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# Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey: Beyond the Narratives of Progress

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- Unpacking the core themes that are discussed in this collection, this article both offers a research agenda to re-analyse Turkey’s ‘authoritarian turn’ and mounts a methodological challenge to the conceptual frameworks that reinforce a strict analytical separation between the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’ factors. The paper problematises the temporal break in scholarly analyses of the AKP period and rejects the argument that the party’s methods of governance have shifted from an earlier ‘democratic’ model – defined by ‘hegemony’ – to an emergent ‘authoritarian’ one. In contrast, by retracing the mechanisms of the state-led reproduction of neoliberalism since 2003, the paper demonstrates that the party’s earlier ‘hegemonic’ activities were also shaped by authoritarian tendencies which manifested at various levels of governance.

AKP ■ authoritarianism ■ democratic backsliding ■ neoliberalism ■ Turkey

The recent trajectory of Turkish politics under the government of the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – Justice and Development Party) is increasingly positioned as a signature node in the global web of ‘democratic backsliding.’ The latter concerns contemporary cases of democratic debilitation defined by ‘promissory coups’, ‘executive aggrandisement’ and ‘longer-term strategic harassment and manipulation’ of the electoral processes.<sup>1</sup> Once touted as a ‘model democracy’ (Akyol 2011; cf. Bâli 2011) for a region in turmoil, the academic and ‘popular’<sup>2</sup> portrayals of AKP’s Turkey have changed gradually from 2011 to 2013 onwards. This is a period marked by the party’s third electoral victory and the intensification of its subsequent attacks on rights and freedoms as demonstrated by the Gezi Park protests. In contrast to the earlier positive assessments of the party’s first two terms in office (2002–2007 and 2007–2011), the 2011–2013 period has come to be seen as a watershed. After this period, the terms of the debate have shifted from unpacking the mechanisms of the party’s self-proclaimed ‘conservative democracy’ (Özbudun 2006; Duran 2008) to charting its ‘authoritarian turn’ (Benhabib 2013).

This recent focus has spawned a considerable literature that attempts to explain the conjunction of AKP’s authoritarian streak with its ongoing commitment to a minimal representative democracy and its insistence on legitimising itself by invoking a majoritarian conception of a ‘national will’ – justified by the party’s electoral success. Accordingly, positioned against the earlier image of a (liberal) ‘democratic’ agent of reform, AKP in recent literature emerges as a regressive political actor which is steering the country away from ‘democracy’ and towards a ‘hybrid’ regime (Aslan-Akman 2012, p. 92; Öniş 2016, p. 141), defined variously as a ‘delegative democracy’ (Taş 2015; Özbudun 2014, pp. 162–163), ‘competitive authoritarianism’ (Özbudun 2015; Esen & Gümüştü 2016), ‘electoral authoritarianism’ (Kaya 2015) or an ‘unconsolidated democracy’ (Müftüler-Baç & Keyman 2015).<sup>3</sup> In short, while there is no agreement on the exact typology to account for the transformation of the political regime in Turkey, there is an emergent consensus that AKP’s recent years have been defined by an explicit authoritarian shift.

Is this increasingly visible dissonance in the analyses of the AKP government merely a product of the party’s changing political orientation? To what extent does AKP’s ‘authoritarian turn’ represent a qualitative break from the party’s earlier practices and policy priorities – and, thus, a case in ‘democratic backsliding’? Does a focus on AKP’s ‘authoritarian turn’ offer a productive comparative angle with which to examine cases of ‘re-authoritarianisation’ (Cook 2016) in other parts of the world? This volume zooms in on these questions and challenges the parameters within which AKP’s ‘authoritarian turn’ has been examined in the recent literature.

Our contributions do not refute the argument that AKP’s post 2011–2013 trajectory has been shaped by *increasingly* authoritarian modalities of governance. However, we contend that prioritising the 2011–2013 period as a *decisive break* from an earlier AKP-led period of democratisation and as the key juncture that produced the structures of an authoritarian regime to come is problematic on conceptual, analytical and empirical grounds. Underscoring this break, often inadvertently, has led scholars to analyse the transformation of the Turkish political regime on the basis of two competing, temporally bound images of AKP.

In the first portrayal (corresponding to the 2003–2007/10 period), AKP is positioned broadly as a democratic party with a clear intent on reviving the sclerotic Turkish economy through liberalisation and reinforcing the country’s EU candidacy bid through civilianisation and democratic re-

forms. In the second period (from 2011, and particularly, 2013 onwards), AKP is clad in the mantle of a decaying hegemonic force that relies increasingly on 'coercion', rather than 'consent', to enforce its policies and shape an ever-increasing portion of the everyday lives of Turkey's citizens. We argue that these two images should be understood, not as diametrically opposed regimes with inherently contradicting modalities of rule, but as two interlinked nodes on the spectrum of a now-apparent authoritarian governance. In other words, we emphasise the importance of placing the two periods in a continuum whereby the 'authoritarian' practices of the later AKP rule can be retraced to – and properly understood in – the context of its earlier 'democratic' incarnation.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to rejecting this clear-cut temporal disassociation of AKP's 'democratic' and 'authoritarian' phases, we further challenge a major conceptual pitfall in the literature which has played a key, yet often unacknowledged, role in the perpetuation of the temporal break narrative. A significant shortcoming in the existing literature on contemporary Turkish politics and political economy is the commitment to theoretical approaches and the adoption of certain ontological positions that presume a categorical distinction between the 'economic' and 'political' spheres.<sup>5</sup> We posit that the literature, even in its more critical corners, has subscribed to a binary conception of 'politics' and 'economics' (as well as 'state' and 'civil society'), and failed to adequately contextualise how the questions of political economy (e.g. production, accumulation, (re)distribution, wealth) feature in AKP's 'authoritarian turn'. In other words, the questions of 'political economy' are either left out of the analytical purview or they are treated separately from the 'political' questions of democracy, political reform and fundamental rights.<sup>6</sup>

