

## DEFINITION AND PROCESS OF DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY

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### Introduction

This paper aims to understand that what are the problems of Turkish democracy and solutions of these problems. With respect to this issue, Mumtazer Turkone (2010) and Mehmet Turhan (2002) provide information. Hakan Yavuz (2010) pursues this study and explains the events with actual and true-life examples. On the other hand, we can say that they have failed to reveal a permanent diagnosis due to unconformity with the academic criteria, emotional and partly prejudiced approach to the subject.

In this context, I both consider the interpretation of Democracy, and knowing the process of Turkish Democracy. In this way I will interpret the differences between Turkey and the Muslim countries especially in The Middle East. To give an example, while Turkey is regarded as a model country thanks to being the first democratic and secular country in Islamic World, it has been struggling with fundamental troubles like pressures on media, government's attitude of interpreting any criticism as a coup d'état and intolerance against opposition. We can exemplify this with the events in the time of Single Party System between 1919 and 1946 and last period of Democratic Party that came into power in 1950. In my study, I will analyze democracy endeavor in the past with historical overview. And then, through examples and interviews, I will explain the process of democracy in Turkey and problems which are happening in our democracy.

### 1. Definition of Democracy

Democracy may be a word familiar to most, but it is a concept still misunderstood and misused at a time when dictators, single-party regimes, and military coup leaders alike assert popular support by claiming the mantle of democracy.

It is one of the most important regime in the world which is very helpful to occur the social cohesion.

Democracy is a system of government in which all the people of a state or polity... are involved in making decisions about its affairs, typically by voting to elect representatives to a parliament or similar assembly.<sup>1</sup> According to American political scientist Larry Diamond, it consists of some key elements. And these are characteristics of democracy:

- a. Democracy is government in which power and civic responsibility are exercised by all adult citizens, directly, or through their freely elected representatives.
- b. Democracy rests upon the principles of majority rule and individual. Democracies guard against all-powerful central government to regional and local levels, understanding that all levels of government must be as accessible and responsive to the people as possible.
- c. Democracies understand that one of their prime functions is to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society.
- d. Democracies conduct regular free and fair elections open to citizens of voting age.
- e. Citizens in a democracy have not only rights, but also the responsibility to participate in the political system that, in turn, protects their rights and freedoms.

So we can say that legal equality, political freedom and rule of law are very important characteristics of democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, USA, 2008.

## 2. A Brief Overview on Democratization in Turkey

Turkey is located at the intersection of civilization; therefore, because of this conditions the people in Turkey also got affected from the developments. Turkey started to discuss about the democracy in the last period of Ottoman Empire especially, The Tanzimat (literally meaning reorganization of the Ottoman Empire, was a period of reformation that began in 1839 and ended with the First Constitutional Era in 1876) and Constitutional Era.<sup>2</sup> Between these eras, a large amount of reforms had been enacted such as: guaranteeing the right of life and property to all of the empire's subjects, the abolition of slavery, legalization of homosexuality and so on. Researching the history of democracy of Anatolia will also give a chance for analysis and interpret the current situation of Turkey.

### 2.1 Tanzimat Era

Tanzimat was a statement of intent on the part of the Ottoman government, promising in effect four basic reforms:

- The establishment of guarantees for the life, honour and property of the sultan's subjects,
- An orderly system of taxation to replace the system of taxing farming,
- A system of conscription for the army,
- Equality before the law of all subjects, whatever their religion.

The Tanzimat era saw a number of important changes in the judicial system, many of them related to the changing position of the non-Muslim communities. The canon law of Islam, *the şeriat*, was never abrogated, but its scope was limited almost completely to family law and it was codified along European lines in 1865-1888. The Empire had always been ruled under a dual system with sultanic decrees functioning side by side with the Islamic canon law, but Tanzimat statesman created new secular laws and institutions to replace this traditional kanun system, mainly where the changing position of the foreigners in the empire or the Ottoman Christians demanded it.

In the education field, secularization was the most important trend in the Tanzimat era. As in the preceding period, priority was given to the creation of professional training colleges for the bureaucracy and the army, the most important being the *Mektep-i Mülkiye* (civil service school), founded in 1859. These are the positive developments in the Tanzimat era.

### 2.2. The Early Republican Period in Turkey

Turkey was formally proclaimed a republic in Oct., 1923, with Kemal Atatürk as its first president; he was reelected in 1927, 1931, and 1935. The caliphate was abolished in 1924, and in the same year a constitution was promulgated that provided for a parliament elected by universal manhood suffrage (extended to women in 1934), and for a cabinet responsible to parliament. However, Kemal governed as a virtual dictator, and his Republican People's party was the only legal party, except for brief periods. During the 14 years of Kemal's rule, Turkey underwent a great transformation, which changed the religious, social, and cultural bases of Turkish society as well as its political and economic structure.

