



THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION IN TURKEY

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: October 14, 2025

Received in revised: November 18, 2025

Accepted: November 18, 2025

Available online: November 30, 2025

KEYWORDS

Keyword1; Social

Keyword2; Political

Keyword3; Democratic

Keyword4; Transformation

Keyword5; Turkey

ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving dynamics of social and political relations in Turkey amid its ongoing democratic transformation, focusing on how diverse social forces interact with the state and shape the trajectory of democratization. Positioned between Europe and Asia, Turkey provides a complex setting where formal democratic institutions coexist with increasing authoritarian tendencies. Employing a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach, the research analyzes developments from the early 2000s to the post-2016 period, drawing on policy documents, political speeches, academic literature, and civil society reports. It explores how state authority engages not only with organized civil society but also with broader social actors—such as media networks, religious communities, gender-based movements, and digital activism—that influence political participation and public discourse. The findings indicate that while constitutional and institutional reforms have expanded the procedural framework of democracy, substantive aspects—particularly freedom of expression, media independence, and pluralism—remain constrained by centralizing state power. Nevertheless, new forms of civic engagement, including online mobilization and gender equality campaigns, demonstrate society's adaptive strategies and resilience. Democratization in Turkey thus emerges as a non-linear and contested process, shaped by the tension between state control and the plural aspirations of its citizens. By integrating social dimensions and empirical illustrations, this study offers a nuanced contribution to understanding how hybrid regimes negotiate power, participation, and identity in transitional democratic contexts,

INTRODUCTION

Turkey holds a unique geopolitical position, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Its strategic location makes it a meeting point between Eastern and Western cultures, rendering it a compelling subject for academic inquiry, particularly in the context of its evolving social and political structures (Dağ & Uslu, 2021). In recent decades, Turkey has undergone significant political transformations, ranging from changes in its governance system and public participation to broader shifts in its societal structure. These transformations not only reflect an ongoing process of democratization but also reveal complex and interrelated dynamics between social and political spheres.

Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, secularism has served as a foundational principle shaping the state's political identity and social order. Yet, the relationship between state authority, religion, and society has never been static. Over time, these interactions have generated tensions and renegotiations of power, especially as different regimes sought to redefine the boundaries between the public and private spheres.

The early 2000s marked a turning point with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), whose conservative and religiously oriented discourse introduced new forms of political legitimacy. This development not only altered the



structure of state governance but also transformed patterns of social engagement, civic participation, and collective identity. Citizens, civil society organizations, and digital communities increasingly became active agents in contesting or supporting state narratives. The expansion of digital media further diversified arenas of participation, allowing previously marginalized voices—such as youth, women, and minority groups—to enter political debate.

Thus, the evolution of Turkish democracy cannot be understood solely through institutional or ideological shifts. It is deeply rooted in the dynamic interaction between political authority and the changing fabric of society. Exploring these interrelations offers critical insight into how democratization in Turkey unfolds as a contested process shaped by negotiation, resistance, and adaptation across both political and social domains..

One of the key aspects of these dynamics is the relationship between the state and civil society. Ideally, democratic transformation should encourage the growth of an active, critical, and participatory civil society. In reality, however, the relationship between the government and civil society groups in Turkey is often tense and conflict-ridden, particularly concerning issues such as freedom of expression, minority rights, and the independence of state institutions (Sunar, 2019). Events such as the Gezi Park protests in 2013 illustrate how tensions between the public and the state can escalate into widespread political crises. The government's repressive response to these protests drew criticism from the international community, raising concerns about the declining quality of democracy in the country. These developments indicate that democratic transformation in Turkey is not linear but marked by ongoing struggles between state authority and societal demands.

Moreover, the socio-political dynamics in Turkey are deeply shaped not only by ethnic, religious, and class-based distinctions but also by the active involvement of diverse non-state actors. Civil society organizations, professional associations,

media networks, and grassroots movements have become important arenas where democratic participation and contestation take place. These actors mediate between citizens and the state, translating social grievances into political claims and influencing public discourse on democracy, rights, and representation.

The Kurdish question, for instance, is not only a matter of state policy but also of sustained advocacy by minority rights organizations and transnational networks seeking recognition and equality. Similarly, women's groups and labor unions have mobilized to challenge gender and economic inequalities, while the rise of digital platforms has enabled new forms of political expression beyond traditional party structures. Independent media and online communities, despite increasing restrictions, continue to provide alternative spaces for dialogue and dissent.

