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Confronting Populist Authoritarians: The Dynamics of Lula's Success in Brazil and Erdogan's Survival in Turkey

IBRAHIM OZTURK

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BIO

Professor IBRAHIM OZTURK is a visiting fellowis a visiting fellow at the University of Duisburg-Essen since 2017. He is studying developmental, institutional, and international economics. His research focuses on the Japanese, Turkish, and Chinese economies. Currently, he is working on emerging hybrid governance models and the rise of populism in the Emerging Market Economies. As a part of that interest, he studies the institutional quality of China's Modern Silk Road Project /The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its governance model, and implications for the global system. He also teaches courses on business and entrepreneurship in the Emerging Market Economies, such as BRICS/MINT countries. Ozturk's Ph.D. thesis is on the rise and decline of Japan's developmental institutions in the post-Second WWII era. Dr. Ozturk has worked at different public and private universities as both a part-time and full-time lecturer/researcher between 1992-2016 in Istanbul, Turkey. In 1998, he worked as a visiting fellow at Keio University, in Tokyo, and again in 2003 at Tokyo University. He's also been a visiting fellow at JETRO/AJIKEN (2004); at North American University, in Houston, Texas (2014-2015); and in Duisburg/Germany at the University of Duisburg-Essen (2017-2020).Dr. Ozturk is one of the founders of the Istanbul Japan Research Association (2003-2013) and the Asian Studies Center of Bosporus University (2010-2013). He has served as a consultant to business associations and companies for many years. He has also been a columnist and TV-commentator. Dr. Ozturk's native language is Turkish; he is fluent in English, intermediate in German, and lower-intermediate in Japanese.

Email: iozturk@populismstudies.org

ABSTRACT

This article delves into the political trajectories of anti-establishment leaders Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) in Brazil and Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, both of whom ascended to power in the early 2000s amid politically fragmented environments. The analysis explores the dynamics of their rise, governance styles, and the factors influencing the retention or loss of power. Lula's success in the 2022 elections against right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro is attributed to his adept coalition-building and pragmatic policies. In contrast, Erdogan, facing economic crises and deep political unrest, managed to secure his position in the May 2023 elections, showcasing the complexities of populism. The article examines the leadership qualities, coalition-building strategies, and responses to challenges encountered by Lula and Erdogan. Despite initial similarities, Erdogan's transformative approach to institutions and the establishment of a self-sustaining clientelist regime contributed to his longevity, in contrast to Bolsonaro's defeat. The role of clientelism, rent-seeking, and corruption in both countries' politics is discussed, emphasizing their impact on public perception. Lula's effective positioning as an alternative to Bolsonaro is contrasted with Turkey's lack of a convincing opposition. Despite bringing Turkey to the brink, Erdogan's retention of power is attributed to maintaining a "man of the people" persona amid societal concerns for security and stability. In conclusion, the article underscores the nuanced dynamics of populist leadership, emphasizing the significance of historical context, governance strategies, and external factors in shaping the trajectories of leaders such as Lula and Erdogan.

Introduction

In Brazil and Turkey, nations marked by histories shaped by military coups and dictatorships, establishment forces found themselves unable to thwart the ascent of anti-systemic actors to power. In the early 2000s, the leftist Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) and the rightist Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Erdogan) rose to prominence in a highly fragmented political environment, garnering support from individuals who had long been marginalized.

Contrary to apprehensions, the transition of power from so-called establishment elites to the "real people" occurred primarily within the existing rules, devoid of bloodshed or violence. Two pivotal factors played a decisive role in shaping this outcome. Firstly, the global landscape witnessed the winds of democracy and market economy reforms, coinciding with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the decisions of China and India to embrace globalization, and the zenith of the appeal of the European Union and the United States. Secondly, public anger and discontent intensified due to the escalating number and depth of economic and political crises in developing countries, such as Brazil and Turkey, which struggled to keep pace with globalization and increasingly found themselves on the periphery.

Furthermore, Turkey's fragmented political environment, in addition to addressing country-specific challenges like corruption, terrorism, and natural disasters, contributed to the impetus for change. Despite Erdogan's party receiving limited support with only 34.28 percent of the vote in the 2002 elections, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) disproportionately secured 363 deputies in the 500-seat parliament due to an unfair electoral system, while many other parties were excluded. due to an unfair electoral system, while many other parties were excluded. In Brazil, the Lula-led alliance triumphed in the presidential race with 61.27 percent support, compared to 38.73 percent for its opponents. Recognizing the significance of coalition-building in such a delicate political climate, Lula moderated his left-wing working-class discourse in Brazil, and Erdogan adjusted his religious and anti-secular rhetoric in Turkey. Both leaders shifted towards the political center, aligning themselves with democratic and market-oriented principles. This suggests that citizens in both countries anticipated a measured and predictable change in central policies rather than a complete overhaul of the system.

Lula and Erdogan assumed power amid the implementation of painful austerity programs in response to economic crises, yielding impressive initial results in both countries. Consequently, they fostered a "responsible" image regarding market economy principles and demonstrated a "sensible" approach toward those experiencing poverty. In Brazil, where macroeconomic stability improved and capital inflows surged, significant commodity exports fueled growth, generating foreign currency. Meanwhile, Turkey garnered attention for its EU membership-oriented reforms, heightened institutional quality, predictability, and productivity. Positive developments in Turkey were primarily driven by structural reforms, leading to productivity and efficiency-driven growth, while in Brazil, the advantage of being a "commodity exporter" was leveraged through the rapid increase in global commodity prices.



Protesters protest for the freedom of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on Avenida Paulista in São Paulo, Brazil on April 7, 2019. Photo: Cris Faga.

After Lula was barred from politics for a third term amid corruption allegations, unaddressed judicially, issues such as corrupt scandals, weakened economic growth, deteriorated income distribution, and political chaos paved the way for the rise of right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro, with a military background, to power at the end of 2018. In contrast, Erdogan did not lose power. After securing control for the third consecutive time in the 2011 elections, Erdogan's response to the economic crisis and systemic corruption scandals took on an authoritarian tone. He implemented "counter-coup" processes to legitimize his ultimate aim of marginalizing democracy in the country. This led to subsequent practices of a state of emergency, the enforcement of radical public security measures, and a rhetorical emphasis on national independence and sovereignty, defining the characteristics of his governance. That is, he maintained power by leveraging security concerns and intimidating voters.

Bolsonaro and Erdogan, facing the pandemic crisis, were expected to leave power due to the severe economic crisis triggered by their incompetent and arbitrary one-person regime practices. While this expectation came true when Lula returned to power for the third time in the March 2022 elections, Erdogan, who had been in power for 20 years, retained his position in the May 2023 elections. This article explores why Erdogan held onto his seat against a coalition led by a center-left-wing leader in 2023, while in 2022, a left-wing coalition led by Lula emerged victorious against the right-wing authoritarian populist Bolsonaro.

The paper unfolds as follows: after establishing a framework outlining the globalization-populism transmission mechanism in the next

section, the third section focuses on a brief comparative perspective of the economies of Brazil and Turkey. The fourth section utilizes social welfare policies to elucidate Lula's rise and Erdogan's endurance in the aftermath. The fifth section delves into the nature of the "coalitions" subject to contestation between the populist incumbent regime and the mainstream opposition. The final section summarizes the main findings and derives some policy implications.

