.) not at face value but as instruments in service of autocratization.

Finally, crisis exploitation serves as the temporal accelerator in the framework. It tells us when to look for the most significant shifts: around 2013 (Gezi and corruption probe) and 2016 (coup attempt), primarily. By incorporating the critical juncture perspective, we expect (and indeed find in Türkiye) that those were moments of rapid change. The framework predicts that after each crisis, the regime not only becomes more authoritarian but also normalizes that new level of control (path dependence) (Cappoccia & Kelemen, 2007). This helps explain why Türkiye's backsliding, once begun, proved hard to reverse or halt – each crisis-driven leap created facts on the ground (e.g., a neutered military, an exiled or jailed opposition, a new constitution) that

then set the stage for the next phase. In comparative terms, this matches patterns seen elsewhere (rally-around-the-flag effects and emergency powers entrenching autocrats), reinforcing the generalizability of what Türkiye represents.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework – drawing on comparative politics, political theory, and constitutional studies – provides a comprehensive lens through which to view Türkiye's descent into authoritarianism under the AKP. It portrays the Turkish case as a synergy of:

- Ideational factors: populist, majoritarian ideology undermining pluralism;
- Institutional factors: structural choices like presidentialism and dominant-party rule enabling concentrated power;
- Strategic factors: deliberate executive actions (aggrandizement via legal changes);
- Contingent factors: exploitation of crises to push the agenda.

Through this multidimensional lens, we can interpret subsequent empirical chapters with clarity: when examining, for instance, the AKP's capture of the judiciary, we see autocratic legalism and executive aggrandizement at work; when analyzing Erdoğan's rhetoric and electoral tactics, populism and delegative majoritarianism frame our understanding; when recounting the post-coup purges, crisis exploitation and competitive authoritarian entrenchment explain their significance. Ultimately, Türkiye's trajectory underscores a key lesson of these theories: democracies can die not only by military force or sudden coups, but by a thousand cuts – many of them legal, many of them popular – administered by those who claim to represent the people. The theoretical constructs elaborated here will guide our analysis of how each "cut" was made in Türkiye and how they cumulated in the dismantling of one of the world's important emerging democracies.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the scholarly literature on democratic backsliding as it relates to Türkiye under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and comparable cases globally. It maps key debates and findings across several thematic areas: (1) regime typologies and the conceptualization of "hybrid" regimes (illiberal democracy, competitive authoritarianism, electoral authoritarianism, delegative democracy, etc.); (2) majoritarianism and the erosion of institutional checks and balances; (3) populist legitimation strategies, nationalism, and societal acquiescence to illiberal rule; (4) the exploitation of crises and the use of "autocratic legalism" to entrench power; and (5) comparative perspectives from other cases of backsliding, such as Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela. Within each theme, the chapter also critiques the methodological approaches used – from single-case process tracing to cross-national index-based analysis – evaluating their strengths and limitations. The goal is to map the intellectual landscape on democratic backsliding, highlighting how this body of work establishes the rationale for the dissertation's own theoretical lens and methodological strategy. The tone throughout is scholarly and analytical, focusing on how different strands of literature contribute to understanding the AKP's Türkiye as a case of democratic erosion in a global context.

4.1. REGIME TYPOLOGIES: ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY, COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM, AND HYBRID REGIMES

One foundation of the literature on democratic backsliding is the effort to classify regimes that blur the line between democracy and authoritarianism. Over the past two decades, political scientists have developed various regime typologies to describe hybrid cases like Türkiye under the AKP. Early in the AKP era, some observers saw Türkiye as an "illiberal democracy". Zakaria used the term as a critique: such regimes hold regular elections yet "ignore constitutional limits on their power and deprive citizens of basic rights", thus failing to qualify as true liberal democracies. In the early 2000s, as the third wave of democratization brought elections to countries without deep liberal traditions, scholars noted a proliferation of these illiberal democracies that had the form of electoral democracy without its liberal substance (Zakaria, 2003). Türkiye in the 2010s is often cited as exemplifying this pattern: an elected government that steadily eroded checks on its authority, prompting warnings about the rise of illiberal rule.

Closely related to the illiberal democracy concept are frameworks that treat hybrid regimes as a distinct category of authoritarianism. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's (2010) influential work defines competitive authoritarianism as regimes in which formal democratic institutions and multiparty elections exist and are widely accepted as the means of gaining power, but incumbents routinely violate democratic rules so egregiously that the playing field is heavily skewed against the opposition. In competitive authoritarian systems, elections occur and opposition parties persist, yet the regime fails to meet minimal democratic standards because rulers abuse state resources, control the media, harass opponents, and otherwise tilt elections in their favor. Levitsky and Way initially introduced this concept in the early 2000s as a challenge to the then-dominant "transitional" paradigm: rather than assuming countries like Russia or Venezuela were imperfect democracies en route to liberalization, they argued these were stable hybrid regimes where "quasi-authoritarianism was entrenched via largely normal electoral structures". Their later work and updates note that competitive authoritarianism has proved remarkably resilient in the post-Cold War era, with many countries (including Türkiye under Erdoğan, Hungary under Orbán, and Venezuela under Chávez/Maduro) joining or remaining in this category into the 2010s (Levitsky & Way, 2020). By 2018, Freedom House and other indices had downgraded Türkiye from "Partly Free" to "Not Free", and scholars widely described it as a competitive authoritarian regime rather than a democracy, marking a consensus that Türkiye's backsliding had crossed the threshold into hybrid authoritarian rule (Özbudun, 2015; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016).

Another prominent typology is "electoral authoritarianism", as articulated by Andreas Schedler and others. Schedler (2006) defines electoral authoritarian regimes as systems that "practice authoritarianism behind the institutional facades of representative democracy" – they hold regular multiparty elections at the national level, yet "violate liberal-democratic minimum standards in systematic and profound ways." In such regimes, elections are not outright sham; opposition parties are allowed to compete, and the dictator maintains a pluralistic facade. However, the competition is heavily managed through tactics like media censorship, persecution of opponents, biased electoral laws, and even fraud, so that uncertainty is contained and the incumbent's victory is all but assured. Electoral authoritarianism has become "the most common form of nondemocratic rule in the contemporary world" after the end of the Cold War (Schedler, 2006). This concept overlaps substantially with competitive authoritarianism – both describe hybrid regimes with elections and authoritarian governance – though Schedler's formulation emphasizes the menu of manipulative tactics used to sustain the "façade" of

democracy. Türkiye's trajectory under the AKP increasingly fit this description: by the late 2010s, observers noted that while Türkiye continued holding hotly contested elections, the process was pervasively unfair (media domination by the ruling party, imprisonment of opponents, etc.), placing it firmly in the electoral authoritarian camp (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; OSCE/ODIHR, 2023).

Guillermo O'Donnell's (1994) concept of delegative democracy offers yet another lens that many scholars applied to Türkiye's evolving regime, especially in the earlier years of AKP rule. O'Donnell coined "delegative democracy" to describe certain new democracies (notably in Latin America) where leaders, once elected, concentrate power and govern in an unchecked manner, claiming their election gives them a sweeping mandate. In delegative democracies, the president is seen as the embodiment of the nation and the principal guardian of the national interest, and is "delegated" broad authority by voters to govern as he sees fit. Such regimes have strong majoritarian and plebiscitary traits: the leader justifies bypassing other institutions (parliament, courts, watchdogs) by invoking the direct mandate from "the people." O'Donnell observed that in delegative systems, horizontal accountability is weak – institutions like the legislature and judiciary are viewed by the leader as nuisances or obstacles to the fulfillment of the people's will. This model is "more democratic, but less liberal, than representative democracy", being "strongly majoritarian" in character (O'Donnell, 1994). Several scholars argued that Türkiye under Erdoğan especially in the 2010s fit the delegative democracy mold: Erdoğan increasingly governed as if periodic electoral victories entitled him to override institutional checks and rule by decree or loyalist agencies (Özbudun, 2014; Taş, 2015). Indeed, one study explicitly described Türkiye's evolution as "from tutelary to delegative democracy" – suggesting that after an initial period of military-"tutelary" oversight, the AKP moved Türkiye into a delegative phase where formal democratic forms persisted but liberal checks eroded (Taş, 2015). Delegative democracy, like illiberal democracy, is not a permanent or stable regime type – O'Donnell (1994) himself warned that delegative democracies can either progress toward liberal, institutionalized democracy or regress into outright authoritarianism. By the latter half of the AKP era, many analysts concluded that Türkiye had in fact regressed further, no longer fitting even the delegative democracy category but becoming an outright hybrid authoritarian regime.

The proliferation of terms – illiberal democracy, competitive authoritarianism, electoral authoritarianism, delegative democracy, et cetera – reflects an ongoing debate in the literature about how best to conceptualize regimes that combine electoral contests with authoritarian

governance. Early optimism in the 1990s, which assumed countries like Türkiye were on a one-way path to liberal democracy, gave way to what Thomas Carothers (2002) called "the end of the transition paradigm." Carothers argued that many so-called "transitional" countries were not in fact transitioning to democracy at all, but rather settling into hybrid forms that needed to be understood on their own terms (neither fully democratic nor straightforwardly authoritarian). This insight paved the way for the typologies above. In Turkish case, scholars have actively debated which label most accurately captures the regime under the AKP, and these debates often map onto assessments of when exactly Türkiye ceased to be a democracy. For example, for much of the 2000s Türkiye might have been seen as an illiberal or delegative democracy – flawed but still formally democratic. Some authors in this period used relatively softer terms: Öniş (2013) spoke of "power-sharing" struggles under AKP hegemony, and Müftüler-Baç and Keyman (2012) examined the AKP's record within a "dominant-party democracy" framework, scrutinizing its democratic credentials. However, by the mid-2010s, especially after the 2013–2016 events (Gezi protests, corruption scandals, and the 2016 coup attempt), there was a near-consensus in the literature that Türkiye had crossed into competitive/electoral authoritarian territory (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Özbudun, 2015; Somer, 2016). Freedom House dropped Türkiye to the "Not Free" category, and the Varieties of Democracy project classified it as an "electoral autocracy" (a term synonymous with electoral authoritarianism) by roughly 2018 (V-Dem Institute, 2023). In their global analysis, Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) indeed cite Türkiye as a prime example of the new "third wave of autocratization" – a wave characterized by democratically elected governments gradually undermining democratic institutions from within, often under a legalistic guise. Türkiye's democratic breakdown thus provided empirical support for the broader theoretical shift Carothers and others noted: rather than a temporary aberration on the way to liberal democracy, hybrid regimes like Türkiye's may represent a stable (if troubling) new normal in global politics.

Importantly, these typological debates are not merely semantic; they tie into substantive analytical questions. One such question is whether hybrid regimes like Türkiye's should be seen as still a form of democracy (albeit defective) or as a form of authoritarianism. Zakaria's concept of illiberal democracy implies an internal critique within democracy – essentially a democracy that is hollowed out. In contrast, Levitsky and Way's competitive authoritarianism posits that such regimes are fundamentally authoritarian (not partial democracies) because they fail the minimum tests of democracy in practice. Authors like Esen and Gümüşçü (2016)explicitly framed Türkiye as "rising competitive authoritarianism", thereby signaling

that by their assessment Türkiye was no longer a democracy at all but a hybrid authoritarian regime. Others, like Somer (2016) or Özbudun (2015), documented Türkiye's "drift toward competitive authoritarianism" as a process – suggesting that it was the direction in which Türkiye was heading as institutional erosion accumulated. The nuance in terminology often corresponds to the timeline: e.g. Taş (2015) still called Türkiye a delegative democracy at that point, seeing the final breakdown as in progress, whereas later works post-2016 speak more definitively of authoritarianism. The literature thus uses Türkiye as a case to refine these regime typologies, illustrating how a country can move through stages: from flawed democracy to delegative/illiberal democracy and ultimately to competitive authoritarianism. This trajectory also connects to older conceptual debates in comparative politics, such as Juan Linz's (1990) classic warnings about the "perils of presidentialism" and majority rule without adequate checks. As will be discussed, Türkiye's shift to an executive presidency in 2017 – essentially consolidating power in a single directly elected office – resonated with Linz's fear that unconstrained presidential power can degrade democracy. In sum, the regime typologies literature provides the vocabulary and conceptual frames to interpret Türkiye's experience, and scholars have actively used Türkiye to test and exemplify these concepts. The consensus emerging from this body of work is that by the late 2010s, Türkiye under the AKP regime can be best categorized as an entrenched hybrid authoritarian or competitive authoritarian system, one that retains formal electoral mechanisms while systematically violating liberal democratic norms.

4.2. MAJORITARIANISM AND INSTITUTIONAL EROSION

A central theme in analyses of Türkiye's democratic backsliding is the role of majoritarianism – the idea that electoral victory confers near unlimited mandate to the winner – and how this ethos contributes to the erosion of institutional checks and balances. Majoritarianism in this context refers to a governing philosophy that privileges the will of the numerical majority (as expressed through elections) over constraints designed to protect minority rights, pluralism, and the rule of law. The AKP under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has often explicitly embraced majoritarian arguments, claiming to represent the "national will" against unelected elites. The literature points out that this majoritarian mindset has been a driving force behind the weakening of Türkiye's institutional safeguards, as the AKP government, buoyed by successive electoral victories, increasingly treated independent institutions as obstacles to be reshaped or

controlled in line with majority preferences (or the ruling party's interpretation of those preferences).

Scholars such as Ergun Özbudun (2014) have chronicled "Erdoğan's majoritarian drift", describing how the AKP's political practice moved away from liberal democratic norms toward a view that winning an election entitled the party to dominate all levers of the state. In a liberal democracy, the constitution and institutions impose limits on the majority to protect against the "tyranny of the majority" – a classic concern raised by Alexis de Tocqueville (2000) in the 19th century. Tocqueville's warning that unconstrained majority rule can endanger freedom has clear echoes in today's Türkiye: Erdoğan's oft-repeated mantra that "democracy is the ballot box" exemplifies a reductionist view equating democracy solely with majority voting, dismissing other liberal pillars. Özbudun (2014) notes that after roughly 2011, the AKP government started to interpret its electoral mandate as authorization to override dissent and marginalize any institution – be it the judiciary, media, or civil service – that could check its power. This majoritarian approach was evidenced in rhetoric (e.g., Erdoğan famously saying "we are the people, who are you?" to critics, implying that only those who voted for him constitute the people) and in concrete steps such as packing courts and regulatory bodies with loyalists and pushing through constitutional changes via referenda and parliamentary super-majorities.

The effect of unchecked majoritarianism, as documented by numerous studies, has been institutional erosion. By this, we mean the gradual weakening, co-optation, or outright dismantling of the autonomy and capacity of institutions that normally balance majority rule – including the judiciary, parliament (as an independent deliberative body), media, bureaucracy, and other oversight bodies. One vivid example is the judiciary. In a healthy democracy, courts serve as a counter-majoritarian check to protect constitutional rights. Under the AKP, especially after 2010, the judiciary's independence was systematically undermined. The literature traces this erosion in detail: the 2010 constitutional referendum, passed with AKP's majority, restructured key judicial institutions (like the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors) in a way that increased executive influence (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012). Subsequently, during and after the 2013–2016 period of crises, the government purged hundreds of judges and prosecutors (especially in the wake of the 2016 coup attempt) and replaced them with loyalists. Özbudun (2015) describes Türkiye's judiciary at that point as effectively captured, noting that these changes contributed to "the drift toward competitive authoritarianism" by removing an essential check on executive power. Similarly, the legislature in Türkiye – though theoretically still a venue for opposition – became dominated by the AKP (which held parliamentary majorities for

most of the period and later allied with the nationalist MHP). The AKP used its legislative control to pass laws curtailing civil liberties (e.g., stricter internet and protest laws) and to cement its control over other institutions (such as giving the executive more say in appointments). Thus, the normal legislative oversight function eroded as parliament largely rubber-stamped executive preferences, particularly after Erdoğan ascended to the presidency and the system de facto shifted to executive-dominant governance even before the formal 2017 constitutional change.

The media sector offers another clear case of institutional erosion through majoritarian logic. Free media is often a casualty in backsliding regimes, and Türkiye has been no exception. AKP leaders justified imposing restrictions on media by citing the need to curb "irresponsible" or "unpatriotic" voices, effectively equating criticism of the government with defiance of the popular will. Over time, independent media outlets were bought out by pro-government business interests or intimidated into self-censorship. By the late 2010s, over 90% of major media in Türkiye was aligned with or controlled by the government, a transformation documented in reports and academic analyses (Yılmaz İ. , 2016)). The takeover of the media was facilitated by politicized regulatory bodies and public banks providing loans to AKP-friendly moguls for acquisitions – again showing how a dominant party can hollow out a nominally pluralist institution (the press) using its leverage over other state apparatus. The AKP justified many of these moves by pointing to its electoral mandate, implying that the media should not act as a "political opposition" since the people had chosen the government's narrative.

A crucial turning point highlighting majoritarian power at work was the 2017 constitutional referendum, which narrowly approved shifting Türkiye from a parliamentary to a presidential system. This change, analyzed by Esen and Gümüşçü (2017b), effectively concentrated previously dispersed powers (head of state, head of government, party leader roles) into the hands of President Erdoğan. The referendum itself was conducted under a state of emergency, with opposition campaigning heavily restricted – indicative of how far the playing field had tilted. Erdoğan and the AKP framed the constitutional overhaul as the will of the majority (the referendum passed with about 51% support) and as necessary for strong and stable government. Critics, however, saw it as the capstone of institutional erosion: it removed remaining checks on executive authority, eliminated the prime minister's office, weakened parliament (for instance, by enabling the president to rule by decree and making it harder for parliament to censure ministers), and further politicized the judiciary through new appointment powers for

the president. The literature often links this episode back to the theoretical critiques of unconstrained majority rule. As Linz (1990) warned, an all-powerful presidency elected by a bare majority can undermine democracy if not counterbalanced by other institutions. Türkiye's experience post-2017 provided real-world validation of those concerns – it created what some commentators called an "elective autocracy" clothed in majoritarian legitimacy.

In comparative perspective, Türkiye's majoritarian turn resonates with patterns observed in other cases where strongman leaders use the ballot box to dismantle liberal institutions. For instance, scholars have noted parallels with Hungary's Fidesz government under Viktor Orbán, which similarly used its electoral super-majority to rewrite the constitution and dominate independent bodies. In both Türkiye and Hungary, the ruling parties argued that they represented the authentic majority and thus had the right to reshape the entire state apparatus accordingly. The result, in both cases, was the evisceration of checks and balances and the creation of a "Frankenstate" (a state stitched together with legal changes to serve the ruling party's aims) (Scheppele K. L., 2013; Kornai, 2015). However, the Turkish case also has unique aspects, such as the legacy of military tutelage and the subsequently constructed hyper-presidential system, which we will explore in later thematic sections and comparative discussion.

From a methodological standpoint, the study of majoritarianism and institutional erosion in Türkiye has often relied on qualitative case studies and institutional analysis. Researchers have traced legal and constitutional changes (process-tracing the steps of institutional capture) and used detailed chronologies of events (e.g., the sequence of AKP confrontations with the judiciary in 2007–2008, the Ergenekon trials curbing the military, etc.) to illustrate how each check was weakened. The strength of this approach is in capturing the process of erosion – showing cause and effect (for instance, how the AKP's conflict with the secular establishment early on shaped its later majoritarian behavior) (Bermeo, 2016). The potential limitation is that a single-country focus can raise questions about generalizability: do these patterns hold beyond Türkiye? To address that, some scholars have engaged in comparative analysis (e.g., comparing AKP's dominant-party behavior to other dominant parties in democratic settings like Japan's LDP to ask why the outcomes differed). Such comparisons highlight that dominant electoral success alone doesn't always produce backsliding – contextual factors (like the robustness of institutions or external anchors) matter. For example, Japan's long-ruling party never dismantled liberal institutions the way AKP did, suggesting that majoritarianism's effects are conditioned by political culture and constraints. In Türkiye's case, the literature often points to

the weakness of liberal norms and the legacy of a statist political tradition as enablers that allowed AKP's majoritarian instincts to translate into institutional erosion (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016). Overall, there is broad agreement in the scholarship that an unconstrained majoritarian political style was a fundamental driver of Türkiye's democratic breakdown – and this finding aligns with democratic theory that warns against equating democracy solely with majority rule at the expense of liberal constitutionalism.

4.3. POPULIST LEGITIMATION, NATIONALISM, AND SOCIETAL ACQUIESCENCE

Another vital strand of the literature examines the role of populism and nationalist discourse in legitimating democratic backsliding, as well as the reasons a substantial segment of society acquiesces in (or even supports) the erosion of liberal-democratic norms. The AKP's tenure, especially under Erdoğan, has been marked by a pronounced populist style of governance. Populism, in the political science sense, is often defined as a "thin-centered ideology" that sets up a moral opposition between "the pure people" and "a corrupt elite" (Mudde C. , 2004)and that tends to be anti-pluralist, claiming that the populist leader alone represents the true people (Müller, 2016). In Türkiye, the AKP from its rise in the early 2000s positioned itself as the voice of the common people (specifically the conservative, pious majority) against the secular Kemalist elite long entrenched in the military, judiciary, and bureaucracy. This populist narrative – encapsulated in AKP slogans about carrying out the "nation's will" and confronting "enemies of the people" – has been central to how the party justified accumulating power and sidelining opponents.

Scholars have analyzed AKP-era populism in both its discursive and strategic dimensions. On the discursive side, works like Dinçşahin (2012)dissect the AKP's rhetoric between 2007–2010, finding that Erdoğan effectively cast any opposition (be it political parties, media, or civil society protesters) as part of an undemocratic "old guard" or as agents of foreign influence, thereby rallying his base around a narrative of popular sovereignty under threat. Yabanci (2016) characterizes populism as "the problem child of democracy" in the Turkish context, noting that AKP's enduring appeal was built on civil society penetration – the party co-opted or created NGOs and community organizations to propagate its populist message and marginalize independent civil actors. This societal penetration helped normalize illiberal measures: for instance, when the government cracked down on media or fired hundreds of academics, its loyal civil society surrogates often defended these moves as necessary to defend the people's will

against conspiracies. Thus, populist framing created a social narrative that legitimized authoritarian turns as democratic or protective actions.

A recurring theme in this literature is the fusion of populism with nationalism (often religiously inflected nationalism) to bolster regime legitimacy. Erdoğan's populism has long had a strong nationalist-Islamist component – portraying the AKP as restoring the nation's authentic values, standing up to Western tutelage, and protecting Türkiye's sovereignty. Öztürk and Taş (Öztürk & Taş, 2020) discuss "religious populism" in Türkiye, arguing that the AKP leveraged Islam and majoritarian religious identity as tools of populist mobilization. By sacralizing the political community – effectively suggesting that devout Muslim Turks are "the real people" – the regime justified policies that privileged the majority's cultural values over liberal individual rights. In a comparative study, Yabanci and Taleski (2018) show how ruling populists in Türkiye and Macedonia "sacralise the majority" by blending religion with nationalism, which in turn increases societal tolerance for illiberal policies targeting minorities or dissenters. In Türkiye's case, this meant that actions like restricting alcohol sales, banning certain artistic expressions, or stigmatizing LGBT communities could be sold as reflecting the will of the (religious-national) majority. Likewise, grand symbolic moves – such as converting the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque in 2020 – were populist-nationalist signals reinforcing Erdoğan's image as the defender of the Muslim majority's identity and aspirations.

Populist legitimation has also been maintained through a narrative of permanent crisis and conspiracy, which complements nationalism. Efe Göknar (2020) analyzes the AKP's "political melodramas of conspiracy" – from the "deep state" allegations of the Ergenekon trials to the wild claims of a global "mastermind" orchestrating Türkiye's troubles – and finds that these narratives created a worldview among AKP supporters that external and internal enemies (often Western powers, Jews, or Christians in anti-Semitic/Crusader tropes) constantly menace the nation. In this climate of existential threat, populist leaders like Erdoğan present themselves as the saviors of the nation, thereby justifying extraordinary measures and accumulating power. Akkoyunlu and Öktem's (2016) concept of "existential insecurity" aligns with this: they argue that the AKP cultivated a sense of existential threat among its core constituency – fear of a coup by secularists, fear of terrorism, fear of economic warfare by foreign forces – which in turn made that constituency more willing to accept authoritarian policies as a price for survival and stability. This speaks to societal acquiescence: many citizens, especially AKP voters, acquiesced in the dismantling of liberal checks because they were convinced (by populist-

nationalist rhetoric) that these moves were necessary to secure the nation's order and values against nefarious enemies.

A key question the literature grapples with is: why do significant portions of society support or at least tolerate democratic backsliding? Several interlocking explanations emerge:

- Polarization and identity cleavages: Türkiye has been deeply polarized along sociopolitical lines – broadly, a pious conservative camp versus a secular modernist camp – for decades. McCoy and Somer's (2019) work on "pernicious polarization" provides a theoretical framework for how extreme polarization can erode democracy. In such a polarized environment, political identity hardens into a social identity; opponents are seen as existential threats, not fellow citizens. In Türkiye, the AKP skillfully leveraged and exacerbated this polarization. Its supporters came to see opposition not just as political rivals but as people who would uproot their religious/traditional way of life if given power. This made AKP voters largely immune to alarm about autocratization – indeed, many viewed the concentration of power in Erdoğan's hands as preferable to any scenario in which the opposition (seen as hostile to "the people's values") might influence policy. Somer (2016) notes that Türkiye's "new authoritarianism" blended global authoritarian playbooks with indigenous cleavages, implying that AKP's illiberal turn was palatable to its base partly because it was framed as empowering the long-suppressed pious Muslim majority against an entrenched secular elite. In essence, the historical grievances of that majority (stemming from episodes like the headscarf ban, military coups against Islamist parties, etc.) were adroitly harnessed by the AKP to build a loyal following that would stick with the party even as it broke democratic norms – because those norms were portrayed as facades that only benefited the old elite.

- Performance legitimacy and clientelism: Another factor in societal acquiescence is the AKP's record of delivering economic growth (especially in its first decade) and tangible benefits, which created a reservoir of good will. Buğra and Savaşkan (2014) detail how the AKP cultivated a new business class and distributed state resources (contracts, credits, social assistance) to its supporters, a form of patronage politics that shored up consent. Many poorer voters benefited from expanded welfare programs, municipal services, and patronage networks aligned with the AKP. This "authoritarian bargain" – trading political freedoms for economic goods and services – has been observed in

various autocratic contexts. In Türkiye's case, as long as the economy prospered and the AKP's patronage machine delivered, a segment of society was willing to overlook creeping authoritarianism. Even when growth faltered in the late 2010s, the AKP shifted its narrative to stress nationalist pride and security (for example, launching military operations in Syria, or grand infrastructure projects) to retain support via performance legitimacy in non-economic terms.

- Weak and delegitimized opposition: Societal acceptance of backsliding is also higher when the opposition is either weak or successfully painted as illegitimate. The AKP benefited from a long-term disarray among opposition parties (CHP, etc., until very recently) and from its populist demonization of opponents (calling them "traitors", "terrorists", or puppets of the West). Selçuk and Hekimci (2020), examining Turkish politics in 2014–2019, discuss how a new political cleavage emerged – "pro-democracy vs. authoritarianism" – but the opposition struggled to coordinate effectively for a time. As a result, many citizens resigned themselves to AKP's dominance, perceiving no viable or appealing alternative. Moreover, heavy-handed measures such as jailing of opposition figures and shutting down critical media meant that counter-narratives struggled to reach segments of the public.

- Cultural resonance of the populist message: Erdoğan's populism has resonated culturally with a large swath of Turkish society. By blending Islamist references, conservative family values, and nationalist tropes (from Ottoman nostalgia to anti-Western sentiment), the AKP crafted an ideological mix that many find emotionally and culturally affirming. Jan-Werner Müller (2016) argues that populism thrives on this sense of representation – populist leaders make their supporters feel seen, heard, and empowered in a way that previous cosmopolitan or secularist leaders did not. In Türkiye, Erdoğan's personal background (coming from a humble religious family) and communication style (often blunt, colloquial, and combative) reinforce his populist authenticity in the eyes of supporters. This cultural alignment means that even as institutions crumble, supporters frame it not as the destruction of democracy but as "setting things right" – removing elitist impediments to the people's will.

The consequence of these dynamics is a kind of "electoral legitimation" of authoritarian practices. As Esen and Gümüşçü (2016) noted in dubbing Türkiye a competitive authoritarian regime, elections continued and the AKP continued to win them (until at least 2019 in the local

context) by significant margins, lending Erdoğan's government the veneer of democratic legitimacy even as it became more repressive. A sizeable bloc of the electorate (often around 45-50% in national elections) consistently endorsed Erdoğan, effectively consenting to the new status quo. This allowed the regime to claim, both domestically and internationally, that its actions were backed by popular mandate – a potent defense against critics. Indeed, the AKP would retort to external democracy advocates that "our people chose us and our system." The literature underscores that this is a hallmark of 21st-century autocrats: unlike the blatant dictators of the past, they maintain democratic rituals (elections, referenda) and use populist legitimation to deflect criticism, arguing that they are empowering the majority. This strategy complicates efforts to counter backsliding, since external actors (like the EU) are hesitant to challenge outcomes that appear electorally legitimated, and internal resistance is fragmented by polarization.

Methodologically, studies of populist legitimation and societal acquiescence often combine qualitative discourse analysis with insights from political sociology (e.g., survey data on public opinion, polarization indices, etc.). Researchers analyze speeches, media narratives, and policy messaging to understand how the regime frames its actions, and they examine public opinion trends to gauge how those frames are received. For example, analyses of Erdoğan's speeches post-2016 show a marked increase in words like "traitors", "crusaders", and appeals to national survival – discourse analysis tools quantify these shifts (Kaya & Köse, 2020). At the same time, public opinion research indicates that a large percentage of AKP voters believed there was a foreign-orchestrated plot to undermine Türkiye (a narrative the government pushed especially after the coup attempt), demonstrating the efficacy of populist propaganda. The strength of such mixed-method approaches is that they link micro-level rhetoric to macro-level attitudes in society, painting a fuller picture of legitimation. A limitation, however, is that in highly repressive environments, gauging genuine public consent is difficult – fear and media control can blur the line between true support and resigned acceptance. Scholars thus debate how much of the societal acquiescence in Türkiye is a product of conviction versus coercion. Some, like Çınar and Sayın (2014), suggest that Türkiye's democracy under the AKP became a "parochial democracy", meaning a democracy in form but driven by parochial (narrow, patronage-based) loyalties rather than genuine pluralism, implying that consent might be more transactional than ideological. Regardless, the literature concurs that without the populist appeal and a degree of public support, the AKP's authoritarian turn would likely have faced greater resistance; it was

the intertwining of populist legitimation with societal divides that smoothed the path for backsliding.

4.4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES IN THE LITERATURE

The study of democratic backsliding and hybrid regimes, as evidenced in the literature on Türkiye and comparable cases, employs a diverse array of methodological approaches, each contributing distinct insights while also having certain limitations. Critically engaging with these methods is important for evaluating the strength of the evidence and arguments in this field, and it also informs how one might design a robust research strategy (as this dissertation does in subsequent chapters).

A significant portion of the scholarship on Türkiye's backsliding consists of in-depth case studies, often using process tracing to link causes and outcomes over time. Scholars following this approach (e.g., Somer 2016; Esen & Gümüşçü 2016, 2017a; Taş 2015) construct detailed narratives of Türkiye's political developments, identifying key decisions, events, and junctures that cumulatively led to democratic erosion (Taş, 2015; Somer, 2016; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; 2017a). They delve into primary sources like speeches, government documents, legal texts, and contemporaneous news, as well as conduct interviews in some cases, to understand the motivations of actors and the sequence of institutional changes. The strength of this method is in capturing complexity and specificity: it can illuminate how, for instance, a court case in 2008 (the AKP's near-ban by the Constitutional Court) influenced Erdoğan's subsequent distrust of the judiciary and fueled efforts to reshape it. By tracing such sequences, case studies can provide compelling causal stories that are sensitive to context. In Türkiye's case, process tracing has elucidated feedback loops (like how early confrontations with the secular establishment emboldened the AKP to take more radical steps later, or how the Gezi protests and 2016 coup attempt served as catalysts for further repression). George and Bennett's (2005) work on case study methodology (cited in the references) underpins many of these studies, emphasizing the value of process tracing for theory development – indeed, Türkiye's case study has helped refine theories of competitive authoritarianism and populist backlash.

However, the limitations of single-case process tracing include potential selection bias and limited generalizability. Focusing tightly on Türkiye could risk ascribing too much explanatory weight to idiosyncratic factors that might not apply elsewhere. For example, one might overemphasize the role of the FETO peculiar feud with Erdoğan as a driver, which is very

Türkiye-specific. Case-centric studies must be careful to distinguish general mechanisms (like executive aggrandizement, polarization, etc.) from case-specific ones (like the FETO network's rise and fall). To mitigate this, many Türkiye scholars have explicitly situated their analysis in comparative context or drawn analogies to other cases (as we have seen in the literature). Additionally, process tracing often relies on the availability of evidence – in closed regimes, certain processes (like decision-making behind closed doors) can be hard to document, so there's a risk of inferred causation that might be incomplete.

To address generalizability, some researchers adopt a comparative approach, examining Türkiye alongside a small set of other cases. For instance, Selçuk (Selçuk O. , 2016) compared populist-authoritarian leadership in Türkiye, Venezuela, and Ecuador, using a Most Different Systems design to see commonalities in how "strong presidents and weak institutions" manifest in different regions. Similarly, works that compare Türkiye and Hungary or Türkiye and Russia (as mentioned) help identify which variables produce similar outcomes across contexts (e.g., polarization, constitutional design, international environment). The strength of small-N comparisons is that they can control for certain variables and highlight differences: why, for example, did Türkiye's military ultimately capitulate to Erdoğan whereas in Egypt (another oft-compared case) the military ousted a similar Islamist-majoritarian government (the Morsi regime) in 2013? By comparing Türkiye with an outcome-divergent case like Egypt, one can theorize about the conditions that prevent or enable backsliding (some argue the answer lies in the unity of the ruling party and the stance of the military). Comparative studies also benefit from a wider lens, which can lend more credibility to claims of causation if the same pattern is observed in multiple settings – for example, if many backsliding cases show the use of referendums to bypass parliaments, one can surmise this is a tactic general to would-be autocrats, not just a peculiarity of Türkiye.

The challenge with small-N comparisons is often case selection and depth. Ensuring cases are comparable enough and data availability for each can be difficult. There is also the risk of confirmation bias – if one picks cases known for backsliding, one might inadvertently downplay cases where similar conditions did not lead to backsliding (what methodologists call "selecting on the dependent variable"). Some studies mitigate this by also considering negative cases or partial failures. For example, to contextualize Türkiye, one could include, say, Tunisia post-Arab Spring (which for a while was a democratic success story in a similar region) or Malaysia (which began liberalizing after long hybrid rule) to see why Türkiye went autocratic while

others didn't. However, not all comparative studies do this, and sometimes rich detail is sacrificed for breadth.

A distinct approach comes from political scientists using quantitative indices and datasets to study democratic backsliding globally. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project and Freedom House scores are commonly employed to track changes in democratic indicators over time and across countries. Scholars like Lührmann & Lindberg (2019) explicitly use V-Dem data to identify the "third wave of autocratization" and analyze patterns (e.g., they find that declines are gradual, begin with attacks on media and academia, etc.). Türkiye's data in such datasets is a crucial piece in those analyses – indeed, Türkiye often appears as a significant contributor to statistical findings (for instance, V-Dem's democracy report 2020 highlighted Türkiye as among the countries with the most precipitous declines in liberal democracy scores in the 2010s) (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2020). The strengths of large-N approaches are their ability to detect broad trends and correlations: they can situate Türkiye in a global picture (showing, for example, that Türkiye's decline was part of a wider post-2006 downturn in global freedom scores) and test hypotheses (like whether economic development correlates with resilience to backsliding, or whether presidential systems are more prone to backsliding than parliamentary ones).

However, these approaches have limitations in granularity and causal inference. Indices may not fully capture on-the-ground realities or sequencing. A country's score might decline after the fact, not necessarily pinpointing the moment of change. As an illustration, Freedom House rated Türkiye as Partly Free until 2017 and then Not Free after – a binary jump that doesn't detail the year-by-year struggles. Indices can also suffer from measurement bias and often lag real events. Moreover, correlations found (say, backsliding is more likely when a ruling party has been in power for over 10 years) do not automatically explain the cause; qualitative insight is needed to understand why that pattern holds. Scholars often address this by mixing methods: for example, using a statistical analysis to identify risk factors for backsliding, and then using case studies (like Türkiye's) to illustrate the mechanisms. This triangulation can be powerful – indeed, some of the best literature on democratic erosion combines macro-data with rich case context. One example is the work of Staffan I. Lindberg and colleagues (2020) who have statistically shown that most contemporary autocratization episodes start under elected leaders and involve legal changes; Türkiye exemplifies that pattern and their papers frequently cite Türkiye as a case confirming the statistical trend.

Another methodological angle is more conceptual or philosophical. Works like Zakaria (1997) or Müller (2016) or even Schmitt (2005) are not empirical studies per se, but their conceptual distinctions (e.g., liberal vs illiberal democracy, populism's definition, sovereignty in exceptions) deeply inform the analytical vocabulary. These contributions rely on logical argumentation, interpretation of political theory, and selective historical examples. They provide the normative framework that empirical studies often use. For instance, Zakaria's essay drew on a wide range of anecdotal evidence and historical reasoning to argue a point about illiberal democracy dangers, which later empirical studies sought to validate or refine. The strength of conceptual work is clarity of thought – it delineates what we mean by things like "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo (2016) does this by categorizing types) and calls attention to overlooked dimensions (e.g., Müller highlighting the anti-pluralism of populism as a threat to liberal norms). The limitation is that without empirical grounding, conceptual arguments can sometimes be too broad or not easily falsifiable. The field of comparative politics therefore tends to continuously iterate between conceptual refinement and empirical testing. For example, the concept of "delegative democracy" was proposed conceptually by O'Donnell (1994); subsequent scholars then examined cases (including Türkiye) to see if the concept held water and how it manifested. Similarly, "autocratic legalism" was articulated by Scheppele with examples, and now researchers are measuring it (e.g., one could attempt to quantify how many new laws were passed that undermined checks in a given country).

In assessing the literature as a whole, one notices an encouraging trend: triangulation of methods. Few scholars rely purely on one approach. For instance, Esen and Gümüşçü (2021) combined qualitative narrative with some quantitative indicators (like electoral data, economic stats) in their analysis of Türkiye's competitive authoritarian turn. Somer (2019) combined normative theory on polarization with survey evidence from Türkiye and other countries. The special issue of Journal of Democracy in 2016 on "backsliding" included both case narratives and cross-national reflections. By using multiple methods, the literature strengthens its conclusions – what case studies observe, indices often corroborate, and what discourse analysis shows, survey data often reflects (e.g., rising authoritarian attitudes among certain publics).

Nonetheless, challenges remain. One is chronological bias: writing about ongoing processes like Türkiye's backsliding means the literature can become quickly outdated by events. There is a risk of early conclusions needing revision as new developments occur. For example, authors writing in 2015 might have thought Türkiye's story had plateaued at delegative democracy, only for 2016's events to push it further. Researchers must constantly update their analyses or

specify the time-bound nature of their findings. This dissertation's literature review, for instance, strives to capture the state of the field as of 2024-2025, acknowledging that earlier works were products of their moment and that newer data (like the 2023 elections in Türkiye) might further nuance interpretations.

Another methodological consideration is access and reliability of data in autocratizing contexts. As Türkiye became more authoritarian, transparency declined. Independent journalism suffered, government statistics became less trustworthy (there are debates about the accuracy of Turkish economic and polling data in recent years due to politicization). Scholars have to navigate these issues, sometimes relying on ingenious proxies (e.g., using satellite imagery of nighttime lights to estimate economic activity when official figures are doubted) or on external assessments (like reports from bodies such as the Council of Europe for legal changes). This necessitates a critical eye in using sources – something we heed by cross-checking claims across multiple academic sources and reports.

In conclusion, engaging with methodological approaches in the literature reveals that understanding democratic backsliding is a multi-faceted endeavor. No single method provides a full picture; rather, it's the convergence of evidence from qualitative narratives, quantitative trends, and theoretical reasoning that gives confidence in the key conclusions. For the Turkish case, this convergence overwhelmingly indicates a deliberate, multi-stage autocratization carried out under electoral legitimation. The methodologies used have exposed different layers of that process – from the micro-politics of elite decisions (captured by process tracing) to the macro-structural shifts in global democratic norms (captured by big data analysis). Evaluating their strengths and weaknesses also informs how one might study cases like Türkiye going forward: an effective research design likely combines these methods, leveraging their complementarities. Indeed, the dissertation that this chapter is part of adopts such a mixed approach – using detailed historical/institutional analysis in dialogue with comparative theoretical insights – precisely because the literature suggests that is the most fruitful way to grapple with phenomena as complex as democratic backsliding.

5. CONSTITUTIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION UNDER AKP RULE

Türkiye's democratic backsliding under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been driven not only by electoral outcomes and sociopolitical trends, but fundamentally by constitutional and institutional transformations that reshaped the very structure of governance. This chapter examines how, over two decades of AKP rule, Türkiye's institutional framework was deliberately refashioned – culminating in the 2017 shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system – in ways that concentrated executive power and eroded liberal-democratic checks and balances. Grounded in comparative politics yet drawing on legal scholarship, the analysis traces how formal constitutional changes and informal institutional reconfigurations enabled what Nancy Bermeo (2016) terms executive aggrandizement. In Türkiye, these changes were often legitimized via popular mandates (elections and referenda) and framed as necessary "reforms", even as they facilitated the slide into competitive authoritarianism.

The chapter proceeds chronologically and thematically. First, it discusses the AKP's early constitutional agenda in dismantling Türkiye's tutelary guardianship – the military and judicial tutelage embedded in the 1982 constitution – through reforms in the 2000s. These early changes, including the 2007 and 2010 constitutional amendments, ostensibly liberalized the system (e.g. curbing the military's role and expanding rights) while also empowering the elected government to assert control over traditionally independent institutions (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012; Bâli, 2010). Next, the chapter analyzes the period of AKP's dominant-party rule in the 2010s, during which the party's majoritarian understanding of democracy translated into institutional restructuring and norm erosion. During this time, the AKP government – emboldened by consecutive electoral victories – pursued a concentration of power within the executive, undermining judicial independence and marginalizing the legislature's oversight capacity (Özbudun, 2014; Taş, 2015). The analysis then zeroes in on critical junctures, particularly the 2016 attempted coup and the ensuing 2017 constitutional referendum, which together served as a tipping point in Türkiye's regime change. The 2017 constitutional amendments, narrowly approved in a climate of emergency, formally abolished the parliamentary system and inaugurated a hyper-presidential regime with greatly expanded powers for the president and diminished checks and balances (Öniş Z. , Sharing power: Turkey's democratization challenge under the AKP hegemony., 2013). Finally, the chapter evaluates how these legal-institutional changes have facilitated democratic backsliding: the

aggrandizement of the executive at the expense of judicial and legislative autonomy, the entrenchment of one-man rule, and the "constitutionalizing" of what had effectively become an authoritarian regime (Göktaş, 2022; Scheppele K. L., 2018). Throughout, Türkiye's experience is situated in the broader context of global democratic erosion, illustrating how ostensibly legal reforms and institutional redesign – often cloaked in the mantle of popular sovereignty and efficiency – can be used to hollow out democracy from within (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Varol, 2015).

In sum, this chapter argues that Türkiye's turn toward authoritarianism under the AKP cannot be fully understood without analyzing the high-level constitutional engineering and institutional reconfiguration undertaken by Erdoğan and his party. By rewriting rules, restructuring key state organs, and ultimately changing the system of government itself, the AKP systematically removed or neutralized the traditional constraints on executive power. These transformations underscore a central thesis of the dissertation: democratic backsliding often unfolds not via outright rejection of democracy, but through incremental legal changes and institutional "reforms" that cumulatively undercut the liberal-democratic (Bermeo, 2016; Scheppele K. L., Autocratic Legalism, 2018). Türkiye's case is a paradigmatic example of this process, offering lessons that transcend the Turkish context even as our focus here remains exclusively on Türkiye's trajectory.

5.1. UNDOING THE TUTELARY LEGACY: EARLY CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES (2007–2010)

When the AKP came to power in 2002, it inherited a political system defined by the 1982 Constitution – a framework born of a military coup that entrenched the tutelary powers of unelected institutions (the military, high judiciary, and bureaucracy) over elected officials. In its first decade, the AKP navigated a delicate balance between liberalizing reforms (often driven by the EU accession process) and efforts to overcome the secularist-military establishment's checks on its rule. This period saw major constitutional changes in 2007 and 2010 that marked the beginning of an institutional metamorphosis in Türkiye. Each of these early changes can be seen as a critical juncture that altered the trajectory of Turkish democracy – initially weakening the old tutelary constraints (a step welcomed by many democrats), but simultaneously laying ground for the AKP's consolidation of power.

A first pivotal transformation came in the aftermath of the April 2007 constitutional crisis. At that time, the Turkish Parliament's attempt to elect then-Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül (from

the AKP) as president was blocked by an opposition boycott and a controversial Constitutional Court ruling enforcing a high quorum for the vote. The military's intervention via an e-memorandum warning against Gül's election underscored the old guard's resistance to an AKP head of state. In response, the AKP government turned to a popular referendum. In October 2007, a set of constitutional amendments was approved by voters that fundamentally changed the presidency: henceforth, the President of the Republic would be elected by direct popular vote, rather than by Parliament, and serve a five-year term (renewable once) instead of the previous single seven-year term (Yazıcı, 2017). This move was significant for two reasons. First, it bypassed the military-secular establishment's veto power over the presidency – essentially democratizing the selection by giving it to the electorate. Erdoğan himself noted that taking the decision "to the nation" was a way to break the elite deadlock. Second, by giving the president a direct popular mandate, it subtly enhanced the presidency's political weight vis-à-vis other institutions. Under the 1982 constitution, the Turkish presidency had already been endowed with broader powers than a figurehead (a legacy of the military's desire for a strong arbiter) (Özbudun, From political Islam to conservative democracy: The case of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey., 2007). Now, with direct election, the president's legitimacy would no longer derive from an elite bargain in Parliament, but from the popular will. Although in 2007 this was justified as a democratizing reform – and indeed it was supported by some reformists at the time – in hindsight it paved the way for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ascendancy to the presidency in 2014 with a strong personal mandate (having won 51.8% of the vote) (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). This change planted the seed for an eventual executive presidency: once Erdoğan occupied that office, he showed little inclination to remain a neutral, ceremonial figure as the constitution envisaged. Instead, he treated his direct electoral mandate as license for active political leadership, foreshadowing the later formal switch to a presidential system (Taş, 2015). In short, the 2007 amendment was a turning point that weakened one traditional check (parliamentary king-making influenced by the establishment) and bolstered the AKP's leverage to shape the top of the state apparatus.

A second and more comprehensive constitutional overhaul came on September 12, 2010, when a package of 26 amendments to the 1982 Constitution was put to referendum by the AKP government. This reform package, approved by 58% of voters, was portrayed as a democratic leap forward – a long-awaited effort to civilianize and liberalize Türkiye's constitutional order, much of which still bore the illiberal imprint of the 1980 military coup. Indeed, many provisions in the package were overtly liberalizing. They included strengthening individual privacy and

gender equality rights, expanding collective bargaining for unions, allowing civilian courts to try military personnel (thus reducing the military's judicial privileges), and removing the immunity of 1980 coup leaders, symbolically holding the old junta accountable. The European Union and many Western observers welcomed these changes as aligning Türkiye more closely with EU democratic norms (Bâli, 2010). However, nestled within the package were crucial changes to the judiciary that proved to be a double-edged sword for Turkish democracy. These controversial provisions restructured the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) – the key institutions overseeing the judiciary – in ways that ultimately increased the ruling party's influence over the judicial branch.

Under the 2010 amendments, the number of Constitutional Court judges was increased and the appointment process modified: Parliament and the President would have a larger say in choosing new members, which in practice meant the AKP (controlling Parliament and holding the presidency by then-President Gül) could appoint jurists more sympathetic to its views. More significantly, the HSYK – the council responsible for judicial appointments, promotions, and discipline – was expanded to 22 members, and for the first time, a majority of its members would be elected by the judiciary at large (a democratizing element) while a smaller number would be appointed by the President and selected by high courts (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012). At face value, this could be seen as bringing pluralism into the system by diluting the dominance of senior judges (often aligned with secularist establishment) through wider elections. Indeed, pro-reform proponents argued the judiciary had been an undemocratic bastion – it had aggressively dissolved political parties (including Islamist parties in the 1990s) and acted as a brake on elected governments. The AKP's message was that judicial reform would make courts more representative of society and end the era of "lawless judges" subverting the national will. Many liberals at the time grudgingly supported the 2010 package for these reasons, despite misgivings about the AKP, as it seemed a chance to finally break the military-bureaucratic tutelage (Bâli, 2010).

Crucially, however, opponents saw the 2010 judicial changes as a veiled "court-packing" attempt by the AKP (Bâli, 2010). By turning the HSYK into a larger body with many new members to be immediately chosen, the AKP-led government could effectively stack it with jurists aligned with its agenda (for instance, members of the then-allied FETO or conservative judges). Likewise, opening the Constitutional Court to more members gave room to install friendlier voices on the bench. The procedural trick of bundling all 26 amendments as a single yes-or-no referendum – rather than separate votes – meant that popular liberal measures (like

curbing military courts or enhancing social rights) carried along the contentious judiciary changes on the wave of public approval. This packaging was criticized as tactically majoritarian – the AKP "cobbled together" diverse amendments to attract a broad electorate, avoiding a situation where voters might reject the judicial amendments if voted on separately. In essence, a likely minority of voters strongly opposed to AKP's judicial plans was outvoted by a majority who supported the overall reform package or parts of it. As Aslı Bâli (2010) observed in a contemporaneous analysis, had each amendment been separate, the outcome might have differed on the controversial points, but the all-or-nothing vote ensured the AKP got everything it wanted.

The immediate impact of the 2010 referendum was a profound reshaping of Türkiye's highest judicial bodies. In the months that followed, the HSYK's new composition was determined. While the design ostensibly followed European best practices calling for a mixed composition (a blend of judges elected by peers and members appointed by elected authorities) to balance independence with accountability, in practice the outcome in Türkiye was still a "majoritarian" council aligned with the ruling party's interests (Özbudun E. , 2015). The HSYK elections among judges in late 2010 reportedly saw a slate of candidates close to the AKP (including adherents of the FETO, which was then closely cooperating with the AKP) sweep the positions, meaning the council was no longer dominated by Kemalist hardliners but rather by those friendly to the government. The Minister of Justice remained the HSYK's ex officio chairman, retaining an executive foothold inside the judiciary. Similarly, new appointments to the Constitutional Court made after 2010 were vetted by the AKP-led executive. In sum, although judicial independence was still constitutionally affirmed, the balance had tilted: the governing party now had far greater ability to influence who sat on the bench and judicial council, and thus indirectly control the trajectory of sensitive cases. This was vividly demonstrated in 2013–2014, when a faction of prosecutors and police (linked to the AKP's erstwhile FETO allies) launched corruption investigations implicating AKP ministers and Erdoğan's family. The government responded by reassigning thousands of police and attempting to restructure the HSYK by law to assert tighter political control; while the Constitutional Court struck down parts of that law, the incident underscored that the post-2010 judiciary was deeply politicized – split between AKP-allied and FETO factions, with genuinely independent voices sidelined (Özbudun E. , 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2019).

