

In Brief: A recent survey demonstrated that the level of political polarization in Turkey has reached a level that should alarm even optimists. One of the most striking findings of the survey is the social distance between constituencies of different parties. The survey also highlighted the prejudices of the respondents toward supporters of the opposing party. While polarization is not unique to Turkey, societies with a stronger institutional structure and democratic culture will find it easier to manage this challenge. Turkey's leaders could either take polarization seriously and implement policies to encourage social cohesion without any short-term political benefits or watch their country sink into deeper polarization and a weaker democracy.

Turkey: Divided We Stand

by Emre Erdogan

Shared suffering unites people, and elections divide them. Wars, natural disasters, and the death of a public hero are moments that can help forge a common identity and cohesive society. Political battles for supremacy, on the other hand, underline and amplify minor differences as political actors often try to energize their base by building fictitious walls between people. As politics become more polarized, it eats at the glue that holds a society together. This is what we are seeing in Turkey.

The recent survey entitled “Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey” conducted by the Association of Corporate Social Responsibility with financial support from the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, a project of the German Marshall Fund, demonstrated that the level of political polarization in Turkey has reached a level that should alarm even optimists. The survey asks each respondent which party s/he feels closest to and which party s/he feels most distant from, and then presents a detailed picture of negative perceptions of the respondents regarding the supporters of other parties.

One of the most striking findings of the survey is the social distance between constituencies of different parties. Social distance, a concept that measures the degree to which members of different social groups

are willing to cooperate with each other, is used in countries with enduring ethnic or race-based conflicts. When asked, 79 percent of the respondents could name a party to which they feel very distant. Forty-four percent of respondents named the Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) as the party they feel most distant from; 22 percent named the governing Justice and Development Party (AKParty). So far, this is nothing unhealthy: people in democracies sometimes feel distant from opposing political parties. However, the survey also highlighted that 83 percent of the respondents do not want their daughter to marry someone voting for the party they feel distant to; 78 percent reject the idea of doing business with someone voting for the “other” party; and perhaps most dramatically, 74 percent reject the idea of his or her children playing with the children of someone who votes for the other party. The basic premise of a liberal democratic system is the possibility of cooperation among different political actors; social distance at these levels makes such cooperation difficult, if not impossible.

Most dramatically, 74 percent reject the idea of his or her children playing with the children of someone who votes for the other party.

Secondly, the survey highlighted the prejudices of the respondents toward supporters of the opposing party. The respondents were asked to associate a set of adjectives they use with either the supporters of the party they feel close to, supporters of the party they feel distant to, both, or neither. An overwhelming majority of the respondents associated positive attributes such as “patriot,” “honorable,” “open-minded,” “generous,” and “smart” with the supporters of the party they feel

close to, while they associated negative attributes such as “arrogant,” “hypocrite,” “bigot,” and “cruel” with the supporters of the party they feel most distant to.

Supporters of different political parties have widely differing views about political issues as well. The most popular leader in the country is President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (47 percent), but his popularity in the eye of supporters of opposition parties is less than 15 percent. This situation is also true for other leaders; none of them attract the sympathy of other constituencies. This partisan polarization is also illustrated in terms of confidence in institutions. The army is still the most trusted institution (75 percent), followed by universities (65 percent). But only 56 percent of respondents, mainly AKParty supporters, have confidence in the presidency or the government. The percentage of those who have confidence in the presidency or the government is no more than 20 percent among supporters of the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and HDP sympathizers, and less than 40 percent among the Nationalist Movement (MHP) constituency. This situation is also true for the courts, the parliament, and political parties, which shows that almost all political institutions are subject to political polarization.

In a pluralistic democracy, diversity in information channels could act as a bridge between different poles in the society. However, this survey also shows that Turkish citizens do not use the same channels to stay informed. Only one or two of the leading newspapers and almost none of the major television channels attract the supporters of multiple different political parties. Moreover, almost every media outlet is deemed “biased” by the majority of respondents. Social media does not solve this problem either. Facebook users’ friends generally have similar political views to their own, and Twitter users follow politically similar people, leading to an illusion of homogeneity of political opinions.

