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Research Article

Transformation of Coercion under Democratic Backsliding: The Case of Turkey

Serdar San

East Texas A&M University, https://www.tamuc.edu/

Abstract: Although the literature on coercion in autocracies reflects a general awareness that coercive institutions in authoritarian regimes are involved in political repression to keep the leader in power, there is little research on the exact forms these coercive apparatuses take across different regimes. Such research could help explain variations in the structures of coercive institutions or why countries adopt different institutional designs. This study explores in depth how the Erdogan government in Turkey structured the internal security apparatus to contain both popular and elite challenges to its survival during the country's authoritarian transformation. The findings—centered on the Erdogan government's reassessment of the sources of threats to its survival and its response to that changed assessment—suggest that shifts in authoritarian leaders' threat perceptions can lead to very different organizational and deployment strategies for coercion in service of regime survival.

Keywords: Turkey, coercion, authoritarianism, regime survival, democratic backsliding, counterbalancing.

Introduction

Research indicates that Turkey has backslid from an electoral democracy to a competitive authoritarian regime under President (and former Prime Minister) Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP).[1] This study

[1] Antonino Castaldo, "Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 467-487, https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2018.1550948; Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1581-1606, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1135732; Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu,

explores how the Erdogan government structured the internal security apparatus to contain popular and elite challenges to its survival during Turkey's democratic backsliding. Findings regarding the Erdogan government's reassessment of the sources of threats to its survival and its responses suggest that we could observe, or expect to observe, an opposite shift in threat perceptions by authoritarian rulers – from the risk of a coup to popular threats, or vice versa. Such shifts may lead to different approaches to organizing and deploying coercion for the purpose of regime survival.

Threat perceptions of the Erdogan government, shaped by the Kemalist establishment (i.e., the military and judiciary), the nationwide anti-government Gezi Park protests in 2013, the December 2013 corruption probe launched by the police against some key individuals close to the AKP government, and the attempted military coup in July 2016, have deeply influenced how policing and internal security have been organized over the last two decades in Turkey.

After 2011, the threat of a military coup declined due to the political delegitimization—and later criminalization—of the military's interventions in politics, particularly following the Gezi protests in 2013.[2] Accordingly, the Erdogan government's threat perception shifted largely from a military coup to the growing social and political opposition, which it began to view as the more significant challenge to its political survival. In response, the AKP government empowered the Turkish National Police (TNP) to suppress rising opposition against its authoritarian activities from civil society and ordinary citizens. This effort was later bolstered by the passage of a draconian Domestic Security Bill, which tremendously increased the powers of the police force.[3]

Following the 2013 corruption probe against its ministers, the AKP's and Erdogan's threat perception focused on a combination of elite and popular challenges. This shift was reflected in their subsequent measures, as discussed below. The attempted military coup in July 2016, which redirected the Erdogan government's focus primarily to elite threats, led to the development of a more fragmented internal security apparatus aimed at addressing potential loyalty challenges within formal coercive institutions.

The next section of the article provides a brief review of the research on authoritarian coercion. The article then examines the major inflection points in Turkey's backsliding into a competitive authoritarian regime – a process that has

"Why Did Turkish Democracy Collapse? A Political Economy Account of AKP's Authoritarianism," *Party Politics* 27, no. 6 (2021): 1075-1091, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820923722.

[2] Esen and Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism," 1584-1585; Betül Ekşi, "Police and Masculinities in Transition in Turkey: From Macho to Reformed to Militarized Policing," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 3 (August 2019): 491-515, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X18768377.

[3] "Turkey: Parliament Approves Domestic Security Package," *Middle East Eye*, March 27, 2015, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-parliament-approves-domestic-security-package.

shaped the Erdogan government's evolving threat perceptions. These perceptions, in turn, have influenced institutional design and the deployment of coercive tools in Turkey. The final section recapitulates the study's findings and summarizes its contributions to the existing literature.

Research on Authoritarian Coercion

Coercion is a defining feature of the state.[4] Several scholars suggest that in authoritarian regimes, "the primary function of coercive institutions and the deployment of coercion is to keep the leader in power."[5] In contrast, coercion in democratic states is primarily deployed to protect citizens from crime and violence; it is exercised according to the rule of law and is subject to meaningful formal external accountability.[6] The nature of threats against the ruler in authoritarian regimes determines the design and organization of the coercive apparatus.[7] Previous research has found that authoritarian incumbents, primarily concerned with their political survival, structure their coercive apparatus and deploy coercion to achieve one of two goals: suppressing challenges from domestic opposition groups or "coup-proofing" against potential threats from within the security and intelligence apparatus.[8]

In a comparative study of Taiwan, the Philippines, and South Korea, Sheena Greitens provides a compelling theoretical framework to better understand how coercive institutions in authoritarian regimes are structured and how this design influences patterns of state repression and violence.[9] She notes that autocratic rulers face two major threats to their political and physical survival: threats from the population (popular unrest) and threats from elites, particularly those within the coercive apparatus.

