

# ONE

## The Islamist-Secularist Divide and Turkey's Descent into Severe Polarization

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**O**n multiple different measures of polarization, Turkey today is one of the most polarized nations in the world.<sup>1</sup> Deep ideological and policy-based disagreements divide its political leaders and parties; Turkish society, too, is starkly polarized on the grounds of both ideology and social distance.<sup>2</sup> This chapter focuses on the bases and manifestations of polarization in Turkey, the main reasons behind its increase, and its ramifications for the future of democracy and governance in the country.

The current dominant cleavage between secularists and Islamists has its roots in a series of reforms intended to secularize and modernize the country after the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. These reforms created a deep division within Turkish society, but until the beginning of the twenty-first century, the secularist elite dominated key state institutions such as the military, allowing it to repress conservative groups and thus keep conflict over the soul of Turkey from coming into the open. Since 2002, however, the remarkable electoral success of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*; AKP) has brought the Islamist-secularist divide to the fore.

Despite the AKP's initial moderation, several developments, including

the collapse of the European Union (EU) accession process, the success of polarization as an electoral strategy, and undemocratic threats from the secularist state establishment, pushed the AKP toward increasingly populist, divisive rhetoric and politics, beginning with the 2007 general elections. As the AKP's dominance has grown since the late 2000s, its own authoritarian behavior has largely driven further polarization. The problem of constant electioneering, the rise of majoritarianism, an erosion of democratic institutions, and a polarized and unfree media landscape have further deepened Turkey's divisions. Although the Islamist-secularist cleavage remains the most salient divide in Turkish politics today, the AKP has inflamed other divisions, particularly between Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, to play the opposition parties against one another.

The consequences of these developments are as clear as they are worrisome. Polarization has eroded fact-based public debate, facilitated a dramatic retrenchment of democracy, undermined the legitimacy of public institutions, divided civil society, and hurt social cohesion. Given that Turkey's political elites cannot even agree that such polarization exists, this problem is unlikely to abate, and no substantial efforts have been made to address it.

## Roots

The origins of Turkey's current polarization lie in the foundational reforms of the 1920s that sought to remove religion from public life and thus fomented a political and cultural divide between secularist and Islamist camps. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following the end of World War I, the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, enacted a series of sweeping top-down reforms to transform the nation along Western, secularist lines: he abolished the caliphate, replaced sharia courts with a secular civil code, and placed all religious institutions under state control to monitor and strictly limit the role that religion would play in public life.

These radical reforms deeply polarized Turkish society and fomented a values-based *kulturkampf* (cultural struggle). As Şerif Mardin's "center-periphery thesis" argues, since the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923, the modernizing and westernizing reforms undertaken

by the Republican elite (“the center”) in both the political and cultural domains have been resisted by a significant segment of Turkish society (“the periphery”).<sup>3</sup> On one side are those close to the center, “whose lifestyles are shaped on the basis of an image of the good society with science and human rationality at its core, which we may loosely refer to as a ‘Secular Image of Good Society.’”<sup>4</sup> On the other side are those close to the periphery, “whose lifestyles are based on the core values of tradition and religion (mainly Sunni Islam), which may best be referred to as a ‘Conservative Image of Good Society.’”<sup>5</sup>

Across the rest of the 20th century, the secularist elite used its control of key state institutions such as the military and judiciary to repress its conservative opponents and thus suppress the symptoms of this divide. On the whole, the center dominated, and those who subscribed to the conservative image of good society were kept on the sidelines. Although the strict secularism of the Kemalist elite managed to exclude Islam from political life, religion remained a powerful force in the formation of individual and communal identities in the country. Turkey’s top-down modernization thus succeeded in restructuring the country’s political institutions but failed to ensure that Turkish society accepted the process of secularization. Instead, Islam remained a powerful symbolic force in the everyday life of Turkish people and in the way in which they define themselves as Muslims.<sup>6</sup> In the first two decades of the 21st century, this divide sharpened and deepened, becoming the basis of the harsh polarization that afflicts Turkey today. The following section examines the process by which polarization intensified and the key drivers of this process.

