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The AKP after 15 years: emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, several observers of Turkey have recognised a novel development in Turkish politics: the rise of Erdoganism. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's personality and style have come to embody the Turkish nation, the state and its economic, social and political institutions. But what is Erdoganism? What are its main attributes? Is it a mere ideology or the name of the emerging political regime in Turkey? While commentators have provided several observations of Erdoganism, it has not been duly examined on its own in the academic literature. This paper's main premise is that in Turkey, a new political regime has emerged in recent years which can best be defined as Erdoganism. Erdoganism has four main dimensions: electoral authoritarianism as the electoral system, neopatrimonialism as the economic system, populism as the political strategy and Islamism as the political ideology. We first explain why we think Erdoganism is a better concept to define the emerging political regime in Turkey. We briefly discuss Sultanism, Khomeinism and Kemalism in order to produce a set of references for our discussion of Erdoganism. We then provide a thorough analysis, explaining the ways in which Erdoganism manifests itself through electoral authoritarianism, neopatrimonialism, populism and Islamism.

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Introduction

In recent years, several observers of Turkey have recognised a novel development in Turkish politics: the rise of Erdoganism. In his newspaper column right after the July 15 coup attempt in 2016, Hayrettin Karaman, a religious ideologue and Islamic law professor close to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, claimed 'the members of our heroic nation are those who love President Erdoğan and who have not lost their traditional values'.¹ Indeed, such proclamations are abundant in Turkey today. Erdoğan's personality and style have come to embody the Turkish nation, the state and its economic, social and political institutions. But what is Erdoganism? What are its main attributes? Is it a mere ideology or the name of the emerging political regime in Turkey? Within the academic literature, Ahmet Kuru discussed Erdoganism as President Erdoğan's 'one-man rule' filled with populist rhetoric and polemical style.² Ihsan

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Yilmaz examined the evolution of Turkey from Kemalism and Erdoganism, focusing on how these two ideologies tried to create their own palatable citizens through the state institutions they controlled.³ Commentators have also provided various observations of Erdoganism. Mustafa Akyol argued that Erdoganism is 'Erdogan's governing philosophy' which 'is on its way to becoming Turkey's new "official ideology" to replace Kemalism'.⁴ He further asserted that Erdoganism 'is mainly a story of populism'.⁵ Soner Cagaptay and Oya Aktas claimed 'Political Islam, authoritarianism, and Turkish nationalism are now integral pieces of Erdoganism', which also 'blends post-colonial theory with anti-Westernism'.⁶ For Tanil Bora, Erdoganism 'refers to a form of governance and ideology' around Erdogan's cult of personality.⁷ Despite this interest in Erdoganism, it has not been duly examined on its own and has not been clearly defined.

This paper's main premise is that in Turkey, a new political regime has emerged in recent years which can best be defined as Erdoganism. Erdoganism refers to the emerging political regime in Turkey that has four main dimensions: electoral authoritarianism as the electoral system, neopatrimonialism as the economic system, populism as the political strategy and Islamism as the political ideology. In explaining this development, this paper makes two contributions to the literature. One, it examines Erdoganism as a novel phenomenon in Turkish politics. Rather than merely an ideology, our paper defines Erdoganism as a political regime type that encompasses not only ideological, but also political, economic and stylistic aspects of the emerging regime in Turkey.

Two, it aims at making a better conceptualisation of the latest changes in Turkey. In describing Turkey's ongoing process of democratic roll-back since the late 2000s, scholars have provided an array of concepts to describe it: 'delegative democracy',⁸ 'illiberal democracy',⁹ 'competitive authoritarianism',¹⁰ 'electoral authoritarianism',¹¹ and 'weak authoritarian'.¹² Our research indicates that the political regime in Turkey has evolved into 'electoral authoritarianism' in recent years. Nevertheless, we claim that this concept falls short of providing a holistic picture of the emerging regime, as it leaves out the discussion of the regime's economic, ideological and strategic features, which correspond to neopatrimonialism, Islamism and populism, respectively. In order to overcome this conceptual inadequacy, we offer a new definition, called Erdoganism, which combines elements of electoral authoritarianism, neopatrimonialism, populism and Islamism.

In what follows, we first explain why we think Erdoganism is a better concept to define the emerging political regime in Turkey. We briefly discuss Sultanism, Khomeinism and Kemalism in order to produce a set of references for our discussion of Erdoganism. After providing a concise background to Turkey's evolution under Adalet and Kalkinma Partisi - Justice and Development Party (AKP) from a model Muslim democracy to an authoritarian state, we provide a thorough analysis, explaining the ways in which Erdoganism manifests itself through electoral authoritarianism, neopatrimonialism, populism and Islamism.

