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Electoral Integrity in Turkey by Emre Toros

Scholarly debate on the subject has considered elections as being central to making descriptions of whether it is states that unfold democratic practices, and how the regularization of elections determines the rules of the game. The literature displays categorizations of regime types, and demonstrates how the definition of democracy itself relies on ambiguity; particular labels, such as illiberal democracy, competitive authoritarianism, semi-democracies, defective democracies or electoral democracies, are more commonly used in covering institutional frameworks within different contexts. Przeworski's (1991) well-known perspective states that "Democracy is a system in which parties lose elections," which can be seen through the examples provided: ex-ante uncertainty, ex-post irreversibility, and repeatability (Alvarez et al. 1996). According to this approach, one of the incumbents has to lose an election that provides a chance for the opposition; the winner should then assume office; and this change of office should not be instrumental in ending all competition. Although political participation and accountability in themselves signal contestation, democracy does not defer to narrower approaches. Instead, the democratic playing field compels the existence of fair conditions through opportunities, and total integrity. After many years, states experience democratic failures in political mobilization and inclusionary participation/representation. These uncertainties confront electoral processes with respect to campaigning, the conduct of polling day, and the aftermath, which influence polarization, political legitimacy, trust, and overall democratic governance.

In the book titled "*Electoral Integrity in Turkey*", Emre Toros meticulously scrutinizes the causes and consequences of the damaged electoral integrity in Turkey, which exists in what can be described as a grey-zone democracy. Defining Turkey's democratic position as an electoral authoritarian state, Toros analyzes the elections in Turkey since the 1940s, examining individual perceptions of electoral integrity, and the institutional drivers of damage to electoral integrity. The study also investigates how alternative cases, such as that of Turkey, have experiences in harmony with global liberal norms, using databases to make comparisons and conduct different methodologies. From this perspective, both individual and institutional levels form part of the analyses, presenting evidence of the consequences of such damage to electoral integrity.

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Chapter 2 demonstrates Turkey's electoral history, accompanied by its developments and challenges. The section has been divided into three periods, in order to illustrate the differing electoral dimensions: 1950-1970, 1970-1990, and 1990-2009. Toros seeks to emphasize the evolution of the electoral issues that the country has experienced, making an association with internal and external developments. In this sense, the study provides important evidence of how the context shapes electoral decisions and integrity in the Turkish case. In the first period (1950-1970), the transformation from the earlier democratic transition toward authoritarian rule through the establishment of the Turkish electoral management body, the Yüksek Seçim Kurulu (YSK), the change in the electoral system from majoritarian rule to the D'Hondt method, including the national remainder system of 1965, the revision of the law meaning emerging difficulties for candidacy, the disappearance of ballot boxes, and the rejection of the registration of opposition names are listed as signs of symbolic electoral violence. According to the author, clientelism in local elections enhances electoral violence and this led to polarization in the period. From a different angle, we can note that the existence of polarization may also cause clientelism issues when considering electoral strategies.

The second categorization (1970-1990) is a sort of indicator of the damage caused to the electoral integrity before the actual polling, through the campaign process and electoral regulations, for example, attacks against political party convoys, and changes in electoral thresholds. The thresholds, ranging from 14 to 50 percent, depending on the size of the constituency, are also among the instruments generating debatable electoral conditions, since the ruling elites' so-called desire for stability challenged the possibility of small parties' representation, or manifested the junta's confirmation of specifically chosen political parties, which all led to an uneven playing field. The debate here relates the linkage between participation and democratic transition, emphasizing its evident representative failures. As the study makes reference to the media, it can be argued that elites in power have greater advantages in terms of discursive opportunities that provide a positive image, by sending messages and relevant information to the audience. Apart from disproportionate airtime, the discussion on specific one-man or dominant media coverage is also a relevant instrument to enlighten the authenticity of the case. Therefore, a theoretical look at the "powerful ruling parties" seems complementary when evaluating Turkey as an alternative case, with its continuities. The period's more dominant issues are understood through campaigning, voting operations, the legal framework, registration, and verification of results, which instrumentalized assurances of political discourse; thus, the study allows us to investigate the question of how political campaigns have reproduced those issues and allowed for a polarizing political climate. The last period (1990-2009) embraces the polarization between the seculars and Islamists, paying attention to the Kurdish question. This perspective is a significant contribution to the study, because it stresses the impact of context, while at the same time not rejecting the fact that certain issues drive and frame singular events.