Populist Waves in the Post-Cold War Global Conjuncture

Over time, the Western-centered liberal multilateral order (LMLO), established in the post-Second World War (WW-II) era, and the unparalleled globalization it ushered have given rise to some pathological contradictions due to the economic, political, and social fault lines they activated. The traditional values and norms of the LMLO prioritized rapid growth, full employment, the pursuit of equality, and democracy, imposing a certain level of control and discipline on excessive capitalist tendencies. In other words, while economies became more integrated through trade, governments could maintain firm control of corporate activities and regulate labor markets, trade unions wielded strength, and, above all, finance was restrained (Kuttner, 2018).

Three global imbalances in different regions and countries triggered uncharted globalization, but self-serving market mechanisms failed to "correct" or neutralize them. First, with the opening up of China and India and the collapse of the Soviet Empire, billions of cheap surplus labors changed the nexus of the world economy, not through direct labor movements but through free trade. Second, radical technological shifts fundamentally transformed the existing global economic paradigm in trade, production, and finance, highlighting excessive connectivity and dependency. Third, the emergence of a substantial structural saving glut in northern Europe, centered on Germany, and in East Asia, centered on China and Japan, triggered enormous global financial flows (Cheung et al., 2020). Despite the surge in production, trade volume, and financial flows that created employment, generated income, and helped lift many people from absolute poverty, it also set parallel and more destructive trajectories in motion.

Taken together, these factors operated in diverse geographies in a complex manner, yielding asymmetric outcomes such as the ascent of a powerful and wealthy business elite, the decline of trade unionism, escalating worker insecurity, financial instability, and surging income and wealth inequality. This process triggered significant migrations and dislocations, perceived as threats to established endogenous lifestyles, national identity, and security in developed countries. Consequently, these outcomes inevitably and dangerously contributed to the rise of populist, xenophobic, and authoritarian attitudes among a growing proportion of the population (Cingano, 2014).

Simultaneously, the "voice of the great masses" emerged against elites who economically oppressed the people, humiliated them as a way of life, and excluded them politically. Given that globalization diminished national sovereignty and independence in both developed and

developing countries from various perspectives, opposition to existing multilateral governance institutions (i.e., the United Nations, NATO, IMF, WTO, and World Bank) and multinational companies externally, along with criticism of the status quo internally, has become a prevalent trend. The possibility of pursuing multiple balanced politics, created by the emerging multipolar world, also provided a fertile ground for alternative combinations of populist rhetoric. As the global economic crisis (GER 2008-2009) and the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-2021) have shown, excessive connectivity undermines the resilience of national economies. Therefore, sustained economic growth and the protection of social peace in semi-peripheral countries like Turkey and Brazil rely on their capacity to manage their adaptation to the instabilities of the global economic system. The similar crises opened the avenue for further populism.

Experts highlight the crisis of trust in democracy over the last three decades, a period dominated by neoliberal globalization as the primary alternative. This crisis is primarily attributed to corruption and the failure of governments to provide essential public goods, particularly in health and education, ultimately impeding the transition of developing countries into higher-income status.

Therefore, populist leaders, who initially adhered to global market norms and upheld the rule of law amid the remarkable global economic growth from 2002, shifted their stance with the onset of the global economic recession (GER 2008-2009) associated with the neoliberal paradigm and its political and economic challenges. Taking advantage of the increasingly multipolar world order, they began gravitating towards their "hardcore" ideologies, legitimizing them with populist rhetoric. This era marked the golden age of global populism until the COVID-19 pandemic (Posner, 2017).

Recent studies (DEMO Finland, 2023; International IDEA, 2022; V-Dem Institute, 2023) measuring the global state of democracy underline that the number of countries moving towards authoritarianism is more than double that of those moving towards democracy, placing 37 percent of the world's population under authoritarian rule (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023). A recent report from Freedom House (2022) finds that only 43 percent of countries can be classified as free and considered democracies

On the other hand, as discussed by Öztürk (2022a), the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the deepening economic crisis did not yield definitive results regarding populist trends. Viktor Orbán in Hungary defeated the opposition coalition and remained in power, while Donald Trump, who lost the elections but increased his votes in the USA, contested the results, refusing to concede peacefully and leaving behind "Trumpism." In Brazil, Bolsonaro lost the election by a narrow margin and, like Trump, attempted to deny the results. In Turkey's most recent case, the ruling populist Erdogan remained in power in largely unfair elections. While the defeat of populist leader Kaczyński in the elections in Poland (October 15, 2023) created some early signals for optimism, the victories of libertarian outsider populist Milei in Argentina and far-right Wilders in the Netherlands suggest that the populist backlash has resurged amid

One of the paradoxes or fragilities of incumbent regimes is that, despite their shortcomings, they enable populist leaders to come to power through relatively free and fair elections. However, once in power, the populist leaders often deny the rules of the game, refraining from adhering to or improving upon the same rules, norms, and values, thereby turning elections into mere spectacles. Unsurprisingly, the "defeating of authoritarian populist leaders" has become a hot topic worldwide. Two such cases are Lula's victory over the incumbent populist leader Bolsonaro and his subsequent rise to power. The other is Erdogan's survival in office in the May 2023 elections despite multiple political and economic crises, pandemics, and a devastating earthquake..

Brazil And Turkey In Perspective

Introducing Main Political Figures

Although the international interconnectedness and geographic proximity (the so-called geostrategy), democratic experiences, population dynamics, economic structures, and cultural codes of these two countries are significantly different, the strategies and policies of said political leaders in mobilizing these different parameters can still provide a reasonable basis for a comparative study with an opportunity to draw far-fetched lessons in the fight against democratic backsliding. Lula and Erdogan ascended to power during a profound governance crisis in 2002. After decades of military dictatorship, Brazil emerged as a prominent and the youngest democracy in Latin America and the world since 1985, undergoing a relatively peaceful power transition. Subject to the separation of powers among the judiciary, legislative, and executive branches, Brazil also possesses a civil oversight mechanism comprising an independent media and an autonomous central bank. Its current constitution provides robust protections for civil liberties.

On the other hand, while Turkey's democratization efforts date back to the second half of the 19th century, genuine multi-party free elections only took place after World War II. Despite numerous interruptions, the multi-party parliamentary system, based on checks and balances, persisted until the implementation of the Presidential Government System (PGS) in 2018. Theoretically, Turkey's PGS can be characterized as a representative democracy and a constitutional republic within a pluriform multi-party system, where the president (serving as the head of state and head of government), parliament, and judiciary share powers reserved for the national government. In practice, since the consolidation of power in 2018, the political regime in Turkey has lost its democratic and rule-of-law-bound characteristics. The parliament has effectively become a rubber-stamping body, providing legitimacy cover for Erdogan's arbitrary and erratic one-person rule. Numerous elected representatives have been expelled from the parliament and imprisoned. Elected mayors, particularly in the Kurdish region of the country, were ousted, imprisoned, and replaced by appointed public servants as "substitutes." The judiciary underwent a thorough purge by the Erdogan regime, with positions filled by professionally unqualified individuals demonstrating a cult-like adherence to the regime.

