

Populism, Authoritarianism, and Inequality in Turkey Under the AKP

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“They want me gone. When Erdoğan is gone, Turkey is destroyed.” – President Erdoğan, March 2016

Introduction

The term “rising populism” has been used to describe the increasing electoral success of right-wing populist parties across the globe, from the United States to France to Turkey and beyond. The very definition of populism is the subject of much debate; populist policies and rhetoric are neither left-wing or right-wing, but rather can be applied across the political spectrum. The current wave of populism, often called “neopopulism,” or neoliberal populism, is distinctly right-wing: such as Putin in Russia, Orban in Hungary, Erdoğan in Turkey, or Modi in India. Some have referred to the populism of the MENA region as the “new Islamic populism” (Hadiz 2016). Despite the presence of populist rhetoric or policies across both left- and right-wing parties, populist movements across the globe and across history share a few common characteristics: nationalism, mass-mobilization, anti-elitism, the adaptation of language, and disruption of judicial processes. The quote at the beginning of this paper illustrates Turkey’s turn towards authoritarian populism under the Justice and Development Party, or AKP. After coming to power in 2002, the AKP for a while maintained its image as a conservative democratic, pro-Western party, and at first seemed to avoid a fall into populism. Since 2011, however, the AKP has become increasingly populist and authoritarian (Karaveli 2018; Temelkuran 2019). In this paper, I will focus on the rise in populism in Turkey under the AKP and its relationship to social, political, and economic inequality in the country. I will use datasets from the *World Inequality Database*, *Freedom House*, *Varieties of Democracy*, and *Credit Suisse* to analyze levels of corruption,

political rights, civil liberties, and the income/wealth inequality in Turkey.

With this data, combined with detailed qualitative and anecdotal data from scholars and journalists, I demonstrate that Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party went through a few main periods. The period 2002 to 2007 was widely regarded as a successful period of economic development, privatization, and democratic institution-building. Following 2008, 2011, and the coup in 2016, the AKP has rapidly shifted towards more authoritarian policies. By 2015, income inequality in Turkey, despite a rapid compression from 2002-2008, had exceeded its pre-AKP levels. Throughout his rule, Erdoğan has relied on populist tools of rhetoric, control, and suppression of his opposition. These populist policies have included the claim to represent the *real people* of Turkey in their struggle against the elites; expansion of public aid to the poor, especially to AKP loyalists; increased executive power and a dismantling of the judiciary, fueled by widely false allegations of sedition against his political opponents; increased corruption despite the promises to get rid of corruption, and more. As Turkey has become more populist and authoritarian, it has also seen repeated economic failures and increases in economic and political inequality.

The Early Years, 2002-2008

Under the leadership of Erdoğan, the AKP's economic performance in the period 2002-2007 was largely positive; Turkey's economy grew rapidly, employment rose, and economic inequality was compressed. After the 2001 economic crisis in Turkey, the economy grew at an average rate of more than 7% per year from 2002-2007 under the leadership of the AKP (Filiztekin 2020). At the same time, the share of income going to the bottom 50% of the income distribution rose from 13.6% in 2002 to 16.3% in 2007. The middle class saw an even higher increase in their income share, which rose to nearly 35% in 2007, from 31% in 2002 (see Figure 2). By 2006, the share of income received by the bottom 90% was greater than the share belonging

to the top 10% for perhaps the first time since the founding of Turkey (World Inequality Database 2020). The ratio of the income share of the top 10% to that of the bottom 50% decreased more rapidly than in the entire Middle East (in which Turkey is included), Greece, Bulgaria, or Egypt. However, income inequality Turkey has remained, by this metric, more unequal than all of these three countries, though more equal than the Middle East region (see Figure 1).

The AKP was believed to be a force of democratization and modernization that also held on to the traditionally conservative Muslim social values of many Turkish citizens. Its early successes in developing the economy and provided much-needed institutional reform helped to stir up widespread support for the AKP in the 2007 elections as well. However, while educated and secular voters were likely to support the AKP in 2002, by 2007, the majority of the AKP's supporters were lesser-educated (Çarkoğlu 2012: 515). Across the period 2007-2011, the influence of negative economic evaluations decreased, and the ideological divide between left and right became a stronger predictor of support for the incumbent AKP. While in 2007 the most left-leaning voters had a 37% likelihood to vote for the AKP, by 2011 this had dropped to only 13%; for the most right-leaning voters, however, the likelihood of support only dropped from 78% to 71% (Çarkoğlu 2012: 519). While this may partly be explained in terms of education and religion, it is also the result of the AKP's attacks on secular critics and left-leaning journalists who dared to speak against the AKP's corruption – following the AKP's rise to power, it began to crack down on freedom of expression of journalists and academics across the country, alienating many of its liberal supporters (see Figure 7). Turkey quickly became one of the worst countries to be a journalist or academic, with freedom of expression rated nearly zero by Varieties of Democracy and Reporters without Borders. This is only one indicator of the AKP's turn towards increasingly authoritarian policies.

