Embattled Ballots, Quiet Streets: Competitive Authoritarianism and Dampening Anti-Government Protests in Turkey

Anıl Kahvecioğlu & Semih Patan

To cite this article: Anıl Kahvecioğlu & Semih Patan (2021) Embattled Ballots, Quiet Streets: Competitive Authoritarianism and Dampening Anti-Government Protests in Turkey, South European Society and Politics, 26:4, 489-515, DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2022.2101622

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2022.2101622

Published online: 16 Sep 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 328

View related articles

View Crossmark data
ABSTRACT
Mass protests frequently occur in electoral autocracies. However, the opposite is true in Turkey, despite mounting grievances and a strong opposition presence with institutional resources. We argue that competitive authoritarian regimes, a subset of electoral autocracies, may dampen mass protests, allowing the opposition an opportunity to defeat the incumbents through elections. Studying Turkey’s main opposition party, we identify three mechanisms that show how politicians strategically respond to the regime’s incentives and constraints leading to protest-averse behaviour. First, the regime’s repression capacity discourages the opposition from openly supporting a mass protest. Second, the opposition learns to target the median voter, which leads to political moderation and protest averseness. Finally, prospective electoral success reinforces the opposition’s commitment to a ballot-centred approach.

KEYWORDS
Opposition; electoral autocracy; elections; repression; CHP; political elites; AKP; authoritarian regimes

In the summer of 2013, Turkey experienced the largest mass protests in its modern history, dubbed the ‘Gezi Protests’. Since then, mass anti-government mobilisation remains dormant. In fact, frustration with the government of the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – Justice and Development Party) has shot up significantly since Gezi due to abysmal economic conditions, widespread human rights violations, and injustices. So why the quiet streets?

The lack of mass protests in Turkey is puzzling based on previous research. Scholars observe that protests frequently occur in electoral autocracies (Robertson 2011; Trejo 2014), such as Turkey. Examples are numerous. Russia had several cycles of nationwide anti-government protests mobilising tens of thousands in the last decade. Venezuela continues to have a series of massive anti-government protests since 2014. In Hungary, the government faced a string of mass protests in 2018, 2019, and 2020. Yet in Turkey, although minor or single-issue protests are still common, they do not escalate into a larger anti-government protest movement unlike the examples above.

CONTACT Semih Patan spatan3@uic.edu
© 2022 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
If electoral autocracies are prone to mass protests, then what explains the opposite outcome in Turkey? Why would organised opposition in such regimes not mobilise for protests despite mounting grievances and considerable opposition resources? We argue that a special type of electoral autocracy called competitive authoritarianism can incentivise protest-averse behaviour among the opposition parties under certain circumstances. In addition to the regime’s authoritarian components that engender a repressive environment, the lack of mass protests can be a result of a strategic choice of the opposition, premised on their past failures in the streets, and expected future success at the ballots. Aiming to contribute to the previous research that largely focuses on the catalysing effects of competitive authoritarianism on protests, we point to conditions that produce an opposite outcome.

To test this argument, we study the Turkish case with a focus on the main opposition party, the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – Republican People’s Party) from 2015 onwards. From an elite-based perspective, we argue that as Turkey completed its transition to a competitive authoritarian (CA) regime in 2015 (Esen & Gumuscu 2016), the regime’s unique combination of authoritarian and democratic elements created an environment that incentivised the main opposition party to adopt a strategic protest-averse behaviour. As a result, despite the amenable conditions, the opposition chooses not to escalate widespread grievances into mass anti-government protests. Our research is important in exploring the opposition’s strategic repertoire dealing with the AKP’s autocratisation within the scope of protest politics. It also challenges the narratives in the autocratisation literature on Turkey that view the opposition solely in victim terms without agency. Instead it treats them as strategic players that adapt to shifting political conditions.

In what follows, we first cover the relevant literature and address its shortcomings. Then, we offer our tripartite framework to explain the lack of mass anti-government protests in Turkey. Next, we show why one would expect a mass protest in Turkey in the first place based on theories of mobilisation. In the following segments, we introduce our research design and present our findings. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications of our findings and providing policy recommendations.

**Protests in competitive authoritarian regimes**

In much of the literature, CA regimes provide a conducive environment for protests (Bunce & Wolchik 2010; Howard & Roessler 2006; Trejo 2014; Vladisavljević 2016). Scholarship highlights several motives to justify this claim. Like closed autocracies, these regimes generate political grievances among citizens due to the authoritarian structure (Howard & Roessler 2006; Levitsky & Way 2010; Vladisavljević 2016). These grievances escalate into protests because incumbents frustrate opposition groups, violate civil liberties, and
exploit public resources systematically. CA regimes also have significantly more accessible resources for opposition groups than closed autocracies (Vladisavljević 2016). Despite authoritarian practices that solidify the incumbent rule, these regimes tend to create ‘arenas of contestation’ providing incentives for high rates of protests (Levitsky & Way 2010, p. 20). In line with resource mobilisation theory, the relative share of resources produces opportunities for the opposition to mobilise citizens (McCarthy & Zald 1977).

Electoral competition is another regime-based incentive for protest participation. Elections may turn into sites of protest to expose the regime’s vulnerability or when incumbents are involved in fraud (Bunce & Wolchik 2010; Howard & Roessler 2006). Finally, in hybrid regimes – a much broader category that covers CA regimes – there is agreement in the literature that while they ‘are not fair regarding political conduct and contestation, the levels of repression and persecution remain relatively moderate’ (Smith 2014, p. 746). A more flexible regime curtails the protest cost and eases the fear of protesters, encouraging citizens to protest (Tarrow 2011, pp. 163–167).

Electoral authoritarianism, which again includes CA regimes, provides diverse tactical choices for the opposition that further incentivises protests. These choices include opposition coalition-building (Wahman 2011), resistance to co-optation (Stepan 1990), lobbying for formal institutions (Rakner & van de Walle 2009), and contentious mobilisation (Bunce & Wolchik 2010, p. 60). As Diamond (2002) notes, opposition success in an electoral autocracy necessitates opposition mobilisation (p. 24). Accordingly, some scholars suggest that protests may catalyse regime transformation in a more democratic direction when certain conditions are met such as a unified opposition, novel election campaigns, or advantageous structural factors (Bunce & Wolchik 2010; Dollbaum 2020; Howard & Roessler 2006).

