

Can Turkey Find Its Way Back to Freedom? Authoritarian Consolidation Versus the Defense of Turkish Democracy

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Chairman Smith, Chairman McGovern, and honorable members, I thank you for the opportunity to testify on the state of human rights in the Republic of Turkey.

I will focus my remarks on five interrelated dimensions of the country's democratic regression: the consolidation of personal rule around a single individual; the systematic erosion of judicial independence and the rule of law; the suppression of independent journalism and the harassment of civil society; the increasingly routine practice of incarcerating elected politicians, journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders; and the arbitrary removal of elected mayors through the *kayyum* (trustee) system. I will then turn, in the final section of my testimony, to a category of victim that international attention too rarely reaches: the hundreds of thousands of ordinary Turkish citizens whose lives, livelihoods, and material resources have been destroyed by the legal infrastructure I describe.

Since 2016, Turkey has been completely transformed into an illiberal state that can no longer even be classified as a competitive authoritarian one. What has emerged in Turkey over the past decade is not democratic backsliding in the abstract. It is a system of personal rule—a regime organized, in increasingly explicit ways, around the political survival, the prerogatives, and the personal preferences of a single individual, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The institutions of the Turkish state—its courts, its prosecutors, its broadcast regulator, its central bank, its electoral commission, and increasingly its

constitution itself—have been progressively reconfigured to serve as instruments of one man’s rule and one man’s political continuity.

The March 2025 arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, a member of the main opposition party, the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP), and the subsequent indictment of more than 400 of his municipal associates mark the most aggressive deployment of prosecutorial power against electoral competition in the republic’s history. İmamoğlu was arrested on March 19, 2025—the same day his party’s primary was scheduled to nominate him as its presidential candidate. He faces 142 charges in a nearly 4,000-page indictment, with prosecutors seeking aggregate sentences totaling 2,430 years. All kinds of charges, including espionage, are continuously added to signal that his travails will not end anytime soon and, therefore, will be prevented from running in the next election cycle. Turkey uses “secret witnesses” whose identities are withheld from the defense, eliminating the possibility of a fair trial. By the most plausible reading of the evidence, these charges constitute the most far-reaching effort to remove a leading opposition candidate from electoral contention in the history of the Turkish Republic.

If this was not enough, two weeks ago, on May 21, a court nullified CHP’s 2023 grand party congress results, thereby arbitrarily removing its elected leadership and replacing it with its previous ineffectual management. What is clear is that this was orchestrated by Erdoğan himself, who was the first to publicly suggest that CHP’s 2023 congress had been “marred by irregularities.” The court decision was announced on the eve of the most important holiday in Turkey, Eid al-Adha, when everything shuts down for a week. While the markets did react, this was an effort to circumvent the decision’s extended impact on financial markets, as with İmamoğlu’s arrest. The purpose of the decision was to create chaos and division within the CHP so as to distract it from focusing on the election process.

These developments are not isolated episodes. They are the predictable culmination of an institutional architecture shaped by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Erdoğan’s personal direction. My purpose today is to describe how that architecture functions, to identify the specific human rights violations it produces, and—above all—to give the Commission a sense of the human cost it has inflicted, both on prominent victims and on the much larger population of ordinary Turkish citizens who bear the everyday weight of one man’s rule.

It is also important to note that Erdoğan is circumventing the ordinary political process because he has realized that, after 23 years in power, he has overstayed his welcome. He cannot risk a free and fair election because he will almost certainly lose it.

I. The Architecture of Personal Rule

Coming two years after the Arab Spring revolt, the widespread Gezi protests alarmed Erdoğan, who not only interpreted them as a mass challenge to his rule but also used them to prosecute real and imaginary opponents. However, it is the failed July 15, 2016, coup attempt that provided him with the wherewithal to transform the Turkish political system. A two-year state of emergency was declared, during which the government issued more than thirty emergency decrees with the force of law. At least 152,000 civil servants —judges, prosecutors, teachers, soldiers, academics, and police officers—were dismissed or

suspended.¹ Many of the dismissed public servants were accused of having links with the Gülen movement, a cleric living in the U.S., and a former Erdoğan ally who was accused of fomenting the coup.

