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# The AKP's Authoritarian, Islamist Populism: Carving out a New Turkey



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# The AKP's Authoritarian, Islamist Populism: Carving out a New Turkey

**BY IHSAN YILMAZ**

## **ABSTRACT**

The global tide of populism will leave a profound mark on Turkey. The ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) success during the past two decades, has hinged on Islamist authoritarian populism and been driven by its long-time leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. "New Turkey" is now a reality. The AKP has been successful at dismantling the Kemalist ideals – ironically, perhaps, by using similarly repressing techniques, such as cracking down on civil liberties and democratic rights.

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**ECPS Leader Profile Series** offer analyses of political leaders and prominent public figures with populist tendencies. Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed by the author are only attributable him and not to any institution with which they are associated.

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Late Islamist populist politician Necmettin Erbakan.

## The Survival of Islamic Parties in Turkey

The Republic of Turkey was born in the aftermath of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, a symbol of power in the Muslim world for over six centuries. The decay and eventual collapse of the Ottomans following the First World War left the former Ottoman populace facing an identity crisis. With the monarchy disbanded, Turkey embarked on a transformative journey – a new republic under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who is credited with moulding the country in his image. The “Kemalist” ideology hinges on six pillars: republicanism, nationalism, statism, populism, laicism, and reformism, all standing in sharp contrast with traditional Ottoman Muslim culture (Los Angeles Times, 1991).

For approximately eight decades, Kemalism prevailed as the state’s main narrative, with its intense focus on a homogeneous nation rooted in Turkish identity and disassociated from its Ottoman past. However, since the core of Ottoman rule was religion – the Ottoman Empire was

the last remnant of the “caliphate” – the new Republic isolated a large number of conservative citizens. The focus on nationalism also isolated a significant number of non-Sunni Muslims, non-Muslims, and non-Turks.

The leaders of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) initially positioned itself as a populist party that voiced the anxieties and grievances of the populace by not only representing the conservative factions but also a number of individuals/groups who felt rejected by Kemalist principles.

Yet, during its two decades in power, the AKP has increasingly identified with the “black Turks,” those who felt excluded by the politics of the “white Turks.” However, this has merely isolated the “white Turks.” Power, in contemporary Turkey, now rests with religiously “pure” Sunni-Turks predominantly from Anatolia. This populace embraces their “glorious” Ottoman past and seeks vengeance for decades of being wronged by Western powers and the “white Turks,” who are held up as representatives of Western ideals. These “black Turks” – deeply religious, predominantly Anatolian Sunni Muslims – are “the people.”

The AKP has been successful at manoeuvring its way into power by tapping into the population's latent anxiety, paranoia, resentment, a sense of victimhood. The party has further divided Turkey between "the people" and "the other." Increasingly, it uses the same tactics to defend its autocratic tendencies (Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018). The AKP's populism has gradually eroded Kemalist nationalism, birthing a new institutionalized narrative for Turkish citizenry – a "New Turkey" (Yilmaz, Caman & Bashirov, 2020). The AKP has constructed this counter ideology using autocratic populism legitimized by Islamist nationalism (Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018).

The AKP is the first successful modern Islamist party to complete its term in power, in Turkey. Formed in 2001, the party comes from a line of members who have either been directly involved with or influenced by a series of right-wing ideologies, primarily from Necmettin Erbakan and his political parties. Erbakan's Milli Gorus (National View) had, since the 1970s, given a generation of Turkish politicians a right-wing, pan-Islamic inspiration and direction. Milli Gorus focused on calling Muslims to save Islam from becoming lost in Western values, thus calling Muslim "brothers" to unite in their efforts against the quote "Zionist" lobby. Erbakan, throughout his life, was a vocal critic of the West and "Zionists." He was known for his anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic statements:

"All Infidel nations are one Zionist entity"; "Jews want to rule from Morocco to Indonesia"; "The Zionists worked for 5,767 years to build a world order in which all money and power depend on Jews"; "The US dollar is Zionist money"; "The Jewish 'bacteria' must be diagnosed for a cure to be found"; "Zionists initiated the Crusades"; "Jews founded Protestantism and the Capitalist order"; "Bush attacked Iraq to build Greater Israel, so Jesus can return" (Vielhaber, 2012).

