

The Post-Pandemic Landscape in Turkey

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Political Arena and Shades of Authoritarianism

In the last year, Turkey has held more or less steady in the rankings referring to its political situation. According to Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2022* report,¹ Turkey had a global freedom score of 32 out of 100 for the year, and its political regime was classified as "Not Free." It scored 16 out of 40 on political rights and 16 out of 60 on civil liberties, unchanged from the previous year's report.²

Meanwhile, the 2022 BTI Transformation Index³ ranked Turkey 63rd out of 137 countries (with the top-performing country ranking first), denouncing the "consolidation of authoritarianism"³ and describing its political regime as a "moderate autocracy."

In the political sphere, the presidentialist system implemented after the controversial 2017 referendum concentrates executive power in the figure of the President, who has moreover expanded his influence over the legislative and executive branches. In 2017, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission warned of the risk posed by this reform, which paved the way for an authoritarian and personalist regime. In the wake of the attempted coup of July 2016, the country was subjected to a wide-ranging political purge affecting all types of dissidence. Although the state of emergency proclaimed after the coup ended in July 2018, the anti-terrorism law was strengthened and

certain government authorities have retained their extraordinary powers to this day.

As for the political opposition parties, attention should be drawn to the continued imprisonment of Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, co-chairs at the time of their arrest of the second largest opposition party, the pro-Kurdish progressive People's Democratic Party (HDP), along with other members of parliament. In a December 2020 judgment, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) called for Demirtaş's immediate release, denouncing that he had been preventively detained on political grounds, a decision likewise applicable to other MPs from the party. Notwithstanding the Court's harsh criticism and the binding nature of its judgment on Turkey, the HDP MPs remain in prison. Other MPs were also stripped of their immunity over the last year and arrested on terrorism-related charges. One of the affected parties, Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu, regained his status as MP following an appeal to the Constitutional Court. In June 2021, that same Court agreed to hear a case to ban the party, which was accused of acting as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), classified as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the European Union (EU) and the United States. HDP's closure would deliver a serious blow to the country's political pluralism. The party has lost 11 of the 67 MPs it won in the 2018 general election for the Turkish Grand National Assembly, retaining just 56. Furthermore, since the 2019 local elections, 48 of the party's mayors have been removed from their positions at the head of their respective municipalities. All of this is compounded by the brutal murder of party member Deniz Poyraz in her office in Izmir, also in June.

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2022>.

² <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2021>.

³ <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/TUR>.

Although the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), does not face such a repressive context, some of its most prominent figures have nevertheless also been targeted by the judiciary. The Court of Cassation upheld the prison sentence for its provincial chair in Istanbul, Canan Kaftancıoğlu, set at 4 years and 11 months in May 2022, for tweets she had made between 2012 and 2017, mostly in relation to the 2013 anti-government protests in Gezi Park. Kaftancıoğlu played a key role in the victory of Istanbul's mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, who is also facing a potential prison sentence for allegedly insulting members of the Supreme Election Council after they cancelled the local elections he had won in 2019, wresting control of Istanbul from the Justice and Development Party (AKP) after 25 years at the helm of one of the country's most important mayoralties. The repeat election held one month later would reaffirm his victory. Meanwhile, the central government has taken back powers delegated to the local government, undermining the city council's ability to act, and, in December of last year, the Interior Ministry launched an investigation against hundreds of city employees, accused of having ties to terrorist groups, prompting strong criticism from the city's mayor for the handling of the investigation.

Rapprochements for a United Opposition

In this context, movements have taken place in the political field of the opposition to the governing coalition. Although the presidential system monopolizes executive power in the figure of the President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's party failed to win an absolute majority in parliament in the 2018 general elections. Its alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) led by Devlet Bahçeli was key to strengthening its position in the body vis-à-vis the rest of the parties. On the other hand, the expansion of presidential power and erosion of rights and freedoms that the country has experienced in recent years has sparked shifts towards unity across the opposition spectrum.

The 2018 general elections and 2019 local elections proved an excellent setting to observe formal alliances and informal support amongst the opposition parties, which yielded tangible results, such as

the election of an opposition candidate as mayor of Istanbul, the heart of the country.