Social Transfers

The great economic performance from 2002-2007 helped to greatly expand and consolidate the AKP's voter base: in the 2007 election, the AKP's base of support increased by 60%, from 10 million in 2002 to 16 million (Eligür 2010: 257-258). This shift in support of the AKP may be attributed to a variety of factors; one way that Erdoğan's government has guaranteed the support of much of its voter base is through increased social transfers. The party's extensive provision of money, food, coal, and other necessities to large swathes of the urban poor proved invaluable as well: in 2007, more than 75% of those who voted for the AKP claimed to do so "because the party provided good constituent services" (Eligür 2010: 258). In the four-year period 2003-2007,

"...the AKP government and its municipalities regularly distributed selective material incentives (food, clothing, and financial assistance; health services; scholarships and free schoolbooks) amounting to more than 3.3 billion YTL" (Eligür 2010: 259).

The amount of social assistance given by the AKP was very significant for the urban poor. From 2003 to 2008, the share of individuals receiving public transfers increased from 15% to more than 45% and, among the poorest 10% of the Turkish population, public transfers account for more than 10% of their total income (Filiztekin 2020: 80). A strong middle class was also growing in Turkey: from 2002 to 2008, the adult median wealth grew from 3407 US dollars to 9812 US dollars, an annual growth of 19.3% (Credit Suisse 2019; see Figure 10). The middle class went from receiving 31% of the income share to 35% of the income share in this period; so, in addition to increasing the income of many in the Turkish lower and middle classes, Erdoğan was also credited with compressing the extreme levels of inequality in Turkey. This trend, however, would quickly reverse.

This group, reliant upon the generosity of the AKP, has formed a key part of the party's

voter base, especially as the AKP's supporter base has slowly lost the most educated and most left-leaning members of the population. As Dorraj claims, "...by implementing reforms that would benefit their client groups and political constituency, they establish a dependent paternalistic relationship that assures them a continued base of support" (Dorraj 2017: 289-290). This data is supported as well by other authors and journalists' first-hand experiences on the ground: according to journalist and author Ece Temelkuran, Erdoğan created a supporter base by targeting social support to his potential voter base "...whose very survival depended on [his] political existence" (Temelkuran 2019: Ch 4). This strategy of creating a loyal base of dependent supporters was not new to Erdoğan; during his tenure as Istanbul's mayor when he was a member of Erbakan's RP, 200 municipal workers in the Eminonu district were fired and replaced with RP loyalists (Çağaptay 2017: Ch 5). This system of patronage is not unique to Islamist parties in Turkey either, but rather has been characteristic of Turkish politics for decades (see Figure 6).

As Filiztekin claims, the "Turkish population's, especially the poor's, reliance on transfers is increasing and the generosity of the state cannot be sustained for long" (Filiztekin 2020: 82). Construction projects were tied to votes, with AKP-voting districts given priority in the development of new metro stations by 2018. As she details in her book *How to Lose a Country*, Ece Temelkuran claims that one AKP supporter in a poor urban district told her, "What can we do? We are hungry. First it was the leftists, and now it's Erdoğan" (Temelkuran 2019; Ch 4). While the massive aid to the poor was a much-needed step of public assistance in Turkey, a country with more than 20% of people living in poverty, this assistance was created not through the proper parliamentary channels of legislation to ensure its continued existence under a new party, but rather was created to be tied to the AKP's own electoral success.

Anti-elitism

As is characteristic of populist rhetoric from South America to Europe to the Middle East,

Erdoğan challenged the social and intellectual elites in Turkey as well as the secular democratic establishment. Erdoğan claims to represent the will of the *real people* in their struggle against the intellectuals, the bureaucrats, and the oligarchy – a trope characteristic of the classical populist leaders like Peron in Argentina, Cardenas in Mexico, and Vargas in Brazil. The AKP came to power by “emphasizing the victimhood of the majority at the hands of a repressive, secular, and Western-oriented minority” (Aslan 2016). Along with a shift in educated voters away from the AKP has come a rise in the number of educated voters in Turkey. Another key group of support for the AKP has been people with high levels of education but nonetheless remain stuck in “the lower tiers of the socio-economic and political hierarchy” (Hadiz 2016: 34-36).

