

# Presidential or Parliamentary Government

## The Democratic Future of Turkey

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Democratically aligned states often fall into two subcategories of political representation; however, scholarly analysis of presidential executive governments suggests “presidentialism is inferior to parliamentarianism” in maintaining the fundamentally liberal values that support the continuation of free government.<sup>1</sup> Examining the role of presidential systems broadly and in the context of Turkey is significant. Doing so will offer insights into the strength of democratic institutions in a post-parliamentarian system. Turkey is a crucial military ally of the West and traditionally represents a generally stable democratic partner, projecting secular, liberal values in the near East. A Turkish transition from a Western-backed liberal democracy could signal a geopolitical shift threatening Western access to resources, shipping, and military interests throughout the region. Turkey straddles a fine geographic and ideological line between East and West. Considering how domestic political transformations in Turkey may lead to geopolitical re-arrangement around central Asia and the Middle East is essential. Turkey’s 2017 referendum granted significant authority to President Erdogan, marking a historic transition away from secularist parliamentarian rule. Erdogan’s newly fortified position provides a “unique democratic legitimacy” reserved for those leaders embodying both a “national identity” and legislative authority.<sup>2</sup> This essay will assert that Turkey’s transition toward a pure-presidential system will degrade liberal democratic institutions and increase the likelihood of the emergence of an authoritarian government. First, this essay will examine pure-presidentialist and pure-parliamentarian democracies theoretically, offering consolidated parameters and the potential externalities of each. Both systems of democratic representation have, in a purely hypothetical scenario,

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1 Juan J. Linz, and Arturo Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 103.

2 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 103.

costs and benefits. After describing the merits and demerits of each design, this essay will describe the political transitions occurring in contemporary Turkish politics through a presidentialist or parliamentary paradigm to resolve debates surrounding the sanctity of the country's democracy. Understanding Turkey's democratic evolution from parliamentarianism to presidentialism will communicate potential remedies for maintaining liberal democracy in Turkish politics as it enters a new phase of domestic leadership under the Erdogan regime.

It is crucial to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the sources that support this analysis. Much of this essay's research builds upon Juan Linz's book *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*. The source contributes to scholarly discussions regarding the most beneficial and long-lasting democratic institutions. However, the overt position of Linz's research suggests that presidentialist systems are more likely to result in adverse outcomes for democratic states. Despite Linz's analysis and practical failures amongst presidential systems, it would be a misrepresentation of a complex political issue to deny pro-presidential arguments a place in this essay.

Additionally, articles from Henry J. Bakery published by *Council on Foreign Relations* and Ekim and Kirişci's work for the *Brookings Institute* provide essential context into the story and political agenda of president Erdogan and his domestic allies. Sources dedicated to explaining the presidentialist aspirations of Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party are often critical of the Turkish regime. That alone does not delegitimize the work of Ekim, Kirişci, Bakery, and others, but it is essential to note the clear anti-Erdogan, anti-presidential undertones of their analysis. However, this essay operates under the assumption that the democratic track record of presidentialist systems is substantially less stable than the parliamentary government, and legitimate democracies require liberal, pluralist institutions to represent the constituency's interests accurately. A systematic critique of presidentialism and a thorough investigation of Turkish democracy will reveal the emergence of anti-democratic practices inherent in the political structure.

It is essential to establish working definitions for parliamentarianism and presidentialism. These operational definitions are not in-depth descriptions of specific types of either design, but general descriptions derived from their most consistent elements. In a theoretical context, limiting either to a particular subcategory of the overarching structure is unnecessarily constraining. In its broadest terms, parliamentarianism describes a system in which the government is responsible to the parliament, meaning that the parliament can dissolve the leading coalition through a vote of nonconfidence.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, the head of government is the head of the legislature and remains subject to the will of elected peers. Unlike a presidential system, the government's leader is a Prime Minister and "is not