This separation has resulted in the proliferation of academic and popular analyses that project a parallax view of AKP's governance, dominated by competing 'economic' and 'political' narratives – two narratives of progress that also clearly map onto the periodisation we have identified above. The 'political' version of this narrative portrays the party as an initially civil society-oriented, democratic actor that successfully tackled the vestiges of the 'tutelary' forces in Turkish politics. In this narrative, the party's early democratic impetus gradually gives way to a more authoritarian single-party orientation which becomes particularly visible after 2011–2013. The economic counterpart of this position similarly brandishes a largely positive account of the party's early economic policies on the basis of the improvements on several key macroeconomic indicators (most importantly, the GDP growth rate, FDI inflows and inflation reduction). While the decline of the 'economic' success narrative is not as pronounced as its 'political' equivalent after the 2011–2013 period, we can observe a similar trend in the increasing number of critical commentaries that zoomed in on the fault lines of AKP's neoliberal orientation.

In the rest of this discussion, I will first unpack the conceptual parameters of authoritarian neoliberalism, and highlight how the proposed framework allows us to retrace more fully the practices and mechanisms that comprise AKP's 'authoritarian turn'. This is followed by an exploration of how the above-outlined narratives of progress have materialised in an epistemic space that comprise contributions from a broad network of social science research. I will then discuss, in line with our contributions, how rethinking the trajectory of AKP's governance through authoritarian neoliberalism provides us with a more productive avenue for investigating the 'authoritarian turn'. This strategy can also offer a remedy for the conceptual shortcomings that have engendered the bifurcated analyses of AKP rule in the first place.

## Overcoming conceptual and temporal disjunctures in the study of the AKP era

In order to overcome the shortcomings of this myopic periodisation, we utilise and further refine the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism to demonstrate how the political, socio-economic, institutional and ideological components of AKP's 'authoritarian turn' materialised in an extended timeframe – including the party's so-called 'golden age' (Öniş 2016, p. 142; Aktaş 2017, p. 176). In line with the growing interdisciplinary literature on the concept and on the analogous disciplinary/coercive aspects of neoliberalism,<sup>7</sup> we position authoritarian neoliberalism as a mode of governance that operates on twin principles. These are (1) establishing a disciplinary statecraft which closes off key decision-making processes to popular pressures, public input and non-partisan auditing mechanisms – particularly, but not exclusively, with a view to protecting the circuits of capital accumulation, and (2) deploying the coercive, legal and administrative state apparatuses to marginalise democratic opposition and dissident social groups (Tansel 2017b, p. 3). Viewed through this lens, we can chart the continuity from the earlier 'democratic' phase of AKP rule to its late 'authoritarian' incarnation, by rendering visible both the molecular and systemic changes that AKP governments have enacted in the already fragile democratic composition of Turkey.

Given that the literature is crowded with a wide array of concepts purporting to possess significant explanatory and analytical powers in relation to the recent trajectory of Turkish politics, one may ask why is it important to re-evaluate AKP's governance through the prism of authoritarian neoliberalism. We contend that a renewed focus on authoritarian neoliberalism helps us rectify the two key shortcomings of the recent literature identified above. Consequently, instead of subscribing to the view that AKP's trajectory should be understood in two distinct periods (i.e. a 'democratic' trajectory from 2002 to 2007–2010 and an 'authoritarian turn' from 2011 to 2013 onwards), we unpack the actors, developments and processes that prefigured and constituted AKP's 'authoritarian neoliberalism' from 2002 onwards.

We investigate the 'repertoires' of authoritarian neoliberalism, i.e. the ways in which AKP has consolidated (1) its economic model, and (2) its 'securitarian' regime (Manunza 2017, p. 130) by focusing on a number of constitutive reconfigurations in the state apparatuses and state–civil society interactions. These include, *inter alia*, (1) the centralisation of economic and political decision-making (i.e. executive centralisation); (2) transformation of the rule of law through executive and judiciary interventions; (3) reorienting key administrative and bureaucratic functions of the state in line with the governing party's strategic interests; (4) reconfiguring media ownership through state interventions; (5) de-collectivising workplace organisation and labour relations; and (6) reproducing discourses of mobilisation and consent generation that are based on existing gendered, racialised and class-based hierarchies.

Linking these developments back to a broader authoritarian neoliberal model should not be read as an effort to reinscribe economic determinism or to advance monocausal explanations. On the contrary, we contend that emphasising the centrality of such political economic processes – as we do in this volume – allows us to investigate the modalities of AKP's governance more extensively and to highlight the practices and processes that helped entrench its authoritarian rule more explicitly. The concept further illuminates how the emergent 'authoritarian bent in state practices can work in tandem with institutions and legal frameworks that sustain a "minimalist"

democracy' (Tansel 2017b, p. 11; Møller & Skaaning 2010, p. 276). This thus guards us against positioning 'Western liberal democracy as the only form for imagining "the political"' (Lowe 2015, p. 198n.54), and situating *ideal-type* liberal democratic institutions and practices as an effective antidote to the vagaries of 'authoritarian' regimes.

