**The Failure of Liberalism in Turkey’s Political Development**

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**Introduction**

The Republic of Turkey’s quest to become part of the West has been a prominent leitmotif throughout the one hundred year history. While it has, in some respects succeeded—it is a member of NATO, an associate member of the European Union (EU), and in terms of its economy and culture it has been “Western-facing” for most of its history—Turkey’s status as part of the West and its own Westernization is also awkward and incomplete. Early on, Turkey’s “fitness” to be part of NATO was widely debated[[1]](#endnote-1), and its EU aspirations have seen, to say the least, ups and downs. As both Yanik and Altunışık note in this special volume, Turkey’s “in-betweenness” or “cuspness” has long defined its geopolitical orientation.[[2]](#endnote-2)

This condition is also reflected in Turkey’s political development. According to Kalaycioğlu, Turkey has long been engulfed in a *kulturkampf* between Western-oriented forces of the center and more traditional, conservative, and Islamic-oriented actors representing the periphery.[[3]](#endnote-3) While Turkey has, in important respects, borrowed Western ideas, institutions, and policies, its practices—particularly with respect to democracy—have often fallen short. As Turan puts it, Turkey has “never quite made it.”[[4]](#endnote-4) The “it” he refers to is a consolidated democracy, and as he and numerous others have documented, Turkey has had (and continues to have) significant democratic shortcomings.

This article will focus on one shortcoming in particular, the failure of liberalism to take root in Turkey, in terms of the development of political institutions, actions by political elites, creation of a political movement or party, and orientations within the broader political culture. Put somewhat differently, whereas Turkey has had, at various points in its history, democratic forms—often of a tutelary or majoritarian orientation—liberalism has been “conspicuously non-existent in Turkey both as a political and intellectual current.”[[5]](#endnote-5) A key point that animates much of the discussion and analysis is that Turkish leaders (and to a certain extent, the wider public) have had a selective view of Westernization, favoring concepts of nation-building, secularism, and material progress over liberal notions that would favor individual rights and limit state power. To the extent liberal elements might be present, they have often taken on a “hybrid”, “unconventional”, or “oxymoronic” character.[[6]](#endnote-6) Furthermore, one might bear in mind that liberalism itself is not a static concept, and that what qualifies as “liberal” today (e.g. LGBTQ+ rights) was not expressly a component of “liberal” practice in the recent past. In this respect, one could say that the bar keeps moving, and even if Turkey might make some progress, it still does not quite “make it”.

This article proceeds in the following manner. First, it briefly expounds upon the term liberalism and suggests factors that can help it to develop in political institutions and in the broader society. Second, it reviews key episodes in Turkish history in which liberalism perhaps could have been pursued or might have stood a chance and discusses why it failed to take root in each instance. Third, it examines survey evidence to uncover whether liberalism’s failures can be assigned to the machinations of political elites or whether there are broader socio-cultural orientations that work against it. It concludes assessing liberalism’s prospects in 2023, as Turkey enters into another round of elections that could offer significant political change.

**Liberalism’s Features and Supporting Components**

Liberalism is a multifarious and venerable concept in political philosophy, associated with figures such as Spinoza, Locke, Smith, Kant, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Mill, Berlin, and Rawls, among others. Today, liberalism undergirds institutions and policies in many contemporary democracies. This is not to say that any country is completely “liberal,” as the demands of liberalism (which focuses on the individual) may not be fully respected and/or give way to other concerns, such as provision of security, state empowerment, group rights, public health, and building national unity. Nonetheless, by understanding what liberalism entails, one can still identify some countries as more liberal than others, including (as in the case of Turkey, but also contemporary Hungary, Poland, India, and Israel) those that have formally democratic institutions but are often illiberal in practice.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Although there are different forms of liberalism and various thinkers have emphasized different priorities and doctrines, one can boil liberalism down to a few core tenets.[[8]](#endnote-8) First and foremost is a concern with individual liberty, including freedom of conscience, belief, speech, and association. Second, liberalism recognizes people as fundamentally equal, and requires tolerance of their different viewpoints and life choices. In simple terms, liberalism accommodates, if not embraces, pluralism. Third, state and governmental powers are fundamentally fiduciary in nature, meaning they are held in trust to create conditions to further the good and freedoms of individuals. In Locke’s words, “the business of laws…[is to provide for] every particular man’s (*sic*) goods and person.”[[9]](#endnote-9) One should emphasize here that it is the individual, not the state, who determines what their interests are, and these individual interests are prioritized over more abstract “state interests”.[[10]](#endnote-10) Fourth, state power must be limited, upholding what Berlin identified as “negative liberty”[[11]](#endnote-11), meaning individuals’ freedom *from* outside interference. In practice, this requires various safeguards. One is that government should rest on the consent of the governed, which, at least in contemporary times, means governments should be chosen by the people.[[12]](#endnote-12) Democracy alone, however, is not enough. Further checks—constitutions guaranteeing rights, empowered courts, rule of law, decentralization of authority, and explicit recognition of cultural rights of minorities[[13]](#endnote-13)—are also endorsed by liberals to guard against the risk of democracy becoming a tyranny of the majority.

One can point to several factors that are more likely to lead elites and publics to embrace liberalism and for liberal ideas to flourish. One is social trust, which goes above and beyond mere tolerance, as one should believe that granting freedoms to others will not undermine the political community or cause other serious harm. If one believes, on the other hand, that certain ideas or practices could be dangerous or even that other groups in society are *inherently* untrustworthy or even potential enemies, one might endorse greater limits on personal and political freedoms, if only against those with whom one disagrees. This latter condition might particularly hold if there is a widespread sense that the political community is insecure (from internal or external threats) and thus must place limits on the freedoms of minority groups or those that might threaten the community.

