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BLACK SEA INITIATIVE

THE INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE OF “NEW TURKEY”

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SELIM KORU



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

A nation must think before it acts

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INTRODUCTION

SELIM KORU

There is a reference book entitled *The Republic of Turkey State Institution Guide* (*Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Devlet Teşkilat Rehberi*), published by the Turkey and Middle East Public Governance Institute (*Türkiye ve Orta Doğu Amme İdaresi Enstitüsü*).¹ It begins with the highest institutions in the legislature, executive, and judiciary, then moves down to the presidency, parliament, prime ministry, and high councils, breaking them up into page-long summaries, with an institution logo and official title, along with their mandates, budgets, current leaders, and international associations. There are impartial or independent institutions, such as the supreme election council and the central bank; local administrative structures, such as city and municipal governates; oversight institutions; government-owned for-profit businesses; and “professional organizations qualified as government institutions.” Akin to the *United States Government Manual*, this book is meant to be a compact picture of Turkey’s government.² If you are working in the municipality of the city of Adana and someone from the “Presidency of the Turkey Water Institute” asks for an appointment, you might reach for this book to learn about that institution. If you ever wonder when the “Privatization High Council” was founded, page 33 will tell you it was on November 27, 1994, under law “4046/3 md.”

Figure 1 is found at the end of the book. It is headed by a box entitled “Constitution,” from which three lines branch out into boxes labelled “Judiciary,” “Executive,” and “Legislature.” Underneath each box are

¹ *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Devlet Teşkilat Rehberi: Özet Kitap* [The Republic of Turkey State Institution Guide: Summary Book], (*Türkiye ve Orta Doğu Amme İdaresi Enstitüsü* [Turkey and Middle East Public Governance Institute], 2014).

² *The United States Government Manual*, <https://www.usgovernmentmanual.gov/>.

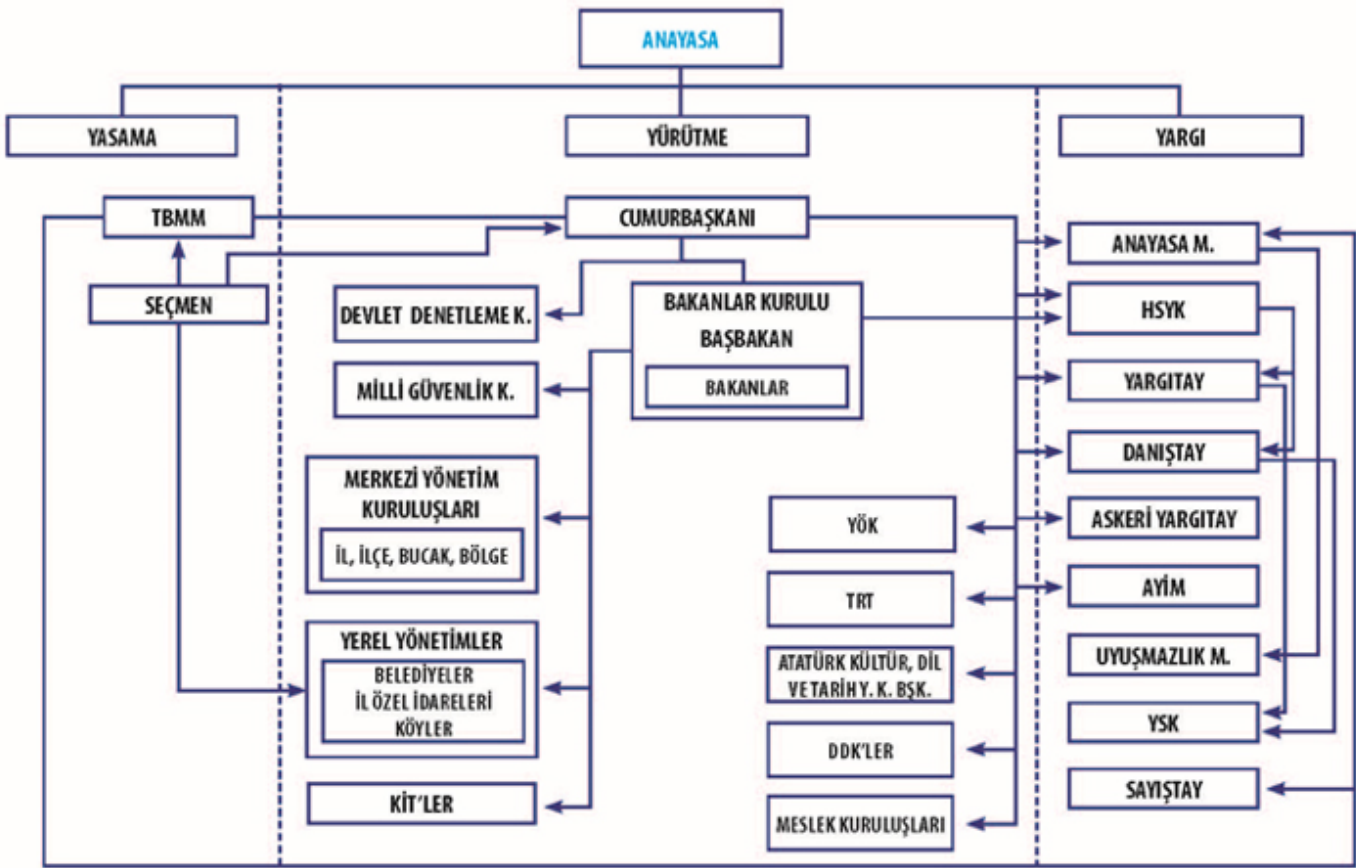


Figure 1: The Republic of Turkey State Institution Guide, page 254

additional boxes marking the institutions for the respective branch of government, and these are divided by dotted lines separating them into three different spheres of government.

The diagram, of course, should be taken with a hefty grain of salt. Turkey experienced a military coup almost every decade or so since its first free elections in 1950 (the current constitution was drafted after the 1980 coup), and even in

the 2000s, when Turkey was in European Union (EU) accession negotiations, the military loomed large over the political sphere. Still, the constitutional democracy laid out in this chart expressed the aspiration of more than 150 years of parliamentary politics, stretching back to the Ottoman Empire. “Normalization,” in political discourse, meant that Turkey would evolve to resemble Western European democracies. It would reduce the influence of the military, rationalize

governance, and make room for individual liberty.

Six years since its publication, this book is all but useless. The Turkey and Middle East Public Governance Institute has been shuttered, and the work of keeping track of the state’s institutions has been transferred to the “Presidency Digital Transformation Office.” The new bare-bones manual is a mere digital drop-down list, with phone numbers and contact information for each institution. The breakneck pace of institutional change in the past years would make it extremely frivolous to attempt a printed version of this drop-down menu. There is also no schematic.³ The closest thing to a visual of the system of government today is Figure 2 that the Erdoğan government published as Turkey entered the “Presidential Executive System” in 2018.

This figure is only a chart for the institution of the presidency, rather than all of government. The rest of the government of Turkey at that time *officially* remains the same, with the separation of powers remaining enshrined in the constitution. In practice, however, the system has changed. This new chart is the only one anyone in Turkey is likely to recognize, and it is the one that best illustrates the country’s system of government. The presidency is the center of gravity,

the sun around which all institutions of state revolve. The ministries, councils, and offices of the executive form the inner orbits, with the judiciary and legislature merely forming outer ones. The constitution is now a mere organizing schematic, rather than the source of legitimacy.

There is a debate on the nature of sovereignty that is helpful in illustrating this change. Here, the liberal tradition claims that the law arises from moral principles and thereby constitutes its own sphere—meaning that in a liberal republic such as the United States, even Congress and the White House are ultimately constrained by the constitution. Another is the realist tradition, most prominently represented by 20th century German theorist Carl Schmitt, that argues that politics—or a sovereign decision maker—precedes the law. “The sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” writes Schmitt, meaning that the mark of the sovereign is that he may suspend the law when political necessity demands it.⁴ In this conception, constitutional frames or even rule-bound legislative bodies cannot be the origins of sovereignty: sovereignty precedes them and rests ultimately within the political sphere. It is embodied in a person who, as a matter of historical circumstance, can act outside the law. The difference between the liberal and realist traditions

3 Elektronik Kamu Bilgi Yönetim Sistemi (KAYSİS) [The Electronic Public Information Management System], <https://www.kaysis.gov.tr/>.

4 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, (University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 25-27.

STRUCTURE OF THE PRESIDENTIAL EXECUTIVE SYSTEM

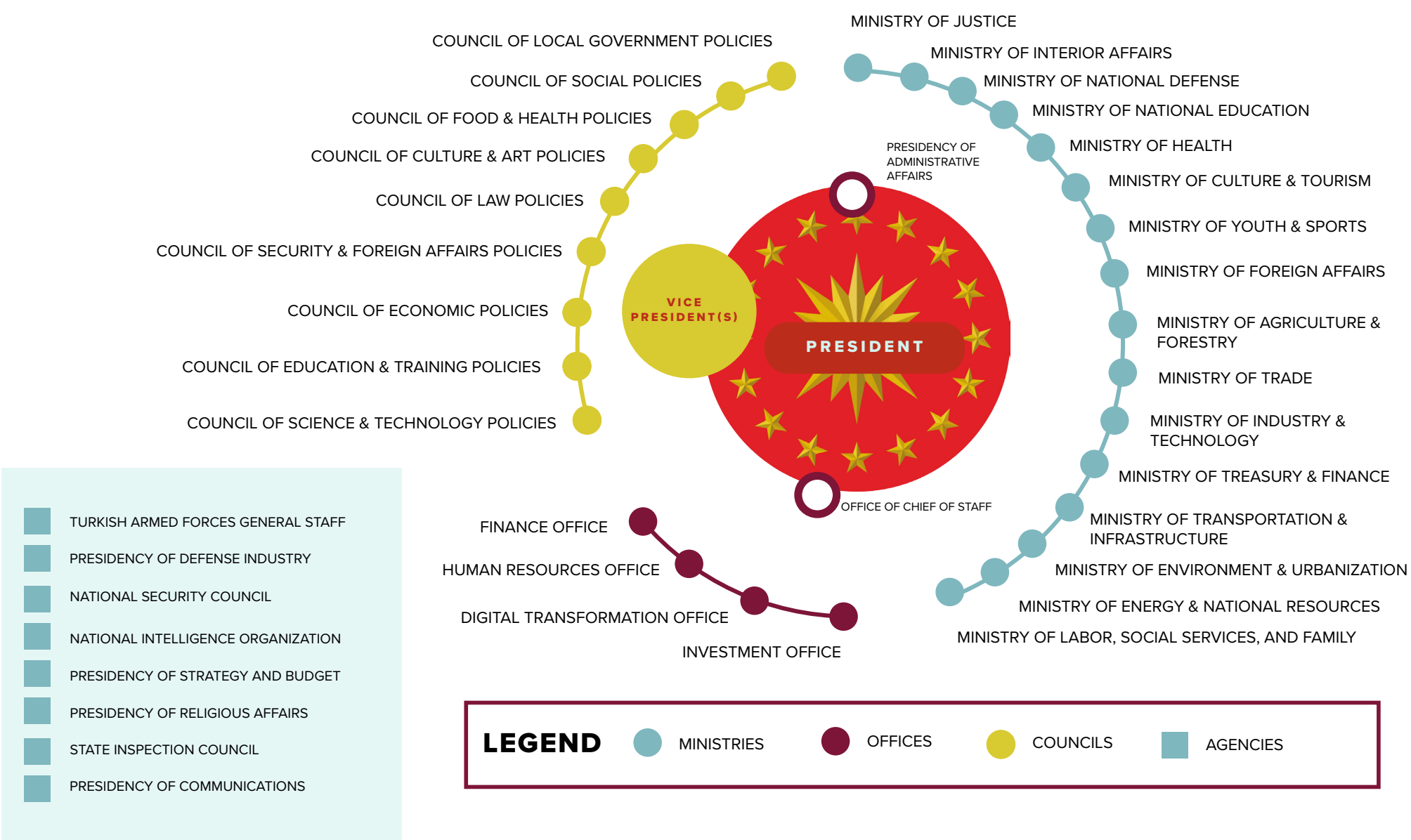


FIGURE 2:
Government structure breakdown for the 2018
Turkish presidential system.
Adapted from The Daily Sabah

is in the first and second charts: the first is a maze of rules and regulations, while the second is a central point, surrounded by a series of deceptively simple concentric circles.