In this context, the dynamics of identity, religion, and class intersect with expanding—but contested—forms of civic participation. The ongoing tension between state authority and the multiplicity of social voices illustrates that democratization in Turkey is not solely an institutional process, but a social negotiation constantly reshaped by collective action, resistance, and adaptation. This multidimensional interaction between political power and social agency forms the core of understanding Turkey's democratic transformation.

Given this complexity, the present study seeks to analyze in depth how social and political relations evolve within the broader framework of democratic transformation in Turkey (Coşkun, 2022). The focus of this analysis includes the interactions among political and social actors in the public sphere, the ways in which government policies shape social structures, and the responses of society through various forms of participation and resistance. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this article aims to contribute to the scholarly literature on democratization in developing countries and to enhance our understanding of how political processes can influence social dynamics in a broader sense.



Turkey serves as an important case study as it encapsulates the challenges faced by other nations situated at the intersection of authoritarianism and democracy, as well as between modernity and tradition.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the dynamics of social and political relations within the broader context of democratic transformation in Turkey. The choice of a qualitative method is based on the complex, multifaceted nature of the topic, which involves diverse actors, evolving discourses, and deeply rooted historical and cultural dimensions. Rather than focusing on statistical measurement, this research aims to explore in-depth understandings of how various social and political actors interact, respond, and adapt to ongoing changes in the Turkish political landscape. The study is designed as a descriptive-analytical inquiry, combining both primary and secondary data sources to construct a comprehensive picture of the evolving relationship between state and society.

Data collection primarily relies on document analysis, which includes the examination of official government documents, party manifestos, political speeches, legal texts, and public policy statements (Dayish, 2022). These are complemented by secondary sources such as academic journal articles, books, media reports, and reports by international organizations related to democracy, civil liberties, and governance in Turkey. Materials were selected from a diverse range of perspectives and institutions to ensure a balanced representation of viewpoints. The research places particular emphasis on developments that occurred between 2002 and 2024, a period marked by significant political changes under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), including constitutional reforms, shifts in civil-military relations, and public mobilizations such as the Gezi Park protests and the failed coup attempt of 2016.

For data analysis, the study employs a thematic analysis approach designed to uncover recurring patterns of meaning within the qualitative materials. The analytical process followed several systematic stages. First, all collected data—including policy documents, political speeches, academic works, and civil society reports—were subjected to a comprehensive familiarization phase, during which key narratives and contextual nuances were noted (Savaşkan, 2021).

Second, the data were open-coded line by line to capture initial ideas and recurrent expressions related to democratic transformation, civil society participation, identity politics, and state–society interaction. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarities and their relevance to the research questions. Through axial coding, relationships among these categories were explored—particularly how state authority discursively constructs legitimacy and how social actors negotiate or challenge these constructions.

Third, the themes were refined and validated through iterative comparison across multiple data sources. Triangulation between official documents, civil society reports, and media discourse was employed to ensure analytical consistency and credibility. Peer debriefing and constant re-examination of coded data helped minimize researcher bias and strengthen interpretive validity.

The analytical framework is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing that political behavior, institutional practices, and public discourses are socially constructed and continuously negotiated. This lens allows the study to interpret themes—such as secularism, nationalism, democracy, and religious identity—not as fixed categories, but as dynamic narratives contested within Turkey's evolving public sphere. (Doğan, 2022).

The scope of this study is limited to the national context of Turkey and does not attempt a comparative analysis with other countries. While the findings may



offer insights relevant to other cases of democratic transition, they are rooted in the specific socio-political realities of Turkey. Limitations of the study include the challenges of accessing unbiased and comprehensive data in a politically polarized environment, as well as the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis, which does not lend itself to generalization. To address these limitations, the study triangulates data from multiple sources and ensures transparency in the interpretation process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The democratic transformation in Turkey over the past two decades has revealed a complex dynamic, particularly in the relationship between the state and society. Analysis of various policy documents, political speeches, and publications from civil society organizations indicates a persistent tension between democratization efforts and authoritarian tendencies. On one hand, Turkey has experienced increased political participation, the expansion of democratic infrastructure, and growing public engagement in political discourse. On the other hand, the political landscape has also been characterized by practices that restrict opposition movements, limit press freedom, and reduce space for critical civil society actors (Bilgin, 2023).