Furthermore, liberalism would also seem to require actors in civil society that can challenge or constrain state power as well as, perhaps, possess some healthy skepticism regarding the power of the state. The latter, however, may not come naturally. At times, rulers may view nation- and state-building as a priority, or embrace a dogmatic, teleological program (e.g. nationalism, Islamism, communism) that presupposes there is one “Truth” or set of correct policies that “must” be followed. Such views need not be restricted to empowered elites. Individuals or groups who lack power at a given moment may still venerate or fetishize the state and seek to control it to further their own agendas. In contrast, liberalism requires groups to abandon more Manichean perspectives and wanton use of state power, accepting instead the legitimacy of expressing alternative viewpoints and a politics of give-and-take that concedes any political goal must compete against others in an open marketplace of ideas.

Suffice to say that Turkey, throughout much of its history, has not proven to a fertile ground for liberalism. In the following section, we will discuss why liberalism has proved to be unattractive or unworkable at key moments in Turkish history.

**Missed Opportunities for Liberalism in Republican Turkey**

Modern Turkish history has seen several inflection points where core constitutional issues were on the table and Turkey *could* have taken a more liberal path. While, at times, liberalism was given an opportunity (often more rhetorically than in practice), it never really took hold, succumbing to political conflict and the emergence of illiberal forces that rose to power. We shall focus on three of these periods: the formative years of the Republic in the 1920s and early 1930s; the adoption of a more liberal constitution in 1961; and reform processes in the 2000s in the initial years of rule under the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP).

***The Creation of a Tutelary, Illiberal System***

After Turkey’s War of Independence (1919-1922), Turkey’s new political leaders faced a variety of choices about what sort of political system would replace the Ottoman Empire. Many of them had been allied with the modernizing “Young Turk” movement prior to World War I, and, like their late-Ottoman forebears, they looked to Europe for inspiration. They embraced many ideas from the Enlightenment—republicanism/popular sovereignty, scientism, rationalism, secularism, material progress—and they repeatedly declared that they aimed to liberate and empower the Turkish people.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The result, however, was hardly a liberal state. While Turkey’s initial rulers may have been democrats “in theory”[[15]](#endnote-15) and may have rhetorically embraced a form of liberalism—which to them was largely equivalent to opposing monarchy, upholding rule of reason, supporting modernizing change, and supporting some limited individual rights[[16]](#endnote-16)—in practice they failed to create institutions that would prioritize individual rights and limit the powers of the state. On the contrary, the Turkish political regime turned into a centralized, tutelary state controlled by a single party in which state power was utilized, at times in a coercive manner, to advance a modernizing agenda.[[17]](#endnote-17) Despite frequent invocations of popular sovereignty, citizens were not empowered, and the rights of an idealized, transcendental nation or an ostensibly unified, homogeneous people took precedence.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Many reasons can be invoked to explain this outcome. In large measure, it can be understood as a continuation of earlier efforts of a Western-oriented elite (the “center”) to transform a more traditional, conservative society (the “periphery”).[[19]](#endnote-19) In line with what was suggested above about conditions conducive for liberalism, here one should emphasize both the asymmetry in power and distrust between the two, with the empowered forces of the center seeing the periphery as irredeemingly backward. As Sofos notes, elites’ distrust of the Turkish people constituted a “fundamental element” of Turkish political life.[[20]](#endnote-20) While the former celebrated an imagined past and prospective future greatness of the Turkish nation, the latter, in their present state, were viewed as decidedly benighted. Enlightened elites therefore needed to hold them in an indefinite apprenticeship[[21]](#endnote-21) and remold them to remove their imperfections. Thus, despite the rhetorically much-heralded promise of popular rule in the notion of republicanism (*cumhuriyetçilik*), the people were given no genuine opportunity to exercise their sovereignty.[[22]](#endnote-22) They were, in political terms, treated like children or wards of the state. In Mustafa Kemal’s words, his paternalistic and tutelary role was to “lead my people by the hand along the road until their feet are sure and they know the way.”[[23]](#endnote-23) The risk of leaving the people to their own devices and allowing them to wander off course was revealed in rebellions/uprisings in 1925 and 1930, both of which, from the elites’ perspective, were connected to the limited experiments with multiparty politics. Both events led to bans on alternative political parties and passage of laws to prosecute regime opponents of the regime and repress dissent and civil liberties. Particularly after 1930, state control over Turkish society became more pronounced. Any chance for liberalism was gone.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Additionally, while the common people were assumed to be wallowing in ignorance, elites had a clear vision about how they wanted to transform Turkey. Similar to what Gerschenkron, labelled the “advantage of backwardness” in pursuing economic development[[25]](#endnote-25), in this instance elites believed that the use of state power would allow them to implement their “*predetermined* model”[[26]](#endnote-26) of Westernization. In line with the quote above, elites (not the people) knew the “road”, one that would require a political-cultural revolution from above. There was thus no need for alternative voices or viewpoints, which, by definition, were “wrong”, if not dangerous. In this case, the idea of fiduciary power takes on a different meaning as it is the state (or, more precisely, its rulers in the Republican People’s Party [*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP])) that appropriates the right to determine what is “the good” for individuals and society as a whole. Here one can mention Berlin’s critique of positive liberty (“freedom to”), which he argued was liable to abuse by being conflated with rational action based on knowledge to which only a certain elite or social group has access. In this way, elite-directed goals (e.g. national development, social engineering) superseded protections of individual thought and action inherent in negative liberty, and claims of “freedom” paradoxically were used to justify state control.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Finally, one could mention that in much of this period elites believed that Turkey—both externally and internally—suffered from an ontological security crisis.[[28]](#endnote-28) Enemies, whether foreign states, non-Muslim minorities, Kurds, those hoping to bring back the sultan or caliph, or Turks simply resistant to the Kemalist project, threatened to undermine not just the government’s reform programs but the state itself. Pluralism In particular was rejected an antithetical, as it would undermine national unity and the singular, undifferentiated vision of “the people” in the Kemalist conception of populism (*halkçılık*). In Chichocka’s terms, the state and nation-building project succumbed to “collective narcissism”, which viewed opponents and outsiders as traitors and threats and produced intolerant, exclusionary, and anxiety-driven policies that were driven by perceptions of insecurity.[[29]](#endnote-29)

