WHAT EXPLAINS CHANGES IN THE LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES OF NON-DEMOCRATIC REGIMES: THE CASE OF THE ERDOGAN REGIME IN TURKEY

By

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Abstract

Authoritarian durability literature has recently dedicated significant attention to legitimation as a crucial part of a regime's toolbox to prolong its lifespan and various legitimation strategies have been put under scholarly scrutiny. However, surprisingly, no study has ever systematically examined under what conditions regimes choose one or another strategy. The thesis addresses this theoretical gap in the literature by conducting a hypothesis-generating case study in the case of Turkey. Using Coleman's (1986) 'bathtub' causal model, it argues that as rational actors, regimes pragmatically opt for one or another legitimation strategy given what challenges and opportunities they have. In doing so, the thesis also examines the legitimation strategies' interaction with other pillars of regime durability and the implications of democratic backsliding. It concludes economic growth/decline is the key factor defining the increase or decrease in employment of performance legitimation claims. When the economy declines, performance deficit is usually compensated with ideological legitimation and more assertive foreign policy discourses. Increased repression is usually accompanied by increased ideological legitimation, including those aimed at the polarization of society across ideological lines. Co-optation leads to an adjustment in ideological legitimation claims to make them more acceptable for the newly co-opted groups. The thesis also offers a model of the impact of democratic backsliding on the selection of legitimation strategies, which predicts increased person of a leader and ideological legitimation, as well as decreased legal-rational and performance legitimation as a result of backsliding.

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This thesis work is dedicated to three people - my mother, Yagut, and husband, Azad, who have been constant sources of support and encouragement during the challenges of graduate school and life, and to my son, Kanan, who patiently waited for me to finish my studies and has been a source of the greatest joy and happiness in our life during the most difficult moments.

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Introduction

Literature on authoritarian longevity has recently dedicated significant attention to legitimation as a crucial component of prolonging regime lifespan. Schlumberger famously stated while repression is usually illustrated as a distinctive feature of authoritarian rule, "any political regime, including autocracies, also needs to create and maintain legitimacy in order to survive over time" (2010, 233). Like democracies, non-democratic regimes need to build legitimacy since "relying on sheer force alone is a too costly way of maintaining authoritarian stability in the long term" (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014, 637).

Particularly since Gerschewski (2013) offered a three-pillar model of authoritarian persistence, which depicts repression, co-optation, and legitimation as key causal factors for generating regime durability, various legitimation strategies employed by non-democratic regimes have been comprehensively studied in the recent literature. Such strategies vary from legal-rational legitimization through creating a democratic façade and performance legitimation via providing economic growth, security, or stability, to legitimation based on ideology, a person of a leader, foundational myth of the regime, etc. (von Soest and Grauvogel 2015, Tannenberg et al. 2021). The ever-growing number of empirical studies have demonstrated that every autocracy has employed one or another strategy, and in most cases, a combination of some of them.

However, surprisingly, no study has ever examined what leads authoritarian regimes to choose one or another strategy. This is the question that my thesis seeks an answer to. More precisely, I am interested in what stands behind a choice of a particular legitimation strategy? Do authoritarian leaders try to plainly employ every strategy that can potentially help to build legitimacy, or do they

make strategic prioritization of some strategies over others at some point in their rule given the environment they act in or the challenges they face and opportunities they have?

I am trying to find answers to this question in the case of Turkey - an interesting case where different legitimation strategies have actively been employed by the Erdogan regime during different periods of its rule in the last 20 years. Using the case of Turkey, I am trying to demonstrate how the opportunities and constraints posed on a regime by the country's economic and political outlook/conditions impact the selection of legitimation strategies. I also look at the interaction of legitimation strategies with other pillars of regime longevity – repression and co-optation, trying to see what implications the growing repression and co-optation of new groups have for the prioritization of different legitimation strategies by the regime. Finally, I also try to link the choice of legitimation strategy to the consequences of the democratic backsliding, trying to identify what kind of changes the backsliding generates in the preferred legitimation strategies.

The findings of the thesis demonstrate that as rational actors, regimes opt for one or another legitimation strategy given what challenges and opportunities they have. Using Coleman's (1986) 'bathtub' model and Tannenberg et al's (2021) typology of legitimation claims, it tries to show how changes in the challenges and opportunities at the micro-level lead to macro-level changes in the employment of different combinations of legitimation strategies. The thesis finds that the trajectory of the economic growth is the key factor defining the increase or decrease in employment of performance legitimation claims. When the economy declines, regimes try to compensate for performance deficit with increased ideological mobilization of their support base and more assertive foreign policy discourses. Increased popular backlash and attendant repression against the opposition are usually accompanied by increased ideological legitimation, including those

aimed at the polarization of society across ideological lines. Co-optation leads to an adjustment in ideological legitimation claims to make them more acceptable for the newly co-opted groups. Finally, the thesis offers a general model of the impact of democratic backsliding on legitimation strategies, arguing that it generates the increased person of a leader and ideological legitimation, as well as leads a to decrease in the employment of legal-rational and performance legitimation claims.

The study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. Above all, it for the first time offers theoretical hypotheses to account for the shifts in legitimation strategies of non-democratic regimes, that can further be tested by other case studies or large-N quantitative analysis. Second, it contributes to the democratic backsliding literature by showing what changes backsliding is likely to generate in legitimation strategies, as well as how legitimation helps to achieve successful backsliding. The study also adds to the authoritarian durability literature by showing how legitimation can be impacted and shaped by interaction with other pillars of authoritarian durability.

The rest of the thesis continues as follows. In the first chapter of the thesis, I provide a comprehensive review of legitimation literature in general and about Turkey in particular, pointing out the gaps in it that my thesis can help to fill. The chapter continues with a theoretical section where I offer theoretical hypotheses accounting for under what conditions authoritarian regimes opt for one or other legitimation strategies. In the third section of the chapter, I describe my methodology, the reason for choosing the case of Turkey, and the sources that I benefit from for the operationalization of variables. It is followed by the second chapter – an empirical chapter that covers the 2002-2007 period of Erdogan's rule in Turkey, in which I first examine what constraints

the regime faced and opportunities it had and then analyze what kind of legitimation strategy selections they led to. Next is the third chapter – also an empirical chapter in which I examine how Erdogan successfully eliminated the initial constraints it had starting from 2007 till the mid-2010s, what new challenges and opportunities emerged afterward and how these developments led to major changes in the regime's legitimation strategies. The chapter is concluded with a section dedicated to a model on the impact of democratic backsliding on legitimation strategies that I argue is generalizable to other countries experiencing similar backsliding. The thesis ends with concluding remarks, where I situate my research in the relevant literature/research agenda, summarize its key findings and contributions to existing scholarship, and suggest possible directions of studies to test theoretical arguments generated from the case of Turkey.

Chapter1 - Literature review, Theoretical Framework, and Methodology

1.1.Literature review: Concept of Legitimacy in the Authoritarian Regime Context and Typology of Legitimacy Claims

Legitimacy is one of the most widely discussed and debated concepts in scholarly literature. The concept, in its broad meaning, encompasses beliefs on the proper source, values, goals, procedures, and performance of political power and institutions (Beetham 2012, 109). As Weber ([1922]1978) suggested a century ago, any power needs to justify itself by cultivating the belief in its legitimacy. While it is possible to achieve temporary obedience "from motives of pure expediency" or "on a purely customary basis through the fact that the corresponding behavior has become habitual", the order is much more stable when it enjoys the "prestige of being considered binding, or, as it may be expressed, of legitimacy.'' ([1922]1978, 31) Therefore, "actions taken by rulers with the aim of generating consent and support from the population as well as obtaining the loyalty of systemically relevant elites" constitutes the core of the legitimation (Kneuer, 2017, 186).

According to the growing literature on the role of legitimacy in authoritarian persistence, nowadays, not only democratic regimes but also authoritarian ones are increasingly attempting to build the legitimacy of their rule, as it is too costly to make the population obey via pure repression or other means. For instance, Gerschewski (2013, 18) highlights that modern autocracies cannot afford to rely solely on "their abuse of power in a strictly hierarchical, pyramid-shaped political order as the unconstrained tyrants of the past – from whom all power was derived – might have done." While a few committed opponents of the regime can be subdued via forceful repression, the majority of the people, as Dukalskis (2017, 27) suggests, are kept obedient by "manipulating

the ways in which they talk and think about political processes, the authorities, and political alternatives"

Due to the nature of authoritarian regimes, democratic or normative legitimacy is not possible for them by definition (Kneuer, 2011). Therefore, for studying legitimation in the non-democratic context, authors employ a non-normative, or as it is sometimes called, descriptive account of legitimacy. According to Weber, descriptive legitimacy "excludes any recourse to normative criteria" (Mommsen 1989, 20) and is built on certain beliefs in the legitimacy of the authority: "the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (Weber 1964, 382). Thus, the non-normative account derives an empirical understanding of legitimacy as a 'belief' in the appropriateness of authority, regardless of the source of that belief and how sources vary across time and space in various non-democratic regimes.

Most of the scholars working in this field borrow David Easton's categorization of "specific support" and "diffuse support" legitimation claims when trying to find the sources of that 'belief' in authoritarian regimes. According to the original account by Easton, diffuse support is directed to the fundamental aspects of the political system, such as political institutions and the constitutional order in the abstract terms, while specific support is directed at the officeholders themselves (political authorities) and is related to questions of performance and outputs, and (Easton, 1975). Schneider and Maerz (2017, 219), building on Easton's account, suggest that diffuse support legitimation in the non-democratic context is "is based on ideology, religious, nationalistic, and traditional claims or the charisma of autocratic leaders", while specific support

legitimation is "performance-dependent and draws upon socioeconomic development and physical security for gaining the support of the people."

Various typologies of legitimacy claims have been offered so far in the relevant literature that identifies subtypes of specific and diffuse support legitimacy. In their study of legitimacy claims of regimes in the post-Soviet countries, von Soest and Grauvogel (2015) differentiate between input-based legitimacy claims (diffuse support) such as foundational myth, ideology, and personalism and output-based claims (specific support) such as international engagement, formal procedures, and performance.

A more recent topology is offered by Tannenberg et al (2021) where they suggest four types of legitimation claims based on the data from expert-coded measures of regime legitimation strategies for 183 countries from 1900 to 2019. Data itself is provided as part of the V-Dem 12 (2022) data set. Types and their conceptualization by them are given below:

> *Ideology-based legitimation claims* – measured based on "to what extent does the current government promote a specific ideology or societal model in order to justify the regime in place?" (V-Dem 12 Codebook 2022, 224).
>
> *Person of the Leader-based legitimation claims* - measured based on "to what extent is the Chief Executive portrayed as being endowed with extraordinary personal characteristics and/or leadership skills (e.g. as father or mother of the nation, exceptionally heroic, moral, pious, or wise, or any other extraordinary attribute valued by the society)?" (V-Dem 12 Codebook 2022, 225).
>
> *Performance legitimation* - measured based on "to what extent does the government refer to performance (such as providing economic growth, poverty reduction, effective and non-

corrupt governance, and/or providing security) in order to justify the regime in place?" (V-Dem 12 Codebook 2022, 225).