The failed coup attempt provided Erdoğan with the “justification” to call for a 2017 constitutional referendum that transformed the Turkish political system. Abolishing the office of the prime minister, the new constitution concentrated all power in the presidency. The president could issue presidential decrees regulating wide areas of national life, appoint ministers without parliamentary confirmation, name half the membership of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors, and exercise control over the central bank, the broadcast regulator, the savings deposit insurance fund, and the public media apparatus. Parliament’s constitutional functions have been correspondingly reduced. The post-coup mass dismissals were not subjected to meaningful individualized review. Although Turkey created the Inquiry Commission on the State of Emergency Measures in 2017 after sustained domestic and Council of Europe pressure, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights later found that its procedures suffered from serious shortcomings, including a lack of transparency, limited independence, absence of oral hearings, inadequate reasoning, and ineffective judicial oversight, leaving it far short of an effective remedy.²

What this institutional concentration has produced is a personalist regime in which a cult of personality envelops a fused party-state. A state-aligned media apparatus is always ready to justify any decision the President makes, whether it is the dismissal of the central bank chief, the persecution of political rivals, or the takeover of businesses. The recent case of Bilgi University is particularly instructive. On May 22nd, during graduation season, students and faculty woke up to a two-line emergency order from Erdoğan closing the university immediately. Overwhelming protests from students, faculty, and parents convinced the president that he had made a mistake; three days later, as if nothing had happened, another two-line order was issued, reopening it. The government press dutifully supported both decisions and implied that the president had made the right decision in each instance.

The 2024 local elections, in which the CHP, under a brand-new leadership, outpolled the AKP nationally for the first time in more than two decades, demonstrated that meaningful electoral competition can persist in Turkey. The events of the past fifteen months—the imprisonment of the leading opposition presidential candidate, the indictment of fifteen elected CHP mayors, and the court-ordered displacement of the main opposition party’s leadership—demonstrate, with equal force, the lengths to which the governing apparatus is willing to go to ensure that competition does not translate into a transfer of power. The presidential commission appointed in May 2025 to draft a new constitution is the latest and most consequential element of this trajectory: the architecture of personal rule is now to be inscribed in the country’s foundational law.³

¹UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Report on the Impact of the State of Emergency on Human Rights in Turkey, Including an Update on the South-East (Geneva, March 2018), p. 14.

²Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Report following her visit to Turkey from 1 to 5 July 2019, CommDH(2020)1, 19 February 2020, pp. 24-25.

³Statement by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, May 27, 2025, reported in Associated Press, “Turkey’s Erdoğan appoints legal team to draft new constitution,” May 27, 2025.

II. Judicial Independence and the Rule of Law

What makes the presidency so powerful is a judiciary that Erdoğan has erected as its primary instrument for implementing his policies. The capture of the courts has been accomplished not by abolishing them but by reconstituting their personnel, redefining their jurisprudence, and—where necessary—simply ignoring their decisions when they prove inconvenient.

The personnel transformation of the Turkish judiciary that followed the 2016 coup attempt is the precondition for everything else. By 2020, approximately 4,399 judges and prosecutors—approximately one quarter of the entire bench—were dismissed in the months after the coup, the great majority on the basis of summary administrative action rather than individualized findings of misconduct. They were often replaced through accelerated appointment procedures by newly minted graduates whose career advancement depends substantially on signaling alignment with the executive.⁴ “Moreover, judges are frequently removed from cases or transferred without their consent, particularly when their rulings conflict with government interests.”⁵

The defining episode of arbitrary justice is the Osman Kavala case. Kavala, a philanthropist and civil society leader, has been detained since October 2017 and is serving a life sentence imposed in April 2022 for what prosecutors characterized as an attempt to overthrow the government in connection with the 2013 Gezi Park protests. Unfortunately, I know this case very well because Kavala was also indicted along with me for organizing the failed 2016 coup. The indictment is a total farce. Having read it numerous times, I can assure you that it provides no evidence, invents facts, and criminalizes ordinary activities, including travel and giving interviews. It treats a two-minute chance encounter at an Istanbul restaurant, where I had gone to have dinner with a journalist three days after the coup attempt, as proof that we had been planning it all along. The indictment admits that they are unable to place us together—our telephones suggested that we happened to be in Istanbul at certain times—but are nonetheless certain we plotted together. This is the kind of evidence prosecutors provide and then get convictions.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2019 that his detention was pursued with the ulterior motive of silencing him as a human rights defender. Article 90 of the Turkish Constitution states that Turkey accepted the ECtHR's compulsory jurisdiction in 1990, meaning the court's final judgments are binding on Turkey. Yet, despite its obligation to do so, Turkey has ignored the European court's demands to release Kavala. Erdoğan has had an almost personal beef with Kavala whom he has denounced publicly on numerous occasions, accusing him of all ill intents, and most importantly of being an ally of George Soros, “that Hungarian Jew.”

