

### Foreword

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A common theme running through many of the chapters of this *Handbook* is the inability of the Turkish Republic to build truly participatory democratic institutions throughout the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first (e.g., see the chapters by Karakoç and Somer in this volume). This isn't just because of the four military interventions but also because even popularly elected governments have routinely suppressed civil society, trampled with judiciary independence, disallowed free media, and repressed minority rights. This is despite the fact that the Turkish economy has modernized rapidly, transforming itself from an almost predominantly agricultural, non-urban, and inward-looking economy to one that is much less dependent on agriculture, much more urban, and highly integrated into global markets (see the chapter by Pamuk in this volume).

Although there are many fruitful ways of approaching this history of political underdevelopment in Turkey, I would like to frame it using a few of the themes from my own work and in the process highlight several challenges and directions of future research.

In *The Narrow Corridor*, James Robinson and I conceptualize the dynamics of political development in terms of state–society relations (Acemoğlu and Robinson 2019). The main thesis of the book can be summarized with a figure, which I borrow from there (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 showcases the forces that shape the long-run evolution of different political systems. It focuses on two characteristics of different political and social systems. On the horizontal axis, we have the power of society, meant to capture the ability of society to organize collective action, act according to its norms and values, participate in politics, and most importantly withstand efforts by the state and elites to impose schemes on it. On the vertical axis, we have the power of the state, representing the capacity of state institutions and the power of economic and political elites controlling the state and commanding the key places in the economy and politics. State power has both a repressive element (the more powerful the state is, the more it can silence opposition and society at large)

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and an organizational aspect (the more powerful the state is, the more it can provide public services, collect information, resolve disputes, and deal with societal problems).

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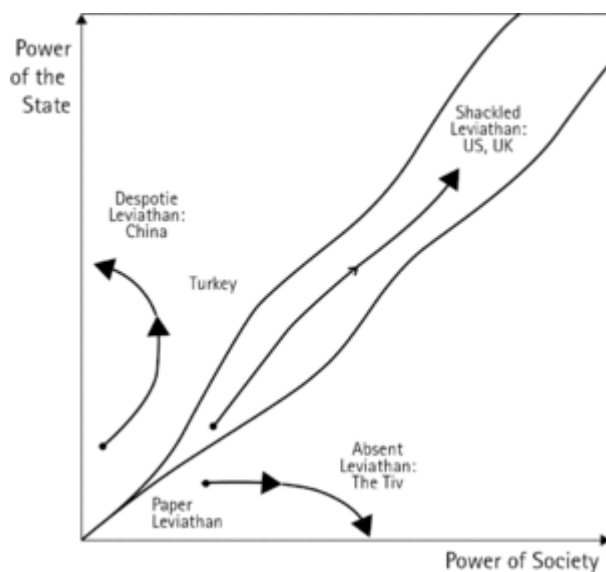


Figure 1. The framework from *The Narrow Corridor*.

Source: Acemođlu and Robinson (2019).

In our framework, state-society relations determine the nature of political power. This is summarized by the three regions depicted in the figure. In the region on the left, we have the “Despotic Leviathan,” where the state is despotic in the sense that it can implement policies or impose its wishes without input from society. The dynamics, represented by the illustrative trajectory, are inexorably toward lower levels of societal power—and, indeed, the trajectory moves gradually toward the vertical axis, where society’s power against the state reaches a minimum. These dynamics are reminiscent of a simplified version of Chinese political history since the Qin dynasty of the 3rd century BCE (Acemođlu and Robinson 2019, chap. 7), where state, bureaucratic, and elite powers have typically been much greater and have consistently undercut society’s organization and political participation.

This is a situation of imbalance, but it isn’t the only one. Its polar opposite, the “Absent Leviathan,” is where the state and its institutions are weak and society’s traditions and norm-based organization are relatively strong. This configuration impedes the development of political hierarchy, a precondition for the emergence and evolution of state institutions. Even when states appear, they are weak and, in fact, often absent from large parts of the territory they are supposed to control. A contemporary example is Lebanon where, in the face of resistance from distinct religious communities, the state has repeatedly proven to be incapable of fulfilling even basic public services, such as law enforce-

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ment, refuse collection, and economic management. In the Absent Leviathan (p. xix) region, the dynamics are toward further state weakness for reasons discussed in detail in Acemoğlu and Robinson (2019).

