AKP at the Crossroads: Erdoğan's Majoritarian Drift

Ergun Özbudun

To cite this article: Ergun Özbudun (2014) AKP at the Crossroads: Erdoğan's Majoritarian Drift, South European Society and Politics, 19:2, 155-167, DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2014.920571

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2014.920571

Published online: 03 Jun 2014.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 3411

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 22 View citing articles
AKP at the Crossroads: Erdoğan’s Majoritarian Drift
Ergun Özbudun

The cleavage between the secular centre and the religious-conservative periphery has been the most important dividing line in modern Turkish politics. In the past, centre-right parties have successfully appealed to the peripheral majority and emerged as victors in almost all parliamentary elections since 1950. This trend continues with the Justice and Development Party (AKP). In power since 2002, winner of three consecutive elections with increasing majorities, the AKP qualifies as a predominant party. The article focuses on the AKP’s recent drift towards an excessively majoritarian conception of democracy, or even an electoral authoritarianism of a more markedly Islamic character. Topics discussed include the Gezi Park events in May–June 2013, the conflict with the Gülen movement, corruption charges against government ministers, recent legislation weakening judicial independence and restricting freedom of expression, and the 30 March 2014 local elections.

Keywords: Turkey; Islamism; Conservatism; Gezi Park; Majoritarianism; Authoritarianism; Delegative Democracies

The cleavage between the secular centre and the religious-conservative periphery has been the most important dividing line in modern Turkish politics. In the past, centre-right parties have successfully appealed to the peripheral majority and emerged as victors in almost all parliamentary elections since 1950. This trend continues with the present governing party AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – Justice and Development Party) with the important difference that its top leadership cadres came from Islamic roots. Nevertheless, the AKP presented itself not as an Islamist but as a conservative democratic party and successfully built a coalition that includes not only the hard-core Islamists but also various shades of conservative and nationalist voters. Understandably, this coaltional character has led to conflicting evaluations of the nature of the AKP and its future course of action. Thus, the conclusion to William Hale and Ergun Özbudun’s 2010 book on the AKP was as follows:

© 2014 Taylor & Francis
Summing up, it appeared that at the beginning of 2009 the AKP was at a crossroads. It might either return to its old policy of vigorously pursuing the reformist path with the ultimate aim of becoming an EU [European Union] member, or to compromise with the state elites and accept the status quo perhaps with some minor improvements . . . It was still unclear which way the cat would jump. Clearly, the story of the AKP was far from finished, although its future was quite uncertain. (Hale & Özbudun 2010, p. 158)

The question is even more valid today than in 2009. Furthermore, there are now several more directions in which the cat may jump. One is a drift to some kind of electoral authoritarianism of a more markedly Islamic character. The second is the break-up of the AKP coalition, which may lead to a split within the party, or at least to a significant weakening of its electoral support. The latter may not necessarily mean losing power, but it may mean the party’s loss of its present ‘predominant’ party status.

These new scenarios are the outcome of the AKP’s third and present term in power. The AKP came to power in 2002 with 34.3 per cent of the vote and then increased its vote share to 46.6 per cent in 2007 and 49.8 per cent in 2011. In all three parliamentary elections, it won close to two-thirds of the seats in the Grand National Assembly: 66 per cent in 2002, 62 per cent in 2007, and 59.3 per cent in 2011. In 2002 and 2011 it won almost twice, and in 2007 more than double, the votes of the second-largest party, the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – Republican People’s Party). Such scores easily qualify it as a ‘predominant party’ (Özbudun 2013a, pp. 97–99).

Together with its growing electoral popularity, the 2010 constitutional amendments also marked an important step in the AKP’s consolidation of power. The amendments, adopted by 58 per cent of the popular vote in a highly polarised referendum, broke the monopoly of the secularist judges in both the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Public Prosecutors (HSYK), the body responsible for all career matters for judges and public prosecutors. Prior to the 2010 amendments, the HSYK was dominated by judges chosen by the two high courts (the Court of Cassation and the Council of State), both with markedly secularist tendencies. The Constitutional Court displayed similar characteristics. Thus, the judiciary exercised a strong tutelary control over the AKP government and its conservative policies. The constitutional amendments of 2010 gave both the HSYK and the Constitutional Court a more representative and pluralistic structure, thus weakening their tutelary control over the elected government (Özbudun 2011, pp. 103–107). The amendments also narrowed the domain of military privileges and immunities. Thus, the competence to try crimes committed by military personnel against the constitutional order of the state was transferred from military to civilian courts, making it possible to prosecute and try a large number of active or retired military officers on allegations of preparing plans for a military coup. In sum, the constitutional amendments significantly weakened the possibility of challenges to the AKP government from the military and/or the judiciary.
The Growing Trend towards Conservatism