Over the last year, rapprochements have been undertaken with the aim of establishing a joint roadmap to restore the parliamentary system and replace the current presidential one. These shifts involved two political factions splintered off from the AKP: the Future Party (GP), founded by former Foreign and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA Partisi), founded by former Economy Minister Ali Babacan. They were joined by the CHP, led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and an MHP splinter group, the Good Party (İyi Parti), founded by Meral Akşener in 2017, after she was expelled from the party for challenging the leadership of Bahçeli, who had become a key ally for the party in power. These parties would also be joined by the Felicity Party (SP), led by Temel Karamollaoğlu, which, like the AKP, emerged following the banning of the Islamist Virtue Party (FP) in 2001, and the Democrat Party (DP), led by Gültekin Uysal, in agreeing a joint statement, signed in February 2022, with the aim of restoring the parliamentary system and launching a democratization process to expand fundamental rights and freedoms, explicitly and expressly affirming their commitment to the rights of Turkish women. The second largest opposition party, the HDP, did not participate in the agreement, nor did it hide its anger with an alliance from which it felt excluded. In fact, it will play a key role in future elections. It thus remains to be seen whether the HDP will find a way to insert itself in this roadmap to a democratic parliamentary system or if its exclusion will weaken the opposition to the party in power.

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These movements towards unity are, in turn, arising in a political context of growing partisan fragmentation. At present, 14 parties are represented in the

600-member-strong Turkish Parliament, of which only five have more than 35 MPs. Another nine parties have at most one, two or four MPs (this is the case of the Turkish Workers' Party, TIP), and seven MPs represent their constituents as independents. Of these parties, the Homeland Party (MP) was founded by the former CHP presidential candidate Muharrem İnce, and Ümit Özdağ's Victory Party arose from a schism to the right of the İyi Parti last year. Previously, in 2020, two other political forces had emerged in parliament, including the DEVA Partisi. The electoral and social effects of this partisan fragmentation will become tangible in the 2023 elections. The leader of the CHP, Kılıçdaroğlu, himself has called attention to "forces that appear to be the opposition" but which, in reality, could be instruments of power intended to distort the political arena.

The Erosion of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms

The year 2021 was not a good one for the defence of fundamental rights and duties in the country. Although a Human Rights Action Plan was announced, it failed to address the most pressing issues in this area. The European Commission's annual country report for Turkey noted the continued "deterioration of human and fundamental rights," underscoring the broad-scale restrictions imposed, which affect freedom of expression and promote censorship or self-censorship of critical voices, as well as the difficulties in exercising the freedom of assembly and association, which, according to the report, faces "recurrent bans, disproportionate interventions and excessive use of force in peaceful demonstrations, investigations, administrative fines and prosecutions against demonstrators on charges of terrorism-related activities. Legislation and its implementation are not in line with the Turkish Constitution, European standards or with international conventions."

In late 2021, the Council of Europe initiated disciplinary action against Turkey for its refusal to comply with the ECHR's binding judgment calling for the release of the philanthropist and activist Osman Kavala, in prison since 2017. Not only was Kavala not released, he was sentenced to life in prison in April 2022, along with seven other defendants, sentenced to prison terms of 18 years. Kavala had been ac-

cused of attempting to overthrow the government at the Gezi demonstrations in a highly controversial trial. After learning of the sentence, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling the detention "unjust, unlawful and illegitimate" and noting that "the current Turkish government has deliberately destroyed any hopes of reopening its EU accession process or opening new chapters and closing open ones under the current circumstances."

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Meanwhile, in July 2021, Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, established to actively combat violence against women following a presidential decision published in March. Turkey was the first country to sign the convention named after its historic city and the only country to withdraw from it. It did so on the grounds that it undermined traditional family values and promoted extramarital affairs and homosexuality. Although the Turkish government indicated that it would design a national action plan to stop violence against women, it has yet to take any relevant measures.

The authoritarian turn taken by the regime in recent years has been accompanied by an openly anti-feminist religious and nationalist discourse. Other groups, such as the LGBTI community, are also facing an increasingly homophobic discourse from political leaders. The ban on celebrating International Pride Day, in force since 2015, for reasons of security and order marked a turning point in how this group is treated, and the context has grown considerably worse in recent years. The index prepared by ILGA-Europe to assess the impact of the laws and policy practices of 49 countries on the lives of LGBTI people ranks Turkey second to last, ahead of only Azerbaijan.