Most of this research finds causal connections between CA regimes, opposition strategies, and protest participation. However, the protest-averse behaviour of opposition in such regimes is unaccounted for in previous research with few exceptions. Trejo (2014) argues that when the chances of electoral success are high for opposition parties in electoral autocracies, they may choose to discourage contentious politics. From a different perspective, Kuntz (2016) suggests that popular uprisings are unlikely in CA regimes because the opposition is incapable of producing polarised camps of ‘evil regime’ vs. ‘good opposition’, quelling the potential for a powerful anti-regime movement. Consequently, protests might seem futile and lead to more regime resilience.

Incumbent strategies may also reduce protest tendency. Because elites are important actors in mass mobilisation in authoritarian regimes, autocrats may co-opt opposition elites to diffuse protests (Reuter & Robertson 2015). Social movement organisations can also be co-opted and institutionalised, reducing the likelihood that protest will occur and impelling more formal ways of raising demands (Trumpy 2008, p. 483). Furthermore, because autocrats in electoral
autocracies open the political arena to contention, mass mobilisation is a significant threat (Sato & Wahman 2019, p. 1423). This may foster repressive tendencies within the government to demobilise opponents, although repression may remain moderate compared to closed autocracies. In CA regimes, incumbents often violate democratic principles and skew the playing field to maintain their rule (Levitsky & Way 2010). Protest repression is a component of this strategic repertoire which might lower protest numbers (Bhasin & Gandhi 2013).

Despite the academic coverage of protest in CA regimes, three points are missing in the literature. First, most research finds a positive association between protest and competitive authoritarianism. We claim, instead, that the opposite can also be true. Second, contrary to studies analysing the dynamics of protest inactivity in electoral autocracies that switched from a fully authoritarian regime (Kuntz 2016; Trejo 2014), our case explores a regime drifting from democracy to competitive authoritarianism, namely, a ‘new CA regime’ (Levitsky & Way 2020). Here, opposition parties are relatively more powerful and protest opportunities are more widespread, making the absence of mass protest even more puzzling. Thus, the literature is unhelpful in explaining the lack of mass protest in this context. Finally, we emphasise the significant protest-dampening impact of high repressive capacity, challenging the claim that repression is only moderate in CA regimes. We show that increased repression stemming from expanding autocratisation may be more than ‘moderate’ in explaining the opposition’s hesitation to escalate grievances into mass protests.

**Mechanisms of protest dampening in competitive authoritarian regimes and the Turkish case**

We propose three variables to study the likelihood of mass protests in CA regimes: (I) repression, (II) opposition learning, and (III) prospective electoral success. First, we contend that ‘repression’ can be a major tool in the government’s effort to disincentivise protests. Incumbents can adopt different repressive methods varying from low to high-intensity, calculating the cost and benefits of coercion in the case of a prospective or immediate protest risk (Levitsky & Way 2010). However, this highly depends on the regime’s repressive capacity and its past experience in quashing mass protests. Absent these conditions, the regime’s threat of use of force may not be a significant deterrent against protests.

Second, CA regimes bring about shifts in the rules of the game that are disorienting and to which the opposition has to learn to adapt. These shifts can include a real chance for the opposition to win elections, the addition of repressive mechanisms to the equation, the lack of an independent judiciary, and government-controlled media among other factors (Levitsky & Way 2010).
To take advantage of competitive elections, opposition parties may choose to pursue a policy of moderation to maximise votes and avoid the streets as a result. Or the opposition’s protest-averse behaviour can emerge in response to past failures, due to the government’s rich tools of repression and manipulation. Whatever the reason, adopting a consistent protest-averse behaviour depends on the opposition’s strategic capacity and cohesion informed by a learning process. Otherwise, the urge to protest the regime and the grievances it creates can overcome the opposition that is either unable or unwilling to respond to the changing rules of the game.

And finally, prospective electoral success might contribute heavily to protest-averse behaviour. By holding competitive elections, CA regimes provide a formal pathway for challengers to defeat authoritarian governments. Although the playing field is seriously skewed in favour of autocrats, elections are an arena of opportunity for the opposition to push incumbents out of office (Levitsky & Way 2010). This may lead to an election-centred approach, de-radicalisation of policies, and, therefore, avoiding contentious options although grievances are high and opposition resources are adequate for mobilisation. However, this is more likely to materialise if the opposition victory is expected and when this optimism is supported by robust evidence such as opinion polls.

Based on this tripartite theoretical framework, we argue that the variation in these factors influences the likelihood of mass protests, which may also explain the differential outcomes in various CA regimes in this context. Put differently, while all CA regimes are capable of producing such conditions, they are not identical in terms of the regime’s repressive repertoire, the opposition’s capacity and electoral optimism. Therefore, the presence or absence of mass protests can be understood as a conditional output of these changing scales in the variables we proposed.

On this basis, we show that the lack of mass protests in Turkey is a result of the high repressive capacity of the regime, methodical opposition learning, and the opposition’s electoral optimism. First, while moderate levels of repression in some CA regimes may allow citizens to use protest means, high repressive capacity creates an efficient dampening effect, which is evident in Turkey after the shift to competitive authoritarianism. Second, we show that ‘opposition learning’ is an important mechanism in adapting to the shifts in the rules of the game, whereby the opposition in Turkey learns from past experiences that mass protests and exclusionary ideological policies do not necessarily attain the desired outcome. Finally, as the opposition’s expected victory at the ballot box increases in Turkey, they become less inclined to support anti-government protests to avoid risk to its electoral prospects.
Why expect mass protest in Turkey?

Before we move further, a definition of what constitutes a mass protest is in order. Mass protests are waves of collective action lasting for weeks or months, attended by large numbers of organised and unorganised people from various segments of society, who gather to contentiously express their shared grievances against a target. Similar to Tarrow's (2011, p. 199) definition of cycles of contention, a mass protest is an escalated contentious conflict in the social sphere, where mobilisation rapidly spreads to different groups in society, innovating novel strategies and frames.

Given this definition, mass protests in Turkey can be expected for two reasons. First, the CA regime increased grievances against the government, leading to political and economic hardships that might have a catalysing effect on opposition mobilisation (Kurer et al. 2019). After the regime in Turkey shifted to competitive authoritarianism, 3 dissatisfaction with the regime surged, owing to partisan distribution of resources, escalating repression, and abuse of civil liberties (Esen & Gumuscu 2021). Second, and perhaps more importantly, despite the AKP’s gradually intensifying repressive policies, the opposition has sufficient resources to act contentiously thanks to the rooted democratic opportunities in Turkey. This demonstrates a unique aspect of CA regimes that have drifted from democracy to authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way 2020). Since mobilisation of resources and social movements are positively associated with one another (McCarthy & Zald 1977), the probability of mass protests occurring in Turkey can be expected to go up.