These developments seem to have emboldened the AKP leadership to pursue a more markedly conservative and majoritarian line. Prime Minister Erdoğan’s increasing references to Islamic themes such as his promise to raise ‘pious generations’, the introduction of more Islamic themes – on an optional basis – into the school curricula, his statements against abortion, his insulting words about alcohol drinkers and unmarried boy and girl students sharing the same house are cases in point. These were accompanied by a law intended to restrict alcohol consumption. Although the law does not prohibit the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages, it bans their advertisement in the printed and visual media, their consumption in public picnic areas, and the sponsorship of cultural and sports events by alcohol-producing companies. Interestingly, while some AKP spokespersons tried to justify the alcohol law on the basis of public health arguments, Erdoğan defended it with reference to religious injunctions: ‘Is there anything wrong with pursuing a policy ordered by religion?’ (Milliyet 2013a). In the words of a Turkish columnist, the aim of such policies seems to be not Islamisation per se, but the ‘ghettoisation’ of the secular way of life, to make it less publicly visible (Uluengin 2013).

Perhaps more than the substance of the AKP’s recent policies, it is the angry, condescending, and authoritarian tone of Erdoğan’s statements that aggravates concern within the secular sectors. Similarly, his recent speeches reflect an excessively majoritarian or even plebiscitarian conception of democracy, as he has come to emphasise more and more the support of the 50 per cent behind him, ignoring the feelings of the other 50 per cent. He sees the ‘ballot box’ as the only legitimate instrument of accountability in a democracy and describes the anti-government demonstrations as an attempt by the minority to impose its will on the majority by unlawful means.

This was precisely the reaction Erdoğan and his government showed to the Gezi Park (Taksim Square) events that shook Turkey for almost the entire month of June 2013. The events started as a seemingly innocent environmentalist protest against the cutting down of a number of trees in the park area, evidently with the intention of building a huge shopping centre there. By all accounts, the majority of the original protestors were peaceful, well-educated, mostly non-political, middle-class young people (Bilgiç and Kafkaslı 2013). Later on, however, the demonstrations were joined by violent marginal groups, partly as a reaction to the police brutality and the disproportionate use of force, and partly for more ideological reasons. Consequently, in parts of Istanbul and some other cities, violent clashes with the police took place, resulting in five deaths, thousands of injuries and detentions, and the destruction of public and private property (Şardan 2013).

Obviously, the Gezi Park events cannot be reduced to pure and simple environmentalist concerns. Rather, they were the spontaneous explosion of accumulated anxieties resulting from what was perceived as the government’s increasing interference with the secular way of life and the arena of personal choice.
In this sense, the decision to build a shopping mall in Gezi Park was the last straw that broke the camel’s back. The government, on the other hand, condemned the protests as the work of a sinister international and national plot to oust Erdoğan and his government by non-electoral means. Among the culprits were unnamed foreign enemies, the interest-rates lobby, and their violence-prone allies – ’thugs’ as he called them. Erdoğan reacted by organising a series of mass meeting in order to mobilise his own supporters and consolidate his base.

In any case, the Gezi Park events exacted a heavy toll on Turkey. First, they deepened the already worrying degree of polarisation between the religious and secular sectors of society, i.e. between the supporters and opponents of the AKP. Secondly, they hurt Turkey’s international image as a prominent secular and democratic Muslim country with the potential to serve as a model for the rest of the Muslim world, particularly for the Arab Spring countries. As the President of the Republic, Abdullah Gül, put it succinctly, ‘an image that you strive to build in ten years, can be destroyed in one week’ (Milliyet 2013b). Thirdly, and relatedly, the government’s strong reaction to the protesters invited criticisms from the EU, the Council of Europe, and many Western circles, creating further tensions in the already stumbling Turkey–EU accession negotiations.