Three other notable divides also have existed in modern Turkey, but they have either faded over time or been exploited to exacerbate the dominant divide between secularists and Islamists. First, between 1960 and 1980, Turkey witnessed the rise of a left-wing labor movement and a nationalist right that defined itself as anticommunist. Societal and political polarization between the nationalist right and the far left increased in the 1970s, resulting in widespread civil violence that culminated in the military coup of September 12, 1980. The 1980 coup radically changed the Turkish social and political landscape. The military regime abandoned the strict secularism of the early republic to increase its popular support and opened up the liberalizing economy and the domestic market to Islamic capital.

These changes helped strengthen Islamic movements within the state and civil society and contributed to the rise of Islamic identity as a strong political force in the 1990s. The nationalist-religious (Turkish-Islamic) ideology of the military regime led it to conduct a massive crackdown on the Turkish left, exceeding by far its suppression of the nationalist right. The military's neoliberal agenda also further marginalized the Turkish labor movement as a political force.

In the second half of the 20th century, two additional fault lines in Turkish politics and society—namely, an ethnic cleavage between Turkish and Kurdish identity and a sectarian divide between Sunnis and Alevis—intensified. To win the Kurds' support during Turkey's war of independence and in the early years of the republic, Atatürk originally appealed to a common Ottoman or pan-Islamic identity to create a multicultural sense of solidarity. Yet the vacuum left by the removal of Islamic elements in state ideology soon started to be filled with an emphasis on ethnic Turkishness, signifying a policy shift from Ottomanism to Turkification. This shift soon helped alienate the Kurds but did not immediately lead to the emergence of an ethnic or national Kurdish identity, mainly because of the regional, feudal, and religious divides among the Kurds themselves.

Such an identity, however, began to emerge in the 1950s and developed in the following decades, as modernization and urbanization led to high rates of Kurdish migration to industrialized cities. The traditional establishment perceived Kurdish demands for recognition of this identity as threats to the territorial integrity of the state and met them with hostility, especially after the 1980 coup. Similar to its role in the rise of political Islam, the 1980 coup also played an important role in the rise of nationalism, deepening the ethnic cleavage between Turkish and Kurdish identity. This divide erupted into conflict in 1984, when the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiye Karkeren Kurdistan; PKK), a terrorist-guerrilla organization, launched a violent secessionist campaign in the southeast. The late 1980s and 1990s were marked by the escalation of the PKK's conflict with the Turkish military and the ensuing rise in the number of casualties, alongside gross human rights abuses and the forced displacement of a large number of Kurds from the southeast to western cities.

The third and final fault line is the one between Sunnis and Alevis. The Alevi faith is a distinct sect of Islam, which differs from the Sunni sect in

terms of both theology and religious practice. It is estimated that Alevis constitute roughly 10 to 20 percent of the Turkish population.<sup>7</sup> The roots of the Sunni-Alevi divide also go back to the early years of the Turkish Republic, when the Republican project sought to construct a national identity that was not only Turkish but also Sunni Muslim, and had no room for minority sects of the dominant religion. Alevis almost uniformly attach themselves to the secularist camp in the prevailing cultural divide of the country, translating into support for center-left political parties and currently the main opposition Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi; CHP). Although historical animosities between these two sects have been largely contained in the Republican era, the divide has grown stronger following key traumatic events, the most notable of which were the 1978 Maraş and 1993 Sivas massacres of Alevi citizens, which are still vivid in Alevis's collective memory.

### **Trajectory**

The rise of the intense polarization of Turkish politics and society between secularists and Islamists started in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Those years saw the political rise of the AKP under the skillful and charismatic leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The party emerged as a splinter of the Islamist Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi; FP), which the Turkish Constitutional Court had banned in 2001 on the grounds that it had engaged in antisecular activities. The AKP's core constituency was conservative segments of society, though it also attracted some liberals and Kurds as it mounted a fundamental challenge to the dominant position of the secularist elite. The party first came to power in the November 2002 elections, following a major economic crisis in 2001 that wiped out almost all of the established parties of the center from the political scene.

Between 2002 and 2006, the AKP pushed for EU accession, a policy goal that united many Islamists, liberals, Kurds, Alevis, and secularists. The party's coming to power coincided with the growing prospect of EU accession for Turkey (which was officially declared an EU candidate country in 1999) as well as a strong economic recovery program led by the International Monetary Fund. Immediately upon coming to power, the party successfully promoted EU accession and its democratic reform agenda to

widen its support base toward the center, to preserve its core voter base by promising expanded religious freedoms, and to guarantee its survival in the face of the secularist state establishment in the judiciary and the military. Democratic reforms went hand in hand with the growth of the Turkish economy and the country's rising profile in foreign policy. The rise of the AKP was generally viewed favorably in the West, where its record of democratic reforms was considered as a possible model for other Middle Eastern countries to emulate. Turkish official rhetoric matched this discourse by frequently pointing at the significance of the Turkish "model" in underlining the need for democracy in the wider region.