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3 Alan Siaroff, "Varieties of Parliamentarianism in the Advanced Industrial Democracies," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 24, no. 4, (2003): 445-446.

directly elected by voters, but instead is selected by the legislature.<sup>4</sup> The democratic legitimacy of a parliamentary leader is derived from the broader constituency but through the indirect appointment of locally elected parliamentarians. The general voting population may question the Prime Ministers' legitimacy because they are not subject to a popular election but reign as the head of a legislative coalition. A Prime Minister's democratic authority does not emerge fifty-plus-one majority; therefore, they must represent a pluralist set of issues presented by government members— leading to more significant equity of representation in the legislature. Generally, the obligation to establish collective or collegial backing in the legislature limits the disenfranchisement of competing parties occurring in presidential regimes that win by a slim majority.<sup>5</sup> A Prime Minister's required legislative majority and the threat of non-confidence votes without a set term in office means that parliamentary systems “offer both better accountability and greater flexibility to a presidential one.”<sup>6</sup> Although parliamentarian leaders do not necessarily represent a direct majority of the voting population, they are stable in a democratic legitimacy contingent on the majority of directly elected officials.

By contrast, Preseidentialist democracies express popular will through voting mechanisms. The executive's role is separate from the legislature. Hence, the executive is not subject to removal by non-confidence and avoids any obligation to maintain bipartisan representation in their office. An executive possesses considerable powers in the constitution, generally in complete control of the composition of his cabinet and the administration.<sup>7</sup> Presidential executives can appoint members of their party to significant roles in the government and purge those who represent a political opposition. Without an obligation to the legislature to maintain plural recognition, the executive can operate a government singularly representing their party— consolidating political authority on an agenda that need only express a slim majority of voters. The set period of a presidential regime is not dependent on the formal vote of confidence by the democratically elected representatives in parliament.<sup>8</sup> Fixed terms, barring exceptional circumstances, insulate the popularly elected executive from the legislature. Therefore, they can oppose the equally legitimate congress without facing a significant threat to their office. The president is not only the holder of executive power but the symbolic head of state and cannot be dismissed except in exceptional cases of impeachment.<sup>9</sup> The tension between the lawmaking body and a singular executive is ubiquitous in presidential democracies.

The prominent feature of presidential democracies is: a complete claim to democratic legitimacy, often with plebiscitary components, that supersedes the

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4 Siaroff, “Varieties of Parliamentarianism,” 445-446.

5 Siaroff, “Varieties of Parliamentarianism,” 445-446.

6 Siaroff, “Varieties of Parliamentarianism,” 445-446.

7 Juan J. Linz, *Democracy: Presidential or Parliamentary, Does It Make a Difference?* (1988), 3.

8 Linz, *Democracy: Presidential or Parliamentary*, 3.

9 Linz, *Democracy: Presidential or Parliamentary*, 3.

perceived legitimacy of parliamentary leaders.<sup>10</sup> The meager fifty-plus-one requirement to attain “popular” presidential rule enables the executive to assert themselves as representing the will of the people and the state. By contrast, the legislature’s democratic legitimacy derives from a localized constituency and does not maintain additional claims to a broad national identity beyond legislative authority.

This electoral mechanism undermines the democratic governance of the legislature—granting rule-making and profound social influence to the executive. The tension created by the dual legitimacy (i.e., formal legislative capacity and head of state) enforces a minimalist interpretation of democracy characterized by an “institutional arrangement ... in which individuals acquire the power to describe by means of a competitive struggle,” not pluralist inter-legislative coalitions.<sup>11</sup> Through direct election, presidents claim multilateral influence without being subject to a strong, equally legitimate legislature or court. Therefore, presidential systems are a minimalist expression of democracy that does not require liberal attitudes to function. Instead, Presidentialism necessitates only competition between political elites. Parliamentarianism, by contrast, requires the consensus of a robust and informed legislative body.

