

Prospects for Democratization under the Erdogan Leadership

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Abstract: An analysis of Turkish politics and prospects for democratization under Erdogan's leadership governments in the recent past years is presented in this paper. It is important how the current president of the Turkish democracy, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, succeeded to direct and manage the AKP party during the last decades and he had led it to continuous victories during all the elections in his country. The Turkish type of secularism has been a successful project that allowed Turkish citizens to consider religion as a system of belief and morality and not as a prescriptive set of political rules. Kemalism had been linked with conservatism and has lost the ability to understand the society and its needs, since it used to act only as the protector of secularism against an obvious Islamic danger. The AKP had not directly confronted with the secularist establishment while it followed a clever strategy in de-emphasizing ideology and in engaging with Kemalism on its own terms.

Keywords: Key-words: Turkey, AKP, Erdogan, Elections, Democratization, Politics.

1. Introduction

It is known that the Turkish type of secularism was a successful project, since it led to a significant portion of the population to consider religion as a system of belief and morality and not as a prescriptive set of political rules. In this era of confrontation, the secular Turkish model has been considered as a bridge between the Western world and Islam, between Europe and Asia. It is now that model faces serious challenges and whether to overcome and be transformed into a new one which will keep up with democratization in the country.

Turkey, under Erdogan's rule, has not seen itself as a strictly Western country any longer. During the AKP's long lasting rule Turkey has experienced massive—though now, slowing— economic growth, raising the standard of living for millions. At the same time, AKP party has established a record of modernization, economic growth, and reforms to meet the accession requirements of the European Union. However, additional changes are still needed in the areas of fundamental rights, especially in the freedom of expression while the European Commission also noted that accession negotiations were moving along slowly.

2. The Political System in Turkey

The Ottoman Empire rules a society composed of a mosaic of religions as well as sects. Thus, it was not possible to stick to a particular version of Islam and thus impose upon uniform faith and practice. Even during the 19th century when several groups thriving for their independence, there were efforts to keep the empire unified by following the secular aspect of Ottomanism.

After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the founders tried to further secularize the polity and society; they wanted the new Turk to become as one who thinks logically. For this reason, they did not only named the new republic as a secular one, but they also went through severe actions to transform country's people from "dogmatic" to "rational" citizens (Heper and Toktas, 2003).

From 1969 onward, parties related to the religion have become components of country's political life, like one the first such political parties is the National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi-MNP). Its successor political parties were the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi-MSP) and the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi-RP). The MNP, RP and FP (Felicity Party) were finally closed by the Constitutional Court; the MSP was banned following the September 12, 1980 military coup.

When the FP closed in 2001, the Innovators (Yenilikciler) who confronted the Conservatives (Gelenekciler) left the FP and founded the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi-AKP) having Erdogan its leader.

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's secularization affected Turkey's core identity with a Kemalist, nationalistic coating. Even though Kemal brought up the unifying power of Turkish nationalism over religious aspects, however Turkishness never replaced Islam; rather both identities overlapped. He succeeded to coat Turkey's deep Muslim identity with secular nationalism, but after all the country retained its Muslim core identity (Jpost, 2010).

The military elite accepts the fact that final authority coming from the constitution belongs to the government, but they are also allowed to be involved in politics whenever-as per their opinion- the country faces the threat of political Islam and separatist nationalism (Heper and Toktas, 2003).

During the creation of the Turkish Republic, the military had been assigned with a specific job and the fact that politicians left a gap in political life allowed the military to take a part. For the last 60 years, there is a strong parliament in Turkey with two ruling parties (www.digitalnpq.org).

After country's involvement in the co-called EU accession, Kemalist army viewed Turkey's accession in the EU as a fulfillment of the European calling that Kemal Ataturk visualized for the country, while at the same time AKP viewed in the democratic club rules of the EU a covering against the generals (Gardner, 2011).

Thus, it is a project accepted by both sides which at the same time seems to server their own, separate aims and needs. However, it is interesting to see that AKP and Erdogan has been wisely patient and methodic by gaining power and valuable time in order to place their own agenda in the political scene. Turkey in a unitary parliamentary republic in which the judiciary is independent of both the legislature and the executive power. The Grand National Assembly has 550 members elected for 4 years term. The government has a unicameral national assembly that elects a member of its ranks to the role of president for a five year term. The president appoints the prime minister, who is the head of the government. A Constitutional Court is entitled to cancel legislation passed by the Parliament, if incompatible with the Constitution.

In the post-September 11 world, Turkey was already stripped of its Kemalist identity and self-defined its position as of the “leader of the Muslim world”; it is one of the larger economies and most powerful military powers in Muslims.

From 1946 until 2001, Turkish cabinets consisted of two types of ministers: those with portfolio and those of state; this was changed in 2011 by Erdogan’s governance, so ministers of state were ministers appointed to further general governmental policy.

In 2011 Erdogan decided to change the perception that certain ministries are considered more important than some others by introducing a protocol based on alphabetical order (Mutrlu-Eren, 2015).

