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2023 Elections in Turkey within Global Context: Right Wing Populism in the Era of Global Shift

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ABSTRACT

Many observers predicted that the catastrophic earthquake of February 2023 and huge and unprecedented problems of high inflation and cost of living crisis would end Erdogan era and his credibility in Turkey. However, despite all ongoing deep problems, Erdogan and his AKP government, after more than 20 years in power, still managed to win the 2023 elections in the second round. It seems none of the serious economic and political problems were enough to get the majority of votes away from the governing party, AKP. Even in the cities where the earthquake costed high level of damage, AKP and Erdogan got significantly high votes, despite rampant corruption and economic mismanagement. The AKP government has not been punished either economically or politically. On the contrary, one of the most striking consequences of this election is that Turkey now has the most right-wing parliament in its recent modern history if we include the right-wing opposition parties in the composition.

KEYWORDS

Turkey; elections; Erdogan; AKP; earthquake; populism; global shift

Turkey entered into election period as a massive earthquake struck South Eastern Turkey on 6 February 2023. The M_w 7.8 earthquake was the strongest to occur in Turkey since the 1939 Erzincan earthquake of the same magnitude, and jointly the second-strongest recorded in the country, after the 1668 North Anatolian earthquake. Within the space of nine hours, these quakes cost the lives of 100,000 to 150,000 people. The actual toll may in fact prove to be higher. It was felt as far as Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Cyprus, and the Black Sea coast of Turkey. These earthquakes were followed by more than 2,100 aftershocks.¹ It is worth remembering that the earthquake of smaller scale in Izmit in 1999 and the following economic crisis in 2001 that swept Erdogan and his AKP to power. Since the 2000s, the AKP has relied on governance models to commodify and financialize spaces and supported the enormous growth of a government-allied construction sector. The wide-scale building campaign, so-called urban transformation, played an important role in the AKP's neoliberal market reforms combined with targeted clientelism and other forms of neo-patrimonialism, in which construction sector

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and urban land and rent have given priority in the government agenda than ever before. During the last 20+ years, the construction sector accounts for 5.4% of the total GDP and employed 1.5 million people (2020 figures); and its contribution to the GDP reached approximately 35% when triggered economic activities of other sectors were considered in Turkey. Turkey-based construction companies also succeeded in increasing their footprints in the global market with the volume of new projects reaching 12.8 billion euros.²

This growth model, based on widespread construction in all urban areas, was not invented by the AKP, it can be traced back to the initiation of neoliberal policies and wider culture of neoliberal restructuring in Turkey from 24 January 1980 decisions to September 1980 military coup, which eliminated all real and potential resistance to neoliberalism in the country. The governments in the 1980s and 90s started to transform urban areas, by building and expanding cheap, shoddy buildings for the working classes.³

AKP regime, after 2002, took this one step further, through much more intensive construction-based wealth accumulation. As a result, economic activity expanded significantly, and huge wealth was transferred to few major construction companies; while at the same time reasonably cheap, affordable accommodation was created for millions of people. Giant buildings, modern looking bloc of flats raised in all urban areas, replacing previous squatter buildings, all of which created an aura of modernity and progress. However, underneath of that modern, even ultra-modern, look, the construction was weak and shoddy, lots of corners were cut, all safety regulations ignored, to produce quickly and cheaply. Ambitious construction companies, seeking to maximize their profits by delivering their projects earlier than scheduled, failed to meet basic conditions of safety. The construction sector has been the backbone of many emerging nations during the last 30 years, triggering activity in scores of other sectors. During this period, banks, under the strong lead of the World Bank and IMF, pushed up consumers' purchasing ability by providing credit and mortgages, and business owners developed a whole variety of ways to attract consumers, from food to accommodation, and to entertainment. Turning Turkey into a construction zone, especially big cities, has been an important lifeline for the AKP government in its 22 year in power. The construction sector and its related industries have grown rapidly over the past two decades, representing nearly one third of Turkey's GDP and employing millions of people. David Harvey, in 2017, in an interview said: '... in Istanbul, Turkey; there's construction cranes all over the place'.⁴