Rational-legal legitimation - measured based on "to what extent does the current government refer to the legal norms and regulations in order to justify the regime in place?" (V-Dem 12 Codebook 2022, 225).

As part of authoritarian legitimation literature, legitimation strategies employed by the Erdogan regime have also become an object of scholarly scrutiny, particularly in recent years when the regime took an increasingly authoritarian turn. For example, Gunay (2016) studies how foreign policy was employed by the regime as a tool for legitimation, and how it was skillfully utilized to garner nationalist support for Erdogan. Yilmaza and Erturk (2021) illustrate, how ideological necropolitics-based narratives of martyrdom, blood, and death were used to legitimize the regime. Others focused on the role of legitimation strategies in the successful de-democratization implemented by Erdogan. For example, Yilmaz et al. (2019) argue construction of 'missions', along with ideational narratives and performance objectives helped the AKP to legitimize its authoritarian grip in the eyes of the main opposition parties. Zachary (2021) claims legitimation strategies greatly helped the regime to preserve its electoral support, despite rising authoritarianism tendencies and lackluster economic performance. Över and Tuncer-Ebetürk (2022) study Turkey's recent transition to personalist rule and the drastic jump in the number of insult proceedings (against the person of the head of the state) that accompanied the transition, concluding that insult proceedings play a particular role in making new frameworks of legitimacy in this transitions to personalist rule. While such studies are very helpful for understanding how various legitimation strategies helped Erdogan to reverse Turkish democracy and delegitimize the opposition, exhaustive screening of the nascent body of literature shows that none of the studies so far

addressed why there have such substantive changes in the regime's preferred legitimation strategies over time.

To conclude, a review of the literature demonstrates that there is enormous work has been done to conceptualize legitimacy in the authoritarian regime context, demonstrate its importance and relevance, provide typology, and empirically show how the regimes do legitimation in various countries. However, there is also an obvious shortcoming - there is no systematic study of why regimes prefer some types of legitimation claims and not others. From this perspective, it is particularly interesting to understand changes in legitimation strategies of the same regimes when they start to make more references to different legitimation claims compared to the previous times. Such within-case variations can help to isolate and identify reasons for new choices and abandoning older claims.

1.2. Theoretical argument

Similar to Tannenberg et al. (2021), I rely on Lipset's (1959, 86) conceptualization of legitimacy as "the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society." Following Ansell (2001), I refer to attempts to build legitimacy as legitimation, meaning the "dynamics, discourses and strategies by which actors seek and maintain legitimacy, regardless of whether they are successful or not, morally convincing or not." As my research question is interested in strategies employed by regimes when talking about legitimation, I focus on legitimacy claims, rather than what population assumes why the regime ruling them is legitimate. Those claims are "reasons, stories,

and explanations that the regimes craft and disseminate for why they are entitled to rule." Dukalskis (2017, 1).

I use Tannenberg et al.'s (2021) framework for the typology of legitimation claims. The reason for this choice is both theoretical and operational. First, the framework, collectively suggested by some of the most prominent scholars in the field, reflects an almost unanimously accepted typology of legitimation claims. Second, the data they provide as part of the V-Dem 12 (2022) data set consists of reliable time-series expert-coded data on the employment of various legitimation claims in various countries, which will be helpful in testing my theoretical arguments.

The only modification I make when using Tannenberg et al.'s (2021) conceptual framework is adding foundational myth and foreign policy to it, borrowing their definition from von Soest and Grauvogel (2015). According to Von Soest and Grauvogel (2015, 290), "particularly strong solidarity ties are established during periods of violent struggle such as war and liberation movements which are often used as powerful legitimation narratives." Foreign policy legitimation is related to achievements the regime claims it make in the external affairs for defending and advancing national interests. While Tannenberg et al. (2021) do not directly mention them, we can assume that foundational myth is part of the ideology regime propagates and thus generates diffuse support, and international engagement can be taken as part of the performance legitimation claims made by regimes to generate specific support.

It is also very important to highlight that, instead of identifying changes in legitimation claims employed by regimes using primary data, I plan to use secondary sources in combination with V-

Dem 12 (2022) data to identify those changes. This will allow dedicating the major analytical focus of my study to my research question - uncovering the reasons behind such shifts/variations.

I start my theoretical argument with the premise that authoritarian regimes are rational actors trying to maximize their interests. As Svolik (2016, 567) notes "the overarching desire of all governments, including authoritarian ones, is to stay in power" and "they are rational in maximizing this preference". From the perspective of this study, this means the regimes act rationally in generating strong legitimacy among the population to achieve regime longevity. The rational actor model has long been used for understanding the political and social behavior and reasoning behind the choices made by actors. The approach is rooted in microeconomics and assumes rational decision-makers are able to rank preferences "according to the degree of satisfaction of achieving these goals and objectives" (Mintz and DeRouen 2010, 59). They are also able to consider alternative courses of action and their possible consequences when making choices on action to be taken. Thus, as rational actors, regimes identify the most feasible strategies of legitimation that promise to yield the highest return in terms of generating regime legitimacy.

That said, various legitimation strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and regimes almost never use only one type of legitimation strategy. As previous empirical studies of regimes from various parts of the world have established, rulers frequently invoke overlapping legitimacy claims that combine elements of various strategies to justify their rule (von Soest and Grauvogel, 2017, Tannenberg et al. 2021). So, the regimes, ideally, identify mutually reinforcing combinations of legitimacy claims by trying to apply them together. For example, if the ideational legitimation is based on strong nationalism within the country, it would likely be supplemented by a more assertive foreign policy in the name of defending national interests abroad. Or we can give an

example of Orban's anti-elitist populist discourses at home being supplemented by foreign policy discourses (and attendant actions) on resisting the evil international elites in Brussels who the government claims want to encroach on the nation's sovereignty (Marcks 2017).

The rational choice of the legitimation is determined by opportunities and constraints the regime faces that make some strategies more available than others at that particular time. Del Sordi and Dalmasso (2018) argue that authoritarian leaders observe the international context to identify opportunities for taking actions to create a positive country image, and then produce discourses to legitimize themselves domestically with references to their international image. Sounding similarly, Bayulgen et al (2018) claim what legitimation strategies a regime prioritizes are shaped by the external environment, as they heavily rely on exogenous factors such as favorable global economic environment and stable regional geopolitics. I claim the same is also relevant for domestic politics, where the leaders observe the domestic politics for opportunities that promise to generate legitimation. They are also able to identify key threats to their stability ad survival and rationally employ selected claims that can help to disperse those threats and deflect potentially destabilizing delegitimating impact on them.

The chief opportunity that authoritarian regimes almost universally try to take advantage of is economic growth. There is an established argument in literature that economic growth can make governments stable and regimes more durable by generating support from a population whose life conditions get better (Reuter and Gandhi 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that economic growth constitutes one of the most used reference points of performance legitimation, the other being providing domestic stability and national security. When the counties economic outlook is

good, authoritarian regimes resort to performance-based legitimation and during an economic crisis period, abandon it in favor of other legitimation claims.

The major form of legitimation to compensate for unsatisfactory economic performance is ideational legitimation. Caman (2018, 4) argues that in such cases, for counterbalancing performance deficits, regimes will most likely employ ideational-identitarian discourses– which Gerschewski (2013) claims are aimed at generating support not because of what the regime specifically does, but because of what it represents in its identity. Another type of legitimation claims that regimes resort to when cannot deliver economic performance is foreign policy legitimation (also a form of performance legitimation) which does not require sharing decreasing recourses with the population. Foreign policy legitimation is usually aimed at generating support by achieving a rally around the flag's impact with regard to real or imagined/fictitious enemies abroad (Gunay 2016). It usually plays a mutually reinforcing role and follows the same reference points with ideational legitimation as is given in the example of the Orban regime in Hungary above.

Along with opportunities and constraints provided by the country's economic and political outlook, interaction with other pillars of authoritarian survival also significantly influences and shapes the legitimation claims employed by regimes. Legitimation is not an isolated pillar of regime longevity and as Gerschewski (2013) offers in her model, in most cases, is employed alongside other pillars – repression and co-optation. The level and form of repression applied, and groups attempted to be co-opted play a role in the choice of legitimation strategy. When a regime's popularity drops and/or it faces a strong opposition that requires high-level repression to deal with, then the regime is more likely to employ legitimation strategies that bring legitimacy to the

application of violent repression. In her original model of three pillars of authoritarian durability, Gerschewski (2013) views legitimation and repression as opposed strategies, claiming that an increase in legitimation reduces the need for repression, while an increase in repression automatically decreases legitimacy. However, it is also argued elsewhere that discursive justification of repression can decrease the delegitimating cost of repression, and even serve the purpose of creating legitimacy (Edel and Josua, 2018). For example, by studying the post-coup repressions in Egypt in 2013, Lachapelle (2021, 11) argues that "repressing groups perceived as dangerous, autocrats can cultivate a following of citizen 'bystanders' (i.e., civilian groups that are not the explicit targets of violence) who are otherwise wary of the threat that the repressed groups pose to them." She calls it a legitimation strategy of repression that not only eradicates the threats to the regime but also strengthens its legitimacy by eliminating the bystanders' adversaries. Charnysh et al. (2015, 328) similarly claim that, for legitimating their use of repression, regimes employ, the approach of framing as a tool "to create a shared understanding of events that both legitimate and motivate repressive action" which is done using an ideological and identitarian reference point. Such framing usually securitizes oppressed groups with reference to nationalism, religion, or national security matters where they are depicted as "traitors", "infidels" or "fifth column of the enemy" etc. (Josua, 2022). So, when the regime needs to repress its opponents, it employs ideological discourses that both legitimate the act of repression against certain groups, as well as increase the legitimacy of the regime among the population that accepts the regime's framing of repressed groups as a threat. Therefore, we can assume when there is a rise in repression by the regime, it will be accompanied by an increase in ideological legitimation.

Legitimating repression is most successful in polarized societies wherein bystanders more easily accept the regime's framing of the members of the other camp as threats to the country (Lachapelle

2021, 5-6). Therefore, we can assume that increased repression will likely be accompanied by polarizing ideological discourses. Such polarizing discourses will also be helpful in preventing the voter defection to the opposition from the regime camp, and therefore, we can assume that whenever a regime faces popular backlash from society due to encroachment on their freedoms or worsening economic conditions, regimes ramp up ideological polarizing discourses as part of its ideological legitimation claims.

In general, it is believed that polarization in society and attendant political conflict between the groups associating themselves with each pole can be conducive to the erosion of democracy (Lipset 1959, Dahl 1971, Arbatli and Rosenberg 2021). Svolik (2019, 23) argues leaders like Orban, Chavez, and Erdogan each contributed to polarization in society and skillfully exploited it presenting supporters with a choice "Vote for a more redistributive Venezuela, a migrant-free Hungary, a conservative Turkey—along with my increasingly authoritarian leadership—or vote for the opposition, which claims to be more democratic but offers less appealing policies and leadership." Therefore, polarizing discourses play a specific role in both deriving voter support and building regime legitimacy. Since polarization happens mostly through ideological discourses, I take it as a sub-type of ideological legitimation and assume that such claims should increase as the democratic backsliding process unfolds.