Due to Erdogan’s AKP efforts towards EU membership, a number of democratic reforms during this period took place, most notably as following:

- ✓ Weakening the Turkish military’s stranglehold over national politics. This was considered as a significant reform and also as a politicized blow to the Kemalist establishment (www.muftah.org). However, the army may still operates as a caste under country’s Internal Service Law Article 35 still having the right to intervene in politics (Gardner, 2011).
- ✓ Since a major corruption and bribery investigation became public (Dec. 17, 2013), the government has been working to reshape the judiciary and justice system so as to prevent the investigations from deepening and to halt the launch of similar probes.
- ✓ A new draft bill that will allow the government to bring more people loyal (169 new members) to itself into both the Supreme Court of Appeals and the Council of State appeals courts.
- ✓ The AKP holds 326 out of 550 parliamentary seats, and, therefore, lacks the supermajority required to amend the constitution unilaterally. The AKP must win the support of at least one more party to rewrite Turkey’s 1982 constitution, which was written under military rule (www.muftah.org).
- ✓ The Constitutional Court in Ankara has become more active and has used its powers to enlarge individual freedom by rejecting the controversial pieces of legislation (Canzilar, 2014).
- ✓ Change of the composition and profile of the military-dominated National Security Council (Cinar, 2006).
- ✓ The latest presidential election held on 10 August 2014 was the first in Turkey’s history where the president was elected by public vote. The former Prime Minister Erdogan succeed to win by the impressive 51.8% of the votes and thus become the 12th President of the Turkish Republic.

The adoption of an Action Plan on Prevention of Violations of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) was a significant step targeting *at aligning Turkey’s legal framework and practice with the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)*. The Constitutional Court continued applying the individual application procedure *since it took a number of important decisions strengthening the protection of fundamental rights in the country and illustrating the resilience of the country’s constitutional system* (EU Commission, 2014).

After the Second World War, Turkey has been the only Muslim country in which more citizens understood democracy as “the only game in town”, while after the September 11 in 2001 the country was the only Muslim one that gave support to the US-led “War against Terror”.

It is worth mentioning that Islam has become hostile to secularization and modernity in those Muslim countries that had been colonies of the West, where colonial power countries were supposed to be carriers and defenders of a mixture of offensive Christian proselytism and the new secularization; but, Turkey was never such a colony and that is an important factor to be considered when its case is examined (Heper and Toktas, 2003).

The interesting point of the more than a decade in power of the Justice and Development party (AKP) is not its supposed hidden agenda-as opposite elites claim that it is Islamizing secular Turkey by stealth- but the absence of a credible opposition.

The Republican Party (CHP) founded by Kemal Ataturk and leading by Kemal Kilicdaroglu started to champion the rights of individuals and minorities, such as the Kurds. CHP used to be the party of the state and now it is becoming a party of the people since they may have realized that they could not continue relying on the generals and the judges in order to win the elections. However, AKP was the first party in Turkey that had brought the Kurdish issue considering that it is better to have the Kurds fighting in the parliament rather than fighting in the mountains (Gardner, 2011). A recent agreement between the AKP government and Kurdish terrorist organization PKK has been initiated, while at the same time an observation committee in which members from the AKP government Peoples' Democratic Party HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi), a [left-wing](#) political party in [Turkey](#), acting as the [fraternal party](#) to pro-[Kurdish Democratic Regions Party](#) (BDP) (Guller, 2014).

Apart from many efforts that Erdogan and his party AKP have done so far in order to meet EU's criteria and fulfill obligations that are necessary for the country's successful accession in the EU, there are also many incidents leading to an opposite direction, as following (Canzilar, 2014):

- Jailing and prosecuting journalists (of nearly 60) leading to deteriorating freedom of speech.
- Pressure on off-message media organization, such as Dogan group, hit by multi-billion dollars tax fines (Zaman, 2014).
- Severe actions against Taksim square and Gezi park protestors (May 2013).
- High level corruption allegations (December 2013).
- Political pressure on decisions of Independent Authorities such as Central Bank (interest rate policy), Banking Regulatory and Supervisory Authority, Capital Market Board.
- Heavy-handed politics into the economic life.
- A new internet law was approved by the Parliament (February 6) which gives to the head of the telecommunications authority (TIB) the ability to block access to certain web pages. It has been widely seen as a government move to increase control over citizens' online activities (<http://ec.europa.eu>).
- In the law, the burden of proof has almost shifted from the prosecutor to the defendant.

The homeland security reform bill will give police new powers in search, seizure, detention and arrests, while restricting the rights of suspects and their attorneys to acquire the details of legal proceedings brought against them during an investigation. It would also make it possible for the government to seize the assets of people and groups convicted of threatening Turkey's constitution or trying to overthrow the government (Canzilar, 2014).

Many secular Turks consider Erdogan having radical Islamic tendencies inclining to the political Islam (*Islam shaping public law and public policy*). They view him as being engaged in the well-known Islamic practice of dissimulation (takiyye) which is about hiding one's real and true intentions waiting for the proper time to reveal them (Heper and Toktas, 2003).