From a democratic backsliding perspective, the 2010 referendum can be seen as a mixed moment. On one hand, it further dismantled the military's institutional privileges – a step in

line with liberal democracy (e.g. abolishing the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians and ultimately enabling prosecution of the 1980 coup leaders was a triumph of civilian rule and justice). It also introduced positive rights changes. On the other hand, it constituted an executive–legislative intervention into the judiciary that eroded the separation of powers. By chipping away at the courts' autonomy under the banner of "democratization", the AKP set a precedent for using legal reforms as a tool of power consolidation – a classic case of what Ozan Varol (2015) terms "stealth authoritarianism", wherein incumbents use the law's formal veneer to entrench themselves in power. Indeed, observers later noted that after 2010, Turkish courts became less of a check on the government's actions – for example, the Constitutional Court, which had boldly annulled AKP laws or even considered banning the AKP in earlier years, grew more restrained once its composition changed (Özbudun E. , 2015). In Bermeo's (2016) framework, this reflects executive aggrandizement: elected leaders (the AKP) weakening another pillar of democracy (the judiciary) through legal, gradual means – all "legitimated" by a referendum rather than an overt coup.

In summary, the 2007–2010 period saw the AKP achieve structural breakthroughs: eliminating the tutelary veto over the presidency and reengineering the judiciary's composition. Both moves were watershed events in Türkiye's political development. They largely fulfilled the AKP's short-term objectives (securing the presidency for the party and taming institutions that had threatened its survival, as when the Constitutional Court nearly banned the AKP in 2008). Importantly, these changes were sold as democratization – and in part were democratizing – yet they also undeniably shifted power towards the ruling party. The stage was set for what came next: with the old secular-military guardians weakened, the AKP in its second decade in power would increasingly turn to majoritarian rule, unconstrained by the checks that previously balanced Turkish democracy.

5.2. FROM DOMINANT-PARTY RULE TO DELEGATIVE DEMOCRACY: THE AKP'S MAJORITARIAN DRIFT (2011–2015)

After the 2010 referendum, Türkiye entered the 2011 general elections with the AKP riding high. The party won a third consecutive term with nearly 50% of the vote in June 2011, securing another comfortable single-party majority in Parliament. This victory – achieved amid robust economic growth and a fragmented opposition – marked the peak of the AKP's electoral dominance. It also represented, as many analysts noted, a crossroads for Türkiye's democracy: would the AKP use its strengthened mandate to advance liberal-democratic consolidation (e.g.

by writing a consensual new constitution for all Turks), or would it veer into majoritarian, hegemonic rule (Müftüler-Baç & Keyman, 2012; Özbudun E. , 2014)? Over the next several years, the evidence increasingly pointed to the latter. The period 2011–2015 was characterized by what Ergun Özbudun (2014) called "Erdoğan's majoritarian drift", wherein the AKP leadership conflated its electoral majority with a carte blanche to govern with minimal regard for opposition, dissenting institutions, or power-sharing norms. During these years, institutional change occurred less through formal constitutional amendments (until 2017) and more through laws, decrees, and political practices that together eroded checks and balances. Türkiye under the AKP began to resemble what Guillermo O'Donnell (1994) termed a "delegative democracy", a system where an elected leader governs in a highly centralized, unchecked manner, claiming direct mandate from the people, and where horizontal accountability is weak. Notably, though Türkiye was still a parliamentary system on paper in these years, many features of delegative or presidentialist rule emerged de facto (Taş, 2015). We examine this transformation through key developments: the stalled new constitution process, the government's growing intolerance of opposition (illustrated by responses to the 2013 Gezi Park protests), the purge of internal dissidents (the AKP–FETO fallout), and changes to institutions like the media and civil service that buttressed executive control.

After its 2011 win, the AKP championed the idea of replacing the 1982 Constitution entirely. A cross-party parliamentary commission was formed in late 2011 to draft a new, democratic constitution. This initiative could have been a nation-building, power-sharing exercise. However, deep disagreements – especially over the governance system – stymied progress. The AKP, guided by Erdoğan's vision, floated the idea of shifting to a presidential system even then, arguing Türkiye needed a strong executive to avoid unstable coalitions and to truly "empower the national will." Opposition parties (Republican People's Party, Nationalist Movement Party, and pro-Kurdish BDP/HDP) largely opposed presidentialism, suspecting it was designed to personalize power in Erdoğan's hands. By 2013, the constitution talks had faltered, having reached consensus on many articles but deadlock on fundamentals like the separation of powers and executive structure (Öniş Z. , Sharing power: Turkey's democratization challenge under the AKP hegemony., 2013). The failure to agree on a new charter indicated a broader phenomenon: the AKP's hegemonic ambitions clashed with the pluralism needed for a consensual constitution. Instead of compromising, Erdoğan seemed content to let the process fail, later saying that if the commission couldn't conclude, the AKP would pursue changes on its own. This episode was an omen that the AKP would eventually

impose constitutional changes unilaterally (as it did in 2017, once political conditions allowed). In the meantime, lacking a new constitution, the AKP increasingly stretched the existing system's limits. For example, the party began informally centralizing policy coordination in the Prime Minister's office and later in the President's office (after 2014) rather than through cabinet and parliament.

One hallmark of the AKP's institutional approach in this era was a majoritarian interpretation of democracy. Erdoğan frequently invoked the "national will" (millî irade) to dismiss critics – implying that because the AKP won elections, the preferences of those who didn't vote for it (nearly half the electorate by 2011) or those who protested its policies were of secondary importance. This attitude became stark during the Gezi Park protests in mid-2013, a wave of urban demonstrations triggered by a plan to raze a park in Istanbul which evolved into a broad protest against the AKP's perceived authoritarian turn and majoritarian imposition of conservative-Islamist social policies. Rather than treat the protesters' concerns as legitimate feedback, Erdoğan denounced them as an anti-democratic minority trying to overturn the election results. He insisted that elections were the only measure of public will, famously retorting, "If you have objections, there is the ballot box" – even though the next national election was years away. The state's response to Gezi was heavy-handed: riot police violently cracked down, and afterward, many organizers were arrested or faced trumped-up charges (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Institutionally, the Gezi events underscored the erosion of accountability mechanisms. Parliament, dominated by the AKP majority, did not seriously investigate police excesses; the judiciary initiated cases not against officials who ordered force, but against protesters and even journalists. This revealed a climate where the ruling party and state apparatus acted in near lockstep, shielding the executive from censure. Gezi also prompted Erdoğan to lean more on polarizing rhetoric, framing the episode as a conspiracy against his legitimate government – a narrative that justified consolidating power further to "defend" the people's mandate (Somer, 2016). In comparative terms, this is characteristic of leaders in backsliding democracies who justify stronger executive action by painting opponents (even peaceful civil society) as threats to the nation (Müller, 2016).

A critical internal rupture occurred in late 2013 that had profound institutional consequences. The AKP's longstanding alliance with the FETO dramatically collapsed. In December 2013, corruption investigations led by prosecutors sympathetic to FETO's network targeted AKP ministers and Erdoğan's inner circle. Erdoğan accused the FETO of forming a "parallel state" and orchestrating a judicial coup. The AKP leadership moved swiftly to purge or reassign

thousands of police officers, prosecutors, and judges suspected of FETO ties (Reuters, 2014). In early 2014, as mentioned, the government also introduced legislation to give the Justice Ministry greater control over the HSYK (the judicial council) so it could reassert dominance over judicial appointments in the face of this perceived insurgency. Although the Constitutional Court struck down parts of that law as unconstitutional (upholding at least some separation of powers), the episode effectively brought the judiciary to heel – many judges and prosecutors got the message that acting against the ruling elites could end their careers. By mid-2014, thousands of civil servants had been purged or reassigned for alleged "parallel state" loyalties, without transparency or due process. This was a form of executive control over the bureaucracy through politicized purge, weakening the professional civil service's autonomy. It also presaged what would happen on a larger scale after 2016. In the short run, the AKP-FETO fallout meant that the only other potent network within the state that was not directly under Erdoğan's command was being excised, leaving the executive even more unchallenged within the state machinery (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2018). Furthermore, after this split, the government pushed laws curbing internet freedom (to stifle leaked recordings of the corruption probe) and increased political oversight over judicial policing bodies – steps that incrementally chipped away at institutional checks in the name of fighting a "traitorous clique" (Freedom House, 2014). The narrative of an urgent threat enabled what Kim Lane Scheppele (Scheppele K. L., 2018) calls "autocratic legalism", whereby a regime uses real or manufactured crises to justify expanding its legal powers and neutralizing independent institutions. Each such move was legal in form – passed by parliament or enacted via regulations – but cumulatively they deepened the executive's domination over the state. By 2015, Turkish experts were openly describing the system as effectively "delegative" – the ruling party's leader governed as if a direct delegate of the people, above the intermediary institutions meant to constrain him (Taş, 2015).

Another crucial component of institutional backsliding in this period was the capture or coercion of institutions outside the formal state structure, especially media. A vibrant, critical media can function as an informal check on executive power; conversely, its subjugation greatly enables authoritarian tendencies. During 2011–2015, the AKP regime either co-opted or cowed much of the Turkish media sector. Through friendly business proxies, the government engineered the takeover of major independent media groups. One infamous example was the 2013 tax fine (nearly $2.5 billion) levied on the Doğan Media Group, which forced the sale of influential newspapers and TV channels to pro-AKP businessmen (Yesil, 2016). By 2015–2016, newspapers that once featured diverse views had been transformed into government

mouthpieces, or silenced. The state regulatory bodies (like the television/radio council RTÜK) were dominated by AKP appointees and routinely sanctioned opposition outlets. Civil society organizations also felt pressure: those critical of the government (human rights NGOs, bar associations, etc.) were smeared as anti-state or faces of foreign influence. While not a formal constitutional change, this broad institutional coercion ensured that fewer independent bodies remained to hold the executive accountable in the court of public opinion or via societal checks. The shrinking of the public sphere compounded the formal institutional changes, enabling the AKP to act with increasing impunity. By the mid-2010s, Freedom House and other watchdogs were noting Türkiye's precipitous decline in media freedom and overall democratic governance, even before the formal system change (Freedom House, 2014; 2017). The outcome was that when the government embarked on more radical changes later, it faced a weakened opposition voice in society.

The AKP's majoritarian approach also manifested in how it managed elections themselves. Though still fundamentally competitive (up to 2015, the AKP respected electoral outcomes), the ruling party manipulated the playing field in subtle ways characteristic of competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Türkiye's extraordinarily high 10% electoral threshold (a legacy of the 1980s) was staunchly maintained by the AKP because it benefited the incumbents by keeping smaller or new parties out of parliament. In 2015, this nearly backfired when the pro-Kurdish HDP ran as a party and just cleared the 10% hurdle, costing the AKP its majority in the June 2015 election (Barkey, 2015). What followed demonstrated the AKP's unwillingness to share power: rather than earnestly attempt a coalition, Erdoğan (by then President) withheld the mandate from opposition coalition-building and effectively paved the way for a snap election in November 2015. During the interim, a conflict with the Kurdish PKK resumed and nationalist fervor rose, circumstances that many argue were manipulated to sway public opinion. The November 2015 elections saw the AKP regaining a parliamentary majority with 49% of the vote. This sequence – essentially annulling an unfavorable election result via constitutional loopholes and crisis-exploitation – was a blow to democratic norms. It underscored that the AKP would not accept governing with reduced power. By late 2015, Türkiye was clearly on the path of what scholars call "competitive authoritarianism", where elections occur and are somewhat free, but the playing field is heavily tilted through control of media, state resources, and legal advantages (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016). All the institutional trends before – media capture, politicization of judiciary, and use of security crises – contributed to this tilt.

By 2015, numerous observers concluded that Türkiye's democracy had substantively hollowed out. Şebnem Gümüşçü and Berk Esen (2016) described Türkiye as a "rising competitive authoritarian" case, noting the erosion of horizontal accountability and civil liberties despite the continuation of elections. Similarly, Yeşim Arat and Şevket Pamuk (2016) wrote of a "deepening authoritarianism" characterized by populist legitimation and suppression of dissent. The conceptual vocabulary used for other backsliding regimes – such as "illiberal democracy" or "delegative democracy" – was now regularly applied to Türkiye (Özbudun E. , 2015; Taş, 2015). All of this occurred still under the formal parliamentary system. Paradoxically, Türkiye demonstrated that even without changing the constitutional system, an elected leader could centralize power to a remarkable degree by bending institutions: de facto if not de jure presidentialism. Indeed, Hakki Taş (2015) pointed out that Türkiye, though a parliamentary regime, was exhibiting the traits of delegative democracies often found in presidential contexts – a testament to Erdoğan's personalization of power and the weakness of institutional checks.

In summary, 2011–2015 was the period in which the AKP's institutional dominance was cemented and democratic norms eroded in practice. No new constitutional text was adopted, but the spirit of the 1982 constitution – already diluted by 2007 and 2010 changes – was further undermined. The separation of powers became nominal as the ruling party overwhelmed the judiciary, legislative oversight, media, and civil society. The stage was thus set for the next bold step: formalizing this concentration of power through a new constitutional order. The shock that enabled that step was the traumatic July 2016 coup attempt, which the AKP swiftly harnessed as a "critical juncture" to rewrite the rules of the political game entirely.

5.3. CRISIS AS CATALYST: FROM THE 2016 COUP ATTEMPT TO THE 2017 PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM

On the night of July 15, 2016, a faction within the Turkish military launched a violent coup attempt against the AKP government. The putsch was quashed within hours, due in large part to masses of citizens heeding Erdoğan's call to resist the plotters, as well as loyalist military and police units. The coup attempt's failure was a pivotal moment in modern Turkish history – not only for the immediate shock and the wave of national unity it initially prompted, but also for how it turbo-charged the AKP's longstanding project to refashion the state. Erdoğan quickly blamed the FETO for orchestrating the coup, declaring a state of emergency on July 20, 2016 that would last two years. During this emergency period and its aftermath, the AKP government (in alliance with the nationalist MHP) undertook extraordinary measures that transformed

Türkiye's institutional landscape, climaxing in the April 2017 constitutional referendum that formally established a presidential system. This section analyzes how the coup attempt served as a catalyst and pretext for accelerating democratic backsliding: the massive purges that gutted remaining autonomous institutions, the use of decree-laws to bypass democratic deliberation, and ultimately the legislative bargain that enabled Erdoğan to realize his goal of an executive presidency. It highlights the pattern of "crisis exploitation" (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Scheppele K. L., 2018) – whereby autocratizing regimes leverage security emergencies to consolidate power – a pattern Türkiye illustrates vividly.

In the immediate aftermath of July 2016, the Turkish leadership framed the crisis as a near-existential threat to the state, warranting extraordinary responses. A state of emergency was declared, granting the government (under the prime minister and president) the power to rule by decree without prior parliamentary approval. What followed was an unprecedented purge of those deemed enemies or disloyal within state and society. By official counts, over 130,000 public employees were summarily dismissed by emergency decree – including military officers, police, teachers, academics, civil servants, and about 4,000 judges and prosecutors (nearly a quarter of Türkiye's judiciary) (Amnesty International, 2017). The sheer scale of this purge decimated institutional capacity for independent action. For instance, the judiciary was hit hard: roughly 2,745 judges were dismissed within one day of the coup attempt (on July 16, 2016, the HSYK council, now compliant with the government, met in extraordinary session to fire them)[16][17]. Ultimately, by 2021, around 4,000 judges and prosecutors had been removed (Turkey Tribunal, 2021), many detained or later tried on charges of belonging to FETO's network. This amounted to a near-total reconstruction of the judicial branch personnel by the executive. The military itself was purged of nearly half its generals and thousands of lower officers, and crucially, subsequent decrees restructured the military by placing the armed forces more firmly under civilian (and specifically presidential) control – for example, bringing the gendarmerie (militarized police) fully under the Interior Ministry, and attaching the military General Staff and intelligence agency directly to the presidency. In academia, over 5,000 academics lost their jobs (many via a single decree shutting down certain universities). Media outlets also were closed by the dozens during the emergency, targeting any remaining FETO-affiliated or critical voices.

This massive purge – conducted with virtually no due process or individualized hearings – was ostensibly aimed at "traitors" and "terrorists" behind the coup and other threats. In practice, it became a tool for comprehensive political control. By removing not only suspected coup-

plotters but also many opposition-minded individuals (e.g., leftist teachers, Kurdish activists, secular bureaucrats), the AKP eliminated a wide swath of independent-minded professionals from state institutions. As Amnesty International (2017) documented, those purged were not given meaningful avenues to appeal for years, effectively intimidating any remaining civil servants: keep your head down and obey, or risk being labeled an enemy. Within months, the bureaucracy and courts were repopulated with loyalists (often younger and politically vetted). The result was that by 2017, the institutional checks from within the state were largely extinguished. The judiciary, already cowed pre-2016, was now both cowed and refilled with AKP-aligned or nationalist judges; the military, once a tutelary power, was firmly under civilian command with its upper ranks handpicked post-purge; the civil service was cleansed of many who might resist partisan directives. This extreme centralization of authority in the hands of the executive, under the guise of emergency rule, exemplifies what scholars call the "authoritarian re-equilibration" that can follow a failed coup or conflict (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Türkiye's state of emergency lasted until July 2018 and during that time over 30 emergency decree-laws were issued, many with lasting impact on the legal system (issuing decrees with force of law allowed the government to bypass normal legislative checks). Kim Lane Scheppele (2018) would label this a prime case of "autocratic legalism": using legal instruments (SoE powers granted by the constitution) to fundamentally alter the balance of power under the cover of crisis response.

Amid this environment, a significant political realignment occurred that enabled the constitutional overhaul. Devlet Bahçeli's MHP, a right-wing opposition party, had long been skeptical of an executive presidency. However, after the coup attempt, Bahçeli shifted to a more nationalist-statist posture aligning with Erdoğan. The reasons are debated: some cite Bahçeli's fear of early elections or internal party splits, others point to genuine concern over national stability. In any case, by late 2016 the AKP (which lacked the supermajority in Parliament to change the constitution alone) found a willing partner in the MHP. Together, they drafted a set of constitutional amendments to establish what they termed a "Cumhurbaşkanlığı sistemi" (Presidential System) – often marketed as a "Turkish-style" presidentialism. In January 2017, the AKP-MHP bloc passed these amendments in Parliament with just above the minimum 330 votes needed to send them to a referendum. This package contained 18 amendments that fundamentally recast Türkiye's political system, which can be summarized as follows:

- Abolition of the office of prime minister: Executive authority would no longer be divided between a ceremonial president and a cabinet led by a prime minister. The

amendments eliminated the prime minister's post entirely, merging the head of state and head of government into the single position of an empowered President (Article 104) (Yazıcı, 2017).

- Concentration of executive power in the presidency: The President would be the sole executive authority, with powers to appoint and dismiss ministers (cabinet members) and all high officials without parliamentary approval. The President could also appoint one or more vice-presidents. Crucially, the President was given the power to issue presidential decrees with the force of law on matters of executive authority. Unlike the old system of decree-laws (which required parliamentary enabling laws and were limited to certain areas), under the new system presidential decrees derive directly from the constitution and do not need prior delegation by Parliament. While in theory a law passed by Parliament can override a conflicting decree, in practice a disciplined parliamentary majority aligned with the President can simply avoid such conflicts. Some areas (e.g., fundamental rights, basic citizenship matters) were explicitly reserved for legislation, but the boundary between law and decree was blurred and left ample room for executive law-making (Yazıcı, 2017). This essentially means the President can legislate in many domains unless the legislature actively asserts itself – a reversal of the prior hierarchy. Moreover, the President was empowered to draft the budget and, if Parliament failed to pass it, to implement the previous budget by decree, ensuring that a hostile legislature could not easily starve the executive of funds.

- Weakening of parliamentary powers and removal of checks: Correspondingly, Parliament's role was diminished. The amendments removed the Parliament's authority to interpellate ministers or initiate a vote of no-confidence in the government (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). Since there is no prime minister to be responsible to Parliament, the classic mechanism of parliamentary oversight vanished. Individual ministers, appointed by the President from outside the assembly, would no longer be accountable to Parliament for their programs (no confidence votes, which traditionally could bring down the cabinet, were abolished). Parliament retained the power to pass laws and to ratify international treaties, but lost control over many executive functions it once had (for example, previously Parliament could authorize the cabinet to issue decrees in specific areas; this was moot since the cabinet was gone and the President had inherent decree power). The legislature's investigatory tools were limited to written questions and an awkward process for launching impeachment-like proceedings against the

President, which would require two-thirds majority and review by the Constitutional Court – conditions highly unlikely to be met in practice for a popular president (and indeed, no such action has occurred under Erdoğan's presidency). Term limits and electoral timing were also set in a way that favored incumbent power: the President is limited to two 5-year terms, but if the Parliament calls early elections in the second term, the President can run again – effectively offering a loophole to extend tenure (this became pertinent as Erdoğan approached 2023, raising debates on eligibility). Additionally, the simultaneous timing of parliamentary and presidential elections every five years (instead of the previous mismatch of four-year parliamentary, five-year presidential) means the president's party aims to win a concurrent majority, reducing the chance of divided government. This synchronization was touted as a stability measure, but it also means a successful presidential candidate likely carries his parliamentary slate on his coattails, strengthening one-party dominance.

- Presidential partisanship and "neutrality" removed: Under the old constitution (Article 101), the president had to sever ties with any political party and be an impartial figure above politics. The 2017 amendments deleted the clause requiring the President to resign from party membership (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). Thus, the President can lead a political party while in office – and indeed, Erdoğan re-assumed the AKP chairmanship shortly after the referendum. This change is symbolically and practically significant: it formalized the fusion of party leadership with state leadership. As the Globalex (2017) analysis noted, it is paradoxical to expect a president who is also a party leader to represent the unity of the nation or to arbitrate fairly. In effect, it acknowledged that the head of state would henceforth be a partisan actor, erasing a constitutional principle of impartiality dating back to Atatürk's presidency. This further concentrated power, as Erdoğan as party leader could ensure loyalty among MPs and control candidate lists, while also being head of government – a level of centralized authority with few parallels in democratic systems.

- Judicial reconfiguration: The amendments also took a further step in remaking the judiciary, beyond the 2010 changes. The High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) was renamed and reduced in size from 22 to 13 members, and critically, its composition was changed so that the President and the parliamentary majority (i.e., the ruling party/alliance) would effectively appoint all members (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). Specifically, 4 of the 13 would be appointed directly by the President, while the

remaining 7 (besides the Justice Minister and Undersecretary who continue as ex officio members) would be elected by Parliament. Given that under the new system the President could be the leader of the majority party, this ensured full political control over the judicial council. The idea of having Parliament elect some members was superficially to add "democratic legitimacy", but the procedure allowed the ruling bloc to prevail (candidates are nominated by a two-thirds committee vote, but if consensus fails, lots are drawn, and then a three-fifths vote in the plenary – in 2017, the AKP–MHP alliance commanded enough votes to reach the three-fifths threshold for their chosen candidates). As a result, when the new Council (rebranded as HSK) was formed in May 2017, reports indicated that of the 7 chosen by Parliament, 5 were AKP-aligned lawyers and 2 MHP-aligned, while the President's 4 picks were presumably loyalists as well. This left virtually no representation for any opposition tendencies within the body that oversees all judicial appointments and discipline. Combined with the post-coup purges, this meant the entire judiciary was under the thumb of the executive. The Constitutional Court's composition was also adjusted slightly (down to 15 from 17, after abolition of military judges), with the President continuing to appoint a substantial portion of its members – and given the President's party control of Parliament, the others effectively subject to his influence as well. The new system did nominally allow the Constitutional Court to review presidential decrees (a concession extracted to claim there remained some check), except in states of emergency. However, given the politicization of that court – many judges of which were appointed by Erdoğan or the AKP majority – the likelihood of it robustly striking down presidential decrees or other abuses has been low (and indeed, it has mostly abstained from direct confrontation with the executive on core regime matters since 2017, aside from a few individual rights cases).

- Other changes: The amendments also included increasing the number of parliamentary seats from 550 to 600 (purportedly to better represent a growing population), lowering the candidate age for MPs to 18 (from 25), and incorporating some changes to civil-military relations such as finally constitutionalizing the end of military courts (except wartime) (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). Indeed, the 2017 reform finished the job of subordinating the military: it abolished the military high courts and explicitly forbade establishment of military courts in peacetime, cementing the principle of unified civilian justice. This could be seen as a democratizing aspect – removing a dual judiciary system

– though in context it was more about removing any vestige of autonomy in the armed forces post-coup. The State Supervisory Council, an inspection body under the President, had its authority extended to cover the military as well. The National Security Council's military representation was reduced in protocol rank below civilian officials. These changes, together with the purges, meant civil-military relations had decisively shifted: the long-standing tutelary role of the General Staff was over, with the military firmly under the President's chain of command – ironically, a democratization in civil-military terms, but occurring just as the overall regime moved into authoritarian territory.

The proposed amendments were put to a popular referendum on April 16, 2017. The campaign took place under the state of emergency, with opposition figures and media heavily constrained. Media coverage overwhelmingly favored the "Yes" side, with Erdoğan and government officials dominating airwaves while the "No" campaign faced intimidation (Freedom House, 2018). European election observers later reported the referendum fell short of international standards: there was unequal media access and the vote took place in a climate of fear (Shaheen, 2017). On referendum day, the result was extremely close – 51.4% Yes to 48.6% No – reflecting a country almost evenly split on giving Erdoğan such sweeping powers (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). Controversy arose when, in the evening of the vote, the High Election Council (YSK) made a last-minute decision to count ballots that lacked an official stamp, contrary to the law. The opposition claimed this decision, affecting some 1.5 million ballots, cast doubt on the result's legitimacy. Massive protests by "No" voters followed in Istanbul and other cities, but the result stood. In essence, a new political system was decided by a razor-thin margin, raising questions about the depth of its popular mandate. Erdoğan treated the outcome as a resounding victory nonetheless, famously calling it a "historic decision" by the nation to change governance. The narrow win, achieved under heavily skewed conditions, epitomizes how democratic façades (a referendum) can be used to legitimize authoritarian projects – a phenomenon not unique to Türkiye (e.g., referendums cementing Orbán's or Chávez's power) but exemplified by it.

As mentioned earlier, Bermeo (2016) note that executive aggrandizement often occurs via legal channels like referenda or constitutional conventions, giving a sheen of consent to the erosion of democracy. Türkiye's 2017 referendum is a prime example: it provided formal legitimacy to what was essentially a constitutional coup – a peaceful, procedurally legal re-writing of the regime's DNA, orchestrated by those in power to perpetuate their rule. One might call it a

"constitutional revolution", as Kim Lane Scheppele described Viktor Orbán's remaking of Hungary (Scheppele K. L., 2013). Indeed, comparisons were drawn: just as Orbán used a parliamentary supermajority in 2010–2011 to impose a new constitution in Hungary, Erdoğan used a slim majority in a referendum to overhaul Türkiye's in 2017. In both cases, the justification was making government more efficient and stable, while the real effect was entrenching the ruling party's control. As one analysis put it, the 2017 amendments "constitutionalized regime change, not simply a tweak of the political system" – it was the formal culmination of Türkiye's shift from a fragile democracy to a competitive authoritarian regime (Gökmenoğlu, 2022).

It is important to underline how markedly the post-2017 system differs from the prior parliamentary one in terms of checks and balances. Under the new constitution (effective fully after the June 2018 elections), Türkiye has what some analysts dub "hyper-presidentialism" or a "Turkish-style executive presidency." The President, as both head of state and government, faces few effective constraints:

- There is no second chamber of parliament (no senate) to slow legislation or scrutinize appointments – Türkiye remains unicameral.
- The cabinet is no longer composed of elected legislators, but of presidential appointees (often technocrats or loyalists). Thus, ministers are accountable only to the President, not to Parliament. This weakens the link between the legislative and executive branches and eliminates internal checks like coalition bargaining or parliamentary questioning of ministers.
- The President can rule by decree on vast areas of policy. Only laws can override decrees, but with Parliament generally in the President's control (via party majority), decree power is tantamount to lawmaking. This is a shift toward what in Latin America has been called "delegative presidency", where presidents routinely legislate by decree (Linz, 1990; O'Donnell, 1994).
- Crucially, oversight institutions have been brought under executive influence. Not only the judiciary, as discussed, but also institutions like the State Supervisory Council (empowered to inspect any public entity, now including military) and theoretically independent bodies (regulatory agencies, the central bank, audit courts) have seen increased political appointments or pressure.

- The impeachment mechanism for the President is almost unreachable: it requires a majority to open an investigation, three-fifths to send it to trial, and a two-thirds Constitutional Court conviction to remove – an extremely high bar especially in a polarized environment.
- Presidential terms of five years with possibility of ten years total (or longer via early election reset) mean a potential long tenure. Indeed, Erdoğan, first elected to the new presidency in 2018, can argue for eligibility through 2028 given the rules.
- The President also has the power to declare states of emergency and issue emergency decrees (as before), but now without a counter-signature from a cabinet (since there is none). While emergency decrees are subject to eventual parliamentary approval, the history of 2016–2018 shows how broadly such powers can be used to remake the system.

The net effect is that by design the executive dominates the legislature and judiciary. This concentration of authority is precisely the outcome that earlier political scientists like Juan Linz (1990) warned could be perilous in presidential systems, especially in societies with deep cleavages: an empowered president who claims to embody the majority can govern with little incentive to compromise, potentially sidelining nearly half the electorate. Türkiye's "Turkish-type" presidentialism lacks many of the moderating features some other presidential democracies have, such as strong federalism or robust judicial independence or an independent legislature (Lijphart, 1999). It more closely resembles regimes like contemporary Russia or Venezuela, where an elected president wields near-unconstrained power in practice (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). Notably, Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez also refashioned his country's constitution via referendum to bolster presidential powers in the 2000s, a parallel often drawn by both supporters and critics of Erdoğan (Corrales & Penfold, 2011).

For Türkiye, the change meant the formal end of parliamentary democracy after roughly 95 years (from the founding of the Grand National Assembly in 1920 and the Republic in 1923). It was a historic institutional rupture. The AKP narrative was that Türkiye was simply adopting a more "modern" and "effective" system of governance, moving past chronic issues of parliamentary fragmentation or military interference. However, as the next section explores, the practical consequence was to facilitate the deepest phase of democratic backsliding: once the new system was in place, Erdoğan's incumbency advantage and control over institutions

became even more entrenched, pushing Türkiye firmly into authoritarian territory as classified by democracy indices (Freedom House, 2018; V-Dem Institute, 2023).

5.4. EXECUTIVE AGGRANDIZEMENT IN PRACTICE: DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING UNDER THE NEW REGIME

With the constitutional amendments approved in 2017 and implemented after the 2018 elections, Türkiye entered a new political era – often referred to officially as the "Presidential Government System" (Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi). This final section assesses how the legal-institutional changes discussed above translated into on-the-ground reality, and how they accelerated democratic backsliding by enabling an unparalleled concentration of executive power. In essence, by 2018 Türkiye had transformed into a de jure presidential regime that ratified what had already been de facto evolving: the personalization of power around Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The period from 2018 to 2023 (which saw Erdoğan's re-election and two decades in office) provides evidence of the consequences of these transformations. We consider several dimensions: legislative marginalization, judicial subservience, erosion of accountability and the rule of law, and the dynamics of executive power under one-man rule. We also reflect on how these changes positioned Türkiye within the comparative context as a case of "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky & Way, 2010), and how the durability of this new institutional order has been tested.

One immediate effect of the new system was the diminished role of the Turkish Grand National Assembly as a center of political gravity. Under parliamentary democracy, even a dominant-party government had to maintain confidence of parliament and respond to interpellations; contentious legislation could be slowed by opposition filibuster or bargaining. In the presidential system, the AKP (in alliance with the MHP) continued to hold a parliamentary majority after 2018, but Parliament's ability to influence policy was curtailed. As noted, the removal of no-confidence votes and interpellations meant the executive (President and appointed ministers) could ignore Parliament without consequence unless it came to passing new laws or budgets. The dynamic shifted to what scholars of presidentialism call "plebiscitary" or "delegative" governance: the President largely governs through direct executive action, and the legislature mostly ratifies decisions. Indeed, from 2018 onwards, Erdoğan issued numerous presidential decrees reorganizing ministries, creating new policy councils and offices under the Presidency, and even altering aspects of how laws are implemented. Parliament, controlled by his party, rarely challenged these decrees. The legislative process often saw bills originating

from the Presidency's policy boards or AKP headquarters introduced by AKP MPs and swiftly passed – essentially making the Assembly a rubber stamp in practice. Opposition members could voice criticisms, but without meaningful veto power, they described feeling emasculated in the new order. For example, parliamentary questioning of ministers became almost moot, as ministers (no longer MPs themselves) attended assembly sessions sparingly. Annual budget debates continued, but the President's party-line discipline ensured approval. In sum, the constitutional weakening of Parliament translated into a palpable decline in horizontal accountability – one of the defining features of democratic backsliding (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018).

It's worth noting that despite these disadvantages, the opposition did mount some coordinated efforts in Parliament on issues like investigative commissions (e.g., proposing inquiries into economic troubles or corruption). However, the AKP–MHP majority routinely blocked such efforts. This reflects another phenomenon of competitive authoritarian legislatures: opposition exists but is ineffectual against a disciplined ruling bloc (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The executive's dominance also extended to the scheduling of elections. The President's newfound ability to call early elections at will (with the proviso that it dissolves Parliament and counts as one of his terms) gave Erdoğan a tool to time electoral contests advantageously. He used this almost immediately: the first presidential and parliamentary elections under the new system, originally due in late 2019, were called early in June 2018 – catching an unprepared opposition off guard and capitalizing on a still-strong economy before a downturn hit. This tactical use of institutional rules to ensure regime advantage is a hallmark of autocratic consolidation (Schedler, 2013).

The post-2017 judiciary has largely fulfilled critics' fears of being compliant to the executive. With the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK) firmly in the hands of Erdoğan and allies, judges and prosecutors are keenly aware that their careers depend on staying in line with government preferences. The chilling effect of the 2016–2017 purges persists – remaining judges know thousands of their former colleagues were dismissed and some even jailed. High-profile trials have illustrated judiciary alignment with executive desires: for instance, the persistent detention of civil society figure Osman Kavala and Kurdish leader Selahattin Demirtaş despite binding rulings by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for their release. Turkish courts have ignored these ECHR orders, a breach of Türkiye's international legal obligations, seemingly to avoid the displeasure of the President who openly labeled these individuals as guilty "terrorists" (Yılmaz & Turner, 2019). When the Constitutional Court in

2020 attempted to order the release of some journalists, lower courts refused to implement it – an extraordinary breakdown of legal hierarchy that occurred with tacit political encouragement. This indicates that the rule of law – a cornerstone of liberal democracy – has been severely undermined: laws and court decisions are applied selectively, often subordinated to political expediency. By 2021, Freedom House rated Türkiye's judiciary as "not independent", and the World Justice Project's Rule of Law index showed Türkiye falling precipitously in constraints on government powers (Freedom House, 2021; World Justice Project, 2021). These quantifications echo the qualitative picture: judicial checks have been rendered largely toothless.

An illustrative pattern has been the judiciary's handling of election-related matters, such as the annulment of the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election (which the opposition won) by the AKP-dominated election board, forcing a re-run (Al Jazeera, 2019). Although the opposition still prevailed in the re-run, the incident revealed how institutions could be bent to give the ruling party extra chances – in this case, likely with judicial or bureaucratic complicity (the initial annulment cited dubious claims of procedural irregularities). The fact that even a local election result was so flagrantly challenged speaks to the prevailing mindset: any power center not under AKP control was seen as potentially illegitimate. More broadly, after 2017 the regime has relied more on legal repression to sideline opponents: thousands of activists, journalists, and politicians have been prosecuted under anti-terrorism laws or for insulting the President. The laws themselves were not new, but their expansive and uneven application reflects a captured judiciary. Ozan Varol's concept of stealth authoritarianism – using the law to stifle dissent while maintaining a façade of legality – is fully manifested here (Varol, 2015). For example, instead of outright banning opposition parties (which would draw international outrage), Turkish authorities under executive influence have opted to arrest their members, dismiss their elected mayors, and keep legal cases as a Damocles' sword. Each of these moves follows legal procedures on paper, but they cumulatively eviscerate democratic competition.

The new constitutional structure has enabled an extraordinary personalization of governance around Erdoğan himself. Institutionally, the creation of numerous policy boards and offices attached to the Presidency – often staffed by Erdoğan's close associates or family members – has meant policy is formulated by a small coterie at the top. Traditional ministries and the civil service have often found themselves bypassed. This has sometimes led to capacity issues (a few advisors cannot replace entire ministries), but it ensures loyalty and direct control. For instance, the Wealth Fund of Türkiye, which aggregates major state assets, was put under the President's

chairmanship. The result is a blurred line between state coffers and presidential discretion – an avenue for patronage and cronies (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2018). In a notable move, Erdoğan appointed his son-in-law as Finance Minister from 2018 to 2020, symbolizing how family/personal trust eclipsed institutional merit or party hierarchy. Although Berat Albayrak eventually resigned amid an economic crisis, the episode underscored the informalization of power: decisions were increasingly made in backchannels and family forums rather than institutional deliberation. This is a feature common in authoritarian settings where formal institutions exist but real power rests in personalized networks (Helmke, 2017).

Accountability mechanisms have been hollowed out. Independent audit bodies that used to report irregularities in public spending have been muzzled – for example, the Court of Accounts (Sayıştay) audits of public institutions have become less detailed and any critical findings are largely ignored by the parliamentary majority. Media, as discussed, provides little investigative check – and those journalists who do expose government corruption or policy failures often face swift reprisals (lawsuits, arrests, or smears). Notably, when Türkiye's economy began faltering with a currency crisis in 2018-2021, rather than allow debate on policy adjustments, Erdoğan doubled down on unorthodox policies (insisting on low interest rates) and sacked even mildly independent central bank governors. The absence of institutional checks – a parliament that could question, or a free media that could pressure for change – arguably exacerbated policy mistakes. In that sense, the concentration of power also meant concentration of policy risk, a known problem in unchecked regimes (Kornai, 2015). Yet politically, Erdoğan could deflect blame or suppress discontent through his control of narrative and institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic and other crises saw Türkiye's government rule largely by presidential decrees and ad-hoc measures, with scant parliamentary oversight. Courts occasionally issued decisions against harsh measures (one Constitutional Court decision in 2020 said a law used to arrest dissidents was too broad), but such rulings were often circumvented with new legislation or simply not implemented fully, showing again that power now lay firmly in the executive's hands.

By 2020, Türkiye was widely classified by scholars and indices as a competitive authoritarian regime – meaning formal democratic institutions exist and multiparty elections are held, but the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of the incumbent, and serious violations of democratic standards are routine. The constitutional and institutional transformations under the AKP were central to creating this skewed playing field. They allowed the AKP to "reset the rules of the game" (to use a phrase from comparative authoritarianism studies) in its own favor (Levitsky

& Way, 2010; Freedom House, 2018). The regime's resilience in the face of challenges – such as the economic downturn or electoral setbacks in big cities – has been buttressed by these structural advantages. For example, even after losing the Istanbul and Ankara mayoralties in 2019 (a rare opposition win in local elections), Erdoğan used his presidential powers to transfer some municipal authorities to central government and squeeze the opposition mayors via budgets and lawsuits, mitigating the impact of those losses. The executive-centered system gives him many levers to do so without needing new laws (presidential decrees sufficed). Furthermore, the polarization of Turkish politics into a pro-Erdoğan bloc and an anti-Erdoğan bloc (Somer, 2016; McCoy & Somer, 2019) has been intensified by institutional changes that raise the stakes of power – when winner takes all executive power, elections become zero-sum, fueling polarization. Erdoğan's camp argues that the presidential system saved Türkiye from chaos and coups, whereas opponents see it as formalizing autocracy. This cleavage itself has become a defining feature of the political landscape (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020).

On an international scale, Türkiye's institutional backsliding has drawn comparisons to other autocratizing states. But one difference often noted is that Türkiye accomplished this while outside major constraint frameworks like the EU (unlike, say, Hungary or Poland which face some EU pushback). Thus, external checks were minimal, giving the AKP a relatively free hand. Notably, after 2016, the EU accession process effectively froze, removing one incentive for Ankara to hold onto liberal reforms (Öniş Z. , 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). The U.S. and NATO also tread carefully, prioritizing Türkiye's strategic role over pressuring it on democracy. This lack of external correctives meant the institutional transformation proceeded unchecked externally as well.

In the end, by institutionalizing an all-powerful presidency and enfeebling other branches, the AKP achieved what can be described as a "Frankenstate" structure (borrowing Scheppele's term): the formal structures of democracy (elections, parliament, courts) remained, but they were reconfigured internally such that they no longer served as real constraints or channels of accountability (Scheppele K. L., 2013). Türkiye's constitution still lists fundamental rights and a separation of powers on paper, but those have been hollowed out by the amendments and subsequent laws. As one constitutional scholar quipped, Türkiye after 2017 has a constitution that "grants stability by fiat of one man" – highlighting the replacement of consensus-based governance with personal rule (Yazıcı, 2017).

The concentration of executive power under the AKP facilitated not only the backsliding to date but may also impede any future re-democratization. Ziya Öniş (2023) characterizes Türkiye's new regime as simultaneously fragile yet resilient. It is fragile in that it rests heavily on one leader's continued electoral appeal and the performance of a centralized system that could falter (e.g., under economic crisis or policy failure, as evidenced by AKP's declining vote share in recent years). However, it is resilient in institutional terms because the playing field and state apparatus have been so shaped to the incumbents' favor that ordinary political competition is hamstrung. The 2023 elections, for example, were held with Erdoğan leveraging all the advantages of incumbency: from broad media coverage to the backing of a politically enfeebled judiciary supervising the process (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023). Even as the opposition mounted an unprecedentedly unified challenge, Erdoğan managed to secure re-election – a testament to how the system he built shields him from the full effect of public discontent (aspects like districting, state resources, and narrative control helped offset dissatisfaction over the economy or earthquakes mishandling). Thus, the institutional changes have created path-dependency: they lock in certain power relations that cannot be easily undone without, ironically, another major constitutional change. Just as these were used to entrench authoritarian tendencies, they would need to be reformed to restore liberal democracy – but doing so would require the opposition to win under unfair conditions, a catch-22 often seen in competitive authoritarian contexts (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

To conclude this section, Türkiye's experience since 2017 strongly validates theories of democratic erosion that emphasize legal-institutional change as the primary vehicle of backsliding (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Bermeo, 2016). The AKP did not often resort to blatant electoral fraud or overt dictatorship; instead, it mastered the subtler art of reworking constitutions, laws, and institutional norms to concentrate power. The shift from parliamentary to presidential government was the capstone of this process, enabling what one might call the "presidentialization of authoritarianism" in Türkiye. In comparative perspective, Türkiye now fits the mold of regimes like Russia under Putin or Venezuela under Chávez/Maduro, where competitive elections coexist with a constitutional order engineered to ensure the incumbent's dominance (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017a; 2017b).

6. EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS UNDER AKP RULE

Türkiye's experience under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) exemplifies the gradual erosion of democratic institutions through elected incumbents' concentration of power. After three successive national election victories (2002, 2007, 2011), the AKP – and especially its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – increasingly moved to undermine checks and balances in the name of "majoritarian" democracy. The period after 2011, in particular, saw an accelerated slide from what was once hailed as a reformist government toward a competitive authoritarian regime (a formally multi-party system with systematically uneven playing field) (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016). This chapter analyzes how key institutions of Türkiye's democracy – the judiciary, electoral system, media, civil society, and the legislature/party system – were either co-opted or weakened by the AKP, and to what extent they proved resilient or vulnerable in the face of authoritarian pressures. Grounded in comparative politics theory and Turkish political history, the analysis shows that Türkiye's institutional guardrails largely failed to prevent democratic backsliding, though pockets of resistance occasionally slowed or challenged the AKP's dominance. Overall, Türkiye illustrates the global trend of executive aggrandizement (Bermeo, 2016). Yet, moments of pushback (e.g. court rulings, opposition electoral victories) also highlight that authoritarian consolidation was neither instantaneous nor uncontested.

In the first decade of AKP rule, Türkiye was often cited as a "model" merging Islam, democracy, and economic growth. Early AKP governments implemented EU-backed reforms, curtailed the military's overt political influence, and expanded civil liberties in some areas (Öniş Z. , 2012). However, by the 2010s this progress had stalled and reversed. Scholars variously describe Türkiye's regime evolution as a shift to illiberal democracy, delegative democracy, or outright competitive authoritarianism (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016). In essence, formal democratic structures like elections continued to exist, but the substance of democracy – a free press, an independent judiciary, a level electoral playing field, protection of civil rights, and meaningful parliamentary oversight – was hollowed out. The AKP's majoritarian worldview, encapsulated in Erdoğan's frequent claim to embody the "national will" by virtue of electoral wins, provided ideological justification for dismantling institutional constraints (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2021). After securing a third term in 2011 with nearly 50% of the vote, the AKP no longer faced serious short-term electoral threats and increasingly treated institutional autonomy as an obstacle to be tamed. The turning point came with a series of confrontations: the 2010 constitutional

referendum that restructured the judiciary, the 2013 Gezi Park protests and their suppression, the late-2013 corruption scandal blamed on a "parallel state" of FETO insiders, and the failed military coup attempt in July 2016. Each of these crises was used by the AKP to justify extraordinary measures that eroded checks and balances – from purging thousands of judges and civil servants to sidelining independent media and locking up dissidents. By the time a new presidential constitution was enacted in 2017–2018, Türkiye's institutional landscape had been fundamentally altered to favor one-party, one-man rule (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2021).

6.1. THE JUDICIARY

The judiciary was one of the first institutions to be reshaped under AKP rule, reflecting the party's fraught relationship with Türkiye's Kemalist "guardians." In the 2000s, high courts and the Constitutional Court had acted as checks on the AKP – most dramatically in 2008 when the Constitutional Court narrowly rejected an attempt to ban the AKP for violating secularism (falling just one vote short of the supermajority needed) (Özbudun E. , 2015). The AKP responded by seeking greater control over judicial appointments. A pivotal moment was the 2010 constitutional referendum, packaged as a democratic reform, which among other changes restructured the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) and the Constitutional Court. The amendments ostensibly broadened representation in these bodies (allowing more judges to be elected by their peers), but they also enabled the government to influence the selection of judges by expanding the HSYK and giving the Justice Minister (an AKP appointee) significant sway. At the time, AKP officials portrayed the judicial reforms as efforts to end the old secular elite's grip and make the judiciary more representative. In practice, however, observers warned that the AKP was engaging in "tactical liberalism to facilitate court-packing" – using the rhetoric of democratization to install sympathizers in the courts. Indeed, the AKP and its then-ally, the FETO, benefitted from the 2010 changes by filling many judicial posts with jurists deemed friendly to the government's worldview. The long-term effect was to dilute the judiciary's independence well before open authoritarian turn: by the early 2010s, the Constitutional Court and HSYK contained far fewer Kemalist holdovers and more judges aligned with or at least acquiescent to the ruling party (or to the FETO who were, until 2013, AKP's partners in power).

The judiciary's autonomy eroded sharply after two crises: the Gezi Park protests of mid-2013 and the December 2013 corruption probes. In the wake of Gezi and especially after the corruption investigations implicating AKP ministers (which Erdoğan blamed on FETO

prosecutors), the AKP moved to purge and subdue the judiciary. In early 2014, the government rushed through a law to restructure the HSYK, effectively reasserting executive control over the judicial council. This controversial law was later struck down by the Constitutional Court as unconstitutional (an instance of judicial resilience), but by the time of the ruling, the Justice Ministry had already reassigned or dismissed hundreds of prosecutors and judges involved in the corruption cases (Özbudun E. , 2015). Even though the Court reversed the legal changes, those purged were not restored to their positions, illustrating how one-time actions can have irreversible effects despite subsequent legal victories. By 2014–2015, observers noted an atmosphere of fear within the judiciary: officials who ruled against government interests risked demotion or transfer to remote postings. For example, in 2015 a prosecutor who criticized the Justice Minister on social media was swiftly exiled to a courthouse in a distant province as punishment. Such punitive reassignments became common, sending a clear message that dissent from judges or prosecutors would be met with retaliation.

Even before the 2016 coup attempt, the AKP was actively "winnowing out" those in the judiciary it deemed unreliable or disloyal. In June 2016 – one month before the coup – the HSYK (now under AKP influence) carried out an unprecedented mass reshuffle of 3,700 judges and prosecutors, roughly a quarter of the nation's total. Officials framed this as a routine rotation to address staffing needs, but insiders and EU observers saw it as a "witch hunt" to uproot remaining FETO and other critics from the courts (Reuters, 2016). One judge affected noted that the HSYK now viewed anyone not aligned with its values as "the other" who must face "the consequences of being on the wrong side." The European Union repeatedly voiced concern that judicial independence in Türkiye was being demolished, warning that these moves were taking Türkiye away from European norms (European Commission, 2016). By mid-2016, President Erdoğan openly sought a constitutional overhaul toward an executive presidency – a goal made easier by having a compliant judiciary that would not block his agenda.

The July 2016 coup attempt marked a final turning point. The putsch failed in a matter of hours, thanks in part to public resistance and cross-party rejection of military intervention (a positive sign for democratic norms) (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017a). However, the aftermath saw the government declare a state of emergency and launch a sweeping purge of state institutions – nowhere more dramatically than in the judiciary. Claiming that the coup was masterminded by FETO's network, the AKP government dismissed over 4,000 judges and prosecutors (about a third of the total) in the months after July 2016. Many were detained on accusations of terrorism or FETO ties, without due process. The result was a near-total reconstitution of judicial bodies

with AKP-loyal or at least government-approved personnel. In one stroke, decades of experience and institutional memory were removed: this mass purge not only undermined judicial independence but also created a climate of intimidation for the remaining judges, who knew they could be next if they ruled against government interests (Turkey Tribunal, 2021). Indeed, self-censorship took hold among judges; as Freedom House noted in 2018, by then "citizens and officials alike were hesitant to express their views on sensitive topics" due to the pervasive fear created by purges and prosecutions (Freedom House, 2018).

