

Regime uncertainty, democratic erosion and resilience, and Turkish opposition actors

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Abstract Which peculiar uncertainties does democratic erosion (DE) pose to opposition actors? How have these uncertainties influenced the behavior of opposition actors during Turkey’s autocratization since the early 2000s? What can we learn from this case regarding the links between DE and opposition behavior? The latter should be treated as an integral part of explaining DE—the gradual decline in the quality of multiple aspects of democracy under popularly elected governments. We argue that a contextual uncertainty, “regime uncertainty” (RU) challenged Turkish opposition actors, compounding the other and related uncertainties they faced such as institutional and strategic uncertainties and affecting their resilience against DE. RU concerns the ambivalence that DE’s inherent qualities generate about what the regime is, or is becoming. The resulting intra-opposition divisions and indecisions raise the question of whether the primary context, frame and end of opposition politics should be issue- and party-based competitive politics or defending democracy against an imminent threat. Hence, RU generates recurring rifts over “normal” versus “extraordinary” politics. We analyze the Turkish experience and intra-opposition politics in four sub-periods (nascent DE, consolidation of erosive power, advanced DE, breakdown and post-breakdown opposition experimentation). Turkish opposition actors’ RU perceptions and resulting behaviors evolved on highly non-linear paths. We offer novel analytical/theoretical tools and argue that the agency and capacity of oppositions to overcome RU in a country, alongside their ability to surmount other challenges, should be considered an integral part of democratic resilience against erosion.

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1 Introduction: opposition dilemmas and Turkey as a crucial case

What kind of peculiar uncertainties did democratic erosion (DE)—the incremental undermining of democracy from within, under popularly elected governments and by using mainly legal tools especially at early stages—pose to Turkish opposition actors? How have these uncertainties contributed to shaping their behavior during Turkey’s autocratization since the early 2000s, and what possible insights can we obtain from this experience regarding the relationship between opposition behavior and democratic erosion?

By process-tracing and analyzing the different sub-periods of the Turkish case in this article, we argue that Turkish opposition actors were challenged and divided by complex uncertainties and resulting dilemmas—in particular what we call “regime uncertainty” and the related tradeoffs and indecisions between “normal” and “extraordinary” politics—regarding the regime context in which they were operating. This weakened their ability to counter DE.

As a corpus of scholarship has demonstrated in recent years, DE is the salient and dominant mode of autocratization threatening democracy in the twenty-first century (Lust and Waldner 2015; Bermeo 2016, 2022; Coppedge 2017; Cassani and Tomini 2019; Lührman and Lindberg 2019; Maerz et al. 2020; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Kneuer 2021), seen across all types of democracies ranging from Indonesia to Bolivia, India, Greece and the US. Under elected governments led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its chairman Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since 2002, Turkey has experienced one of the longest and most transformative processes of DE in the world in the twenty-first century, comparable to cases like Venezuela and Hungary. Venezuela and Turkey “stand out as drawing significant attention” (Friesen et al. 2023, appendix: 133). For example, operationalizing DE as a major total decline in a country’s liberal democracy (at least ten percent) incrementally (moderate annual erosions) lasting for at least five years,¹ one finds only four countries having suffered DE more than ten years and regressed to electoral autocracy as a result: Bolivia, Hungary, Venezuela and Turkey (Somer and Yilmaz 2023).

When the AKP was elected to power, Turkey was a democratizing electoral democracy, with a liberal democracy score of 0.5 out of 1.0 according to the Varieties of Democracy database. Following a slight improvement to 0.53 in 2003 and 2004, this score began its continuous and incremental decline. The annual average decrease was 0.03, with the highest yearly drops (0.08) suffered in 2013 and 2014. The cumulative outcome of this gradual decay, however, was drastic. By 2018, Turkey’s liberal democracy score had suffered a four-fold retreat from 0.5 to 0.1. Similarly, its electoral democracy score had fallen from 0.68 in 2004 to 0.28 in

¹ By using V-Dem’s liberal democracy, ROW (regimes of the world), and coup indicators: <https://v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/>.

2017, and the country was classified as an electoral autocracy. As of 2022, and despite improvements after opposition parties' successful performance in 2019 local elections (Esen and Gümüşçü 2019; Ayan Musil 2024), these scores remained at the strikingly low levels of 0.14 and 0.28.

For sure, as the government in charge and increasingly dominant party, AKP governments, party leader Erdoğan and their agency (Kneuer 2021) were primarily responsible for the developments and policies that led to DE during this period. However, all this also took place in the presence of highly mobilized and resisting, if also internally divided opposition actors. Between 2002 and 2023, opposition political parties failed to prevail over the AKP in 6 general and 3 local elections and in 3 referenda, excluding the partial exceptions of June 2015 general and 2019 local elections. The "opposition" did not only comprise political parties. "Opposition actors" included among others critical NGOs, social movements such as the one following the massive Gezi protests in 2013, women, environmentalists and the Kurdish minority, and approximately half of the electorate who kept voting for opposition parties with typically over 80% turnout rates and who showed up in pro-opposition rallies. Institutional and civic opposition actors involved many members of the high judiciary and other bureaucratic agencies (at least until they were tamed, packed with pro-government figures and gradually lost their independence), major portions of private business, as well as a vibrant media, which by now has mostly been bought out by Erdoğan allies but still entails vocal pro-opposition outlets.

Arguably, these actors more or less constituted the horizontal, vertical and diagonal accountability mechanisms of Turkish democracy.² Whether through failure to stop AKP policies that undermined democratic norms and rule of law or through polarizing and democracy-eroding acts of their own, their actions also contributed to DE. These should be explained as part of why and how DE transpired.

Neither the opposition nor the AKP supporters were necessarily unconditional and principled democrats (Somer 2011). Given that they formed a very diverse group, one can safely assume that some opposition actors were more candid and principled in their self-proclaimed actions to uphold democracy than others who harbored instrumental and power-seeking motivations of their own.

Whatever their real motivations and priorities were, however, one may ask why they failed to stop more of the eroding incumbent's policies and most importantly unseat Erdoğan by formulating and joining forces around a common political strategy. This failure cannot only be explained by the unlevel playing field that the incumbent created over time through undemocratic policies, which were in any way moderate in early stages.

DE takes place incrementally over years, which seems to give democratic oppositions many opportunities to intervene (Gamboa 2017), at least compared to autocratizations characterized by rapid and blatant breakdowns of democratic orders, such as military or civilian coups or revolutions. Further, incremental legal

² As we will see below, as part of the bureaucratic opposition actors but not democratic checks and balances, one can also include the military, which acted as a praetorian-authoritarian veto player against the government until the AKP and its allies truncated the military's authorities and political powers through politicized trials and a crucial referendum in 2010 (Somer 2014; Gürsoy 2017).

and behavioral changes that gradually erode democracy do not bring about outright regime change. The subversion of democracy emerges as the aggregate result of changes in different areas over time (e.g. laws, social norms, political institutions and procedures, media and civil society landscape).

All this means that, at least until the advanced stages of DE, Turkish opposition actors like others in such contexts enjoyed more freedom and space to counter authoritarianism than oppositions in fully authoritarian contexts. Why did they still fail to arrest DE and/or to replace the AKP?

Part of the answer may lie in the uncertainties and associated dilemmas they faced. Whether from autocracy to democracy or vice versa, regime changes pose major uncertainties to opposition actors, which have best been explored and theorized so far in contexts of electoral authoritarian regimes and democratic transitions from fully authoritarian regimes (Schedler 2001, 2013; Mainwaring 2003; O'Donnell and Schmitter 2013; Ong 2022). During a democratic opening under an electoral authoritarian regime, for example the early Ben Ali era in Tunisia or Poland's transition to multiparty competition after 1989, opposition actors face major uncertainties regarding which institutional rules still prevail, what the regime's intentions, capabilities and vulnerabilities are, and at what point democratic transition ends and democracy begins. Hence, they also face behavioral dilemmas. How much can they really criticize the government before they are reigned in? Are elections really held to concede democratization or simply co-opt opposition actors? Would there be a crackdown if they won too many seats in the legislature? They also face related moral and strategic dilemmas. Should they operate as anti-systemic actors, focus on delegitimizing the regime based on principle and thereby expose themselves to more exclusion and oppression, or should they seek inclusion through cooperation and inevitably legitimize the authoritarian government in the process (Mainwaring 2003)? Should they pursue winning the elections within prevalent rules, changing these rules and conditions, or both (Schedler 2002)?

Research has also begun to analyze such uncertainties in contexts of DE. Opposition actors faced major uncertainties regarding institutional rules and the incumbent's intentions and capabilities during incremental executive aggrandizements of countries like Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Thailand and Turkey, giving rise to strategic dilemmas about how to respond. We join this growing corpus of scholarship analyzing opposition behavior and strategies to explain how and why DE occurs and can be reversed (Gamboa 2017, 2022; Selçuk et al. 2019; Somer, McCoy and Luke 2021; Cleary and Öztürk 2022; Esen and Gümüşçü 2023).