Greitens argues that while most autocrats deal with a combination of these threats at any given time, in constructing their coercive apparatus, they face a "coercive dilemma." In such instances, authoritarian regimes must choose between addressing popular threats or addressing threats from regime elites – a choice that entails a fundamental organizational trade-off between mitigating the risk of popular overthrow and coup-proofing against elite threats.

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4 Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, *AD 990-1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

5 Yanilda María González, *Authoritarian Police in Democracy: Contested Security in Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, October 2020), 13, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108907330; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence* (Cambridge University Press, August 2016), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316489031; Pablo Policzer, *The Rise and Fall of Repression in Chile* (University of Notre Dame Press, February 2009).

6 González, *Authoritarian Police in Democracy*, 11-12.

7 Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police.*

8 González, *Authoritarian Police in Democracy*, 13; Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police*; Policzer, *Rise and Fall of Repression in Chile.*

9 Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police.*

She explains that because coup-proofing calls for fragmented and socially exclusive coercive institutions, while managing popular unrest demands more unitary and inclusive ones, authoritarian leaders cannot simultaneously maximize their defense against both types of threats. Greitens argues that authoritarian rulers facing this coercive dilemma design their coercive apparatus based on the dominant perceived threat at the time they come to power. Dictators who prioritize the threat of a coup are likely to create a fragmented and socially exclusive security apparatus, while autocrats concerned with the risk of popular unrest are more likely to establish socially inclusive and unitary coercive organizations.

Fragmentation—defined as the existence of multiple organizations with overlapping or competing domestic security functions and a lack of coordinating authority above them—serves to prevent collusion among these agencies and to keep any single agency from becoming powerful enough to stage a coup against the ruler.[10]

Relatedly, there has been significant research on so-called counterbalancing. Counterbalancing refers to the division of a state's coercive power among multiple, overlapping security organizations to protect against threats from intra-regime contenders or coups.[11] These studies suggest that the proliferation of new security structures with overlapping functions alongside existing institutions is not a universal or typical feature of all authoritarian regimes. Contemporary conceptions of counterbalancing distinguish between the coup-proofing tactics known as "divide and rule" or "balance within," which involve balancing different factions within the security apparatus against one another, and tactics referred to as "broadening the field" or "balance outside," which involve creating new units within existing security institutions or establishing entirely new security forces outside the existing institutions.[12]

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[10] Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police.*

[11] Erica De Bruin, "Counterbalancing and Coups d'État," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, November 19, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1871; Heather Martin, "Coup-Proofing and Beyond: The Regime-Survival Strategies of Hugo Chávez," *Latin American Policy* 8, no. 2 (December 2017): 249-262, https://doi.org/10.1111/lamp.12130.

[12] Tobias Böhmelt and Ulrich Pilster, "The Impact of Institutional Coup-Proofing on Coup Attempts and Coup Outcomes," *International Interactions* 41, no. 1 (2015): 158-182, https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2014.906411; Erica De Bruin, "Preventing Coups d'État: How Counterbalancing Works," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 7 (August 2018): 1433-1458, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002717692652; Abel Escribà-Folch, Tobias Böhmelt, and Ulrich Pilster, "Authoritarian Regimes and Civil-Military Relations: Explaining Counterbalancing in Autocracies," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 37, no. 5 (September 2020): 559-579, https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894219836285.

The Reconfiguration of Coercion in Turkey during Democratic Backsliding

Turkey was an electoral democracy when the AKP rose to power in 2002. Despite the influence of the secular Kemalist establishment (i.e., the judiciary and the military) over national politics and society, which impeded democratic consolidation, Turkey held free and fair elections with a mostly even political playing field and equal access to resources for political parties.[13] Furthermore, the initial years of the AKP created a hopeful environment for political rights and civil liberties in Turkey due to the reduction of the Turkish military's prerogatives in domestic politics through institutional reforms, as well as the implementation of political and legal reforms as part of the country's EU membership bid.[14] However, the dissolution of military tutelage and the EU-sponsored reforms did not result in democratic consolidation. Instead, Turkey experienced a gradual backsliding from electoral democracy to a "competitive" authoritarian regime.[15]

