



Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey: Social Distance, Perceived Moral Superiority, and Political Intolerance

By Emre Erdoğan

The past few years have crystallized existing fault lines in Turkey, increasing the fragility of the Turkish society and political system against the internal and external shocks.

The July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey was aborted, but civil and political liberties became victims in the aftermath. Measures taken against the putschists under the state of emergency affected the whole of society, pushing Turkey to the category of “not free” countries according to Freedom House’s annual report.¹ On the other hand, the referendum on transforming Turkey from a parliamentary system of government to a presidential one passed by a very small margin and the question remains as to where this experience will take Turkey. The chaos in Syria continues to affect the country through millions of refugees and incursions of the Turkish military into Syria.

The recently published “Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey” survey presented a similar picture of Turkish society as it did in 2015,² that political

polarization is very high, indicating that the problem in Turkey is structural and not conjectural. The survey, conducted by Istanbul Bilgi University Center for Migration Research with contributions from GMF’s Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, was completed with field studies in November–December 2017. Respondents in the survey were asked to identify a party whose supporters they feel close to (*own party*) and a party whose supporters they feel most distant from (*other party*). Then, these two points of reference were used to measure dimensions of polarization such as social distance, perceived moral superiority, and political intolerance.

Indications of high social distance were present in the survey, as 78 percent of the respondents did not approve of their daughter marrying a supporter of the “other party,” and only 29 percent said they would like to be neighbors with such a person. There were also signs of perceived moral superiority such as 91 percent of the respondents thinking supporters of “their political party” are “honorable” while 80 percent claiming that “other party’s” supporters are “arrogant.” A disturbing level of political intolerance emerged from the survey: About half of the respondents supported wiretapping the phones of supporters of the “other party,” and 37 percent said they are against participation of the members of this group in elections. Unsurprisingly the three dimensions

¹ Freedom House, “Turkey Profile,” 2018.

² The first survey on the “Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey,” conducted just after the repetitive elections of July and November 2015, had shown that political polarization in Turkey was very high, manifested in social distance between the supporters of different political parties, moral prejudices against each other and partisan polarization on many issues from the foreign policy to the roles attributed to the government and the opposition. In an earlier piece on this series, I had argued that in a divided society, it would not be easy to create a political culture based on tolerance and empathy. And the trend is indeed in the opposite direction.



of polarization — social distance, perceived moral superiority, and political intolerance — were found to be correlated.³

Reasons for this political polarization are manifold. Turkish political culture, which is based on continuous tension between the center and the periphery, the secular and the religious, Kurdish and Turkish may be accounted as the main cause. These societal cleavages have existed throughout the history of the Turkish Republic. Political institutions have also intensified the political polarization by the lack of intraparty democracy. The referenda and the referendum-like elections with zero sum outcomes as well are a cause of continued polarization. Meanwhile, lack of intraparty democracy and autocratic rule of party leaders have prevented diversity within parties. Lastly, populist politicians from the left and the right have seen polarization as an opportunity to be exploited rather than a problem to be mitigated and systematically triggered the fear of and hate toward the other.

The survey also showed that Turkish citizens do not share a common reality. They live in “echo-chambers” where they only listen to affirmative views and filter out other voices which may affect their beliefs. The survey showed that each partisan group is getting their news from totally different media outlets and shutting themselves off from the others. Contrary to widespread impression, social media does not fill this gap either. People have friends with similar political views in Facebook and they prefer to follow people with similar political ideas in Twitter. Moreover, the majority of Twitter and Facebook users do not prefer to share their political opinion on these outlets.

The public sphere where views can be exchanged seems to have disappeared. According to the findings of the survey, people do not engage in political discussions except among family or friends. Only two thirds of participants said they could engage in a discussion about the state of emergency — considered a highly sensitive issue — in a family dinner or with friends. The percentage of those willing to discuss

this issue in the work or school environment was 36 percent. More than 80 percent of respondents said that their significant others, families, and friends share the same opinions with them about the state of emergency. The unwillingness to discuss with foreigners and being exposed to different opinions, creates a twisted perception of the reality.

Contrary to this general picture, the survey showed that the Turkish society has very well-founded commonality, particularly when it comes to foreign policy issues. Most strikingly majorities across the political spectrum agreed that that the West (the EU and the United States) is against Turkey and wants to divide Turkey. Similarly, there is a consensus that Azerbaijan and Russia are its closest allies, and that the United States and Israel are its biggest threats. Additionally, large majorities across the political spectrum agreed that Syrian refugees should go back to their own country after the civil war. These consensual points are outcomes from both history and current developments; however they are posing a threat to the role of Turkey as a peaceful transatlantic partner.

There are various consequences of this polarized political environment in Turkey. First, such a political topography provides a fertile environment for pragmatic politicians targeting quick victories in the forthcoming series of elections in 2019. The upcoming presidential election, to be held with the parliamentary elections simultaneously, will provide a lot of gains for the winner and it requires a coalition of voters at least at the second round. New alignments in the polarized political environment facilitate such coalition building efforts, and political divides between camps may be exploited and enhanced by the polarizing rhetoric of politicians. This situation makes the rise of new political actors very difficult, since all poles of the cleavages are already occupied and voter transition between camps is difficult. Hence, the winners and the losers of these elections will be from the same pool of politicians.

The “echo-chambers” phenomenon and the lack of unbiased media outlets which would serve as intermediaries between political tribes will facilitate the rise of impermeable walls by amplifying the

³ Istanbul Bilgi University, Center for Migration Research, “Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey 2017,” <https://goc.bilgi.edu.tr/en/our-researches/25/dimensions-of-polarization-in-turkey-2017/>.

polarizing rhetoric of politicians. Without having the possibility to take the perspective of “other,” voters will form their preferences through the lenses of their camps. As a result of this failure, discussions between different political constituencies will take the form of mutual declaration of moral superiorities of camps and will not create any consensus or compromise.

Moreover, the current political situation, the unfinished civil war in Syria, the military activity of the Turkish army in the region and the enduring conflict in the southeastern part of Turkey will multiply the polarization in Turkey. Foreign policy developments will continue to be echoed in domestic politics and enforce the divisions among voters.

The million dollar question is how polarization can be mitigated in the Turkish context, and there is no easy answer. As long as the sense of insecurity and emergency rule continue in Turkey, there is no way to solve the polarization problem. However, once Turkey goes back to normalcy, civil society and media can play a very important role in bridging between different societal islands.

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About the Author

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