The presidential system is rife with structural issues that threaten the sanctity of liberal democratic government. These problems occur in several practical scenarios. However, it is essential to identify the broader negative trends associated with presidentialism before demonstrating its effects on Turkish democracy. The presidential duality encompassing the responsibilities of a head of state and government creates a unique self-image with different widespread expectations among the voting population.<sup>12</sup> The socio-political ascendance developed in a prominent singular executive transfers their political identity to the political identity of the whole state—coalescing a representative’s beliefs with the state’s ideological character. The profound relationship between a president and the state’s identity makes it “difficult to relinquish power and to be excluded from the prospect of regaining it in the case of failure of the successor.”<sup>13</sup> Attaching a singular political representative or ideology to the state wrongfully attributes the incumbent’s decisions to the people’s will or, more accurately, the “majority” of a pre-determined constituency.

Additionally, the president’s position as a popular candidate necessitates a consolidated voting base. The general election implies that a candidate must incorporate as many political opinions into the executive agenda. Maintaining a majority means entertaining the possibility that extremists (in a bipartisan voting block) might demand the executive acquiesces to minority political demands to maintain a tenuous majority.<sup>14</sup> Parliamentary leaders must appeal to a diverse set of representatives, resulting in the mediation of disparate opinions. Presidential

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10 Linz, *Democracy: Presidential or Parliamentary*, 3.

11 Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, (1976), 269.

12 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 6.

13 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 17-18.

14 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 4.

candidates must consolidate a broad base of opposition, including divisive elements, to compete in a winner takes all election. Therefore, they must be sensitive to the demands of extremists within their supporters. The structure of presidential elections legitimates extreme political opinions in political discourse that threaten the liberal values sustaining democracy.

Exploring the democratic future of Turkish presidentialism requires exploring the rise of President Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP's party originates in the conservative Islamic nationalist movements that opposed secular parliamentary rule throughout the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> However, since its 2002 ascendancy, the AKP has shifted away from "traditional Islamist predecessors under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan."<sup>16</sup> Recent public opinion research suggests that support for the AKP does not fundamentally equate to Islamist political rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> The goals of the contemporary AKP appear to focus on economic policy performance far more than religious and ideological appeals and instead focus on financial and populist appeals to attract voters.<sup>18</sup> The transition indicates that despite Islamist roots, the AKP, and by extension Erdogan, are more focused on maintaining a secular government in Turkey. However, this secular identity of the AKP does not indicate a reassurance of liberal democratic values centered on political pluralism. The rejection of Islamism only eases trepidation regarding Turkish alignment with the West.

Since the 2017 referendum transitioning toward pure-presidentialism, the AKP has failed to eliminate concerns about the democratic standards of the new state. Liberals across Turkey initially hailed Erdogan's ascent as a sign of progress but are quickly finding his policies contradict the liberal democratic values.<sup>19</sup> Since acquiring significant presidential authority, Erdogan's "government has jailed tens of thousands ... conducted a sweeping purge of the army and the state bureaucracy, shut down media outlets, and suspended thousands of academics," suggesting that the Turkish state fears negative discord in civil society.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, Erdogan's military reformation signals massive consolidation of political influence. The Turkish military often served a unique internal role, deposing political leaders who threatened the parliamentary rule if they failed to transfer power peaceably. Erdogan's new role as a singular executive enabled him to gut the military hierarchy and replace them with AKP sympathizers- securing his position from military interference.

Under Erdogan's new constitution, Turkey's political order must fall into line based on the AKP's decisions. Essentially, Erdogan successfully removed the checks

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15 Ihsan Dagi, "Islamist Parties and Democracy: Turkey's AKP in Power," *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3 (July 2008): 25-30.

16 Dagi, "Islamist Parties and Democracy," 25-30.

17 Dagi, "Islamist Parties and Democracy," 25-30.

18 Dagi, "Islamist Parties and Democracy," 25-30.

19 Halil Karaveli "Erdogan's Journey: Conservatism and Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 6 (2016): 121.

