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# **Personal Party: Erdoğan’s Consolidation of the AKP & Constraints of Elites in Turkey**

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## Abstract

*This paper demonstrates a political executive's emergence as a personalist leader within a political party through the bureaucratic means of influencing the duration of time in office of high-level cabinet elites that pose as competition and constraints to his leadership role. Due to the restrictions on a leader's decision-making and power from the effects of "institutionalization" among cabinet elites, a leader with the intentions of becoming a personalist leader may employ the strategy of rotating elites frequently to inhibit the process from developing and restraining their individual power. This research demonstrates the use of this rotating strategy during Erdoan's terms as leader of Turkey. An aspect of the Turkish president's incremental consolidation of power within the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been by decreasing the term duration of elites in the Turkish cabinet through frequently rotating these elites from high-level positions to the extent of breaking down institutionalization and aiding his emergence as a personalist leader. Remarkably, the successful implementation of the rotation strategy is uncommon in state systems with competitive elections. By observing the increasingly short duration of the terms of Turkish cabinet elites, an element in the process of Erdoan's personalization of power is displayed in a nominally democratic system. After establishing the importance of term duration of cabinet elites in constraining the power of a political leader, the paper examines the strategies used by President Erdoan, important selected cases of the theory, and concludes with the implications of a political leader moving cabinet elites to personalize power.*

## **I. Introduction**

How do personalist leaders emerge out of civilian systems with competitive elections? A leader consolidating power to become a personalist leader in such a system is unexpected and largely unusual in the contemporary international system. The literature surrounding personalist leaders takes into account the rise of these leaders within systems conventionally seen as susceptible to the emergence and rule of such a leader – post-colonial, totalitarian, single-party, or military juntas. Yet, the emergence of a personalist leader within a civilian system with foundational characteristics of a democracy such as competitive elections is rarely, if ever addressed.

Personalism, a political leader's personal control over a state's governing apparatus and political decision-making without concern of punishment from other elites, can give a better and more nuanced idea of who is in control of a state and likely policies that will be pursued. A personalist leader, one that exercises political power with no constraints on their decision-making, is important to differentiate from similar leaders. Other forms of authoritarian leaders similarly control significant decision-making power, but still face constraints from the political power of rival elites. In a one-party system, party elites continue to compete for leadership roles. In military juntas, officers collude to reach a consensus on a leader's transition to and from the top position. While in democratic systems, leaders are regularly voted into office by constituents. Personalist leaders do not face constraints in their decision-making nor intense competition for leadership from other governing elites that leaders of other systems do.

Has Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoan consolidated executive power within a civilian system with competitive elections to be correctly characterized as a personalist leader and by what means was this accomplished? Over the extent of his leadership, the Turkish president Erdoan has overseen a transition to a centralized presidential system and has

consolidated power within the AKP to become the only viable leader. The incremental emergence of Erdoğan as a personalist leader is uncharacteristic of the functioning of a system with multiple parties and competitive elections. These factors largely inhibit a leader from gaining personalistic power, which begs the question of how President Erdoğan was able to successfully concentrate political decision-making without contestation of other elites?

Recently, Professor Anne Meng has constructed a criteria for “institutionalization” – the process by which decision-making and state resources are distributed to elites through rules and procedures<sup>1</sup> – to measure the restraints imposed on a leader’s power by other elites in the ruling government, especially the bureaucracy. Without this process, elites are less able to constrain the decision-making of a leader. To break this process, a leader seeking to gain more personal political power may attempt to shorten the terms of other governing elites within the bureaucracy to inhibit the elite-constraining process of institutionalization. Through rotating cabinet elites in a way that limits the term duration in a position, a leader can consolidate personal power by weakening the relative power of elites and institutions to that of the leader and the autonomy of their decision-making. With frequent movement in the cabinet, such as consistently rotating elites holding leadership positions and sidelining elites with recognized personal credibility, a regime’s “institutionalization” in which other elites have a considerable base of power to check the leader can be substantially eroded. In the case of Turkey, Erdoğan has interrupted the institutionalization among elites within his cabinet to help enable him to concentrate power and become a personalist leader.

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<sup>1</sup> Meng, *Constraining Dictatorship*. 93.

The current Turkish government formulated by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP in the past two decades has defied the conventional procedures and governance of either a presidential or parliamentarian system with competitive elections. Erdoğan's consolidation of power that defines this period in Turkish politics is necessary to assess from the perspective of changes within the ruling party to truly understand the development of a personalist leader within a system of competitive elections and parties. Hybrid regime,<sup>2</sup> competitive authoritarian,<sup>3</sup> populist,<sup>4</sup> and other terms have become common in trying to decipher the changing governance of Turkey under President Erdoğan, yet these terms alone lack the specificity needed to capture the incremental transitions and changes to Turkey's executive institutions. Broader typologies that depict the entirety of a regime's governing apparatus face the issue of properly depicting the variance in each state. For typologies to accurately portray regimes and their transitions is theoretically difficult because of the divergence between each individual state and even the variance between authoritarian regimes and among democracies.<sup>5</sup> The variation and specificity to conditions in each state is noted by Barbara Geddes in that each regime, "...draw(s) on different groups to staff government offices and different segments of society for support... different procedures for making decisions, different ways of handling the choice of leaders and succession, and different ways of responding to society and opponents." (Geddes, 1999: 121)

However, "competitive authoritarianism" is relatively accurate in describing the overall political situation in which Turkey currently finds itself under Erdoğan. The literature on competitive authoritarianism — a system in which democratic institutions are used to obtain and

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<sup>2</sup> Cassani, "Hybrid What?"

<sup>3</sup> Çaliskan, "Toward a New Political Regime in Turkey"; Sarfati, "How Turkey's Slide to Authoritarianism Defies Modernization Theory."

<sup>4</sup> Castaldo, "Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey."

<sup>5</sup> Geddes, "What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?" 121.

exercise authority, but rules are violated to an extent that the regime fails to meet minimum requirements for a democracy (Levitsky and Way, 2002: 52) — describes political generalities in Erdoğan's Turkey. In addition to explaining regime behavior, Levitsky and Way (2002) outline how the “arenas” of democratic contestation – elections, legislature, judiciary, and media – are manipulated under these regimes (54-8), reminiscent of other political developments in Turkey’s non-executive institutions in recent decades. Still, the competitive authoritarian definition omits the importance of the leader personally concentrating power within the executive of a political system. Rather than add to the literature of attaching -isms to explain Erdoğan’s growing authoritarian rule, this research explains his incremental emergence as a personalist leader through constraints on cabinet-member elites within his government. By using Anne Meng’s indicators for regime institutionalism (Meng, 2020), this research demonstrates that Erdoğan has centralized enough power, primarily through the rotation and manipulation of political elites in his cabinets to be considered a personalist authoritarian leader.

Although a consolidation of power can be seen by Erdoğan’s actions in other government institutions, examining Erdoğan in the space of his own political machine, the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), demonstrates a more concise and accurate depiction of Erdoğan’s rise and maintenance of power in his emergence as a personalist leader. Within the dynamics between leadership and the cabinet in the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), a consolidation of power in Turkey’s delicate democracy can be demonstrated without the dramatic revolution that is traditionally expected in the descent into authoritarianism. With the contemporary example of the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, strategic rotating of cabinet elites has enabled him to consolidate power into a personalist leader in a perspective not often observed. As an aspect of the emergence of Erdoğan’s personalization of power within a nominally democratic

Turkish government, this research explores the incremental growth in the frequency of rotations of elites, which broke down institutionalization among elites in the cabinet and helped to enable Erdoğan's personalization of power throughout his time as Turkish Prime Minister (2003-'14) and President (2015-present).

### *Erdoğan & Turkish Politics*

Since the early 2010s, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has noticeably consolidated power in the Turkish government by the way of limiting the power and independence of political institutions and crushing dissent. After initially being seen as a progressive reformer during his first term (2003-2007), the Turkish government under Erdoğan began to transition to a political path away from political and economic liberalization and towards one of an authoritarian personalist leader. A gradual consolidation of power in the executive seats of government at the expense of other political institutions, coupled with a growing brutal suppression of protests and political opposition defined Turkish politics under Erdoğan since the late 2000's.