The AKP’s shift towards conservatism and authoritarianism marked the end of the long-time alliance between independent, non-party liberal democrats and religious conservatives (Şahin 2008). The Gezi Park events were the culmination of the increasingly cool relations between the two. The AKP, with its growing self-confidence began to feel that it could safely ignore the intellectually important, but numerically insignificant, liberals. Probably, the most frank and explicit admission of this parting of the ways is found in the following statement by Aziz Babuşçu, the chairman of the powerful İstanbul provincial organisation of the AKP: ‘Those who were partners with us in one way or another during our ten-year period of government will not be partners with us during the next ten years. The future is a period of construction. The construction period will not be to their liking. Therefore, those partners will not be with us. Those who walked together with us yesterday in one way or the other, tomorrow will be partners with the forces that are against us. Because the future that will be constructed and the Turkey that will be built will not be a future and a period which they will accept’ (Cengiz 2013). These statements have not been disowned or contradicted by any member of the AKP’s top leadership.

Towards the end of the year 2013, the AKP received another serious blow with the disclosure of a major criminal investigation involving the sons of three cabinet ministers, the general director of a major state bank, and certain businessmen and bureaucrats on corruption-related charges. The AKP leadership quickly reacted by describing this as a sinister plot by international actors and their Turkish collaborators, with the intention of discrediting and ousting the AKP government. By international instigators was meant explicitly or implicitly the United States (US) and Israel, and by ‘their Turkish collaborators’ the Gülen movement. The latter, led by a former preacher, Fethullah Gülen, who has been living in the US in self-imposed exile for many years, is one of the most important and influential religious communities in Turkey, very
active in the fields of education, media, publishing, and other business sectors (Yavuz & Esposito 2003). The followers of the movement generally voted for the centre-right parties in the 1980s and the 1990s, rather than for the Islamist Welfare Party (RP). Since the formation of the AKP in 2001, however, they have collaborated closely with it. The movement is believed to have a large number of supporters in the judiciary and the police.

Relations between the AKP and the Gülen movement started to cool off from 2012, as will be explained below. Both sides were careful, however, to hide their differences from public eyes. With the disclosure of the above-mentioned corruption-related criminal investigations on 17 December 2013, the conflict came out into the open. Erdoğan and his supporters immediately blamed the movement as the force behind the conspiracy, portraying the police officers and public prosecutors involved in the investigation as committed members of the Gülen movement. In a few days, the conflict turned into an all-out war with no holds barred. Thus, Erdoğan used unusually strong words to refer to the movement, such as ‘spies’, ‘agents’, ‘sub-contractors’ of foreign forces, ‘traitors’, ‘members of a gang’, ‘involved in political engineering’, ‘a state within a state’, ‘a parallel state’, etc., and declared his intention of ‘entering their dens and destroying them’ (Taraf 2013a). At the same time, the government engaged in a large-scale purge of suspected pro-Gülen officers from the police force. This action is generally viewed as an effort to interfere with the ongoing judicial process in order to cover up the corruption charges.

On 25 December 2013, Erdoğan announced a Cabinet reshuffle that involved ten ministries, including the departure of the three ministers whose sons were the subject of criminal investigation and a fourth who was himself the subject of corruption charges. There were even charges against Erdoğan himself and members of his family. In fact, one of his sons was interrogated by a public prosecutor in this connection. Although corruption has been a usual part of Turkey’s political life, the unprecedented extent of the present allegations and the government’s efforts to cover them up have seriously undermined the legitimacy of Turkey’s already fragile democracy. The cabinet reshuffle was followed by two former ministers (İdris Naim Şahin and Ertuğrul Günay), who had nothing to do with the corruption charges, resigning from the party. At the time of writing (in mid-April 2014), a total of ten deputies have resigned from the party since the beginning of the recent crisis. Whatever the truth behind the charges and the counter-charges, there is no doubt that this open conflict between the AKP and the Gülen movement represents a much more serious and politically damaging crack in the AKP coalition.

It is not clear what lies behind the sudden break between the AKP and Gülen movement following their close collaboration for almost ten years. The first crack appeared in 2012 when a public prosecutor called on Hakan Fidan, the chief of the Turkish Intelligence Agency (MIT), to testify about his role in the secret negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan – Kurdistan Workers’ Party). The negotiations were taking place in Oslo, obviously under the instructions of the government. The AKP government considered this a
serious blow to its Kurdish policy and blamed the Gülen movement for trying to torpedo the ‘peace process’. It is also likely that the government felt increasingly restless about the growing influence of Gülen sympathisers within the police force and judiciary. It reacted in Autumn 2013 by disclosing plans to close down preparatory courses for university entrance exams, an area where the Gülen movement was very active and from which it drew a great deal of income and social influence. The movement’s response was the disclosure of the corruption charges mentioned above, which in turn triggered the recent crackdown on the Gülen sympathisers.