The 2017 constitutional amendments – approved in a tightly fought referendum – then formalized executive dominance over the judiciary. Under the new constitution, the HSYK was replaced by a Council of Judges and Prosecutors (CJP) mostly appointed by the President and the parliamentary majority. The council's membership was reduced to 13, of which 6 seats (almost half) are directly appointed by the President, and the rest by Parliament – meaning that if the President's party holds parliament (as the AKP-MHP alliance did), virtually the entire CJP is effectively chosen by the ruling bloc. No seats are reserved for judges elected by their peers, breaking with democratic best practices (Oder, 2017). The Constitutional Court was also impacted: its size was reduced (from 17 to 15) and through attrition and new appointments Erdoğan steadily filled it with loyalists. By 2020, a majority of the Constitutional Court's members had either been appointed by Erdoğan or were holdovers seen as sympathetic to the AKP. Thus, both the regular judiciary and the constitutional judiciary came under de facto control of the executive.

By undermining separation of powers, the AKP turned the courts into an instrument rather than a check of executive authority. Politically sensitive cases increasingly yielded decisions aligned with Erdoğan's preferences. Courts routinely jailed journalists and opposition politicians on dubious charges (e.g. "revealing state secrets" in the case of journalist Can Dündar, or "terrorism propaganda" for academics who signed a peace petition) (Human Rights Watch, 2019). High-profile examples include the imprisonment of Selahattin Demirtaş and Osman Kavala, in both instances, Turkish courts ignored binding European Court of Human Rights rulings for their release, underscoring executive influence over justice. Prosecutors became zealous tools in the hands of the state: by 2018, the infamous Article 299 (insulting the President) had been invoked over 1,800 times since Erdoğan took office in 2014, ensnaring journalists, students, even a former Miss Türkiye in criminal cases for mild criticisms (European Court of Human Rights, 2018). The rule of law effectively deteriorated; the Venice

Commission and other international bodies observed that Türkiye's courts no longer reliably upheld basic rights or constrained government action (Venice Commission, 2017).

Amid this bleak picture, there were isolated moments of judicial independence that proved fleeting but significant. In 2014, the Constitutional Court asserted itself in a few landmark rulings – notably overturning the government's ban on Twitter and YouTube as violations of free expression. Erdoğan publicly decried these decisions, but the fact that the Court acted against the government's wishes showed some resilience of legal norms. Similarly, in January 2016, the Constitutional Court ordered the release of detained journalists Can Dündar and Erdem Gül, affirming press freedom; Erdoğan angrily stated he "did not respect" the ruling, and not long after, the post-coup purges ensured the Court would not likely defy him again (Pamuk, 2016). Another example was the Wikipedia case: Türkiye banned Wikipedia in 2017, yet the Constitutional Court in late 2019 ruled the ban unconstitutional, leading to Wikipedia's unblocking in January 2020 – a rare instance where judicial review reversed an illiberal policy (Gökmenoğlu, 2022). These cases demonstrate that the judiciary's erosion was not absolute; vestiges of independence lingered especially in the highest court. However, such decisions were exceptions that proved the rule: generally, when core regime interests were at stake, even the top courts fell in line or were circumvented. In 2018, for instance, lower courts brazenly refused to implement a Constitutional Court order to free two jailed journalists, a nearly unprecedented open defiance likely guided by political pressure. This incident – lawyers had to remind lower courts that Constitutional Court rulings are binding symbolizing how deeply politicized and fearful the judiciary had become (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

In summary, the judiciary in Türkiye transitioned from a semi-autonomous branch with a tradition (albeit a sometimes politicized one) of guarding secularist state principles, into a subservient arm of the executive. The process combined formal restructuring (2010 and 2017 reforms) with purges and informal pressure (2014 and 2016 waves), resulting in what one bar association leader called simply replacing one form of tutelage with another: "We don't want a FETO structure in the judiciary, but neither do we want an Erdoğanist structure." Critics both inside and outside Türkiye lament that this is exactly what transpired: an "Erdoganist" judiciary that reliably advances the ruling party's agenda and targets its opponents (Turkey Tribunal, 2021). The erosion of judicial independence removed a crucial bulwark of democracy, enabling the executive's excesses to go unchecked by domestic courts. This judicial capture has had cascading effects on all other institutions and rights, setting the stage for broader authoritarian consolidation.

6.2. ELECTORAL INSTITUTIONS AND PROCESSES

Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of democracy, and Türkiye has held regular multiparty elections for decades. Under AKP rule, elections continued to take place on schedule and with opposition participation, but electoral institutions and practices were increasingly tilted in favor of the ruling party. The period after 2011 saw the integrity of Türkiye's elections challenged by growing imbalances in media coverage, misuse of state resources, changes in electoral rules, and outright interference by ostensibly neutral bodies like the election commission. Yet, it is important to note that Turkish elections have remained genuinely competitive in outcome – the AKP suffered notable defeats in some instances – even as the playing field grew ever more uneven (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023). This section examines how the High Election Board (YSK) and other electoral mechanisms were pressured or altered, how electoral laws were tweaked to the AKP's advantage, and how the ruling party leveraged its dominance to constrain the opposition's electoral chances. We also highlight moments of resilience, notably the opposition's successes in the 2019 local elections, which demonstrated that incumbency advantage could be overcome despite institutional biases.

Türkiye's elections are overseen by the Supreme Election Council (YSK), a constitutionally established body composed of senior judges. Traditionally, the YSK enjoyed a reputation for professionalism, and Turkish elections were generally deemed well-administered on technical terms. However, as political polarization intensified, the YSK faced accusations of partisanship. One early sign was during the 2010 constitutional referendum: the YSK controversially allowed the government to stage the referendum with minimal campaign time and logistical advantages. Greater controversy came during the April 2017 constitutional referendum, a watershed moment for electoral integrity. On referendum day, the YSK made a sudden, unprecedented ruling to count unstamped ballots as valid – essentially changing rules mid-count in a way that "seemed to favor the government". Opposition parties and international observers (e.g. an OSCE mission) were alarmed, calling this decision a clear breach of electoral law that cast doubt on the tabulation's integrity (Shaheen, 2017). The referendum, which handed Erdoğan a narrow 51.4% "Yes" for expanding his powers, thus unfolded "on a manifestly unequal playing field" under a state of emergency, with media and civil society muzzled and even the vote-counting rules bent by the electoral authority.

Despite these issues, Türkiye's electoral management bodies have not entirely lost public trust. The OSCE's (2023) observation of the 2023 elections noted that the election administration

"generally enjoyed trust", and voting day procedures were mostly smooth. However, the same report flagged lack of transparency and concerns over independence in the YSK's work. A pattern in recent years is that while the conduct of voting (balloting, counting at polling stations) is largely efficient and even-handed – thanks in part to pluralistic ballot-box committees and vigilant party observers – the broader electoral context is skewed by the ruling party's influence. The YSK's contentious decisions typically favored the AKP. For instance, prior to the June 2018 general elections, the YSK was accused of gerrymandering when it redrew some constituency boundaries and merged electoral districts in ways seen as disadvantaging the pro-Kurdish HDP. Additionally, regulations on campaign media were loosely enforced when it came to AKP violations but stringently applied to opposition parties (e.g. penalizing minor opposition infractions). These double standards fed a perception that the referee is not neutral.

A critical aspect of electoral integrity is the fairness of the campaign environment. In Türkiye, the AKP gradually constructed an unlevel playing field long before votes were cast. By the 2010s, the ruling party effectively dominated mass media coverage (as detailed in the next section), meaning opposition candidates struggled to get their message out. The government liberally used state resources for campaign purposes – from inaugurating public works projects as election propaganda to overtly using the state-run broadcaster TRT as an AKP mouthpiece. During the 2014 presidential election, Erdoğan (then Prime Minister running for president) enjoyed wall-to-wall media coverage, while opposition candidates got only a tiny fraction of airtime on major networks. The OSCE (2015) noted that 2014 and 2015 elections were marred by bias: the incumbent party blurred the line between state and party, with public officials (including the ostensibly neutral President after 2014) campaigning actively for the AKP, and government announcements timed to boost the AKP's prospects. The 2016-2018 state of emergency – imposed after the coup attempt – further tilted the field: dozens of opposition-leaning media outlets had been shuttered, leading figures of the HDP were imprisoned, and emergency decrees restricted rallies and gatherings. The April 2017 referendum and the June 2018 elections thus took place under conditions where the opposition's basic freedoms of assembly and expression were curtailed. International observers concluded that Türkiye "does not fulfill the basic principles for holding a democratic election" in these conditions, even if voters were offered a real choice at the polls (Venice Commission & OSCE/ODIHR, 2017). In the 2018 election, HDP's presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş had to campaign from prison via social media messages. The playing field was so skewed that in 2018 the OSCE

(2018) termed the elections "competitively authoritarian": technically competitive and with high turnout, but fundamentally unfair.

While outright fraud in vote counting has not been a systematic issue in Türkiye, the AKP leveraged legal reforms to solidify its electoral advantage. One longstanding structural bias is the 10% national electoral threshold (among the world's highest) for parliamentary representation, in place since 1982. The AKP resisted lowering it for years (it was only modestly reduced to 7% in 2022 to help MHP cross the threshold), a stance that incidentally helped AKP by wasting opposition votes. In 2014, as local elections in Ankara and other cities looked close, the government amended regulations to allow security forces greater presence at ballot boxes and to relocate polling stations in the southeast for "security" – measures critics said facilitated voter intimidation in Kurdish areas and reduced turnout where the opposition would otherwise poll strongly (OSCE/ODIHR, 2015). After losing its parliamentary majority in the June 2015 election, Erdoğan refused to let the opposition form a government, instead calling a snap election for November 2015. In the interim, a renewed conflict with the PKK and a wave of violence created a climate of fear. The snap November 2015 elections were thus held under shadow of violence, and the AKP regained a majority, a result some analysts attributed in part to the intimidation of the opposition's base during the interim unrest (though AKP also adjusted its message and benefited from voters' desire for stability) (2015). This episode highlighted how incumbents could manipulate timing and context (if not the actual voting) to reshape outcomes – a phenomenon Andreas Schedler (2006) terms the "menu of manipulation" in electoral authoritarian regimes.

Leading up to the 2017–2018 transition to presidentialism, the AKP introduced a new election alliance system that allowed parties to run in formal coalitions. Ostensibly a reform to help smaller parties, this was primarily designed to cement the AKP's partnership with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The People's Alliance (AKP-MHP) ensured that even if the AKP's vote share dipped, it could secure a parliamentary majority with MHP's support – and that Erdoğan could win the presidency with MHP's votes in the second round if needed. Meanwhile, the Nation Alliance of opposition parties formed defensively in response. The alliance system arguably leveled the field slightly by enabling opposition coordination (see Party System section), but other changes in 2018 were clearly partisan: electoral law amendments that year placed the partisan Interior Minister in charge of ballot security, allowed moving ballot boxes on security grounds, and controversially permitted unsealed ballot papers to be counted (essentially codifying the YSK's 2017 unstamped-ballot decision). These legal

moves drew criticism from the Venice Commission and Council of Europe as undermining confidence in elections (Venice Commission & OSCE/ODIHR, 2017).

Despite the obstacles, Türkiye's elections have produced some genuine surprises that revealed a degree of resilience in the electoral system and society's democratic instincts. The most significant was the 2019 local elections, in which the opposition scored major victories in big cities. In March 2019, opposition candidates won the mayorships of Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, and other key cities, dealing the AKP its worst ballot-box setback to date. Particularly symbolic was Istanbul – Erdoğan's home city and political birthplace – where CHP candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu won narrowly, ending 25 years of Islamist/conservative rule in Türkiye's largest metropolis. The AKP did not accept defeat lightly. It launched an all-out challenge to the Istanbul result, alleging irregularities without convincing evidence and leaning on the YSK to intervene. In a contentious decision, the YSK annulled the Istanbul mayoral election results, citing minor procedural issues (such as a few polling officials not being civil servants)[54]. The council's decision applied only to the metropolitan mayor's race – even though all ballots (for mayor, district councils, etc.) had been cast together – a one-sided remedy that appeared nakedly political (Dalay, 2019). This move was widely seen as the AKP pressuring the YSK to overturn an unfavorable outcome, and it was unprecedented in modern Turkish history. However, this blatant interference sparked an unintended backlash. It galvanized voters' sense of injustice, uniting opposition supporters and even some principled AKP voters who felt the re-run was undemocratic. In the June 2019 redo election, İmamoğlu won again – this time by an overwhelming margin of ~9%, far larger than the initial 0.2% victory (Al Jazeera, 2019). The public essentially rebuked the attempt to nullify their will. The opposition's ability to protect its victory in Istanbul on the second try was a striking example of democratic resilience. It showed that while the ruling party could exert influence over institutions, it could not entirely predetermine outcomes when public sentiment mobilized strongly against it.

The 2019 episode also highlighted the importance of civil society and party monitoring in elections. Opposition parties and NGOs trained tens of thousands of poll watchers who scrutinized the process, deterring fraud. When the AKP sought to spin a narrative of fraud in Istanbul, these independent monitors and some honest YSK officials came forward to refute false claims. In effect, the presence of engaged citizens in the electoral process acted as a check on manipulation. Another resilient feature is Türkiye's high voter turnout – consistently around 85% in general elections and even 89% in the pivotal 2023 election. Voters' commitment to participating, even when they suspect unfairness, keeps elections meaningful. As one

international observer noted in 2023, “Turkish democracy is proving to be amazingly resilient. This election had a high turnout and offered a real choice. However, it is a long way from creating fair conditions.” (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023). The very competitiveness of elections has helped the opposition maintain hope and, at times, achieve breakthroughs (2019) or at least seriously contest the AKP.

Beyond the voting process, the AKP also eroded democracy by undermining the meaning of electoral mandates when it lost. In the 2014 local elections, the HDP (then running as the BDP in local races) won dozens of municipalities in the southeast. After the collapse of peace talks with the PKK in 2015, the government moved to unseat these mayors. Beginning in September 2016, under emergency rule, the Interior Ministry removed and jailed scores of HDP mayors on charges of aiding terrorism, and appointed “trustees” in their place. By 2017, at least 48 out of 65 HDP-run municipalities had been taken over by such central government appointees (Amnesty International, 2017). This amounted to nullifying local election results en masse in predominantly Kurdish cities and towns. The pattern recurred after 2019: despite HDP winning many municipalities again, within months the state ousted dozens of those mayors as well (often on old or flimsy charges). For example, the elected mayors of major southeastern cities like Diyarbakır, Mardin, and Van were removed in August 2019 and replaced with governors as trustees (Human Rights Watch, 2019). By mid-2020, virtually all HDP-led councils had been taken over. These actions constitute a severe assault on democratic representation and local self-government. The government’s justification was national security, but critics note that accusations were broad and due process scant. Essentially, where the AKP couldn’t win at the ballot box, it used state power to override the voters’ choice. This set a dangerous precedent: elections matter only when the ruling party prevails. It is a hallmark of authoritarian regimes to tolerate opposition victories only up to a point. Türkiye unfortunately crossed that line with the systematic disenfranchisement of Kurdish electorates.

In sum, Türkiye’s electoral system under the AKP presents a paradox of robust voter engagement and formal competition alongside mounting structural unfairness. The institutions meant to safeguard fairness – an independent election commission, neutral security forces, a pluralistic media – have been compromised by the ruling party’s long tenure and tactics. Yet the fact that the AKP has at times been surprised by outcomes (losing big cities, facing runoff votes) suggests elections are not mere window dressing; they remain genuine contests, albeit asymmetric ones. The resilience lies in Turkish society’s continued attachment to voting as the route for change, the opposition’s adaptability (forming alliances across ideological lines), and

sporadic integrity in the system (honest local officials, court interventions like annulling blatantly illegal moves). International observers in 2023 diplomatically summarized the situation: Türkiye's elections are "well-managed" and offer "genuine political alternatives", but the incumbent enjoys an "unjustified advantage", and restrictions on media, opposition campaigning, and civil society "hindered" true pluralism (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023). In other words, the mechanics of voting function, but the environment is heavily skewed. This distortion of electoral institutions has allowed the AKP to maintain power for over two decades, turning elections into a tool of legitimation for an illiberal regime – yet the possibility of democratic accountability has never been entirely extinguished, as moments like 2019 prove.

6.3. MEDIA AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

An independent media is often the first target of would-be authoritarians, and Türkiye has been no exception. Under AKP rule, especially after 2011, Türkiye's media landscape was transformed from one of relative pluralism into a tightly controlled space dominated by pro-government outlets. The mechanisms of media capture ranged from economic coercion (fines, forced ownership changes) to direct censorship (banning websites, pulling TV stations off air) and intimidation (lawsuits, arrests, and violence against journalists). By the late 2010s, Türkiye had become one of the world's leading jailers of journalists and had effectively muzzled mainstream media (Freedom House, 2018). This section charts the progressive constriction of media freedom, highlighting how the AKP leveraged state power and business proxies to silence critical voices. We also note how some journalists and new media platforms resisted the onslaught, carving out niches of independent reporting despite great risks.

In the AKP's first term (2002–2007), media freedoms saw a brief improvement due to EU-driven reforms. Censorship laws were liberalized (e.g. easing bans on Kurdish language content) and overt interference by the state's shadowy "Deep State" networks diminished compared to the turbulent 1990s (2007). However, even in this early period, the AKP learned to manage and pressure the media to its advantage. A critical turning point was a 2007 event: when the military issued an e-memorandum opposing the AKP's presidential candidate, much of the media initially echoed establishment criticisms of the AKP. After surviving that crisis, Erdoğan grew more hostile to mainstream outlets, many of which were owned by conglomerates with secular leanings. By 2008–2009, the AKP started using tax investigations and fines to cow media bosses. The most famous example was the Doğan Media Group (owner of the high-circulation Hürriyet newspaper and other outlets), hit in 2009 with an astronomical

tax fine of $2.5 billion after it reported on a corruption scandal implicating AKP figures (Bechev, 2014). Widely seen as retaliation, this fine sent shockwaves – it signaled that the government could bankrupt media companies if they stepped out of line. Under pressure, Doğan eventually sold off its media assets in 2011–2012, marking the start of a major ownership reshuffle in Turkish media in favor of AKP-friendly businessmen.

After 2011, the AKP had enough political clout to accelerate media capture. Several independent outlets were bought by pro-AKP entrepreneurs, often with the tacit backing of state banks (which provided generous loans). A notable case was the 2013 sale of Sabah-ATV (a leading newspaper and TV channel): originally seized by a state fund from an opposition-aligned owner, it was sold to a consortium led by Erdoğan's son-in-law with financing from a public bank (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2018). Thus one of Türkiye's largest media groups became a government mouthpiece. Over time, an AKP-aligned media empire emerged, including not just traditional newspapers and TV channels but also an army of online trolls and propaganda websites. By 2015, the majority of TV news channels – the primary source of information for most Turks – toed the government line. This became starkly evident during the Gezi Park protests in 2013: while international outlets covered the massive demonstrations, Turkish TV largely ignored them (CNN Türk infamously aired a penguin documentary during the height of the protests). The few channels that reported on Gezi, like Halk TV, faced fines by the RTÜK (the state broadcasting regulator). Gezi thus exposed the extent of self-censorship and government pressure on media (Amnesty International, 2013).

In the aftermath of Gezi, the crackdown intensified. Journalists who were sympathetic to the protests or critical of the police response were fired in waves – media owners keen to maintain favor with the government purged troublesome editors and writers. Estimates suggest hundreds of journalists lost their jobs due to political pressure in 2013-2014 alone. The "pool media" phenomenon emerged: pro-government business groups allegedly created a fund (or pool) to buy out media and ensure positive coverage. Investigative reports later revealed leaked tapes of officials discussing direct intervention in newsrooms (for instance, Erdoğan personally calling TV executives to get opposition leaders' speeches cut from live broadcasts).

Alongside economic and political pressure, the AKP used legislation and the judiciary to constrain media. Defamation and insult laws were weaponized – not only the notorious Article 299 (insulting the President) but also penal code articles on "terrorism propaganda" and vague accusations like "denigrating Turkishness" (Article 301) were applied to journalists, often for

merely criticizing government policies. The anti-terror law was broad enough to prosecute reporters who wrote about Kurdish issues or FETO connections. Even mainstream papers like Cumhuriyet faced this treatment: its editor-in-chief Can Dündar was arrested in late 2015 after publishing evidence of Turkish intelligence sending arms into Syria, accused of aiding terrorism and espionage (simply for doing investigative journalism). Although the Constitutional Court ordered his release in 2016, as mentioned, Dündar fled abroad after an assassination attempt and was later sentenced in absentia (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

The judiciary's decline (as discussed) facilitated media repression. Courts reliably rubber-stamped government requests to block websites or issue gag orders. A notorious instance was the nationwide ban on Twitter and YouTube in 2014 after leaked tapes alleged AKP corruption; lower courts approved these bans within hours (they were lifted only when the Constitutional Court intervened to restore access, citing freedom of expression). The AKP also passed new internet laws requiring providers to remove content swiftly at the state's behest and mandating user data retention, enhancing online censorship (Freedom House, 2014). Each terrorist incident or political embarrassment was followed by blanket bans on news coverage and social media throttling – by the mid-2010s, Turks were accustomed to having Twitter or Facebook slow to a crawl during critical moments (such as immediately after bombings or the night of the 2016 coup attempt) as the government tried to control narratives.

After the July 2016 coup attempt, the media environment went from repressive to near-monolithic. Under emergency decrees, the government shut down over 160 media outlets – including newspapers, TV channels, radio stations, websites – simply by executive order, with no judicial review (Amnesty International, 2017). These included not just FETO-linked outlets (like Zaman, once Türkiye's largest newspaper, and Samanyolu TV) but also many Kurdish outlets (e.g. Azadiya Welat newspaper), leftist publications, and independent radio stations. The purge did not spare wire agencies and journals; even the state news agency Anadolu saw some staff purged for alleged disloyalty. By early 2017, the media that remained was overwhelmingly pro-government or silenced. The numbers tell the story: as Freedom House (2017) reported, over 150 journalists were in prison by 2017 – making Türkiye the world's leading jailer of journalists at that time. Many others went into exile to avoid arrest. Websites of expatriate Turkish journalists (like Ahval or Artı Gerçek) were blocked domestically. The climate of fear and self-censorship was palpable; journalists still in Türkiye largely avoided criticizing the government, as doing so could swiftly lead to job loss or detention. By 2018, even major international media correspondents faced harassment – several European journalists were

denied entry or expelled, and a Wall Street Journal reporter was arrested and later deported (Freedom House, 2018).

A capstone in the AKP's media takeover was the 2018 acquisition of Doğan Media (the last big independent media conglomerate). Doğan's remaining assets – notably the flagship Hürriyet, the popular Kanal D and CNN Türk channels – were sold to Demirören Group, owned by a family with close AKP ties, reportedly under strong government pressure (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2018). With that, almost all high-circulation newspapers and high-rating TV networks in Türkiye came under direct or indirect AKP influence. The state broadcaster TRT was already a government mouthpiece, giving the AKP 90%+ of coverage in elections. Now even private media mirrored that bias.

In essence, Türkiye's mainstream media by the late 2010s functioned as an echo chamber for the ruling party. Alternative viewpoints survived primarily on the internet and in a few small outlets. The government moved to choke those as well: in 2019 it required online streaming services to apply for licenses (threatening independent internet TV like Medyascope), and in 2020 a new social media law forced platforms to have local representatives and to remove content authorities dislike, under penalty of bandwidth throttling (Freedom House, 2021).

The impact of media capture on Türkiye's democracy has been profound. It deprived citizens of the information needed to hold their government accountable. Scandals that might have toppled governments in a freer media environment (from corruption revelations to policy failures) had little resonance, as TV – the main source for less-educated and rural voters – simply did not report them or spun them as foreign conspiracies. The AKP mastered a narrative of itself as the guardian of stability against traitors and terrorists, repeated ad nauseam by media it controlled. This propaganda dominance helped sustain its base and confuse the public about opposition alternatives.

Nonetheless, some resilient media and expression outlets persisted. A handful of opposition newspapers like Cumhuriyet and Sözcü continued to publish, though under constant legal pressure (Cumhuriyet's journalists were prosecuted, and Sözcü writers faced trials too). These print outlets, with relatively small circulation, were symbolically important as voices of dissent. The expansion of the internet and social media in the 2010s provided a lifeline for free expression. Millions of Turks turned to Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook for unfiltered news, especially the educated urban populace. This enabled the rise of independent online journalism: for instance, Medyascope, founded by veteran journalist Ruşen Çakır, broadcast diverse

political debates on YouTube; T24 and Bianet offered critical news coverage on their websites. These digital platforms gained significant followings, though they too faced throttling and legal harassment (Freedom House, 2020). Significantly, during the 2019 Istanbul election re-run, opposition candidate İmamoğlu effectively used social media and viral videos to circumvent the pro-government TV blackout and reach voters – an effort credited with helping him win the rerun by a landslide. Additionally, the widespread use of VPNs and satellite TV allowed some Turks to access foreign news or exile-run stations (like Germany-based Özgürüz or Medya Haber).

Another form of resilience has been civil society solidarity with journalists. Organizations like the Turkish Journalists' Association and international NGOs (Reporters Without Borders, Committee to Protect Journalists) closely monitored press freedom violations, raising awareness and campaigning for jailed reporters (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). While this did not stop the crackdown, it kept an embattled community of journalists visible and reminded the public and international partners of Türkiye's repressive turn. Occasionally, public outcry led to small positive steps – e.g. in 2016, after much advocacy, some of the imprisoned Cumhuriyet journalists were released on appeal (though others were convicted).

In conclusion, the AKP's domination of media has been a linchpin of its authoritarian entrenchment. By controlling the narrative, the government shielded itself from scrutiny and delegitimized the opposition in the eyes of many. The democratic notion of a "Fourth Estate" providing oversight was largely demolished. Yet, the persistence of some independent voices and the ingenuity of journalists migrating to online forums underscore that the spirit of a free press did not entirely die. Turks have a history of political satire and probing discourse that survives in pockets (for example, satirical magazines like LeMan still poke fun at leaders, and underground music and art carry dissent). Ultimately, however, the lack of a truly free media has severely weakened institutional accountability in Türkiye. The erosion of media freedom, more than any single action, facilitated all other dimensions of democratic erosion, by removing the transparency and critique that could mobilize public resistance. Any future democratic recovery in Türkiye would likely require a re-opening of the media space and legal guarantees for freedom of expression as foundational steps.

6.4. CIVIL SOCIETY AND CIVIC SPACE

A vibrant civil society – including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations, unions, and social movements – is essential for a healthy democracy. In Türkiye, civil society has long been dynamic but often contested by the state. Under AKP rule, especially after its power became secure post-2011, civil society came under intensifying siege. The AKP government sought both to co-opt civil society by empowering pro-government groups (especially religious or conservative NGOs) and to contain or crush independent civil society organizations that were critical of its policies (Sözen, 2022). Over time, the space for dissent and autonomous civic action shrank dramatically, through tactics ranging from onerous regulations and smear campaigns to mass arrests and closures. Here we review how different segments of civil society – from human rights organizations and advocacy groups to universities and labor unions – fared under the AKP, and what forms of resilience they displayed in the face of authoritarian pressure.

Ironically, the AKP's early years saw a notable expansion of civil society space. In the 2000s, aligned with the EU accession process, Türkiye eased restrictions on associations and encouraged NGOs via new legal frameworks. EU funding and reformist zeal led to a flourishing of organizations focusing on human rights, minority rights, women's rights, environmental issues, etc. (Öniş Z. , 2013). The AKP initially welcomed many NGOs as partners in its effort to roll back the old military-secularist elite. For instance, conservative Muslim NGOs and business associations (like MUSIAD) grew in influence, complementing the AKP's social base. Liberal intellectuals and activists, some of whom supported AKP's reformist agenda early on, established platforms for dialogue and democratization. This honeymoon for civil society, however, came with a Faustian bargain – the AKP expected loyalty or at least neutrality from NGOs. As long as civil society challenged the previous establishment (e.g. calling out military human rights abuses or pushing for Kurdish cultural rights), the government tolerated or even encouraged it. But once civil society began to challenge the AKP's own practices, the backlash began.

The Gezi Park protests in 2013 mark a watershed. Gezi started as an environmental sit-in to save a park but morphed into a nationwide protest movement against AKP's authoritarian tendencies. It was a quintessential civil society uprising – led not by political parties but by a spontaneous coalition of youth, NGOs, artist collectives, soccer fan clubs, and ordinary citizens. The government's violent response to Gezi showed that it would not tolerate bottom-up dissent. In the aftermath, authorities took punitive measures against groups associated with the protests. NGOs that had supported Gezi or that advocated liberal values suddenly faced intense scrutiny

– many were hit with excessive audits, fines, or trumped-up legal cases (Amnesty International, 2013). For example, Taksim Solidarity (the umbrella group of professionals and activists who organized in Gezi) faced a criminal trial (eventually acquitted after years). The government also began painting Western-funded NGOs as "foreign agents", fostering public suspicion of civil society's motives.

Concurrently, the AKP sought to build a compliant civil society of its own. It channeled funding to pro-government NGOs, including religious charities and Ottoman heritage cultural foundations. The presence of a vast state-sponsored religious network, the Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs), further bolstered AKP's influence in the civic realm by organizing grassroots support under the guise of religious community work. The party and its proxies founded numerous associations to rival independent ones – for instance, when the longstanding Turkish Human Rights Association criticized AKP policies, a new pro-government human rights NGO was promoted to drown out its voice. This "divide and conquer" strategy aimed to tame civil society by rewarding those who toed the government line (or were apolitical) and isolating those who remained critical. Scholars label this outcome as "tamed civil society", wherein NGOs either become regime-friendly or risk elimination (Sözen, 2022).

Legal changes gradually tightened the leash on civic groups. For instance, a 2014 law enlarged government oversight of associations and gave provincial governors broad powers to halt NGO events on security grounds. Police increasingly invoked these powers to break up meetings, detain participants at workshops, or ban public demonstrations, especially on sensitive issues like Kurdish rights or corruption. NGOs reported visits from intelligence agents warning them to be careful about criticizing the government. By 2014, observers were already writing of a "shrinking civic space" in Türkiye (Bechev, 2014).

The crackdown escalated dramatically after the July 2016 coup attempt. The subsequent state of emergency decrees not only targeted state institutions but also struck at civil society with a vengeance. By government fiat, over 1,500 associations, foundations, and NGOs were summarily closed and their assets seized. These included human rights organizations, cultural centers, NGOs, FETO-linked charities, and even sports clubs. Essentially, any civil society entity deemed even remotely connected to FETO or other "enemies" of the regime was dissolved overnight (Amnesty International, 2017). Among them were well-known groups like Kimse Yok Mu (a FETO-associated charity) and scores of local NGOs in the majority Kurdish southeast accused of PKK sympathies. Leading civil society figures were arrested:

most notoriously, Osman Kavala, a philanthropist who funded culture and dialogue projects (and who had supported Gezi), was detained in late 2017 and eventually charged with attempting to overthrow the government via the Gezi protests. Despite no credible evidence – the European Court of Human Rights ordered his release – Kavala remains in prison serving a life sentence, a clear message to other philanthropists and NGO leaders (European Court of Human Rights, 2019). Similarly, in 2018 authorities arrested 13 activists (including Turkish Amnesty International's director) at a digital security workshop on an island, accusing them absurdly of plotting insurrection; this "Büyükada case" dragged on for years, terrorizing the human rights community (Amnesty International, 2020).

In addition to direct shutdowns, the government introduced new regulations to keep NGOs on a short leash. A 2020 law allowed the Interior Ministry to replace the boards of any NGO if its members are under terror investigation – a vaguely defined trigger that could apply to almost any critical group. This law also imposed stricter auditing and gave authorities powers to block NGO funding. It was described by civic activists as an attempt to legalize the state's arbitrary powers under the emergency. The target was clearly to stifle any independent organizing, whether it be neighborhood environmental groups or nationwide networks of lawyers.

Civil society encompasses more than NGOs. Trade unions were another casualty of backsliding. While Türkiye has never been very labor-friendly, the AKP years saw union rights decline further. Pro-government unions were promoted (for instance, a conservative public sector union close to AKP grew massively) while strikes were frequently banned by government decree (ostensibly for national security or public health reasons). Several major strikes in the metal and glass industries were halted by emergency decrees. Unionists affiliated with left-wing confederations (DISK, KESK) faced intimidation; hundreds of union members were among those purged from public jobs after 2016 for alleged subversive ties (many were simply critical of the government). The Academy also became a frontline of civil society resistance and repression. In 2016, over 1,100 academics signed a petition calling for peace in the Kurdish regions ("Academics for Peace"). Erdoğan vilified them as "traitors" and "so-called intellectuals"; ensuing months saw over 400 of these academics dismissed from their university positions and some prosecuted for propaganda (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Universities' autonomy was further curbed by a 2018 decree that ended elections for rectors, allowing President Erdoğan to directly appoint all university heads – often choosing party loyalists, which had a chilling effect on campus activism and research freedom.

The AKP's assault on civil society was aided by deep social polarization. By framing certain NGOs and activists as enemies of the people – either tools of foreign powers or domestic "terrorists" – the government justified its actions to a sizable portion of the population. For example, LGBTQ organizations and women's rights groups fighting gender-based violence have been demonized by the AKP's Islamist allies as threats to family values. The government in 2021 even withdrew Türkiye from the Istanbul Convention on preventing violence against women, under pressure from conservative civil groups it favors (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Progressive NGOs pushing for gender equality thus not only lost legal ground but were branded as immoral by regime propaganda. This polarization means that when civil society groups are attacked or banned, a part of society either cheers or remains apathetic, limiting broader backlash.

Despite the harsh climate, Turkish civil society has shown remarkable courage and adaptability (Sözen, 2022). Many activists have continued their work underground or in exile. Some banned organizations reconstituted themselves informally or under new names. For instance, when the prominent NGO Anadolu Kültür (founded by Kavala) was hamstrung by his arrest, other cultural activists formed alternative channels to continue outreach to minority communities. The bar associations in major cities became vocal opposition voices, especially during rule of law crises – e.g. bar associations publicly protested the removal of elected mayors and the imprisonment of lawyers. The government tried to split and weaken the bars by allowing multiple bar associations in each province (an effort to create pro-government bar associations), but the main bars in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir remain critical and continue to speak up on rights issues. Human rights groups like the Human Rights Association (IHD) and Human Rights Foundation of Türkiye (TIHV), though under pressure, still document abuses and support victims. The Saturday Mothers – a group of families of disappeared persons – have held vigils since the 1990s and despite being forcibly broken up by police in recent years, they persist in seeking truth. The environmental movement also experienced a resurgence in localized struggles (often led by villagers) against mining and development projects; these might not overtly challenge the regime politically, but they keep civic activism alive at the grassroots. One of the most significant forms of civil society resilience was the response to the 2019 local elections. Civil society organizations mobilized en masse to ensure free elections: volunteer networks like Oy ve Ötesi ("Vote and Beyond") trained observers and coordinated monitoring across thousands of ballot boxes. This citizen-led initiative greatly helped detect and deter fraud, giving confidence in the opposition's victories. In Istanbul's rerun, civil society and

opposition parties created an unprecedented parallel vote tabulation system to cross-verify the YSK, effectively safeguarding the vote (Dalay, 2019). Such activism demonstrates latent democratic energy in society, ready to be harnessed when opportunities arise. However, the costs for dissidents remain very high. Many civil society leaders are in prison or exile. International support has been a lifeline: the EU and other donors shifted some funding to remaining independent NGOs to keep them afloat; the ECHR rulings, even if ignored by Ankara, provide moral vindication for jailed activists; and global networks provide solidarity (e.g. the #FreeDemirtas or #FreeKavala campaigns) (Amnesty International, 2021). Nonetheless, domestic civil society's influence on policy is minimal in the current environment. It survives more as a symbol of hope for a future democratic opening than as a current counterweight to the state.

In summary, civil society under the AKP experienced both co-optation and coercion. Türkiye went from an emerging democracy with a burgeoning civil sphere in the 2000s to a "shrinking civic space" case by the late 2010s, comparable to Russia or Egypt in the breadth of restrictions (Freedom House, 2018). The vulnerabilities were clear: heavy reliance on external funding made some NGOs easy to smear as foreign agents, and weak legal protections allowed the government to quash organizations at will. Yet, the spirit of activism and community did not disappear. The very "incredible courage of Turkish civil society" can be seen in those who, against all odds, continue to organize charity drives, protest injustices, or simply speak truth to power in Türkiye today (Sözen, 2022). Their resilience has not reversed authoritarianism, but it has preserved the ideals and practices that could underpin a democratic revival in the future.

6.5. LEGISLATURE AND PARTY SYSTEM

The national legislature (Grand National Assembly of Türkiye) and the broader party system constitute the arena of formal politics. Democratic erosion in Türkiye has been tightly linked to the weakening of parliamentary checks and the rise of a dominant-party system under the AKP. Over time, the AKP government marginalized parliament's role, especially after shifting from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2017–2018, and entrenched itself as the overwhelmingly dominant force in party politics. This section explores how the AKP turned the legislature into a mostly rubber-stamp body, how opposition parties were constrained or repressed, and how the party system evolved into a bifurcated pro-/anti-regime cleavage. We also consider the moments when parliamentary dynamics and party competition provided

openings for democracy – such as the temporary loss of AKP's majority in 2015 and the opposition's increasing coordination in recent years.

Following its 2002 election victory, the AKP rapidly became what scholars call a "predominant party" – one that repeatedly wins majorities while the opposition remains fragmented (Gümüşçü, 2013). In 2002 the AKP managed to form a single-party government with only 34% of the vote (thanks to Türkiye's high 10% threshold knocking out several parties). In 2007 and 2011, it increased its vote to 46% and 49% respectively, each time securing a comfortable majority of seats. This electoral dominance allowed the AKP to dictate the legislative agenda and staff the state apparatus with its loyalists, gradually placing party priorities above institutional norms (Çarkoğlu, 2011). During the parliamentary system era (pre-2017), the AKP government faced theoretically significant checks: motions of no-confidence, parliamentary commissions, and presidential vetoes. In practice, however, it largely neutralized these checks. AKP's internal discipline was iron-clad – MPs virtually never broke ranks, as candidate lists (hence future careers) were controlled by Erdoğan. The opposition parties (primarily CHP, MHP, and the Kurdish party under various names) lacked the numbers to override AKP initiatives and were often sidelined in committee work.

One early example of legislative resilience came in March 2003, when parliament surprisingly rejected a motion to allow US troops to use Türkiye as a staging ground for the Iraq invasion – despite AKP leadership backing it. This vote showed that even a dominant party can have internal dissent (many AKP MPs were uncomfortable facilitating a war). Erdoğan, who was not yet PM at that time, learned from this episode to tighten party control further. In subsequent years, AKP backbenchers rarely defied him again.

Parliament's marginalization accelerated after 2011, when AKP rule took a more authoritarian turn. Key democratic norms eroded: opposition rights in parliament were curtailed by changing internal rules to limit filibuster or speech lengths. The AKP-majority parliament sometimes bypassed proper procedure – for instance, rushing massive omnibus bills with minimal debate, or holding midnight sessions to pass controversial laws (like the 2014 security reforms enhancing police powers). Oversight mechanisms suffered: parliamentary inquiries into corruption (e.g. a 2014 commission on the corruption scandal) were stymied by AKP MPs voting to clear implicated ministers. Although parliamentary committees could in theory check the executive, in practice AKP MPs dominated committee chairs and agendas, ensuring sensitive topics were buried.

The June 2015 general election dealt the AKP its first major parliamentary setback. It lost its majority (winning 258 of 550 seats) as the pro-Kurdish HDP surged past the 10% threshold and the nationalist MHP also gained. This was a moment of potential legislative assertion: opposition parties together held a majority and could have formed a coalition or at least significantly clipped AKP's wings. However, due to deep mistrust and strategic errors, the opposition failed to unite to form a government. Erdoğan capitalized on this disarray, refusing to permit the formation of an opposition-led cabinet. Instead, he called new elections for November 2015. Between June and November, the country saw renewed conflict with Kurdish militants and a wave of ISIS-linked bombings, which created a climate of fear and nationalism. In the snap Nov 2015 election, the AKP bounced back to majority (with 317 seats). This episode underscored two things: (1) an opening in the dominant-party hold did appear through elections, showing AKP's hegemony was not unassailable; (2) the ruling party (via Erdoğan) was willing to use extra-parliamentary means – manipulating security situations and exploiting the President's constitutional powers – to avoid ceding power. It also exposed the opposition's disunity as a key vulnerability in the party system.

After regaining its majority, the AKP moved swiftly to eliminate what it saw as threats within parliament. One target was the HDP, whose strong performance in June 2015 had cost AKP dozens of seats. In May 2016, with support from the MHP, the AKP passed a constitutional amendment to strip MPs of immunity if there were pending investigations against them. This move was clearly aimed at HDP deputies (though it technically applied to all). Soon after, a wave of arrests ensued: approximately a dozen HDP lawmakers, including co-leaders Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, were detained and later imprisoned on charges of terrorism or insulting the state. This effectively removed a significant portion of the elected opposition from the legislature and intimidated the rest. The remaining HDP MPs often boycotted sessions or were prevented from fully participating (some were later also expelled from parliament upon conviction). The message was that even parliamentary status could not protect dissenting voices – a severe blow to democratic norms. Notably, the CHP – the main opposition – largely went along with the immunity removal (due to its own nationalist sensitivities vis-à-vis the Kurdish issue), a decision it later regretted as it undermined parliamentary opposition as a whole.

The constitutional referendum of April 2017, narrowly passed, transformed Türkiye's system of government and with it, fundamentally recast the legislature's role. The amendments, implemented in 2018, abolished the office of Prime Minister and transferred all executive authority to a President who is both head of state and government (Venice Commission, 2017).

This new "Turkish-style" presidentialism drastically reduced the legislature's powers and capacity to oversee the executive. Key changes included:

- Parliament's instruments to scrutinize the executive were eliminated or curtailed. The classic parliamentary tool of interpellation (no-confidence motions) was abolished entirely. MPs could no longer question ministers orally in sessions; they could only submit written questions, which ministers (now appointed by the President) might or might not answer in a perfunctory way (Venice Commission, 2017). The threshold to launch a parliamentary investigation of the President or ministers was set extremely high (requiring three-fifths to simply start inquiry, and two-thirds to send a case to the Constitutional Court) – practically impossible unless the President's own party turned on him. As a result, impeachment or serious inquiry is virtually off the table.

- The President was empowered to issue presidential decrees with the force of law on many issues, without needing prior parliamentary delegation. While the amendments formally stipulate that laws outrank decrees and that some areas (basic rights, certain financial matters) are reserved for legislation, in practice this created a parallel lawmaking mechanism. Given AKP's continued parliamentary majority, the chances of parliament overriding a presidential decree by passing a contradicting law are slim – especially as decrees take effect immediately and the ruling party has no incentive to undo them. The Venice Commission (2017) warned that this "original legislative power" of the President is a huge shift of authority. It has indeed been used extensively by Erdoğan since 2018 to reorganize ministries, create agencies, and regulate economic and social matters with minimal legislative input.

- Under the new system, if parliament fails to pass the budget proposed by the President, the previous year's budget simply rolls over, adjusted for inflation. This means the President can effectively bypass parliament on budget approval – a radical departure from the prior system where a failure to pass the budget could bring down the government (Venice Commission, 2017). Now the executive's financial power is unchecked; parliament cannot even force a government shutdown.

- The President gained the power to dissolve parliament (by calling early elections) at will. While this also triggers a presidential election, it's a leverage tool – the President can threaten dissolution to discipline parliament. Meanwhile, parliament's ability to call its own early elections requires a 60% supermajority, making it very hard to use without

the governing party's consent (Venice Commission, 2017). This asymmetry further subordinates the legislature, as the president can always preempt an uncomfortable parliament by resetting the calendar on his terms.

- Parliament lost some powers like electing a Prime Minister or having a say in Cabinet formation (since the Cabinet is now appointed entirely by the President) (Venice Commission, 2017). Conversely, the ruling party's parliamentary majority (AKP-MHP) used its remaining powers to cement control elsewhere, for instance by appointing nearly all members of the Constitutional Court and judicial council in alignment with the presidency, as discussed earlier.

In essence, the post-2017 constitution left parliament "starkly limited", in the words of one analysis. Scholars describe the new Turkish system as a "hyper-presidential" regime violating separation of powers (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2020). The legislature is no longer a co-equal branch; it's more of an advisory or legitimating assembly, similar to those in competitive authoritarian regimes where elections occur but real power is concentrated in the executive.

One unintended side effect of the democratic decline has been a reconfiguration of the party system along a pro-/anti-authoritarian axis. As the AKP entrenched its hegemony and closed avenues within the system, the previously divided opposition parties began to find common cause. Researchers Selçuk and Hekimci (2020) note the rise of a "democracy–authoritarianism cleavage" that by late 2010s overshadowed old secular vs. religious divides. This new cleavage forced opposition parties – secularist CHP, nationalist Good Party (İyi Parti, İYİP), Islamist-conservative Democracy and Progress Party (Demokrasi ve Atılım, DEVA) and Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi, SP), even the pro-PKK HDP – to tacitly or openly cooperate to defend what remained of democratic space. Same was seen in the formation of the Nation Alliance in 2018 (CHP, İYİP, SP, and others) and their outreach (albeit informally) to HDP voters. In 2019's local elections, this coordination paid off: opposition parties set aside ideological differences to back joint candidates in big cities, with remarkable success. Selçuk and Hekimci (2020) argue that the authoritarian turn "induced" opposition coordination as a survival response. This is a form of systemic resilience – the party system adapting to present a unified democratic front when faced with a dominant authoritarian party.

The AKP recognized this threat and tried to counter it by solidifying its own alliance with the nationalist MHP (the People's Alliance). The result by the 2020s is effectively a two-bloc system: Erdoğan's bloc (AKP, MHP, and a few smaller Islamist parties) vs. the opposition bloc

(CHP, IYIP, DEVA, GP, SP, and tacitly HDP). This realignment suggests that the classic Turkish political cleavages (secular vs. Islamist, Turkish vs. Kurdish nationalism, left vs. right) have in some ways been subsumed by a more fundamental cleavage over regime type: continuing Erdoğan's personalized rule vs. restoring parliamentary democracy (2021). Such polarization is double-edged: it helps consolidate opposition votes, but it can also deepen societal division and make consensus governance difficult if power ever changes.

A note on party system dynamics would be incomplete without mentioning that even within the ruling party camp, there were fractures – though they have not yet significantly loosened Erdoğan's grip. By the late 2010s, several high-profile AKP figures who had been sidelined (former President Abdullah Gül, former PM Ahmet Davutoğlu, former economy czar Ali Babacan) broke away. Babacan formed the DEVA Party (Democracy and Progress Party) in 2020, and Davutoğlu formed the Future Party. These new parties, espousing a return to more orthodox policies and a less authoritarian style, indicate that authoritarian consolidation generated some elite defections. However, due to Erdoğan's continued personal popularity among the AKP base and control over media and resources, these splinter parties have so far remained minor players. Tellingly, they chose to ally with the CHP-led opposition in 2023 rather than pose an independent challenge, underscoring that the only viable contest is all-against-Erdoğan. The AKP itself has transformed from a broad coalition of conservatives to a tighter patronage network revolving around Erdoğan. This has arguably weakened institutionalization within AKP – decisions are top-down, and other voices were purged (as seen by the exit of those dissidents). While that may hurt governance (lack of internal debate), it also removes alternative power centers that could challenge Erdoğan. Thus, the party system has increasingly come to mirror a personalized, almost hegemonic party model with Erdoğan at the apex.

Given the heavy dominance of the executive, one might think the parliament has become entirely irrelevant. However, it still serves a symbolic and occasionally substantive role. For example, after the 2016 coup attempt, it was in the parliament building that all parties (including AKP, CHP, MHP, HDP) gathered under bombardment to jointly denounce the coup – a powerful moment of unity and affirmation of the electoral order. Parliament continues to be a venue where opposition deputies can voice criticism (albeit often shouted down by AKP-MHP majority). Speeches by opposition leaders in parliament are among the few times they get televised coverage (on state TV's mandatory broadcast of group speeches), enabling some outreach to the public. On rare occasions, opposition pressure in parliament has forced small

retreats – e.g. in 2021, CHP's exposure of a massive mobster-government scandal in speeches contributed to public pressure that led to an awkward ministerial resignation. Furthermore, opposition mayors (like those who won in 2019) use municipal councils – local legislatures – to practice a form of governance and accountability, though even there the AKP often controls council majorities and tries to thwart mayors.

In the big picture, however, the legislature has been tamed. The Freedom House (2018) report explicitly cited "the passage of the 2017 amendments that radically increased the power of the presidency and reduced checks and balances" as a key reason Türkiye was rated Not Free. It noted that the new system enables a "personalized control over the state" by Erdoğan, with parliament and other institutions sidelined. Quantitatively, Türkiye's scores on indices for legislative constraints on executive have plummeted in the V-Dem and Polity datasets after 2017, reflecting this constitutional change (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

Türkiye's experience demonstrates how a dominant ruling party can incrementally erode the legislature's authority and turn the party system into an uneven field. The vulnerabilities exploited by the AKP included the absence of constitutional safeguards for minority rights in parliament (allowing it to e.g. strip immunities by majority), the opposition's ideological splits (which the AKP used to isolate and attack one group at a time, like the HDP), and a public that often prioritized stability or identity over checks-and-balances in voting. Nevertheless, resilience manifested in the opposition's learning curve – by late 2010s, parties that historically would not cooperate began to do so out of necessity, and voters showed willingness to support unfamiliar candidates (a nationalist voting for a secularist, etc.) if it meant curbing the AKP. This realignment could be the foundation of a future democratic recovery, or if it fails, could slide into a one-party dominant system akin to those seen in Malaysia's past or Russia's present.

By 2023, the AKP-led bloc retained control of both presidency and (with allies) parliament, but the margins were narrower than before. The CHP-led opposition made unprecedented inroads, suggesting that even an engineered system does not guarantee permanent lock-in. The legislature remains an arena to watch – if, for instance, the AKP were to lose a parliamentary majority in a future election, it could create a constitutional crisis under the presidential system. The story of Türkiye's parliament and parties thus encapsulates the broader theme of this chapter: democratic institutions hollowed out to enable authoritarian rule, yet not entirely destroyed, leaving some path (however steep) for reversal. As long as multi-party elections exist, the party system retains the potential, however slim, to check the executive through the

ballot – and that is why Erdoğan and the AKP have invested so heavily in manipulating the rules and context of those elections to avoid any loss of their hegemony.

7. POPULIST LEGITIMATION AND THE PEOPLE'S TOLERANCE OF AUTHORITARIANISM

Since coming to power in 2002, Türkiye's Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has transformed the country's political landscape from a fragile democracy into a competitive authoritarian regime. This chapter examines how the AKP's populist and nationalist rhetoric has been used to legitimate authoritarian practices from 2002 through 2024, and why significant segments of Turkish society have tolerated or even endorsed this authoritarian turn. Focusing exclusively on the Turkish case, we analyze the discursive strategies and mechanisms by which Erdoğan and the AKP have presented their rule as the embodiment of the "national will", thereby justifying the erosion of liberal-democratic institutions. We then explore how societal cleavages, political socialization, media propaganda, fear, and patronage networks have cultivated public acceptance of authoritarian changes – as evidenced in repeated electoral victories and public acquiescence to authoritarian policies. Throughout, our analysis is grounded in the conceptual framework of majoritarian authoritarianism, delegative democracy, and populist legitimation introduced in earlier chapters, applying those concepts to the Turkish case. In doing so, we draw on a range of sources: AKP leaders' speeches and party documents, media discourse, public opinion data, and scholarly literature. The tone remains analytical and scholarly, aligning with the methodological approach of the dissertation's theoretical foundations.