20 Karaveli, "Erdogan's Journey," 121.



and balances of a federal presidential system and eliminated the power of a legislature to exercise a vote of non-confidence. Turkey's transition to presidentialism in the contested 2017 referendum replaced the parliamentary system with a presidential one, centralizing all powers in the executive office.<sup>21</sup> These powers include the right to establish and abolish ministries, appoint ministers, and other senior officials—all of whom would operate without any legislative or judicial review.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the AKP and Erdoğan will likely continue to win the popular vote. The parties reforms would further institutionalize a populist, one-person system that jeopardizes legislative and judicial independence.<sup>23</sup> Here in lays the paradox of presidential majoritarian democracy. Regardless of the AKP's democratic legitimacy, the organization's position enables them to degrade democratic practices while claiming to represent the people's will. Securing Erdoğan's presidentialist regime has transformed a complex but functional pluralist political arrangement into a one-party state.

Turkey's failure to maintain a parliamentary government appears to have left the state as a democracy in name alone. Regardless of popular election, Erdoğan and the AKP look to have become electoral authoritarians, legitimizing one-party rule by dismantling an opposition candidacy. Political opposition from the Gelecek (Future) party exists in Turkey's authoritarian electoral system, but they have failed to win the majority of votes following the consolidation of Erdoğan's influence.<sup>24</sup> Opposition parties mainly serve to legitimize AKP dominance. The elections are not 'competitive' in any real sense because laws curtail political freedoms and civic discord in Turkey. Other parties exist only to maintain the illusion of free election. As Turkey maintains an electoral structure, it will self-identify as a democratic state. However, Erdoğan's presidential rule highlights the fallibility of concentrated authority in democratic systems and their tendency to manipulate democratic legitimacy to erode the institutions upholding representative government.

Erdoğan and the AKP maintain control by manipulating influential members of Turkish society in the public and private realms. Turkey's presidential regime relies on neo-patrimonial relationships driven by the exchange of services between the state and private interest groups. In exchange for patronizing the AKP, Turkish elites receive protection and preferential treatment from the state.<sup>25</sup> The under-hand exchange of public services concentrates political and financial power around

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21 Henry J. Barkey, "How Erdoğan Muscled Turkey to the Center of the World Stage," *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 30, 2020,

<https://www.cfr.org/article/how-erdogan-muscled-turkey-center-world-stage>.

22 Sinan Ekim, Kemal Kirişci, "The Turkish Constitutional Referendum, Explained," *Brookings*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/04/13/the-turkish-constitutional-referendum-explained/>.

23 Ekim and Kirişci, "Constitutional Referendum."

24 Ihsan Yilmaz, Galib Bashirov, "The AKP after 15 Years: Emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 9, (2018): 1812-30,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1447371>.

25 Yilmaz, Bashirov, "The AKP after 15 Years," 1812-30.

maintaining AKP control. It is a system in which executive power does not emerge from the popular expression of the constituency— instead, Erdogan relies on appealing the interests of non-state actors. In the diffuse and malleable hierarchy of parliamentary government, there is no clear and lasting hierarchy to establish neo-patrimonial structures.