The case of Can Atalay, a human rights lawyer convicted in the so-called “Gezi trial” of 2022 alongside Kavala, is also emblematic of arbitrary justice. Atalay was elected to parliament from prison in May 2023; the Constitutional Court, Turkey's highest court, repeatedly ruled, in 2023 and 2024, that his continued detention violated his rights to liberty and to political participation, and ordered his release. Yet, a lower court, the Court of Cassation, not only “overruled” the Constitutional Court but—in an unprecedented

⁴European Commission, [Turkey 2020 Report](#), 2020, p. 23

⁵European Commission, [Türkiye 2025 Report](#), 2025, p. 27.

step—also requested the criminal prosecution of the Constitutional Court justices who had issued the ruling. Atalay was stripped of his parliamentary seat in January 2024 and remains imprisoned today.⁶

The Atalay episode is no longer exceptional. As of late 2025, Turkey was in violation of more than eighty unimplemented judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and a comparable number of unimplemented rulings of its own Constitutional Court. In February 2026, the president of Turkey's Constitutional Court, Kadir Özkaya, publicly acknowledged that the Court lacks the authority to enforce ECtHR rulings—an extraordinary admission of institutional impotence by the head of a court whose decisions are, under the Turkish constitution, binding on all branches of government.⁷

On February 11, 2026, President Erdoğan appointed Akın Gürlek as Minister of Justice. Gürlek, the former chief public prosecutor of Istanbul, had personally directed the most politically sensitive prosecutions of the past three years, including the case against Mayor İmamoğlu.⁸ His elevation from the prosecutorial chair that had filed these charges to the cabinet position that supervises the prosecution service nationally was widely understood as the closing of a loop—an explicit signaling that the political weaponization of prosecution is not an embarrassment but a credential, and that future career advancement depends on willingness to bring politically driven cases.

As in the previously mentioned case regarding the reinstatement of the main opposition party's leadership due to alleged irregularities at the 2023 congress, it is important to note how cases are arbitrarily assigned. An appeals court relied on a law governing associations rather than the electoral statutes, even though Turkey's Supreme Election Board (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu) is constitutionally empowered to supervise party congresses. There is no precedent in modern Turkish history for using an ordinary civil-association statute to overturn the democratic choice of a political party's membership.

III. Press Freedom and the Containment of Civil Society

Turkey ranks 159th out of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index—well into the lower fifth of all states surveyed, and below several formally undemocratic systems. As of mid-2026, *Expression Interrupted*, a Turkish NGO, as of the end of May, with the release of three journalists, some 24 more remain incarcerated. This number, while lower than the figure of 84 reached in 2016, does not reflect a real improvement as there 119 journalists/authors on trial.⁹

The disinformation law, enacted in October 2022 as Article 217/A of the Turkish Penal Code, criminalizes the dissemination of “false information” with penalties of up to three years in prison. Its vague definition of falsehood and its application to social-media posts as well as published articles have made it the leading vehicle for the criminal prosecution of journalists. It serves to harass journalists, as any comment

⁶Human Rights Watch, World Report 2025: Turkey (New York: HRW, January 2025).

⁷Turkish Minute, “Turkey's chief justice says top court lacks authority to enforce ECtHR rulings,” February 26, 2026.

⁸“[Akın Gürlek kimdir?](#)” T24, February 11, 2026. See also Human Rights Watch, “Turkey: Leading Opponent of Erdoğan on Trial,” March 3, 2026.

⁹*Expression Interrupted*, <https://www.expressioninterrupted.com/archive.php> May 2026.

or article, if deemed to be “false” by the Presidential Center for Countering Disinformation, can be used to prosecute and imprison someone.

Similarly, Article 299 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes “insulting the president,” has also been used arbitrarily to further harass journalists. The broadcaster Sedef Kabaş was prosecuted in 2022 for reciting an old Turkish proverb—widely known in Anatolian folklore—on television, which the prosecution argued obliquely referred to the president. She was summarily arrested and tried, sentenced to prison for two years, and released after 49 days of pretrial custody pending the conclusion of appeals. In 2025, Zafer Arapkirli of BirGün was accused by another pro-government journalist of insulting the president for having written, “[y]ou are a very bad screenwriter... and always have been,” and was duly charged. He also received a two-year sentence because he wrote that Alawites in Syria may have been victims of atrocities, a statement deemed to be false information. Some of the accusations are truly absurd: two famous journalist/author brothers Ahmet and Mehmet Altan were arrested in 2016 for passing “subliminal messages during a television program,” in support of the failed 2016 coup. Between 2014 and 2020 alone, Erdoğan’s government investigated approximately 160,000 Turks for insulting the president and prosecuted 35,000.

The Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) has imposed escalating fines and broadcast bans on opposition outlets. The 2022 Mass Communication Law expanded RTÜK’s authority over internet broadcasting and online news content. The cumulative pressure has produced a media landscape in which a substantial majority of the press is now controlled by outlets aligned with or directly owned by entities friendly to the government. When the founder of the opposition broadcaster Tele 1 was arrested on “espionage” charges, Turkey’s Savings Deposit Insurance Fund appointed a trustee to manage the channel, which was subsequently put up for sale.

Since 2016, the Turkish authorities have shut down more than 1,500 foundations and associations. A 2020 law mandating annual audits of nongovernmental organizations and authorizing the Interior Ministry to appoint trustees to NGO boards under criminal investigation has placed the entire associational sector under the implicit threat of administrative dissolution. In 2021, the assets of 770 NGOs were frozen on allegations of terrorism financing—allegations that, in the great majority of cases, have produced no successful prosecutions but have served their purpose of paralyzing the organizations in question.

IV. The Imprisonment of Political Figures

The Turkish state routinely charges opposition political leaders, especially those who advocate for Kurdish rights, with trying to undermine the “unity of the state,” and related crimes. Invariably, these prosecutions are triggered by speeches given by political leaders. They are, in fact, political prisoners because they were convicted on the basis of conduct that, in any system respecting the rule of law, would not constitute a criminal offense.

In addition to Atalay, mentioned in an earlier section, perhaps the most prominent political prisoner is Selahattin Demirtaş, the former co-chair of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) and, in 2014 and 2018,

the party's presidential candidate. He has been imprisoned since November 4, 2016—now approaching ten years. The European Court of Human Rights has ruled three times—in 2018, 2020, and most recently in July 2025—that his detention violates the European Convention on Human Rights and serves the ulterior purpose of stifling pluralism and limiting democratic debate. In May 2024, a Turkish court sentenced him to forty-two years' imprisonment for speeches during the 2014 Kobani protests, in a mass trial that resulted in convictions of more than one hundred former HDP officials, including his former co-chair, Figen Yüksekdağ. She has been jailed for 30 years, just like Demirtaş, for speeches deemed to challenge national unity during the same Kobani protests. The Kobani protests were triggered by the Islamic State's rampage through Northern Syria and its attack on the Kurdish town of Kobani. Demirtaş had emerged as the most successful Kurdish politician in Turkey, one who could also appeal to non-Kurdish audiences in the country's western regions. Under his leadership, HDP grew into the country's third-largest party, and in Istanbul, he mobilized his supporters to help defeat Erdoğan's mayoral candidates. Demirtaş may just have been imprisoned for defying Erdoğan after one of AKP's election defeats in Istanbul by stating, "we will not let you become president."

These cases are not exceptional; they are emblematic. Behind them stand thousands of others—Kurdish politicians convicted in mass prosecutions after the 2016 lifting of parliamentary immunity, and journalists detained for long periods of time pending trial on charges later dismissed. The pattern is the use of detention itself—prolonged pretrial detention, denial of release pending appeal, and successive prosecutions—as the principal instrument of political incapacitation.

V. The Kayyum System: Removing Elected Mayors by Administrative Fiat

Among the most consequential and least internationally understood features of Turkey's contemporary authoritarianism is the kayyum system—the practice by which elected mayors are summarily removed from office and replaced with state-appointed trustees, almost always provincial governors or district administrators chosen by the Interior Minister. The mechanism rests on Emergency Decree No. 674, issued in September 2016 under the post-coup state of emergency, which amended the Law on Municipalities to permit the central government to take direct control of any municipality whose elected leadership stands accused of "aiding terrorism."¹⁰ The accusation alone—without conviction, without indictment, without judicial review of any kind—is sufficient. The decree was nominally an emergency measure; it has, like so much of the post-2016 architecture, become permanent law.