Democratic backsliding "denotes the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy."[16] Democratic backsliding typically involves the erosion of (1) institutional (legislative and judicial) checks and balances, (2) political and civil rights, and (3) competitive elections.[17] According to Bermeo, democratic backsliding may culminate in a full breakdown of democracy and "regimes that are unambiguously authoritarian," or may lead to the serious weakening of democratic institutions, yielding political regimes that are ambiguously democratic or hybrid.[18]

In the contemporary period, democratic backsliding occurs more commonly through executive aggrandizement by a freely elected government.[19] Executive aggrandizement "occurs when elected executives weaken checks on executive

[13] Esen and Gumuscu, "Why Did Turkish Democracy Collapse?" 1077.

[14] Leila Piran, *Institutional Change in Turkey: The Impact of European Union Reforms on Human Rights and Policing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Esen and Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism," 1584.

[15] Levitsky and Way coined the term "competitive authoritarianism." These regimes are competitive in that opposition forces use democratic institutions to seriously contest for power. However, they are not democratic because the electoral playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents, resulting in real but unfair competition. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, June 2012), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781353.

[16] Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (January 2016): 5-19, 5, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012.

[17] Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, September 2019), 172, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108671019.

[18] Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," 6.

[19] Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," 10.

power one by one, undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences." [20]

Turkey, in this respect, provides an illustrative example of democratic backsliding, particularly through executive aggrandizement. The AKP government implemented controversial legal reforms that increased executive control over the judiciary. The party also used its electoral power to tighten its grip on key state institutions, such as the Turkish Supreme Electoral Council and the state-run Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) station, and gained effective control over most mainstream media outlets.[21]

Therefore, and especially since 2011, although elections still occur, these processes have increased the politicization of state institutions and skewed access to media and finance. This has not only tilted the electoral playing field against the opposition but also undermined electoral fairness.[22] Over the last decade, Turkey has experienced a sharp decline in various indicators of democratic performance, with some scholars even suggesting that its democratic backsliding has reached the point of democratic breakdown.[23]

2007-2011: Pacification of the Military and the Initial Signs of Democratic Backsliding

During Turkey's backsliding into a competitive authoritarian regime, several reconfigurations also occurred with critical implications for the structure and functioning of coercive institutions. Indeed, since its rise to power in 2002, Erdogan's AKP has faced the challenge of dealing with threats to its rule from both the military and domestic opposition groups. As a result, several institutions have been targets of executive aggrandizement. Erdogan and his AKP's meddling with the judiciary and police began as early as the party's second term (2007–2011). In these initial years, incumbents used the courts and police—then heavily influenced by Gulenists[24]—to target Kurdish nationalists, leftist groups, and espe-

[20] Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," 10.

[21] Serdar San and Davut Akca, "How Turkey's Democratic Backsliding Compromises the International Dimension of Democratization," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 30, no. 1 (2021): 34-52, 39, https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12223.

[22] Esen and Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism," 1587.

[23] Ryo Nakai, "The Democratic Backsliding Paradigm in Enlarged European Union Countries: In-Depth Analysis of V-Dem Indicators," *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2023): 9, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2022.966472; Esen and Gumuscu, "Why Did Turkish Democracy Collapse?" 1077.

[24] The Gulen movement, pioneered by the late Turkish Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen, was previously an ally of Erdogan, providing support to the AKP in its confrontation with the secularist establishment. However, after 2010, the position of the movement began to diverge from that of the AKP on various policy matters. Police investigations into government corruption in late 2013 accelerated the split, leading Erdogan to launch a mass purge of Gulenists from the government bureaucracy.

cially ultra-secularists in the military, accused of conspiring to destabilize or overthrow the AKP government.[25] During this period—particularly after the weakening of the political leverage granted by the EU accession negotiations, which had previously helped shield the AKP from military tutelage—the ruling party increasingly relied on the intelligence and enforcement capabilities of the Turkish National Police (TNP) as a counterweight to address the threat of a potential coup attempt by the military.

