

Consequences of Securitization Process on Internal and External Levels in Türkiye (2011-2022)

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Abstract

This article critically examines the repercussions of securitization within the Turkish political system, analysing its implications at both domestic and regional dimensions. It focuses on the domestic level as one of several factors that have exacerbated the polarization of society and negatively affected Türkiye's normative foreign policy. The article adopted the components of the securitization process as the theoretical framework, with its three aspects: existential threats, emergency actions, and breaking free of rules, as demonstrated in "Security: A New Framework for Analysis" book. The article concluded that vulnerabilities represented in the decline of democracy led to the loss of the political system's popularity and the prevalence of a state of polarization in its two parts: elite and masses. Authoritarian tendencies have also eroded the barriers between domestic and foreign policy. Indeed, the foreign policy reflected the ruler's perceptions away from institutionalization and bureaucracy. The traditional centers of power lost their pivotal role in foreign policy, and new institutions took over traditional authorities' functions under the executive branch's direct leadership. This shift enabled the ruling regime to engage in the Middle Eastern conflict zones in keeping with their tendency to feel proud and grandiose.

Keywords

Securitization, Foreign Policy, Existential Threat, Emergency Action, Polarization

1. Introduction

Turkish foreign policy has witnessed a remarkable shift in goals and orientations. Before the Arab Spring, all eyes had turned to Türkiye as a potential dem-

ocratic model for aspiring Arab countries. This perception has been reinforced by Türkiye's strong diplomatic and economic relations with the region under the AKP government. Unexpectedly, the Turkish model has fallen and been criticized in its principles and applications. The AKP government has stepped back and abandoned the main principles that contributed to its success at the domestic and regional levels. If normative principles controlled the first decade of the AKP, the second decade, which coincided with the Revolts, represented a coup against the principles of the first. Türkiye's "zero problems with neighbors" principle had evolved into "zero partners". Türkiye's Middle East policy, which opposed the region's militarization, had been replaced by military involvement in Syria and Libya. At the same time, Türkiye gave up its role as an impartial arbitrator and supporter of the status quo in the Middle East (Keyman, 2012).

The positive transformations of Turkish foreign policy witnessed have been driven by the strength points achieved in the AKP's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party) first decade, including democracy, economic flourish, and social inclusion. As a result, the government abandoned the security perspective in the local context, reflecting positively on the regional context. Such assumption is supported by the AKP golden age policymakers who argued that the main mistake committed by Türkiye and undermined its role as a regional actor was "viewing society as a potential enemy", where politics had been driven by fear of internal problems (Davutoglu, 2012).

Scholars and researchers categorize the factors that influenced Turkish foreign policy during the study period into regional factors, such as the instability of the Arab region after the Arab uprisings, and major power relations. This includes Türkiye's conflict with the United States and the European Union and its growing closeness with revisionist states like Russia and China. In the context of the article, focusing on internal factors, Hakkı Taş (Taş, 2020) believes that the main reason for the deviation in Turkish foreign policy was the rise of populism resulting from the transition to the presidential political system. He emphasizes that this shift has deeply impacted the formation and execution of Ankara's foreign policy. Meanwhile, both Burak Bilgehan Özpek and Nebahat Tanriverdi Yaşar argue that a mix of populism and Islamism was the primary driver of an aggressive foreign policy, mainly serving as a means to deflect internal political criticism arising from the erosion of democratic values (Özpek & Tanriverdi Yaşar, 2017). Barış Kesgin suggests that the main reason lies in decision-makers adopting the principle of strategic depth, which prompted them to engage robustly in Middle East crises (Kesgin, 2019). Yasin Avcı and İbrahim Kurnaz contend that the Islamic tendencies of decision-makers influenced the decision-making process based on religious and historical ties between Türkiye and Middle Eastern countries. In this context, decision-makers chose to exclude divergent sections of the population, such as secular and liberal Turks, which led to counterproductive outcomes (Avcı & Kurnaz, 2018). On the other hand, Bülent Aras and Aylin Gonerer believe that the significant shift originated from the ruling elite's percep-

tion of their role. Contrary to the traditional view of Türkiye as an agent for the Western camp, the Justice and Development Party elite lean towards seeing Türkiye as a global power with multiple responsibilities. Consistent with this perspective, Türkiye should both strengthen its ties with the West and deepen its connections in the Middle East (Aras & Gorener, 2010). Murat Yeşiltaş focused on the hypothesis of “geopolitical exceptionalism” as an alternative to the “defensive geopolitical vision”. Contrary to the defensive geopolitical perspective, the new vision is rooted in historical and cultural intersections capable of inducing a type of geographical convergence. In this context, Türkiye’s territories are considered an integral part of the surrounding geographical regions, allowing Türkiye to play a global role (Yeşiltaş, 2013). In this context, this article will focus on adopting the securitization perception as the fundamental reason for the transformation Turkish foreign policy has witnessed.

With reviving securitization perception at the expense of democracy, the positive change in Türkiye’s foreign policy before the Arab Spring, toward more peace, stability, and cooperation in the region, was quickly and unexpectedly turned into a process of re-securitization due to various political vulnerabilities. This article formulates the main assumption that “Türkiye’s domestic vulnerabilities have negatively influenced its regional foreign policy towards the Middle East”. The article tries to prove that the decline of democracy led to the erosion of the barriers between domestic and foreign policy. Thus, the foreign policy reflected the ruler’s perceptions away from institutionalization and bureaucracy. In sum, the article highlights the political vulnerabilities, and then tries to explain relational links among those problems as a motive and the regional politics as a result.