Why Erdoganism?

As we mentioned above, we offer a new term, called 'Erdoganism', which defines the emerging Turkish regime that combines elements of electoral authoritarianism, neopatrimonialism, Islamism and populism. Why not another universal category? We believe no universal category adequately captures the main tenets of the regime in Turkey. Electoral authoritarianism leaves out the regime's three other important elements: neopatrimonialism, Islamism and populism.

Because Erdoganism is a personalistic regime, we discuss Sultanism, Khomeinism and Kemalism as personalistic regimes to produce basic reference points for our discussion of Erdoganism in Turkey. Certainly, these are not the only types of personalistic regimes in the world, or in Muslim-majority countries, and neither do we ignore important differences between these regimes and Erdoganism. Rather, our contention is that despite the differences, similarities emanating from their personalistic character can help us generate the main dimensions of the Erdoganist regime in Turkey.

Sultanism is a universal category that fails to provide a holistic picture of the regime in Turkey. Sultanistic regimes 'are a generic domain of extreme patrimonialism where the state is assumed to be closely bound up with the fate of the leader'.¹³ Moreover, 'the distinction between regime and state is much more blurred' in these regimes.¹⁴ The developments in Turkey in the post-2016 abortive coup period have pointed at extreme personalisation of the regime whereby the fate of Erdoğan the leader and Turkey have merged. However, as Chehabi and Linz mention, sultanistic regimes are

based on personal rulership, but loyalty to the ruler is motivated not by his embodying or articulating an ideology, not by a unique personal mission, nor by any charismatic qualities, but by a mixture of fear and rewards to his collaborators.¹⁵

Hence, Sultanistic regimes lack any ideology and they are not popular at all, as they rule by fear and rewards.¹⁶ In contrast, the Erdoganist regime in Turkey is popular with a significant portion of the society. Also, Islamism is an important feature of the Erdoganist regime and provides a significant ideological backbone. The regime instrumentalises Islam in generating justifications for its hegemonic role in Turkish society and politics, in demanding obedience to its rule, and in sustaining the support of its voter base. Therefore, Sultanism is not a sufficient category to capture the main tenets of the regime in Turkey.

Khomeinism emerged in Iran after the 1979 Revolution. It referred to a form of governance and ideology around Ayatollah Khomeini and his cult of personality.¹⁷ Khomeinism was against representative politics. Within two years, it had outlawed most opposition parties, both secular and Islamic, such as the Tudeh Party, the Islamic People's Republican Party, and the People's Fighters.¹⁸ While the regime introduced presidential elections after 1979 as a show of respect to popular will, as Jason Brownlee shows, they 'had come to function as plebiscites of approval for the system ... negotiations within the regime had produced a leading candidate whom the public then elected overwhelmingly'.¹⁹ Under the Khomeinist regime, neopatrimonialism has become the norm of state–society relations whereby 'easy access to allocated oil revenue and unchecked trade activities have provided some religiously-privileged groups with unique opportunities to form autonomous politico-economic bonds'.²⁰ The regime directed the state budget to the regime-connected companies and organisations such as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Imam Charity Committee (ICC), which in turn propagated its ideology. The Khomeinist regime also regularly confiscated property belonging to the political opposition under the banner of 'war booty according to religious law' and distributed it to its cronies.²¹ In this sense, the Khomeinist regime made instrumental use of Islamism to pursue its political goals. The regime and its leaders constantly resorted to religious dogmas, such as being heirs to the 'Hidden Imam' or 'Sayyed' to justify their 'divine' right to rule and free themselves from checks and balances.²² Indeed, the use of such popular notions was part of the Khomeinist regime's populism as well. It divided the society into two rival camps of the oppressors, imperialists and the West on the one hand, and the oppressed Muslims on the other, and positioned itself as the

protector of the latter against the former. Khomeini and other Iranian populist leaders, most importantly Mahmood Ahmadinejad, constructed an image of a 'saviour' around themselves, embellished by motifs of ancient Persian empires and the Shi'ite Imamate.²³