Founding members of the AKP, including Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Abdullah Gul and Bulent Arinc, were raised on such rhetoric. They would eventually belong to the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi – FP). The FP was banned for violations against the constitution, which protected the Kemal-

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**Traditionally, the highly secularized military had kept major Islamist parties at bay, while the majority of the public had been "secularized" by the ideals of Kemalism. Yet, eight decades of crafting a new identity amongst a highly diverse and somewhat religious populace had created fissures in the society.**

ist ideology. The disbanded members of the FP formed two separate parties – the AKP and the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi – SP) (Koni, Rosli, & Zin, 2015).

Traditionally, the highly secularized military had kept major Islamist parties at bay, while the majority of the public had been "secularized" by the ideals of Kemalism. Yet, eight decades of crafting a new identity amongst a highly diverse and somewhat religious populace had created fissures in the society. Not only did Sunni Muslim factions feel marginalized, but so too did Kurds (15-20 percent of the country's population) and Alevi (10-15 percent of the population). These groups were institutionally discriminated against or denied recognition, all in an effort to form a singular Turkish identity. This would be an ideal citizen, the secularized Sunni Turk (Yilmaz, Barton & Barry, 2017).

Widespread discrimination created resentment against the Kemalist governments. The AKP found an opportunity in this growing discontentment. It emerged as a "Muslim Democrat" party that would represent the discontented Sunni conservatives and historically marginalized ethnic and religious factions. In 2001, the AKP broke away from the Milli Gorus doctrine and positioned itself as a centre-right party. It was for the people and an answer to

the rifts within society.

While the AKP took a more reformist agenda with younger leaders from the former party, SP was led by Erbakan and a group of older Sunni Muslim men who stood by their hard-line views rooted in Milli Gorus. The AKP craftily separated itself as a reformed religiously “moderate” democratic party that offered an alternative to the status quo – the promise of liberalized Islamic democracy. One of Erdogan’s statement shows how he viewed the new party: “We don’t need bearded men who are good Koran reciters; we need people who do their job properly” (Genc, 2019).

The February 28, 1997, came down hard on Islamists and other non-Kemalist parties. The AKP’s earliest version used this oppression to position itself as a better alternative compared to the “secular elite” led by the military establishment. It became the voice of “the people”: Erdogan promised the party was dedicated to the welfare of the people rather than any ideology or personal agendas. “A cadre will run the party,” he said, “and decisions won’t be taken under the shadow of one leader...”

His role was that of an “orchestra chief,” in his own words. The “age of me-centred politics is over,” he insisted (Genc, 2019). The AKP cautiously stepped into the corridors of power in 2002, winning 34.28 percent of the vote and defeating the Kemalist Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – CHP). The military took a “wait and see” approach to the AKP; as a Turkish diplomat in 2002 said: “Erdogan knows what will happen if he oversteps a line.”

## Tip of the Iceberg: Two Sides of the AKP

The performance of the AKP during its initial years hinged on making Turkey a prosperous nation – it was what their reformist agenda promised. They needed to make the economy strong, improve public welfare, and make Turkey a “bridge” between East and West. However, over the years this promise disintegrated and the

AKP evolved into a populist authoritarian party.

In 2007, to secure a second term in office, the AKP showed an early sign of its populism. Under Kemalist principles, to modernize and secularize society, women were barred from wearing a headscarf in public offices and educational institutions. The AKP predominantly represented Muslims; the potential first lady wore a headscarf. This was a point of contention – a clash of two ideologies, between the Kemalists and the AKP. As the AKP sought to reverse this ban, they were met by harsh criticism from the military, a digital campaign called “a digital coup”, and massive “Republican Rallies” in major cities calling out the increasing role of Islam in the supposedly secular fabric of Turkish society.

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**In a bid to stop the AKP, a trial was launched by the military to keep the party in check. The trial did not lead to the AKP being banned, but severely limited the party’s funding. However, this fed into the AKP narrative of the corrupt elite and military trying to interfere in the democratic process.**



The ceremony of Third Bosphorus bridge was attended by then Turkish President Abdullah Gul and then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on May 29, 2013 in Istanbul. Photo: Sadik Gulec

In a bid to stop the AKP, a trial was launched by the military to keep the party in check. The trial did not lead to the AKP being banned, but severely limited the party's funding. However, this fed into the AKP narrative of the corrupt elite and military trying to interfere in the democratic process. It very successfully played to the victimhood and fear of its conservative voter base, which had felt always coerced by the "westernized" military trying to impose "un-Islamic" principles on them. It also played the "humanitarian" card, where it defended freedom to practice one's religion. As Hayrünnisa Gül explained, "There are not more headscarves than before; the headscarf-clad women have begun to be more active and as a result of this, more visible in social life" (Elver, 2014). The AKP won a second term with even more votes than in 2002.