Authoritarian neoliberalism further complicates the operationalisation of 'neoliberalism' in the existing literature by not equating 'neoliberalism' with 'free markets' or 'marketisation'. The concept of neoliberalism, both in the wider social sciences literature and in works focusing on the Turkish case, has retained a close affiliation with the processes of marketisation – an orientation that has led many scholars to magnify the impact of 'free markets' at the expense of recognising the constitutive role of the state in co-producing and maintaining those markets. Compared against a global template that strictly conceptualised neoliberalism as marketisation, some scholars have suggested that the Turkish trajectory during the AKP period signals a different *modus operandi* as it 'differs from the thick versions of free market fundamentalism' (Keyman 2010, p. 316; cf. Buğra & Savaşkan 2014, p. 8; Tansel 2017c). Authoritarian neoliberalism helps us reorient this picture by reaffirming (1) the state's role and function in reproducing neoliberalism, and (2) the significance of analysing neoliberal policies beyond marketisation, as vehicles to transform the relationship between states, households and 'the economy' on a significantly expanded logic of commodification.

Finally, it is important to stress that we do not aim to project a seamless account of AKP's governance from its inception to the present day. In other words, our insistence on recognising the full spectrum of authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey should not be read as an effort to flatten out the variations in AKP's policies and strategies. On the contrary, our approach allows us to examine the seemingly changing parameters of politics after 2011–2013, not by collapsing all developments into a prefigured authoritarian template, but by charting the concrete policies and practices that gradually constituted AKP's authoritarian neoliberal regime. Our contributions thus demonstrate that the 'normal' operation of liberal democracy and the implementation of neoliberal policies can complement, and even facilitate, the emergence of intently authoritarian practices (Tansel 2017b, p. 11; Bekmen 2014, p. 47).

## The rise and fall of AKP's narratives of progress

Before detailing how the twin narratives of progress shaped the analyses of the AKP period in the literature, it is important to return to the immediate political and socio-economic context in which AKP came to power in November 2002. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Turkey was reeling from a decade of political and economic instability which was marked by successive economic crises, erratic coalition governments and intensified conflict with the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê – Kurdistan Workers' Party). The trial-and-error approach to deepening liberalisation in the 1990s culminated in a major economic crisis in 2001 which shrank the economy 'at an unprecedented rate of some 9.5%' (Akyüz & Boratav 2003, p. 1550). By 2002, the dominant precepts of centrist party politics were exhausted and the public showed no inclination to further support what was clearly a failing economic and political programme.

The European Commission's *Eurobarometer 2001* report captured this bleak mood very well. In surveys conducted in October 2001, 56 per cent of the respondents from Turkey reported that their

conditions had deteriorated in the past five years, while only 30 per cent displayed any optimism that their situation would get better in the next five years (European Commission 2002, pp. 15–16). Respondents gave overwhelmingly negative assessments about both their individual and the country's general economic prospects, with 74 per cent responding that the economic situation in the country would get worse in 2002 and 54 per cent expecting a deterioration in their household finances in 2002 (European Commission 2002, pp. 18–22). The report further identified two key trends, the popular expressions of which would help bring AKP to power in November 2002. Eurobarometer reported that only 13 per cent of respondents trusted political parties (European Commission 2002, p. 24), yet 59 per cent supported Turkey's EU membership and 77 per cent of those who indicated that they would vote in a membership referendum claimed that they would vote for EU entry (European Commission 2002, pp. 56–58).

The deeply entrenched dissatisfaction with traditional party politics, coupled with economic insecurity and a widespread desire for substantial political and economic change – as indicated by the support for EU membership – signalled that the voters were ready to embrace an alternative which the recently established AKP would come to represent. When the twin crises of November 2000 and February 2001 brought down the Turkish economy, the culprit in public perception for what seemed to be a recurring theme in the country's post 1980 economic liberalisation was found in the political establishment. The coalition government's fundamental inability to steer a course out of the crisis greatly facilitated AKP's landslide electoral victory in 2002 (Öniş 2009, pp. 415–416).

Therefore, right from the outset, the AKP's political ascendancy materialised in a context defined by an explicit popular desire for economic and political reform, which the party swiftly capitalised on by underscoring its newcomer status and its commitment to 'competence, integrity, and democracy' (Öniş & Keyman 2003, p. 99). As with many other threads in the global fabric of neoliberalisations, AKP rose on a 'new social consensus on the basis of steadily increasing productivity, economic growth and a limited generalisation of prosperity' (Rupert 1995, p. 83). Subsequent analyses of the party's political and economic performance, particularly in its early years, were coloured both by the crisis-ridden years of governance that marked the pre-AKP period, and the party's rise as an alternative to a paralysed party politics 'known more for economic populism, clientelism, and corruption than for democratic accountability' (Öniş & Keyman 2003, p. 95).

### *The narrative of economic progress*

Given the popular dissatisfaction with the immediate economic results of liberalisation in the early 2000s, one might assume that AKP's rise to political power would have indicated a sea change in economic policy. Yet, AKP's solution to the ongoing economic woes, far from charting an alternative trajectory, was entirely in line with the IMF-backed reform package devised by the preceding coalition government (Aydın 2013, p. 101). As the OECD's 2002 review suggested, despite two decades of neoliberalisation, Turkey was 'still in a state of transition, and competition policy is not yet fully integrated into general policy' (2002, p. 12). Accordingly, AKP took the necessary measures to reinstate the faith of the country's long-list of creditors by pledging allegiance to a programme approved by major international financial institutions.

The subsequent reform packages, which entailed a considerable shift in public spending, were devised to be implemented in accordance with a macroeconomic policy that prioritised inflation reduction, further trade liberalisation and attracting foreign investment. The short-term positive balance sheet of this strategy, which was marked by (uneven) GDP growth, inflation reduction and significant increases in FDI flows led to the production of a narrative of economic progress. Notwithstanding some cautionary examples, this largely legitimised the government's economic orientation. By focusing predominantly on select macroeconomic indicators and eschewing any systematic analyses of the social ramifications of pursuing 'growth' policies, most early accounts of AKP's economic programme made positive assessments. These failed to problematise the survival and strengthening of neoliberal precepts – liberalisation, financialisation, dependency on foreign capital, and the shrinking of the rights and collective power of labour – that had created the cycle of volatility in the 1980s and 1990s (Yeldan 2006, p. 206).

