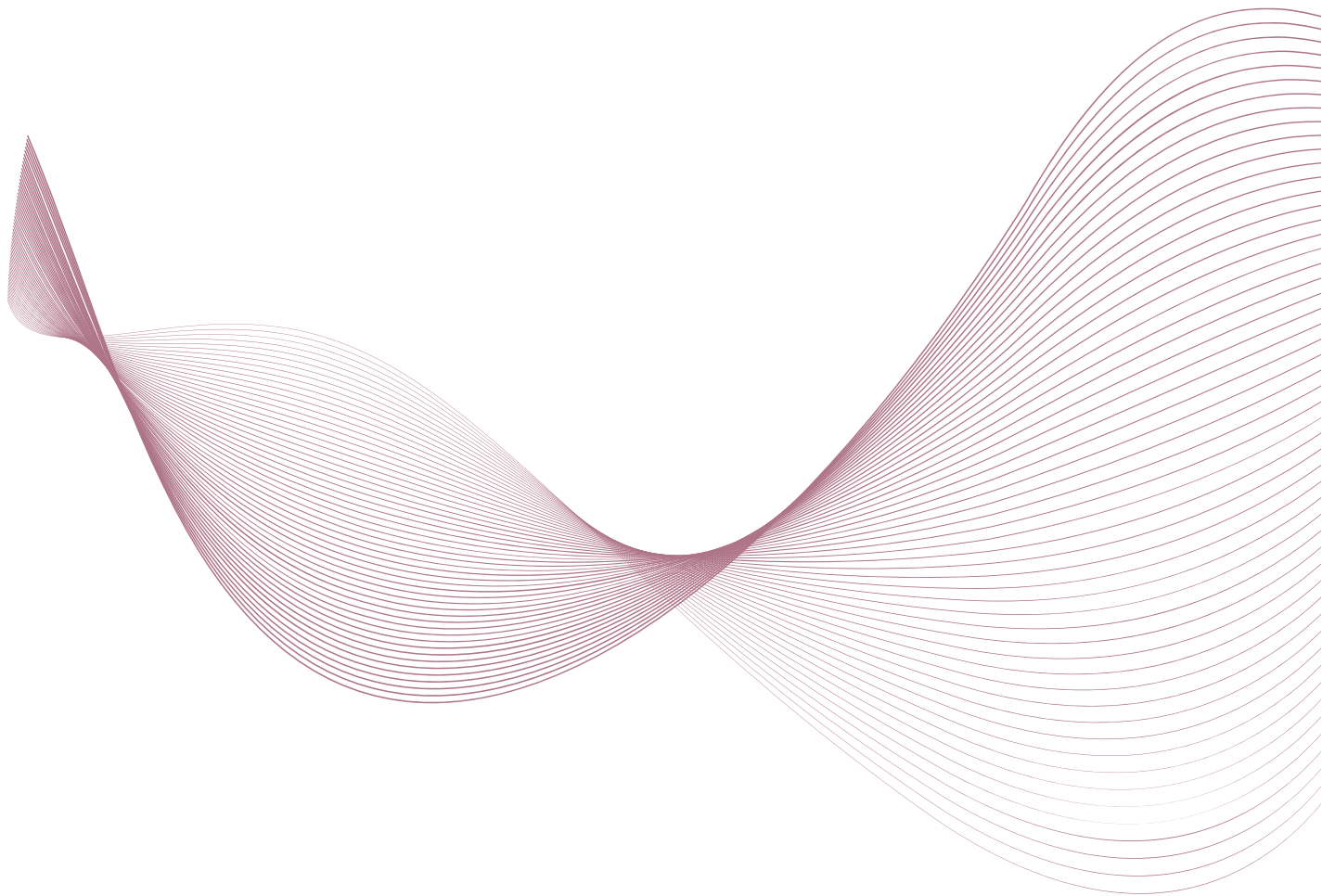


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# Democracy and Autocracy

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## Compliance and Push-back: Politicization of Turkey's Civil Society and Interest Groups under Autocratization

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The role of civil society and interest groups in undemocratic settings remains unclear. On the one hand, grassroots mobilizations during the third-wave of democratization have created high expectations (Feinberg, Waisman, and Zamosc 2006; Silliman and Noble 1998; Toepler and Salamon 2003). Democratization scholarship suggests that civil society generates democratic demands, breeds social capital, and organizes scattered dissent into a sound opposition to autocrats (Diamond 1999; Clarke 1998). In the 1990s and 2000s, civil society has become associated with democratic transition because of its assumed participatory and representative nature.