It bears mentioning, of course, that Turkey did make a transition to formal, multiparty democracy after World War II, and the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP), which was led by former members of the CHP, assumed the reigns of governance in 1950. The DP positioned itself as a party of the periphery (in particular with respect to being more respectful of religion and traditional values) and private business interests. While it gave rhetorical support to Kemalist principles, its rule rested on a majoritarian logic that was intolerant to the CHP, which was now in opposition. The DP’s opponents rightfully feared that they would be squeezed out of the political system altogether. The result was polarization and violence, eventually leading to a military coup that toppled the DP government. The key point for our purposes, however, is that the 1950s, despite democratization in terms of introducing competitive politics, were not a true period of political liberalization, as partisan distrust and strong state power persisted and made it difficult for liberalism to emerge.

***The 1961 Constitution: A Brief Chance for Liberalism***

Turkey would have a greater (if brief) opportunity to move in a liberal direction after the 1960 military coup. The military authorities soon declared that they had no intention to hold onto power, and they invited legal scholars to help draft a new constitution. The result was a document that was heavily influenced by emerging constitutionalism in Europe that aimed to decentralize and limit state power.[[30]](#endnote-30) Significant changes included creation of an upper chamber of parliament (the Senate), a Constitutional Court and other high courts (e.g. the Supreme Court of Appeals), and autonomous public institutions for media, higher education, and state planning that were designed to keep executive power under rule of law constraints. A new proportional representation election system also made single-party governance less likely. The constitution enumerated numerous individual rights, including freedom of thought and belief, freedom of communication, privacy, and freedom to form associations. It was very clear that fundamental rights and freedoms “cannot be usurped, transferred, or relinquished” (Article 10), that the state shall “remove all political, economic, and social obstacles that restrict the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual” (Article 10), and that “the law shall not infringe upon the essence of any right or liberty *not even when it is applied for the purpose of upholding public interest, morals and order, social justice as well as national security*” (Article 11, emphasis mine).[[31]](#endnote-31) A liberal could hardly ask for more.

We know, of course, that the promise of liberalism was not realized. In the 1960s, Turkey experienced a series of weak coalition governments, and societal changes as well as the new electoral law facilitated the emergence of numerous parties and the mobilization of groups (leftists, Kurds, far-right nationalists, Islamists) that challenged the Kemalist order. This led to polarization and violence. The military intervened in 1971 to try to restore some stability, pushing through constitutional amendments to strengthen its tutelary role in the National Security Council (which had been created in 1961), permit executive decrees that allowed civilian authorities to evade many checks and balances, and limit individual rights (in contrast to what was declared in Article 11) in the name of upholding state unity, national security, and the common good. These moves, however, had limited success, as weak governments, polarization, and violence also marked much of the 1970s. Eventually the military launched a more repressive coup in 1980 and suspended (and later abrogated) the 1961 Constitution.

What went wrong? Assuming Turkey “got it right” on paper, why could liberalism not succeed in practice? Numerous answers suggest themselves. First, the 1960 coup and the 1961 Constitutions did not solve Turkey’s core political dilemmas of social divisions and distrust. They (briefly) papered them over, but by the 1960s disputes between the Kemalist-oriented center and the periphery, now chiefly represented by the center-right Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP), had re-emerged. Secondly, representatives of the latter had been largely excluded from the writing of the new constitution, and consequently viewed the constitution as a means for the state bureaucracy to protect itself from the will of the voters. The Turkish center-right, which came to power in a single-party government after the AP won elections in 1965, thus came to view the Constitution as an illegitimate impediment to, in its view, its rightful power, and repeatedly challenged its features that sought to limit state power. At the same time, as Turkish political life become both more polarized and more unstable with the emergent of new actors, the forces of the center concluded that liberal features of the Constitution created clear dangers and were thus a “luxury [that] Turkey could ill afford.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Isiksel further suggests that the 1961 Constitution suffered from a “parchment barriers” problem, meaning that its liberal requirements on paper did not correspond to or help further the real-life objectives of major political actors. Put differently, the ostensible benefits of liberalism were abstract, diffuse, and served the (still largely not empowered) individual citizen. Elites saw no clear advantage from it, and thus the Constitution “lacked institutional champions to realize its progressive potential.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Karaveli, presenting a somewhat different perspective, suggests that the 1961 Constitution was less a victory of liberalism than one of technocracy and the emerging industrial elite, which needed a means to advance its interests against the more populous agrarian-oriented majority.[[34]](#endnote-34) In other words, a liberal document served, somewhat paradoxically, as a means for the elite to hold onto power against more popular force that could win elections.

By 1971, the liberal moment had clearly passed, and any chances to revive the liberal spirit of the 1961 Constitution were lost amid growing class, ethnic, and sectarian conflicts in the 1970s. These were “resolved” by the 1980 coup that cemented the dominance of neoliberal, socially-conservative parties on the political right.