Chapter 3 pinpoints the last two decades, due to the overwhelming electoral integrity problems. To situate this within the country, electoral institutions and media structure, and

the depiction of the “troubled years (2009-2019)” have been reflected; additionally, this part compares Turkey with other countries with the highest credibility ratings for electoral integrity and consolidated democracies. According to Toros, the period between 2009 and 2019 covers issues in relation to campaigning, planning, voting operations and the verification of election results, through additional ballots, media censorship, state abuses, impartiality, violent physical attacks, law-based regulations, unstamped ballots, and limitations on the opposition that allow Turkey to be defined as a competitive authoritarian regime. Regarding the electoral integrity problems, Toros meaningfully associates damaging practices with institutional and structural sources, thus contributing to a holistic analysis. Both institutional and structural points underscore its “worst backsliding” position. As an impartial institution, the YSK does its best to determine investigations, make decisions concerning records, and ensure fruitful electoral conditions. Likewise, the media is portrayed as a source of information that shapes public perceptions, relying on access and usage. The provision of a Turkish media system which enables structural opportunities and restrictions on producing and receiving information might accomplish the portrait. In other words, the classification of the media system of Turkey could associate it with characteristics such as political parallelism and state intervention. Another point is related to perfectly given electoral malpractice experiences in the study; the definition of electoral integrity includes unbiased conditions, this allows to comprehend violent incidents, especially during the repeated elections of 2015. The bombing attacks or clashes indirectly shape the opposition’s mobilization space, they set constraints on equal and fair competition for the election campaign. Those conditions might not be directly linked to opposition representatives in the contextual analysis; rather, they emerge as narrative-based advantages for the ruling party’s discursive performance. Consequently, the instrumentalization of insecure conditions in the ruling party’s discursive mobilization is also vital for an understanding of regional aspects, whereas the state of emergency inevitably led to backsliding.

In the fourth chapter, Toros scrutinizes citizens’ perceptions of electoral integrity and demonstrates how their educational level, forms of media consumption, partisanship, and trust in media sources are highly significant factors. The findings address the fact that demographic features such as being female or having a lower income level lead to a perception of more problems in electoral integrity. Similarly, citizens who receive information from digital sources have negative perceptions compared to those who obtain information from television and radio. The findings reveal a pivotal dimension, transferring different perceptions between supporters of the ruling bloc (AKP and MHP) and the opposition (CHP and HDP), including Kurdish speakers. This unique aspect of the Turkish context contributes to the literature regarding polarization and perceptions of electoral integrity. The study underlines citizens’ perception of “(un)fair coverage” in the media; nevertheless, such conceptualization could be a portrayal of the mechanism itself, thus questioning whether the role of “echo chambers” from the polarization within the literature is self-explanatory; this discussion is visible in the 8th chapter, evaluating electoral expectations. Furthermore, a “willingness to access information,” which determines

the reception of reliable information, is not isolated from digital partisanship and echo chambers or cognitive dissonance; this not only refers to government manipulation or electoral strategies attempted by the opposition. Citizens' expectations and notions may derive from the role of information disorders (misinformation and disinformation); hence, perceptions of misleading content and its impact are another element. Toros's study gives an opportunity to consider different approaches and conceptual backgrounds, providing an extensive content.