From the mid-2000s onward, however, the AKP adopted increasingly polarizing rhetoric and policies that led first to the stagnation and later to the regression of Turkish democracy. Several distinct causes prompted it to foster political and societal polarization through the populist rhetoric of then-Prime Minister Erdoğan, starting with the 2007 general elections. First, the partial freeze of EU accession negotiations in December 2006 significantly dampened hopes of Turkish membership and thus eliminated a significant factor that had induced the AKP's moderation. Second, this polarizing rhetoric was highly effective, particularly given the AKP's dominant status in the political party system and a weak and divided opposition. The party capitalized tremendously on feelings of "victimhood" among the peripheral masses, which felt alienated and discriminated against by the former secularist state establishment in the center as embodied in the military, judiciary, and state bureaucracy. The success of this discourse in the 2007 elections encouraged it to use similar rhetoric in the following general, local, and presidential elections, as well as in two constitutional referenda.<sup>8</sup> A key element of this populist polarizing rhetoric has been an "us" versus "them" divide, referring respectively to the "people," constituting the public will and represented at the political level by Erdoğan through his leadership of the AKP, mainly as opposed to the corrupt "Republican elite," which represents the "establishment" embodied in the main opposition party, the CHP. This populist view of the "people" vs. the "elite," where the party and its leader are represented as "the voice" of the genuine "will of the people" as opposed to that of the "elite" identified with the opposition, has encouraged a binary worldview across society.

Finally, a serious and often undemocratic threat from the secularist

establishment contributed to the AKP's polarizing turn. At the societal level, secularist pushback took the form of mass "Republican" rallies in 2007, grouped around secular masses who felt threatened by the rise of the AKP. Meanwhile, at the political level, secularists within the military high command issued a memorandum seeking to prevent the AKP from winning the presidency, while judicial interventions aimed to prevent Erdoğan from becoming the president in 2007 and to close down the AKP in 2008. Because of the relational nature of polarization, this secularist resistance and attack—often expressed in the binary dichotomy of the "secular" and "progressive" "us" against the "religious" and "backward" "them"—provided fertile ground for the AKP's polarizing rhetoric to flourish and resonate in the broader society.

Starting with the 2010 constitutional referendum, the AKP's efforts to consolidate its power over state institutions and crack down on the opposition have been a primary driver of polarization. To free itself from the threat posed by the secularist state apparatus, the party changed the Turkish Constitution through a referendum in September 2010. The twenty-six constitutional amendments covered a variety of issues, ranging from the granting of positive discrimination to women to the creation of an ombudsman office and from the right to information to the reform of the judicial system. Most of the controversy, however, focused on two amendments that concerned the composition of the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Public Prosecutors, the latter of which determines the career paths of judges and prosecutors through appointments, transfers, promotions, reprimands, and other mechanisms. At the time, the AKP was still closely allied with the Gülen movement, an Islamist group founded by the Turkish imam Fetullah Gülen and referred to since 2016 by the Turkish state as the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETÖ), which encouraged students in its schools to pursue careers in the state bureaucracy.<sup>9</sup> The introduced amendments ultimately paved the way for the then progovernment Gülenist cadres to rapidly infiltrate the judiciary and then launch sham trials against secularist military officials, leading to massive purges in the military. Feeling politically more secure after the 2007 elections and the 2010 constitutional referendum, the party could rely less on the EU and its democratization agenda. The EU's credibility of conditionality had been waning in the face of rising opposition within Europe to

Turkish accession, which made it easier for the AKP to increasingly violate democratic principles and weaken fundamental freedoms in the country.