The first section of this report will narrate the change in the character of the presidency, specifically how

it acquired a new political charge. According to Schmitt, the spheres of economics, aesthetics, ethics, and others are separate, and defined by dichotomies (profitable-unprofitable, beautiful-ugly, good-evil). The political sphere is constituted and defined by the friend-enemy distinction, an association that extends to the willingness to go

into existential struggle, meaning war.⁵ The choice that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has made again and again throughout his political career has been to privilege the political sphere over all others. More than ever before, life has become about the friends and enemies

of the nation, inside and outside of the country. In the language of the state, the word “terrorist” no longer just describes armed groups, but student protestors, journalists, or opposition politicians. Without constitutional safeguards, this implies a rule of the majority, and in its

⁵ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 25-27.

advanced stages, a regime of Sunni-Turkish supremacy. The way in which this dynamic has manifested itself is in a need to “normalize” the country away from its recent past as a state under what Turkish nationalists believe to be the tutelage of Western imperialism to become a geopolitical power in its own right. This is the “emergency” that Turkey lives under, and the engine of its immense institutional transformation. Though it is ongoing, the emergency became most acute with the 2016 coup attempt, which the Erdoğan government, along with the majority of Turks, believe to be an intervention by the United States. This event allowed the government to enact the presidential system, which was initially a deeply unpopular idea. It also continues the wellspring of its legitimacy with the public today.

“New Turkey,” however, also significantly departs from the Schmittian pattern. As expanded upon in the report’s second section, the institutional planets orbiting the sun of the president do not do so in an orderly fashion. “New Turkey’s” solar system of institutions is a treacherous and unpredictable place. Ministries, police forces, regulatory authorities, construction firms, financial institutions, and universities grow or shrink rapidly, orbit in strange formations, or crash into each other. These are often loosely linked through religious orders, political factions, organized crime networks, or regional “hometown” networks, none of which are officially supposed to be part of government. In the absence of a credible

constitutional framework, governance occurs through these networks and is anchored to the political authority of the president, rather than his legal right.



THE ROAD TO THE EXECUTIVE PRESIDENCY



Recep Tayyip Erdogan/Instagram

The present system—like any—grew out of the circumstances of its predecessor. That is why we need to look at the last years of the parliamentary system in Turkey and the chain of events that led to the creation of the Erdoğan-sized presidency.

While “Old Turkey’s” presidency was not a ceremonial office, it was not an executive one, either. It was designed in the post-coup constitution of 1980 to be occupied by a figure who represented the priorities of the military-led Kemalist elite. Presidents appointed the top judges, generals, and other important bureaucrats (such as university rectors) and had a soft veto on legislation (parliament could override it with a two-thirds majority), but they did not preside over the cabinet; the prime minister did. Prime ministers were often middle-aged figures with the energy to immerse themselves in the day-to-day tasks of governance. Presidents were usually older and concerned themselves with appointments and broad legislative issues that set the tone for the state in the medium-to-long term. Presidents also crucially took an oath of office that bound them to be non-partisan in their conduct.

In 2007, the presidency of Ahmet Necdet Sezer was due to end. According to the 102th clause of the constitution at the time, candidates to the office need to receive a two-thirds majority (367 votes) in the first two rounds of parliamentary voting, or a simple majority (251 votes) in another two rounds. The Justice and Development Party (AK Party), having a majority of 354 in the 550-seat parliament (the Republican People’s Party (CHP) had all remaining seats,) was in a strong position to get its candidate elected. It put forward Abdullah Gül, who was one of the three senior founding leaders of the AK Party (along with

Bülent Arınç and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) and foreign minister at the time. For the first time in Republican history, someone with an Islamist background, whose wife wore a headscarf, was positioned to occupy the highest office of the land.

That summer, the opposition, judiciary, and military acted together to block Gül’s election. After initial voting in parliament, the opposition took the matter to the Supreme Court, which ruled that a quorum of 367 was needed to hold the vote in the first place. This was seen as an overtly political, and deeply unjust, decision. The opposition also organized massive protests across major cities, calling for the protection of the country’s secular character. Most alarming perhaps was a message that the military put on its website, threatening to intervene in politics to protect what it perceived to be a threat to the secular Kemalist order. The act is still remembered as the “e-coup.” The establishment was tolerating an Islamist government, but the presidency was off limits.

Though effective, these events put government into deadlock, forcing the country into early elections. In the ensuing campaign, the AK Party put its case directly to the people, arguing that the establishment was resisting change, that it was bending the rules of the Republic to cling to power. The campaign was a resounding success. The AK Party strengthened its share of the popular vote from 34.28 percent to 46.58 percent. The pan-Turkic Nationalist Movement

Party (MHP) also entered parliament and announced that they would participate in subsequent parliamentary sessions. This meant that a quorum would be established in presidential voting—allowing the AK Party to elect Abdullah Gül to the presidency. Using its new majority, the AK Party government also put to a referendum a constitutional amendment for all subsequent presidents to be elected via popular vote. It passed with 68.95 percent. Put together, 2007 marked the growth of the AK Party from a strong plurality into the voice of the majority.

It may not have been immediately apparent at the time, but the office of the president had been changed forever. The generals had designed the presidency as the “captain’s bridge,” and they would always own the captain. Popular (and populist) right-wing politicians, such as Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel, had served in the position before, but never despite the military’s wishes. The AK Party not only denied them the office, but it also made sure that they could never attain it again. Abdullah Gül would be the last president elected by a parliamentary vote. The captain’s bridge now belonged to the majority vote, and that, the assumption went, was the AK Party’s territory.

But that vote was scheduled for 2014. Gül had been elected in parliament, and he took his oath of impartiality seriously. His link to politics was his relationship to Erdoğan. One of the most memorable moments of that year was Erdoğan’s



much-anticipated announcement of the candidate. “Our candidate for president,” he had said, “is my brother Abdullah Gül.” It expressed the complicated relationship between the men, since technically, Erdoğan was picking his own superior. Erdoğan was clearly the more popular of the two, but privately, the men conversed as equals and talked through important decisions before announcing their united positions. While Erdoğan had unparalleled political instincts and tactical genius, Gül brought strategy and long-term policy planning. It was his picks for ministerial posts (Ali Babacan, Beşir Atalay, Ahmet Davutoğlu, etc.) that made the first terms of the AK Party a success. All this made it tolerable to Erdoğan for Gül to officially surpass Erdoğan in protocol, but only barely.

By the early 2010s, however, tension was building between the two. Erdoğan no longer consulted Gül on matters relating to the party and, most importantly, lists of MP candidates before elections. In public events where both leaders were due to attend, for example, there was a waiting game of sorts. Erdoğan was often late for events, while Gül liked to be punctual. The problem was that the president could not be seen to be waiting for the prime minister, so Gül’s staff would have to time his departure according to the tardiness of Erdoğan. This was vexing to the president since it made people think that he was holding up events. The tension spilled over into public events as well. On May 10, 2014, Erdoğan and Gül were sitting next to each other at the Council of State, listening to a speech by President of the Turkish Bars Association Metin Feyzioğlu.

When Feyzioğlu levelled criticism against the government, Erdoğan lost his temper and began shouting from his seat. Gül motioned him to calm down, but Erdoğan kept shouting. It was episodes like these that illustrated how Erdoğan did not consider himself bound by the hierarchy enshrined in the constitution. He believed that he represented the will of the people in a unique way and deserved a unique office.

Erdoğan’s followers call him “*reis*,” an affectionately submissive term roughly meaning “leader” or “chief.” The official titles must have seemed stifling in comparison. The presidency, after all, was not the strong executive office that Erdoğan craved. Presidents had the power to shape the state in the long term (especially the judiciary and military), while prime ministers presided over the cabinet and, effectively, the legislature. Like any parliamentary system, Turkey’s was designed to prevent the emergence of any one person as the undisputed ruler of the state and, instead, enable government through messy negotiations and compromise. Starting in the early 2010s, however, Erdoğan floated the idea of a “reinforced presidential system.”⁶

Though Erdoğan was as popular as ever, the idea polled terribly. The term “presidential system” (*Başkanlık Sistemi*) sounded like an alien concept, carrying a whiff of the American federal system.⁷ People associated it with a “one man” dictatorship, which suggests a reversion to the founding years of the Republic. According to polls in 2011 and 2013, only 17 percent of the population favored a presidential system.⁸ Even within his party, Erdoğan had trouble keeping the idea on the agenda.

By August 2014, when President Gül’s term would expire, Erdoğan had been prime minister for almost 12 years and was making no secret of his desire to become the next president, reinforced or not. He declared that since he would be the first elected president in Republican history, he would, in effect, ignore his oath of impartiality and continue to weigh in on politics. In a parliamentary speech in July of that year, Erdoğan asked, “Were İsmet İnönü, Evren, Demirel, Sezer impartial? They all had their political opinions.” The problem with his predecessors was that they had the wrong political opinions, “Their politics overlapped with that of the state, not with that of the people.” In this

view, impartiality was not only undesirable, but it also was a fiction designed to cover up the establishment’s subversion of the democratic will. “If I get elected, I will not be impartial. I will be a president on the side of the people. That is what Turkey needs.”⁹ Erdoğan may have been right in saying that oaths of impartiality could cover up political decisions, but they still had real power. Such oaths underpinned the Republican system that allowed the AK Party to compete when the entire establishment had been against it. His cynicism would deny others similar opportunities.