Increased repression, due to being against the nature of legal-rational legitimacy, should also decrease the legal-rational legitimation claims employed by the regime - as a rational actor, a regime would understand that such claims will become less appealing to the public. Moreover, higher repression is usually associated when a regime faces a growing popular discontent, one of the key causes of which is worsening economic conditions. Therefore, we can also assume that

increased repression will likely coincide with a decrease in employment of economic performance-based legitimation claims.

When a regime's popular support decreases, it might also become interested in co-opting new groups to widen support from society. For example, as Vladimir Putin's popular support was visibly on the decline with the start of his 3rd term of presidency, the regime started to make increasing references to the nationalism which further strengthened after the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas - a phenomenon any authors call a nationalist turn in Russia (White, 2018). So, when the regime attempted to co-opt nationalist groups to increase its political support within society, it increased making nationalist legitimacy claims. Therefore, we can assume that the co-optation of other political groups into the regime results in adjustments in the ideological legitimation claims as the regime faces the necessity to make legitimation claims that new groups will be receptive to.

Finally, changes in the level of liberal democracy in the country can change the importance attached to one or another type of legitimation claim by the regime. As democratic backsliding increases, a regime starts to emulate the democratic procedures less and accordingly is likely to make fewer efforts toward legal-rational legitimation of its rule. Instead, in such regimes, leadership-based legitimation claims gain more prominence as we can expect that the backsliding/autocratization process will eventually result in more concentration of the power in the hand of the one man – the dictator (Tannenberg et al. 2021). Therefore, we can assume that if an already autocratic regime gets more closed, or a hybrid regime is backsliding toward autocracy, those regimes will likely make less legal-rational legitimation and more person of a leader-based legitimation.

To sum up, the **dependent variable** of my thesis changes in the legitimation strategies employed by non-democratic regimes, which I suggest can be explained by the impact of a number of **independent variables** such as major threats to the regime faces (horizontal threats such as opposition within state elites or vertical threats such as popular backlash), the trajectory of the economic development, level of repression, the ideology of the co-opted groups and level of democracy.

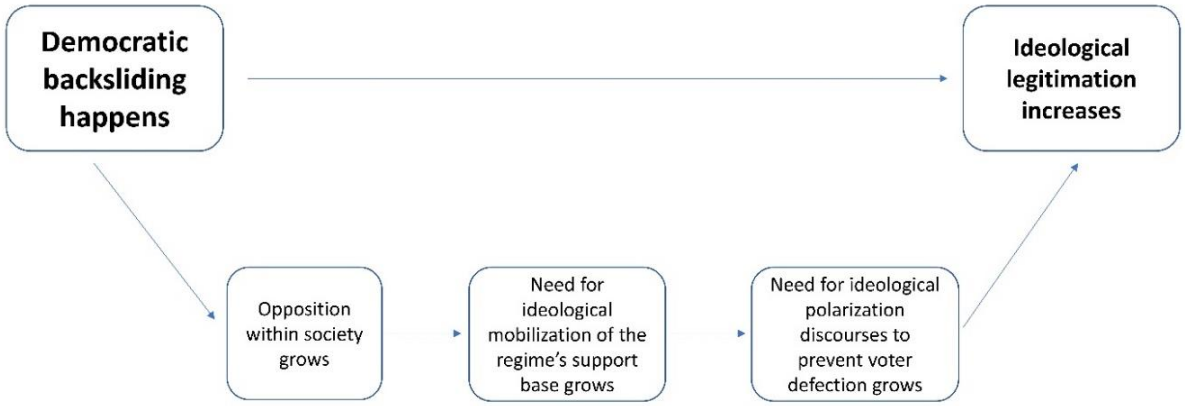
1.3. Methodology and Case Selection

As I mentioned before, there is no study in the literature that theorizes under which conditions authoritarian leaders choose one or another legitimation strategy. To address such a theoretical gap, I conduct what Lijphart classified as a hypothesis-generating case study (Levy 2008). Hypothesis-generating case studies aim to generalize beyond the data – "they examine one or more cases for the purpose of developing more general theoretical propositions, which can then be tested through other methods, including large-N methods." (Levy 2008, 5). So, by conducting a hypothesis-generating case study on Turkey, I aim to come up with theoretical hypotheses that can be applied elsewhere.

To establish the causal relationship between my explanandum (change in legitimation strategy) and explanans (independent variables), I use Coleman's (1986) 'bathtub' model, a causality model based on rational choice theory (Ylikovski 2016). It translates causality into transition mechanisms between the macro and micro levels. I argue that changes in the constraints and opportunities the regime faces at the macro-level generate the need to make changes for actions at the micro-level,

eventually leading to changes in the macro-level of legitimation strategies. Since my study focuses on not a single but many changes during the two decades of Erdogan's rule, it can be properly illustrated by a series of 'bathtubs'. Figure 1 below illustrates a causal relationship between democratic backsliding and an increase in ideological legitimation. I provide the illustration of the rest of the causal relationship models of changes in legitimation strategies from my theoretical section in Appendix A of the thesis.

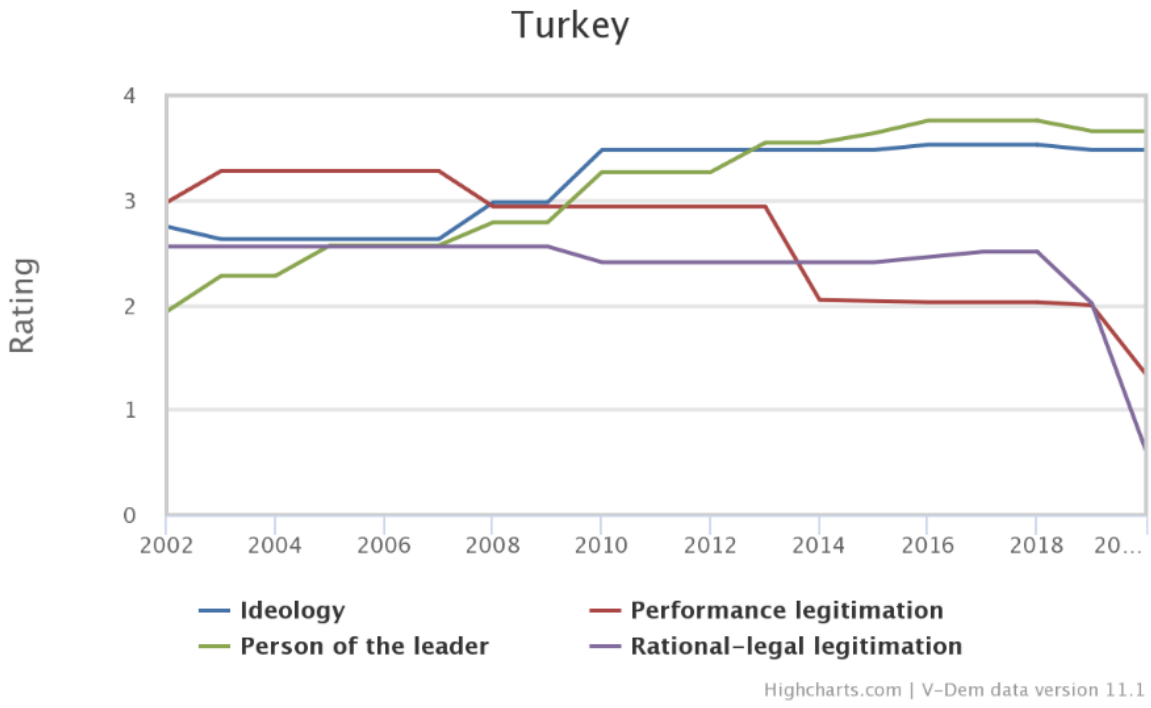
Figure 1 Causal model of changes in ideological legitimation.



The case of the Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) regime led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey is a very suitable case for such study as the regime actively utilized all strategies described in the literature giving preference to different combinations of them at different points of time during its rule. After the regime came to power in 2002, it based its legitimation on democratic and rule of law reforms, the EU accession process, and most importantly, good economic performance (Gunay, 2016, Günay and Dzihic 2016). So, the regime was mostly doing legal-rational and performance legitimation. Ideological legitimation made by the regime in this period was unusually non-Islamist, and deliberately avoided religious discourses and policies (Bayulgen et al 2018). But later, since the early 2010s, the regime started to make

more legitimation based on religious ideology/identity. Since the mid-2010s, it largely gave up economic performance legitimation and gradually incorporated nationalism into its ideological discourses (ibid). In the same period, the regime also started to do more legitimation based on the leader - Erdogan's persona (Över and Tuncer-Ebetürk 2022). Such 'personalist' legitimation culminated after a transition to a presidential republic from a parliamentarian one, a period when Erdogan eliminated from power all other prominent AKP figures with a personal following (Bardakchi 2016). Foreign and security policy - involvement in conflicts in Syria, Libya, and security issues became an important source of legitimation discourses in this period (Gunay 2016). In short, the case of Turkey has strong within-case variation, which allows identifying why the regime has initially chosen some set of legitimation strategies and later paid less attention to them in favor of others. Such shifts in the dominant legitimation strategies are also corroborated by the V-Dem 12 (2022) data set (see Graph 1).

Figure 2 Legitimation claims employed by the Erdogan regime in Turkey



Source: V-Dem 12 2022

While findings from secondary literature do not fully overlap with V-Dem survey data in terms of the exact point in time that the decreases and increases happened in some forms of legitimation claims, both sources confirm the same overall trend - which I believe is enough to accept the graph generated from V-Dem 12 (2022) data as the baseline to follow the changes. For example, while V-Dem 12 (2022) data shows a slight decrease in legal-rational legitimation since 2010 and its sharp collapse after 2018, secondary literature talks about the steady decline since the early 2010s. Therefore, in my argumentation on when a certain type of legitimation increased and decreased and after what events/processes, I will mostly benefit from the secondary literature and have the V-Dem 12 (2022) data (Graph 1) as an overall graphical illustration of trends in changes.

The selection of the Erdogan regime in Turkey as a case study to empirically test my theoretical arguments has several reasons. The first reason is the Erdogan regime's employment of all types of legitimation claims as described above demonstrating strong within-case variation in terms of dominant strategies in different periods. This will allow me to assess the conditions in the country in a given period and examine if changes in them had expected impacts on the choice of legitimation strategies.

The second reason is that the case of Turkey has been subject to a large number of studies of authoritarian legitimation in the last few years, providing rich secondary data. Both V-Dem 12 (2022) data and numerous empirical studies of authoritarian legitimation in Turkey will be helpful to identify types of legitimation claims and the periods they have been actively deployed. This will free me up from the necessity of studying the primary data for the identification of legitimation

claims employed in Turkey and allow me to focus on the reasons behind the employment of those specific claims as my research questions require.

Third, Turkey is a country that had experienced significant democratic backsliding in recent years. This will allow examining if the level of democracy or trajectory of democratization is more associated with certain types of legitimation strategies and not with others. Therefore, I will be able to draw generalizations for other relatively freer countries which have recently been experiencing democratic backsliding under similar populist regimes.

