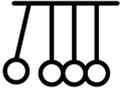


The Social Consequences of Political Polarization in Turkey

POLITICS

Zeynep Kocatepe



Abstract

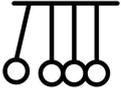
Political polarization can be defined as the gradual sharpening of individuals' ideological positions and the increase in social distance between groups with opposing views. In Turkey, political polarization has visibly intensified over the past 40 to 50 years, leading to significant changes in the social structure of society. The aim of this paper is to examine this polarization in Turkey, from half a century ago to the present day, along with its social impacts.



Polarization is a term frequently used in political science literature. This concept can start from the strengthening of individuals' political beliefs and can even go as far as harboring hatred toward those with opposing views (Sunstein, 2009). This polarization can occur in two ways: ideological polarization and emotional (affective) polarization. In Turkish politics, and therefore among the Turkish people, both types of polarization can be observed.

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So, what is the history of this division? In our country, since the early years of the Republic, structural issues such as the secularism–religiosity divide, right–left struggles, and the concept and issue of “Kurdishness” have been the main causes of this division. Until the year 1965, the distinction in Turkey was not right–left, but rather between “CHP and those opposed to it.” From the mid-1960s onward, right–left polarization, and from the 2000s onward during the AK Party government period, this polarization has become more visible. Especially in the period after 2010, developments such as the Gezi Park Events, the July 15 Coup Attempt, and the constitutional referendum have been among the issues that deepened polarization.

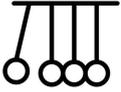
1970

The societal roots of today's polarization can be seen not only in the politics of the last twenty years but also especially in the clashes around right-wing and left-wing ideologies in the 1970s. This period was a breaking point during which polarization turned into street violence, and political identities became a matter of life and death. The Turkey of the 1970s witnessed a major social division under the shadow of economic difficulties and political instability.

During this period, the left-wing gained prominence—especially following Bülent Ecevit’s rise after the Cyprus Peace Operation—which caused discomfort among right-wing parties. Right-wing parties united under the name “Nationalist Front” to suppress the left through political and armed organization. With the support of deep state structures and the influence of foreign powers, the country was virtually divided street by street; right–left clashes intensified. Coffeehouses were raided, massacres occurred during rallies, and sectarian attacks took place in cities such as Maraş. While society was split into camps, the economy collapsed, and violence became part of daily life. The authority of the state weakened, and security forces were no longer a source of trust for certain segments of the population. Both sides armed themselves, and young people lost their lives for ideological struggles.

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On December 27, 1979, the General Staff, the commanders of the armed forces, and the Gendarmerie Command jointly submitted a “warning letter” to President Fahri Korutürk. The letter emphasized the issue of separatism in the East, the right-left conflict, and military concerns. However, despite this warning, no political actor took necessary steps. The Demirel government announced new economic measures on January 24, 1980: devaluations* were made, subsidies** were removed, and agricultural support policies were revised. However, these decisions led to a rise in inflation and worsened the economic conditions of the people. All these developments paved the way for the military coup on September 12, 1980 (Özdemir, 2021)

1980

In this chaotic environment, the military, under the leadership of Chief of General Staff Kenan Evren, seized power. On the morning of September 12, 1980, Turkey entered one of the most severe turning points in its history. Martial law was declared across the country; political parties were dissolved, their leaders were arrested, and trade unions were silenced. Life suddenly took on a completely different form. One of the most lasting marks of this period was the 1982 Constitution, drafted by the military administration. Unlike the 1961

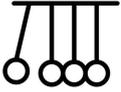


Constitution, the new Constitution became one that restricted fundamental rights and freedoms. These restrictions aimed to suppress the youth movements that had intensified before the coup, to create an apolitical youth,

and to establish a more disciplined society. For this purpose, the new government developed a conservative attitude that would dominate Turkish politics in the following years, aiming to

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unite the youth under the roof of Islam (Küçük, 2019). Political life, which had previously unfolded in lively debates in coffeehouses, universities, and workplaces, suddenly fell silent. People became reluctant to speak, express opinions, or organize. A noticeable depoliticization emerged, especially among the youth. Politics began to be perceived as something that only concerned certain segments of society. A large part of the population, in the aftermath of the trauma, adopted political disengagement as a kind of survival strategy. This shaped not only the spirit of that period but also of the years that followed. For the average person on the street, politics no longer meant hope—it had come to represent conflict and tension.

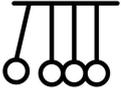
Toward the end of the 1980s, the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) was established by inheriting the conservative and religious legacy of the National Salvation Party (Millî Selamet Partisi). It quickly expanded its organization nationwide and, by emphasizing moral development and industrialization, gained broad support especially in rural areas and the provinces. This rise caused deep concern among secular circles because Welfare appeared on the stage with dreams of an Islam-centered institutional structure and economy as an alternative to the secular state. This further contributed to the polarization of a public that had already been forced into depoliticization (Özdemir, 2021).