Erdoğan won the 2014 presidential election with ease, resigned his position as chair of the AK Party, and ascended to what was—formally at least—a position that was above politics. Then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu succeeded Erdoğan as chairman of the AK Party and prime minister. Nationally and internationally recognized, Davutoğlu was an able politician, but lacked his own base of support within the party and must not have seemed a threat to Erdoğan’s continued sway. The avuncular professor was clearly supposed to be an extension of Erdoğan, not his successor. Erdoğan ruled exactly the way he said he would. He used his informal but decisive influence over his former party to continue



A wall rug of Erdogan at a rally of the AK Party. (Random/Wikimedia Commons)

controlling the executive and legislative branches of government.

Turkey during this period was governed through a heavy constitutional infringement at the pinnacle of power. In retrospect, this was the moment when the defining characteristic of “New Turkey”—the supremacy of the political sphere over the legal one—first came to life. But the transition was anything but smooth. The opposition criticized this heavily and repeatedly, and the Erdoğan government

6 “Kurtulmuş, AKP’nin ‘hedefini’ açıkladı: Güçlendirilmiş başkanlık [Kurtulmuş announced the AKP’s target: Reinforced Presidency],” *Diken*, November 14, 2016, <http://www.diken.com.tr/kurtulmus-akpnin-hedefini-acikladi-guclendirilmis-baskanlik-gundemimiz/>.

7 Salih Bayram, *Türkiye’de Başkanlık Sistemi Tartışmaları* [Discussions of the Presidential System in Turkey], İstanbul: SETA Yayınları, 2016, http://file.setav.org/Files/Pdf/20160105130350_bt_web.pdf.

8 “Erdoğan’ı üzecek anket, [The Poll that will upset Erdoğan],” *Milliyet*, December 15, 2011, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/Erdogani-uzecek-anket-1475863>; and “Bu Anket Başbakanı Gerçekten Ağlatacak [This poll is really going to make the prime minister cry],” *Sözcü*, August 23, 2013, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2013/yazarlar/ugur-dundar/bu-anket-basbakani-gercekten-aglatacak-362019/>.

9 “Erdoğan: Taraflı Cumhurbaşkanı Olacağım! [Erdoğan: I will be a President who chooses a side!],” *Kanal 7*, July 8, 2014, <https://www.haber7.com/partiler/haber/1177823-Erdogan-tarafl-cumhurbaskani-olacagim>.



Gezi Park Protest, June 2013. (Mstyslav Chernov/Wikimedia Commons)

was clearly uneasy about the situation. It urgently needed to merge the offices of the president and prime minister, but the idea of a “reinforced presidency” continued to be unpopular. Metropoll, a reputable polling agency, said in late 2015 that it had polled the presidential system “at least ten times in the past two years” and that the idea never received more than 32 percent approval, which was roughly the pre-2007 voting base of

the AK Party.¹⁰ So widely acknowledged was this problem that when Minister of Justice Bekir Bozdağ was pressed early that year on this issue, he lamented, “They do not want the citizen to learn about the presidential system. They are afraid that if he does learn about the presidential system, he could change his mind,” in effect acknowledging that the government wasn’t able to shift public opinion in their favor.¹¹ The public had

¹⁰ “İşte son kamuoyu araştırmaları... Türkiye başkanlık istiyor mu? [Here are the latest polls... does Turkey want a presidency?],” *Hürriyet*, May 5, 2015, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/iste-son-kamuoyu-arastirmalari-turkiye-baskanlik-istiyor-mu-40010465>.

¹¹ “Bakanlık sisteminin öğrenilmesini istemiyorlar [They do not want the presidential system to be learned about],” *TRT Haber*, January 29, 2015, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/baskanlik-sisteminin-ogrenilmesini-istemiyorlar-164997.html>.

given Erdoğan the presidency, and it was fairly tolerant of his daily violations of his oath of office, but it wasn’t ready to go any further.

As the country approached the June 2015 national elections, the AK Party struggled with what was widely referred to as “two headedness.” Davutoğlu spoke in front of traditional campaign stops with huge crowds, while Erdoğan held political speeches in glitzy halls of a more presidential nature. He was not being impartial, but the expectation of impartiality still prevented him from rolling up his sleeves. Meanwhile, the opposition was gaining momentum. In particular, the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), which was the most recent incarnation of the Kurdish movement, was changing the political landscape. Born of the 2013 Gezi Protests, a nationwide protest movement against the AK Party, the HDP was shaping up to be something akin to the European Greens. It was reaching out to a young, well-educated, liberal urban base in the big cities, merging that vote with its traditionally Kurdish base in the southeast. The right considered the Kurdish movement to be the political wing of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a trojan horse sent to Ankara to undermine Turkey’s unity. The HDP’s charismatic leadership worked hard to overcome this image, arguing that it was *Türkiyeli*, or “of Turkey” (rather than “Turkish,” a subtle but important distinction). Its co-chairman,

Selahattin Demirtaş, was arguably the most talented politician after Erdoğan, cutting through the mainstream Turkish media’s resistance with razor-sharp wit.

Given that the peace process between the government and PKK was underway, some floated the idea that the Erdoğan government might enter into a tacit alliance with the HDP. The price of such an arrangement would certainly be the presidential system on the government’s side and the continuation of the peace agreement on the HDP’s side.

Demirtaş’ campaign focused relentlessly on the government’s weakest point: the daily constitutional infringement at the highest level of government. He called Davutoğlu, who was officially leading the AK Party ticket, the “intern Prime Minister” and chose to address President Erdoğan, who was the real force behind the AK Party, directly. This was key to Demirtaş’ appeal. Throughout the campaign, Demirtaş, a leftist and the leader of an ethnic and linguistic minority, spoke to Erdoğan, the leader of the religious and cultural majority, as an equal. Demirtaş boasted that he didn’t answer the president’s phone calls and addressed him in the colloquial “*sen*” rather than the formal “*siz*” in his speeches.¹² Much of this was intended to break the spell that Erdoğan was the providential leader of the country and thus entitled to a super-presidency. An instinctive politician,

¹² Akin to the difference between the French “tu” and “vous.”

Demirtaş seems to have understood that the executive presidency was the means of institutionalizing a majoritarian system, which amounted to a regime of Sunni-Turkish supremacy. Meeting the president on that basis gave him tremendous symbolic power. The campaign is remembered primarily by a March 2015 speech, during which Demirtaş said:

Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as long as the HDP exists, as long as the members of the HDP breathe on this soil, you [sen] will not be president. Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, we will not make you president, we will not make you president, we will not make you president.¹³

It may sound like a straightforward statement, but this was an electrifying moment, and five years on, the phrase still rings in the collective consciousness. First, its circumstances were unprecedented. The Sunni-Turkic majority Erdoğan represented was not sacrosanct, Demirtaş was saying, and its supremacy could be opposed at the parliamentary podium, the very heart of Turkish democracy. There was a moral edge to the statement that Erdoğan had often wielded on his way up, but had never himself faced before. It must also have been infuriating for him

to hear this from the representative of a minority with whom he was still officially in peace talks. Recognizing the rights of minorities did not make them thankful, he may have thought, it only encouraged further irreverence and insubordination.

The statement also had a more subtle aspect to it that needs to be unpacked to make sense in English. Erdoğan at this point already was the “president,” but not quite the kind of president that Demirtaş was referring to. In Turkish, the President of Turkey is a “*Cumhurbaşkanı*,” a combination of the words “*cumhur*,” roughly meaning “the public,” and “*başkan*,” a Turkic word for “head;” this is the common translation for president. While the presidents of some other countries (France, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Portugal) are also called “*Cumhurbaşkanı*,” most others have no *cumhur*- prefix, and are only “*başkan*.” The most prominent such “*başkan*” is the President of the United States, and due to the weight of that particular office, the plain title of “*başkan*” for the head of state has a powerful ring to it. In the executive system that Erdoğan was proposing at the time, he would cease to be a “*Cumhurbaşkanı*” and become a “*Başkan*”—just like the President of the United States. This would separate him from previous Turkish presidents and

elevate him to a higher geopolitical level in the eyes of the public.¹⁴

By choosing to pound his rhetorical hammer on this particular word, Demirtaş was isolating Erdoğan, turning his nationalistic rhetoric against him. Turkey’s conventions were not good enough for the president. He sought a foreign title, one which indicated that he was at least as power hungry and imperialistic as the Western “*başkan*” he railed against every day. The statement fed into the image of Erdoğan that had been growing among the opposition for some time: a man consumed by vanity, resentment, and the quest for power.¹⁵ Demirtaş might still have been angling for a deal with the government, but he wanted to maximize his party’s performance at the ballot box and negotiate from a position of strength.

In the June 2015 national elections, the AK Party lost its governing majority in parliament for the first time since 2002. A

hung parliament ensued, and opposition leaders began to eye each other for a possible governing coalition. Had they succeeded, it might have trapped Erdoğan in an “Old Turkey” presidency without executive powers, sidelined his party, and possibly crippled his political movement. Demirtaş’ promise might have become reality. The pan-Turkic MHP, however, would not sit down with the HDP, which they saw as an extension of the PKK. This meant that coalition talks could not start. Speaking about the post-election climate five years later, Osman Baydemir, a leading HDP MP at the time, says that the HDP sent an emissary to Erdoğan, giving him three options: form a coalition with the CHP and receive HDP support; form a minority government and receive HDP support; or form a coalition directly with the HDP, without giving up any ministries. All the HDP asked for in return was for the peace process to continue. According to Baydemir, Erdoğan merely dismissed the emissary, saying, “You will see.” What

¹⁴ After 2016, Erdoğan’s team would cave to the polling and call the new system “the national and local presidency” and retain the official title of “Cumhurbaşkanı.” Informally, however, Erdoğan never gave up trying to be a “başkan.” On his inauguration day as the nation’s first elected president, the first question he received from a journalist was “what should we call you?” Erdoğan replied, “you may call me ‘my president,’” using the American term without the *cumhur*- prefix (“başkanım diyebilirsiniz”). Everything about the day was minutely planned, and the question was likely planted. Erdoğan couldn’t help himself. He wanted to be called a “başkan,” even if the term was relegated to a footnote in the grand event. Today, the usage of the term still marks the cleavage between Erdoğan supporters and the opposition. Erdoğan’s loyalists insist on referring to him as “başkan Erdoğan,” while those in the opposition or outer circles use the official “Cumhurbaşkanı.”

¹⁵ Erdoğan would never forgive Demirtaş. Once he attained his emergency powers after the 2016 coup attempt, Demirtaş became the first and only party leader to be imprisoned, and remains so to this day. Demirtaş was imprisoned in Edirne, which is the farthest point in the country from Diyarbakir, where his family resides. His wife, Basak Demirtaş, and his two daughters have to regularly travel to Edirne to see him. The personalized nature of the punishment inflicted on Demirtaş highlights the force of his speech, as well as the importance of the executive presidency.

¹³ “Demirtaş, tarihin en kısa grup toplantısını yaptı! [Demirtaş has held the shortest [parliamentary] group meeting in history!],” *T24*, March 17, 2015, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/Demirtas-hdp-grup-partisini-tek-cumleyle-bitirdi,290709>.