The practical effect has been to disenfranchise millions of voters. Following its first major application in September 2016, some 95 mayors were removed from the cities, districts, and towns. In the 2019 municipal elections, the pro-Kurdish party, HDP, won a total of 65 municipalities; 48 of these had their elected mayors removed, their town councils abolished, and 43 co-chairs imprisoned.¹¹ In Diyarbakır, Mardin, and Van—three of the largest metropolitan municipalities in the southeast, with combined

¹⁰Emergency Decree No. 674 of 1 September 2016, amending the Law on Municipalities. See Human Rights Watch, "Turkey: Crackdown on Kurdish Opposition," March 20, 2017.

¹¹ Fatma Yörür, "Türkiye'nin kayyum geçmişi," VOA, November 11, 2024.

populations exceeding three million—mayors were removed despite having won their elections with vote shares ranging from 53 to 63 percent.¹²

The kayyum system warrants particular attention because it is not based on any due process, requirement for a court order, presentation of evidence, or indictment. The recipient kayyum is not provided an opportunity to respond. The Minister of the Interior signs an administrative order; the elected official is removed; a state appointee is installed in his or her place; and the municipality's council is dissolved by the same order. The European Court of Human Rights has, in several kayyum cases, found violations of the right to free elections.

Kayyum's application sometimes stretches the imagination. Ahmet Türk, probably the most respected and senior Kurdish politician, renowned for his conciliatory views and efforts, won the mayoralty of Mardin three times in the 2014, 2019, and 2024 elections. In each case (including when he was 82), he was unceremoniously kicked out by the Interior Minister. This practice of removing mayors has not only been sustained but also extended beyond Kurdish municipalities to towns controlled by the main opposition party.

On October 30, 2024, Ahmet Özer—the elected mayor of Istanbul's Esenyurt district, a distinguished academic and the first CHP mayor ever removed under the kayyum mechanism—was arrested in a dawn raid at his home on charges of membership in the PKK. Within hours, the Istanbul Deputy Governor was installed in his office. Özer represents the most densely populated district in Turkey, with over 950,000 residents. His arrest and replacement were widely understood, both domestically and internationally, as a pilot deployment of the kayyum mechanism against the main opposition party—a test of whether the same tools that had been used for nearly a decade against Kurdish elected officials could be extended to mainstream opposition municipalities. The arrest, six months later, of Istanbul Mayor İmamoğlu and the cascade of investigations against CHP mayors that followed (fifteen of whom are presently in detention) is the answer to that test.

The kayyum system is, in functional terms, the local-government counterpart to the legal infrastructure I described in earlier sections. It permits the central executive to overturn democratic outcomes it disapproves of, without independent review, on the basis of terrorism allegations that need never be tested in court. It disenfranchises millions of voters. And it has been progressively normalized—moving in stages from Kurdish-majority municipalities, where it has operated since 2016, to mainstream opposition municipalities, where it now poses an active and expanding threat to the outcome of every election the governing party fears it will lose.

VI. The Reach into Ordinary Lives

The cases I have so far described concern public figures—politicians, journalists, lawyers, civic leaders, elected mayors—whose imprisonment or removal is, regrettably, a familiar feature of authoritarian systems. I would now ask the Commission to consider a second category of victim, less visible internationally but in aggregate far more numerous: the ordinary Turkish citizens whose lives,

¹² Al Jazeera, "Turkey removes pro-Kurdish mayors, arrests more than 400," August 19, 2019.

livelihoods, and material resources have been destroyed by the legal infrastructure I have described. Their numbers are not measured in dozens or hundreds, but in hundreds of thousands.

The principal instrument has been the emergency decree, or Kanun Hükümünde Kararname (KHK), issued under the state of emergency declared after the July 2016 coup attempt. Between July 2016 and July 2018, the Turkish government dismissed more than 130,000 public servants simply by publishing their names in the annexes to government decrees. There was no court summons, no evidence presented. Once dismissed in this manner, individuals lost not only their jobs but also a wide range of associated rights: their (and their family members') passports were canceled; their professional licenses were revoked, precluding them from practicing privately; their pensions were forfeited; the social security and health insurance to which they had contributed for decades were withdrawn; and—under a specific decree provision—those who lived in publicly owned housing were required to vacate, with their families, within fifteen days. The official designation on their files associated them, without evidence or conviction, with terrorist organizations, rendering them effectively unemployable in the private sector as well. The term that has emerged in Turkish civil society to describe this condition is *sivil ölüm*—civil death.