Kemalism was the official doctrine of the Turkish Republic before it was replaced by Erdoganism. Kemalism was mainly a nationalist and secularist regime and was centred around the authoritarian figure of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.²⁴ Mustafa Kemal viewed his party as an institution 'representing the entire Turkish people and the general interests of the nation'.²⁵ In Atatürk's lifetime, only his party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), 'competed' at the elections, the purpose of which was to rubberstamp the candidates chosen by Atatürk himself.²⁶ The Kemalist regime continued the neo-patrimonial practices of the late Ottoman era such as state manufacturing of a nationalist bourgeoisie that would be loyal to the regime and control the media for the benefit of the rulers. Property of non-Muslim citizens of Turkey, who were dismissed as 'foreigners' and even 'traitors', was either confiscated or meted out by heavy taxes and then was channelled to the nationalist 'Turkish' bourgeoisie.²⁷ As an ideology, Kemalism rested on secular Turkish nationalism and the personality cult of Mustafa Kemal who was presented as the father of the nation, its saviour and its teacher. Kemalism discriminated against practicing Muslims, Kurds, Alevis and non-Muslims based on secularist and nationalist notions and homogenisation policies. Kemalism was also populist. Indeed, one of its six fundamental principles is populism. Mustafa Kemal misused the concept of 'the national will', viewed himself as the representative of the national will and dismissed his critics as traitors.²⁸

As the above analysis shows, Sultanism, Khomenism and Kemalism are personalistic regimes in which the leader embodies the fate of the nation and the state. Elections, when they take place, act as a rubber stamp for the regime's preferred policies. They are also neo-patrimonial regimes in which state resources are distributed among regime cronies and clients. However, in contrast to Sultanism, both Khomenism and Kemalism are populist regimes that rely on nationalist ideologies and blend them with a thick ideology such as secularism and Islamism, to maintain their legitimacy. Recent political developments in Turkey point at a similarly personalised but highly popular regime that crushes domestic opposition at will, distributes economic benefits to its supporters in a discriminatory fashion and uses religious nationalism as an ideological backbone to its practices.

Emergence of the Erdoganist regime in Turkey

AKP in Turkey has Islamist origins. The party is the latest and the most successful political organisation of the Islamist National Outlook Movement (Milli Görüş Hareketi, MGH) in Turkey. Political Islamism emerged in the 1970s as a formidable challenger to hegemonic Kemalist ideology in Turkey. The MGH created Islamist political parties in the 1970s which rejected Kemalism and offered an Islamist path as an alternative to Kemalist notions of secular nationalism, Westernisation and modernisation.²⁹ Erdogan and other leading members of the MGH were constantly agitating their voters with Islamist pleas, dividing them along religious lines. For example, for Erdogan, elections in Turkey were 'a census' on religious identity, where Muslims voted for the MGH parties, and non-Muslims voted for other parties.³⁰ The Erdogan-led Welfare Party (RP) won the 1995 general elections and earned the right to create a government as the leading member of a coalition. Erdoğan also won his first major election in 1994 when he became the mayor of Istanbul from the RP ticket.

However, the RP continued to be an Islamist party in power after 1995. Its leaders, including Erbakan and Erdoğan, continued their anti-democratic and Islamist positions. Although they began to pay lip service to themes such as secularism and democracy, their Islamist character resulted in the 1997 postmodern coup when the Erbakan-led government was toppled and moved out of office by the Kemalist military establishment. Immediately after the coup, the reformist younger generation of Turkish Islamists claimed to have changed their orientation towards democracy and started to make references to universal human rights and other Western ideals.³¹

AKP was established by the reformist wing of the MGH in 2001. The leaders of the party claimed to have abandoned the retrogressive Islamist outlook for democracy and human rights. Immediately after seizing power in 2002, AKP began to pass democratisation reforms aimed at fulfilling the Copenhagen Criteria of the European Union (EU) and strengthening democracy in Turkey.³² This led some scholars to argue that the party 'embraced a process of moderation and pragmatic change' over ideological objectives, and hence gave us 'the best picture we have so far of what Muslim Democracy might become and what it might stand for'.³³ Scholars argued that AKP pragmatically embraced notions of democracy to survive in power, reframe its image as a democratic actor, and gain the support of the EU and those segments of society that previously did not vote for Islamist parties, such as Kurds, liberals and the Gülen movement.³⁴

Although the AKP government managed to start official negotiations for accession with the EU by 2005, severe opposition by Germany and France against Turkey's EU membership, as well as the Cyprus debacle, considerably stalled the accession process.³⁵ AKP's reform drive also faded by 2007. As Murat Somer explains, instead of democratic consolidation, AKP was instead focused on consolidating its power and 'capturing the state' in its second period in power from 2007 to 2011.³⁶ The party continued to make strategic use of political reforms to weaken rival political institutions and capture them from within. Particularly instructive in this sense were the judiciary and military. The 2010 Referendum introduced sweeping changes to the Constitution, reorganising the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors in order to bring them under the government's control. The changes also reduced the military's power by restricting its privileges to intervene in social affairs and severely curbing the authority of military courts. Furthermore, in a series of investigations between 2008 and 2011 called Ergenekon and Balyoz, the government purged as well as put to trial tens of high-ranking military generals who were accused of plotting to overthrow the government. Along with the Constitutional changes in 2010, these developments terminated the Kemalist hegemony in the judiciary and weakened the military's de facto checks on AKP's executive power.³⁷