Scholars of Turkish politics note that the AKP's prolonged rule exhibits a "majoritarian drift", wherein democratic legitimacy is conflated with electoral majority and used to override institutional checks and minority rights. Ergun Özbudun (2014) observed that after successive election victories, the AKP embraced an "excessively majoritarian conception of democracy, or even an electoral authoritarianism of a more markedly Islamic character". In practice, this meant that winning elections – often with around half the popular vote – was treated as a mandate to remake state institutions and silence dissent in the name of the majority. This aligns with Guillermo O'Donnell's model of delegative democracy, where an elected leader claims almost unchecked authority on behalf of "the people." Türkiye, though long a parliamentary system, displayed the key features of delegative democracy, especially after 2011: the erosion of horizontal accountability, strong centralized rule around an individualized leader, a quasi-cult of personality embodying the nation's will, and extensive clientelism. As Hakkı Taş (2015) argued, post-2011 Türkiye exemplified delegative democracy through anti-institutionalism, an

anti-pluralist (anti-political) agenda, and patronage-based governance. Under Erdoğan's leadership, formal institutional constraints (courts, parliament, regulatory agencies) were neutered or co-opted, and power became highly personalized – all justified by the claim that the elected leader directly represents the people's will.

At the heart of the AKP's legitimation strategy is populism – defined by Mudde (2004) and others as a manichean discourse opposing "the pure people" against a corrupt or unpatriotic elite. From its inception, the AKP utilized populist framing to position itself as the voice of the conservative Turkish masses long marginalized by a secular Kemalist establishment. The enduring center-periphery cleavage in Turkish society – secular urban elites versus religious-conservative masses – provided fertile ground for this populist appeal (Yabanci, Populism as the problem child of democracy: The AKP's enduring appeal and the role of civil society., 2016). Erdoğan's rhetoric cast the AKP as the representatives of the "real" nation – pious, ordinary people (often referred to simply as millet, "the people" or halk) – struggling against entrenched secular "tutelage" (the military, judiciary, and old political elite) that had dominated Türkiye before 2002. This narrative resonated with many Turks who felt disempowered or culturally alienated under the old order. By championing religious freedoms (like lifting the headscarf ban) and promising economic opportunity, the AKP claimed to restore majority rule and authentic democracy after decades of quasi-authoritarian secular rule. Thus even in its reformist early years, the AKP's democratic mandate was imbued with a populist legitimacy: the government derived authority not just from legal electoral victory but from a higher mission to fulfill the "national will" in the face of illegitimate elites.

Over time, as the AKP consolidated power and encountered new threats (judicial challenges, mass protests, corruption scandals, coup attempts), this populist-majoritarian logic became the rationale for autocratization. Erdoğan's stance increasingly echoed the sentiment that "democracy is the ballot box – nothing more". He frequently equated electoral success with carte blanche authority, rejecting checks and balances as impediments imposed by elitist or foreign forces. For instance, during the 2013 Gezi Park protests and subsequent corruption probes, Erdoğan insisted that legitimacy comes only from elections: "Once the ballot boxes are opened, the rest is only footnotes to history... Today it is what the people say which matters rather than what was said in the city squares", he declared, dismissing street demonstrations and media criticism as irrelevant (Taş, 2015). This statement exemplifies Erdoğan's majoritarian populism – conveying that the government's actions cannot be delegitimized by protests, civil society, or opposition voices, since the "people" have spoken at the polls. In the

same vein, he lambasted opponents as traitors and rallied supporters by vowing to give the dissidents "an Ottoman slap" at the ballot box (2016). Such rhetoric invokes populist majoritarian authority to justify harsh measures: if "the people" (as a monolithic construct) are on his side, then suppressing dissent or bending institutions is portrayed not as authoritarianism but as the people's will in action.

By 2019, Türkiye was widely classified as an "electoral autocracy" or "competitive authoritarian" regime – elections continued to be held and fiercely contested, but the playing field was heavily skewed by the incumbent's control of media, state resources, and the legal system (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016). Still, Erdoğan's regime maintained a democratic façade grounded in majoritarian legitimacy. This chapter investigates how the AKP engineered consent for this system among a large segment of citizens, even as liberal democratic norms decayed. We dissect the AKP's populist-nationalist narrative in detail and then turn to societal responses – why the people (or at least a substantial portion of them) have accepted, legitimized, or even enthusiastically endorsed authoritarian changes. The discussion is structured thematically, covering: (1) the AKP's "national will" discourse and self-portrayal as embodiment of the people; (2) the construction of internal and external enemies (elites, "traitors", terrorists, and foreign conspirators) to delegitimize opposition; (3) the fusion of religious and nationalist themes to sacralize the government's authority; (4) the capture of media and propaganda apparatus to manufacture consent; (5) the strategic use of fear and crisis (security threats, coups, chaos) to rally popular support around authoritarian measures; and (6) the role of patronage and clientelism in binding constituencies to the regime. We then assess public opinion trends and evidence of "tolerance for authoritarianism" – exploring polarization and the emergence of a pro-authoritarian constituency that prizes strong leadership and stability, consistent with the theoretical concept of normative support for authoritarian rule.

7.1. THE AKP'S POPULIST-NATIONALIST RHETORIC AS LEGITIMATION

7.1.1. CLAIMING THE "NATIONAL WILL": MAJORITARIAN RULE AS DEMOCRACY

A central pillar of the AKP's legitimation strategy has been the invocation of the "national will" (milli irade) as the supreme source of authority. From Erdoğan's speeches in the 2000s to the present, the term milli irade is used almost as a sacred concept, referring to the authentic voice of the people expressed through the ballot box. By appropriating the notion of the national will,

the AKP frames all its major policies and power-grabs as fulfilling a democratic imperative. Any challenge to the government can thus be depicted as defying the people's will – a narrative that delegitimizes opposition and justifies concentrating power in the ruling party's hands.

In practice, the AKP's majoritarian interpretation of democracy holds that once electoral victory is achieved, the governing majority has broad mandate to reshape state and society as it sees fit, with minimal compromise or oversight. Erdoğan famously argued that elections confer a "license" to rule without interference until the next vote – an argument resonant of delegative democracy. This view was on display whenever the regime clashed with other institutions. For example, after the constitutional referendum of 2010, which the AKP won with 58% support, Erdoğan retorted to critics of ensuing judicial reforms (which increased executive influence over courts) by saying the people had spoken in the referendum, so the changes were unassailable. Similarly, during debates on a new presidential system, AKP narratives emphasized that the direct election of the president (first implemented in 2014) and the 2017 constitutional referendum (which narrowly approved an executive presidency) were expressions of the national will that trumped any objections about separation of powers or minority rights. In Erdoğan's words, the 2017 charter was the people's demand for "strong governance": "The April 16 2017 vote is the victory of the national will – Türkiye chose the presidential system to secure its future", he declared, framing the power shift as a democratic necessity (this despite the fact that the referendum passed with only 51.4% amid reports of irregularities) (Shaheen, 2017).

By elevating majority rule to an absolute principle, the AKP effectively redefined democracy in populist terms. Instead of liberal-democratic notions of pluralism, rule of law, and minority protections, democracy was reduced to winner-takes-all majoritarianism. Opposition parties, independent media, and civil society organizations were increasingly depicted as nuisances – or even conspirators – trying to undermine the elected government. Erdoğan routinely chastised critics by saying they "have no respect for the national will" if they questioned AKP policies outside of election time. When masses protested in the streets, as in 2013, he denounced them for attempting to achieve through unrest what they couldn't achieve at the ballot box. In a televised speech during the Gezi Park protests, Erdoğan underlined that government changes can only happen via elections, not via "provocation" on the streets. He insisted, "The ballot box is the only place to ensure it. Besides the ballot box, no one can point at us as a target", effectively ruling out other forms of democratic accountability (Taş, 2015). This message appealed to his supporters' sense that their democratic voice (expressed in AKP victories) was

being disrespected by protesting minorities or elite institutions. It also signaled to the broader public that stability and order (as defined by the elected majority) were paramount, justifying firm action against any extra-electoral dissent.

Importantly, the AKP's majoritarian rhetoric also involved appropriating the symbols of the nation – flag, martyrs, and history – to reinforce that it alone represented "the people." In victory speeches, Erdoğan often proclaims "Today 85 million Turks won" or "Türkiye as a whole won" when referring to AKP's success, claiming a unity between the party and the nation. After the 2014 local elections, which the AKP won amid divisive controversies, Erdoğan told a cheering crowd: "77 million should know that the new Türkiye has won today", as if the entire country was one and the same with the AKP's cause (Yabanci, 2016). This totalizing language feeds the populist notion that the leader and his loyal majority are the nation, whereas those who oppose them are outside or against the nation. By defining himself as the embodiment of national will, Erdoğan secures a narrative high ground: any measure he undertakes (dismissing judges, jailing journalists, passing emergency decrees) can be sold as the people's desire for security and justice, not the regime's self-interest.

7.1.2. PEOPLE VS. "ENEMIES": DEFINING WHO THE PEOPLE ARE (AND AREN'T)

Inherent to populism is the drawing of a sharp line between the righteous "people" and some vilified "other." Over the years, the AKP has continually reshaped the identity of its antagonists – from secular Kemalist elites to coup-plotters to alleged foreign agents – but the function is the same: to unite supporters against a common enemy and to rationalize authoritarian measures as necessary defense of the people. Erdogan's Türkiye exemplifies what scholars call "pernicious polarization" – politics structured around an ever-widening gulf between pro-government and anti-government camps, with intense mutual distrust and even hatred (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018). The AKP has actively fostered this polarization by rhetorically excluding whole categories of citizens from "the people", branding them as internal enemies who do not deserve the same rights or voice.

Early in AKP rule, the primary antagonist was the old secular establishment – often denoted as the "Jakobins" or "tutelary powers" in AKP discourse. These included the top brass of the military, secular high judges, bureaucratic elites, and their allies in politics and media. The AKP accused them of being out-of-touch oligarchs who had for decades oppressed the devout majority (for instance, banning the headscarf in universities, or staging military coups against

elected governments). By casting these secular elites as anti-democratic forces, the AKP justified early reforms like curbing military influence and restructuring the judiciary as steps to liberate the national will. During the Ergenekon trials, pro-AKP media ran front-page stories of a vast secularist conspiracy to overthrow the government. While the trials initially had support from liberal segments as a reckoning with Türkiye's coup-prone past, they morphed into a political melodrama of conspiracy that blurred fact and fiction (Taş, 2015). The Ergenekon narrative (promoted by AKP and its then-allies in the FETO) painted an "ultra-secular, ultra-nationalist clandestine organization" allegedly behind assassinations and coup plots – effectively demonizing hundreds of secular officers, journalists, and academics as terrorists. This conspiratorial narrative set the stage for weaponizing state power: mass arrests and long pre-trial detentions of dissidents were portrayed as heroically defending democracy from a shadowy "deep state" (White, 2014). Thus, a purge of secular opponents was legitimated in the public eye as delivering the people from would-be usurpers of their will.

As one set of "enemies" was vanquished, new ones emerged. By the mid-2010s, the AKP's relationship with its former Islamist partner, the FETO, soured and turned violently hostile. After the December 2013 corruption scandal (which implicated AKP ministers and even Erdoğan's family via leaked tapes), Erdoğan alleged it was a "coup attempt" by a parallel state – referring to followers of FETO embedded in the police and judiciary (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017a). In response, the AKP purged thousands of perceived FETO and spun a new conspiracy narrative named "Mastermind" (üst akıl in Turkish). The Mastermind conspiracy, propagated by a 2014 state TV documentary and AKP-friendly media, went even further: it claimed all troubles Türkiye faced – from Gezi protests to the corruption probes and later the 2016 coup attempt – were orchestrated by a single global mastermind force hostile to Türkiye. This narrative had anti-Semitic undertones and xenophobic appeal, insinuating that foreign powers (often a Jewish or Western cabal) were behind the FETO and domestic unrest. Erdoğan himself fanned these flames, cryptically alluding to "the mastermind" in speeches. According to Erdağ Göknar's (2020) analysis, these political melodramas of conspiracy – from Ergenekon to Mastermind – have functioned to "prefigure and legitimate authoritarian governance" in Türkiye. By convincing a large swath of the public that nefarious traitors and foreign agents were constantly plotting against the nation, the AKP cultivated tolerance for extreme counter-measures. The government's subsequent judicial retaliation, purges, and emergency rule could be justified as necessary to protect "the people" from existential threats.

The “People vs. Enemy” framing reached a climax around the July 15, 2016 failed coup attempt by a faction in the military (blamed on FETO officers). The coup’s defeat was immediately appropriated by Erdoğan as a victory of the people’s will – he famously said the plotters faced “the iron fist of the nation.” The massive “Democracy and Martyrs” rallies held in the weeks after (organized by AKP with even some opposition participation) solidified a new founding myth for the regime: the people in their millions took to the streets to protect democracy, and thus earned Erdoğan the mandate to refound the state. At a unity rally on August 7, 2016, attended by over a million supporters in Istanbul’s Yenikapı Square, Erdoğan appeared flanked by opposition leaders (except the Kurdish party) and declared Türkiye had “shown the world the spirit of one nation, one flag, one homeland, one state” (a slogan he frequently uses). At that rally, the imagery was telling: giant Turkish flags and portraits of Erdoğan and Atatürk adorned the stage, symbolizing that Erdoğan’s movement had merged with the very identity of the Turkish nation (Voice of America, 2016). The message was clear – those gathered (AKP supporters and even opposition who joined against the coup) were the people, the patriotic majority; those who plotted the coup or who wouldn’t stand with the nation were traitors (hainler). The “traitor” label was subsequently used to tar a wide range of opponents: tens of thousands of suspected FETO arrested or purged were “traitors”; Kurdish insurgents or even certain opposition politicians were “terrorists” or “traitors”; journalists who criticized the state’s heavy-handed response were “betraying” the country. By extending the enemy category to include not just armed plotters but dissidents of all stripes, the regime empowered itself to demand uncritical loyalty from citizens. Patriotism became defined as support for Erdoğan’s government, whereas dissent could be equated with siding with Türkiye’s enemies. This narrative greatly helped in normalizing authoritarian practices: for many Turks, it became plausible that jailing thousands of accused coup-sympathizers without due process, or shutting down over 150 media outlets, was an unfortunate but necessary purge of anti-national elements (Amnesty International, 2017).

In sum, the AKP has cultivated a siege mentality in its supporters – a belief that “real” Turks are perpetually under threat from conspirators (be it secular elitists, PKK terrorists, FETO, or Western “imperialists”). Erdoğan’s charisma and communication skills enabled him to embody the strong protector of the people against these threats. This populist logic meant that authoritarian measures (surveillance, arrests, even reinstating the death penalty) could be framed as the people’s righteous vengeance against traitors. Indeed, at the one-year coup commemoration in 2017, crowds chanted for the death penalty for plotters and Erdogan vowed

to “chop off the heads of those traitors”, to wild applause (Al Jazeera, 2017). Such violent rhetoric, blatantly illiberal, was cheered by a populace convinced that extraordinary evil in their midst warranted extreme justice. Thus, through relentless “othering” of enemies, Erdoğan secured public license to rule with an iron hand. The portion of society that identifies with “the people” as defined by the AKP tends to see crackdowns on “enemies” not as repression, but as empowerment of the majority and protection of the nation.

7.1.3. NATIONALISM AND RELIGION: SACRALIZING THE MAJORITY’S DOMINION

The AKP’s populism has increasingly been fused with aggressive nationalism and religious appeals, creating a potent ideological mix sometimes termed “Islamic nationalism” or religious populism (Öztürk & Taş, 2020). By co-opting the symbols of Islam and Turkish nationalism, Erdoğan sacralized his political project – suggesting that supporting the leader is not only a democratic duty but a quasi-spiritual one, and that the majority’s cultural identity must reign supreme. This fusion has played a critical role in legitimating authoritarian steps as expressions of the popular will rooted in sacred values, rather than mere power grabs.

One key strategy has been monopolizing the narrative of Turkish Muslim identity. Bilge Yabanci and Dane Taleski (2018) describe how ruling populists in Türkiye have “co-opted and monopolized the majority religion in the name of ‘the people’s will’”, effectively sacralizing the majority and excluding minorities or secular segments from full moral membership in the nation. In Türkiye’s case, Sunni Islam and Turkish ethnicity are portrayed as core to national identity. The AKP casts itself as the guardian of Türkiye’s Islamic heritage and Ottoman legacy, frequently invoking religious motifs. Erdoğan often starts mass rallies or speeches with a prayer or Quranic recitation, and the post-coup rallies in 2016 notably opened with prayers and an Ottoman military band performance. By suffusing state events with religion, the regime blurs the line between political loyalty and religious piety. Diyanet, the state Directorate of Religious Affairs, has been mobilized to reinforce regime narratives: its Friday sermons have warned against “foreign plots” and the moral duty to support national unity, dovetailing with AKP talking points. In 2016, Diyanet even published a booklet on “social media ethics” framing opposition social media activity as sinful lies against the nation. Pro-AKP Islamic scholars preach that criticizing the government or consuming “Western media” is religiously improper, further merging faith and loyalty to Erdoğan.

This religious populism creates a stark in-group vs out-group message: the in-group are "devout Turkish patriots" – implicitly Sunni Muslims – who stand with the AKP; the out-group are those lacking in faith or national loyalty (secularists, leftists, non-Muslim minorities, etc.). For example, during election campaigns Erdoğan has implied that opposition leaders are "godless" or "pro-LGBT" (exploiting conservative Islamists' antipathy to LGBTQ rights) while presenting himself as the defender of traditional family and Islamic values (Yabanci & Taleski, Co-opting religion: How Ruling Populist in Turkey and Macedonia Sacralis, 2018). The presidency orchestrated large rallies under slogans like "Great Türkiye" and "native and national" to emphasize that the AKP's agenda is authentic to Türkiye's religious-national essence, whereas opponents are under foreign influence or moral decay. One particularly exclusionary slogan, repeatedly used by Erdoğan, is: "One nation, one flag, one homeland, one state" (Turkish: Tek millet, tek bayrak, tek vatan, tek devlet). This mantra – prominently displayed on banners at AKP rallies – encapsulates an ethno-religious majoritarian nationalism that leaves little room for pluralism. It implies that any divergence (for instance, ethnic minority assertions or secular autonomy) is a threat to unity. In a 2016 rally, Prime Minister Yıldırım explicitly banned partisan flags, saying "The spirit of one nation, one flag... will prevail", reinforcing that only the national flag (and by extension, the ruling party's platform) should be visible – a symbolic negation of political diversity (Chudziak, 2016).

The convergence of mosque and state under AKP populism reached a milestone with symbolic moves like the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 2020 and the construction of giant new mosques (e.g., Çamlıca Mosque overlooking Istanbul). These actions were immensely popular among the AKP's base and were touted as fulfilling the "people's will" and restoring national pride. While seemingly cultural, such moves also helped legitimate Erdoğan's unchecked power: they conveyed that only a strong, unrestrained leader could vanquish secular constraints and deliver on the pious majority's dreams. Indeed, polls have shown significant public approval for such nationalist-religious gestures, even as the same public might be wary of other authoritarian aspects. By satisfying symbolic cravings of the conservative majority, Erdoğan secured greater leeway on other fronts.

Nationalism also played out in the Kurdish issue. For years, AKP had courted Kurdish votes (as many Kurdish pious communities preferred AKP to secular Kurdish parties). But after 2015, when a peace process collapsed and a Kurdish party (HDP) showed strong electoral gains, Erdoğan pivoted to hardline Turkish nationalism. Aligning with the MHP from 2016 onward, the regime cracked down on opposition politicians, removing elected mayors and jailing HDP's

leader Selahattin Demirtaş. This repression again was sold as protecting "the people" from terrorists (by conflating the HDP with the outlawed PKK terrorists). Many Turkish citizens, imbued with nationalist fervor and fearful of disintegration, accepted draconian measures against Kurdish opposition as legitimate. The democracy-authoritarianism cleavage in society increasingly overlapped with an ethno-religious cleavage: the ruling bloc depicted itself as representing the patriotic Sunni majority, while casting critical voices (be they secular liberals, leftists, Alevis, or Kurdish activists) as "others" not fully of the people. Orçun Selçuk and Dilara Hekimci (2020)argue that by the late 2010s, Turkish politics had bifurcated into a pro-democracy vs pro-authoritarian axis, but this cleavage also maps onto identity lines – with many conservatives equating "authoritarian" moves with defending the nation, and many opposition supporters viewing "democracy" as synonymous with checking majoritarian tyranny.

Crucially, blending nationalism and religion has instilled a moral dimension to supporting Erdoğan: it is portrayed as morally right and divinely favored. Conversely, opposing him is not just a political preference but a mark of impiety or treachery. This moralization heightens tolerance for authoritarianism because believers are more willing to excuse or actively endorse undemocratic actions committed in service of a "higher cause." Many see the AKP as righteous providers and protectors – an almost familial or spiritual bond reinforced by the party's religious-national rhetoric (Yabanci, 2016). Under such framing, calling for checks on Erdoğan can be painted as undermining Allah's will for national unity, making dissent unthinkable for devout loyalists. This attitude was evident when some AKP supporters equated Erdogan's survival of the coup with divine intervention – bolstering the belief that he is the rightful, almost predestined leader whom it would be sinful to resist.

7.1.4. MANUFACTURING CONSENT: MEDIA DOMINANCE AND PROPAGANDA

No authoritarian drift can succeed without controlling the flow of information and opinion. The AKP learned this early and moved steadily to dominate Türkiye's media landscape, thereby shaping public perception in its favor. Over 2002–2024, independent journalism in Türkiye was gradually strangled, especially after 2011, and pro-government outlets proliferated. By saturating the public sphere with the AKP's narrative – and suppressing dissenting views – the regime greatly enhanced the persuasive power of its populist legitimation. Many citizens simply do not hear credible counter-arguments, or they distrust them as "fake news" thanks to state propaganda. This section details how the AKP achieved near-hegemonic media control and how propaganda reinforces public tolerance of authoritarianism.

In the 2000s, Turkish media included numerous mainstream newspapers and TV networks critical of the government. The AKP, while initially tolerating some criticism, increasingly pressured media bosses through economic and legal means. A turning point was a massive tax fine ($2.5 billion) on Doğan Media (owner of secular daily Hürriyet and CNN-Türk TV) in 2009 after it covered AKP scandals (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2018). Many saw this as punishment aimed at forcing Doğan to capitulate or sell. Indeed, in 2011–2013, several prominent outlets changed hands to AKP-friendly businessmen, and outspoken journalists were fired – a process often termed "media capture." The final blow came in March 2018, when Doğan Holding announced the sale of its entire media group to Demirören Group, a conglomerate closely allied with Erdoğan. This deal put virtually all major TV news channels and high-circulation newspapers (Hürriyet, Posta, Milliyet, Sabah, ATV, CNN-Türk, etc.) under either direct government ownership or friendly ownership. As a result, by 2018 over 90% of media outlets were pro-government in editorial line. The death of pluralism in mainstream media was acknowledged by media freedom advocates: "The government now has complete control of the media... only a handful of low-circulation outlets still offer an alternative to the government's propaganda" (Reporters Without Borders, 2018).

Through this captured media, the AKP disseminated a unified narrative that glorifies the government and demonizes its opponents. Television, still the most influential news source across Türkiye, became a mouthpiece for AKP talking points. During elections, channels gave hours of live coverage to Erdoğan rallies while ignoring or slanting coverage of opposition. After the 2016 coup attempt, TV networks ran almost nonstop patriotic programming, further elevating Erdoğan's stature. Dissenting journalists were not only fired but many were prosecuted and jailed on charges like spreading terrorist propaganda or insulting the president. This created a pervasive climate of self-censorship – even neutral reporters learned to avoid criticizing the government or covering opposition views, lest they face consequences. The few remaining independent entities (such as online news sites and foreign media bureaus) have far smaller reach, partly because the government has banned or throttled popular platforms (like temporarily blocking Twitter, YouTube, and regularly suing journalists) (Freedom House, 2018).

State propaganda emphasizes themes of national pride, fear of enemies, and economic progress to bolster the regime's image. For example, nightly news on government-linked channels will highlight infrastructure achievements (new bridges, hospitals), announce counter-terror operations, and air Erdoğan's speeches at length. Meanwhile, any negative news (ranging from

corruption allegations to economic troubles) is downplayed or presented as the result of foreign conspiracies (e.g., framing a currency crisis as an "economic war" waged by the West). By carefully curating information, the regime has convinced many citizens that the AKP is Türkiye's savior and that any problems are caused by malign foreign or traitorous forces – thus exonerating the leadership from blame and justifying extraordinary measures. A stark illustration was in early 2023: despite a dire cost-of-living crisis and criticism of the state's earthquake response, state-dominated media focused on highlighting government aid efforts and stirring nationalist sentiments against supposed foreign "media attacks" on Türkiye's economy. Consequently, a large portion of voters continued to trust Erdoğan over the opposition even under objectively poor conditions.

Media propaganda also relentlessly portrays the opposition as incompetent, disunited, or dangerous. Opposition leaders have been subjected to smear campaigns. When opposition mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu won the Istanbul mayoralty in 2019, government media initially refused to even report the result; later, when forced to allow a rerun election, they echoed AKP claims of irregularities and all but openly campaigned against İmamoğlu. The effect of this one-sided media diet is evident in public opinion: polls have found that AKP supporters overwhelmingly trust only the pro-government media and disbelieve critical news as "fake." In one survey, 70% of AKP voters said they "only believe what I see with my own eyes", dismissing reports of corruption or state abuses as fabrications (Konda Research, 2019). Such attitudes show how propaganda sustains tolerance for authoritarian acts – if supporters never fully believe the regime did wrong, they feel no need to hold it accountable.

Another propaganda tactic is creating a cult of personality around Erdoğan. Turkish cities are filled with billboards of Erdoğan with slogans like "Başkan Erdoğan: The People's Voice". On television, AKP-allied pundits refer to him as "Reis" (chief) in reverent tones, crediting him for everything from economic growth to national security victories. In the education system too, new curricula under AKP emphasize Ottoman-Islamic figures and downplay secular republican icons, subtly aligning historical greatness with the values AKP espouses. The narrative often implies that Erdoğan is following in the footsteps of great Turkish leaders (even Atatürk or Ottoman sultans) in making Türkiye strong and respected. This not only boosts Erdoğan's legitimacy but frames any opposition to him as unpatriotic or sacrilegious, given his elevated status as the nation's chosen leader.

Finally, the government has extended its information control to the digital sphere. Recognizing that younger and urban Turks turn to social media and online news, the regime has passed laws to censor and monitor internet content. Twitter and Facebook have been periodically blocked or coerced to remove content. Thousands of social media users have been prosecuted for posts deemed insulting to the president or spreading terrorist propaganda. The AKP also employs a contingent of online trolls and influencers who amplify pro-government narratives on Twitter and attack government critics (this is colloquially known as the AK Troll army). Meanwhile, alternative online voices face cyber-attacks or throttling (Freedom House, 2021). Through these measures, the AKP ensured that even on digital forums, its narrative dominance holds, or at least that counter-narratives struggle to reach the politically unconvinced.

The net result of media and propaganda control is an electorate of which a large segment is informationally insulated in a pro-AKP echo chamber. Many sincerely believe that Türkiye remains a democracy – because they continuously hear that it is – and that Erdoğan's strong actions are both legal and necessary. This informational asymmetry was reflected in a 2024 Pew survey: 65% of those favorable to Erdoğan said they were satisfied with "the way democracy is working" in Türkiye (versus only 9% of those unfavorable to him)[60]. Clearly, Erdoğan's supporters largely perceive Türkiye as democratic and well-governed – a triumph of narrative framing. Furthermore, nearly half of Erdoğan supporters (49%) in 2023 told Pew Research Center that "rule by a strong leader" would be a good way to govern (Pew Research Center, 2023). This indicates how propaganda and discourse have normalized the idea of a strongman in lieu of liberal democracy. To those citizens, constant messaging about external and internal threats, coupled with positive coverage of Erdoğan's leadership, makes a strong leader model seem not only acceptable but desirable for the country's well-being.

7.1.5. THE POLITICS OF FEAR: USING INSECURITY TO JUSTIFY AUTHORITY

Hand in hand with propaganda, the AKP has skillfully used fear as a political tool to win public compliance. Fear has many faces in Türkiye's context: fear of terrorism, fear of coups, fear of economic collapse, fear of social chaos, even fear of returning to the unstable pre-AKP era. Erdoğan's rhetoric and policies have consistently played up these fears to present authoritarian measures as protective. We see a pattern wherein periods of threat or crisis are leveraged to accelerate democratic backsliding, with a populace often rallying behind hardline responses out of fear. This section explores how the politics of insecurity underpins popular legitimation of the AKP's authoritarian turn.

Firstly, security threats from terrorism and war have been a prominent source of public fear. Türkiye has endured many terror attacks over the last two decades (by ISIL, by PKK-affiliated groups, etc.), and since 2015 it has also been engaged in military operations in Syria. The AKP government consistently responded with tough security policies – mass arrests, expanded police powers, military campaigns – which generally drew broad public support. The government's messaging in these instances frames civil liberties as secondary: Erdoğan often said, "There is no compromise with terror. Harsh measures will continue until every last terrorist is neutralized." Many citizens, scared of bombings or violence, acquiesced to this logic. For instance, following a spate of ISIS and PKK attacks in 2015-2016, polls showed rising approval for Erdoğan's "law and order" approach, and the AKP's vote share actually rebounded in late 2015 elections (Selçuk O. , 2016). Tightening anti-terror laws and purging security forces of alleged dissidents were accepted as inevitable. Even the resumption of a dirty war in the southeast (with curfews and heavy clashes in Kurdish towns) drew limited public outcry in the Turkish-majority west, as media propaganda largely justified it as anti-terror operations. The climate of fear created by terrorism thus bolstered the public's tolerance for militarized, illiberal governance, as many felt such measures were needed to survive.

The 2016 coup attempt was an even more palpable fear-inducing event. That night, as tanks rolled and fighter jets bombed government buildings, millions legitimately feared a return to military rule or civil war. The coup's defeat was swiftly followed by a state of emergency that lasted two years – essentially rule by decree with sweeping arrests. Under normal conditions, such an extraordinary concentration of power in Erdoğan's hands might have met resistance. But riding a wave of fear and anger at the coup plotters, the majority of Turks (including opposition voters initially) supported emergency rule as necessary. The government announced the emergency was to "cleanse the state of virus", implying anyone caught in the nets deserved it. Over 150,000 public servants were purged by decree, often without due process, yet there were no mass protests by citizens on their behalf – partly because fear persisted that FETO's "sleeper cells" were everywhere, and partly because people were fearful of being associated with traitors if they spoke out (Turkey Tribunal, 2021). Fear silenced the public's critical faculties, enabling the government to re-engineer the state virtually unopposed.

Fear of instability or return to the "bad old days" is another psychological factor the AKP exploits. Many Turks remember the 1990s as a time of weak coalition governments, economic hyperinflation, and frequent crises (including the 2001 financial crash). The AKP contrasts that era with its own tenure of relative stability and growth (especially in its first decade). Erdoğan

frequently tells voters that if the AKP loses power, the country would "go back 50 years" or fall into chaos. For example, in the 2018 campaign, he warned that an opposition win would result in "economic collapse and terrorist groups running wild." Such statements tap into voters' status quo bias and fear of the unknown. Indeed, interviews indicate some citizens stick with Erdoğan not because they approve of creeping authoritarianism per se, but because they fear any change might bring disorder or economic turmoil. This mindset is encapsulated by an Erdoğan voter in 2014: "I want stability and quiet to return to Türkiye… If the opposition wins, the country will fall apart. There is simply no alternative to the AKP" (Bechev, 2014). By presenting himself as a bulwark against chaos, Erdoğan persuades a segment of the population to overlook undemocratic practices as the "price of stability." In times of crisis (be it a failed coup, a global pandemic, or regional wars), this attitude hardens – people rally around the "strong leader" for security, a phenomenon known in political science as the "rally 'round the flag" effect.

The AKP's narrative also fosters fear of foreign domination – a revival of historical anxieties about Western powers. Erdoğan frequently alleges that Western governments, "international lobbies", or financial speculators are trying to undermine Türkiye's success and sovereignty. When the Turkish lira has plunged, he speaks of an "economic attack by foreign powers" rather than policy missteps. When EU officials criticize Ankara's human rights record, he tells the public that "they want to keep Türkiye weak". This taps a deep nationalist vein and encourages Turks to close ranks behind their leader against external critics. As a result, measures that distance Türkiye from Western liberal norms (like imprisoning civil society activists or quashing protests) are rationalized domestically as defying Western meddling or double standards. The populist pitch is that "the West supports our opposition and 'agents' within to stop Türkiye's rise", so by suppressing those elements, the government is actually protecting national independence. This narrative gained traction after 2016 especially: Erdogan blasted Europe for harboring "terrorists" (FETO and PKK) and claimed even the coup might have had Western backing. While speculative, these claims found an audience at home and thus any Western criticism of Erdogan's authoritarian steps could be dismissed by supporters as just foreign antagonism – not objective concern – further reinforcing domestic acceptance.

Finally, fear is reinforced by direct intimidation. People know that those who dissent loudly (journalists, professors, activists) often pay a heavy price. This creates self-censorship and a tendency to rationalize or justify what the regime does, to avoid cognitive dissonance or trouble. For example, among the educated urban middle class, some who privately have misgivings

about Erdogan's policies will still vote AKP or stay silent out of fear – fear of losing their jobs (given how the public sector and much of private sector employment is AKP-controlled), or even fear of social ostracism in conservative communities if they break ranks. The mass purges of 2016-2017, which left over a hundred thousand labeled "terrorists" and unemployed, sent a loud message: loyalty is safety; dissent is dangerous. Many ordinary citizens, seeing this, opted for loyalty or apathy, thus indirectly legitimizing the government's moves by their quiescence. Amnesty International's (Amnesty International, 2017) report described how purged public sector workers were left with no recourse and in social isolation, which serves as a warning to others. In a society where fear pervades, overt resistance evaporates and regimes can claim public compliance as consent.

7.1.6. PATRONAGE AND SOCIAL BASE: BUYING TOLERANCE THROUGH BENEFITS

While narrative and fear are powerful, the AKP regime also relies on more concrete levers of public support – namely patronage and clientelism. Over two decades, the AKP has built extensive networks of material distribution that bind voters to the party. Through welfare programs, public sector hiring, business contracts, and local party organizations, the AKP has essentially "bought" the goodwill of millions. This economic dimension of populist legitimation means that for many, tolerance of authoritarian practices is intertwined with perceived personal or communal gains from the regime. In short, people may accept illiberal rule because their livelihood seems to depend on the regime's continuation. Here we examine how patronage operates and contributes to sustaining the AKP's popular base.

One major aspect is the welfare state politicization. The AKP dramatically expanded social assistance to the poor – offering monthly cash transfers, coal and food deliveries, free health services, etc. However, research shows these benefits are often distributed with an eye to political loyalty. AKP-run municipalities and neighborhood party cells play key roles in identifying beneficiaries and handing out aid, which creates a patron-client dynamic: recipients often feel grateful and beholden to the party. found that many low-income women consistently vote AKP because welfare benefits (often delivered personally by party-linked officials) have fostered a sense of loyalty and even affection toward Erdoğan. They sometimes refer to him as a caring father figure, praying for him to stay in power. It's telling that AKP agents reinforce this by personalizing credit: recipients have reported getting text messages from Erdoğan before elections, reminding them of assistance given as "a gift from me" (Göknar, 2020). Such tactics

concretize the idea that support for the leader yields tangible rewards, whereas his defeat could mean losing those benefits.

Quantitatively, welfare transfers surged under AKP rule, especially in election years and targeted in districts the AKP needed to win. Çavdar's (2022) analysis shows that the share of households depending on social assistance (making up >50% of income) rose significantly from 2003 to 2016, particularly among poor women – a key AKP constituency. The AKP effectively turned many of the economically vulnerable into a "loyal base" by meeting basic needs that previous governments neglected. While alleviating poverty is laudable, the clientelistic delivery mechanism means these citizens often feel they must keep the AKP in power to survive. Indeed, studies and surveys indicate a palpable fear among welfare recipients that an opposition government would not take care of them. This dependency dampens enthusiasm for change and can make people overlook the AKP's authoritarian excesses as long as their immediate welfare is maintained.

Patronage extends beyond direct welfare. The AKP presided over an economic boom (until recently), fueled by construction and public investment, from which it selectively enriched a new class of business cronies. These so-called "Anatolian tigers" or pro-AKP conglomerates (many represented by the business association MÜSİAD) received huge government contracts – from building bridges and airports to managing city services – often via nontransparent tender processes favoring those close to the party. In return, these business elites provided financial support to AKP (through campaign donations or buying media on its behalf) and helped sustain employment in AKP strongholds. Esen and Gümüşçü (2018) detail how state–business relations under AKP built a competitive authoritarian regime, noting that loyal business groups were rewarded, while companies seen as aligned with the opposition faced fines, loss of contracts, or even expropriation. The message to entrepreneurs was that prosperity comes from political fealty. As a result, a significant segment of the middle and upper class that might normally oppose authoritarian governance (due to interest in rule of law, predictability) instead became stakeholders in the regime. For example, construction tycoons enriched by AKP mega-projects have little incentive to push back on democratic erosion; doing so could jeopardize their lucrative deals.

At the grassroots, the AKP's party organization and civic outreach reinforce patronage bonds. The party has millions of members and sympathizers engaged in local networks – women's branches, youth branches, neighborhood committees. These networks don't just mobilize for

votes; they often serve as community support systems. AKP volunteers might attend weddings, help with hospital paperwork, or provide small loans to locals, thereby integrating the party into daily social life. This fosters social capital that translates into votes and trust. It also creates an echo chamber where the AKP's narrative is constantly validated by peers, making it socially costly to dissent in those communities. In strong AKP areas, community pressure adds to tolerance of authoritarian acts: if everyone around you seems to support the government and is benefiting somehow, an individual is less likely to question the wisdom or fairness of the government's actions.

Empirical evidence of patronage's effect on political behavior is striking. Studies using survey experiments have found that voters who receive clientelist benefits are significantly more likely to remain loyal even if they are unhappy with other aspects of governance. In Türkiye, an augmented list experiment in the 2011 election suggested over one-third of voters had been targeted with some form of vote-buying or material inducement (Neundorf, Öztürk, Northmore-Ball, Tertytchnaya, & Gerschewski, 2021). This is a huge number that likely grew with each election. Patronage doesn't guarantee victory on its own, but in a polarized 50-50 electorate, it can tip crucial percentages by essentially "buying tolerance." It's notable that despite economic downturn since 2018, Erdoğan maintained around 45-50% electoral support; one reason is that his government expanded short-term relief (raising minimum wage, boosting pensions, cheap credit) ahead of elections to mitigate discontent. Essentially, material incentives softened the blows of economic mismanagement and kept many from abandoning the regime.

Fear of losing patronage is a powerful motivator too. Public sector employees know that overt opposition could cost them their jobs; business owners fear losing contracts. Poor voters worry an opposition may neglect or even punish AKP strongholds. Erdoğan smartly reinforces these fears. In a leaked meeting (2019), he allegedly told AKP municipal officials to ensure that even if they lost city hall, key resources still flowed through AKP channels, so that people "understand the difference" and regret voting opposition. Likewise, when CHP mayors tried to distribute aid in 2020, the central government impeded them, to prevent opposition from building a patronage reputation. The goal is to make voters believe only the AKP can deliver, so that even if they grumble about authoritarian tendencies, they stick with the devil that feeds them.

Patronage, thus, works in tandem with populist discourse. The AKP not only says it represents "the people" but also acts as the benefactor of the people. This creates a reciprocal legitimacy:

the party provides and protects, the people support and obey. It mirrors a traditional patrimonial relationship transposed to modern electoral politics. Under such conditions, liberal democratic values (press freedom, judicial independence) can seem abstract compared to the concrete benefits at stake. A citizen might privately value democracy, but if they fear that real change means losing their job or their family's health insurance, they may rationalize or accept creeping authoritarianism as a necessary compromise.

7.2. PUBLIC REACTIONS AND TOLERANCE: A POLARIZED SOCIETY'S EMBRACE OF MAJORITARIAN AUTHORITARIANISM

Having detailed the AKP's strategies for legitimating its rule, we turn now to the response of Turkish society – in particular, the extent to which "the people" have tolerated or supported authoritarian changes. It is important to note that Turkish society is deeply polarized, and not everyone has tolerated authoritarianism. Roughly half of the population (the opposition camp) has persistently opposed Erdoğan's authoritarian behaviors, as seen in protests, civil society activism, and voting patterns. However, the other half – Erdoğan's voters and supporters – have generally accepted, rationalized, or even applauded the concentration of power and erosion of checks and balances, as long as it is by "their" side. This section analyzes why that supportive half of "the people" has been so resilient and permissive toward authoritarian practices. We draw on public opinion data and scholarly interpretations to show how populist legitimation translates into mass attitudes. Concepts from our theoretical framework, like delegative democracy and normative support, are reflected vividly in Türkiye's case: a significant constituency believes the elected leader should have wide latitude to govern and aligns its values with the regime's illiberal turn.

7.2.1. ENDURING POPULAR SUPPORT IN THE FACE OF DEMOCRATIC EROSION

One of the most striking features of Türkiye's past decade is that despite clear democratic backsliding, Erdoğan and the AKP have continued to win elections or at least remain highly competitive. The AKP won decisive victories in 2011 and 2015 (after suppressing Gezi protests and graft probes), narrowly prevailed in the 2017 system-changing referendum, retained the presidency in 2018, and Erdoğan was re-elected again in 2023, albeit with the slimmest majority. These outcomes suggest that a large segment of voters either does not prioritize liberal-democratic features or is willing to trade them off for other benefits. This aligns with

O'Donnell's (1994) notion of delegative democracy, where voters effectively delegate extensive authority to a leader and do not demand robust checks and balances. In Türkiye, elections have become plebiscites on Erdoğan's leadership rather than contests over policy performance or institutional norms. As Sebnem Gümüşçü (2013) put it, "Elections are not free or fair, but they matter greatly because this is how Erdoğan comes to power and stays in power", meaning even under unfair conditions, enough people vote for him, conferring him democratic legitimacy to justify his rule.

Public opinion surveys offer insight into the mindset of Erdoğan's base. A 2021 study by Neundorf et al. (2021) found "high levels of normative support for the political system" among government voters in Türkiye – that is, many AKP supporters share and internalize the regime's values and thus view its actions as legitimate. This normative support was remarkably stable even during crises. For example, during the steep economic recession of 2018-2022 (with inflation soaring and currency collapsing), AKP loyalists largely stood by Erdoğan. The researchers conducted survey experiments introducing economic crisis scenarios and found that voters with strong prior loyalty to the AKP were unmoved in their support by negative performance information (Neundorf, Öztürk, Northmore-Ball, Tertytchnaya, & Gerschewski, 2021). In other words, there exists a "reservoir of support" that is rooted in identity and ideology (populist, religious-nationalist) rather than in government performance. This aligns with Easton's (1965) theory of diffuse support: the AKP has built up such credibility with its base that short-term grievances (like a bad economy) don't easily translate into withdrawal of political support. This buffer allows the regime to survive crises that might topple less legitimized governments. Indeed, Erdoğan's approval ratings remained around 40-45% even at the height of economic turmoil, suggesting roughly that proportion of the populace has a baseline loyalty.

One reason for this loyalty is that many AKP voters conflate Erdoğan's rule with democracy itself. As mentioned, 65% of pro-Erdoğan respondents in 2024 were "satisfied with the way democracy works" in Türkiye, whereas almost none of the opposition supporters were. To Erdoğan's supporters, the existence of regular elections and majority rule under their preferred party is sufficient for them to consider the system democratic (even if external observers would call it authoritarian). This demonstrates what might be termed "majoritarian legitimacy" in the masses: as long as their side wins elections, the system feels legitimate and democratic to them, regardless of institutional backsliding. They have essentially internalized the AKP's redefinition of democracy as majoritarianism. Conversely, those who dislike Erdoğan

overwhelmingly see the system as undemocratic. So public opinion is split into two realities – one that views Türkiye as democratic enough (hence tolerant of its characteristics), and one that views it as an authoritarian state to be fought. This cognitive divide has prevented a unified public backlash against democratic erosion. The pernicious polarization McCoy & Somer (2019)theorize is evident: each side doubts the other's legitimacy, and the middle ground disappears.

Polls on specific issues reveal further the values cleavage. In late 2017, after the controversial emergency decrees, a poll by Konda found 72% of AKP voters approved of how the government handled post-coup purges, whereas over 90% of opposition voters disapproved. Similarly, on media freedom, AKP voters often express that "too much media criticism can harm the country", thereby justifying curbs on press. These attitudes stem from the narratives we discussed: AKP supporters genuinely fear chaos or external plots and thus see strong measures as warranted. Public opinion research by Esen and Gümüşçü (2021) noted that AKP voters widely believed opposition parties were in league with either Western interests or terrorists, making them less likely to vote for change. If the alternative is perceived as existentially dangerous, sticking with the incumbent authoritarian seems the safer bet.

Another study by Selçuk & Hekimci (2020)observed the emergence of a "democracy–authoritarianism cleavage" in which one bloc prioritizes liberal democracy and the other prioritizes conservative authoritarian values. They argue this new cleavage actually facilitated opposition coordination (as various anti-Erdoğan groups united to save democracy), but also meant the pro-Erdoğan bloc became even more cohesive around an authoritarian identity. The July 2018 switch to a presidential system is telling: it passed narrowly, but subsequent polls showed almost all AKP/MHP voters favored the new system (seeing it as good for Türkiye), while almost all opposition voters thought it was detrimental. Thus, the public's legitimation of the regime's new institutions broke down entirely along partisan lines. Legitimacy became a partisan concept: Erdoğan's Türkiye is legitimate for his supporters and illegitimate for his detractors.

From the regime's perspective, the key was maintaining roughly half of society on its side. This they have done. Even in the very close 2023 election, Erdoğan managed just over 52% in the runoff. Notably, in that election many observers thought economic pain would peel away his base, yet the core remained loyal, swayed by identity and security narratives. Berk Esen and Sebnem Gümüşçü (2023) titled their analysis "How Erdoğan's Populism Won Again",

emphasizing that populist appeals to culture and security trumped the opposition's focus on economy. They pointed out that Erdogan's control of media and state resources, plus his narrative blaming outside forces for economic woes, helped convince enough voters to stick with him (especially older, rural, less-educated voters who rely on state TV and benefits). The election demonstrated that authoritarian resilience rests on a loyal voter base that either doesn't believe how bad things are, or believes only Erdoğan can fix them.

A closer look at socio-demographics of Erdoğan's tolerant supporters shows patterns: they tend to be older, less urban, more religiously devout, and with lower education on average. For instance, Pew found Turks over 50 and those with only secondary education were much more likely to favor "rule by a strong leader" than younger, educated Turks (Pew Research Center, 2023). This suggests that political socialization under AKP rule (and perhaps under prior Turkish political culture) instilled deference to authority in certain segments. Younger and more educated Turks, especially in big cities, lean heavily opposition and are less tolerant of authoritarianism – which is why in local 2019 elections, the opposition took cities like Istanbul and Ankara. However, the AKP heartland – smaller Anatolian cities, rural areas, older generations – remains staunch. Many in that heartland have only really experienced politics under AKP's hegemonic narrative (especially those who came of age post-2002). They might lack exposure to liberal viewpoints and see AKP's blend of Islam and nationalism as natural governance. Their communities reinforce it, as discussed under patronage and propaganda. In effect, half of Türkiye has been habituated to a new normal, where robust presidential powers, partisan judiciary, and curtailed press freedom are not alarming because they perceive it as delivering good outcomes (or at least preventing worse outcomes).

It should also be note the role of elections as legitimation rituals. Each election that Erdoğan wins – even if unfair – reinforces to his base that "the majority is with us". This majority perception boosts confidence in the regime's course. For example, after the 2017 referendum squeaker, pro-government citizens celebrated it as a national decision to elevate Erdoğan. The OSCE observers noted the vote was on an unlevel field, but domestically the result was sold as the people's clear choice for presidentialism. In 2018, Erdoğan often reminded people "we have been elected by the nation 13 times" – a refrain to preempt any suggestion of illegitimacy (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023). This repeated mandate gives psychological assurance to supporters that even if specific actions seem harsh, they are on the side of democratic right – since they keep winning votes. Conversely, this narrative tries to instill resignation in opposition supporters (i.e., "we always lose, maybe the majority truly wants this").

7.2.2. THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE: SIGNS OF STRAIN AND THE OTHER HALF

While this chapter emphasizes the tolerance of authoritarianism among Erdoğan's supporters, it is important to acknowledge that tolerance is not unlimited or universal. Over 2022-2024, Türkiye saw hints of potential change: the opposition formed a broad coalition and nearly won in 2023, suggesting that if socio-economic conditions worsen further or if Erdoğan's charisma wanes, some of that tolerant base might peel away. Public tolerance can also be conditional – for instance, economic crisis did erode AKP's vote share from its heights (compare AKP's 49.8% in 2011 to 35.6% in 2023 parliamentary vote). There are anecdotes of former AKP voters saying "we gave him power to fix things, not to create more problems", showing some latent demand for accountability (Pew Research Center, 2023). Thus, the populist legitimation can fray if people feel the "deal" (security and prosperity in exchange for freedom) is not being kept. However, so far Erdoğan has skillfully mitigated discontent via short-term measures and intensified nationalist rhetoric.

On the other side, the half of Türkiye that does not support Erdoğan has shown remarkable democratic resilience. They consistently decry abuses, support opposition media (albeit limited), and turned out in huge numbers in recent elections to try to unseat him. Civil society, though under siege, still produces some activism (e.g., women's rights marches, environmental protests). The opposition's stance can also contribute to tolerance among Erdoğan's base inadvertently: since the country is polarized, each side tends to see the other as an existential threat. Government supporters are told (and believe) that if the opposition takes over, they will undo pious Muslims' gains, or even persecute them (an oft-repeated fear referencing the secularist past). This fear of the other side's illiberalism (whether realistic or not) reinforces tolerance of "our side's" illiberalism. In a sense, Erdogan's constituency might not champion abstract authoritarianism, but they prefer an authoritarian bent under Erdoğan to risking oppression under the other side. This dynamic – "better to be the oppressor than the oppressed" – was articulated by some pro-AKP individuals after the coup attempt, as they saw the purge of FETO as flipping the script on decades of Islamist victimhood.