The AKP's repression of the political opposition further intensified polarization in the aftermath of two notable events, the Gezi Park protests of June 2013 and the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016. The Gezi Park protests, which began as a protest against an urban development plan for Taksim Gezi Park in Istanbul, quickly spiraled into mass nationwide protests against the government, resulting in police brutality and the death of five protestors. The protests increased the government's sense of insecurity and led to further measures curtailing democratic space for opposition, further deepening the divide between the two camps. In addition, the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, not only enabled the government to further curb fundamental freedoms, but also heightened the insecurities of oppositional segments in society, who witnessed the violence and mobilization of progovernment masses in reaction to the coup attempt and feared that this might turn against them in the future.<sup>10</sup> The aftermath of the coup attempt was marked by an extended state of emergency that lasted for almost two years, and led to massive purges in all state institutions as well as severe curtailments of fundamental rights and freedoms in the country.

It was within this context that the campaign on the April 2017 constitutional referendum on the introduction of the executive presidential system was fought. The electorate was left to decide the future of the country's political regime in an extremely polarized environment and with restricted information provided by overwhelmingly dominant progovernment media outlets. Yet even with governmental pressure and heavily deployed resources, the result was a close call, with 51.41 percent of the electorate voting in favor and 48.59 percent against the constitutional changes. The AKP and Erdoğan soon moved to hold elections so that the new regime could be implemented, and the presidential and parliamentary elections both took place on the same day in June 2018. Wary of its declining popularity in the face of the economic downturn affecting Turkey at the time, the AKP entered the elections in an electoral alliance with the ultranationalist right-wing Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi; MHP), which proved crucial in electing Erdoğan to the presidency and in helping the new coalition secure a majority in parliament. Under the new executive presidential system, political power is now highly cen-



tralized in the office of the presidency at the expense of the parliament, with minimal regard for checks and balances. This centralization of power has provided fertile ground for polarization to flourish. With Erdoğan now wielding more formal and informal power than ever, polarization has become increasingly personalized and defined by support for or hatred of the president.<sup>11</sup> Most recently, the informal AKP-MHP coalition stoked polarization along these lines during the March 2019 local elections, in which it based its campaign largely on the personalistic cult of Erdoğan and publicly demonized opposition candidates on the grounds that they were affiliated with terrorist organizations.

### *Additional Cleavages*

Although the Islamist-secularist *kulturkampf* employed by the AKP is the strongest basis of polarization in Turkey, the AKP has skillfully stoked ethnic and sectarian polarization to play opposition parties against one another and maintain its majority in parliament. Polarization along the Islamist-secularist axis refers mostly to the rift between the governing AKP and the main opposition CHP and to some extent, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi; HDP). Since 2015, however, the AKP has deepened the Kurdish-Turkish cleavage to win support from the ultranationalist and anti-Kurdish MHP, and has sharpened the divide between the AKP/MHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP.

Although the MHP is an opposition party like the CHP and HDP, its base and the party itself stand closer to the AKP, and starting in 2018, it entered an alliance with the AKP in parliament. The affinity between the two parties was seen most recently in the June 2018 elections, in which votes shifted from the AKP to the MHP and the two parties formed a *de facto* coalition in its aftermath. Yet between 2002 and 2015, the AKP and MHP had been staunch political opponents, as the former sought to expand freedoms for Turkey's Kurdish population and to negotiate with the PKK. The official view on the Kurdish issue had shifted in 1999, following the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the emergence of Turkish prospects for EU membership, and had led to significant reforms intended to improve the lives of Kurds in the country in the initial years of the 2000s. Nonetheless, violence reemerged in 2004 and continued on and

off, with brief interludes in 2009 and 2012–13 as the two sides conducted peace negotiations. The peace process ultimately broke down in the wake of the June 2015 general elections, in which the success of the pro-Kurdish HDP deprived the AKP of a parliamentary majority for the first time since 2002. Subsequently, President Erdoğan realized that peace negotiations with the PKK were benefitting the HDP more than his own party and moved instead to court the ultranationalist vote.

By escalating the conflict with the PKK since 2015, the AKP has stoked ethnic cleavages and polarization in order to diminish support for the pro-Kurdish HDP and to win the backing of the MHP. According to various studies, this history of conflict and violence has already fostered a political and social environment of “mutual negative feelings and high levels of mistrust between the Kurds and the Turks.”<sup>12</sup> After the peace process collapsed in 2015, the government chose to demonize the HDP by persistently equating it with the PKK and by jailing its leader along with numerous party representatives, further deepening the political and societal divide on this front. As observed both before and after the June 2018 presidential elections, the AKP’s discourse now places the HDP and the CHP firmly together on the opposite pole in its rhetoric, branding both as pro-Kurdish and proterrorist political parties. Meanwhile, the AKP’s anti-Kurdish turn has aligned the party more closely with the MHP base and allowed it to maintain a parliamentary majority through its alliance with the MHP.