More interesting is the region in the middle, the narrow corridor. This corridor is defined by a balance of power between state and society. The trajectories in this region look very different from those outside of it. While those outside involve one side ultimately becoming stronger at the expense of the other, inside the corridor state and society can simultaneously gain capacity and strength. This is, we argue, because of what we refer to as the “Red Queen dynamics,” with analogy to Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*: state and society have to run together and build additional capacity in order to keep up with each other. For example, as the state takes up more domestic or international responsibilities, society has to increase its ability to monitor and contend with the state and the elites. The Red Queen dynamics are the foundation of a different type of state and a different nature of political power; and we label it the “Shackled Leviathan” to capture the notion that the state is still strong, but it is monitored, tethered, and controlled by society and ultimately by democratic institutions.

The heart of our theory, and the driving force behind the Red Queen effect, is that true democratic participation and liberty, as well as economic incentives encouraging innovation and experimentation, can only flourish within the corridor. The corridor itself, though precarious at the best of times, can be bolstered by societal mobilization and participation. Institutions matter, but a cleverly designed constitution or the right set of institutions is never sufficient to protect the corridor, nor is it a true bulwark against threats to democracy. Put simply, democracy is seldom given to the people; it is often taken and almost always in need of defense by the people via collective action.

In *The Narrow Corridor*, we trace the history of many historical polities via these trajectories and explain what sorts of events can place a society inside or outside the corridor and, even more importantly, how the borders that define the narrow corridor are determined by economic, social, international, and historical factors.

Conceptualized in this way, Turkey’s problem, as different from countries without strong statehood, is one of failure to reach and enter the corridor—one of perennial societal weakness and overbearing strength of state and its elites. Yet this observation, rather than answering the fundamental questions about the roots of Turkish political underdevelopment, begs several more.

1. Turkey’s path of development looks nothing like those of archetypal examples of Despot Leviathans such as China or Russia. Why is that?
2. Though imperfect and often prone to meddling by an overeager military, Turkey has been a republic since 1923 and has reverted back to electoral politics quickly even following military coups. Why hasn’t this history of democratic politics led to the emergence of civil society organizations and greater societal mobilization?
3. Is the problem of Turkish democracy one of political institutions or political culture?

(p. xx) 4. Why have significant challenges to the system, especially over the last since 1980, come from political Islamic movements rather than any type of social democratic or non-religious populist movement?

5. And finally, is any of this related to post-Ottoman Turkey's efforts to build a nation?

Several insightful chapters in this volume shed light on aspects of some of these questions, and in the spirit of raising even more questions rather than providing definitive answers, I will now speculate on some potential ideas that go in a somewhat different direction from those typically emphasized in the literature on Turkish politics, including the chapters in this *Handbook*.

### A Limited Despotic Leviathan

The conceptual framework summarized in Figure 1 needs to be extended to do justice to the complexity of a case like Turkey because though society has remained perennially weak and the state dominant, Turkish political dynamics have neither been completely insulated from civil society activism nor taken the republic's politics back to the same extent as hierarchical control by state elites that could be seen in parts of Anatolia and the Balkans in the heyday of the Ottoman Empire (though this is not to deny that in much of the periphery of the empire, the Ottoman state was mostly absent; see, for example, Owen 2013). Even President Erdoğan, who has centralized powers in his hands and undercut all sources of autonomous checks on his and his cronies' machinations, does not see himself as capable of turning his back on electoral politics and had to admit defeat in the second election for Istanbul's municipal government in 2019 (after he forced the annulment of the results of the first, arguing without compelling evidence that there were systematic irregularities).

Extending the framework for these more nuanced cases is a task we take up in the second part of *The Narrow Corridor*. Focusing on cases from Latin America and Africa, we propose the notion of the "Paper Leviathan," where the state is too disorganized to dominate society, even though society itself remains weak. Though there are echoes of this in Turkey as well, it would be incorrect to view the Turkish state as a Paper Leviathan. The Paper Leviathan is a (mostly) stable configuration of politics at the bottom right, as shown in Figure 1, while the Turkish case can be conceptualized as a configuration on the left middle—a fairly strong state, a historical legacy since Ottoman times, that is not pulling away too far from the corridor. Why is that? Why haven't elites ever completely disregarded electoral democracy in Turkey?

