

# Conservative Authoritarianism in Turkey

Written by Çağlar Ezikoğlu

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This article aims at exploring the crisis of liberal democracy in Turkey with regards to competitive and conservative authoritarianism. The classification is borrowed from the work of Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. Competitive authoritarianism means that a regime violates *at least one* of the three defining attributes of democracy: free elections, broad protection of civil liberties, and a reasonably level playing field (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Although Turkey has been classified as a 'flawed democracy' for a very long time, the current regime shows that it perhaps better fits the definition of competitive authoritarianism. Turkey has also been identified as an 'illiberal democracy' by the AKP (the Justice and Development Party), after it promised a moderate Islamist democracy. An 'illiberal democracy' is one which enjoys free elections, but not basic rights and freedoms.

The AKP was established in 2001 and won the general election in November 2002. The 2002 winning coalition was supported by both domestic and foreign actors, such as various European countries and the United States, liberal intellectuals within Turkey, moderate Islamist groups like Gülen Movement, faith-based organisations, Western style business institutions, conservative businessmen, and conservative and centre right voters – whose votes matter in elections after all. As a result of this alliance, the first AKP term produced many important developments and successes in terms of Europeanisation and the EU accession process. This situation helped to prove the AKP's conservative democratic credentials, rather than the claim that the AKP was a continuation of the Milli Görüş movement. During the clash between the secularist/militarist bureaucracy and the AKP in the party's second term, the government began to change the conservative approach to democracy it had identified with since its establishment in 2001. There are some minor signals that demonstrate that political Islam is on the rise under the AKP. However, the AKP had been supported by liberals due to the decreasing of power of the military in Turkish politics in comparison to Turkey's democratically elected bodies. Liberals believed that the AKP would fight its secular militarist/Kemalist opponents to support democratisation and demilitarisation in Turkey. Following the important victory of the AKP in the 2011 election, the party's conservative democratic identity has become less credible. The AKP's shift towards conservatism and authoritarianism marked the end of the long-time alliance between independent, non-party liberal democrats and religious conservatives. As a result, the AKP under Erdogan's leadership has become more Islamic. Turkish society became divided into two camps after the Gezi Park Protests, and secular people are concerned about the rise of authoritarianism and political Islam under the AKP.

As discussed above, Erdogan's political survival is directly related to the rise of Islamism and authoritarianism in Turkey under the AKP, but alternative approaches are not enough to explain this phenomenon. This article will consider the policy of Erdogan and the AKP in the light of Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Before exploring this argument, this article summarises Moore's book. Moore's thesis is a comparative analysis of America, England, France, India, China and Japan in terms of their modernisation processes. Moore (1967, p.413) offers three alternative routes for these countries in order to understand the history of their modernisation. With regards to Germany and Japan, Moore identifies a conservative revolution and a reactionary capitalist route. According to Moore, the bourgeois revolution is either aborted or never takes place in these countries. The capitalist transformation has been managed by industrial and landed elites rather than the bourgeoisie and there is a strong conservative alliance between elites, such as the aristocracy, against the peasantry. As a result, this alliance bolstered an autonomous state liable to being controlled by fascist leader.

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As mentioned above, Moore focuses on exploring the origins of dictatorship and democracy. Indeed, Turkey's early republican period, under the regime of Mustafa Kemal, may become an additional case for Moore's thesis. Following the abolishment of the Ottoman Empire and the Caliphate, Kemal's regime began a social and cultural revolution in order to achieve modernisation and Westernisation. He and his associates aimed at transforming all cultural and symbolic aspects associated with the Islamic way of life, including equal rights for women, reforming the language, and creating a new national and cultural identity, that of being Turkish. However, Kemal changed direction from a reformist liberal approach to a militant and authoritarian secularism, due to Turkey's absent bourgeoisie. Some authors, like Murat Belge, in his book *Militarist Modernisation: Germany, Japan and Turkey* (2011), draw a connection between Turkey's early republican period and the reactionary route identified by Moore as having been taken in fascist countries.

Specifically valuable to the case of Turkey, and the history of the AKP and the Erdogan regime, might be the concept of Catonism relied on by Moore (1967, p. 484). Moore focuses on economic relations between classes in order to explain the modernisation process of countries, and to him the economy is one of the most important indicators for the distinction between democratic or authoritarian states. Moore rejects the assumption that the behavior of a class in any particular situation is determined by the 'economic factor' rather than the 'religious factor' or the 'diplomatic factor'. Social class is the unit of analysis, but in its cultural, ideological, and political concreteness, not only in terms of its members' abstract economic interests. However, in the last part of his book, Moore mentions the conservative or radical imagery for understanding the origins of dictatorship in Asian and European countries like Japan or Germany. According to Moore, radical and conservative rhetoric helps to control the whole country within authoritarian regimes (Moore, 1967, p.481). Moore gives a very good example from the Cato the Elder to explain this phenomenon and this article tries to engage Cato/Catonism to help understand the AKP's policy under Erdogan's leadership.

