



Securitization and Authoritarianism

The AKP's Oppression of
Dissident Groups in Turkey

Ihsan Yilmaz · Erdoan Shipoli
Mustafa Demir

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Autocratic Survival and Securitization

INTRODUCTION

Autocratic survival is complex, and authoritarian regimes use multiple, non-exclusive survival strategies. Why and how autocracies remain stable have been two of the main questions in research on authoritarianism. In addressing these questions, the literature, based on empirical studies, identifies legitimacy, repression, and co-optation as three tools that authoritarian regimes use to secure their continuing rule (Gerschewski 2013). Coercive capacity is central to authoritarian resilience, and the greater a regime's capacity to prevent or crack down on opposition activity, the greater its prospects for survival. Securitization is one of the instruments that the authoritarians use to repress the opposition.

Securitization is a speech act, which politicians use to construct an issue as a 'high-politics' issue that can only be understood by the elite, not the masses, thus it is above politics. The issue also needs the politicians' immediate attention and expertise to use any means possible to deal with that issue. Political elites sometimes use the tool of securitization to convince the public when they want to resort to extraordinary measures, by arguing that there is an existential threat to the community, nation, or the state, known as the referent objects in the securitization theory. In this narrative, only coercive, repressive, and extraordinary measures will suffice to deal with the threat(s) and to secure the referent object. By uttering the word 'security', a ruler claims a special right to use whatever

means are necessary to prevent the threat. Sometimes, the word security is substituted with nation, motherland, threat, defence, or similar words. In the case of Turkey, these words can be ‘nation’, ‘state’, ‘religion’, which are always associated with security, and security threats from ‘the foreign powers’, ‘the domestic collaborators’, ‘the Sevres treaty’ keywords but not limited to them (see in detail Yilmaz 2021). These and similar keywords such as ‘Allah,’ ‘Islam,’ ‘Ummah’ and ‘the Muslim World’ are embedded in peoples’ minds with security issues. The issues may or may not correspond to a real security situation, but that becomes secondary to the securitization of that particular issue through speech(es). As a result, not only is the realm of possible threats or insecurity enlarged, but so are the threatened actors or objects. Thus, the security issues, actors, and objects can be extended to include actors and objects well beyond the military security.

Securitization has always been an important tool in Turkish politics. Since the establishment of the republic, securitization has been an important piece of the political narrative. The fear that Turkey would be divided by the Great Powers along ethnic lines, similar to the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire, are founding insecurities, fears, anxieties, and siege mentality that informed the nation-building policies at the birth of the Turkish Republic in 1923 (Yilmaz and Shipoli 2022).

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has used securitization since the beginning of his political career. Starting with securitizing the Turkish conservative mindset against the establishing pro-Western secular nationalist elite of the republic, today his main concern is to convince his supporters that if he doesn’t win elections there will be an existential threat to Turkey, Turks, Islam and the Muslim World. Erdoğan is no stranger to de-securitization when he tried to win the hearts and minds of Kurds (Yilmaz et al. 2021) and Alevis (Yilmaz and Barry 2020), and re-securitization when that strategy didn’t work (Yilmaz et al. 2022). Since his political inception, Erdoğan uses instruments of historical trauma, conspiracy theories, and fear to securitize political issues to ensure his political survival. In his road to authoritarianism Erdoğan has put together a clear synthesis of securitization and authoritarianism, the former being a tool for the latter.

This study contributes to securitization theory by shedding light on the effect of these instruments, namely traumas, conspiracy theories, and fear, in the securitization process, in legitimizing securitization, and the role of the functional actors. This book also contributes to the extant literature

on Turkey's authoritarianization under the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—Justice and Development Party), through the lens of securitization and exploitation of past traumas, fears, and conspiracy theories. Second, in an attempt to provide a holistic picture, it analyses how the AKP has securitized, de-securitized and re-securitized different socio-political groups and identities in Turkey, according to the time and need for its political survival.

AUTOCRATIC SURVIVAL

There is considerable research on the tools that autocracies use to remain secure and stable internally. Having examined many empirical cases, the literature highlights that they use certain strategies to maintain their hold on power (Maerz 2020). The available literature mainly refers to three instruments, utilized by autocracies in maintaining stability: legitimacy, repression, and co-optation (Gerschewski 2013; Schneider and Maerz 2017).

