



# The Five Challenges to Erdoğan's Executive Presidential Rule after the Coronavirus

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A dominant global narrative has suggested that the coronavirus pandemic is strengthening the role of the state, undermining globalization, and allowing strongman leaders to further entrench their rule. The pandemic has engendered the return of state power, yet what remains unanswered is a fundamental question: What kind of state is needed to address unprecedented global challenges? A comparative glance at how different countries have handled the pandemic indicates that “inclusive governance,” based on a robust system of checks and balances, has been a key factor distinguishing cases of success. Effective governmental responses have generally drawn not only on strong state capacity but also on political processes that work with local governments and civil society, rather than excluding perceived opponents, centralizing power, and polarizing the wider society.

Turkey is not immune from these dynamics. Although the country maintained a low death rate early during the pandemic—largely thanks to its young demographic profile and strong investment in healthcare—the crisis has intensified a preexisting shift away from inclusive governance. The central government has continued to unilaterally exercise its extensive powers under Turkey's executive presidential system and in April launched criminal probes against the opposition mayors of Ankara and Istanbul for organizing municipal fundraisers. It has detained journalists reporting on the coronavirus outbreak, excluded critics from amnesty legislation, and passed a new law tightening regulations on social media. It has redoubled its efforts to control civil society, shuttering Istanbul Şehir University and launching a divisive overhaul of Turkey's bar associations. And in August it faced accusations from opposition leaders that it was underreporting coronavirus cases and deaths to cover up a resurgent outbreak.

Turkey now faces a growing disconnect between the complex governance challenges created by the pandemic and a highly centralized political structure. The executive presidential system is confronted by five interlocking challenges, which are not only political, but also socioeconomic and systemic. As a result, Turkey is experiencing powerful trends toward increasing pluralization in its party politics, greater complexity in its governance challenges, and a worsening mismatch between its political institutions and society's demands. In light of these trends, the tendency of reducing Turkish politics to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's words and actions is not tenable.

## Rising Political Alternatives

Even before the pandemic, the centralization of power in Turkey was facing challenges from two distinct angles. These challenges have only grown more prominent in recent months.

To begin, political openings at the local level have revitalized the opposition's Nation Alliance. In the 2019 local elections, it won mayoral races in five of Turkey's six largest provinces, including in municipalities that had been under Islamist control for 25 years. Prior to the pandemic, opposition municipal leaders were already drawing public attention through their efforts to improve local services. For instance, after government-controlled banks refused to fund infrastructure projects in Istanbul, Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu secured €110 million in financing from Deutsche Bank and €97.5 million from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. İmamoğlu and other mayors have leapfrogged the national government to leverage regional and global connections.

The pandemic has only elevated the stature of opposition local officials, putting them on the front lines of the crisis response. They have shown they can govern effectively and even outshine the central government. Early on, the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul launched donation campaigns to support struggling families—only for the central government to shut down these fundraisers and freeze their donations. Nonetheless, local leaders have circumvented the government's restrictions: An initiative run by Ankara's mayor, Mansur Yavaş, raised donations worth TL 28 million (roughly \$4 million) to help pay for residents' utilities and basic necessities. Such local efforts have significant potential to win over voters in a country where 76 percent of the population is urban and citizens frequently depend on municipal services.

At the same time, President Erdoğan faces a second challenge from within the conservative camp, led by former officials from his own Justice and Development Party (AKP). In December 2019, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who previously served as foreign minister and prime minister in successive AKP governments, launched the Future Party, which includes several former AKP parliamentarians. Another new contender is the Remedy Party founded in March by Ali Babacan, who held top posts in AKP governments from 2002 to 2015. Babacan has cast his party as a more centrist, democratic alternative to the AKP, criticizing the government's politicization of religion and populist economic policies.

Although some observers faulted Babacan and Davutoğlu for maintaining low profiles during the onset of the pandemic, their parties have gradually gained greater traction on social media. In the process, they have challenged the image President Erdoğan projected of an indivisible Turkish right. As of July, 3.3 percent of Turks said they would vote for the Future Party or Remedy Party in parliamentary elections. But given that the pro-government People's Alliance won a narrow victory in the 2018 parliamentary elections with 54 percent of the vote, even limited defections could deprive the government of its legislative majority.

The rise of these political alternatives has accelerated a trend toward the pluralization of party politics and reshaped the parameters of electoral competition. Turkey's politics can no longer be reduced to a single actor or the two alliances that competed in 2018. Since 2019, party politics have become increasingly plural, and this pluralism is in tension with the centralization of power under the executive presidential system.