Unlike in 1960, the Turkish military in 1980 had no time or tolerance for liberalism, which it deemed had been a failure. In sort, the experience of the 1960s and 1970s was not to be repeated. It therefore drafted, with minimal input from actors in civil society, a new constitution that enumerated but then quickly qualified the extent of individual freedoms by subordinating them to requirements of security, unity, and governability. Thus, despite declaring fundamental rights and freedoms as “inviolable” and “inalienable” (Article 12), the constitution later states that none of the rights and freedoms shall be exercised to “to violate the indivisible integrity of the State with its territory and nation, and to endanger the existence of the democratic and secular order of the Republic based on human rights (Article 14).[[35]](#endnote-35) Suffice to say state authorities often took license under the latter provisions (including through use of military -run state security courts and declarations of state of emergency) to severely limit individual rights and marginalize, if not eliminate, their opponents. Moreover, there was no room—on paper or in practice—for pluralism that would recognize religious minorities such as Alevis or ethnic minorities such as Kurds. Arat and Pamuk declared that the 1982 Constitution provided a legal basis—one the authorities would use again and again—for “illiberal democracy,” a feature Isiksel dubs “authoritarian constitutionalism.”[[36]](#endnote-36)

***The AKP Period: Liberal Hopes Dashed***

In the 1980s and 1990s Turkey did have a competitive, if constrained, political system. There was some room for various political parties to express different political ideas, although those that espoused views that the military viewed too threatening—above all, political Islamism and political demands relating to Kurdish identity—could be harshly punished. Turkey remained, as it had for much of its history, a tutelary democracy, with the military and state bureaucracy (including the courts) upholding the sacrosanct principles of the Republican order. Turkey did apply to join the European Community—the precursor of the EU—but it was quickly rebuffed, as its “democracy” compared poorly to the liberal democracies of Western Europe.

There would be, however, one more chance for liberalism in Turkey. This was linked to two developments. First, in 1999 the EU agreed to consider Turkey as a candidate country for membership, but made it clear that Tukey would have to significantly liberalize. Second, in 2022, the AKP came to power, winning a parliamentary majority (albeit with just over a third of votes) on a platform that promised political change largely in line with the EU’s demands, including greater rights for Kurds, an issue which had long been a taboo. While the AKP had clear roots in political Islam, it positioned itself as a champion of “conservative democracy”, not Islamism. Abdullah Gül, one of the the AKP’s co-founders and Turkey’s President (2007-2014), suggested that the party rejected the “alien imports” of its Islamist predecessors and stood for “liberalism, human rights, and the market economy.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Many observers hailed the prospects for Turkish democracy under what appeared to be moderate, “post-Islamist” party.[[38]](#endnote-38) The AKP pushed through numerous constitutional reforms to curtail the power of the military and strengthen individual freedoms. Turkey’s EU prospects brightened, and accession talks began in 2005. This period represented, in the words of Onis, a “golden age” in terms of democratic and liberal optimism.[[39]](#endnote-39) As seen in Figure 1, Turkey’s score on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) “Liberal Democracy Index” peaked in this period (reaching .526 in 2004[[40]](#endnote-40)), easily eclipsing its scores in the early 1960s, which were, in turn, much higher than those under the decidedly illiberal single-party rule in the early days of the Republic. Between 2010 and 2020, Turkey’s V-Dem Democracy score experienced the third steepest democratic decline among all countries (after Poland and Hungary), changing its status from an “Electoral Democracy” to an “Electoral Autocracy”.[[41]](#footnote-1)

Figure 1 about here

Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Liberal Democracy Index, scored 0 to 1. Index is based on a combination of V-Dems Polyarchy (Electoral Democracy) and Liberal index.

Much of this is rather well-known. Optimism regarding the AKP and democratization has passed. Various reforms stalled, including the AKP’s once-ballyhooed “Alevi Opening” and “Kurdish Opening”. The government began to persecute its opponents and gained greater control over the media and economic resources. This accelerated in the aftermath of the 2013 Gezi Park protests and more so after the failed 2016 coup and the adoption of a presidential form of government. Rather than a “democratic” system that might be modified with an adjective (e.g. illiberal, majoritarian, unconsolidated), Turkey is now a much more authoritarian state.[[42]](#endnote-41)

What went wrong? Why did the AKP—which had attracted a broad swathe of support in Turkish society, including among liberals—fail to deliver on its promise? Numerous answers suggest themselves. For starters, one could suggest that the AKP’s liberal promise was actually illusory, that was practicing the Islamic concept of *takiyye*, hiding its true beliefs, and that various liberals, both in Turkey and beyond, were entranced or duped by its rhetoric about freedoms and democracy.[[43]](#endnote-42) According to this line of thought, the AKP used its liberal rhetoric to win support among Turks and key international actors, such as the EU, which it used to shield itself from critics. Having consolidated power by the end of the 2000s, the AKP could then begin to show its “true colors” and became more aggressive in going after its opponents while abandoning its reform agenda.[[44]](#endnote-43) If this was in fact the case—we lack the means to definitively know if this is so—then liberalism actually never really had much of a chance under the AKP.

If, on the other hand, we are open to the possibility that the AKP was at least partially sincere in its stated commitment to liberalism, what went wrong? Here we can return to earlier suggestions about what facilitates the development of liberalism and how they were lacking in Turkey in the past two decades. First, it is clear that Turkish society has grown more polarized, with numerous deleterious effects, including on social trust and cohesion.[[45]](#endnote-44) This has hampered the emergence of a more inclusive, respectful politics, and has perpetuated a zero-sum conception of political competition. At the same time, from the AKP’s perspective, its opponents made repeated attempts to use various “guardians” of Turkish democracy (the bureaucracy, the military, the Constitutional Court) against it, threatening the party’s very survival. The AKP survived these threats, but now saw such institutions (particularly the courts) as a threat to be eliminated. Thus, in the 2010s, we have seen a transformation of the AKP from a typical vote-seeking party into a “hegemony-seeking” party, one that is driven to harness state power to preserve and consolidate its dominant position.[[46]](#endnote-45) In this reading, the erosion on various constraints on the AKP in the late 2000s was merely a necessary condition, with various crises/shocks/threats (e.g. Gezi Park protests, the party’s poor showing in June 2015 elections, the failed coup in 2016) becoming catalysts for the party to abandon its previously more liberal orientation. The result is that rather than reaching out to a broader base (as it had in early 2000s), the AKP has focused on consolidating itself around a nationalist-conservative core and adopted a majoritarian logic, one in which it represents the National Will and genuine, native (*yerli*) Turks as opposed to untrustworthy, cultured and arrogant elites who are beholden to foreign ideas and interests.[[47]](#endnote-46)