On the other hand, critics argue that it is unrealistic to attribute these virtues to civil society. They note that civil society can scarcely remain independent of the autocratic state's influence and kindle sustained democratic demands, social cohesion, and deliberation under repression. Indeed, there is evidence that civil society mirrors oppressive political environments and often reproduces power inequalities in undemocratic contexts (Jamal 2007; Chandhoke 2001; Encarnación 2006). Interest groups can become yet another instrument for resilient autocrats, helping the regime to coopt, silence, or manipulate dissent and opposition (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Riley and Fernández 2014).

Debates on the relationship between civil society and political regimes are rooted in empirical insights from consolidated autocracies, where legacies of democratic governance and civic participation are limited or non-existent. Where are we in this debate with regards to the "third wave of autocratization?" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). The unfolding third wave is dominated by the decline of electoral and liberal democracies by power-abusing elected incumbents, labelled as democratic erosion or backsliding (Lührmann *et al.* 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Bermeo 2016). The result is the slow breakdown of democracy and emergence of the different shades of hybrid regimes.

The intensity and reach of autocratization have been substantial over the last decade. Still, the third wave of autocratization and democratic decline literatures are dominated by structural and incumbent-focused analyses. There has been little in-depth research on institutions and actors outside the political arena (e.g., Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Levitsky and Way 2010). This short article centers on the transformation of civil society and interest groups under the gradual and piecemeal process of democratic erosion. What happens to a formerly pluralistic civil society under steady democratic decline? How do interest groups respond under political repression? How do they adapt to remain relevant?

I address these questions through the case of Turkey, where gradual democratic erosion has resulted in regime change from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy (V-Dem 2021; Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2017). Turkey is a representative case to illustrate civil society transformation under contemporary democratic erosion for two reasons. First is one of the most cited examples of third-wave autocratization—the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) (2002–present). Since 2010, democracy has been gradually waning, leading to democratic breakdown in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt and 2017 constitutional amendments (V-Dem 2021; Brownlee 2016; Esen and Gumuscu 2020; Somer 2019). Second, the roots of Turkey’s electoral democracy date back to the 1950s when its pluralistic and participatory features were weakly conceived. Hence, the country’s historical and contingent institutions and actors diverge from resilient autocracies mentioned earlier. During the 1960–70s, a strong civil society and trade union mobilization kept civic participation and grassroots mobilization alive. After the abrupt breakdown of democracy with the 1980 coup, rights-based civil society has flourished following the return to multi-party democracy from 1983 through the 1990s and 2000s (Toprak 1995).

I focus on civil society and interest group mobilization in the area of gender politics, particularly women’s organizations focusing on the last decade when democratic erosion undoubtedly escalated at an increasing rate. The reason for choosing gender politics is two-fold. First, the current government has sponsored a conservative-nationalist gender agenda that promoted women’s ‘true emancipation’ through family and domestic care. Second, in recent years, women’s organizations have become one of the most persistent and well-organized civic opposition groups that have demanded equality, participation, and justice, and mobilized the grassroots against autocratic policy-making.

I argue that civil society can abet both democratic and undemocratic forces. To expand and complement their political hegemony, incumbents turn to civil society to create a government-oriented sector. This distinct sector is populated by interest groups linked to the incumbents by ideological and financial ties. Moreover, selective repression and legislative power also allow the incumbents to tame civil society’s autonomous and pluralistic nature (Yabancı 2019). These complex variables create an interest group ecology that is dynamic and densely populated, but highly politicized and polarized between government-oriented and oppositional interest groups under the impact of democratic erosion.

Two interlinked features separate “third wave” cases from persistent autocracies in terms of civil society and regime relations. First, democratic institutions and civic culture have a longer legacy in Turkey and similar countries. “Democratic legacy” refers to the *institutionalized* presence of democratic rules of competition among rival political actors and a culture of political and civic participation. Political elites and the electorate accept democratic procedures as a routine mechanism of power change and power-sharing. It is more difficult—or takes more time—for anti-democratic incumbents to remove elections and democratic procedures amidst a sustained democratic legacy (Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning 2020).

Importantly, a longer democratic legacy makes it hard to erode an organized civic and social opposition, and pluralism within civil society. Not only do many rights-based social movements and interest groups exist, but they are also grounded institutionally and socially. When political institutions are monopolized, civil society offers an alternative venue to organize opposition and build an extensive action repertoire to contest the incumbents’ attack on rights, freedoms, and democratic institutions. Civil society with its institutional memory, social capital, and organizational skills can sustain democratic demands and mobilization, despite ongoing autocratization at the formal institutional level.