Under the AKP adminstration, grievances accumulated on many fronts, particularly in the economic realm. The annual consumer price inflation rate has risen from 6.5 per cent in 2009 to more than 36 per cent in 2021 5; unemployment is increasing steadily, while the annual GDP growth has displayed an opposite trajectory since 2011. As a result, economic problems are systematically mentioned as the most pressing issue in public opinion polls (Cumhuriyet 2021). Political grievances relating to the government’s repressive policies also continue to mount. Turkey has a lamentable record of human rights violations, which independent organisations often decry. Consequently, President Erdoğan’s popularity has declined in polls, demonstrating the gravity of the overall discontent towards the regime (Gazete Duvar 2022). 6

In addition to accumulating grievances, Turkey’s relatively powerful democratic institutions as well as sizeable opposition groups thanks to its democratic legacy creates political opportunities for protests. Turkey is one of the most developed countries in party institutionalisation among CA regimes with a broad opposition group size (see Figure 1). 7 Despite shrinking liberties and political participation, Turkey still has wide resource opportunities and human capital for contentious mobilisation that might jeopardise regime security.
Figure 1. ‘Party institutionalization index’ and ‘Regime opposition group size’ across competitive authoritarian regimes.
Source: Authors’ elaboration of data from: www.v-dem.net

In addition to the amenable conditions at the macro level discussed above, individual-level data also point to accumulating political energy towards protest activity. According to the World Values Survey, the willingness to join protests in Turkey is at an all-time high since the 1990s (see Figure 2). This is a dramatic attitudinal change within a relatively short period, considering the stability of these attitudes in the years before the latest wave.

Despite such justified expectations, mass mobilisation in Turkey remains latent since the Gezi protests in 2013. Large numbers of people participated in the Gezi protests, mobilising rapidly (see Figure 3). During the first half of 2014, there were also small clusters of cycles of contention that became increasingly rare after the first half of 2015. The sharp decrease in the numbers from the second half of 2015 also coincides with the regime’s shift to competitive authoritarianism, which solidified after the June 2015 elections (Esen & Gumuscu 2016).
Given the high levels of social, political, and economic grievances, as well as available resources, we should expect a higher probability of mass anti-government protests in Turkey. However, as of 2021, this remains untrue.

**Research design and methods**

This research uses an exploratory case-study strategy (Gerring 2004) to identify the causal mechanisms that plausibly indicate an association between the institutions of a CA regime and mass-protest activity as part of a theory-
building effort (George & Bennett 2005). We identify our primary causal mechanism by closely investigating the main opposition party, CHP, and the relationships between key events, actors, and institutional constraints, including the outcome of the opposition’s protest-averse behaviour. We conduct process-tracing to a limited extent to detect causal relationships that explain the case, helping us uncover the links between the political context and the CHP’s strategy regarding protests.

We use semi-structured interviews with high-ranking members of parliament (MPs) of the CHP to substantiate our theoretical framework and confirm our observations. Interviews present the opportunity of collecting data regarding the narratives of analysis subjects. Because we explore the CHP’s strategic protest-aversion, interviews with party officials are the most reliable tool to answer our research question. Thirteen interviews were conducted with CHP officials, all of whom were MPs and part of the party administration. The duration of the interviews varies but no interview was completed under twenty minutes to ensure satisfactory coverage while some lasted over an hour. We did not share the questions or our framework with the interviewees in advance and only told them the research was about protests and opposition strategies in Turkey to avoid influencing their answers. All interviews were conducted face-to-face between March–April 2021.

The period the interviews were conducted was marked by both repressive conditions and optimistic expectations, which might have affected the responses. The repressive environment was evident in the regime’s coercive actions against opposing voices, whereas the optimistic environment was the product of an important electoral triumph for the CHP in the local elections of 2019. The deputies could see that the AKP had lost its dominance at the ballot box and the authoritarian regime in question could be overthrown through electoral mechanisms, an observation which was repeatedly made in our interviews.

Our research strategy that focuses on the main opposition party assumes that mass protests are directly linked to elite political behaviour so that unless the opposition political elites credibly signal their commitment through policies encouraging protests, the likelihood of mass protest will decrease. A strand of research regarding the effects of political opportunity structures on the development of collective action informs this assumption. In this literature, the presence of influential allies and rifts among or between elites are consistently shown to be driving factors for social protest (Tarrow 1996). In authoritarian regimes, activists can only plausibly hope to find such influential allies within the opposition political elite. When the opposition parties are not interested in mass protests and are strongly coordinated, political opportunities for activists consequently diminish.
There are two important reasons for selecting the CHP as our focus. First, as the main opposition party, the CHP has unmatched standing in its capacity to signal the opposition’s stance on critical issues. This is crucial for our elite-based theoretical approach to mass protests. Given its popular support base, without the commitment of the CHP, activists cannot reasonably assume that the political elite would support a mass protest. Second, among the major opposition parties in Turkey, the CHP is the only mainstream party with institutional continuity that allows tracing changes over time. Additionally, we exploit the variation in the CHP’s position on mass protest support over time as a research strategy. Since the party’s position on protests is not constant, its protest-averse policy cannot be explained away by a traditional party position argument.

While we made a theoretically informed decision to focus on the CHP as part of our research design strategy, we believe that studying other opposition parties in the parliament would not have significantly altered our findings. None of the minor opposition parties offers an alternative approach to mass protests. For instance, centre-right, nationalist İYİP (İyi Parti – the Good Party) officials have repeatedly pointed to the ballot box, dismissing the streets as a solution to the ills of Turkey (Hürriyet 2021). Even the HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi – the People’s Democratic Party) has been relatively wary of encouraging street politics since their involvement in the ‘October 6–8 Riots’ in 2014 received a heavy state response. In fact, in their recent meetings with other parties, the HDP has reiterated the importance of elections as the way out (HDP 2021). Thus, we are confident that our findings would remain robust to different case selection strategies.