One additional point is worth making. By the late 2000s, Turkey arguably was more democratic than it ever had been, but it was still hardly liberal. In some respects, it resembled Italy in the 1950s and 1960s, dominated by a single party (the Christian Democrats) that had a high tolerance for many forms of corruption and was closely linked to a religious establishment. During this time, Italy was illiberal on many cultural issues: divorce and abortion were legalized in the 1970s and homosexual activity, while technically legal, faced sanctions from the Church and the wider public. Yet, Italy was a member of the European Community and typically considered a democracy. It is doubtful, however, that Italy *circa* 1960 would be allowed into the EU today, which suggests that definitions of democracy have changed and include a more expansive liberal content, including items (such as LGBTQ rights) that were not emphasized in the past. Put differently, for at least part of the AKP period, Turkey might have “made it” with respect to previous conceptualizations of democracy, but the bar has moved, and now “democracy” (at least in the EU) is expected to be liberal, including on cultural issues such as women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, and cultural pluralism. On all of these measures, Turkey has historically performed poorly, and under the AKP (again, in its early years) Turkey only pursued what Cagaptay calls “à la carte liberalism,” meaning that it was liberal on economic issues and endorsed free expression of religiosity (e.g. wearing of the headscarf) but illiberal on other matters, including women’s rights and personal freedoms such as consumption of alcohol.[[48]](#endnote-47) On this score, the very definition of the AKP’s self-proclaimed “conservative democracy” is also telling, as it is, according the AKP figure who most extensively elaborated on it, predicated on “public morality” and the “fusion of the state and nation…[to restore] the corroding system.”[[49]](#endnote-48) Liberal it clearly is not.

**What about Turkish Political Culture?**

We might also consider one additional explanation for the failure of liberalism to take root in Turkey, both during and prior to AKP rule: Turkish political culture. In other words, while we have thus far analyzed the “supply side” of illiberalism in Turkey, we have not fully considered the “demand side” side, at least as (conceivably) it might have come from Turkish society itself.

Until recently, it would be hard to find much movement within society or the broader political culture that has a truly liberal orientation. In part, this is due to some peculiarities of Turkish history, as the notion of “liberal” (or “left”, for that matter) was often equated with the modernization agenda of early Republican state.[[50]](#endnote-49) Opposition to this regime was framed largely in traditionally conservative socio-cultural terms and it never took on a liberal character. As Yayla notes, the Kemalist habit of venerating the state is widespread, and when political life became more open and competitive from the 1950s onward, various groups battled for control of the state rather than embracing a more liberal agenda seeking to limit its power.[[51]](#endnote-50) Gürpinar adds that liberalism, perceived by Kemalists to be a danger in the early Republic, was later viewed so by both the right and the left, with “liberalism” even acquiring a pejorative meaning among many on the left.[[52]](#endnote-51) It is therefore notable that the first noteworthy “liberal” organization, at least in the sense I am using the term in this paper, the Liberal Thought Society (*Liberal Düşünce Topluluğu*, LDT) was established only in 1994, and even then, after several small liberal parties received a miniscule amount of votes in elections in the 1990s, its members acknowledged that the potential of a liberal political program in Turkey were “rather limited”.[[53]](#endnote-52) Notably, the LDT supported the AKP in the 2000s, when the latter seemed committed to democratic reform. These hopes have long since been dashed.

The example of the LDT points to a larger conundrum facing Turkish liberals, one rooted in societal distrust and polarization and their own minority status in Turkish political life. While they espouse greater freedoms and democratization, they are well aware of their own limited electoral potential.[[54]](#endnote-53) They are thus leery of “too much” democracy, which was reflected not only in how the “liberal” elements of the 1961 Constitution served a dual purpose by also limiting the power of conservative/illiberal voters but more recently in ambivalence toward democracy as the AKP began to consolidate its power. For example, a 2008 survey—conducted at a time when the AKP faced its closure case before the Constitutional Court and when there was still some prospect that the Kemalist establishment could prevail against the AKP—found that Turks who endorsed more liberal values in their private lives (who tended to be more secular and more educated) were *less likely* to favor greater democratization.[[55]](#endnote-54)

Whether this authoritarian, illiberal impulse within the culturally Westernized minority—for which ample evidence stretches back into the early years of the Republic—is still present can be debated. Certainly, the CHP, which has stood in opposition to the AKP for over two decades, has abandoned some elements of heavy-handed Kemalism and is now more liberal on some issues, particularly religious expression. The better representative of liberalism among Turkish political parties, however, is the Kurdish-oriented Peoples’ Democratic Party, which combines demands for rights for Kurds with support for greater freedom of expression, gender equality, and LGBTQ and other minority rights. However, with liberalism now connected with what many Turks believe to be unacceptable and threatening expressions of Kurdish nationalism, as well as the fact that (conservative Turkish) nationalists are the largest voting bloc in Turkey[[56]](#endnote-55), its prospects at the ballot box may still be limited. This is discussed more below.

Public opinion surveys can also shed light on aspects of wider support (or not) for liberalism within Turkish political culture. One noteworthy effort in this regard was a 2016 survey commissioned by the German Friedrich Naumann Foundation, which specifically focused on support for aspects of liberalism.[[57]](#endnote-56) Its findings were generally mixed. Turks did offer strong support for liberal principles in general terms. For example, 93 percent thought having a democratic form of government was very important (60.8 percent) or important (32.8 percent) and a similar total completely agreed (55.1 percent) or agreed (37.3 percent) that human rights are universal. Solid majorities also said that they respect people who are different than them (79.3 percent) and the judicial oversight is necessary to insure the government abides by the law (58.6 percent). However, such general support for liberal principles weakens on questions where liberalism competes with another priority, such as national unity or public morality. For example, whereas 19.4 percent of respondents said that there was no justifiable reason to restrict freedom of thought, many more respondents found justifications, including to preserve Turkey’s territorial integrity (31.6 percent), national integrity (23.7 percent) (both most saliently questioned by some Kurdish nationalists), and religious values (14.1 percent).[[58]](#endnote-57) Results from additional questions from this survey are reported in Table 1, which includes separate figures for supporters of the AKP and those of the CHP and (often more liberal) HDP, with AKP and CHP supporters standing as proxies for more/less pious respondents.[[59]](#endnote-58)