The Sunni-Alevi cleavage is less intense than the former two divides but has become one part of the partisan polarization between the AKP/MHP and CHP. Studies have found that negative perceptions of Alevis are widely prevalent across Turkish society.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the AKP’s pro-Sunni policies aimed at Islamizing Turkish politics and society have further contributed to Alevis’s growing anxiety and alienation, their almost undivided support for the secularist CHP, and the deepening rift between the two sides.

### *The Current State of Polarization*

The most comprehensive and recent study of polarization in Turkey has found that “the level of political polarization in Turkey has reached a level that should alarm even optimists.”<sup>14</sup> A majority of the Turkish public also

seems to acknowledge this claim, as 62 percent of the population is reported to believe that the country is deeply polarized.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, polarization in contemporary Turkey has been driven by elites. Although strong ethnic, sectarian, and value-based cleavages have long divided Turkish society, the populist discourse and governance of the ruling party and its leader, as well as earlier undemocratic maneuvers by the secularist opposition, have played key roles in cultivating these largely identity-based societal divisions and locating them firmly in distinct partisan identifications throughout society.

Turkish polarization extends from the level of political parties to that of the general society, where citizens regularly assess key political issues by reference to their partisan affiliations. Crucially, citizens who support different political parties frequently hold vastly different opinions on the basic facts of recent political history and the legitimate structure of government. For instance, while 81 percent of AKP supporters believe that the Gezi protests of June 2013 were engineered by foreign powers intent on weakening the AKP, 85 percent of those who support the CHP believe that they were peaceful protests undertaken in reaction to government policies.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, while 84 percent of AKP supporters regard the new presidential system introduced in 2017 as good for the future of the country, this figure drops to 5 percent and 22 percent for CHP and HDP supporters, respectively.<sup>17</sup> Polarization is also visible in the way in which individuals' partisan affiliations determine their trust in public institutions. For instance, both AKP and MHP supporters display high rates of support for all state institutions, but for CHP and HDP supporters these figures are dramatically reversed.<sup>18</sup>

Where polarization is extreme, it "extends into other aspects of social relations," affecting interpersonal relationships across society.<sup>19</sup> Societal polarization often is evident in the way in which partisan identities translate into people's preferences in everyday practices. For instance, the abovementioned study on political polarization found that 74 percent of the Turkish public rejects the idea of doing business with someone who votes for the party from which they feel most distant, 79 percent would not want their daughters to marry someone who supports that party, 70 percent would not wish to see them as neighbors, and 68 percent are against their children playing with their peers from families supporting that party.<sup>20</sup> The same

study also found “signs of perceived moral superiority,” with 90 percent of the respondents expressing that the supporters of their chosen political party are “honorable,” 80 percent claiming that the supporters of the most distant political party are “arrogant,” and 85 percent stating that supporters of the most distant party pose a “threat to the country.”<sup>21</sup>

The polarization between political parties and across society thus rests on the articulation of key sociopolitical, ethnic, and sectarian identities along partisan lines. AKP and MHP supporters cluster around Turkishness, nationalism, conservative values, and religiosity (Sunni Islam); CHP supporters define themselves mainly with reference to secularism, the principles of Atatürk, and the Alevi faith; and Kurdishness seems to be the main defining trait for HDP supporters.<sup>22</sup> On a more positive note, when taken out of the partisan context, the social distance between individuals seems to decline. For instance, a recent report on social cohesion in Turkey has found that 76 percent of the population does not have a problem with having a neighbor from a different ethnic group, and 79 percent of the population would accept a neighbor from a different sectarian background (Sunni/Alevi). Similarly, 67 percent of the public does not mind their children making friends with their peers from families that hold different political views.<sup>23</sup> Although these numbers are far from ideal for a cohesive society, they nonetheless indicate that Turkey’s identity-based cleavages are polarizing instruments mainly when framed in partisan terms and less so outside a partisan context. This evidence suggests that developments in the political realm between political actors in terms of discourses and policies are the main catalyst for polarization in Turkish society.