Given the overarching characteristics of political regimes

and the pragmatic, opportunistic, and contingent attitudes of populist leaders reflecting their personalities, comparing populists and deriving reliable, generalizable conclusions proves challenging. Nevertheless, despite differences in rhetoric, their discourse ultimately aligns with mainstream ideology when in power. In this context, Lula is a left-wing populist, Bolsonaro is right-wing, and Erdogan represents a hybrid form, oscillating between left and right-wing rhetoric.

Of working-class origin, Lula embarked on his career as a metalworker, evolving into a trade unionist during the 1970s. Amidst the Brazilian military dictatorship, he led significant workers' strikes from 1978 to 1980. He played a pivotal role in founding the Workers' Party in 1980, contributing to Brazil's political opening and the end of the military regime. Although Lula has maintained ideological consistency, his two terms in power from 2003 saw him adopting a more market-friendly approach to gain confidence while concurrently upholding a "pro-citizen" stance through extensive social welfare policies.

In contrast, as a right-wing populist, Bolsonaro utilized anti-elitist sentiments, challenging the establishment and positioning himself as a spokesperson for the "common people" while championing family values. Bolsonaro, who entered politics in the late 1980s as a retired representative of a "democratically defeated military class," is the complete opposite of Lula, who fought against the military class. His national populism relied on themes of neo-nationalism, social conservatism, and economic and fiscal conservatism. It should be an incredible coincidence that after successfully confronting Bolsonaro's military forces in the late 1980s as a left-wing trade unionist, actively contributing to the revival of democracy in Brazil, Lula found himself in a new role as Bolsonaro's rival in civilian politics in the 2020s. While Bolsonaro aimed to undermine Brazil's democratic gains through civilian means, Lula declared his intention to advance democracy even further. As a seasoned trade unionist and politician, Lula again emerged victorious in the battle against Bolsonaro, this time in civil politics.

On the other hand, Erdogan, with a "hybrid" political personality, defies easy comparison with center-left-wing figures like Lula, right-wing figures like Bolsonaro, and others. This uniqueness led Cagatay (2017) to label him the "inventor of 21st-century populism" in the post-Cold War multipolar world. Beyond his personality and ideological affiliation, the geopolitics of Turkey has significantly shaped Erdogan's approach, compelling him to adopt a pragmatic stance to balance competing interests at the intersection of the East and West, and the global North and the South. Additionally, the varied impacts of Brazil's abundant natural and energy resources, along with Turkey's dependence on them, have contributed to the formulation of distinct policies and strategies by these leaders.

Despite the mentioned differences between Lula, Erdogan, and Bolsonaro, and regardless of their tenures in power, they all fell short of exhibiting transformative leadership. Instead, they pragmatically engaged in transactional give-and-take relationships, mainly when circumstances were favorable. Ultimately, they could not steer the

economy onto a sustainable growth path. As de Colvalho (2017) puts it, the combination of low-quality intellectual rather than political leadership, poor strategic thinking, and weaknesses in the face of financial markets made the adoption of 'a liberal capitalism with a human look' a done deal. In both countries, it was not a step in any direction but the result itself.



Campaign posters of opposition Republican People's Party, CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul, Turkey, on May 3, 2023. Photo: Tolga Ildun.

The final political actor to be considered in this analysis is Kemal Kilicdaroglu (referred to as Kilicdaroglu), the leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the opposition coalition's presidential candidate in the May 2023 parliamentary elections. A retired bureaucrat with left-wing leanings, Kilicdaroglu observed a significant shift in political rhetoric toward right-wing ideologies during Erdogan's rule. Recognizing the need to resonate with the conservative silent majority, he endeavored to align his discourse and the CHP's rhetoric more closely with them. At the same time, Kilicdaroglu anticipated that the traditional elites would remain loyal voters to the CHP. However, neither he nor his party managed to establish a consistent, convincing, and trustworthy line within this evolving discourse. That is mainly because CHP is known to be the status quo party whose supporters include the elites, military and civilian bureaucrats, and a privileged, wealthy class. Aware of the ongoing negative political legacy or image of the CHP's top-down societal engineering, repression, negation, and insult of the lifestyle of the so-called silent majority, Kilicdaroglu built his entire election campaign in 2023 on a kind of defense, apology, self-criticism, and the need for a new "social contract." However, with his weaker and indeterminate leadership quality, these "last-minute efforts" were seen as a tactical maneuver and

remained unconvincing. Although his established electorate continued to support him, in the end, he was not entirely successful in recruiting a significant number of "borrowed votes" from the alternative circles.

By leveraging his shared ethnicity as an advantage, he also managed to prevent the Kurds from fielding a separate presidential candidate and thereby secure their support. Although the nationalist tone of his discourse unsettled the Kurds and the conservative aspect troubled the secular Kemalists, the prevailing distrust towards Erdogan garnered him significant support. However, despite leading in the early phase of the first round of the May 2023 elections, he ultimately failed to secure victory after Erdogan's alleged voting fraud which was left unchallenged and uninvestigated because every single apparatus of the state and the media is controlled by him and his cronies. Unfortunately, his passive response to political interference, silence, non-compliance with voter laws, cowardice, indecision, and the highly volatile nationalist stance he adopted in the second round resulted in a decline in his supporters' numbers. As a consequence, Erdogan emerged victorious in the elections once again. However, rather than relying heavily on populist rhetoric, he should have shown that his party was more competent for power with his coalition partners than Erdogan. By triggering a populist race regarding distributive policies, he opened Eden's doors by legitimizing Erdogan's destructive policies. At a more fundamental level, as compared to Lula's stance against Bolsonaro, Kilicdaroglu has no past combative stance or leadership capacity for such a Herculean race.

It can be stated that Kilicdaroglu failed to garner the support of (i) the white pro-status quo Kemalist Turks due to his ethnic Kurdish origins, (ii) a large Sunni Muslim population due to his minority religious affiliation (Alevism), (iii) Kurds and Leftists because of his Kemalist-nationalist ideology, and, last but not least, (iv) liberals and the big capitalists because of his distance from the market economy, inconsistent statements against the capital owners. Furthermore, given his late age, relatively weak leadership, the fact that he had lost every election he had contested, and opaque "negotiations" with various lobbying forces, it was unlikely that a coalition led by Kilicdaroglu would defeat Erdogan. In conclusion, while Lula competed in a more anti-establishment and anti-elite position than Bolsonaro in Brazil, Kilicdaroglu failed to settle in the same position against Erdogan's competitive authoritarian regime.

Economic Challenges

When Lula and Erdogan took over the power in the early 2000s, they faced three main challenges with crucial implications for their success: i) Overly politized and excessively divided political culture hinders stability, social capital, and coalition building. ii) A decade of stagnated economy with chronic high inflation. iii) High level of uncertainty caused by a lack of trust in Lula's hardcore left and Erdogan's conservative Islamist ideology.

To address these serious concerns, starting from the election campaign at the latest, they emphasized trust building and maintaining social coalitions by promoting a pragmatic, flexible in their first years

approach to economic managementin power. They also promised to continue ongoing reforms, respect for the rule of law, and adherence to market economy principles. The external world was also quite supportive to their advantage, as the 2000s witnessed one of the golden ages of global capitalism in terms of production, trade, and financial flows. The ongoing austerity programs in the economies of both countries began to show positive results, and the reforms enabled them to take advantage of the new opportunities emerging in the expanding global economy. Turkey's comprehensive reform program for the EU membership provided additional anchors.