The following section seeks to describe the relationship between perceptions of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) and electoral integrity. As the author mentions, EMBs function through democratic norms on paper; however, practices tend to vary; therefore, this analysis is a touchstone to propound case and issue-based differences. It is noted that if citizens evaluate organizations' acts impartially, they are more likely to address a low level of malpractice and a high level of electoral integrity. Cross-national analysis uncovers the association between electoral integrity and the perceived fairness of EMBs; similarly, if electoral malpractice increases, the perceived fairness of electoral officers declines. Again, both high income and educational levels lead to lower perceived fairness. Other attributes of democracy influence higher levels of perceived fairness. This raises the question of whether the connection between attributes of democracy and perceived fairness is related to context-specific evaluation or an evaluation of institutions' function in a democracy. In the Turkish context, the findings share differences through the non-significance of income, education, gender, and partisanship to perceived fairness.

To evaluate the consequences of electoral problems, the sixth chapter sheds light on citizens' perceptions, examining how their voting behavior is influenced. Toros focuses on the repeated local elections, which occurred in 2019. The local elections saw the YSK's decision in favor of the ruling party's demand, while recounting all votes in five districts plus the invalid ballot papers and blank votes in thirty-four other districts. The study argues that perceptions of the legitimacy of elections shape voters' decisions; hence, this hypothesis indicates that some AKP supporters thought that the YSK's decision had damaged the credibility of the elections (p.120). To test the hypothesis, a list experiment was generated, asking questions about media coverage, the production of information (and its form), the fairness of the campaign, and the YSK. In this sense, voters could select among various choices to determine the source of the (dis)integrity of the elections, which was not only associated with the YSK. This measured the situation perfectly. The findings supported the fact that AKP supporters perceived the YSK's decision to rerun the elections negatively. This reveals an important point, because the YSK retains its reputation as a "safe" institution of the ruling party. Accordingly, the perception of institutional credibility is stronger than partisanship in this case. The analysis provides fruitful scientific evidence for the common argument regarding the political change and positive developments for Turkish democracy after 2019. We can also think the fact that the increasing voting share of İmamoğlu in the second run is not entirely linked with perceptions over the (in)credibility of elections and EMBs. Rather, leader-based mobilization, an "alternative" type of inclusionary populist

discourse considering Turkey's polarized environment and economic crisis, and emotional reactions could be seen as factors.

For the purpose of a holistic argumentation, the next chapter presents the relationship between electoral integrity and democracy, concentrating on trust in government. Following the given literature, it is underlined that electoral services or expectations of electoral practices shape trust in government. Turkey has been eluded from cross-national analysis through partisanship, which constitutes a level of trust. In this way, Toros is able to support the argument that certain countries can be 'alternative' and 'authentic'. Moreover, the emphasis on "different understandings of trust among citizens" (p.136) and contextual dynamics are prominent elements. His findings allow us to discuss political efficacy and apathy in discovering case differences. Chapter 8 discusses the distance between voters' perceptions and electoral outcomes, stressing the concept of "surprised voters", and engaging in media consumption/trust and partisanship. Notions of democracy and governance rely on voters' outcomes (being winners or losers), and electoral expectations are determined through evaluations of electoral integrity that support their understanding of the democratic process. The last chapter indicates perceptions concerning policy proposals, such as postponement due to extraordinary circumstances, and the COVID-19 Pandemic. The analysis reveals that experts' recommendations and offers are more determining than those voiced by the opposition and government. However, the ruling party supporters approve of the government's proposals, which evidences the politicization of "neutral issues" through partisanship.

In conclusion, elections are designed with a vague condition so as to define regimes; on the other hand, electoral integrity draws a line between democratization and autocracy (Schedler 2006). The study exhibits remarkable evidence through diverse methodologies, covering different periods. Toros comprehensively scrutinizes Turkey's electoral integrity through historical evaluation, individual perceptions, institutional factors and the media environment, presenting a portrayal of polarization and democratic issues and providing inspiring reconstructive political recommendations.

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