3. AKP Party and Erdogan's Leadership

It is very interesting to review Recep Tayyip Erdogan's political career, since it would be helpful to understand the critical success factors contributed to the last period overall performance of AKP party and its penetration into Turkish community.

Erdogan belongs to Turkey's cultural periphery; he is married having four children and he had a modern education and a working experience in several private companies in the wholesale food sector (Heper and Toktas, 2003).

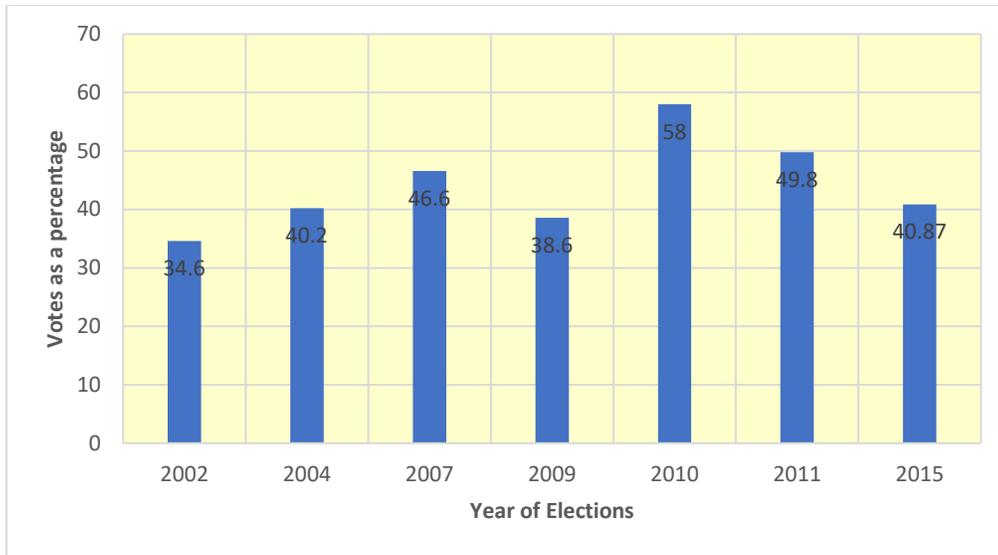
After Erdogan was elected a mayor in Istanbul metropolitan in 1994, four years later he was sentenced into the prison by four and half months and banned from active politics. After he was released, he played a significant role in the Innovators movement in the Virtue Party and upon the closing of that party, he formed his Justice and Development Party.

Erdogan is currently the 12th President of Turkey. From 1994 to 1998 as the Mayor of İstanbul, and from 2003 to 2014 he served as the 25th Prime Minister of Turkey. In the next table 1, Erdogan's assignments at the top political level in Turkish politics is given, while at the Appendix B a more detailed historical review of his political career is presented.

Table 1: Erdogan's political career in Turkey (1994-)

Political offices		
Preceded by Nurettin Süzen	Mayor of İstanbul 1994–1998	Succeeded by Ali Müfit Gürtuna
Preceded by Abdullah Gül	Prime Minister of Turkey 2003–2014	Succeeded by Ahmet Davutoğlu
	President of Turkey 2014–present	Incumbent
Party political offices		
New office	Leader of the Justice and Development Party 2001–2014	Succeeded by Ahmet Davutoğlu
Diplomatic posts		
Preceded by Tony Abbott	Chairperson of the Group of 20 2015	Succeeded by Xi Jinping

As per its own statement, the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) is *a conservative democratic mass party that situates itself at the center of the political spectrum*. AKP has been successful at five elections since its foundation in 2001, while it has increased its votes in three consecutive elections and has been in office during these terms (www.akparti.org.tr). In the following chart, the results for the AKP for both general elections (in 2015, 2011, 2007 and 2002) and local elections for the municipality (in 2009 and 2004) in Turkey are presented:

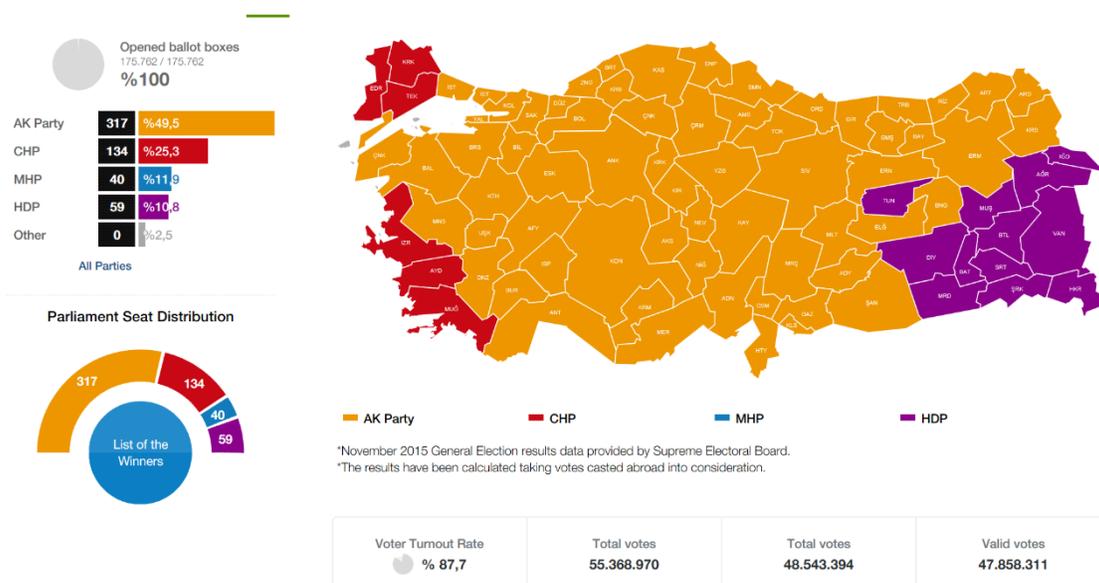


Scheme 1: AKP’s electoral victories in Turkey (2002-)

(source: www.akparti.org.tr)

During the last general elections, AKP succeeded to reach the 40.9% of the voters which is another significant milestone in its history. In the following graph the percentage of each political party in last general elections in 2015 is given (scheme 2) while the electoral results

As per Ahmed (2018), a leftist journalist Umit Kivanc claims that AKP has been the first political party in the mainstream scene in Turkey. He sees CHP as not a political party, but as a party-like organization which at the same time is a part of the state. Finally, he considers MHP party as directly a state organization.



Scheme 2: 2015 General Elections in Turkey (votes by %)

(source: www.yenisafak.com)



Scheme 3: AKP Evolution (2015 June-Nov)
(source: Vanlear, 2018)

In the elections in 2007 a constitutional crisis took place caused by general's intervention of not accepting Abdullah Gul as a presidential candidate. That decision made Erdogan to take the call and he went to the people raising his party's share in the political scene from 34% in 2002 to 47% (Gardner, 2011). Following, AKP's vision was also shaped by the previous Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu with his "Strategic Depth" book saying that "Turkey's traditionally good ties with the West...are the form of alienation" and that AKP party will correct the course of history (Cagaptay, 2011).

Several incidents happened that granted success to AKP party and some of the important ones can be presented as below:

- Erdogan's leadership style is second to none. AKP would not be in this position if Erdogan was not its leader. He is a gifted politician, that people express their rapport (Heper and Toktas, 2003).
- AKP took advantage of Turkish anger with the US war in Iraq, presenting it as an attack against all Muslims, included the Turks. Such a view resulted into a bipolar vision, even though it is said that AKP's foreign policy is not simply dualistic but rather conditional on Islam's "a la carte morals" (Gardner, 2011).
- Erdogan's competitiveness against other parties (Gardner, 2011):
 - ✓ The centre-left Republican People's party (CHP) under Kemal Kilicdaroglu: Erdogan insistently reminding the Sunni majority that Kilicdaroglu comes from the Alevi minority.
 - ✓ Ultranationalist MHP party: ten of whose leaders had to resign after sex videos of them appeared on the internet.
- Individuals- both ideologically and financially- related to AKP party have succeeded to step up and hold prominent posts in the high courts after the September 2012 referendum by which the party was empowered to appoint a majority of the top judges without a confirmation process (Cagaptay, 2010).

It is interesting to note few things about Erdogan's leadership and personality; there seem to be four major influences on his life (Heper and Toktas, 2003):

- ✓ His father; an authoritarian personality.
- ✓ Kasimpasa; the neighborhood where he grew up in Istanbul in which there were close relations between families. It gave to him the feeling of belonging to the Turkish cultural periphery.

- ✓ His teacher; at the primary school. He urged him to attend the Imam Hatip School and become a practicing Muslim, doing his prayers regularly, learned patriotism and love for human beings and service for the country.
- ✓ Sufism; the internal school of Islam, founded on the *pursuit of spiritual truth as a definite goal to attain: the truth of understanding reality as it truly is, as knowledge, and so achieving "ma'arefat"* (www.ias.org).

Turkey's accession process to the EU has provided an opportunity to demonstrate that a culture of Islam and democracy would be possible to work together and that could also change the view of the Islamic world toward the EU in a positive manner in both directions. Furthermore, it has been also noted that Turkey's process of accession will finally assist to define what Europe is, since its identity is believed that has not been clearly decided, yet (www.digitalnpq.org).

The hold-up in the EU accession process has not caused delays in country's economic integration with EU. Turkey being in the anteroom of the EU as a candidate member in 2004, the government wisely used the unifying idea of Europe *as an engine of reform, widening freedom of expression and association and minority rights while curbing the power of the military, which until then had reserved the right to make and break government* (Gardner, 2011).

Turkey's net debt to GDP ratio was around 36% in 2013 which is below Maastricht Criterion of 60 % while Turkey's budget deficit/GDP ratio in 2013 is around 1% which is again below Maastricht Criterion of 3 %, one of the lowest rates in Europe.