As early as 2003, AKP's then incipient economic programme was cast as a desirable alternative to failed 'neoliberal' and state-controlled economic models. Asserting the importance of perceiving AKP policy as an incarnation of 'Third Way' politics, Ziya Öniş and Fuat Keyman (2003, p. 100) claimed the party's model signalled the emergence of a 'postdevelopmental' state 'that effectively contributes to the development of a free-market economy without actually repressing the market mechanism'. For Öniş and Keyman, the emergent economic model was *not* neoliberal, as the state would 'underwrite and safeguard a basically free but intelligently regulated market economy' (2003, p. 97). This was a position which both authors would eventually abandon, substituting it with an emphasis on the AKP government's 'neoliberalism' (Öniş 2009; Keyman & Gümüşçü 2014; cf. Keyman 2010, p. 316). This position betrayed a fundamental inability to both conceptualise and explain the concrete practices of neoliberalism, as the two authors simply equated neoliberal reform with unfettered market deregulation and state withdrawal.<sup>8</sup>

Yet while the preferred nomenclature to classify AKP's economic programme gradually reverted back to 'neoliberalism', the seemingly successful macroeconomic performance also led to a rehabilitation of the neoliberal model to the extent that neoliberalism came to be seen as the blueprint of AKP's economic success. Fuat Keyman and Şebnem Gümüşçü (2014, p. 91, emphasis added) articulated this position explicitly in their claim that 'many Arab states have come to regard Turkey's impressive growth rate and the improvements in its citizens' economic well-being under AKP's *neoliberal* economic policy as a source of awe and inspiration'. An often poorly understood and misrepresented portrayal of macroeconomic performance (cf. Subaşat 2014; Yeldan & Ünüvar 2015) effectively legitimised the view that 'Turkey owes its economic success to the strengthening and implementation of the free-market oriented liberal economic philosophy' (Oğuzlu 2011, p. 986; see also Dağı 2008, p. 29).

Improvements in individual markers of this (neoliberal) 'economic philosophy' came to dominate the overall assessments of AKP policies. Accordingly, Öniş (2009, p. 423) highlighted the 'virtuous cycle' of investment in AKP's early years, whereby 'improvement[s] in the overall macroeconomic and macropolitical environment' led to 'a significant increase in the quantity of FDI flowing into the Turkish economy, [and]... a major increase in privatisation revenues'.<sup>9</sup> Many other analyses highlighted that economic growth 'surged' after 2001.<sup>10</sup> These accounts placed significant emphasis on growth figures – which largely lose their significance when contextualised against high-growth rates in similar 'emerging economies' since 2002 (see Tansel 2017c). Frequent refer-



ences to economic growth manifested without qualifications, even in critical accounts which noted AKP's command over a 'relatively stable and growing economy'.<sup>11</sup> This tendency to prioritise macroeconomic indicators has developed in tandem with an indifference to tracing the concrete ways in which the policies that engendered this 'growing' economy were reshaping both the state apparatuses and the households' conditions of social reproduction. Contrary to those social scientists and economists who consistently underscored the contradictions of AKP's economic programme (see note 6), those who subscribed to a narrative of AKP-led economic growth failed to investigate the wide-ranging effects of a growth model focused on privatisation, financialisation, foreign investment, increased commodification and attacks on collective rights which resulted in qualitative changes in industrial relations, patterns of employment and household indebtedness (Karaçimen 2014, 2015; Çelik 2015).

In contrast, scholars who provided a positive balance sheet of AKP's early economic programme continued to assess the country's socio-economic conditions through a narrow lens even after the 2007–2008 global economic crisis. It is not uncommon to find claims in the literature that 'Turkey [has not only] remained relatively unaffected by the financial and economic crisis, but its economic performance . . . has been impressive' (Keyman & Gümüşçü 2014, pp. 38–39), despite the significant evidence to the contrary that demonstrates the acute impact of the crisis on households and the economy in general (Aytaç, Rankin & İbikoğlu 2014).

### *The narrative of political progress*

The 'political' counterpart of this narrative coalesced around AKP's early portrayal as a force of democratisation and harbinger of a new type of politics, allowing civil societal actors to take precedence over ossified state elites. Throughout its first two terms in office, the party was perceived by many observers in academia, international and national media and policy-making circles as a vehicle for regional stability and greater democratisation.<sup>12</sup> Many recognised AKP's democratic credentials by highlighting its battles with 'tutelary' state apparatuses such as the military, as well as the party's 'activist foreign policy' (Aras & Görener 2010; cf. Robins 2013), its (potential) capacity to bridge Islam and democracy (Kanra 2005; Nasr 2005), and its role in launching 'democratic openings' (Keyman 2010; Kirişçi 2011; cf. Çiçek 2011).

Following AKP's first election triumph, Ziya Öniş and Fuat Keyman welcomed the new political environment by declaring that 'Turkey has finally elected a single-party government that strongly believes in economic reform, basically respects the IMF framework, and wants full-fledged EU membership' (2003, p. 105). For others, AKP represented a historic opportunity to overcome the country's seemingly innate inability to chart an 'exit from the authoritarian regime established after the military coup of September 12, 1980' (İnsel 2003, p. 306). At the international level, the symbiosis of the party's pro-EU position and its self-styled conservative democratic position elicited predominantly positive responses and AKP was cast in the role of 'a peace broker in multiple cultural, religious and political arenas' (Sandole 2009, p. 648; cf. Arkan & Kınacıoğlu 2016).