The police monitored and cracked down on secularists within the army, culminating in the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer (Balyoz) prosecutions. The Ergenekon trials resulted in the end of the military's decisive political role in Turkey, but these proceedings also eroded judicial independence.[26] Executive aggrandizement in the judiciary continued when the AKP government passed a constitutional referendum in 2010 that restructured the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors.[27]

2011 Election Victory – 2013 Gezi Protests: Rising Popular Dissent

Democratic backsliding gained momentum in Turkey after the onset of the AKP's third term in office in 2011. The military threat to the political survival of the Erdogan government was sidelined through the political delegitimization and subsequent criminalization of the military's interventions in politics. The AKP grew stronger electorally after 2011, receiving almost 50 % of the popular vote in the general elections that year. At that time, Erdogan shifted to a more majoritarian and anti-pluralist stance. Several scholars argue that the AKP's strengthened electoral mandate and Erdogan's growing anti-pluralism allowed him to portray those who opposed his policies as enemies of the "national will." This sentiment, reflected in elections, resulted in an increased concentration of power in Erdogan's hands, the capture of crucial state institutions that lost their ability to restrain executive power and were increasingly used against the opposition, and the partisan exploitation of state resources.[28] These processes have led Turkey to meet the three defining criteria of competitive authoritarianism—free but unfair elections, violations of civil liberties, and an uneven electoral playing field—since 2011.[29]

Increasing societal objection and criticism of the AKP government's authoritarian leanings culminated in the outbreak of the anti-government Gezi Park protests in May 2013. The protests initially began as a reaction to police violence

[25] Esen and Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism," 1585; Esen and Gumuscu, "Why Did Turkish Democracy Collapse?" 1077.

[26] Esen and Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism," 1585.

[27] Hakkı Taş, "Turkey – from Tutelary to Delegative Democracy," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2015): 776-791, 781, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1024450.

[28] Castaldo, "Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism," 479;

[29] Castaldo, "Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism," 479; Esen and Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism," 1585.

against peaceful demonstrators protesting the government's urban transformation projects targeting Gezi Park in Istanbul. What started as an environmentalist concern, however, quickly escalated into a broader wave of anti-government demonstrations, through which protestors expressed a wide range of concerns related to the issues of freedom of the press and expression, individual rights and freedoms, and the overall authoritarian policies of the AKP government.

The Gezi protests shifted the attention and threat perception of Erdogan and his AKP from state institutions (i.e., the military) to the people, as the ruling party began to view domestic opposition groups as a significant threat to its "new Turkey" goals.[30] In response to the popular uprising, the AKP government deployed the police to suppress opposition from civil society and ordinary citizens – actions later supported by the 2015 Domestic Security Bill, which granted several controversial powers to the police.[31]

One critical institutional arrangement used to help quell the popular unrest following the Gezi protests has been the increasing militarization of the police. Indeed, the two decades following the 9/11 terrorist attacks have witnessed the rapid blurring of distinctions between police and military, law enforcement and war, and internal and external security worldwide. Kraska highlights particular trends of the growth and normalization of police paramilitary units (e.g., SWAT teams), modeled after elite military special operations groups, and the growing tendency of police to rely on military/war models when formulating policies for crime, drug, and terrorism control.[32]

The Turkish experience in this respect mirrors these global patterns. Ironically, however, while Erdogan was committed to the demilitarization of politics, he increasingly relied on the expanding reach of the militarized police force to respond to rising opposition against his authoritarianism.

Before and after the Gezi Park protests, crowd control units of the national police were equipped with large quantities of less-lethal weapons, including pellet guns, tear gas launchers, and water cannons.[33] In this regard, Turkey became the world's largest consumer of tear gas for three consecutive years, from 2012 to 2014.[34]

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[30] Suat Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey," *Small Wars Journal*, March 3, 2018, https://archive.smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/rise-paramilitary-groups-turkey; Taş, "Turkey – from Tutelary to Delegative Democracy," 783.

[31] Middle East Eye, "Turkey: Parliament Approves Domestic Security Package."

[32] Peter B. Kraska, "Militarization and Policing – Its Relevance to 21st Century Police," *Policing* 1, no. 4 (2007): 501-513, https://doi.org/10.1093/police/pam065.

[33] Kıvanç Atak, "Encouraging Coercive Control: Militarisation and Classical Crowd Theory in Turkish Protest Policing," *Policing and Society* 27, no. 7 (2017): 693-711, https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2015.1040796.

[34] Koray Çalışkan, "Toward a New Political Regime in Turkey: From Competitive toward full Authoritarianism," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 58 (May 2018): 5-33, 19, https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2018.10.