## The Importance of Erdogan's Catonism in the Case of Turkey

The key elements in a certain kind of authoritarian rhetoric – advocacy of the sterner virtues, militarism, contempt for 'decadent' foreigners, and anti-intellectualism – appear in the West at least as early as Cato the Elder at the end of the second century BCE (Moore, 1967, p.491). According to Moore, Catonism always promises 'happiness and progress' (Moore, 1967, p.492). For instance, Catonism can stand against cosmopolitanism, intellectuals, big money or usurers. According to Catonists, art must be healthy and traditional. Moreover, the notion of a specific set of sexual relations is the basis of the home, the family and the state. Moore gives an example of Nazi Germany's family vision, 'Kinder, Kirche, Küche' (children, church, kitchen), which is seen to offer a healthy domestic environment for women (Moore, 1967, p.493). Another important part of Catonism is the use of aggressive actions and policies against intellectuals and elites. Moore points out that if any politicians give aggressive and insolent speeches, they can control the citizens easily. Interestingly, Catonism claims that these speeches and policies always are implemented by governments which identify themselves as 'progressive' or 'reformist' in a given country.

The history of the AKP and its leader Erdogan has many similarities with the concept of Catonism. One important example of this are certain Catonist policies of Erdogan. For instance, Erdogan has made very aggressive speeches about women's rights and the lifestyles of secular people. For example, Erdogan called abortion 'murder'. In May 2012, the AKP government prepared a draft law whose stated goals were to increase fertility across the country. The draft law aims to restrict women's rights by imposing an abortion ban after the fourth week of pregnancy. The other important issue for Erdogan is alcohol. Although the law does not prohibit consumption of alcoholic beverages, it bans their advertisement in printed and visual media. Moreover, the AKP government stated that new regulations would prohibit the sale of alcohol after 10 pm. On the one hand, some AKP politicians tried to justify the alcohol restriction on the basis of public health. On the other, Erdogan defended it with reference to religious injunctions: 'Is there anything wrong with pursuing a policy ordered by religion?'

Another example of such policies of Erdogan's is his point of view on the lifestyle of Turkish citizens. In November 2012, Erdogan promised to end mixed-sex student residences, referring not only to dormitories but also to private student residences and flats. Many people, including the then Prime Minister, disapproved of co-educational living situations as being counter to Islamic beliefs and law. It is reported that during a closed-door meeting, Erdogan said

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that

this is against our conservative, democratic character . . . We witnessed this in Denizli, an inland town in the Aegean Region. The insufficiency of dormitories causes problems. Male and female university students are living in the same accommodations. This is not being checked.

## Anti-Intellectualism and Traditionalism in Erdogan's Discourse

Recep Tayyip Erdogan was born in Kasimpasa, which is a poor urban district in Istanbul. Erdogan comes from a lower class family, like Cato the Elder. Politics is always more important than other issues, like education, for Erdogan, and he has been in Turkish politics since he was young. As a result, Erdogan's political background is superior to his educational background. This situation affects Erdogan's point of view, which goes against those of intellectuals, elites or well-educated people in Turkey. When Erdogan's winning coalition started to become smaller after 2007, he began to show his perspective on the dichotomy between 'white Turks' and 'black Turks'. White Turks here are the well-educated, well-to-do Kemalist elites fashioning themselves on (some of) Ataturk's ideas. They are often associated with state bureaucracy and the military. Black Turks are those that the white Turks see as poorly educated, lower-class and either still peasants in Anatolia or rural areas, or unable to shake off their peasant heritage. Following the Gezi Park Protests which had been led by the elites of Turkish society, Erdogan said:

According to them we don't understand politics. According to them we don't understand art, theatre, cinema, poetry. According to them we don't understand aesthetics, architecture. According to them we are uneducated, ignorant, the lower class, who has to be content with what is being given, needy; meaning, we are a group of negroes.

As seen by this speech, Erdogan has disdain for the elites and intellectuals in Turkey's cities and he has used the differences between them and the wider population in order to polarise Turkish society. He said that, 'In this country there is a segregation of black Turks and white Turks. Your brother Tayyip belongs to the black Turks'. Another group Erdogan uses to demonstrate his anti-intellectualism are academics. Before 2011, most liberal academics supported the Erdogan government due to its attempt to stem the power of the military and handle the Kurdish peace process. However, after the collapse of this coalition, Erdogan increased his criticism of academics. Let me give one example. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, an initiative from Turkey, Academics for Peace, released a petition signed by 1,128 academics which calls on the Turkish government to end state violence and negotiate with the Kurdish political movement. There are many critics of this initiative, and one of them is Erdogan, who called academics 'lumpen', 'half-portion intellectuals', and 'crappy'.

Erdogan's anti-intellectualism shares similarities with Cato the Elder's perspective. Cato believed that Hellenic influence and its seemingly positive impact on the intellectual environment in Rome could be a threat to the Roman tradition and lower classes. Similarly, Erdogan stands against intellectuals or elites in Turkey because these groups are identified as a 'possible enemy' for the lower classes, who support Erdogan/the AKP and Erdogan uses this discourse to maintain his support.

As seen in these speeches and policies, Erdogan has become a Catonist politician who tries to control the private lives of people with a conservative agenda in order to control the whole country and to increase his power. Additionally, Erdogan has insulted liberals, intellectuals, academics, and other elites many times and when he increased his criticisms of these groups, the other parts (especially conservatives) of society showed him even more support. As mentioned above, the policies associated with Catonism always parallel a discourse of happiness and progress. A similar situation is presented by the case of Erdogan and the AKP. Erdogan and the AKP government identify these developments as the establishment of 'advanced democracy' (a high level of democracy) in Turkey, although it seems that authoritarianism and conservatism are on the rise.

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# Conservative Authoritarianism in Turkey

Written by Çağlar Ezikoğlu

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