In conclusion, Türkiye's experience under the AKP demonstrates how populist legitimation works in practice to secure public tolerance for authoritarian governance. Majoritarian rhetoric, enemy narratives, nationalist-religious fervor, propaganda, fear, and patronage together have cultivated a political culture among a significant segment of Turks that views Erdoğan's strongman rule as not only acceptable but as the fulfillment of the popular will. This culture

does not value liberal checks for their own sake; it values outcomes – stability, identity affirmation, material benefits – which the regime delivers in sufficient measure to outweigh concerns about jailing journalists or weakening courts. The AKP's success in aligning its interests with those of "the people" (at least a large portion of them) has been key to its longevity. In scholarly terms, Türkiye under Erdoğan exemplifies "delegative democracy", wherein the electorate entrusts one leader to act in its name with few constraints. It also illustrates "competitive authoritarianism" buttressed by genuine popular support – a case where autocratization is not purely top-down but partially bottom-up, ratified by elections and consent of a sizable mass.

However, this arrangement remains inherently unstable. It rests on continuous performance and polarization. Should the regime falter in providing security or prosperity, or should the opposition find a way to break the populist narrative, public tolerance could shift. As of 2024, though, Türkiye's people's tolerance of authoritarianism – painstakingly constructed by the AKP's populist legitimation – has been a decisive factor in the country's democratic backsliding. Türkiye's story underscores the dissertation's broader argument: authoritarianism today often wears a populist democratic mask, relying on ballots and popular acquiescence as much as on bullets and coercion (Bermeo, 2016). Understanding this synergy between leader and loyalists is essential to explaining how democracy can erode with the apparent permission of "the people" themselves.

8. CRISES AND CRITICAL JUNCTURES: PIVOTAL MOMENTS IN THE AKP'S AUTHORITARIAN TRAJECTORY

Türkiye's democratic backsliding under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has not been a steady, linear process, but rather a path-dependent trajectory punctuated by a series of critical junctures. Critical junctures are relatively short periods when there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will shape long-term outcomes, setting the system on a new path (Cappoccia & Kelemen, 2007). In the Turkish case, major crises – political showdowns, societal upheavals, coup attempts – have served as these turning points. During these moments of institutional flux, the AKP leadership seized opportunities to consolidate power, often by altering formal rules or norms, and thereby accelerated Türkiye's shift from fragile democracy toward competitive authoritarianism. Each crisis examined in this chapter from the 2007 e-memorandum to the 2017 presidential system referendum functioned as a permissive juncture that allowed extraordinary measures and departures from previous constraints. Below, each episode is analyzed chronologically, explaining its context and causes, how the AKP leveraged it to reshape Türkiye's political order, and its longer-term impact on democratic institutions and regime type. Throughout, each case is framed within theories of democratic backsliding and critical junctures, highlighting how short-term crises produced enduring institutional changes.

8.1. THE 2007 E-MEMORANDUM AND PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION CRISIS

In April 2007, a confrontation erupted over the election of Türkiye's next president – a position historically occupied by secular establishment figures. The AKP, freshly in power since 2002, sought to elect one of its own (Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül) as president, alarming secular opponents who feared a devout Muslim president would undermine the republic's secular foundations. Tensions climaxed on April 27, 2007, when the Turkish Armed Forces posted an "e-memorandum" on its website – an implicit threat of intervention, vowing to act as guardian of secularism if needed (Çınar & Sayın, 2014). Simultaneously, the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) boycotted the parliamentary vote's first round and petitioned the Constitutional Court to invalidate it on technical grounds (arguing a quorum of 367 MPs was required). The Court sided with the opposition, blocking Gül's election and precipitating a constitutional and political crisis. In effect, Türkiye's secular establishment – the military, high

judiciary, and allied civil-society elements – openly challenged the AKP's right to fill the presidency, invoking tutelary prerogatives to protect the state's founding principles (Özbudun, 2014).

Rather than capitulate, the AKP met this crisis with a strategy that turned the tables on the old guardians. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan denounced the military's memorandum as undemocratic interference and portrayed the Constitutional Court's ruling as a partisan maneuver. He then called early general elections for July 2007, effectively daring the public to choose between the AKP and the tutelary establishment. In the ensuing campaign, the AKP capitalized on a wave of popular sympathy for civilian rule. Millions of pious-conservative Turks viewed the military's threat and the court's obstruction as an illegitimate "e-coup" against their elected government (Özbudun, 2014). The AKP's narrative cast itself as the victim of an undemocratic elite – a stance encapsulated by its slogan "We will elect a Muslim president", signaling defiance of secularists and appealing to majority sentiment. This framing resonated: the AKP won a landslide 47% of the vote (up from 34% in 2002) and a large parliamentary majority (Aydın-Düzgit, 2012). Armed with this renewed mandate, the AKP swiftly passed a constitutional amendment to change how presidents are selected, shifting from a parliamentary vote to direct popular election of the president. This bold move – enacted via a referendum in October 2007 – was a direct institutional response to the crisis, aimed at preventing future establishment blockades of AKP candidates. In August 2007, after the election, the opposition's boycott collapsed and Parliament successfully elected Abdullah Gül as president, marking the first time a politician rooted in Islamist politics held Türkiye's presidency.

The 2007 showdown and its resolution proved to be a watershed undermining the old order of "tutelary democracy" and empowering the AKP. By defying the military and appealing to the electorate, the AKP enhanced its democratic legitimacy while simultaneously weakening the military's perceived authority to intervene. Gül's ascent to the presidency, moreover, removed a crucial secular check on the AKP. Traditionally, presidents (like outgoing Ahmet Necdet Sezer) had vetoed laws and appointed judges to safeguard secularism. Gül, as an AKP loyalist, instead used these powers to advance the government's agenda. For instance, he appointed AKP-aligned figures to key positions, including the board regulating universities (YÖK), and signed constitutional amendments (such as one easing the ban on headscarves at universities) that were deeply controversial among secularists (Yazıcı, 2017). These changes began to tip the balance of horizontal accountability: institutions like the judiciary and higher education started to reflect AKP preferences. In historical institutionalist terms, the e-memorandum crisis was a

critical juncture that abruptly broadened the AKP's range of options. Erdoğan's decision to confront the crisis through elections and legal changes, rather than compromise with the establishment, set Türkiye on a new path. The choices made in this brief period – early elections, a new presidential selection method, populist mobilization against the old elites – closed off alternative trajectories in which the military or courts might have successfully contained the AKP (Taş, 2015). Instead, after 2007 the old secular guardians were on the defensive, and the AKP grew bolder in asserting civilian supremacy. This juncture also engendered an enduring path dependency: once the military's interventionist role was politically delegitimized and the presidency occupied by the AKP, subsequent attempts by the old establishment to challenge the government would face higher barriers and provoke even stronger countermeasures.

From the perspective of democratic backsliding, the 2007 episode was paradoxical. On one hand, it was a victory for democratic principles (popular sovereignty over military tutelage). On the other, it emboldened majoritarian instincts within the AKP. Erdoğan emerged from the crisis convinced that "the nation" had endorsed him against the old elites. This emboldenment manifested in reduced willingness to conciliate with opponents. As observers noted, after its July 2007 triumph the AKP leadership "felt no need to accommodate the opposition" (Özbudun, 2014). Gül's presidency in turn enabled the AKP to penetrate state organs that had been bastions of secularism, facilitating what one analysis called a "change of the balance in institutions" like the Constitutional Court and high judiciary in the AKP's favor. In sum, the e-memorandum crisis was a pivotal moment that shifted Türkiye's course: it weakened the military–judicial guardianship that had constrained elected officials, thereby opening the door for the AKP's subsequent institutional overhaul. The events also ingrained a narrative of existential conflict – the idea that unelected elites were sabotaging the "national will" – which the AKP would invoke in future crises to justify extraordinary steps.

8.2. THE 2008 AKP CLOSURE CASE

Hardly a year after the presidential saga, the AKP faced another existential threat from the secular establishment. In March 2008, Türkiye's Chief Public Prosecutor filed a lawsuit in the Constitutional Court seeking to ban the AKP and bar 71 of its leading members (including Erdoğan and Gül) from politics for five years. The indictment accused the AKP of being a center of "anti-secular activities", essentially arguing that the ruling party's Islamist-leaning policies violated the constitutional order (Özbudun, 2014). This drastic measure – a party closure case – was not unprecedented in Türkiye (Islamist predecessors of the AKP had been

banned in the past), but targeting a popular ruling party that had just won re-election was a profound political crisis. Several precipitating factors fueled the case. One immediate trigger was the AKP's move to lift the university headscarf ban via constitutional amendment in early 2008, which secularists viewed as an assault on the secular republic's principles. Additionally, the AKP's post-2007 assertiveness (such as placing loyalists in key state positions) heightened fears among Kemalist elites that the government was methodically "Islamizing" the state. The closure case, accepted by the Constitutional Court in March 2008, thus became the judiciary's bid (likely encouraged by elements of the military behind the scenes) to "safeguard" secularism by terminating the AKP's tenure. In effect, this was a judicial coup attempt: a non-electoral mechanism to remove a democratically victorious incumbent, reflecting the ongoing power struggle between the old establishment and the AKP's new dominant-party regime.

The closure lawsuit thrust Türkiye into months of uncertainty until the Court's verdict in July 2008. This period constituted a critical juncture in that the country's political future hinged on a few actors' choices under highly fluid conditions. The Constitutional Court came within a hair's breadth of dissolving the ruling party: 6 out of 11 judges voted for closure, just one vote short of the seven required to ban the AKP (Özbudun, 2014). In the end, the Court stopped at imposing a heavy fine and issuing a "serious warning" to the AKP, allowing it to continue in power by the slimmest of margins. The near-death experience had a profound effect on the AKP leadership's subsequent choices. Erdoğan and his party emerged from the judicial ambush convinced that entrenched secularist forces would stop at nothing – even extra-democratic legal warfare – to sabotage them. In this sense, the closure case deepened the AKP's sense of "existential insecurity" and set up a new trajectory where the party would prioritize safeguarding its survival by neutralizing hostile institutions (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016).

Importantly, the AKP leveraged the closure crisis to justify aggressive measures that it might otherwise have struggled to legitimize. Far from weakening the AKP or deterring its illiberal tendencies, the attempted ban backfired and accelerated Türkiye's democratic erosion. The AKP skillfully rallied public opinion against the Constitutional Court and the prosecutor, painting the case as an undemocratic plot by the old elite to overturn the will of the voters. This narrative not only shored up the AKP's base, but also created political momentum for institutional reforms to curb the judiciary's power. Within weeks of the verdict, Erdoğan vowed to overhaul the constitutional framework that allowed such judicial interventions. Over the next two years, the AKP formulated a package of constitutional amendments, culminating in the 2010 referendum, aimed (among other things) at reconfiguring the higher judiciary and High

Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) to dilute the influence of Kemalist holdovers (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012). In public, AKP leaders sold these changes as efforts to "democratize" a politicized judiciary – a message that resonated with many voters who saw judges and prosecutors as biased actors bent on defying an elected government. Indeed, the court-packing accusation became a central point of debate: the opposition warned that the AKP's judicial reforms were a power grab in democratic clothing, while Erdoğan argued they were necessary to remove anti-democratic "guardians" in robes. The closure case thus directly set the stage for a critical choice by the AKP to pursue constitutional amendments – a choice with lasting consequences for Türkiye's institutional landscape.

Concurrently, the AKP took more immediate steps during the crisis to strike back at those it perceived as orchestrating the threat. In July 2008, as the closure trial was unfolding, AKP-friendly media and prosecutors launched the controversial "Ergenekon" investigations targeting retired generals, journalists, and civil society figures alleged to be part of a clandestine secularist coup plot (Aydın-Düzgit, 2012). On the very day the Chief Prosecutor presented his oral arguments to the Court, police detained two former four-star generals and dozens of others, accusing them of a terrorist conspiracy to topple the AKP. This was a remarkable counter-offensive: it signaled that the AKP was prepared not only to defend itself passively in court but to proactively purge elements of the "deep state" believed to be behind the closure attempt. A contemporaneous analysis noted that Türkiye had entered uncharted waters – an incumbent Islamist-rooted party was "actively fighting back" against the secular establishment within the state, using the legal system against its foes. In other words, the closure crisis opened a permissive moment for the AKP to reconfigure civil-military and judicial relations. The result was a cascade of events: large-scale trials of alleged coup networks (Ergenekon and later "Balyoz"), and an emboldened AKP-FETO alliance (at the time) working to dismantle the old military guardianship. Each of these moves further weakened checks on the AKP, contributing to a gradual but accelerating authoritarian trajectory.

The failure of the 2008 closure bid proved to be a turning point that bent Türkiye's institutional arc in the AKP's favor. First, it effectively immunized the AKP from future judicial dissolution: the narrow escape and subsequent constitutional changes meant that never again would the Constitutional Court likely muster the will or the numbers to outlaw the ruling party. By 2010, the composition of the Court had changed (through new appointments and expanded membership) to include more judges seen as sympathetic or at least not implacably opposed to the AKP, largely because of the reforms spurred by the closure case fallout. The 2010 reforms

– enlarging the Constitutional Court and restructuring the HSYK – significantly eroded judicial independence and facilitated a "drift toward competitive authoritarianism" in Türkiye by bringing the judiciary under the ruling party's sway (Özbudun, 2015). In essence, the secular judiciary's attempt to eliminate the AKP became the catalyst for the AKP capturing the judiciary.

Second, the events of 2008 entrenched a narrative of permanent struggle against a "parallel state" or entrenched elite subverting democracy – a narrative that the AKP would reutilize in subsequent crises. In the short term, this manifested as public support for taming the judiciary: many Turks accepted that the Constitutional Court had overreached and thus supported the idea (or at least did not resist) that it was necessary to reform the courts in the name of democracy (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012). In the longer term, Erdoğan would revive this narrative to frame the 2013 corruption probes and the 2016 coup attempt as attacks by shadowy networks (FETO, etc.) – effectively, the closure case set a template in AKP discourse for delegitimizing any serious challenge as undemocratic conspiracy.

Finally, in terms of democratic institutions, the critical juncture of 2008 accelerated the erosion of what remained of horizontal accountability in Türkiye. After surviving the closure attempt, the AKP moved from a defensive posture to an offensive, hegemonic posture. The party grew less tolerant of dissent within state agencies and more determined to place loyalists throughout the bureaucracy, judiciary, and security apparatus to foreclose future threats. This was evident in the aggressive push to retire or sideline commanders suspected of disloyalty (through Ergenekon/Balyoz trials) and to promote officers aligned with the government's worldview. The short-term crisis thus triggered a path-dependent process: once the AKP started purging opponents and changing appointment procedures in 2008–2010, each step made it easier to take the next, and harder to reverse course. Scholars of historical institutionalism emphasize that choices made during critical junctures generate self-reinforcing processes (Cappoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Türkiye illustrates this: the decision to fight back against the secular establishment in 2008 led to legal and personnel changes that in turn empowered the AKP to further marginalize opponents, thereby steadily moving the regime closer to electoral authoritarianism. In summary, the 2008 closure crisis was pivotal not only because it threatened the AKP's existence (and thus revealed the regime cleavage in stark form), but because the AKP's successful navigation of the crisis accelerated the dismantling of checks and balances and locked in a new institutional trajectory more firmly under one-party control.

8.3. THE 2010 CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

The September 2010 constitutional referendum was a direct outgrowth of the confrontations of 2007–2008. After defeating the military's intervention and the judiciary's closure attempt, the AKP set out to rewrite parts of the 1982 Constitution to preempt future challenges. The referendum package, backed by the AKP and put to voters on 12 September 2010, contained 26 amendments covering a range of issues – from individual rights (e.g. gender equality, privacy protections) to labor rights – but its most consequential provisions were those restructuring the judiciary. The amendments proposed to expand the number of judges on the Turkish Constitutional Court and on the HSYK, and crucially, to change the appointment procedures in ways that gave elected officials (the president and parliament) a greater role in selecting these judges and council members. In addition, the reforms further limited the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians and removed some of the last legal immunities shielding the 1980 coup leaders (Özbudun, 2015). The AKP pitched the referendum as a democratic, EU-aligned reform that would civilianize the constitution and enhance rights. But opponents (including the CHP and MHP) argued that, taken together, the changes amounted to a "court-packing" scheme – an attempt by Erdoğan to stack the highest courts with loyalists and undermine the separation of power. The term "Kulturkampf" was invoked by some analysts to describe the referendum as an extension of the struggle between religious-conservative and secular visions for Türkiye (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012). Thus, the 2010 referendum was not just a technocratic reform; it was a high-stakes political contest embedded in the narrative of democratic backsliding, coming after years of AKP-Establishment strife.

The lead-up to the referendum exemplified how the AKP leveraged the critical juncture created by the 2007–08 crises to push through lasting structural changes. The closure case's aftermath provided both the motive and the political capital for these amendments. Publicly, Erdoğan framed the referendum as the logical next step in Türkiye's democratic evolution – finishing the job of replacing the coup-era constitution with something more in line with EU norms. He argued that the judiciary had historically been an undemocratic "bastion" blocking the national will, and that reform was overdue (Yılmaz H. , 2012). Indeed, one reason much of the Turkish electorate supported the judicial reforms was a perception that the existing judiciary was partisan and anti-democratic, given its role in party bans and alignment with military interests. By tapping into public resentment of the old judicial guard, the AKP managed to turn a potentially esoteric issue (judicial appointments) into a populist cause. For example, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan campaigned vigorously in favor of the "Yes" vote, portraying it as a blow

against the judges who nearly banned the AKP and as a step toward true democracy. Upon victory, he declared the referendum result "a lesson in democracy" and evidence of the nation's "longing for democracy". The referendum passed with 58% approval, a solid majority that validated Erdoğan's strategy of bundling judicial changes with popular measures (like social rights expansions) and riding the wave of antipathy toward the old elites (Yılmaz H. , 2012).

From a historical institutionalist perspective, the 2010 referendum marked the institutionalization of the new path set in motion by the prior crises. It was the point at which temporary advantages the AKP had gained (e.g. high public support, weakened opponents) were converted into durable rules of the game. The amendments significantly altered the composition of the Constitutional Court and HSYK by increasing their membership (from 11 to 17 justices on the Court, for instance) and by giving the President of the Republic and the parliamentary majority greater appointment power. In effect, this widened the scope of executive influence over the judiciary. Critics described the package as "democratic window dressing" hiding an attempt to dominate the courts (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012). While it is true that the amendments also included liberalizing elements (such as stronger privacy rights and civilian court oversight of the military), those provisions were likely included both on their merits and strategically to sweeten the package. Analyses noted that the most controversial provisions (judicial appointments) were debated intensely in the media, and voters were aware of the "court-packing" issue – yet many voters accepted it, perhaps reasoning that the judiciary's past behavior warranted corrective oversight by elected authorities (Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu, 2013). Thus, the AKP was able to parlay the crisis-induced public distrust of the old judiciary into a mandate to redesign it.

The long-term impact of the 2010 referendum on Türkiye's regime trajectory was profound. By reconstituting the top judicial bodies, the AKP gained a far greater degree of control (or at least influence) over the mechanisms that had previously served as checks on its power. In the years immediately following, this translated into a judiciary more compliant with or aligned to AKP interests. For instance, after the referendum, the HSYK (the council in charge of judge and prosecutor appointments and discipline) was reorganized, and subsequent elections to the HSYK saw a mix of AKP-leaning and FETO-affiliated candidates dominate, marginalizing hardcore secularist voices. The Constitutional Court, expanded with new judges appointed by President Gül (himself from the AKP), took on a less confrontational stance toward the government. A notable example is that the Court in 2012 upheld the controversial new education law (which introduced elective religious courses and was criticized by secularists)

with less resistance than might have been expected from the pre-2010 judiciary. More systematically, legal scholars observed a decline in the judiciary's independence post-2010: the AKP's ability to influence judicial appointments meant that judges and prosecutors who were overtly hostile to the government were weeded out or sidelined (Esen B. , 2018). By 2013–2014, when a rupture occurred between the AKP and the FETO (whose adherents had also been present in the judiciary), the government was able to reassign or dismiss hundreds of prosecutors and judges with relative ease, something that would have been far more difficult under the pre-2010 legal framework. In essence, the referendum reforms armed the executive with legal tools to undertake executive aggrandizement. Türkiye in the early 2010s increasingly fit the model of an "illiberal democracy" or competitive authoritarian regime: elections continued (the AKP won another strong victory in 2011), but the playing field was tilting as independent institutions lost autonomy (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016).

The path-dependent consequences of the 2010 critical juncture became fully apparent in later years. By locking in a judiciary and constitutional court more friendly to the ruling party, the AKP could pursue controversial policies with less fear of judicial invalidation. For example, when the government clashed with opposition-minded media or passed laws limiting freedoms (such as stricter Internet regulation in 2014), appeals to the Constitutional Court only sporadically succeeded. In fact, the Constitutional Court did occasionally rule against the AKP (e.g. overturning parts of a 2014 law tightening the HSYK under then-Prime Minister Erdoğan), but these instances were exceptions that proved the rule: horizontal accountability had been enfeebled. The juncture also had an ironic twist – it initially occurred with the tacit support of pro-EU, liberal segments who disliked the old tutelage. The EU even welcomed many aspects of the 2010 package (seeing judicial reform as aligning with European standards) (Mügge, 2015). This lent Erdoğan a veneer of legitimacy and international approval as he made these changes. Only later, when the consequences for democratic quality became evident, did some liberals express buyer's remorse. By then, however, the new institutional path was entrenched. In summary, the 2010 referendum was a pivotal institutional restructuring that consummated the AKP's ascendance over the judiciary – an outcome made possible by the critical juncture of crises that preceded it. It illustrates how democratic backsliding often occurs legally and gradually: a public ratification of amendments under the banner of "more democracy" ended up facilitating less democratic governance by removing robust judicial checks. The stage was now set for the AKP, unchecked by the military or courts, to confront new crises on its own terms in the years ahead.

8.4. THE 2013 GEZI PARK PROTESTS

In late May 2013, what began as a small environmental demonstration in Istanbul's Gezi Park mushroomed into the largest wave of anti-government protests in Türkiye's recent history. The immediate trigger was the AKP-controlled Istanbul municipality's plan to raze Gezi Park (one of central Istanbul's few green spaces) and replace it with a replica Ottoman-era barracks shopping mall – a project seen by activists as emblematic of top-down, profit-driven urbanization. When police used force to evict a few dozen peaceful protesters camping in the park on May 30, images of brutality circulated on social media, sparking outrage. By the next day, thousands had descended on Taksim Square. The heavy-handed police tactics – tear gas barrages, water cannons, and beatings – acted as a catalyst, touching a nerve among disparate segments of society beyond the original environmentalists (Çınar & Yılmaz, 2014). Over the following days and weeks (June–July 2013), protests spread to dozens of cities and towns across Türkiye, with an estimated 3 to 5 million participants at their peak. The grievances quickly expanded from Gezi Park's trees to broader issues: creeping authoritarianism, erosion of secular lifestyles (e.g. new alcohol restrictions), curbs on free expression, and Erdoğan's polarizing rhetoric. The demonstrators represented a broad coalition – secular liberals, nationalists, some Islamists disillusioned with the AKP, Kurds, labor unions, students – loosely united by the slogan "Her Yer Taksim, Her Yer Direniş" ("Everywhere Taksim, Everywhere Resistance"). In essence, Gezi became a spontaneous mass protest movement against what was seen as the AKP's majoritarian arrogance and encroachments on civil liberties. For the AKP, this uprising posed the most significant street challenge to its rule to date, coming after a decade of electoral dominance.

The AKP government's reaction to Gezi was uncompromising and set a precedent for how dissent would be framed and suppressed thereafter. From the outset, Erdoğan struck a defiant tone, refusing to concede the park issue and instructing police to clear occupations. The authorities' response was, as Amnesty International (2013) documented, "brutal and unequivocal", involving systematic excessive force against largely peaceful crowds. Over the course of summer 2013, police repeatedly used unnecessary and abusive force – including firing tear gas canisters directly at protesters, use of plastic bullets and beatings – resulting in at least 8 civilian deaths, thousands of injuries, and mass arrests. The government also temporarily curtailed social media (which Erdoğan derided as a "menace") and leaned on friendly media to minimize coverage of the protests. This coercive approach signaled a decisive break from any

earlier AKP posture of accommodating public criticism; it treated protesters explicitly as enemies.

Equally significant was the narrative constructed by Erdoğan and pro-AKP media to delegitimize the Gezi movement. Rather than recognizing the protests as a diverse domestic outpouring of grievances, Erdoğan depicted them as orchestrated by malign forces. He blamed "extremist elements" and even alleged foreign links behind the unrest, claiming that a shadowy combination of "looters", radical leftists, and foreign agents (at one point invoking an "interest rate lobby" of speculators) were driving the riots. In a televised speech on June 3, 2013, he pointed to the main opposition CHP for "provoking" events and stated that intelligence services were investigating international connections to what he dismissed as attempts at a "Turkish Spring". Such rhetoric was a deliberate strategy to securitize the protests – casting a predominantly civic uprising as a plot against national stability. The effect was to rally AKP loyalists by invoking fears of chaos and foreign meddling. Indeed, massive pro-government counter-rallies were organized in which Erdoğan appeared before tens of thousands of supporters, framing Gezi as a struggle between "us" (the true nation) and "them" (traitors and foreign conspirators) (Göle, 2013). This populist, conspiratorial framing of an internal protest foreshadowed how the AKP would later characterize other challenges (notably the 2016 coup attempt, also blamed on foreign-backed "traitors").

Crucially, the government leveraged the Gezi turmoil as justification to tighten legal and institutional controls to preempt future mass dissent. In the immediate aftermath, authorities initiated a purge of sorts: police officers suspected of sympathizing with the protests were reassigned, civil servants who joined demonstrations faced disciplinary action, and compliant police and governors who had acted forcefully were praised or promoted. The AKP-led Parliament passed new restrictive laws on public assembly and policing powers. For instance, adjustments to the Law on Meetings and Demonstrations in early 2014 increased penalties for participation in unauthorized protests and gave police expanded authority to use force. Later, in 2015, the government introduced a "Domestic Security Package" of laws enhancing police stop-and-search powers, allowing use of firearms against demonstrators with molotovs, and broadening detention powers – measures clearly influenced by the Gezi experience and justified in terms of preventing "violent protests." Moreover, surveillance of social media was intensified; during Gezi, platforms like Twitter had been key for mobilization, so the government later imposed tighter internet controls (e.g. a law in 2014 enabling URL blocking without immediate court orders). These legal shifts reflect how the critical juncture of Gezi

enabled a permanent ratcheting-up of authoritarian practices: what was done as an "extraordinary" response during the protests (mass police violence, curbing media, demonizing dissidents) became normalized state behavior thereafter.

The Gezi Park protests and the regime's response marked a point of no return in the AKP's authoritarian trajectory. Politically and psychologically, Gezi convinced Erdoğan that a significant portion of Turkish society was implacably opposed to him – and in his view, willing to resort to insurrection. This fed an increasingly authoritarian reflex: rather than seeing dissent as a healthy facet of democracy, the AKP leadership came to view large-scale protest as an existential threat manufactured by internal and external enemies. As one comparative perspective notes, aspiring autocrats often seize on episodes of unrest to justify power grabs – akin to how historical authoritarian leaders have used crises to clamp down (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Türkiye post-Gezi fits this pattern. The government's narrative successfully convinced many AKP voters that Gezi was not a legitimate civic movement but a "foreign-backed attempt at a color revolution", as pro-AKP pundits would insist (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016). This gave Erdoğan the political cover to intensify repression.

One immediate institutional effect was the chilling of civil society and freedom of expression. Independent media outlets that sympathized with Gezi faced reprisals; several journalists were fired under government pressure in 2013 for their coverage. Over the next few years, media pluralism declined sharply, with major outlets being bought by pro-government businessmen (often under official encouragement) or bullied into self-censorship. The public space for protest shrank; for example, iconic public squares like Taksim were thereafter often closed off to demonstrations through bureaucratic excuses or massive police deployments. The right to peaceful assembly, while still existing on paper, became heavily curtailed in practice – something noted by international observers and evidenced when even small protests (e.g. against corruption or in support of besieged academics) were routinely met with police force in the mid-2010s.

Perhaps the most telling long-term consequence of Gezi was the legal persecution of those associated with it, even years later. In what Human Rights Watch (2019) called a "politically motivated" rewriting of the events, Turkish prosecutors in 2019 charged 16 civil society figures with attempting to overthrow the government by organizing and financing the Gezi protests. The indictment absurdly cast the Gezi demonstrations as a foreign-funded coup plot, naming then-Prime Minister Erdoğan and his entire cabinet as "victims" of this alleged conspiracy.

Despite a lack of any credible evidence that these individuals incited violence or had any orchestration role (the protests were notably leaderless and organic), the mere fact of such a trial nearly six years later shows how the regime codified its securitizing narrative into judicial action. This prosecutorial campaign – accusing peaceful dissenters of sedition – underscores that the government never accepted Gezi as legitimate protest. Instead, the state's position (persisting into the late 2010s) is that Gezi was an illegal insurrection. This has a deeply corrosive effect on democratic norms: it broadcasts a warning that large-scale protests will be treated as treason. Such a posture is the antithesis of democratic pluralism.

In sum, the Gezi Park protests were a critical juncture that both revealed and accelerated Türkiye's democratic backslide. The brief window of uncertainty in mid-2013 – when the government's authority was openly challenged on the streets – ended with the AKP reasserting control by force, and then using that episode to justify a permanent crackdown on dissent. After Gezi, Türkiye can be observed moving further along the continuum from competitive democracy to competitive authoritarianism, wherein formal democratic processes continued (elections in 2014, 2015, etc.) but the environment became increasingly repressive and unequal. Gezi also reshaped political discourse: Erdoğan's embrace of a hardline nationalist-populist tone dates from this period, as he sought new allies (like the nationalist MHP) and demonized critics as enemies of the state. Thus, Gezi's legacy is twofold: it energized a generation of pro-democracy activists and gave a glimpse of a different societal vision, but it also prompted the ruling regime to entrench its authoritarian instincts, ensuring that such a spontaneous popular challenge would not be easily repeated. The trajectory that leads to the even darker events of 2016–2017 flows in part from the lessons Erdoğan learned at Gezi: never yield, double down on repression, and frame every crisis as a conspiracy.

8.5. THE 2013–14 CORRUPTION SCANDAL AND THE AKP–FETO FALLOUT

In mid-December 2013, the AKP government was rocked by an explosive high-level corruption scandal that pitted erstwhile allies against each other and plunged the regime into a new crisis. On December 17, 2013, Istanbul prosecutors launched dawn raids that led to the detention of dozens of individuals, including the sons of three cabinet ministers, influential businessmen close to the AKP, and the head of a state-owned bank. Leaked evidence (bags of cash found in a minister's home, wiretap recordings of illicit dealings) pointed to a sprawling graft scheme involving bribery, gold smuggling to Iran, and sweetheart deals. Crucially, it soon became clear

that those driving the investigations were senior police officers and prosecutors associated with the FETO, which had covertly built up influence within the police and judiciary. The AKP and the FETO had been tacit partners for much of the 2000s (collaborating, for instance, in purging secularists during the Ergenekon trials), but by late 2013 their relationship had soured over power-sharing and policy differences (one trigger was an AKP plan to close FETO prep schools). The December 17 operation, followed by a second round on December 25 targeting even bigger fish (reportedly including then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's own family), was widely seen as a FETO move to expose AKP corruption and thereby check Erdoğan's power. In effect, a long-hidden intra-state conflict burst into the open: a "parallel state" of FETO-aligned officials was challenging the AKP from within law enforcement and the courts. The stakes were enormous – the scandal struck at the AKP's legitimacy and threatened to indict the very top of the government.

The AKP leadership, especially Erdoğan, responded to the corruption probes not as a normal democratic government might (by allowing investigations and possibly resignations), but as if fending off an imminent coup d'état. Erdoğan immediately cast the revelations as a "judicial coup" orchestrated by a treacherous parallel structure loyal to FETO rather than the state (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017a). He forcefully rejected the allegations of corruption as fabrications and instead constructed a narrative that Türkiye was under attack by a clandestine network embedded in the bureaucracy – effectively, he shifted public focus from the content of the charges to the origin and motives of those charges. This was a textbook use of crisis framing: by asserting that the police and prosecutors behind the raids were tools of foreign-backed conspirators (he insinuated American and Israeli links, given FETO's U.S. exile), Erdoğan sought to invalidate the legal process and rally nationalist sentiment. The term "parallel state" (or "parallel structure") entered the AKP's lexicon at this time and has since been a staple term to describe the FETO. President Abdullah Gül (nominally above politics) even warned of the "serious threat" posed by entities acting as a parallel state – lending credence to Erdoğan's claims (Özbudun, 2015).

Armed with this narrative, the government moved with astonishing speed to purge and neutralize the investigative bodies. Within days, hundreds of police officers involved in the probes were sacked or reassigned – by late January 2014, over 2,000 police personnel across Türkiye had been reshuffled. By February, attention turned to the judiciary: the AKP-majority parliament hurriedly passed a law (on February 15, 2014) to overhaul the HSYK, giving the Justice Minister greater powers over judicial appointments and disciplinary actions. Though

President Gül approved this HSYK law with some reservations and it was partially annulled later by the Constitutional Court, the government had already used it to reassign or demote hundreds of judges and prosecutors perceived to be FETO-aligned (Özbudun, 2015). For example, the lead Istanbul prosecutors of the corruption case were removed and the investigations soon stalled and were officially dropped by the new prosecutors (despite the troves of evidence). One observers' commentary noted: "Erdogan hit back at the corruption investigation… by reassigning thousands of police and hundreds of judges and prosecutors" (Reuters, 2014). This large-scale purge in early 2014 was arguably Türkiye's biggest since the 1980 coup – and it was done by an elected government, under the banner of cleansing a fifth column.

The AKP's framing of the event as an attempted "soft coup" by a "parallel state" was highly effective in mobilizing its political base and justifying extraordinary steps. In many supporters' eyes, Erdoğan became a defender of national sovereignty against a sort of internal invader. Indeed, by characterizing the legal case as a putsch, Erdoğan absolved himself and his party of addressing the substance of the corruption claims. Instead, he flipped the script to portray himself as the target of illegitimate forces. The critical juncture qualities of this episode are clear: within a short span (roughly December 2013 to spring 2014), decisions were made that fundamentally altered Türkiye's judicial institutions and further entrenched executive dominance. The choices available to Erdoğan in responding to the scandal were numerous (he could have conceded to some reforms or compromises), but he chose a path of confrontation and consolidation – a choice that triggered a new path-dependent trajectory of authoritarian consolidation. Once the purges were in motion and the judiciary brought to heel, it became exceedingly unlikely that any future corruption or abuse of power could be impartially investigated. In other words, the window of institutional flux closed with the AKP emerging stronger and the rule of law weaker.

The fallout of the 2013–14 corruption crisis proved to be a hinge point that restructured power within the Turkish state in two critical ways. First, it definitively ruptured the AKP's alliance with the FETO, transforming FETO from shadowy partners into the state's public enemy number one (eventually officially designated as the FETÖ terrorist group). This meant that tens of thousands of civil servants – police officers, judges, teachers, bureaucrats – who were suspected of loyalty to FETO rather than Erdoğan were now marked for removal. The process began in 2014 with the justice sector and police purge, but it did not stop there. Over the next few years, Erdoğan systematically uprooted FETO influence: shutting down FETO-affiliated

media outlets, revoking the licenses of FETO-linked banks and businesses, and arresting or exiling the movement's perceived leaders. By one count, between 2014 and the eve of the 2016 coup attempt, Turkish authorities had already reassigned or dismissed thousands of police and judges on accusations of being part of the "parallel structure", and closed private prep schools run by FETO's network (the dershane closures) (Chudziak, 2016). This amounted to a comprehensive cleansing of state institutions of one of the AKP's last internal checks. Paradoxically, the AKP's earlier empowerment (via the 2010 judicial reforms) had allowed many FETO into judicial ranks; now those same reforms facilitated identifying and expelling them when they turned against Erdoğan, since the executive had leverage over judicial appointments. By 2015, the HSYK – now under tighter government control – expelled scores of judges/prosecutors for alleged FETO ties, and in a critical 2014 HSYK election, a government-aligned judicial bloc defeated a FETO platform for control of the council. In short, post-corruption scandal, the state's coercive and adjudicative apparatus was decisively taken over by Erdoğan loyalists (or at least cleansed of those deemed unreliable).

Second, the way the AKP handled the corruption scandal dealt a fatal blow to the rule of law and remaining separation of powers in Türkiye. After December 2013, no independent corruption investigation of significance would be feasible, as the police and prosecution were under the ruling party's thumb. The open interference in the judicial process – firing investigators, quashing cases – sent a clear message that judicial independence was effectively dead when regime survival was at stake. The High Council of Judges and Prosecutors, meant to shield the judiciary from political influence, was turned into an instrument of political retribution, dissolving the "headquarters" of the so-called parallel state in the judiciary. One telling quotation came from the head of Türkiye's Association of Judges, who said of the 2014 HSYK law: "With this law the government is dissolving that [parallel] center… It is a major blow to the independence of the judiciary" (Pamuk, 2016). Indeed, the executive aggrandizement that began in 2010 reached its culmination here: by early 2014, the judiciary's ability to check the executive was not just weakened, it was conformed to the executive's will.

This had a cascading effect on Türkiye's regime type. By 2015, many scholars classified Türkiye not as a flawed democracy anymore but as a competitive authoritarian regime, precisely because the erosion of judicial and media independence meant the ruling party could rig the playing field heavily in its favor (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016). The corruption scandal episode also politically polarized the country even further. AKP supporters largely accepted Erdoğan's framing that the scandal was a fiction cooked up by a parallel state. Opposition voices, however,

saw the blatant suppression of the investigations as proof of staggering malfeasance and authoritarian cover-up. This polarization – between those who trusted Erdoğan's narrative and those who believed the corruption evidence – entrenched a cleavage often termed the "democracy vs. authoritarianism" cleavage in subsequent Turkish politics (essentially pro-Erdoğan vs. anti-Erdoğan camps) (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020; McCoy & Somer, 2019). It's notable that the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) actually collaborated with the AKP in one respect: both were alarmed by the idea of a parallel state and supported legislation to curb FETO's influence (CHP, for example, initially backed investigations into FETO infiltration). But this was short-lived; soon the opposition focused on the government's overreach and lawlessness in responding to the probes.

Another long-term consequence was that Erdoğan emerged from this crisis more personally dominant. In the cabinet reshuffle that followed (three ministers resigned due to the scandal, although Erdoğan portrayed it as them being tainted by slander), Erdoğan installed even more loyal figures. He also appeared to learn that sharing power – even with an ideological ally like FETO – was too dangerous. From 2014 onward, Erdoğan relied on a tighter inner circle and purged dissenters within the AKP (e.g. President Gül and Deputy PM Bülent Arınç, who had questioned the response to the scandal, were gradually sidelined). This centralization around Erdoğan set the stage for the next major step: the drive for an executive presidency.

In summary, the 2013–14 corruption probes crisis was a critical juncture that the AKP transformed from a threat into an opportunity to fortify its hold on the state. In Capoccia and Kelemen's terms, it was a brief phase of high contingency – outcomes could have ranged from serious accountability (had the rule of law prevailed) to exactly what happened: an accelerated autocratic turn. By choosing the latter path, Erdoğan triggered self-reinforcing processes: once the parallel state was "rooted out" and the judiciary tamed, future challenges would be met with even more uniform repression (as seen in 2016). This juncture thus significantly shifted Türkiye's political trajectory, locking in an authoritarian trend. It illustrated one of the key patterns of modern democratic backsliding, the use of legal mechanisms by elected incumbents to eviscerate checks and balances, often justified by a narrative of protecting the nation. Türkiye's democratic institutions – already eroding – had now suffered a direct hit to the rule of law, creating an environment in which, ominously, a truly unchecked executive could exercise power. That reality would define Türkiye's fate in the tumultuous events to come, notably the 2016 coup attempt and 2017 constitutional overhaul.

8.6. THE JULY 2016 COUP ATTEMPT AND STATE OF EMERGENCY

On the night of July 15, 2016, Türkiye experienced an unprecedented event in its political history: a violent coup attempt by a faction of its own military that brought tanks into the streets and warplanes into the skies over Ankara and Istanbul. This rogue military faction, which the Turkish government quickly identified as being led by officers aligned with the FETO, seized control of key nodes (bridges, airports, the state TV station) and even bombed the parliament building in an effort to overthrow President Erdoğan's government. The putschists, however, failed to capture or neutralize Erdoğan and the top political leadership. In a dramatic sequence broadcast via FaceTime, Erdoğan addressed the nation, urging people to flood the streets in resistance (Al Jazeera, 2017; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017a). Turkish citizens responded en masse, confronting soldiers and effectively democratizing the defense of the government. Crucially, all major opposition parties, despite their dislike of Erdoğan, condemned the coup immediately – a key reason the plotters could not claim any legitimacy. Within hours, the coup attempt collapsed: soldiers were lynched or arrested by civilians and loyalist police, and loyal military units regained control. For the first time in modern Türkiye, a coup d'état was thwarted by a combination of public mobilization and the unity of political forces against it. President Erdoğan emerged as the survivor of a direct assault on the constitutional order.

Erdoğan famously referred to the failed coup as "a gift from God", an indication of how the regime would utilize this critical juncture. The aftermath of July 15, 2016, was characterized by an almost unbounded opportunity for the AKP leadership to "refound" the regime under the pretext of protecting democracy (Bâli, 2018; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017a). Immediately, the government declared a state of emergency on July 20, 2016 (with the Parliament's rubber-stamp approval), which would end up being extended seven times, lasting two years until July 2018. Under the state of emergency, Erdoğan and his cabinet (now ruling by decrees that had force of law) undertook a sweeping purge and restructuring of the state and society that is staggering in scale. As one analysis noted, the coup attempt served as a catalyst or pretext enabling the authorities to carry out a "final crackdown" on all enemies, primarily the FETO (Chudziak, 2016).

The numbers illustrate the breadth of the purge: By official counts, in the months after the coup over 100,000 civil servants were summarily dismissed, including more than 34,000 arrested pending trial and over 3,000 judges and prosecutors removed. This included about 30% of all military officers (nearly 150 generals) expelled, tens of thousands of police and civil

bureaucrats, and even teachers and academics (more than 20,000 teachers lost jobs, and 6,000 academics were fired). The media was hit particularly hard: at least 186 media outlets were shuttered, and around 150 journalists jailed, effectively silencing nearly all remaining critical voices (Turkey Tribunal, 2021). Entire institutions linked to FETO – schools, universities, charities, hospitals – were closed or seized. In essence, using emergency decrees, Erdoğan executed a wholesale cleansing of the state, removing not only those implicated in the coup but anyone suspected of disloyalty or dissent under the broad brush of "terrorism." The pretext was national security. As one emergency decree rationalized, these steps were necessary to "suppress" the coup network and other terrorist threats. But in effect it allowed Erdoğan to repopulate the state with loyalists: tens of thousands of new hires (often AKP-approved) filled the vacancies, ensuring a far more homogeneous bureaucracy and military.

From a theoretical standpoint, July 2016 represents a paradigmatic critical juncture: a sudden crisis opening extraordinary options for agency, followed by choices that lock in a new institutional path. Erdoğan's choices – to declare an extended emergency, rule by decree, and purge widely – fundamentally altered Türkiye's political order. These were radical actions that would have been unthinkable (and unlawful) in normal times; the coup attempt created a "rally around the flag" effect and atmosphere of fear that Erdoğan exploited to push the boundaries. In essence, the coup attempt allowed measures that opponents had long feared Erdoğan would like to take, but hadn't had the justification for. Now the justification was irrefutable for many: the state was fighting traitors who almost toppled the government. Moreover, the public trauma of the coup (around 250 people were killed resisting it) generated a nationalist fervor that Erdoğan harnessed. Crowds stayed out for weeks in "democracy watch" rallies, in effect endorsing Erdoğan's hard-line response (the opposition, after initial support against the coup, became uneasy as the purges expanded to unrelated dissidents).

The legacy of the failed coup on Türkiye's institutions is difficult to overstate. Perhaps the most consequential change was the transformation of civil-military relations – the coup attempt broke the back of the military's political role for good, but at the price of politicizing and weakening the institution. With roughly a third of generals dismissed and many cadets jailed, the Turkish Armed Forces – historically the guardians of the secular order – came firmly under civilian (specifically Erdoğan's) control. Emergency decrees abolished military high schools (long seen as breeding grounds for certain cliques) and brought the military directly under the defense ministry and president (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017a). The coup thus enabled the AKP to achieve a goal it had pursued fitfully for years: full supremacy over the once-autonomous military. The

institutional "power asymmetry" flipped completely – the military, discredited by the coup, became an instrument of the executive with no appetite to intervene again.

Concurrently, the judiciary and law enforcement were purged of any remaining independent-minded elements. This not only removed FETO influence (which was indeed significant in those bodies) but also allowed the government to pack courts with loyalists at all levels. For example, the two vacant positions on the Constitutional Court (after two members were arrested for alleged coup ties) were promptly filled by judges friendly to the AKP (Bâli, 2018). The result was that by 2017, Türkiye's apex court almost never ruled against the government line (notably, it remained silent or ineffective against blatant rights violations under the emergency). In lower courts, thousands of new judges/prosecutors were appointed in a rush, many of them staunch Erdoğan supporters. This completion of judicial capture meant the last avenue through which the opposition or civil society could seek redress – the courts – was largely closed.

Another area of impact was the bureaucratic and societal purge of FETO's network, which in scale amounted to something like de-Ba'athification in post-2003 Iraq or de-Nazification post-World War II, except targeting a much more amorphous group. As the OSW (2016) analysis observed, due to the FETO's amorphous nature and wide social reach, the authorities undertook a campaign of "large-scale elimination" not only of actual members but anyone "merely suspected" of ties. This created a climate of fear and collective punishment: for instance, having an account at a FETO-linked bank or having gone to a FETO-affiliated school could get a person purged or arrested. The purge also served as a handy tool to dispense with various other dissidents (activists, leftists, etc.) by lumping them in with the coup plotters. Notably, in November 2016, several HDP opposition lawmakers were arrested on terrorism charges, facilitated by the emergency rule and a political environment that tolerated no dissent. The state of emergency decrees institutionalized many changes that would outlast the emergency itself – including the ability of the government to fire any civil servant deemed a security risk without due process, a provision that remained in force even after 2018 through subsequent laws. In short, the coup attempt provided both motive and means to reconfigure the Turkish state into a centralized, loyalist apparatus.

Furthermore, the failed coup and the subsequent "victory" narrative boosted Erdoğan's personal authority and was used as the springboard for the final push to change the constitution from a parliamentary to a presidential system. The nationalist fervor and calls for a strong, unified leadership in the wake of the coup were deftly channeled by Erdoğan to argue that Türkiye

needed a powerful executive presidency to prevent future instability. Indeed, the path to the 2017 constitutional referendum was paved during the emergency period, when opposition voices were cowed and the public was still traumatized by the coup attempt. As one analysis put it, "Türkiye proves the link between securitization and the rise of presidentialism in times of crisis" – voters, under the shadow of the coup's aftermath and terror attacks, could be led to view an executive presidency as a solution for stability (Selçuk O. , 2016). And indeed, by April 2017, Erdoğan narrowly won a referendum to adopt a presidential system (more on that in the next section), something he might have struggled to achieve without the rally-round-the-flag effect and MHP's nationalist support that the post-coup environment fostered.

From a democratic backsliding theoretical lens, what happened after July 2016 in Türkiye epitomizes what Bermeo and others describe as the contemporary mode of democratic demise: not a sudden breakdown, but a rapid erosion under the guise of protecting democracy. Erdoğan insisted the emergency measures were saving the republic from enemies (invoking democratic legitimacy as the elected government fighting putschists), yet those very measures annihilated democratic norms. International indices recorded Türkiye's steep decline: Freedom House dropped Türkiye to "Not Free" by 2017, and EU officials decried a "witch-hunt" atmosphere. But domestic opposition was largely hamstrung; criticizing the purge could be (and was) equated with sympathy for terrorists (Freedom House, 2017). In effect, the failed coup enabled the success of a "creeping coup" by the executive – a consolidation of authoritarian power that may have been incremental before, but proceeded at breakneck speed after the coup attempt (Bâli, 2018).

In conclusion, the July 2016 coup attempt was the ultimate critical juncture in the AKP's authoritarian trajectory: it was a moment of existential threat that Erdoğan turned into an occasion for transformative change. Choices made in the turbulent days and weeks after the coup – to invoke emergency rule, to purge at unprecedented scale, to rule by decree – had self-reinforcing effects that fundamentally constrained future choices and opponents' capacity to resist. By the time the emergency was lifted in 2018, Türkiye's polity had been refashioned: a demoralized opposition, a neutered media, a judiciary in lockstep with the executive, a military purged and compliant, and a bureaucracy populated by loyalists. The path forward was one of "authoritarian resilience", in which Erdoğan's regime, having survived a near-death experience, would entrench itself further. As Esen and Gümüşçü (2017a)observed, the failure of the coup not only demonstrated the resilience of Türkiye's competitive authoritarian regime but paved the way for an even more stable authoritarian order under AKP rule. Put simply, after July 2016

Türkiye was no longer a case of democratic backsliding – it had largely backslid. What remained was to formalize this new reality, which the regime proceeded to do in the next critical juncture: the 2017 constitutional referendum.

8.7. THE 2017 CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM AND THE SHIFT TO PRESIDENTIALISM

The final pivotal moment examined is the April 16, 2017 constitutional referendum, in which Turkish voters (narrowly) approved a package of amendments that fundamentally altered the country's system of government from a parliamentary regime to a hyper-presidential system. The referendum was the capstone of Erdoğan's long-held ambition to accumulate the powers of head of state and head of government in one office. Contextually, this vote occurred under extraordinary conditions: Türkiye was still under the state of emergency declared after the 2016 coup attempt, and the climate was one of intense nationalism, fear of threats, and heavy suppression of dissent. The proposal – backed by the AKP and its new ally, MHP, would abolish the prime minister's office, transfer executive authority to a president who could also lead a party, enable the president to issue decrees, appoint cabinet ministers and senior judges, and dissolve parliament (triggering new elections) on certain terms. It was a sweeping change, effectively concentrating power in Erdoğan's hands without the coalition constraints or intra-party checks that a parliamentary system can impose. Opponents (CHP, HDP, and various civil groups) warned that this was a recipe for "one-man rule" or dictatorship (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). But following the coup attempt, Erdoğan's narrative of needing strong leadership for a strong Türkiye resonated with a segment of voters. Moreover, the playing field for the referendum campaign was glaringly uneven, as international observers later chronicled.