The party's repeated attempts at constitutional reform, its 'civilianisation' efforts (Cizre 2011; Gürsoy 2012; Bardakçı 2013) and its consequent battles with the apparatuses of the so-called 'tutelary regime' (Aydınlı 2013; cf. Akça & Balta-Paker 2012) led some observers to represent AKP as an agent of 'subaltern democratisation' (Yel & Nas 2013), a denomination that neatly mapped onto the

party's own claim to represent the 'national will' (see Bilgiç 2018). AKP's seemingly successful formula of 'conservative democracy' was further framed as a potential blueprint for democratisation in other countries in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>13</sup> In the pre-Gezi landscape, this dominant view of AKP-as-democratisers led one sympathetic observer to claim that 'Turkey has established itself [as] an example of a well-functioning democracy in the Muslim world, and is repeatedly illustrated as a possible model for other Muslim countries' (Yalçın 2012, p. 206).

Notwithstanding intermittent calls to recognise the limits of the party's conservative democracy,<sup>14</sup> the literature was marked by analyses that set AKP governments' piecemeal reforms against the background of the recent past. The previous two decades had been shaped by severe democratic deficits under the leadership of dysfunctional coalition governments and the military junta. Given the patchwork improvements in several areas of governance under AKP rule, particularly where the EU initially acted as an anchor for reform (Müftüler Baç 2005; Kaygusuz 2012; cf. Tocci 2005), it would be unfair to wholly dismiss the earlier, positive assessments of the party's democratic trajectory. Yet what was missing in many of these accounts tracing the party's democratic reform initiatives was an attention to *how* the party's ostensible moves towards greater democratisation were materialising in contexts beyond the observers' narrow focus on the institutional components of parliamentary democracy.

As we have seen, those following the narrative of economic growth emphasised select indicators to assess the AKP's economic performance, and thus, remained inattentive to the broader questions surrounding the politics of distribution, employment and state transformation. Similarly, those who underlined the narrative of democratic progress often failed to recognise a trend towards centralising decision-making, an increasingly interventionist attitude towards various state apparatuses and a tendency to marginalise public input when the popular response contradicted the party's objectives.

Many of the initial incarnations of these patterns emerged precisely in the context of the party's 'political' attempts to facilitate its 'economic' programme – e.g. in labour market reforms or in continual reorganisation of urban planning rights (see Bozkurt-Gürgen 2018; Çelik 2015; Eraydın & Taşan-Kok 2014). Individual components of the economic reform packages, such as privatisation processes, were increasingly shaped by non-democratic practices and outright corruption, which under the AKP rule has become 'centralised and exists and prevails through making highly debated, notorious new laws and regulations' (Çeviker Gürakar 2016, p. 109; see also Buğra & Savaşkan 2014). In short, those who followed the twin narratives of progress detached the examinations of neoliberal reform and democratisation from each other, and thus rendered their analyses incapable of recognising how the two processes were co-constitutive.

### **A rude awakening: end of the narratives of progress**

Both in the academic literature and in popular writing on Turkey, the AKP-induced democratisation–economic development narrative started to flounder in the 2007–2011 period, and rapidly disintegrated after 2013. While the 2010 constitutional reform and the highly politicised court cases against alleged coup plotters are often represented as a watershed for AKP's 'authoritarian turn', many observers have also underscored the party's victory in the July 2007 elections as an earlier, but

perhaps less explicit, crossing point (Bardakçı 2016, p. 5; Canyaş, Canyaş & Gümrükçü 2016, p. 78). Yet it was the government's response to the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the subsequent assaults on rights that gravely undermined the party's credentials and self-representation as a vehicle of 'civilianisation, democratisation, freedom of belief and equality of opportunity' (AK Parti n.d.) (see Bilgiç 2018). Incidentally, this narrative shift corresponded to AKP's own discursive reconfiguration, as the party gradually replaced its own claim to creating a 'conservative democracy' with that of a nebulous 'advanced democracy' (Alpan 2016, pp. 17–18).

The shift to a more critical lens in analyses of AKP's governance was not only a result of domestic political developments. It was also intimately linked to the successive waves of popular uprisings and mobilisations against incumbent rulers in the Middle East and North Africa which created ripple effects in social sciences. These events have not only toppled regimes and transformed the political landscape in the region, they have also forced social scientists to reassess and reflect upon the conceptual and analytical parameters they utilise to study such dynamics.<sup>15</sup>

One such collective episode of soul-searching in the face of failed predictions and models has materialised in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests in Turkey. The 'unexpected' intensity and scale of the protests, coupled with AKP's heavy-handed crackdown have resulted in a considerable shift in the scholarly analysis and commentary of Turkish affairs – especially in the West. Concomitant with this emergent critique of the government's democratic credentials, the party's economic policy received increased critical scrutiny (Gündüz 2015). Once again, the shift in the scope of scholarship was partly a direct response to concrete socio-economic developments in the country, which – contrary to the boisterous claims of AKP officials – did not emerge unscathed from the 2007–2008 global economic crisis (Canyaş, Canyaş & Gümrükçü 2016, p. 78).