After a failed coup in 2016 against Erdoğan and the AKP, the regime has become further intolerant of popular opposition. Blamed on an opposition led by Gülenists, followers of a former ally of Erdoğan – cleric Fethullah Gülen – Erdoğan's government suppressed any potential further sources of opposition by jailing tens of thousands of alleged Gülenists, purging the government's military and bureaucracy, and heavily censoring media and academia.<sup>6</sup> The failed overthrow had also prompted Erdoğan to additionally consolidate power by pushing through a referendum changing the government from a parliamentary system to a strong-centralized presidential system. In ways, the failed coup strengthened Erdoğan's emerging cult of

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<sup>6</sup> Karaveli, "Erdogan's Journey," 121.

personality.<sup>7</sup> With the narrowly successful referendum, Erdoğan has been able to transition continuously through Turkey’s top political positions — Prime Minister (2003-’14) and President (2014-’16) during the Parliamentary system and then currently, again as President (2016-present) under a new centralized presidential system.

Moreover, Erdoğan has demonstrated governing characteristics of a personalist leader, such as solidifying himself as the strongman of a political party and the development of neo-patrimonial linkages. Turkey is not new to strongmen executives exerting their individual power over the state’s political system. Former leaders such as Süleyman Demirel, Bülent Ecevit, and Turgut Özal personally set the national agenda and controlled their respective political party; helping to establish a “leader-as-party-and-country” cult of personality as a tradition within the Turkish Republic’s political identity.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the Republic has struggled as an illiberal state since its founding with strong leaders dominating over a lack of intra-party cooperation.<sup>9</sup> However, not since the terms of Turkey’s founding father, Mustafa Kemal Ätaturk (r. 1923-’38) has Turkey seen a “chief executive” so willing to implement his visions through political domination.<sup>10</sup> Erdoğan’s emphasis on an “Alla Turca” system, modeled after the Turkish state’s predecessor Ottoman Empire, calls for enhancing the powers of the president at the expense of the prime minister and parliament.<sup>11</sup> As a result of advancing this centralized-executive system, the AKP has become an instrument for Erdoğan to consolidate political power. The party has been characterized as a medium for Erdoğan’s “hegemonic” leadership rather than an active

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<sup>7</sup> Günay and Dzihic, “Decoding the Authoritarian Code,” 543.

<sup>8</sup> Cizre, “Leadership Gone Awry,” 38.

<sup>9</sup> Karaveli, “Erdogan’s Journey,” 121; Görer and Ucal, “The Personality and Leadership Style of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,” 358.

<sup>10</sup> Cizre, “Leadership Gone Awry,” 38.

<sup>11</sup> Cizre, 38.

political party.<sup>12</sup> Both high-level elites and other party cadre within the AKP have had growing difficulty in exerting any power or function outside the authority of Erdoğan. With the exception of Bülent Arinç, members of the party have increasingly had to toe the line behind Erdoğan or leave the party.<sup>13</sup> Instead of a political institution, the AKP has been reduced to “a personal vehicle” for Erdogan to achieve his political ambitions.<sup>14</sup>

Common with other personalist regimes, a level of neo-patrimonialism has developed under Erdoğan’s leadership in Turkey. The AKP’s implementation of redistributive political policies, especially through infrastructure initiatives such as “Yeni Türkiye” (New Turkey), led to redistribution of resources that increased the AKP’s neo-patrimonial power and transformed the party into a “state-like institution”.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the importance in the proximity to and approval from the Turkish President in the growth of AKP-friendly businesses and decline in the prospects of businessmen who have criticized Erdoğan or support opposition exemplifies the growing political neo-patrimonial dependencies needed to succeed in the Turkish economy.<sup>16</sup> The new AKP-allied business sector has been vital in extending the party’s power over that of the opposition.<sup>17</sup> On a personal neo-patrimonial level, the regime seemingly demonstrates similar linkages in the appointment of Berat Albayrak, a son-in-law of Erdoğan, as the former Minister of Treasury and Finance.

Yet, Turkey still has competent institutions that compete and at times have defied Erdoğan’s authoritarian tendencies. Elections are held in which the results display a high level of

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<sup>12</sup> Görener and Ucal, “The Personality and Leadership Style of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,” 359; Yavuz and Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*, 122, 129.

<sup>13</sup> Cizre, “Leadership Gone Awry,” 43; Görener and Ucal, “The Personality and Leadership Style of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,” 372.

<sup>14</sup> Cizre, “Leadership Gone Awry,” 37.

<sup>15</sup> Cizre, 38; Günay and Dzihic, “Decoding the Authoritarian Code,” 538.

<sup>16</sup> Günay and Dzihic, “Decoding the Authoritarian Code,” 538.

<sup>17</sup> Günay and Dzihic, 538.

competition between the AKP, the CHP, and numerous other minority parties. As recently as 2019, the strong opposition towards Erdogan's AKP was most evident in the party's loss of the crucial mayoral seat of Istanbul, Turkey's largest city and a critical political center, to Ekrem İmamoğlu of the CHP.<sup>18</sup> Other figures have also emerged to offer an opposition to the individual rule of Erdogan. Before being sentenced to jail for criticizing the Turkish President,<sup>19</sup> Selhattin Demirtaş of the Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) was a charismatic contrast to Erdogan and his associated party's gains challenged the stagnant intra-party opposition to the AKP.<sup>20</sup> Within the party itself, major figures such as Ali Babacan who is seen as a major component of Turkey's 2000's economic successes and Ahmet Davutoğlu, Ankara's contemporary foreign policy czar, have both left the party and have created their own political parties in defiance of Erdogan's consolidation of power. Unlike other personalist regimes, Erdogan still faces a level of competition from other political personalities outside the AKP. Despite these challenges, Erdogan remains as a personalist executive in Turkey, with sole leadership over the AKP and control over Turkey's state resources and political decision-making.

## **II. Literature Review**

Examining literature on the different strategies and dynamics of a leader emerging and maintaining power as a personalist leader including; defining a personalist leader, "coup-proofing", neo-partrimonial politics and aspects of institutionalization and elite-constraints are relevant to the topic. A personalist regime is a distinct type of authoritarian rule in which decision-making is largely controlled by an individual leader. Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg

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<sup>18</sup> "Erdogan's Party Suffers Blow after Istanbul Re-Run Poll Defeat."

<sup>19</sup> Staff, "Turkish Court Sentences Demirtas to Jail for Insulting President."

<sup>20</sup> Cizre, "Leadership Gone Awry," 40.

define personalist rule as a political system in which political activity, “... is shaped less by institutions or impersonal social forces than by personal authorities and power” and where, “the rivalries and struggles of powerful and willful men... are fundamental in shaping political life.” (Jackson & Rosberg, 1984: 421) In this context, politics are asocial because the broad-base of society is immobilized and instead, politics are shaped around cooperation and competition of the leader and elites.<sup>21</sup> Others have held a coinciding definition of a personalist system as a dictatorship where government institutions only exist in name and governance rests absolutely in a “strongman” leader (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1994: 474).

Although personalist regimes share many characteristics with military juntas and single-party regimes, key aspects differentiate them. The access to office and its benefits are more at the discretion of an individual leader in a personalist regime and essentially all decision-making power is vested in the leader, resulting in less delegation and independent decision-making to members of the military or ruling party.<sup>22</sup> Party and military organizations may be constructed to support the regime, but have not been institutionalized to an extent that would constrain the personalist leader’s decision-making.<sup>23</sup> This configuration also makes personal regimes less vulnerable to economic conditions that can maintain material underpinnings of regime loyalty, but are more vulnerable to the death of a leader or a violent overthrow.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, positions within a personalist governing “clique” are often more fluid and composed of a leader’s personal allies and relatives, rather than technocratic bureaucrats or military officers.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jackson and Rosberg, “Personal Rule,” 423–24.

<sup>22</sup> Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?,” 121; Bratton and Van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*, 61–96; Chehabi et al., *Sultanistic Regimes*; Snyder, “Paths out of Sultanistic Regimes.”

<sup>23</sup> Bratton and Van de Walle, “Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa,” 472.

<sup>24</sup> Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?,” 121; Huntington, “Religion and the Third Wave.”

<sup>25</sup> Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?,” 130.