In a notable 2016 case, some 2,000 academics signed a petition titled "Academics for Peace," criticizing the government's military foray into the country's southeastern provinces as part of a counterterrorism offensive. Soon after the petition was made public, many of the signatories, including those at private institutions, were fired, and some were prosecuted for terrorist propaganda. The purge of academia deepened after the 2016 coup attempt, as schools accused of affiliation with the Gülen movement were shuttered.

Alongside the post-coup KHK system, a parallel infrastructure of ordinary criminal prosecution has reached even further into civil society, illustrating with particular clarity the personalist character of contemporary Turkish governance. Perhaps Article 299 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes "insulting the president," stands out as the most revealing law regarding the personalization of the regime. The Ministry of Justice claims that more than 31,000 investigations into alleged insults against the president were opened in 2020 alone. Since Erdogan became president in 2014, the total has reached 160,000. Nearly 39,000 people have stood trial for the alleged crimes. Of these, over 3,600 defendants were sentenced to prison. Children have not been spared, including 100 minors who were also sentenced. The European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2021 that Article 299 itself violates the right to freedom of expression and should be amended or repealed; the Turkish judiciary has continued to enforce the provision unaltered. Among those prosecuted have been journalists, lawyers, students, activists, and ordinary citizens whose social-media posts have drawn attention.

A few specific cases convey the character of these prosecutions. Ayse Barim, a well-known talent manager, was arrested in 2025 and charged with being an organizer of the Gezi protests. But she was charged some 12 years after the fact. Her pretrial detention lasted 248 days. The government's accusation, devoid of any concrete evidence, amounted to the suspicion that she had instructed her clients to participate in the protests. Prosecutors insisted, despite denials by the actors in question, that

she had been responsible for their participation. This was all it took for her to be sentenced to 12.5 years in prison.

Mehmet Şah Tekiner, a 62-year-old man, was prosecuted for sharing on social media a Turkish-language translation of a German newspaper article that described Erdoğan as authoritarian. While he claimed that he did not have a social media account and that his grandchildren may have created and shared it, prosecutors remained unconvinced.¹³ The German news agency, DW's correspondent in Turkey, Alican Uludag, was charged with insulting the president and released after 90 days of pre-trial detention just over a week ago, with charges still pending. Children have been prosecuted for tearing campaign posters. Pensioners have been prosecuted for muttering in cafes. The cumulative practical effect is to attach criminal liability to the everyday expression of political dissatisfaction by ordinary citizens.

This use of Law 229 not only serves to punish the president's enemies but, more importantly, has a broader "chilling effect" that makes everyone think twice before criticizing anyone associated with the regime. This is perhaps especially true of those who have suffered from spending time in jail.

Conclusion

The trajectory of human rights in Turkey since 2016 is not a matter of contested interpretation. The Council of Europe, the European Commission, the United Nations human rights treaty bodies, every major international human rights organization, and the great majority of the relevant academic literature converge on a single assessment: a country that two decades ago was a plausible candidate for European Union accession and that retained—uniquely in its region—both a competitive electoral tradition and a robust civic culture has been steadily reorganized around a single individual's continued rule. The institutions of the Turkish state have been captured. The space for opposition has not been completely abolished; it has been criminalized.

It is important to remember that Erdoğan assumed power in 2003 with a promise to democratize Turkey. In the first half-decade or so of his rule, he introduced many reforms that expanded the space for free speech and activity. He now seems determined to complete Turkey's transformation into a one-man, one-party state. Even if he succeeds in squeezing another electoral term out of the public by manipulating all the powers at his disposal, the longer he stays in power, the greater the backlash against him will be. The strongest card he has to play is the nationalist one, and that makes him, like all other authoritarian leaders, dangerous. Paradoxically, the stricter he gets at home, the more he undermines his nationalist card. Finally, the Trump administration has rolled back U.S. involvement in international human rights organizations, and related State Department reporting has been scaled back. In the process, it has also improved relations that had deteriorated under President Joe Biden.

On the other hand, the election genie has not yet been removed from the average Turk's consciousness. Erdoğan will face public resistance. What matters is ensuring that those who believe in the future of

¹³Global Voices, "In Turkey, a citizen sentenced to prison for insulting the president," November 7, 2021 (Mehmet Şah Tekiner case).

Turkish democracy know they are not alone. This is where institutions like the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission add their voice, as it has in so many other cases, to support their struggle for democracy.

I am grateful for the Commission's attention to their situation, and I would welcome your questions.