1990

By the time Turkey entered the 1990s, matters became even more complex. The conflicts in the southeastern region of the country were not only a regional security issue but also led to deep political polarization nationwide. Society became divided over the fight against the PKK terrorist organization and the resulting casualties. While one segment supported the government's security policies, the other drew attention to severe human rights violations. Political parties failed to reach a clear consensus on the matter; instead, polarization deepened. Harsh state interventions on the ground and rights violations in unmonitored areas known as “grey zones” led to a loss of public trust. Some political actors defended military operations, while others criticized the harm to civilians and the infringement of democratic rights. This situation caused sharp divisions across political

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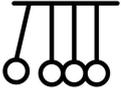
camps and reinforced the public perception of “us” versus “them.” The “sorrowful pride” and moral questioning experienced by soldiers and security forces further complicated this societal divide. The heavy toll of the conflicts created deep trauma and polarization not only among the families of the deceased but also across broad segments of society. This period marked a shift in politics away from achieving social peace, turning instead into a process in which opposing groups increasingly alienated each other and conflict was fueled more than solutions were sought. Thus, in 1990s Turkey, politics was shaped not by social consensus but by deep divisions and polarization—traces of which remain among the fundamental causes of ongoing social tension to this day (Arslan, 2015).

During this period, the issue of Kurdish identity became increasingly central on the political stage. The demands of the Kurdish population for recognition of their identity, culture, and language became focal points of political polarization. The varied approaches of political actors to these demands deepened social fragmentation. Some political parties advocated for the recognition of Kurdish identity and the expansion of cultural rights, while others perceived these demands as threats to state unity and responded with strong opposition. In this way, the politics surrounding the Kurdish issue further strengthened the “us vs. them” dichotomy in public perception.

The media also played a key role in fueling this polarization. In particular, the biased presentation of political discourse and news made it difficult for different groups to understand each other. Media outlets largely began to serve specific political views, creating significant gaps in public knowledge and perception. This situation caused political polarization to affect not only political spheres but also the daily lives of citizens. On the other hand, divisions experienced in the public space further reinforced the role of politics in social polarization. In particular, the headscarf ban and the February 28 process became symbols of social division in Turkey. The tension between secularism and religious freedoms led individuals and groups to redefine their relationships with the state and society. During this period, especially among conservative circles, there was a strong sense of being excluded from the public sphere, which in turn contributed to the deepening of political polarization and social mistrust. As a result, post-1990s Turkish politics created lasting polarization in

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society—not only through security and identity issues but also through the influence of the media and ideological struggles in the public domain.

2000

Just when it was expected that polarization would diminish after the 1990s and that peace and unity would return to politics, the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 marked a significant turning point in Turkish politics—both within the center-right and in the overall political structure. Unlike traditional parties, the AKP followed a line that blended conservative values with tendencies toward liberalization. During this period, the secular-conservative divide deepened: among urban and educated segments of society, secular lifestyles and an emphasis on laïcité became more prominent, while more conservative populations in Anatolia supported the AKP's policies.

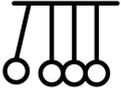
From the mid-2000s onward, especially with the 1st and 2nd Ergenekon trials—prosecutions associated with the so-called "deep state"—public trust in state institutions began to erode. While these trials were seen by some as a reckoning with entrenched powers within the state, others perceived them as a means for the political administration to suppress opposition groups. As a result, societal doubts about the impartiality of the state increased.

A serious polarization also occurred in the media landscape. A significant portion of the media came under the control of the political administration, while opposition media outlets faced pressure and censorship. This led to the formation of distinct perceptions of reality across society; people increasingly began to follow news sources that reinforced their own political views. The fact that even media broadcasting channels became politically involved became one of the clearest examples of how Turkish politics has divided the public.



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2010

In Turkey during the 2010s, social tensions became visibly apparent, especially with the Gezi Park protests. Initially sparked by an environmental issue, the Gezi Resistance quickly evolved into a broad social opposition against government policies. These protests created a new political consciousness and an organizational dynamic among youth, adults, and various social groups. The attempted coup on July 15, 2016, further deepened the societal divide between “us” and “them.” Following the government's suppression of the coup attempt, a state of emergency (OHAL) was declared, leading to massive purges in public institutions and the media.



Severe restrictions were imposed on freedom of the press and expression; dissenting voices were silenced or suppressed.

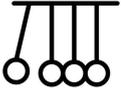
During this period, the divide between social classes deepened, and economic power became a significant factor influencing political views. People increasingly adhered to political identities based on their living environments. Political polarization extended into family life, with conflicts arising even among relatives, friends, and neighbors due to differing opinions. This situation inflicted deep wounds in the social fabric and turned polarization into a part of not only political life but also everyday social life (Sayın, 2022).

