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The Authoritarian Turn in Turkey and the Weakness of the Authoritarian System

Following the attempted coup on 15 July 2016, Turkey is experiencing an authoritarian turn. But its underlying causes go back much further. When the governing party AKP came into power in 2002, it allowed itself, in an alliance with Kurds and liberal forces, to be led by a pro-EU orientation. But in recent years, with accession to the EU looking unlikely, it has sought a monopoly on power. This strategy is helped by the blurred boundaries between the governing party and state functions, the marginalisation of opposition voices and a network of patronage for its own supporters. – S. K.

Turkey is a prime example of the dramatic decline in the quality of democracy and the rise of illiberal authoritarian tendencies. Various factors, including the end of realistic prospects of joining the EU, have contributed to this authoritarian turn. The country has been continuously sliding towards becoming a competitive authoritarian system since 2011 at the very least, following the outbreak of unrest in the Arab world.¹ In the case of Turkey, this development is characterised by a stark monopolising of power, an increasing blurring of the boundaries between state functions and the governing party, the governing party's unchecked access to state resources, increasing control of the media, restrictions to the freedom of the press and the extensive limitation of democratic protest at elections. In recent years state funds have been used to create a media and economic bloc close to the government. This in turn guarantees the governing party's hegemony over the public discourse and its monopoly on economic redistribution.

Parallel to these developments, the governing *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Party for Justice and Development, AKP) has increasingly lost ideological substance. Its most prominent representatives from its early years are now no longer in the parliamentary club or its institutions and have largely become isolated. They were replaced by people who have shown absolute loyalty to president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. That is, the monopoly on state power has gone hand in hand with Erdoğan's monopoly on power within the party.

While the Gezi protests in 2013 (see RGWO 7–8/2013, 13–15) introduced a new phase marked by the delegitimisation of public protest and stricter security laws (in response to the protests a new security law was passed granting the police far-reaching rights), following the failed coup of 15 July 2016 there have been extensive "purges" and a changing of the guard in public and even in the private sector. This article primarily examines the structural framework and those factors contributing to the monopolising of power in Turkey.

The EU accession process causes a reform bottleneck

Awarding Turkey the status of an official candidate country in 1999 had the effect of boosting democratisation. Many of the

political obstacles to liberalising the system were overcome and a pro-EU coalition was formed from a broad spectrum of interests, from Islamists and Kurds to Kemalists. While oppressed groups such as Islamists and Kurds hoped for greater freedoms, many Kemalists saw the prospects of joining the EU as preserving secularism and the Kemalist character of the state. For a long time the Kemalist establishment, led by the army, had delayed the democratic opening up of the country out of concerns it might strengthen Islamic forces and encourage Kurdish separatism.

The parliamentary elections of 2002 took place in the shadow of the severe financial crisis that had rocked the country since the previous year and had the effect of a political earthquake. None of the established centre parties managed to get back into parliament. The AKP suddenly achieved an absolute majority. Only a year earlier it had been born of the schism in the Islamist camp brought about by reformists around Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The party was founded as a result of the realistic assessment that ideological Islamic politics had next to no chance of success in Turkey. The party programme reflects the de-ideologisation and adaptation to global discourses and concepts. Taking up a pro-EU line and continuing the economic reforms introduced in consultation with the IMF (International Monetary Fund) following the financial crisis are two prime examples of the pragmatism shaping AKP policy from the very outset.

Supported by entrepreneurs, by liberal and to an extent even Kemalist elements, the AKP wasted no time in pushing through extensive legal reforms, for instance new penal and civil codes and far-reaching changes to the constitution. The institutional reforms enabling adaptation to European norms and procedures reduced the predominance of the military and Kemalist bureaucracy.

The constitution passed in 1982 under the aegis of the army following the military coup of 1980 introduced many controlling bodies intended to limit and check the power of elected governments. Such controlling bodies include the university council, the highest radio and television authority and the powerful National Security Council. All of these bodies contained military men along with representatives of the Kemalist bureaucracy. The National Security Council



The Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the mass demonstration against the failed military putsch ("democracy and martyr assembly") in Istanbul on 7 August.

Photo: Keystone

(MGK – *Milli Güvenlik Konseyi*), was dominated by the generals. The reforms related to EU accession led to restructuring and new personnel within these bodies. The military men were replaced by civilians appointed by either the government or the parliament. This squeezing out of the military was not accompanied by fundamental structural reform however. The centralist and authoritarian character of the Kemalist state remained untouched.

Although the reforms introduced with an eye on EU accession were in line with basic liberal values, the process did not usher in the development of a liberal democracy, but laid the foundations for reinforcing authoritarian tendencies.

The system becomes unbalanced

Reducing the influence of the military was an important step towards democratising the political system, but it was not accompanied by an extensive restructuring of the state or decentralisation. The military had always played a special role in the tradition of Turkish statehood: it was the only institution to enjoy complete autonomy from the government. It had its own budget and its own jurisdiction free from civil control. In this sense, the ousting of the military amounted to the dissolution of the separation of powers, albeit an undemocratic one.²

Since the founding of the Republic in 1923, the army had considered itself the guardian of secularism and the country's Western orientation. Following the transition to a multi-party system in 1946, it had often intervened against elected governments. Together with the Kemalist bureaucracy, which controlled the powerful state machinery, the military regarded themselves as a counterweight to the elected governments, which in their opinion were all too often populist and driven by their own interests. The generals and officers perceived themselves as serving as a corrective force on behalf of the state's positivist orientation, putting Western orientation and secularism before democracy.

The reduction of military and Kemalist influence in the state and the economy went hand in hand with the rise of

new forces better disposed towards the AKP or indeed created by the party. At this time, an important role was also played by the Gülen movement, named after the preacher, which was mainly active in the education sector and whose supporters had been increasingly forcing their way into state institutions since the 1980s. The movement provided the religious and well-educated cadres that the governing party lacked at the time.