Impacts of 2023 February earthquake disaster undercut the country's manufacturing sector with supply chains and production lines affected in particular. Output was scaled back as some firms paused production due to the earthquakes, while new orders were also affected, and supply-chain disruption was also evident. World Bank issued a rapid damage assessment report, the Global Rapid Post-Disaster Damage Estimation (GRADE) Report, in late February. Direct damages to residential buildings account for 53% (\$18 billion) of the total damage, with 28% of damage (\$9.7 billion) in non-residential buildings (e.g., health facilities, schools, government buildings, and private sector buildings), and 19% of damage (\$6.4 billion) related to infrastructure (e.g., roads, power, water supply). The bank estimates that the earthquakes would also shave at least half a percentage point off Turkey's forecast gross domestic product growth of 3.5% to 4% in 2023. The report acknowledges that recovery and reconstruction costs will be

much larger, potentially twice as large, and that GDP losses associated to economic disruptions will also add to the cost of the earthquakes.⁵

Some analysts predicted that the earthquake would end Erdoğan era and his credibility. However, despite the ongoing deep economic problems and the catastrophic earthquake, Erdoğan managed to win the election in the second round. This paper will assess the structural and conjunctural reasons for the continuous restoration of Erdoğan's hegemonic power.

The election results haven't smoothed over Erdoğan's wrongdoings; however, his re-election does not mean that he is popular, or that his policies have popular approval. In reality, Erdoğan failed to win the election in the first round, for the first time in his career, and won by a small margin in the runoff. This election result points more to the political bankruptcy of CHP's, and its leader Kılıçdaroğlu's, campaign and its alliance with far-right nationalist parties than to Erdoğan's and AKP's success. In other words, the failure of opposition to connect with the masses and speaking with one voice and lack of clear leadership was at the root of Erdoğan's success rather than his popularity. For instance, failing to understand the changing global circumstances and geopolitical shifts, Kılıçdaroğlu embraced a roughly pro-Western, anti-Russian and openly pro-NATO position in an attempt to reset its traditional foreign policy discourse, but paid no attention to the costs of dependence on the EU and NATO. He kept mostly silent on the Kurdish question, and he appealed to xenophobic nationalist feelings and anti-refugee policies and declared an open war against refugees, the overwhelming majority of whom live in deep poverty without basic rights, because he claimed that the migrants are like 'flood of irregular people infiltrating our veins every day'.⁶

Kılıçdaroğlu's deliberate silence on Kurdish issue alienated the Kurdish voters in the South East. The Kurdish party ran under the name of the Green Left Party (YSP) to avoid disqualification if the courts shut down the HDP in the middle of the election process. The Kurdish alliance did not nominate a candidate for the presidency and supported Kılıçdaroğlu's bid instead, to concentrate all opposition against Erdoğan. On the other hand, by the decision to support the opposition block, the Kurdish party paid a heavy price for realigning itself with the mainstream state parties.

Kılıçdaroğlu forced an alliance with a xenophobic and anti-Kurdish party, with which he agreed on a series of measures, including supporting the government's administration of Kurdish municipalities to replace elected mayors in the Kurdish regions. The agreement sparked some rejection among the left, but they ended up backing Kılıçdaroğlu again. The elections result was a blow to the HDP/YSP, which has lost seats and a large part of the vote on Turkey's west coast, falling from 67 MPs to 61. The Kurdish votes were crucial in the determination of the election outcome but Erdoğan's last-minute alignment with the Kurdish Islamic Party Hudapar attracted the votes from traditional and conservative Kurdish circles in addition to the Turkish Workers' Party (TIP) candidates standing for MPs in provinces where the HDP/YSP was also running, divided the left-wing vote. More crucially, during the election campaign, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used his usual fearmongering tactics accusing the opposition of PKK links and 'terrorist support'. This also played an important role diverting the attention of the masses from earthquake and economic hardship to the unity and integrity of the nation.