The run-up to the April 2017 vote was marked by heavy bias and restrictions favoring the "Yes" (pro-presidential system) camp. European election observers concluded that the referendum "took place on an unlevel playing field" with the "two sides of the campaign not having equal opportunities". Under the state of emergency, fundamental freedoms "essential to a genuinely democratic process were curtailed" (OSCE/ODIHR, 2018). The government dominated the airwaves: as noted in the observers' report, the "Yes" campaign, backed by Erdoğan and the ruling party, received the lion's share of media coverage while "No" campaigners were marginalized (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). Many opposition rallies were banned or disrupted under emergency decrees forbidding gatherings, whereas Erdoğan and AKP figures held frequent rallies (even controversially in European cities with the Turkish diaspora, sparking

diplomatic spats). Dozens of politicians and activists campaigning for "No" were detained or threatened with investigation on absurd grounds like "insulting the president" or "terrorism propaganda." The HDP's co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş, for example, was in jail throughout the campaign (having been arrested in Nov 2016), which silenced a major "No" voice, especially in the southeast. Additionally, a last-minute decision by Türkiye's High Election Board on referendum day – to count unstamped ballots that normally would be invalid – was heavily criticized as illegal and raised questions about the vote's integrity (Shaheen, 2017). Observers highlighted that this move "lifted an important safeguard against fraud" and noted that about 1.5 million such ballots were counted (exceeding the margin of victory) (OSCE/ODIHR, 2018).

Despite these conditions, the referendum result was extremely close: the "Yes" camp won with approximately 51.4% of the vote to 48.6% "No", a margin of about 1.38 million votes out of 49+ million cast. Major urban provinces (Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir) actually voted No, suggesting that support for the new system was largely from rural and conservative-nationalist bases. The opposition cried foul and urged annulment due to irregularities, but the election board and courts (now filled with AKP loyalists) rejected these appeals (Shaheen, 2017). On April 17, 2017, President Erdoğan declared victory and hailed the dawn of a "new Türkiye", effectively completing the institutional transformation that had been years in the making.

The 2017 constitutional referendum stands as the culminating critical juncture in Türkiye's democratic backsliding under the AKP, in that it formally codified an authoritarian shift that had been proceeding de facto. By legalizing the executive presidency, the referendum removed remaining structural checks on Erdoğan's power, paving the way for "the regime change without regime change." In practical terms, the amendments (most of which came into effect after the June 2018 elections) allowed Erdoğan to: rule until at least 2028 (with the possibility of two five-year terms starting in 2018, and a loophole for a potential third term if early elections are called), issue decrees with force of law (in areas not explicitly reserved for legislation), appoint a vast array of officials (from vice-presidents and ministers to half the members of the High Judicial bodies) without parliamentary approval, and dissolve parliament on any pretext (triggering simultaneous presidential and legislative elections) (Yazıcı, 2017). It also ended the neutrality of the presidency – Erdoğan could resume chairmanship of the AKP (which he did immediately), thus blurring party and state. The separation of powers was functionally gutted: whereas in the parliamentary system the government needed the confidence of parliament, in the new system the president faced only a token impeachment process requiring impossibly high majorities.

From a regime-type perspective, Türkiye under the new constitution fits the ideal type of a "delegative democracy" or outright electoral autocracy, wherein periodic elections occur but the playing field is heavily skewed and horizontal accountability is minimal to none. Scholars Esen and Gümüşçü (2017b), who called the referendum a "small yes for presidentialism", emphasized that it was carried out in unfair circumstances and that it consolidated competitive authoritarian rule. The changes were implemented despite only a slender majority approving them, highlighting how the AKP leveraged crisis conditions to achieve a long-sought goal that may not have been attainable in normal times or a more balanced media environment. Indeed, European observers pointed out that under the state of emergency, fundamental freedoms (like media, assembly) were curtailed and that likely influenced the outcome (Shaheen, 2017). The legitimacy of the referendum was thus contested, but internationally, apart from muted criticism, it stood, and Erdoğan moved forward.

For Türkiye's democratic institutions, the shift to presidentialism in 2017–2018 was the death knell for what remained of institutional checks. The parliament became markedly weaker – after 2018, the presidency could legislate via decrees in many domains, and budgetary control shifted largely to the executive. The judiciary, already cowed, saw the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (the reformed HSYK) now have 4 of its 13 members appointed directly by the president and the rest by the parliament (effectively by the ruling party majority). The Constitutional Court's composition was almost entirely appointed by AKP presidents or parliamentary majorities by that point, and with the new system, any future appointments would be in Erdoğan's hands up to 2028. The military had no constitutional role at all in the new system (the National Security Council was retained but purely advisory and anyway filled with Erdoğan loyalists). The bureaucracy was reshaped as well: ministries could be restructured or merged at will by presidential decree, and top civil servants became political appointees (the traditional merit-based career bureaucracy was eroded). This "personalization" of power aligns with Juan Linz's (1990) classic warnings about presidentialism in polarized societies – except in Türkiye's case, it was an already-authoritarian president securing his hold, rather than a flawed democracy experimenting with a new constitution (Yazıcı, 2017).

In societal terms, the adoption of the presidential system had the effect of further polarizing Türkiye. Erdoğan pitched the victory as a nearly civilizational choice – equating the "Yes" vote with securing Türkiye's future greatness and independence (often tying opponents to coup-plotters or terrorists during the campaign). The narrow margin revealed a country split down the middle. The post-referendum political landscape saw the formal alignment of the AKP with

the nationalist MHP (a de facto coalition that became the "People's Alliance") versus a disparate opposition that, however, began to coordinate more by necessity (CHP, newly formed İYİP, and others later formed a "Nation Alliance"). Thus, one could argue the 2017 critical juncture entrenched a new dominant cleavage: pro-Erdoğan vs. anti-Erdoğan (or authoritarian vs. democracy block) as the defining feature of politics (McCoy & Somer, 2019). However, given the incumbency advantages and institutional controls in Erdoğan's hands, the opposition's task to rollback authoritarianism became Herculean under the new rules.

Finally, the 2017 referendum underscored how democratic backsliding can culminate in constitutional change that is hard to reverse. By using a veneer of democratic process (a referendum) to ratify an undemocratic design under conditions of limited freedom, the AKP achieved what theorists call "constitutional retrogression." It's a textbook case where populist authoritarian leaders first undermine checks, then rewrite the constitution to formalize their dominance – seen also in places like Hungary (Orbán's 2011 new constitution) or Russia (Putin's 2020 amendments). Türkiye's case is particularly instructive because each prior crisis (2007, 2008, 2013, 2016) incrementally set the stage for the next, and the 2016 crisis directly enabled the 2017 constitutional overhaul in an almost deterministic way. As a Council of Europe observer put it, "the state of emergency should have been lifted before such a fundamental vote", implying that the outcome was shaped by the abnormal situation (OSCE/ODIHR & Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2017). The AKP did not lift emergency rule until three months after the referendum, having secured the change.

In conclusion, the 2017 constitutional referendum was the critical juncture that sealed Türkiye's transition to a new regime type. It legally consecrated Erdoğan's one-man rule, fulfilling the authoritarian trajectory that began unfolding years prior. By enshrining the executive presidency, Türkiye's democratic backslide crossed a point of no return: any future restoration of liberal democracy would now require not just changing leaders but undoing the constitutional structure itself. This underlines a key insight of backsliding literature – that autocratization often becomes entrenched through legal means and constitutional redesign, which are then difficult to reverse (absent another crisis or extraordinary political consensus). In Türkiye's case, the path set by the AKP through successive crises culminated in a new constitutional order, locking in the "New Türkiye" Erdoğan heralded, which bears little resemblance to the pluralistic democracy reformists once hoped Türkiye was moving toward. As of 2017, Türkiye firmly stood as an executive-dominated hybrid regime, with the last decade's critical junctures – each

an opportunity turned into autocratic consolidation – having fundamentally transformed its political landscape.

9. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES – TÜRKIYE AND OTHER COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Türkiye's democratic backsliding under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is not an isolated case but part of a broader pattern of erosion in hybrid regimes worldwide. Over the past two decades, political scientists have described a "third wave of autocratization" in which numerous democracies have regressed into hybrid or authoritarian rule (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Above discussed concepts like illiberal democracy, delegative democracy, and competitive authoritarianism all have been developed to classify regimes that straddle democratic forms and authoritarian substance. In these systems, elections continue and incumbents claim democratic mandates, but liberal institutions – the rule of law, checks and balances, a free press, minority rights – are steadily undermined. Türkiye under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan exemplifies this trend, as do Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Russia under President Vladimir Putin, and Venezuela under the Chávez/Maduro leadership. Each of these cases features elected strongmen who hollowed out democratic institutions from within, turning flawed democracies into "illiberal" polities that retain the veneer of electoral legitimacy while ignoring constitutional limits and basic rights. The trajectory of Turkish regime under the AKP thus invites comparison with these other competitive authoritarian regimes to illuminate common patterns and distinctive nuances of democratic backsliding in the 21st century.

This chapter focuses on Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela as comparative cases alongside Türkiye. These regimes have been selected because all meet the definition of competitive authoritarian or "hybrid" regimes in which multiparty elections and formal democratic institutions exist, yet incumbents routinely violate democratic norms so severely that the playing field is heavily skewed (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Each case represents a once (or nominally) democratic system that experienced significant backsliding under a long-ruling leader or dominant party. At the same time, they provide variation in regions (Eastern Europe, Eurasia, Latin America, Middle East) and historical context, allowing for a cross-regional perspective on authoritarian resurgence. All four countries saw an authoritarian turn during roughly the same historical period (2000s–2010s), often cited in the literature as emblematic cases of the contemporary democratic recession (Diamond, 2015). Focusing on these prominent examples enables a thematically structured comparison of how and why competitive authoritarian regimes emerge. Other relevant cases of recent backsliding – such as Poland under

the Law and Justice Party, the Philippines under Duterte, or India under Modi – are occasionally referenced for additional insight, but the core comparative analysis centers on Türkiye, Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela. These four were chosen because they illustrate key dimensions of hybrid regime evolution, and each has figured prominently in scholarly debates on democratic erosion.

The comparison is organized thematically across several key dimensions of competitive authoritarianism, rather than as separate case studies. This allows us to identify common strategies and mechanisms through which incumbents undermine democracy, as well as important differences shaped by local conditions. The themes examined include:

1. Constitutional and institutional transformations: How incumbents rewrite constitutions and restructure state institutions to entrench their power.
2. Co-optation and erosion of the judiciary: How the independence of courts is curtailed through packing, purges, and politicization.
3. Control of media and public discourse: How regimes suppress independent media and dominate the information environment.
4. Populism and majoritarian legitimation: How populist rhetoric and claims of majority mandate are used to justify illiberal governance.
5. Exploitation of crises and critical junctures: How ruling parties leverage crises (real or manufactured) to grab emergency powers or eliminate rivals.
6. Patronage networks and state capture: How authoritarian incumbents use patronage, clientelism, and corruption to secure elite loyalty and capture the state apparatus.
7. Electoral manipulation and autocratic legalism: How elections are skewed via legal engineering, and how rulers use "rule-by-law" tactics to maintain power while preserving a façade of legality.

Grounded in the theoretical concepts introduced earlier in this dissertation – notably illiberal democracy, delegative democracy, competitive authoritarianism, and what some have termed majoritarian authoritarianism – this chapter employs a snowball survey of academic literature to compare Türkiye's experience under the AKP with analogous processes in Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela. The goal is to produce a deep, thematic analysis that highlights both universal patterns of democratic backsliding and the context-specific features of each case. By juxtaposing Türkiye with these other regimes, we can better understand the general logic of how elected leaders dismantle democracy from within, and also discern what is unique about

Türkiye's path. Ultimately, this comparative perspective will shed light on how the Turkish case contributes to broader theories of regime change and democratic erosion. The sections that follow examine each theme in turn, drawing on extensive scholarly research and case evidence to map the convergences and divergences among the four countries. For the sake of not repeating what has already been written and discussed throughout the dissertation so far, Türkiye's case will not be dissected under every thematic sub-chapter while Hungary, Russia and Venezuela will be discussed in more detail.

9.1. CONSTITUTIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS

One of the first hallmarks of democratic backsliding is the transformation of constitutional and institutional frameworks to concentrate power in the hands of incumbents. Competitive authoritarian regimes often undertake constitutional coups or legal revisions that weaken checks and balances and extend the ruler's tenure (Scheppele K. L., 2018). These changes are usually implemented under the guise of reform, sometimes even via popular referendums, but their effect is to fundamentally rewrite the rules of the game in favor of the ruling party. Türkiye, Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela each underwent significant constitutional or institutional overhauls that facilitated their transition from democracy toward authoritarianism. While the specifics vary, the pattern of using legal means to achieve authoritarian ends is a recurring theme.

Hungary's democratic backsliding under Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party followed a similar script of radical institutional reengineering. After winning a two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2010, Fidesz undertook what Kim Lane Scheppele (2013) famously termed a "constitutional revolution." The party drafted and enacted a new constitution (the Fundamental Law of 2012) without input from the opposition or civil society, using its supermajority to sideline the existing system of checks and balances. The new constitution, along with a flurry of cardinal (super-majority) laws, extensively rewrote the institutional landscape. Key changes included weakening the Constitutional Court's powers (for example, removing its jurisdiction over budgetary laws and packing it with new Fidesz-appointed judges), lowering the retirement age for judges from 70 to 62 which forced out a wave of senior judges (including Supreme Court justices) and allowed Fidesz to appoint their replacements, and creating new institutions staffed by loyalists – such as a National Judicial Office with sweeping powers over courts, headed by a close ally of Orbán (Bánkuti, Halmai, & Scheppele, 2012). The ruling party also entrenched

its policies by requiring a two-thirds majority to change many basic laws (on media, electoral rules, fiscal policy, etc.), thus "locking in" Fidesz's agenda even if it were to lose a simple majority in the future. In János Kornai's (2015) words, Hungary executed a "U-turn" away from democracy through these legal steps, retreating from the liberal democratic model it had adopted after communism.

Orbán openly articulated his ideological aim as building an "illiberal state." In a 2014 speech, he declared liberal democracy obsolete and praised regimes like Russia and Türkiye as models, coining the term "illiberal democracy" to describe Hungary's direction (reported in Müller, 2016). This majoritarian worldview held that since Fidesz won a strong electoral mandate, it was entitled to refashion the state in line with its vision. By 2013, scholars were describing Hungary as a "Frankenstate" – a state stitched together from legal changes to serve the ruling party's aims (Scheppele K. L., 2013). The new Fundamental Law and related institutional tweaks gave Fidesz enduring control: for instance, even if it lost a future election, a loyal Fidesz President (elected to a long term) and packed courts could veto or block an opposition government's initiatives. Indeed, as of 2022, Orbán had won four consecutive elections with supermajorities, enabling him to amend the constitution at will. The cumulative effect is that Hungary's nominally democratic constitution now functions as a mechanism for "elective dictatorship" (as some critics label it) where checks and balances are feeble (Kornai, 2015). This illustrates how a determined ruling party can legally consolidate power by rewriting foundational rules – a pattern strikingly parallel to Türkiye's experience, though achieved earlier and even more comprehensively in the Hungarian case.

Russia's slide into authoritarianism was also marked by significant institutional restructuring, albeit more through informal recentralization and later amendments rather than an immediate constitutional rewrite. The 1993 Russian Constitution (adopted under Yeltsin) already provided for a strong presidency, and Vladimir Putin fully exploited these powers after coming to office in 2000. In the early 2000s, Putin built what he called a "power vertical", reasserting central control over Russia's federal and political institutions. Notably, in 2004, following a terrorist attack (the Beslan school siege), Putin abolished the direct election of regional governors, switching to a system where governors were effectively appointed by the Kremlin (a change later partially reversed in 2012, though in practice elections remain tightly managed). He also brought the State Duma (parliament) to heel by engineering large pro-Kremlin majorities – achieved through a mix of electoral manipulation (discussed later) and the cooptation of minor parties. Independent power centers in the state were one by one subdued: oligarchs who had

wielded influence in the 1990s were either co-opted or exiled/imprisoned (as in the case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky), sending a clear message that political challenges to the Kremlin would not be tolerated. Constitutional checks like the judiciary were tamed informally (few judges would rule against the regime on serious matters after seeing the fate of those who crossed Putin), but formal institutional changes at first were limited. In essence, Russia in the 2000s became a "super-presidential" system in practice, even as the letter of the 1993 Constitution remained largely unchanged (Fish, 2005).

However, as Putin's rule extended, constitutional manipulation came into play to extend his tenure. The first workaround was the swap with Dmitry Medvedev: term-limited from serving more than two consecutive terms in 2008, Putin backed Medvedev as president for one term while he became prime minister, then returned as president in 2012. To avoid needing such maneuvers again, Putin introduced major constitutional amendments in 2020. In a choreographed process capped by a nationwide vote, the constitution was amended to "reset" Putin's term count to zero, allowing him to run for additional presidential terms beyond the prior two-term limit (effectively permitting him to stay in power until 2036). The amendments also strengthened presidential powers further (e.g., granting former presidents lifetime immunity and a permanent seat on a new State Council, ensuring Putin's influence even beyond his presidency) and enshrined conservative values (such as a provision against same-sex marriage) to bolster Putin's legitimation strategy. Although presented as reflecting the "will of the people" (the regime organized a referendum-like vote that it claimed showed popular approval), these changes were a clear case of an incumbent bending constitutional rules to entrench personal rule. By resetting term limits and reinforcing presidential primacy, Putin's Russia moved firmly into personalist authoritarian territory under a constitutional facade. What distinguishes Russia's path is that its initial constitution already favored executive dominance, so wholesale rewriting was unnecessary – instead, strategic amendments and the creative "use" of constitutional loopholes (like the Medvedev interlude) achieved the goal of open-ended power. The outcome is a constitution devoid of liberal democratic spirit, molded to legitimize an indefinite Putin presidency (Levitsky & Way, 2020). In comparative perspective, Russia demonstrates that even without a new constitution, an authoritarian-minded leader can co-opt existing institutional frameworks to the same effect: permanent, centralized control.

Venezuela's Hugo Chávez went perhaps the furthest in refounding a regime via constitutional transformation. Upon his election in 1998, Chávez's first major initiative was to convoke a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution. The 1999 Constitution of the Bolivarian

Republic of Venezuela, approved by popular referendum, dramatically altered Venezuela's political structure. It strengthened the presidency (extending the term length from 5 to 6 years and allowing immediate re-election for a second term), introduced new institutions (such as a public defender and a revamped unicameral legislature), and redefined rights in an ambitious way. While the 1999 constitution had many democratic-sounding provisions, in practice it was a tool for Chávez to sweep aside the old order. The Constituent Assembly not only drafted a new charter but also effectively dissolved the existing Congress and packed the new institutions with Chávez loyalists (Corrales & Penfold, 2011). All judges were subject to re-appointment, enabling an initial purge of the judiciary. In the early years, these changes still allowed for some pluralism – opposition parties continued to compete and even briefly ousted Chávez in a short-lived 2002 coup – but the new constitutional order gave Chávez ample levers to dominate politics.

As his rule progressed, Chávez further modified rules to entrench his movement's dominance. After surviving a recall referendum in 2004 and seeing his allies win legislative super-majorities, Chávez moved to eliminate presidential term limits. A 2007 constitutional reform package (which included removing term limits) was surprisingly rejected by voters – the only nationwide vote Chávez ever lost. Undeterred, he re-submitted the proposal specifically on term limits in a 2009 referendum, which passed. This amendment abolished term limits for all elected offices, allowing Chávez (and other officials) unlimited re-elections (Corrales J. , 2015). This was a critical juncture: Venezuela shifted from a bounded competitive system into an open-ended electoral autocracy once term limits – a key democratic constraint – were removed. After Chávez's death in 2013, his successor Nicolás Maduro inherited these powers and went even further in dismantling institutional checks. Most notably, when the opposition won control of the National Assembly in late 2015 – posing the first serious institutional challenge to the Chavista regime – Maduro used a compliant Supreme Court to nullify the Assembly's powers and then in 2017 convened an extra-constitutional Constituent Assembly packed with regime supporters. This new body simply usurped legislative authority, thereby voiding the opposition's electoral victory. The 1999 constitution was essentially bypassed without being formally replaced: Maduro ruled by decree through the loyalist Constituent Assembly and an "emergency economic decree", gutting the last vestiges of horizontal accountability. In short, Venezuela went through multiple waves of constitutional engineering – first the Chávez-era Bolivarian Constitution, then ad hoc Maduro-era structures – all aimed at extending ruling-

party hegemony. What began as a populist refoundation of the republic ended up as outright authoritarian rule camouflaged by revolutionary legality.

Comparatively, Venezuela's experience underscores how authoritarians can exploit constituent power and repeated legal revisions to cement their rule. Chávez used democratic tools (elections, referenda, constituent assemblies) to dismantle democracy – a textbook case of what scholars call "autocratic legalism", defined as the use, abuse, and non-use of law to undermine liberal institutions (Corrales J. , 2015). Türkiye and Hungary implemented their constitutional overhauls once in power, whereas Chávez preemptively rewrote the rules upon taking office, and Maduro manipulated the constitution ex post to neutralize electoral defeat. Despite these differences in sequencing, the end results are analogous: rule "by law" rather than rule of law. Each regime tailored the constitutional order to ensure that formal democratic processes could not easily dislodge the incumbents.

In sum, across the four cases, we observe a clear pattern of incumbents transforming formal institutions to consolidate power. Whether through new constitutions (Hungary's Fundamental Law, Venezuela's Bolivarian Constitution), sweeping amendment packages (Türkiye 2017, Russia 2020), or gradual legal tweaks, the letter of the law has been reshaped to serve authoritarian ends. These legal-institutional changes are often carried out with claims of popular legitimacy – for example, Orbán invoked the "will of the two-thirds" majority, Erdoğan the "national will" of referendum voters, Chávez the voice of a constituent assembly representing the people. In reality, they mark the subversion of constitutional democracy from within. This phenomenon validates Nancy Bermeo's (2016) observation that contemporary democratic breakdowns more commonly occur via executive aggrandizement. Through constitutional and institutional engineering, competitive authoritarians entrench themselves while maintaining a façade of legality. The next sections examine how these regimes also neutralized other key institutions (like the judiciary and media) and what mechanisms they used to sustain their dominance beyond just rewriting the laws.

9.2. CO-OPTATION AND EROSION OF THE JUDICIARY

An independent judiciary is a foundational check in liberal democracies, but it is often one of the first targets of an aspiring authoritarian regime. All four cases – Türkiye, Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela – demonstrate systematic efforts to co-opt, weaken, or outright purge the judicial branch to remove constraints on executive power. By capturing the courts, regimes both

immunize themselves from accountability and gain a potent tool to use against opponents. The tactics employed range from court-packing (increasing the number of judges and filling seats with loyalists), to lowering retirement ages and purging existing judges, to asserting political control over judicial appointments and disciplinary processes. The end result is the erosion of the rule of law and the conversion of courts into extensions of the ruling party's authority – often cloaked under legal reforms that claim to enhance efficiency or "democratize" the judiciary.

The Hungarian judiciary, once relatively strong among post-communist states, saw a swift and surgical emasculation after Fidesz's 2010 victory. With constitutional changes, Fidesz implemented a multifaceted strategy: purge, pack, and patronage. First, the new constitution and a cardinal law on the judiciary in 2011 lowered the mandatory retirement age for judges from 70 to 62 overnight, forcing about 274 judges – including many senior appellate and Supreme Court judges appointed under previous governments – into retirement (European Court of Justice, 2012). This created a sudden vacuum that the ruling party could fill with its appointees. Although the European Court of Justice later ruled this mass ouster illegal age discrimination, by then the deed was done – many new judges had been installed. Second, Fidesz expanded and packed the Constitutional Court. The court's size was increased (from 11 to 15 judges) and the nomination rules changed so that Fidesz alone (with its two-thirds majority) could name candidates without opposition consensus. Orbán's parliamentary bloc swiftly appointed loyalists, including party apparatchiks with minimal judicial experience, tipping the balance of the court. Decisions of the Constitutional Court that had previously struck down laws were no longer an obstacle – for instance, after the Court invalidated an early Fidesz media law, the government simply re-passed similar provisions via a constitutional amendment, and the reconstituted court acquiesced (Scheppele K. L., 2013). Third, a new National Judicial Office (NJO) was created, headed by a Fidesz loyalist (Tünde Handó, a close friend of Orbán's family). The NJO was given extraordinary administrative powers such as selecting which court would hear certain cases and deciding judicial promotions and transfers. This allowed behind-the-scenes influence on which judges handled politically sensitive trials. Under Handó, the NJO consistently favored judges perceived as government-friendly and sidelined those who were not (Scheppele K. L., 2018).

Additionally, the Chief Prosecutor's office in Hungary has been led since 2010 by Péter Polt, a known Fidesz affiliate, who has largely shielded government corruption from prosecution while zealously going after opposition figures – effectively meaning judicial accountability through

criminal law is one-sided. With these measures, Hungary's judiciary has been subjugated: the Constitutional Court seldom rules against core government interests, and the ordinary courts' leadership is aligned with the ruling party. While not all individual judges are government puppets, the system is structured such that cases critical to Fidesz are likely to be decided favorably for the regime. The remaining independent judges operate under the shadow of a political sword – they can be reassigned or passed over for promotion. In sum, through retirement purges and institutional redesign, Orbán transformed Hungary's judiciary from a potential veto player into a compliant body. Asv Scheppele (2013) noted, "the sudden lowering of the retirement age for judges was a coup from above against an independent judiciary", and together with court-packing, it ensured that the courts would not block Fidesz's broader authoritarian project.

In Russia, the judiciary had limited independence even in the 1990s, and under Putin it progressively lost any autonomy. Rather than dramatic legal changes, Russia's approach has been characterized by informal control and selective empowerment of courts for authoritarian ends. Early in Putin's tenure, high-profile cases signaled that judges were expected to align with Kremlin interests. The most notorious was the prosecution of oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky in the mid-2000s: the trial and conviction (widely seen as politically motivated punishment for a rival) demonstrated that courts would dutifully implement the Kremlin's will in politically salient cases. Judges who showed independence could face demotion or worse. Over time, a norm of "telephone justice" became entrenched – where outcomes of sensitive trials are dictated by political superiors via informal channels. The Kremlin also centralized the prosecution service under loyal leadership (Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika, and later Igor Krasnov, have been regime stalwarts), ensuring that politically important cases are handled to the regime's satisfaction.

While Putin did not need to purge the judiciary en masse – many judges were pliant or could be pressured – there were structural tweaks reinforcing control. The merger of Russia's Supreme Court and High Arbitration Court in 2014 (the latter had been relatively professional and had sometimes ruled against government interests in business disputes) brought economic cases under the sway of a more government-influenced judiciary. Judicial appointment powers remained largely with the president, and Putin ensured key positions (like the Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court) were held by regime loyalists. The Russian Constitutional Court, which in the 1990s had a moment of defiance under Yeltsin (even declaring some of his decrees unconstitutional), became quiescent in the 2000s and has since actively assisted the regime –

for example, it quickly approved the legality of the 2020 constitutional amendments extending Putin's rule. Moreover, new repressive laws passed by Putin's rubber-stamp parliament (such as laws on "foreign agents", extremism, and protest regulation) gave courts broad tools to criminalize dissent, and judges have enforced them strictly against opposition activists. In effect, Russia's judiciary has been co-opted as an instrument of the authoritarian state – it provides a legal stamp on repression rather than checking it. Scholars note that Russia illustrates "rule by law" in action: the regime uses courts and laws to legitimize crackdowns, creating a veneer of legality (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Independent-minded lawyers or judges do exist but have no power to change systemic outcomes; indeed, some critical lawyers have themselves been disbarred or fled abroad.

The Venezuelan judiciary's subjugation under Chávez and Maduro is one of the clearest cases of outright court-packing and politicization. Before Chávez, Venezuela's Supreme Court (renamed the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, TSJ, under the 1999 constitution) had 20 justices who served fixed terms. In 2004, following a contentious recall referendum which Chávez survived, the pro-Chávez legislature passed an "Organic Law of the Supreme Court" that expanded the number of justices from 20 to 32. This allowed Chávez's coalition to immediately appoint 12 new loyalist justices, tipping the balance of the court in the government's favor (Human Rights Watch, 2004). The same law also made it easier for the National Assembly (controlled by Chávez's party) to remove justices with a simple majority, thus exerting a Damoclean sword over any sitting judges. Unsurprisingly, once the new pack of judges was installed, the judiciary became reliably pro-government. The reconstituted TSJ demonstrated its allegiance by dismissing cases against government officials and upholding controversial executive actions. In 2010, after the opposition made gains in parliament, the outgoing chavista-dominated legislature packed the TSJ again by appointing 9 loyalist justices in a hurried lame-duck session, further entrenching the Court's obedience (Corrales J. , 2015). By the time the opposition actually gained a legislative majority in 2015, the TSJ was fully a political tool: it swiftly invalidated several opposition legislators' elections (stripping the opposition of a supermajority) and then proceeded to strike down every law the new National Assembly tried to pass. In 2017, the TSJ went so far as to briefly declare it was taking over the powers of the National Assembly outright – effectively an attempted judicial coup – which was walked back after international outcry, but only nominally. Shortly after, Maduro created the extra-legal Constituent Assembly to bypass the legislature entirely, as noted earlier.

Beyond the Supreme Tribunal, lower courts in Venezuela are heavily politicized. The vast majority of judges in Venezuela are temporary or provisional (without tenure), making them extremely vulnerable to political pressure – they know that ruling against government interests could cost them their positions. The regime has jailed judges who defied orders in high-profile cases; a notable example is Judge María Lourdes Afiuni, who in 2009 granted bail to an opposition-linked businessman against the government's wishes and was promptly arrested and imprisoned (Amnesty International, 2010). This case sent a chilling message to all judges. Under Maduro, the judiciary has been an active participant in repression – issuing arrest warrants for opposition leaders, banning opposition candidates from office on dubious grounds, and legitimizing the executive's increasingly autocratic measures. In 2018, when Maduro ran for re-election in a widely criticized vote, it was the courts that had banned his main potential opponents (by upholding their disqualifications or imprisonment). Venezuela thus shows an extreme of judicial erosion: the courts are not merely compliant but are weaponized to eliminate political pluralism. As Corrales (2015)observed, Chávez's strategy of "autocratic legalism" relied heavily on capturing the judiciary – by abusing legal mechanisms like court expansion and loyalist appointments, the regime armored itself against any lawful challenge.

Across these cases, the erosion of judicial independence follows a consistent rationale. Independent courts are dangerous to emerging authoritarians because courts can overturn unconstitutional laws, block fraudulent election results, or hold corrupt officials accountable. Therefore, hybrid regimes move early to disable this threat. Some common themes emerge:

- Both Hungary and Venezuela literally expanded the size of their highest courts and filled new seats with loyalists in order to obtain a majority. Türkiye increased seats on its high courts via constitutional amendment as well. This is a direct way to shift the ideological balance of courts.

- The mass dismissal of judges in Türkiye post-2016 and Hungary's forced retirements exemplify using administrative measures to purge courts of independently minded jurists. By reducing the tenure or changing retirement rules, regimes legally justify removing an old guard en masse (European Court of Justice ruling noted this as unlawful in Hungary's case, but the political goal was achieved nonetheless).

- In all cases, appointment processes were altered or exploited to install regime-friendly judges. This includes changing judicial council structures (Türkiye's HSYK reform), requiring only simple legislative majorities for appointments where previously

consensus was needed (Hungary), or simply having a rubber-stamp legislature appoint loyalists (Venezuela, Russia).

- Even without formal changes, executives use their influence to discipline judges (e.g., Russia's informal pressures or Venezuela's probationary judges system) ensuring that the judiciary internalizes the regime's preferences. Judges come to understand that certain outcomes are expected in politically sensitive cases (through signals from superiors or overt statements by leaders).

- Once captured, the judiciary can lend a false legitimacy to authoritarian actions. Regimes prefer to jail opposition figures on criminal charges via courts rather than by extralegal abductions, as it creates a legal pretext. For example, Türkiye's judges hand down terrorism convictions to journalists and opposition politicians, giving the regime a talking point that "due process" was followed (albeit under draconian laws the regime itself enacted). In Venezuela, the judiciary banned opposition parties and politicians, so the government claims their exclusion is "legal."

In theoretical terms, this pattern aligns with Ozan Varol's (2015) notion of "stealth authoritarianism", where legal and judicial mechanisms are used to silently erode opposition. By co-opting courts, competitive authoritarians achieve repression through law rather than overt coercion – or as one scholar put it, they turn the judiciary into an "arm of the executive's political project" (Özbudun, 2015). The public face of the regime's actions becomes a court ruling or legal procedure, deflecting criticism and confusing observers about whether the rule of law is really being violated or just "enforced."

In conclusion, the comparative evidence from Türkiye, Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela demonstrates that the subversion of judicial independence is a cornerstone of democratic backsliding. Despite differences in legal systems and contexts, each regime ensured that the courts would not constrain their consolidation of power – either by capturing the courts or neutralizing them. This removal of an impartial umpire paves the way for further authoritarian measures, as seen in the subsequent control of media and manipulation of elections discussed in the following sections. A judiciary that is co-opted becomes a shield and sword for authoritarian incumbents: shielding them from accountability, and serving as a sword against their adversaries under the cloak of legality.

9.3. CONTROL OF MEDIA AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Free media and open public discourse pose a direct threat to any would-be authoritarian, as they enable criticism, opposition mobilization, and truth-telling about government abuses. Consequently, controlling the media – especially mass media like television – is a vital part of the playbook for competitive authoritarian regimes. Türkiye, Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela each illustrate the systematic suppression or co-optation of media outlets and the constriction of the public sphere. Through a mix of legal regulations, acquisition of media by regime allies, intimidation of journalists, and propaganda, these governments have achieved near-monopolies over the narrative presented to their citizens. The degree and style of media control vary, reflecting each country's media landscape and political culture, but the end goal is consistent: to establish a "stranglehold on the media" and dominate public discourse (Bâli, 2018).

Under Viktor Orbán, Hungary has seen one of Europe's most thorough cases of media capture by a ruling party. Upon returning to power in 2010, Orbán's government moved quickly to secure dominance over the media narrative. They passed a new media law in 2010 that established a centralized Media Council and a Media Authority, both packed with Fidesz delegates and given powers to sanction media for vague infractions like "unbalanced coverage." This law was widely criticized by European watchdogs for endangering press freedom. Using regulatory pressure and state advertising as levers, Fidesz gradually induced changes in ownership and editorial stance. Independent media outlets faced hostile financial conditions – for instance, the national radio frequency of the last major independent radio (Klubrádió) was not renewed. The government and its business allies also began buying up media. A dramatic culmination occurred in 2018, when over 400 private media outlets – including newspapers, internet news sites, TV and radio stations – were consolidated into a single holding called KESMA (Central European Press and Media Foundation), a nonprofit entity led by Fidesz allies (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). Owners effectively "donated" their media companies to this pro-government foundation, creating a giant centralized pro-Orbán media empire overnight. The government exempted this merger from competition law scrutiny, underscoring its direct involvement (Balkan Insight, 2018).

Today, virtually all television broadcasters with nationwide reach in Hungary are controlled by the state or Fidesz-friendly owners (the primary source of news for most voters, the TV2 and M1 channels, are blatantly pro-government). The public broadcaster has been turned into a government propaganda outlet. Major print outlets have either been bought and turned into mouthpieces or shut down if they were uncooperative. A notorious example was the largest opposition daily Népszabadság, which was abruptly shut down in 2016 by its new owner after

it published exposés on government scandals. What remains of independent journalism in Hungary is mostly online (e.g., Telex, launched by journalists who left after the pro-Fidesz takeover of Index.hu). However, independent sites have limited reach compared to the mass media controlled by Fidesz, and they struggle financially as the government directs advertising (especially lucrative state advertising) exclusively to friendly outlets. The Fidesz government's control over media is bolstered by a patronage system: businesspeople close to Orbán (such as his ally Lőrinc Mészáros) have been the ones to purchase media outlets, aligning content with government messaging in return for state contracts and favors. This "media capture" model, rather than direct censorship, has proven effective – formal censorship or jailing of journalists is rare in Hungary; instead, the media environment is saturated with pro-government voices and critical media are marginalized economically and in distribution. International media freedom indices have accordingly plummeted for Hungary, now ranking it among the least free media environments in the EU. The government's domination of public discourse is so complete that in election campaigns, the opposition often cannot get its message out to large swathes of the population, contributing to Fidesz's electoral advantages (Scheppele K. L., 2022). In short, Hungary demonstrates how a modern democracy can be transformed into an "informational autocracy" where pluralism is stifled not by outright bans, but by ownership concentration and relentless pro-government propaganda (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

Russia's control of the media sphere has been a cornerstone of Putin's power since the beginning. In the chaotic 1990s, Russia had a relatively freewheeling press (with oligarch-owned TV networks often criticizing government), but Putin reversed that in short order. By 2001, the Kremlin had reasserted control over nationwide television. The two major private TV networks that had been independent – NTV (owned by Vladimir Gusinsky) and ORT/TV6 (partly owned by Boris Berezovsky) – were taken over through state-run companies or pressure on their owners. NTV's owner was forced into exile and Gazprom (the state-controlled gas giant) took over the channel, while ORT was brought under loyal management. Since television was (and remains) the primary source of news for the majority of Russians, this move was decisive: from the early 2000s onward, all major TV channels (Channel One, Russia-1, NTV, etc.) have been either state-owned or controlled by Kremlin-friendly entities, and they unfailingly echo the government line. Dissenting voices were purged from the airwaves (Lipman & McFaul, 2001).

Print media and radio have also faced pressure, though critical newspapers like Novaya Gazeta and radio station Ekho Moskvy were allowed to exist in a limited niche for some time, catering

to small liberal audiences. However, even these have been squeezed in recent years (Ekho Moskvy was taken off the air in 2022, Novaya Gazeta suspended operations amid censorship laws about the Ukraine war). The Kremlin has honed a sophisticated propaganda apparatus, including international outlets like RT and Sputnik, but internally it relies on a mix of state media, tame private media, and strict control of narrative on sensitive issues. Laws on extremism, fake news, and "disrespecting authorities" are used to threaten journalists. Self-censorship is common – editors know which topics are taboo (e.g. Putin's family, high-level corruption unless sanctioned, the security services) and avoid them. Those who cross red lines face harassment or worse: numerous journalists were assassinated in the 2000s (e.g., Anna Politkovskaya in 2006, known for Chechnya war reporting), sending a chilling message, though the state denies involvement. More recently, the Russian state has labeled independent media outlets and even individual journalists as "foreign agents", a stigma that forces them to add onerous disclaimers and often drives away advertisers, crippling their viability. By the mid-2010s, Russia's mainstream media had become almost entirely a propaganda machine for the regime, and by the 2020s, even the small independent outlets were effectively either silenced or operating from exile due to a draconian new law punishing any "false" information about the military or war with long prison terms (passed in 2022) (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). The Russian public sphere is thus saturated with the Kremlin's narrative: whether it's the framing of domestic opponents as traitors or the justification of foreign policy moves, state media relentlessly parrots the official line. In effect, the Putin regime perfected the model of media dominance, whereby the average citizen encounters little to no counter-narrative in daily news consumption, and dissenting information is confined to the margins (such as some corners of the internet).

Chavez's Venezuela initially had a combative independent media that openly opposed his government (especially in the early 2000s; private TV networks even supported the brief 2002 coup against him). In response, Chávez sought to both create a pro-government media sector and hamstring opposition outlets. The government launched new state media, including the television network Telesur (aimed at Latin American audiences) and expanded state radio and print presence. More coercively, in 2007 Chávez made a landmark move by refusing to renew the broadcast license of RCTV, a popular independent television station that had been critical of him. This effectively shut RCTV down (at least from the airwaves; it later tried to continue on cable) and served as an object lesson to other media. The remaining major private TV channel, Venevisión, thereafter softened its criticism, and eventually its line became largely

pro-government. Other outlets gradually changed hands or their editorial stances under economic pressure. The government used regulatory bodies to squeeze media – for instance, CONATEL (the telecom regulator) fined and sanctioned radio stations and newspapers, and imposed limits on content (like bans on violent images which were selectively applied to censor news of protests or scarcity) (Freedom House, 2008). A pattern of indirect censorship emerged: newsprint supply, which is imported and distributed via a state agency, was choked off for independent newspapers (several had to stop publishing or go online-only due to lack of paper). By the mid-2010s, most print and broadcast media had been either co-opted or run out of business, and the space for criticism was largely limited to online outlets and foreign media. The Maduro government intensified these trends – it blocked signals of foreign broadcasters like CNN en Español when coverage was unfavorable, and it leveraged laws against "hate speech" on social media to arrest online critics. Internet censorship and surveillance increased, though not to the extent of the Russian or Chinese model; still, connectivity issues and targeted blocking of content became common during protest waves.

The Venezuelan government also relies heavily on propaganda via state media and daily presidential broadcasts. Chávez famously hosted a weekly TV show (Aló Presidente) where he would speak for hours, ensuring his messaging dominated. Maduro continued frequent television addresses. Public discourse has been further distorted by patronage: the government uses access to food, jobs, and services as leverage to mobilize supporters and silence dissent among state-dependent populations. For example, during elections or protests, state employees are warned about consequences of siding with the opposition, and pro-government rallies are boosted by people who fear loss of benefits if they don't attend. In short, the Venezuelan regime has achieved near-complete control over mass communication channels and uses that control to propagate a narrative of revolutionary legitimacy while delegitimizing its opponents. The opposition, with limited media voice internally, often has to rely on social media platforms like Twitter, YouTube channels, or foreign-based news networks to reach Venezuelans – avenues that have far less penetration than TV or that can be shut off by the regime in critical moments.

Examining these cases side by side, several common techniques of media control become apparent:

- Each regime ensured that major media outlets (especially TV networks) are owned or financed by regime loyalists. This can be done through state ownership (Russia's Channel One, Venezuela's VTV), encouraging oligarchs/cronies to buy outlets

(Türkiye's Demirören group, Hungary's KESMA foundation, Russia's Gazprom Media), or forcing out independent owners (as in all cases to some degree). Once ownership is secured, content naturally shifts to favor the government.

- Media regulators are armed with broad powers to fine, suspend, or close outlets on ambiguous grounds (e.g., "endangering national security" or "unbalanced reporting"). These legal tools are selectively enforced against critical media. Additionally, in many cases the government controls major advertisers (state enterprises) or subsidies, and these resources are only directed to compliant outlets. The creation of an unviable business environment for independent media – such as cutting off newsprint (Venezuela) or advertising (Hungary, Russia) – forces them to sell or shutter.

- Journalists and media figures in these regimes face a constant threat of legal action. Libel laws, terrorism or incitement charges, or special laws like "insulting the president" (Article 299 in Türkiye's penal code, used thousands of times under Erdoğan) serve to intimidate the press. In more severe cases, journalists are imprisoned (Türkiye, Russia to some extent, Venezuela has had a few) or even physically harmed by unidentified assailants, fostering self-censorship among the rest.

- State media and official communications flood the public space with the regime's narrative, often bolstered by nationalist or populist themes (discussed further in the next section on populism). Dissenting or factual counter-narratives are drowned out or delegitimized. A notable strategy is labeling independent media as traitors or foreign agents (Russia's "foreign agent" label, Venezuela calling critical media tools of "imperialism"). This erodes public trust in those sources if they manage to speak out.

- Although the internet initially offered an outlet for alternative voices, regimes have expanded their control here too. They pass laws to police social media content (all four have enacted cybercrime or anti-"fake news" laws). They surveil and harass online activists. In extreme instances, they block platforms or specific services during sensitive periods. Increasingly, authoritarian governments also engage in online propaganda (troll farms, bot armies pushing the official line or harassing opposition accounts).

The effects of media control are profound. By monopolizing information, these regimes shape public perception in their favor, reduce the opposition's ability to mobilize, and create an environment in which alternative viewpoints are either not heard or not trusted. In competitive

authoritarian settings, elections still occur, but media control skews the playing field by ensuring the incumbents dominate the campaign narrative and public agenda ((Levitsky & Way, 2010). For example, leading up to Hungary's 2022 election, Orbán's Fidesz blanketed state and private media with messaging about the war in Ukraine and economic handouts, while the united opposition scarcely got coverage except negative portrayals – a major factor in the outcome (Scheppele K. L., 2022). Similarly, in Türkiye's 2023 elections, Erdoğan received overwhelmingly positive and continuous coverage on Turkish TV, whereas opposition candidates got minimal and often biased exposure. These information asymmetries greatly handicap opposition parties.

From a comparative perspective, the near-total media dominance in all four cases underscores that controlling the narrative is a central pillar of modern authoritarian strategy. Unlike classical dictatorships that simply banned opposition media outright, competitive authoritarians allow some vestiges of private media but disable its effectiveness through capture and intimidation. This subtler approach can confuse external observers and even parts of the populace into thinking there is still media pluralism, while in reality the sphere of acceptable discourse has narrowed dramatically.

To conclude, the control of media and public discourse in Türkiye, Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela has enabled those regimes to legitimize themselves, discredit opponents, and reduce accountability. Free expression has been sacrificed, and with it, a key mechanism that liberal democracies rely on to self-correct and check power. The next theme will delve into how these regimes justify such draconian measures to their publics – specifically, through populist and majoritarian rhetoric that claims these moves are the will of the people.

9.4. POPULISM AND MAJORITARIAN LEGITIMATION

A striking commonality among Türkiye under the AKP, Hungary under Fidesz, Russia under Putin, and Venezuela under Chávez/Maduro is the use of populist and majoritarian rhetoric to legitimize authoritarian measures. Populism, in its essence, constructs a political narrative of a virtuous "people" versus a corrupt or alien elite, and claims that the leader or ruling party alone represents the true will of the people (Mudde C. , 2004; Müller, 2016). Each of these regimes has deployed populist discourse to justify the concentration of power and the erosion of checks and balances. By invoking the mandate of "the people" – often defined in exclusionary, majoritarian terms – they seek to neutralize criticism and label institutional constraints as

undemocratic obstacles. This section examines how each leader harnessed populist appeals and a majoritarian notion of democracy, and how that facilitated democratic backsliding. We will see that despite different ideological flavors (Islamist-tinged in Türkiye, nationalist in Hungary and Russia, socialist in Venezuela), the form of the rhetoric and its function in regime maintenance are notably similar.

Viktor Orbán has been one of Europe's most unabashed populist authoritarians, explicitly theorizing his approach as building an "illiberal democracy." Orbán's populism is rooted in Hungarian nationalist and culturally conservative rhetoric. After the corruption scandals and austerity under the previous Socialist government, Orbán rode a wave of public anger from the "people" at a failed liberal elite. He positioned Fidesz as the defender of ordinary Hungarians' interests – against not only the left-liberal domestic elite but also against foreign forces like the European Union, international capital, and George Soros (whom Orbán's government vilified in large propaganda campaigns as a shadowy sponsor of immigration and opposition). Like Erdoğan, Orbán conflates his electoral majority with the nation itself: in his view, two-thirds of the voters gave Fidesz a mandate to radically remake Hungary, and he frequently cites that democratic mandate to rebuff critics. He famously declared in a 2014 speech that Hungary was abandoning liberal democracy in favor of a new model – often paraphrased as "illiberal state" – drawing inspiration from "successful" countries like Russia and Türkiye that prioritize national sovereignty and traditional values over liberal ideals (Müller, 2016). In doing so, Orbán made explicit the argument that liberal checks and pluralism are optional at best, and impediments at worst, to the true interests of the people (as defined by the ruling party).

Orbán's majoritarian ethos is captured by his party's actions and slogans. Fidesz politicians have referred to their governance as an "elective dictatorship" meaning that once elected with a majority, they have the right to do virtually anything (they use the term approvingly, not pejoratively) (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). They often point out that every four years elections happen – implying that is sufficient democracy – and between elections, any external critique (from EU institutions or NGOs) is dismissed as undemocratic meddling with the people's will. Orbán has fostered a cult of personality and a narrative of himself as the keystone of the nation's will, protecting Hungary's people from threats like migrants (during the 2015 refugee crisis) or liberals who would dilute Hungary's identity. During campaigns, he frames choices in existential terms: "It's us or them – the Hungarian people's values or the sellouts." This resonates with many voters, especially when combined with real policies like generous family

subsidies or utility price cuts that Orbán labels as helping "the people" (as opposed to the previous elite who "bled the people dry").

An important component of Orbán's populism is the notion of Christian majoritarianism. Fidesz casts itself as the guardian of Hungary's Christian heritage and traditional family structure, standing against multiculturalism, Muslim immigration, and LGBTQ rights – themes that portray the majority's cultural preferences as under threat by liberal minorities or foreigners. By defining the "people" in ethnonational and religious terms, Orbán not only marginalizes political dissenters as illegitimate but also justifies policies that curb minority rights (e.g., refusing refugee quotas, constraining minority sexual orientations or gender identities) as the desire of the majority. In summary, Orbán's Hungary shows how populism buttresses authoritarian tendencies: by asserting that "the people are with us" and we embody their will, Fidesz rationalizes dismantling checks and vilifying any opposition as enemies of the nation (Kornai, 2015). This majoritarian populist narrative has been so strong that Orbán has largely maintained public support or at least acceptance for his illiberal project, as evidenced by repeated election victories despite democratic decay.

Putin's Russia features populist elements, though of a somewhat different style. Putin did not present himself as an anti-elite outsider (he was a state insider from the start), but he harnessed a popular yearning for stability and national pride after the troubled 1990s. Putin's rhetoric often divides society into patriotic, ordinary Russians versus various internal and external adversaries: oligarchs who are disloyal, liberal intellectuals allegedly subservient to the West, Western nations that want to weaken Russia, and so forth. The populism here is couched in nationalism – Putin positions himself as the embodiment of the Russian people's resurgence, correcting the humiliations of the post-Soviet collapse (Fish, 2005). He frequently references the "voice of the people" in legitimizing his policies: for instance, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was justified by an overwhelming (though highly dubious) referendum result and described as fulfilling the will of the Crimean (and Russian) people for reunification, against the protests of international law. Domestically, Putin has maintained genuine popularity for long stretches, due in part to economic improvements in the 2000s and effective propaganda. He leverages that popularity to claim a broad mandate – even though Russian elections are not free, the regime banks on Putin's personal approval ratings (often bolstered by controlled media and rally-round-the-flag effects) to assert legitimacy.

A telling populist move was the creation of the Kremlin's narrative of the "People's Front" (All-Russia People's Front) in 2011, a political coalition meant to rally pro-Putin societal forces beyond the formal party (United Russia). It projected Putin as above party politics, a leader directly supported by the masses. When mass protests did occur – e.g., the 2011–2012 rallies against election fraud – Putin's response was to disparage protesters as a small, spoiled urban class doing the bidding of foreign NGOs, implicitly contrasting them with the "real Russia" of conservative, patriotic citizens in the heartland who supported him. The regime often uses the term "national traitors" (or fifth column) for critics, a frame that suggests the genuine Russian people stand with Putin against those traitors. Thus, dissent is un-Russian and illegitimate by definition of this narrative.

However, Putin's populism is also heavily paternalistic: he casts himself as the father of the nation who knows best and protects the common people from chaos and external threats. It's less about mobilizing "the people" to actively express their will (as Chávez did with mass rallies) and more about embodying the people's will in a charismatic strongman figure. This resonates with a segment of Russian society accustomed to centralized authority. It also blurs accountability – if Putin is the people's will, then opposing Putin is opposing Russia itself. Legitimation in Russia, therefore, rests on a form of populist nationalism where Putin claims to personify majority aspirations for stability, prosperity, and restored greatness, while portraying his opponents as an unpatriotic minority or foreign puppets (White & Herzog, 2016). This has helped justify crackdowns: e.g., when opposition politician Alexei Navalny exposed corruption and gained support, the Kremlin painted him as not representing ordinary Russians but a Western-backed provocateur – rationalizing his imprisonment as defending the people from a dangerous agent of chaos.