In the remainder of the article, we first discuss how we aim to complement extant research on DE and opposition behavior. We then examine how RU differs from other and related uncertainties and explain the resulting dilemmas between "normal and extraordinary" opposition behaviors. Next, in the main body of the article, we illustrate these points by presenting an analytical narrative of the Turkish case with respect to the dilemmas faced and debated by Turkish opposition actors, discussing Turkey's DE in four subperiods:

- Nascent stages of DE (2002–2007)
- Consolidation of the incumbent's erosive power within the state and media (2008–2012)

- Advanced DE and consolidation of power in state and society (2013–2016)
- Democratic breakdown, and “post-breakdown” opposition dilemmas and experimentation (2017–2022)

In the conclusions section, we will recapitulate our arguments, with a brief evaluation of the opposition behavior and performance in the May 2023 elections.

2 The challenges of explaining opposition behavior during democratic erosion

The first step to better understand and conceptualize opposition behavior during DE may be to avoid reducing DE to executive aggrandizement. DE may not always draw predominantly on executive aggrandizement (Coppedge 2017). Further, as our examination of the Turkish case will also show, a DE episode may start before executive aggrandizement becomes salient (Somer and Yilmaz 2023). This is important to acknowledge for our purposes here because both some opposition actions, and executive aggrandizement itself, may arise as a result of these prior decays in other areas of democracy.

Hence, we suggest that DE should be examined as a multi-dimensional process where democratic norms and behavior fade away gradually in multiple areas ranging from civil society and public discourse to parliament, courts and executives, and where opposition actors play major causal roles. Accordingly, an adequate definition of DE may be: *the incremental subversion of democracy from within through the gradual decay of democratic quality in various domains, under popularly elected governments, by the interactive actions of governments, oppositions, and institutions, and by maintaining at least the veneer of many institutions, discourses and normative principles of democracy.*

Second, a fine-grained analysis of the Turkish case suggests that the uncertainties and dilemmas that opposition actors face during DE, and thus opposition behavior, are more complex than implied by the binary descriptions and policy prescriptions that extant scholarship has so far produced, such as “institutional/extra-institutional” (Gamboa 2017, 2022) and “moderate/radical” (Cleary and Öztürk 2022).

Several insightful studies argue that institutional opposition channels combined with issue-based, moderate non-violent opposition is the best way to counter eroding incumbents. Comparing Venezuela and Colombia, Gamboa (2017, 2022) argues, for example, that such strategies maintain oppositions’ legitimacy and make it less likely that they will be subjected to severe repression. By contrast, using extra-institutional channels and “radical” opposition behavior is often said to backfire, as argued by Cleary and Öztürk (2022) based on a comparison of Venezuela, Turkey, Thailand, Ecuador, and Bolivia. We agree that irregular or radical opposition attempts to remove popularly elected incumbents from office can polarize public opinion and boost support for the incumbent who is provided with a pretext for additional aggrandizement, while more “moderate” opposition behavior can buy opposition actors more time to secure “democratic survival.”

Yet, several questions remain. Why do many opposition actors resort to extraordinary oppositional strategies, often enjoying significant public support, if such strategies are costly and counterproductive? This should be explained in terms of DE's dynamics themselves. Empirically, whether a particular opposition action is "institutional/moderate" or "extra-institutional/radical" can be very hard to classify because this may depend on context. Were Turkey's massive, grassroots and anti-government Gezi protests (Tuğal 2013; Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2014), for example, "extra-institutional" because they were self-organized outside formal institutions or "institutional" because the protesters exercised their constitutional freedoms of association, protest, and self-defense against police violence? Were they "radical" because they voiced the maximalist demand of the government stepping down and some protesters resorted to coarse language and vandalism, or "moderate" because they were disruptive yet mainly unarmed and peaceful protests asking the government to change policies or resign?

Perhaps more importantly, can opposition strategies be labeled as radical or moderate without considering the actual level of threat to democracy in a country (Somer 2014; Somer et al. 2022)? Which opposition behaviors can legitimately be considered institutional, extra-institutional, moderate or radical can vary across different stages of DE and disparate political cultures and depends on how strong an incumbent's authoritarianism is.

Unless one can hold the threat level to democracy across cases constant, can one answer counterfactual questions such as: would Venezuela's democracy have fared better if opposition to Hugo Chavez had limited itself to institutional, conventional methods and avoided extraordinary measures like coups (2002), general strikes to halt government revenue (2002–2003), recalls (2004), and electoral boycotts (2005) (Hawkins 2010, p. 19–22; Gamboa 2017, p. 464–68; Carrión 2022, p. 40)? The Hungarian opposition acted much more moderately than its counterpart in Venezuela, but still failed to prevent DE leading to electoral autocracy (Ilonszki and Dudzińska 2021; Scheppele 2022). All in all, abstaining from aggressive and disruptive behavior can help oppositions protect some legitimacy but not necessarily enable them to arrest DE. Further, opposition actors may suffer even greater legitimacy losses by failing to stop autocratization through moderate behaviors, if and when supporters begin to see them as guilty through inaction, complicit or useless. These possible consequences are hard to predict for insiders and outsiders alike because they depend on the regime context, i.e. "what the regime has become or is becoming" through subtle, incremental and mainly legal changes and, consequently, how imminent the threat to democracy is (Somer et al. 2022).

3 Regime uncertainty and normal vs extraordinary opposition behavior

Regime uncertainty is a contextual uncertainty that concerns the questions of "where the regime is at a particular stage of DE and/or what it is becoming," and based on the answers to these, what ought to be the primary and legitimate basis, identity, goal and frame of opposition politics. Some degree of RU, we argue, is a built-in feature of DE processes, inherently generating intra-opposition rifts over how to interpret

Table 1 Normal vs Extraordinary Politics and Institutional vs Extra-Institutional Politics

	Normal Politics	Extraordinary Politics
Institutional	Motion of censure	Impeachment
	Issue-specific opposition in legislature	Walk-outs
	Judicial review	Party ban
	Electoral alliances	Judicial activism
	Issue-specific protests and civil society activity	Cross-ideological anti-incumbent alliances Non-violent anti-incumbent protests
Extra-institutional	Sector-specific and temporary strikes	Coup
	Sit-ins	General strike
	Whistleblowing	Civil disobedience Armed resistance

and how to respond to the policies of the incumbent and other developments that jointly produce DE.

Specifically, under conditions where DE is in progress but democracy has not fully been eroded, should the primary rationale of opposition behavior be to defend democracy, i.e. save/restore democracy in the face of an imminent threat, or to contest specific policies and ideas? The former rationale can warrant “extraordinary politics” of resistance, contentious mobilization and militant democracy. We define as *extraordinary opposition behavior* those opposition actions that could be considered as “unconventional,” “disruptive,” “radical” or illegitimate in a more or less functioning democracy where the main actors lack strong reasons to fear political conflicts producing significant DE, but which may be seen as legitimate when facing imminent threats to democracy. Though the exact typology would vary across political cultures, as Table 1 shows, examples are impeachment trials and party bans, general strikes and electoral boycotts, judicial activism, cross-ideological and anti-incumbent grand electoral coalitions, and mass protests asking the government to step down.

In the absence of an imminent threat to democracy, in turn, the rationale of contesting specific policies and ideological positions would call for *normal opposition behavior*: any form of conventional political participation in a more or less functioning democracy. Parliamentary opposition, party-based electoral competition and alliances, and issue-based protests, issue-based advocacy and media campaigns, and judicial review are some examples.

As Table 1 summarizes, our extraordinary/normal opposition behavior distinction crosscuts empirically as well as analytically the institutional/extra-institutional and moderate/radical distinctions. An impeachment trial of a president, for example, is a legal/institutional procedure, but also an extraordinary and “radical” measure according to our definition since it is an unusual remedy justified in exceptional circumstances. Democracies could not govern if impeachments were a regular practice. Similarly, sit-in protests, general strikes and banning parties are extraordinary but can be either institutional and extra-institutional depending on context. Legislators could organize a sit-in protest during a formal meeting for example, or outside by boycotting the legislature. Also, unless we limit the definition of democratic insti-

tutions to formal procedures alone, such an action by legislators may be seen as part of how democratic institutions defend themselves against authoritarian threats in exceptional circumstances.

To give another example, judicial actions such as banning a political party or candidate from ballot, or public statements reprimanding the government, are all extreme measures that would be seen as judicial activism, illegitimate or overreaching under normal circumstances and a generally democracy-respecting government. But many could view the same measures as legal, legitimate and even moderate under conditions where the party and politician in question were, say, bent on abolishing the constitution or organizing an insurrection.³ Such a context would even justify banning the party altogether or military interventions based on the logic “militant democracy” (Müller 2012).