The second AKP government also started to undermine another important institution that was key to checking its power: independent media. Beginning with 2009, the AKP government started to jail journalists en masse on dubious charges as part of the Ergenekon and Balyoz cases. By 2012, there were 61 journalists in gaol in Turkey according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, more than any other country in the world.³⁸

Their decisive victory in the 2011 general elections gave the Islamists yet another electoral opportunity to form a government of their own. In contrast to the previous two periods, however, this time they were free to a great extent from the shackles of Kemalist bureaucracy and the military establishment. However, rather than further democratising the system, they

decided to take a decisive reverse turn, and began to work on establishing an authoritarian populist regime around the cult of Erdoğan.

Electoral authoritarianism

An important feature of Erdoganism is 'electoral authoritarianism'. Electoral authoritarian regimes have three common characteristics: an uneven playing field for the opposition, elections that are neither fair nor free, and a widespread crackdown on fundamental freedoms. In electoral authoritarian systems, opposition exists, but opponents are not allowed to win the majority of votes. Opposition parties' existence mainly serves to legitimate the authoritarian political system which, in selective ways, continues to repress them. In electoral authoritarian systems, elections for legislative and executive offices occur regularly, yet they are often rigged in favour of the incumbent. The elections are not 'competitive', because political freedoms are severely curtailed. Heavy authoritarian controls prevent certain parties from participating in elections, or campaigning for them. The elections themselves often involve vote rigging and electoral fraud in various forms such as ballot-box stuffing, vote buying and voter intimidation. Finally, electoral authoritarian systems engage in widespread violation of civil liberties. They frequently harass independent media, restrict freedom of association and speech, and suppress government critics.³⁹

Similarly to White and Herzog, we also categorise the Turkish political regime as electoral authoritarianism.⁴⁰ Since 2011, the regime in Turkey has come to represent all three characteristics of an electoral authoritarian regime. To begin with, the political playing field has been increasingly skewed to favour the incumbent regime. Independent media was prevented from covering the opposition parties, and their members were harassed and frequently arrested on spurious charges.⁴¹

Secondly, elections since 2015 have been neither free nor fair. This is a radically pervasive development in Turkish politics, since although Turkey had never been a liberal democracy, the political elections had been free and fair since 1950 and the incumbents left their offices peacefully after losing elections. However, the 7 June and 1 November elections in 2015 and especially the Constitutional Referendum in 2017 demonstrated that those days were over. AKP refused to relinquish power after failing to establish parliamentary majority in the June 2015 elections. The biggest opposition party, CHP, accused President Erdoğan of preventing the opposition parties from establishing a coalition government in the period following the elections.⁴² During the process of this 'constructed impasse' in the summer of 2015, the government re-started the war with the Partîye Karkaren Kurdistan - Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the south-east of Turkey, as the latter resorted to terrorism.⁴³ Coupled with AKP's politics of fear, the PKK's terrorist attacks led the Turkish voters to believe that AKP's loss of power was the reason behind the new wave of terror. Together with the 'inability' of the opposition parties to form a coalition government, this atmosphere of fear helped AKP to gain its power back in November 2015 as the party received 50% of votes in the new elections.⁴⁴

A more pervasive set of developments took place during the 2017 Constitutional Referendum cycle that changed Turkey's political regime from a parliamentary system to a strong presidential one. The referendum was conducted in an environment of an unprecedented level of fear and restrictions against the opposition forces who campaigned for a 'No' vote. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Preliminary

Report claimed that 'Lack of equal opportunities, one-sided media coverage and limitations on fundamental freedoms created [an] unlevel playing field in Turkey's constitutional referendum'.⁴⁵ AKP won the referendum by the slightest margin: 51% 'Yes' against 49% 'No'. However, both international and opposition election observers documented widespread irregularities during the vote-counting. Opposition parties claimed that the elections were rigged and demanded the results be annulled, to no avail.⁴⁶

Thirdly, the political regime has conducted an unprecedented level of crackdown against opposition forces ever since the 2013 Gezi Protests in Istanbul. During the 2013 Gezi Protests, the opponents of the AKP government 'who were fed up with an aggressive and dominant political style' poured into the streets to protest the regime.⁴⁷ The latter responded harshly, and in the crackdown eight protesters were killed and hundreds were wounded.⁴⁸

In December 2013, a series of police investigations revealed corruption involving high-level AKP elite including Recep Erdoğan's son Bilal Erdoğan and three cabinet ministers. The regime refused to let its elite to be investigated. Erdoğan characterised the investigations as a judicial coup designed by the Gülen movement and initiated a comprehensive crackdown against the latter. The police officers in charge of the operations were arrested. The prosecutors of the case were replaced and the cases were subsequently closed.⁴⁹ In the following months, the regime appointed its trustees to all Gülen-affiliated media organisations to turn them into pro-AKP mouthpieces and other institutions, effectively usurping thousands of private properties.