The Turkish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) announcing their election manifesto ahead of the November 1, 2015 general election. (Yıldız Yazıcıoğlu/Voice of America)

they “saw,” Baydemir says, is the Turkey of today.¹⁶

That summer, the peace process broke down, and the war between the state and the PKK-led Kurdish movement resumed with a vengeance. Massive protests rose up in the southeastern provinces, and the state deployed heavy military units that flattened entire towns. As talks collapsed in parliament, a second election was set for November 1. During this window, Erdoğan rolled up his sleeves, campaigning on behalf of the party that he had officially left behind. It was during this period that peace talks with the PKK ended, and the government once again returned to a war footing. Erdoğan took a nationalistic stance, which would form the basis of his alliance with the MHP. In the November election, the AK Party received its parliamentary majority again with 49.5 percent, its highest share of the vote up to that point. Constitutional or not, it had become clear that Erdoğan needed to violate his oath and campaign actively for “New Turkey” to survive.

In the early months of 2016, pressure was mounting on Prime Minister Davutoğlu. Many in the party thought that he had

failed in the June 2015 elections, and most dangerous of all, there were constant rumors that he was trying to take the reins from Erdoğan. The “two-headedness” of the government was causing it to expend a great deal of energy on squashing these rumors. Davutoğlu also appeared to be doing well in his negotiations with the EU, attaining the holy grail of visa-free travel into the Schengen zone in exchange for a migration deal, pending conditions.¹⁷ It was increasingly looking like he wanted to step out of Erdoğan’s shadow and actually govern himself. His lieutenants were trying to convince key people in the party, as well as Erdoğan himself, to abandon plans for the deeply unpopular executive presidency. Backlash was inevitable. In April 2016, circles close to the Erdoğan family leaked information on the points of disagreement between Erdoğan and Davutoğlu. In May, Davutoğlu resigned, and Erdoğan installed the ever-loyal Binali Yıldırım.¹⁸ There would no longer be friction between the president and prime minister, but the constitutional infringement continued.

The coup attempt on June 15, 2016, changed the equation. Parliament had been bombed, and Erdoğan only narrowly

¹⁶ “Osman Baydemir anlatıyor: Çözüm süreci nasıl bitti? [Osman Baydemir explains: how did the peace process come to an end?],” *Kısa Dalga*, December 7, 2020, <https://www.kisadalga.net/osman-baydemir-anlatiyor-cozum-sureci-nasil-bitti/>.

¹⁷ Turkish diplomats have long sought to gain visa-free travel in the Schengen zone for Turkish passport holders. In the deal that Davutoğlu struck with EU leaders, Turkey was to attain this right contingent on reforms in its policies relating to migrants and changes in its anti-terror laws. After Davutoğlu stepped down, the Erdoğan government failed to enact the reforms, and the EU did not grant visa-free travel.

¹⁸ The incident is remembered for the “Pelikan File,” a blog post authored by the Bosphorus Group, a PR firm loyal to the Erdoğan government and close to son-in-law Berat Albayrak.

escaped what was probably a kill-or-capture mission.¹⁹ There was little doubt among the public that the Gülenists, an organization that had infiltrated state institutions for decades, were behind it (more detail on the Gülenists in the next section) and that they had been supported by the United States. Erdoğan declared a state of emergency and made the case that the nation had entered a new stage in its existential struggle against Western powers. All discussion on the presidential system faded into the background, as the nation became focused on the daily waves of the purge of the Gülen network. The post-coup environment gave Erdoğan unprecedented political power, and he may have been tempted to call for a referendum on the presidential system that year. He chose to wait, however, and reshape the political scene in a deeper way.

The pan-Turkic nationalists in parliament were more vulnerable than ever in this period. In the 2015 elections, the MHP's seats in parliament had dipped below those of the HDP. This situation was humiliating and sparked an internal challenge against party leader Devlet Bahçeli. The MHP rebels sought to hold extraordinary party congresses to vote for a new leader, and as Bahçeli fought their demands in court, he began to make

regular trips to the presidential palace.²⁰ This appeared to be the foundation for an alliance between the Islamist and pan-Turkic leaders. Erdoğan could make sure that the challenge against Bahçeli would not succeed, and in return, Bahçeli would support him behind opposition lines.

In November 2016, Bahçeli spoke on the idea of an executive presidency. The speech set the groundwork for the alliance between the Islamist and pan-Turkic factions of Turkish politics:

In these days, when the Republic of Turkey is in an existential struggle, it is exceedingly dangerous and objectionable for our future, that the president, who is at the head of the government and the state, should be on the wrong side of the law. For this danger to be eliminated, there are two alternative paths before us. The first of these and the one which is the most correct, most wholesome to us, is for the honorable President to give up on enforcing the de facto presidency, and to retreat to his legal and constitutional boundaries. If this isn't going to occur, the second path is for

there to be a rapid inquiry for a way to legalize the de facto situation. It shall not be seen, nor talked about, in any civilized and democratic country in the world, that a government and power structure commit a crime every day.

Though ostensibly objecting to the president's violation of the constitution, Bahçeli was suggesting that the offense could be rectified through a post-facto legalization. He then went on to lay out a roadmap to how this could be done:

Faced with this situation, if the Justice and Development Party is to continue its stubbornness with regards to the presidential system, there are again two options in front of us.

First, if the AKP has a constitution already prepared or in preparation, it can bring it to the GNA [Grand National Assembly, Turkey's parliament], granted that it contains previously agreed upon articles. Members of parliament can vote according to their principles and beliefs, and listening to the voice of their conscience, will surely

arrive at a decision.

Second, this proposal for constitutional amendment will either become law in the GNA General Assembly by surpassing the 367 frontier, or remain above the 330 threshold and be presented to the people's decision in a referendum.

The Nationalist Movement Party is respectful and bound to every decision the Turkish nation will make. Our preference, as always, is for the continuation, strengthening, and reform, of the parliamentary system. If our nation should say the opposite, however, we will naturally have nothing to say to the contrary.²¹

These “options” were stages of a process surely discussed in great detail during Bahçeli's meetings with Erdoğan. It was telling that Bahçeli neglected to mention, for example, the possibility of the motion falling below 330 votes in parliament and being rejected without ever going to a referendum. He insisted that he was opposed to the presidential system, but also hinted that he would be open to change his mind about it. Bahçeli was becoming the example Erdoğan needed:

¹⁹ Karim El Bar, “3 helicopters sent to ‘kill or capture’ Erdoğan at hotel during coup, leaks say,” *Middle East Eye*, July 18, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/3-helicopters-sent-kill-or-capture-Erdoğan-hotel-during-coup-leaks-say>.

²⁰ “Beştepe’de Erdoğan-Bahçeli görüşmesi [Erdoğan-Bahçeli meeting in Beştepe],” *NTV*, November 2, 2016, https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/bestepede-Erdoğan-bahceli-gorusmesi,Hk4PJ24NjECyrGAPm_FP2w.

²¹ “Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi Genel Başkanı Sayın Devlet Bahçeli’nin TBMM Grup Toplantısında Yaptıkları Konuşma 11 Ekim 2016 [The Speech Nationalist Movement Party Chairman, the honorary Devlet Bahçeli held at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey on October 11 2016],” Nationalist Movement Party, http://www.mhp.org.tr/htmldocs/genel_baskan/konusma/4136/index.html.

an opposition figure who, seemingly guided by patriotic duty, edged closer and closer to his side. The more public this transition was, the more “patriots” in the opposition camp were likely to follow him.

Bahçeli’s speech was therefore an attempt to rescue the presidential system from being Erdoğan’s vanity project. It may have fallen flat at any other time, but the anti-Western political climate after the coup attempt sustained it. The night of the coup saw the most ideologically charged Islamist and pan-Turkic elements take to the streets.²² Now, the broader social segments of these groups, represented by Erdoğan and Bahçeli, were fusing into a “patriotic” front against foreign intervention. The AK Party’s design for what was now called “Turkish Type Presidential System” was put before parliament in January, where it received a three-fifths majority, and was scheduled for a referendum in April 2017.²³ In early 2017, the AK Party’s own polling still indicated that public support for the system was in the low 30s. A highly effective campaign, as well as support from the MHP leadership (contrary to his

earlier statement, Bahçeli came out in favor after all), raised the number into the 40s. To push the “yes” vote over the edge, the government sparked a very public fight with the Netherlands, which they used to whip up anti-Western nationalist sentiment. The government of the Netherlands at the time was not allowing AK Party politicians to campaign among Turkish residents in that country.²⁴ AK Party supporters, egged on by politicians from Ankara, faced riot police in Rotterdam, and the incident escalated into a full-blown crisis.²⁵ Nationalist voters rallied around the flag, staging protests across Turkey. On April 17, 2017, less than a year after the coup attempt, a referendum on the presidential system passed with 51.4 percent. Erdoğan had finally legalized his total control of state rule by expanding into a new, broader nationalistic base. The first elections under the new system were scheduled for the following year.

The new electoral system was designed to reinforce majoritarian rule indefinitely. The presidential and parliamentary elections are held simultaneously every five years. If no presidential candidate manages to get a majority of votes,

²² Selim Kuru, “Turkey’s Last Coup: What I Saw in Ankara,” *War on the Rocks*, July 16, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/turkeys-last-coup-what-i-saw-in-ankara/>.

²³ The new office was again to be called *Cumhurbaşkanlığı* rather than the foreign-sounding *Başkanlık*. See: Türey Köse, “‘Türk Tipi Başkanlık’ TBMM Genel Kurulu’nda [The “Turkish Type Presidency” is at the GNA General Assembly],” *BBC Türkçe*, January 8, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-38529200>.

²⁴ Jon Henley, “Turkey threatens to pull out of migrant deal as Dutch row intensifies,” *The Guardian*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/13/turkey-summons-dutch-envoy-over-riot-police-tactics-in-rotterdam>.

²⁵ Interview with author, November 2020.



then a second round is held. There is an assumption in the new system that whoever is elected president is also the leader of the most successful political party, or party coalition, as Erdoğan was in 2018, and continues to be. There are also no midterm elections. This makes it highly likely that a single party is in charge of the executive and legislative branches of parliament, without the need to compromise with the opposition, for a period of five years. Technically, it would be possible for someone to be elected without his political party gaining a parliamentary majority, or being elected while not affiliated with a political party. Muharrem İnce, Erdoğan’s main opponent in the 2018 presidential election, had been an MP with the CHP, but not its leader. Had he been elected, he would

either have had to replace the party chairman to combine positions, or go through the chairman to enact parts of his legislative agenda. This was, in any case, highly unlikely. Erdoğan won the 2018 presidential election in the first round, with 51 percent of the popular vote.