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<sup>2</sup> Ahmet Yasir Eren, "The Place and Importance of the Views of Ummah Movement in Turkish Democracy With the Sample of Welfare Party", Journal of Global Studies, Vol. 7, Kyoto, Japan, April 2017, p. 2.

From the promulgation of the Law on the Maintenance of Order in March 1925, Turkey's government was an authoritarian one-party regime. While the RPP had a rank-and-file organization throughout the country, which its secretary-general led, the members of the national assembly, the cabinet, the prime minister (who was also executive chairman of the party) and the president (who doubled as party chairman) dominated it.<sup>3</sup>

State and party became increasingly integrated. In 1936, the state took control of all private radio stations, creating a state monopoly of electronic media that lasted until the 1990s. Also in 1936, the interior minister became the secretary general of the party, and the provincial governors became the party heads in their provinces. In contrast to Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin – civilians who always appeared in uniform – he was a victorious marshal who set aside his uniform when he assumed the presidency, donning it only occasionally when attending maneuvers. Without doubt, the true foundation of his power was, not the ballot box or the constitution, but his prestige as the nation's savior warrior. His concept of the republic was plebiscitary and in that sense dictatorial. Yet he also defined the "golden rule" that soldiers who intended to enter politics should resign from the military. Under him, the military budget was restricted in favor of civilian priorities. Atatürk did not elaborate his "six arrows" ideology into a totalitarian form, and he rejected fascist-style militarism and expansionism. To this day, one of his most universally accepted maxims is "peace at home and peace abroad".<sup>4</sup>

Between 1923 (formal establishment of the Republic of Turkey) and 1945, Turkey was controlled by the single-party regime. The "Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi" (Republican People's Party, hereinafter referred to as RPP) was the only party during that period. Single party regime was not desired and targeted continuously; it was seen as a temporary regime because of the political situation in Turkey. Moreover, the multi-party system was an ideal system to be achieved.

The Turkish regime of the 1930s and 1940s, of which the main characteristics have been outlined above, thus in many ways resembled the other authoritarian regimes that sprang up all over southern Europe in this era (such as the regimes of Salazar in Portugal, Franco in Spain and Metaxas in Greece). It differed from them, however, in that it was not culturally and religiously conservative, but on the contrary attempted a far-reaching cultural revolution in a conservatively religious society. The example of the most important dictatorship in the Mediterranean, fascist Italy, was certainly important to the Turkish leadership. The way in which Mussolini seemed to forge national unity and energize Italian society impressed many in Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.3 After Multi-Party System in Turkey

The World War II is a breaking point for the desire for democracy on Earth. After the World War II, the idea of democracy spreads all over the World as a political thought, and in Turkey the democracy experience begins in the strict sense just after these first moves. Although, the early times of democracy movement is quite painful for the Turkish society, this democracy process of Turkey is considered early compared to most of countries.

According to Erik J. Zürcher:<sup>6</sup>

*"In a very general sense, the defeat of the Axis Powers in the Second World War was in itself a victory for democratic values. The United States of America, a pluralist, capitalist democracy, emerged from the war as the dominant world power and its example could not fail to impress many in Turkey, just as it did in countries all over the world."*

<sup>3</sup> Erik J. Zürcher, Turkey A Modern History, I. B. Tauris, Third Edition, New York, 2013, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> Carter Vaughn Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity*, Yale University Press, USA, 2010, p. 262.

<sup>5</sup> Erik J. Zürcher, Turkey A Modern History, I. B. Tauris, Third Edition, New York, 2013, p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> Erik J. Zürcher, Turkey A Modern History, I. B. Tauris, Third Edition, New York, 2013, p. 51.

In May 1950, a general election was held in the Turkish Republic that resulted in a big victory for the opposition. Democrat Party (DP) became the first party. Bernard Lewis, puts forth the following insight describing the event:

*“This was a very important event for a country like Turkey. For a government to lose an election and be replaced by the opposition is nothing extraordinary in the political life of established democratic societies. In Turkey, however, such a peaceful transition was a novelty – not only in the history of the country, but of the entire region, and indeed of others that shared a comparable history and tradition. This was an epoch-making event, seen by many at the time as the dawn of a new era. Some indeed went so far as to assert that the defeat and supersession of Ataturk's RPP was the last and greatest of all its achievements in the building of the Turkish Republic”.*<sup>7</sup>

With the multi-party system, DP was the most important outstanding party. Very popular at first, the government, eased the restrictions on Islam and led a booming economy. As seen from this view, this period was the period of change and development in Turkey. However, at the same time, it further alienated the opposition by imposing restrictive laws on the media and occasionally banned critical newspapers from publishing. Growing tensions caused the government to impose martial law in early 1960. The army stepped in and toppled the government on May 27; the president, prime minister and several cabinet members were arrested and quickly trailed for treason. Adnan Menderes (Prime Minister) was executed.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Current Situation in Turkey

Several factors helped the AKP win a majority in national elections within fifteen months of its founding in 2002. It presented itself not as an Islamic party but as a “conservative democratic” party. It combines this conservatism with emphases on socioeconomic justice, democracy, individual rights, and EU integration; on those points the AKP resembles European social democrats.