Much of the existing literature on personalist regimes revolves around case studies of Post-colonial African states and the effects of neo-patrimonial linkages (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994; Reno, 1997; Meng, 2020). Personalist regimes proliferate in states around the globe, but have become a deep-seated component of African politics in the post-colonial era in particular. The literature presents neo-patrimonial networks as an integral part in the perpetuation of personalist regimes. A personalist leader's ability to recruit clients to operate the state apparatus is likely to overtime reproduce variations of neo-patrimonialism instead of different regimes.<sup>26</sup> This process also allows a leader to more closely manage the careers of potential rivals within the government and inhibits elites from building their own political power bases through similar neo-patrimonial networks to challenge the leader.<sup>27</sup> Relatedly, “Bureaucratic Authoritarianism” takes into consideration how attempts of a leader to control career patterns and power bases of incumbents in technocratic roles can limit the strength of bureaucracies in states experiencing high-levels of economic development (Remmer and Merkx, 1982: 4-5; Collier and Cardoso, 1972).<sup>28</sup>

Another aspect of a personalist leader maintaining their rule is in the literature of “coup-proofing” — measures that a leader takes to reduce the military’s ability to coordinate and initiate a successful coup d’etat against the leader (Sudduth, 2017; Quinlivan, 1999).<sup>29</sup> Coup-proofing strategies include establishing paramilitary groups separate from the armed forces, frequent rotation of commanders and dividing military forces into rival branches.<sup>30</sup> Although

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<sup>26</sup> Bratton and Van de Walle, “Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa,” 472.

<sup>27</sup> Reno, “Democratic Experiments in Africa” 726.; Bratton and Van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*.

<sup>28</sup> Remmer and Merkx, “Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism Revisited,” 4-5.; Collier, Cardoso, and Studies, *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*.

<sup>29</sup> Sudduth, “Coup Risk, Coup-Proofing and Leader Survival” 3.; Quinlivan, “Coup-Proofing.”

<sup>30</sup> Sudduth, “Coup Risk, Coup-Proofing and Leader Survival,” 3.

coup-proofing largely applies to preventing coups stemming from the military, some of its methods have similarities to the bureaucratic strategies utilized by Erdogan, namely the frequent rotation of powerful members of governing institutions. A leader's rotation of military commanders to prevent a coup d'état carries a similar logic to that of cabinet bureaucrats: to inhibit an elite's ability to gain decision-making and state resources to challenge the leader.

The literature on how elites in bureaucracies "institutionalize" to constrain leaders and the outcomes of this process are critical in understanding Erdogan's rotation strategy. Durable rules and authorities of a bureaucracy allow for state organizations to "institutionalize" leaving levels of decision-making and resources to coalition elites and outside of the personal control of the leader (Meng, 2020: 93). In this way, the "institutionalization" of government organizations allows elites to constrain a leader's decision-making by way of bureaucratic rules and norms that inhibit a level of personalist rule. Moreover, Anne Meng's *Constraining Dictatorship: From Personalized Rule to Institutionalized Regimes* (2020) explains the relationship between institutionalization and a leader and considers the indicators for institutionalization in regimes that allow elites to constrain leaders. In what she calls the "revolving door", Meng observes that African leaders frequently rotated important cabinet officials to prevent any elite from amassing power to an equivalent or greater status than the leader (109). By implementing "revolving door" policies, a leader can inhibit the institutionalization of a government and personalize their rule.

Her institutionalization measurements involve the established rules of succession and the frequency of changes within the upper-levels of a cabinet. Meng's seven indicators for regime institutionalization are as follows:

“1. *Successor Policy*: is there a constitutional amendment specifying the rules of succession? 2. *Successor (Strict)*: is there a constitutional amendment specifying exactly who would succeed the president in the case of his death? 3. *Term limit*: are there constitutional term limits? 4. *VP/MP appointed*: was a vice president or prime minister appointed? 5. *VP/PM same*: was the person appointed to the vice president or prime minister position the same as the year before? 6. *Defense appointed*: was a minister of defense appointed? 7. *Defense same*: was person appointed as the minister of defense the same person as the year before?” (Meng, 2020: 111)

In addition to Meng, different aspects of institutionalism have been present in the literature. The importance of “institutionalism” in preventing a political party from being merely a vehicle for a ruler is a primary contribution to the literature (Huntington, 1996d). A political party’s survival after the founders of the organization leave and its ability to exist without key actors are crucial indicators of institutionalization within a political party. Others emphasize the significance of elite compliance with the rules of a political institution in measuring the strength of a party’s institutionalization (Levitsky and Murillo, 2009). The ability for institutionalization to occur apart from powerful actors is vital in the abilities of elites of a state to constrain a leader within a political system.

The importance of elite constraints on a leader is also present in the study of variation in authoritarian regimes. In Jessica Weeks’ *Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict* (2012), authoritarian regimes are broken down from a singular classification and distinguished by military characteristics and elite constraints. The variables of the typology matrix are if the leader has a military or civilian background and if the

leader's decision-making is constrained by elites (elite-constrained) or if the leader is not constrained by elites (non-constrained/personalist).<sup>31</sup> From this matrix, Weeks classifies authoritarian leaders as: civilian, elite-constrained (Machine); militaristic, elite-constrained (Junta); civilian, personalistic (Boss); and militaristic, personalistic (Strongman).<sup>32</sup> The matrix reveals important dynamics in personalist regimes by emphasizing the conditions of civil-military relations and constraints between the leader and elites. Whereas others have distinguished the condition of personalization between the breadth of a leader's mobilization in a society – i.e. participation – and “the plurality of political association within governing institutions” – i.e. competition (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994: 472). Still, each matrix captures either directly or indirectly the importance of a regime's personalization depending on the extent of constraints on the decision-making of an individual leader. Weeks' specifications for leadership characteristics within an authoritarian regime provides for a more specific look into how personalist leaders operate and moves past broad -isms of categorizing the entire governance of a state.

### **III. Theoretical Argument**

The strategy of frequently rotating elites from high-level cabinet positions interrupts the ability for elites to institutionalize the political power of their positions, leaving power in the decision-making of the leader, an enabling aspect in the emergence of a personalist executive. The process of institutionalization, in which elites gain political power from a delegation of decision-making and resources, constrains the individual power that a leader can exert in the political processes of a state. By maintaining positions of decision-making and resources within a bureaucracy, elites

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<sup>31</sup> WEEKS, “Strongmen and Straw Men.”

<sup>32</sup> WEEKS, 330.

can inhibit the personal power of a leader. To disrupt institutionalization, a leader can rotate elites from a position to prevent an elite from amassing the resources and decision-making responsibilities of a high-level position in the long-term. Through rotating elites, a leader can greatly diminish any bureaucratic constraints on their decision-making and use of state resources. Without elite-constraints, a leader has the ability to exercise individual power over the decision-making of a state and act as a personalist leader. The strategy of a leader's personalization of power through rotating elites involves the dynamics and independence of elites within a bureaucracy, a leader's rotation of elites to shorten their terms in a position, and the impact of this strategy on a leader's ability to emerge as a personalist executive.

In contrast to the power of the leader, the functioning and proper implementation of a bureaucracy allows other individuals and groups to amass political power within the same system. The delegation of power from the leader to members of the government and its proper functioning under rules and routines provides a bureaucracy an independent stability and efficiency from the leader.<sup>33</sup> The independence of the bureaucracy allows elites at the upper-echelons of government to generate political power through the allocation of state resources under their discretion to other bureaucrats or directly to their constituents, while operating within the confines of bureaucratic arrangements. This bureaucratic structure inhibits a leader's personalization of power by denying direct access to resources and decision-making that are at the elite's discretion, while providing the opportunity for the elite to build a reputation and exert political influence independent of the leader.

Meng's indicators 3-7 (111) imply the importance of the maintenance of bureaucratic rules and stable terms of elites in producing institutionalization at the highest-levels of the

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<sup>33</sup> Jordan, "Attacking The Leader, Missing The Mark," 12.

bureaucracy, the leader's cabinet. These indicators attach the significance of the continuation of an individual elite in a high-level cabinet position (Vice President/ Prime Minister and Defense Minister) from year to year to the success of institutionalization within a cabinet.<sup>34</sup> The process of “institutionalization” and its functions — the delegation of power, creation of a political hierarchy, and the creation of rules and procedures within a government — depersonalizes and constrains the power of a leader.<sup>35</sup> As Meng notes, “... the appointment of *any* elite to a position of influence within the presidential cabinet constrains the leader by empowering that particular elite with state resources and the visibility of a position of power.” (Meng, 2020: 110)

The independence and power of elites in a bureaucracy can produce competitive dynamics in which a political leader looks to curtail the process of institutionalization and the potential for bureaucratic elites to constrain their decision-making. To reduce the constraints imposed by institutionalization, leaders may rotate governing elites from any one high-level position frequently so that any elite's term is too brief to gain and utilize the proper decision-making power and resources that are designated for the position. Consequently, a leader can exert more personal control over the decision-making and resources of a position that is being frequently rotated by other elites, which impedes the opportunity for other governing elites to institutionalize their positions, constrain the personal reach of the leader, and build a reputation and influence to situate themselves as potential competitors to the leader.