2. Securitization of the Political System

The securitization process is a more extreme and radical version of politicization. Politics become beyond the established rules, and issues are framed as a special kind of politics that needs procedures outside the normal bounds. When an issue is being “securitized”, it is considered more crucial than others and should take absolute priority as being an existential threat. In this context, security is a “reference practice” through which it does not matter whether the chosen issue is an existential threat but how it is introduced. In other words, the “criteria of securitization are constituted by the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects”. The securitization process has three main aspects. First is a securitizing actor. He is in charge and has the social capital allows to securitize an issue, demanding freedom from all constraints, and having all resources. Second is the masses. They tolerate and accept violations of rules. Such acceptance can stem from dominance and coercion means. Third is the possibility of conjuring a security threat. If specific issues exist in the collective consciousness as a threat, they can easily be framed and institutionalized based on the persistence or re-

curing of such issues. Three actions must be completed during the securitization process when the factors mentioned above are present: existential threats framing, emergency action implementation, and breaking free of rules (Buzan et al., 1998).

In the Turkish context, the securitization process moved from securitizing some issues or one sector to securitizing the political regime, where terms like “state” and nation are synonymous with “ruler” and “elite”. The three aspects of the securitization process—securitizing actors, securitized issues, and mass acceptance, are available. The president and the AKP elite stand in for the “securitizing actor”, who, thanks to his social capital, can recognize problems that should be securitized. Instead of dealing with issues through suitable political procedures, they were securitized. 2013 Gezi protests were framed as an attempted coup aimed at overcoming the democratically elected Islamic government, in complete disregard for the state of discontent resulting from restrictions on rights and liberties (Ağartan, 2018). This narrative had momentum due to the simultaneous fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The corruption scandal was framed as a “judicial coup” conducted by the Gulen movement, HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, Peoples’ Democratic Party) as an enemy of the state, “Academics for Peace” as a terrorist organization, the “No” camp of the 2017 referendum as a coup supporter, and anyone criticizes the government as an enemy of the state. Economically, the Western powers were blamed for sowing “chaos” in the country due to their “hatred” of the rise of a “new Türkiye” (Taş, 2018). Needless to say, the Kurdish question has turned from strategic peace to a strategic war, and coercion instruments have replaced political ones. Such accusations of internal and external actors and state violence against minorities led to procedures that increased the confusion and complexity of the scene; thus, the state has turned to a deep polarization status.

Alongside the securitizing process of various issues, the ruler elite gets the masses’ support. Social capital stems from two causes. The first is the AKP’s successive electoral victories in 2002, 2007, and 2011. A quantitative study found that being a political winner has the most considerable effect on satisfaction with democracy in Türkiye. Furthermore, party identity is more important than other variables in determining citizens’ satisfaction with democracy. Citizens support the established policies as an extension of their support for the ruling party instead of evaluating the performance of democratic institutions (Sema & Sahin, 2020). The second cause is the redistribution of wealth and power. AKP has created a stakeholder class from the formerly excluded sectors of society, especially the religiously conservative Anatolian bourgeoisie and the informal sector workers. Philanthropy has additionally been employed to combat poverty. All of these, in turn, enabled the party to establish electoral predominance (Çınar & Sayin, 2014). Regarding mass acceptance, the decline in human rights indicators points to using coercive tools, as expected, as a concomitant result of the securitization process. According to Freedom House, Türkiye recorded a significant decline in freedom indicators by obtaining 32 points (out of 100) in the Po-

litical and Civil Rights Index, to be classified as “Not Free” after being partially free until 2017 (*Turkey. Freedom in the World 2020, 2020*). In 2016, Türkiye also recorded the most significant decline in the global indicators of rights and freedoms, with a decrease of 15 points (*Cinar & Kose, 2020*). In this context, the memories of recurrent military coups in Türkiye’s recent past made it easy to frame political issues as a security threat by invoking the concern existing in the Turkish collective consciousness of the military re-involvement possibility in civilian life. Therefore, the main accusations revolved around initiating a coup, supporting the coup, or aiding the putschists.

The successful securitization process followed by the regime has three steps discussed in the following sections.

3. Successful Securitization Components

1) Existential Threat

Throughout the history of the Turkish Republic, the political system has been securitized despite the different policies followed—the isolationist policy in the one-party era, the Western camp policies during the Cold War, the multi-dimensional policy in the post-Cold War, and the diversity of the various securitized issues—The Soviet threat, Arab nationalism, the Kurdish question, economic openness, and the revival of Islamic identity.