Economically speaking, Turkey also entered the elections with huge and unprecedented problems of high inflation and cost of living crisis. There was public outrage over rising inflation and the government's handling of the February 6 earthquake in southern Turkey that killed over 50,000 people and left millions without homes. The election has not resolved any of the critical issues that faced the peoples of Turkey. However, the re-election of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in a run-off against Kılıçdaroğlu is a political experience of international significance for all those campaigning against the rise of right-wing populism in the 21st century world.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AKP candidate, won 52.14 percent of the votes, while the CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu received 47.86 percent. The difference in votes between the two candidates was nearly 2.3 million. Erdoğan was ahead in 52 provinces, while Kılıçdaroğlu, who was ahead in 29 provinces, increased his vote in Turkey's three largest cities: Istanbul, Ankara and İzmir. As in the first round, Kılıçdaroğlu came first in the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts and in most Kurdish-majority provinces in the east and southeast. Erdoğan won elections outside these areas and in all provinces except Ankara, Eskişehir and Tunceli. This shows that Erdogan still sustained strong support electoral base in non-urban areas particularly in the Anatolian hinterland and in the poorer and conservative neighbourhoods in the cities.

Erdoğan, a skilled strategist using siege mentality effectively, resorted to a phoney 'anti-imperialism' and populism, taking advantage of his rival's open orientation to the NATO and Western powers. Kılıçdaroğlu had pledged to bring Turkey even deeper into NATO's war with Russia, even accusing openly the Russian government of interfering in the elections before the first round without providing any evidence whatsoever. Also adopting a mainstream pro-Western/pro-IMF economic program, Kılıçdaroğlu pledged to develop ties with financial circles in London and New York, adopting a close IMF-led anti-worker austerity program to address the economic and financial crisis. At the end, the election results point more to the political and economic bankruptcy of the opposition's campaign in particular, CHP's alliance with far-right forces, than to Erdoğan's slim success.

After the first round on May 14, Kılıçdaroğlu signed an election protocol with the far-right racist Victory Party. He built his campaign largely around a platform of deporting millions of innocent refugees and waging a 'war on terror' targeting the Kurds, and thus Kılıçdaroğlu attacked the most vulnerable sections of the population. He declared that he was clearly against refugees, the overwhelming majority of whom live in deep poverty without basic rights. More importantly, his political programme lacked substance in terms of democratic and social reforms to fulfil the expectations of workers and urban poor and fell short of addressing the rights of the workers and social security.

Many of the pollsters in Turkey predicted before the elections that the nationalist-Islamist coalition (AKP-MHP) would lose. However, they were mostly wrong. Now AKP-MHP coalition holds more than 320 seats in the Turkish Parliament out of 600, down from 344. Even though Kılıçdaroğlu received more presidential votes than Erdoğan's previous challengers, his party, CHP, failed to materialize expectations, securing only 25% of the parliamentary vote in contrast to the 30% it received in the 2019 local elections. The opposition was confident that the timing of the ballot would work in its favour, considering it was a period of unusually high inflation, cost of living crisis and

disastrous earthquake relief efforts by the government. Some even envisaged the victory of his rival, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, in the first round. Instead, the exact opposite has happened. Turkey's almighty President extended his rule into a third decade.

It seems none of the serious economic and political problems were enough to get the majority of votes away from the governing party, AKP. Even in the cities where the earthquake costed high level of damage, AKP and Erdogan got significantly high votes, despite rampant corruption and economic mismanagement. The earthquake in February caused at least 50,000 preventable deaths in Turkey due to substandard housing. Some have warned the real toll could have been as high as 150,000. Despite the economic recession and high inflation, for which the government is held responsible, people have voted for President Erdogan in both the presidential and parliamentary elections. The government has not been punished either economically or politically. On the contrary, one of the most striking consequences of this election is that Turkey now has the most right-wing parliament in its recent modern history if we include the right-wing opposition parties in the composition.

What are the reasons for Erdogan's success?

Restoration of the hegemonic block

It is worth placing the election results in its historical political context, Erdogan's continuous success is rooted in the formation of historical power block since Turkey had been officially integrated into the western camp. It is repeatedly argued that the political pendulum in Turkey swings between Kemalist secularism and religious conservatism. According to this binary view, Turkish society is divided along secular conservative religious camps. In fact, Kemalism, in the true sense of the utopian secular ideology, has not been in power in Turkey since the end of the Republican People's Party's one-party regime in 1950. The coming to power of the conservative Democrat Party in 1950 elections marked a clear transition from utopian republicanism to a national conservative regime with authoritarian inclinations within the NATO camp. Even the Turkish armed forces gradually abandoned a pure statist Kemalist ideology but not their role as protector of state and sovereignty. Their attempt in 1960 to reintroduce a more orthodox Kemalism failed, confronted by the same conservative nationalist Islamist power block. By the 1980s, the armed forces had become much more defensive and apologetic about the credentials of Kemalism and regarded the CHP as yet another failed political party on a par with the Islamic and conservative parties.