The government's crackdown against the Gülen movement reached a massive scale after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Despite a lack of clear evidence⁵⁰ the government blamed the Gülenists for the coup. Erdoğan and AKP used the coup attempt as a justification for mass detention of not only Gülen movement members but anyone who criticised Erdoğan and his political regime. In 2017, Amnesty International reported 'the arbitrary dismissal of more than 100,000 public sector employees' which included over 3500 judges, 'members of the armed forces, police officers, teachers, doctors, academics, and people working at all levels of central and local government'.⁵¹ The persecuted judges and public prosecutors were replaced with those loyal to the Erdoganist regime. These massive purges and evacuation of complete branches of state bureaucracy provided a suitable ground for AKP to rig the Constitutional Referendum in 2017, given no independent media or judiciary remained to check the implementation of election rules and regulations.

Finally, Erdoğan and AKP have eliminated opposition parties from the electoral competition through various means. When two young popular leaders emerged out of the ranks of the traditional Islamists (Numan Kurtulmus) and the centre-right Democrat Party (Suleyman Soylu) in 2010, Erdoğan co-opted both by bringing them into AKP and appointing them to powerful positions. When another popular leader (Meral Aksener) emerged out of the opposition Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi - Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in late 2016, the regime prevented her from rallying the party's base against its current leader Devlet Bahçeli, who proved to be Erdoğan's favourite in MHP due to his ineptitude.⁵² Lastly, since the 7 June 2015 elections, Halkların Demokratik Partisi - Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the key opposition party with the capacity to deny AKP parliamentary majority, has been the target of a series of intimidations and arrests. Right after the 1 November elections in 2015, the leaders of HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, were arrested on dubious charges. These were followed by a series of arrests of the elected HDP deputies and mayors from the south-east of Turkey.⁵³ As a result, the HDP has been effectively paralysed. These

developments show that in addition to 'democracy', the Turkish regime has lost its 'competitive' component as well.

Political economy: neopatrimonialism

Neopatrimonialism has been an integral feature of the Erdoganist regime in Turkey. A 'neopatrimonial system' can be defined as 'a mixture of two co-existing, partly interwoven, types of domination: namely patrimonial and legal-rational bureaucratic domination'.⁵⁴ Under patrimonialism, all power relations between ruler and ruled, and political as well as administrative relations, are personal relations; there is no differentiation between the private and the public realm. However, a neopatrimonial regime does not rely exclusively on traditional forms of legitimation or on hereditary succession. It provides loyalty and submission to a ruler by means of both formal and informal mechanisms. Neopatrimonial regimes 'are based not only on patriarchal values and norms, but on rationally driven exchange of services, when a patron buys the loyalty of a client in exchange for protection of client's interests'.⁵⁵ Clientelism is an integral part of neopatrimonialism. The patron transfers public goods and services to his clients, who may or may not be linked with kinship ties. Although clientelism can be based on some sort of traditional relations, it is a rather modern phenomenon, linked to the existence of a state.

In Turkey the successive AKP governments established a neopatrimonial network of relations whereby the AKP gained popularity with and the loyalty of its voters and certain segments of society. Although patronage relations between ruling parties and society have been one of the important characteristics of mass politics in Turkey,⁵⁶ the AKP government broadened its range and scope during its tenure in power.⁵⁷ To begin with, provision of welfare has become one of the leading channels of mass patronage. The loyal support of voters has been gained through the provision of public welfare as 'charitable patronage', redistribution of public resources, and access to public jobs, health services and public housing.⁵⁸ The regime deliberately channelled state funds, such as free goods and services, to the districts and cities that voted for the party and effectively punished those who did not.⁵⁹ Therefore, the ruling party skewed the principles of the welfare state which would normally require the state to remain impartial in its provision of welfare to citizens and to establish 'rights-based relations' with its citizens.⁶⁰ Instead, it used welfare as part of its clientelist network in which 'providers are patrons and beneficiaries are clients'; thus, loyalty to the party is rewarded while distrust and criticism are punished.⁶¹ Indeed, these changes are the result of a long-term transformation in the Turkish welfare system since the early 2000s that focused on utilising, for welfare provision, those religious values and institutions associated with the AKP government.⁶² These measures have transformed AKP into an instrument of popular mobilisation geared towards sustaining and enhancing the party's support base in society.⁶³