Under AKP’s administration, the same policies have been followed under democratic cover. In its first decade, the leading security issue was democratic considerations, while the main threat was the Kemalist state apparatus, military, and judiciary. As a faction excluded and largely marginalized before, the AKP administration portrayed their struggle against both institutions as a struggle for democracy and recognition of a legitimate government that won citizens’ trust through the ballot box (*Kutlar et al., 2020*). In fact, this narrative had a logical basis if military interventions against conservative governments, such as the Welfare Party government in the 1990s, were evoked. With popular support, the AKP government modified “tutelage democracy” by forcing the penetration of the judiciary and the military to accept the new hegemonic system (*Çinar & Sayin, 2014*). The military coup plots, such as the 2007 attempt, helped to damage the credibility and popularity of the military establishment. Meanwhile, EU reform packages successfully disarmed the army and brought it under civilian authority. Furthermore, the Ergenekon trials brought about a structural change where on the one hand, the trials led to the disposal of old leaders, such as the former head of the armed forces and nine other generals. On the other hand, expanding the accusation circle led to exercising a form of self-censorship for eschewing imprisonment or dismissal (*Demirsu, 2017*). Although these trials were initially a victory for the civilian government and a kind of democratization of the military, they are now widely seen as a kind of “legal nihilism” (*Gehring, 2019*). Together with the 2010 constitutional amendments that raised fundamental shifts to the structure of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Judicial Coun-

cil, the threat of military institutions has become a thing of the past (Martin, 2015). Nevertheless, establishing civilian rule does not necessarily equate to a transition to democratic rule. When the AKP secured its power, its pre-eminent authoritarian tendencies rose in a desire to remake the “imagined society”, the transition to a highly centralized and personalizing system, and the disregard of the opposition, what can be called “de-democratization” (Özpek, 2018).

Because fragile political systems are based primarily on consolidating the masses and accumulating support against a potential enemy, the threat narratives have had to persist despite the end of the influence of Kemalist and militaristic institutions. In the beginning, sensitive and comprehensive issues, such as the Kurdish issue, were placed on the agenda as critical, and old issues, such as the Cyprus crisis and the Armenian question, were brought up. Those issues to which the adjective “urgency” was added, and thus a demand was made to line up behind the leadership to solve them (Sezal, 2017). Hence, in the context of the securitization of the entire system, an essentialist definition of opposition as the mouthpiece of the military tutelary and the supporters of the attempted coup has been formulated.

The political regime claimed to aspire to secure democracy by monopolizing the representation of democracy. Indeed, AKP resorted to the old exclusion policies that were previously practiced against it, and, thus, Türkiye’s classification as a “partly free”, “semi-democracy”, “hybrid regime”, or “defective democracy” state slipped to described as “Delegative Democracy”, “electoral democracy”, electoral authoritarian, competitive authoritarianism, Erdoganism, competitive democracy, competitive autocracy, neoliberal authoritarianism, pseudo-democracy, and “unfree” (Özbudun, 2015; Yilmaz et al., 2019).

Ironically, the turbulent scene restrained claims that the state was democratic in the AKP’s first decade. In fact, the regime neither work to consolidate democratic foundations nor to strengthen state institutionalization. On the contrary, a state of “de-institutionalism”, “anti-institutionalism”, and clientelism has prevailed. Therefore, it seemed like the regime adhered to democratic values to legitimize its existence, then soon abandoned them. “Özlem Kaygusuz” claimed that since 2006, Türkiye “witnessed a steady rise and consolidation of a neoliberal security state” in response to the criticisms raised against the political elite hegemonic crisis, where The precepts of this “neoliberal security state” then began to shift to a “politics of regime security”, hence the AKP regime’s security is identified with and naturalized as state security (Kaygusuz, 2018). Of course, if the regime is framed and becomes equivalent to the security of the state itself, then any criticism of the policies of the ruler and his elite would be a betrayal.

2) Emergency Action

The regime faced successive obstacles, such as the Gezi protests, the economic decline, the loss of the parliamentary majority in June 2015, and the failure of the Kurdish peace process (Erişen & Erdoğan, 2018). Crises threatened the survival of the current dominant system. However, they did not turn into a general

concern that might push for exceptional measures or change the institutional form of the political system. For example, while the Gezi protests were a pride moment for millions, they challenged the legitimacy of the AKP regime.

In response, the internal security sector has been securitizing. “The Internal Security Act” entered into force in May 2015, disrupting the relationship between security and freedom. The law was prepared by representatives of the AKP alone without the involvement of other actors for just one week, without even being checked by the Constitution and Justice Commissions of Parliament. By law, security powers relating to arrest, search, detention, and use of weapons have expanded without concrete evidence, where suspicion is considered enough. Notably, the law gave legitimacy to the classification of the right to demonstrate and assemble as terrorist activities, considering that they can be the beginning of internal security threats. Within six months of the law’s entry into force, 2207 members of the security forces were retired by the decision of the “Higher Evaluation Board of the General Directorate of Security. Hence, their names were presented to the public as members of the security organization of “Parallel Structure” (Çolak, 2017). Thus, the police replaced the army in the new security system (Tuğal, 2014).

A new era of securitization started with the attempted coup in 2016. By framing the entire political system as threatened and must be securitized, A transition from a parliamentary system to a “Turkish form of the presidential system” that is not subject to the norms of democracy has been successfully enforced. The violence of the coup plotters, represented in the killing of 249, the wounding of thousands, and the attack on critical institutions such as Parliament with aircraft, brought the history of military interventions to mind. The collective consciousness led to widespread solidarity with the regime to prevent military intervention in determining the fate of civilians (Karakatsanis, 2020). This decisive moment was exploited by a purge campaign that included all state institutions, where a large number of members of the military were dismissed, and many internal security agencies were supported and strengthened, in addition to interfering in the armed force’s recruitment and promotion procedures (Uluçakar, 2020). So far, all these measures are logical and justified, but what is not justified anymore is the expansion of the accusation circle to include civil society, academics, and members of opposition parties, intensifying authoritarian trends and normalizing the state of emergency. At such a moment, the regime could demand freedom from all constraints and get all the resources to deal with such a threat. It has become able to break free from the rules through two steps (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey) the state of emergency and the presidential system.