Both during the Gezi Park events and the recent crisis involving the Gülen movement, the AKP government chose a policy of confrontation by galvanising and mobilising its core supporters around charges of a foreign conspiracy. It is doubtful, however, whether this confrontational strategy will pay off electorally. The hard-core Islamist supporters of the AKP have always been a minority of its voters. Thus, a 2002 pre-election survey showed that only 27.4 per cent of AKP voters had voted for the Islamist-leaning Virtue Party (FP) in 1999. On the other hand, a surprisingly high 21.9 per cent had previously voted for the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), 9.2 per cent for the centre-right Motherland Party (ANAP), 7.3 per cent for the centre-right True Path Party (DYP), and 6.9 per cent for the centre-left Democratic Left Party (DSP) (TÜSES 2002, pp. 70–71). Thus, the AKP had successfully brought together former-centre-right voters, moderate Islamists, moderate nationalists, and even a segment of the former centre-left, essentially rebuilding the Özal ANAP coalition. The latter dated back to the end of the military rule of 1980–83, when ANAP under the leadership of Turgut Özal built a similar coalition, which Özal often boasted had brought together four major political tendencies. The coalition had emerged as a clear victor from the 1983 transition elections with 45.2 per cent of the vote. In the 2007 and 2011 parliamentary elections, the AKP continued to grow at the expense of centre-right parties that today are totally extinct. Such moderately conservative but pragmatic former centre-right voters cannot be expected to respond positively to a policy of confrontation and polarisation. By all estimates, the hard-core conservative and/or Islamist voters do not constitute more than a quarter to a third of the total AKP vote. Thus, even if a split within the AKP does not take place, a significant decline in the AKP vote can be predicted. Furthermore, after the break with the Gülen movement, religious appeals may no longer be as effective as before, even among the AKP’s religiously conservative supporters.

The AKP and the Present State of Turkish Democracy

Turkey’s democratic record over the last three years has been mixed. On the positive side, the most important development was the ceasefire with the PKK, the violent Kurdish insurgent movement, since March 2013. The ceasefire was arranged through the above-mentioned secret negotiations with the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who has been in jail since 1999. The government’s response was the introduction of certain modest reforms relating to the Kurdish question, as will be spelled out below.
Other reforms involved the return of certain properties to non-Muslim (more specifically, Greek and Armenian) charitable foundations, unlawfully taken away from them in earlier decades, and certain improvements brought about by the so-called third and fourth ‘judicial reform packages’ (Law No. 6352 dated 2 July 2012 and Law No. 6459 dated 14 April 2013, respectively) (Özbudun and Türkmen 2013). Thus, the European Commission’s 2013 Turkey Progress Report states that

the 3rd Judicial Reform Package, adopted in July 2012, started to produce results, in particular as regards detention (including its length). The 4th Judicial Reform Package provides judicial remedies for a number of issues on which Turkey had been condemned by the European Court of Human Rights. It narrowed the scope of terror-related crimes by removing the link between the imparting of ideas through publications, statements, speeches, etc., and the use or threat of use of coercion or violence. If implemented in line with European standards, those changes should have a positive impact on freedom of expression. (European Commission 2013, pp. 12, 44–64)

Paradoxically, however, the impact of these legislative changes on the behaviour of the courts has so far remained very limited.

Other modest but positive steps were announced by Prime Minister Erdoğan on 30 September 2013 as a ‘democratisation package’ (Özbudun 2013b). The package raised the possibility of lowering the current ten per cent national electoral threshold, promised to lower the threshold for budget support to political parties from seven to three per cent of the total vote cast, and promised to allow the conduct of political activity in languages and dialects other than Turkish. The most important item with regard to the Kurdish problem was to allow education in languages and dialects other than Turkish in private schools. Predictably, the spokespersons for the PKK and its political arm, the Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi – BDP), found these reforms positive but insufficient. Independent Turkish and foreign observers also generally thought that the package was below expectations.