The AKP's second term saw the infamous Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials. These were the AKP's first moves to ensure that the Kemalist institutions could no longer threaten the party. The trials targeted Kemalist military generals and their accomplices, who were accused of plotting a coup against "the people." During these trials, the AKP successfully used anti-Kemalist media propaganda and the anxieties of the Turkish people who had been denied freedoms by the "elite and military." They needed the judiciary to "set an example" of those who tried to interfere with democracy.

The trials were the preamble to the AKP's 2010 Constitutional Referendum, which proposed a number of amendments to the Turkish constitution. In the build-up to the vote, the AKP increasingly positioned Kemalist institutions, like the military and judiciary, as the "enemy of the people" through Sledgehammer and Ergenekon. The 2010 referendum limited the military's power and also paved way for more political control over the judiciary. It also financially benefitted the pseudo-capitalist AKP by allowing businesspeople with tax debts to go overseas (Yilmaz, Barton & Barry, 2017; Şahin & Hayirali, 2010). Essentially, "the others" were defeated in favour of "the people." The vote, to conservatives, represented that the "White Turks" had been dealt with – a reward for the former's decades of suffer-

ing and humiliation during the Kemalist era.

There was a marked change in the AKP's posture following 2010. In early 2013, the Gezi Park protesters were brutally dealt with, and, to deflect criticism, the AKP painted them as "enemies" of the people. After this point, any opposition directed towards the AKP was "otherized" through a host of conspiracy theories playing on fear and paranoia. The Gezi Park protests, which began as a movement against the government's plans to convert the public park in Istanbul's Taksim Square into real-estate development, were peaceful – until riot police arrived and brutalized the protestors (Julia, 2018).



Civilians were visiting the Gezi Park and Taksim Square during Gezi Park protests at night. Photo: Ipek Morel

These peaceful protests were a symbol of resistance against the AKP's clientelism, Islamism, and increasing autocratic tendencies. The riot police's intervention led to many arrests and the deaths of 11 individuals. In the party's defence, Erdogan emphasized that the protestors were Western sponsored liberal "terrorists," who opposed development. He said, "we need to be courageous," in defence of the riot police's actions. Thus, civil society was deemed pro-Western, foreign-sponsored "terrorism" – in stark opposition to the "black Turks," who were pious, pure, and dedicated to the party and state. The two – party and state – had become entwined, as the AKP was the flagship of faith and hope for security and prosperity (Yilmaz, Barton & Barry, 2017).

The AKP's first two terms were marked by several welfare-centric policies and public works that were promoted by the

government, which helped it maintain the people's confidence. This period saw a huge flux of neo-liberal reforms – including privatizing the public sector, which promised improved service delivery, and infrastructure development. These reforms drastically improved the country's socio-economic standing in less than a decade.

While these measures temporally improved conditions, in reality, they were – and are – being used as means to an end by the AKP. The party has currently plunged the country into an economic crisis, with inflation rates touching 12 percent and the Turkish lira drastically reduced against the US dollar. The crisis has only been made worse by the COVID-19-induced economic slowdown (BBC, 2020).

Crony capitalism obscured by welfare-ism and neo-liberal reforms has placed AKP loyalists in various businesses, reinforcing a strong support (and donor) base for the party. The AKP uses state institutions as revenue collection bodies. Privatization and public procurement offices reward loyalists and punish opposition-owned or aligned businesses (Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018). Recklessly seeking financing for mega infrastructure projects has increased the public debt, yet the showcase projects have appealed to the general public. AKP supporters often espouse the view, "Sure, he may be stealing, but look at the new airports, hospitals, roads and bridges!" (Bilici, 2020). In other words, through such public investments, corruption is made socially acceptable. Thus, the AKP has successfully made visible changes to show that it has been doing something for the people, all while rewarding its loyalists and punishing opposition groups within the business and media communities.