Scholars stress on coercive capacity of the autocratic regimes, “the greater a regime’s capacity to prevent or crack down on opposition activity, the greater its prospects for survival” (Yilmaz et al. 2022, 3). However, it is an empirical fact that building stability on solely repressive policies would be very costly. Therefore, holding power would require further efforts to legitimize practising it. Legitimacy, for autocrats, is about converting their power into the right to rule. Because strength is a temporal phenomenon and is not enough to hold, keep, and wield power permanently.

That is why after grasping power, autocratic regimes offer decreased repression in exchange of political support and maintain the public/majority’s consent. Because such regimes need political support of the citizens to reduce the threats such as political plots, military coups, and violent rebellions against their rules (Magaloni 2008, 728; von Soest and Grauvogel 2017, 288).

At this stage the most relevant issue is the source of legitimacy. Many contemporary autocracies, for instance, see winning elections as the main source of legitimacy to rule over the people and the state (Gandhi 2015; Saikkonen 2017; Kneuer 2017). For such regimes, elections are means to capture the state and the society rather than a means of democracy. Thus, for them winning elections is crucial at any cost. They are ready to

employ any means, legal or illegal, to win elections or silence the opposition when they are in the government and can use government resources for their party needs (Cheeseman and Klaas 2018; Harvey and Mukherjee 2018). Because, losing an election is a great sign of weakness for an electoral authoritarian regime, especially for its self-interested supporters and partners. Thus, such a regime cannot afford to lose an election and will do anything to prevent failure.

Another strategy practised by autocratic regimes to survive is co-optation, which is based on mutual benefits between the power holders and influential figures among the elites, especially within the opposition (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006). Compared to its alternatives, such as threats or crack downs, co-optation is highly cost effective in consolidation of power and legitimizing authoritarian actions (Geddes 1999; Boix and Svobik 2013; Pepinsky 2014). Thus, it might be seen as a way of legitimizing holding and wielding the power. Co-optation is “the [ability and] capacity to [buy the loyalty of] tie strategically relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite” (Gerschewski 2013, 22). Different strategies and techniques are used in co-optation processes that require further research. However, we leave this gap for some future research. Briefly, co-optation is a process, which is run by the authoritarian elite to integrate/buy loyalty from politicians (Buehler 2015, 367) or influential public figures. Efforts of co-optation can also be interpreted as a sign of authoritarianization in a relatively democratic setting. This means that in a democratic polity, the ruling elite resorts to co-optation as an intention to further consolidate their power and invoke authoritarian measures.

This process is not limited to influential figures. Sometimes a powerful group might need to support a relatively less powerful but influential group. In doing so, they sometimes might need to compromise their ideological manifestation or provide some benefit to appeal to their support (Piven and Cloward 1977, 30). When the process is completed, the theory argues that the co-opted small partner will gradually be absorbed and the co-opting force will have painted the small partner with its colour, ideology-wise (Holdo 2019, 444).

However, there might be some exceptions. For example, in Turkey during the 2015 elections, it was not the smaller nationalist party; but the powerful ruling party that changed its ideological stance on some sensitive issues such as the Kurdish question. In other words, ideologically, the ruling party shifted towards a more nationalist tone, setting a

more conducive environment to be able to co-opt the smaller nationalist far right Nationalist Action Party (Yilmaz et al. 2021). In doing so what we have observed was that securitization has been the key instrument both in co-optation of the nationalist party and in legitimation of a nationalist tone in the eye of the ruling party's traditional support base. The extant research fails to report this aspect of co-optation, which is an ideological shift of the ruling party towards the smaller party, and the use of securitization in co-optation. At the same time, this might reveal the populist nature (Yilmaz 2018) of the larger ruling partner. Seeking an electoral populist opportunity in adopting the new narrative of the small partner can motivate the big partner to operate the co-optation process unorthodoxically. Relying on empirical data, the book highlights that both securitization and de-securitization can be used for co-optation.

Securitization has been an indispensable instrument in Turkish politics. Erdoğan has successfully securitized the possibility of losing elections, which means he persuaded his followers that his loss of elections will create an existential threat to Muslim Turks, Turkey, Islam and the Muslim World. However, at the beginning of this political career he used the opposite, de-securitization, in gaining the hearts and minds of masses in his ascend into power in the face of the staunch opposition from the Kemalist military tutelage. In the early 2000s to win the votes of liberal leftists, Kurds, and Alevis he used de-securitization and when he needed the support of nationalists and Islamists, he re-securitized the Kurds and Alevis with the help of conspiracies, national traumas, and fear. In doing so this research also offers new insights into the theory of securitization in relation to the strategies utilized to legitimize acts of securitization.