The logic of frequent rotation of regime elites is to prevent the development of “autonomous bases of support” (Geddes, 1999: 133; Bratton and Van de Walle, 1994, 1997). Elites that do begin to develop “autonomous bases” tend to be quickly excluded from political

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<sup>34</sup> Meng, *Constraining Dictatorship*, 111.

<sup>35</sup> Meng, 96, 110.

life by a threatened leader in a personalistic regime.<sup>36</sup> In single-party regimes, it is the freedom of movement for elites within government positions that creates alternative bases of support and competition that incentivizes a leader to aggressively pursue centralized patronage over government elites.<sup>37</sup> The rotation of government elites as a strategy to secure personalization for a leader is found in other regimes with non-civilian characteristics as well. As a method of “coup-proofing”, military leaders frequently rotate commanders and rival military officers are often removed from the governing apparatus.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, a common trait of military juntas that become personal dictatorships is the cessation of rotation of leaders.<sup>39</sup> In the transition from military junta to personalist leadership, the absence of rotation at top-positions has previously led to political consolidation under elites with personalist ambitions to surpass the political power of their officer peers.

Despite the rotation of elites being used more commonly in established military and one-party systems, the strategy has also been used in competitive civilian regimes to consolidate power. The effects of rotation on the incentives and preferences of civilian-government elites are easier to assume because the objective of their position is always to hold office, unlike military officers that may have alternative ambitions.<sup>40</sup> Hence, the power dynamics between elites and a

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<sup>36</sup> Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?” 133.; Bratton and Van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*; Bratton and Van de Walle, “Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa.”

<sup>37</sup> Reno, “Democratic Experiments in Africa” 726.; Bratton and Van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*.

<sup>38</sup> Sudduth, “Coup Risk, Coup-Proofing and Leader Survival”; Quinlivan, “Coup-Proofing”; Biddle and Zirkle, “Technology, Civil-military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World.”;

<sup>39</sup> Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?,” 124.; Barbara Geddes references the military regimes of Brazil (1964-1985), Argentina (1976-1983), and El Salvador (1948-1984) as successful in officer elites colluding to rotate leaders and maintaining the power of the junta. Whereas the regimes of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic (1930-1961), Idi Amin in Uganda (1971-1979) and Jean-Bédel Bokassa in the Central African Republic (1966-1977) were examples of an individual officer emerging as a personalist leader after a short-term military junta failed to rotate leaders and prohibit any one officer from consolidating power over other military elites.

<sup>40</sup> Geddes, 129.

leader pursuing strategies of rotation can be better assessed because of the straightforward preference of the actor of the bureaucratic elite and the civilian leader's predilection to maintain the highest-level of political power, often by consolidating power in the circumstance of personalist leaders. Erdoğan's strategic rotation of high-level cabinet elites – especially deputy prime ministers and prime ministers – has been a significant enabling factor in allowing him to centralize power to a personalistic level. The increasing brevity in the duration of high-level elites exemplified in the Turkish cabinets under Erdoğan demonstrate a growing lack of elite constraint on the leader. Erdoğan's gradual consolidation of power to become a personalist leader comes at the expense of cabinet elites' capacity to create institutionalization within the AKP.

#### **IV. Methods & Analysis**

The analysis for this research is two-fold. First, the term limits of cabinet elites since Recep Tayyip Erdoğan assumed the office of Turkish Prime Minister in 2003 are quantitatively assessed. Then, a qualitative assessment of the strategies employed by Erdoğan in changing the power dynamics between the leader and AKP cabinet elites. This analysis both addresses the impact of the rotation of elites, while giving exemplary cases for selected cabinet terms. To measure the personalism of Erdoğan's regime, I used a majority of Meng's institutionalization indicators that assess the duration of the terms of prominent cabinet members in relation to the consistency of the leader's position.<sup>41</sup> Although Meng's work studies African regimes in the post-colonial era, her measurements can be applied to any regime, including Erdoğan's Turkey.

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<sup>41</sup> Meng, *Constraining Dictatorship*, 111.

Surprisingly, academic datasets for national leadership and cabinet positions by year for Turkey are sparse. In collecting the data for individual cabinet elite's terms and positions, the directory, "Chiefs of State & Cabinet Members of Foreign Governments" in the Central Intelligence Agency's Historic Data was used for years 2003-October 2020.<sup>42</sup> For the positions of government leader, Minister of Finance, Minister of Defense, and Minister of Foreign Affairs and their correlating years, were confirmed with the dataset, "Who governs? A new global dataset on members of cabinets" (Nyrup, 2020). Furthermore, the "Who governs?" database was referred to in helping to determine the level of importance of a cabinet position. The cabinet positions in the database "portfolio" were designated as "high", "medium", or "low".<sup>43</sup> The positions considered "high" – Minister positions equating to Defense, Military, or National Security; Government, Interior, or Home Affairs; Finance, Budget, or Treasury – were translated as top cabinet positions in this study.<sup>44</sup> The database's "medium" – i.e. Foreign Economic Relations, Health and Social Welfare, Justice, Labor, and Transport – and "low" – i.e. Children, Youth, or Women; Tourism, Veteran, Sports, Science, Technology, or Research – cabinet positions were considered lower-level than those expressed in the database as "high" positions.<sup>45</sup> A difference between the Nyrup, 2020 cabinet position designations and the one used here is that this research considers the Justice Minister and the AKP elite that managed European Union relations before and during accession talks as high-level cabinet elites.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "Historical Data - CIA"; "Historical Data - CIA."

<sup>43</sup> Nyrup, "Replication Data For," 66.

<sup>44</sup> Nyrup, 66.

<sup>45</sup> Nyrup, 66.

<sup>46</sup> Mehmet Ali Şahin (2007-'09) and Bekir Bozdağ (2013-'17) were the two high-level elites who were appointed to the Justice Minister position. Both had served as DPMs before being Justice Minister (and consecutively after in the case of Bozdağ) which this research considers a normal transition of near-equal importance.

Egemen Bağış, a Minister of State focused on European Union negotiations (2009-'11) and then as Minister of European Union Affairs, was considered a high-level elite due to the importance of European Union Accession to Turkish policy goals during his terms, rather than as a Medium-level position as designated under "Foreign Economic Relations" (Nyrup, 2020).

In the position of Interior Minister, two interim elites skewed the results. Although the Interior interim ministers – Osman Güneş (2007, 2011) and Sebahattin Öztürk (2015) – were not added to the results, the cabinets with Efkan Ala as Interior Minister (2013-'15, 2015-'16) were accounted for with the variance in results of Ala's terms counted both as two short terms and one three-year term. Also from 2003-2011, a number of elites mentioned in this study were "Ministers of State". Although, their exact responsibilities, especially for those serving between 2007-'11, and their numbers in any one cabinet vary, their designation separate of other AKP elites in positions of medium and low-level cabinet positions would suggest a higher importance. Another factor taken into consideration for the analysis is a 2013 scandal involving cabinet elites involved in a scheme to evade sanctions on Iran.<sup>47</sup> A consequence of this was a reorganization of the cabinet in which cabinet elites, including higher-level members in this study, were either removed, relocated to another position, or entered to the cabinet.<sup>48</sup> Despite a possible influence on movements in the cabinet due to the corruption scandal, how Erdoğan decided to assign responsibility and steps taken to correct the scandal still exemplifies the rotation strategy and was not the only political course of action Erdoğan could have pursued. Finally, Cabinet changes during the years 2014-'15 — in which Erdoğan went from Turkish Prime Minister to President — were more difficult to designate which cabinet they should be attributed to. Terms that continued from 2014 on through the first presidential term were deemed to be a part of a 2015-2018 term.

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<sup>47</sup> Butler, "Turkey Dismisses Corruption Case That Has Dogged PM Erdogan"; Welle ([www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com)), "Turkey Rocked by Corruption Scandal | DW | 26.12.2013."