The AKP's corruption was widely exposed for the first time in the December 2013 corruption and bribery scandal. In a leaked phone call between Erdogan and his son Bilal, they discussed how the father was not pleased with a bribe of USD 10 million being offered by Sitki Ayan, a fossil fuel company owner. Erdogan, who was then Prime Minister, urged his son, "Others can bring it, so why can't he, huh? Who do they think is? But they are

falling now, they'll fall on our laps, don't worry!" (Bilici, 2020). This bribe won Ayan and his petro-company a bid to construct a natural gas pipeline connecting Iran and Turkmenistan to Europe; in addition to winning the contract, the company was granted a huge state subsidy excepting it from various taxes (Bilici, 2020). A clear pattern is visible where the Treasury guarantees various loyal businesspersons when they try to access European banks for growth and investment (Bilici, 2020).

A few months earlier, the AKP launched an attack on another civil society group: it labelled a pluralistic Islamic organization, known internationally as the Gulen Movement, as an enemy of the people. This attack was done to deflect attention from the government's corruption, shifting the public's attention. It was an autocratic move disguised as populism. Those who took up further investigations were soon purged by the AKP government. As the AKP gained more power, the identity of the "other" was constantly shifting – from Kemalists and "White Turks" to Gulenists, all of whom were used as scapegoats to divert attention from AKP corruption and to eliminate future opposition.

Following the corruption probe, thousands of police officers, judges, and prosecutors were purged from their jobs – allegedly for "spying" on the government. Gulenists were accused of having erected a parallel structure within the state, undermining the AKP's "pure" efforts. The government claimed members of this parallel structure had fabricated the corruption scandal. A potential critic was once more silenced through autocratic means.

Another example of the AKP using populism to further its position in power revolves around its shattered hopes to join the European Union (EU). During its first two terms, the AKP faced pressure to meet EU membership requirements. To do so, the AKP not only needed to show that Turkey was financially prosperous – at that time, the country was on the road to achieving it – but it also had to comply with liberal democratic values. Its "Muslim Democrat" image was useful – it potentially offered a successful hybrid of Islam and liberal democratic values (Yilmaz, Barton &

Barry, 2017). However, post-2013, the AKP's increasing autocratic tendencies and the EU's disinterest in Turkish accession have ensured that the AKP is not shy about its Islamist autocratic behaviours.

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The AKP government appointed trustees to Zaman Media Group in Istanbul on March 4, 2016.

To hide its crony capitalism, the AKP has not only targeted civil society but also punished several media entities who have proved critical of the government. A prominent example is the Ipek Media Group, a media house which was even charged in court for “causing terrorism.” The media house was brutally raided, with police breaking windows and firing tear gas. The result of the charges led to a trial and subsequently the company was stripped of a significant number of sub-

sidaries that were given to public officials and its operation was handed out to designated “loyal” AKP trustees. The 2016 coup attempt led to the total shutdown of Ipek Media Group and forced the family to flee overseas, as members of the family were sentenced to as many as 79 years in prison for allegedly being members of a “terrorist group” (Bilici, 2020).

Thus, alongside creating a new bourgeoisie to support itself, the AKP has also silenced freedom of the press by dismantling critical media and redistributing its “bounties” to pro-AKP media figures. This creates an environment where the AKP's autocracy goes unchallenged, and the cover for it are fear and conspiracy-driven narratives that justify the AKP's strict actions.

The autocratic tendencies have spread to the international sphere, too. In the spirit of liberal democracy, the AKP during its first term offered to launch a joint investigation with Armenia, a “fact finding” regarding the genocide which Turkey has denied for decades. The Ottoman genocide of the Armenian population has always been a controversial topic in Turkey; the previous Kemalist regimes and governments refused to recognize it. Armenia refused the AKP's offer and demanded outright recognition (Council on Foreign

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**Increasingly, the AKP has blended its autocracy with Islamism and pro-Turk nationalism, which is carried out through penal populism. In a trickledown of the post-2013 events, the AKP has promulgated an image of “being tough on crime” by criminalizing the ever-expanding category of “others.”**

Relations, 2007). Over the next decade, as Turkey's EU hopes faded, the AKP used the Turkey-Armenia rivalry to gather populist support at home.

The party has also practiced "trans-populism." In 2020, the AKP involved itself in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia (BBC, 2020). In a proxy-war facilitated by Azerbaijan, Turkey emerged as a "strong" Muslim nation, militarily boosting its neo-Ottoman claims at home and allowing the AKP to distract the Turkish people from the country's dire economic situation. By claiming a victory for "the pure people" and the "ummah," the AKP bolstered its Islamist image and justified its foreign interventions.