As outlined earlier, scholarly attempts to explain and conceptualise AKP's 'authoritarian turn' have developed in parallel with the production and adoption of different categories. The specific denomination of Turkey's 'authoritarianism' has been variously defined as 'competitive' (Özbudun 2015; Esen & Gümüştü 2017) or 'electoral' (White & Herzog 2016; Chrona & Capelos 2017), and in other cases, subsumed under the category of 'hybrid' regimes (Öniş 2016). The plethora of concepts and definitions utilised in the analyses of the late AKP period could be interpreted as a sign of theoretical innovation. However, there is also a more practical explanation which attributes this conceptual expansion to the vicissitudes of Turkish politics:

Part of the difficulty in pinpointing the exact nature of the new Turkish regime lies in its fluid and fast evolving nature. Snapshots of the country's political and institutional environment would yield different results if taken before or after AKP's third general election victory in 2011, the Gezi protests of the summer of 2013, the intra-Islamist split between AKP and the Gülen movement in late 2013, the presidential election of 2014, the twin elections of June and November 2015, or the failed coup attempt of July 2016. While it was still possible to label Turkey a flawed or illiberal democracy before mid-2015, the developments since the June 2015 election and the July 2016 coup attempt have led more observers to opt for sub-categories of authoritarianism instead (Akkoyunlu & Öktem 2016, p. 506).

A similar attempt was made by Ziya Öniş (2016, p. 142) who identifies three key 'phases' for periodising the ebbs and flows of the AKP's political and economic trajectory.

The first, from late 2002 to 2007, looks in retrospect like a kind of golden age (...) The second phase, which spanned the 2007 and 2011 elections, was a time of transition. (...) The third phase, which began after the June 2011 election, saw the virtuous cycle of the first phase go into reverse.

Given the intensity and rapid pace of the developments that observers now recognise as the triggers of AKP's authoritarian drift, it is not unreasonable to suggest that prior assessments of AKP governments had to be re-negotiated in light of the changing political circumstances. Furthermore, we do not refute the claim that the scope of AKP's authoritarian practices has widened considerably in the post 2011–13 period. Yet this oscillating periodisation and the focus on the 'fluidity' of the Turkish regime risks losing sight of the enduring patterns and practices that criss-crossed and connected different 'phases' of the AKP rule. Underscoring these 'phases' does not help us construct a more accurate picture of the 'authoritarian turn'. On the contrary, this attempt obscures the lineage of the policies and tendencies that comprise AKP's authoritarian statecraft. It makes significant portions of the party's history invisible by presenting them as 'golden age[s]' and amorphous 'time[s] of transition'. Inadvertently, these critical interventions overemphasise the post 2011–2013 period as the constitutive stage of the party's authoritarianism and shy away from revisiting the political and economic balance sheet of the party's earlier years in government. Ultimately, the main question that drives such investigations is 'what went wrong?' – as opposed to *how* and *why* was the party capable of (re)constructing and strengthening an authoritarian regime?

These accounts are further undermined by a significant analytical impasse as they reproduce the problematic separation of 'economic' and 'political' developments in assessing the authoritarian trajectory of AKP. The turning points towards authoritarianism identified in these contributions predominantly represent 'political' moments. As such, they underestimate how AKP governments' management of 'the economy' has long been underpinned by the type of coercive and disciplinary strategies that these observers have only begun recognising in the political realm *after* 2011–13. Attempts to broaden the scope of the analytical parameters utilised in the study of AKP's 'authoritarian turn' often remain comfortably within the confines of the 'political'. For example, those who underscore the validity of 'competitive authoritarianism' assert that the concept 'takes into account aspects of a political regime other than its electoral system, thereby allowing us to focus on different aspects of AKP's regime' (Esen & Gümüşçü 2016, p. 1583). 'Political' aspects of the regime are still valorised as the prioritised category of analysis, which reinforces a hermetically sealed understanding of a realm of politics separate from 'the economy'. This political focus significantly erodes the concept's ability to shed light on a host of economic, cultural and ideological patterns and practices, that very much constitute AKP's authoritarian statecraft.

The final part of the paper advances the utility of authoritarian neoliberalism as a remedy for both the twin narratives of progress, and the analytical issues that have plagued the accounts that (1) neglect the questions of political economy by operating on a disconnected conception of the 'economic' and 'political' processes; and/or (2) assume a diametrical opposition between liberal democracy and authoritarian statecraft.

## Repertoires of authoritarian neoliberalism

We advance the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism in our efforts to understand and explain the historical trajectory of AKP's authoritarian statecraft. The primary utility of deploying this concept – as opposed to the many other alternatives outlined above – is that it helps us avoid the pitfall of analysing the constitution of authoritarianism through an exclusive focus on 'political' processes that seemingly deviate from liberal democratic practices. Therefore, authoritarian neoliberalism overcomes the dichotomous examinations of the 'economic' and 'political' components of AKP's governance that the other accounts have subscribed to. As we have seen, this has resulted in an inability to detect how the emergent 'authoritarian' practices highlighted after 2011–13 had already been in the making in ostensibly 'economic' fields, particularly in policy areas directly relevant to the expansion of neoliberal restructuring.

More importantly, authoritarian neoliberalism, instead of normalising the type of policies that have accompanied AKP's 'growth' years, unequivocally underscores the inherently anti-democratic tendencies of neoliberalisation. As Ian Bruff (2016, pp. 109–110) elucidates, 'state-directed coercion insulated from democratic pressures (...) is central to the creation and maintenance of a [neoliberal] politico-economic order which actively defends itself against impulses towards greater equality and democratisation'. In contrast to many adherents of the narratives of progress, we thus chart the manifestation of 'authoritarian' practices in conjunction with the AKP-led process of neoliberalisation.

The concept assumes two closely related forms in the contributions to this volume. In its descriptive function, authoritarian neoliberalism denotes that Turkey's transition to electoral democracy after the 1980 coup did not necessarily spell an end to the authoritarian modalities of rule that underpinned the military regime, but rather highlights how practices and institutions enacted in the 1980s have been repurposed under civilian rule. As Bedirhanoglu & Yalman (2010, p. 109) have argued, the authoritarian neoliberal 'form the state had acquired as early as the 1980s has persisted since then through the powerful articulation of these [neoliberal] economic, political and cultural processes into each other'. This is an important corrective to the accounts that attempt to assess the health of Turkish democracy purely on electoral grounds. But the recognition of the enduring legacy of military rule does not, in and of itself, help us shed light on the specificities of AKP's authoritarianism.