Several court cases in which leading Kemalist and ultra-nationalist circles were accused of conspiring against the elected AKP government led to a massive restructuring within the ranks of mil-

itary officers, which mainly benefited officers close to the Gülen movement, as became clear after the attempted coup of 15 July.

The disappearance of EU prospects and its consequences

A second important factor weakening the already weak and moreover non-democratic balance of power and checks and balances was the loss of realistic prospects of accession to the EU. While for many secular people in Turkey hope of joining the EU, albeit in the distant future, had guaranteed the democratic and above all the Western orientation of the country, these hopes were dashed by the negative signals coming from individual European capitals. In response, Turkey was gripped by a wave of anti-European and anti-imperialist nationalism. The ruling AKP could mobilise this atmosphere for its own ends by alluding to the Ottoman past and promoting a popular culture characterised by films, TV series, music, architecture and cuisine full of Ottoman references. In this context one can also observe that Tayyip Erdoğan acted with greater certainty and contrariness, particularly in dealing with Western partners.

The third significant factor paving the way for the AKP's monopoly on power on all levels of the state was the end of its cohabitation with Kemalism. State president Necdet Sezer's term in office came to an end in 2007. The former president of the constitutional court was considered to be a dyed-in-the-wool Kemalist. Since all laws had to be ratified by the president and the president also had the power of veto over appointments to government positions, many critics of the AKP considered Sezer to be a safeguard for Kemalist-type secularism. Especially due to his power of veto over appointments in the public sector, Sezer balanced out the absolute political power of the AKP government.

The nomination of Abdullah Gül, one of Erdoğan's old cronies, as Sezer's successor led to the ultimate splintering of the fragile pro-EU coalition formed by liberals, secularists, conservatives and Islamists who had supported the reform process.

The consolidation of power

The disappearance of structural obstacles was followed by a phase of consolidating power that continues to this day, principally characterised by a party-political personnel policy in public institutions and companies close to the state and by the marginalisation of oppositional and critical voices. Increasingly authoritarian actions are legitimised by scenarios of external and internal threats. Alternatingly, representatives of the Kemalist establishment, the Gezi protest movement, the Gülen movement and the Kurdish movement are labelled enemies of the democratic system, as extreme, foreign elements in a nation portrayed as homogenous. In this context, the failed coup provided fresh “ammunition” for a new “enemy”.

In a discourse led by the rhetoric of friends and enemies, the AKP is portrayed as the only legitimate democratic force, on the basis of its strong electoral support. The party's battle against its opponents (real and imagined) is dressed up as a battle for democracy. This discourse can also be observed in public institutions and the judiciary due to the blurring of the boundaries between the state and the governing party.

The redistribution of state resources to entrepreneurs close to the AKP via privatisation and awarding licenses, contacts etc. has created a corporate sector close to the government. The involvement of the governing party and its leaders in the economy has further reinforced their hegemony. Many people have begun to feel that nothing can be achieved without the AKP. Even among the less well-off, patronage networks have created relationships of financial dependency. Many people fear that the end of AKP rule would mean the end of their jobs, their status and their prosperity. Their associating their own well-being with the continuation of AKP rule is a significant factor contributing to the party's grip on power.

The attempted coup and its consequences

The events of 15 July 2016 highlight above all the weaknesses of AKP rule. Ironically, the challenge to the party's predominance came not from Kemalist forces, but from members of the military widely considered to have been close to the Gülen movement. The nationalist-religious movement that has risen around the preacher Gülen was strongly represented principally in the judiciary, the security forces and the education sector. Several universities and above all preparatory courses for university entrance exams were connected to it and were considered important places for the recruitment of cadres. The placing of these cadres in the public sector or in companies and media groups close to this movement is an expression of the reciprocal relationship between formal and informal structures that has always existed but that has gained in significance due to the polarisation in society.³ The Gülen supporters were considered to be loyal allies of the AKP due to their faith, their

nationalist orientation and not least due to the alliance with the ruling party. Gülenists often replaced Kemalist forces, whom the AKP long considered the greater threat. The background to the break between Gülen and Tayyip Erdoğan is not clear, but the Gülen movement's increasing claims to power played a role in it. In 2012 at the latest, the government began to squeeze out the Gülen movement. However, from the current perspective it turns out that this was done only half-heartedly and it is often not easy to determine where the AKP ends and where the Gülen movement begins.

The attempted coup provided the government with the opportunity to declare a state of emergency and to take rigorous action against the movement. The government's response confirms the suspicion however that it is reacting without any plan. In this regard, the mass dismissals, the arrests and the restrictions placed on critical journalists are not a sign of strength, but must be considered a sign of weakness. Whether the AKP is forced to embark on a more inclusive path once more or whether it will become even more authoritarian remains to be seen.

Notes

- 1) Levitsky, Steven; Way, Lucian: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism. In: *Journal of Democracy* 13, 2 (2002), 51–65. Levitsky, Steven; Way, Lucian: *Competitive Authoritarianism. Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. Cambridge 2010.
- 2) Ülgen, Sinan: From Inspiration to Aspiration. Turkey in the New Middle East. In: *The Carnegie Papers*. Dezember 2011; http://carnegieendowment.org/files/turkey_mid_east.pdf.
- 3) Baskan-Canyas, Filiz; Canyas, Orkunt F.: The Interplay between Formal and Informal Institutions in Turkey: the Case of the Fethullah Gülen Community. In: *Middle Eastern Studies* 52, 2 (2016), 280–294.

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The Turkish government reacted to the Gezi protests in 2013 with stricter security laws.

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