The presidency officially remains one of the three branches of government, subject to checks and balances. In practice, it is unimpeachable and in control of the legislative and judiciary branches of government. Technically, Article 105 of the revised constitution allows a three-fifths majority of the now 600-seat parliament to vote that the president be tried for crimes, or a two-thirds majority for him to be put to the Supreme Court. According to Turkey’s long-standing Political Parties



Turkish Supreme Court. (Wikimedia Commons)

Law, however, party bosses decide on regional candidates before elections. This translates into perfect party discipline, even when the party boss in question does not happen to be in total control of the levers of state. There is also a

culture of conformity in Turkish politics that makes dissent extremely difficult. In the 2017 voting for the executive presidency in parliament, there were many AK Party MPs who wanted to vote against the motion. Many met and

discussed their ideas, but they decided that it was not worth the risk. “Everything bad that happened after this would be blamed on us,” said one of these MPs.²⁶ The only MP to ever resign from the AK Party has been Mustafa Yeneroğlu, who was raised and educated in Germany. All this makes Article 105 a very light check on the president. It certainly hasn’t been in question under President Erdoğan’s two years under the new system. As he often says, he has never “recognized a will above the national will.”²⁷ If the “national will” is expressed by the razor slim majority, this seems to be accurate.

The institutional structure of the country is evolving accordingly. An article on the presidential system published by legal scholar Kemal Gözler 17 months after it went into effect enumerated its severe procedural failings, laying out in painstaking detail the system’s contradictions.²⁸ There are many institutions, such as the sovereign wealth fund, he writes, which are in effect both run and supervised by the president. The presidency engages in what Gözler calls “the problem of parthenogenesis,” meaning that the various cells of the system were replicating themselves

without outside interference. This is against the idea, he writes, that “one of the most fundamental principles of our administrative law is the legality of administration [*idarenin kanunîliği*]. This principle means that the power to establish administrative institutions does not rest with the administration [*idare*] but with the legislature.” An example of such parthenogenesis, according to Gözler, is Presidential Decree 4, clause 186, in which the president decreed that he could establish development institutions by presidential decree. Gözler points to this as a bug of the presidential system, but it makes more sense to think of it as a feature. In the absence of a real constitutional order, every action of the state—no matter how small—must be traced to a decision made by President Erdoğan. This bug creates a monumental task of governance, one that has to be assisted by informal means.

²⁶ Interview with author, July 2020.

²⁷ “Milletin iradesinin üzerinde irade tanımayarak demokrasimizi ileriye taşıdık [We have carried our democracy forward by not recognizing any will above the will of our people],” Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, February 12, 2019, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/101951/-milletin-iradesinin-uzerinde-irade-tanimayarak-demokrasimizi-ileriye-tasidik->.

²⁸ Kemal Gözler, “Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sisteminin Uygulamadaki Değeri: Bir Buçuk Yıllık Bir Bilanço [An Evaluation of the Presidential System of Government in its Implementation: the Balance Sheet of One and a Half Years],” Turkish Constitutional Law, December 27, 2019, <https://www.anayasa.gen.tr/cbhs-bilanco.htm>.



RULING THROUGH THE BUREAUCRATIC OLIGARCHY

This section will step back from the timeline of events leading up to the establishment of the executive presidency and look at the evolution of the ideas underpinning governance in the AK Party era. The AK Party rose to power by extending the political sphere from the tightly regulated Kemalist space across all aspects of life.

Formally impartial institutions often have well-known political leanings. The *BBC* and National Health Service (NHS) in Britain, for example, are known for being staffed largely by people who are progressive, while members of the British Armed Forces are mostly conservative. In the United States, Evangelical Christians are overrepresented in the armed forces, and Jewish people are overrepresented in fields requiring a high degree of education, such as medicine, law, and academia.²⁹ While this is subject to conspiracy theories, it is not surprising, nor should it be alarming. Different groups of people may be inclined towards different areas of life, and given recent history, paying too much attention to this is rightly considered distasteful. As long as individuals adhere by the law, the system works.

In Turkey, there are similar dynamics. Broadly defined, there are networks that display political, regional, or religious affiliations, which are then used to build support within government or semi-governmental institutions. The Presidency of Religious Affairs, the government institution that centrally assigns imams to mosques, is

²⁹ David A. Hollinger, "Rich, Powerful, and Smart: Jewish Overrepresentation Should Be Explained Instead of Avoided or Mystified," *Jewish Quarterly Review* vol. 94, no. 4 (2004): pp. 595-602; and "Onward Christian Soldiers," *The Economist*, May 25, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/erasmus/2019/05/25/onward-christian-soldiers>.

heavily conservative and inner Anatolian. The mainstream left used to be well-represented in the legal profession and in academia, and continues to have influence in semi-governmental institutions, such as the Chamber of Mechanical Engineers (TMMOB) or the Turkish Medical Association (TTB). The pan-Turkic nationalists (*Ülkücü*), and the “Idealist Hearths” (*Ülkü Ocakları*), their nationwide network of student organizations, are feeders for institutions like the police and armed forces, in which they maintain group coherence.³⁰ There are also micro-groupings: A department head from Konya might be inclined to hire his fellow Konyans, for example. By themselves, these things are not problems and may be considered natural expressions of the country’s diversity.

What happens when these groups of people no longer share a set of rules that govern their interactions? What happens when the interplay between them becomes a competition, rather than cooperation of diverse parts of one nation? In recent decades, this kind of thinking has made some groupings in Turkey far more powerful and dynamic than what one might see in most other countries. Specific groups can take over whole areas of public policy or orchestrate complex political operations. In this environment, institutions become

strongholds to be defended, besieged, infiltrated, taken over, purged, and re-taken, sometimes over the course of only a few years.

The Erdoğan government springs from a far-right Islamist movement with relatively little access to or influence on institutional networks. Like all outsiders, it attributed great importance to what was happening in the institutions of state. The Islamists imagined shadowy networks of Freemasons, Jews, and others, generally seeing them as sinister forces obstructing the “the will of the people.” Once they entered politics, members of the early AK Party moved away from such talk, but they did think of themselves as fighting “tutelage” (*vesayet*), which generally refers to the military elites who set the boundaries of acceptable politics and have intervened through military coups when politicians overstepped those boundaries. The paradigmatic case in recent memory was the “367 affair” of 2007—when the high courts, military, and CHP came together to block the AK Party’s candidate for president. In the 2010s, when Erdoğan was thinking about systemic reform, he began using another term for the evil he saw lurking within the state: “the bureaucratic oligarchy” (*bürokratik oligarşi*). This may be Erdoğan’s own innovation, and though some of these terms are overlapping in



President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attends the party’s parliamentary group in the capital Ankara. (akpartyeng/Instagram)

meaning, this one implies a more diffuse structure. Erdoğan used “bureaucratic oligarchy” to refer to any interest groups within government bureaucracy that were not subservient to him, and therefore, “the will of the people.” Having become the establishment, politics was now about finding and replacing the remaining pockets of resistance.

From this point of view, it is easy to conflate democratic checks and balances with subversive forces within the state. Speaking to the Konya Chamber of Commerce on December 18, 2012, for example, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan addressed problems he was having with “City Hospitals,” a policy for shutting down smaller hospitals in big cities and centralizing medical care in newly built

massive medical complexes. Erdoğan said:

We have not been able to bring to life the City Hospitals project for 6 years because of the bureaucratic oligarchy. We no longer want to see patients being carried outside in stretchers on the campuses of hospitals. But we have not been able to overcome this. Why not? Because of the bureaucratic oligarchy and the judiciary. But those looking in from the outside think ‘you have 326 MPs, 326 MPs and you are still making excuses?’ But that thing called the separation of powers . . . it

³⁰ The *Ülkücü* are mostly represented by the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which is in Erdoğan’s governing coalition, and the Good Party (İYİ), which is in the opposition. While the *Ülkücü* are traditionally strong in what is called the “armed bureaucracy,” namely the police, military, and intelligence forces, they have boosted their presence across other parts of the public sector in recent years.

comes and plants itself in front of you as an obstruction. And you have a playing field.

The legislative, executive and judiciary in this country need to first think of the benefit of the people and then of the benefit of this state. If we are to become strong, we can only be so in this way, but if the investment I’m going to make is going to get delayed by a mere word for 3 months, 6 months, then one year, two years are gone, then you will never be able to answer for this country, these people, not to history, nor to those lying under this soil.³¹

Erdoğan begins his reasoning from the premise that he is the undiluted expression of “the will of the people.” This makes him, and the people following him, unlike any of the other interest groups within the country’s institutions. Therefore, he has no choice but to see parts of the state that are not directly subservient to him—of which, according to the constitution, there are many—as forces that are against the popular will. These are not merely sources of inefficiency and obstructions to progress, but enemies that prevent

Turkey from becoming more powerful in relation to other countries. While the enemy on the party-political level has been defeated, as Erdoğan’s reference to “his” MPs indicates, their presence within the country’s institutions remains and forms the most significant obstacle for the country’s “reawakening.”

In this environment, Erdoğan moves according to the popular adage, “Politics does not accept emptiness [vacuums]” (*siyaset boşluk kabul etmez*).³² Right-wing political leaders sometimes use this as a catch-all phrase, but behind it is a particular zero-sum approach to governance. Erdoğan by no means invented the phrase, but he has often invoked it and has been more disciplined than others in implementing it. The idea is that institutions are vessels to be filled by a political force. Thinking that they can somehow remain politically neutral is dangerously naïve—institutions always have a political content, and if it isn’t yours, it is that of your enemy. This attitude is disguised under a thick coating of liberal language. When it was first running for office in 2002, for example, the AK Party argued that the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), a regulatory body, exercised undue power over universities. In its electoral platform, the party promised

universities “managerial and academic independence.”³³ During successive AK Party governments, however, party loyalists took over YÖK and tightened their grip over universities. They did this first to ostensibly “de-politicize” them, and later, to re-politicize them in their favor.³⁴ More recently, the Erdoğan government’s surrogates tried to gain control of the Turkish Bar Association, a body where all lawyers must register. When lawyers resisted the interference, the government passed a law that opened the way for the establishment of alternative bars, which has allowed them to dilute the system, empower their own institutions, and disempower those who resist them.

Suffusing the country’s institutions in this way, however, has not been easy. In its early days, when the AK Party was besieged on all sides by the coup-prone “oligarchs” of the Kemalist order, it could not have survived on its own. European and Turkish liberals supported

the Islamists in public. More significantly, a silent ally among the bureaucratic oligarchs themselves aided the young government: the Gülenists. This alliance is the original sin of the AK Party, one which opened the country’s institutions to the corrosive effects of religious orders, political ideologies, and criminal networks.

The Gülenists were originally one of many religious groups known as *cemaat*, which roughly translates into “religious community” or “lodge” and are typically organized around a charismatic leader.³⁵ Starting out in the 1970s, Fetullah Gülen was a preacher with a particularly strong appeal. Cassette tapes of his sermons circulated widely among conservative circles and allowed him to build a cult following. Over time, the group developed a unique hierarchy, built up common funds, extended into the worlds of business, charity, media, and most importantly, education. The Gülenists

33 “2002 Genel Seçimleri: Seçim Beyannamesi [2002 General Elections: Party Program],” AK Parti, <https://www.akparti.org.tr/media/318780/3-kasim-2002-genel-secimleri-secim-beyannamesi-sayfalar.pdf>.