Elite views on polarization provide little hope for change at this level. A recent study found considerable polarization across the spectrum of the Turkish elite concerning the existence of polarization in Turkey, a disparity that overlaps with the bipolar partisan divide between the government (defined broadly as the AKP and MHP) and opposition.<sup>24</sup> Whereas progovernment elites publicly deny the existence of polarization in the country, the opposition considers polarization to be a fundamental problem that must be urgently addressed. Progovernment elites claim either that polarization has never existed in the country, or that it has always been present but has declined, implying that there is no current cause for concern. They also argue that foreign enemies intent on harming Turkey, as well as the

AKP's domestic opponents, have stirred up debate regarding polarization to weaken the government. Conversely, opposition elites who publicly acknowledge the existence and salience of polarization in the country base their justificatory narratives on their personal perceptions of exclusion, othering, and "living in parallel worlds" on cultural, religious, ethnic, and sectarian grounds. Overwhelmingly, they perceive that the government has been forcing existing societal divides into a bipolar polarization that is driving the two camps of society ever further apart.

The same study also found that those in the progovernment camp who deny the existence of polarization claim that four factors have prevented it: essentialist traits of Turkish society, such as its assumed hospitality; an essentialist reading of Turkish history, referencing a mythic Ottoman imperial past characterized by harmony; a reductionist assumed continuity and comparison with the more recent past; and the assumed societal diversity lying behind the AKP's electoral support. In this view, polarization, to the extent that it exists, is the work of enemies who want to destabilize the government and the country. Attributing polarization to the actions of these underdefined (and apparently uncontrollable) internal and external enemies prevents the possibility of meaningful dialogue that grapples with the role of political processes, instruments, and agency. In stark contrast with such accounts, those who publicly acknowledge the presence of polarization in Turkey stress the significance of the "political" in fostering or easing polarization through careful management of the country's key cleavages.

This gap in itself implies that, in the absence of a radical change in political constellations, the currently reported high rates of polarization in Turkey can only be expected to remain as they are, at best, in the near future. Yet the prevailing mode of denial in the progovernment camp also runs the risk of sustaining precisely the type of governance and the policies that contribute to polarization, as well as increasing perceptions of vulnerability among those who feel excluded and marginalized. Such an impasse would lead to even higher levels of polarization, which in turn would make it all the more difficult to attain the minimal societal will to live together that is required for Turkey to become an electoral democracy once more.

*Additional Drivers*

Although the populist rhetoric of the AKP and its leader is a critical driver of polarization, other institutional factors have also exacerbated political divisions. The constant electioneering mode that has taken hold of Turkish politics, majoritarianism as a mode of governance and the concomitant erosion of democratic institutions, and increased partisanship in the media landscape have all contributed to polarization—and polarization in turn intensifies these factors, creating a vicious downward spiral marked by heightened antagonism and democratic backsliding.<sup>25</sup>

Turkey has been in a constant electioneering mode since 2014, with presidential and local elections in 2014, two general elections in 2015, a referendum on the introduction of a presidential system in 2017, presidential and parliamentary elections in 2018, local elections in March 2019, and a rerun of the Istanbul mayoral election in June 2019. While some of these elections (e.g., the March 2019 local elections) were scheduled, regular elections, others (i.e., the 2017 referendum and 2018 presidential elections) were necessitated by regime change and one (i.e., the November 2015 general elections) was a rerun of a previous election in which the AKP had lost its majority in parliament. This constant electioneering has fueled the intensity of political debates and stark divisions across partisan lines.

The deterioration of the rule of law and the rise of majoritarian governance methods under AKP rule also have contributed to polarization. Majoritarianism has marginalized the opposition in governance and overall political discourse, and restricted the democratic space for opposition and independent forces. In 2018, for the first time in nearly two decades, Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" assessment downgraded Turkey's status from "Partly Free" to "Not Free."<sup>26</sup> World Bank governance indicators likewise show that the rule of law in Turkey has declined rapidly since 2014.<sup>27</sup> Marginalization of the opposition has contributed to the growing polarization between the AKP and opposition parties, mostly the CHP and HDP, at both the political and societal levels. Those who feel increasingly excluded and vulnerable as a result of the majoritarian governance style and repression are locked into a perpetual support for the opposition regardless of the policy issues in question. They also become

more attentive to negative events and information from progovernment circles, thereby bolstering both their in-group cohesiveness and their hostility toward the other group. The institutional decay that accompanies the erosion of democracy also has fueled political polarization by degrading trust, especially among the opposition, in moderating public institutions such as the judiciary.