To highlight, we are not arguing in this article which policies are legitimate or effective under a certain set of circumstances, and which ones were during Turkey’s DE. These are questions subject to long-standing debates among both legal experts and scholars of democracy. These disagreements offer further evidence that what can be considered as normal and legitimate versus extraordinary and illegitimate opposition behavior can become quite uncertain for insiders and outsiders alike during DE, depending on the changing perceived level and nature of autocratization, which is our point here.

RU is linked with and can be reinforced by institutional, informational and strategic uncertainties that prevail also in non-DE regime contexts. Still, we introduce RU as a peculiar uncertainty specific to DE, because it derives from the constitutive features of DE as a process. What distinguishes DE from “precipitous autocratizations,” (Somer et al. 2022) or “sudden deaths” (O’Donnell 2007) such as a constitutional self-coup or military putsch, is that DE occurs through incremental changes to democratic institutions, discourse and norms, and at least initially through formally legal means and based on significant electoral legitimacy. What causes autocratization is not any single event, which may not look very alarming in itself, but the cumulative result of changes. These features make it harder for opposition actors to interpret the context of these gradual changes, what kind of intended and unintended ramifications they may trigger, and the incumbent’s intentions and inclinations underlying them, in order to determine the proper response.

Other uncertainties such as imperfect information about incumbent intentions—how much does the incumbent intend to erode democracy—are clearly in play here also, but uncertainty emerges not only because opposition actors lack access to private information (e.g. about incumbent plans) but also because the toolkit used, i.e. the mode of autocratization itself, is inherently subtle, confusing and often legitimized based on promises to repair real deficits of extant democracies.

Extraordinary reactions based on an imminent regime threat may be required to protect democracy, if opposition actors interpret the changes as interrelated and part of a slippery slope to democratic breakdown. By contrast, normal, issue- and party-

³ “Why A Colorado Court Just Knocked Trump off the Ballot,” *The Daily: New York Times*, December 20, 2023.

based politics should suffice if they reflect temporary conflicts and bumpy road segments that are part and parcel of democracy.

Thus, oppositions are challenged and confused by uncertainties that are absent or milder in contexts of rapid autocratizations based on patently unconstitutional actions and coercion. Consider an *autogolpe* (“self-coup”), which is an example of precipitous autocratization. It occurs “when a president closes the courts and the legislature, suspends the constitution, and rules by decree until a referendum and new legislative elections are held to approve broader executive powers” (Cameron 1998, p. 125). In such a situation, there is no uncertainty that democracy has been suspended but there is uncertainty concerning the relative strengths of the opposition and the autocrat, i.e. whether the opposition has sufficient capacity to overcome the autocrat’s oppression. Based on an assessment of relative resource capacities and how strongly the coup-makers would react, they can decide whether or not to try to overturn the coup and through which means.

In contexts of DE, however, the question is whether democracy is facing or will face soon—unless the incumbent is stopped—the imminent threat of a breakdown. There is no one moment when a president declares state of exception and suspends the parliament and the constitution, as for example Saied of Tunisia did in 2022. Instead, a president gradually produces the same outcome by making piecemeal changes to laws and bylaws, packing the courts, weakening democratic norms and polarizing society to produce a mass base willing to endorse its transgressions over time (Somer et al. 2021). Since the changes are incremental and diffused, many actors will not be convinced about the urgency of regime-saving actions (Grillo and Prato 2023). This creates a rift which is a direct result of RU. It drives a wedge between those who see and do not see a regime change in play.

Hence, we can call “alarmists” those opposition actors who see an imminent threat to democracy that can only be countered with extraordinary opposition behavior. “Cautioners” would be those actors who don’t see such an imminent threat and therefore think that only normal opposition behavior is necessary and legitimate.

“Strategic alarmists,” in turn, would be those who see a regime threat but still advocate normal opposition politics based on their assessment of incumbent power and intentions. The position of what we call strategic alarmists reveals the interaction between RU and other uncertainties. Consider an alarmist opposition actor who sees a regime threat to democracy. This actor may still advocate normal political measures if s/he has information to believe that the eroder has enough informational and material resources to manipulate public opinion and co-opt supporters to ensure that extraordinary opposition responses end up backfiring, for example by reinforcing polarization and delegitimizing the opposition.

Alarmist, cautioner, and strategic alarmist positions refer to frames of mind and politics rather than fixed actors. Our narrative on Turkey below will show how actors could change their dominant frame of politics over time. The story we aim to tell is about regime uncertainty, indecision and how shifting intra-opposition behavioral and interpretive divergences vis-a-vis the right frame of politics weakened the opposition’s resilience against DE.

4 Opposition actors and dilemmas in Turkey's democratic erosion and "success" vs "failure"

Our analysis of the Turkish case is not aimed at developing a full causal narrative of Turkey's DE. This resulted from a web of domestic and international factors beyond the scope of this article. Nor do we aim to classify Turkish opposition performance as "success" or "failure." It is true that Turkish opposition actors "failed" in terms of simple binaries such as unseating the incumbent or not, and stopping DE or not. Evidence is clear that they have so far failed on both accounts. A closer look, however, reveals a more complex record, making it harder to classify Turkish opposition performance as "failure" in terms of more continuous variables such as levels of mobilization, dynamism and resistance.

Turkey's opposition actors have been highly mobilized since the beginning of DE, helping high election turnouts (regularly above 80%) with roughly 40–50% supporting the opposition. As we will see below, they have experimented with a very diverse range of normal and extraordinary politics in opposition to DE. They have produced regular issue-based as well as mass anti-government protests, opposition in parliament, dissent and criticism in social media, independent media formations, and fact-checking initiatives. Resistance has also involved initiatives by the military during the first decade.⁴ The judiciary has resisted DE both through judicial reviews and vetoes of laws and policies and through what many would consider as extra-institutional judicial activism such as a motion to close the ruling AKP party and controversial interpretations of the constitution to halt AKP policies.

Given this complex record, we cannot rule out the counterfactual possibilities that DE might have been faster and deeper (or the opposite) had Turkish opposition actors performed differently.

An additional factor complicating the record is that the boundaries between the ruling and opposition camps have changed considerably over the last two decades, some actors switching sides either through the incumbent's co-optation and capture of institutions or through conflicts. Two shifts stand out and muddy the picture. First, the far-right MHP (Nationalist Action Party) was a fierce critic of the AKP governments and part of the opposition until it became part of the ruling alliance with the AKP after 2015. In turn, major actors split from the AKP and joined the opposition after the *de jure* transition to an authoritarian presidential system in 2017, which seem to have signaled incumbent vulnerability and encouraged opposition electoral alliances but not necessarily electoral victories (Ong 2022). Second, the Gülen movement—a transnational religio-political network led in the US by the self-exiled Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen—was part of the incumbent camp and a key agent of its eroding policies and state-capture during the first and second phases of DE, but step by step fell out with the AKP and began to oppose it after 2012 or so (Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2017; Yavuz and Balcı 2018). However, most Turkish opposition actors reject Gülenists as part of the opposition and many facts

⁴ A 2007 online ultimatum by the military chief of staff was a major intervention in civilian politics short of a coup, as we discuss below. In turn, we do not consider the failed military coup in 2016 against the AKP as "opposition" for reasons explained in our main narrative below.

around Gülenist motivations in a wave of anti-government corruption investigations in 2013 and an aborted coup attempt in 2016 remain opaque, rendering it hard to decide whether their behavior should be treated as part of intra-incumbent conflicts or opposition behavior.

A full account of the developments during the four subperiods is beyond our purview. Instead, we aim to illustrate in the below account how the toolkit of DE coupled with the AKP's identity gave rise to RU, influencing, fracturing, and simultaneously mobilizing/hardening and weakening/disheartening opposition actors.

5 Nascent stages of democratic erosion (2002–2007)

This period shows how opposition behavior, intra-opposition divisions and the eventual political clash with the incumbent were shaped by agentic choices, the nature of the DE toolkit and the diverse ways in which it was possible to interpret AKP policies through the lens of Turkey's preexisting cleavage over religion and secularism. Without selecting on particular acts, it is hard to describe opposition behavior in terms of binary categories such as radical versus moderate: significant cooperation and compromise with the incumbent in parliament as well as civil society went in tandem with growing alarmist mobilization that culminated in a confrontation in the end.

The AKP on the eve of its 2002 election victory was popular but also polarizing. On one hand, it was launched amidst severe political-financial instability with a discursive and programmatic commitment to widely popular goals of eradicating corruption, fighting socioeconomic inequalities and poverty, and pursuing European Union standards and membership. On the other, the anti-systemic, political Islamist background, perceived identity, and core cadres of the party triggered major debates and divisions.

