



**Bilge Yesil.** *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016. 230 pp. \$28.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-08165-1.

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Starting with the landslide election victory of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) in 2002 and continuing well into the mid-2010s, Turkey was long portrayed in the West as a model for Middle Eastern countries, with its moderate Muslim outlook, EU membership candidacy, and integration with global capitalism. Yet, soon after the harsh government response to the Gezi protests of 2013, the illusionary allure of the AKP's "Turkish model" began to wane. As successive AKP governments adopt increasingly authoritarian and hardline policies, the "Turkish model" has almost entirely lost its allure as a model of democratization.[1] Instead, as the AKP strengthens its grip on the levers of power, we are witnessing the emergence of a form of governance that has been described as competitive authoritarianism[2] or as a weak authoritarian regime.[3] This emerging regime, which is commonly referred to as "New Turkey" (Yeni Türkiye) by pundits and critics alike, pushes forth a pious conservative, Islamist, and nationalist cultural agenda whilst maintaining a strictly neoliberal economic outlook.

Mass media is one of the battlegrounds where the transition into the emerging regime is most keenly felt. Often using a carrot and stick strategy to entice (or force) client corporations to buy broadcasting outlets and become media patrons,

the AKP has successfully consolidated its control over broadcasting and mass media.[4] While much has been written about both the consolidation and effects of AKP hegemony, it suffices to say that the contemporary mass media landscape is dominated by forces whose corporate interests are deeply vested in maintaining clientelist relationships with the AKP.[5] Within such a landscape, accumulating and preserving political capital has become a crucial factor in determining the future of a media organization.[6] This alliance between media patrons and the government has led to the almost total collapse of editorial independence, a decline in legal freedoms necessary for investigative journalism, and the intolerant persecution of dissent. Over the past decade, Turkey has steadily cruised toward the bottom of press freedom rankings published by organizations such as Reports without Borders and is currently the only European Union candidate country without a free press. Sadly enough, it has also become one of the countries with the highest number of imprisoned journalists, surpassing even China and Russia.

Within such a context, *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State* is an attempt to comprehend the trends that have contributed to the current state of mass media in Turkey. Relying on a perspective informed by the

political economy approach, Bilge Yeşil's book charts the historical evolution of media-military-state relationships in the post-1980 period, documenting how both economic and ideological challenges to hegemonic alliances governing the country have reshaped the media. As such, the first chapter of the book goes back to the early years of the Turkish Republic and provides a comprehensive overview of how Kemalist ideology, by severing all ties to the Ottoman past, managed to establish a statist, nationalist, and secularist media culture that lasted until the 1980s. Yeşil argues that state-owned radio and TV broadcasting was instrumentalized by the Kemalist tutelage to promote a secular-laicist Turkish national identity while systematically delegitimizing and ignoring ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities in Turkey.

The second chapter documents how the Turkish state, in the face of mounting economic debt during the 1980s, was forced into privatization and neoliberal restructuring of national industries. This resulted in broad investment in the telecommunications sector, the establishment of private radio and television channels during the 1990s, and the rise of commercial broadcasting. The third chapter provides a review of the turbulent 1990s, outlining how the Kemalist tutelage attempted to use the mass media to suppress Kurdish and Islamist challenges to the status quo. Yeşil suggests that during this decade, the Kurdish movement was perceived by the state as a threat to the unity of the nation-state while the Islamists were seen as a threat to the secularist order. The establishment of pro-Kurdish and Islamist broadcasting channels were vigorously suppressed and a nationalist-secularist discourse portraying "the Kurdish conflict and the rise of political Islam as threats to national unity and state survival" (p. 50) prevailed in both state and commercial broadcasting. Ultimately, the rise of political Islam during this period proved to be unassailable, with Islamist politic parties dominating Turkish politics from the mid-1990s onward. Escalating tension

between the Kemalist establishment and political Islam eventually culminated the 1997 "postmodern coup" wherein the military ousted the Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) from power.