Table 1 about here

Table 1 Support For Liberal Positions by Party Identification

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Question/Issue | Overall Response (%) | AKP/CHP/HDP supporters |
| In order to ensure order we can abridge democracy (Agree) | 50.1 | 64.4/29.4/45.3 |
| Should Ideas that Upset You Be Allowed to be Published? (Yes) | 33.6 | 44.3/23.7/7.5 |
| Security Forces Can Violate Law in Fight Against Terrorism (Agree) | 44.1 | 51.5/32.4/24.8 |
| State Can Prevent Media that Promote Other Religions (Agree) | 33.6 | 47/13.1/24.1 |
| State Can Seize Private Property for Public Interest (Agree) | 50.7 | 64.2/38.9/25 |
| Never Allowable to Close a Political Party (Agree) | 27.3 | 15.6/31.2/70.9 |
| Men and Women are Equal (Agree) | 58.5 | 58/67.7/56.4 |
| Wife Should Ask Husband’s Permission to Work (Agree) | 57.8 | 69.6/38/56.4 |
| Homosexuality Should be Prohibited (Agree) | 47.7 | 61.1/27.9/47 |
| Top Priority: Security/Economic Development/Rights and Liberties | 39.5/35.2/19.4 | AKP: 43.4/41.4/11.7  CHP: 32.7/29.7/31.9  HDP: 47.2/20.7/31.9 |

A few points stand out. First, one can see that liberal positions receive divided or lukewarm support on many questions. This is particularly true when liberal ideals are juxtaposed or put in conflict against other values or needs. Furthermore, in most cases, AKP supporters are markedly less liberal than those of CHP (particularly on questions concerning religion or morality) and the HDP (particularly on questions of state power and free expression). This finding stands in contrast to that from the 2008 survey—when secularists were less liberal on many broader political questions—but this likely reflects the changed circumstances in 2016, when the AKP was both more firmly in power and threats to core democratic principles were far clearer. Questions on Table 1 on women’s equality and homosexuality stand out in particular, corresponding to the above observation that cultural illiberalism is particularly pronounced in Turkey. Finally, with respect to other demographic variables (not reported in the table), education (as opposed to age, education, profession, and income) stands out as most important, with those with more education more likely to embrace liberal positions.

This survey provides a useful snapshot on a wide variety of questions, but cannot point to any trends. Here we have to rely upon surveys that have been conducted over several iterations, and the best one for our purposes is the well-known World Values Survey (WVS).[[60]](#endnote-59) It asks a variety of questions regarding political orientations, including support for democratic and non-democratic forms of government.[[61]](#endnote-60) Given our focus on (political) liberalism, and in particular on cultural values that might undergird it, the WVS’s Emancipative Values Index (EMI) can be of great use, It combines responses on several questions concerning personal autonomy, equality (in particular gender equality), choice (including abortion, divorce, and homosexuality), and voice (priority on giving people more say in society). The EMI has been used in multiple iterations of the WVS and used in historical analyses to explain culture shifts, human empowerment, and democratization.[[62]](#endnote-61) Its value ranges from 0 to 1.

Table 2 presents Turkey’s EMI scores over six iterations of the WVS. The most striking finding is the relative consistency of responses over time. Put differently, despite immense economic growth, social transformation, and incipient democratization in Turkey since 1990, there is no little evidence of a broader cultural shift favoring “emancipative values,” as has been found in numerous studies in other countries using WVS data.[[63]](#endnote-62) Most Turks remain firmly “in the middle” on the EMI, while a sizable percentage profess “low” emancipative values. In all iterations of the survey, only a small minority of respondents demonstrate “high” emancipative values. Turkey’s scores (measured by the mean) are not only much lower than West European states, but also lower than such countries as Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Serbia, Ukraine, and Russia in the most recent iteration of the survey.

Table 2 about here

Table 2 “Emancipative Values” in Turkey

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| EMI Score | 1990 | 1996 | 2001 | 2007 | 2011 | 2018 |
| Low (0-0.3) | 30.6 | 46.9 | 38.3 | 42.3 | 45 | 36.1 |
| Medium (0.3-0.7) | 57.7 | 44.2 | 52.4 | 51.8 | 51.8 | 58.4 |
| High (.07-1) | 11.7 | 8.9 | 9.3 | 5.9 | 3.2 | 5.5 |
| Mean | .40 | .34 | .35 | .36 | .33 | .36 |
| Std Deviation | .16 | .17 | .16 | .14 | .14 | .14 |
| N | 980 | 1835 | 3294 | 1341 | 1600 | 2375 |

Source: on-line analysis of WVS, www.wordlvaluesurvey.org

One might ask why this is the case. One possible answer is that the index is too weighted toward moral/sexual issues that might conflict with more traditional and religious values, both of which are held by most Turks.[[64]](#endnote-63) In this sense, one could perhaps suggest the index is “biased,” although another way of putting it is that, in line with what was suggested above, contemporary liberalism now embraces a host of cultural orientations, particularly on gender relations and sexuality more broadly speaking, that transcend a its more early-20th century focus on political institutions and political rights. Not surprisingly, simple cross-tab analysis finds that self-reported religious Turks are more likely to hold low emancipative values than those who claim to be less-religious.[[65]](#endnote-64) Similarly, the mean score on the EVI for those intending to vote for the AKP was much lower (.33) than those planning to cast votes for the CHP (.42) or HDP (.39) Education, income, self-reported social class, and satisfaction with the political situation (a proxy for AKP support) all correlated in an expected manner, whereas there is no evidence of pronounced divides on age, gender, or urban/rural residence. While there is no doubt that one could perform a more detailed examination of the survey data, for our purposes the most salient point from the WVS data (which is also found in other surveys) is that there is no reason to think Turkish society is a bastion of liberal values.