Hence, considerable segments of the state elite,⁵ as well as Turkey's mainstream political actors and media, believed that AKP's self-fashioning as a new center-right party was merely dissimulation (*takiyye*) (Heper 2005). According to this alarmist view, the party leadership was bent on undermining democracy and the constitutional order, if and when they were allowed to amass sufficient power. Others who were more receptive to the AKP's self-characterization as a reformist and "conservative democrat" party saw no such grave threats, perceiving the new party as a corrective initiative.

In this phase, alarmism was mostly framed in the party's alleged anti-secularism: popular print and television advertisements of the center-left daily *Cumhuriyet* asked viewers, "are you aware of the danger?" whilst using visual references to Islamization to stress the regime threat. Mainstream social-political elites, including those in the high judiciary, saw secularism as a *sine qua non* of democracy and the Turkish state-controlled secularism necessary to contain anti-secular, mainly political Islamist elements. In turn, pro-AKP views ranged between "secularism is unnecessary for democracy" and "a softer secularism (unlike Turkey's rigid secularism) is

⁵ NTV MSNBC, 24 April 2002. <http://arsiv.ntv.com.tr/news/148495.asp> <accessed on 7 April 2022.>.

necessary for democracy” (Somer 2015). They were often framed by the claim that the AKP was a “post-Islamist” party (Bayat 2005).

The AKP winning a large majority of parliamentary seats with a plurality of votes—thanks to a ten percent electoral threshold—brought these diverging perspectives to broad daylight as the state elite assumed a defensive stance. Their suspicions revolved around AKP appointees and partisan packing of bureaucracy, including with members of opaque religious orders (*tariqas*), discursive repudiation and vilification of secularism and secular opposition (Somer 2007), and education reforms that could crack the door open for creeping Islamization. In the interest of space, one example should illustrate the point.

The cabinet proposed reforms that would truncate the authorities of YÖK (Council of Higher Education); an institution that played an activist role in guarding universities against Islamist influences, and split big public universities into smaller ones. Such reforms had been defended by many others who wanted more autonomous universities. By the same token, similar initiatives led by Islamists in coalition governments had previously facilitated growing influence of organized Islamist networks in universities, and as it turned out, this is what actually happened over time under AKP governments also.

Taken as single and isolated events, the AKP’s policies seemed legal and controllable. Their erosive effects could only materialize cumulatively, contingent upon further future actions of the government and based on particular interpretations of the incumbent’s background and intentions. The defenders of the AKP fiercely fought these interpretations and projections, accusing the alarmists of “profiling,” “reading intentions” and fortune telling. Party speakers’ discourse highlighted liberal democracy and EU membership, but rank-and-file AKP members and pro-AKP intellectuals reflected a much more conservative and political Islamist outlook and instrumental understanding of democracy (Tepe 2005; Somer 2007, 2011). AKP members and their Gülenist allies framed government policies as necessary reforms to achieve “full democracy” while making light of any violations of democratic rules and norms.

Similar to PiS in Poland, the AKP justified its gradual concentration of power and vilification of opposition as necessary to overcome an *ancien régime* (communism in Poland and “tutelary democracy” in Turkey; see Sözen 2008) that hindered full democracy. The party berated its opponents as the elite defenders of “old Turkey,” who needed to be liquidated to make way for inclusive progress and full democracy.

This strategy killed three birds with one stone. On one hand, the party tapped into the public “discontent” (Rhodes-Purdy et al. 2023) with the status-quo and longing for change, by lumping together all of the social, political and economic system’s deficiencies in a simple frame. Second, it portrayed the AKP as the embodiment of the “popular will” and policies bypassing conventional democratic norms as necessary to overcome elite “tutelage.” Third, this discourse repudiated critics as defenders of oligarchic interests. This framing was further propagated in later years as the media gradually came under government control often through corrupt buyouts that looked completely legal on the surface.

Despite serious perceived threats to secularism and democracy, parliamentary opposition in Turkey per se, namely the pro-secular Republican People’s Party (CHP)

mainly employed normal politics, remaining relatively open to cooperation and compromise with the AKP on an issue-by-issue basis until nearly the end of the government's first term. For example, the EU "harmonization" laws of 2003 (Atasoy 2009) passed with opposition support and dialogue.

Issue-based opposition was relatively successful in preventing those policies that had the nature of making headlines and drawing domestic and international attention, like in 2004 when the AKP tried to criminalize consensual sexual relations as adultery by claiming to advance "gender equality" and by inserting it into a reformed penal code enjoying cross-partisan support.⁶ Following strong opposition both at home and abroad, the proposed article was withdrawn. However, issue-based opposition was ineffective against piecemeal changes to bylaws or partisan packing of bureaucracy, which happened outside widespread public attention.

In turn, the AKP's performance legitimacy and powerful academic and intellectual perspectives boosted the party's pro-democratic image. The government successfully continued the structural reforms and policies initiated by the previous government, restoring financial stability. A big economic growth impetus emerged amidst an IMF-advised recovery plan, record levels of privatization revenue, massive foreign direct investment fueled by optimism about EU accession and a favorable global financial climate, and a strong Turkish lira fueling consumption and improving living standards (Aytaç and Öniş 2014, p. 50; Dorlach 2015, p. 534). In fact, given Turkey's auspicious conditions in early 2000s—e.g. an industrial economy integrating with global markets, relatively high and growing GNP per capita, legacy of multiparty politics, and EU candidacy—for democratization, DE contradicted the predictions of general theories of democratization (Sarfati 2017), making Turkey a theory-infirming critical case. Many also saw the AKP's coming to power through peaceful elections—a feat that failed in such cases as FIS in Algeria and Hamas in Palestine—as a symptom of democratization in its own right. An insightful review concludes that many analyses in this period "misidentified/misinterpreted burgeoning autocratization in Turkey as democratization, albeit with problems" due to their overfocus on the AKP's identity as an agent of bottom-up social-cultural transformations (Sözen 2020, p. 209).

Still, resignations from the AKP signaled alarmism in the face of practices contrasting with the party's pro-democratic, pro-EU and anti-corruption public promises. After 2005, a new parliamentary opposition emerged on center-right platforms comprising splitters from the AKP and CHP,⁷ who adopted a strategic alarmist stand.

Many opposition actors outside the parliamentary opposition harbored less reconciliatory views, especially after May 2006, when a gunman murdered a supreme judicial magistrate at the Council of State, a major independent and pro-secular institution. His funeral in Ankara turned into a mass anti-government event, draw-

⁶ *Takvim*, 25 August 2004. <http://arsiv.takvim.com.tr/2004/08/25/gnb104.html>; *Bağimsız İletişim Ağı*, 22 February 2018. <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/194571-akp-2004-te-suc-haline-getiremedigi-zinayi-yeniden-gundemine-aldi> <accessed on 17 November 2022.>.

⁷ *Hürriyet*, 19 February 2005. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/mumcu-icin-akp-den-istifa-edecekler-38689007>; *Milliyet*, 30 September 2005. <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/anap-gruba-dogru-129977> <accessed on 24 November 2022.>.

ing in nearly 10,000 alongside the secularist state elite (including members of the top brass). The Constitutional Court (CC), the Court of Cassation, and Council of State—autonomous agencies that played a key role against the AKP in early stages—issued a joint declaration while protesters chanted slogans denouncing the AKP and religious fundamentalism. The declaration argued that “negative remarks of certain politicians and press [outlets]” provoked the attack,⁸ referring to conservative-Islamic and Islamist outlets close to the AKP.

This assassination aggravated the threat perceptions of alarmists and strengthened expectations of a more vocal or interventionist bureaucracy (Somer 2010, 2011).⁹ The CHP also became more outspoken about a “regime threat” and more aligned with alarmist bureaucratic elites and intellectuals. Immediately after the attack, CHP chairman Deniz Baykal warned Erdoğan to clean up his act, urging him to “realize” how his party was “dragging Turkey” to a point of catastrophe.¹⁰

A crisis in 2007 over the question of electing the next head of state marked a key moment when opposition actors fell short of formulating a coherent and clear strategy on the basis of a shared prognosis, hence failing to prevent the AKP government from effectively co-opting the presidency, an autonomous agency in normal political contexts. Pro-secular actors saw the presidency as a crucial mechanism of horizontal accountability and “a symbol and ‘the last citadel’ of the secular republic” (Hale and Özbudun 2010, p. 40; Somer 2014). Yet, the AKP ruled out nominating a consensus candidate acceptable to the CHP also, and it was feared that the AKP-dominated assembly would nominate and elect—for which it had full legal right—somebody with dubious commitments to constitutional secularism in the eyes of pro-secular actors. With the election approaching, two prominent members of the state elite pointed out that the number of AKP deputies following the aforementioned resignations would fail to meet the parliamentary quorum of 367/550 necessary for the first round of voting—in other words, that the AKP should seek consensus with the CHP.¹¹ This was a controversial interpretation of the constitution, which could be seen as extraordinary judicial activism, or, worse, an extra-institutional intervention.

