





COMMENTARY

Turkish Local Elections in the Shade of Endangered Media Trust and Economic Credibility

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Turkey is in a continuous election race as the local elections to be held on 31 March will be the 6th elections in the last five years. Besides the ongoing electoral tension, the country has also been in an extraordinary period since the summer 2016, when a military coup attempt, post-coup crackdown, and a dramatic change in government system occurred.

Even though the two-year-long state of emergency was lifted on 18 July 2018, Turkish politics is still far away from democratic standards. Quite the contrary, the regime has displayed a tendency toward full authoritarianism since the 2017 constitutional referendum¹, which transformed the country from a parliamentary democracy into a presidential system. Turkey continues to be not free due to low freedom ratings, weakened political rights and limited civil liberties². Electoral process remains to be deeply uneven due to media bias in favor of People's Alliance, a nationalist, conservative and populist electoral alliance under the leadership of President Erdogan, and attacks aimed at opposition groups.

Considering all these facts, many experts do not expect for local elections to bring substantial change. However, there also are a few significant developments which might be "game changer" factors for elections results: endangered media trust and economic credibility. This commentary will critically analyze mainstream expectation towards Turkish politics, *no change in sight*, with the latest discussions on economy and the media. Therefore, we argue that endangered media trust and economic credibility can be the limits of Turkish authoritarian populism.

Authoritarian Populism in Turkey

It is impossible to understand authoritarian populism in Turkey separated from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's populist evolution³. In the first decade of the 2000s, Erdogan was an inclusive reformer, who focused on winning the trust of Turks outside his electoral base. Due to the winds of democratization, Turkey became a serious candidate for EU membership and made considerable efforts to address chronic issues related to its democratic deficit, such as the role of military in political sphere and the Kurdish conflict. Expectedly, such political transformation and its economic return gave successive electoral victories to President Erdogan. Nevertheless, in the early 2010s, ongoing political deadlocks between Turkey and the EU raised mutual skepticism about Turkey's membership. On the other hand, President Erdogan's biggest election win in 2011 paved the way to the rise of populism, which weaponized both religion and

¹ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/new-perspectives-on-turkey/article/toward-a-new-political-regime-in-turkey-from-competitive-toward-full-authoritarianism/76DDFD46CFDD20B15E2908A9BECBEAEC>

² <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/turkey>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/11/from-reformer-to-new-sultan-erdogans-populist-evolution>

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nationalism. Hence, in Erdogan's view, Turkey had turned a "new page" to avoid rule by "criminals whose direction has split from God's will and the will of the people"⁴. From that moment on, Erdogan started to rule more confidently without seeking a wide consensus. Political pluralism, harmony and tolerance were damaged in the meantime. The "Gezi Park Protests", a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest, sparked on 28 May 2013 and gained momentum as a reaction the government's encroachment on Turkey's secularism and concerns towards freedom of the press, of expression and assembly. However, protests were suppressed by excessive use of police force and Erdogan's 'external and internal enemies' skyrocketed since then⁵.

Therefore, the political discourse was increasingly framed under a nationalist narrative, and weaponized, too. With the increasing populism, each election became an attendance check for condensed identities, instead of a democratic process, which is supposed to have its unique agenda⁶. Expectedly, Erdogan continued his electoral victories, in parallel with the rise of the populism, backed, as it was shown above, by instrumentalization of religion and nationalistic discourse.

After the military coup attempt in 2016, Turkey has entered in an extraordinary situation, triggered by the establishment of the state of emergency, which was set to be the new norm in Turkey. Within a deeply uneven electoral atmosphere in 2017, Turkish political system was transitioned from a parliamentary democracy to an executive presidency with sweeping powers. Shortly afterwards, snap elections, aiming to put the new government system in practice took place in June 2018, under similar uneven atmosphere. Even though Turkey has experienced democratic ups and downs since its establishment, such system change is considered the largest shift in governance in almost a century of Republican era⁷.

With the new presidential system of government, Turkey has swayed from rambling representative democracy and to delegative democracy, in which "whoever wins election to the presidency is thereby entitled to govern as he or she sees fit"⁸. For instance, democratic institutions, such as parliament and the judiciary, have already lost more of their substance. President Erdogan positioned People's Alliance, the ultra-nationalist electoral alliance between the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the opposition Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), above the divisions of party politics and claimed to represent the nation as a whole, rather than particular interests or groups. By

⁴<https://t24.com.tr/haber/erdoganin-3-balkon-konusmasinin-tam-metni-74-milyonun-hukumeti-olacagiz,150677>

⁵<https://ahvalnews.com/turkey/turkish-leaders-forever-portray-country-under-external-attack>

⁶<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/konda-genel-muduru-bekir-agirdir-sokakta-neseysi-ve-ortak-hayati-konusalim-41136447>

⁷<https://www.dw.com/en/recep-tayyip-erdogan-sworn-in-as-all-powerful-president-as-turkey-enters-uncharted-territory/a-44587595>

⁸ O'Donnell, Guillermo A. (1994:59). "Delegative Democracy." *Journal of Democracy*, 5(1), 55–69.