Neoliberal restructuring in Turkey began with an economic stabilization package, widely known as the 'January 24 decisions'. The package, drafted by Turgut Özal in consultation with the IMF, indicated a real turning point in Turkey's economic history and signalled that state-led industrialization would end once the planned development was carried out. The opening up of Turkey's economy to global influences began with this package. Thus, neoliberal restructuring, export-oriented pro-growth policies with external borrowing, was introduced in Turkey. By following these neoliberal policies, state revenues were supposed to be diverted from the public sector and from the services used by working people into the purses of international creditors, the transnational

corporations operating in the region and their local allies in countries' own ruling elite. Predictably, these policies were met by popular protest and widespread unrest, which was suppressed by state violence. Eight months after the 24 January 1980 reform package was introduced, a military coup abolished the democratic process, closed all political parties and unions, and took full control on 12 September to prepare the ground for the speedy implementation of neoliberal reforms by suppressing all opposition. The years of military rule, 1980–83, saw the forceful continuation of the neoliberal reforms. General Evren explained in 1991 how he saw the role of the coup with respect to the 24 January decisions: 'If we had not intervened after the 24 January stabilization package, I have no doubt that none of the economic reform proposals could have been implemented. Only when we, the army, intervened and provided stability, the conditions became ready for the implementation of the programme' (Milliyet 1991) Socially, the neoliberal restructuring was accompanied by state sponsored Sunni Islam and religious education as an antidote to confront the rise of the left and trade union activism of late 1970s. Indeed, from the mid-1980s, Islamist parties steadily increased their share of vote in the elections.

Later from 2002, the AKP government, which came to power following the 2001 economic crisis, took these steps further, both in terms of neoliberal economic restructuring and promoting further social conservatism based on an Orthodox interpretation of Sunni Islam. The 2001 economic crisis in Turkey had set the record for the country's worst recession and the deepest decline in economic growth since the Second World War. The Islamist party, AKP, which had grown out of popular Islamist support, won despite all the intense campaigns presenting it as a threat to the secular regime. Economically, the beginning of the AKP government corresponded with the rise and establishment of the small and medium-sized entrepreneurial companies (KOBIs), the 'Anatolian Tigers', from Central Anatolia, that became a central part of Turkey's export-oriented bourgeoisie-owned business sector. These often had conservative and strongly Muslim ownership. In the first part of its rule, the AK Party followed a more populist neoliberalism, it practiced a controlled neoliberalism with social welfare practices. Luckily for the AKP government, 2001 to 2007 was a period when there was plenty of capital that global investors were willing to invest in growing developing economies, generally with low interest rates. The AKP rule in particular supported these small and medium-sized companies, and thus their owners and millions of workers employed in these firms have become the natural base for the AKP movement.

There are obvious and contingent reasons for the resilience of Erdoğan and his nationalist-Islamist style of authoritarian ruling, still after 21 years being in power. His government has spent years monopolizing the judiciary, law enforcement, and rule by executive fiat have ensured that the state apparatus has become one with Erdoğan. He has overseen the construction of a media environment that is overwhelmingly loyal and compliant. He used the 'deep state' discourse to justify purges and the packing of the courts and other key state institutions. He put thousands of activists, journalists, politicians, and anyone who criticized him in prison. However, his heavy authoritarian control is not enough to explain the election results. The regime's perseverance is not simply a result of its heavy oppression, its authoritarianism. The reasons for its continuing popularity run much deeper than that. There are structural and historical factors that most opposition politicians refuse to recognize or couldn't understand. Here are a few

thoughts that can help us better understand the electoral behaviour of the citizens of Turkey, whose choice is not as irrational as it may seem.