## Mounting Socioeconomic Troubles

The pandemic has also aggravated preexisting socioeconomic problems, prompting concerns about the government's capacity to address them. The third major challenge facing Erdoğan's executive presidential rule is the strain that the Syrian refugee population has placed on the economy and society. Turkey currently houses 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees, and the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria's Idlib province has pushed almost 1 million more toward the border.

A recent survey of more than 1,600 Istanbul residents, organized by the think tank Istanbul in January, demonstrates the depth of public resentment toward these refugees. Forty-nine percent of respondents expressed medium or high levels of agreement with the idea that Syrians are a "less capable race," and 78 percent said that the government treats Syrians better than Turkish citizens. While other challenges have attracted greater attention during the pandemic, delivering inclusive governance in this domain remains a critical issue.

A fourth challenge—unemployment, especially among Turkish youth—was similarly serious before the pandemic. According to official statistics, the unemployment rate was 13.2 percent at the beginning of the pandemic in March—and would have been higher if the labor-force participation rate had not fallen by 4.5 percentage points over the previous year. Furthermore, youth unemployment was 24.6 percent in March, having risen by 6.9 percentage points since March 2018. Years-old government regulations, particularly regarding severance pay, have directly contributed to youth unemployment.

More seriously still, the labor market has contracted significantly during the pandemic. Between February and April, the number of those who received a short-term working allowance, a form of unemployment benefit, from the Turkish Employment Agency jumped from under 18,000 to over 2.59 million. Meanwhile, the number of new job listings on Kariyer.net, a widely used employment website, fell from almost 21,000 in February to less than 4,500 in April.

The final challenge confronting the executive presidential system is a triangular governance problem, in which economic, food, and health insecurity compound one another. Because Turkey relies on imports for many agricultural products and inputs, its food supply has been especially vulnerable to pandemic-induced disruptions in global supply chains. With food prices rising, food insecurity is now threatening many low-income families. Meanwhile, the core governance task of providing healthcare has become more complex and urgent. These intersecting challenges may further increase the importance of local officials, who are often best positioned to address such concrete problems.

### **Systemic Deficiencies**

Precisely as Turkey's government faces these intertwined socioeconomic challenges, it confronts a problem of its own making: the fact that the executive presidential system has weakened its capacity to deliver good governance. Although state capacity is robust, especially in healthcare, a lack of inclusiveness has undercut the official pandemic response.

Most fundamentally, the centralization of power has tied the hands of municipal and national officials—a problem that even local leaders from the AKP privately complained about before the pandemic. Government ministries and local municipalities have been unable to make policy changes or launch new programs because the president's office must first approve them. And while previously constituents and interest groups could

raise grievances through institutionalized channels within the parliament, the presidential system has cut these lines of communication. Overall, measures for government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and the rule of law have declined markedly since Erdoğan took office as president in 2014.

Some areas of foreign policy have recently been bright spots for the Turkish government, which has gained leverage in the Libyan and Syrian conflicts. However, Turkey's increasing heft abroad owes less to its effective management of foreign policy and more to the waning influence of Western powers. In fact, the personalization of Turkish foreign policy has undermined diplomacy, as state institutions have often been "completely excluded" from policymaking.

This crisis of governance has driven the opposition parties—however ideologically diverse—to unite around calls for a "strengthened parliamentary democracy" with fortified checks and balances. More conservative forces, including the Islamist Felicity Party, the nationalist İYİ Party, Davutoğlu's Future Party, and Babacan's Remedy Party, have found common ground on this issue with their more social democratic counterparts. The center-left Republican People's Party and pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party have similarly demanded constitutional reform. The problem of governance has become as acute as that of democratic backsliding, and it has proven a crucial rallying cry for Erdoğan's opponents.

### **The Turbulence Ahead**

The focus in Western capitals on President Erdoğan has frequently led observers to reduce Turkish politics to a single actor. Furthermore, when assessing Turkey's political landscape, analysts have often relied on an outdated binary between a strong, cohesive ruling alliance and a weak, divided opposition. The reality is far more complex: Turkey is a resilient society with a large middle class, an increasingly united opposition, and energetic local governments.

A fuller understanding of the challenges facing Erdoğan's executive presidential rule offers a modest corrective to the pessimism about Turkey that prevails among U.S. and European policymakers. These challenges will likely produce political turbulence and further democratic erosion, but they may ultimately engender positive change. While Turkey's trajectory remains uncertain, in the long run its resilient society is an important barrier against the consolidation of authoritarian rule. Taking a more far-sighted view, Western policymakers should remain committed to engaging with Turkey, especially outside the realm of security issues. They should not abandon all hope of a more democratic Turkey.

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