Indicators of the militarization of the Turkish police were not limited to the use of military-grade equipment. Police Special Operations Teams (Polis Özel Harekat Timleri) are the most visible example of how the military model has impacted the civilian police in Turkey. The AKP government dramatically increased the staffing of these paramilitary police units during the period of authoritarian consolidation following 2013. In 2015, for example, 5,000 new Special Operations Team members were recruited – a considerably higher number compared to past recruitment patterns.[35] More importantly, these units have been regularly deployed for proactive raids targeting dissenting citizens, including Gulenists, members of the Kurdish political movement, journalists, academics, and civil society activists.[36]

From 2013 Corruption Probes to 2016 Coup Attempt: A Mixed Threat Picture

Another key moment in the reorganization of coercion during Turkey's authoritarian consolidation was the 2013 corruption investigations, which were believed to have been organized by a group of Gulenist police officers and prosecutors aiming to remove Erdogan and his AKP from power. The AKP government and the TNP had worked in unison to dismantle military tutelage and marginalize oppositional groups after the 2013 Gezi protests. However, these investigations into government corruption, which Erdogan called a coup attempt by the Gulenists within the police and judiciary, brought Erdogan and his AKP to the brink of the biggest political crisis during their then eleven years in power. Erdogan responded to this crisis with further executive aggrandizement. In this respect, by undertaking a series of institutional changes regarding the higher judiciary, media and communications, as well as internal security and national intelligence, the AKP government successfully undermined institutional checks and balances, establishing significant control over these entities.[37]

As suggested by scholars on policing, as a powerful bureaucracy that controls coercion, which politicians can selectively distribute toward their own political ends, "by commission or omission, police forces can create politically uncomfortable situations for elected officials." [38] The AKP government responded to the intra-elite crisis created by the corruption probe first by purging or rotating suspected Gulenists inside the TNP. The police officers involved in the graft probe

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[35] Betul Ekşi, "Masculinities of the State: The Prime Minister and the Police in Turkey," PhD diss. (Boston, MA: Northeastern University, December 2015), http://hdl.handle.net/2047/D20199663.

[36] "Operation against Gülen Movement in Ankara with 'Heavy Automatic Weapons': 15 Detention Orders Issued," *Kronos*, September 29, 2020, https://kronos38.news/ankara da-gulen-cemaatine-agir-otomatik-silahlarla-operasyon-15-gozalti-karari/. – in Turkish

[37] Özlem Kaygusuz, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Regime Security in Turkey: Moving to an 'Exceptional State' under AKP," *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 281-302, 293, https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2018.1480332.

[38] González, *Authoritarian Police in Democracy*, 19.

were first dismissed from their positions, then arrested and charged with plotting to overthrow the government. Others suspected of opposing the AKP—especially those who served in critical units such as intelligence, counterterrorism, and organized crime squads—were rotated to less critical or low-profile positions. Within three months following the December 2013 corruption investigations, about 8,000 police officers had been removed.[39] These purged officers were replaced with individuals known for their hawkish, ultra-nationalist, and anti-democratic tendencies, including some officers who had previously been relegated to low-profile positions for disciplinary or other reasons. Thus, the AKP government attempted to "balance within," that is, to balance Gulenist factions within the police force with their own loyalists.

In response to the investigations, the government also passed legislation in February 2014 granting the justice minister the power to appoint the head of the Inspection Board of the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), effectively allowing the government to monopolize the authority to decide whether a judge or prosecutor has committed an offence.[40]

As part of the AKP's reconfiguration of internal security after the corruption probes, the government also aimed to expand the powers of the National Intelligence Organization (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı, MİT) over the police and the military.[41] Indeed, MİT is known as the institution to which Erdoğan has given the most importance within the state apparatus, particularly after the appointment of Undersecretary Hakan Fidan, who is now the Minister of Foreign Affairs and a close ally of Erdogan.

The Law Amending the Law on State Intelligence Services and the National Intelligence Agency, passed on April 17, 2014, granted the MİT director increased authority and legal protection.[42] The courts suffered a significant blow from this law, which "gave the National Intelligence Organization (headed by a presidential appointee) power to collect 'all information, documents or data from any entity in Turkey' without having to seek judicial permission or submit to judicial review." [43]

Opposition deputies reacted to these changes by alleging that Turkey was turning into an "intelligence state," akin to the Baath regime in Syria, where an administration would be created under the control of the national intelligence agency – and by extension, under Erdogan.[44]

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[39] Hikmet Çiçek, "The F-type Purge in the Police Continues at Full Speed," *Aydınlık*, March 7, 2014, https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/koseyazisi/poliste-f-tipi-tasfiye-butun-hiziyla-suruyor-6614. – in Turkish

[40] Kaygusuz, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Regime Security in Turkey," 293.

[41] Kaygusuz, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Regime Security in Turkey," 294.

[42] Taş, "Turkey – from Tutelary to Delegative Democracy," 784.