To succinctly summarize the stylized facts of macroeconomic progress during the initial two terms of Lula and Erdogan, average growth generally aligned with Brazil's and Turkey's long-term averages of 4 and 5 percent, respectively. From a comparative standpoint, Brazil exhibited significant volatility compared to similar emerging market economies, while Turkey's growth saw a consistent decline post-2014. In Erdogan's initial years, the surge in productivity resulting from EU and IMF reforms took center stage in driving growth, whereas Brazil relied on commodity exports as the primary engine of economic expansion. Both countries achieved the upper-middle-income (UMI) country status regarding their per-capita GDP, which hit 13,000 dollars in Brazil in 2012 and 12,500 in Turkey in 2013. Both countries' monetary and fiscal discipline, implemented in response to the persistent threat of inflation during the 1990s, played a pivotal role in achieving reasonably high growth and a successful disinflation process. Inflation remained in single digits for both nations. Alongside the disinflation process and the expansion of employment opportunities, capital inflows, surpassing historical benchmarks for the two nations, facilitated the financing of a substantial fight against poverty, leading to a notable improvement in income distribution.

However, the global financial crisis laid bare the vulnerable and fragile nature of both countries' growth trajectories. The growth episodes in both nations, highly susceptible to external conditions, were significantly interrupted by the global crisis in late 2008, contributing to a deterioration in the political climate. Although the growth performance surpassed the OECD (2 percent) and world average (3 percent), it remained well below the growth achieved by the reference group of upper-middle-income countries (UMI) at 7.3 percent. This disparity can be attributed to both countries' experiencing unstable and long-term declines in growth, indicating structural issues, an overemphasis on fiscal austerity, and a lack of well-designed and implemented industrial policies.

Over the subsequent decade, the situation further deviated. Average growth between 2011 and 2018 was 0.7 percent in Brazil during the unstable post-Lula years and 6.2 percent in Turkey until the full institutionalization of the one-person regime. In contrast to their 2012 achievements, Brazil and Turkey fell behind the world GDP per capita and the UMI group. Several negative factors, including the post-2014 recession bringing renewed unemployment and poverty, political instability, and associated uncertainty, paved the way for Bolsonaro's rise to power in 2018. Turkey faced persistent reform backlogs, loss of

EU membership perspective, and Erdogan's increasing authoritarian tendencies after the 2011 election, resulting in significant regression. Widespread and systemic corruption scandals from December 17-25, 2013, Erdogan's self-orchestrated coup attempts on July 15, 2016, and the system reform in 2018 triggered a period of deconstruction (Öztürk, 2022b; Guriev & Papaioannou, 2020)

. During the Bolsonaro era (2019-2022) and Erdogan's single-man regime, average growth remained at 0.7 percent and dropped to 4.7 percent in Turkey. Professional and autonomous institutions in both countries were undermined and occupied by Erdogan's incompetent but ambitious loyalists, becoming highly politicized and discredited. Consequently, these figures are deemed unreliable, exaggerated, and manipulated. Unlike Brazil, the excessive use of unsustainable expansionary monetary and fiscal policies made inflated growth costly and short-lived. Growth was significantly lower during Bolsonaro's era and insufficient in Turkey after the presidential change in 2018.

In the 2019-2022 period, the most concerning socioeconomic indicators in Brazil include a surge in poverty due to low growth and a deteriorating fiscal balance resulting from the escalating public debt burden. Conversely, in Turkey, alongside these issues, the alarming increase in external deficits and inflation reaching triple digits are significant factors contributing to the economic challenges. It is crucial to note that these factors have led to an extreme depreciation of the Turkish lira.

From a comparative perspective, the rise of right-wing populist Bolsonaro to power in Brazil and the complete transformation of the Turkish parliamentary system towards one-person presidential rule in 2018 played a crucial role in the subsequent years of both countries. The argument that unsustainable growth dynamics and populist policies would lead to a deterioration in the macroeconomic environment and those populist leaders, contrary to their promises, would cause more significant damage to society was proven. Like Bolsonaro in Brazil, Erdogan worked to curb the country's institutional capacity by attacking the judiciary's power and electoral institutions. Their aggressive manner and attacks on women and journalists served as apparent methods of implementing a "divide and rule" strategy (Phillips, 2022). Their far-right rhetoric also exhibited hatred for minorities.

The pandemic also highlighted how populists deny science, scientists, and expertise. They both dismissed and denied COVID-19 and promoted unproven remedies (Burni & Tamaki, 2021). Even went beyond that, Erdogan mobilized people for political campaigns during the pandemic and expressed skepticism about vaccines. Both countries have recorded some of the worst COVID-19 responses, with death tolls presumed to be significantly undercounted (Béland et al., 2021; Phillips, 2022).

Neglecting the green economy deal and environmental sustainability has been another significant aspect of their populist approach. Deforestation in the Amazon region returned in Brazil, turning the country into a pariah in the global fight against climate change. In Turkey, the construction sector took center stage in Erdogan's economic policy, leading to shrinking agricultural areas (Adiguzel, 2023; Le Monde, 10.08.2023).

Bolsonaro's actions after the elections raised concerns about how authoritarian populist leaders (do not) leave power. Far-right supporters stormed the presidential palace, Supreme Court, and Congress in Brasília on January 8, 2023, echoing the attack on the US Capitol in 2021. Erdogan's use of state resources for the campaign and his slander against opposition candidates during the 2023 elections further highlighted populist tendencies. Both leaders have shown a pattern of opposing what they promised in opposition, resorting to unsustainable policies, and not leaving power quickly when unsuccessful.

With Bolsonaro's election at the end of 2018 and Erdogan's significant regime change in Turkey in 2018, Brazil, the RLI was 0.58 in 2012-2013, right after Lula. However, it fell steadily to 0.49 until 2022, when Bolsonaro lost the election.

Table 3 WJP Rule of Law Index

	Argentina	Brazil	China	India	Kazakhstan	Mexico	Poland	Romania	Turkey
Income Group	Upper middle	Upper middle	Upper middle	Lower middle	Upper middle	Upper High	Upper middle	Upper middle	Upper middle
Overall Score	0.53	0.49	0.47	0.50	0.53	0.42	0.64	0.63	0.42
Constraints on Government Powers	0.56	0.51	0.20	0.58	0.49	0.44	0.54	0.62	0.28
Absence of Corruption	0.46	0.43	0.53	0.40	0.46	0.26	0.72	0.55	0.45
Open Government	0.61	0.60	0.48	0.59	0.64	0.39	0.66	0.63	0.48
Fundamental Rights	0.66	0.48	0.26	0.47	0.66	0.49	0.61	0.67	0.38
Order and Security	0.61	0.64	0.83	0.64	0.80	0.52	0.80	0.82	0.73
Regulatory Enforcement	0.50	0.46	0.48	0.47	0.52	0.40	0.62	0.58	0.48
Civil Justice	0.55	0.50	0.53	0.43	0.61	0.37	0.61	0.66	0.43
Criminal Justice	0.41	0.33	0.48	0.39	0.47	0.28	0.58	0.53	0.34

https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2022/Turkey/

So, if Bolsonaro had stayed in power as long as Erdogan and managed to reshape the system, the results in Brazil might have mirrored those in Turkey. This sheds light on why the authoritarian right-wing populist leader Erdogan, unlike Bolsonaro, successfully secured his 21-year seat and retained power in Turkey's May 2023 elections.