Increasingly, the AKP has blended its autocracy with Islamism and pro-Turk nationalism, which is carried out through penal populism. In a trickle-down of the post-2013 events, the AKP has promulgated an image of "being tough on crime" by criminalizing the ever-expanding category of "others." For example, in 2015, the AKP strained relations with the Kurds by dismantling a truce with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); the party needed a new antagonist to divert attention for the party's own failures (Karadeniz, 2015; Smith, 2005). Erdogan justified his government's actions by positioning pro-Kurdish factions in the society as a threat: "It is not possible for us to continue the peace process with those who threaten our national unity and brotherhood" (Karadeniz, 2015). The end of the truce meant that domestic terrorism rose in the country, creating the need for a party that was "tough." Of course, the AKP fit the bill.

The Kurds – specifically the PKK – had already been side-lined under previous Kemalist governments. Even speaking Kurdish can land a person in jail in Turkey. But the AKP drummed up a security conflict to make the populace feel threatened and insecure, ensuring that people desired a "strongman" party to once again lead them out of this "crisis" (Karadeniz, 2015).

The AKP's use of penal populism is not limited to Kurdish separatist groups. To curb opposition political parties, the AKP has craftily extended this "threat"

to encompass not just "terrorist" Kurdish separatists but also any party that is sympathetic to the ethnic group. The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) routinely secured a significant number of votes in local elections, helped mediate the conflict between the Turkish government and the PKK, and, in the 2015 parliamentary elections, briefly became the third largest party in the country. Following the 2016 coup attempt, the HDP has been widely persecuted by the AKP based on allegations of "ties" to the PKK (Yilmaz, Barton & Barry, 2017; Karadeniz, 2015).

The AKP has successfully used security crises as a pretext to use state institutions of law and order to persecute potential political opposition. After the HDP's decision to defy Erdogan and enter the next election, Erdogan started the re-certification of the HDP, saying, "I visited 5 cities, the mayors of which were members of HDP. None of those mayors came to welcome me. Because they had orders from the mountains. They are commanded by the mountains. They have no will of their own." [1]

Here he is referring to the Qandil Mountains, where the PKK's headquarters are, implying that the HDP mayors – who underwent security checks and clearances by Turkish judicial institutions and intelligence agencies before the elections and were democratically elected – were terrorists.

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**The AKP's shift from pluralist to right-wing Islam is a way of legitimizing the AKP's position as it plays on the trauma and victimhood many Turks have experienced since the end of the Ottoman Empire.**



Hagia Sophia was converted into the mosque by the Erdogan regime in Turkey on July 10, 2020. After that, several groups have celebrated the decision in front of Hagia Sophia. Photo: Ugur Ferhat Baloglu

In a similar vein, the AKP had promised to return properties seized from various minority groups, including the Holy Cross Armenian Cathedral on Akdamar Isle in Van Lake and the re-opening of the Surp Giragos Armenian Church in Diyarbakir. These promises became a token of good faith. Erdogan even said, “The times when a citizen of ours would be oppressed due to his religion, ethnic origin, or different way of life are over” (Sheklian, 2018; Arsu, 2011). However, when faced with a severe economic crisis and other policy failures, the AKP instead chose to rely on Islamic populism to solidify its support. In 2020, the two iconic Istanbul churches were converted from museums to mosques, the Hagia Sophia and the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora (Serhan, 2020).

Hagia Sophia’s first congregational prayers after its reconversion were led by Erdogan himself and Ali Erbas, the head of Diyanet (the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs). Erbas said, “The reopening of Hagia Sophia... is the return of a sacred place, which had embraced believers for five centuries, to its original function.” This conveniently denied the church’s rich past tracing back to Byzantium (Dawn, 2020).

This shift from pluralist to right-wing Islam is a way of legitimizing the AKP’s position as it plays on the trauma and victimhood many Turks have experienced since the end of the Ottoman Empire. In this instance, the AKP promises retributive justice for the wronged “Black Turks” by restoring what is rightfully theirs.

After more than a decade in power, the AKP lost its Parliamentary majority in

2015. However, it maintained significant control through the presidential office, which Erdogan had assumed. To undo the effects of the 2015 elections, a number of “disasters” took place, always orchestrated by the “enemies” of the Turkish people. Erdogan called an early election due to PKK terrorism and the government’s refusal to negotiate with terrorists (Cornell, et al, 2015). Following the July 2016 coup attempt, the AKP was able to consolidate nearly all political and legal power in its hands.