Second, democratic erosion unfolds through piecemeal and legal steps (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). In other words, incumbents avoid abrupt and blatantly illegal measures but find legal loopholes to undermine democracy gradually (Waldner and Lust 2018). This means that although political violence exists, its intensity and spread are much lower compared to persistent autocracies where indiscriminate political violence nips in the bud any potential civic space.

Together with a democratic legacy, the lower levels of political violence earn dissenting groups time to build adaptive skills that might foster alternative participation and organized opposition.

### Civil Society and Interest Groups during AKP Rule

Despite the AKP's repressive legal and judicial practices targeting civil society, the number of registered associations and foundations in Turkey has increased during the gradual breakdown of democracy (Fig 1) (CIVICUS 2021).

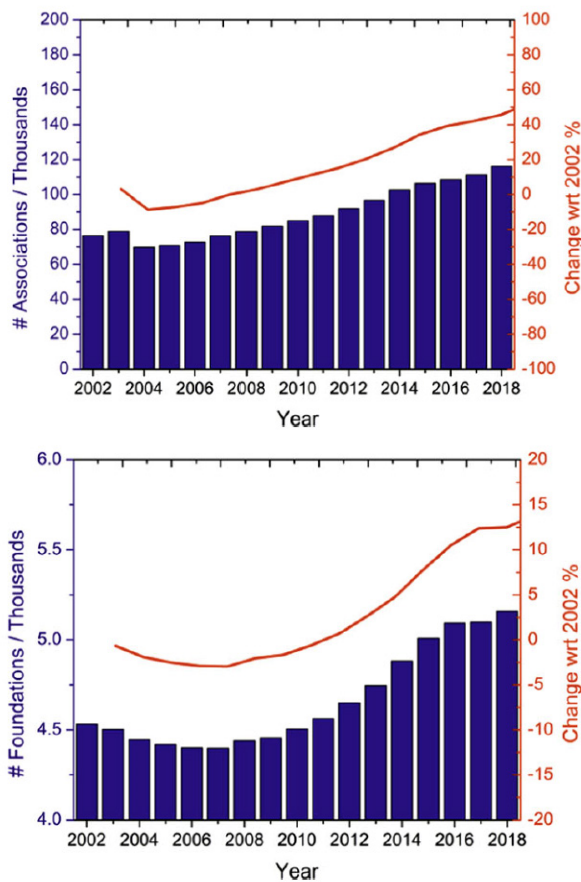


Figure 1. The Numbers of Associations and Foundations during AKP Rule (2002–2019). Source: (Yabancı 2019)

This increase is partially due to the ruling party's strategy to foster government-oriented civil society (Yabancı 2016; 2021a; 2021b). In particular, women's organizations with ideological and organic links to the AKP have assumed a central role in its attempts to control and coopt civil society. The AKP has long sought to promote a socially conservative political agenda and to reconceive women's rights and gender relations

through a family and domestic care perspective. Women have been encouraged to prioritize parenting roles for the sake of new generations loyal to the nationalist-conservative ideology that the AKP embodies (Güneş-Ayata and Doğangün 2017; Yabancı 2021c).

Towards this end, government-oriented women's organizations have become resourceful actors. They target multiple action areas through their activities. Through lobbying, they aim to influence the government's policies and budget on issues related to women and family. However, their lobbying does not meet the normative expectations of such activity in a democracy, whereby interest groups are included in policymaking. Consultations with the government usually take place behind closed doors. Therefore, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact nature of their lobbying power and the leeway these organizations have in terms of initiating new policies or pressuring the government. Still, when the government proposes a controversial policy, women's organizations with organic ties to the AKP appear well-informed about the details in advance. For instance, when the AKP decided to limit the scope of alimony in 2020 or to license religious authorities to conduct civil marriage in 2017, government-oriented women's organizations were aware of the upcoming drafts. They started well-planned advocacy campaigns to prepare the public in advance.

Meanwhile, autonomous women's organizations that I interviewed in 2018 and 2019 complained about being shut off from policy consultations since 2011. Instead, the government prefers only a few women's organizations for pre-legislative meetings with interest groups. Civil society's inclusion in lobbying and policy-making takes place in an asymmetric environment contrived by the government.