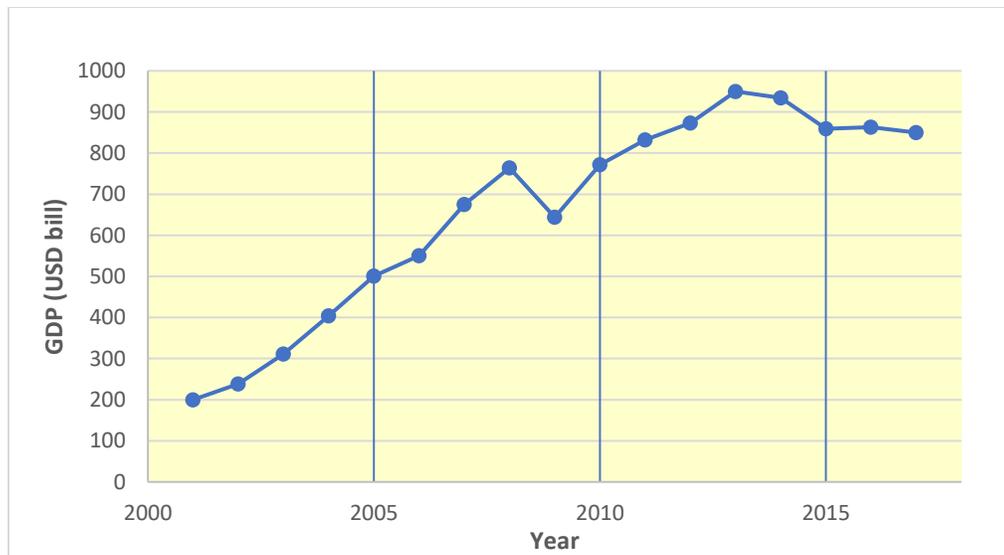
In general, Turkey's EU bid looks to have been slightly stalled, since there are concerns about regressing rather than progressing with democratic reforms in the country (Canzilar, 2014). At the same EU itself an important anchor for Turkey's economic and political reforms. In this regard, EU states that *it is in the interest of both Turkey and the EU that the opening benchmarks for chapter 23: Judiciary and Fundamental rights and 24: Justice, Freedom and security are defined as soon as possible, leading to opening of negotiations under these two chapters* (EU Commission, 2014).

EU considered that Turkey can move faster in negotiations by meeting the requirements of the negotiating framework and by respecting its contractual obligations towards the EU. By this, an important help would be given the negotiation process, while the cooperation between the EU and Turkey could also be developed in all crucial areas (EU Commission, 2014).

Some of the important economic parameters related to the recent development of the country during 2001 onwards are also the following (Gardner, 2011):

- The AKP elites helped change the country physically, with hospital, new schools, transportation infrastructure (more airports and domestic airlines that compete with buses, railways, highways).
- The rise of dozens of Anatolian towns and cities-60 of them are now connected to the natural gas network.
- During AKP's period in the governance, GDP of the country has been tripled, GDP per capita has been doubled and FDI have been increased tremendously. Turkey has experienced massive—though now, slowing— economic growth, raising the standard of living for millions. Between 2002 and 2011, the Turkish economy [grew](#) by an average of 7.5 percent per year.

During the last two decades Turkey has developed its economy, with a rich history of private enterprise. With a GDP of around USD 822 billion (2013) and a purchasing power parity per capita at around USD 19, 000 (2013), Turkey is the world's 17th largest economy and Europe's 6th largest economy. Additionally Turkey is Europe's seventh largest trading partner, while Europe is Turkey's main partner, accounting for around half its trade (www.worldbank.org). In the following graph, country's GDP is presented during AKP's ruling period after 2001:



Scheme 4: Turkey's GDP (2001-)
(source: counryeconomy.com)

During the global economic crisis Turkey suffered a contraction of - 4.8 % in 2009. Due to favorable global liquidity conditions created by stimulus packages and rising capital inflows in Turkey, the economy registered a strong return to growth of 9.2% and 8.8 % in 2010 and 2011 respectively.

However, new legislation being considered by the Turkish parliament allowing also the seizure of property from those accused of conspiring against the government is causing concern among domestic and foreign investors (Canzilar, 2014).

4. Critical Review

Turkey is now the world's 17th largest economy, a G-20 member, and offers access to markets in Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Turkey is a significant hub for the transportation of oil and gas as it acts as a bridge between Europe and some of the largest energy suppliers in the world.

Kemalism today is associated with conservatism and has lost the ability to understand the people, but only to be the protector of secularism against an obvious Islamic danger. The AKP has not confronted with the *secularist establishment* but it has followed a wise strategy in *de-emphasizing ideology and in engaging with Kemalism on its own terms by pursuing Turkey's "above-politics" EU membership project* (Cinar, 2006).

Accession negotiations were opened in October 2005, but they lost momentum in just over a year's time over Turkey's unwillingness to open its ports to Cyprus. The EU Commission noted that even though Turkey has made progress in meeting several EU membership criteria accession negotiations have been moving along slowly, and that the process had lost its momentum.