<sup>48</sup> "10 Ministers Changed in the Cabinet - TIME"; "Turkish Cabinet Shuffle."; Egemen Bağış, Muammer Güler, and Mehmet Çağlayan were caught in the scandal and resigned. Bekir Bozdağ was moved from a DPM to Minister of Justice. Emrullah İşler, Nihat Zeybekci, Efkan Ala, Lütfi Elvan, Fikri Işık, and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu entered the cabinet after the scandal.

The altering of position names and size of cabinets between different Erdoğan administrations was an added difficulty in assessing different power dynamics between leadership and cabinet elites. In determining which positions would be considered “top” positions in the cabinet, positions were separated into “leader”, “leadership”, and “ministers”. The “Leader” is a term for Erdoğan in which he is the executive head of governance in Turkey. Despite Erdoğan’s positions as prime minister and president before the new centralized system nominally held different political roles, Erdoğan was largely perceived as being politically active in leading the actions of the AKP while occupying the traditionally neutral presidential position. Therefore, his time as prime minister and president held the same value in the research. “Leadership” are cabinet elites whose positions are less designated towards a specific aspect of governance and hold political authority closest to the leader, these positions include the President (2003-‘18 Parliamentarian system), Vice President, Prime Minister, and Deputy Prime Minister. The “Ministers” are responsible for major aspects of governance and include positions with responsibilities in the basic running of the state – Defense, Economics, Finance, Foreign Affairs, Interior, Justice, and “State”. Whereas Meng (2020) is only concerned with the terms of the Prime Minister/Vice President and Defense Minister, the civilian nature of Turkey’s government and positions held by Erdoğan’s internal AKP elites requires an expansion of analyzed positions.

Cabinet positions that were acknowledged as a demotion from “Leadership” or from a critical “Minister” to a position of lesser significance, in terms of relevance in the governance of the Turkish state were Ministers of National Education, Customs and Trade, Labor and Social Security; Food, Agriculture, and Livestock; and Development. With the logic that sole motivation of civilians in any bureaucracy is to maintain or advance their position within the

government,<sup>49</sup> the assumption in this assessment is that members and candidates for cabinet positions seek to advance their careers by progressing to positions of leadership or control of large and critical state ministries. Despite the importance of a leader moving elites from higher to lower cabinet positions to diminish institutionalization, a larger pattern in the case of Turkey was not established in this research. Only seven elites in eight rotations were moved to positions outside of high-level seats.<sup>50</sup> Although recorded in the data, elites being moved to low or middle-level cabinet positions did not hold significance in the analysis.

The main objective in displaying the data below is to demonstrate a relative decline in the duration of elites in any one high-level cabinet position, displaying a weakening of institutionalization of the AKP and the power of elites compared to the leader, as a factor in the emergence of Erdoğan as a personalist leader. The data is organized in sequential order of Erdoğan's terms as Turkish Prime Minister and President. Each cabinet elite politician is listed by their first position, the years they held that position, and then the number of years that position was held. This is repeated for a second and third subsequent position within the top levels of the cabinet if the individual elite had held additional positions. Terms in which the duration of the elite holding office follows a trend that would allude to benefiting a leader's personalization (in a cabinet position for two years or less) are highlighted in green, yellow, or orange depending on which position was their last.

As Erdoğan consolidates power in the executive, or "personalizes" his rule, it can be expected that terms in office of other cabinet elites will be on average two years or less –

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<sup>49</sup> Geddes, "What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?," 129.

<sup>50</sup> Nimet Çubukçu – Minister of National Education (2009-'11), Hayati Yazıcı – Minister of Customs and Trade (2011-'14), Cevdet Yılmaz – Minister of Development (2011-'15), Faruk Çelik – Minister of Labor and Social Security (2011-'16) and Food, Agriculture, and Livestock (2016-'17), İsmet Yılmaz – Minister of National Education (2016-'18), Numan Kurtulmuş – Minister of Culture and Tourism (2017-'18), Lütfi Elvan – Minister of Development (2015).

considered to be a “short” term. Rather than a set number of years to indicate “institutionalization”, Meng looks for the consistency of elites remaining in a particular position by measuring each year an elite stays within a position.<sup>51</sup> Using this indicator as a benchmark, this research considers an elite in a single position for over two consecutive years as sufficient time for that elite to begin having an “institutionalizing” effect on the government. Therefore, to inhibit institutionalization, an average reduction in a cabinet elite’s terms in any one position can be expected to be two or less. Additionally, elites tended not to start a position at a set time of the year and many held positions in between the last entire years counted for their term. This study considers this by rounding up to a full year in the last year of the elite’s term, regardless of the month when the elite left the position. For the elites that served in a position for more than a year, but less than two, the measurement of observing two years or less as an indicator of a lack of institutionalization, helps to capture this distinction and draws closer to Meng’s indicators.

Considering the personalist tendencies of the Erdoğan regime, it is expected that a decrease in the duration of high-level AKP cabinet elites to the extent of averaging “short” terms as Erdoğan’s rule progresses will be observed.

*H1: As Erdoğan’s continuous rule at Leader positions progresses, the duration of the terms of cabinet elites will be on average two years or less.*

Moreover, because time and experience spent in the cabinet helps to enable the power of “institutionalization” to constrain a leader, to better consolidate power it can be expected that

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<sup>51</sup> Meng, *Constraining Dictatorship*, 109.

incoming cabinet members that replace outgoing members will have less experience within top cabinet positions.

*H2: As Erdoan’s continuous rule at Leader positions progresses, “new” elites in cabinet positions will have less experience in the cabinet.*

Given the hypotheses, it is expected that the terms and experience of cabinet elites will decrease with the progression of Recep Tayyip Erdoan’s time in power. The reduction in term duration of cabinet elites follows the strategy of rotating personnel in high-level positions to personalize executive power at the expense of fellow AKP elites.

### *Results & Implications*

In applying the criteria of my theoretical argument and methods, an incremental loss in institutionalization and political power of AKP elites of the Turkish cabinet is demonstrated due to an increased frequency in the movement of elites in top cabinet positions and a decrease in the duration of position terms. Overall Fifty-one cabinet elites, excluding two interim Interior Ministers, from 2003-‘21 were considered to have at some point been appointed to a “high-level” position within an Erdoan cabinet and 49 of 80 (61%)<sup>52</sup> movements of high-level elites were recorded as terms of two years or less – a “short term”. After a very stable 2003-‘07 term where nearly all elites served their four year term or beyond (only Guldal Aksit served only two years and Osman Gune was an interim Interior Minister in 2007 and 2011), rotations became more frequent and terms shorter. Between 2007-‘11, there were 22 rotations between high-level elites,

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<sup>52</sup> This calculation changes to 47 of 79 rotations, 59%, when Ala’s Interior Minister terms are considered continual.

15 (68%) of which had terms of two years or less. The 2011-‘14 cabinet term saw 14 rotations with 8 (57%)<sup>53</sup> being from elites who only served in positions for a short term.

Yet, the abrupt minister transitions resulting from the 2013 corruption scandal and the phasing out of “Minister of State” positions could be partially responsible for skewing results and the true essence of the rotation strategy during cabinets from 2003-‘13. Despite these factors, the pattern of increased frequency in the rotation of high-level cabinet positions is still a political reality in the AKP under Erdoğan, especially for “new” elites who entered the high-levels of the cabinet for the first time after 2007. During the 2007-‘11 cabinet, 11 of 14 (79%) new elites transitioned from their initial position in two years or less. The data of the 2011-‘14 cabinet demonstrates that 6 of 9 (70%) new elites had been moved in the duration of a short term. Even more significant, is that all ten new elites during Erdoğan’s first term as Turkish President faced a short rotation and all 13 of their rotations were of two years or less. During that term, 23 of 25 (92%)<sup>54</sup> rotations were short. Moreover, an increase of new elites having served only one position for a short term unevenly increased with one in Erdoğan’s first Prime Minister term (2003-‘07), six in the second cabinet (2007-‘11), four in the abbreviated third cabinet (2011-‘14), and seven in Erdoğan’s first Presidential term (2015-‘18). In contrast, Erdoğan’s second Presidential term under a new centralized-presidential system has so far had two of six high-level cabinet elites serve in a position for two years or less (Berat Albayrak and Naci Ağbal). Other than a minor decrease in the frequency of rotations between the 2007-‘11 and 2011-‘14 parliamentarian cabinets, a clear development of an increase of high-level cabinet elites is displayed in the gathered data until the first-term of the centralized-presidential system.

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<sup>53</sup> This calculation changes to 7 of 14 rotations, 50%, when Ala’s Interior Minister terms are considered continual.