**Case analysis: the mechanisms explored**

**Repression**

Moving onto an authoritarian trajectory requires strategic shifts and engenders new ways of sustaining power, such as the restructuring of repressive capabilities. As expected, the AKP increased its repressive capabilities to discourage protest mobilisation, following the same path during its autocratisation. The Gezi protests that started in May 2013 represent a turning point in this context (Özen 2015). The demonstrations commenced with an environmentalist concern about the reconstruction of Gezi Park and turned into nationwide protests against the government, lasting almost three months. The government employed several tactics to dismantle the protests. The police’s violent intervention in demonstrations led to vicious clashes between the police and protesters, producing multiple fatalities and thousands of casualties. In addition, they used targeted arrests to effectively steamroll protest mobilisation and create a psychological barrier for likely participants (Demirel-Pegg & Rasler 2021). Concurrently, the government produced
delegitimising rhetoric whereby protesters were labelled as vandals or terrorists, imprisoning the right to protest within a so-called ‘unlawful context’ (de Medeiros 2018). In such a polarised environment, the AKP also organised counter-protests, called ‘Respect for National Will Meetings’, to bolster the image that the AKP had legitimate popular support against illegitimate anti-government protesters (Bilgiç 2018).

To claim that the Gezi protests initiated a new security understanding and a new framing strategy against protests is not an overstatement. As Atak and Della Porta (2016) note, the police started to approach protests with zero-tolerance in the aftermath of Gezi, reflecting the constant concern that protests may turn into a public riot to subvert the regime (pp. 617–618). The AKP ‘integrated (demonstrations) into a broader adversarial framing strategy’ to cultivate a protest narrative relying on a simple ‘for-or-against position’ (de Medeiros 2018, p. 8). Thus, the government managed to reproduce the same protest framing on every occasion based on the ‘us vs. them’ dyad that associated deviance with the right to protest. Some deputies we interviewed shared this observation regarding protests in the aftermath of Gezi. They noted that the difference between the pre-Gezi period and the current political state is the arbitrary pressures on democratic mass organisations, the expulsion of independent media organs, and the seizure of all state institutions by the AKP. These changes encouraged the AKP to ban further contentious democratic demands (Interviewees 7, 9).

As of 2015, the AKP’s repressive measures against the right to assembly increased even more dramatically, particularly through the adoption of legal pre-emptive strategies. Arslanalp and Erkmen (2020b, p. 110) demonstrate that the number of protest bans between 2015–2019 was three times more than the period between 2007–2014. They also coin the term ‘mobile emergency rule’, defined as governmental practices that suspend ‘constitutional rights and obligations via executive and administrative decisions in an extremely localised, temporary, and ad-hoc manner’ (Arslanalp & Erkmen 2020a, p. 951). As a device used in the autocratization phase, mobile emergency rule practices escalated significantly after the second half of 2015, particularly in the form of curfews, creating a significant obstacle for the likelihood of protest mobilisation (pp. 952–955). Meanwhile, the ruling party introduced the Internal Security Package to broaden the police department’s control in 2015. The package gave the police the right to directly take ‘suspects’ into custody without due process, limiting the right to assembly.

More importantly, the failed coup attempt in July 2016 created an opportunity for the AKP to declare a series of states of emergency which lasted for two years and provided legitimacy to extended boundaries of repression. According to the 2017 Freedom House’ report, the post-coup process enabled the government ‘to impose curfews and declare certain public and private areas
off-limits, and to ban or restrict meetings, gatherings, and rallies’.16 In this restrictive environment, protest bans and curfews reached their peak and continued as a regular practice even after the emergency period ended (Arslanlp & Erkmen 2020a, p. 110). Meanwhile, the government targeted many civil society organisations during the emergency term. According to the Human Rights Association’s report, 1,419 civil society organisations, 145 foundations, and 174 media organisations were closed in less than two years via statutory decrees (2020, p. 9).

While the period following the coup attempt imposed serious limitations on people’s right to assembly, it concurrently generated a new context for protest politics, transforming the street into a pro-government space (see Figure 4). Conventionally, protesting means resisting or challenging the authorities. However, it took an opposite form in the summer of 2016. The scope of protesting is exposed to a certain reversal, and it becomes a significant tool for those who already have official ways of making political decisions.

This created an additional obstacle for opposition groups and parties to use protests in a political environment, with emergency circumstances already shaping and seriously restricting the opposition’s elbow room on the street. The coup attempt not only formed a non-conducive milieu for the opposition through restrictive measures but also presented the government with the opportunity to build an alternative space excluding the opposition or only allowing them to act in line with the government’s interests. This was evident in the anti-coup rallies in which opposition parties were involved (BBC News 2016), or in the rallies organised directly by them (Deutsche Welle 2016).

![Figure 4](image-url)  
*Figure 4. Pro-government protest trend in Turkey (Summer 2016).  
Source: First author’s original data*
The AKP’s repressive policies also have serious repercussions for politicians, who allegedly encourage people to protest, including criminal prosecution and removal of parliamentary immunities. In one such case, the HDP’s chairman was accused of inciting insurrection for the uprising in southeast Turkey in 2014 and put in jail later in 2016. In addition, motions to lift immunities are commonly used against the opposition MPs to box them into a political impasse (Anadolu Ajansı 2021). Aware of these threats, some deputies asked to remain anonymous during our interviews when we stated that the interview is about protests, exhibiting concerns regarding the repressive environment.

Our interviews show that these repressive measures stifled the likelihood of protests. When asked about the reasons for the lack of anti-regime protests, they highlighted the repressive measures that make citizens hesitant to participate in protests. Most respondents emphasised the excessive use of force by the police and the adoption of more militaristic strategies to discourage citizens from joining demonstrations. One deputy stressed that the judicial system has become a means of punishment by putting prospective protesters in jail and maintained that the AKP equated all opponents to illegitimate actors during the emergency rule (Interviewee 3). Another deputy argued that after the coup attempt, citizens were frightened of even joining a civil society organisation (Interviewee 5). It was also remarked that the state of emergency continued even after its abolishment and the repressive practices against contentious politics became permanent (Interviewee 10). The AKP’s repressive actions also influence the party’s likely engagement with protests, given that the party adjusts its policies according to the people’s demands (Interviewee 2).

The deputies noted that these repressive measures also cultivated a sense of hopelessness regarding the potential outcomes of protests. Even citizens critical of the government came to perceive protests as illegal activity due to government propaganda, and this generated hesitancy towards protest participation (Interviewee 2). One deputy argued that opponents need a rehabilitation process because of the obstruction of democratic channels which preclude the idea that protest can be a political option (Interviewee 9). Another noted that deadly results deriving from the violence used both by police forces and pro-government citizens in protests produced an avoidance reflex concerning protests (Interviewee 11).