[43] Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," 11.

[44] Yıldız Yazıcıoğlu, "The 'Intelligence State' Debate in Türkiye," *VOA Türkçe*, February 24, 2014, www.voaturkce.com/a/türkiyede-istihbarat-devleti-tartışması/1858320.html. – in Turkish

Ongoing negotiations between the Turkish state and the Kurdish insurgency (the so-called Peace Process or *Çözüm Süreci*) broke down after the AKP lost its parliamentary majority in the June 2015 general elections. In these elections, the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party entered the Turkish parliament with a campaign challenging Erdogan's push for a presidential system. Following the breakdown of the negotiations, the long-standing Kurdish question once again became militarized, and heavy armed clashes between Turkish security forces and the PKK erupted in Kurdish-populated regions and urban centers in south-eastern Turkey.

In this political environment—and particularly following the AKP's return to power in the November 2015 repeat elections with 49.5 percent of the popular vote—the ruling party and then-Prime Minister Erdogan implemented a more subtle and sophisticated strategy to manage popular challenges against their regime consolidation. Erdogan and the AKP elite replaced their securitizing or "coup plot" discourse, which was created to frame domestic opposition groups as internal components of an internationally orchestrated coup attempt designed to remove the party from power, with the criminalization of political opposition under the pretext of "countering terrorism." [45]

This strategy was supported by daily police operations targeting academics, intellectuals, opposition politicians, and human rights activists.[46] According to Yılmaz, this approach was anchored in "strategic legalism," through which the AKP government aimed to silence opposition and repress challengers while creating an image of legitimacy for the government and sending a clear signal to other potential dissenters that they, too, would be prosecuted.[47]

After the July 2016 Coup Attempt

In this increasingly authoritarian political environment, Turkey faced a failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, believed to have been organized and executed by a group of military officers with Gulenist ties.[48] Two hundred and fifty people were killed and more than 2,000 wounded before the uprising was suppressed by loyalist security forces the following day.

The failed coup attempt of July 2016 shifted Erdogan and his AKP's threat perception from a combination of popular and elite threats to a predominantly elite one. As the democratic opposition and the Kurdish political movement—

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[45] Kaygusuz, "Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Regime Security in Turkey," 296.

[46] Zafer Yılmaz, "Turkey's Regime Transformation and Its Emerging Police State: The Judicialization of Politics, Everyday Emergency, and Marginalizing Citizenship," in *The Condition of Democracy: Vol. 2: Contesting Citizenship,* ed. Juergen Mackert, Hannah Wolf, and Bryan S. Turner (Routledge, 2021), 166-183.

[47] Yılmaz, "Turkey's Regime Transformation and Its Emerging Police State," 170.

[48] Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, "Turkey: How the Coup Failed," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (January 2017): 59-73, 61, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/turkey-how-the-coup-failed/.

previously perceived as significant threats to AKP political goals—were contained through anti-terror operations, political trials, and routine repression targeting the opposition, the bigger perceived threat for the Erdogan government remained challenges originating from within the security apparatus (i.e., police and military).

Not long after the coup, the ruling party took critical steps to redesign the internal security framework, enabling it to manage and deter potential elite challenges to its rule. The AKP government tightened its control over formal security institutions, first through the use of executive decrees (*Kanun Hükmünde Kararname*) issued after the declaration of an official state of emergency on July 20, 2016. These decrees enabled mass purges of cadres considered disloyal within the police and other security services.[49] Incidentally, Erdogan's efforts to gain control and loyalty within the police have had a dramatic effect on the organization: more than 30,000 law enforcement personnel have been dismissed since the failed coup.[50]

Following the mass purges, the AKP government initiated a rapid recruitment and restaffing process within the security apparatus, which appears to have been largely informed by political loyalties. As Eissenstat notes, "the AKP government has tried to 'coup-proof' these institutions by recruiting from its own base and that of current allies, notably the ultranationalist right, to fill the vacated positions." [51] This phenomenon, Gingeras argues, appears to reflect the growing political alliance between the AKP and the far-right Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), which Erdogan established following the AKP's poor electoral results in the November 2015 parliamentary elections.[52] In this regard, tens of thousands of new personnel were recruited into the TNP within a short timespan to replace those purged.

Following the July 15 coup attempt, in addition to restaffing the formal security services with political loyalists—or balancing within to address security concerns against possible threats from inside the formal coercive institutions—Erdogan also created new units within the police and promoted informal loyalist forces outside the military and police as counterweights to the formal security services.[53]

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[49] Howard Eissenstat, "Uneasy Rests the Crown: Erdoğan and 'Revolutionary Security' in Turkey," Snapshot, Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), December 2017, https://mideastdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Eissenstat_171220_FINAL.pdf.