What actually happened during the attempted coup on July 15, 2016, is still murky. Whatever happened, it was the distraction the AKP needed to deflect attention from its increasing autocracy and other policy failures. Fethullah Gulen, once viewed as an AKP ally, had been public enemy number one since the fallout after the 2013 corruption and bribery scandal.

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**What actually happened during the attempted coup on July 15, 2016, is still murky. Whatever happened, it was the distraction the AKP needed to deflect attention from its increasing autocracy. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, supporters of Gulen were purged from their jobs; many were arrested or forced to flee the country. Within a year, the AKP obtained absolute power through a constitutional referendum, which changed Turkey from a parliamentary system to a presidential one.**

The AKP accused Gulen and his followers of orchestrating the failed 2016 coup. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, supporters of Gulen were purged from their jobs; many were arrested or forced to flee the country (BBC, 2020).



A military coup attempt plunged Turkey into a long night of violence and intrigue on July 16, 2016 in Istanbul, Turkey.

Within a year, the AKP obtained absolute power through the 2017 Constitutional Referendum, which changed Turkey from a parliamentary system to a presidential one. This change gave Erdogan – now president – the power to directly appoint top public officials, intervene in the legal system, and impose a state of emergency (BBC, 2020). The AKP had successfully used populism to prey on the populace’s fears and insecurities. The party had also succeeded at labelling all opposition – Kemalists, Gulenists, civil society, political parties, and the media – as threats to the country. Thus, the government justified the highly inhumane and undemocratic arrests carried out following the failed coup.

As part of this purge, the AKP seized media companies and educational centres. The party understood these institutions posed a threat to its populism. The organizations were shuttered or became AKP mouth pieces. Post-July 2016, the AKP took over or closed down all educational institutions associated with the Gulen Movement. The institutes taken over have been given to pro-AKP NGOs or the Diyanet (the Directorate of Religious Affairs) (Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018). The AKP government also used its ties with certain countries to extradite Gulen employees living abroad, close foreign Gulen-affiliated schools, and re-open the schools under control of loyal NGOs or other organiza-

tions (Aljazeera, 2016).

The AKP has effectively used terror to sow multiple conspiracy theories to delegitimize the “others.” Not only has the government accused Gulen of masterminding the coup attempt, but it also claims the Gulen Movement is funded by the United States and bent on destroying Turkey.

Excuses like this create an external enemy while also covering up AKP failures. For instance, the former Finance Minister explained why the Turkish currency was so devalued by blaming, without any evidence, foreign conspirators: “Some countries are in [on] this scheme, as well as financial institutions and the interest rate lobby. These include some Muslim countries, too. I will not name names here, I am only drawing the framework” (Hurriyet Daily News, 2018). Thus, America and the “Jewish lobby,” along with its Gulf allies and Saudi Arabia, are the biggest “enemies.”

This myth is further legitimized in the public view when it is linked to the Treaty of Sèvres, which partitioned Ottoman territories among European powers (this was followed three years later by the Treaty of Lausanne, which created the Republic of Turkey, but also disconnected it from its Muslim past). Thus, capitalizing on this past trauma, the AKP has incited fear of “outside conspiracies” that seek to destabilize the country. The country hides behind these conspiracies while also using them to solidify its base.

According to the AKP’s narrative, reinforced through its nearly total control of the media and the Diyanet, “New Turkey” is destined for greatness. Erdogan, in recent years, has vowed “not to make the same mistakes again” in reference to facing “defeat” at the hands of the Western-Jewish lobby. In one of his speeches, he made this explicit: “World War I was designed as a fight to grab and share in Ottoman lands. In an era when the world order is shaken at the foundations, we will frustrate those who dream of doing the same about the Republic of Turkey... We tear up the scenarios of those who want to besiege our country politically, economically, and militarily ... To those who

are surprised by Turkey's rising again, like a giant who woke up from its century-old sleep, we say: 'it is not over yet!' (Global Village Space, 2020).

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The AKP has crafted a “New Turkey,” a country populated by paranoid, insecure, vengeful, and conservative Muslims. As opposed to the stigma attached to traditional ways of life under Kemalism, the AKP’s “New Turkey” has created space for the Sunni Muslim citizen to fully embrace his or her religious heritage.



A Supporter of ruling AKP holds party flags during an election rally in Istanbul, Turkey on June 3, 2015. Photo: Alexandros Michailidis

## The AKP and its ‘New Turkey’

The AKP has always been the party of Erdogan. The pre-2017 Turkish constitution highlighted that anyone selected as President must abandon his/her affiliation with any political parties and remain impartial. However, when Erdogan was elected president, in 2014, he ignored this.