Assuming power in 2002, the AKP stabilized the economy and reduced inflation. It accelerated EU integration, carrying out enough reforms that EU accession negotiations could begin in October 2005. The reforms ranged from greater cultural freedom for Kurds to changes in the National Security Council. The AKP's ability to produce what EU commissioner Günter Verhaugen optimistically called “the second revolution after the establishment of the Republic” is something that the party's electoral success alone cannot explain, given the extent to which the Turkish political system vests Powers in unelected bodies.<sup>9</sup>

Turkey is not described as a full-fledged democracy. Practicing Muslims who were oppressed in the past, such as Muslim female students who were banned from wearing headscarves on university campuses, have attained many rights as a result of the country's EU bid. In this respect, the EU accession process has brought a number of benefits to Turkey. As part of this process, serious democratic reforms have been introduced to the country. If these reforms are maintained and Turkey's democratic system can attain the EU standards regarding the rule of law and respect for human rights and freedoms, then democracy and human rights in Turkey will develop. However, Turkey has recently started to backpedal from the EU democratic standards.<sup>10</sup>

While Turkey is regarded as a model country thanks to being the first democratic and secular country in Islamic World, it has been struggling with fundamental troubles like pressures on media, government's attitude of interpreting any criticism as a coup d'état and intolerance against opposition.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lewis, “Democracy in Turkey”, *The Making and Unmaking of Democracy*, Edit. Theodore K. Rabb and Ezra N. Suleiman, Routledge, New York, 2003, p. 225.

<sup>8</sup> “Timeline: A History of Turkish Coups”, Aljazeera's Official website, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2012/4/20124472814687973.html>, (September 22, 2016)

<sup>9</sup> Carter Vaughn Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity*, Yale University Press, USA, 2010, p. 361.

<sup>10</sup> Manuel Almeida, In Conversation with Fethullah Gulen, <https://english.aawsat.com/m-almeida/interviews/in-conversation-with-fethullah-gulen>, March 24, 2014.

To give an example, in Turkey, the President refuses to meet with journalists who may ask him uncomfortable questions. It has been years since he held a real press conference. He can only be in the presence of journalists whom he knows will play by his rules. If, by chance, someone finds the opportunity to rear their head and ask a real question, they will find themselves on the receiving end of a severe dressing-down.<sup>11</sup>

President Erdogan has been making a bad situation worse by using the failed coup as an opportunity to expand his own political power. After the coup collapsed a state of emergency declared and the government began arresting a wide range of opponents that had nothing to do with the coup. Journalists, secularists, scholars, government officials who did not agree with president Erdogan's vision for Turkey they were arrested. There are more than 50.000 people like this were arrested. More than 150.000 civil servants, military officers, teachers, policemen, doctors, prosecutors, even judges have been removed from their job and many of them have been arrested.

As one example of how far these ridiculous purges have gone the Turkish soccer authorities announced they have fired 94 officials including a number of soccer referees for their ties to the coup. So the government of Turkey is used this coup to settle old scores and to clean out of the house those who do not seem or deem sufficiently loyal to Erdogan's vision for Turkey. Incredibly it was reported a couple of months ago that Turkey would release 38.000 criminals from prison to make room for those taken into custody in these purges letting murderers, rapists, thieves go in order to make room for political opponents.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

It is clearly seen that mistakes made by the leaders and political parties negatively affected the development of democracy in Turkey. Needles to say that these issues should also be studied comprehensively in the future.

As seen in this study, while Turkey is regarded as a model country thanks to being the first democratic and secular country in Islamic World, it has been struggling with fundamental troubles like pressures on media, government's attitude of interpreting any criticism as a coup d'état and intolerance against opposition myself think that these problems are structural and traditional. We can exemplify this with the many events in the background of The History of Turkish Democracy. Therefore, we need to examine the subject not only with actual aspect but also in historical perspective.

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<sup>11</sup> Hasan Cemal, Acceptance Speech at the Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism on March 12, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> For more information see. Stockholm Center for Freedom, <https://stockholmcf.org/>