Contrary to the conventional claim that repression is moderate in CA regimes, our research shows that their repressive capacity can be high, a condition that has substantially influenced protest mobilisation in Turkey. Both the literature and the interviews with the CHP deputies affirm this hypothesis. Despite serious repressive measures against contentious politics, we assert that protest can still be an option for opponents because of high levels of grievances and available resources.
**Opposition learning**

Turkey’s shift to the CA regime in 2015 and the unique institutional composition of authoritarian and democratic elements that came with it moved the opposition towards the centre of the political spectrum in Turkey. In this process, the opposition learned how to strategically counter the government’s efforts of polarisation, marginalisation, and delegitimisation. Opposition counter-strategies include two main categories: (I) a policy of moderation that includes appealing to the median voter and toning down the party’s conventional ideological positions informed by past failures, and (II) opposition cohesion achieved through coordinating as a united front against the government. This centre-seeking behaviour also made the opposition protest-averse in their quest to defeat the government, given the ‘inherent tension between the logic of movement activism and the logic of electoral politics’ (McAdam & Tarrow 2010).

Particularly during the 1990s and 2000s, the CHP was staunchly secular, ideologically rigid, and distant from conservative and low-income voters (Ciddi & Esen 2014, p. 421). The party’s exclusionary identity politics provided it with a stable base but also proved to be quite costly. After a scandal involving the party chairman forced a leadership change in 2010, the status quo within the CHP underwent a political transformation under the new leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. As Ciddi & Esen put it, to avoid ‘electoral ghettosisation’, the Kılıçdaroğlu administration engaged in some policy shifts that pushed the party closer to the centre (p. 424). The next elections vindicated this strategy against the naysayers as the CHP increased its vote share five percentage points from around 21 per cent in 2007 to 26 in 2011.

With these changes, the CHP became a conventional social-democratic party, an observation that CHP deputies supported in our interviews. One of the MPs remarked that under Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP reached out to every segment of society, unlike the CHP of twenty years ago (Interviewee 9). Similarly, another deputy claimed that the party ‘opened itself up’ to different constituencies and abandoned identity politics (Interviewee 4), which is dubbed the ‘Kılıçdaroğlu model’ (Interviewee 13). One should note that these changes came gradually as Kılıçdaroğlu’s rhetoric involved inflammatory personal attacks against Erdoğan (Selçuk, Hekimci & Erpul 2019) in the years before 2015. However, the CHP’s ideological transformation started to crystallise as the shift to the CA regime was completed.

In the face of the AKP’s tightening authoritarian grip with the transition to the CA regime, changes in the party platform alone proved insufficient to undermine the authoritarian government. This realisation led the CHP to cooperate with other opposition parties against the AKP. Thus, one of the main strategic outcomes of this learning process was the coordination between the opposition parties. With the CHP’s organisational leadership ‘secular, Islamist, Turkish nationalist, and pro-Kurdish political parties coordinated’ in multiple elections
at different levels (Selçuk & Hekimci 2020, p. 1497). While the degree of opposition success varied, they nevertheless made significant gains. In the parliamentary elections of 2018, for instance, a coordinated opposition successfully denied the AKP a single-party majority in the parliament. The next year in the 2019 local elections, several opposition parties came together under a formal Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı).18 They won five of the six largest metropolitan cities and are now governing the plurality of Turkey’s population, albeit at the local level.

Within this context of political learning and strategic adaptation to the CA regime, the opposition embraced protest-averse behaviour. The opposition deemed protests to be counterproductive because of unsuccessful past experiences with major anti-government protests which discouraged seeing them as a viable option against the regime. Additionally, given that populist autocrats thrive on polarisation to maintain their rule (Svolik 2020), the government may weaponise any contentious action in the streets to deepen polarisation and delegitimise the opposition. Therefore, the perceived risk of alienating the median voter, inching closer to the opposition, outweighed an uncertain future benefit of protests for the opposition.

The Republic Protests (Cumhuriyet Mitingleri) of Spring 2007 and the Gezi Park protests in Summer 2013 are instances where mass protests, endorsed by the CHP, challenged the AKP rule. The Republic Protests were a series of mass rallies against the government and in support of state secularism that lasted for weeks. Hundreds of thousands participated in these rallies in multiple cities, accusing the AKP of creeping religious influence over state institutions. The protesters demanded that the AKP stand down its presidential candidate because his wife wore a headscarf, and therefore, he was not suitable for a secular office. The protests were supported by the CHP and highly attended by the party administration including the party leader Deniz Baykal along with more than a hundred MPs (Hürriyet 2007).

Although many citizens joined in the protests, they were far from being politically inclusive (Göl 2009, p. 800). These rallies were marked by demands and concerns that were purely based on cultural differences and distaste for the conservative values of the ruling government, and this alienated a large segment of the society. This exclusionary attitude was at odds with the strategy of targeting the median voter. Consequently, in the parliamentary elections a couple of months later, the AKP increased its vote share from 34.2 per cent to 46.2, whereas the CHP only marginally increased its vote share by 1.5 percentage points but lost 39 parliamentary seats. This result suggested that the CHP’s position did not resonate with the majority of Turkish society.

In 2013, the largest anti-government protests in the republican history of Turkey took place in Istanbul’s Gezi Park. These protests were unequivocally supported by the CHP at various levels. At the highest level, Kılıçdaroğlu remarked that protesters and their demands must be respected and urged
Erdoğan to take necessary actions (Anadolu Ajansı 2013b). Throughout the protests, the CHP MPs, including Kılıçdaroğlu, visited Gezi Park several times to meet the protesters and give voice to their demands (Hürriyet 2013b; Milliyet 2013). At the grassroots level, the party’s youth organisation directly participated in the demonstrations (Cumhuriyet 2013). In addition to using domestic channels to shore up support for the protests, the CHP has also appealed to the international community, relaying the messages of the protesters (Anadolu Ajansı 2013a).

Although the protests were largely peaceful, mainstream news outlets circulated clashes with the police and images of vandalised cars and storefronts. This imagery depicting the protesters as radical agents swayed public opinion against them. Erdoğan instrumentalised the Gezi protests to polarise society to such a degree that he once infamously said that he could ‘barely hold back the 50 per cent at their homes’ referring to his constituency which was ready to counter mobilise (Hürriyet 2013a). In the end, the AKP regime survived these mass protests. The polarisation that Erdoğan created solidified his constituency and helped him win the presidential elections in the following year.

It is important to note that these mass protests happened in a context where the opposition parties were not committed to a protest-averse attitude. Therefore, activists on the ground did not have any reason to assume that their protests were unwanted by the opposition elite. In other words, excluding the hostile government, the political context permitted mass protests as an option, evidenced by the amount of support and direct participation these protests garnered from the CHP. By the same token, the absence of mass protests during the period we explore is closely related to the CHP’s protest-averse behaviour, as an output of the regime dynamics that discourages any popular energy from developing into a mass protest.