The AKP governments also distribute patronage through privatisation and redistribution of rents within the upper income brackets.⁶⁴ AKP has brought the 'periphery', its conservative, nationalist and non-affluent supporters, to the 'centre' and elevated them to a new bourgeoisie. Through this new bourgeoisie, the party has gained the loyalty of conservative and religious voters.⁶⁵ However, the regime also punishes those businesses that have been critical of its rule and have supported the opposition. It has been pursuing particularly oppressive measures towards critical media outlets. A Freedom House report⁶⁶ dated 2014 showed that

through various repressive measures, the government restricted the critical media outlets and forced them out of business. They were either sold to government cronies or completely shut down.

Furthermore, AKP established several regime-connected charity organisations and foundations which have not only become a 'substitute for welfare state functions',⁶⁷ but also indulged themselves in an extortion racket. The most influential of these foundations has been TURGEV. Created by Erdoğan himself in 1996, Türkiye Gençlik ve Eğitime Hizmet Vakfı - Service for Youth and Education Foundation of Turkey (TURGEV) is currently owned and managed by Erdoğan's family, and does not pay any tax to the state. TURGEV acts as a quasi-official charity of the regime. It collects exorbitant sums of donations from wealthy businessmen, as well as foreign and domestic companies, who are in turn rewarded by lucrative deals with the government.⁶⁸

Finally, after capturing the state, AKP monopolised access to state resources, including jobs and public tenders. The party and the state have been fused in an AKP organisational framework that oversaw party-connected personnel combining political and administrative functions. In addition, AKP allocated state-sponsored development projects to regime-connected businesspeople, distributing economic benefits to and enriching regime cronies in the process.⁶⁹ As a result, AKP has turned into a neopatrimonial tool serving to empower the regime's leaders.

Political strategy: populism

Populism is the core feature of Erdoganism. Populism is 'a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the world that sets a morally pure and unified ... people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior'.⁷⁰ Populists frame the meaning of 'the people' in a form conducive to their political interests and claim to represent the people,⁷¹ against the 'corrupt' elite who try to exclude the people from power. Populists also divide the society in a horizontal/identitarian dimension between the insiders and outsiders, whereby the outsiders, who may even be citizens, are regarded as the foreigners, if not the internal enemies, based on their identities.⁷² In this sense, populism divides the society into the opposite poles of 'us' and 'them', 'friends' and 'enemies'.⁷³ Populists are not only anti-elitist, but also anti-pluralist. They are 'hostile to representative politics' and its institutions.⁷⁴ They claim that only they represent people, while rejecting the legitimacy of other political elite, past or present. What is more, populists claim that only those who support them are the 'real people', while those who do not are 'traitors'. Populists delegitimise opposition by associating opponents with the 'corrupt elite', 'foreign interests' and 'terrorists'. Populism also relies on personalistic and paternalistic leadership. The charismatic leader is generally attributed divine characteristics: He represents the national will and has the ultimate capacity to discern the common good. His authority and judgement should not be questioned.

Populists also use authoritarianism and neopatrimonialism as their techniques of governing. They fill the state with loyalists and deny doing so to the opposition. They also capture media and prevent opposition outlets from reporting on their crimes. They enact 'an economic project that utilises widespread redistributive or clientelistic methods'.⁷⁵ In other words, populists engage in mass clientelism: the exchange of material and immaterial favours by elites for mass political support. Moreover, populists support 'discriminatory legalism'

which redefines citizenship: that only some people can enjoy full protection of laws, while others cannot. As Muller suggests, 'what makes populists distinctive is that they can engage in such practices openly and with public moral justifications'.⁷⁶ Populists justify their colonisation of the state by claiming that only they are the true representatives of the nation. Mass clientelism is also justified by the claim that only 'some people' deserve the support of the state.

In Turkey, Islamists have developed a peculiar strand of populism since their inception in early 1970s. Islamists emphasised their quality of representing the practicing Muslim majority population in Turkey, who were oppressed by the Kemalist regime and were excluded from strategic bureaucratic positions and denied entry to universities with headscarves. They famously referred to themselves as 'the blacks' of Turkey who were stigmatised and discriminated against by the Kemalist hegemony and were deprived of opportunities of employment in prestigious positions and of upward mobility.⁷⁷ Furthermore, as Tuğal mentioned, Islamists attached a strong 'religio-moral' component to their populism and claimed that 'the people' referred to not only those who were exploited and excluded, but also the faithful and morally superior.⁷⁸ They claimed to represent these poor Muslim masses who were following Islamic practices and rituals. They also relentlessly attacked the West, in particular the 'Western values and Western imperialism'.⁷⁹