Along with these political factors, the Turkish media landscape favors the rise of polarization. Since the late 1990s, the state of Turkish media has resembled a “polarized pluralist model” characterized by “high media integration into party politics (or political parallelism) and state intervention, along with low media commercialization and journalistic professionalism.”<sup>28</sup> The AKP has intensified this situation. After the 2007 general elections, the AKP took important steps to tame and weaken the former mainstream media, and established its own progovernment media bloc by encouraging and facilitating media ownership by businesses that are close to the party.<sup>29</sup> As of March 2019, progovernment businesses dominate the conventional media landscape, with only a few exceptional outlets associated with the opposition. Thus, in addition to partisanship, Turkey also suffers from an “unfree press,” ranking 163rd out of 198 places in Freedom House’s 2017 press freedom list.<sup>30</sup> This context fosters a climate in which partisanship trumps fact-based debate, as citizens are drawn to receiving political news from media sources that align with their own thinking.

The polarizing nature of the media landscape, also referred to as the “echo chamber effect,” extends from conventional media to new social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The government crackdown on traditional media has led to a rise of social media platforms as an alternative source of information in a country where approximately half of all households have access to the internet. Yet research also has shown that on social media platforms, as in conventional media use, people prefer to hear views similar to their own, leading different political party supporters to inhabit different worlds that seldom overlap or interact.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, social media has made it easier for the government to track down and suppress opposition, which also helps to fuel polarization. Thousands of people have been put on trial or even persecuted on the basis of the statements that they posted on Facebook and Twitter.

## Consequences

Polarization is having dire consequences for Turkish democracy and society. First of all, in a polarized political environment, people pay less attention to facts and more to the people and political parties that advocate certain policy positions from given perceived identity clusters. In other words, *what* is being said matters far less than *who* is saying it. For instance, in a recent experimental study that asked respondents to provide their views on certain statements related to Turkish politics, the study participants changed their views when they were told that some of the statements came from President Erdoğan.<sup>32</sup> This polarized political context inhibits rational, fact-based public debate on key issues of Turkish domestic and foreign policy. It also has a crucial impact on electoral contests, where people's voting behavior hinges on their emotional or identity-based attachment to the parties and their leaders, rather than the evidence on the ground and the parties' policy positions. This dynamic leads to an almost predetermined voting composition that is reflected in parliament, where intraparty vote shifts between the blocs are almost nonexistent and prospects for change in power constellations are limited.

Second, as democratic backsliding deepens polarization, polarization in turn strengthens democratic regress, creating a vicious cycle that is difficult to break. Because of polarization, AKP supporters in particular "tolerate . . . the party's illiberal policies and overlook its involvements in state capture and corruption."<sup>33</sup> The uneven playing field for the opposition is hardly a matter of concern for the AKP electorate. A context shaped by zero-sum considerations diminishes prospects for cooperation and compromise.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, polarization helps to suppress intraparty opposition or criticisms within the governing party. AKP leaders underscore the perceived need to stick together in the face of common enemies and threats, such as the old Republican elite, and during election periods they frequently remind the electorate of the secularists' past misdeeds, particularly their restrictions on the public expression of Islam, such as the ban on wearing headscarves in public institutions. The vicious cycle of polarization also extends to the media landscape. The current Turkish media environment, already conducive to polarization, further perpetuates distinct echo chambers in which polarized individuals turn to media sources that



support their partisan attachments. In such an environment, it is difficult to create a public space where diverse voices can be heard.