Answering the question, "How and why was Bolsonaro defeated and had to accept the results so that Lula could return for a third term in 2022, while Erdogan retained power in Turkey's 2023 elections?" leads to the first conclusion: Changing populist-authoritarian governments in power is a daunting task, especially if they persist and fundamentally change the regime, as Erdogan effectively did in 2018. As discussed by Yilmaz and Morieson (2022) from different perspectives, Erdogan's ability to impose his point of view on society depends on taking control of the press, manipulating the justice

system, and effectively using national culture. Society's ability to adapt is influenced by time, and over the past two decades, Erdogan has found or artfully created such an opportunity in Turkey. While the elections in Brazil took place within a functioning democratic constitutional state, such an order was almost abolished in Turkey, turning elections into a mechanism for legitimizing an authoritarian leader.

The following section focuses on the extraordinary relationships that Lula and Erdogan have built through social welfare policies and the two leaders' coalition-building ability with society to ensure that all of these factors produce results in the complex web of relationships with each other.

The Use of 'Social Policy' Family Stipend (Bolsa Família)

During and After Lula

During their first two terms, economic growth in two countries with the above-discussed fragile aspects until the global economic crisis in 2008-2009 and the significant rise in national income allowed both Lula and Erdogan to implement social policies toward the most fragile targeted groups. To start with Brazil, the growing export surplus and rising tax revenues allowed the Lula government to fight widespread poverty by investing in social programs. During Lula's era, social spending accounted for 16 percent of GDP through direct/indirect social assistance. Direct transfers included conditional cash transfer programs, non-contributory pensions, food transfers, unemployment benefits, exceptional circumstances pensions, etc. In-kind transfers are benefits of universal free public education and health systems. According to OECD (2023), with the addition of contributory pension payments, social spending topped 25 percent of GDP

Among others, Bolsa Família (the Family Stipend), the core of Lula's social policies, was implemented in 2003 as the world's most extensive direct conditional cash-transfer program directly to the poor. It supported families with children with a per capita income of fewer than 70 dollars a month, granted a small sum of money per child (up to three children) as long as they were vaccinated, stayed in school, and did not engage in illegal child labor. The benefits are mainly paid to women via a chip card. As a result, as of 2010, 12.4 million households had enrolled in the program, and, in sum, 20 to 30 million Brazilians were rescued from poverty. According to Neri (2010), one-sixth of Brazil's strides in poverty reduction can be attributed to this program, which only cost 0.5 percent of the Brazilian GDP.

Through Bolsa Família, nearly 13 million new jobs were created, and the increase in the minimum wage from $100 to $205 during Lula's presidency was crucial in addressing Brazil's traditionally skewed income distribution. Recent studies indicate that targeted cash transfer programs associated with Bolsa Família and minimum wage hikes accounted for more than half (55 percent) of the decline in earnings inequality among formal sector employees and thus contributed to Lula's re-election for a second term in 2007 (Ferrari & Bittes, 2023).

According to World Bank (2022) indicators, the Gini coefficient, an inequality measure, stood above 0.60 in 1995 and was at 0.58 when Lula assumed office in 2003. It then declined to 0.53 after his two terms in 2010, signifying a noteworthy improvement, although still ranking as the highest among major countries and democracies. This is

attributed to the constraints on the state's social spending caused by financial needs, emphasizing the necessity for increased employment generation and targeted cash transfers to address the significant inequalities. Despite their significant success, Neto & Vernengo (2007) argue that Lula's social policies failed to break the longstanding pattern of income inequalities and escalating social injustice.

After Lula, things rapidly changed. Dilma Rousseff, who ruled Brazil after Lula but was impeached in 2016, was subject to the nexus of problems like massive corruption scandals, economic recession, and fiscal crisis and had to limit social spending, especially after 2014. When Brazil's worst-ever recession began in 2014, and GDP per Brazilian dropped by 10 percent from 2014 to 2016, progress stopped and, in some areas, reversed. Michel Temer, who led the country until the end of 2018, opted for a complete austerity program in which social spending would be cut entirely. Instead of turning to capital and the rich, he assumed that poverty would be combated under market conditions only after economic growth returned (Ferrari & Bittes, 2023). However, growth and the market mechanism alone are unlikely to eradicate poverty or improve income distribution.

An unusual aspect of social welfare spending in Brazil is that, although total social transfers reached an enormous 25 percent of Brazil's GDP, even higher than in most prosperous countries, they have been "hardly redistributive" in Brazil. Interestingly, while 2015 taxes and transfers reduced the average Gini coefficient in OECD countries from 0.47 to 0.31, Brazil cut inequality by only half as much on average. The Gini coefficient stood at 0.53 in 2017 (Higgins & Pereira, 2013). One reason for this is the biased tax structure against the poor (OECD-IDB, 2020). At the end of 2018, the number of people living on less than $1.25 a day reached 8.2 million, the highest since 2007.

Besides other factors, that process finally allowed the right-wing party leader Bolsonaro to come to power. However, unlike his rhetoric favoring the poor, he did the opposite with the policies favoring the rich; like his predecessor Temer, he thought that economic growth and employment increases would contribute more to the fight against poverty than that kind of direct cash support. In that line of thinking, he underestimated hunger and malnutrition; thus, tens of millions were impoverished. Morevoer, Bolsonaro, who wanted to get out of Lula's shadow, instead of developing and popularizing theBolsa Família, wanted to go around and erase it from the public's memory with other names, measures, mechanisms, and policies. Among others, restricting applications, extending the waiting period, expelling the current beneficiaries, and reducing the real effect of aid amounts by not updating according to inflation were the central approach (Higgins & Pereira 2013).

According to experts, while many areas must be intervened to save a resource close to 10 percent of the national income, the Bolsa Família aid category, whose share of national income is meager but whose marginal contribution is unmatched, caused the most significant deterioration in income distribution. As a result, Brazil reappeared on the World Food Program's "Hunger Map" of the United Nations (UN) in 2021, with 28.9 percent of the population living in food insecurity. Thirty-three

million Brazilians faced acute hunger, and 100 million lived in poverty, the highest number in years. It was a significant setback for a country removed from the map in 2014 (France 24, 2022). As the 10th largest economy in the world, the largest one in Latin America, and one of the world's largest food producers and exporters, Brazil's return to the UN's hunger map is not easier to bring any convincing explanation other than an overall wrong management system.

As compared to his rivals, during his first two terms, Lula remained in the past as a model and mechanism in the fight against poverty and income inequalities. Adapting a patriarchal approach, he regarded social expenditures as his blessing rather than handling them from a modern constitutional perspective. Thanks to favorable global economic conjuncture, he increased social aid significantly compared to the past. The society focused on aid, and the model, mechanism, and philosophy behind it remained of secondary importance. Most importantly, with time after 2010, the Lula period stood out as a success story due to the cutting of social aid that started with Temer and continued with Bolsonaro in the aftermath of the global crisis and an environment of instability and economic stagnation.