Hugo Chávez was, in many ways, the quintessential populist leader. He rose to power denouncing Venezuela's traditional political elites (the established parties AD and COPEI), which he blamed for corruption and neglect of the poor. Chávez framed his presidency as the start of a "Bolivarian Revolution" that would empower the marginalized masses – chiefly the poor, long excluded Afro-Indigenous populations, and others – against the oligarchy, imperialists (the United States), and their local "lackeys." His discourse split society into el pueblo (the people), whom he often affectionately called mi pueblo, and the escuálidos (the squalid ones), his derogatory term for the opposition elite. Chávez frequently spoke in a colloquial, everyman style, laced with humor and fury, in hours-long TV addresses that captivated supporters. He cultivated a direct bond with his base through mechanisms like Alo

Presidente (his weekly live call-in show) where citizens could literally speak to him on air. In theory and practice, Chávez advanced the idea of participatory democracy – creating communal councils and encouraging the formation of grassroots "Bolivarian Circles." However, these structures, while initially genuine in some communities, increasingly became top-down instruments of patronage and mobilization for Chávez's agenda (Hawkins, 2010).

Chávez's populist legitimation was extremely effective in the first decade of his rule: he could point to repeated electoral victories, including referenda and recalls which he won, as evidence that he was the embodiment of the Venezuelan people's will. His electoral slogan "Por ahora y para siempre" (for now and forever) after winning end to term limits in 2009 exemplified his narrative that the people wanted him indefinitely. He presented all his controversial moves (like the new constitution, court-packing, nationalizations of industry) as fulfilling the people's demand for a more just and sovereign Venezuela. He regularly conflated his supporters with the nation: for instance, massive pro-government rallies were portrayed as "the people in the streets defending their revolution", while opposition protests were painted as pawns of the rich or the CIA. This delegitimization went so far that when the opposition actually won the legislative election in 2015, Maduro (Chávez's successor) and his allies essentially refused to accept that as the legitimate will of the people, claiming the revolution still represented the true people – a logic that underpinned their subsequent nullification of the Assembly.

In Venezuela's populism, there is also an important social-justice dimension. Chávez's rhetoric championed the poor majorities' socioeconomic rights. Populist redistribution – using oil revenues for missions (free healthcare, education, subsidized food) – bought a deep loyalty among beneficiaries, who saw Chávez as finally giving them voice and dignity. This populist social contract meant that many were willing to overlook or even endorse the undermining of formal institutions, because those institutions were seen as tools of the old elite that never cared for the poor. In other words, Chávez equated liberal institutions with elite domination, and thus illiberal moves with popular emancipation (Selçuk O. , 2016). For example, when he packed courts or bypassed parliament, he argued it was necessary to break the elite's stranglehold that had thwarted the people's needs. This resonates with the idea of delegative democracy too – Chávez claimed his sweeping mandates (winning 60%+ of votes multiple times) allowed him to personally drive transformative change without being stymied by opposition legislators or technocratic checks.

Under Maduro, the populist playbook continued but with less charisma and a more beleaguered economy. Maduro leaned even more on demonizing enemies (he frequently alleges plots of assassination or economic sabotage), blaming the country's woes on an "economic war" waged by domestic elites and the U.S. The notion of "the people vs. oligarchs/imperialists" remains Maduro's chief justification for clinging to power despite electoral illegitimacy and economic collapse. The government's continued, albeit dwindling, social programs are targeted to loyalists through the Carnet de la Patria (homeland card system), essentially turning populist redistribution into an overt clientelist tool – only the "good people" (regime supporters) are deserving. Venezuela's case illustrates the double-edged sword of populist legitimation: it can entrench a regime by mobilizing mass support and tolerance for authoritarian actions, but if the populist regime fails to deliver materially (as happened with the economic meltdown), its claim to embody the people can ring hollow, leading to a legitimacy crisis. Indeed, by the late 2010s, Maduro's government had lost the support of much of "the people", surviving more through coercion than genuine populist appeal, although it still uses the rhetoric unabated.

In comparing these cases, we see various shades of populism, but all serve to rationalize the dismantling of liberal democracy:

- Each leader vilified some form of "elite" or "establishment" as enemies of the people – whether it was Türkiye's secular Kemalists and foreign financiers, Hungary's liberal intelligentsia and Brussels bureaucrats, Russia's oligarchs and Western-backed liberals, or Venezuela's Punto Fijo era parties and the U.S.-aligned bourgeoisie. By doing so, they justified purging state institutions or changing laws as "cleansing" the influence of those elites.

- Populists claim "We are the people" – ergo, those not with us are outside the legitimate polity. Orbán said on one occasion that the opposition "couldn't represent the nation even if they won, because we are the nation" (paraphrasing a 2022 campaign rhetoric). Erdoğan often implies opposition parties are aligned with terrorists or foreign interests, hence not true representatives of the Turkish people. Such narratives provide moral cover to deny the opposition normal democratic rights (like fair media access or even the right to govern if they win, as seen in Venezuela's annulment of the opposition legislature).

- In all cases, leaders conflated democracy with majority rule alone, discarding liberal notions of pluralism and minority protections. They use electoral wins as blank checks.

If 51% (or in some cases just a plurality under unfair conditions) voted for them, they treat it as carte blanche to override any objections from institutions or minority groups. This leads to what has been described as "competitive authoritarian majoritarianism" – elections are held and won, and then that victory is cited to legitimize authoritarian governance until the next controlled election.

- Populist legitimation is not purely procedural; it taps into emotions and identities. Nationalism, religion, ethnic identity, or class resentment are invoked. Putin invokes pride in Russian history and Orthodox traditionalism; Orbán speaks of defending Christian Europe; Erdoğan blends Turkish nationalism with Sunni Muslim identity; Chávez evoked Bolívar and socialism for the poor. These deeper identity appeals bond a certain majority coalition to the leader. They also often involve scapegoating others (migrants, ethnic or sectarian minorities, external enemies) to solidify an in-group vs out-group dynamic.

- Populist leaders often directly mobilize their base in rallies to demonstrate popular support and intimidate opponents. For instance, Erdoğan orchestrated massive "Democracy Rally" gatherings after the coup attempt, as a display of people's will backing him. Chávez regularly convened enormous street marches of red-shirted supporters. Even Orbán, though less reliant on rallies, occasionally musters supporters for national consultations or demonstrations of the "Peace March" group to show popular backing. These spectacles reinforce the narrative that the people (visibly present in large numbers) stand with the regime.

The effect of populist and majoritarian legitimation on democratic backsliding cannot be overstated. It creates a narrative shield for the regime's actions: closing a critical TV station isn't censorship, it's the people rejecting lies; changing the constitution isn't power-grabbing, it's what the majority wants; jailing an opposition leader isn't repression, it's punishing a traitor to the people. Such narratives can skew public perceptions and reduce resistance, as supporters view anti-democratic actions as necessary and even democratic in a substantive sense (i.e., serving the true people's interest). Moreover, it demoralizes the opposition and complicates international responses – as regimes claim any external criticism is an attack on their nation's democratic choice.

However, populism as a strategy also has limits and risks: if the regime's claimed majority erodes (due to economic crisis or other failures), the legitimating narrative falters and the

regime may lean more on pure coercion (as arguably seen in Venezuela and perhaps increasingly in Russia as well). Türkiye and Hungary have thus far sustained enough of a loyal base via identity politics and patronage that their populist rhetoric retains potency, though both also show signs of high polarization where nearly half the society vehemently opposes the regime's direction. The long-term consequence is a deeply divided polity, which can entrench authoritarianism but also makes any future democratic reconciliation exceedingly difficult (McCoy & Somer, 2019).

In conclusion, populism and majoritarian rhetoric have been instrumental in facilitating democratic backsliding in these cases. They provided the normative justification for dismantling institutional checks (since those were cast as serving elites or minority factions) and helped rally a segment of the population to actively or passively support authoritarian moves. By examining Türkiye alongside Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela, we see that while the cultural content of the populism differs, the structural role is analogous: populism is the political glue and moral rationalization for competitive authoritarian regimes. Türkiye's case, with Erdoğan's adept use of religious-nationalist populism, underscores how a democracy can be hollowed out under the banner of fulfilling the people's will – a cautionary tale repeated in varying forms across the other regimes.

9.5. EXPLOITATION OF CRISES AS CRITICAL JUNCTURES

Crises – whether political, economic, or security-related – often serve as critical junctures that accelerate the demise of democratic norms and provide cover for authoritarians to tighten their grip. A classic pattern in the trajectories of Türkiye, Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela is how ruling parties have exploited crises (or perceived crises) to justify extraordinary measures, expand executive power, and marginalize opposition. In many cases, these crises are framed as existential threats to the nation, thus rallying public support (or acquiescence) for what might otherwise be unacceptable authoritarian steps. Sometimes the crises are real (a coup attempt, a terrorist attack, a recession), sometimes manufactured or exaggerated (a "migrant invasion", claims of foreign plots), but in all instances they mark turning points that regimes leverage to entrench themselves. This section explores how crises have been used in each country as pivotal opportunities for authoritarian consolidation, essentially functioning as catalysts for backsliding.

Viktor Orbán's government has similarly used crises to tighten its hold, though the crises in Hungary were often more manufactured or political than objectively dire. A prime example is the European refugee crisis of 2015. When hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees (many from Syria and other conflict zones) surged toward Europe, Orbán seized on this as a "civilizational crisis." He ordered the construction of a razor-wire fence on Hungary's southern border, blocked asylum seekers, and ran an intense propaganda campaign depicting migrants as dangerous invaders (Kornai, 2015). Billboards and speeches warned that "Brussels" (the EU) and George Soros were planning to flood Hungary with immigrants to destroy its identity. Orbán declared a state of emergency in border regions and later a nationwide "crisis situation due to mass immigration" – a status that, remarkably, has been kept in force almost continuously since 2015 despite the drastic drop in migration numbers. This legal state enabled special powers for the police and army to act, and it created a perpetual sense of besiegement. Orbán used the refugee crisis to position himself domestically as the protector of Hungary and Europe's Christian identity, which significantly boosted his popularity at home during the 2018 election. It also helped him justify passing amendments that tightened asylum rules and criminalized aid to illegal migrants (the "Stop Soros" law package in 2018). Essentially, a humanitarian crisis was reframed as a security crisis to reinforce nationalist-authoritarian politics.

Another crisis Orbán leveraged was the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Hungary's parliament (where Fidesz held a two-thirds majority) granted the government open-ended emergency powers in March 2020, allowing rule by decree with no clear time limit. This "Authorization Act" effectively suspended normal legislative oversight. Orbán argued such sweeping powers were needed to deal with the pandemic (Scheppele K. L., How Viktor Orbán wins, 2022). Although the government eventually ended that particular emergency state in June 2020, it simultaneously passed new legislation embedding many decree powers into law and later declared other emergencies (including one related to the Ukraine war in 2022). The upshot is that Orbán could govern with minimal constraint, and indeed during the COVID emergency he issued decrees not only on public health but on unrelated matters like accelerating infrastructure projects and tightening control over municipalities (many of which were run by opposition after 2019 local elections). Thus, a public health crisis became an occasion to recentralize authority and sideline opposition mayors (who complained that emergency financial rescues favored Fidesz areas). Orbán's swift use of the crisis earned Hungary criticism as an example of

"pandemic authoritarianism", but domestically it faced little resistance given fears over the virus.

Hungary's initial democratic backsliding too was catalyzed by a kind of crisis: the 2006 political scandal and subsequent protests. In 2006, a leaked tape of then-Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány (Socialist) admitting his government lied "morning, evening, night" about the budget to win re-election sparked outrage and riots in Budapest. Orbán, then opposition leader, fanned the flames, demanding the government's resignation. Though the Socialists hung on until 2010, the episode delegitimized them in the eyes of many and fed into a narrative of regime crisis. Orbán capitalized on the public's sense of betrayal and disorder, presenting Fidesz as the restorer of honesty and stability. The widespread disillusionment with the incumbent government (which also oversaw an economic recession by 2008) created fertile ground for Orbán's 2010 landslide (Kornai, 2015). In that sense, a crisis of governance and legitimacy in the prior regime opened the door for Orbán's radical refoundation of the system.

Vladimir Putin's ascent and consolidation are deeply tied to crises – some genuine, some possibly orchestrated. The Second Chechen War (1999-2000) was a critical rallying point for Putin's initial popularity. A series of mysterious apartment bombings in Russian cities in 1999 killed nearly 300 people. The bombings were blamed on Chechen terrorists (though later some evidence suggested possible involvement of Russian security services, it remains disputed) (Fish, 2005). Putin, then a relatively unknown prime minister, took a hardline stance, launching a full-scale war in Chechnya with brutal tactics. His tough, resolute image ("wiping out terrorists in the outhouse", as he phrased it) resonated with a populace traumatized by chaos and violence. The Chechen war and the terror threat were instrumental in manufacturing consent for a security-driven, centralized leadership. Riding this wave, Putin won the 2000 presidential election handily. Once in power, he used the ongoing conflict as justification to curtail media freedom (tv networks were criticized for "undermining the war effort" and soon brought to heel) and to push through measures strengthening the FSB (the domestic successor to the KGB). The war set a template: national security crises would be met with the concentration of authority and reduction of liberties, with public support.

Another pivotal crisis was the 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis and the 2004 Beslan school siege, both horrific terrorist incidents. In each, Putin's government responded with increased securitization. After Beslan, Putin famously declared that such tragedies required rethinking Russia's political system – specifically, he proceeded to abolish the direct election of governors,

as noted earlier, claiming that in times of terror threat Russia needed more unity of command. It was a striking example of using a security crisis to justify a political centralization that had no obvious link to solving terrorism (Levitsky & Way, 2010). But the public, shaken by the massacre, largely went along with this narrative that strong, top-down control was needed to keep them safe. Putin essentially leveraged Beslan to finalize his construction of a "power vertical", eliminating one of the last vestiges of federal democratic practice (governor elections).

Economically, Putin also benefited from the 1998 financial crisis (though this predated him as leader) in a paradoxical way – that crisis had discredited the liberal economic reformers and Yeltsin-era governance, making Russians yearn for stability and a firm hand (Levitsky & Way, 2010). When he assumed power in 2000, he had a mandate to ensure "never again" would Russia face such humiliation, which he did by recentralizing fiscal control and using surging oil revenues to stabilize the economy. In later years, external crises like international sanctions or geopolitical confrontations have similarly been exploited. For instance, after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Western sanctions and a mild economic downturn hit Russia. Putin rallied Russians with a siege mentality, calling for self-reliance and patriotism in the face of Western aggression. His approval ratings actually soared above 80% in 2014-2015 despite economic pain – a phenomenon dubbed the "Crimea effect" or "rally round the flag." This allowed him to further marginalize liberal opposition (portrayed as "national traitors" at a time of conflict) and to tighten control over NGOs via the foreign agents law (2012) and undesirable organizations law (2015) under the premise of safeguarding Russia in a crisis-laden international environment.

Most recently, the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine (a crisis largely of Putin's own making) triggered the most severe authoritarian crackdown in post-Soviet Russia. Citing the war (officially a "special military operation") and the need for national unity, the government quickly criminalized any dissent about the war – passing laws that impose long prison sentences for spreading "false information" about the military or even calling the war a war. In effect, Putin used the war emergency to eliminate the last vestiges of independent media and opposition activism, transforming Russia from a competitive authoritarian system into a near-totalitarian one in practice. The war, a self-inflicted crisis to maintain geopolitical control, became the justification for a final purge of dissent (with almost all notable opposition figures jailed or exiled in its wake). This exemplifies how an autocrat may create a crisis (in this case by launching a war) that then serves as the pretext for accelerating authoritarian consolidation.

Crises have been a double-edged sword in Venezuela's story. Chávez faced a major crisis early in his rule: the April 2002 coup attempt. For 48 hours, he was ousted by a coalition of military dissidents and business leaders, before loyal military units and massive popular protests restored him. That experience profoundly shaped the regime's trajectory. Upon his return, Chávez moved swiftly to punish and purge those he saw as enemies. High-ranking military officers involved in the coup were expelled, and the armed forces were reshaped with promotions of loyal chavistas (including the creation of new civil-military structures like the Bolivarian militias). Chávez also used the coup attempt as a mandate to radicalize his revolution – it convinced him that the old elite would stop at nothing to remove him, so he needed to consolidate power further. This led to, among other things, the aforementioned 2004 court-packing law (expanding the Supreme Court to guarantee its loyalty) and a clampdown on the oil company PDVSA. The coup was followed by another crisis: the December 2002 – February 2003 general strike, led by PDVSA management and the opposition, which crippled the oil industry and economy (Corrales J. , 2015). After weathering that (largely by firing 19,000 PDVSA employees and recruiting loyalists to restart operations), Chávez emerged far stronger. He had broken the back of the old oil technocracy and union leadership. These crises effectively eliminated two powerful checks: parts of the military and the state oil company, thereby removing alternate power centers and allowing Chávez to personalize control.

Later, economic crises played a pivotal role. The steep decline in oil prices in 2014, combined with years of mismanagement, plunged Venezuela into a deep economic depression with hyperinflation. This humanitarian and economic crisis – marked by shortages of basic goods, mass emigration, and collapsing public services – severely eroded popular support for the Maduro government. In a democratic setting, such a disastrous performance might have led to the government's electoral defeat or resignation. Indeed, the opposition won a landslide in the December 2015 legislative elections, feeding on public discontent. That electoral victory for the opposition-dominated National Assembly was in a sense a response to crisis, but the regime's reaction to it was to manufacture a constitutional crisis. Maduro used lame-duck appointments to stack the Supreme Court, which then invalidated most Assembly actions and even invalidated some election results to strip the opposition of a supermajority. When the opposition pushed for a recall referendum in 2016 (a constitutional mechanism Chávez had introduced and survived himself in 2004), the electoral authority and courts blocked it on dubious grounds, creating a political standoff. The culmination was the 2017 Constituent Assembly crisis: after months of opposition street protests and an inconclusive dialogue,

Maduro convened a new Constituent Assembly election, under rules ensuring chavista dominance, effectively to bypass and dissolve the existing legislature. This move was framed as necessary to restore peace and order – Maduro claimed the opposition was fomenting an "insurrection" with foreign backing, a narrative to justify why an extraordinary constitutional measure was needed. The Constituent Assembly, once seated, indeed granted Maduro decree powers and took over legislative functions, thus resolving the regime's governance crisis by simply obliterating the opposition's institutional foothold. Internationally, this was seen as a blatant coup against democracy, but internally the government sold it as an emergency response to save the country from chaos and civil war.

Venezuela's story also includes how a regime can struggle when crisis undermines its base: by the late 2010s, the depth of economic collapse and international isolation (especially after Maduro's widely discredited 2018 re-election) made it harder for Maduro to claim majority legitimacy. In 2019, opposition leader Juan Guaidó even attempted to leverage the constitutional crisis and popular unrest to declare Maduro illegitimate and assume an interim presidency (backed by many countries). This created a brief competing presidency crisis, which Maduro weathered with backing from the military and allies like Russia and Cuba. Nevertheless, the episode demonstrated that severe crises can put even entrenched competitive authoritarians in peril, or at least force them into more overtly authoritarian measures to survive. Maduro's regime did survive – but primarily by brute force (security forces quelling protests, etc.) and external support, not by skillful crisis exploitation to broaden consent.

Crises often serve as critical junctures that redirect a country's political path. In these cases, each crisis was used by incumbents to push through changes or narratives that might not have been possible in normal times. They declare states of exception, rally nationalist fervor, or scapegoat enemies to consolidate control. The comparative pattern is that:

- Security threats (coups, terrorism, war) are used to concentrate power (e.g., Türkiye 2016 emergency, Russia's anti-terror centralization, Venezuela 2002 aftermath). Rulers cast themselves as indispensable protectors, and opposition as either impotent or traitorous.

- Political stalemates or protest waves are reframed as coups or insurrections to justify extraordinary steps (e.g., Maduro 2017 claiming insurrection, Erdoğan equating Gezi with a foreign plot, Orbán implying the 2006 protests delegitimized the old regime).

- Economic crises are externalized (blamed on foreigners or previous regimes) to justify both crackdowns and the necessity of the current leadership (e.g., Erdoğan's "economic war" narrative, Maduro's "economic war" by imperialists narrative). They can also allow governments to assume emergency economic powers and sideline legislative oversight.

- Public health or natural crises (in Orbán's case COVID) provide newer examples of how even non-political emergencies can be opportunistically used for political gain.

In all these, timing matters: leaders wait for or cultivate a window when fear and uncertainty are high, then act swiftly to change structures or narratives while the public and opposition are off-balance. By the time normalcy returns, the polity has been transformed – more power resides in executive hands, opposition is weakened, and new precedents are set that further crises can be easily declared or simulated when convenient.

The comparative insight is that democracies (even if weak) can often muddle through routine times, but a shock or crisis can rapidly accelerate autocratization if would-be authoritarians are in place to exploit it. As the saying goes, "never let a serious crisis go to waste" – these regimes certainly did not. By studying these cases together, scholars and observers gain a clearer understanding of how crises function as catalysts in the erosion of democracy. It underlines the importance of resilient institutions and political norms that can resist panic-driven overreach. Unfortunately, in the cases examined, institutions and norms buckled under crisis pressure, facilitating leaps toward authoritarian rule.

9.6. PATRONAGE NETWORKS AND STATE CAPTURE

A critical, though sometimes less visible, dimension of competitive authoritarian consolidation is the construction of extensive patronage networks and the capture of state resources by ruling elites. In Türkiye, Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela, ruling parties or leaders have systematically taken control of economic and bureaucratic levers to enrich their allies, entrench loyalists throughout the state, and create a dependent class of supporters. This "carrot" side of authoritarianism complements the "stick" of repression: by distributing spoils and opportunities to cronies and followers, regimes secure a political base that has a vested interest in their continuation. State capture refers to the ruling clique's domination of not just the political apparatus but also the commanding heights of the economy and key institutions, bending them to serve private or partisan interests rather than the public good. Such practices often lead to

high levels of corruption and nepotism, but are rational from the regime's perspective as they bind influential groups (business magnates, bureaucrats, security officials) to the regime's survival. In this section, we examine how each regime has employed patronage and state capture, and how this has reinforced their authoritarian rule.

Under Viktor Orbán, Hungary has experienced what Bálint Magyar famously terms the "post-communist mafia state" (Magyar, 2016) This concept highlights how Orbán's regime operates akin to a clan or mafia, where the state's resources and power are used systematically for the enrichment of a family-like network at the top. Orbán and his close circle (family members, childhood friends, loyal schoolmates, and their families) have benefited enormously from state contracts, EU funds, and privatizations. Perhaps the emblematic figure is Lőrinc Mészáros, Orbán's boyhood friend and a former gasfitter in Orbán's village, who in the span of a decade became one of Hungary's richest men. His companies have won a huge share of public tenders – from construction projects (including many funded by EU development money) to energy deals – leading to jokes that "Mészáros" is just a front for Orbán himself. Mészáros openly stated that his fortune's secret was "God, luck, and Viktor Orbán." Another example is Orbán's son-in-law, István Tiborcz, who owned a company that won lucrative contracts to install street lighting in multiple cities; an EU anti-fraud investigation later found irregularities suggesting favoritism, but the Hungarian prosecution (led by Fidesz loyalists) did not pursue it. These are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern where Fidesz-connected oligarchs thrive in nearly every sector: construction, banking, media, agriculture. Meanwhile, many independent or opposition-leaning business figures have been squeezed out or seen their businesses targeted by punitive tax audits or regulatory hurdles until they sell to government-friendly owners (Innes, 2014).

State capture in Hungary also manifests in the civil service. After 2010, Fidesz purged the bureaucracy of people deemed unsupportive and replaced them with cadres often selected for loyalty over expertise. New institutions like the National Public Service University were established to train a new generation of civil servants in the government's ideological mold. Orbán's relatives also got positions; for instance, Orbán's father and son-in-law through business acquired quarries and real estate deals related to state projects. Public procurement laws were often tailored or circumvented to benefit insiders – a study by Corruption Research Center Budapest (2016) found that tenders with only one bidder (a hallmark of rigging) became very common under Fidesz.

A unique feature in Hungary is the use of long-term appointments to entrench Fidesz loyalists even beyond electoral cycles. For instance, the head of the State Audit Office, Chief Prosecutor, and even leaders of newly created bodies like the Budget Council were given terms of 9+ years, ensuring that even if Fidesz lost power, key oversight levers would remain in their allies' hands (Kornai, 2015). The Constitutional Court judges (packed with Fidesz picks) also get 12-year terms. Fidesz modified laws to allow its outgoing 2010-2014 parliament to appoint loyalists to positions like the head of the Media Authority for extraordinarily long terms (up to 9 years). This is an indirect form of state capture: filling ostensibly independent institutions with partisan loyalists for extended durations, thus insulating the patronage network from short-term political change.

The effect of Orbán's patronage system is reflected in Hungary's corruption metrics and crony-capitalism indices – it's often cited as one of the most corrupt EU states, with EU funds effectively fueling the Orbán network's enrichment (as EU audits have repeatedly found issues but rarely enforced real penalties). Yet, because Orbán's cronies also sustain the economy (building projects, keeping media running, etc.), they form a class of "loyal beneficiaries" who prop up the regime. Orbán has also extended minor patronage to the populace: for example, cutting utility prices (the burden of which was partly passed to foreign energy companies), increasing public sector wages before elections, or offering generous family tax benefits and loan programs for middle-class families (often a segment supportive of Fidesz). These policies both serve an ideological aim (support for traditional families) and a clientelist one (rewarding a base constituency). Meanwhile, poorer regions often remain economically dependent on public work programs controlled by Fidesz mayors, effectively making many voters in depressed areas beholden to the ruling party for basic income (Scheppele K. L., 2022). This entwining of political loyalty and livelihood fosters a patron-client democracy, where voting against the regime might threaten one's economic interests.

Patronage in Putin's Russia is pervasive, forming what some analysts call a system of "patronal presidentialism" or more colloquially, an oligarchic or kleptocratic state (Hale, 2014). In the 1990s, a handful of oligarchs had captured the state; Putin reversed this by capturing the oligarchs. Early in his presidency, he made a famous bargain: oligarchs could keep (most of) their wealth if they stayed out of politics and submitted to the Kremlin's strategic direction. Those who did not – most famously Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who funded opposition and challenged Putin – were crushed and their assets redistributed to Kremlin loyalists (Khodorkovsky's giant oil company Yukos was bankrupted and its main assets given to state-

run Rosneft, headed by Putin's close associate Igor Sechin). A new class of state-dependent billionaires emerged, often from Putin's own St. Petersburg circle or KGB/FSB comrades (the "siloviki" clique). People like Gennady Timchenko (a friend from St. Petersburg, granted huge oil trading contracts), the Rotenberg brothers (Putin's judo partners, awarded massive construction projects like Sochi Olympics facilities and gas pipelines), and Yuri Kovalchuk (Putin's close friend, major bank owner and media investor) became incredibly wealthy essentially via state patronage. These individuals in turn invest in projects that bolster Putin's regime (like buying media to ensure friendly coverage or serving as shadow financiers for operations abroad).

The Russian state itself is a source of personal enrichment. Top officials, from ministers to regional governors, have been involved in grand corruption schemes (when these officials fall out of favor, they are prosecuted for corruption as a selective enforcement mechanism; otherwise the system tolerates graft as a loyalty benefit). Public procurement, especially in defense and major infrastructure, is rife with kickbacks. The "power vertical" also implies a patronage vertical: regional political machines rely on funds and approvals from the center, and in exchange, local elites deliver votes (often fraudulent) for Putin's party and maintain social stability. This is a classic patron-client hierarchy: Putin at the top distributes resources and permission; lower-level elites mobilize political support and enforce order in their domains.

One hallmark of Russia's state capture is blurring of lines between state security and organized crime. Certain illicit enterprises (like smuggling or even cybercrime) are believed to operate under the protection of, or directly by, security agencies, generating off-the-books revenue that can be used to fund patronage (Galeotti, 2018). The term "Kleptocracy" is often used: public assets are exploited for private gain of the ruling network. However, that private gain is also politically instrumental – wealth is not just for luxury but for financing proxy groups, co-opting potential rivals (through giving them a stake in the corrupt system), and ensuring elite cohesion (everyone has dirt on their hands, so all hang together).

For ordinary Russians, patronage is felt in more mundane ways. Many jobs and positions—from getting a spot in a good university to a promotion in a state company—can depend on the blat (connections) system which now flows through United Russia (the ruling party) or Kremlin-linked networks. The regime also secures mass loyalty via certain material benefits: Putin's years saw rising pensions and wages (especially in the early oil boom years), consistent payment (contrast with Yeltsin-era wage arrears), and some targeted subsidies. State

corporations are large employers and often the backbone of single-industry towns; their continued operation (even if inefficient) is a social pacifier and a means to command loyalty (workers can be mobilized for pro-regime rallies by the threat of losing jobs, for example).

Additionally, the line between private wealth and state action is blurred in foreign policy: Russian oligarchs have sometimes acted as extensions of state objectives (like Yevgeny Prigozhin using his wealth to finance the Wagner mercenary group and troll farms that advance Kremlin interests). In return, these individuals enjoy impunity and more opportunities.

The durability of Putin's regime owes much to how effectively he's bound the fate of a powerful elite to his own. Many of these elites have accumulated vast riches, but mostly within Russia (or parked abroad but still tied to Russian assets); they know that a post-Putin democratic or nationalist regime might strip them of ill-gotten wealth or jail them, as happened to some after the Soviet collapse. So they have a shared interest in the regime's survival. Henry Hale (2014) posits that in such patronal systems, as long as the patron (Putin) remains clearly in charge and the distribution of rents is steady, the elite coalition holds; if he were to falter, the coalition could fracture, but Putin has managed those risks by eliminating alternative patrons and demonstrating personal strength.

Chávez's government initially had a popular mandate to redirect oil wealth to the poor, but over time a regime of extensive patronage and corruption took hold (Corrales & Penfold, 2011). Oil revenue, which boomed in the 2000s, funded massive social programs (which certainly alleviated poverty in the short term and built Chavismo's electoral base) but also created a huge pot of rents to be captured. Chávez replaced meritocratic technocrats at PDVSA (the state oil company) with loyalists after the 2003 strike, and PDVSA became both the cash cow and slush fund of the revolution. Billions of dollars were channeled off-budget into funds like Fonden, directly controlled by the executive, used for discretionary spending. This opacity led to monumental corruption. For instance, foreign currency controls established in 2003 (ostensibly to prevent capital flight) enabled insiders to get dollars at preferential rates and resell them on the black market for huge profits – a scam known as "bolívar fuerte arbitrage" that enriched a new class of "boligarchs" (Bolivarian oligarchs). Many politically connected individuals became millionaires through import schemes and kickbacks while national output and services deteriorated.

Chávez also militarized patronage: he brought the military not just into cabinet posts but also into control of industries and imports. Generals were put in charge of state-run enterprises (like

mining, oil services, or food distribution) and many engaged in graft. Over time, the Venezuelan military's upper echelons turned into a corrupt enterprise themselves (some involved in drug trafficking – leading to the term "Cartel of the Suns" for certain generals). By co-opting the military with economic rewards (and impunity), Chávez and later Maduro ensured the armed forces' loyalty. Indeed, under Maduro, as conditions worsened for the general population, the loyalty of the military and other elites was maintained by letting them extract what remained – such as controlling food import and distribution (military officers often diverted subsidized food to black markets) or participating in illicit economies (gold mining, smuggling).

The government also engaged in massive expropriations and nationalizations from 2007 onward, often transferring assets to cronies who mismanaged them. State agencies proliferated and became employment vehicles for political supporters; by some counts the public sector more than doubled. Many state jobs required a "Carnet de la Patria" (homeland card) in the later Maduro years – a card that tracks participation in pro-government events and voting, effectively tying public employment to political compliance.

For the broader citizenry, patronage took the form of mission benefits, housing, and direct transfers, which created dependency on the regime. During Chávez's height, people received homes through Gran Misión Vivienda (with the implicit understanding of political allegiance), and barrio residents got subsidized food or cash from local party-linked committees. As the economy collapsed, these benefits shrank, but what remained (like the CLAP food box program) was distributed via party structures that favored loyalists. Many poorer Venezuelans felt they could not risk an opposition victory because they might lose these scant lifelines.

The concept of state capture in Venezuela is extreme in that the ruling clique not only took over existing institutions but hollowed them out and repurposed them purely for regime maintenance. By the 2010s, PDVSA didn't properly invest in oil production (leading to a catastrophic output decline) because it was busy funneling money to cronies and political projects. The judiciary didn't adjudicate disputes fairly, it rubber-stamped regime needs. Even electoral authorities became tools to maintain the patronage network (managing elections such that the regime couldn't lose power which would threaten all beneficiaries).

What is stark about Venezuela is how swiftly the patronage-built coalition crumbled once the money ran out. Oil prices crashed and the economy imploded under mismanagement, meaning there was far less to distribute after 2015. The regime's response was to turn to more coercive means (as we saw earlier) and to alternative patronage via international sponsors (oil or gold

deals with Russia, China, Türkiye). For example, Russia offered loans and in exchange got stakes in Venezuelan oil fields – effectively outsourcing some state assets to foreign patrons to keep the domestic patronage afloat. This is a pattern in some collapsing autocracies: they rely on external alliances when internal resources wane.

Comparatively, these cases reveal a spectrum of "legalized corruption" and clientelism:

- In all, corruption is not a bug but a feature – it's the grease that makes the regime's loyalty machine run. But it's channeled toward regime-sustaining ends.
- Each regime selectively enforces anti-corruption – usually targeting opposition or inconvenient figures, while protecting loyal graft. E.g., Hungary jails some opposition mayors for graft but ignores larger pro-Fidesz scandals; Russia jails a minister occasionally as a scapegoat but systemic kleptocracy continues; Türkiye likewise arrests some AKP dissenters or bureaucrats for graft as needed but shields allies.
- These systems often see the leader's family and inner circle enriched to an extraordinary degree, reinforcing personal power. (Erdoğan's family controls media and business, Orbán's family and friends became top rich list members, Putin is rumored to be enormously wealthy through proxies, Chávez's daughter became the richest person in Venezuela by some accounts).
- State budgets and assets get used for partisan purposes (campaigning, buying votes, rewarding supporters). For instance, Türkiye's discretionary housing and aid programs before elections, or Hungary's public advertising that doubles as Fidesz propaganda, or Venezuela literally using PDVSA resources to fund campaigns.
- Creation of a loyal bourgeoisie or elite class, which in turn often dominates the private sector and thus can also punish those in business who support the opposition (e.g., by excluding them from markets or government deals). Over time, independent business is stifled and replaced by crony business.

The consequence for democracy is dire: patronage and state capture mean that even if an opposition wins a future election, they face a captured state full of antagonistic appointees and a hollowed economy controlled by regime loyalists. It makes democratic recovery difficult, because the new government would have to purge and rebuild institutions while contending with sabotage from embedded cronies. This is evident in Venezuela (the opposition-controlled

Assembly in 2016-2020 had no real power because the rest of state apparatus was captured), and in a hypothetical post-Fidesz or post-Erdoğan scenario, undoing the institutional capture would be a massive challenge.

In summary, patronage and state capture tie the fate of key interest groups to the authoritarian regime, thereby reinforcing its stability. Türkiye's political economy under AKP, Hungary's mafia-like network, Russia's oligarchic patronage, and Venezuela's Bolivarian rent-distribution all confirm that controlling the "power of the purse" is as important as controlling the "power of the sword" for these regimes. The Turkish case, for instance, shows how a party can transform a society's elite structure in its favor – from secular conglomerates to conservative businesses – ensuring that the people with economic clout prefer the status quo. These processes underscore that democratic backsliding is not only about institutional changes or repression, but also about reshaping the resource landscape to perpetuate the dominant party's rule.

9.7. ELECTORAL MANIPULATION AND AUTOCRATIC LEGALISM

Competitive authoritarian regimes maintain a façade of democratic legitimacy by continuing to hold elections, but they engage in systematic electoral manipulation to ensure those elections are neither free nor fair. Unlike overt electoral autocracies that might dispense with meaningful competition entirely, competitive authoritarians like Türkiye, Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela keep opposition on the ballot (at least to some degree) and seek public endorsement through votes, even as they rig the process heavily in their favor. Crucially, much of this rigging is done through legal mechanisms and administrative control – what has been termed "autocratic legalism" by Scheppele (2018) or what Andreas Schedler (2006) described as the "menu of manipulation" that electoral autocrats use. This involves exploiting laws, rules, and state institutions to tilt the electoral playing field: redrawing districts, changing electoral systems, controlling election commissions, abusing state resources for campaigns, harassing or disqualifying opposition candidates, and restricting voting rights of unfavorable demographics. By using legal and quasi-legal means rather than outright blatant fraud (though overt fraud can occur too), regimes both reduce the risk of domestic unrest (since there is a veneer of legality) and blunt international criticism ("we acted according to our laws").

In this section, how each country's regime has manipulated elections and entrenched itself through legalistic means, thereby hollowing out the democratic process while maintaining its form will be analyzed.

Perhaps the most striking case of "engineering democracy" is Orbán's Hungary. After coming to power in 2010, Fidesz completely overhauled the electoral system to entrench its dominance. It scrapped the mixed two-round system and introduced a single-round system with first-past-the-post in 106 single-member districts plus a proportional component for the remaining seats – but importantly, they gerrymandered the district boundaries to favor Fidesz (Kovács, 2013). The new map greatly over-represents rural areas where Fidesz is strong and packs urban liberal voters into a few districts. They also added a "winner compensation" feature: in addition to normal seat allocation, the votes that the winning party wastes (i.e., above what needed to win in each district) are added to its total for the proportional seats. This technical tweak sounds arcane but heavily benefits the largest party – effectively giving a bonus to Fidesz. Due to these rules, Fidesz in 2014 and 2018 retained two-thirds supermajorities in parliament with only about 45% of the vote. In 2022, even with the opposition uniting and getting ~ united 6-party coalition ~, Fidesz still won 68% of seats on 52% vote, thanks to the system bias (Bánkuti, Halmai, & Scheppele, 2012). Kim Lane Scheppele (2022)analyzed Hungary's elections and noted that "the election system is crafted to ensure any division in the opposition automatically generates supermajorities for the ruling party… autocrats can rig elections legally, using their parliamentary majorities to change the law to neutralize whatever strategy the opposition adopts". For example, when the opposition in 2022 tried to game the system by uniting, Fidesz had already extended the gerrymander and passed laws restricting campaigning by the united list.

Other legal manipulations in Hungary include changing campaign regulations to Fidesz's benefit (e.g., campaign billboard placements by the opposition were fined or removed for minor violations). Fidesz also extended voting rights to ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries (who largely vote Fidesz by mail), while imposing onerous requirements on expatriate Hungarians in Western countries (who lean opposition, forced to vote in person at embassies often far away). These rules created a two-tier electorate effectively. The election administration is led by Fidesz appointees, and they have tolerated sham "pseudo-parties" that Fidesz secretly funds to split the opposition vote (multiple fake small parties appeared on ballots in past elections to confuse voters and take list votes, then vanished).

A further tactic: Orbán's government heavily tilts media during campaigns, using state media as Fidesz campaign mouthpiece and flooding the airwaves with government ads that are thinly veiled propaganda. In 2022, some estimates were that Fidesz had 10x the media reach of the opposition. Moreover, the government saturates the environment with fear messaging (e.g., during campaigns, "public service" billboards warned against migrants or George Soros, aligning with Fidesz's campaign themes).

Despite these edges, Fidesz's actual ballot-counting hasn't needed overt fraud so far; it wins by the rules it wrote. But the opposition practically has to win by a landslide to get a slim majority because of systemic bias. As Orbán himself quipped, "even when we lose, we win" – a reference to how the system ensured Fidesz control even if it lost the popular vote (in 2006 they lost narrowly, which drove Orbán to redesign the system to avoid that scenario recurring).

Russia's elections in the Putin era range from partially competitive in early years to essentially predetermined by the 2020s (V-Dem Institute, 2023). In the 2000s, Putin maintained some pluralism but ensured dominance. The State Duma elections illustrate progressive manipulation:

- In 2003, the use of "administrative resources" (state influence, media bias) and the creation of a pro-Kremlin party (United Russia) plus satellite parties allowed a pro-Putin majority.
- For 2007, they changed to a pure proportional system with a 7% threshold, eliminating independent candidates and small parties – resulting in an almost complete sweep by United Russia and tame opposition.
- Later reintroducing mixed system, but in practice by then any genuinely threatening opposition was barred. Candidate registration is a key choke point: opposition candidates like Alexei Navalny have been routinely disqualified from running (Navalny tried to run for president in 2018, was barred due to a controversial criminal conviction widely seen as fabricated).
- In the presidential realm, serious opponents were either co-opted or eliminated (e.g., coercing oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov in 2012 to run a token campaign to simulate competition, or allowing only systemic opposition like Communist Zyuganov who is tolerated).

Outright fraud has also been documented, especially in certain regions or when needed for margin. The 2011 Duma elections were tainted by ballot stuffing (evidenced by suspicious turnout patterns and videos), sparking mass protests in Moscow. The regime responded by clamping down harder and tweaking how they fraud. For example, in the 2018 presidential election, Putin had no real challengers (Navalny barred), so the main goal was to inflate turnout to show legitimacy. State workers were pressured to vote and cameras strategically placed to avoid filming some precincts where stuffing might occur. Electoral commissions are packed with loyalists. Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC) is chaired by Ella Pamfilova, who has a human rights reputation but ultimately toes the line – under her, the CEC eliminated many independent candidates in the 2019 Moscow city election by invalidating signatures, for example.

Another technique is "managed opposition": allowing only tame opposition parties to win some seats (LDPR, a nationalist party, or the Communists to an extent) to maintain a veneer of pluralism, but those parties either support Putin on key issues or are kept in a powerless minority. This fragmentation and co-optation strategy ensures no unified opposition front. As of the 2020s, elections in Russia have become almost performative. The constitutional referendum of 2020 (to allow Putin's term reset) was conducted over a week with no independent observation and even prize giveaways to encourage turnout, culminating in a dubious 78% approval result. The 2021 Duma elections saw the use of online voting in Moscow that reversed multiple opposition wins overnight (leading many to suspect manipulation of the e-voting system). Essentially, where legal means aren't enough, they now openly manipulate results, as the costs of public protest have risen (post-Navalny poisoning/arrest and wartime repressions). However, Putin's regime still cares to maintain formalities of legality – they usually make all changes through laws (passed by their rubber-stamp parliament) and try to justify actions legally (like convicting Navalny under fraud charges so he legally can't run). This is autocratic legalism in the sense that everything is draped in a veneer of law, even if the spirit of democratic competition is utterly violated.

Electoral manipulation in Venezuela has been extensive and evolving. Under Chávez, elections were competitive but advantages stacked: huge state media coverage, use of state funds (PDVSA financed many campaign initiatives indirectly), voter mobilization through state resources, and occasional tilts like gerrymandering. For instance, district malapportionment meant that in 2010, the opposition got more popular votes (52%) but only 40% of seats. The electoral authority (CNE) was majority-controlled by Chavistas, and while voting itself was

secret, the opposition accused the government of intimidating voters by making them think their votes were monitored (e.g., the infamous Tascon List after the 2004 recall, which listed those who signed to recall Chávez; some signers later claimed they were discriminated against) (Corrales & Penfold, 2011).

As Chávez's own popularity remained relatively high, overt fraud was less necessary. He even accepted a narrow loss in the 2007 constitutional referendum. But when fortunes changed under Maduro, manipulations became more blatant:

- In 2016, after the opposition took the legislature, the CNE (electoral council) and Supreme Court worked to cancel a pending recall referendum by invalidating signature collections in some states on spurious grounds.

- The 2017 Constituent Assembly election was arguably not competitive at all: the opposition boycotted, and the system was designed to guarantee the government majority. Smartmatic, the company providing voting machines, revealed that the turnout numbers were inflated by at least a million (a rare insider acknowledgment of fraud).

- The 2018 presidential election saw main opposition candidates barred (some jailed, others exiled or disqualified). Major opposition parties were invalidated by the pro-government election board for technical reasons (like not re-registering). The resulting election had Maduro essentially hand-pick his opposition (some minor candidates to give an illusion). Most of the opposition boycotted, turnout was low, and the vote was heavily rigged (reports of coercion, multiple voting, etc.). Maduro declared victory; this election was widely not recognized internationally due to its sham nature.

Additionally, vote buying and coercion have been documented: the government uses the Fatherland Card system to see who voted (not how they voted, but whether they showed up) and often threatens that benefits (food boxes, etc.) could be cut if turnout in an area is low or opposition-leaning. Security forces and colectivos (pro-government paramilitary groups) have also harassed opposition campaigns and voters. So Venezuela went from being a borderline competitive authoritarian case under Chávez (with serious unfairness but still functioning elections) to a hegemonic authoritarian case under Maduro where elections are essentially predetermined and the opposition largely withdrew (in 2018 and also boycotted 2020 legislative election). Only when the regime felt confident (in 2021 regional elections, after splitting the opposition and under heavy sanctions that made them seek some legitimacy) did they allow

somewhat more space, resulting in the opposition winning a few governor posts but still amid many irregularities. Across these cases, a thread is how legal frameworks and institutions are bent to achieve undemocratic outcomes. Scheppele (2018) defines autocratic legalism as when autocrats come to power and then change the constitution and laws to systematically undermine checks and lock in their dominance, while still invoking the rule of law. We've seen how:

- Orbán changed election laws to ensure his party's perpetual victory, and wrote a new constitution to legalize many illiberal practices. All done via legislation, not brute force.
- Erdoğan used a legal referendum to concentrate power and passes laws to stifle opponents (like anti-terror laws that criminalize dissent).
- Putin's regime passes restrictive laws (foreign agent law, anti-protest laws) and then strictly enforces them through pliant courts to eliminate opposition, claiming it's all legal procedure.
- Chávez/Maduro constantly invoked legal procedures (from writing a new constitution in 1999 to the controversial Constituent Assembly in 2017) to give a veneer of legality to what is basically power grab. They also abuse the legal system to outlaw opponents (e.g., banning parties, jailing on legal pretexts).

This strategy can confuse external observers or citizens because it creates "plausible legality" – it's not obviously a raw dictatorship if everything has a law behind it. But "autocratic legalism" ultimately hollows out democracy from within by subverting the substance of laws while keeping their form.

In comparative perspective, electoral manipulation and autocratic legalism are the ultimate tools that cement these regimes. They ensure that even if opposition forces and dissatisfaction grow, the mechanisms to translate that into a change in leadership are jammed. Voters can vote, but the system is rigged enough that the incumbent effectively cannot lose (short of an overwhelming anti-incumbent wave, which might still be mitigated by last-resort fraud or emergency measures).

Türkiye's case is interesting because despite all the unfairness, it hasn't become a fully foregone conclusion – the opposition still had some real victories (2019 mayorals) and polls remain contested. In that sense, Türkiye remains competitive authoritarian rather than fully closed. However, each step (like jailing İmamoğlu, trying to ban HDP) nudges it closer to a scenario

where Erdoğan's victory is inevitable regardless of popular will. The lessons from Hungary, Russia, Venezuela show that if incumbents are willing and able to cross that threshold, they can manage to stay in power indefinitely, but often at the cost of increasing illegitimacy and internal decay.

10. CONCLUSION

10.1. REVISITING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND KEY FINDINGS

This final chapter synthesizes the dissertation's findings and reflects on their implications for understanding illiberal democracy and democratic backsliding, both in Türkiye and in comparative perspective. The dissertation sought to find out how did the AKP consolidate authoritarian control in Türkiye while maintaining electoral legitimacy and its implications about democratic backsliding in competitive authoritarian regimes. While doing so, the research has uncovered that the AKP achieved a multi-faceted authoritarian consolidation through gradual but systematic means. Crucially, it combined formal legal changes and institutional capture with informal coercion and intimidation – all cloaked in the mantle of democratic legitimacy. Over the past two decades, Türkiye under the AKP illustrates how an elected government can incrementally dismantle liberal-democratic checks and balances "in plain sight" while still winning elections. This supports a broader insight echoed by scholars of democratic backsliding: modern autocracies often emerge not via sudden coups, but via executive aggrandizement (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Bermeo, 2016). The Turkish case thus reveals the subtle mechanisms of 21st-century autocracy: authoritarianism gained through ballots and legal decrees rather than tanks on the streets.

In what follows, each sub-question of the dissertation is revisited in turn, summarizing how the evidence from Türkiye addresses those queries and testing the corresponding hypotheses. Throughout, a critical stance is maintained toward the AKP's illiberal practices. The chapter then moves to discuss the theoretical contributions of this research – including new conceptual insights – and its limitations. It concludes with reflections on what Türkiye's experience portends for the global "third wave of autocratization" and how these findings can inform efforts to safeguard democracy (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

10.1.1. CONSTITUTIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPTURE: ERODING CHECKS AND BALANCES

Research Question 1 asked how the AKP reshaped Türkiye's constitutional and institutional framework – particularly through the shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system – to

erode checks and balances and concentrate executive power. The findings confirm Hypothesis 1, the AKP deliberately transformed Türkiye's governance structure to systematically eliminate checks on executive authority. Through a series of constitutional amendments, legal reforms, and personnel purges, the ruling party reconfigured the state in a manner that entrenched its dominance.

Over the course of its rule (2002–2023), the AKP undertook a step-by-step dismantling of institutional constraints. Early on, it used legal reforms and confrontations to neutralize the traditional centers of "tutelary democracy" – namely the military and secular elite bureaucracy that had historically acted as guardians of the Republic. By the late 2000s, civilian control over the military was solidified (e.g. curtailing the National Security Council's authority and prosecuting generals during the controversial Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials). While these steps were framed as democratization, they simultaneously removed an important check on the ruling party's power (Özbudun, 2015; Somer, 2016). As Castaldo (2018)argues, the AKP effectively replaced the old military tutelage with a new party tutelage – positioning itself as the unaccountable guardian of the "national will."

The culmination of institutional capture was the transition from a parliamentary system to a hyper-presidential system. The pivotal moment came with the 2017 constitutional referendum, narrowly approved amid a state of emergency, which created an "Executive Presidency." This reform – enacted after the July 2016 coup attempt – abolished the office of Prime Minister, greatly expanded presidential decree powers, and weakened parliamentary oversight. President Erdoğan emerged with the ability to rule virtually by fiat, facing minimal legislative or judicial constraints. The 2017 amendments were the capstone on a series of earlier constitutional changes (such as the 2010 reforms to the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors) that incrementally eroded judicial independence and empowered the executive (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017b). By leveraging repeated electoral victories and referendums as a mandate, the AKP legally dismantled democratic guardrails from within – a textbook case of constitutional capture cloaked in popular legitimacy. This supports Hypothesis 1 and exemplifies what scholars term "authoritarian constitutionalism", where would-be autocrats use the constitution itself to eliminate checks and balances (Scheppele K. L., 2018).