<sup>54</sup> This calculation changes to 22 of 25 rotations, 87%, when Ala’s Interior Minister terms are considered continual.

### *“Leadership” Rotations*

The incremental increase in the frequency of “leadership” rotations among the roles of deputy prime minister (DPM) and prime minister (PM) is most telling in a strategy of rotation for Erdoğan to create a greater distance between the power dynamic of the leader and AKP elites occupying positions politically closest to him. In his first ministerial term, all three DPMs remained in their position for the entire cabinet term. In the subsequent parliamentarian terms, the frequency of rotations and those of short terms accelerated. The 2007-‘11 term saw the DPM positions rotated five times with two DPMs rotating in two years or less. In the condensed 2011-‘14 term DPM rotations dropped to three, but with a consistent two short terms, displaying a larger proportion of short terms in the position. Between 2014-‘18, the years that consist of his first presidential term, the Erdoğan cabinet experienced eleven rotations with ten having been rotated in two years or less — only Numan Kurtulmuş held the position for three years — a noticeable and rapid increase. Until 2011, the standard number of deputy prime ministers in the Turkish cabinet was usually three before being expanding to four. Although the increased number in elites could arguably partially explain the greater rotation, the rapid alteration of elites, especially in Erdoğan’s first presidential term, that mostly included elites with little to no experience at the top levels of the bureaucracy instead alludes to a diminishment in the power and political significance of the position within the upper-levels of the Turkish cabinet.<sup>55</sup>

The brief terms of Erdoğan’s succeeding prime ministers – Ahmet Davutoğlu (2014-‘16) and Binali Yıldırım (2016-‘18) – signifies similar implications to that of the heavy rotation of

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<sup>55</sup> Of the sixteen cabinet members to hold DPM after 2007, only five – Bülent Arınç (2009-‘16), Mehmet Şimşek (2016-‘18), Cemil Çiçek (2007-‘11), Bekir Bozdağ (2011-‘13), and Recep Akdağ (2017-‘18) – can be said to have significant cabinet experience. Four of the DPMs – Veysi Kanyek (2016-‘17), Nurettin Canikli (2016-‘17), Lütfi Elvan (2015-‘16) – have little experience at top positions in the bureaucracy at the time of their appointment. Whereas seven DPMs – Hakan Çavuşoğlu (2017-‘18), Yıldırım Türkkes (2015-‘17), Numan Kurtulmuş (2014-‘17), Yalcın Akdoğan (2014-‘16), Emrullah İşler (2013-‘14), Hayati Yazıcı (2007-‘09), and Nazım Ekren (2007-‘09) – have little to no experience in the cabinet when assuming the position of DPM.

DPMs. Compared to the eleven previous years in which Erdoğan was the Turkish Prime Minister, the two-year terms of both Davutoğlu and Yıldırım suggest that the rotation strategy was used to limit the power of possible AKP political rivals at a position nearly parallel with Erdoğan's. PM Ahmet Davutoğlu's rise in prominence in the AKP was seen as something of a threat to Erdoğan, which prompted his removal and the appointment of a more loyal AKP politician, Binali Yıldırım,<sup>56</sup> whose previous experience during Erdoğan's administrations largely consisted of top ministerial positions in Transportation rather than a core ministry. By diminishing the term of Davutoğlu and replacing him with another short-term, but more complacent ally, Erdoğan reduced the independence of the top bureaucratic position in the Turkish government.

In considering these results, the hypotheses set in the methods portion can be considered accurate. Excluding the second presidential term, the duration in terms of upper-level cabinet elites decreases to a majority of short terms of two years or less. Additionally, the noticeable transition of experienced cabinet elites with short-termed “new elites”, especially in the DPM position and the current cabinet with the exception of FM Cavusoglu, supports the second hypothesis. Overall, Erdoğan progressively limited the duration of the terms of high-level cabinet elites and filled positions with elites of less experience within the cabinet. Most importantly, these trends are prominently observed in the positions closest to Erdoğan – the DPMs and Prime Minister – before his current term as leader in a consolidated presidential system.

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<sup>56</sup> Gunter, “Unrecognized De Facto States in World Politics,” 1.

### *Meng's Indicators*

At first glance, it may appear that the Turkish government during Erdoğan's tenure has largely followed Meng's indicators for institutionalization. The rules for succession were followed and term limits with regular elections were for the most part held. Furthermore, the personnel in key positions were relatively stable. The Ministry of National Defense (MND) was stable with just two ministers until 2015. Even after security crises involving the 2016 failed coup, the position has been held by Hulusi Akbar since 2018.<sup>57</sup> The Turkish President position with Ahmet Sezer and Abdullah Gül serving their entire terms before Erdoğan assumed office in 2018 was stable and the newly created Vice President position has been held by Fuat Oktay since its establishment. Although not entirely equitable to Meng's intentions of the Prime Minister position in her institutionalization indicators, the multiple positions of Deputy Prime Minister were relatively stable from 2003 until around 2011, with only Nazım Eren (2007-'09) having held the position for a short term. In addition to the high-positions Meng's indicators observe, the position of Foreign Affairs has been a position of great importance that was also stable. In a span of 18 years, only four ministers have held the position.<sup>58</sup>

However, Erdoğan's seeming compliance with Meng's indicators is misconstrued. In extrapolating Meng's criteria in the progression of Erdoğan's eighteen years in office, a breakdown in institutionalization can be recognized around the terms of leadership positions surrounding Erdoğan. As mentioned above, the short terms of Erdoğan's PMs challenges the indicators, as well as the increasing frequency of the rotation of DPMs. Furthermore, the instability in the MND position during the time before the failed coup starting in 2011, during

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<sup>57</sup> Between 2015-2018, the position was held by three ministers – Mehmet Gönül for a second time in 2015, Fikri Işık (2016-'17), and Nurettin Canikli (2017-'18).

<sup>58</sup> The four Foreign Ministers during Erdogan's rule has been Abdullah Gül (2003-'07), Ali Babacan (2007-'09), Ahmet Davutoğlu (2009-'14), and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu (2014-present).

the crisis and subsequent to the attempted take-over may allude to limiting the power of the civilian leadership of Turkish defense through rotation during a politically unstable time. The other notably stable bureaucratic position, the Foreign Minister, has had two of its four ministers, Ahmet Davotḡlu and Ali Babacan split from the AKP and start their own parties, the Future and Democracy and Progress Parties, respectively. These splits were clear political dissents against Erdoḡan’s consolidation of power. The defection of two of the AKP’s most experienced and accomplished elites after 2015 only to create their own parties, displays the struggle elites have had in accumulating power within the party relative to the growing predominance of Erdoḡan.<sup>59</sup>

## **V. Selected Cases**

*Moderate: 2003 – 2007*

As an exception, Erdoḡan’s first cabinet was characterized by a focus on liberalization, instead of the outset of a leader concentrating authority. Two landslide election victories for the AKP in 2002 and 2007, corresponded with Turkey’s economic growth and liberalizing reforms.<sup>60</sup> The stability of elite position terms in Erdoḡan’s first cabinet also correlated with the major policy goal of qualifying for accession into the European Union (EU) through liberalizing reforms.<sup>61</sup> The stability in elite politics of this cabinet is likely also due to Erdoḡan and the AKP learning to moderate their political stance at first. Failure to do so was exemplified in the short-lived administration of the Islamist Refah Party, a precursor to the AKP, before being couped in 1997 after taking a religious stance that was decidedly too Islamic for the military.<sup>62</sup> From the perspective of Erdoḡan, the stability in the terms of his high-level governing elites compared to

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<sup>59</sup> Cizre, “Leadership Gone Awry,” 43.

<sup>60</sup> Görener and Ucal, “The Personality and Leadership Style of Recep Tayyip Erdoḡan,” 358, 371.

<sup>61</sup> Cizre, “Leadership Gone Awry,” 38.

<sup>62</sup> Cizre, “Leadership Gone Awry.”

successive cabinets also implies the nature of accumulating power through bureaucratic means. At first, Erdoğan's power was not as centralized and could not frustrate the ambitions of competing party elites as he could after building his reputation and political power in consecutive leadership positions in following terms. In his first-term as prime minister, a focus on liberalizing reforms and Erdoğan's establishment as leader within a new ruling AKP party was an initial deviation from the personalist ambitions and strategies that would be pursued in subsequent cabinets. This era in Turkish politics is defined as one suggesting a future of Westernization and economic prosperity, rather than a Turkish Republic led by a personalist leader.