Another contribution of this research is to the scholarship on autocratization of the AKP regime. This contribution is twofold. First it examines how securitization has been employed as a strategy in the process of authoritarianization, second it looks at how securitization is utilized to eliminate AKP's socio-political opposition.

On this matter, there is a need for an introduction of what securitization is, its building blocks, and the process.

SECURITIZATION

According to the theory of securitization, security is seen as a rhetoric, an act of speech (Buzan et al. 1998; Waever 1995; Buzan and Waver 2003, 2009) rather than a commodity. It is a consequence of a process rather

than a product or a status. In the hands of incumbents, it's a way of persuading the masses about the use of exceptional measures on certain issues by referring to existential threats to the referent objects such as the nation, the state, or the community.

In the process of securitization, the ruling incumbents draw a picture of a state of emergency using words. In doing so, they aim to 'egitimize and claim the use of any sort of measures including extra-legal measures (exceptional/security/military) in dealing with the highlighted existential threat, which can be real, exaggerated, or imagined (Waever 1995, 55; Buzan et al. 1998, 26). The meaning attributed to the security is quite important as well. It sometimes means the security of the state, nation, official religion, or culture. These issues are securitized by the words of securitizing actors who are influential political or bureaucratic figures, depending on the audience. Using security words, they sometimes construct exaggerated, and even imagined, existential enemies threatening the security of the nation, the motherland, or any other referent objects that are seen invaluable by the audience, the people. Therefore, the security issues "can be extended to include actors and objects well beyond the military security of the territorial state" (Williams 2003, 513).

The theory of securitization has been first introduced in the 1990s with a narrow scope. As a theory it has mainly been used in Eurocentric analysis. However, over the last decade it has been further developed, its scope has been enlarged and used in various cases across the globe and its philosophical dimension is further deepened and strengthened. One commonly debated issue in securitization is the actors of securitization, such as who the audience is and who the securitizing actors are. Traditionally, the political elite have the power to securitize an issue and persuade the audience, which in traditional securitization theory are usually the people. Through feelings, needs, insecurities, and interests, the political elite tries to get a consent, usually silent, to use extraordinary means to tackle a political or a security issue (Balzacq 2011a, 9; b, 34; Adamides 2020). However, in the recent literature we can see more focus on the 'functional actors' (Floyd 2020) who have been neglected so far, but who have the power to veto the use of extraordinary means, or who can counter-securitize. They could be experts, academics, and other political parties in a country. These functional actors can be used as allies to securitize an issue. Sometimes they need to be pursued to come on board, so they are considered as an audience. In some cases, the role of the securitizing actor is claimed by actors that have not been assigned that

role in the first place, but through speech act and mobilization they can claim that authority (Philipsen 2018; Balzacq 2019). We will show in our empirical section that this is the way that co-optation of MHP and AKP worked, where the AKP has shared the authority of securitization with MHP so they can securitize political issues together and separately.

Usually, the grievances of domestic groups, such as minorities, are framed as the conspiracies of an enemy state or states and are claimed to pose a clear and present threat to the nation, its identity, economy, or the state's security and territorial integrity. Thus, the grievances, demands, and identities of these minority groups are constructed as being beyond political deliberation and processes (Williams 2003). After these issues are set in the agenda and the audience has accepted them as issues of existential importance, the security actors build coalitions that will help them broaden the concern about the issue among different audiences (Leonard and Kaunert 2011, 67) and political supporters (Balzacq 2005; Roe 2008).

De-securitization, on the other hand, is described as the shifting of issues out of emergency mode into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere. In other words, de-securitization is the reverse process of securitization that shifts the securitized issue out of emergency (Emmers 2007, 111) and broadens the boundaries of politics. Contrary to securitization, the objective of de-securitization is to remove certain issues from the security agenda (Buzan et al. 1998, 4). Sometimes the lack of securitizing speech acts alone can suffice for de-securitization (Behnke 2006). When de-securitization is employed, political issues become decoupled from the imagined or real agendas of security actors, permitting political discussion in the public sphere. Thus, issues that were previously considered taboo “are shorn of their existential character and acquire legitimacy, enabling them to be addressed and debated through ‘normal’ political processes” (Weiss 2016, 569–570). Normalization of strained relations between antagonistic countries, recognition of ethnic minority rights after civil war or terrorism, and normalization of a group, such as immigrants that were previously constructed as threats, are some examples of de-securitization (Hansen 2011).

However, de-securitization is often more difficult than securitization (Shipoli 2018). Although there is a big theoretical debate about the process of both securitization and de-securitization (Balzacq 2019; Baysal 2020; Tulumello 2020, 6), there is an agreement that securitized actors need to have a ‘counter-securitization move’ to be able to de-securitize

themselves and their causes (Shipoli 2010; Jamal 2020; Paterson and Karyotis 2020).