The confrontation between the AKP and the secular bureaucratic elite compelled the CHP to align with the latter and adopt extraordinary strategies.¹² Alarmists were convinced that the AKP’s presidential nominee would sign into law any legislation passed by the assembly even when these violated constitutional regime norms and rulings (Patton 2006, p. 532–33).¹³ The CHP campaigned against AKP unilateralism, adopting the quorum argument. Pro-secular civil society organizations and media

⁸ *BBC Turkish*, 18 May 2006. https://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/europe/story/2006/05/060518_turkey_protests.shtml <accessed on 19 November 2022.>.

⁹ *Hürriyet*, 19 May 2006. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/bakanlar-polis-kordonuyla-kacti-4438804> <accessed on 19 November 2022.>.

¹⁰ *BBC Turkish*, 19 May 2006. https://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/europe/story/2006/05/060519_erdogan.shtml <accessed on 19 November 2022.>.

¹¹ The AKP’s legal team argued that no such threshold was necessary. *BirGün*, 27 December 2006. <https://www.birgun.net/haber/kosk-yolunda-simdi-de-367-tartismasi-30702> <accessed on 20 November 2022.>.

¹² Author’s interview with a high-ranking CHP official. 6 July 2020, Ankara.

¹³ *The Guardian*, 28 August 2007. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/28/turkey.marktran1>.

outlets, including the Atatürkist Thought Organization actively mobilized the pro-republican/secular segments of middle classes (Somer 2019, p. 50) to participate in massive “Republic Rallies” (Somer 2007) in major cities, which reflected an extraordinary political mobilization. They demanded that AKP withdraw Gül’s candidacy (whose nomination Erdoğan announced in the meantime) and uphold secular democracy with slogans such as “Turkey is secular and will remain secular” and “neither coup nor religious law (Sharia).”¹⁴

The opposition, however, was not united. The two smaller parties representing the center-right differentiated themselves from the CHP’s response, declaring that they would not report to the general council chamber on the day of the voting. They blamed the AKP for “opportunism” (i.e. rather than posing a democracy threat) while simultaneously criticizing the “reactionary” CHP,¹⁵ arguing that secularists’ extraordinary strategies could further boost the AKP’s conservative popular support. Exposing more intra-opposition disagreement, two deputies each from these smaller parties defied the boycott and joined the vote.¹⁶ Immediately after the session, CHP resorted to the normal political measure of filing an annulment case at the CC,¹⁷ while the General Staff of the Armed Forces employed the extraordinary tool of publishing on its website a note emphasizing their sensitivity toward secularism (Türk 2018, p. 156). This critical declaration, which called out AKP’s “unending efforts” to “erode” and “redefine” the “fundamental values” of the republic, was quickly labeled an *e*-memorandum by many.¹⁸

The AKP fought back with a democracy-defending message of its own, pitting the popular dimension of democracy against division of powers. Erdoğan mobilized his base, calling snap elections and a referendum on various constitutional amendments that, among other changes, made the election of the president more majoritarian by explicitly eliminating “any quorum requirement for the impending presidential election and bring direct popular elections of future presidents” (Somer 2019, p. 50). AKP scored a massive victory, increasing its share of votes to a resounding 46.6% (it went on to win the referendum too). The new legislature convened to elect AKP’s candidate as the new speaker, and after 3 rounds of voting, Gül the new head of state. In retrospect, many alarmist concerns came true under Gül’s presidency. In addition to approving all government appointments that incrementally packed the courts and bureaucracy, he only vetoed 4 laws out of 886.¹⁹ Many of the passed

¹⁴ *BBC News*, 29 April 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6604643.stm>; *Reuters*, 29 April 2007. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-president/one-million-turks-rally-against-government-idUSL2910950920070429> <accessed on 8 April 2022.>.

¹⁵ *BBC Turkish*, 27 April 2007. https://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2007/04/printable/070427_turkey_vote.shtml <accessed on 20 November 2022.>.

¹⁶ *Hürriyet*, 28 April 2007. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/katilmadilar-6420720> <accessed on 20 November 2022.>.

¹⁷ *Hürriyet*, 27 April 2007. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/mecliste-368-kisi-var-iddiasi-6414928> <accessed on 8 April 2022.>.

¹⁸ *MyNet*, 12 April 2015. <https://www.mynet.com/27-nisan-e-muhtirasi-tam-metni-110102212559> <accessed on 26 November 2022.>.

¹⁹ *Cumhuriyet*, 8 August 2014. <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/iste-gulun-kosk-karnesi-geleni-onaylamis-103255> <accessed on 26 February 2023.>.

laws gradually eroded democracy and helped the AKP remain in power despite significant opposition. In 2014, for example, Gül signed a critical “Internet Law” bill that enabled the government to censor massive corruption allegations against the government.²⁰

This grew the divides among political, cultural, and state elites. Alarmists rang warning bells about a slippery slope of gradual Islamization and demise of democracy. Cautioners focused on isolated events and explicit behavior and discourse rather than ideology and the latent and cumulative effects of creeping authoritarianism. Alarmist and cautionary positions were diverse and internally divided. Opposition actors who believed that extraordinary politics was necessary to counter a regime threat disagreed over the content of such politics. The foregrounding of secularism in public debates also invoked intra-opposition differences between hardliner secularists favoring the status quo and moderate secularists aiming to protect but also reform Turkish secularism (*laiklik*), which was criticized as too rigid, anti-pluralist and state-interventionist. Further, the measures that some alarmists proposed had militarist overtones, e.g. some argued that the army should play an activist role in halting reforms (Aydemir and Özdemir 2016, p. 121), alienating cautioners and strategic alarmists.

6 Consolidation of the incumbents’ erosive power within the state and media (2008–2012)

This period shows how RU can continue to prevail among opposition actors despite increasingly overt confrontations with the incumbent. In this phase, the AKP consolidated its power within the state and media, by combining policies of “autocratic legalism” (Scheppelle 2018), which helped the party and its powerful ally and major partner at the time, the Islamist Gülen movement (Yavuz and Balcı 2018; Somer 2019, p. 51) subdue the military, judiciary and major portions of critical media, creeping authoritarianism, and “polarizing politics” (Somer and McCoy 2019). Opposition actors, having failed in 2007 to prevent the government’s effective circumvention of horizontal accountability by leveraging its popular support, oscillated between the toolkits of normal and extraordinary politics and remained divided between alarmists, cautioners, and strategic alarmists.

Intellectual elites became fiercely polarized between alarmists and cautioners especially before and after the 2010 referendum, calling each other as oligarchic and “complicit/foolish” respectively. Beyond their ideological and personal differences, what boosted this fight was RU: the incumbent’s power grabs were justified based on discourses of electoralism and democratization, which exploited the previously existing flaws of Turkish democracy such as regional-ethnic inequalities, military tutelage and rigid secularism. Hence, all the while when Turkey’s democracy scores were continuously falling, major segments of domestic and international pro-demo-

²⁰ *BBC Turkish*, 19 February 2014. https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2014/02/140219_gul_internet <accessed on 18 March 2023.>.

cratic audiences remained, either uneasily or ardently pro-incumbent and jubilant about democratization.

The far-right opposition party MHP, which had entered the parliament after the 2007 elections, supported the AKP-proposed constitutional amendments legalizing the Islamic headscarf on university campuses, against protests by pro-secular NGOs and rallyists.²¹ The CHP appealed to the judiciary and the CC reversed the changes a few months later,²² in a ruling that AKP supporters and cautioners criticized as politically motivated and “juristocratic.”²³

In this atmosphere, the high judiciary took an extraordinary step: in March 2008, Turkey’s chief public prosecutor appealed to the CC to ban the AKP on the grounds that it was a “focal point” of actions to subvert the constitutional order. The indictment argued that “all actions and rhetoric of the party are aimed at establishing an Islamic society in which Islamic rules and values have priority” (cited in Axiarlis 2014, p. 3–4), emphasizing the role of secularism in serving as the foundation of democracy.

Alarmists supported the indictment, pointing out incremental changes that on their own looked quite innocent, such as the replacement of government-critical newspapers on Turkish Airlines flights with pro-government and Islamist ones.²⁴ In fact, Erdoğan declared war and called a boycott on Turkey’s then-most influential media conglomerate, which covered convictions that erupted in Germany in the fall of 2008 and linked the AKP and pro-AKP news channels to corruption and illegal funding (Esen and Gümüşçü 2016, p. 1589–90; Somer 2019, p. 51–52).