Government-oriented women's organizations also work to assuage negative public opinion of the incumbents. Recent legislation concerning sexual assault is a case in point. In 2020, the AKP proposed a change that would acquit perpetrators of sexual assault upon marriage to underage victims. Public opinion appeared adamantly unified against the proposal. Hence, government-oriented women's organizations were hesitant to directly support it. Nonetheless, they also avoided criticizing the government's insistence that underage women marry their assaulters, fearful of enflaming public opinion further. Instead, they sought to justify the proposed law by distorting the facts. They argued that such marriages had taken place consensually in the past and that the government merely intended to maintain strong families in line with "Turkish traditions." Within Turkey's climate of negative partisanship, such campaigns whitewash controversial

policies. They also prevent the potential formation of a unified cross-partisan public opinion on salient issues, thereby preventing defections from the AKP's support base.

Their success in shaping public opinion emerges as a key reason for the AKP's promotion of such organizations. These groups have orchestrated an anti-gender equality campaign in line with religious principles and a conservative political-legal agenda (Yabancı 2016; Diner 2018). To date, they have become successful in rallying a considerable part of society against gender equality and mainstreaming principles, and specifically against the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention (on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence) as well as LGBTQ+ rights.

In doing so, these organizations follow a template similar to other conservative and populist movements across the world by promoting femonationalist and heteropatriarchal values (Mulholland *et al.* 2018; Farris 2012; Verloo and Paternotte 2018). Accordingly, feminism and gender equality are alien to "the authentic traditions of the nation" and "the true nature" of women who are allegedly the guardians of family values. Towards this aim, they have adopted several strategies. An "academic journal" and expert reports have laid out an alternative conception of "gender justice"—an allegedly superior substitute for gender equality. The concept of gender justice is built on a haphazard blend of Islamic principles with cherry-picked features of post-colonial feminist theory for justification beyond Turkey, especially in non-Western contexts. Annual international conferences and participation in projects and networking in Europe have also helped these organizations establish alliances across borders with like-minded organizations, thinkers, and academics.

Thanks to their organizational reach and financial resources provided by state ministries and AKP-run municipalities, government-oriented women's organizations carry out national projects on diverse issues, including vocational training for unskilled women, support for drug-addicted children, integration programs for women refugees, and aid to the poor. These projects demonstrate their ability to reach out to disadvantaged or precarious women and to establish local links with their target groups. Most importantly, these grassroots ties turn them into transmission belts that report societal demands and discontents to the government. Overall, the intermediary role they assume between their target group, public opinion, and the government make them valuable assets for the AKP's societal reach and legitimacy.

## Tactful Adaptation of Autonomous Civil Society

Democratic decline has raised serious challenges for autonomous civil society organizations and movements. The AKP has been targeting interest groups and activists with skills to mobilize public opinion regarding politically salient issues since 2013's nationwide protests (Yabancı 2019). Pre-emptive detention, terrorism charges, and securitization of human rights activism have become normalized following the 2016 botched coup. What is truly cumbersome is not the repressive capacity of the incumbents per se, but the unpredictability of political repression of interest groups. Issues or events once considered permissible might turn out to be lightning rods in a few years. Red lines are redrawn quite quickly.

Nevertheless, repression has also given rise to an intensified regrouping and change of strategies within civil society. Democratic breakdown has had two consequences for autonomous interest groups in Turkey. First, they have gone through an organizational transformation, turning to horizontal networks and grassroots mobilization. Again, the emergence of new women's networks and organizations is notable here. Spearheaded by educated and urban women in their mid-20s and 30s, new women's organizations have quickly superseded professionalized NGOs. They established nationwide visibility and secured the participation of women from diverse backgrounds of age, education, class, and region.

Second, autonomous and oppositional interest groups have developed an impressive capacity to adapt to the quick shift in repressive measures by 1) developing new structural relationships based on cross-cutting alliances, and 2) drawing upon multiple means of action across the country, including protests, democratic innovations, litigation, and indirect lobbying through public awareness campaigns.

***"Nevertheless, repression has also given rise to an intensified regrouping and change of strategies within civil society."***

Regarding alliances, autonomous women's groups reach out to women of diverse backgrounds to bridge secular-religious, Turkish-Kurdish, and left-right cleavages by emphasizing gender equality and defending women's rights. As a result, they have focused on the intersectionality of discrimination and gendered power

structures. Secular and Muslim feminists have joined efforts to promote women's rights and gender equality and more specifically to defend the right to make decisions regarding their bodies, outfits, and social roles against government interference.