The AKP has established a record of modernization, economic growth, and reforms to meet the accession requirements of the EU. Indeed, the AKP has advocated for Turkey's accession to the EU, bringing with it a far-reaching process of reforms, many of which are aimed at strengthening the country's democracy.

Turkey has made progress in meeting EU membership criteria, particularly through constitutional reforms, additional changes are needed in the areas of fundamental rights, especially in the freedom of expression. The Commission also noted that *accession negotiations were moving along slowly, and that the process had lost its momentum* (EU Commission, 2010).

The AKP supports a change from "political" to "social" Islam; Erdogan states that they continue to be committed to Islam as a religion only as individuals and they denied to develop an Islamist agenda (Dagi, 2008). However, such a separation is most of the times not the easiest thing to be achieved since it is well-known the degree of influence a leader places on its party and Erdogan is a one of them.

After the last parliamentary elections in 2015, AKP is seen to continue to be the dominant party in Turkish politics; thus, it is important to see further steps towards democratization in the country and people-individuals to benefit from this process.

For Erdogan's supporters, however, there is confidence that the presidential system will deliver for Turkey, a country they felt has in the past been held back by dysfunctional parliamentary coalitions (Ahmed, 2018).

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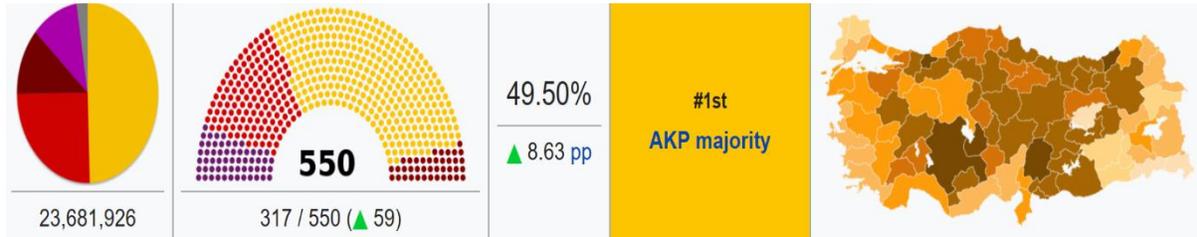
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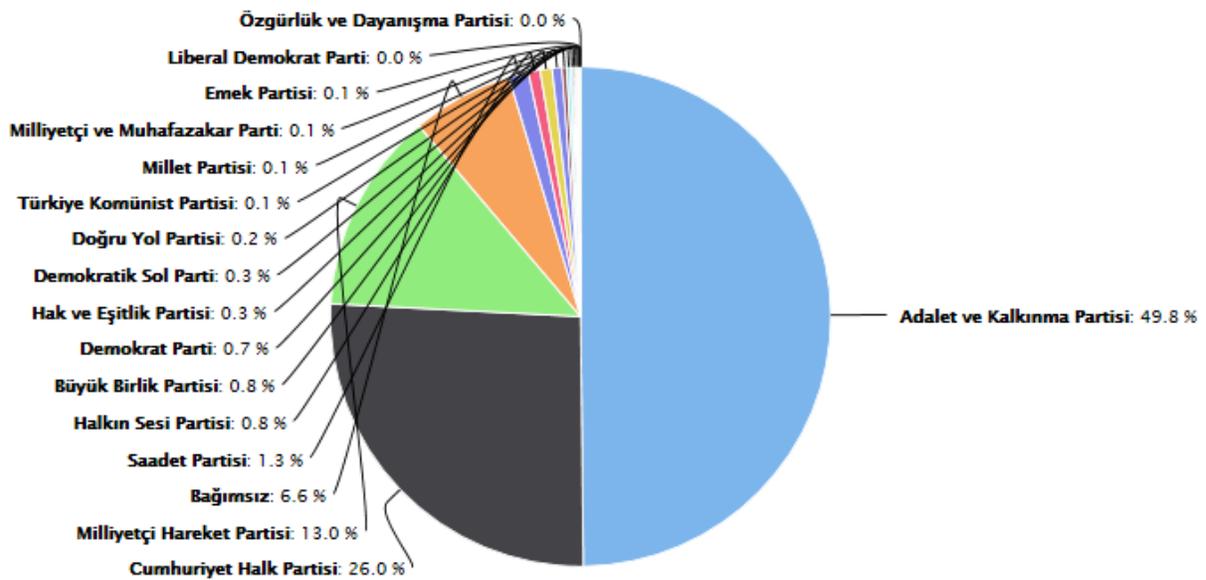
APPENDIX A