Days after the coup failed, a state of emergency was declared with the stated goal of eliminating internal enemies (Çıdam, 2017). Although the state of emergency is an exception that must be applied for a short time, it has lasted for two years, during which executive decrees were used, not subject to legislative or par-

liamentary oversight, to bring about fundamental changes to the structure of the state. Such changes have continued even when the state of emergency is canceled (Burç & Tokatlı, 2020).

During the state of emergency, a referendum was held in April 2017 to amend the constitution and give the President of the Republic broad powers (Voulvouli, 2019), in exchange for significantly diminishing Judiciary and legislative powers, thus creating an authoritarian presidential system from top to bottom (Gençkaya, 2018). This system characterized by the lack of vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms, reliance on populist elections, control of the media, and the presence of a central economic system that allows the political authority to dispose of resources as it pleases, eliminating the opposition by coercive methods or at least marginalizing it (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020). These measures were described as a “civil coup”, “organizational coup”, and a “palace coup” carried out by the executive authority to unseat and limit the other authorities. In contrast, authoritarian regimes deal with institutional restrictions as obstructing and unnecessary. Furthermore, this system carried some aspects of the former Kemalist system, such as the primacy of the state over society (Aydın-Düzgit, 2019). In this context, a one-man regime has been successfully established, described as a form of Caesarism, Bonapartism, and a “Turkish type” of civil fascism (Ulus, 2020). In such a new system, breaking free of rules has been the main feature, as explained in the next section.

3) Breaking Free of Rules

Under the referendum and subsequent presidential elections held in 2018, the President of the Republic has the power to Appoint and dismiss: deputies, the President, ministers, high-ranking executives (Article 104), The Chairperson, and the members of the State Supervisory Council (Article 108); The Chief of the General Staff (Article 117); members of The Council of Higher Education (Article 131). He also has the right to: Call to amend the constitution; Define national security policies; Use the armed forces; pardon convicts (Article 104); regulate the establishment, abolition, duties, and powers, and the organizational structure of ministries (Article 106) (*The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 1982*).

The matter continued beyond expanding the powers granted to the President; instead, both Parliament and the judiciary suffered from disrupting and limiting their effectiveness and prominent roles. Under the presidential system, many well-established parliamentary functions were withdrawn in favor of the President. There are many examples. First: The President of the Republic became responsible for submitting the budget bill to the Parliament (Article 161). Second: Ministers became accountable to the President of the Republic instead of Parliament. Thus ministers became public servants appointed and dismissed by individual will because they did not enjoy parliamentary confidence motion. Third: While Parliament has the right to ask the vice presidents and ministers written parliamentary questions, it cannot do the same with the President. Fourth:

The decisions and decrees of the President during a state of emergency are not subject to parliamentary oversight (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Finally, all these privileges have yet to be matched by fundamental oversight tools since submitting a motion for an investigation with the President of the Republic requires an absolute parliamentary majority. For the motion to become an official investigation, two-thirds of parliament members must approve (Article 105) (*The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 1982*). Since the presidential elite is the hegemon party in Parliament, fulfilling such a condition is impossible. Mutual support between the President and the AKP confirms this assumption. The President supported his party in the 2015 parliamentary elections when he was an honorary president without natural powers, clearly violating the constitution. He also took over the party's chairmanship in 2017, demonstrating the impression that the state was becoming a partisan presidency (Akman & Akçali, 2017). Needless to say, parliamentary legislation and decrees have been used extensively to achieve the President's wishes.

Regarding the judiciary, the process of losing its independence began early on the pretext of getting rid of the parallel Kemalist state. The constitutional referendum held in 2010 contained a significant revision of the judiciary, where the composition of HSYK was changed with the power of the executive above it increasing (Özdikmenli & Ovalı, 2014). Hence, the size of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors has expanded to allow the executive authority and Parliament to appoint some senior judges and prosecutors (Taş, 2015). In 2013, the principle of "secret investigations" was eliminated by forcing the judicial police to immediately report any ongoing secret investigations to the government in response to corruption scandals. In a blatant challenge to the independence of the judiciary, the government-supported "Platform for Unity in the Judiciary" (YBP) during the elections for the HSYK held in 2014, in turn, declared their loyalty to the government and AKP parliament. Once YBP won, four prosecutors with a core role in the corruption investigations were fired, proving the government's complete control of HSYK and the entire judiciary (Özbudun, 2015). In the same context, the judicial rulings that are supposed to be venerated have been criticized and violated in many situations, including criticizing the judicial order to halt the demolition of Ghazi Park (İğsız, 2014), criticizing the judicial order to lift the ban on Twitter, and violating the court's decision to stop construction work in the presidential palace (Taş, 2015). In the aftermath of the military coup attempt, these violations were partial and indirect until the opportunity arose to nationalize the entire judiciary irreversibly. Immediately after the military coup failed, two members of the Constitutional Court were dismissed, and ten members of HSYK were arrested (Jongerden, 2020). In the months following the state of emergency, the number of judges arrested reached 2745, and the transfer of judges has been normalized without justification other than "service requirements". In May 2021, 3070 judges and prosecutors were transferred, and 3968 were dismissed (*Turkey 2021*

Report, 2021). According to the constitutional amendment, the President of the Republic has the right to appoint and dismiss three members from the High Court of Appeals; two members from the Council of State (Article 146); The Chief Public Prosecutor, and the Deputy Chief Public Prosecutor of the High Court of Appeals; the quarter of the members of the Council of State (Article 164) (*The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 1982*). In addition, the 13 HSYK members are appointed rather than being elected; the President appoints four members, the parliament, dominated by the President's elite, appoints seven of them, and the Minister of Justice, also chosen by the President, appoints the remaining two members (*Griffen et al., 2019*).