On the negative side of the picture, one may mention long detention periods, violations of the right to a fair trial, excessive and disproportionate use of police force in demonstrations, financial and other pressures on media owners that have resulted in considerable self-censorship and the firing of a number of critical journalists, and the extremely vague and broad definitions of ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist propaganda’ in the Anti-Terror Law. Thousands of Kurdish activists, including elected local officials and journalists, are on trial or in detention on the basis of this law.1 Freedom House ratings place Turkey in the ‘partly free’ category. Turkey’s score on civil rights and political rights showed an improvement in the mid-2000s, and remained stable at 3 for several years but fell to 3 on political rights and 4 on civil rights in 2012 (Piano & Puddington 2006, p. 123; Puddington 2010, p. 143; 2013, p. 51).2 These scores accurately reflect the changes in Turkey’s democratic record. Thus, while a modest improvement was recorded in the first two terms of the AKP government, a reverse trend seems to have started during its third term.

These observations are generally shared by many Turkish and foreign analysts who were sympathetic towards the AKP government during its first two terms in power. To
cite a few examples, İlhan Dağı, a leading Turkish professor of political science, describes the current state of Turkish democracy not as an ‘illiberal democracy’ but as ‘post-modern authoritarianism’. ‘The difference between the two’, he argues, ‘is that in the former a majority simply imposes its will on the rest, while in the latter the majority legislates a particular way of life and uses the state apparatus to impose its choice of morality, lifestyle and value system . . . In public debates and justification of social and cultural policies, the party leader is increasingly relying on “values.” He refers to them as “our national values,” “historical values,” “our civilisation” and “values that our nation represents”’ (Dağı 2012).

Similarly, Marc Pierini, who served as the EU representative in Turkey between 2006 and 2011, observes that ‘the ruling party has ramped up efforts to impose its own religious-conservative views on society, using the majority it acquired in three successive legislative elections as justification. The coexistence of different lifestyles is not a goal. The government has responded to recent protests with a divisive narrative and heavy-handed law-and-order policies. It has used aggressive language against specific people, groups, and institutions both in Turkey and abroad . . . From a liberal democracy perspective, the solution is not found exclusively in the ballot box . . . In modern and diverse societies, conducting inclusive forms of dialogue and building consensus is an essential part of advancing democracy. This is especially true in Turkey, which is quite diverse in terms of beliefs, religious practices, and lifestyles’ (Pierini 2013, pp. 1, 4).

There is a wide grey area between fully institutionalised and consolidated liberal democracies and outright authoritarian regimes, or ‘hybrid regimes’. The current state of the Turkish political regime can best be described as a ‘delegative democracy’ (DD), as Guillermo O’Donnell puts it (O’Donnell 1994), or as a ‘plebiscitarian democracy.’

O’Donnell developed his notion of DD chiefly on the basis of the experience of Latin American presidential systems. Delegative democracies, he argues, ‘are not consolidated (i.e. institutionalised) democracies, but they may be enduring. In many cases, there is no sign either of any imminent threat of an authoritarian regression, or of advances toward representative democracy.’ In contrast to representative (or institutionalised) democracies, they are marked by a highly personalistic style of leadership (personalismo): ‘DD is strongly majoritarian. It consists in constituting, through clear elections, a majority that empowers someone to become the embodiment and interpreter of the high interests of the nation . . . Elections in DDs are a very emotional and high-stakes event: candidates compete for a chance to rule virtually free of all constraints . . . After the election, voters/delegators are expected to become a passive but cheering audience of what the president does’ (O’Donnell 1994, p. 60).

A related feature of the DD is the weakness of ‘horizontal accountability’, i.e. accountability to other autonomous institutions of the state such as the legislature or the courts. Such accountability is seen by the President as a ‘nuisance’ and an impediment to fulfilling his/her mission: ‘In institutionalised democracies, accountability runs not only vertically, making elected officials answerable to the ballot box, but
also horizontally, across a network of relatively autonomous powers (i.e. other institutions). Vertical accountability, along with the freedom to form parties and to try to influence public opinion, exists in both representative and delegative democracies. But the horizontal accountability characteristic of representative democracy is extremely weak or nonexistent in delegative democracies. Furthermore, since the institutions that make horizontal accountability effective are seen by delegative presidents as unnecessary encumbrances to their “mission,” they make strenuous efforts to hamper the development of such institutions’ (O’Donnell 1994, pp. 61–62).