Electoral Victories of AKP in Turkey



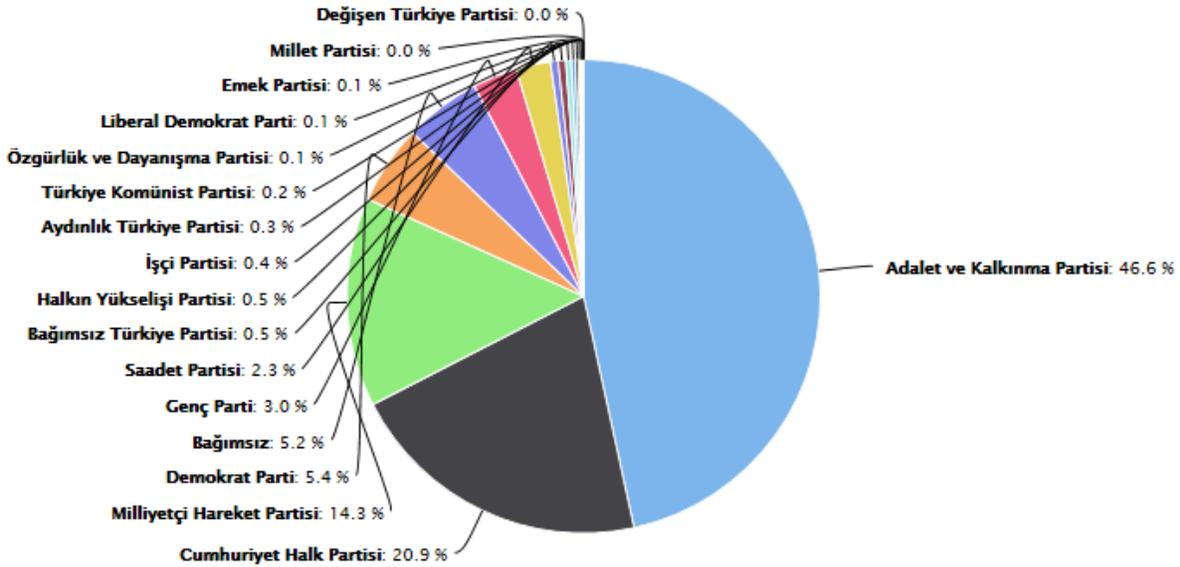
Scheme A1: 2015 General Elections in Turkey (votes by %)

(source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justice_and_Development_Party_\(Turkey\)\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justice_and_Development_Party_(Turkey)))

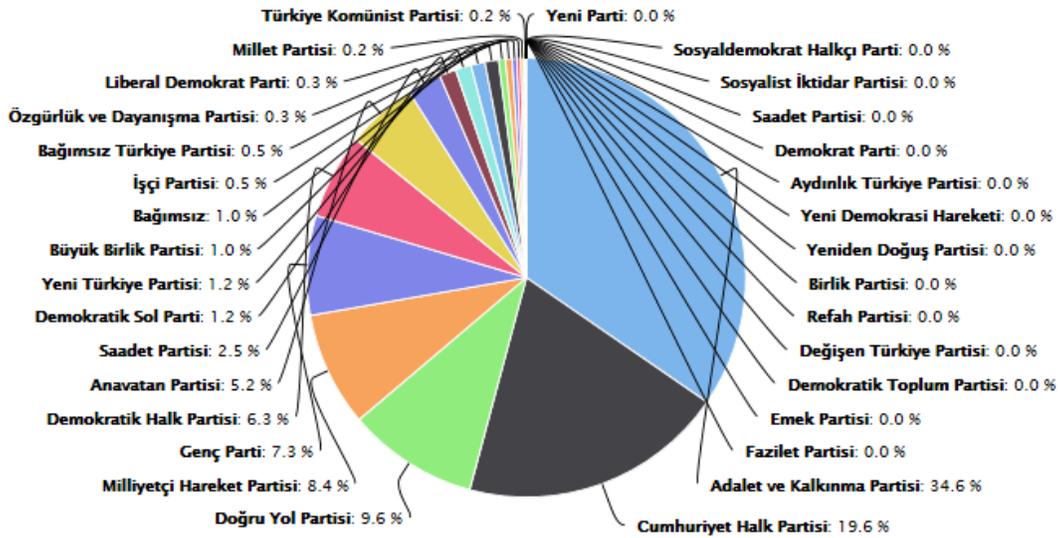


Scheme A2: 2011 General Elections in Turkey (votes by %)

(source: www.akparti.org.tr)