Erdoğan and AKP also adhered to the features of the classic populist agenda. For example, Erdoğan divided the society into 'pure' people and 'corrupt' elite and depicted himself as the man of the people. Erdoğan's charismatic leadership played an important role in enabling AKP to increase its popularity and remain in power.⁸⁰ He presented himself as the 'voice of deprived "real people" and the champion of their interests against the old elites'.⁸¹ He also increased his popularity with the working class through such populist acts as having his hair 'cut in the poor neighborhood where he grew up' which helped to show that his 'newly acquired power has not changed him'.⁸² Orcun Selcuk also demonstrated that Erdoğan's peculiar populist style carried important similarities with Hugo Chavez and Rafael Correa's in Venezuela and Ecuador, respectively.⁸³

After AKP consolidated its power in 2011, one-sided messages in media imposed Erdoğan's cult on society, which portrayed Erdoğan as the saviour of the nation who embodies its glorious past and future. As a charismatic leader with aggressive nationalistic rhetoric, Erdoğan aims to fulfil utopian dreams of loyalist voters who see in him 'a new father of Turkey'. The personality of Tayyip Erdoğan is divinised by partisan voters and elites, and as such a cult of personality around him has been entrenched.⁸⁴

Erdoğan's populism also carried an anti-institutionalist attitude. He opposed horizontal accountability structures such as the judiciary and the Constitutional Court, and blamed them for the ills of society.⁸⁵ Erdoğan asserted the moral and normative supremacy of the national will⁸⁶ and, acting as if he were the embodiment of the national will, he vilified his critics such as Kurdish nationalists and Gülenists, as traitors and the 'enemies of the state'.⁸⁷ The regime divided the society into 'us' and 'them' based on the distinction between its conservative and nationalist allies and secular, leftist, Alevi, non-Muslim and Gülenist critics.⁸⁸

Furthermore, the Gezi Protests and the December 2013 investigations dramatically increased the 'existential insecurity' of the regime and led to an obsession with the threat of a revolution or a coup.⁸⁹ Convinced of a Western conspiracy and fuelled by an insecurity complex, the regime has been engaging in creating domestic and international controversies

which usually involve conspiracy theories of sort. From the failed coup attempt in 2016 being a Western, mainly US, conspiracy⁹⁰ to diplomatic spats with Netherlands and Germany over the right to carry out political campaigns,⁹¹ the regime has been continuously involved in creating 'managed international crises' to sustain its political platform inside.

AKP's ideology: Islamism

Islamism is 'a form of instrumentalisation of Islam by individuals, groups and organisations that pursue political objectives'.⁹² Islamism 'provides political responses to today's societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition.'⁹³ Islamists are rational actors 'engaged in cost-benefit calculations'.⁹⁴ They are pragmatic decision makers who are willing to exchange theological ideals for political gains.⁹⁵ They use ideology instrumentally and strategically to earn votes and justify their policies.

Starting with its second term in power, AKP's Islamist outlook made a comeback in its official rhetoric and practice.⁹⁶ After it consolidated its power and captured the state in 2011, AKP launched an ambitious project to Islamicise Turkish society and politics. To be clear, we do not claim that Turkey has become a theocratic regime under AKP, nor that it is on its way to becoming one. The religious establishment in Turkey is completely subordinated to political authorities and has no independent position on political issues. Rather, the political regime has increasingly turned into an Islamist one and currently carries some of the most important features of such a regime.

It is important to understand that while Islamists generally claim to adhere to 'universal' notions of Islam, they usually derive their doctrines from their national contexts. This is because their religious and political vocabulary is usually shaped by national notions. The worldviews of Islamist organisations, movements and parties are further shaped by political struggles they engage with in a given country. Therefore, if a country hosted a historic Islamic empire such as the Ottomans or the Safavids, the Islamists tend to idealise them in their search for ideal reference points. Similarly, the ideal form of government can be an Ottoman Sultanate, a Sunni Caliphate or a Shia Imamate depending on national identities.