To fulfil that aim, we highlight the more substantive dimension of the concept which draws heavily from the work of Nicos Poulantzas and Stuart Hall. Accordingly, instead of exclusively focusing on the vestigial practices of the coup era, we deploy the concept to trace how the policies and practices that facilitate neoliberalisation engender anti-democratic and disciplinary forms of governance. This often occurs with a view to protecting the primary circuits of capital accumulation, as has been the case in the construction industry during the AKP era (see Balaban 2011). These disciplinary practices are not antithetical to representative democratic regimes; on the contrary, following Stuart Hall's (1979, p. 15) work on authoritarian populism, we contend that an authoritarian neoliberal regime can '[retain] most (though not all) of the formal representative institutions in place' while also 'construct[ing] around itself an active popular consent'.

Thus, authoritarian neoliberalism allows us to reconcile AKP's electoral support with its majoritarian, exclusionary and disciplinary policies. These policies have increasingly 'intensified state control over every sphere of social life' and enacted a 'draconian and multiform curtailment' of rights and liberties (Poulantzas [1978] 2014, pp. 203–204; see Tansel 2017b, pp. 2–4). As a result of this

two-dimensional understanding of the concept, some contributions in this volume chart an explicit line through from the earlier authoritarian traditions of centre-right politics in Turkey to AKP. Others place a stronger emphasis on the party itself as the main agent in the construction of an authoritarian neoliberal regime.

Our empirical investigations map out the consolidation of authoritarian neoliberalism in several fields by bringing together important contributions from various branches of the social sciences. In line with our insistence on recognising the authoritarian constitution of neoliberal reforms, we trace major shifts in economic governance with particular reference to labour relations (Bozkurt-Güngen 2018) and corporate ownership (Yeşil 2018). We interrogate how developments in these areas have been linked to the broader transformation of the state under the AKP rule, and how these reforms have been enforced through anti-democratic means – often through executive centralisation – or have facilitated and normalised further authoritarian practices. We further examine the repercussions of the changing politics of security (Kaygusuz 2018) and of consent generation (Bilgiç 2018).

In her detailed survey of industrial relations during the AKP era, Sümercan Bozkurt-Güngen provides an important corrective to the economic narrative of progress discussed above. She highlights how successive AKP governments have prioritised ‘the collective/institutional exclusion of the labouring classes from policy-making processes’. Bozkurt-Güngen’s study reveals that the increasingly neoliberalised management of the labouring classes unfolded within a context of legal and socio-economic reforms which have undermined the rights and protections of workers, and raised barriers against trade union mobilisation.

Bilge Yeşil’s contribution focuses on a key nexus of governmental discretion and corporate power, tracing the consolidation of media ownership in pro-government conglomerates within the broader trajectory of liberalisation and privatisation. Documenting the institutional and legal reforms that have restricted press independence and promoted a pro-AKP media landscape in the past decade, Yeşil explores how AKP’s policies in this field are built on the mechanisms of clientelism exploited by previous governments, but are also increasingly relying on direct interventions to shape the country’s media system.

The final two contributions by Özlem Kaygusuz and Ali Bilgiç examine the ways in which AKP’s authoritarian statecraft has utilised security apparatuses and mobilisation discourses as tools of coercion and consent creation. Kaygusuz (2018) situates the expansion of AKP’s disciplinary statecraft within a global context defined by the rise of ‘neoliberal security state’ forms, but claims that the government’s security paradigm has transformed into a more extreme conception of ‘regime security’ in the aftermath of the coup attempt in 2016. Through a careful analysis of the AKP-led reforms in the judiciary and state security apparatuses, Kaygusuz uncovers the party’s consistent commitment to executive centralisation, i.e. assembling key decision-making powers and coercive capacities of the state strictly under the aegis of the government.

Bilgiç (2018) shifts the focus to the party’s discourses of mobilisation and its successful attempts at consent creation by providing an analysis of the Gezi Park protests and the government-sponsored ‘National Will’ meetings in 2013. Focusing on different subjectivities that the country’s neoliberalisation has produced, Bilgiç uncovers how AKP has succeeded in adopting the historical ‘national will’ narrative of the Turkish right. This narrative was then deployed by the party to legit-

imise its majoritarian understanding of politics, and to withstand the popular discontent that the Gezi Park protests unleashed in 2013.

## Coda

The contributions collected in this volume aim not only to enrich the ongoing debates on the nature, limits and prospects of Turkey's 'authoritarian turn', but also to provide an analytical challenge and an opportunity for reflection in relation to certain frameworks that have been used to assess the politics of AKP rule. It is important to stress that the shortcomings of the 'narratives of progress' uncovered earlier in this paper should be seen as products of the problematic assumptions that have underpinned these analyses, rather than as flawed research into or wilful misrepresentations of AKP's record. Dichotomous conceptions of 'the economy' vs. politics, democracy vs. authoritarianism, and state vs. civil society have prevented many observers from detecting the emergence of certain trends that they would recognise as 'authoritarian' only after they had appeared in the realm of formal 'politics' (e.g. political interference in the judicial system, crackdown on oppositional social forces, curtailment of rights, irregularities in elections). Furthermore, the accounts that are embedded in these 'narratives of progress' have failed to sufficiently interrogate the wide-ranging consequences of AKP's economic programme. They have often produced positive, short-termist conclusions derived from a narrow focus on select macroeconomic indicators that effectively legitimised neoliberalisation.