### Top-Down Democracy

I believe that clues about these questions come from the answer to the second broad area I have highlighted. It has much to do with the fact that Turkish electoral democracy has

(p. xxi) not unleashed the same participatory political dynamics as many other democracies in Europe, Latin America, and even Africa have done; and this is no accident. It was by design. It is mostly because it was an elite-organized affair, imposed on society rather

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than originating from society's demands. In these arguments, the reader may see traces of the framework introduced in my first book with James Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Acemoğlu and Robinson 2006). The central tenet of our theory in that book is that participatory democracy emerges out of the demands of non-elites, typically excluded from power. Though as Stein Rokkan recognized long ago, elites can sometimes manipulate the form of democracy in a way to restrict non-elites' political power, this path to democratization typically involves a significant redistribution of political power away from elites (Flora, Kuhnle, and Urwin 1999; see also Acemoğlu, Ticchi, and Vindigni 2011; Acemoğlu and Robinson 2008). The strengthening and emboldening of society is often a direct consequence of this process. Yet this never happened in Turkey. In fact, the subsequent path of political development may have been significantly hampered by the way in which the republican form of government was introduced in Turkey in 1923 and the political blueprint used by the leading cadres (going back to the repressive, top-down style of the Committee of Union and Progress, from whose ranks came almost all founders of the Turkish Republic; see the chapter by Öktem in this volume). It wasn't only that declaring Turkey a republic made future political demands for democracy moot but also that republican state-building efforts further strengthened the state and enabled it to broaden its reach throughout the territories now controlled by the new republic.

In this way, Turkey could be given as an example of where the dynamics of the Despotic Leviathan do not completely debilitate society, and democratic electoral institutions have managed to survive and have had some restraining influence over the elites; but this has happened within a political equilibrium in which the state and the elites that control it are still dominant over society. The recent period of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) rule has been no exception, even if the identity of the elites benefiting most from this equilibrium has changed.

### A Clientelistic Political Culture?

What about culture? I want to argue that Turkey's political problems cannot be understood without a serious look at the country's political culture. By this, however, I do not mean that there is a clearly defined Turkish culture that is inimical to democratic participation. Nor do I appeal to some simplistic notion of everlasting Islamic culture as a barrier to democratic politics. Rather, as explored in detail in Acemoğlu and Robinson (2021), it would be most fruitful to view culture as co-evolving with politics; but once this evolution starts, political culture itself becomes a powerful constraint on the nature of political engagement.

The framework in Acemoğlu and Robinson (2021) starts from the observation that no human society possesses an unambiguous and unchanging cultural structure. Rather, (p. xxii) different human communities have a reservoir of "attributes," which can be gelled in distinct ways to create different underpinnings of political and social behaviors. However, the set of attributes is not completely flexible; and especially in cases where these attributes are very specific and "embedded" into a particular way of life or a particular

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set of political, economic, and social exigencies, the resulting political culture may lack sufficient flexibility to adapt to changes, which may preclude certain political trajectories.

I believe this perspective provides insights that could be useful for understanding the evolution of political culture in Turkey. The traditional models of social relations that have defined Ottoman and then Turkish politics have been based on a rather hierarchical structure, a premodern version of patron-client relations, where those who are higher up in the hierarchy command respect as patron and maintain this position by exchanging favors and providing personalistic services to those who are subservient to them. It is easy to see how such a political culture can be supported on the basis of traditional family values, prevalent not just in Anatolian society but in many different parts of the world where collectivist traditions have powerfully persisted.

This clientelistic political culture is not unbreakable since the set of attributes that sustain it are quite varied and can be combined to support myriad behaviors. All the same, it is remarkable how common it is, not just in national politics but also within Turkish parties and political movements (including parties and movements of the left), in academic organizations, and in businesses. This culture has arguably made it harder for society to take a unified position in politics, for example, for clamping down on corruption and excessive state power, in the same way that James Robinson and I have argued that the caste system has done for Indian democracy (Acemoğlu and Robinson 2019, chap. 8). In both cases, society's internal divisions have made collective action and bottom-up participation in politics more difficult and democracy much less stable and effective.

### The Challenge of Political Islam

The fourth topic is the role of Islam in Turkish politics. There are many intriguing issues here. A striking one, also noted in several chapters of this volume, is that some of the most reformist or even revolutionary political movements in post-1980 Turkey have come from the Islamic side, and the early AKP can be counted within their ranks (see the chapter by Çınar in this volume). How could this be despite the fact that Islamist movements have not been outsiders to power as they have often had a voice within the system and they are, at least on the surface, unlikely to be standard bearers of civil society organizations or to have clear incentives for moving the country into the corridor?

I don't know the answers to these challenging questions, but I suspect they are related to the discussion of the role of Islam in Saudi Arabia and more broadly Middle Eastern politics in Acemoğlu and Robinson (2019, chap. 12), which itself partly draws from Plateau (2017).