In this sense, it is no surprise that Erdoganists in Turkey long for the Ottoman past and the glorification of Turkish-Ottoman history. As Saracoglu and Demirkol show, 'Sunni-Muslim values ... have become the core element defining what the 'nation' is' in the AKP period. Nostalgia for the Ottoman past has been a long-time Islamist notion in Turkey.⁹⁷ The Islamist ideal in Turkey is the regime of the Ottoman classic period. Historically, they desired to traditionalise society 'by creating an invented ideal Ottoman society that would serve as a model for restructuring the present and the future'.⁹⁸ AKP has put this neo-Ottomanist ideology in practice in both domestic and foreign policy. As a result, peculiar Ottoman motifs has been recreated in national education, national holidays,⁹⁹ media and TV shows,¹⁰⁰ and foreign policy.¹⁰¹

The regime slowly but surely fought against secular principles that the state-society relations in Turkey were based on.¹⁰² An important part of this project was to create an ideal Turkish citizen, a project that was first carried out by Kemalists in Turkey. As part of this project, the regime embarked on creating 'a pious generation' that would serve its ideological goals,¹⁰³ while using the Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs) as an 'imposer' of this state ideology.¹⁰⁴ The regime also overhauled the Turkish education system to promote its Islamist

ideology and 'capture the minds' in Turkey.¹⁰⁵ The national education curriculum was emptied of philosophy, secular principles and Darwin, and filled with religion and history courses that glorify jihad and martyrdom.¹⁰⁶

AKP's Islamism demonstrated itself in the party's foreign policy as well. Particularly since the failed coup attempt in 2016, the AKP government grew increasingly anti-Western in its outlook. It went so far as accusing the US and EU of being behind the failed coup of 15 July 2017.¹⁰⁷ In particular, Erdoğan brought back religio-civilisational animosity against the West in his rhetoric. Today, Erdoğan and his media constantly propagate the existence of a holy warfare between the Muslims and the Christian West and claim that the latter is bent on the former's destruction.¹⁰⁸ Also, Erdoğan uses blatant Sunni sectarianism in his rhetoric which constantly pits Sunnis against Alevis both within Turkey and outside.¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, AKP's Islamism evolved into a new and radical rhetoric filled with glorification of martyrdom, constant calls to mass sacrifice in defence of both Islam and Turkey against domestic and foreign infidels, and populist agitation of society through such representations. While the motifs of martyrdom and sacrifice have been features of AKP's youth policies,¹¹⁰ they have gained a cultic quality in the period following the 2016 coup attempt. They involve billboards showing the pictures of those killed during the failed coup, constant media broadcasting of their funerals, embellished with sentimentalised narratives of the tragedy, and changing the names of an endless number of streets, bridges, schools and buildings to 'the July 15 Martyrs'. As a *New York Times* story stated, '[a] cult of martyrdom reminiscent of that in post-revolutionary Iran was being manufactured in Turkey.'¹¹¹

Finally, a growing trend in AKP's Turkey has been the rising status of regime-connected religious scholars such as the head of Diyanet Mehmet Görmez and columnist/scholar Hayrettin Karaman, who have become instrumental in legitimising the regime's policies through various Islamic injunctions ie *fatwas* and declarations. Görmez made statements in support of the AKP government's newly emerging radical Islamist rhetoric attacking abortion, women's rights and the New Year's celebrations.¹¹² Furthermore, both Görmez and Karaman utilised a *jihadist takfiri* rhetoric to demonise the regime's opponents such as the Kurdish nationalists and the Gülenists, and labelled them as 'out of Islam' and 'heretics'. Islamist scholar Hayrettin Karaman emerged as the religious ideologue of the hard-line Islamists with his personal *fatwas* that he issued in his column in a pro-government daily, *Yeni Safak*. In the aftermath of the 17–25 December investigations that revealed blatant corruption of top-level AKP bureaucrats, Karaman issued a *fatwa*, declaring that 'corruption is not a theft'.¹¹³ Karaman also declared that voting 'Yes' was a religious obligation in the April 2017 referendum, effectively labelling the 'No' voters heretics.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, Karaman played an important role in providing religious justifications for the rise of the security state and extrajudicial activities that emanated from it. He issued a *fatwa* in 2017 in which he asserted that the vile crimes of those who support Erdoğan and his regime cannot be prosecuted, because Muslims in Turkey are under attack by anti-Muslim forces both inside and outside.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

This paper argued that in Turkey, a new political regime has emerged which can best be defined as Erdoganism. Rather than merely an ideology, it defined Erdoganism as the emerging political regime in Turkey that has four main dimensions: electoral authoritarianism as the electoral system, neopatrimonialism as the economic system, populism as the political

strategy and Islamism as the political ideology. We showed that no universal category adequately captures the main elements of the emerging regime in Turkey. Electoral authoritarianism left out the economic, strategic and ideological elements of the regime. Although Sultanism provides a better focus on personalistic and clientelistic features, it falls short of discussing the role of ideology and populism. From our analysis of Sultanism, Kemalism and Khomeinism, we derived four reference points for the Erdoganist regime – electoral authoritarianism, neopatrimonialism, populism and Islamism – and demonstrated the ways in which the emerging regime in Turkey shares these attributes in a detailed examination of the latest political developments in Turkey.

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