



PERSPECTIVES

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Profiling Erdoğan's Fan Club— No Democracy, No Problem

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Studies have shown that only 2.4% of Turks believe their country's biggest problem is its democratic deficit. Advanced democratic standards, or the acute lack of them, have never been a game changer in any Turkish election. In other words, democracy does not sell in the Turkish market.

Turkey's Islamist leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has not lost a single election, be it presidential, parliamentary, municipal, or referendum, since he came to power in 2002. His Justice and Development Party's (AKP) nationwide support has ranged between 34% (in 2002) and 52% (in 2018). This is a spectacular success story by any criterion, especially for a leader whose authoritarian-to-tyrannical governance is not a secret, even to his voters.

What lies behind this 21st century Turkish Stockholm Syndrome? Why have so many Turks fallen in love with their executioner? The sociopolitical factors on which Erdoğan's popularity is based are too extensive to address in one brief article. It is worth noting, however, that there is a missing link between Erdoğan's popularity and universal democratic values.

In its 2020 assessment, Freedom House put Turkey on its list of countries that are "[not free](#)." Other countries in Turkey's [grouping](#) include Afghanistan, Angola, Belarus, Brunei, Chad, Djibouti, Eritrea, Gabon, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, North Korea, Nicaragua, Qatar, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. According to the World Justice Project, Turkey [ranks](#) 107th out of 128 countries on rule of law. According to Reporters Without Borders' [press freedom ranking](#), Turkey is 154th out of 180 countries, scoring worse than Pakistan, Congo, and Bangladesh.

That embarrassing performance would suffice to overthrow a dozen leaders in any part of the democratic world. In addition, corruption and nepotism are rampant in Turkey but reporting on them can be very dangerous. What of welfare, then? Turkey's per capita income is barely \$8,500.

A maverick Turkish YouTube channel recently carried out a [social experiment](#). A few days after Erdoğan said Turkey's future was in Europe, an interviewer went to a crowded Istanbul square with a microphone to solicit the opinions of passersby. Giving the question a deliberate twist, the interviewer asked one man: "What do you think about the main opposition leader's comments that Turkey's future is in Europe?" "How wrong," the man answered. "Europe is our enemy." The interviewer then apologized and said, "Oh, my mistake! My editors just told me it was Erdoğan who said Turkey's future is in Europe. Your comment?" "But of course," the man replied. "If Erdoğan said it, it is true."

Who is that man, and the 25 million or so other Turks who unconditionally vote for Erdoğan? In a 2018 [study](#), pollster KONDA profiled the Erdoğan fan:

- 66% are primary or secondary school graduates. Only 10% have a university degree.
- 89% of AKP voters' fathers are primary or secondary school graduates.
- 45% live on a monthly income of TL1,201-2,000 (\$162-270).
- 59% say they hardly make ends meet.
- 46% identify themselves as traditionally conservative and 43% as religiously conservative.
- 87% identify themselves as either pious or religionist.
- Only 13% of the women surveyed do not wear any kind of Islamic headscarf.
- 83% are Turks while 11% are Kurds.
- Four-fifths say they would never vote for any leader other than Erdoğan.
- Only 3% think Turkey's foreign policy is a failure.
- 52% say they feel insecure in Turkey.
- Only 20% do not approve of government restrictions on access to social media.
- Only 23% think Turkey should become a member of the EU.
- 89% approve of the government's forceful appointing of trustees to private companies.
- 91% approve of the government's forceful closing of educational institutions (schools and universities).
- 36% acknowledge that the government arbitrarily and unjustly detains innocent people.

- 76% approve media bans for national interests.

In a 2019 study, researcher SODEV [found](#) that only 50.6% of AKP voters think the judiciary is independent and only 57.3% that the courts are unbiased. Overall, only about a third of Turks believe they have an independent and unbiased judiciary.

More recently, in November 2020, an opinion poll conducted by researcher Artı Bir [revealed](#) that only 1.7% of Turks trust the courts and 1.2% trust parliament.

And in December, research house Optimar [found](#) that only 2.4% of Turks think their country's biggest problem is its democratic deficit. Engin Ardiç, a pro-government columnist, commented: "This means 98% of the people do not have a problem about democracy."

That's the heart of the matter. Advanced democratic standards, or the acute lack of them, have never been a game changer in any Turkish election. In other words, democracy does not sell in the Turkish market.

AKP voters, who make up 40-50% of all Turkish voters, are less educated, religiously conservative, relatively poor, and insecure Erdoğan fans who do not care about democratic values and approve of his authoritarianism. That profile gives Erdoğan carte blanche for further oppression, which, again, will come with no political cost.

Research shows that most Turks are happy with their ballot box democracy with no checks and balances, weakened institutions, government-controlled judiciary, and widening democratic deficit. Let them enjoy it.

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