To fully conceptualize how Erdogan has seized unprecedented authority, one must consider the majoritarian tendencies of Turkey’s presidential system in the broader social context of the country. The AKP’s populist rhetoric centers on the significant financial disparity and hyperinflation crippling domestic development in Turkey.<sup>26</sup> However, neo-patrimonialism is a fundamental part of the Turkish economic structure, contradicting populist economic rhetoric. The socio-economic situation makes one question how the AKP has maintained national support after eliminating long-standing parliamentary institutions. Historical political trends indicate that dominant presidential systems succeed in many “countries where, because a natural consensus is lacking, a consensual instead of majoritarian form of democracy is needed.”<sup>27</sup> The diverse socio-political opinions across Turkey resulted in a dysfunctional parliamentary system- many people felt it was ineffective compared to the direct authority of the presidential system. Constituencies who willingly hand over power to a dominant popular leader are “those with deep ethnic, racial, and religious cleavages but also those with intense political differences... huge socio-economic inequalities, and so on.”<sup>28</sup> This paradigm encapsulates the deep demographic divides at the heart of Turkish politics. Turkish scholarly investigations suggest significant “prejudice against Kurdish ethnicity [among] lowly-educated and economically dissatisfied individuals.”<sup>29</sup> The presence of ethnic division and an inflation rate of nearly ninety percent parallels general observations about states who are likely to endure “democratic backsliding” at the hands of a populist executive.<sup>30</sup> Turkish social and economic realities reflect a proven path toward authoritarianism at the hands of a democratically appointed executive. The trend indicates that the move toward pure-presidentialism fits the domestic political context of Turkey but suggests that democratic institutions will only continue to erode under the Turkish executive.

There is substantial evidence asserting the destabilization effect of influential executives in a democratic government; however, there are benefits to presidentialism. There would be far fewer examples within the global community without rational justification for presidential governments. Singular presidential

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26 Dagi, “Islamist Parties and Democracy,” 25-30.

27 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 91-92.

28 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 91-92.

29 S. E. Aytaç, Ali Çarkoğlu, “Ethnicity and religiosity-based prejudice in Turkey: Evidence from a survey experiment,” *International Political Science Review*, (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512117696333>

30 “Turkey Inflation Rate November 2022 Data - 1965-2021 Historical - December Forecast.” Turkey Inflation Rate - November 2022 Data - 1965-2021 Historical - December Forecast. Accessed December 10, 2022. <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/inflation-cpi>.

executives, separate from a state legislature, present a unique “accountability to the voters for performance.”<sup>31</sup> The accountability of the incumbent is enhanced because the president is directly responsible for the actions of their office. If the people of Turkey were profoundly disappointed with the government’s policies, there is a line of direct attribution to the executive. A single person is clearly “identified as governing for the entire period of a mandate,” and they cannot diffuse responsibility for negative externalities.<sup>32</sup> However, this fails to note the structural problems of concentrated power within representative government; people may remove a poor-performing executive at the end of their term, but the systematic issues of the office remain. In the eyes of the voting population, “presidential elections have the advantage of allowing the people to choose who will govern.”<sup>33</sup> Still, they fail to account for the relative permanence of presidential rule and the overt tension of equally legitimated government officials operating in the legislature. Unsurprisingly, the Turkish people opted for a dominant presidential authority during political and economic duress. Reframing the Turkish political order around a centralized executive may even alleviate some of the economic, ethnic, and geopolitical issues facing the nation. However, the purpose of this essay is not to consider the potential benefits of Erdogan’s preeminent position but to demonstrate that the emergence of pure-presidentialism threatens Turkish democracy. These are two related but different questions. Regardless of the new government’s relative success or popularity, there are clear indicators to suggest a decline in democratic practices.

Pure-presidentialism in Turkey symbolizes an ideological break from their Western allies. Most stable European democracies are parliamentary regimes.<sup>34</sup> If Turkey is to remain a Western-aligned state, it will undoubtedly face harsh criticism from European parliamentarians. Introducing authoritarian-leaning presidentialism into the contemporary Western international community could threaten crucial opportunities for aid and development from the West. Turkey may have to look elsewhere to develop trade and exchange resources. Perhaps aligning with emergent Turkic nations in central Asia would present adequate growth opportunities for Turkey; however, these states often maintain extractive authoritarian political and economic systems.

As mentioned, Turkey is a demographically diverse state with a fractious history of sectarian inter-communal violence. Even in the modern age, the region descends into an ethnocentric political competition that often results in armed conflict. Recent years have seen the continuation of anti-Kurdish rhetoric from the Turkish majority. The Kurdish involvement in the Syrian civil war presents severe dangers for Turkey’s political goals in the Middle East. Traditionally, “presidentialism has prevailed in societies that are relatively integrated ethnically,” which does not

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31 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 12.