34 With universities being deeply left-leaning or secular in Turkey, the government has had difficulty in hollowing them out and has only met some success after the 2016 coup attempt. In recent years, however, even the oldest and most prestigious universities have been breached by government appointment. Institutions like the Middle East Technical University and Boğaziçi University used to maintain a precarious balance between the government and their critical faculties. That balance has now tipped in the government’s favor. See: Bethan McKernan, “Istanbul university students clash with police over rector appointment,” *The Guardian*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/06/istanbul-university-students-clash-with-police-over-rector-appointment>. Institutions like Ankara University, which has a historically leftist makeup that is close to the Kurdish movement, has been under relentless pressure, and its most critical faculty has effectively been purged. See: Suzy Hansen, “‘The Era of People Like You Is Over’: How Turkey Purged Its Intellectuals,” *New York Times*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/24/magazine/the-era-of-people-like-you-is-over-how-turkey-purged-its-intellectuals.html>.

35 While many of the AK Party’s founding leaders were sympathetic to the *cemaat* of İskenderpaşa, this was a very loose association that largely did not reflect on their institutional choices.

31 “Kuvvetler Ayrılığı Engel [The Separation of Powers is an Obstruction],” *Radikal*, December 18, 2012, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/kuvvetler-ayriligi-engel-1112491/>.

32 For example: “Erdoğan Atatürk’ün Evinde [Erdoğan is in Atatürk’s Home],” *Hürriyet*, June 21, 2003, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/Erdoğan-ataturkun-evinde-154712>.



Fetullah Gülen in his home in Pennsylvania. (afsv.org/Gulen Institute)

became known in political circles, but did not take a firm political stance. In 1999, Gülen moved to the United States, where he would be beyond the reach of his rivals in Turkey. He set up his residence in a 26-acre property in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, where he remains to this day.³⁶

Unlike most other networks, many in the bureaucracy who paid fealty to Gülen kept their association hidden, especially in critical institutions like the military and judiciary. According to an infamous video recording of Gülen, their strategy was to “move within the arteries of the system” until his covert adherents were in key positions, and only reveal themselves when they were ready to take over

the state.³⁷ Gülenists would have their own hierarchies within institutions and answer to a chain of command that went up to Saylorsburg, PA, rather than the constitution of the Republic of Turkey. When the AK Party was founded in 2001, it became the first political party that the Gülenists openly supported. Gülen’s business and educational empires threw their weight behind the government, and its media championed Erdoğan’s policies. When the AK Party battled the traditional

nodes of power within the bureaucracy, it was the covert Gülenists in Ankara’s central institutions who supported them. The most infamous of such cases are the Sledgehammer and Ergenekon trials, in which scores of Kemalist and nationalist officers—the Kemalist “oligarchs” and bureaucratic rivals of the AK Party and the Gülenists—were jailed.

In 2010, the AK Party government proposed a major constitutional amendment package aimed at reforming the judiciary. It argued that this was essential to overcome the oligarchic hold of “Old Turkey’s” Kemalist elites, and to drive the point home, they scheduled the plebiscite on the 30th anniversary of the July 12, 1980, coup d’état. On the campaign trail, Erdoğan also repeatedly implied that the country’s Alevi minority had undue influence on the judiciary. “The time for making appointments with orders from the *dede* [Alevi spiritual leaders] is ending,” he said at a campaign stop in Sincan.³⁸ This was an old, but notoriously vague, claim that circulated in Islamist circles, who saw the Alevi as quasi-Shia heretics. While there was reason to think that the judiciary was predominantly Kemalist in outlook, it would be very difficult to say that there was an Alevi structure in it, certainly not anywhere near

37 The recording can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Y_cLmsmOuY&ab_channel=Medyascope. The group’s central narrative explicitly aims at what one would recognize as state capture through the work of the “golden generation,” the network that would eventually seize the levers of power.

38 Sedat Ergin, “Aleviler Neden Rencide Oldu? [Why are we the Alevi offended?],” *Hürriyet*, September 17, 2010, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/aleviler-neden-rencide-oldu-15801716>.

36 Vinny Vella, “The cleric next door: Pocono neighbors weigh in on Fetullah Gülen, the man Turkey wants back,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 16, 2016, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/pennsylvania/fetullah-gulen-movement-turkey-erdogan-saylorsburg-pennsylvania-camp-20190116.html>.

that of the Gülenists, who, meanwhile, campaigned rigorously for the “yes” vote. Fetullah Gülen himself said on television that “even those in their graves must be awakened to use their ‘yes’ vote in that referendum,” a characteristically bizarre phrase that is still remembered today.³⁹ There was great irony in this situation. While there was a Kemalist elite in Turkey, the sinister religious network that these Islamists imagined to be running their lives through an oligarchic hold on the judiciary did not exist. The sinister network of their own, which they had built up specifically to counter these networks, however, did.

The referendum passed with 57.88 percent of the vote. In his victory speech, Erdoğan said he thanked “his brothers” who supported the campaign “from across the ocean,” a euphemism the nation associates with the Pennsylvania-based Gülen. The remark received especially strong applause, and Erdoğan, smiling, added that since the opposition liked to criticize his transatlantic allies, it was up to him to defend them.⁴⁰ Gülenist power within the state was a secret between

him and his base, a mysterious force that worked its way through the bowels of the state on their collective behalf. In the end, the 2010 referendum restructured the Supreme Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors, among other reforms, and gave the Gülenists a commanding view of the bureaucratic landscape.

In the following years, the Gülenist network reached the peak of its power. “They walked the halls swinging their arms around, like the owned the place,” said a bureaucrat active during those years, and it is common to hear the same from people across private and public institutions. “They had bright people with fancy degrees applying for key public institutions,” says another. “It was government policy to hire them. It came straight from the minister.”⁴¹ The Gülenists had won at the game of “bureaucratic oligarchy.”⁴² Their huge informal network meant that they could make or break careers, funnel money through lucrative backroom deals, and have worldwide reach without any oversight. Particularly

39 Fetullah Gülen, “Fethullah Gülen, Referandumda Ak Parti İçin ‘Evet’ Oyu Verilmesini İstedi..! [Fetullah Gülen asked for a “yes” vote for the AK Party in the referendum],” YouTube, MedyaNur, March 17, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNb7xSxCGOs.

40 2010, CNN Türk, Live Broadcast, Ankara, July 12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YlcZDnDs4>.

41 Interview with author, June 2020.

42 The Gülenists were so dominant that they caused a subtle change in the Turkish language. Turkish does not have definite or indefinite articles, but one may think of any public utterance of the term *cemaat* in those years as having a silent definite article. People were not talking about *a cemaat*, they were talking about *the cemaat*. Nobody had to specify that they were talking about the *Gülenists cemaat*; the term automatically implied them. Once the state declared the Gülenists to be terrorists, it became inappropriate to refer to them as *cemaat*, and the word snapped back to its original usage. A person speaking of a *cemaat* without any definitive adjectives today may once again be asked which *cemaat* he is referring to.

concerning was the Gülenist presence within the police since it was widely believed that they were using its mandate for intelligence gathering to listen in on the nation’s phone conversations.⁴³ The idea of privacy was disappearing. As Ahmet Şık, an investigative journalist who wrote a book about them, said while being tucked into a prison-bound police car, “Whoever touches [them] burns!” The “Imam’s Army,” to quote the title of Şık’s book, accumulated immense resentment across the country’s institutions.⁴⁴

Even AK Party circles were gradually afraid of the burn, and rightly so. It is not exactly clear how the alliance fell apart, but the reason is: The Gülenists were becoming too powerful for the government to control. There are rumors that the first cracks appeared over MP seats. As part of their tacit understanding, the AK Party had been allocating Gülen a handful of seats before every election. Before 2011, the Gülenists are said to have asked for tens (some later said more than 100⁴⁵), a radical increase that would effectively have given Gülen veto power over legislation. Erdoğan apparently rejected the request outright, which amplified the already festering ill-feeling between the camps. In February 2012, prosecutors

summoned Hakan Fidan, the country’s top intelligence officer, to testify in a case that involved the government’s talks with the PKK. Considering that the case was heading in a direction that could implicate Fidan with serious charges, this was deeply concerning to the government. Today, this is seen as the first shot across the bow. AK Party leaders eventually saved Fidan from getting sucked into the case, presumably through backroom negotiations with the Gülenists. The alliance, however, was now in question. In December 2013, embarrassing and incriminating phone conversations of top government officials and the Erdoğan family leaked on YouTube. What followed was a painful and very public unraveling of the alliance. Erdoğan declared the Gülenists network a terrorist group and a “parallel state” and began to purge them across public and private institutions.

Millions of people were in some way affiliated with the Gülen movement. Their network of schools, banks, shops, prayer groups, and other institutions was so vast that, especially for conservatives, it would have taken a conscious effort to avoid them all together. As the purge went on, hundreds of thousands in public and private employment lost their jobs,

43 Interview with author, July 2020.

44 Ahmet Şık, *İmam’ın Ordusu: 15 Temmuz Darbe Girişimi İncelemesiyle Birlikte* [*The Imam’s Army: With an Examination of the July 15 Coup Attempt*] (İstanbul: Kırmızı Kedi, 2017).

45 Yeni Şafak Temsilcisi, “Erdoğan, 2011’de ‘Fethullah Hoca, bu kirli yapının tam göbeğinde’ demişti [Yeni Şafak Representative: Erdoğan said in 2011 that ‘Fetullah hodja is at the center of this dirty construct’],” T24, December 28, 2015, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/yeni-safak-temsilcisi-erdogan-2011de-fethullah-hoca-bu-kirli-yapinin-tam-gobeginde-demisti,322075>.

the government seized more than a thousand companies, and many went to jail on bogus charges. In theory, the Erdoğan government aimed to punish those who were involved in what the Gülenists called “confidential service” (*mahrem hizmet*), meaning people who infiltrated institutions and formed a secretive parallel hierarchy. In reality, the purge went far wider, spilling over into the public sphere, turning into a regime of collective punishment of the organization, including the vast majority of Gülenists who were not involved in illegal activity. There were too many people who had long resented Gülenist power. Ordinary people—who had failed entrance exams, were passed over for promotions, or didn’t get public tenders—now wanted payback. Gülenists who lost their jobs and businesses couldn’t be hired anywhere. Their civil rights were routinely violated with impunity, and the government was all too happy to feed the fire. When a senior government figure in one instance spoke on the need for mercy, Erdoğan quickly called to reprimand him.⁴⁶ The public instinct for revenge was to flow freely.

