



# The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Polarization in Turkey

*Emre Erdoğan*

With the coronavirus, the world is threatened by one of the most dangerous pandemics in human history. Several countries have introduced strict measures such as travel bans, closing schools, canceling social events, quarantining specific zones, and even economic lockdowns. As the pandemic continues to spread, these measures are likely to be adopted by an increasing number of countries. Despite the efforts of governments, the global economy has already started to experience a recession and an increase in unemployment as a result of the steps taken to ensure social distancing.

The relative successes of democratic states or authoritarian states in dealing with the pandemic could have a long-term impact on the future of democracy. Democratic countries such as the Italy, Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom have not made a good start while China is busy making propaganda about having contained the pandemic and even helping others.

Facing the crisis with a deeply polarized society and having recently adopted a system in which power is concentrated in the hands of the president, Turkey presents an interesting test case in this debate. With 15,679 official cases of coronavirus infections and 277 related death as of April 2, it is implementing radical measures. Schools, universities, shops, cafes, restaurants, and other public places, including even mosques, are closed. Citizens are advised to stay home, and a curfew for the elderly is imposed. A total lockdown, as in some European countries, is yet not imposed, but the option remains on the table.

## **Presidential Power and the Pandemic**

Turkey transitioned to a presidential system last year, following a referendum in 2017. This was framed as meeting the need for a strong executive that could perform efficiently without hindrance from the legislative and judiciary branches. Under the new system, the president can appoint and dismiss all ministers with a decree without being subject to the parliament's approval, can issue decrees overnight in areas that are not already covered by the law, and can appoint or dismiss members of the high judiciary. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan therefore enjoys all the powers needed for quick and efficient decision-making in managing the pandemic in Turkey. Consequently, the effectiveness of the government in dealing with the crisis will be used by citizens to evaluate not only his performance, but also the merits and shortcomings of the strong presidential system.

The presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 2023 will be an opportunity for citizens to pass verdict this new system, most probably based on memories of the coronavirus days. Erdoğan has always been successful in developing a narrative to consolidate his constituency, but this time narratives will be beaten by facts about the loss of loved ones, increased unemployment, and bankrupted businesses. Second, the tension between science and religion in the country may take a new form, and perhaps the pandemic will open routes for reinterpreting religious rhetoric, which has dominated the political and social scene under the rule of the Justice and Development (AK) Party. As the government's interventions in the public sphere is highly dominated by religious imperatives, a change in the interpretation of religion may lift the pressure on the diverse lifestyles in Turkish society.

### **A Polarized Society**

The pandemic catches Turkey when its zeitgeist is one of a considerable level of political polarization. The constituencies of the different parties are becoming affectively more distant from each other, and peaceful coexistence seems to be very difficult with people's intolerance toward others' political rights. The recent referenda and referendum-like elections seem to have raised higher the existing walls between political camps, transforming every attempt at public deliberation into a contest of political identities with the outcome being roughly a 50-50 divide. While initial observations suggested that the pandemic may help mitigate this polarization, there are emerging signs suggesting that the phenomenon is resilient and might even be aggravated.

The way President Erdoğan decided to manage the crisis was one of the factors that initially lead to unity in dealing the pandemic. Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca acts as the spokesperson of the government and has the responsibility of public communication. While he has political legitimacy because he is appointed by the president, he also has the legitimacy of expertise as he is a medical doctor with links to the medical sector. It seems that with this choice the government chose to minimize partisan criticism as the minister so far seems to enjoy cross-party support with an approval rate of near 65 percent according to one survey. However, this situation could change very quickly, depending on the course of the pandemic. So far, opposition parties are treating it as a national emergency and refraining from using it against the government or President Erdoğan. They are supportive of the measures taken by the government and are demanding more in a non-accusing manner.

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The common threat the coronavirus poses should unify citizens and motivate them to cooperate. There are some signs that this is happening. The strongest fault line in Turkey today appears to be between those who practice social distancing and those who do not. People who emphasize social distancing set aside their cultural and political biases for the sake of containing the pandemic. For example, well known political Islamists urged the government to temporarily shut down mosques and members of the main opposition Republican People's Party criticized the president of the party's Istanbul branch for organizing a large gathering. But, while fear can unite society, there are also signs that it might be dividing Turks.

### **Science, Religion, and Politics**

The age-old and universal debate between science and religion has escalated since the onset of the pandemic. Some people in Turkey, as elsewhere, cling on to their faith to cope with the trauma. Some of them have

made statements undermining the opinions of experts and arguing that taking precautions is unnecessary and useless as God will decide. Some of them claim that praying is more effective than medical precautions. Meanwhile, another part of society has argued that the pandemic “once again” proves that religion is useless and that it should step aside for science to deal with the coronavirus crisis. Some have publicly disparaged religion as an institution and mocked people who cling on to their faith. The Directorate for Religious Affairs has been at the epicenter of this debate with decisions it has been late in taking such as closing mosques or decisions it has taken such as broadcasting “sela”—a prayer for announcing an upcoming funeral or rallying the people in case of an emergency—from the minarets every evening. This debate will probably play a role in fueling polarization in Turkey as it reflects a deep societal divide and is another sign of the country’s culture wars.

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Perhaps the most extreme example of polarization has been witnessed around the issue of collecting donations from citizens. While the government was trying to cope with the overall impact of the pandemic, metropolitan municipalities mainly held by the opposition took initiatives to ease the lives of their residents. One of their initiatives was launching donation campaigns aiming to support the most economically vulnerable segments of society. President Erdoğan responded first by launching his own donation campaign, without any direction on how the money would be spent, and then suspending the campaigns of the municipalities through the Ministry of Interior. While this is an evolving situation, it has already sowed new seeds of polarization.

### Looking Ahead

The pandemic initially led to a sense of unity against a shared threat in Turkey. Three factors played a role in this positive outcome. First, the government decided to manage the crisis in a non-polarizing manner through a spokesperson who is perceived as more of a technocrat than a politician, and it took decisions that could antagonize its voter base such as closing mosques and placing people coming back from pilgrimage to Mecca under quarantine. Second, the opposition treated this as a national emergency, supported measures introduced by the government, and demanded more in a non-accusing manner. The municipalities held by the opposition cooperated with the government in executing the restrictive measures taken by the latter. Last but not least, most citizens put aside their ideological, political, and cultural differences to overcome what they saw as a common threat, as would happen in rare circumstances such as a foreign attack.

This could have led to the mitigation of polarization and the strengthening of the foundations of pluralism in Turkey, but other factors came into play that have overshadowed these hopes. First the government, possibly seeing that the opposition was gaining public-opinion points, changed its approach from cooperation to confrontation. By suspending the donation campaigns of opposition-held municipalities it has dismissed the possibility of the opposition playing a positive role that is independent of the government in coping with the crisis. Second, polarization has proved resilient and the fault lines around religion became more pronounced and the policies of the Directorate for Religious Affairs above aggravated the situation. While the opposition parties have yet not visibly changed their stance, their supporters are becoming increasingly more critical

of the government, which will increase political tension. Increasing polarization and the fear caused by the pandemic could create a perfect storm that could lead to authoritarian tendencies in society.

We do not know exactly how but the pandemic will have a deep impact on Turkish society and politics. What we do know is that the grief and experience of the days of quarantine may be the defining moment of a generation. Today's young people may even be named after the pandemic in the future.

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