Erdoğan’s appeal to both low-income and less educated voters as well as to the highly educated with low upward mobility is again reminiscent of many early populist leaders. Yrigoyen in Argentina in the early 1900s, for example, came to power with his Radical Party through his appeal to the urban laborers and the educational elite who were eager for more political power; he also relied extensively on mobilizing rhetoric against the foreign elite and the oligarchy (Hayes 2019). The same is true of populist leaders across Europe today. Erdoğan’s populist appeal, then, is not entirely unique. Attacking the metropolitan, secular elite who stood against the traditional conservative values of the majority of Muslim Turks, Erdoğan crafted his place in Turkish politics alongside a neoliberal promise of development and global integration. Those who he could not convince with his Islamic appeal to social conservatism, he managed to convince with this pro-EU orientation and neoliberal policies. By 2007, the newly formed party had secured its place in Turkish politics through its economic successes.

However, the economic successes were rife with corruption, particularly in the later phase of the AKP’s leadership. Many of the previously state-owned enterprises were awarded to party insiders, and entire industries such as construction, energy, and media are dominated by large

groups with “close links to the party or the party state” (Öniş 2019: 8-9). While income inequality was rapidly compressed under the AKP, wealth inequality saw no such compression; it has, in fact, been increasing steadily throughout the AKP’s rule (see Figure 2). The corrupt privatization of formerly state-owned enterprises fueled this industrial concentration; the seizure of businesses owned by Erdoğan’s secular opponents also helped to consolidate industries in the hands of AKP members.

Post-2008

Following the 2008 financial crisis, the Turkish economy began to falter. Particularly since the AKP’s widespread electoral success in 2011, the neoliberal structural reforms began to stall, and “the positive role of autonomous agencies were blocked...and broadening of economic activity decelerated” (Filiztekin 2020: 64). While between 2002 and 2008 median adult wealth in Turkey had grown nearly 20% per year, by 2016 median wealth was less than it was in 2008 (see Figure 10). At the same time, income inequality in Turkey began to slip back into a pattern of growth (see Figure 3 and Figure 5). So while the median and the average Turkish adult was seeing his/her wealth decrease in absolute terms, the wealthy and well-connected were receiving an increasing share of the wealth (see Figure 2).

As Filiztekin notes in his article, the “...most important determinant of overall inequality is the educational attainment of household head” (Filiztekin 2020: 74). From 2003-2007 under the AKP, there was a rapid convergence in the incomes of the less educated and the highly educated, but this trend reversed in 2008 – just as the economy was beginning to falter and inequality beginning to grow. Additionally, Turkish citizens became less likely to rely on self-employment income from small businesses and more likely to receive paid employment income (Filiztekin 2020: 81). As the economy faltered, Erdoğan’s policies became increasingly populist and authoritarian as well.

Authoritarian Turn

Since the 2011 Arab Spring, Turkey has slipped further and further into authoritarian rule. After a remarkable improvement in its freedom index from 2002-2008, the AKP's crackdowns on its opposition and its handing over of more power and discretion to the police under the antiterror act. By 2007, the police could legally spy on all Turkish citizens: their text messages, calls, emails, and more (Eligür 2010; Karaveli 2018). Following the 2011 Ergenekon scandal, in which journalists, university presidents, professors, politicians, military officers, and more were jailed under suspicion of treason and sedition. Most of the evidence against them was fabricated and, coincidentally, all were vocal critics of Erdoğan and the AKP government. In line with these crackdowns on freedoms, Turkey's freedom index dropped from a peak in 2008 to its pre-AKP levels by 2016 (see Figure 4 and Figure 9). This suppression of freedom was accompanied with industrial concentration and cronyism; by 2011, more than half of Turkish media companies were run by pro-AKP businesses, and those industries which were run by Erdoğan's secular opponents were subject to politically-motivated tax audits (Çağaptay 2017).

The power to appoint of university presidents and university board members was taken from the universities themselves and transferred to the Ministry of Education, which under the leadership of the AKP continues to create a "pro-[AKP] cadre at universities" (Eligür 2010: 271). This is another way that the AKP has continued its attacks on the secular elite and carved out its place in the highest positions of political and intellectual influence in Turkey. It is also representative of the way that Erdoğan has successfully centralized his own power and created AKP support networks deep in Turkish society: the urban poor, the rural conservatives and the Anatolian business elite all have been vital to Erdoğan's success, and he has attempted to appease them all. Through appointing pro-AKP and pro-Islamist professors to top university

positions, expanding social assistance programs for the poor, and integrating the Turkish economy with the West and with the MENA region, Erdoğan has successfully answered the desires of many of his most loyal supporters.