Experiences with failed protests taught the opposition that they do not always work. Moreover, they also do not neatly align with the CHP’s new strategic outlook that prioritises coalition building to win the median voter. The government, relying on its control over the media, could use protests to fan the flames of polarisation through negative framing, spoiling the opposition’s long-term strategy of depolarisation. While mass protests so far have failed to produce regime change, the opposition’s depolarising strategy is a tried-and-true method. Operationalised as ‘radical love’ during the 2019 mayoral elections, the campaign focused on counteracting the government’s polarisation trap and reaching out to the AKP’s base (Demiralp & Balta 2021), delivering a remarkable win at the ballot box.

In our interviews, we observed a cautious attitude regarding protests, similar to that of ordinary citizens. All the deputies that we interviewed seemed hesitant to pledge committed support to potential future protests like Gezi, although they acknowledged that people have the right to protest. One deputy claimed that it would be against the spirit of protest if the CHP
organised them and remarked that they did not ‘dream of another Gezi’ (Interviewee 4). In practice, we observe these deputies’ strategically cautious support for protests aimed at non-escalation as well. Around the time when we conducted our interviews, student protests were ongoing at one of the most prestigious public universities in Turkey, Boğaziçi University, demanding that the university rector be elected and not appointed from outside by President Erdoğan. While the CHP officially denounced the police repression and called on the government to hear the protesters, the party did not encourage participation and chose not to escalate the situation. We see a similar position in many other cases, from environmental protests in the Black Sea region (BBC News 2021) to student protests demanding more university housing accommodation (Gazete Duvar 2021). The CHP supports these protests, but only in their limited scope, without any attempt to weave various frustrations together to encourage a mass protest.

Deputies in our interviews also highlighted their concerns over how the media portrays protests. One deputy suggested that they were supportive of people using their democratic rights, but simultaneously, they were careful ‘not to be provoked [into a radical response]’ (Interviewee 7). Another suggested that the media associates even the most innocuous protests with terrorism, displaying their concern of being perceived illegitimate, adding: ‘Therefore, we do not believe that anything other than elections will bring results’ (Interviewee 3).

Given the unsuccessful past experiences and the current authoritarian environment that delegitimises street politics and polarises the political arena, the Turkish opposition is hesitant to take their chances with another anti-government protest. This dilemma is characteristic of CA regime political conditions. CA regimes uniquely combine both democratic and authoritarian elements that make elections meaningful and protests costly. Adapting to the new rules of the game, the opposition in Turkey strategically chooses not to encourage mass protests to increase its chances against the government at the ballot box.

**Prospective electoral success**

Competitive elections in CA regimes provide a sense of hope among the opposition that they can bring about a change in incumbency. The second half of the last decade in Turkish politics showcases a similar optimism about elections among the opposition parties. The shift to a CA regime happened in a context where the AKP’s popularity was seriously challenged through various means, and elections are no exception, particularly since 2015 (Esen & Gumuscu 2019). After the AKP’s landslide electoral victories, the autocratisation phase witnessed several downturns in electoral success. The first shock for the government was from the June 2015 general elections, where the AKP’s vote share
shrank almost 10 percentage points compared to the previous one. The results were a herald of the possibility that elections were still able to produce change. The opposition parties could have formed a coalition government to drive the AKP out of government but failed to do so. This, in turn, led to a snap election in November, which resulted in the AKP’s victory.

Despite the AKP’s alliance with the nationalist MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi – The Nationalist Action Party) and the post-coup state of emergency, the constitutional amendment referendum in 2017 was won by only a small margin. This signalled diminishing support for the AKP. It was a ‘small yes’ to the amendment package and was certainly a disappointment for the ruling party which failed to form an executive presidency with an unequivocal authority (Esen & Gumuscu 2017). Similarly, Erdoğan and the AKP prevailed in the presidential and general elections in 2018, but only through the coalition with the MHP and under continuing emergency circumstances.

The biggest shock to date was the local elections in 2019, where the AKP handed over Istanbul and Ankara to the opposition, dramatically ending the control over these cities that the AKP and its predecessors had enjoyed for a quarter-century. In particular, the re-run of the elections in Istanbul resulted in a serious increase in the margin of victory in favour of the CHP, a barometer of the growing expectations of opposition success in future elections. Esen and Gumuscu (2019) argue that the results signalled the end of the electoral hegemony of the AKP, and the CHP’s electoral triumph rejuvenated the opposition, showing a path for victory against the CA regime. In this context, the 2019 contests proved elections are still competitive in Turkey and have the potential to produce changes in the CA regime when growing discontent intersects with opposition unity.

The decline in the AKP’s votes and the opposition’s increasing competence at the ballot box since 2015 have together spawned a political atmosphere that heightened the expectations of opposition party success in the electoral arena. Public opinion polls conducted recently confirm this expectation, showing that the AKP’s votes are at a historic low, whereas opposition parties are capable of receiving sufficient votes to overthrow the authoritarian government (Euronews 2022). Relying on this shift in electoral predictions, the interviewees were also quite optimistic regarding the prospective elections. All the interviewees claimed that the opposition will win the next elections owing to increasing grievances against the AKP and the opposition’s recent resurgence in electoral results. One deputy openly declared that the odds for the CHP’s success in the next elections are the highest in the last twenty years (Interviewee 5).

In addition to strong polling, there are other reasons that feed the opposition’s optimism regarding future elections. First, deputies argue that the opposition coalition is responding to the democratic demands that are gradually mounting against the government, which has, in turn, generated demonstrable electoral success. And second, they stated that winning the local elections made
both the party and society more confident in the likelihood of a political change, boosting hope among citizens for subsequent electoral success (Interviewees 2, 4, 5). Local elections were proof of the real possibility that the opposition can succeed at the ballot box and cast doubt on the common assumption that the AKP does not lose elections (Interviewee 9). The 2019 results pulled opposition supporters out of their growing despondence, particularly after the loss of the 2018 presidential elections. One deputy confidently emphasised that the CHP is very close to toppling an autocratic government through elections, maybe for the first time in world political history (Interviewee 12).²⁰

The opposition’s high morale following recent elections reinforces the commitment to an election-centred approach. Such an approach de-radicalises the opposition narrative and diminishes the value of protests as a political opportunity to challenge the regime. A high-ranking deputy underlined this democratic paradox for the opposition parties, suggesting that as all the other participation channels are blocked, the democratic process has been reduced to the ballot box (Interviewee 2). Focusing solely on electoral results buttresses a soft narrative that rules out the possibility of contending against the regime with alternative strategies. She maintains that the public is driving the belief that contentious action is not a viable option to oppose the government, and the opposition parties determine their policies accordingly. If the perception that ‘protesting is a marginal activity’ was not rooted in the public conscience, political decision-makers would have acted differently (Interviewee 2).