The purge picked up speed in summer 2016, and many believe that the coup attempt occurred prematurely on July

15 because the Gülenists network in the military received intelligence that it was about to be purged. There is consensus across Turkish politics that the Gülenists were behind the coup attempt. While there are some valid questions as to whether Gülenist officers were alone in planning and executing the coup, given recent history, as well as the bits of hard evidence publicly available, there is little reason to doubt the network’s involvement at a very high level.⁴⁷ After that night, whatever reservations the public still had about the collective punishment of the Gülenists disappeared. The government’s crackdown, as well as public persecution of the group, intensified. As of late 2020, rarely a week goes by that a group of bureaucrats, especially in the armed forces or police, aren’t arrested on charges of being covert members of the “Fetullahist Terrorist Organization” (FETÖ). Politicians regularly accuse each other of collaborating or having collaborated with the group at various points in recent years.⁴⁸

In terms of governance, the Gülenists saga is the single most determinant event of the AK Party era so far. The Erdoğan government thought of itself as being superior to the “bureaucratic

oligarchs,” but was not above using the Gülenists as a weapon against others. After a damaging civil war, they thought that the presidential system would finally grant them a blank page to bring about the rule of “the majority” that they always envisaged. They thought of the presidency as the center of a cosmic order, finally suffusing the country’s institutions with the “will of the people.” Instead, the pattern they set together with the Gülenists, of systematically subverting the law, setting up parallel hierarchies, and stacking institutions in their favor, has ingrained itself in the way the country’s institutions—private and public—conduct business.

As the Gülenists were being purged from Turkey’s schools, ministries, newspapers, and firms, gaping power vacuums opened. It quickly became apparent that these could not be filled by generic Erdoğan supporters alone. So vast was the need for personnel that the government had to rely on other networks. The first people to rush into the breach were the Ülkücü, Kemalist Eurasianists, and similar nationalistic groups. Especially in the “armed bureaucracy” of police and military forces, the Gülenists had relegated these groups to field work in far-off provinces, or dead-end enforcement jobs. Having

played key roles in purging the Gülenists and defending the government in the coup attempt, the government now gave these circles some of the most plum and influential jobs in Ankara. The Ülkücü especially are known to have connections to organized crime networks, so in the last three years, it once again became common to see politicians appearing in photos with figures from the underground world.⁴⁹ Concurrently, there is an unmistakable rise in the crime rate, while corruption probes in municipalities are at an all-time low.⁵⁰

In areas where Islamists are more influential, such as education and the construction sector, there have been a mix of groups. TURGEV, the charitable foundation managed by the president’s son Bilal Erdoğan, tried to fill the gap left by the vast educational network of the Gülenists (often literally, by appropriating their buildings). A number of other *cemaat* also quickly moved into the vacuums left by the Gülenists. There are hundreds of *cemaat* in Turkey, and most are insignificant religious groups. The biggest grouping of them, however, is the Nakşibendi order, which has four large *cemaat*: Menzil, İskenderpaşa, İsmail Ağa, and Erenköy. (Another grouping with many small branches are the Nurcu, the

46 Interview with author, April 2020.

47 Yıldırım Oğur and Ceren Kenar, “Who was Behind the 15th July Coup in Turkey?,” *Medium*, March 21, 2017, <https://medium.com/@15thJulyCoup/who-was-behind-the-15th-july-coup-in-turkey-19f75a5771c5>.

48 The opposition usually blames the government for collaborating with the Gülenists in its early years and allowing them to grow in power. Erdoğan, in turn, accuses the opposition of approaching them in the time between the events of December 17-25, 2013 (widely referred to as the “events of 17-25”), when they leaked the corruption tapes, and the July 15, 2016, coup attempt.

49 “AKP ve MHP ‘Susurlukçu’ Drej Ali’nin düğününde buluştu [The AKP and MHP met at ‘Susurluk’s’ Drej Ali],” *Cumhuriyet*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/akp-ve-mhp-susurlukcu-drej-alinin-dugununde-bulustu-1570540>.

50 Bahadır Özgür, “Çeteler parlıyor: Devletteki yeni cerahat [The Gangs are shining: the new pus of the state],” *Gazete Duvar*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2019/09/17/ceteler-parliyor-devletteki-yeni-cerahat>.



important people.

The size and scope of these networks is almost impossible to determine, but they cast a shadow in parts of the economy and civil service. Since its beginning in 2002, the AK Party has presided over an era of steady economic growth and privatization. Overall, however, between 2001 and 2020, the number of public sector employees has increased by 119 percent, constituting a jump from 2.1 million to 4.6 million (excluding military and intelligence personnel). Bahadır Özgür, a journalist specializing in political economy, points out that much of this expansion has happened in specific institutions, such as the postal service, state television, and public banks and that it has accelerated with the 2017 implementation of the presidential system. While these jobs have provided space for interest groups, argues Özgür, “the AKP’s life arteries are local municipalities.” Between 2007 and 2020, personnel attached to municipal governments increased by 205 percent.⁵² In addition to these jobs, there are firms that municipal governments set up to perform specific functions,

President Erdoğan at the Ibn Haldun University Complex opening ceremony, October 2020. (turgev.org)

former home of the Gülenists.) Previously relegated to their provincial origins, these religious groups have been developing bureaucratic, business, non-governmental organizations, and international aid arms, much as the Gülenists had. None of them are nearly as institutionally coherent, well-organized, and ambitious as the Gülenists, but they have quickly filled the Gülen-shaped power vacuum across the state, society, and industry.

In “Old Turkey,” institutions were systemically unjust, but they had set rules, and it was difficult to bend them. In the 2000s, the country’s institutions began to fray, and for many, a Gülenist connection was the golden ticket to a good school, secure job, or steady business contracts. In “New Turkey,” the Gülenists have been replaced by a cast of other groups fulfilling some of their old functions. A teacher looking to be transferred or promoted may text a family WhatsApp group to ask whether they have any contacts within Ülkücü circles and the MHP. A developer who wants to get the tender to build part

of a hospital might need contacts with the Menzil *cemaat*, both of which have significant pull in the Ministry of Health.⁵¹ An ambitious judge (many of whom are in their 20s and early 30s) will try to get into the more refined İskenderpaşa *cemaat*’s afternoon discussion groups to meet

⁵¹ Menzil is the name of the village in Adıyaman Province, where the order is based. Today, there are regular buses to the village from city centers, such as Istanbul and Ankara, as well as to the group’s secondary base in Eskişehir Province. Journalist Saygi Öztürk estimates that 35-40 such buses arrive in Menzil daily and that a helicopter landing ground often brings VIP guests. He quotes the head of the order having said that as many as 10 ministers have visited him at the same time. According to Öztürk, Menzil’s influence over the Ministry of Health has somewhat waned since the term of former Minister Recep Akdag, who was a longtime member of the *cemaat*. Current Minister Fahrettin Koca is of the İskenderpaşa *cemaat*, which is powerful in the health industry. See: Saygi Öztürk, *Menzil: Bir Tarikatın İki Yüzü [Menzil: Two Faces of an Order]*, (Doğan Kitap, 2019).

⁵² Bahadır Özgür, “AKP en çok nerede kadrolaşıyor? [Where is the AKP organizing the most?],” *Gazete Duvar*, August 2, 2020, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2020/08/04/akp-en-cok-nerelerde-kadrolasiyor>

called Municipal Economic Enterprises (*Belediye İktisadi Teşebbüsleri*). These have steadily employed between about 260,000-300,000 people between 2007 and 2017. By 2020, that number has reached more than 700,000. While there is no way of knowing for sure how these jobs are distributed, it is highly likely that they are divided among the various regional and religious networks attached to the AK Party government.

The various *cemaat*, as well as political identities such as pan-Turkic Ülkücü nationalism or Eurasianist-Kemalist nationalism, all swerve around a central pillar of the Islamist political tradition, of which Erdoğan himself is the quintessential example. Those considering higher offices are well-advised to build their resume according to this example. They must graduate from *Imam Hatip* high schools, where religious education is mandatory, as well as involve themselves in AK Party politics at a young age. Those from conservative parts of the country—especially the Black Sea region, where Erdoğan is from—emphasize their origins. Those who aren’t might try to marry into such families. The mayor of Balıkesir touched on the importance of this central pillar of identity, “There is here a human

presence that represents the state within the military, in the civil service and so on. I’m not talking about politics here. Politics is represented by those from Trabzon, by those from the Black Sea.” Laughing a little while adjusting his seat, he added, “If you want to attain [government] office, you have to be an *Imam Hatip* graduate and be from Trabzon. That is the way it is in our [the AK Party’s] term.”⁵³ For positions of real power, in other words, religious orders or pan-Turkic fraternities aren’t enough, and can even be obstacles. One has to be of a more plain heritage.

There is also a set of small, but systemically important, institutions such as the Ministry of Finance, Foreign Ministry, and Central Bank, as well as regulatory bodies, such as the Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency (BDDK) or the Energy Market Regulatory Authority (EPDK) that are relatively free of peripheral identities, and are politicizing in the more plain nationalism of the Erdoğan era. This may have several reasons. First, groups such as the Menzil *cemaat* or the Ülkücü like big pieces of institutional real estate, such as the Ministries of Health and Interior, which have the power to reach into the village level in the provinces, employ tens of thousands people, and hold extremely

lucrative public tenders.⁵⁴ An institution like the Foreign Ministry employs only a few thousand people and puts out meagre public tenders.⁵⁵ Its properties are scattered across the world, only serve narrow purposes, and are subject to the laws of different countries. Its entrance exams for career professionals also remain fairly competitive, which means that it cannot easily be stacked with the adherents of any specific group. Second, *cemaat* networks specifically are aware that they are regarded with suspicion since the falling out with the Gülenists.

Many small, systemically important institutions have therefore been purged since the Erdoğan-Gülen civil war, but their “vaccums” have not been filled. The Foreign Ministry, for instance, purged a full third of its staff and did not replace them. The Central Bank purged a quarter of its staff and replaced a few top managers, mostly from government-friendly banks.⁵⁶ Those who remain understand what is expected of them. “New Turkey’s” regulators, central bankers, intelligence

officers, and diplomats fold directly under the presidency, reflecting its cult of personality and nationalistic worldview. Those who do not have the stomach for such politization either leave or refrain from applying in the first place.

The emerging challenge for the government is to maintain some degree of institutional capacity, and the place where this has been felt most acutely is the economy. Despite having a dynamic private sector, strong banks, and a resilient class of highly capable civil servants, Turkey’s economy performed poorly under Erdoğan’s son-in-law and Finance Minister Berat Albayrak. He “owned at least one floor in every [government] institution in Ankara,” according to one source, and the Trabzon-based Islamist family has key assets in the country’s media, construction, and energy industries.⁵⁷ Albayrak probably has the most institutional outreach since the Gülenists, yet none of it translated into sound policy. The lira halved in value between 2017 and 2020, inflation

⁵⁴ The health ministry employed 1.62 million people health personnel in 2020.

⁵⁵ The MFA has small offices in Istanbul and Izmir. The properties it manages abroad are subject to the laws of host states. It has about 2,500 career diplomats and a total of about 6,000 staff. In comparison, according to information published in March 2019 by CCN Holding, Ankara’s “City Hospital” alone has 2,700 academics, doctors, and surgeons, as well as 6,300 health professionals and 4,000 managerial staff. CCN Holding built the Ankara City Hospital.