#### *Shifts: 2011 – 2014*

The years 2011-‘14 mark a shift in the characteristics of the cabinet and the Turkish government that can be summarized as an acceleration of personalization of political power under Erdoğan. The rotations of 2011 with the background of the continuation of political trials and the following 2013 scandal solidified the pattern of Erdoğan's political consolidation during this time. Outside of the cabinet, authoritarian instances of Erdoğan politicizing institutions, such as the judiciary branch, in order to silence opposition included the Ergenekon Trials (2008-‘16) in which political prosecutions of military and political opposition were tried for various politically-motivated charges.<sup>63</sup> The trials expanded Erdoğan's attempt to consolidate power in non-executive institutions in parallel of personalizing power within his cabinet.

Although the 2013 scandal and the phasing out of what was arguably an overabundant number of Ministers of State were likely justifiable moves Erdoğan took involving cabinet elites, it also clearly continued a consolidation of the higher-level positions of the Turkish cabinet.

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<sup>63</sup> Görener and Ucal, "The Personality and Leadership Style of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan," 371.

Erdogan's strategy of rotating cabinet elites was still an optional course of action that advanced a trend of his personalization of power within the AKP. Although the cabinet reshuffle helped Erdogan consolidate power, the corruption scandal and other investigations into the AKP also damaged the perception of the party and proved that a reshuffling of elites in the cabinet would not suffice as a political solution to the AKP's credibility domestically or to foreign observers.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, Erdogan still seized the opportunity to further consolidate control over the Turkish cabinet. The marked change and personalization of power during this cabinet is marked as Turkey went from a "Mixed Democratic" to "Civilian Dictatorship" system in 2014 according to the "Who Governs?" database.<sup>65</sup> Between 2011-'14, Erdogan began to frequently rotate high-level elites in the midst of political trials and a corruption scandal. The trend of rotation during turmoil is further exacerbated during Erdogan's first presidential term.

#### *First Presidential Term: 2015 - 2018*

Erdogan's first presidential term was also mired with crises that were taken as opportunities to further personalize power. The turbulent 2015 elections, the 2016 failed coup, and the change of the constitution were all sources for major change in Turkey's political institutions and infrastructure. As exemplified by the sharp increase in rotations, the instability of the cabinet abetted Erdogan in responding to these crises as he personally saw fit. More than at any other time, cabinet elites served for less than two years, displaying instability reminiscent of the political times. In addition to the short term of Prime Minister Yildirim, the rapid increase in the frequency and short terms of DPMs during this time displays a larger instability of the closest competitor cabinet positions to Erdogan's. At a time when Erdogan pressed for a centralized

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<sup>64</sup> RIZVI, "Growing Tensions," 11.

<sup>65</sup> Nyrup, "Replication Data For."

presidential system, rotations of high-level elites in positions that would lose power under the proposed system were sharply increased. This instability hindered the institutionalization at the top-levels of the cabinet as Erdoğan centralized power through policies that eliminated the positions most capable of constraining his decision-making. The profound institutional changes resulting from an incremental accumulation of power and the impact of the failed 2016 coup further strengthened Erdoğan as a personalist leader and decreased the importance of the positions of AKP elites in the cabinet.

Since the AKP's sound 2011 election victory that gave Erdoğan the first consecutive third prime minister term, his ambition to create a centralized presidential system was publicly acknowledged.<sup>66</sup> Questionable tactics during the 2015 parliamentary elections have also shaped Turkey's politics to one dominated by the AKP under Erdoğan's personalized policies. A June 7, 2015 vote broke the AKP's hold on a governing coalition, prompting minority parties to begin talks to form a new governing coalition. Breaking from procedures laid out in the Turkish Constitution, Erdoğan handed back the mandate to form an interim government to his AKP prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, rather than the leader of the runner-up CHP (Republican People's Party) party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu.<sup>67</sup> The violation in the constitutional procedure amounted to what was deemed a "civilian coup" by Kılıçdaroğlu.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the following election on November 1, 2015 was held during resumed military operations in the southern part of the country – where much of the AKP's opposition is located – casting doubt on the legitimacy of the election that broke the parliamentary deadlock and saw the AKP's support grow from 40.1% to nearly half.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> RIZVI, "Growing Tensions," 10.

<sup>67</sup> Cizre, "Leadership Gone Awry," 42.

<sup>68</sup> Cizre, 42.

<sup>69</sup> Cizre, 42.

After failing to reach the majorities needed for legitimacy to call for a constitutional referendum during the 2015 elections,<sup>70</sup> the 2016 failed coup acted as a catalyst for the subsequent referendum. In surviving the failed coup, Erdoğan and the AKP were able to position themselves as the defenders of the Turkish state and gained an increased sense of legitimacy to bring about the referendum to create a centralized presidential system. The 2017 Referendum, which terminated the position of prime minister and the president's neutrality – which had arguably already been ignored during Erdoğan's first Presidential term — to make one executive,<sup>71</sup> truly solidified Erdoğan's power to the extent of personalist rule. Although the process of consolidating power to become a personalist leader was incremental throughout Erdoğan's cabinets, the events of the 2016 failed coup and the subsequent 2017 constitutional referendum helped Erdoğan facilitate the increasing rotation and replacement of AKP cabinet elites. By manipulating the rotation of the political positions of cabinet elites during a time of political instability, Erdoğan had successfully constructed a Turkish regime that is highly-personalized, with himself as the leader.

#### *Stability In Erdogan's 2<sup>nd</sup> Presidential Term?*

Under the new unitary presidential system, the cabinet under Erdoğan has seemingly stabilized from that of the previous parliamentarian cabinets. Since 2018, only one top elite (Berat Albayrek as Treasury and Finance Minister) and a Governor of the Central Bank (Naci Ağbal) have been removed from their cabinet posts. This stability should be understood with the following considerations. Erdoğan has continued the trend of consolidating critical bureaucratic positions to a few manageable high-level seats.<sup>72</sup> Although down-sizing the cabinet essentially

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<sup>70</sup> Cizre, 37.

<sup>71</sup> Kirişci, "The Turkish Constitutional Referendum, Explained."

<sup>72</sup> See *Table 1.5* in Index

by eliminating “Ministers of State” can be argued to be a valid reform, exerting authority over the personnel of top positions and the duration of their terms to the extent that Erdogan has furthers his goal of personalizing political power over elites in the cabinet. Also, the replacement of near-competitor leadership positions such as prime minister and multiple deputy prime ministers to a single Vice President demonstrates a consolidation of power benefitting the personal authority of the Turkish President. Another continuing aspect in the personalization of power over the bureaucracy is the lack of experience in high-level bureaucratic positions of the current cabinet, with the exception of Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu was also the only high-level cabinet elite to transition from the parliamentarian to the centralized-presidential system, demonstrating a continuation of a pattern of Erdogan appointing AKP elites new to the cabinet or who have not continuously served at high-levels in the cabinet. The absence of continual experienced elites at top levels of the bureaucracy, impedes the ability for elites to institutionalize and check the power of the leader. The continuation of consolidating control over personnel in the cabinet has facilitated Erdogan’s personalization of the AKP within the new unitary presidential system.

#### *Naci Ağbal & The Turkish Economy*

In March 2021, Erdogan removed the Governor of Turkey’s Central Bank, Naci Ağbal, the fourth Turkish Central Bank Governor in five years to be rotated by Erdogan.<sup>73</sup> This episode exemplifies the continued dynamics and complications of Erdogan’s personalization of rule over the Turkish government. When Ağbal attempted to make standard reforms to recover the Turkish economy from inflation, Erdogan saw this as a threat to his personalized economic model and

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<sup>73</sup> Hannon, “Turkey’s Erdogan Ousts Central Bank Governor in Surprise Move”; Butler, “Turkey’s Erdogan Ousts Central Bank Governor after Steep Lira Slide.”

had Aḡbal removed, further demonstrating a growing propensity to unilaterally govern Turkey and its economy. The economic progress of the 2000's that expanded the middle class under Erdoğan was considered his “prized achievement”.<sup>74</sup> The AKP’s initial successful economic policies became Erdoğan’s fixed and unwavering approach to Turkey’s fast-moving economy even as these same policies contributed to instability years later. Moreover, the responsibility of the economy was primarily tasked to Erdoğan’s son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, as Minister of Treasury and Finance (2018-2020) and then to Lütfi Elvan whom has very brief experience within the upper-levels of the cabinet as Deputy Prime Minister (2015-2016).<sup>75</sup> The elites in which Erdoğan has partially entrusted the Turkish economy with, a personal relative and an elite with relatively little experience in AKP cabinets, displays the constraints of elites in a critical point of governance. Erdoğan’s refusal to reverse his personalized economic policy for conventional reform by firing Naci Aḡbal, demonstrates a further personalized rule and cult of personality of Erdoğan over Turkey, despite the worsening economic conditions in which much of his power and support is vested in.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The argument and analysis presented here displays a new perspective in assessing the power of a national leader and questions in identifying personalist rule. Rather than assessing a government typology through an overview of multiple government institutions, a better indication of political developments in a country can be made by the power dynamics between a leader and elites within a governing political party. Exemplified in this paper, the frequent movement and rotation of cabinet elites can service a leader’s personalization of power by hindering institutionalization

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<sup>74</sup> RIZVI, “Growing Tensions,” 11.