**Conclusion**

This article has documented the chronic failure of liberalism to take root in Turkey. Liberalism’s “conspicuous nonexistence” is connected to many factors, including political choices by the Republic’s founders, deep-rooted divisions and distrust in Turkish society, frequent invocation of “crisis” so that liberal freedoms are seen as risky or a luxury, and the prevalence of nationalist-conservative thought that in many respects as antithetical to contemporary liberalism. Notably, Turkey has had opportunity to move down a more liberal path, but these journeys have been cut short. The most recent one in the 2000s engendered high expectations, including unprecedented widespread demands from below (during the Gezi Park protests) for political changes in a more liberal direction. However, this too ultimately failed. Pulling a card from previous periods in Turkish history, the AKP has attempted to portray itself as the repository of the national will and Turks’ core values, and in so doing it has tried to de-legitimize dissent and pluralism, casting its opponents as existential threats to the state and nation. In this respect, one might suggest that Turkey has come “full circle”.[[66]](#endnote-65)

This is not to say that liberalism is forever doomed in Turkey. Elections in 2023 offer an opportunity for change, and, given developments over the past decade, they may be crucial to any hope for the country’s democratic future.[[67]](#endnote-66) Opposition parties believe they have a good chance to gain power, based on their victories in 2019 local elections, the country’s mounting economic problems, and their ability to form a coalition to stand against the AKP and pivot on issues such as religious expression to capture culturally-conservative but disgruntled AKP voters.[[68]](#endnote-67) Opinion polls throughout 2022 showed the opposition likely to prevail over the governing AKP-MHP alliance and against Erdoğan in presidential elections.[[69]](#endnote-68) At the time of this writing, much remains uncertain, including the opposition’s presidential candidate. By the time this paper is published, the results of these elections will be known. Still, it is worth briefly addressing prospects for liberalism in Turkey.

Clearly, an AKP victory would mean continuation of the status quo if not the strengthening of the present illiberal regime. Victory by the opposition, on the other hand, could perhaps given Turkey get another opportunity to move in a more liberal direction.

However, such an outcome would be only a necessary but not sufficient condition. More would need to be done. A positive sign, perhaps, the opposition’s stated plan to move back to a parliamentary system, which should, in theory, provide a check on executive power by making it far more accountable for its actions. This could in turn limit the power of the state and reduce the capriciousness of political decision-making. This, however, might be too optimistic a scenario. First, Turkey has been down this path before. A parliamentary system has not, historically, been able prevent corruption or move Turkey in a more liberal direction. Often, it has produced factionalization and instability. Moreover, if the opposition does prevail, would it really temper its victory by reducing state power? As noted, Turkish parties have focused on capturing the state and then using it against their opponents. Given Turkey’s polarized environment and the distrust between the AKP and its opponents, one can easily imagine a scenario where the “temptation of power” prevails and expansion of individual freedoms and liberties is pushed aside as a top priority.[[70]](#endnote-69) Instead, clientelism and crony capitalism could be employed by the incoming coalition to distribute spoils and keep the various factions of the opposition together. The opposition could also conduct its own purge of officials, including from the courts, and also try to use the media to give it a political advantage against what could be a still potent AKP. Indeed, this resembles what the AKP eventually did in the late 2000s after coming to power on a more liberal platform.

A larger concern is whether a victory by the anti-AKP coalition would change what appears to be a deeply-rooted political culture that is illiberal on many cultural issues. Here a central question concerns support for pluralism, including issues such as LGBTQ rights as well as the ever-vexed Kurdish question. Indeed, the latter has strong potential to undermine the coalition itself, as Kurdish voters will be important to any chance the opposition has at winning but prominent Turkish nationalist actors within the coalition, in particular the *Iyi* Party, are loathe to work with the Kurds to move forward on a solution that would grant them greater cultural and political rights.[[71]](#endnote-70) In other words, the divides in Turkish society are real and deep. Liberalism could perhaps help to bridge them, but it is at best questionable whether conditions today are sufficiently propitious for liberalism’s development in Turkey.