⁵⁶ Gülenists were not replaced at the working level, more than one banker claimed, because they did not significantly contribute to the day-to-day tasks of the bank. “I remember how they’d make fun of us saying, ‘I could write an inflation report in two days,’” one said, adding, “They thought writing reports was the work of a peon [amele]. They didn’t come as workers, they came as managers [yönetici].” This kind of sentiment is prevalent, especially in small and systemically important institutions. (Interview with author, December 2020)

⁵⁷ Interview with author, July 2020.

⁵³ The statement made national news, often as a “scandalous admittance” of a widely talked about, but unacknowledged, trend. The governor later said that his statement was truncated and that it was intended as a joke. He is neither an *Imam Hatip* graduate, nor from Trabzon, which suggests that his statement expressed personal frustration more than anything else. “AKP’li belediye başkanı: Makam sahibi olmak için bir imam hatipli bir de Trabzonlu olacaksınız [AKP Mayor: to hold office, you have to be an imam hatip graduate and be from Trabzon],” *Cumhuriyet*, December 19, 2019, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/akpli-belediye-baskani-makam-sahibi-olmak-icin-bir-imam-hatipli-bir-de-trabzonlu-olacaksin-1709735>.

shot up, and foreign investors pulled out billions of dollars from the country.⁵⁸ It took the economic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic for Erdoğan to reconsider his decision of making Albayrak the economy tsar. In November, he appointed Naci Ağbal, who was not in the Albayrak fold, as chairman of the Central Bank. Albayrak resigned in protest, creating a minor bureaucratic vacuum in which the AK Party’s remaining, relatively non-affiliated economic managers could be called to fix the situation.⁵⁹

The new team knew that some of the institutional foundations of the economy, such as the rule of law and institutional capacity, have been eroded. Central Bank economists saw for the first time in years that their work was factored into decision making. The business community found that they could once again get appointments with ministries, rather than going through special channels. The government also promised “legal reforms.” These, contrary to popular expectation, did not mean that the legislature would be impartial towards the political opposition, but rather, that the legal system would improve its capacity

to deal with foreign investors, including building capacity in contract and property law.⁶⁰ Overall, the reform process has demonstrated that “New Turkey’s” system could still pick competence over kinship, but only after great damage was done and at the precipice of crisis.

The structure of governance in “New Turkey” has some immediate political implications as well. For one, it means that, in Erdoğan’s words, “The fate of the AK Party and the fate of our country have merged.”⁶¹ The bureaucracy’s allegiance is to Erdoğan’s leadership and his vision, and his adherents consider any peaceful transition of power as tantamount to coup plotting. The Erdoğan government could also not reshuffle its political deck, such as abandoning its coalition with the MHP and aligning with an opposition party. The MHP is a node connecting chunks of the police, armed forces, construction industry, and organized crime, all of which are vital for the government’s operations. Putting pressure on those relationships, or attempting to rewire them, would not be the end of the Erdoğan government, but it would be needlessly taxing. As MHP Chair Devlet Bahçeli likes to remind

people, “The People’s Alliance [the AK Party-MHP] was not built through negotiation. The People’s Alliance was not formed through a process of give-and-take.”⁶² The MHP, for example, never asked for a ministry, nor any other top jobs. Similarly, the various *cemaat*, regional, professional, and other groups may at different times have disputes between each other and the government, but these will be resolved through backroom deals, rather than transparent, rules-based negotiation.

Similarly, groups within the state cannot risk attempting to back opposition political parties, nor even waiver in their support for the Erdoğan government. The political links between the presidency and the bureaucracy mean that any political group outside of that web of relations, such as leftist parties of the CHP or the HDP, are by definition foreign to the state. They can be tolerated to various degrees for the sake of public order, but they can never belong to government. Since the constitution has long been weakened, opposition membership in parliament, the legal positions they have gained through local elections, or the rights granted to them by their mere citizenship are greatly diminished. In recent elections, the government has argued to the electorate that they were engaged in an election of “*beka*,” meaning “survival.” Considering that an opposition victory would mean a fundamental uprooting of the country’s

power structure, this characterization is accurate in a way.

58 Caitlin Ostroff, “Foreign Investors Flee Turkey’s Bond Market,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/foreign-investors-flee-turkeys-bond-market-11595583002>.

59 Lütfi Elvan, who came up as a bureaucrat in Turkey’s prestigious State Planning Agency (DPT), was apparently preparing for retirement when Erdoğan called upon him to replace Albayrak.

60 Interviews with author, December 2020 and January 2021.

61 Hatice Şenses Kurukız, Kaan Bozdoğan, Hanife Sevinç, Semra Orkan, Kaan Bozdoğan, and Hikmet Faruk Başer, “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Macron senin zaten süren az kaldı. Gidicisin [President Erdoğan: Macron, your time has nearly run out anyways. You are a goner.],” *Anadolu Agency*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-macron-senin-zaten-suren-az-kaldi-gidicisin/1971570>.

62 “Bahçeli’den Bülent Arınç’a sert tepki [Strong reaction by Bahçeli towards Bülent Arınç],” *Dünya*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.dunya.com/gundem/bahceliden-bulent-arinca-sert-tepki-haberi-601258>.

WHERE IS THE SYSTEM GOING?

There is a discussion among Turkey's opposition about whether it would be appropriate to propose a return to the parliamentary system. Some caution against this approach, pointing out that a drive for the restoration of "Old Turkey" betrays a lack of understanding of its fundamental problems, and will not be able to establish a firm institutional and legal structure.⁶³ This has not stopped Turkey's major opposition parties from coming together to chart the path to a "reinforced parliamentary system."⁶⁴ As it stands, the proposal is more a denunciation of the new Erdoğan-led regime than a clearly defined alternative.

Still, these calls have elicited a response from the government, which is remarkable. The Erdoğan government is the prime mover of Turkish politics, but it is extremely reluctant to seriously engage with criticism. In this case, however, Mehmet Uçum, a senior consultant to the president and vice president to the Presidency's Council of Law Policies, penned a relatively lengthy response entitled, "What does the reinforced parliamentary system signify?"⁶⁵ Here, Uçum

63 Levent Köker, "Başkancı rejim: Popülist yarışmacı otoriterlik mi, diktatörlük mü? [The Presidential System: Populist competitive authoritarianism or dictatorship?]," *Birikim*, September 2020, <https://birikimdergisi.com/dergiler/birikim/1/sayi-377-eylul-2020/10048/baskanci-rejim-populist-yarismaci-otoriterlik-mi-diktatorluk-mu/11902>.

64 Ayşe Sayın, "İYİ Parti ve Gelecek Partisi 'parlamenter sistem' üzerine çalışacak [The İYİ Party and the Future Party to work on the parliamentary system]," *BCC Türkçe*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-54960757>

65 Mehmet Uçum, "Güçlendirilmiş parlamenter sistem ne anlama geliyor? [What does the reinforced parliamentary system signify?]," *Sabah*, December 5, 2020, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/perspektif/mehmet-ucum/2020/12/05/guclendirilmis-parlamenter-sistem-ne-anlama-geliyor>.

argues that a return to the parliamentary system would choke the popular vote within a “bureaucratic-institutional tutelage” (*Bürokratik-kurumsal vesayet*), and poses—rather predictably—that this would open up the country to foreign interference. The political opposition therefore sought to integrate Turkey into a “cast system relying on the steps of hierarchy and ‘social evolution,’ in other words, a global cast fascism,” which in turn, is controlled by “imperialist globalists.” Uçum’s article confirms the notion that there is very little nuance to the presidential system as it exists today. It is about a thin majority electing a single super-executive who is to govern the country through an ever-shifting combination of formal and informal rules.


“New Turkey’s” approach to sovereignty should not sound original to observers of international politics. Erdoğan’s government follows a pattern of thinking that was theorized before in the nation states of Europe and is becoming popular again across the world. India under Narendra Modi, Hungary under Victor Orban, and other major countries are undergoing similar transformations.⁶⁶ In Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu faces his fourth election in two years because

he lacks the presidential system that Erdoğan has fashioned for himself. The Trump administration in the United States also showed a tendency for this kind of “realist” thinking. Where Erdoğan’s adherents seek to battle the “bureaucratic-institutional tutelage,” Donald Trump’s former chief strategist Steven Bannon sought to “deconstruct the administrative state.”⁶⁷ Where AK Party surrogates try to rationalize the abolition of checks and balances, former Attorney General William Barr made Schmittian arguments to lift checks and balances on the American presidency.⁶⁸

Turkey today is one of a few laboratories where the ideas of far-right nationalists have been implemented at an advanced level. Politically, the process is fairly robust. President Erdoğan’s approval ratings continue to be strong despite economic hardship and the COVID-19 pandemic. Legally, Uçum and others also point out that getting out of the current system is extremely difficult. The opposition would need to unify around a single leader, win the presidency and a parliamentary majority of 360 (out of 600 seats), and then turn around and tell their majority that they are going to break up the office of the president and

redistribute sovereignty across different institutions in a way that would give the opposition (now including the AK Party) power to check them. The government understands the difficulty involved and sees any kind of opposition as a plot to incite “counter revolution.”⁶⁹

Adherents of Erdoğan, however, have other things to worry about. Even if they are able to manage the half of the country that does not support them, they will have to resolve at least two problems within the system they have built. First, the presidential system assumes that after Erdoğan’s lifetime, there will be other individuals in whom the will of the majority will concentrate. This assumption is a risky one. In various other presidential systems like those of the United States or France, presidents can be voted out of office. Since the Turkish president effectively fuses with the state, this will be very difficult to do. The Turkish system might come to resemble that of China or Russia, where leaders emerge out of tightly controlled politburo-like environment of Ankara’s ruling cadre and stay on for long terms. Second and more pressing is “the problem of merit” (*liyakat sorunu*) as it is often referred to in government circles. Relentless politization has hollowed out the country’s most cherished institutions, making it less likely that competence meets responsibility. This is the subject of anxious discussion in Ankara and Istanbul. The fear is that this problem will prevent

the country from generating the economic and military power needed to climb the rungs of international competition. It is difficult to say whether the Erdoğan government will be successful in tackling these problems, but its future depends on it. 

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⁶⁶ “Narendra Modi threatens to turn India into a one-party state,” *The Economist*, November 28, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2020/11/28/narendra-modi-threatens-to-turn-india-into-a-one-party-state>.

⁶⁷ Max Fisher, “Stephen K. Bannon’s CPAC Comments, Annotated and Explained,” *New York Times*, February 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/24/us/politics/stephen-bannon-cpac-speech.html>.

⁶⁸ Tamsin Shaw, “William Barr: The Carl Schmitt of Our Time,” *New York Review*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/01/15/william-barr-the-carl-schmitt-of-our-time/>; also see: Adrian Vermeule and Eric Posner, *The Executive Unbound: After the Madisonian Republic*, (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶⁹ Uçum, 2020.

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