Several factors account for this level of polarization, some of which are related to the enduring conflicts

in society. Samuel Huntington included Turkey among “torn societies” in his essay “The Clash of Civilizations?”¹ The deep divide between modernizing/Westernizing elites and the rest of the populace has already been accepted as the major cleavage in Turkish politics, defined as the center-periphery conflict. The modernist (pro-Western and secularist) center controlled the state apparatus for a while. Then the periphery, representing the traditional and religious segments of society, gained wealth through rapid economic modernization. They first penetrated the center then took control of it, resulting in the pre-hegemonic rule of the AKParty. A final cleavage became visible with the emergence of *Kulturkampfs*, based on secular and religious visions of society. The periphery always expressed itself through religious values,² but rapid modernization and integration of peripheral elements into the central distribution of wealth created a new class of political actors.

Apart from these deeply wired societal conflicts, recent phenomena also facilitated the political polarization. Turkey has held a series of referenda and referenda-like elections over the last decade. The most significant one was the referendum of 2010, a “mixed bag” package of constitutional amendments, which clearly illustrated societal cleavages. As a result of domestic political tension, the 2014 local elections also turned into a referendum in which the AKParty received a vote of confidence from voters. The August 2014 presidential election clearly showed how societal rifts are defining factors in the degree of political polarization. The zero-sum presidential race led to further polarization and divisive political rhetoric. The subsequent elections in June and November 2015 also contributed to sharpening divides between political “tribes.”

1 Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* (1993): 22-49.

2 Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, “The Turkish Referendum: Democratic Consolidation or Political Conflict?,” *On Turkey*, German Marshall Fund, September 3, 2010, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkish-referendum-democratic-consolidation-or-political-conflict>; Ersin Kalaycıoğlu (2011), “Kulturkampf in Turkey: The Constitutional Referendum of 12 September 2010,” *South European Society and Politics*, DOI:10.1080/13608746.2011.600555

Major political actors did not hesitate to exploit to consolidate their party base and galvanize their supporters. During the political campaigns, almost all actors used a discriminatory discourse. Political leaders labeled the divisions as existential conflicts; different opinions were presented as evidence of treason or ignorance. Negative adjectives were integral parts of the political rhetoric. None of the political leaders failed to find scapegoats for the political and economic instability and terrorism in the country. It would be surprising if this discriminatory rhetoric were not echoed at the ballot box.

Worsening global economic conditions, increased cross-border political instability, and proxy wars are external factors facilitating the abuse of negative predispositions.

This trend is, of course, not unique to Turkey. Worsening global economic conditions, increased cross-border political instability, and proxy wars are external factors facilitating the abuse of negative predispositions. Populism is widely observed globally with the emergence of a new class of leaders and aspiring leaders: Viktor Orban in Hungary, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Narendra Modi in India, Shinzo Abe in Japan, and Donald Trump in the United States extensively exploit societal cleavages and have political rhetoric based on scapegoating, discriminating, and “othering.”

In a divided country, where citizens are grouped under the flags of their favorite political party and where this is no visible demand for political and societal diversity, it is not easy to create a political culture based on tolerance and empathy. This is even more so if some of these rifts are historically rooted and some newer ones have emerged as the result of rapid social and

economic development.³ Political leaders who exploit these cleavages to maximize their vote share are not willing to change their approaches to build a climate of mutual trust and dialogue. They see this as having no short or medium-term benefits and as undesirable for political actors, unless they have a longer-term vision.

While polarization is not unique to Turkey, societies with a stronger institutional structure and democratic culture will find it easier to manage this challenge. Being in the middle of a chaotic region with great spillover effects does not make it easier for Turkey to manage polarization. Turkey's leaders could either take polarization seriously and implement policies to encourage social cohesion without any short-term political benefits or watch their country sink into deeper polarization and a weaker democracy. The direction Turkey goes in this regard will be one of the factors shaping Turkey's place in the transatlantic community and the role it can play internationally.

³ For a review of cultural factors, see Emre Erdoğan "The Unbearable Heaviness of Being a Turkish Citizen," On Turkey, German Marshall Fund, February 21, 2014, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/unbearable-heaviness-being-turkish-citizen>.

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About the Author

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