While increasing the influence of the AKP in politics, Erdoğan has cemented his own executive power, effectively creating a presidency similar to that of Putin in Russia, with near-total decision-making control. He has eroded the judicial and legislative checks on his own office (see Figure 8). Through these measures, along with removing the political power of the military in Turkey, Erdoğan has made himself untouchable, further blurring the lines between party and state. The center-right, conservative democrats have been expunged from the AKP and replaced with more hardline Islamists.

Conclusion

In its beginning years, the AKP was regarded within Turkey and across the world as a modern, pro-Western party intent on democratizing Turkey. At first, albeit with many notable domestic failures, the AKP succeeded in developing the economy of Turkey, decreasing the role of the military in politics, and developing democratic institutions in Turkey. Inequality was temporarily reduced, and Erdoğan was rewarded for these successes at the ballot box. Relying on populist appeals to national identity, the virtue of the *real people*, conservative Muslim values, and neoliberal principles, Erdoğan crafted his place in Turkish politics where leftists such as Ecevet and Islamists such as Erbakan had previously failed. Since 2007 and especially since 2011, however, Erdoğan and his AKP have become increasingly authoritarian, and income and wealth inequality have risen rapidly. By appealing to populist narratives and by delivering what many of his supporters wanted, he maintains a very large and loyal supporter base even today. As Turkish historian and political scientist Soner Çagaptay said in a recent interview, “[Erdoğan’s] base loves him not only because he is a populist, nativist leader and

because they identify with his message, but they also love him because he has lifted many in the base out of poverty” (Barry 2019).

Where the CHP and leftist parties failed to offer the poor any support, Erdoğan succeeded. Following 2011, however, the economic successes of the 2002-2008 era have begun to evaporate. The incomes of those who Erdoğan once helped lift out of poverty are now stagnating. As more of the supporters in his base are seeing their incomes stagnate while Erdoğan and his well-connected party elites get wealthier, Erdoğan is losing a key part of his constituency and has been forced to resort to increasingly authoritarian policies to keep his grip on power, which has further alienated the liberal and secular voters who previously supported him. He has dismissed the very liberties that he once claimed to protect, and the progress he once made towards developing Turkey is slowly fading away. As Turkey experiences rapid inflation, stagnating incomes, suppression of speech, consolidation of industries, cronyism and corruption, and an increase in income and wealth inequality, many Turkish seculars, intellectuals, dissidents, and common people are finding Erdoğan increasingly difficult to tolerate; meanwhile, his supporter base has not yet lost hope. As he has entrenched himself in government and consolidated his power, a Turkey without Erdoğan is becoming harder to imagine.

As Erdoğan said it himself: when Erdoğan is gone, Turkey is destroyed.

Figures

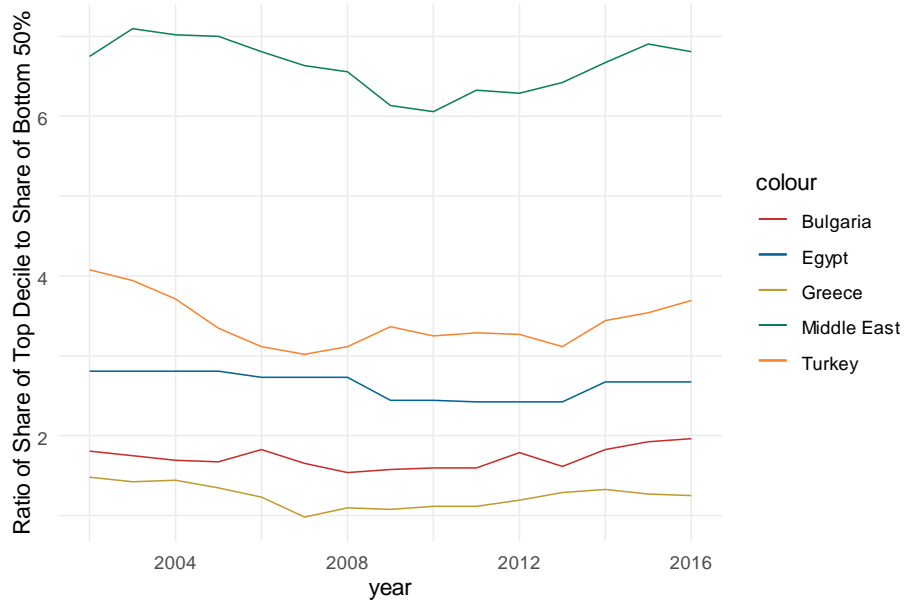


Figure 1: Top 10% Income Share to Bottom 50% Income Share, 2000-2016. Source: World Inequality Database