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dismissing party politics and the articulation of group interests, intermediary structures have become meaningless.

Endangered Trust in the Media

Turkish media has always been instrumentalized to different extent by politics and business. However, with increasing populism, the media gained more importance in the political discourse, becoming an element to sustain direct and plebiscitary links with the people. Moreover, after the failed 2016 coup, *Turkish winter*, a term coined by Burak Kadercan to refer increasing autocratic tendencies of Turkey's ruling party, has also become more apparent⁹. 150 media outlets have been shut down, and mass trials were held under the state of emergency¹⁰. Despite that the two-year state of emergency was lifted in June 2018, all the repressive decrees issued under extraordinary situation continue their existence in law¹¹.

Academics, journalists and writers who dare to challenge official narratives are still under threat of criminal investigation, prosecution, intimidation, harassment and censorship¹². The country remains to be the world's biggest prison for professional journalists¹³. Moreover, IPI (the International Press Institute) stresses that 95% of Turkish media is under governmental influence due to a combination of market distortion, economic pressure and friendly media ownership¹⁴. Shortly, many believe that Erdogan would not have transformed Turkey without such media environment, which consistently undermined Turkish democracy in a vicious circle.

Without ignoring the impact of hostage media on electoral results, as observed in earlier elections, one should also consider the limits of authoritarian measures towards the media. For instance, Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017 shows that trust in news coverage is only 40% among Turkish audiences and that decreases to its lowest when it is about the trust in television (33%)¹⁵. Furthermore, Aydin Unal, Erdogan's former consultant, politician and columnist at Yeni Safak, had warned that pro-government media lost its trustworthiness so much that even the pro-government voters keep themselves informed through the opposition media outlets¹⁶, if left any.

⁹ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/06/13/turkish-winter/>

¹⁰ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/2018/09/24/the-total-collapse-of-freedom-pluralism-and-diversity-in-turkeys-mainstream-media/>

¹¹ <https://pomed.org/snapshot-after-the-june-elections-no-brakes-on-turkeys-authoritarian-slide/>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/01/turkish-journalists-face-abuse-threats-online-trolls-attacks>

¹³ <https://rsf.org/en/detained-journalists>

¹⁴ <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/no-progress-toward-media-freedom-in-turkey-ipi-report-finds/>

¹⁵ <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/publications/2017/turkey-digital-news-report/>

¹⁶ <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/aydinunal/yerel-secim-ve-riskler-2048176>

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Not surprisingly, decreasing trust in the media caused the emergence of social media as an alternative forum for public debate¹⁷. When people realized that asking for better media or journalism does not change anything, they started to operate as the journalists they need. According to Konda Research and Consultancy's "What has changed in 10 years?" report, newspaper readership decreased from 61% to 26% in Turkey¹⁸.

In the meantime, social media seems to have toppled traditional media from its throne. Regarding social media usage, Turkey had the 3rd highest ranking in the world in 2016¹⁹ and remains to be one of the leading countries. Then again, Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017 indicates that online media, including social media, is at the top of the list of sources of news used *weekly*, with a weekly reach of 89%²⁰.

Some journalists have already framed these issues of decreasing trust and audiences in traditional media along with unstoppable popularity of social media as the crisis of Turkish media²¹. Therefore, experts might be cautious about the local elections as electoral process is still deeply uneven. However, one should also consider the limits of authoritarian measures towards the media.

Endangered Economic Credibility

In the first decade of the 2000s, Turkey experienced an economic boom²², thanks to the country's stable political scene and the right conditions for implementing reforms. The economy showed strong growth between 2002 and 2007 and post global financial crisis, which was left behind with 8.8% growth in 2010 and 9.2% in 2011. Taking critical steps such as the privatization of loss-making state-owned enterprises, a successful reform of the banking system, integration to a floating exchange rate system, lifted restrictions on foreign capital inflows, tightened fiscal discipline, increased the independence of the Central Bank, and stabilized inflation, Turkey, as an economically successful state with a stable socio-political system, became attractive for investors, especially from the West.

However, on the basis of Daron Acemoglu's book "Why Nations Fail", which discusses how democracy affects economic performance, Gezi Park Protests appear to be a milestone for both Turkish politics and economy. During the protests in the summer of 2013, Turkey's positive image received a major blow and important capital outflowed the country. Istanbul's stock exchange