Erdogan's 'Green Card' and Transactional Approach



The banner 'Potato, onion, goodbye Erdogan' was carried in the 1 May rally, which coincided with the critical 14 May elections in Turkey on May 1, 2023. Photo: Shutterstock.

Since 2003, Erdogan has employed social transfer and protection spending as practical fiscal policy tools to address poverty (Sarisoy and Koç, 2010). His social policies blend market-friendly economic strategies with substantial redistribution effects, incorporating health education elements and active labor market policies like training programs and public works (Sagdic, 2021; Baylan, 2019).

Besides the central government benefits, after the ruling AKP changed the Metropolitan Municipalities Law to expand municipalities' social assistance capacities in 2004, benefits were exponentially expanded to poor families, encompassing various types of in-kind and cash assistance programs. For instance, by 2014, regular central government benefits in kind and cash for low-income families had risen to $260 monthly, while the official minimum wage stood at $370. Initially, a free healthcare card program for the poor (the Green Card program) was implemented and covered 6.9 million individuals, 4.2 percent of the population in 2003 and 12.7 percent in 2009. Finally, a universal healthcare system was established, and Green Card holders were included in the new system in 2022 (Yörük, 2023).

The number of beneficiaries and the share of government budgets allocated to these programs have dramatically increased. As a result, public social spending increased from 3.4 percent of GDP in 1995 to 12.5 percent as of 2016. Adjusted for inflation, spending increased by 176 percent between 2006 and 2017 (Yentürk, 2018; Üçkardeşler, 2015). Social programs are funded by the state's general budget, municipalities, the European Union, and other funds for encouraging social assistance and solidarity.

The AKP's wage policy also targeted society's most fragile or vulnerable segments, composed of its potential conservative voters (Karataşlı, 2015). Intentionally or not, the minimum wages have been used as an income distribution policy in the form of "low-wage equalization." With all these caveats, the minimum wage, $100-150 band in 2001, rose sharply to $450 by 2008. After 2018, marking the consolidation of the "contingency management" came with a one-man rule, the sharp rise in exchange rates from 2,20 per US dollar in January 2014 to 27 in July 2023, a 12-fold increase over a decade resulted in a steady decline of minimum wage, falling to an all-time low $220-250 range during 2021-2022.

A notable weakness in Erdogan's approach, intentionally overlooked for reasons to be elucidated later, was the curtailment of the "protective welfare state." This reduction specifically targeted passive labor market policies, including unemployment insurance, workplace regulation, and the tolerance of trade union activities, as well as agricultural support and housing subsidies. Considering all these facets, some economists characterize Erdogan's social policies as "social neoliberalism" (Öniş, 2012).

What has a crucial implication from the viewpoint of the current discussion in this article is that despite Erdogan's social spending policies failing to bring a lasting impact on poverty and income inequalities amidst a sharp increase in living costs, Erdogan has successfully maintained the adherence of even the most vulnerable segments of society to his political career, necessitating an explanation. In addition to Erdogan's widely recognized populist strategies involving media manipulation, scapegoating the opposition as inept and colluding traitors, and employing fear-based politics by portraying the outside world as an enemy and a threat to national independence and sovereignty, a pivotal factor in his success is his transactional approach, linking aid and voting through sustained dependency.

The modern welfare state, aiming to "liberate the individual and protect his dignity," as advocated by Amartya Sen (1999), necessitates transformational leadership with a focus on a clear vision, collective benefits, and long-term value. On the contrary, as Kuhnert and Lewis (1987) stated, transactional leaders prefer to operate within the existing organizational structure and culture, adhering to precedent rather than instigating change. In other words, instead of addressing poverty and permanently liberating individuals from its grasp, this approach perpetuates and manages poverty by creating a system that fosters people's dependence on aid in exchange for votes, forming a parasitic symbiosis of "give-and-take."

In this context, Erdogan's leadership is characterized by a transactional approach centered on negotiations for short-term goals, seeking voter loyalty through clientelism—a pyramid structure wherein selective benefits are distributed, with the assistance of brokers, to individuals or groups in exchange for political support (Gherghina & Volintiru, 2017). The crucial aspect here is to furnish this structure with the essential political, cultural, and psychological elements that sustain loyalty and affiliation with politics based on this aid rather than prompting questioning the enduring poverty among those in need. This characteristic positions Erdogan as a contender for the title of the "populist of the 21st century," as mentioned earlier.



President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has attended the rally in Izmir as part of the 14 May General Elections campaign in Izmir, Turkey on March 29, 2023. Photo: Idil Toffolo.

By taking the historical legacy of the patrimonial state, Erdogan has successfully positioned himself on the side of the people against the elites and the system and, more importantly, articulated social aid with this discourse. In the particular case of Turkey, transactional leadership involves: i) Honoring the so-called homogeneous, virtuous,

silent majority by claiming to represent their voice and interests. ii) Legitimizing their visibility and vertical mobility as their right to effectively participate in governance has been severely blocked. iii) Improving income distribution by transferring a larger share of social assistance to the selected social groups.

This approach has long-term implications regarding the rule of law, economic development, democracy, and human rights. Erdogan comes from a political tradition claiming that the elites and institutions of the political establishment, such as the Constitutional Court and the High Judiciary, are allied to prevent people from achieving power. In that regard, as Aytaç and Öniş (2014) stated, like his predecessor Necmettin Erbakan, he continued employing the famous motto "Milli Irade" (The Will of the Nation), the term refers primarily to the Muslim lower classes as opposed to the establishment elites. The persistent and polarizing insistence of populists that the interests of "establishment elites" and the large silent majority, representing the "national will," are mutually exclusive implies that, in power, those will subject to positive discrimination in controlling public resources will change hands.

Soon after coming to power, the AKP, garnering broad support from the urban poor and conservative masses affected by recurring economic crises, and who had lost trust in mainstream political parties, aimed to forge relevant coalitions and implement swift, albeit progressively more heterodox policies, to introduce new forms of targeted social policy. The essence of the matter is that, considering the volatile voting behavior among the average electorate, assisting the poor primarily through "modern state mechanisms" may not foster perpetual dependency and "loyalty." For this reason, alongside conventional social state approaches outlined in the previous section, aid was also "privatized" through pro-business wealth transfer policies, individualized to the voters, closely monitored by party branches, and coordinated with governorates and municipalities.

All the way down to the neighborhood committees, local party organizations identify the loyalists and channel aid and employment opportunities. In doing so, the ruling party established mutual interdependence between the party, the urban poor, and the business or economic elites through highly partisan methods of targeted resource distribution. Over time, this symbiosis evolved into their shared destiny. In other words, with the flow of resources, privileges, and dependence on the AKP's continued control of the state apparatus, the two constituents of this trio became increasingly partisan and apprehensive of redistribution and reprisal should the AKP lose power (Esen & Gumuscu, 2021). Through the social networks where Erdogan holds influence, mainly via various foundations and associations managed by his family members, close relatives, and other conservative structures, he cultivates self-fulfilling prophecies, portraying Erdogan as a patrimonial figure, a big brother, a modern-day Robin Hood who "takes from the rich and gives to the poor." By that, he aims to implant in people's consciousness the idea that "corruption is inevitable for the good of the people." To reinforce this image, some religious authorities have even attempted to produce religious credentials (fatwas), discussing "what is corruption and what is a legitimate commission of the Sultan" in Islam (Yilmaz, 2020).