Many years ago, I argued that the type of democracy that fits the Turkish case best is DD (Özbudun 2000, pp. 151–153). This statement seems even more valid today than it was in earlier decades. Erdoğan’s style of leadership, particularly in his third term in office, bears clear marks of personalismo, with a strong sense of mission and an excessive concentration of authority in his hands. Parallel to this, he sees the ballot box (i.e. vertical accountability) as the only instrument of accountability and the only source of democratic legitimacy. ‘National will,’ as expressed through the ballot box, is elevated to a nearly sacred status. Instruments of horizontal accountability, always weak in Turkish politics, have further weakened. Thus, the strong, loyal, and disciplined AKP majority in parliament makes accountability to the legislature ineffective. The powers of the Court of Accounts, responsible for supervising government spending in the name of parliament, were curtailed. Pressures over media owners and other civil society actors have been pointed out above. But perhaps the most ominous recent development concerns the judiciary.

As referred to above, the 2010 constitutional amendments broke the monopoly of the ultra-secularist judges over the higher echelons of the judiciary and gave the Constitutional Court and the HSYK a more representative and pluralist structure. As such, these reforms were strongly supported by Turkish liberals and were commented upon favourably by the relevant European institutions. However, the government apparently was not happy with the results, regarding the HSYK, where a strong majority of members were judges elected by their peers, as closer to the Gülen movement than to the government.

The tension between the government and the Gülen movement erupted into a real crisis with the 17 December 2013 revelations concerning corruption charges. Erdoğan and other AKP spokespersons quickly blamed the prosecutors as ‘agents’ and ‘guilty’ and issued a government regulation making some radical changes in the rules governing the role of the judicial police (members of the police force employed in criminal investigations under the authority of public prosecutors) in criminal investigations. When the HSYK responded with a declaration criticising the regulation, Erdoğan declared them ‘guilty’ too and stated that he would have immediately put the HSYK members on trial if he had had the power to do so. He also admitted that the AKP had made a mistake in 2010 by changing the structure of the HSYK (Taraf 2013b). At the same time, the government engaged in a large-scale purge of suspected pro-Gülen officers in the police. Also, about 100 judges and public prosecutors involved in the corruption investigations were transferred to less sensitive posts. Even
more ominously, a law was adopted (Law no. 6524) on 15 February 2014 that radically changed the structure of the HSYK and transferred many critical powers of the Plenary of the Council to the Minister of Justice. This is clearly a step backwards from the constitutional amendment of 2010, which had been highly praised in European circles and is inconsistent with the present Article 159 of the Constitution. Many provisions of this law were found unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in its ruling of 10 April 2014. In mid-February, parliament adopted another highly controversial bill severely restricting access to the internet, again strongly opposed by all other parties in Turkey and criticised by EU institutions.

The recent downward trend in Turkey’s democracy record is also observed in the 2014 *Freedom in the World* report of Freedom House. While Turkey maintained the same scores of 3 and 4 in 2013, it received ‘a downward trend arrow due to the harsh government crackdown on protesters in Istanbul and other cities and increased political pressure on private companies to conform with the ruling party’s agenda . . . In his early years in power, Erdoğan was widely praised . . . for introducing overdue reforms. Then came a period in which reform efforts seemed to stall. More recently, key democratic institutions have faced intense pressure, and basic civil liberties experienced setbacks’ (Freedom House 2014a, pp. 14–22).

The same report also refers to Turkey as a case of ‘modern authoritarianism’, which it describes as follows:

While freedom suffered from coups and civil wars during the year, an equally significant phenomenon was the reliance on more subtle, but ultimately more effective, techniques by those who practice what is known as modern authoritarianism. Such leaders devote full-time attention to the challenge of crippling the opposition without annihilating it, and flouting the rule of law while maintaining a plausible veneer of order, legitimacy, and prosperity. Central to modern authoritarian strategy is the capture of institutions that undergird political pluralism. The goal is to dominate not only the executive and legislative branches, but also the media, the judiciary, civil society, the economy, and the security forces . . . The past year was notable for an intensification of efforts to control political messages through domination of the media and the use of legal sanctions to punish vocal critics . . . In Turkey, a range of tactics have been employed to minimise criticisms of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. They include jailing reporters (Turkey leads the world in the number of imprisoned journalists), pressuring independent publishers to sell their holdings to government cronies, and threatening media owners with reprisals if critical journalists are not silenced. (Freedom House 2014a, p. 3)