There are economic reasons for this result. From its first election victory in 2002, the AKP regime followed a standard neoliberal economic programme with a populist cushion that made it possible for the party to keep and even increase its electoral support. During the first five to six years, this was achieved with no difficulty by the introduction of a new welfare regime with a range of social assistance programmes and by greater financial inclusivity (making consumer loans available to the poor). Supporting such programmes in health, education and housing was only possible when there was a constant inflow of capital into the country and the economy was growing continuously based on this foreign investment. After the US Federal Reserve scaled back its easy money policy, alongside an interest rate hike, as a policy response to the 2008 global financial crisis, the inflow of foreign capital slowed down and stopped, and this put downward pressure on Turkish growth; this all made it increasingly more difficult for the regime to continue its populist neoliberalism. The neoliberal economic model continued in Turkey but with a much more weakened level of populist cushioning: many of the social welfare programmes and the expansion of consumer loans slowed down after 2008 and ended a few years after that. However, the regime still managed to keep its support among the poor, mainly among the workers of KOBIs, by providing a little more, timed carefully just before the elections. After 2010–11, in order to keep large number of small and medium sized companies in business, Erdoğan's regime integrated state-capitalist tools into its neoliberal programme. This mixture has kept Turkey on an unconventional but still somewhat sustainable path. The regime mobilized sovereign wealth funds, import substitution and selective incentives for certain sectors of economy, such as security and defence. It lowered interest rates and boosted production in low-tech industries like construction and textile, and hundreds of thousands small to medium size companies. These measures alienated orthodox economists and western institutions, such as the IMF, and the professional middle classes, but tightened the AKP's control over small to medium-sized businesses and state-dependent capitalists, at the same time provided employment to millions of workers. As the sharp increasing high inflation and deep cost of living crisis reduced the real incomes of millions of workers, this didn't reduce the total income entering a typical working-class household. Because of the expansion in employment now more than one-person from many working-class households were in employment and the total money coming to an average household was still sufficient. This time, the cost of living crisis and high inflation hit the professional middle classes more. They tried to mobilize the working class, but around their own demands. This is quite typical for this urban professional middle class because they think if they have a crisis the whole society has the same crisis. In the campaign and in social media, they were complaining about how they find it difficult now to go to holidays, or paying their children's private school fees, etc. This same narcissism of the professional urban middle classes didn't convince the workers, just the opposite, being fully aware of their own class situation they voted for employment, and for who they think would provide them continuous employment, rather than vague promises from the opposition.

Utku Balaban looks at official sources about employment between 2013 and 2021, and shows that there is a positive correlation between the number of employments available and the votes for the ruling AKP government. Especially important for these elections,

the employment expanded significantly for the last three years. Erdogan's vote, comparing with 2018 elections, declined only 3 percent. This trend one can see everywhere where the majority of population is working class, even in big cities. In Istanbul, for instance, in working class districts of Bağcılar, Zeytinburnu, Sultangazi, and Güngören, the level of decline in Erdogan's vote was much smaller than the national average, and much higher in traditionally social democratic middle-class districts of Kadıköy, Besiktas and Cekmekoy.⁷ Ongoing economic hardships have had a far greater impact on the urban working and middle classes than on rural populations living in the large interior Anatolian heartland of Turkey. Throughout his political career, Erdoğan has always won by large majorities in Anatolia and many small towns while often doing poorly in the large cities. This election was not different. In all those Anatolian towns, where there is fast industrialization and significantly increased employment, the decline in Erdogan's vote was much smaller. Therefore, one can conclude that the economic policy of Erdogan, keeping interest rates low and continuing export and thus expanding employment, even at the expense of declining real wages and cost of living crisis, seem to have worked for him. Majority of these workers are employed in KOBIs, small and medium size companies. The definition of this group of companies is a company employing up to 50 workers. In Turkey, more than 3 million companies in industrial production sector are in this category, employing 11,5 million workers.⁸

The owners of such companies are natural allies of the Islamic movement, so-called Anatolian Tigers, and their workers voted for Erdogan in large numbers, despite the cost of living crisis and all their increased difficulties, simply because they thought this is the regime providing them their employment. As well as using welfare schemes to build trust among poorer sections of the population, Erdoğan's administration integrated state-capitalist tools⁹ into its neoliberal programme. This mixture has kept Turkey on an unconventional but still somewhat sustainable path. R.T. Erdogan appointed himself chairman of Turkey's sovereign wealth fund, and mobilized sovereign wealth funds, import substitution and selective incentives for certain sectors such as security and defence.¹⁰ It also lowered interest rates and boosted production in low-tech industries like construction. While alienating orthodox economists and the professional classes, these measures tightened the AKP's grip on small to medium-sized businesses and state-dependent capitalists, along with their workers. As a result, a significant part of the working class did not break away from the ruling bloc and that the opposition parties failed to make advances.