[50] Muhammed Boztepe, "Interior Minister Soylu: 33,000 People Were Dismissed by Statutory Decrees between December 17–25 and After July 15," *Anadolu Ajansi*, September 26, 2019, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/icisleri-bakani-soylu-17-25-aralik-ve-15-temmuz-sonrasi-khk-ile-33-bin-kisi-ihrac-edildi/1591165. – in Turkish

[51] Eissenstat, "Uneasy Rests the Crown," 4.

[52] Ryan Gingeras, "Deep State of Crisis: Re-Assessing Risks to the Turkish State," Bipartisan Policy Center, March 2017, https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPC-National-Security-Turkish-State.pdf.

[53] Eissenstat, "Uneasy Rests the Crown;" Serdar San, "Erdogan's Private Police Force: A New Blow to Turkish Democracy," *OpenDemocracy,* July 22, 2020, https://www.open

As part of a "broadening the field" or balancing outside strategy, in 2017, the AKP government recruited thousands of neighborhood watchmen (Bekçi) and provided them with broad new powers, including the authority to stop and search citizens, carry firearms, and use force when deemed necessary.[54] Before this reintroduction by the AKP government, neighborhood watchmen were uniformed auxiliaries assisting the police with duties, such as patrolling neighborhoods at night to prevent disturbances and petty crimes. With the introduction of the new legislation in 2017, the neighborhood watchmen were given powers equivalent to those of the police. This raised concerns that, while serving as a loyalist armed force intended to counterbalance disloyal security forces, the empowered neighborhood guards might also help monitor and suppress political opponents under the pretext of maintaining public safety and preventing crime.

In "broadening the field," the AKP government also condoned a network of informal security structures outside the official security apparatus that includes military contractors, criminal gangs, and party youth wings.[55] (see Table 1)

The first layer of this pro-government paramilitary structure is composed of private security contractors.[56] The most well-known is SADAT (International Defense Consulting Construction Industry and Trade Inc.), a private military consultancy firm founded by the late Adnan Tanriverdi, who was once a principal advisor to Erdogan. The suspected domestic repression activities of SADAT brought it to public attention. There were allegations that SADAT was behind the Esedullah (Lion of God in Arabic) paramilitary groups, which were reportedly deployed alongside official army and police forces during the urban clashes in 2015, which started after the failure of peace talks between the Turkish state and the PKK insurgency.[57] SADAT is also believed to have played an active role in quelling the 2016 coup attempt.[58] Multiple Turkish-language and foreign media outlets reported eyewitness accounts that members of pro-AKP armed groups, including SADAT, were involved in the killing of civilians and lynching of coup plotters on the night of the failed coup attempt.[59]

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democracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/erdogans-private-police-force-a-new-blow-to-turkish-democracy/; Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey."

54 San, "Erdogan's Private Police Force."

55 Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey;" Eissenstat, "Uneasy Rests the Crown;" Sevinç Öztürk and Thomas Reilly, "Assessing Centralization: On Turkey's Rising Personalist Regime," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 24, no. 1 (2024): 167-185, https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2022.2137899.

56 Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey."

57 Ayhan Işık, "Pro-state Paramilitary Violence in Turkey since the 1990s," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 21, no. 2 (2021): 231-249, 244, https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2021.1909285.

58 Öztürk and Reilly, "Assessing Centralization," 179.

59 Leela Jacinto, "Turkey's Post-Coup Purge and Erdogan's Private Army," *Foreign Policy,* July 13, 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/13/turkeys-post-coup-purge-and-erdogans-private-army-sadat-perincek-gulen/; Michael Rubin, "Has Sadat Become Erdogan's Revolutionary Guards?" American Enterprise Institute, May 30, 2017

Table 1. Threat Perceptions of Erdogan and the AKP and Their Responses

Period	2007-2011	2011-2013 Corruption Probes	2013 Corruption Probes – 2016 Coup Attempt	2016 Coup Attempt-
Nature of the threat	Elite Military	Popular Opposition groups	Elite and popular Police (Gulenists) and opposition groups	Elite Disloyal cadres within the police and military
Response	Strengthening of the police	Militarization of the police	Targeted rotations/purges within the police Expansion of the powers of the National Intelligence Organization (MİT) Legislation: new Domestic Security Bill	Mass purges within the police and the military Fragmentation of the security sector (new units within the police and pro-government informal security structures

The second layer is comprised of gang and mafia groups.[60] For example, some members of the AKP government were reported to have developed strong ties with the Osmanen Germania biker gang, "which was accused of spying on and threatening Turkish exiles in Germany."[61] Further, the far-right Turkish mafia boss Sedat Peker, a staunch supporter of Erdogan, publicly threatened to target political opponents and declared his support on several occasions. According to Cubukcu, such criminal groups serve as a deterrent against political opponents and other perceived enemies both within Turkey and among the Turkish diaspora.[62]

https://www.aei.org/foreign-and-defense-policy/middle-east/has-sadat-become-erdogans-revolutionary-guards/.