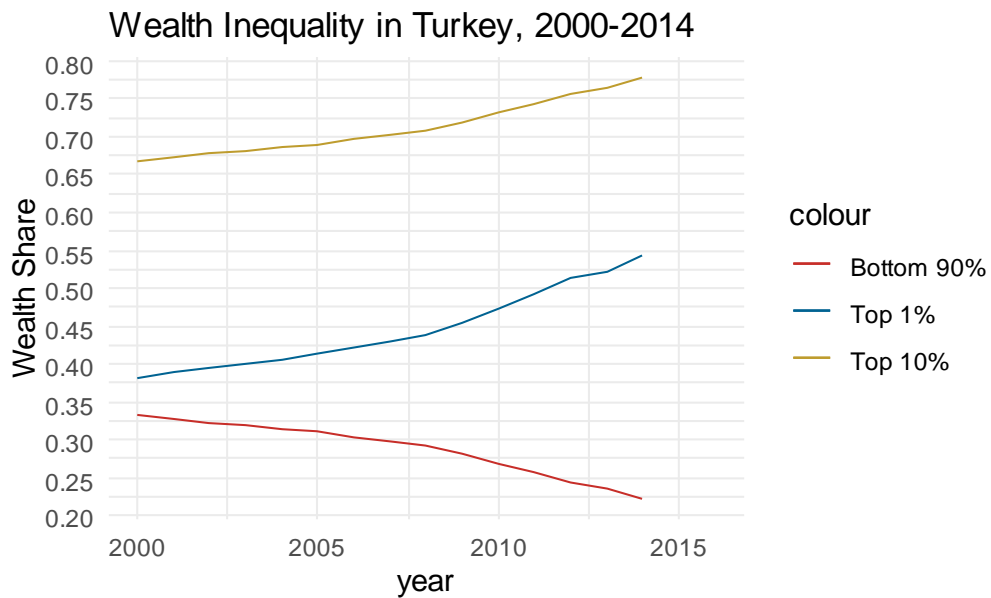


Figure 2: Wealth Inequality in Turkey, 2000-2014. Source: Credit Suisse

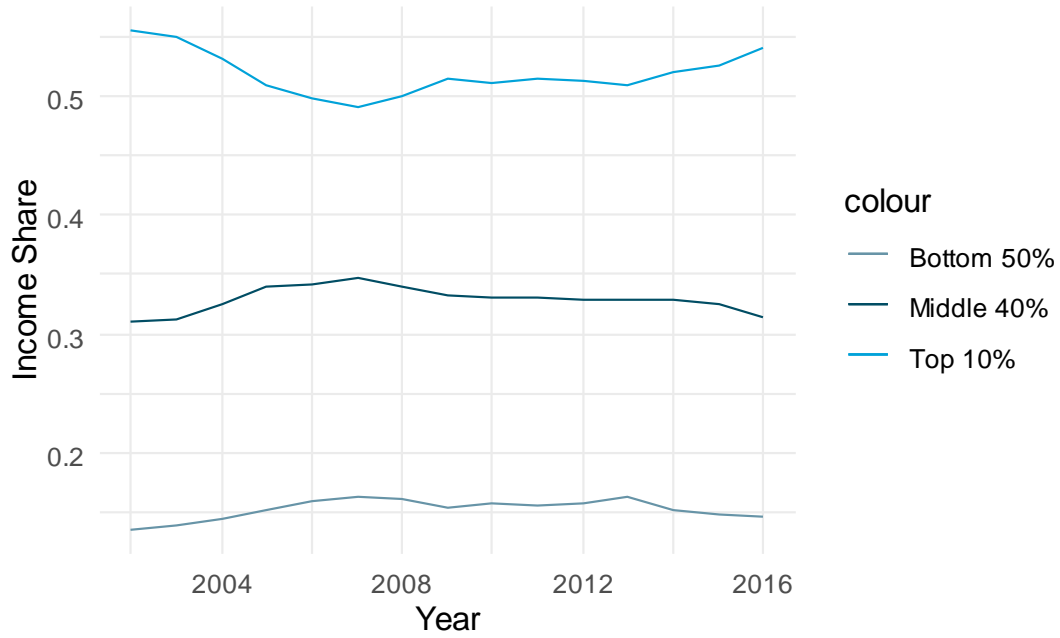


Figure 3: Income Inequality in Turkey, 2002-2016. Source: World Inequality Database