In essence, the efficacy of the "divide and rule" strategy lies in scapegoating others. In alignment with this approach, Erdogan, at the expense of the ongoing comprehensive reform and the EU membership agenda, subjugated the entire establishment. Instead of dismantling exclusive interest groups, he adopted a confiscation strategy in Olson's (1982) terminology, institutionalizing corruption, political pressure, and exclusion, thus introducing a fundamentally new approach to social spending.

Erdogan's transactional approach revolves around a well-established and highly sophisticated form of clientelism, emphasizing dyadic relationships, contingency, hierarchy, and iteration (Hicken, 2011). It is more accurate to characterize these developments as a product of a learning-by-doing or trial-and-error process during his tenure as the mayor of Istanbul, which he assumed in 1994 amidst a highly divided opposition landscape, securing the lowest vote rate at the time. This incubation period allowed him to evolve his system from its rudimentary stages to a state of sophistication (Compiegne, 2022).

For Erdogan's "give-and-take" or "win-win" game to operate successfully, the following conditions must be met:

i) Utilizing the state apparatus as a platform for executing the "distributional game" involves creating rent arrears in various regions and sectors as leverage for distributional purposes.

ii) Developing an anti-systemic religious-nationalist language for the "divide and rule" strategy (Tahiroglu, 2022).

iii) Gaining control of financially dependent media to collaborate in manipulating the public by disseminating fake yet appealing stories (Yanatma, 2021; Coşkun, 2020; Kizilkaya, E. 2023; Tahiroglu, 2022b).

iv) Distancing from external actors and anchors, such as the EU and the IMF, which advocate transparency, discipline, and compliance with the rule of law. Notably, Erdogan halted EU accession negotiations at the transparency and tender chapters, citing political, religious, and national reasons. Subsequently, Erdogan projected the image of a country failing to implement European Court of Human Rights decisions (Eurobarometer, 2022).

v) Enlisting "militant bureaucrats," particularly within the judiciary, to cooperate in undermining systems like public procurement, facilitating favoritism and money laundering. The corruption files of December 17-25, 2013, revealed lenient treatment of government contract favoritism by law enforcement, ensuring a steady revenue stream in exchange for support in Erdogan's re-election (Emek & Acar, 2015; Arslantas & Arslantas, 2020; Özgür, 2020; Akça & Özden, 2021; Özel & Yildirım, 2019).

vi) Establishing dependent capitalists or an economic elite through extensive patronage networks of corruption and favoritism to serve as intermediaries in the rent distribution process (Esen & Gumuscu, 2021).

vii) Establishing effective intermediaries, such as local party branches, municipalities, foundations, associations, and religious sects, to facilitate the delivery of privatized aid to the targeted social segments.

As convincingly demonstrated by Esen and Gümüşçü (2021), Erdogan's transactional approach and corruption are closely related and mutually supportive. First, in the abovementioned process, Erdogan established an alternative, dependent capitalist class. This class contributes a portion of the rents it acquires from the government, involving practices such as construction permits, land allocation, municipal companies, and large infrastructure projects without tenders but with customer guarantees (Emek, 2015). Second, the enormous corrupt economy allowed him to create massive sources of rent arrears and distribute it partly to people experiencing poverty in the form of "cash and kind or subsistence allowances in exchange for loyalty and votes." (Buğra, 2020; Özel & Yıldırım, 2019). The explained pay-off matrix has brought critical political repercussions, namely, the AKP's weakened reluctance to resign through democratic means and the increased tolerance of its coalition partners for democratic backsliding. Therefore, with the personalization of power and rising authoritarianism under Erdogan's rule, especially after the 2018 regime change, the need to attract voters and dependence on the economy for private resources decreased, underlining a further alert on the collapse of democracy.

The same happened in Brazil but with different dimensions. Although clientelism, rent-seeking, and kleptocracy – altogether corruption- are the dominant features of politics in Brazil, they are not subject to profound public awareness or concern as long as economic growth delivers positive results. Rather than eradicating the sources of corruption, the regime's grand barons use the existing "culture of ignorance" as an integral part of their reckoning in the struggle for power against one another. As an expression of social culture or helpless devotion, society tends to justify that mechanism by relying on the understanding of "he who keeps honey licks his finger" or "it does not matter if politicians steal from what they produce."

Lula's dismissal in 2010 at the height of his popularity, conviction in 2018, and return to power in March 2022 are case in point. Lula, who was argued to have been involved in "Operation Car Wash-2014," the most extensive corruption investigation involving politicians, public institutions, and major construction companies, was found guilty and imprisoned in 2018. However, according to the UN resolution and many other observers, Lula's trial process was unfair because of insufficient evidence and human rights abuses. Indeed, the appointment of the case judge as minister of justice by Bolsonaro, who won the 2018 elections while Lula was in prison, shows the nature of the above-mentioned intra-elite power struggle. To continue with the same logic, the fact that Lula's case was dropped, and his political career was reopened due to the aforementioned systemic shortcomings does not show Lula's absolute innocence either.

It is emphasized here that in many countries such as Brazil and Turkey, where institutions are weak, social culture is accommodative, and voters' awareness of citizenship is insufficient, overt conflicts between elites through the judiciary and the media only prepare the ground for further negotiations between the status quo powers rather than radically reforming and improving the system to achieve better democracy, human rights, and economic development.

Establishing 'Coalitions' Against the Populist Incumbent Regime

Establishing a coalition within the voter base to attain and retain power is crucial, but equally essential is forging a robust alliance in parliament after the removal of authoritarian populists. As observed in the 2022 elections in Brazil and the 2023 elections in Turkey, the electoral process witnessed significant economic, political, and social upheaval orchestrated by the reluctant incumbent populist government. Recent evidence also highlights that even in defeat, populists leave behind a resilient structure and a trail of destruction, particularly challenging when they narrowly lose elections. Overcoming these challenges necessitates efficient administration through sustained coalition building.

As Lemos (2022) discusses, the overarching goal is establishing a government committed to implementing essential reforms and mending the nation's economic, political, and social fault lines. However, overcoming this legacy poses a significant hurdle for the new government, requiring efficient administration. It necessitates concerted efforts to gather diverse interests and navigate challenges posed by the remnants of the populist regime. The focus should be on acquiring and leveraging power to build a resilient government. This government must confront the enduring legacy of populism, enact necessary reforms, and prevent a recurrence of populist influences in future elections. Despite facing considerable resistance and witnessing the destructive impact of the right-wing authoritarian-populist leader in Brazil, Lula's rallying cry to "let's leave everything else aside other than taking back democracy and institutions" proved effective. Reflecting on his past success, society reconsidered its preferences, particularly evident in the second round of the election. In contrast, Turkish voters did not afford the opposition coalition a similar opportunity. The opposition encountered additional reluctance in garnering support, especially following apparent missteps in the second round of the election. Voters, skeptical of the leadership's capacity to either counter Erdogan's destructive actions or propel the system forward, chose to withhold their endorsement.