60 Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey."

61 Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer, "Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression," Freedom House, February 2021, 39, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Complete_FH_TransnationalRepressionReport2021_rev020221.pdf; Chase Winter, "Turkish AKP MP Linked to Osmanen Germania Gang in Germany," *Deutsche Welle*, December 14, 2017, https://www.dw.com/en/turkish-akp-politician-linked-to-osmanen-germania-boxing-gang-in-germany/a-41789389.

62 Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey."

The third layer of this structure of informal coercion is the unofficial party youth wings and vigilante groups, such as the Ottoman Hearths (*Osmanli Ocaklari*).[63] The Ottoman Hearths was founded in 2009 to recruit AKP supporters from among Turkish youth. Members of the Ottoman Hearths have openly declared their devotion to the president and their willingness to "defend Erdogan and his regime against any kind of vigilante or insurgency." [64] Furthermore, members of the group have reportedly been involved in violently targeting opposition party offices and journalists, appearing at AKP rallies to show their support for the party, and helping suppress dissidents during anti-government protests.[65] For example, members of Ottoman Hearths rallied for Erdogan and monitored protests that erupted during the 2014 presidential election and the 2017 constitutional referendum.[66]

Conclusion

This study analyzes the reorganization of coercive institutions in Turkey during its backsliding toward competitive authoritarianism. Based on research on the Erdoğan government's reevaluation of the sources of threats to its survival and its corresponding actions, it is evident that a shift in the threat perceptions of authoritarian rulers can lead to contrasting changes in how coercion is organized and deployed for regime survival.

This finding reveals that conceptualizing authoritarian regimes as uniformly dependent on coercion ignores a critical element of variation in their governance: the different ways in which they design their coercive apparatus and employ violence and repression to maintain power. While the existing literature acknowledges that coercive institutions in authoritarian regimes engage in political repression to preserve the leader's power, relatively little research examines the specific manifestations of the coercive apparatus across such regimes. This lack of investigation hinders our understanding of why variations in the structure of coercive institutions exist or why different countries might adopt different institutional designs.

These findings also mirror previous work that found authoritarian rulers organize coercion either to quell challenges from domestic opposition groups or to protect against possible threats from within the security and intelligence apparatus. What is unique in the Turkish case, however, is that although the literature

[63] Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey."

[64] Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey."

[65] Emre Kizilkaya, "'Ottoman Hearths' Accused in Attacks Targeting Parties, Media," *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 11, 2015, https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/emre-kizilkaya/ottoman-hearths-accused-in-attacks-targeting-parties-media-88379; Suraj Sharma, "Turkey's Ottoman Hearths: Menacing or Benign?" *Middle East Eye*, September 6, 2017, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkeys-ottoman-hearths-menacing-or-benign.

[66] Cubukcu, "The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey."

argues that authoritarian leaders should choose between defending against population or elite threats—or that they face a "coercive dilemma," which makes them likely to design their coercive apparatus based on the dominant perceived threat at the time they come to power—during the period between the December 2013 corruption probe and the July 2016 coup attempt, Erdogan does not appear to have prioritized one threat over the other. As discussed above, this is seen in the measures he took, designing the security apparatus to address both kinds of threats. This finding suggests that authoritarian rulers do not necessarily need to choose between either threat when designing their coercive apparatus and can organize these institutions in a way that responds effectively to both threats simultaneously.

This study also contributes to existing research on "counterbalancing." Findings suggest that the AKP government promoted the police as a counterweight to the Kemalist military during its early years, while the Erdogan regime's reassessment of the sources of threats to its survival—and its response to that changed assessment following the 2013 graft probes and the 2016 coup attempt—reveal both types of counterbalancing tactics (i.e., divide-and-rule and broadening the field) in action.

Disclaimer

About the Author

Serdar San is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at East Texas A&M University. *E-mail*: serdar.san@tamuc.edu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2460-5373

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