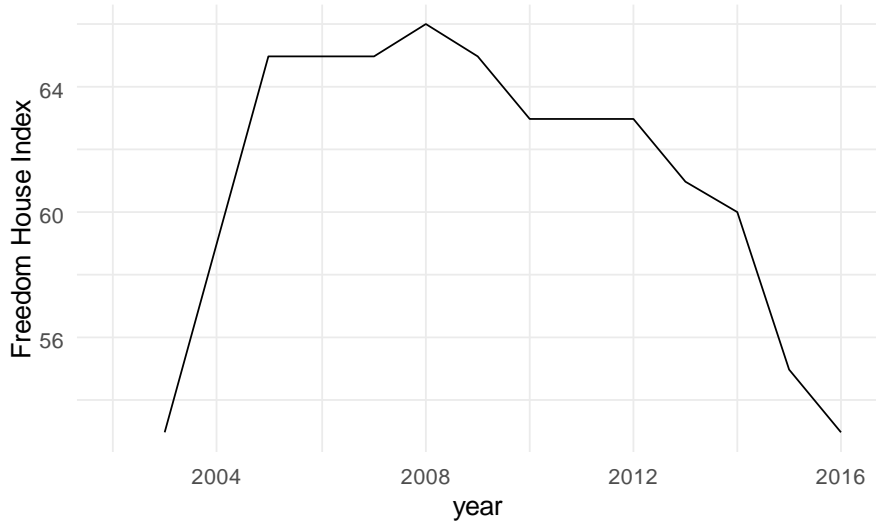


Figure 4: Freedom Index in Turkey, 2002-2016. Source: Freedom House

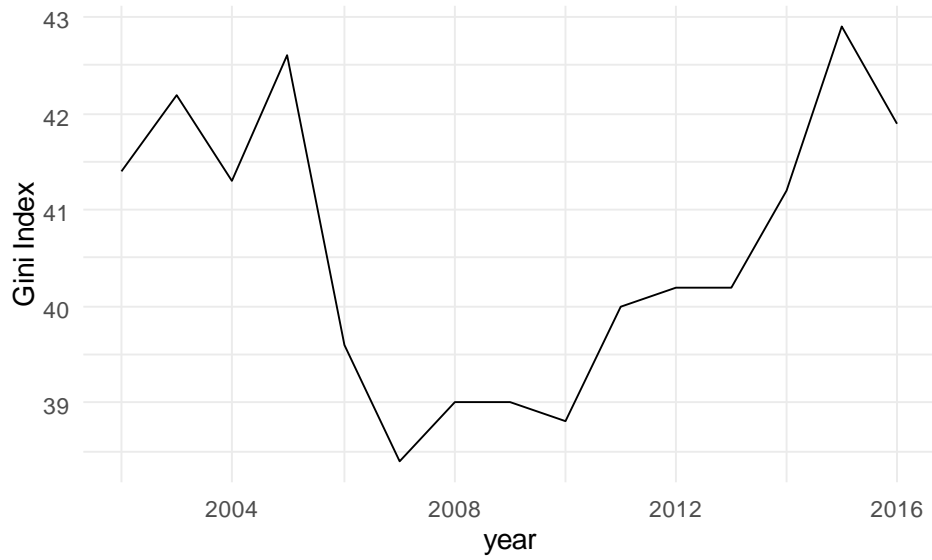


Figure 5: Gini Index in Turkey, 2002-2016: Source: World Bank

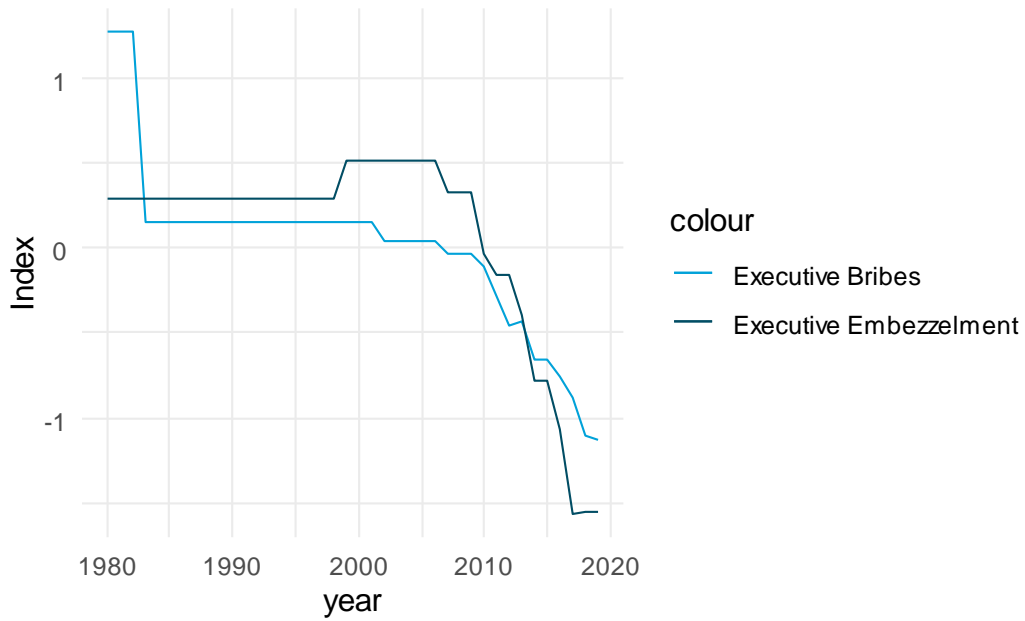


Figure 6: Executive-Level Corruption in Turkey. (4 = No Corruption, 0 = Routine Corruption). Source: Varieties of Democracy