Finally, it is also a convenience case selection. I know the language of Turkey which greatly helps to access the sources in Turkish. This means that I will not limit myself to English language scholarship on legitimation in Turkey and will also have access to local expert opinion and scholarly works on legislation claims made by the regime.

1.4.Sources of data

To operationalize my independent variables, i.e., various threats the regime faces in different periods and constraints such threats create, as well as emerging new opportunities, I use secondary data from existing literature on the economy and politics of Turkey, particularly a rich literature on the democratic backsliding in the country. I occasionally refer to newspaper reports, opinion poll results, and reports by international organizations when secondary literature lacks the necessary data. In addition to them, I use primary data from various reputable data sources. For example, I use V-Dem 12 (2022) Liberal Democracy Index and Civil Society Repression Index to account for the erosion of democracy and rise of repression in Turkey. It is worth mentioning that

various V-Dem indexes have recently become one of the most widely accepted operationalizations in the study of democratization (Teorell et al 2019, Vaccaro 2021, Fleuß and Helbig 2021, Bethke, and Pinckney 2021) which attests to the high reliability of this data. Finally, I use World bank data for observing the trajectory of economic growth in Turkey.

Chapter 2 - The First Period of Erdogan's Rule (2002-2007): Legitimation Claims Focusing on Moderation, Reforms, and Economic Growth

In this chapter, I examine the legitimacy claims by the Erdogan regime in its first period of rule in 2002-2007 arguing that the regime rationally and pragmatically selected a set of specific claims given the threats the regime faced and the opportunities it had. In the first subsection of the chapter, I describe what threats the regime faced and the opportunities it had. In the second subsection, I examine the legitimation claims employed by the regime arguing how they were tailored to neutralize those threats and extract the maximum benefit from the opportunities.

2.1. Challenges the Regime Faced

In its initial years, the regime faced three distinct challenges. First, AKP won the election not because it was supported by the majority of the population, but because most of the mainstream parties failed to pass the 10% electoral threshold to get into parliament due to being discredited by the socio-economic shock of the 1999 crises (Aktas 2017). Only two parties made it to the parliament in that election – AKP won 34.3% of the votes (363 seats out of 550) and the People's Democratic Party (*CHP*, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* in Turkish) got 19.4% of the votes. So, despite forming a single-party government, AKP had the support of just a third of the voters.

The second challenge was the threat of losing power due to the coup by the Kemalist-secularist military, or the party closure by the Constitutional Court (CC). The military, which was considered a bulwark of secularism and Kemalism, was a very powerful actor in Turkish politics and conducted 4 coups in the 4 decades preceding the AKP's accession to power. The most recent coup

was initiated to prevent to rise of Islamism under the Welfare party coalition government in 1997 (Gurbey 2012). Not surprisingly, when the new AKP government first met with the military, it was "reminded of the 'February 28th process,' referring to the military's removal from power of the Islamist-led governing coalition in 1997" (Patton 2006, 532). So, during that period, there was the realistic threat of a coup by the military "who was highly suspicious of the real intentions of AKP and its Islamist character" (Bashirov and Lancaster 2018,1216).

AKP could also face the fate of its predecessor Islamist parties – a closure by the CC. AKP was established a year before the 2002 election as a break-away party from the Islamist Virtue Party, which was closed by the CC in 2001 "to prevent Islamist reactionary groups from gaining social and political ground in the country" (Bashirov and Lancaster 2018, 1215). The predecessor of the Virtue Party, the Welfare party was also banned by the CC in 1998 for violating the principle of the separation of the state and religion (Bali 2013). Erdogan himself served as a major of Istanbul between 1994 and 1998 from the Welfare party and got imprisoned for 10 months in 1999 for reciting a poem with allegedly Islamist messages while being a mayor (Akkoyunlu & Öktem 2016). So, the AKP came to power at a time when two previous political parties of its founding leaders had been closed down by the CC in the last four years; when the leader of the party, Erdogan, had been imprisoned and banned from active politics; and "when the Kemalist-secularist center represented by the military and the judiciary had displayed its determination to eliminate any Islamic-popular opposition as well as its social and economic networks" (Yavuz 2006, 88-89).

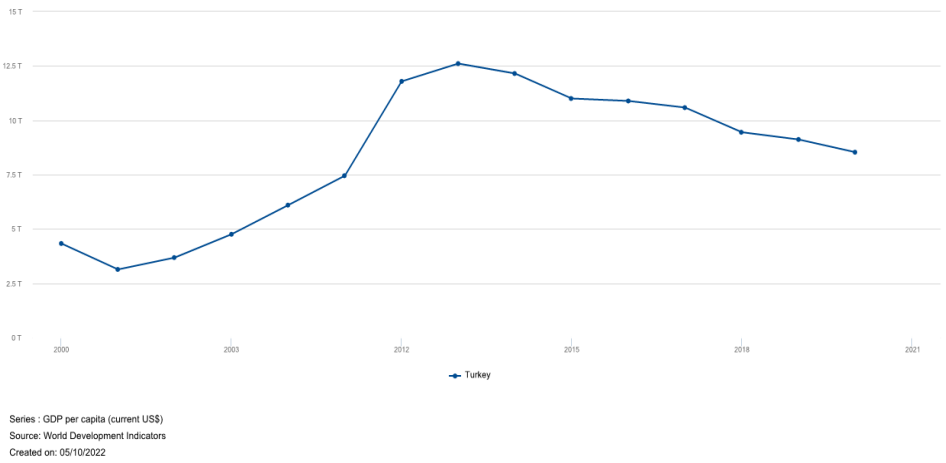
Finally, the media, economy, the courts, security apparatus, and most of the other state intuitions were dominated by the Kemalist-secularists who were totally against the rise of political Islam in the country (Insel 2003). Patton (2006, 528) argues at that time "powerful forces in the

bureaucracy, judiciary, media, and the business community were taken aback when the party with Islamist roots won a two-thirds majority in parliament" and were ready to mount a strong opposition to it.

2.2. Economic growth as a major opportunity

The Turkish economy, particularly its banking sector experienced allegedly the worst economic and liquidity crises of its history from 1999 to 2001 which is considered to be one of the key reasons which left almost all of the mainstream parties out of parliament in the 2002 election (Aktas 2017). Significant attempts to tackle the implications of the crises were undertaken by the coalition government predeceasing the AKP under the guidance of donor international financial institutions. On May 15, 2001, Turkey signed a loan agreement for $15.7bn from International Monetary Fund becoming the fund's largest borrower ever (Oğuz 2001). However, such efforts needed time to produce benefits and AKP was lucky to take the power when such fruits started to be felt by the population. Also fueled by the global economic rise in the 2000s, the Turkish economy experienced significant growth (see Graph 2 below) starting from 2003.

Figure 3 GDP per capita in Turkey under the Erdogan regime



Source: World Bank Development Indicators

To sum up, due to lacking majority public support, being opposed by the military, and Kemalist-secularist courts, bureaucracy, media, political and economic elites, the regime was quite vulnerable in that period. Employment of repression to strengthen the regime would have been counterproductive and unlikely to succeed for that period – security apparatus and courts have not been controlled by the regime yet. In such a difficult situation, the AKP government-employed legitimation claims differently than what would have usually been expected from a populist force with very strong religious routes. I claim that this was a rational choice that promised to produce the most benefit for the regime. The regime examined the threats it faced, and the opportunities it enjoyed for crafting the best possible legitimation claims.

2.3. Legitimation claims the regime employed in 2002-2007

As data from various case studies of Turkey corroborated by the V-DEM 12 (2022) data set shows, the most important sources of legitimacy that the regime attempted to tap into during the ruling period of the first AKP government in 2002-2007 were legal-rational, performance and ideological legitimation claims. In the next three subsections, I elaborate on these legitimation strategies, paying particular attention to how they served to address the threats the regime faced and benefited from the opportunities it had.

2.3.1. Legal-rational legitimation claims

Given the risk of closure which has been repeatedly demanded by various parties and civil society groups ever since the AKP first took office, "the regime took advantage of the legitimizing power and the virtue of democracy" to counter such pressures (Dagi 2006, 8). AKP founders "declared that their party championed democracy, secularism, justice, and social welfare, and intended to

make Turkey a wealthy nation." (Patton 2006, 515) Patton argues (2006), to ease the suspicions that the party had a hidden Islamist/fundamentalist agenda, it explicitly rejected the idea of being labeled as an Islamic party and opted to present itself as a conservative Democratic Party, "pointing out that its belief in a free-market economy and its conservative views on moral values run parallel to the stance of Christian democratic parties in Europe" (Patton 2006, 528). It also presented itself as fully committed to both secularism and democratic pluralism (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018).

The EU accession process played a particular role in backing both legal-rational and performance legitimation claims of the regime as it led to deepening reforms that contributed to both improving democracy/rule of law and modernizing the country's economy (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). Turkey's EU accession process gained momentum before the 2002 election when EU Commission granted Turkey candidate status in 1999 (Sandal 2014, Bashirov & Lancaster 2018). Though AKP's predecessor Islamist parties were against EU accession, it declared full support for EU accession. Erdogan even toured the European capitals before the EU summit of December in Copenhagen in 2002 to secure a specific date to start membership negotiations with the EU (Jenkins 2003, 57). He stated that "the Copenhagen political criterion was not only part of the requirement for Turkey's entry into the EU but an objective of democratization to be reached regardless of EU membership" (Dagi 2006, 10). As Patton (2006, 528) suggests, such active involvement with the EU proved to be very useful and appropriate for addressing legitimacy issues related to the party's Islamist roots both internationally and among the liberal-democratic forces in Turkey. Moreover, laws passed by the AKP to meet the political standards of EU accession also gradually paved the way for establishing civilian control over the military.

Such legal-rational legitimation of authority based on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law and EU accession has served 2 purposes. First, it was an attempt to deflect the pressure faced by the regime from the state power (i.e. the military and judiciary) that was not controlled by the party in that period (Dagi 2006). Being accepted as democratic and not religious could have made any party banning undemocratic and hense illegitimate. As Dagi (2004, 9) finds out, building discursive supremacy and legal-rational legitimacy over its opponents was aimed at making AKP's closure less likely - Kemalist-secularist elites would have risked their own legitimacy by denouncing the party championing human rights and democracy.

Second, it was also a helpful strategy to address the other major challenge the regime faced – the lack of support from the majority of voters. Reforms and EU membership bid helped the government to acquire the support of modern/secular segments "lessening its inherent insecurity within the system" (Dagi 2006, 12). With this objective, the AKP government could avoid being seen as an outsider or an anomaly in the most vulnerable period of its rule. Given the nature of the threat the regime faced and the limited economic, repressive, and electoral resourceless it controlled, the legal-rational legitimation was a very pragmatic choice to reduce the threat coming from Kemalist-secularist elites, garner the support of a larger segment of the population and ensure survival in power.