**(p. xxiii)** Briefly, the argument is that despotic governments in the Middle East were able to use religion and religious scholars instrumentally in order to solidify their reign. This capture had at least two facets. First, rulers utilized Islamic principles to justify their control of politics. Second, and more importantly, they also used Islam and the authority of regime-friendly clerics and scholars to shut off avenues for non-Islamic civil society action. This strategy was effective but couldn't completely seal off the regime against any

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opposition. What it implied, however, was that the path of least resistance for opposition movements was to claim to be even more (and more truly) Islamic than the regime—a dynamic which Plateau calls “obscurantist.” In Acemoğlu and Robinson (2019, 378–384), we also discuss why certain features of Islam’s political teachings such as the role of women in society, may have facilitated this equilibrium, though of course the main contributing element is the non-representative and despotic governments in the Middle East.

Some of these Middle Eastern strategies were used in the Ottoman Empire, and even if the Turkish Republic was established on a secular platform, its elites also attempted to manipulate Islam, especially with the advent of the 1980 coup, and soon turned it into another weapon in their efforts to control society. This created yet another fertile environment for obscurantism: the early repression of the religious segments of Turkish society and the avowed secularist nature of the Turkish state became a source of grievance among many religious Turks, and the use of Islam to express such grievances created ample opportunities for political Islam to resurface in Turkish politics in different forms. It was these grievances that were voiced and later exploited by the AKP so successfully.

### The Vestiges of Nation-Building

Turkey’s history is also complicated by the difficult process of turning a multi-ethnic empire into a national republic. This is a process with parallels to those that transpired in Austria-Hungary and Russia, albeit via very different trajectories and with varying degrees of success. The Ottoman Empire arguably went through a more violent and disruptive set of events during the critical period of nation-building, the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries, than Austria-Hungary and even Russia. This was partly because of the many severe military defeats it suffered, but even more importantly, it was because Turkish nation-building was led by a top-down, nationalistic band of military officers who soon decided that ethnic cleansing (primarily of Armenians and Greeks), or at the very least severe repression of all non-Turkish ethnicities (including the Kurds), was the only way of forging a modern nation-state.

This fraught process not only created a highly non-participatory beginning to the Republic (perhaps as much as half of the population being viewed as the “other” to be assimilated into the dominant ethnic identity and, when they resisted assimilation, perceived as the enemy). It was also that the continued presence of multiple ethnicities (p. xxiv) in the Republic’s territories became another axis of division within society and almost redline in its domestic politics, similar to the role that Islam came to play.

All of this created a double whammy for the emergence of broad-based societal participation. First, the religious and ethnic fault lines endured, and the better-organized Islamist and nationalist elements were at the forefront of making demands from the state. This implied that, paradoxically, many bottom-up demands came from groups whose agenda was inimical to both broad-based political participation and democratic politics. Second, any social democratic or non-elite movement was immediately countered by the accusation

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that it was trying to, or at the very least it would inadvertently, undermine the national unity of the Republic or its religious bedrock.

## Concluding Remarks

Since the ideas I have proposed here are not tried and tested and come from somebody who is not an expert on Turkish history or politics, they have to be taken as mere hypotheses to be investigated or rebutted if they happen to contradict other relevant facts. Because they are not yet tried and tested, it would be premature to base any perspectives for the future on them. Nevertheless, to the extent that they have some validity, they would suggest that multi-pronged changes are necessary for Turkey to establish true participatory democracy (which is important not just for its political development but also because Turkey's democratic retardation is keeping its economy less developed and less productive (see Acemoğlu and Üçer 2020, on Turkey, and Acemoğlu et al. 2019, on cross-country evidence of the effects of democracy on economic growth)).

Turkey would need to strengthen and rebuild its civil society, media, and democratic institutions; but as the framework I have borrowed from Acemoğlu and Robinson (2019) emphasizes, none of this is likely to be achieved without society's emboldened participation in politics, which requires a change in political culture and norms. Put simply, Turkish society has to start showing less respect for authority and hierarchy in order to be able to plow through the sand barriers that have for so long stood in the way of democracy. It is also important that the litmus tests created in Turkish politics by religion, nationalism, and the questions of ethnicity are removed because they contribute to societal divisions, make collective action and democratic participation more difficult, and ultimately keep Turkey away from the corridor.

Alas, none of this is easy to do. Yet, despite all of these problems, Figure 1 suggests that Turkey is not very far from the corridor and that Turkish society is not completely powerless, as ongoing forms of civil society activism in the country demonstrate. Whether the right coalitions can be built on these foundations will be defining for the near-term future of Turkish democracy.

## (p. xxv) Acknowledgments

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