¹⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/turkey>

¹⁸ <https://interaktif.konda.com.tr/en/HayatTarzlari2018/#firstPage>

¹⁹ <https://www.turkeyhomes.com/blog/post/technology-social-media-in-turkey>

²⁰ <https://www.turkeyhomes.com/blog/post/technology-social-media-in-turkey>

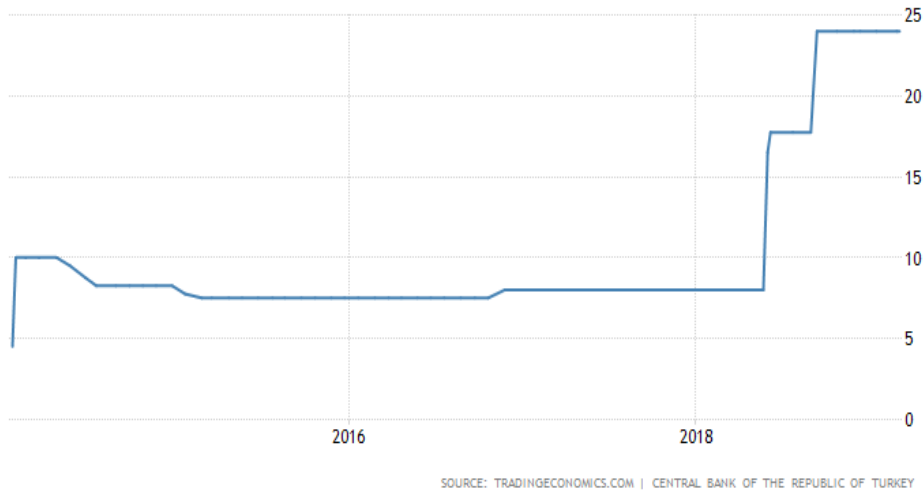
²¹ <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/mehmet-soysal/krizlerin-esigindeki-medya-2782893/>

²² https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2013-11-06/turkeys-economy-a-story-success-uncertain-future#_ftn1

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experienced a loss of 10.5% in a single day on June 3, which was the biggest one-day loss in a decade²³. Turkish Central Bank raised the average interest rate from a record low of 5.15% in May to 6.98% in June and peaked at 9.3% in August. Even though the investments began to return, and the interest rate dropped shortly afterwards the protests, Turkish economy has been affected due to political climate's turbulences and interrupted economic reforms since then.

Turkish Interest Rate in Last Five Years²⁴



US-TL Rate Chart in Last Five Years²⁵



²³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-22750491>

²⁴ <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/interest-rate>

²⁵ <https://www.chartoasis.com/usd-try-forex-chart-5-years-cop0/>

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As mentioned earlier, Turkey has entered in an extraordinary political atmosphere since the failed 2016 coup. Regarding the uber-populist escalation, the latest electoral campaigns were mainly sucked in a vicious circle of identity politics. However, it does not mean that Turkish voters overlook the economic reality. According to opinion polls, there are three main determinants for Turkish voters: political stability, security concerns and economic situation²⁶. Given that Turkey has managed to avoid major terror attacks²⁷; economic situation continues to gain importance when it comes the voting behavior.

In last general elections, supposedly moved forward by over 16 months to avoid possible damage on popular vote, President Erdogan reached his all-time highest electoral support, translated into more than 26 million votes. However, his party, the AKP, lost the majority in the parliament and formed a coalition with the far-right nationalist MHP party. The results were interpreted, even by pro-government experts²⁸, as a message for Erdogan, to put the economy back on track.

Since the summer of 2018, Erdogan holds arguably the same degree of control and power as Atatürk managed nearly a century ago, but Turkish economy remains to struggle due to its structural issues such as lack of education reform, low levels of competitiveness and labor force participation, insufficient tax system, low added value of exports, structural deficit and so on. In January 2019, the annual inflation rate was recorded as 20.35 percent²⁹. Dollar-to-lira rate is now around 5.5 to 1 as it was only around 2 to 1 as recently as mid-2013. Considering the latest recession, the first recession in a decade, the local elections will test his party's grip on the country's largest cities.

Final Word

Many experts do not expect for local elections to bring substantial change to Turkish political landscape, due to the deeply uneven electoral process, media biased attitude, and attacks at opposition groups. However, regarding the latest public debates on endangered media trust and the government's decreasing economic credibility, the authoritarian populism might have its own limits in Turkey.

Firstly, the media trust is considerably low and there is an unstoppable popularity of social media among large shares of public opinion. Secondly, it's worthy to remind that President Erdogan's economic credibility is persistently challenged, particularly in the light of the latest inflation rate and economic recession. Even though President Erdogan previously placed the blame on foreign powers,

²⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-39576314>

²⁷ <https://ahvalnews.com/counterterrorism/how-turkey-has-avoided-major-terror-attacks-last-year>

²⁸ <https://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2018/06/29/secmen-guvendi-guvenlik-dedi>

²⁹ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-inflation-rate-at-20-35-pct-in-january-140984>

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who “hide behind currency rate speculation and the interest rate lobby”³⁰, this narrative is continuously challenged by the very economic reality, and subsequently, by the social media, which can feed the public opinion with undistorted information on leading issues, including the economic ones. Therefore, the local elections will show us if we can talk about an extension of authoritarian populism’s effects in the country or a retrenchment of it.

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³⁰<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/11/from-reformer-to-new-sultan-erdogans-populist-evolution>