2.3.2. Ideological legitimation

AKP government's choice of ideological legitimation claims was also shaped by the threat environment it was operating in and the opportunities it had. Bashirov and Lancaster (2018, 1215) claim "structural constraints imposed by powerful state institutions and the threat of repression by

the military" played a defining role in tempting AKP to moderate its ideological discourses. The regime downplayed Islamic conservative ambitions and instead claimed AKP was a conservative party of 'average' Turkish citizens (Dagi 2006, 8). They often avoided open conflict on religious issues and backed away from openly Islamist measures, "fearing that it would provoke a reaction from the military" (Bayulgen et al 2018, 345). For example, as Jenkins (2009, 1-2) argues, "in 2004 [Erdogan] shelved a package of educational reforms to enhance the status of Islamic schools in the face of opposition from the ostentatiously secularist Turkish military."

Along with deflecting the secularist threat, this representation also aimed to garner the support of the so far disfranchised poor people from Anatolia (both those living in rural areas and those who immigrated to big cities in mass numbers) (Esen and Gumuscu 2016). There was a clear opportunity to do that as these groups were largely angry with other mainstream parties for being too 'elitist' (Bashirov and Lancaster 2018). The regimes populist discourses constructed conservative Muslim Turks – the core supporters of the regime - as the "real and morally superior owners of Turkey who had been victims of the Kemalist elite that oppressed them and denied their general will" (Ihsan 2021, 4). Along the same line, AKP has presented itself as "a grassroots movement of the Anatolian periphery, which had long been politically, culturally, and economically excluded by the Kemalist modernization through Westernization" (Gunay 2016).

Resultantly, the ideology championed by the regime during that period had much fewer religious tones – a stark difference from the later periods of Erdogan's rule. Such moderation from Islamic ideology, again, presumably aimed at solving two major issues the regime faced in that period – minimizing the possibility of becoming banned from politics for being too religious and expanding the party's vote base non-religious segment of the population. As Bayulgen et al (2018, 341-342)

argue, in doing so, the motive for the AKP, a conservative party with clear Islamic routs and ideology, was basically survival.

2.3.3. Economic performance legitimation

Given the massive e economic crises the country experienced in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the pre-election campaign of 2002 was dominated by debates on the economy, and AKP paid major attention to economic issues in its campaign agenda and initial government action programs (Insel 2003). When a positive global economic outlook coupled with the neoliberal free-market reforms (that AKP initially pursued) translated into high levels of growth and increased living standards for the middle and lower classes in the 2002–2007 period, it largely contributed to the soaring popularity of the regime and provided a very ample source to generate performance legitimation claims and the AKP (Bayulgen et al 2018). So, it was very natural that, as a rational actor, the regime seized the opportunity to make significant references to positive economic performance to depict itself as a very competent government.

To conclude, when AKP came to power in 2002, it opted to employ a specific set of legitimation strategies based on legal-rational claims, non-Islamic populist-conservative ideology, and economic performance. By such a combination of legitimation claims, AKP strategically aimed at avoiding a clash with military and Kemalist-secularist state elites, business, and media, as well as gaining the support of large segments of the population and building a coalition of constituents broader than its core conservative-religious support base.

Chapter 3 - Transformation of Challenges and Opportunities between 2007-2016 and Subsequent Changes in Legitimation Strategies

In this chapter, I examine how the regime managed to eliminate initial constraints it had, what new challenges and opportunities emerged for the regime and how these new developments, particularly unfolding democratic backsliding, interacted with and shaped new legitimation strategies employed by the regime.

3.1. Breaking the Power Kemalist-secularist Elites and Beginning of Backsliding

AKP's carefully chosen legitimation strategies helped it successfully avoid the confrontation with the military and other segments of Kemalist-secularist elites for the initial period of its rule when the regime's position on power was the most vulnerable. But when in 2007 the party put forward the candidacy of Abdullah Gul, a person with political Islam background, to the post of the president of the country, the military posted a drafted memorandum on General Staff's website, "effectively threatening to stage a coup if Gul was elected president by the parliament" (Jenkins 2008, 7-8). In response to this challenge, AKP announced a snap election which it won with 47% of the vote and increased the number of its MPs in the parliament to 341 (out of 550). "Bewildered and humiliated by the electorate's failure to heed its warnings" the military did not resist the election of the new president (Jenkins 2008, 7).

The next year AKP initiated constitutional amendments, including the lifting of the ban on wearing headscarves in education institutions which were duly approved by the AKP-dominated parliament. In response, a public prosecutor applied to the CC to close down the party for

promoting anti-secular activities (Cook 2009). While the 11-member CC voted 10-1 approving that AKP was in fact engaged in anti-secularist activities, only 6 members accepted those activities are merit for closing the party – just 1 vote short making the AKP live the fate of its predecessor Islamist parties (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016).

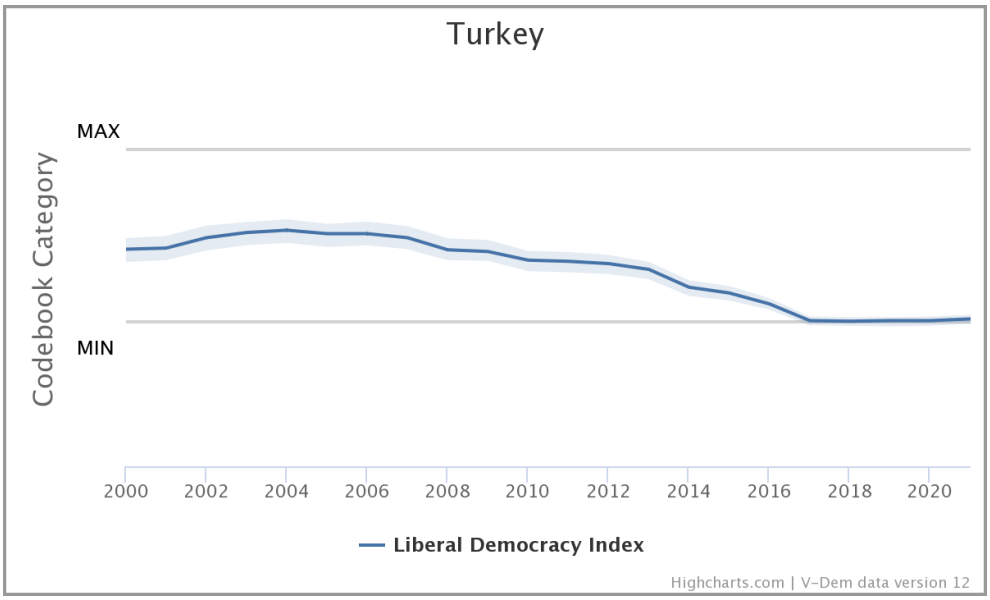
So, while by that time AKP managed to garner the support of a majority in the country, the narrow escape from the closure of the party demonstrated the persistent opposition by Kemalist-secularist elites. To ensure its long-term dominance in Turkish politics, the party still needed to defeat elitist opposition. Emboldened by the electoral victory in 2007 legislative and 2009 local elections, AKP began to break the power of those institutions through legislative changes as well as colonizing them with party loyalists. The constitutional referendum in 2010 reorganized the CC and Prosecutors Office bringing them under full government control. Constitutional amendments also made closing a party virtually impossible and most of the new judges were appointed among AKP loyalists (Bashirov and Lancaster 2018).

To cripple the power of the military, Ergenekon and Balyoz investigations were launched respectively in 2008 and 2011. Accused of plotting to overthrow the government, tens of generals and hundreds of other officers were put on trial, and many more were purged from the military (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016). The constitutional changes of 2010 also diminished the institutional power of the military. All these measures "weakened the Kemalist hegemony in the judiciary, curtailed the army's political power, and eliminated the domestic structural constraints on AKP's power" (Bashirov and Lancaster 2018, 1216).

Moreover, businessmen close to the regime were allocated a large number of cheap credits by state banks to purchase the biggest media holdings in the country to generate loyalist media outlets (Yanatma 2021). The regime also helped the growth of its own business elite consisting of handpicked companies close to Erdogan via awarding them the most lucrative public tenders and redistributing to them former public assets during free-market reforms and privatization (Yildirim, 2015). Yilmaz and Bashirov (2018, 1820) call this policy by AKP bringing the "'periphery', its conservative, nationalist and non-affluent supporters, to the 'center' and elevating them to a new bourgeoisie." This also helped to further grow the support for the party among conservative and religious voters (ibid).

In short, by 2011 AKP managed to transform its security environment, successfully eliminating the domestic constraints on its policymaking. This opened the way for the implementation of its hegemonic project taking all levers of power under its control (Ozen 2020) which eventually led to one of the most spectacular cases of democratic backsliding. In general, many scholars consider the 2011 election victory with a 50% vote a turning point for Turkey when a party of moderation, reforms, and democratization launched a gradual process of de-democratization (Kemahlıoğlu 2015, Bardakchi 2016). As Graph 3 below demonstrates, the V Dem Liberal Democracy Index of the country has been on a steady fall (stopping after 2018 due to the 'floor' effect) indicating a clear democratic backsliding.

Figure 4 Liberal Democracy in Turkey



Source: V-Dem 12 2022

Erdogan himself got elected as president in 2014, launching the process of turning the country into the presidential form of governance to further cement his rule which eventually led to the establishment of a 'one-man system' (*tek adam sistemi* in Turkish) by the late 2010s (Shengul 2021). The pluralistic atmosphere of 2000s – "a temporary outcome of the tentative power balance between the guardians and the AKP than sign of genuine democratization" (Akkokunlu and Oktem, 2016, 514) – gradually turned into a situation in which the cost of dissent steadily rose (Yabanci 2016).

3.2. The Emergence of New Challenges: Public Backlash against the Regime

Such consolidation of power and increased democratic backsliding in Turkey did not happen without a major backlash from liberal democratic segments of society, as well as former regime allies with whom Erdogan was no longer willing to share the power in the country. Moreover,

economic stagnation and later recession that started in the early 2010s (see Figure 2), which was to a significant extent linked to authoritarian style economic mismanagement, further increased the number of people unhappy with the regime.

The most significant manifestation of rising backlash from society was the Gezi Park protest in the summer of 2013. The events started as a small-scale protest to save a park and quickly grew after a brutal reaction by police and brought together various groups in society. This "biggest example of mass civil movement in the republic's history" (Yardimci-Geyikci 2014, 445), resulted in 11 death; thousands of protesters got injured, and hundreds were arrested. Occurring amid revolutions in the Middle East, Gezi reminded AKP of the possibility of a secularist social revolution that can lead to its demise (Bashirov and Lancaster 2018).

Another manifestation of popular backlash was June 2015 legislative elections, in which AKP's vote shares dropped from 50% to 41%. For the first time since 2015, the party gained less than enough sits in the parliament to form a single-party government (Charikoglu and Yildirim 2016). President Erdogan announced a snap election in November of the same year. After a very short campaign period that took place in a climate of violence and fear and was dominated by the security issues around two major terrorist attacks in Ankara and a new military campaign against PKK[1] in the east of the country (Sayarı 2016), AKP managed to bring back its electoral support to 50% to establish a single-party government (O'Connor & Baser 2018).