This election-centred mindset is so salient within the opposition camp that they even claim that the AKP provokes protests as a trap. A high-ranking deputy revealed their mindset about the matter, suggesting that the AKP uses protests to polarise and consolidate its electorate and then plays the victim. As the opposition, he remarked, they ‘expose this political engineering based on lies and fake news’ (Interviewee 1). Deputies claim that the AKP’s alleged instrumentalisation of protests stems from its ability to criminalise protestors through manipulation and provocation, entrapping opposition parties in cycles of contentious action. The CHP, therefore, is cautious about the government’s provocations and distances the party from some protests (Interviewee 13).

The foresight concerning protest outcomes sometimes manifests direct opposition to the idea of protest. A top-ranking deputy stated that the CHP, as a candidate for the next government, is currently against street protests (Interviewee 12). Moreover, when we asked another high-level deputy about the CHP’s political stance towards a potential mass protest, their response was clearly unsupportive (Interviewee 2). Another MP notes that the strategy of mass protest is not instrumental in changing the regime; on the contrary, it makes the
government more authoritarian. This leaves no option other than the ballot box for the opposition party where protests, he argues, are futile since they do not have a positive impact on swing voters (Interviewee 9).

The party leadership has also reiterated their protest-averse position in the clearest terms. Regarding Erdoğan’s claims about the opposition’s intent to take to the street, Kılıçdaroğlu remarked that he ‘must be dreaming’ and that, on the contrary, he had urged his party supporters to exercise restraint:

This is what I tell them: You will not cause any disturbances, you will not go out on the streets, and you will patiently wait for the elections. . . . You will go out and vote and replace an authoritarian government through democratic means, period. . . . Apparently, the gentleman [Erdoğan] wishes that we take to the streets; we will not. He will force us, but we will not. However, we will do what is necessary at the ballot box. . . . Taking to the streets is not in our books (BBC News 2022).

Using our elite-based approach to protests, both the deputies’ and Kılıçdaroğlu’s outright rejection of street politics is a credible commitment to an election-centric strategy that signals the party’s position to the people on the ground, openly discouraging a potential mass protest.

CHP deputies do not see protesting as a viable option to challenge the government. Even presented with a hypothetical scenario about the government rigging the next elections to win a majority, no deputy considered protests as an appropriate response. Instead, most repeated their focus on ballot box security to prevent fraud and emphasised that the next elections will be a success. The deputies’ answers affirm our third argument that electoral optimism incentivises the opposition to avoid policies that might risk their electoral prospects, including protest-averse behaviour. Hence, instead of helping the government draw attention to the non-electoral sphere to consolidate its electorate, the opposition avoids involvement in the contentious arena.

**Conclusions**

The incentives leading to contentious mobilisation in CA regimes are unambiguous in many respects due to the regime’s inevitable accumulation of grievances and the enduring political opportunities of the opposition. Higher repression costs for incumbents and the opposition’s relative free space for developing strategies to undermine the regime make protests a realistic option for opposition in CA regimes. We conducted this study when the same conditions produced the opposite effect, namely when mass protest is not treated as an option to contend with the regime. Introducing a puzzling case, we provide a compelling answer to the question of why the opposition appears unwilling to escalate widespread grievances into mass protests in Turkey.
To answer this question, we formulate a theoretical framework composed of three variables to understand how CA regimes can influence mass protests: (I) repression, (II) opposition learning, and (III) prospective electoral success. We contend that variation within these factors affects the likelihood of mass protests in CA regimes and thus explains the contrasting outcome we observe in Turkey.

First, the government’s increasingly high repressive capacity helped silence the opposition, disproving claims that CA regimes are only moderately repressive. However, repression is not enough by itself to explain the dearth of mass protests in Turkey since even the most repressive regimes around the world may produce them. As a second factor, we suggest the term ‘opposition learning’, which determines the opposition’s capabilities in adapting to shifts in the rules of the game that come with the transition to a CA regime. Finally, we propose ‘prospective electoral success’ as a decisive mechanism in understanding protest-averse behaviour. While all CA regimes offer a potential electoral victory for the opposition, when it moves from a mere theoretical possibility to a widely expected outcome, as it did in Turkey, it incentivises the opposition to develop a protest-averse position, refraining from actions that might put prospective electoral victories at risk. This strategy could be instructive for other cases that have similar regime properties. If this strategy pays off in Turkey, opposition groups in similar regimes elsewhere may choose to avoid the streets as well.

While the protest-averse behaviour of the Turkish opposition has solidified, one should be aware of its potential drawbacks as well. Discouraging protests in order to channel frustrations to the ballot box may backfire if the government engages in widespread electoral fraud. In such a scenario where elections become irrelevant, the opposition would need its supporters to mobilise, signalling to the government that refusing to concede is too costly. However, after actively discouraging mass protests leading to an extended hiatus, protest mobilisation can prove difficult. This is particularly true since the government has recently been ramping up its rhetoric of criminalising street politics. The opposition may choose to avoid the streets strategically, but this should be done in a matter that does not endorse the government’s efforts to criminalise all street politics. In the end, the opposition is responsible to ensure that their political strategies do not come at the expense of the people’s democratic rights by conceding to authoritarian policies.

Notes

1. Competitive authoritarianism is a regime type where competition is ‘real but unfair’ due to manipulations in elections, exploitation of state resources, and injustices in the playing field in favour of incumbents (Levitsky & Way 2010, p. 3). Whereas electoral autocracy is a broader term that includes both competitive authoritarian and hegemonic authoritarian regimes, where elections are not meaningful.
2. There might be other mechanisms at work that can explain the absence of mass protests. For instance, the global pandemic that started in March 2020 has brought about restrictions to assembly. However, this is not a valid argument for Turkey, because the lack of mass protests precedes 2020 (see Figure 3). Another factor could be the relatively weak organisational capacity of the opposition compared to the government to support a mass protest. While this is true, the opposition parties have already demonstrated their ability to organise highly coordinated events, such as the march for justice in 2017 called Adalet Yürüyüşü initiated by the CHP.