The constitutional amendments made by presidential decrees issued during the state of emergency are not subject to be brought before the Constitutional Court, either in form or substance (Articles 119 & 167). Basically, the state of emergency is considered a state of derogatory to the constitution by suspending some of its articles and detracting from basic rights and freedoms during the state of emergency 2016: 2018, 32 presidential decrees were declared. Some decisions not directly related to the emergency were made in explicit contradiction with the logic of the emergency itself, such as 126,000 persons' dismissal from public service without trial for life and without paying social benefits. Meanwhile, the dismissed employees have resorted to the Constitutional Court. However, the court ruled that it had no power to test emergency decrees. Thus, emergency decrees became unconstrained by the legislative power dominated by the president's elite and the judiciary after the Court relinquished its function (*The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 1982*). A good example of undermining judicial sovereignty is the decline in the Rule of Law and Control of Corruption Indicators, as shown in the following table (*Kaufmann & Kraay, 2020*).

Indicator (year)	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Rule of law	0.05	0.08	0.11	0.04	0.01	-0.21	-0.32	-0.36
Control of corruption	0.03	0.11	0.03	0.16	-0.15	-0.19	-0.33	-0.34

Note: World Bank: -2.5 weak, 2.5 strong.

In sum, power has been concentrated in the hands of the President of the Republic in exchange for removing the authority of political institutions and ministries and weakening the parliament and the judiciary, with no guarantees against the non-institutional policies' failure (*Aras, 2019*).

4. Securitization Consequences on Internal and External Levels

The approach of securitization had severe repercussions, both internally and externally. At the internal level, the securitization stemming mainly from the decline in democratic indicators and the consolidation of powers led to: 1) the po-

litical regime losing the popularity it had established over two decades and 2) a state of extreme polarization. Externally, the foreign policy-making process has become one-sided and needs more institutional standards.

1) The Internal Level

a) Loss of Popularity

The process of “securitization of the political system” and feeling potential threats created actual threats represented in the crisis of hegemony. The regime has fought for political, economic, and social domination for two decades—such hegemony is in danger due to losing its main pillars (Elçi, 2021). For a decade, the AKP’s popularity depended on its ability to obtain sufficient popular support in successive elections, which has changed dramatically. In the successive parliamentary elections of June 2015, November 2015, and 2018, the ruling party failed to secure an absolute majority. This clear shift signaled the winds of change on the horizon. Regarding the presidential elections in 2014 and 2018, the vote showed the extent of prevalent division over the existing political system, with an uncomfortable percentage of victory (51.79% and 52.59%, respectively) (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020). Meanwhile, the president’s party was defeated in the 2019 local elections, losing the most important and populous cities, including Ankara, Istanbul, Antalya, and Izmir (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020). Municipalities along the entire Aegean and Mediterranean coastline voted for the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), while Municipalities in southeast Anatolia voted for the HDP (Yavuz, 2018). For two reasons, the AKP’s loss of Istanbul has pivotal indications on the AKP hegemony crisis. The first is that the party has ruled Istanbul for 25 years, and President Erdogan began his political career as a mayor there, indicating a sharp decline in popular support. The second point is that the opposition party’s victory necessitated questioning the election’s integrity. The president has consistently cited this mechanism as the primary source of his legitimacy, stemming from the “ballot box” (Christofis, 2020). Such a defeat did not come out of nowhere but rather stemmed mainly from a move away from focusing on the needs of citizens and focusing on the usual discourse of security. The official discourse of the Justice and Development Party and its ally, the Nationalist Movement Party, used the rhetoric of national survival and blamed the opposition for the major crises. In contrast, the opposition prioritized more substantive propositions, including Commitment to governance, developing the economy, improving transportation services, and helping the neediest groups, such as students and the elderly (Aras & Helms, 2021).

The significance of the recent local elections is illustrated by the fact that for more than a decade, the power of AKP has relied on two factors: the ability to address large segments of the population and the ability to channel state resources to the poorest to win loyalty. With the municipal elections, both capacities were undermined. Opposition parties dominated urban provinces with a large population and a higher contribution to Türkiye’s GDP. They controlled 42 provinces (out of 81), with a total population of nearly 52 million (62%) and a contribution to the GDP of TL 3 trillion (72.4%), as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Provinces out of AKP control after 2019 election.