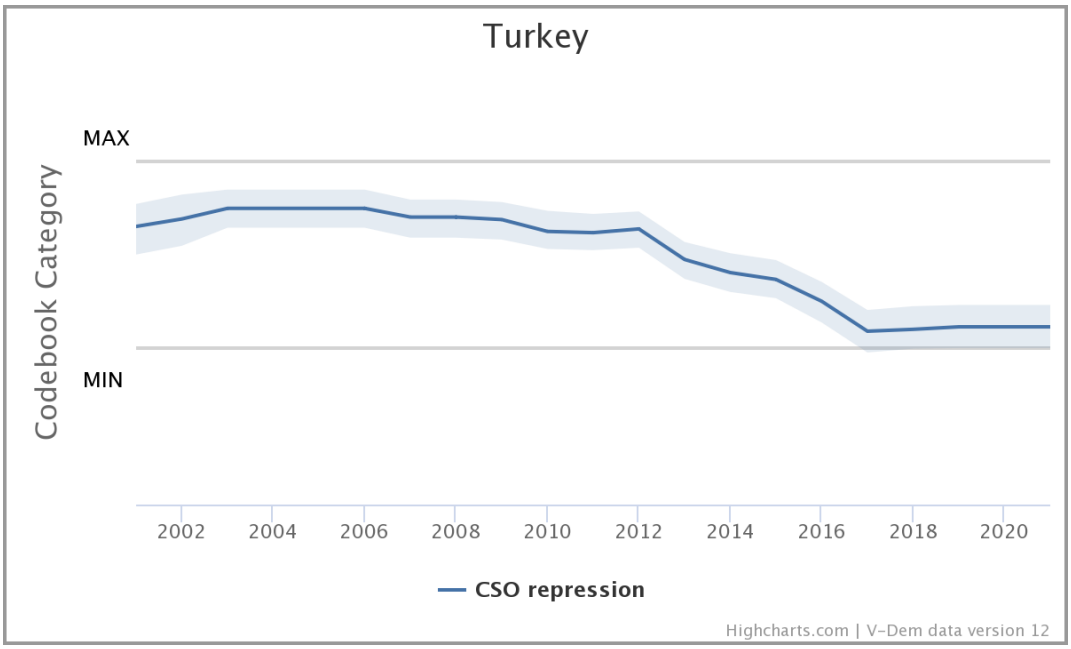
[1] PKK or Kurdistan Worker's Party is an organization designated as a terrorist by the Turkish and many Western governments.

3.3. Failed Coup as an Opportunity to Strengthen the Regime

These years were also a culminating period of the fallout of the regime with its ally Gülen movement.[2] Media and prosecutors linked with Gulen played an important role in regime's prosecutions of its opponents (Ozen 2020). But when their alliance started to unravel, struggle between the former allies resulted in a coup organized by pro-Gulen officers in the military in July 2016. The unsuccessful coup provided a golden opportunity for the regime to increase repression against all its political opponents and centralize the power to Erdogan under a state of emergency that gave it "the power to issue executive decrees which have the force of law and are subject to little scrutiny by the Parliament or the courts" (Bashirov and Lancaster 2018, 1222) More than 100,000 public sector employees were arbitrarily dismissed after the coup and replaced by regime loyalists (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018, 1818). Access to critical media was restricted and many of them were forced out of the business. Such purges and fear environment allowed the regime to rig the Constitutional Referendum in 2017 to complete the shift to the presidential system, as independent media and judiciary were too weakened to monitor the proper implementation of voting rules (O'Connor and Baser 2018). As Graph 4 based on V Dem Civil Society Repression Index demonstrates, since the early 2010s, Turkey experienced a significant increase in repression reaching the highest possible levels after 2016.

2 Gulen Movement is an Islamist fraternal movement headed by Fetullah Gulen. After fallout with the movement and subsequently failed coup in 2016, it was designated as a terrorist organization by the Turkish government.

Figure 5 Civil Society repression in Turkey (where 0 means severe repression and 4 means no repression).



Source: V-Dem 12 2022

To sum up, in the early 2010s, the constraints/challenges the regime faced and the opportunities it had were significantly different from those of the pre-2010 period. Kemalist-secularist state and non-state elites had effectively been defeated. The judiciary and bureaucracy were colonized loyalist media and business elites had emerged. The regime also expanded its electoral base managing to get 50% of the votes in the 2011 general election. Moreover, the EU-accession process collapsed in the early 2010s, which weakened the incentive to carry out reforms based on accession conditionality. At the same time, the new period brought with it challenges of major popular manifestations of dissent which were the Gezi movement of 2013 and later lackluster electoral performance of the June 2015 elections. Growing economic hardship increased the number of people unhappy with the regime. Finally, rising popular backlash increased the need for repression, which could potentially further degrade the legitimacy of the regime.

3.4. Changes in the Legitimation Strategies Employed by the Regime

Such a new constraint/threat/challenge environment required a completely new set of legitimation strategies that would better address the challenges the regimes faced, as well as be more likely to be persuasive to the audience. Changes in the legitimation strategies in this period included an increase in the ideological and person of a leader legitimation and a decrease in performance and legal-rational legitimation.

3.4.1. Increased Legitimation Based on the Ideological Discourses

The most clearly identifiable response of the regime to the transformation of the threat environment and opportunities was increased attention paid to the ideological legitimation to mobilize its conservative-Muslim support base. In addition, ideological legitimation promised to legitimize the regime's increasingly repressive methods of dealing with the growing dissent in society. Finally, being freed from the previous constraints coming from the power of Kemalist-secularist elites, the regime had a free hand to push forward political Islam-linked legitimation claims.

Bayulgen 2018 (360) argues, in this period, the regime "increasingly embraced a vitriolic and ideological tone" and such rhetoric by the regime kept intensifying with each regime-threatening event such as the Gezi protests, a setback in the June 2015 election, and the 2016 coup attempt. Erdogan started to make frequent references to Islamist themes and ideals and openly talked about his desire to raise "pious generations", as well as started to attack the secular way of life in the country (Bashirov and Caroline Lancaster 2018, 1219). According to Yilmaz et al (2020), such

ideational narratives of the regime had their sources in religious beliefs, nationalist ideas, traditions, and identitarian discourses. They were exclusionary, aiming at Manichean-like polarization in society between the regime camp and the opposition and securitization of the latter.

Çınar (2018) claims Gezi protests was the critical juncture that compelled the regime to abandon the 'moderation' that characterized its discourse in the initial period of its rule. By framing protesters as infidels, thugs, traitors, and servants of foreign powers, the government legitimized the use of excessive force against them in the eyes of its supporters. After the 2015 election setback, the regime also started to employ discourses and implement policies that, as Bashirov and Lancaster (2018, 1219) argue, "would dismiss the concerns and demands of secular segments of society and instead focus on consolidating its support among the religious-conservative core voters." The regime completely broke its ties with the other 50% of the society that did not vote for the party. Instead, it focused on ideological legitimation calculated to consolidate the support of the half of the population it already had via continuous mobilization of that core.

To do that, it resorted to what many in Turkey characterized as identity politics (*kimlik siyaseti* in Turkish) (Karatash 2020, Cumhuriyyet 2021). Defined as making references to "shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups, (Cressida 2020, 2), identity politics by the regime focused on the disfranchisement of the conservative-religious population by Kemalist-secularists in the past and threatened that the past will repeat itself in case the regime change happens.

The regime's ideational legitimation was also aimed at polarization in society (Tepe 2014, Keyman 2015). The purpose of such polarization by creating friend–enemy distinctions were not only to pit groups against each other but also it was useful in bringing those who are defined as friends

together to support the regime and prevent voter defection to the other camp (Günay and Dzihic 2016, 542). Polarizing discourses and securitization of the opponents particularly intensified between the two elections in 2015 (O'Connor & Baser 2018). Using the impact of renewed fighting with PKK, the regime linked its opponents to PKK in its narratives, and by doing so attempted both to delegitimize them and build its own legitimacy by presenting itself as fighting for security, stability, and the integrity of the country (Şahin, 2021).

Another ample opportunity for the regime to prop up ideational narratives to build up its legitimacy was the 2016 failed coup attempt. Though the coup posed a significant challenge to the regime, according to Yilmaz et al (2020, 273), Erdogan skilfully exploited it to mobilize society with discourses of "defending their country against internal traitors" who were "controlled like puppets by external enemies." The regime also successfully used the coup and its defeat as the result of the popular mobilization as a new 'foundational myth' of the Turkish nation. According to von Soest and Grauvogel (2017, 290), "particularly strong solidarity ties are established during periods of violent struggle such as war and liberation movements which are often used as powerful legitimation narratives." In this context, the failed coup helped the regime to develop strong ideational narratives and a "foundational myth around Erdogan's role in leading the modern liberation movement in 2016" (Yilmaz et al 2020, 273).

When the regime made an alliance with MHP, another conservative-nationalist party in the post-coup period to ensure maintain the support of the majority support of the conservative over the core, the nationalist tone of its legitimation discourses further strengthened (Selçuk Hekimci 2020, Caman 2018). Nationalist discourses depicted the "Muslim-Turk" nation as under existential threat of being destroyed by "foreign enemies and their internal agents" and presented Erdogan as the

protector against them (Yilmaz et al 2020, 270). The regime made “extensive use (and abuse) of nationalist symbols, imagery, and references, including the national flag and the anthem, to frame every election as a crucial battle in the war of liberation, not a routine democratic exercise where losing is such a possibility as winning” (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016, 514).

3.4.2. Increased Person of a Leader Legitimation

Tannenberg et al (2020) claim personalistic legitimation claims have been on a steady rise ever since Erdogan assumed power in 2003 but were particularly increased after he became president in 2014. I argue such change was linked to the gradual increase in the personal power of Erdogan within the regime as the democratic backsliding process unfolded. Initially, AKP was a party that was formed as an alliance by some prominent reformists within the Islamist Milli Gorush movement, and many of them have been influential within the party and political decision-making. From the early 2010s, the concentration of the power in the hand of the leader resulted in their marginalization and replacement with Erdogan loyalists. (Bardakchi 2016). For example ex-President Gul, ex-Prime Minister Davutoglu and ex-parliamentary speaker Arinc were purged by Erdogan. Bashirov and Lancaster (2018, 1211) call this process of ‘Erdoganization’ of AKP - the "de-institutionalization process within which Tayyip Erdogan gained complete control over the party." Erdogan's personal power peaked as he used the 2016 abortive coup to rule the country for several months by presidential decrees.

Obviously, such a massive concentration of the power in the hands of the leader - the usual element of the democratic backsliding - increased his place and role in the legitimation claims the regime produced. Since becoming the president, Erdogan “presented himself as the chief (*Reis* in

Turkish), the wise, native and national (*yerli ve milli* in Trukish) leader of the Turkish people" (Yilmaz et al 2020, 272). According to Tannenberg et al (2020, 86), "the intensity of claims based on Erdogan's persona now surpasses those of the founder of the republic and its first president, Kemal Atatürk." In short, eliminating the power of the military and Kemalists-secularists elites, his own former allies (e.g. Gulen movement), and prominent 'comrades' within the party, Erdogan managed to gather massive power in his hands which led to rising of legitimation around his persona.