Third, polarization is eroding public institutions, most notably the parliament and the judiciary. Even before the presidential system took effect with the June 2018 elections, the utility of the Turkish parliament had greatly diminished. With the help of political allies such as the MHP, the AKP passed bills unilaterally without seeking the opposition's support and vetoed almost every bill proposed by opposition parties. This lack of cross-party cooperation and approval for legislation damaged the legitimacy of the legislature. Full partisan control over the judiciary has curtailed any prospect of judicial independence. It is thus not surprising that public trust in the Turkish courts has declined considerably in the past decade, from 67 percent in 2007 to 45 percent in 2016, ranking Turkey ten percentage points behind the average trust levels in the judiciary across the member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).<sup>35</sup> A similar picture is visible concerning the office of the presidency. In the new presidential system, the office of the president holds an extraordinary amount of political power with minimal checks and balances. The phrase "he is not my president" is commonly heard in a society where Erdoğan's election to the presidency was by a close 52 percent in a highly polarized context. The public legitimacy of political decisions likely will be contested further as the exercise of political power becomes even more firmly located and centralized in the office of the presidency.

Fourth, polarization is shaping Turkish civil society. With a few exceptions, Turkish civil society organizations (CSOs) are divided along partisan lines, in line with the familiar identity cleavages discussed above. Cooperation is rare, and the norm is to push for the rights of one's own. To some extent, this trend existed before the recent polarization, yet the government has aggravated this situation by favoring like-minded CSOs, instrumentalizing them for political purposes, and repressing CSOs that are perceived to voice oppositional views.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, polarization is undermining societal cohesion. At this point, few values are keeping Turkish society together. Partisan polarization may not translate into intense societal conflict in people's everyday lives, but the few commonalities that bind citizens from different political persuasions together seem to be negative attitudes toward the West and toward

Syrian migrants.<sup>37</sup> Levels of social trust are low in general and only relatively strong within the identity clusters around the polarized divide.<sup>38</sup> World Values Surveys show that Turkey ranks at the bottom of all OECD countries in terms of levels of interpersonal trust, with only 12 percent of the population expressing trust in others.<sup>39</sup>

### **Remedial Actions**

Currently, neither the Turkish elite nor Turkish society as a whole has made substantial efforts to reduce the levels of polarization in the country. There were some promising developments at the elite level before the June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, but these produced only limited results. The anti-AKP electoral alliance formed between the CHP, the nationalist İYİ Party (or Good Party, founded by discontented former MHP members before the 2018 elections), and the pro-Islamist Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi; SP) initially appeared to be a potential step toward overcoming polarization, as it encompassed a broad base of secular Republicans, nationalists, and Islamists who all favored a return to parliamentary democracy. However, following the alliance's poor performance in both the parliamentary elections and the presidential race, it soon was said that they had failed because of their proximity to the CHP, and the alliance dissipated almost immediately after the elections. The 2018 election results also suggested that despite elite-level efforts to draw support away from the pro-government bloc, nationalist and Islamist voters did not leave their home base. Similarly, despite the government crackdown (including the imprisonment of its leader), the beleaguered HDP managed to pass the 10 percent electoral threshold required to enter parliament, partly thanks to CHP voters in the west of Turkey who did not wish to see the HDP seats taken over by the AKP in the event that the HDP failed to pass the electoral threshold. Nonetheless, this effort, which could be interpreted as a movement toward normalcy on the Kurdish-Turkish cleavage, soon fell victim to the polarizing tactics of government representatives, who struck back at this challenge to their authority by branding the CHP and its support base as terrorists alongside the HDP.

In the March 2019 local elections, the opposition fared significantly better by forming strategic alliances in key urban centers and ultimately winning the three largest cities in the country, including Istanbul and the

capital, Ankara. The opposition's mayoral candidate in Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, quickly became popular and well-known across the country for his inclusive and tolerant discourse. By declaring the Istanbul vote invalid on highly contested legal grounds and deciding to rerun the election, the Supreme Election Council, which until then was perceived as a relatively impartial institution, dealt a severe blow to its credibility in the eyes of the opposition. On a more positive note, İmamoğlu's landslide victory in the rerun has shown growing public discontent with the ruling elite's polarizing policies and discourse.

In recent years, Turkish academia and the think-tank community have shown greater interest in the study of polarization, focusing mainly on its root causes and manifestations. For instance, the German Marshall Fund and Istanbul Bilgi University conducted the first extensive survey on polarization in Turkey in 2017, while the Istanbul Policy Center undertook an extensive project on polarization by bringing together different stakeholders from the government, CSOs, and the media to discuss the issue and propose solutions. Nonetheless, the dramatic divide among Turkish elites concerning the mere existence of polarization hinders potential spillovers from these realms from affecting the political parties, where the root of the problem mainly lies.

## NOTES

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