Some opposition actors, however, had different takes. A journalist argued that it was highly “risky” and “difficult” to try a party capturing nearly 50% of the electorate. In his perspective, outright closure of the AKP would be too “harsh,” warranting “intermediate” level sanctions instead, such as warnings.²⁵ Others argued that the AKP was a legitimate democratic party (like European Christian democrats) being unfairly targeted by the judicial elite.²⁶

The court’s decision could be interpreted as a compromise between extraordinary and ordinary political logics. 10 of the 11 judges agreed that the AKP had indeed become the “focal point of anti-secular activities.” But they ruled to only sanction the party by cutting off half of its treasury aid (Somer 2019, p. 51). 6 jurists voted for the extraordinary penalty of party closure, just one vote short of the necessary 7.

The AKP’s main response to the party closure motion was to weaponize “auto-cratism” framed in a discourse of building “advanced democracy”. During

²¹ *Bağımsız İletişim Ağı*, 11 February 2008. <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/religion/104792-constitutional-change-for-headscarf-at-university-passed-in-parliament> <accessed on 21 November 2022.>.

²² <https://anayasa.gov.tr/tr/mahkeme-gundemi/genel-kurul/5-haziran-2008-genel-kurul-gundemi-vesonuculari/>.

²³ *Yeni Şafak*, 8 June 2008. <https://www.yenisafak.com/yerel/hasan-celal-guzel-turkiye-demokrasi-degil-yargiclar-sistemi-var-122233> <accessed 17 March 2023.>.

²⁴ <https://www.gazetevatan.com/yazarlar/reha-muhtar/thy-yaziya-ne-cevap-verdi-204640> <accessed on 26 November 2022.>.

²⁵ <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/guneri-civaoglu/eksik-anayasa-506559> <accessed on 21 November 2022.>.

²⁶ Hasan Celal Güzel, *Radikal*, 18 March; 22 April 2008.

the first week of July 2008, weeks before the CC ruling, Gülenist elements within law enforcement launched the “Ergenekon” arrests and indictments, charging active-duty generals and admirals with plotting a coup (Cagaptay 2020, p. 6).²⁷ These targeted military personnel and retirees, journalists, academics, political party members and activists, as well as some prominent secular intellectuals and civil society activists.²⁸

The government’s framing challenged opposition actors, as it effectively forced them towards defending an armed forces with authoritarian baggage in countering the government’s punishment of its vocal critics. Meanwhile, the AKP and its Islamist allies were taking “control of much of the media” (Cagaptay 2020, p. 5) by instrumentalizing the legal authorities of state watchdogs. The counter-strikes of the AKP camp exacerbated the mutual distrust among various opposition actors. Cautioners critical of the status quo ante (and the military) tolerated the AKP’s policies in this phase, which were often based on fabricated evidence and without due process, and labeled alarmists as coup-mongering militarists (Rodrik 2011; Bakiner 2017, p. 35). Alarmists and strategic alarmists, saw the trials as further proof of a regime threat and the cautioners as effectively assisting creeping or explicit authoritarianism.

Against this background, the government introduced a crucial constitutional amendment package. This package put to referendum was an omnibus bill—a typical instrument of DE toolkit—of twenty-six changes, most of which were mainly uncontroversial and democratizing reforms, such as individuals’ right to directly petition the CC and collective bargaining rights for civil servants (which had been long demanded by democratic civil society). Only a few articles, such as those that expanded the size of the CC and increased the role of the AKP-dominated parliament and ordinary members of the judiciary in the appointment of high judiciary justices, were controversial. These could crack the door open for government control of the judiciary—and thus pacifying a major agent of democratic resilience at best and making it a weapon DE at worst—but only conditional upon ill will. Increasing polarization and government pressures on media helped the AKP frame the choice as “a battle between those defending their privileges in the ‘old Turkey’” and those supporting democratization and further reforms (Somer 2019, p. 53).

The “No” side became deeply fragmented prior to the referendum. Cautioners and some strategic alarmists defended the “insufficient, but Yes” position, while alarmists accusing them of being “convenient idiots” got trapped in a pro-status quo stance themselves. With opposition actors unable to formulate a principled and united front, the changes passed with a sizeable margin.

In the end, however, what sped up the Turkish judiciary’s loss of independence was a contingent political development. The CHP went to the CC and annulled one of the changes: the election of high judiciary members based on open list elections. The party miscalculated that partisan candidates the AKP-Gülenist alliance was promoting would have less success with closed lists. In fact, the opposite happened, which gave the colluders “the prerogative to appoint a majority of judges to high

²⁷ *Milliyet*, 28 October 2008. <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/2455-sayfalik-iddianame-okunuyor-1008742> <accessed on 9 April 2022.>.

²⁸ “86 on trial in Turkish coup case,” *The New York Times*, 20 September 2008.

benches without a confirmation process” (Cagaptay 2020, p. 5–6). The amendments “significantly weakened the possibility of challenges to the AKP government from the military and/or the judiciary” and “emboldened the AKP leadership to pursue a more markedly conservative and majoritarian line” (Özbudun 2014, p. 156–57).

With another critical autonomous branch of the legal-political system effectively co-opted, the government subsequently pursued ambitious cultural and social policies that directly or indirectly targeted individual freedoms (e.g. restricting the sale and advertisement of alcoholic beverages, advocating against co-educational university housing and abortions) and promoted religious themes (e.g. informally banning evolution theories in education). Simultaneously, democratic norms such as tolerance of political satire and dissent were gradually eroded through discursive and other practices.

Popular opposition to government actions increased, with many demonstrations focusing on specific social or economic issues such as women’s democratic freedoms or labor rights. For example, students protested against a certain method of DE that the AKP-Gülenist alliance employed: mass cheating and systematic fraud in university admission and public personnel selection exams.²⁹ Protests included sporadic demonstrations against the government’s environmental³⁰ and clientelistic urban and rural development policies (which served among other interests of the incumbent the cultivation of symbiotic business groups willing to overlook or endorse DE), campaigns against alcohol and abortion,³¹ and unilateral restructuring of national education.³² The cultural elite also protested against AKP unilateralism, notably in April 2013 against the government’s plans to turn Turkey’s oldest movie theater, a symbol of the country’s republican heritage into a shopping mall.³³ These peaceful protests were often met with government suppression and police crack-down, notoriously causing the death of a retired teacher in 2011,³⁴ and their legitimate demands were mainly ignored by the AKP.

These mostly issue-based, “normal” protests gradually gave way to larger mobilizations stressing the regime threat. One of these, the CHP-led Republic Day commemorations in 2012, was banned and dispersed by riot police (with tear gas

²⁹ *Cumhuriyet*, 10 April 2011. <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/ogrenciler-kalem-kirdi-237708> <accessed on 26 November 2022.>.

³⁰ *Cumhuriyet*, 13 March 2011. <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/beyoglundahes-protestosu-229616> <accessed on 26 November 2022.>.

³¹ *Haber Ekspres*, 31 January 2011. <https://www.haberekspres.com.tr/gundem/alkol-sinirlamasini-boyle-protesto-ettiler-h8518.html>; *Sendika*, 2 June 2012. <accessed on 26 November 2022.>.

³² *CNN Turk*, 11 September 2012. <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/4-4-4-protestosuna-sert-mudahale> <accessed on 26 November 2022.>.

³³ “Emek Theater protestors face court; cinema circles condemn police violence,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 8 April 2013.

³⁴ *Sözcü*, 27 January 2023. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2023/gundem/icisleri-bakanliginin-metin-lokumcu-raporu-ortaya-cikti-polisler-hatali-gaz-kullandi-7571183/>.

³⁵ *CNN World*, 29 October 2012. <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/29/world/europe/turkey-holiday-clash/> <accessed on 30 May 2022.>.

and water cannons).³⁵ Another major demonstration took place later at the Middle East Technical University.³⁶

By building on this momentum, the massive Gezi Park protests erupted in the summer of 2013, where millions of citizens protested the government's arbitrary rule on the streets for months, demanding its resignation. While mainly non-violent (all of the casualties were from the protesters), they disrupted the normal flow of social life in a striking example of extraordinary politics waged at a grassroots level. They were also extraordinary in being considerably cross-ideological and cross-partisan.

Parliamentary opposition supported the Gezi demonstrators but refrained from assuming a leadership role, which spontaneous protests often lack, arguably afraid things could get out of control and pull the country into chaos and that party involvement would derail the cross-partisan and spontaneous nature of the protests. They might also have taken into account the pro-government vilification of the protesters in a highly polarized setting manipulated by partisan control of the media (Hintz 2016). In fact, under heavy and unconstitutional pressure from the government, most of the big media blocked out the protests and fired journalists who challenged the censorship.