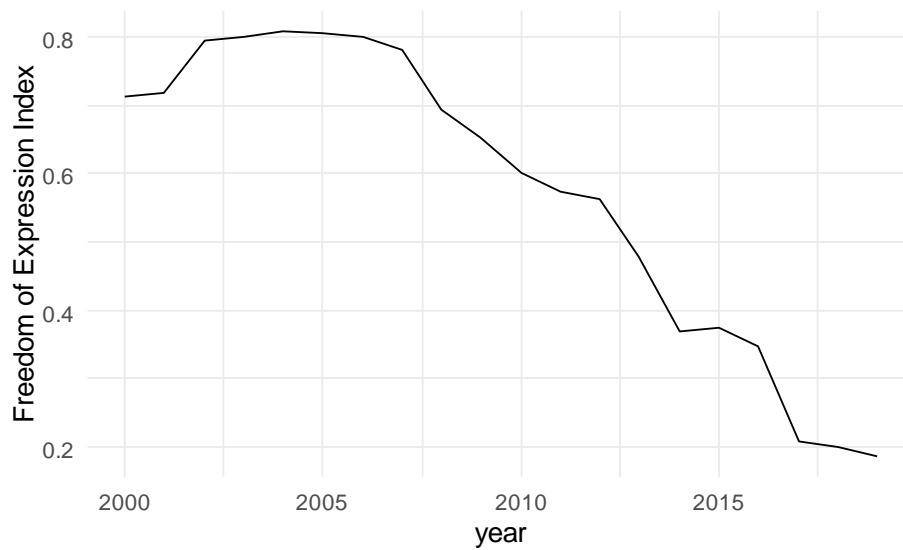


Figure 7: Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index in Turkey, 2000-2019. Source: Varieties of Democracy

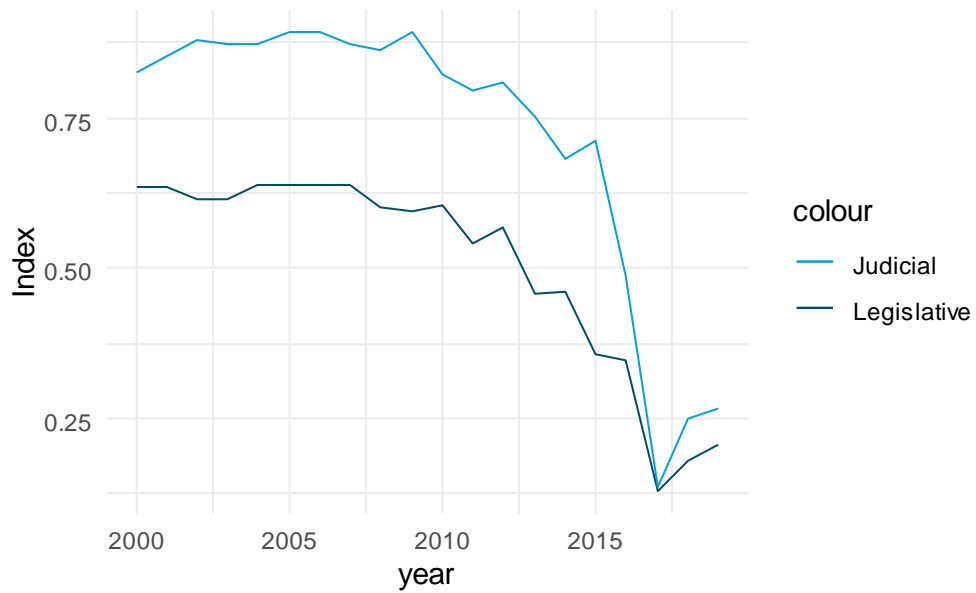


Figure 8: Checks and Balances on the Executive in Turkey, 2000-2019. Source: Varieties of Democracy. (1 = High Checks and Independence, 0 = Low)