Furthermore, the AKP captured state institutions through personnel control and purges, entrenching loyalists across the bureaucracy, judiciary, and security apparatus. Especially after critical junctures (like the corruption probes of 2013 and the 2016 coup attempt), thousands of

civil servants, judges, police, and military officers were purged and replaced with AKP-aligned cadres. By 2020, over half of all judges in Türkiye had been appointed during the AKP era, many during the post-2016 emergency. Independent oversight agencies – from the central bank to media regulators – were filled with party loyalists, hollowing out the impartiality of the state. Each formal power grab was reinforced by such administrative changes: for example, after the 2017 shift to presidentialism, Erdoğan ruled by emergency decrees that closed inconvenient institutions (like opposition media outlets and NGOs), merged the powers of previously autonomous bodies under the presidency, and thereby reengineered the state into a party-state. The result is that checks and balances were not only weakened; they were actively reversed – institutions designed to check power became instruments of the ruling party's power.

10.1.2. DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS: RESILIENCE AND VULNERABILITY

Research Question 2 examined the extent to which Türkiye's democratic institutions demonstrated resilience or vulnerability to manipulation by the ruling party, and what mechanisms facilitated or hindered the AKP's authoritarian consolidation. The findings reveal that while there were isolated pockets of institutional resilience, overall Türkiye's democratic institutions proved highly vulnerable to capture and abuse. This vulnerability, rooted in both design flaws and deliberate undermining, greatly facilitated the AKP's consolidation of power.

In testing this against the study's expectations, we find a nuanced confirmation of how institutional weaknesses abetted autocratization. Türkiye's institutions did provide occasional resistance – for example, opposition parties remained in the game and won significant victories in some elections, and courts sometimes issued rulings that checked the government – but these were exceptions that proved the rule. By and large, the integrity of key institutions was compromised through politicization, intimidation, and biased rule changes.

Several mechanisms of institutional manipulation stand out:

The judiciary, meant to be a bulwark of rule of law, was gradually subjugated. The AKP government stacked high courts with loyalists (especially after a 2010 judicial reform allowed more executive influence in appointments) and used disciplinary proceedings to sideline independent judges (Özbudun, 2015). After 2016, mass purges targeted over 4,000 judges and prosecutors, replacing them with regime sympathizers. The result was a judiciary largely compliant with the executive's wishes. While there were moments of resilience – e.g. the Constitutional Court in earlier years occasionally ruled in favor of opposition appeals or rights

claims – such independence waned as the courts' composition tilted overwhelmingly pro-AKP. By the late 2010s, courts routinely upheld government positions (such as keeping opposition leader Selahattin Demirtaş imprisoned despite European Court of Human Rights rulings), illustrating the judiciary's lost autonomy. Politicized appointments and the chilling effect of executive pressure meant that the judicial branch ceased to function as a meaningful check on power (Selçuk O. , 2016).

Elections in Türkiye remained regular and competitive in form, but their fairness and freedom deteriorated over time. This aligns with the competitive authoritarianism model (Levitsky & Way, 2010)wherein incumbents use state resources and legal manipulations to tilt the electoral field. The AKP exploited state advantages – dominating media coverage, channeling public funds toward campaigning, and manipulating election laws – to ensure it could win even as its popular support fluctuated. For instance, changes to electoral law ahead of the 2017 referendum and 2018 elections (such as allowing unstamped ballots to be counted, gerrymandering districts, and requiring police at polling stations) raised serious concerns among observers about the integrity of the vote. Media bias was extreme: by 2018, over 90% of media outlets were owned by pro-government businesses, denying opposition voices a platform. Intimidation further marred electoral processes, especially in Kurdish-majority areas where opposition campaigners were harassed or arrested. Despite these adverse conditions, oppositions showed resilience at times – notably in June 2015, when the AKP briefly lost its parliamentary majority, and in 2019 local elections, when opposition candidates won mayoralties in Istanbul, Ankara, and other cities. These instances demonstrated that democratic processes had not been completely hollowed out. However, the regime's response to such setbacks underscored institutional vulnerability: after June 2015, the AKP resorted to polarization and security fear-mongering to reverse its losses in a snap election that November; after the opposition's win in the 2019 Istanbul mayoral race, the government-controlled election board anulled the result and forced a re-run (only to be met with a bigger opposition victory, a rare failure of the regime's manipulation). Overall, electoral institutions proved only partially resilient – while votes were still counted and opposition victories possible, the playing field was grossly uneven. Türkiye's case confirms that elections can continue in an autocratizing state, but their democratic quality erodes as incumbents entrench.

Beyond the formal branches of government, other institutions of accountability were also undermined. Independent media and academia were prime targets: through legal harassment and ownership takeovers, critical media was decimated (over 150 journalists were jailed in the

post-2016 crackdown, and major newspapers like Hürriyet were sold to pro-AKP conglomerates). Civil society organizations, from human rights groups to educational foundations, faced closure or crippling restrictions under emergency decrees (especially after 2016). Universities saw over 1,500 academics purged for alleged dissent. These repressive moves severely curtailed the "watchdog" function of media and civil society. Yet, even here, slivers of resilience appeared – a handful of independent online news platforms and NGOs persevered (often at great risk), and new social movements (e.g. women's rights protests) sporadically emerged, showing that societal resistance was down but not out. The limited autonomy of some local governments after 2019 (where opposition mayors attempted more transparent governance in big cities) also offered a glimpse of institutional pushback, though the central government quickly constrained these by, for example, appointing trustees in place of elected mayors in Kurdish regions.

10.1.3. POPULIST LEGITIMATION AND PUBLIC ACQUIESCENCE

Research Question 3 explored how the AKP employed populist and nationalist discourses to legitimize authoritarian practices, and what factors made segments of the electorate tolerant of or complicit in these transformations. The evidence strongly supports Hypothesis 2: the AKP regime constructed a powerful majoritarian populist narrative that framed its actions as the embodiment of the "people's will", thus providing political cover for illiberal measures. This narrative, combined with favorable sociopolitical factors, led a significant portion of the electorate to either endorse or at least tolerate the erosion of democracy.

The AKP's discourse under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan exemplified classic populism: it divided society into the righteous "people" versus corrupt or traitorous "elites" and "enemies", and asserted that electoral victory confers an unlimited mandate to govern (Müller, 2016). Over time, this populist framing evolved into what can be termed "majoritarian authoritarianism" – a belief that winning a majority (even a bare majority) in elections entitles the government to override all constraints and speak exclusively for the nation. Erdoğan frequently equated ballot-box success with a direct, personal mandate from "the national will", dismissing critics as undemocratic forces sabotaging the popular will (Yabanci, 2016). This ideological stance was used to justify concentrating power: any check or balance (independent courts, a free press, opposition parties) could be portrayed as hindrances imposed by unelected elites, and thus "anti-people."

This populist legitimation strategy proved remarkably effective in securing public acquiescence to authoritarian moves. Several factors help explain why large segments of Turkish society acquiesced in – or even applauded – the backsliding:

The AKP's core support base, particularly conservative religious Turks and nationalists, identified strongly with the party's narrative. The AKP positioned itself as the champion of the pious Sunni Muslim majority and the guardian of Turkish sovereignty against internal and external "others" (secularists, Western liberals, FETO, etc.). This created a polarizing "us vs. them" worldview. Many voters came to see Erdoğan as a leader who restored their identity's pride after decades of feeling marginalized by secular elites. Consequently, they viewed criticisms of the AKP or constraints on its rule as attacks on themselves or on national dignity. Populist rhetoric tapping into religious-nationalist sentiments thus normalized extraordinary measures: e.g. closing newspapers or jailing opponents was framed as necessary to defend the nation from traitors. Nationalist tropes (especially after 2015, in alliance with hardline nationalists) further justified crackdowns as protecting the state against terrorists and foreign plots. In short, the AKP cultivated an affective loyalty among its supporters that often trumped abstract democratic principles like pluralism or minority rights.

In its first decade, the AKP benefited from strong economic growth and service delivery, which built a reservoir of public goodwill and credibility (Öniş Z. , 2013). Many citizens, especially in rural Anatolia and working-class urban areas, experienced tangible improvements (infrastructure, healthcare, social aid) under AKP governance. This performance legitimacy made supporters more forgiving of antidemocratic excesses – as long as the government delivered stability and prosperity, demands for liberal democracy remained secondary. Moreover, the AKP developed extensive patronage networks and clientelistic ties. Access to state jobs, contracts, and welfare was often mediated through party channels, tying livelihoods to the AKP's continued rule (Günay & Dzihic, 2016). Such material bonds incentivized loyalty and muted potential dissent: many voters feared that opposing the regime could mean losing economic benefits. As a result, even those uneasy with some AKP policies often stayed in line, valuing stability and personal benefit over rocking the boat.

The absence of persuasive alternative narratives also contributed to public complacency. The opposition parties in Türkiye historically struggled to form a united front or present a compelling vision that transcended the country's polarizing cleavages. Until very recently, secularist, nationalist, and Kurdish-oriented opposition groups were divided, sometimes viewed

with suspicion by each other's constituencies. The AKP adeptly exploited this fragmentation and portrayed opposition elements as either elitist (in the case of the secular CHP) or extremist (in the case of the pro-Kurdish HDP). Additionally, as noted under Research Question 2, by the late 2010s the government had succeeded in dominating the media landscape, meaning most voters were primarily exposed to the AKP's framing of events. The near-monopoly of pro-government media reinforced the populist message and drowned out dissenting viewpoints. In such an information environment, the public's ability to even recognize the erosion of democracy was impaired – many simply heard the government's justification that extraordinary steps (purges, emergency rule) were needed to protect the nation. This informational asymmetry cultivated consent or at least resigned acceptance among broad swathes of society.

As will be discussed further under Research Question 4, repeated crises were used to rally the AKP's base around the flag. When people feel under siege (from alleged conspiracies, terrorism, coups), they often rally behind strong leaders and become willing to sacrifice freedoms for security (Taş, 2015). The AKP's populist narrative amplified this effect by constantly presenting Türkiye as embattled by internal and external "enemies of the people." In such a perpetual crisis mindset, authoritarian measures could be sold as urgent and patriotic. A segment of the electorate thus saw crackdowns not as tyranny, but as heroic defense of the nation, further entrenching their support for Erdoğan's hardline course.

Thus, the AKP's mix of Islamist-inflected populism and aggressive nationalism provided ideological legitimation for authoritarian practices and explains why democratic norms did not trigger greater public outcry. Segments of the electorate were not just passive victims of authoritarianism – many became willing accomplices in their own democratic disenfranchisement, convinced by populist rhetoric that the AKP's actions were in service of a higher democratic ideal (a majority's will). This finding strongly validates Hypothesis 2. Türkiye exemplifies how populism can serve as a "friendly face" for autocracy – what the regime does with one hand (eroding checks and rights) is pardoned by the other hand's claim to represent "the people." It aligns with theoretical work warning that populism is inherently illiberal and, once in power, tends to attack pluralism and minority protections (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). The Turkish case puts empirical flesh on those warnings: we see the step-by-step interaction between populist governance and institutional erosion.

Moreover, Türkiye's experience contributes nuance: populist legitimation was necessary but not alone sufficient; it worked in tandem with societal factors. For example, one might compare

to other populist regimes: in some countries, populists erode democracy amid widespread apathy or weak civil society. In Türkiye, because of a relatively vibrant political culture, backsliding was highly contested and polarizing – large parts of the electorate fiercely opposed AKP's direction (e.g. the Gezi Park protesters, urban secularists), even as a roughly equal portion stood by the regime. This polarization meant that populist legitimation both energized supporters and deeply alienated detractors, splitting society. The dissertation found that this dynamic of intense polarization can entrench an authoritarian trajectory by preventing a unified democratic opposition, while also ensuring that the regime retains a passionate support base immune to outside criticism.

10.1.4. CRITICAL JUNCTURES: CRISES AS CATALYSTS FOR AUTOCRATIZATION

Research Question 4 investigated how crisis moments (such as the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the December 17–25, 2013 corruption probes, and especially the July 2016 coup attempt) functioned as critical junctures in the AKP's authoritarian trajectory, enabling institutional restructuring and political repression. The findings clearly support Hypothesis 3: each major crisis in Türkiye's recent history was seized by the AKP as an opportunity to accelerate and deepen authoritarian consolidation. These episodes served as "shock events" after which the regime intensified power grabs and silenced opponents, often through legally-backed exceptional measures. In other words, crises were not merely challenges to the regime; they became enablers of the regime's transformation – illustrating the adage that would-be autocrats "never let a serious crisis go to waste."

Three crises in particular marked inflection points:

- The Gezi protests were a wake-up call for Erdoğan, who saw in the multitudes of dissenters a direct threat to his rule. The government's response was a harsh crackdown – riot police used excessive force, resulting in deaths and thousands of injuries, and a wide net of arrests of protesters, activists, and journalists followed. Gezi became a pretext for the AKP to brand all liberal or urban opposition as pawns of foreign plots and internal enemies. In its aftermath, the regime hardened its stance: new laws tightened control over social media and public gatherings, and pro-government narratives painted Gezi as an attempted "color revolution" orchestrated by outsiders. This securitizing discourse not only justified immediate repression but also laid the groundwork for later measures by normalizing the idea that mass protest equals treason.

Gezi thus stands as a critical juncture where Türkiye's trajectory decisively pivoted from soft authoritarian tendencies to a more openly illiberal direction (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016). It also demonstrated to the AKP the utility of portraying any dissent as an existential crisis – a formula they would repeatedly use.

- In late 2013, massive corruption investigations implicated AKP ministers and even Erdoğan's family. Rather than allow an independent judicial process, Erdoğan cast the probes as a "judicial coup" orchestrated by a shadowy "parallel state" – referring to the FETO, a former ally turned foe within the bureaucracy. This moment was used to purge the police and prosecutors' ranks of those deemed FETO (thousands were removed or reassigned) and to introduce legislation curbing the independence of the judiciary. The corruption crisis enabled Erdoğan to tighten his grip on the judiciary under the guise of protecting the elected government from an undemocratic conspiracy. It also began the open politicization of the bureaucracy, as loyalty to the AKP (and specifically non-sympathy to FETO) became the paramount criterion for state employment. This period taught Erdoğan that controlling the narrative of a crisis – in this case, flipping a corruption expose into a tale of betrayal – allows the regime to actually emerge stronger and more authoritarian than before. By early 2014, Türkiye had new draconian internet censorship laws (to stop leaks), a cowed press (journalists who reported on the corruption were persecuted), and a judiciary in turmoil. What could have been a government-toppling scandal instead became a stepping stone for further autocratic legalism – using ostensibly legal responses (like new laws and court cases against "plotters") to entrench power (Scheppele K. L., 2018).

- July 15, 2016 coup attempt was arguably the most consequential crisis. A faction within the military tried to overthrow the government, leading to violent clashes and the coup's defeat within hours. The coup attempt – traumatic for Turkish society – provided Erdoğan with what he later called "a gift from God." In its immediate aftermath, a state of emergency was declared, lasting two years, during which Erdoğan ruled by decree with minimal oversight. Under the emergency, the regime undertook unprecedented purges and restructuring: over 100,000 public sector employees (including military officers, judges, academics, teachers, and civil servants) were dismissed for alleged links to the coup or terrorism; thousands of schools, NGOs, media outlets, and even businesses were shut down or seized by the state. Opposition politicians were arrested and imprisoned. Crucially, this period also paved the way for the 2017 constitutional

referendum, as discussed under Research Question 1, which cemented one-man rule. The coup attempt thus acted as the critical juncture that enabled Türkiye's full transition into a new regime. Erdoğan and the AKP justified every extreme measure as necessary for the survival of the state – the notion of an existential threat allowed them to rally public support (or at least acquiescence) and silence international criticism. The pattern fits what scholars have observed elsewhere: would-be autocrats often manufacture or capitalize on crises to suspend normal politics and ram through changes that would otherwise meet resistance (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In Türkiye's case, while the coup attempt was real, the AKP maximally exploited it, treating it as a blank check for authoritarian re-founding of the state. This aligns perfectly with Hypothesis 3: the crisis was the catalyst that permitted rapid institutional reconfiguration, completing the project of capturing the judiciary, military, and bureaucracy in one sweeping wave under emergency decrees.

Across these crises, a clear strategy emerges: the AKP harnessed the politics of fear and exception. Borrowing from Carl Schmitt's notion of sovereign power in an exception, Erdoğan positioned himself as the indispensable savior in moments of chaos – thereby justifying extraordinary powers (Schmitt's theory, though not cited explicitly by the AKP, aptly describes their practice). This resonates with the concept of "autocratic legalism", where legal instruments (states of emergency, new legislation) are used to achieve autocratic ends under cover of legality. Each crisis, in effect, permanently ratcheted authoritarianism up to a new level; there was no return to the previous status quo. Thus, Gezi normalized heavy-handed repression of dissent, the 2013 scandal broke judicial independence, and the 2016 coup attempt enabled the new constitution and purge of all remaining opposition within state organs.

It is also notable that some crises were actively provoked or magnified by the regime. The AKP's divisive policies and rhetoric arguably contributed to polarization that made events like Gezi more explosive. Some analysts suggest that even the collapse of the peace process with Kurdish rebels in 2015 and the subsequent resumption of conflict (accompanied by bombings and unrest) were cynically used by the AKP to rally nationalist support and discredit the pro-Kurdish opposition ahead of elections (Somer, 2016). While not "fabricated" in a conspiratorial sense, these crises were certainly manipulated and amplified by the regime's narratives. Erdoğan's government continuously operated in a permanent state of campaign crisis, keeping the public on edge and thus more accepting of hardline measures.

10.1.5. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES: TÜRKIYE IN THE GLOBAL AUTOCRATIZATION WAVE

Research Question 5 situated the Turkish case in a broader comparative context, asking how Türkiye's democratic backsliding under the AKP compares to other cases of competitive authoritarianism (such as Hungary, Russia, Venezuela) and what insights it offers for theories of hybrid regimes and electoral autocracy. The analysis found that Türkiye's trajectory shares many common patterns with other 21st-century cases of autocratization, yet also has unique features that refine our understanding of how competitive authoritarian regimes emerge.

Türkiye's shift from a flawed democracy to a competitive authoritarian regime reflects global trends identified in the literature on hybrid regimes:

- Like leaders in Hungary (Orbán) or Venezuela (Chávez/Maduro), Erdoğan came to power through elections and then systematically hollowed out liberal-democratic institutions. All these cases validate concept of "illiberal democracy" where electoral victors undermine the rule of law, minority rights, and checks and balances. In Hungary, for instance, Orbán's government enacted a new constitution and media laws to entrench itself. Similarly, Chávez in Venezuela used constitutional revisions (1999, 2009) to extend his power and packed courts and electoral bodies; Erdoğan's path was comparable, Türkiye mirrors this with its 2017 constitution and media crackdown. The general lesson is that electoral autocracies often maintain the form of democracy (elections, constitutions) but subvert the substance, a pattern Türkiye underscores.

- Andreas Schedler (2002)outlined a "menu of manipulation" in electoral authoritarian regimes – tactics like media control, harassment of opponents, vote dilution, and judicial control. Türkiye's experience demonstrates the broad applicability of this menu: from media capture to judiciary co-optation, the AKP employed nearly every tool in Schedler's list. This aligns Türkiye with cases like Russia, where Putin's regime took over national TV, persecuted opponents, and rigged elections in subtle ways (Fish, 2005). In fact, a comparative study by White & Herzog (2016) noted that both Russia and Türkiye leveraged strong state capacity to reinforce authoritarian rule, using institutions like the courts and security forces to suppress opposition legally. Similarly, in Hungary and Poland, ruling parties have subjugated courts and media. Türkiye's trajectory thus confirms that there is a template of institutional manipulation being replicated across cases of democratic backsliding. It enriches theory by showing how a

country with a relatively strong civil society and prior multi-party competition (unlike post-Soviet Russia, for example) can still fall prey to the same authoritarian playbook – albeit with more public contestation.

- Türkiye highlights, as do other cases, the role of populist legitimation in democratic erosion. Majoritarian rhetoric and nationalist mobilization have been crucial in places like Hungary (where Orbán invokes the will of "the Hungarian people" against Brussels or migrants to excuse illiberal laws) and India (where Modi's BJP uses Hindu nationalist populism to marginalize opponents). The dissertation's integrated analysis of populism's role – drawing on Türkiye – supports the emerging consensus that populism is a common denominator in contemporary autocratization (Müller, 2016; Pappas, 2019). Türkiye goes further in blending Islamism with populism, similar to some extent to regimes like Iran's elected authoritarians or Modi's India in blending religion with nationalism. This suggests a pattern: invoking a civilizational or religious identity ("the ummah", or "Christian Europe", or "Hindu Rashtra") often accompanies populist autocrats to deepen an us-them divide. The insight from Türkiye is how effective this can be even in a country that once aspired to liberal democratic norms – a cautionary tale that no society is immune to exclusionary nationalist populism.

- Many competitive authoritarian regimes exploit crises – a fact not unique to Türkiye. For example, Russia used the war in Chechnya and later external conflicts to rally support and repress critics under pretext of security. Hungary used the 2015 refugee crisis to pass draconian measures and later COVID-19 to rule by decree. Sri Lanka and the Philippines have seen leaders use terrorism or crime waves to justify extraordinary powers. Türkiye's contribution to this comparative understanding is detailed evidence of how successive different types of crises (social unrest, corruption scandal, coup attempt) each can be harnessed to progressively erode democracy. It underscores for theory that crises are flexible instruments – whether genuine or manufactured, they allow incumbents to act decisively to reshape political order (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The Turkish case adds that the frequency and variety of crises may correlate with the speed of backsliding: Türkiye had multiple crises in a short span (2013–2016), which turbocharged its autocratization. This invites further comparative research into whether countries with more frequent "shocks" descend faster into authoritarianism.

- Another commonality is the weakening of external democratic pressure. Türkiye's democratic backsliding occurred in a period when its once-strong incentive to democratize (EU accession) faded. Similarly, many backsliders (Russia, Venezuela, etc.) operate in a world where great power competition and norms have not strongly penalized autocracy. This aligns with Levitsky & Way's (2010) argument that Western leverage and linkage affect authoritarian durability. Türkiye's partial drift from the West and reduced EU leverage in the 2010s likely eased AKP's path. This trend is echoed by Hungary and Poland defying EU norms or various regimes receiving support from non-Western powers. Thus, Türkiye exemplifies the global context of a "democratic recession" where international democracy promotion is weak and autocrats find support or at least acquiescence abroad.

While fitting these broader patterns, Türkiye's case offers some unique insights and contrasts that enrich comparative regime theory:

- Türkiye is somewhat unique in that prior to AKP, it was a democracy under military "tutelage" – the secular military-bureaucratic establishment exerted behind-the-scenes control (as seen in periodic coups and interventions). The AKP's rise initially dismantled this tutelage (heralded as a democratic advance), only to replace it with its own form of tutelage. This inversion – from military guardianship to populist party guardianship – suggests a path-dependent dynamic: the presence of a strong prior tutelary actor meant that when AKP eliminated it, an unchecked power vacuum allowed the party to install itself as the new unaccountable guardian. Not all countries have this dynamic. For instance, in some Latin American countries, the military stepped back fully during democratization; in Türkiye, its forced exit created a sudden opening for civilian dominance without counterweight. This may explain why Türkiye's backsliding became so steep post-2010 – a caution that removing one form of undemocratic influence (e.g., the military) does not guarantee democracy if another force can monopolize power (Castaldo, 2018). It also offers a comparative lesson: transitions from tutelary regimes need to be carefully managed to avoid new power monopolies.

- Unlike many cases of competitive authoritarianism, Türkiye is a Muslim-majority society with a formally secular state and a long history of multiparty politics. The AKP's rule has been a test of integrating a form of political Islam into a democratic framework – a test that ultimately failed as the regime became authoritarian. This provides insight

into the broader debate on Islam and democracy. Türkiye in the 2000s was often touted as a model that political Islam can be reconciled with democracy. The post-2010 unraveling, where Islamist-conservative rhetoric was marshaled to erode liberal institutions, shows a complexity: it was not Islam per se that caused backsliding (as the AKP was democratic in its early years), but the fusion of Islamist identity politics with populist majoritarian claims and the personalization of power that proved fatal to liberal democracy. Comparatively, it raises questions: e.g., how does Türkiye's Islamist-populist authoritarianism compare with more secular populist regimes (like Hungary) or explicitly theocratic ones (like Iran)? Türkiye's case suggests that populism is the stronger common denominator – religion was an instrument within a populist framework. It also offers hope that a devout society can indeed sustain democracy (since many devout Muslims in Türkiye also oppose authoritarianism), refuting any simplistic cultural determinism. The key issue is the politicization of identity and the destruction of pluralism, which can happen under any cultural context if a regime chooses that path.

- Türkiye had, by the early 2000s, an established party system, reasonably free elections, and a vibrant civil society (albeit with flaws). This sets it apart from many competitive authoritarian cases which were weak democracies to start with. The fact that Türkiye still succumbed to autocratization is a sobering insight: even relatively robust democracies are not immune to reversal. It enriches theory by challenging the idea that democratic consolidation is irreversible once a certain threshold (like wealth or institutionalization) is passed. Türkiye was a middle-income country with a large middle class and experienced democratic institutions – yet backslid. This invites scholars to refine models of democratic durability: clearly, factors like polarization, leadership ambitions, and institutional loopholes can override socio-economic predictors of stability. It echoes recent experiences in other robust democracies under strain (e.g., recent populist challenges in the United States or India) – Türkiye is a dramatic case that democratic erosion can occur even in environments thought relatively safe from it.

- Türkiye's case shows a mix of legalistic strategies (constitutional change, laws) and informal pressure (mob attacks on opposition offices, using businesses to buy media, etc.). While many regimes use both, Türkiye's balance is notable. Erdoğan's government has preferred to cloak repression in legality (passing laws to censor the internet rather than simply censoring, holding a referendum to legalize more power

rather than just grabbing it). This is the epitome of "stealth authoritarianism" where actions are taken through the facade of law to avoid outcry.

- Some regimes (e.g., outright dictatorships) don't bother with this façade. But in the 21st century, a number of regimes do (Hungary, Poland, etc.), and Türkiye is a leading example of how effective that can be – until very late in the process, many observers hesitated to label Türkiye undemocratic because moves were nominally within constitutional procedures. It highlights for theory the need to detect and theorize authoritarian practices that subvert democracy while complying with its superficial rules.

10.2. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Having revisited the research questions and demonstrated how the evidence answers them (largely confirming the three core hypotheses), this dissertation offers several novel theoretical contributions. Moving beyond describing the Turkish case, it has sought to develop a comparative and interdisciplinary framework for understanding illiberal democracy in the 21st century. The key contributions highlighted:

1. The concept of "majoritarian authoritarianism": A central contribution of this work is the articulation of "majoritarian authoritarianism" as a distinct subtype of competitive authoritarian regime. This concept emerged from observing the Turkish experience, where the ruling party relies heavily on the rhetoric of majority rule to legitimize its concentration of power. Majoritarian authoritarianism refers to a system in which an elected leadership claims an exclusive mandate of "the people" – often defined narrowly as their own supporter base – and uses that claim to override institutional checks, minority rights, and pluralism. It complements and extends existing typologies of hybrid regimes. While Levitsky & Way's (2010) competitive authoritarianism emphasizes an uneven playing field maintained through coercion and fraud, majoritarian authoritarianism emphasizes that democratic backsliding can be propelled by the ballot box itself when winning elections is taken as carte blanche for autocracy. This idea is connected to, but goes further than, Guillermo O'Donnell's delegative democracy (where a leader governs as if given free rein by voters) – in majoritarian authoritarianism, not only does the leader bypass horizontal accountability, but they actively dismantle it claiming moral superiority of the majority's will. The dissertation's

comparative discussion suggests this concept has applicability beyond Türkiye. Countries like Hungary, India, and Poland display similar tendencies where leaders justify illiberal moves as fulfilling the majority's desires. By formalizing "majoritarian authoritarianism", this research contributes a framework for scholars to identify and compare regimes where populist majoritarian logic is at the core of autocratic consolidation. It is a warning that winning elections is not a sufficient condition for democracy – the normative commitment to liberal democratic principles is equally essential, else electoral triumph can breed tyranny of the majority (Tocqueville, 2000).

2. Populism-backsliding nexus (empirical synthesis): While it is often asserted that "populism is a threat to democracy", detailed empirical analyses of how populist governance translates into institutional backsliding have been relatively scarce. This dissertation fills that gap by systematically tracing the interplay between populist discourse and democratic erosion over an extended period (Türkiye 2002–2023). The contribution here is twofold: empirically, it documents the step-by-step process by which populist strategies (demonizing opponents, undermining truth via propaganda, invoking majority will to skirt rules) directly facilitate the undermining of courts, the press, and other checks. Theoretically, it integrates literatures on populism (e.g., Mudde, Müller) with those on democratic erosion (Levitsky & Ziblatt, Bermeo) to propose a more nuanced model of backsliding. In this model, populist legitimation is not just a side-factor but a driving mechanism that works in tandem with institutional capture. The Turkish case shows that populism creates the political and societal conditions that make institutional capture possible or at least easier – it softens the ground by reducing public resistance and framing anti-democratic actions as heroic. This insight can inform theory by highlighting, for example, that measures of populist discourse might be predictive of impending democratic erosion in comparative datasets. It also suggests that efforts to prevent backsliding must address the populist narratives, not just the institutional mechanics. In summary, the dissertation contributes a richly evidenced argument that populism and democratic erosion are mutually reinforcing – a relationship that needs to be incorporated into future models of hybrid regimes.

3. Crisis exploitation theory in hybrid regimes: Building on Hypothesis 3, the research contributes to theory by formalizing the idea that periodic crises serve as catalysts or accelerators for hybrid regime consolidation. While scholars have noted this in various cases, this dissertation's detailed chronology of Türkiye provides a clear template: a

competitive authoritarian regime often remains partially constrained until a critical juncture (or multiple) provides the chance to eliminate remaining checks. We propose a conceptual "crisis consolidation model": in stage 1, an aspiring autocrat gradually chips away at institutions; in stage 2, a crisis hits and is seized to justify emergency or extra-ordinary actions; in stage 3, these actions fundamentally restructure the regime, crossing into full (or nearly full) authoritarian territory, after which a new equilibrium is reached. Türkiye's 2016 coup attempt exemplifies stage 2 and 3 in this model. Similarly, comparative references (e.g., Hitler's use of the Reichstag fire, Orbán's use of the migrant crisis, etc.) align with this pattern. The contribution here is making this mechanism explicit and generalizable: it alerts scholars and democracy watchdogs to the fact that how a government responds to a crisis is a make-or-break moment for democratic survival. The concept of "autocratic legalism" is integrated into this model to explain how legal tools are employed during crises to entrench autocracy. The interdisciplinary insight also links to political psychology: during crises, societies grant leaders more leeway (rally-round-the-flag effect), which autocrats exploit – connecting state-level analysis with mass behavior. Thus, the dissertation not only chronicles Türkiye's crisis episodes but theorizes them, contributing to a broader understanding of critical junctures in regime change.

4. Bridging political theory and comparative politics (majority vs. liberalism): An innovative aspect of this research is its blending of normative political theory with empirical comparative politics. The Turkish case was analyzed not just through empirical data but also through the lens of enduring theoretical debates: majority rule vs. liberal constraints, sovereignty vs. rule of law, etc. By invoking thinkers like Alexis de Tocqueville on the tyranny of the majority and Carl Schmitt on states of exception, the dissertation provides a richer interpretation of events. For example, Tocqueville's 19th-century warnings about an "omnipotent majority" resonate strongly in Erdoğan's Türkiye, illustrating the contemporary relevance of classical theory. Likewise, Schmitt's idea that sovereign is he who decides on the exception illuminates Erdoğan's behavior in emergencies. The interdisciplinary approach means the dissertation is not just a country study but also a commentary on democratic theory: it shows empirically how unchecked majoritarianism (democracy without liberalism) leads to tyranny, thereby reinforcing the arguments of liberal theorists that democracy cannot survive without liberal institutions and norms (Zakaria, 1997). This blending of theory and

practice is a contribution in itself, suggesting that future comparative work on democratic backsliding can benefit from a dialogue with political philosophy to interpret the normative implications of empirical trends.

5. Normative and practical insights for democratic resilience: Beyond academic theory, the research yields insights with practical implications for safeguarding democracy. By dissecting the failure of Turkish institutions to stop backsliding, the dissertation identifies factors that could bolster resilience elsewhere. Some implications include: - The importance of a united opposition and broad coalitions: Türkiye's opposition remained fragmented for much of the AKP era, easing the ruling party's dominance. When a more united front emerged (as in the 2019 local elections with opposition parties cooperating), it scored successes. Lesson: electoral autocrats can be defeated at the polls if opposition groups overcome divides – a point of hope that is generalizable (as seen recently in the Czech Republic or Malaysia where broad alliances unseated entrenched leaders). - Independent media and fact-based discourse: The rapid decline of media freedom in Türkiye shows how crucial a free press is as a first line of defense. Societies need robust independent media (traditional and digital) to inform citizens and debunk propagandist narratives. Supporting journalism and combating disinformation is thus a key takeaway for democracy advocates. - Judicial and bureaucratic independence: Türkiye's experience warns that formal provisions for judicial independence mean little if ruling parties can pack courts. Institutional designs like supermajority requirements for appointments, independent commissions, or constitutional protections for civil service tenure might help in other contexts to prevent what happened in Türkiye. Essentially, the finding is that institutions must be fortified not just by law but by a culture of adherence, and where that culture is weak, external reinforcement or design tweaks are needed. - International support and norms: The dissertation subtly highlights that stronger international engagement (EU, Council of Europe, etc.) in defending Turkish democracy might have constrained AKP's worst impulses. Therefore, globally, democracies should strengthen international norms and perhaps conditionality – e.g., ties of aid or membership to democratic standards – to raise the cost of backsliding. This is especially relevant given Türkiye's comparison with EU members like Hungary, suggesting organizations like the EU need better tools to handle internal autocratization. - The role of civil society: Türkiye's remaining civil society, while battered, still provides seeds for future democratic revival. The research implies that even under

repression, keeping civil society alive (NGOs, social movements, community groups) is critical. They preserve pluralism and can lead the charge when political openings occur. Thus, supporting civil society in autocratizing contexts is vital.

In providing these insights, the dissertation contributes to a forward-looking dialogue on how democracies can be more resilient. It does not merely diagnose what went wrong in Türkiye; it also extracts lessons that reformers and scholars can use to prevent or mitigate democratic backsliding elsewhere. This normative contribution is in line with the dissertation's aim to transcend case study description and inform the "broader quest of safeguarding democracy in an age of rising populist authoritarianism."

10.3. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

While this dissertation provides a comprehensive analysis of Türkiye's democratic backsliding and contributes novel insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Recognizing these limitations not only provides context for interpreting the findings but also points to areas where further investigation is warranted.

Single case focus and generalizability: This study is essentially a deep dive into one country-case (Türkiye) with comparative references. As such, one must be cautious in generalizing the findings universally. Türkiye has particular historical, cultural, and geopolitical contexts – for instance, its legacy of a secularist military, its majority-Muslim society with a strong Islamist movement, and its unique position straddling Europe and the Middle East. These factors might limit direct applicability of some conclusions to other cases. While the concept of "majoritarian authoritarianism" and patterns of populist legitimation are argued to be relevant elsewhere, the single-case method means those propositions are hypothesis-generating rather than definitively proven across cases. Future research could use a multi-case study or quantitative approach to test whether the identified mechanisms (e.g., crisis exploitation, populist discourse effects) hold similarly in different settings. In short, this dissertation prioritizes depth over breadth; it paints a rich picture of one trajectory, which may not capture all possible paths to competitive authoritarianism.

Temporal proximity and evolving events: As of this writing (2025), many developments analyzed – especially the post-2016 period – are relatively recent and ongoing. The dissertation effectively writes a "first draft of history" for Türkiye's autocratization. This means some judgments could be subject to revision as new information emerges or as the situation evolves.

For example, the long-term impact of the 2019 opposition municipal victories or the economic downturn of 2018-2022 on Türkiye's regime trajectory is still unfolding. The conclusions drawn about near-indefinite AKP hegemony might be challenged if, say, the 2023 elections or beyond see a real power shift (recent events suggest increased opposition coordination). Thus, one limitation is the potential lack of historical distance – the analysis might not fully capture enduring versus transient factors. Political dynamics in Türkiye could shift, altering some of the findings (e.g., if the AKP were to lose power and some democratic institutions recover, some conclusions about irreversibility might soften). The dissertation mitigates this by anchoring analysis in structural and theoretical frameworks, but the fact remains that we are analyzing a moving target.

Scope of institutions and society covered: The dissertation focuses primarily on formal political institutions (executive, legislature, judiciary, elections) and broad discursive trends (populism, nationalism). While it discusses media, civil society, and economy as they relate to these, there are areas less explored due to scope. For instance, the role of the economy in the AKP's regime durability is mentioned (the AKP's early economic successes, later crises), but a detailed political economy analysis (linking neoliberal policies, inequality, business elites' co-option by AKP, etc.) is beyond the scope. Similarly, foreign policy and geopolitical influences on Türkiye's democratic backsliding receive limited attention. One could argue that shifts like Türkiye's estrangement from the EU, alignment with more authoritarian powers (Russia, China), or regional conflicts (Syria's war spilling over) had feedback effects on domestic politics. These aspects are touched only briefly. Furthermore, within society, this work did not delve deeply into regional variations (e.g., how Kurdish-majority regions experienced a harsher authoritarian clampdown than western Türkiye), or gender dynamics (e.g., how authoritarianism affected women's rights or minorities specifically). These choices were made to keep the dissertation focused, but they represent limitations in thematic coverage. Each of those aspects could be an avenue for further research or could slightly nuance the conclusions (for example, considering how patriarchy and authoritarianism intersect in populist discourse, or how economic downturns might eventually erode regime legitimacy).

Methodological constraints: The research method is primarily qualitative, reliant on extensive literature review, document analysis, and secondary sources (including academic works, reports, and some primary speeches). There were no field interviews or original surveys conducted. This means some insights (like why voters behaved as they did, or internal AKP decision-making rationales) are inferred from existing studies and public opinion data rather

than direct evidence collected by the author. While triangulating many scholarly sources provides confidence, the lack of primary fieldwork could be seen as a limitation in capturing on-the-ground nuances. Also, the snowball literature approach might carry a risk of bias: certain dominant narratives in academia may overshadow dissenting interpretations. The dissertation tries to incorporate counter-arguments (for instance, acknowledging AKP's supporters' perspective, or noting moments of resilience), but inevitably, a critical stance was maintained. A different researcher might emphasize different aspects (for example, a government perspective might stress the security threats Türkiye faced, which the AKP responded to). Thus, the analysis, while thorough, is not neutral – it is a critical interpretation of the AKP era. Methodologically, a more mixed-method approach (combining quantitative data on democratic indicators, for instance, with qualitative process-tracing) could strengthen future studies.

Normative positioning: The dissertation is openly critical of the AKP's autocratization. While this normative stance is grounded in liberal democratic values and abundant evidence of rights violations, one could argue this introduces bias. Supporters of the AKP or similar movements might feel that positive aspects (e.g., initial democratizing reforms, economic improvements, popular will expression) do not receive equal weight. In a scholarly sense, the limitation is that the research does not adopt a neutral tone but rather an advocacy for liberal democracy. Some might say this colors the interpretation of events (though arguably in line with the normative foundations of comparative democratization scholarship). Balancing this, the dissertation made an effort to understand why many citizens supported the AKP (thus avoiding a purely dismissive view of them as irrational), and to place Türkiye's changes in context rather than as singular evil. Still, readers should note that the analysis is motivated by a concern for democratic principles, which shapes the critique.

10.4. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Building on the limitations and the findings, several avenues for future research emerge. Having introduced the concept of "majoritarian authoritarianism", a logical next step is systematic comparative research to refine and validate it. Future studies could conduct cross-national analyses of regimes that display similar features (e.g., India under the BJP, the Philippines under Duterte, Hungary under Fidesz, Poland under PiS, etc.). By comparing the degree of majoritarian rhetoric, institutional change, and public attitudes, researchers could determine how widespread this subtype is and what conditions favor it. Large-N statistical studies might incorporate new indices that measure majoritarianism in political discourse or constitutional

frameworks. Additionally, case-oriented scholars could do paired comparisons (e.g., Türkiye vs. Hungary) to see where the patterns converge or diverge. This would strengthen the generalizability of this dissertation's claims and potentially reveal variations – for instance, perhaps economic context or historical cleavage structures condition how majoritarian authoritarianism unfolds.

An intriguing area that remains under-explored is how competitive authoritarian regimes can halt or reverse their autocratization. Türkiye's story as of now is one of decline, but as history shows, no regime is permanent. Future research could investigate scenarios of democratic revival or liberalizing change in such contexts. This could involve studying cases where backsliding was arrested (e.g., how did South Korea overcome authoritarian interludes, or how did some Latin American countries break from populist authoritarians?). Specifically for Türkiye, one could research what factors might enable a return to a more democratic system: Would it be economic crisis delegitimizing the regime? A grand opposition coalition sustained over time? International pressure or incentives (perhaps a rebooted EU accession interest)? The literature on "autocratization reversal" is still emerging (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019 discuss some cases); Türkiye could be both a subject and a reference point for this line of inquiry. Such research is normatively important to provide pathways of hope: identifying leverage points that pro-democratic forces can use even after severe backsliding.

While this dissertation touched on societal polarization and attitudes, more can be done on the micro-level analysis of public opinion and culture under autocratizing regimes. Future scholars might employ surveys, interviews, or ethnography in Türkiye (and comparable societies) to delve deeper into questions like: How do ordinary citizens rationalize the tension between their support for a leader and the erosion of democratic norms? What role do factors like education, urban/rural divides, or social media use play in either resisting or absorbing populist authoritarian narratives? Additionally, studying the youth and new generations could be illuminating – do younger Turks, who grew up mostly under AKP rule, view democracy differently than older generations? Are there signs of value shifts that might either entrench authoritarian attitudes or conversely yearn for change? Such research could inform whether the authoritarian turn has reshaped political culture in lasting ways, or whether liberal democratic ideals still have strong resonance at the grassroots.

As noted in limitations, a more focused political economy analysis would be valuable. Researchers might examine the interplay of neoliberal economic policies, inequality, and

authoritarian politics in Türkiye. The AKP period saw rapid growth followed by severe crises; how did this economic rollercoaster contribute to political legitimacy or dissent? A comparative angle could look at whether economic downturns eventually weaken populist regimes (there is debate: some argue economic crisis is the Achilles' heel of populists, others say populists can scapegoat and survive). Türkiye's ongoing inflation and unemployment issues could provide real-time data. Also, examining the role of business elites and corruption networks (e.g., the concept of a "mafia state" as in Hungary (Magyar, 2016) – does Türkiye fit that with its patronage and cronyism?) can deepen understanding of how money and power interlink in backsliding regimes.

Another research direction is prescriptive: studying what kinds of institutional designs might inoculate democracies against the kind of capture seen in Türkiye. This could involve comparative constitutional analysis: e.g., would stronger federalism or decentralization make it harder for one party to dominate an entire state? (Türkiye's centralized structure made it easier for AKP to capture everything from Ankara). Or, how do independent judiciaries in some countries resist capture better – what lessons can be learned from, say, the robustness of the judiciary in countries like Taiwan or South Africa which faced attempts at politicization but maintained some independence? Scholars could also explore electoral system impacts: Türkiye's majoritarian electoral system (with a 10% threshold that often excluded minority representation) perhaps fueled the AKP's sense of total mandate. Would proportional representation or different electoral rules mitigate such outcomes? While these questions veer into normative proposals, they are important for the field of institutional design and democratization studies, taking heed of Türkiye's cautionary tale.

Given Türkiye's geostrategic importance, future research might also place its democratic backsliding in a regional context. The Middle East in the 2010s saw both the Arab Spring and a general authoritarian resurgence. Türkiye influenced and was influenced by these currents. For instance, how did Türkiye's turn to authoritarianism affect the broader narrative of democracy in the Muslim world? Conversely, how did regional conflicts (Syrian war, refugee flows) bolster the AKP's security narrative? A comparative regional project could look at Türkiye alongside other countries in its neighborhood (Egypt's failed democratic experiment, or autocratization in places like the Gulf) to parse out any cross-pollination of authoritarian tactics. Additionally, Türkiye's relationship with Western powers (NATO, EU) and Eastern ones (Russia, China) could be studied to see how global power shifts provide lifelines or

pressures on semi-authoritarian regimes. This international dimension would complement the primarily domestically-focused analysis of this dissertation.

One emerging area is the role of digital technology and social media in either abetting or resisting authoritarian consolidation. Türkiye has been active in internet censorship and also in using social media legislation to curb dissent. Future research could examine to what extent digital authoritarianism is a pillar of the AKP strategy and compare it with other states. Also, how opposition movements use digital tools to organize (e.g., Gezi Park was to an extent a social media-organized protest) and how regimes counter that – a domain evolving rapidly with new surveillance and propaganda techniques. Understanding this could be key for modern strategies of both autocrats and democrats.

10.5. FINAL REFLECTIONS: SAFEGUARDING DEMOCRACY IN AN AGE OF AUTOCRATIZATION

The story of Türkiye under AKP rule is at once a warning and a lesson of hope for democracies worldwide. It warns us that democracy's demise can be gradual, legalistic, and popularly supported – a chilling reality of our era. No longer is the classic image of democracy's death a tank on the lawn of the presidential palace; it might well be a ballot box, a courtroom, or a parliamentary vote that ushers in authoritarianism. Türkiye exemplifies how easy it can be for an elected leader to chip away at a democratic order, bit by bit, until little remains. The warning extends to all societies: we must not be complacent in assuming liberal democracy is the default or "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992). As long as leaders can claim democratic legitimacy while eroding democracy, the threat of backsliding is universal. This calls for eternal vigilance: strong checks and balances, an independent press, active civil society, and a citizenry educated in constitutional values are not luxuries but necessities.

At the same time, understanding these dynamics is also a source of hope and strategy. By dissecting how democracy was undermined, we illuminate how it might be defended and restored. Türkiye's experience, and those of similar countries, point to several levers of transformative action. One is the power of unity in diversity: the opposition's success in 2019 came when social democrats, nationalists, liberals, and Kurds found common cause. In an age of polarization, finding common ground on democratic rules of the game is essential. Another lever is international solidarity: global democratic institutions and networks can support local actors, shine a light on abuses, and impose costs on autocrats (for example, through sanctions on human rights violators or support to independent media). Though international influence has

limits, it should not be abandoned – multilateral efforts (like those by the Council of Europe or United Nations rapporteurs) did bring some attention to Türkiye's slide, and such pressures likely prevented even worse abuses. Strengthening global norms against authoritarianism – a kind of "democratic vaccine" – is a project that needs reinvigoration, learning from the mixed record of the post-Cold War era.

There is also a hopeful note in the resilience of democratic aspirations. Even at the height of the AKP's power, millions of Turkish citizens did not give up on their rights. The continued existence of a political opposition, the bravery of journalists who kept reporting truth at personal risk, the mass protests that erupted when things went too far (as in Gezi or after the attempted Istanbul election annulment) all testify to a society that, beneath the weight of authoritarianism, still yearns for freedom and justice. Human history is replete with examples of regimes that seemed invincible in their time yet crumbled when societal tide turned – from Latin American dictatorships to Eastern European communist regimes. Competitive authoritarian regimes are not monolithic; they contain the seeds of their own challenges – economic mismanagement erodes their legitimacy, internal power struggles can split them, and generational change can weaken their populist appeal. In Türkiye's case, the economic difficulties and electoral close calls of recent years hint that the story is not finished.

Thus, this dissertation ends on a constructive note: knowledge is empowerment. By analyzing in detail how the AKP's Türkiye fell into authoritarian practices, we equip scholars, citizens, and policymakers with insights to identify early warning signs and craft responses. If there is a silver lining to the "third wave of autocratization", it is that we are learning much more about how democracies fail – and therefore how they might be saved or reborn. Türkiye's case has spurred vibrant debates among intellectuals and activists within the country about constitutional reform, the rule of law, and the need to rebuild a democratic culture that values pluralism over polarization. These debates, and similar ones globally, are the crucibles from which a renewed democratic ethos could emerge.

In practical terms, to steer humanity through this wave of autocratization, actions could include: bolstering civic education that emphasizes critical thinking and tolerance; implementing electoral system reforms that reduce winner-takes-all outcomes and ensure broader representation; using technology not as a tool of surveillance but as a means to increase government transparency and citizen participation; and fostering dialogue across ideological divides to reduce the poisoning effects of polarization. Each society will have its specific path,

but all can draw lessons from each other. Türkiye's journey shows the perils of ignoring warning signs – but also the possibilities of course correction when enough people and institutions stand up for democratic values.

In closing, the chronicle of Türkiye's democratic erosion under the AKP is a stark reminder that the fight for democracy is never truly "won" – it must be continuously defended and reinvigorated. Yet, it also contributes to the broader quest of safeguarding democracy by teaching us how erosion happens and thereby how it might be countered. The narrative of lost democratic freedoms is not immutable; understanding it is the first step to reversing it. Just as Türkiye's experience serves as a cautionary tale in this age of rising populist authoritarianism, it can also serve as an inspiration – that with knowledge, vigilance, and collective action, the global trend need not be a one-way descent. Democratic backsliding is real, but so too is democratic resilience. The final hope resonating from this research is that by learning from cases like Türkiye, current and future generations will be better equipped to defend liberal democracy and perhaps usher in a new democratic renewal after the tempest of autocratization passes.

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PUBLICATIONS

YEAR	TITLE	JOURNAL
2021	Putin and Erdoğan – A "Beautiful Friendship" of Illiberal Presidents	Academic and Applied Research in Military and Public Management Science
2021	Törökország Afganisztán-politikája a NATO csapatok kivonulása és a menekültválság fényében	Biztonságpolitikai Szemle
2021	Van kiút a török EU-integráció válságból?	Biztonságpolitikai Szemle
2022	Turkey-EU talks on handling the 2015 refugee crisis	Biztpol Affairs
2023	Some Issues of the Employment of Syrian Refugees in Turkey in the Light of European Integration	Új Munkaügyi Szemle
2023	E-Devlet: Service to the Turkish Citizen or a Tool in the Hand of a Centralized Government?	Verejna Sprava A Spolocnost
2023	Division, Persecution and Rearrangement - The AKP's Controversial Relationship with Turkish Civil Society	European Scientific Journal
2023	Stabilization of the Turkish Economy in the Early 2000s and the Urgent Action Plan	European Scientific Journal

2023	Török közvetítési kísérletek az orosz–ukrán háború hadviselői között	Külügyi Szemle
2023	Turkish Mediation Attempts between the Belligerents of the Russian-Ukrainian War	Annales: Universitas Budapestiensis De Metropolitan
2023	Re-Visiting Turkish National Security Strategy After the Cold War	Košická Bezpečnostná Revue

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