3. Although Turkey’s transition to the CA regime was not completed until 2015 (Esen & Gumuscu 2016), its preceding democratic decline had started much earlier (Sözen 2020). This means that the grievances that Turkey’s authoritarian regime generated did not appear overnight but rather accumulated over the years and peaked as the regime consolidated. Thus, although our analysis is limited to the post-2015 era, the seeds of grievances can be traced back to even earlier periods.

4. The AKP is an Islamic-oriented conservative political party that has been in power since 2002. In its initial years, it was known for its democratic agenda and moderate policies. In the second decade of its rule, however, scholars started to emphasise the party’s democratic retreat and label the regime as an authoritarian one (Sözen 2020).

5. Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey data. For more information, see: https://www.tcmb.gov.tr/wps/wcm/connect/TR/TCMBTR/Main\±Menu\±Istatistikler\±Enflasyon\±Verileri\±Tuketici\±Flyatlar\±.

6. People who do not approve of President Erdoğan have risen to 54.4 per cent in January 2022 from 27.4 per cent in July 2016.

7. Data is taken from V-Dem; see https://www.v-dem.net/. Countries were selected from each continent (Africa, South America, Europe, and Asia) based on Levitsky and Way’s (2020, p. 53) list of CA regimes. We tested the same comparison with different countries in the same list and obtained similar results.

8. For more information, see https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/ WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp.

9. The data is taken from the dataset created by one of the authors exploring protest, repression, and pro-government contentious dynamics in Turkey. Based on protest event analysis as the method of data collection, it was human-coded systematically using two newspapers, Cumhuriyet and Yeni Şafak, from 1 January 2013 to 30 April 2019.

10. Our dataset does not cover the post-April 2019 period. Several minor or issue-based protests have been organised from May 2019 until today such as pride marches of LGBTQ groups, feminist demonstrations, or Boğaziçi University protests. However, all these protests have remained within their limited scope and did not turn into mass protests. This can be confirmed by the ACLED dataset, which does not report any mass protest activity in Turkey during this period. For more information, see https://acleddata.com/dashboard.

11. We assigned numbers for each interviewee to maintain confidentiality. The list of interviews can be found at the end of the article.

12. Whereas all the other parties in the opposition are either newly formed within an already emerging context of opposition unity (e.g. İYİP [iyi Parti – the Good Party]), or minor parties without a large constituency (SP [Saadet Partisi – the Felicity Party]), or an ethnic party without a coherent mainstream policy platform (e.g. the HDP [Halkların Demokratik Partisi – the People’s Democratic Party]).
13. These were riots in southeast Turkey in support of the Kurds in Kobani (Syria) who were under imminent threat of attack from ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria]. These riots turned into urban warfare with the involvement of the terrorist organisation PKK [Kurdistan Workers’ Party], and they were repressed by the security forces, resulting in hundreds of casualties and leading to the dissolution of the peace process between the HDP and the state.

14. Although we assume the presence of competitive authoritarianism in Turkey for the period we investigate, it does not operate monolithically. For instance, particularly after the June 2015 elections, the regime disproportionately heightened its repressive capacity in the southeastern region, where the Kurdish population is dominant, compared to other parts of Turkey. The government declared curfews that lasted for weeks and intervened in electoral processes. Elected politicians were arrested, removed from office, and replaced by government-appointed trustees. These interventions effectively reversed the outcome of the elections in the region (see Arslanalp & Erkmen 2020a, 2020b), thus, making ‘prospective electoral success’ less of an incentive to avoid protests. Therefore, the threefold explanation we offer may not be equally applicable at the sub-national level. However, this does not change the outcome at the national level, but rather, shows that repressive mechanisms can be more effective in hindering protest mechanisms in some contexts than variables such as opposition learning or prospective electoral success.

15. On 15 July 2016, a religious clique in the state, called the Gülenist movement, attempted a coup to overthrow the AKP government and failed. Thousands of citizens resisted on the streets upon the call of President Erdoğan, leading to the death of more than 200 citizens. In the aftermath, a new era started in Turkish politics marked by a series of state of emergencies, engendering several cases of violation of rights and liberties.


17. As of February 2021, there were 1,336 motions to lift immunities in the Turkish parliament against 195 MPs, including the chairman of the CHP.

18. The alliance was composed of four parties: CHP, İYİP, SP, and DP (Demokrat Parti – The Democratic Party). The pro-Kurdish party HDP was excluded.

19. In fact, it was these same municipal elections in 1994 that gave way to the AKP’s rise in Turkish politics.

20. This is factually incorrect. In 1950 the DP (Demokrat Parti – the Democratic Party) defeated the CHP’s authoritarian government.

Acknowledgments

This research is based on the authors’ dissertation projects at Bilkent University and the University of Illinois at Chicago. We would like to thank Rebecca Clendenen, Berk Esen, M. Tahir Kilavuz, Mary Painter, and Tijen Demirel-Pegg for their valuable feedback and contributions at different stages of this article. We would also like to thank Didem Naz Dioken for her assistance with the figures.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
Notes on contributors

**Anil Kahvecioğlu** is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science at Bilkent University. His dissertation focuses on contentious pro-government mobilisation under the AKP rule. His research interests include social movements, contemporary Turkish politics, authoritarianism, and populism.

**Semih Patan** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His dissertation work focuses on the role of legislatures in competitive authoritarian regimes. His broader research interests include political behaviour, opposition strategies, and local politics in authoritarian regimes.

**ORCID**

Anil Kahvecioğlu [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9918-9397](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9918-9397)

Semih Patan [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3113-6838](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3113-6838)

**References**


BBC News (2022) ‘Kılıçdaroğlu: Erdoğan sokağa çıkamızı istiyor; zorlayacak, baskı kuracak ama çıkmayacağız [Kılıçdaroğlu: Erdoğan wishes us to take to the streets; he will force, and pressure us but we will not],’ 5 January, available online at: [https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-59881472](https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-59881472).


List of interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee #</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>25 March 2021</td>
<td>CHP Party Headquarters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>29 March 2021</td>
<td>CHP Party Headquarters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>30 March 2021</td>
<td>Grand National Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>31 March 2021</td>
<td>Grand National Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>31 March 2021</td>
<td>Grand National Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>31 March 2021</td>
<td>Grand National Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>06 April 2021</td>
<td>Grand National Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>06 April 2021</td>
<td>Grand National Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>07 April 2021</td>
<td>Grand National Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>07 April 2021</td>
<td>Grand National Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>26 April 2021</td>
<td>CHP Party Headquarters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>26 April 2021</td>
<td>CHP Party Headquarters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>12 April 2021</td>
<td>CHP Party Headquarters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>