In the Turkish case, as mentioned-above, fearing that Turkey would be divided by the Great Powers along ethnic lines are founding insecurities, fears, anxieties, and siege mentality that informed the nation-building policies at the birth of the Turkish Republic in 1923 (Yilmaz 2021; Yilmaz and Shipoli 2022). The Turkish political elite (the Kemalists) tried to homogenize the nation and undertook a ‘Turkification’ project as part of its ‘modernization’ (Jongerden 2007, 213). Kurdish identity was constructed as an existential threat to the Turkish national identity, the territorial integrity of the state, and the homogenous nation myth (Bilgin 2008, 593). Turkey’s domestic collaborators or internal enemies are defined widely as any group not among the designated desired citizens (Yilmaz and Barry 2020; Yilmaz et al. 2021). Thus, they could be non-Muslim minorities, Kurdish political movement members, and heterodox Muslims such as Alevis or, more recently, Gülenists. As a result, Kurdish identity was securitized after the establishment of the Turkish nation state, which aimed at homogenization of the population to prevent foreign interference (Birdisli 2014; Romano and Gürses 2014; Geri 2017; Martin 2018; Ozpek 2019). This has resulted in several Kurdish insurgencies, revolts, and terrorist organizations, which in turn have been used by the state to justify its securitization of the Kurdish identity. Just after its establishment in 2001, the AKP promised to break this vicious cycle by undertaking pro-EU and multicultural democratizing reforms that would de-securitize not only the Kurdish issue but also the Alevi issue, non-Muslim issue, Islamist issue and so on. As a result, the AKP came to power in November 2002, after receiving strong support from the anti-Kemalist groups and minorities that were locked in the realm of security and suffering from the state’s injustices and victimizations. However, once they consolidated the power, the AKP used the old method of securitizing minorities and constructing threats to further their authoritarian regime stability.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book starts with an introductory chapter introducing the issue that it is tackling: the use of securitization in authoritarian stability, through the case of AKP regime of Turkey. Chapter 2 sets the theoretical background of the book, the latest literature and development on the theory, its

expansion and where it is heading. The third chapter analyses the culture of securitization in Turkey, how it has been historically employed, and how it is used today for the authoritarian grip of power by the governing Islamist–nationalist coalition. Fears, insecurities, and conspiracy theories are of utmost importance when analysing the securitization of different groups at different times in Turkey, so much emphasis has been given to them.

In the following four chapters we separately analyse the securitisation of four groups: (a) Kemalists, White Turks, and Leftists; (b) Islamic groups and parties; (c) Kurds; and (d) Alevis. Why we categorized them as such is because of the way they are being ‘handled’ by the AKP government and how they have been ‘served’ to their constituencies. For the AKP’s Islamist base, the Kemalist, the White Turks, and the Leftists represented the rich pro-Western establishment and were not representative of the Turkish people. They were to blame for gatekeeping government positions, businesses, and the resources of Turkey from the general public. In this narrative, they were also co-conspirators of the Western hegemony in Turkey and did not want Turkey to remain religious. The dissident Islamic groups and parties are labelled as traitors who colluded with other groups to sell out their ‘cause’ (Yilmaz 2022; Yilmaz et al. 2020). In the securitized environment it becomes sufficient to leave the ‘herd’ without even criticizing them to be called a security threat. Moreover, if an old partner doesn’t support all the policies of the securitizing actors, then they have committed some sort of ‘blasphemy’ and they become even worse than the worse enemy. That is the case of AKP’s dissident Islamic groups, including the Gülen Movement, Furkan Vakfi, and new parties by former AKP leaders. The Kurds were always the ‘usual suspects’ in Turkey when it came to securitization. Why we focused on dissident Kurds in particular is because for AKP and Erdoğan, Kurds that vote for them are good and need to be de-securitized, but when they don’t vote for the AKP then they are re-securitized. As far as Alevis are concerned, like the Kurds, they are the usual suspects of securitization in Turkey. Moreover, they are labelled as the ones who have committed blasphemy, have left Islam, and have established an unclean version of Islam, colluding with foreign powers.

After analysing the securitization of opposition groups in Turkey, we conclude with a simple question: why? In the conclusion we analyse what

were the ‘fruits’ of securitization for the AKP and Erdoğan. Securitization is done for a purpose and then extended. That is what happened in Turkey, which brought an authoritarian power grip for Erdoğan.

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