32 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 12.

33 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 20.

34 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 4.



characterize the secular divides within the Turkish polity.<sup>35</sup> Successful European democracies, which Turkey aligns themselves with, maintain an ethnically and ideologically diverse population through equitable parliamentary representation. Perhaps, a parliamentary government would better serve the ethnic plurality in Turkey. The emergence of opposing ethnic and political groups would create a bipolar choice in popular elections and would produce considerable polarization.<sup>36</sup> A proportional parliament could support the presence of minority groups without having to promote nationalist rhetoric to secure a majority in a presidential election. However, Erdogan's position as president means he is free to receive his opponents or not and has no obligation to establish collegial relations with non-AKP-aligned groups. Prime ministers, unlike presidents, are members of a larger body and are "forced to interact to some extent as an equal with other politicians and leaders of other parties" to maintain legitimacy.<sup>37</sup>

Having established the context and the methods used to bring about presidentialism in Turkey, it is essential to note the most apparent problems it presents to democracy compared to its former parliamentary system. Pure-parliamentarianism requires mutual dependence, presidentialism is a system of mutual independence, and Erdogan is above the liberal institutional backbone of legislature and judiciary that counteracts authoritarianism.<sup>38</sup> Crucially, in a parliamentary system, the rate of ministers who serve more than once in their careers is "almost three times higher" than in presidential democracies.<sup>39</sup> Unlike presidentialist systems, the executive party in parliamentary democracies enjoyed a legislative majority in most cases.<sup>40</sup> The Prime Minister's success depends on representing the most interest at a given time. Erdogan's decisions are atomistic and not reflective of the legislature's desires. Locally elected officials cannot contribute significantly to Turkey's new order because of the executive's dominance. Most significantly, pure-presidential democracies are twenty-two percent more susceptible to military coups and have a twenty percent democratic survivability rate compared to parliamentary governments, which enjoy a sixty-one percent survival rate.<sup>41</sup> Considering the AKP removal of the dissenting military hierarchy, it is not outside the bounds of Erdogan's executive reach to use Turkey's armed forces for domestic political gain, a clear infraction of any democratic system.

The emergence of pure-presidentialism in Turkey after the 2017 referendum is a significant transformation in the political order of historically parliamentary democracy. Erdogan and the AKP's rise to power have altered the democratic framework of the nation and demonstrates that presidential democracy is not likely

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35 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 44.

36 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 20.

37 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 25.

38 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 120.

39 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 127.

40 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 129.

41 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 124-125.

to propagate consistent and fair representative government in the foreseeable future. Many potential domestic and geopolitical externalities result from Turkey's shift to majoritarian populist presidentialism that could redefine the country's position in the global order. The signs of authoritarianism have already begun to express themselves under the consolidated rule of the AKP and are in line with theoretical arguments disputing the democratic fortitude of presidentialism. Managing the complex ethnic, socio-economic, and regional issues of the Turkish state is best left to a proportionally representative legislature— a legislature with the right to hold political leaders accountable. Presidential democracies carry an inherent “majoritarian implication” that will lead to the disenfranchisement of Turkish voters and increased polarization along established ethnic and social lines.<sup>42</sup> Despite enjoying high levels of domestic support, Erdogan's ability to “neutralize any opposition by appealing to Turkish voters' nationalist predisposition” has negatively affected free political discourse.<sup>43</sup> Turkey's presidentialist system enables the denigration of inter-governmental checks and the oppression of civil liberties to maintain authority. Fundamentally, the methods in which Erdogan and the AKP operate in the presidentialist context obstruct the liberal values required for a functioning democracy. The research indicates that Turkey's transformation from parliamentary to presidential rule is a step towards authoritarianism. If Turkey desires to reaffirm the nation's democratic tradition, the parliamentary government must re-emerge in its original form.

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42 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 69.

43 Linz and Valenzuela, *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*, 69.