One of the main findings of this study is the way in which the government, particularly under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has utilized electoral mechanisms to legitimize its authority while simultaneously consolidating power through constitutional amendments and institutional restructuring (Borsuk & Levin, 2021). For instance, the shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2017 significantly expanded executive power and weakened the role of the parliament and oversight institutions. This shift directly affected state-society relations, with increased control over the media, judiciary, and security apparatuses (Aksoy, 2018).

In the social sphere, this political transformation has also influenced the construction of

collective identities. The government has actively promoted a national identity narrative grounded in religious and conservative values, which has, either implicitly or explicitly, marginalized secular groups, liberal voices, and ethnic or religious minorities such as the Kurds and Alevi (Sert, 2021). Public policies—such as restrictions on alcohol consumption, regulations on dress codes in public spaces, and the inclusion of religious instruction in public education—serve as indicators of this ideological shift. These policies have elicited varied responses: while they are largely supported by conservative segments of society, urban populations, intellectuals, and minority communities have expressed resistance through demonstrations, social media criticism, and civil society activism (Bulut & Yildirim, 2020).

The Gezi Park protests of 2013 serve as a concrete example of public resistance to the state's growing authoritarianism. What began as an environmental protest quickly evolved into a broader expression of dissent against political domination and the erosion of civil liberties. The state's repressive response—through the use of force and mass arrests—highlighted its preference for coercive control over democratic dialogue. This event also marked the narrowing of civic space in Turkey, where activism and free expression have become increasingly vulnerable to criminalization and state surveillance (Gerlich, 2021).

Nevertheless, democratic transformation in Turkey has not been entirely stagnant or regressive. Despite political pressure, various grassroots initiatives continue to promote inclusivity and pluralism (Akçay, 2021). Numerous non-governmental organizations remain active in advocating for human rights, gender equality, and minority protection. Furthermore, independent media outlets and alternative journalists continue to facilitate public discourse, even under threats of censorship or intimidation (Altınörs & Akçay, 2022). These examples demonstrate that Turkish society is not entirely passive; rather, it displays political



resilience through creative and adaptive forms of resistance.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that social and political relations in Turkey are characterized by a constant push and pull between democratization efforts and authoritarian practices. While the state uses the legitimacy of electoral democracy to strengthen its authority, it simultaneously undermines substantive democratic principles such as civil liberties, social justice, and equal participation. On the other hand, society actively responds to these developments through various forms of resistance, social solidarity, and counter-discourse. Thus, democratic transformation in Turkey does not follow a linear path but instead unfolds through a dynamic and contested process shaped by ongoing negotiation and conflict between state power and societal demands.

CONCLUSIONS

The democratic transformation in Turkey over the past two decades reflects a non-linear process, characterized by dynamics, contradictions, and persistent tensions between state authority and societal responses. On the one hand, Turkey has made efforts to strengthen political legitimacy through electoral mechanisms, constitutional reforms, and the expansion of public participation. On the other hand, these efforts have often been accompanied by power consolidation that leans toward authoritarian tendencies—marked by the restriction of civil liberties, the weakening of oversight institutions, and increased pressure on the media and civil society organizations.

This study reveals that the socio-political relationship in Turkey is both complex and dynamic. The state functions not only as a provider of formal political structures but also as a dominant actor in shaping collective identities and the public sphere. Through religious and nationalist narratives, the state attempts to direct public discourse in line with its political agenda. However, society does not passively accept such domination. Various forms of resistance—

ranging from public demonstrations and alternative discourses to the strengthening of civil society—indicate the presence of significant social resilience in the face of political pressure (Yeşiltaş, 2006).

Thus, democracy in Turkey exists in an ambivalent condition: procedurally functioning through elections and formal institutions, yet experiencing substantive deficits in areas such as social justice, individual freedoms, and political equality. This process of democratic transformation cannot be fully understood through institutional indicators alone, but must also consider how society responds to and participates in these political changes.

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of viewing democratization as a process shaped by interactions between the state and society, as well as by the surrounding social and cultural constructions. In the context of Turkey, long-term political stability will largely depend on the state's ability to strike a balance between the need for control and the openness to diverse societal voices. Therefore, this research not only provides an overview of the socio-political situation in Turkey, but also offers critical reflections for other countries facing similar challenges in their democratic transition processes.

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