Highlighting Lula's advantage, absent in the Turkish opposition coalition, it is crucial to note a shortcoming in Bolsonaro compared to Erdogan. Bolsonaro's limited time in power prevented him from establishing an Erdogan-like kleptocracy, as described earlier. Unlike Erdogan, he couldn't consolidate control over institutions and failed to institute a robust "transactional model" that resonated with voters. Consequently, Bolsonaro couldn't position himself as an anti-establishment and anti-elite or embody the image of a "paternal figure" redistributing wealth from the affluent to the less privileged.

An important observation regarding Erdogan's situation is that, unlike Bolsonaro in Brazil, he has gained control over the state apparatus, the judiciary, the press, and economic resources. That allowed him to manipulate the opposition to determine whom to cooperate with and compete against within the opposition. As a reminder, when Erdogan was President and his party lost power in 2015, neither CHP (Kilicdaroglu) nor MHP (led by Devlet Bahçeli) formed a coalition with Erdogan's party. In the next elections

that year, Turkey entered a turbulent phase marked by fear that came with political bloodshed, heightened public security concerns, and Erdogan's party regaining power independently. As a reaction to Bahçeli's resistance to establishing a "coalition government" following the June 7, 2015, events that caused Erdogan's bloody victory, opposition within MHP intensified. Although Bahceli lost his post in the party congress in June 2016, the pro-Erdogan court came to his aid, declaring the party congress invalid and allowing him to maintain his leadership. However, that episode rendered Erdogan's former rival politically beholden to him, resulting in a notable shift in his political discourse towards becoming Erdogan's long-term coalition partner. Erdogan has also been proactive in disseminating compromising materials of a prominent opposition leader and orchestrating his replacement through various media manipulations.

The success of keeping his political rival, whom he had consistently defeated in previous elections, in his seat by portraying him as oppressed and victimized, with unfair attacks reminiscent of those directed against Erdogan in the past, serves as evidence of Erdogan's strategy to divide and rule Turkey along deep fault lines. Indeed, taking it a step further, Erdogan, with his charismatic leadership, effectively dismantled the concept of "center politics" in the past. By steering the language of politics towards the right and conservative spectrum, he eradicated space for left-wing political discourse. Consequently, he compelled his opponents to navigate unfamiliar terrain, leaving them as guests, novices, or the away team, ultimately defeating them. (Korkmaz, 2022a-b).

To further consolidate the above perspective, it is interesting to briefly compare the Great Marmara Earthquake of 1999, which played a significant role in his rise to power amid ongoing significant political pressure, enduring economic crisis, and heightened political instability, with the recent earthquake in Southeast Anatolia in 2023. This time, it reflects Erdogan's heavy toll of political-populist mistakes, economic crisis, and instability. Despite these challenges, he managed to stay in power. Besides the factors mentioned in the former earthquake, his performance in the mayorship of Istanbul, plus his unfair discrimination by the establishment forces in the media, judiciary, bureaucracy, and the military, brought him to power.

Unlike the 1999 Marmara Earthquake, conditions in the earthquake of 2023 were remarkably against the Erdogan government in power. In deep shock, his response to the earthquake was incomplete, incorrect, and significantly delayed. Similar to the previous natural disasters, the main reason was the government's unpreparedness, the incompetence of civil servants, and the fragile institutions. In addition, the government prevented nongovernmental organizations outside the government's direction and control from engaging because it feared this would be to its detriment. Despite the earthquake's devastations, the loss of more than 50,000 lives, the economic destruction it brought, the heavy systemic corruption that caused it, and the ongoing economic crisis, aside from Turkey in general, Erdogan's high vote in this specific earthquake-hit disaster region in the last election needs explanation.

Despite the recent economic hardships and the devastating earthquake that caused an unknown number of lives, exposing Erdogan's corrupt regime, other things being equal, the outcome changed due to manipulations by Erdogan-controlled media and the belated yet highly organized efforts of agents in relief organizations closely aligned with Erdogan's rent-seeking coalitions, like large private companies, religious civil society organizations, and public institutions. In other words, Erdogan's well-functioning "transactional approach," successfully implemented in the earthquake environment, came together with cultural codes, creating an invincible armada in his favor. This is not the first time the government bought political loyalty in return for short-term material rewards combined with religious-nationalist language. The same tactics have been successfully employed in many natural disasters and industrial or occupational accidents.

In the context of Kilicdaroglu, the opposition leader, (i) his low-profile leadership that lacks conviction, (ii) his perceived ethnic and religious affiliation, and (iii) CHP's elitist, oligarchic, and pro-capitalist identity, rooted in the tradition of top-down social engineering, hinder him from gaining resonance in society. Conversely, Erdogan's portrayal of him as "a coupist and junta supporter, collaborator with foreigners, and enemy of national will" has proven effective in triggering concerns related to national security, independence, and sovereignty. In an environment of shifted political cleavages and conservative-right-wing rhetoric, his efforts were perceived as a "last-minute tactical maneuver."

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the economic, social, and political crisis caused by unrestrained neo-liberal globalization and overconnectivity, highlighted during the contagious global financial crisis in 2008-2009 and the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in significant disappointments and a growing public inclination toward populist rhetoric.

Populists, capitalizing on fractures in existing governance structures, rise to power and attempt to retain it by transforming the main characteristics of the regime. This creates a "populist vicious cycle," where their central ideology and personality lead to contingency management and arbitrariness in governance, inadvertently inviting failure by disabling institutions, rules, merit, independent-autonomous bodies, science, and check-and-balance mechanisms. As populists lose the capacity to fulfill extreme promises made while in opposition and exhibit effective governance, they tend to become even more oppressive, leaning towards a one-person regime.

This process ultimately gives rise to clientelism, rent-seeking, and kleptocracy, constituting corruption as a dominant feature of politics in countries like Brazil, especially under Bolsonaro since 2018, and in Turkey, starting with Erdogan's third term in 2011.

The challenges of how populists come to power and leave it are markedly different. While it is possible to replace incumbent conventional politicians bound by the game's rules, replacing a populist who stays in power for an extended period and shifts the regime from its central axis requires entirely different skills. Authoritarian populists leverage the state's power during election campaigns, often pushing legal and ethical limits.

The personal leadership capacity of populists also plays a decisive role. For example, Erdogan's crony capitalism, rooted in transactional rather than transformative leadership, is closely tied to his ability to blend cultural, economic, and political elements, combining hope with fear and security with short-term self-interest. This entails intertwining his political destiny with the fate of a large segment of voters.

In such a scenario, an opposition leader aiming to remove a populist from power must possess leadership capacity, the ability to form a coalition, and the capability to present voters with a more adaptable and transformative vision for the future, persuading them of its merits.

In contrast to Lula, who effectively positioned himself as a viable alternative to Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2022, the opposition in Turkey failed to do the same. Bolsonaro lost power not only because of his failures but also because of Lula's past performance and high leadership quality in forming inclusive coalitions. Despite bringing Turkey to the verge of destruction during the 2023 election, Erdogan, by successfully using pro-citizen and anti-establishment rhetoric, presented himself as "the man of the people" persona. No leader emerged in Turkey to convincingly replace him amidst an environment of fear and societal concerns for security, stability, and sovereign independence.

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EUROPEAN CENTER FOR POPULISM STUDIES (ECPS)

ADRESS: 155 Wetstraat / Rue De La Loi 1040 Brussels, Belgium
EMAIL: ecps@populismstudies.org
PHONE: +32 24658318

WWW.POPULISMSTUDIES.ORG