Simultaneously, parliamentary opposition continued to use "normal" avenues like negotiation, compromise, and dialogue with the AKP in the national assembly. Active opposition participation in a major inter-party constitutional reform commission in parliament between 2011 and 2013 was a clear example of normal opposition politics. The commission's consensus on a major package of democratizing reforms broke down at the last minute, mainly due to Erdoğan's insistence on a presidential system and some minor yet long-standing disputes on the definition of citizenship (Somer 2022).

DE circa 2013 was already at an advanced stage. According to Varieties of Democracy, Turkey's electoral and liberal democracy scores had already fallen from their apices of 0.68 and 0.52 in 2004 to 0.52 and 0.36 in 2012 respectively. Gezi protests showed that opposition actors were still quite strong and self-confident, yet also still lacking a common message, front and leadership.

7 Opposition dilemmas and disunity during advanced democratic erosion (2013–2016)

Toward the end of the year, 2013 witnessed another anti-government crisis, this time mainly led by erstwhile government allies and a product of intra-incumbent power struggles, thus leaving other opposition actors uncertain about where to stand. Gülenist elements in the judiciary and police, many of whom had been recruited by the AKP and who previously had targeted AKP opponents, launched a major corruption probe against key AKP figures, allies, and Erdoğan's family in December 2013 (Arango 2014). The opposition faced the predicament of criticizing the government's corruption based on audio recordings leaked by the very elements it

³⁶ *En Son Haber*; 18 December 2012. <https://www.ensonhaber.com/gundem/odtude-basbakan-erdogana-protesto-2012-12-18> <accessed on 27 November 2022.>.

had fought against during the first decade of DE for infiltrating the state with the help of AKP nepotism and partisan packing of bureaucracy. As Somer (2019, p. 53) summarizes, “in addition to increasing Erdoğan’s authoritarianism and accelerating his purge of AKP moderates, this [AKP—Gülenist] conflict forced more people to choose between two evils: government corruption, on one hand, and antigovernment and illegal formations within the state, on the other.” Similar to their predicament in the run up to the 2010 referendum, the opposition parties “again failed to open a third, prodemocratic path, encumbered as it was not only by its own deficiencies but also by its disadvantages on an increasingly unlevel playing field” (*ibid.*).

Instead, the CHP, as well as the MHP targeted Erdoğan with personal insults such as “dictator” and “thief,” which further contributed to affective polarization (Selçuk et al. 2019). Furthermore, the corruption scandal complicated and fragmented the field of opposition, as Gülenist elements, who had made key contributions to DE together with the AKP, now came to adopt anti-AKP positions.

The AKP’s survival of the largest popular protests in Turkish history and a major corruption scandal in the same year, and subsequent victory in the March 2014 local elections taught parliamentary opposition hard lessons, while also prompting their first efforts at better coordination. In the presidential elections of August 2014 that Erdoğan won, the two largest opposition parties, CHP and MHP, nominated a joint candidate. The nomination of Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, former general secretary of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, was (rightfully) criticized for his inexperience and lack of popularity. But this choice resulted from the opposition’s realization that a supra-partisan political struggle (albeit without the pro-Kurdish party) was necessary against the regime threat. Further, İhsanoğlu’s pious identity signaled their conviction that secularism or the secular dimension of democracy could no longer serve as the main axis of pro-democracy opposition. But the joint candidacy of İhsanoğlu did not produce a durable opposition platform also because the opposition coordination was poorly executed, including İhsanoğlu’s nomination itself, and major segments of opposition voters did not support İhsanoğlu because of their left-wing or pro-secular ideological preferences, i.e. based on a logic of “normal politics”.

Erdoğan declared his rule as a directly elected president in a parliamentary system a *de facto* transition to presidentialism—in effect testifying that he was using unconstitutional powers. He explicitly disregarded his constitutional responsibility of impartiality and continued to vilify the opposition and *de facto* run both AKP and government affairs. Should the opposition have responded with extraordinary or normal politics? The previous failures of both normal and extraordinary initiatives complicated the problem for opposition actors and led to their experimental oscillation between the two frames, with a common frame gradually but unsurely becoming attainable.

Selçuk and Hekimci (2020) point to the incremental rise of a democracy—authoritarianism cleavage induced by advanced DE, which they argue has led to more coordination among an increasingly diverse group of opposition forces after 2014, somewhat overshadowing other cleavages such as secular—religious and Turkish—Kurdish cleavages, “muting” “identity-based differences” and coordinating “in the name of a democratic cause” (Selçuk and Hekimci 2020, p. 1500). In terms

of our argument here, this means adopting the mindset of extraordinary politics overriding normal political competition.

Still, all this followed a very non-linear path, not all actors embraced the same frame and RU-caused dilemmas continued. Suffice it to give two examples here. In the June 2015 elections, the AKP lost its majority in parliament for the first time. Initially, President Erdoğan seemed to follow the democratic convention of first giving the mandate to form a government to the party with a plurality of votes, in this case the AKP, and then to the next party with most votes (CHP). Pursuing normal institutional politics, the CHP engaged in negotiations with the AKP to build a grand coalition government, which became unusually prolonged with no end in sight. The party leadership appears to have trusted Erdoğan and did not mobilize its base to demand the mandate. Erdoğan seems to have never intended to share power, however. When the talks eventually ended in failure, Erdoğan simply announced repeat elections in November, citing the third largest party MHP's earlier declaration not to join any government. In the meantime, the country was swallowed up by a mysterious spiral of terror and violence. In this environment of fear and instability, the AKP regained its majority in the November elections.

The CHP shunned extraordinary politics—and was criticized for it—during two more critical events in the next year. First, when the AKP proposed to temporarily lift the immunity of parliamentarians, ostensibly against MPs linked with the outlawed PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), the CHP enabled it occur without a referendum by criticizing the unconstitutionality of the proposal but not fighting it, for fear of AKP negative campaigning and because more limited immunity was in the CHP party program. The latter reasoning would have made some sense in a context of judicial independence, but in a context of advanced DE, it was clear that the government would use this to reign in the parliamentary opposition, as it did. Second, when Erdoğan used a failed coup attempt in July 2016 to liquidate critics and consolidate his *de facto* autocratic powers, the CHP could not successfully develop a position that distinguished between the jointly opposed coup plot and Erdoğan's exploitation of it to deepen DE.

8 “Breakdown” and post-breakdown regime uncertainty and opposition experimentation (2017–2022)

Some time between 2014 and 2018, most indices began to categorize Turkey as an electoral autocracy and “not free.” In line with our argument about RU, the exact date would be hard to pinpoint and open to interpretation. An obvious breaking point was 2017, when Erdoğan's camp introduced a series of constitutional amendments to effectively institute an authoritarian presidential system (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017). But the referendum was held under the authoritarian conditions that had already been deepened much earlier, especially following the 2016 coup attempt. The path to the putsch and the conditions that enabled the government to exploit the coup to sideline opponents had already been created previously, through many other, prior policies and events. These included the December 2013 corruption scandals, Erdoğan's declaration of a *de facto* transition to presidentialism in 2014, rejection of

power-sharing (but starting an authoritarian alliance with the MHP) in 2015, sacking of the prime minister in 2016, and incremental institutional conquest that began even earlier. Hence, reflecting the logic of DE, not a single big blow but a process of numerous cumulative blows spanning years constituted the breakdown—insofar as we can talk about a “breakdown.”

RU was neither absent before nor disappeared after the 2017 referendum. The very choice by opposition actors, of participating in the referendum instead of boycotting it reflected a choice of normal over extraordinary politics. The referendum lacked democratic legitimacy based on international standards as it was held under (an extended) state of emergency denying the opposition equal voice and the electorate a fair choice.³⁷ Then, on the day of voting, an unprecedented decision of the High Electoral Board to allow votes in unstamped ballots³⁸ compounded opposition dilemmas and many CHP supporters expected party leadership to resist with extraordinary methods.

As Tol (2023) summarizes, “criticism over [CHP’s] leadership grew ... when [chairman Kemal] Kılıçdaroğlu prevailed on his supporters not to take to the streets.. Kılıçdaroğlu later explained he’d heard Erdoğan supporters were armed, and he didn’t want to be responsible for any violence that might have ensued.” The government-controlled media was also waiting up in arms to denounce such actions as a coup or treasonous complicity with external enemies. The opposition, in short, was bashed for not boycotting and calling illegitimate the increasingly unfair elections and parliamentary procedures systematically favoring the incumbent (Esen and Gümüüşü 2017). Opposition party leaders feared that boycotting would weaken voters’ interest in politics and their hope in the possibility of changing the government democratically in the future (Somer 2021).