Even after his election as president, he did not fully separate himself from the AKP. He wanted to rule over the party through proxies. For example, fearing of losing his influence on the party, Erdogan did not let the AKP, then under Ahmet Davutoglu, form a coalition government after it lost its majority in June 2015 and instead pushed for a snap election in November of the same year. He also forced Davutoglu to resign/abdicate party leadership in favour of an Erdogan loyalist, Binali Yildirim. Those posing a threat to Erdogan's control of the party – including founding members – were gradually eliminated (Pitel, 2020). Having changed the constitution and introduced a sui generis presidential system in April 2017, Erdogan “legalized” his connection with the AKP and he resumed his role as party leader. This phenomenon is named the “President with a party system (Partili Cumhurbaşkanlığı sistemi) (Gözler, 2017).

Following the 2017 referendum, Erdogan now has the ability to choose his own officials for the highest offices in the country, ranging from the judiciary to vice chancellors of universities. This foundational change to Turkey's democratic structure was made possible by the AKP's populism. The party used the anxiety over “the other” to justify its desire for a more centralized government. The formation of the “President with a party” system was the final step in the AKP's authoritarian transformation. The AKP can use force entirely at its discretion, as a large portion of the population trusts the party to keep them safe.

Thus, the AKP has crafted a “New Turkey,” a country populated by paranoid, insecure, vengeful, and conservative Muslims (Yilmaz, 2021). As opposed to the stigma attached to traditional ways of life under Kemalism, the AKP's “New Turkey” has created space for the Sunni Muslim citizen to fully embrace his or her religious heritage. That same citizen fully believes that Turkey is ready to avenge its historical loss – the destruction of the Ottoman Empire – and dominate the world once again. All the while, the AKP ensures that any threats to this new utopia are dealt with swiftly and strictly; no one can “mess” with Turkey like they once did.

Erdogan and his party have emphasized their position as “authentic Turks.” For instance, Erdogan famously said, “In this country there are White Turks, as well as Black Turks. Your Brother Tayyip is from the Black Turks” (Ferguson, 2013). At this point, any dissenting voices are either jailed or driven out of the country, as they are not truly representatives of “the people’s” views and are deemed foreign propaganda (Göknar, 2019).

To religiously legitimize its authoritarian turn, the AKP has relied on fatwas and support from religious institutes to provide it validity. For example, Diyanet’s head, Mehmet Gormez, issued a statement after the 2016 failed coup attempt. It read: “Praise to Allah for granting the calls to prayer that silenced the coup, after the [past] coups that have silenced calls to prayer” (Fabbe & Guiler, 2016). Adding more divine legitimacy to the issue, Erdogan added that the coup attempt was as “a gift from God” that has “fortunately” unmasked the “parallel” structures within the state, thus saving the people, their party, and the leader (Fabbe & Guiler, 2016).

The AKP is now extending its populism to other countries. It has been busy generating a neo-Ottoman narrative rooted in a blend of civilizationalism and pan-Islamism. Turkey is increasingly involved in Africa and Asia’s Muslim-majority countries. This takes the form of joint military exercises, trade agreements, welfare programs, cultural exchanges, lending diplomatic support, and at times aiding in conflicts. Recent examples include support given by Ankara to Pakistan over the disputed Kashmir territory. Erdogan also boosted Turkey’s role in Libya, saying, “The road to peace in Libya goes through Turkey” (Maziad and Sotiriadis, 2020).

To consolidate support ahead of the next election in 2023, the AKP is floating an expanded neo-Ottoman fantasy – that Turkey has the “right” to demand the return of its lost Ottoman territories in Greece, Cyprus, Syria, Iraq, Armenia, Georgia, and Iran. According to Erdogan, after 100 years, the Lausanne Treaty will have come to an end; then, Turkey will wield its “real” influence – influence that has been kept in check by Western power and financial

lobbies (Elitas & Serpil, 2019).

Increasingly, the AKP and Erdogan have positioned themselves as the rightful heir of the Sunni Muslim world, referencing their Ottoman past and Muslim Democrat image. This posturing hasn’t always taken the form of overt political manoeuvring: the famous AKP-supported TV serial, “Dirilis: Ertugrul,” has taken by storm a number of countries where “New Turkey” looks to deepen its influence. The story narrates the fictional, humble-yet-courageous beginning of the Ottoman Empire at a time when disunited Muslim tribes were victims of the Crusaders and “pagan” Mongols. Thus, according to the story, the Muslim’s plight was answered by Ertugrul, who eventually established the Ottoman Empire (Maziad and Sotiriadis, 2020). This show is spreading Turkey’s neo-Ottoman narrative – that Turkey has the solutions to problems facing the (Sunni) Muslim world.