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**Notes**

1. Kubicek, “Turkey’s Inclusion.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Yanik, “The making,” and Altunışık, “The trajectory.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Kalaycioglu, “A Hundred Years.” There is, of course, a rich literature on this schism in Turkey. A seminal source is Mardin, “Center-Periphery Relations.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Turan, “Never quite making it.: [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Gürpinar, “The Trajectory,” 162. There is also a history of liberalism in the late Ottoman period that certainly informed Turkish liberalism after 1923. It is explored in Özavcı, “Liberalism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Özavcı, “Liberalism,” 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Numerous articles have explored “illiberal democracy” in various settings. See for example Zakaria, “The Rise.” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. A useful review can be found in Freeman, “Liberalism.” Many debates among liberals revolve around economic concerns (e.g. how property rights rank among other rights, the role of government in alleviating economic inequalities). These issues, however, are not central to my analysis. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Locke, *A Letter*, 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. There can, of course, be overlap between the two, and the state’s “need” to provide order and security can also be seen as a prerequisite for individuals to pursue their interests. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Berlin, *Four Essays*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Beliefs about extensive suffrage should be have evolved over time. Locke (1632-1704), for example, favored a constitutional monarchy with a parliament chosen by privileged (white) male voters (which was essentially what the United Kingdom had until the early 20th century), and Mill (1806-1873), while supporting female suffrage, championed a system in which the votes of more educated people would weigh more than those of the less educated. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The last confers group or community rights and is more associated with contemporary as opposed to more classical liberalism, which was relatively unconcerned with minorities, particularly ethnic minorities. For more see Kymlicka, [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Hanioğlu, *Atatürk*. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Mango, *Atatürk*, 536. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Özavcı, “Liberalism.” In particular, he upholds Ahmet Ağaoğlu (1869-1939) as the leading liberal of this period. Ağaoğlu, however, failed to prevail against those who sought to use state power and consequently limit individual rights in pursuit of the goals of the Kemalist Revolution, [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Özbudun, “The nature,” and Ete, “Tutelary Regimes.” For a more negative assessment that suggests Turkey more closely resembled a fascist state, see Parla and Davison, *Corporatist Ideology*. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Sofos, *Turkish Politics*. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Mardin, “Center-Periphery.” [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Sofos, *Turkish Politics*, 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Mardin, “The Ottoman Empire,” 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Turnaoğlu, *The Formation*, 241. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Quoted in Tomlin, *Life in Modern Turkey*, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Zurcher (“Three turning points”) sees the short-lived experiment in 1930 with an alternative political party, the Free Republican Party, combined with pressures from the Great Depression, as decisive in Turkey’s political development. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness*. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Karpat, “The Republican People’s Party,” 44, emphasis mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Berlin, *Four Essays*. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Sofos, *Turkish Politics*, 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Chichocka, “Understanding.” [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Kalaycioglu, “A Hundred Years,” and Isiksel, “Between Text and Context.” [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Constitution of the Turkish Republic (1961) (in English), translated by Sadık Balkan, Ahmet Uysal, and Kemal Karpat, available at <https://www.anayasa.gen.tr/1961constitution-text.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Jacoby, *Social Power*, 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Isiksel, “Between Text and Context,” 723. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Karaveli, *Why Turkey is Authoritarian*, 121-122. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. An English-language version of the 1982 Constitution can be found at <https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Turkey_2017.pdf?lang=en>. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Arat and Pamuk, *Turkey Between Democracy*, 57, and Isiksel, “Between Text and Context.” [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Quoted in Tezcur, *Muslim Reformers*, 157. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. For example, see Dagi, “Post-Islamism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Öniş, “Turkey-EU Relations,” 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. For comparison, the scores of the United States (.805), Germany (.863), Poland (which acceded to the EU in 2004) (.809), and Bulgaria (which was negotiating EU membership) (.629) were all much higher. In contrast, Russia’s score (.16) was much lower in 2004 and peaked at .301 in in 1992 and 1995. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. See V-Dem Institute, “Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021,” p. 19, available at <https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/dr/dr_2021.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
42. Çalışkan, “Toward a new political regime.” [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
43. For a self-critical review of this issue, see Kubicek, “Faulty Assumptions.” [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
44. The most developed exposition of this argument is Hintz, *Identity Politics*. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
45. Aydın-Düzgit, “The Islamist-Secularist.” [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
46. Bashirkov and Lancaster, “End of moderation.” [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
47. Sofos, *Turkish Politics*, 199-201. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
48. Cagaptay, “Turkey’s.” [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
49. Akdoğan, *AK Parti*, 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
50. Özavcı, “Liberalism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
51. Yayla, *Kemalizm*. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
52. Gürpinar, “The Trajectory,” 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
53. Denli, *Liberal Thought*, 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
54. One survey in 2016 found that only 5.4 percent of respondents identified most strongly as Liberal/Democrat, far less than Conservative/Religious (31.6 percent), Secularist/Ataturkist (13.5) Nationalist (27.8) and even Social Democratic/Communist (12.2). See Friedrich Naumann Foundation, “The Void.” [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
55. See “Biz Kimiz? Hayat Tarzaları Araştırması 2008,” available at <https://konda.com.tr/rapor/165/biz-kimiz-hayat-tarzlari-arastirmasi-2008>. This is a report of a survey of 6482 respondents conducted by KONDA. The report presents limited data, but suggests that those who are more “liberal” on issues such as gender roles or personal freedoms are less “liberal” or “democratic” on larger societal questions such as closing political parties, the latter of which was a very current issue in 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
56. Hazama, “Conservatives.” [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
57. Friedrich Naumann Foundation, “The Void.” The survey was conducted by the professional polling organization Metropoll in June 2016 (a month prior to the coup attempt) with a representative sample of 1285 respondents. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
58. Notably, 7.2 percent of AKP supporters said nothing could justify such restrictions whereas 50.4 percent of HDP supporters stated this position. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
59. The survey report, while presenting data broken down by gender, age, profession, income, and education, does not do so for religiosity, although it does report that 70.6 percent of AKP supporters say they are “pious” whereas 75.5 percent of CHP supporters say they are “believers” but not “pious”. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
60. Data can be found and downloaded and limited on-line analysis can be conducted at www.worldvaluessurvey.org. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
61. Analysis of these questions can be found in this Special Issue in Yeşilada, “The AKP.” [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
62. Welzel, *Freedom Rising*. Its code on the WVS is RESEMAVAL. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
63. Ibid. One could also be directed to Welzel’s numerous publications with Ronald Inglehart. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
64. Yeşilada, “The AKP,” develops this point in greater detail. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
65. For example, in 2018, 40.8 percent those who described themselves as “religious” (two-thirds of all respondents) were “low” on the EMI compared to 25.7 percent who described themselves as “not religious” and only 13 percent of the small number of respondents (1 percent) who said they are atheists. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
66. Sofos, *Turkish Politics*, 218. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
67. See, for example, Hussain, “Turkey’s Next Elections,” as well as the special report on Turkey, “Erdogan’s Empire,” *The Economist*, January 21, 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
68. These conditions were in place in 2019, which might offer a blueprint for 2023. See Esen and Gumuscu, “Killing Competitive Authoritarianism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
69. See for example, “Al-Monitor/Premise poll finds tight race for Erdogan in Turkey's elections,” *Al-Monitor*, December 7, 2022, available at tinyurl.com/tmb3xu9d. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
70. The notion of “temptation of power” is a general one for ostensibly democratic parties that come to power in countries with weak democratic institutions. See Hamid, *Temptations of Power*. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
71. *Birgün*, “Meral Akşener: HDP’nin olduğu masada biz olmayız,” September 6, 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)