Province	2014	2019	Population	GDP
Adana	MHP	CHP	2263373.00	82074569.44
Amasya	AKP	MHP	335331.00	12068707.95
Ankara	AKP	CHP	5747325.00	395730878.66
Antalya	AKP	CHP	2619832.00	149701206.23
Artvin	AKP	CHP	169543.00	8765710.63
Aydın	CHP	CHP	1134031.00	41842664.35
Bilecik	AKP	CHP	228334.00	12637108.59
Bolu	AKP	CHP	320014.00	17003139.43
Burdur	CHP	CHP	273716.00	11433201.13
Çanakkale	CHP	CHP	557276.00	29062602.97
Çankırı	AKP	MHP	196515.00	7746262.55
Diyarbakır	BDP	HDP	1791373.00	41246384.15
Edirne	CHP	CHP	412115.00	18195865.10
Erzincan	AKP	MHP	237351.00	11131030.13
Eskişehir	CHP	CHP	898369.00	48897977.52
Hakkâri	BDP	HDP	278218.00	8566421.77
Hatay	CHP	CHP	1670712.00	51655714.41
Mersin	MHP	CHP	1891145.00	79281899.00
Istanbul	AKP	CHP	15840900.00	1327451595.99
İzmir	CHP	CHP	4425789.00	263037661.69
Kars	MHP	HDP	281077.00	7543796.19
Kastamonu	AKP	MHP	375592.00	14781867.18
Kırklareli	CHP	BAĞIMSIZ	366363.00	20609296.39
Kırşehir	AKP	CHP	242944.00	8186350.60
Kütahya	AKP	MHP	578640.00	24197100.27
Manisa	MHP	MHP	1456626.00	70990939.50
Mardin	BAYIMSIZ	HDP	862757.00	24071548.57
Muğla	CHP	CHP	1021141.00	55069068.89
Siirt	BDP	HDP	331980.00	8801217.18
Sinop	CHP	CHP	218408.00	6909993.96
Tekirdağ	CHP	CHP	1113400.00	73808082.74
Tunceli	BDP	TKP	83645.00	4133866.45
Van	BDP	HDP	1141015.00	21145607.46
Bayburt	AKP	MHP	85042.00	2839510.06
Karaman	AKP	MHP	258838.00	11872387.72
Batman	BDP	HDP	626319.00	14130046.71

Continued

Bartın	MHP	MHP	201711.00	6393727.51
Ardahan	AKP	CHP	94932.00	3399121.78
Iğdır	BPD	HDP	203159.00	6099862.09
Yalova	AKP	CHP	291001.00	14671091.09
Karabük	MHP	MHP	249287.00	9610564.74
Osmaniye	MHP	MHP	553012.00	16079768.99
TOTAL			51928151.00	3042875417.75
%			62.1% out of (83614362.00) citizen	70.43% out of (4320191226.77 TL)

Source: *YeniŞefek* (2014, 2019), TÜİK (2021, 2023).

b) Polarization

Polarization involves groups with so many conflicting viewpoints that reaching a minimal agreement becomes challenging. This often results in a social network composed of subgroups with frayed ties (Furman & Tunç, 2019). It is an evolving condition that starts with theoretical aspects that turn over time into different, opposing, and extreme practices (DiMaggio et al., 1996). Political polarization constitutes a threat to the extent that individuals and groups line up along multiple lines of potential conflict and organize around exclusive identities, thus “crystallizing interests into opposite factions, which have consequences on social integration and political stability” (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008).

Polarization is both a cause and a consequence of the crisis that Türkiye is currently experiencing. Democratic decline and the tendency to authoritarianism have resulted in a state of acute, sharp-edged, structural, and multi-level polarization. Polarization and strong opposition increased the sense of insecurity among the political elite and stakeholders, who took a more restrictive approach to the public sphere as long as it served their interests (Gürsoy, 2015). Throughout the history of the Turkish Republic, there have been sharp divisions and zero-sum conflicts; perhaps the most prominent are the secular-conservative, the Kurdish-Turkish, and the civil-military divides that moved from political and party life to all sectors (Öney & Selck, 2016). Paradoxically, the regime has adopted an ideology that tends to end the polarization between the bureaucratic-military center and the conservative periphery and end the ethnic division by assimilating and embedding nationalities under the concepts of pluralism and democratic openness (Şimşek, 2013). Once the traditional marginal forces moved from the periphery to the center, a new type of polarization arose in the political camp: either supporting the regime or against it (Öney & Ardag, 2021).

Elite Polarization: Marginalizing AKP founders, such as Abdullah Gül, who was prevented after his presidency from returning as party leader, has expanded to include other equally credited members to the rise of the party internally and regionally. The architect of foreign policy, Ahmet Davutoglu, who is credited with the emergence of Türkiye as a regional power and a core player in the Mid-

dle East, as well as the revival of Turkish pride in Ottoman heritage, which extended to include parts of Asia, Europe, and Africa, is a good example in this context. As a result of the tendency of the political system to personalize and unite powers, President Erdogan clashed with Davutoğlu. While the former wanted to act as head of state and party in violation of the constitution at this time, Davutoğlu obstructed that and was not a supporter of the transformation of the political system as well (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020). Therefore, Davutoğlu was replaced by “Binali Yıldırım”, the president’s loyal, the least popular, and the loser in the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election (Christofis, 2020). As a result, Davutoğlu established a new party, expected to be a powerful alternative to the AKP. The Future Party has attracted many former members of the ruling party. Indeed, representatives of the AKP lead 12 of the party’s 18 presidencies. Meanwhile, the former Minister of the Economy “Ali Babacan” established Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) as a liberal alternative (Aras & Helms, 2021). Such parties provide a suitable alternative for a large segment of conservative Turks who are worried about their religious identity in case secular-oriented parties return to power. Restrictions on the practice of religious rites, and state interference in freedom of dress, are still strongly present in the consciousness of conservatives, forcing some to vote for the AKP even if they are not satisfied with the policies. With an alternative to conservative politics by parties led by respected and appreciated figures, even from those who follow different ideologies, the possibility of gaining the public’s trust becomes possible (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020).