In doing so, women's organizations utilize different discourses. For example, Muslim feminists refer to religious texts to contest centuries-old masculine interpretations that justify discrimination and violence targeting women, while secular women's networks emphasize more directly a conception of gender equality inclusive of LGBTQ+. However, this diversity does not stem from a fundamental fragmentation but a strategic choice to reach out to diverse audiences across the religious-secular cleavage. This alliance has raised mutual awareness, leading to a more embracing attitude among secular women towards Muslim women's agency, and the willingness among Muslim women to open up on taboo issues like abortion, LGBTQ+, or divorce. Overall, new alliances have revealed that, whether Muslim or secular, being a woman in Turkey means facing similar hardships due to the gender roles imposed by an increasingly nationalist-conservative and authoritarian regime.

Autonomous women's organizations have invented a wide repertoire to mobilize the grassroots. For instance, women's assemblies are a remarkable success for civic participation. Women's assemblies are deliberative forums established in 25 cities as well as at several district and university levels in densely populated urban areas. They encourage more women to experiment with democratic innovations by directly voicing their demands regardless of their partisan or ideological affiliation. Through assembly meetings, participants become informed about their legal rights and discuss long-term solutions for inequality and violence. I was told that during local assembly meetings, topics for discussion range from early and forced marriages, to violence and equal pay. Such meetings do not only aim to create solidarity but also to seek solutions for specific discrimination, by pooling women's experience, knowledge, personal networks, and legal expertise.

Women's organizations continuously organize peaceful demonstrations, mostly in urban areas, despite police violence and bans on the freedom of assembly following the 2016 coup attempt. Social media has become a major platform for organizing and expanding participation in these protests. While protests do not always prevent the government from imposing new legislation undermining women's rights, according to the activists I interviewed, sustained protest keeps the public informed where the traditional media is controlled

by the incumbents, and supports the solidarity and cooperation among women's organizations. It also has profound symbolic importance: the streets are venues to contest the undemocratic turn. To refuse to surrender the streets to the government is to defy the attempts to deepen autocratization. Digitally-savvy mobilization has become more crucial than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic. Immediate mass protests were quickly organized via social media platforms following the government's abrupt decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention. Women's assemblies took place online during the lockdown to ensure that women continued to have a voice on equal platforms.

The action repertoire of women's organizations also extends into litigation. An organization of activist-lawyers called "We Will Stop Femicides" takes up legal proceedings to support victims of domestic violence (or their families in cases when the victim is deceased). The platform publicizes upcoming court hearings on every case. According to the activists, when the organization is involved in court proceedings, security forces, prosecutors, and judges are less able to be lenient on the perpetrators of these crimes. The platform also utilizes open digital sources to create a nationwide database of femicides. This documentation has lately become the only reliable source of skyrocketing femicide cases. These efforts are essential for legal redress, but they also create collective memory for the women's movement, raise public awareness, and pressure the government to tackle gender-based crimes.

Overall, despite increasing restrictions under institutional erosion of democracy, women's groups have invented a myriad of ways to continue mobilization for democratic demands and favored alternative channels of participation and claims-making.

## Conclusion

De-democratization scholarship has focused on institutional change to explain the causes and consequences of democratic erosion. Non-political institutions, such as civil society and interest groups, have received meager attention. Women's organizations in Turkey reveal several lessons about the transformation of civil society and interest group mobilization under democratic erosion and eventual democratic breakdown.

First, civil society under democratic erosion is densely populated and dynamic. On the one hand, there are resourceful government-oriented groups. They assist incumbents in search of extending their hegemony

to civic and social arenas. These groups promote the government's controversial policies, and prevent coalition formation and interest aggregation across partisan cleavages. On the other hand, civil society has the capacity to mobilize new grassroots demands for participation, justice, and pluralism. As a result, civil society can become deeply politicized, reflecting the partisan polarization of politics.

Second, the actions and agenda of interest groups depend on how they position themselves in this polarized environment. Government-oriented groups have access to guaranteed resources and bureaucratic facilitation. They have become highly professionalized organizations with nationwide reach and lobbying. Autonomous and oppositional actors within civil society face repression and are locked out of lobbying. As a result, they often turn to grassroots mobilization and alliances, and expanding and changing the mediums of contention.

Third, while civil society is split along pro- and anti-incumbent poles, unexpected cooperation and alliances can also appear under repression. Previous ethnic or religious cleavages can become secondary or be bridged through novel alliances. These groups are active in multiple issue areas and have more options than cooptation or atomized scattered contention. They also resort to protest, ensuring that the street remains a "natural habitat" for oppositional groups.

Democratic legacy and the historical and institutional rootedness of civil society are crucial factors that allow civil society to capitalize on contesting against the incumbents. Civil society and its transformation in Turkey reveal that democratic erosion is not the only process at play. While autocratization is deepening at the political and institutional levels, re-democratization might be simultaneously unfolding at civic and societal levels.

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