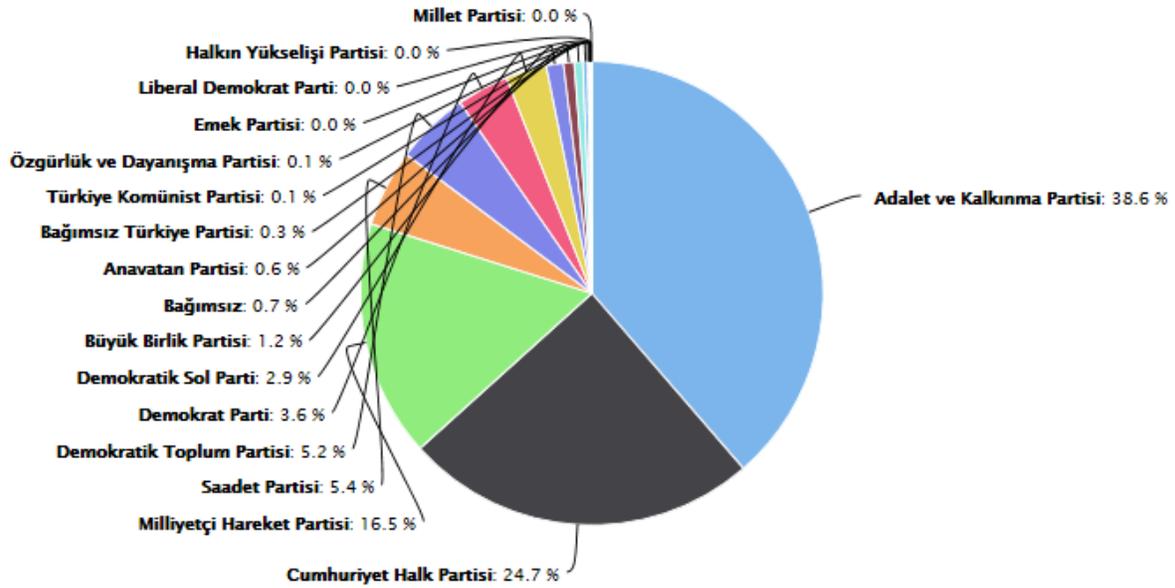


Scheme A3: 2007 General Elections in Turkey (votes by %)

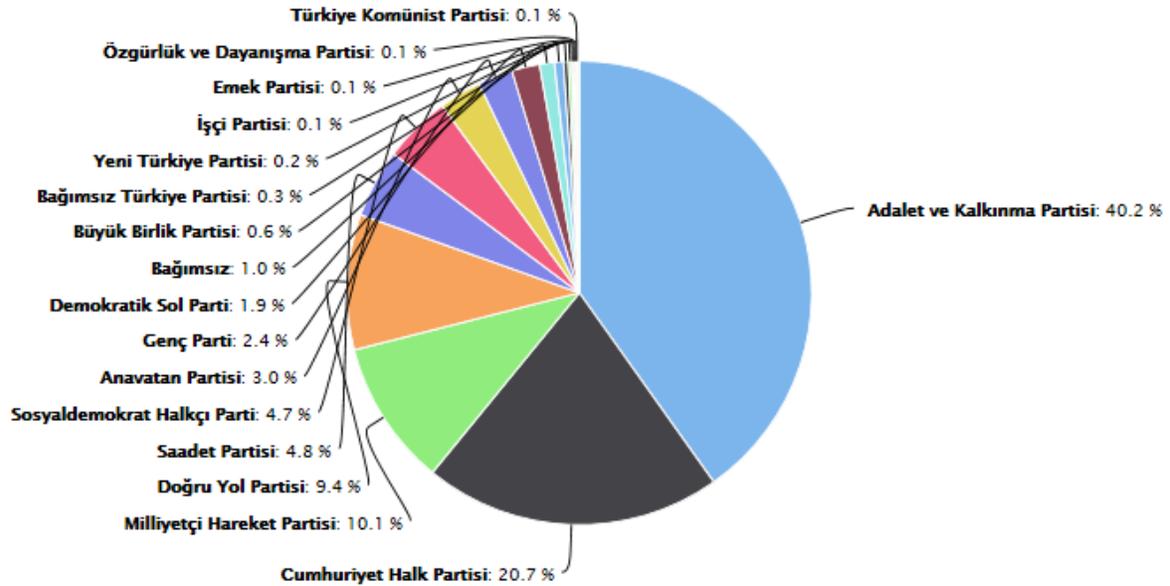
(source: www.akparti.org.tr)

Scheme A4: 2002 General Elections in Turkey (votes by %)

(source: www.akparti.org.tr)



Scheme A5: 2009 Local Elections in Turkey (votes by %)
(source: www.akparti.org.tr)



Scheme A6: 2004 Local Elections in Turkey (votes by %)
(source: www.akparti.org.tr)

APPENDIX B

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Political History

1954	Born in Kasimpasa, a lower middle-class district in Istanbul.
1969	Member of National View Association (Milli Gorus Teskilan), a think-tank of both the National Order Party and the National Salvation Party (MSP).
1980	BA degree from department of economics and trade, Marmara University in Istanbul.
1984	Became the head of the Welfare Party's (RP) Beyoglu District Branch in Istanbul.
1986	Elected to the central executive committee of the RP.
1989	RP's candidate for the Beyoglu mayoralty. Although he lost, he tripled RP votes in Beyoglu compared to last results.
1994	The RP nominated him as their candidate for Istanbul metropolitan mayor and won.
1994-98	Major of Istanbul metropolitan city
1998	Received a prison sentence of 4 ½ months and was banned from active politics.
2001	Founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP)
2002	AKP party won the general elections in Turkey
2003-14	Erdogan served as the 25 th Prime Minister of Turkey
2014	Erdogan elected as the 12 th President of Turkish Republic