The Islamic-Neoliberal Power Bloc Polarization: The alliance between the Gülen movement and the AKP elite was built on shared interests and a common enemy’s existence. Mutual interests emerged in the former’s need for his followers to infiltrate the bureaucratic state apparatus and the latter’s need to support the former with capital, educational institutions, and competent followers capable of managing the state apparatus. The common enemy was the army-judicial alliance that had long marginalized the conservative elite. With the rise of the regime’s authoritarian tendencies, the symbiotic relationship between the two ended. The AKP elite wanted a submissive ally, while Gülen preferred an independent role (Yavuz, 2018). The crisis erupted with attempts to exclude Gülen movement members from the regime’s revenues; thus, the “mutually beneficial” regime was terminated. In November 2013, the government planned to implement a bill closing the Gülen private preparatory schools that were instrumental in recruiting new followers for the movement (Bozarslan, 2020). Such a plan led to the launch of the corruption probes, described as a “Judicial coup” made by the Gülen’s “deep state” or “parallel state” (Kutlar et al., 2020). In response to the corruption scandal, Gülen supporters within the various state institutions were subjected to a purge. The regime dismissed thousands of judges, prosecutors, and police affiliated with the movement, changed the legislation of the police and justice ministries to tighten the grip of the executive authority (Gürcan & Peker, 2015), excluded Gülen-linked companies from public contracts, and

acquired the Bank of Asia (Özpek, 2018). After the 2016 coup attempt, more than 1000 private schools and fifteen universities run by the Gülen movement were shut down (Tee, 2018). Nowadays, More than half a million Turkish citizens are being investigated for belonging to the FETO (Yılmaz & Shipoli, 2021). Thus, the old ally turned into the number one internal enemy. It is worth mentioning that the purge was so expensive because, for years, the political regime resorted to the Gulen movement to develop a bureaucratic team capable of running the state (Watmough, 2020).

Partisan Polarization: Partisan polarization is prolonged and rooted in the institutionalization and ideology of all Turkish parties. Such polarization manifests itself in two significant occasions or instead in two golden opportunities missed by the ruling party to reduce the intensity of this polarization. The first was in June 2015 parliamentary election, where the country faced critical social and political instability. It is possible to form a grand coalition of the AKP and the main opposition CHP that would have been a 65.82% majority. Nevertheless, neither party's leaders could trust the other (Erişen & Erdoğan, 2018). The second opportunity was in the prevailing political climate during the attempted military coup in 2016, through which social mobilization was accomplished (Şen, 2020). Realizing that the military should not interfere in political and civil life, opposition parties lined up to support the army's return to its barracks. This state of solidarity and agreement of opinion between the ruling party and the opposition quickly dissipated because of the authoritarian approach followed under the state of emergency (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020). "People's Alliance" is formulated between AKP and MHP on the one hand, and "National Alliance" is formulated among CHP, HDP, and İYİ parties. Accordingly, no consensus or convergence of views is going to occur (Yalvaç & Joseph, 2019). Alongside polarization at the leadership level, "all in-party supporters are almost quite distant from all other parties". In other words, the Turkish party scene is a stalemate, where individuals adhere to their values and beliefs against new facts that may require taking different positions. They also tend to reinforce their positions rather than accept new inputs (Erisen, 2016). A study conducted by "Semih Çakır" explained that Türkiye is one of the most partisan polarized countries, coming in third place compared with 48 countries. The same study shows a straightforward correlation between party affiliation and voting behavior. Moreover, the level of partisanship is rising year by year, reaching 75% in 2015 (Çakır, 2019). Thus, the electoral behavior of individuals and their political affiliations do not depend on the rightness or wrongness of the policies followed but instead on their party affiliation.

Mass Polarization: Mass polarization is deeply rooted when political parties and political identities are overlapped. On the one hand, elite conflicts affect the masses' opinion. The dichotomy of "we" and "they" indicates populism and partisanship directed at half the people and excluding the other half completely. The ruling party's alliance with the nationalist movement party called the People's

Alliance, for example, has restricted the people to its supporters and electors. Also, during the 2017 constitutional referendum, opponents of a transition to the presidential system were categorized as “pro-coup”. The state of marginalization and exclusion practiced against 50% of the people prompted parallel reactions. Generally, the masses are set into two groups, one favoring democratic considerations and the other supporting security and stability in the form presented by the ruling elite (Yalvaç & Joseph, 2019). A study by “Istanbul Bilgi University” explained the extent of the societal split. A party supporter did not want to have: a business partner (74%); a son-in-law (79%); a neighbor (70%); or a friend of their child (68%) from other party supporters. Furthermore, Party supporters consider themselves morally superior and describe themselves as intelligent, honorable, generous, and open-minded. Meanwhile, they described other parties’ supporters as selfish, hypocritical, intolerant, and a threat. Such an outcome ends with the acceptance of the restriction of the political rights of the less intelligent and those who pose a threat to the entity of the state, where Respondents find it unfavorable for the other party supporters to make a demonstration (47%); organize a meeting (44%) or make a press release (43%). While Violation of the right to privacy is upheld by approving that the phones of members of the other group must be listened to (50%) (Erdoğan, 2017).