The remaining three chapters in the book concentrate on the period from 2000 to 2015, describing the collapse of Kemalist tutelage and the meteoric rise of political Islam in the form of the AKP. The fourth chapter discusses how the consolidation of AKP hegemony is a product of "the tensions between globalization and statist dynamics as well as the AKP's consolidation of the authoritarian neoliberal order" (p. 72). Yeşil describes how, although the AKP came to power with the populist promise of change, the party eventually co-opted the authoritarian statist model it inherited from Kemalist tutelage to further its own agenda. The next chapter provides a detailed analysis of the strategies used by successive AKP governments to reshape "the media arena in Turkey between 2005 and 2013" (p. 105). Effects of AKP consolidation over the mass media include the intensification of political polarization, rampant cronyism, and a steep decline in press freedoms. The final chapter of the book evaluates the impact of the Gezi Park protests and 2013 corruption allegations on both mass and social media. The former event, Yeşil argues, established social media as an alternative to more conventional forms of broadcasting. In a situation wherein mass media deliberately chose not to provide live coverage of what was happening in Gezi Park, social media established its credentials as a viable resource for both information and mobilization. Later that year, social media (Twitter in particular) was used to release a spate of corruption allegations against the inner circle of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, his family, and AKP cabinet ministers. This, Yeşil argues, resulted in the state legislating a series of legal measures intended to eliminate potential threats from social media, resulting in the restriction of online media sites, imposition of media blackouts, and surveillance of online and offline private data.[7]

In short, Bilge Yeşil's book is a fantastic introduction for those wanting to develop an understanding of the complex relationship between politics, economics, and the media in contemporary Turkey. I strongly recommend this highly readable, well-researched book to both an academic and a lay audience.

#### Notes

[1]. Cihan Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism* (London: Verso, 2016).

[2]. Ergun Özbudun, "Turkey's Judiciary and the Drift Toward Competitive Authoritarianism," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 2 (2015): 42–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2015.1020651>; and Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1581–606, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1135732>.

[3]. Karabekir Akkoyunlu and Kerem Öktem, "Existential Insecurity and the Making of a Weak Authoritarian Regime in Turkey," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 505–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1253225>.

[4]. According to the 2018 annual report published by the Media Ownership Monitor (<https://turkey.mom-rsf.org/en/>), an organization supported by the international human rights organization Reporters without Borders, Bianet (Independent Communication Network), and the Federal German Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation, pro-government corporate mass media in Turkey commands access to around 45 percent of all audiences. Of the twenty-six national newspapers, eighteen are owned by corporations with close ties to the AKP. A very similar scenario holds valid for television channel ownership.

[5]. See, for example, Raşit Kaya and Barış Çakmur, "Politics and the Mass Media in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 4 (2010): 521–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2010.540112>; Banu Baybars-Hawks and Murat Akser, "Media and Democ-

racy in Turkey: Toward a Model of Neoliberal Media Autocracy," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5, no. 3 (2012): 302–21, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-00503011>; and Ivo Furman, Erkan Saka, Savaş Yıldırım, and Ece Elbeyi, "The Gulf Information War| News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis in the Turkish Mediascape: Agendas, Frames, and Manufacturing Consent," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 1340–67, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/8991>.

[6]. Asli Tunç, *Media Ownership and Finances in Turkey: Increasing Concentration and Clientelism* (Ljubljana: South East European Media Observatory, 2015), originally published on the Resource Centre for Media Freedom in Europe website, <https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Publications/Reports/Media-Ownership-and-Finances-in-Turkey-Increasing-Concentration-and-Clientelism>.

[7]. For a more detailed overview regarding the state of the internet in Turkey, see Bilge Yeşil, Efe Kerem Sözeri, and Emad Khazraee, "Turkey's Internet Policy after the Coup Attempt: The Emergence of a Distributed Network of Online Suppression and Surveillance," *Internet Policy Observatory* (February 28, 2017), <http://repository.upenn.edu/internetpolicyobservatory/22>.

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