The AKP-led “New Turkey” has been built around nepotism, clientelism, authoritarianism, conspiracy theories, populism, and an Islamism closely mirrors the Milli Gorus ideology that, at one point, the party was eager to distance itself from. Yet today, the AKP proudly espouses these values, working them deep into the socio-political fabric of Turkish society (Cornell, at all 2015).

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**Whatever happens in 2023, it is undeniable that the AKP has transformed Turkey from a Kemalist state to a more right-wing Islamist populist state that seeks to export its ideas and influence on other Muslim majority countries.**



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Photo: Mustafa Kirazli

## The AKP's Future

Turkey's 2019 local elections showed that the AKP has fallen in popularity – at least in cities, where the CHP remains the main opposition force (Gill, 2020). Although the AKP won a plurality of votes, the CHP won the mayoral elections in Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara, Turkey's three biggest cities.

In the past, the AKP has shown tendency to successfully either engulf parties within the AKP or shut them down. However, it is still unclear what the AKP will do about the CHP as the critical 2023 general elections draw closer. It must not be forgotten that the AKP draws most of its support from rural areas; thus, its defeat in secularized cities cannot be a clear indication of its nationwide defeat. The COVID-19 pandemic has hurt the Turkish economy, and the financial situation may only get more precarious as the Turkish lira sinks even lower against the dollar. Erdoğan has fired a number of officials that have been used as scapegoats, including his very own son-in-law, the now former finance minister, Berat Albayrak (Gill, 2020).

Whatever happens in 2023, it is undeniable that the AKP has transformed Turkey

from a Kemalist state to a more right-wing Islamist populist state that seeks to export its ideas and influence on other Muslim majority countries.

# CONCLUSION

The global tide of populism will leave a profound mark on Turkey. The AKP's success during the past two decades, has hinged on Islamist authoritarian populism and been driven by its long-time leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The AKP and Erdogan are like conjoined twins. During his one interregnum as leader, during his first presidential term, he ruled the party through his proxies and then changed the Constitution to "legalize" his control over the party and the parliament.

Although the AKP once campaigned as a Muslim Democrat party, it has over the years turned to Islamist authoritarianism and populism to hide its failures and transgressions, exploiting Turkey's existing anxieties and religions and ethnic divides to survive. It has gradually expanded the definition of "the other," starting with the Kemalist elite before demonizing civil society, "foreign-sponsored" Gulenists, and non-Turkish groups such as Kurds. All of these "others" have been used as scapegoats, creating an atmosphere of terror that the AKP has used to curb any political opposition. All critical media and educational institutions have been subdued into silence. Almost no critical voices remain in Turkey. Those who might speak out risk being labelled a traitor. By creating a state of constant threat, the AKP can resort to calls for "law and order" – something that only the strongman AKP can deliver. Thus, the party can justify "going tough" on the various "terrorists" who are trying to undermine the nation's wellbeing, further eliminating any opposition.

The party uses three gambits to support itself. First, successive changes to state institutions have led to displacement of the former Kemalist regime and strong institutional checks and balances. Second, the presidential system increasingly allows the AKP to legitimately practice its authoritarian actions and policies. It uses the same power to crush any political, civil, or media opposition. At the same time, it has used educational institutes and the Diyanet to spread its narrative, producing a generation of AKP loyalists who are susceptible to the anxieties that the party has used to amass power and secure its future. Lastly, the AKP has been able to use its position in power to create a new bourgeoisie, one whose business deals are facilitated by public officials; in return, a patronage-based relationship is established, to ensure the AKP has powerful friends and allies in the private sector.

"New Turkey" is now a reality. After twenty years of AKP rule, the party has been successful at dismantling the Kemalist ideals – ironically, perhaps, by using similarly repressing techniques, such as cracking down on civil liberties and democratic rights. Yet the AKP's ideology is a dangerous entanglement of religion and nostalgic pride in Ottoman culture, giving it unparalleled legitimacy in the eyes of its Turkish supporters and also in the eyes of Muslims around the world, where the AKP seeks to export its specific variant of populism.

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