Another significant aspect of the regime's strength is socio-political: its mass organization. The AKP has more than 11 million active members and strong local branches and also controls a multitude of civic organizations from charities to professional syndicates, and from youth clubs to unions. All these links give its supporters a sense of power, visibility, and often material perks, easy access to jobs and funds, all of which are so important especially in times of economic hardship. Cihan Tugal, a sociology professor in Berkeley, USA, did some field work in Turkey and Egypt among the supporters of Islamist movements. He writes that through local support organizations these movements have been organizing a large mass of people. In such organizations tens of thousands of people are involved, some as organizers and many as volunteers.¹¹ As a result, a different kind of Islamic activist is being created. So, in Turkey, around AKP-led organizations, in local community groups,

Koran reading groups, around mosques and even in local cafes, the Islamists are organizing people, providing real material help to poor households, finding employment to hundreds and thousands of poor people. This is very important, and just by saying that these people are being tricked, they are indoctrinated with wrong ideas, you cannot achieve anything. You need to create alternative organizations, grass roots movements, there is no other way, there is no short cut. This is real, and this tightly organized large community is active for millions of people in Turkey. There is no other way, you have to go to these places, live in these places and actively work with local communities for solving their day to day problems.

Now, some words about the opposition. The mainstream opposition comprised secular and centre-right parties commonly known as the Table of Six, and a far-right party joined after the first round. The opposition was led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's Republican People's Party (CHP), the founding party of the Turkish Republic. CHP has been shifting to the right since the mid-1990s, both in its economic policy and its Turkish nationalism, and opposition to the Kurds. The second largest party in this group was İyip, a secular offshoot of the Turkish nationalist MHP. Two of the smaller parties in the coalition were breakaways from the AKP, led by the former Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan and the former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.

Erdogan's enemy is my friend approach adopted by the opposition parties did not work and lacked a coherent economic programme and foreign policy direction. During the campaign, the Table of Six did not talk about the neoliberal free-market direction of the economy over the past forty years, but rather they made it explicit that they wanted to go back to early AKP period. The opposition, in terms of foreign relations adopted a broadly pro-Western and anti-Russian line that effectively amounted to an endorsement of US hegemony over the Middle East and the Balkans. In interviews with Western media outlets, he pledged to involve Ankara more in NATO's war against Russia and then, without providing any evidence, accused the Russian government of interfering in the Turkish elections.

Especially after the first round, when Kılıçdaroğlu made a pact with the far-right party it kept mostly silent on the Kurdish question and become aggressively anti-migrant to the point of being openly racist. By swinging to the far right during the two-week interval between the first round and the runoffs, the opposition was hoping to attract anti-Syrian and anti-Kurdish voters while somehow keeping the Kurds on-side. This strategy relied on capturing the 5% that went to the far-right racist anti-immigrant candidate Sinan Oğan, a former member of the MHP and the only other presidential contender in the first round. When Oğan declared his support for Erdogan, Kılıçdaroğlu signed a pact with extreme right-wing fascist Ümit Özdağ, who wanted to deport all unwanted immigrants. Kılıçdaroğlu agreed with his racist anti-migrant agenda uncritically and even claimed that there were 10 million migrants in Turkey, and denouncing refugees as potential rapists and criminals. All national and international bodies working with the migrants and refugees disputed this number, saying that all refugees, registered and unofficial, in Turkey are not more than 5 to 6 million. He promised to deport millions of Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugees fleeing imperialist wars in their own countries. At the end, only half of the far-right vote went to Kılıçdaroğlu in the runoffs, at the same time his overtures to far-righty Turkish nationalists appeared to demobilize the Kurds, as turnout fell in all Kurdish majority provinces.