But Turkish opposition actors’ “resilience” against DE might not have been undermined by their use of normal or extraordinary methods per se, but their lack of persistence and indecision between different modes of politics. In other words, their credibility might have been weakened through the oscillation of the same actors between different modes and the inability of different actors to coalesce around the same mode—as we maintain, an outcome that is at least partially a product of RU. Hence, briefly before the CHP was heavily criticized for its reluctance to organize extraordinary, contentious mobilization, it had practiced extraordinary politics. The most notable example was the 450 km “Justice March” of CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu, who walked with thousands of cross-partisan followers from Ankara to Istanbul in 2017, in reaction to an opposition MP’s arrest. Another example of numerous individual acts of extraordinary politics was MPs organizing sit-in protests in parliament and one (at that time independent) MP handcuffing herself to the rostrum

³⁷ <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/events/?id=3388#:~:text=The%20Venice%20Commission%20has%20also,would%20go%20against%20European%20standards.>

³⁸ *Deutsche Welle*, 18 April 2017, <https://www.dw.com/tr/yysk-m%C3%BCh%C3%BCrs%C3%BCz-oy-gerek%C3%A7esini-a%C3%A7%C4%B1klad%C4%B1/a-38478270> <accessed 15 November 2023.>.

to protest the passing of authoritarian constitutional amendments before the 2017 referendum.³⁹

Toward the May 2023 elections, opposition actors gradually appeared to have achieved greater coordination. They first formed in 2018 a two-party “Nation Alliance,” between the CHP and the newly formed İYİ (which came out of the nationalist MHP, which allied with Erdoğan). This became possible with an innovative extraordinary act: when the government tried to disqualify İYİ from elections by exploiting a legal detail, CHP lent 15 MPs to İYİ, thereby bypassing the restrictive policy. Still, opposition parties could not nominate a joint presidential candidate in 2018 and lost. In the local elections of 2019, the Nation Alliance achieved more coordination and employed an “actively depolarizing” strategy (Selçuk and Hekimci 2020; Wuthrich and Ingleby 2020; Somer et al. 2021), which the Hungarian opposition later borrowed to take the mayorship of Budapest. When this alliance, together with the pro-Kurdish HDP’s outside support, brought success at the local level, the Nation Alliance grew to become a six-party grand alliance (“Table of Six”) in 2022.

While revealing significant learning and innovation on the part of opposition actors, however, all this neither implied Turkish opposition overcoming RU nor brought opposition success in the May 2023 elections, as we will discuss in the conclusions section.

9 Conclusions

Insofar as DE is—at least partially—a new and distinct mode of autocratization that relies less on repressing the opposition and more on the public’s consent, electoral legitimacy through competitive politics and a facade of legality, opposition behavior should be an integral part of how we explain DE. As long as DE continues in a country, it needs to be explained why opposition actors either cannot or do not stop DE by taking advantage of the political and institutional tools available to them. Here, as our narrative in this article must also have shown, opposition behavior becomes both an exogenous variable—since agentic choices and preexisting cleavages and institutional paths matter—and an endogenous variable insofar as opposition behavior is shaped by the built-in features of DE itself.

In this article, we have focused on and conceptualized one such endogenously determined aspect of opposition behavior: regime uncertainty (RU) and the resulting opposition choices between normal and extraordinary politics. We have suggested that RU is related with other uncertainty types, such as strategic, informational and institutional, which are already explored by extant scholarship but has important features peculiar to DE. We have analyzed how and why RU emerged during Turkey’s DE since early 2000s, how it has remained intact even at advanced stages of DE, and how RU-induced opposition divisions and indecisions help to better understand and explain Turkish opposition behavior during the last two decades. We have shown that RU gave rise to explicit intra-opposition debates and divisions that are hard

³⁹ *Haberturk*, 1 January 2017, <https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1359033-aylin-nazliakadan-mecliste-kelepceli-protesto/10> <accessed 22 December 2023.>.

to categorize in terms of the concepts offered by extant research. Hence, we have put forward the normal/extraordinary politics distinction as an alternative conceptual tool that crosscuts and has advantages over alternative analytical distinctions such as institutional/extra-institutional and moderate/radical distinctions. The distinction between normal and extraordinary politics may better capture the shifting and context-dependent meanings and consequences of difficult political choices that opposition actors are faced with during DE.

DE may be harder to overcome as time passes and it becomes a more deeply ingrained process, as in Hungary, Venezuela and Turkey (Friesen et al. 2023; Somer and Yilmaz 2023). Autocrats become more entrenched over time, but also the qualitative erosion of democracy's different aspects become deeper and more habituated; hence, it may take more than unseating an eroding autocrat to overcome DE. Haggard and Kaufman (2021), for example, identified sixteen DE cases between 1974 and 2017. In 2023, a minority of only six of these look like they *might* have stopped DE: Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, North Macedonia, war-ridden Ukraine, and Poland after the October 2023 elections. Although, one would be hard pressed to argue that these cases yet represent clear and sustainable reversals of DE. This is especially true if we consider that reversing DE would require successful redemocratization by reversing the decay of democracy in such domains as behavioral, institutional and normative.

Opposition expectations were high before Turkey's May 2023 elections that they would win. Opposition parties seemed to have achieved significant coordination whereby two general conditions that facilitate electoral alliances elsewhere (Ong 2022) were met. The AKP-led regime looked increasingly vulnerable due to a painful economic crisis (Aytaç 2021), a devastating earthquake and some high-profile defections from the AKP. Second, opposition parties realized that they depended on each other to win.

Undoubtedly, many different factors that are outside the scope of this article can help to explain why opposition electoral alliances nevertheless lost both the presidential and parliamentary election (Aydın-Düzgüt et al. 2023; Esen and Gümüüşü 2023). RU-related dilemmas also appear to have contributed to the outcome.

Opposition parties contested the 2023 elections with joint lists and the joint presidential candidacy of [then CHP leader] Kılıçdaroğlu, promising to rebuild democracy after the elections. The Table of Six also cooperated with a second "Labor and Freedom Alliance" involving pro-Kurdish and leftist parties. The program of the Table of Six was effectively a program of democratic restoration or transition. But, arguably due to RU, it was not named as a program of democratic transition but as a call for "strengthened parliamentary system." After all, what would transition to democracy mean if democracy is not fully abolished, or seems to continue in the minds of many? While some representatives of the Table of Six and the pro-Kurdish and left-wing HDP, which led the Labor and Freedom Alliance described their coalitions as a "democracy alliance (*demokrasi ittifakı*)," others adhered to the term "electoral alliance (*seçim ittifakı*)."

Even more revealingly, confusion and lack of consensus over RU and normal versus extraordinary politics appear to have undermined opposition coordination and resilience. Hence, on one hand, the Table of Six and Labor and Freedom alliances

appeared as if opposition actors were uniting on a common path of extraordinary politics, by sidestepping their normal programmatic differences and building an extraordinary democratic front. But close inspection suggests that most members of the table perceived their cooperation as an ordinary electoral alliance, i.e. a tool of normal politics. Some right-wing party representatives complained, for example, that they could not explain to their base why they joined a coalition with the center-left CHP.⁴⁰ This revealed that they were operating with a mindset framed by normal competitive politics—where ideological competition is legitimate and desired—rather than an extraordinary, cross-ideological and constitutive politics aimed at restoring and reconstituting the rules and institutions of competitive politics.

Further, those members of the Table of Six who were defectors from the AKP did not see eye to eye with the others regarding when DE began and how deep it became. They traced the beginning of the “regime problem” to around their respective times of estrangement from the AKP. Former Finance and Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Babacan’s interviews, for example, made clear his perception that problems of democracy and rule of law began only recently, ca. 2016, and had fallen short of a democratic breakdown, a view that also reflected those of many in his base.⁴¹

Hence, even though Turkish opposition hopes to produce a “positive case” of overcoming DE by unseating Erdoğan and the AKP were not realized at this time, the reasons why still produce important insights into opposition dilemmas that contribute to DE.

We have argued in this article that evaluating the performance of opposition actors in terms of binaries such as “success” versus “failure” and “institutional” versus “extra-institutional” is not easy. Rather than pursuing one path versus the other Turkish opposition actors appear to have lacked the ability to coalesce around one path and rationale of behavior.

Learning and innovation appear to continue, including on different forms of opposition coordination alongside a continuing democracy-autocracy axis. Time will show whether these will give rise to new and more powerful forms of “extraordinary democratic politics,” able to overcome entrenched DE and electoral autocracy.

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⁴⁰ *Haber 7*, 24 April 2023 <https://video.haber7.com/video-galeri/237163-davutoglundan-oy-itirafi-halasini-bile-ikna-edemedi> <accessed 15 November 2023.>.

⁴¹ *Politik Yol*, 24 December 2022 <https://www.politikyol.com/deva-lideri-babacan-keske-2017de-avaz-avaz-bagirip-bu-yanlis-baskanlik-sistemi-referandumuna-evet-demeyin-deseydim/> <accessed 15 November 2023.>.

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