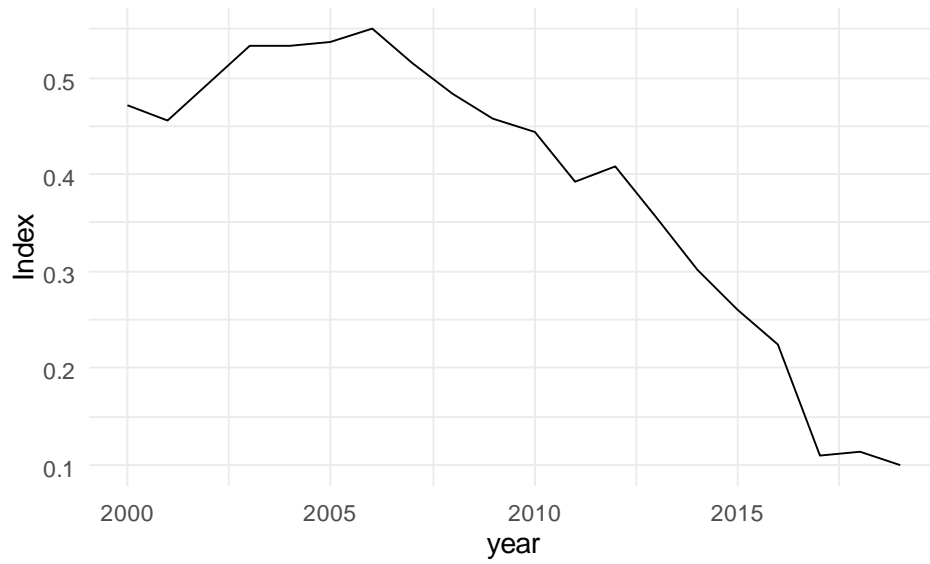


Figure 9: Liberal Democracy Index in Turkey, 2000-2019. Source: Varieties of Democracy

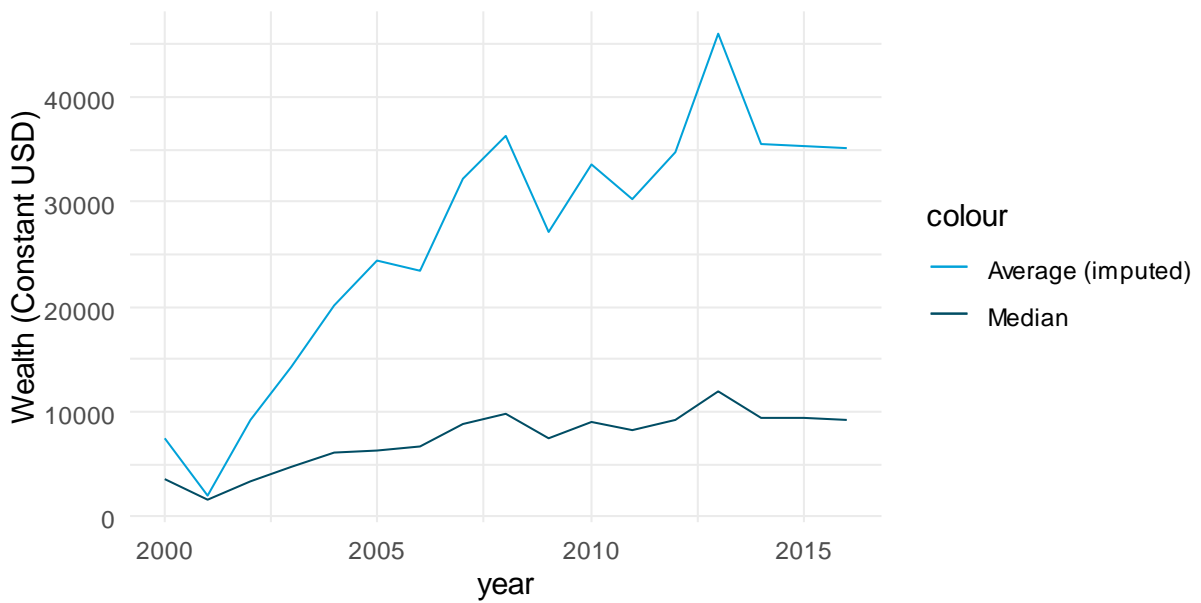


Figure 10: Evolution of Wealth in Turkey, 2000-2016. Source: Credit Suisse

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