The main claim of the opposition during the campaign is built on a number of false expectations, such as EU accession for Turkey, a Pax Americana for the Middle East, and a fast rising and export-oriented economy model that depends on cheap Western credit. Turkey's high economic growth in the 2000s was mainly based on Turkish exports of manufactured goods, but all this manufacture relied on hot cash coming from the West and high levels of public and private debt. After the outbreak of the 2007–08 global financial crisis, however, this model was rendered unsustainable, because global monetary flows slowed considerably after interest rate hikes in the West. Growing economic and social vulnerabilities emerged in the second decade of the AKP rule, together with an increasingly authoritarian and aggressive political direction in particular, after 2011. Several significant incidents from the sharply increased pressure upon press freedom in 2011, with dozens of media professionals being detained under vague anti-terror laws, to the 2013 Taksim Gezi Park protests and the 2016 failed coup attempt, took place in the context of a global economic slowdown and a continuing financial and economic crisis. At the political level, the years following the aftermath of the 2008 global crisis witnessed an increasingly authoritarian surge, not only in Turkey but in many parts of the world, from India to Latin America, and from Eastern Europe to North America. In the long aftermath of the 2008 global financial disaster, politics at both global and national levels have shaped up as a rivalry between neoliberal globalism and national economies. Therefore, the mainstream opposition's empty agenda of restoring a Western-friendly and expanding free-market capitalism has already run its course for Turkey and failed to be convincing for the electorate.

According to a number of political scientists and sociologists, in the second decade of the AKP regime, Turkey has shifted from a tutelary democracy to a competitive authoritarian regime. These studies, building on Levitsky and Loxton's framework which underlines the catalyst role played by the election of populist leaders for the rise of competitive authoritarianism, describe hybrid regimes, where democratic institutions are still seen as the principal means of obtaining and exercising power, abuse them so often and to such an extent that electoral competition is anything but fair.¹² There were 35 competitive authoritarian regimes in 2010, according to Levitsky and Way's book *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. Some of these democratized; others slid into full-scale authoritarianism; still others remained competitive authoritarian regimes. 'Some competitive authoritarian regimes democratized (including Peru, Slovakia, and Taiwan), while others hardened into full-blown authoritarianism (such as Belarus, Cambodia, and Russia). Still others (including Albania, Benin, and Ukraine) careened back and forth between democracy and competitive authoritarianism'.¹³ Levitsky and Way, in 2020, pointed to two worrying trends since the publication of their book. The decline of Western liberal hegemony and the emergence of a new form of competitive authoritarianism in countries such as Hungary, the Philippines, Venezuela, and of course Turkey.

By 2019, it was clear that the liberal international order was in deep trouble. The tectonic plates that underpin it are shifting, and little can be done to repair and rescue it. The fall of the liberal international order horrifies the Western elites who built it and who have benefited from it in many ways. What set these countries apart were stronger democratic traditions and institutions than the earlier countries, where conditions had been less favourable for democracy. 'Tilting the playing field in countries such as

Hungary, the Philippines, Turkey, and Venezuela requires greater skill, more sophisticated strategies, and far more extensive popular mobilization than in, say, Benin, Madagascar, or Moldova', the authors told us. Prospective autocrats must first command sizable electoral majorities and 'This is often achieved via polarizing populist or ethno-nationalist strategies'. Erdoğan didn't only manage to tilt the playing field in his favour: he convinced a large part of the population, including the opposition, that this is the new normal. Erdoğan and his AKP, even in amid serious economic crisis, 'used effective populist appeals that tapped into longstanding popular resentment against the established political elite'.¹⁴

Erdoğan was a mastermind of the game, effectively clipping all potential rivals' wings; he understands realpolitik well and adapts to new circumstances, changes his tactics, recruits new players to shore up his support base. He is a shape shifter par excellence motivated by pragmatist gain rather than ideology. He has been able to neutralize any opposition by appealing to Turkish voters' nationalist or religious predisposition with a language about Turkey's rightful return as a great power, complete with government-produced videos linking the present to past Ottoman glories.