In contrast, our contributions underscore that AKP's recent 'authoritarian turn' should be understood as the single facet of an authoritarian model of governance which was already shaped by executive centralisation – at the expense of political oversight and public participation – and sustained by the deployment of the full power of the state in the service of the party's interests. These interests have largely coalesced around neoliberal policies that have increased the scope and pace of commodification and restructured the state's regulatory and distributive roles. Nevertheless, despite the documented electoral irregularities and overt acts of violence that ensured the party's survival, AKP has also succeeded, to a certain extent, in normalising and legitimising its own authoritarian practices, often through exploiting the existing socio-economic, political and cultural lines of stratification.

What are the broader implications of rethinking AKP's authoritarian trajectory along the lines we suggest in this collection? Representing AKP's 'authoritarian turn' as a harbinger of a global resurgence in authoritarianism might be misleading (Klaas 2018; cf. Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that some of the processes that the party has utilised to entrench its tight grip on power are already promoted and exploited by other governments across the world. Efforts to limit public scrutiny of socio-economic reforms are increasingly documented in the global North as well as in the South (see the contributions in Tansel 2017a), while the trend of legislating neoliberal restructuring through emergency decrees by the executive has gained rapid pace in countries such as Italy and Spain (Cozzolino forthcoming; Clua-Losada & Ribera-Almadoz 2017).

Thus, while the exigencies of the current state of emergency in Turkey and AKP's success in controlling and reshaping state apparatuses might not be replicated in other contexts, both the lib-

eral democratic and authoritarian forms of capitalism are increasingly facing challenges that propel state managers to privilege inherently anti-democratic means of managing crises. We therefore re-assert the centrality of critically examining the questions of political economy in the ongoing discussions on democracy and authoritarianism, and urge scholars to take heed of Nancy Fraser's (2015, p. 189) advice: '[w]hoever would speak about democracy today must also speak about capitalism.'

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Bermeo (2016, p. 6, 11); Akkoyunlu & Öktem (2016); Esen & Gümüşçü (2016); Öniş (2016); Börzel & Schimmelfennig (2017, p. 284).
- <sup>2</sup> I use the term 'popular' to refer to the analyses and commentaries published for audiences beyond academia, such as magazine articles, newspaper pieces and TV reports.
- <sup>3</sup> In addition to the works discussed throughout the article, see Saatçioğlu (2016); Somer (2016); Waldman & Çalışkan (2017); Öniş & Kutlay (2017); Göl (2017); Sarfati (2017) for other recent contributions to the literature on Turkey's 'authoritarian turn'.
- <sup>4</sup> The individual contributions to this volume unpack this claim in different empirical domains in detail, but we would also like to highlight the corresponding findings of the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem 2017), which reveals that the 'democratic backsliding' in the AKP era was visible as early as 2003–2004.
- <sup>5</sup> Acknowledging this also helps us emphasise the importance of treating the contradictions and auto-critiques that manifest between the analyses written in these two periods (2002–2007/10; 2011–2013 onwards) as symptoms of shortcomings inherent in certain approaches and concepts, rather than the outcomes of inadequate applications of otherwise sound theories.
- <sup>6</sup> This should not be read to the effect that the party's democratic and economic balance sheet received no critical scrutiny. See, inter alia, Bedirhanoglu & Yalman (2010); Coşar & Yücesan-Özdemir (2012); Bozkurt (2013); Buğra & Savaşkan (2014); Akça, Bekmen & Özden (2014), Boratav (2015) and Çelik (2015) for critical engagements with neoliberalism in the AKP period.
- <sup>7</sup> See Bruff (2014); Soederberg (2014); Oberndorfer (2015); Springer (2015); Wigger & Buch-Hansen (2015); Bruff & Wöhl (2016); Yeşil (2016); Roberts (2017); Tansel (2017a); Bruff & Tansel (forthcoming).



- <sup>8</sup> See also Moore & Dannreuther (2009, p. 155) for the same misconception. Compare these accounts with those of Cahill (2014); Soederberg (2014); and Delwaide (2011) for careful analyses of the role of the state in neoliberalism.
- <sup>9</sup> It should be noted that Öniş increasingly highlighted the contradictions of the government's economic programme, including its reliance on short-term capital inflows (see especially Öniş & Bakır 2007); yet his criticisms have fallen short of challenging the core assumptions that drove the policy and rarely questioned the problems inherent to the pursuit of a 'high growth path' (Öniş 2009, pp. 425–427).
- <sup>10</sup> See Acemoğlu & Üçer (2015); Abramowitz & Barkey (2009); Tür (2011, p. 592); Tol (2012, p. 352); Çağaptay (2013, p. 800); Sachs (2013); Üçer (2014).
- <sup>11</sup> See Sert & Yıldız (2016, p. 53); Şimşek (2013, p. 439); Çınar & Sayın (2014, p. 366); Esen & Gümüşçü (2016, p. 1584); Ağartan (2016, p. 143).
- <sup>12</sup> See, among others, The New York Times (2004); The Economist (2010). As Claire Berlinski (2017) has documented, the dominant representation of AKP in the Western press was one that highlighted the party's reformist, pro-Western and pro-EU attitude.
- <sup>13</sup> See Altunışık (2005, 2008); Atasoy (2011); Bâli (2011); Çağaptay (2014); Taşpınar (2014) for various contributions to the debate on the 'Turkish Model'.
- <sup>14</sup> See, *inter alia*, Tepe (2005); Çınar (2006); Coşar & Yeğenoğlu (2011); Birdal (2013).
- <sup>15</sup> See, *inter alia*, Gause (2011); Schwedler (2015); Valbjørn (2012).

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