Freedom House’s more recent special report, entitled ‘Democracy in Crisis: Corruption, Media, and Power in Turkey’, focuses on government–media relations. The report starts with the sentence, ‘Turkey’s democracy is in crisis,’ and goes on to say that

‘This report focuses on one element of the crisis in Turkey’s democracy: the government’s increasing pressure on the media over the last seven years. While acknowledging that Turkey’s current crisis is bigger and more systemic, Freedom House believes it is important to analyze in depth the government’s efforts to marginalise and suppress independent voices and reporting in Turkey’s media. A free
press is a vital actor in any democracy, providing accountability and encouraging a healthy public debate. In Turkey, with a weak opposition and judiciary, an unfettered press is essential. The muzzling of the press in the last seven years has contributed to the wide disjunction between citizens and their government. It is both a symptom and a cause of the current crisis ... As reflected in Freedom House’s annual ratings ... Turkey is not a dictatorship. It is a country where different views are expressed and heard, with a vibrant and diverse civil society. But it remains a country where criticising the government means risking your livelihood, your reputation, and sometimes your freedom. And at the present moment, it is a country where the government is behaving more, rather than less, authoritarian. (Freedom House 2014b, pp. 3–4)

Thus, the present conflict has the potential to turn into a real ‘legitimacy’ crisis with consequences that are hard to predict. Much depends on the electoral performance of the AKP. The 30 March 2014 local elections took place in an exceedingly polarised and confrontational atmosphere and turned into a nationwide vote of confidence or non-confidence in the AKP and Erdoğan. The result for the AKP was neither a clear victory nor a clear defeat. The AKP clearly emerged as the leading party with about 44 per cent of the vote. On the other hand, its vote share fell by about six per cent of the total vote compared with the 49.8 per cent the party won in the parliamentary election of 2011. Such performance forebodes an even more polarised and hard-to-predict competition in the presidential elections of August 2014, where the winning candidate must obtain an absolute majority of the votes on either the first or the second round. The present level of support makes Erdoğan’s election a risky prospect, even though at the moment he seems to be willing to take this risk. A second possible scenario is that he may decide to remain as the prime minister and nominate Gül for a second term in the presidency. At a more fundamental level, however, possible scenarios are a return to democratic reforms with a more inclusionary political discourse, a further drift towards authoritarianism, and a split within the AKP. As stated at the outset, it is not clear which way the cat will jump.

Notes

1. For an evaluation of Turkey’s recent human rights record, see European Commission 2013; Pierini 2013; Edelman et al. 2013. Even though the last report focuses on Turkey’s foreign policy under AKP rule, it also contains valuable insights into the AKP’s ideology. The recent ideological shift towards Islamism in foreign policy has a parallel in domestic politics as alluded to above.
2. Freedom House rates countries’ democratic performance on two scales: political rights and civil rights. Countries are rated on a scale from 1 to 7 with 1 indicating the best and 7 the worst scores. Countries that score between 1 and 2.5 are rated as ‘free’, between 3 and 5.5 as ‘partly free’, and between 5.5 and 7 as ‘not free’.

References

Milliyet. (2013a) ‘Başbakan Erdoğan Alkol Yasasını Eleştirenlere Cevap Verdi’ [Prime Minister Erdoğan Answered the Critics of the Alcohol Law], 29 May.
Milliyet. (2013b) ‘Cumhurbaskanı Gül’den Gezi Parkı Açıklaması’ [Statement by President Gül on Gezi Park], 18 June.
Taraf. (2013a) ‘Erdogan’a göre medya casus, herşey komplo’ [According to Erdogan, the media is a spy, everything is a conspiracy], 26 December.

Taraf. (2013b) ‘Yine vatana ihanetle suçladı’ [Again he is accused of treason], 30 December.


**Ergun Özbudun** is Professor of Constitutional Law and Political Science at Istanbul Şehir University. Previously he taught at Ankara and Bilkent Universities and was a Visiting Professor at Chicago, Columbia, Princeton, and Paris (Sorbonne) universities. Among his books in English are *Social Change and Political Participation in Turkey* (Princeton University Press, 1976), *Contemporary Turkish Politics: Challenges to Democratic Consolidation* (Lynne Rienner, 2000), *The Constitutional System of Turkey: 1876 to Present* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), *Party Politics and Social Cleavages in Turkey* (Lynne Rienner, 2013), and *Islamism, Democracy, and Liberalism in Turkey: The Case of the AKP* with William Hale (Routledge, 2010).