The re-election of Islamist President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in a run-off against Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is a political experience of international significance. The Marxist Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci wrote in his *Prison Notebooks* that 'the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'. Gramsci was preoccupied with the breakdown and collapse of the liberal order that was the dominant pattern in international affairs after the First World War and in particular, understanding the rise to power of Benito Mussolini. For Gramsci, Mussolini was one such 'morbid symptom' of the interregnum of the interwar period. The term 'interregnum', originally used to denote a time lag separating the death of one royal sovereign to the enthronement of the successor, is here, as used by Gramsci, understood as a period when one arrangement of hegemony is waning but prior to the full emergence of another.¹⁵

It seems that in the third decade of the twenty-first century, the world is once again living in an interregnum. It is poised between inward-looking old hegemonic powers (the US and European states) and reluctant new emergent ones (China and other emerging powers). Developments such as razor fences covering Eastern Europe's borders against North African and Middle Eastern migrants, Narendra Modi using religious nationalism to mobilize a large segment of the country's Hindu majority in India, right-wing populist mavericks like Duterte and Bongbong Marcos in the Philippines, and Orbán's right-wing authoritarian populist regime in Hungary are among the many morbid symptoms of our times. So is Trump's still powerful isolationism ('America first'), which is supported by Christian evangelicals both at home and abroad. It was, therefore, not just a coincidence that Erdoğan's regime in Turkey turned increasingly authoritarian during the same years. All of these right-wing populist leaders, from Hungary to India, from Italy to the Philippines, and from Turkey to Thailand are alike in specializing in aggressive patriotism, the defence of an endangered national independence and nostalgia for past glories. Consequently, in several countries, including Turkey, Hungary, Egypt and the Philippines, we are witnessing increasingly repressive state apparatuses.

Of course, in all these countries there are local and/or national conditions that prepare the ground for such right-wing authoritarian surges. This authoritarian

outbreak, however, is not rooted in the personalities or psychologies of Trump, Modi, Erdogan or Orban, but in underlying conditions, long-term historical factors that affect the world economic system and the changing power balance. Trump, Modi, Orban and Erdogan are less the creators than the outcome of protracted economic, social and political processes. It would be a mistake to think that the so-called liberal order is in trouble solely because of Trump's, Orban's or Erdogan's rhetoric or policies. In fact, more fundamental problems are at play, which account for why these autocrats have been able to successfully challenge an order that enjoys almost universal support among the foreign policy elites in the West.

All such populist right-wing shifts are the result of an increasingly volatile and chaotic international situation, which became more emphasized in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis and economic downturn. This is the direct consequence of a process that Giovanni Arrighi called 'hegemonic transition' within a period of systemic chaos, where 'the incumbent hegemonic state (or group of states) lacks the means or the will to continue leading the system of states'.¹⁶ This long and protracted period of hegemonic transition from the Euro-Atlantic core to Asian economies, especially China and India, like every other period of hegemonic transition and instability in which 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born', has created more and more morbid symptoms. In many parts of the world, not only in emerging economies like Turkey but also in the core economies too, including the United States and Western European powers, new forms of authoritarianism have emerged within the context of global crisis, severe austerity measures, economic nationalism, racism and xenophobia. This new authoritarianism is a morbid phenomenon in itself, and it is at the root of other authoritarian and morbid symptoms that grow from below.

It is obvious that the current juncture represents a particularly dismal chapter in the history of Turkey that displays all the traits of economic crisis and political exhaustion. The problem is not just the AKP or its leader, Erdogan. The opposition bloc's appeal, 'anyone but Erdogan', sounds clear and straightforward, but it is not only simplistic but misleading, reducing Turkey's deep structural problems to a simple personal one. The problem for Turkey at this critical point in history is structural and historical. What can be called a polycrisis (the simultaneous occurrence of several catastrophic events) has dealt an enduring setback to development in emerging economies, like Turkey. This crisis will persist for the foreseeable future. The current state of the Turkish economy and polity should be understood in the context of the global rise of right-wing authoritarianism that is itself a consequence of neoliberal restructuring and the global shift. Neoliberal economic governance and right-wing authoritarian leaders and movements are posing serious threats to democracies all around the world.

Notes

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