2) The External Level

Democratic constraints institutionalize the power of political actors so that initiating any foreign policy requires the consensus of local actors, including the legislature, the judiciary, and stakeholders. When democratic standards are restricted, the legislative and executive authority is non-existent or “serves only to rubber-stamp the executive’s initiatives”. The stakeholders would be repressed, as the executive authority becomes free from all obstacles that may slow down the decision-making process. In this context, the type of authoritarian system may make a difference, where the presence of any voices beyond that of the leader may lead to substantially better decision-making. Single-party regimes may include reasonable opinions emanating from the party elite. In an authoritarian military system, the opinions of military leaders may vary. Once an authoritarian system turns into a “personalist authoritarian” system, the decision-making process spirals out of control (Peceny & Butler, 2004). In the face of crises arising from authoritarian tendencies and ill-advised individual decisions, Political leaders tend to avert domestic criticism through diplomatic or military victory abroad. Here, aggressive foreign policy becomes a product of the insecurity of the political system and a cost to be paid to achieve stability and ensure popular support (Özpek & Tanriverdi Yaşar, 2017).

As part of personalist authoritarianism in Türkiye, what is known as “personal diplomacy” has emerged, especially with the transition of the political system to the presidential one? The main advantage of the presidential system is the acceleration of the decision-making process as an inevitable consequence of the concentration of powers in the hands of the ruler who has become more influen-

tial in making foreign policy as in domestic politics. The president's centrality in foreign policy was accompanied by his view of his ideas and beliefs as higher than the hierarchical decision-making process. The president despised the opposition parties and asserted, more than once, that they were under Western influence, so they could not represent the people (Ülgül, 2019). Crucially, decision-making power was transferred from government institutions to the presidential palace. At the same time, traditional foreign policy-making institutions such as the State Department and the National Security Council have been sidelined. Moreover, the role of the Turkish armed forces, which used to pursue an isolationist approach and tended to oppose involvement in the Middle East like its opposition to military intervention in Syria, ended (Haugom, 2019).

The marginalization of authorities and other actors has resulted in two outcomes. The first is diplomatic institutions' marginalization. To avoid the mechanics of the State Department, agencies with expanded diplomatic roles under the president's direct control, such as the Office of Public Diplomacy, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), and the Maarif Foundation, have been established (Taş, 2020). Foreign policy has become an extension of domestic politics, with traditional centers of power losing their pivotal role in making foreign policy, and new institutions taking over traditional authorities' functions under the executive branch's direct leadership. This shift enabled the leadership to engage in the main conflict zones in the Middle East according to their tendencies and beliefs to feel proud and great. The second is the personalization of foreign policymaking that has been widely characterized as hostile and contentious (Kesgin, 2019). The dominant discourse on Turkish foreign policy has shifted from conservative rhetoric to populist nationalist discourse. The president's perceptions became clear in foreign policy in attacking both Syrian and Egyptian regimes and his criticism of the Saudi regime after killing "Khashoggi" in a way that did not comply with Turkish interests. In general, foreign policy has been militarized to preserve regional prestige (Aras, 2019). The decline of democratic values and the emergence of power monopoly have facilitated revising foreign policy in line with the executive authority (Snider, 2015).

5. Conclusion

The article addresses the implications of the securitization of the Turkish political system on both the local and regional levels. It focuses on a fundamental assumption that the rise in authoritarian tendencies has eroded the barriers between domestic and foreign politics, where the latter has become a reflection of the ruler's perceptions, far from institutionalism and democracy. This assumption solidifies the transition of the Turkish political system to a more extreme form of populism, where terms such as "state" and "nation" have become synonymous with "ruler" and "elite". The securitization process begins by focusing on the state's institutions represented in the military and judiciary, considering

them the main threat to the very democratic considerations. The political system claimed to aspire to protect democracy by monopolizing it. Amidst the securitization process, Türkiye became burdened by emergency measures where the relationship between security and freedom was disrupted, turning fundamental rights like assembly and demonstration into acts classified as terrorism, especially after the failed military coup in 2016. Following the coup, a state of emergency was imposed, and a referendum was conducted in April 2017 to amend the constitution and grant the President broad powers, leading to a concentration of power at the top, known as “the civil coup”. The securitization approach had serious implications, both domestically and internationally. Domestically, the securitization, mainly resulting from the decline in democratic indicators, led to the political system losing its popularity, which it had gained over two decades since President Erdoğan came to power, in addition to the occurrence of extreme polarization. Internationally, the foreign policy-making process became unilateral and a reflection of the ruler’s perceptions, facilitating interference in neighboring countries’ affairs and the Middle East crises in general.

At present, the elite of the ruling Justice and Development Party still hold the reins of power. However, the Turkish political and security situation is far from stable. The Turkish political landscape has remained highly turbulent since the last presidential elections last May. Although President Erdoğan won the electoral race, for the first time in his political history, he had to go through a runoff election round, meaning the victory wasn’t as smooth as the conservative current was used to. Political polarization between the elite of the Islamic Justice and Development Party on one side, and the liberal and secular currents on the other, remains intense and shows no signs of subsiding soon. In the same context, the internal security situation in Türkiye is fraught with complexities and disturbances due to the refugee crisis manifested in acts of violence against foreigners. Regionally, Türkiye continues to be on a hot security plate due to its proximity to Iraq and Syria and the influence of the Kurdish concentration on its southern borders. Türkiye continues to suffer from terrorist bombings, the latest of which was the Istanbul bombing in November 2022. Additionally, Türkiye’s economic security remains in a predicament. Türkiye is experiencing inflation and an unprecedented collapse of the local currency, which cannot be separated from the broader economic, security, and social context.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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