3.4.3. Decrease in Legal-Rational Legitimation

In this new environment, legal-rational legitimation, which was helpful to avoid party closure or coup, deflect the criticism by Kemalist-secularist elites, and attract the support of the non-conservative voters – was no more tempting for the regime. Moreover, the failure of the EU accession process also ended the rule of law reforms period, which used to serve as a convenient source of generating legal-rational legitimation claims. Finally, the obvious erosion of democracy, freedom, and rule of law, particularly massive repressions, purges in bureaucracy, opposition, media, and civil society - in short, the ongoing democratic backsliding process - made it less likely that the society will be receptive towards legal-rational legitimation. I argue these three reasons led to a relative decrease in the legal-rational legitimation the regime made over time since the early 2010s.

However, as Graph 1 demonstrates, there was a slight rise in such legitimation for a brief period after the 2016 coup attempt when Erdogan, in his speeches, presented popular mobilizations to defeat the coup as a triumph of democracy (Carney 2019). As such discourses were also

accompanied by as harsh repression trespassing the limits of any legitimate employment of force, post-coup democracy discourses were short-lived (Rogenhofer 2018) and did not bring a sizable change in the overall legitimation strategies of the regime.

3.4.4. Decrease in Performance Legitimation

Legitimation based on economic performance was decreased due to the stagnation that was followed by a consistent economic recession. According to surveys, in March 2010, the very beginning period of the economic stagnation, 55% of respondents thought that the country's economic situation had gotten worse in the past two years (Bayulgen et al 2018). In the same study, 50% responded that although there was a global component to the crisis, the government also performed badly in dealing with the consequences of the crisis. Such attitude in public grew even further as economic hardship piled up and peaked with the recent collapse of the lira.

As its economic performance dropped, the regime resorted to two discursive strategies to address the possible losses in its performance legitimacy. First, it tried to shift the blame for economic failures to global economic recessions and 'foreign enemies' (*dış mihraklar* in Turkish) that did not like rebuilding Turkey's former glory (Bahçe 2018) which was well-echoing with ideological legitimation claims the regime made.

Second, the regime focused on the other most common form of performance legitimation – foreign policy legitimation (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). The regime presented itself as a restorer of the "greatness as an independent and powerful Turkish Muslim nation that leads the Muslim World and has an important say in international and global affairs" (Yilmaz et al 2020, 272). Arab spring

and the turmoil that the Middle East found itself after, was a good opportunity for the regime to take advantage of for foreign policy legitimation. Using a brief rise of political Islam and Muslim brotherhood in the Middle Eastern region, the regime started to get more involved in regional affairs presenting itself as a role model as well as starting to interfere in conflicts in Syria and Libya (Bashirov and Lancaster 2018). All these foreign policy endeavors were used as a source to generate performance legitimation claims. Such discourses, built on references to nationalism and national greatness, religious identity, and anti-westernism also echoed closely the domestic ideological legitimation acting as a mutually reinforcing factor with it.

To sum up, due to economic stagnation and recession the regime started to make fewer performance legitimation claims as it understood such claims will become less likely to generate an expected impact. With discourses generated from more assertive foreign policy, it tried to partly compensate for losses in performance legitimation. However, overall, since the early 2010s, performance legitimation claims of the regimes experienced a significant drop.

3.5. Addressing the Legitimation Gap

As we can observe from Graph 1, a decrease in legal-rational and performance legitimation might have created a certain gap in the regime's perceived legitimacy. The regime tried to address this gap via several strategies. First, it massively increased the ideological and person of a leader's legitimation. Such an increase cannot be fully observed in Graph 1 since V-Dem 12 (2022) survey measures the extent of using different forms of legitimation claims with only a 4-point scale. In that scale, number 3 means reliance on a given strategy "to a large extent but not exclusively" and 4 means "almost exclusively". Since the Erdogan regime never fully relied on a single form of

legitimation, no matter how much growth happened in the employment of ideological and person of a leader legitimation claims, they never reached 4.

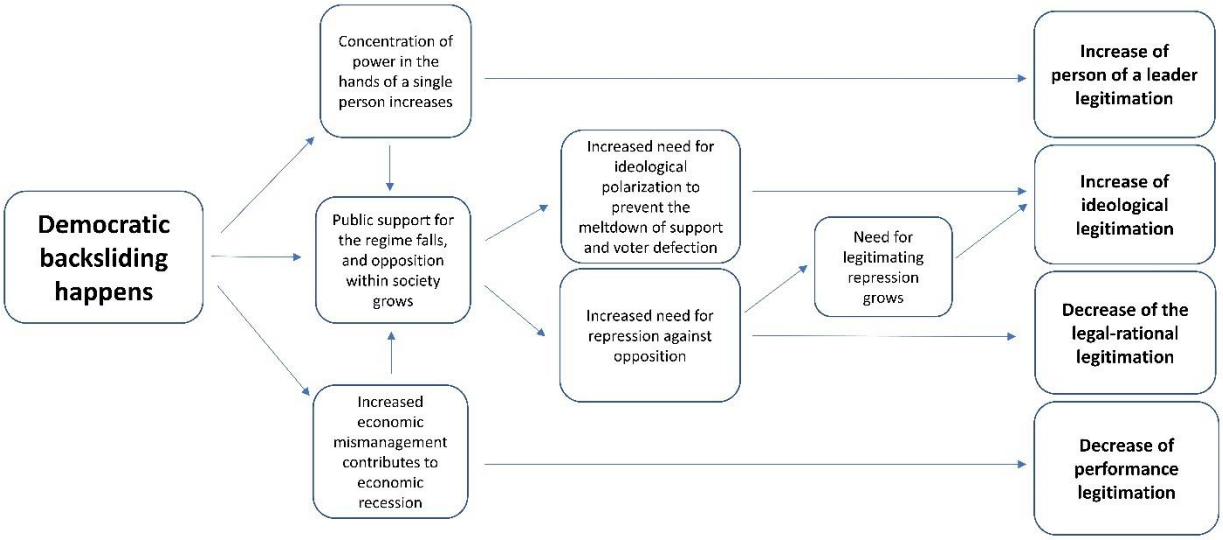
The second strategy the regime used to close the legitimation gap was increased reliance on the other pillars of regime durability in Gerschewski's (2013) model – repression and co-optation. As mentioned in previous sections, the regime got more repressive since the early 2010s which peaked during the post-coup arrests and purges period (See Graph 4). The regime also co-opted other parties with compatible ideologies. The biggest gain in this sense was co-opting MHP into the regime after the coup. However, other smaller but growing conservative parties such as the Motherland Party (*Vatan Partisi in* Turkish) and the Voice of People Party (*Halkin Sesi Partisi* in Turkish) were co-opted and their leader Suleyman Soylu and Numan Kurtulmish were made deputy heads of AKP and later elevated to key ministerial positions.

3.6. Modeling the Backsliding-Related Changes in the Legitimation Strategies

Is it possible to model changes in legitimation strategies of the non-democratic regimes with strong external validity based on what we have observed in the case of Turkey? I argue that it is difficult to do so for the entire process of transformation in Turkey covering 2002-2020, as antecedent conditions when AKP came to power were very specific – such conditions will likely be different in other countries making it unlikely that workable generalizations can be drawn from the first decade of the regime's rule in Turkey. However, I argue that Turkey passed through 'a text-book example' of democratic backsliding in the second decade of Erdogan's rule which gives a very good material for generating a model specifically for the period of democratic backsliding. Figure

2 below provides such a model that I argue can be applied to other cases of democratic backsliding too.

Figure 6 Transformation in legitimation strategies during the democratic backsliding process (based on Tannenberg et al's (2021) typology of legitimation claims)



The model argues that democratic backsliding usually results in several changes in the political and economic life of the country. First, backsliding usually results in a concentration of power in the hands of a leader and the elimination of checks and balances. Such concentration of power is likely to lead to an increase in the person of a leader legitimation as the leader becomes the centerpiece of the political system.

Second, backsliding in a relatively democratic society usually generates public backlash which requires increasing ideological indoctrination to prevent the meltdown of regime support. Moreover, the need for repression to quell the segment of society that does not buy ideological legitimation also increases. This also increases the need for securitization of the repressed groups

to legitimate the act of repression leading to a further increase in ideological legitimation. To increase the impact of ideological discourses, as well as make the audience more receptive to the legitimation of repression, regimes also increase discourses aimed at polarizing society into antagonistic groups across ideological lines. Resultantly, the ideological legitimation is further increased.

Increased repression also erodes the democratic credentials of the regime leading to decreased employment of legal-rational legitimation claims.

Finally, democratic backsliding is usually accompanied by increased corruption, nepotism, and economic mismanagement. This likely negatively impacts the economic growth perspectives of the country as well as leads concentration of resources in the hands of a few regime cronies. Given the worsening economic conditions of the population, as a rational actor, regimes decrease legitimating themselves via references to their performance.

Conclusion

This study is located at the intersection of several research agendas. First and foremost, it benefits from the enormous conceptual and theoretical work done in the literature on non-democratic legitimacy and legitimation and tries to address the particular gap in that literature – under what conditions do regimes opt for one or another legitimation strategy and what explains changes in those strategies. The study also benefits from (and hopefully contributes to) other research agendas such as rational choice, authoritarian longevity, democratic backsliding, political polarization, the impact of economic trajectory on politics, etc.

The study is a hypothesis-generating case study and by focusing on the case of Turkey and using Coleman's 'bathtub' model, it attempts to come up with theoretical conclusions for similar non-democratic countries, particularly those experiencing backsliding/autocratization. It argues that as rational actors, regimes pragmatically opt for one or another legitimation strategy given what constraints/challenges and opportunities they have. Such constraints might come from vertical challenges such as backlash from society, or horizontal challenges such as resistance by the state and non-state elites (among military, judiciary, bureaucracy, business, media and etc.). Regimes also eagerly utilize opportunities they have such as economic growth, certain successful foreign or domestic policy acts, or any other event popular among the population to generate legitimation claims.

In the case of Turkey, the regime mostly did legal-rational and non-religious populist-conservative ideological legitimation in the first term of its rule to deflect the horizontal pressures from Kemalist-secularist elites and to expand its support base to other groups that previously did not

vote for Islamist parties. It also used the growing economy to generate strong performance legitimation claims.

Experiencing its first open clash with the military in 2007, the regime worked to systematically eliminate the constraints it had in the initial years and managed to complete this process by the early 2010s. The tutelage of the military over politics was eliminated, the judiciary and bureaucracy were colonized by party loyalists and regime-friendly business elites and media outlets were created. The regime also managed to consolidate the support of almost half of the population. At the same time, the new period brought with it new challenges that required a different set of legitimation strategies to cope with. This was a period, what many authors call the start of the period of the implementation of the hegemonic project of the regime leading to the major democratic reversal process. This process resulted in the concentration of the power in the hands of Erdogan, which was accompanied by widespread partisanship, clientelism, elimination of political competition, disfranchisement of various segments of society unsupportive of the regime, worsening economic conditions, and many other evils/perils of de-democratization. As a result, along with consolidating all levers of power in the hands of the regime, democratic backsliding also created a new challenge – it fostered a new alliance of regime opposers, the biggest manifestations of which were the Gezi movement of 2013 and later weak electoral performance of the June 2015 legislative elections.