2020

In the 2020s—that is, today—social and political polarization in Turkey has taken on new forms under the influence of digitalization. Social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram have become places where individuals express their political views and interact with like-minded people. This has led individuals to blindly believe in biased news,

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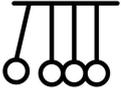
encounter only content that supports and praises their own political perspectives, and has increased intolerance toward opposing views. As a result, impartiality has vanished and has been replaced by misinformation. The way algorithms provide content based on user preferences has deepened polarization not only on an individual level but also on a societal scale.

For younger generations, this digitalization process has also altered modes of political participation. A widespread sense of hopelessness has emerged among youth due to a lack of trust in traditional party politics, a weakening belief in the transformative power of politics, and the uncertainty caused by ongoing economic crises. Concern for the future has increased the tendency for brain drain, and young people have started to express their political demands more around issues like class, social equality, and environmental justice. However, the failure of institutional politics to adequately address these demands—and the worsening of the situation to a nearly hopeless state—has led to the search for alternative paths outside the system (such as the recent protests held in Saraçhane).

Political polarization in Turkey has now moved far beyond the traditional left-right divide and has transformed into a dual struggle mainly between the AKP and CHP. In this new situation, identity, lifestyle, historical narratives, and senses of belonging have become more prominent than differences of opinion. On one side stands the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power for many years and relies on a large, conservative base; on the other side is the Republican People's Party (CHP), the main political address for secular and, most notably, pro-Atatürk voters. This opposition is reflected not only at the level of political parties but also in voters' daily lives, social media activity, education, and cultural preferences. The AKP–CHP conflict is defined through lifestyle differences—ranging from clothing to parenting styles, from media consumption to vacation preferences—pointing to two distinct sociological groups. Due to labels imposed on both sides, the distance between the two camps has grown wider and reached a dangerous level. As the struggle deepens, it has turned into a “fight for freedom,” becoming less about party supporters and more about a generational conflict among youth.

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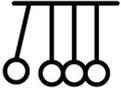
Whether this struggle is fair has become a major topic of debate in recent times. Claims that the opposition does not have equal conditions of competition have become more pronounced—especially in areas such as media control, judicial independence, and distribution of public resources. The CHP becoming a general target, the AKP facing severe criticism in social media to the point of insult, and strategic targeting of CHP mayors have made this inequality more visible.

In this context, the judicial process involving Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu stands as a critical example. Having caused a symbolic defeat for the AKP by winning Istanbul in the 2019 elections, İmamoğlu quickly became one of the most prominent figures of the opposition. However, in recent days, the annulment of his university diploma and a subsequent detention order have strengthened public claims of political engineering through the judiciary. Whether the accusations are justified and whether the diploma revocation is based on a fair legal foundation remain highly controversial. Both the timing and content of the decision have triggered criticism that political competition is being suppressed through legal means. Nevertheless, to unconditionally support Ekrem İmamoğlu—and thus the CHP—based solely on political affiliation, without the judicial process being completed or a final outcome reached, also reflects another aspect of polarization. Turkey is walking a very fine line between critical thinking and blind loyalty, between conscious citizenship and ignorant partisanship.

This process shows that the AKP–CHP rivalry now continues not only at the ballot box but also across the judiciary, media, and bureaucracy. This paints a worrisome picture regarding the fundamental principles of a democratic regime and creates an environment where politics is increasingly becoming a power struggle and institutional checks and balances are weakening. As a result, in the 2020s, Turkey has definitively shifted from a left–right political axis to an AKP–CHP one; and this struggle has evolved into not just a political but also a societal divide. In such a polarized climate, it is becoming increasingly difficult to speak of fair political competition, and serious structural problems are emerging that threaten the healthy functioning of democracy.

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Conclusion

Politics in Turkey has long been a source not only of differences in opinion but also of deep societal polarization. This polarization has gone beyond mere political preferences, damaging the social fabric of the country, severing relationships, and making communal life more difficult. These dimensions of social division have hindered the development of a democratic culture and made societal reconciliation more challenging.



However, Turkey is a country that has historically managed to emerge from difficult times and has the capacity to hold its differences together. Overcoming the deep divisions experienced today is not only the responsibility of politicians but of all segments of society. Listening to the voices of young people and acknowledging their calls for rights, law, and justice is key to overcoming this polarization. The future of Turkey depends on a social vision that sees differences as richness and is based on the principle of living together. Yet, the realization of this vision is only possible through the assumption of responsibility by every individual and institution, the softening of political discourse, and determined steps toward freeing society from polarization. The first person to take this step must undoubtedly be those in power—and if they are unable to make the necessary move, perhaps they should no longer be in power.

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