Student demonstrations also played a significant role in 2021, especially in the wake of the presidential appointment of a new rector for one of the coun-

try's most prestigious public universities, Bosphorus University. After the 2016 coup attempt, the President obtained, through separate emergency degrees, the power to appoint university rectors. Although the President had already appointed a candidate as rector for the university in 2016, the appointment of an AKP-affiliated rector, Melih Bulu, in January 2021 sparked strong protests by students and faculty, who called for a return to the democratic system of electing rectors and criticized the new system as a means of undermining university autonomy. Bulu was replaced by Mehmet Naci İnci, again by presidential appointment, in August. The protests, which have continued throughout the year, have been harshly repressed. According to the group Boğaziçi Watch, around 1,000 students have been arrested, two of whom, Berke Gök and Perit Özen, remained in prison from October 2021 to January 2022. This is in addition to the close to one hundred students who have lost their scholarships for participating in the protests and the reprisals suffered by a sector of the faculty.

Overcoming the Pandemic in a Context of Economic Crisis

At the start of the academic year, another series of student protests took place in different parts of the country. This time, the protests criticized the lack of affordable housing and residence halls for university students. The issue of rent was related to one of the most pressing issues affecting the country in 2021, marked and growing year-on-year inflation. Whilst in the second half of the year, the country's economic growth far outpaced that of the rest of the emerging and advanced economies, the depreciation of the lira and high inflation had a decisive impact on the day-to-day lives of Turkish families. Erdoğan's policy, opposed to interest rate hikes, seeks instead to promote credit, exports and cheap labour. But these measures did not help control inflation, which soared over the year, nor could they prevent the dramatic depreciation of the Turkish lira, which plummeted 44% against the dollar. The year closed in December with a year-on-year inflation of 36.1%, which, at the start of 2022, was further exacerbated by the war in Ukraine and a significant increase in the prices of energy and other commodities for which Turkey

depends on imports. The consequences of the war were felt not only in import prices, but also in the cutbacks in exports to Ukraine and the growth prospects of the tourism industry. Russians accounted for the largest groups of tourists to Turkey in 2021, with some 4.7 million visitors. Ukrainians ranked third, after Germans, sending some 2 million travellers to the country.

According to Reuters, Turkey's year-on-year inflation reached 69.97% in April 2022. Erdoğan's economic preferences, markedly against raising interest rates, have affected the Central Bank's independence. Between 2020 and 2021, three Bank governors were removed, and they were not the only ones affected by the changes. In December 2021, Nuredin Nebati replaced Lütfi Elvan as the new Finance Minister.

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Although inflation has continued to grow worryingly in 2022, the lira managed to stabilize itself relatively in late 2021 (compared to the worst months of the economic crisis), reaching a value of 13.36 lire to the dollar in January 2022.

The war has thus slowed the long-awaited economic recovery, driven by the vaccination phenomenon, which began in January with the Chinese Sinovac vaccine and German BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine, which it is hoped will be joined by another of domestic origin to be called Turkovac. Mobility restrictions were gradually and progressively lifted beginning in June, benefitting the summer tourism season. Unemployment fell from 13% in the first quarter of the year to 11.3% in the fourth. Amongst the economically active population, minimum wage workers account for more than 40% of the total labour force. To limit the impact of inflation on their income, the President announced a 50% increase in the minimum wage, bringing it to 4,250 lire in 2022.

The context of economic crisis has negatively contributed to the cultivation of xenophobic potential in Turkish society, which hosts some 3.7 million Syrian

refugees, 1.4 million foreign nationals with residence permits, and a third category of irregular immigrants consisting mostly of Afghans, Pakistanis and Syrians, whose numbers are ambiguous, as well as a final category consisting of some 350,000 asylum seekers. The flames of this xenophobic sentiment are being fanned by some opposition parties, which have weaponized this issue to attack the reception policies of the AKP, which, in recent years, has also promised to promote the voluntary repatriation of, at least, one million Syrians to Turkish-controlled areas of northern Syria. According to the Turkish President, half a million Syrians have already voluntarily returned to their country of origin.

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The economy and the refugee question are two of the key issues that could seriously affect the electoral prospects of the ruling party. A December 2021 survey conducted by MetroPoll pointed to an 8% fall in the AKP's expected share of the vote compared to the 2018 general elections, in contrast to the expected electoral gains of various opposition parties. In the final stretch of the legislative period, the country's internal and external dynamics will surely be marked by the 2023 electoral race.

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