Such a different set of challenges and opportunities required the adoption of new legitimation strategies to address them. In response to the growing public backlash, the regime increased religious ideological legitimation to mobilize its core support base among conservative-religious voters. Breaking the power Kemalist-secularist military and elites allowed the regime to generate

such discourses without fearing a coup or party closure. Moreover, it also increased repression of popular opposition which required increasing legitimation of violence and securitization of opponents through ideological discourses. Polarizing ideological discourses have also been used both to prevent voter migration to the opposition as well as successfully securitize the regime opponents. 2016 abortive coup both served as the opportunity to increase ideological legitimation based on a new 'foundational myth' and led to more ideological legitimation to justify the massive post-coup repressions.

Economic stagnation and recession tempted the regime to abandon economic performance legitimation and try to compensate it by ideological and foreign policy legitimation. Worsening democratic records of the regime, as well as the collapse of the EU-accession process, also led to lesser legal-rational legitimation made by the regime. Finally, the overwhelming concentration of the power in the hands of Erdogan during the backsliding process resulted in the increase of person of leader legitimation.

While the findings of the thesis confirm existing interpretations of how the regime in Turkey benefitted from various legitimation claims to tighten its grip on power, unlike them, it also theorizes why the regime employed a different combination of legitimation claims in different periods. At the same time, by showing how Erdogan strategically deployed various forms of legitimation claims to consolidate his power, it shows successful legitimation is not only one of the three pillars of authoritarian longevity (as Gerschewski (2013) famously suggested), but also it is very helpful in achieving democratic backsliding.

Moreover, the thesis also brings more clarity to the interaction of legitimation with the other two pillars of authoritarian longevity. In contrast to the original model of Gerschewski (2013), it shows that increased repression does not necessarily lead to decreased legitimacy – if the regime can skilfully deploy legitimation of repression to frame the repressed groups as a threat to the well-being of the nation, repression can, in fact, increase the legitimacy of the regime as an ardent fighter against such threat. Co-optation of new groups can also lead to changes in legitimation discourses, as, for example, the co-optation of far-right nationalists into the regime camp in Turkey increased the nationalist tone of its discourses. Moreover, the thesis brings in the role of polarization to the study of legitimation. While confirming the argument in the literature that polarizing can be detrimental to democracy and help pave the way to its erosion (Svolik 2019, Arbatli and Rosenberg 2021), the thesis demonstrates that polarizing ideological discourses can be deployed to increase the receptiveness of regime supporters to its legitimation discourses, as well as make it more likely that to deflect the delegitimating impact of repressions.

The case of Turkey also provides a good source of information to generate a general model of the impact of democratic backsliding on the decrease or increase in different types of strategies, according to which, backsliding usually leads to an increase in ideological and person of a leader legitimation, and decreases the employment of performance and legal-rational legitimation claims.

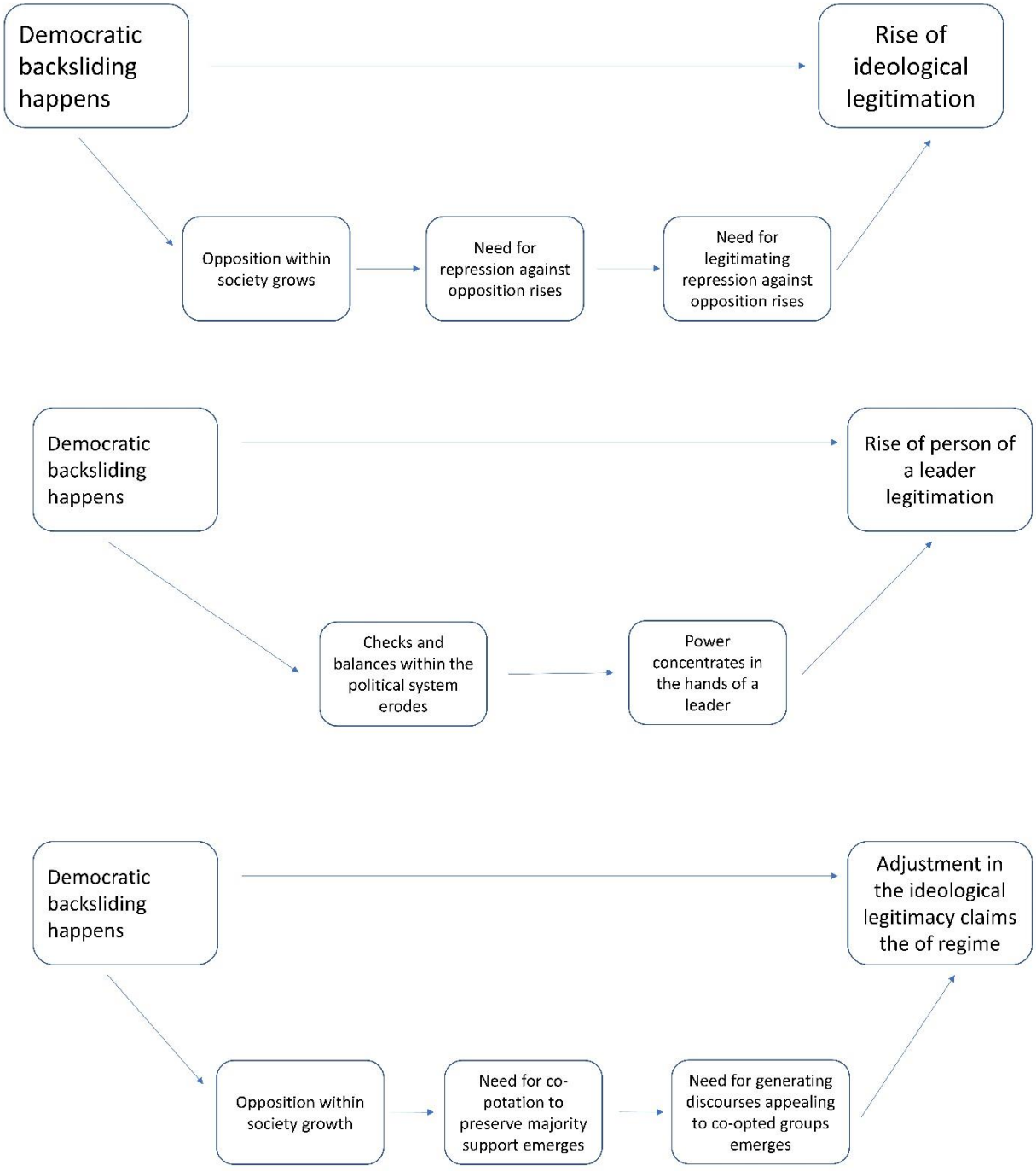
In general, the theoretical conclusions of the thesis can be helpful to understand and explain changes in legitimation strategies in other non-democratic regimes. For example, they can be a good departure point to explain some trends in legitimation claims that an expert survey by Tannenberg et al. (2021, 91) found, such as "increases in legitimation claims based on conservative and nationalist ideologies in cases of democratic backsliding in Serbia, Hungary, and Poland" or

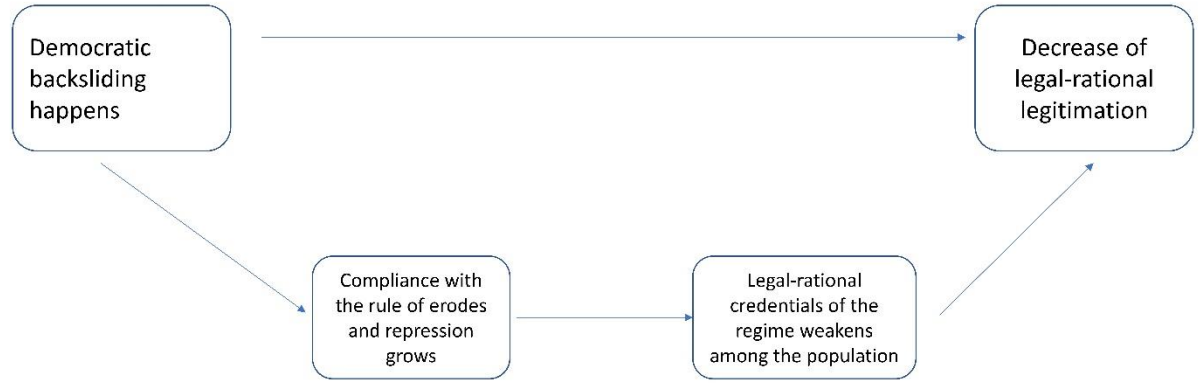
"increased emphasis of the leader in countries like Russia, Cambodia, India, and the Philippines". Perhaps, they can also be helpful to understand why and how Donald Trump used polarizing discourses in the US to legitimate his power and increasingly undemocratic acts/policies.

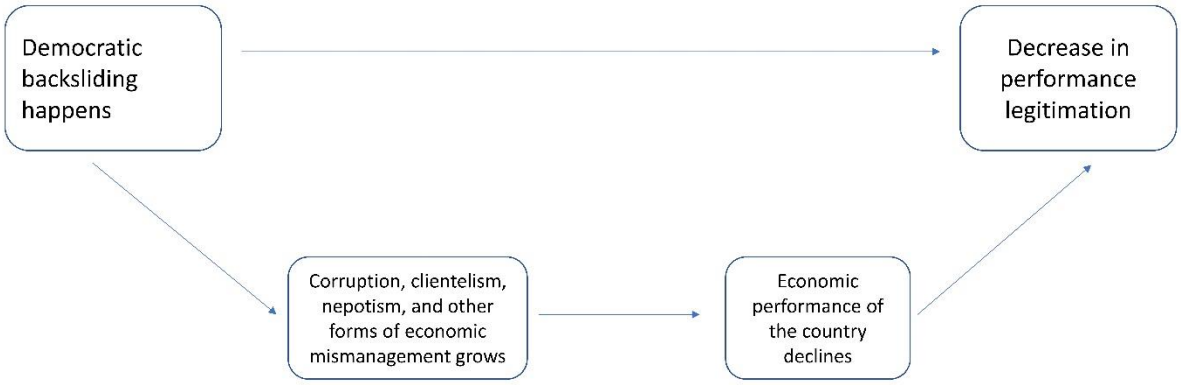
Finally, the thesis opens up a new space to continue research to test its theoretical arguments both in other case studies and via large-N quantitative analyses. In terms of large-N studies, using V-Dem 12 (2022) data for operationalization of the changes in the legitimation claims, my arguments can be tested to see whether democratic backsliding is correlated with an increase in ideological and person of leader legitimation and a decrease in legal-rational and performance legitimation (using V-Dem 12 (2022) Liberal Democracy Index for operationalizing independent variable (IV)), whether increased repression leads to increased ideological legitimation (using V-Dem 12 (2022) Civil Society Repression data for operationalizing IV), whether increased personalization of the system leads to increase in person-of-a leader legitimation (using Geddes et al (2018) Personalism in Dictatorships data for operationalizing IV), whether economic decline leads to a decrease in performance legitimation (using World Development Indicators data for), etc.

Appendix A

Examples of other possible 'bathtub' models of causality in changes in selected legitimation strategies







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