<sup>75</sup> “Turkey Appoints Lutfi Elvan as New Finance Minister.”

within a bureaucracy and consequently lessening restraints on their decision-making. This research can be applied as a possible indicator of other leaders who may be in the process of consolidating power to become a personalist-executive in the future. The observed increase in frequency of rotation of high-level AKP cabinet positions, especially DPMs, corresponded with Erdoğan's consolidation of governing power leading up to the transition to a centralized presidential system. Leaders with similar ambitions may demonstrate the frequency of cabinet movement of that of Erdoğan and the AKP, such as Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and his March 2021 cabinet reshuffle<sup>76</sup> or Russian president Vladimir Putin's abrupt shuffle in early 2020 that placed a relatively unknown bureaucrat as prime minister.<sup>77</sup> As Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has demonstrated personalization through a rotation strategy, a critical tactic in the consolidation of power does not necessarily involve a revolution or government takeover in one dramatic motion, but a consistent and substantial growth of personal power within a single political party at the expense of other elites.

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<sup>76</sup> Pedroso, "Bolsonaro Will Replace Top Military Commanders after Cabinet Reshuffle."

<sup>77</sup> Seddon, "Putin Reshuffles Russia Cabinet to Try to Spur Economy."

## VII. Appendix

**Figure 1 – Top Elites by the Year They Entered Erdoğan’s Cabinet by his Terms in Office**

**Table 1.1 - 1<sup>st</sup> Cabinet, 2003-‘07**

| Politician           | Position | Years    | Number of Years | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Position | Years    | Number of Years | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Position       | Years    | Number of Years |
|----------------------|----------|----------|-----------------|--------------------------|----------|-----------------|--------------------------------|----------|-----------------|
| Nazım Ekren          | DPM      | 2007-‘09 | 2               |                          |          |                 |                                |          |                 |
| Hayati Yazıcı        | DPM      | 2007-‘09 | 2               | MS                       | 2009-‘11 | 2               | Custom & Trade                 | 2011-‘14 | 3               |
| **Murat Başesgioğlu  | MS       | 2007-‘09 | 2               |                          |          |                 |                                |          |                 |
| Mehmet Şimşek        | MS       | 2007-‘09 | 2               | Finance                  | 2009-‘16 | 7               | DPM                            | 2016-‘18 | 2               |
| **Mustafa Yazıcıoğlu | MS       | 2007-‘09 | 2               |                          |          |                 |                                |          |                 |
| Cemil Çiçek          | DPM      | 2007-‘11 | 4               |                          |          |                 |                                |          |                 |
| ***Egemen Bağış      | MS       | 2009-‘11 | 2               | EU Affairs               | 2011-‘13 | 2               |                                |          |                 |
| ***Mehmet Çağlayan   | MS       | 2009-‘11 | 2               | Economy                  | 2011-‘13 | 2               |                                |          |                 |
| **Faruk Çelik        | MS       | 2009-‘11 | 2               | Labor & Social Security  | 2011-‘16 | 5               | Food, Agriculture, & Livestock | 2016-‘17 | 1               |
| **Selma Kavaf        | MS       | 2009-‘11 | 2               |                          |          |                 |                                |          |                 |
| Faruk Ozak           | MS       | 2009-‘11 | 2               |                          |          |                 |                                |          |                 |
| Cevdet Yılmaz        | MS       | 2009-‘11 | 2               | Development              | 2011-‘16 | 5               |                                |          |                 |
| Ahmet Davutoğlu      | FA       | 2009-‘14 | 5               | PM                       | 2014-‘16 | 2               |                                |          |                 |
| Bülent Arınç         | DPM/MS   | 2009-‘16 | 7               |                          |          |                 |                                |          |                 |

Table 1.2 - 2<sup>nd</sup> Cabinet, 2007- '11

| Politician        | Position  | Years     | Number of Years | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Position | Years     | Number of Years | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Position | Years     | Number of Years |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| *Ahmet Sezer      | President | 2003- '07 | 4               |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |
| *Abdullah Gül     | DPM/FM    | 2003- '07 | 4               | President                | 2007- '14 | 7               |                          |           |                 |
| *Abdüllatif Şener | DPM       | 2003- '07 | 4               |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |
| Mehmet Ali Şahin  | DPM       | 2003- '07 | 4               | Justice                  | 2007- '09 | 2               |                          |           |                 |
| *Beşir Atalay     | MS        | 2003- '07 | 4               | Interior                 | 2007- '11 | 4               | DPM                      | 2011- '14 | 3               |
| *Ali Babacan      | MS        | 2003- '07 | 4               | FA                       | 2007- '09 | 2               | DPM                      | 2009- '16 | 5               |
| **Kürşad Tüzman   | MS        | 2003- '09 | 6               |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |
| Kemal Unakıtan    | Finance   | 2003- '09 | 6               |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |
| Mehmet Aydın      | MS        | 2003- '11 | 8               |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |
| Mehmet Gönül      | MND       | 2003- '11 | 8               | MND                      | 2015      | 1               |                          |           |                 |
| Abdulkadir Aksu   | Interior  | 2003- '07 | 4               |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |
| **Güldal Aksit    | MS        | 2003- '05 | 2               |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |
| **Nimet Çubukçu   | MS        | 2005- '09 | 4               | National Education       | 2009- '11 | 2               |                          |           |                 |
| ****Osman Güneş   | Interior  | 2007- '07 | 1               | Interior                 | 2011- '11 | 1               |                          |           |                 |

Table 1.3 - Cabinet 2011- '14

| Politician       | Position | Years         | Number of Years | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Position | Years     | Number of Years | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Position | Years     | Number of Years |
|------------------|----------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Bekir Bozdağ     | DPM      | 2011- '13     | 2               | Justice                  | 2013- '17 | 4               | DPM                      | 2017- '18 | 1               |
| İdris Naim Şahin | Interior | 2011- '13     | 2               |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |
| İsmet Yılmaz     | MND      | 2011- '17     | 6               | National Education       | 2016- '18 | 2               |                          |           |                 |
| ***Muammer Güler | Interior | 2013- '13     | 1               |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |
| Emrullah İşler   | DPM      | 2013- '14     | 1               |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |
| Nihat Zeybekci   | Economy  | 2013- '15     | 2               | Economy                  | 2016- '18 | 2               |                          |           |                 |
| *****Efkan Ala   | Interior | 2013- '15     | 2               | Interior                 | 2015- '16 | 1               |                          |           |                 |
| Yalçın Akdoğan   | DPM      | 2014- '16     | 2               |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |
| Numan Kurtulmuş  | DPM      | 2014- '17     | 3               | Culture & Tourism        | 2017- '18 | 1               |                          |           |                 |
| Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu | FM       | 2014- Present |                 |                          |           |                 |                          |           |                 |

Table 1.4 - Presidency 1<sup>st</sup> Term 2015- '18

| Politician               | Position | Years     | Number of Years | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Position | Years     | Number of Years | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Position | Years         | Number of Years |
|--------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Mustafa Elitaş           | Economy  | 2015- '16 | 1               |                          |           |                 |                          |               |                 |
| Lüfti Elvan              | DPM      | 2015      | 1               | Development              | 2015      | 1               | MTF                      | 2020- Present |                 |
| Yıldırım<br>Türkeş       | DPM      | 2015- '17 | 2               |                          |           |                 |                          |               |                 |
| ****Sebahattin<br>Öztürk | Interior | 2015      | 1               |                          |           |                 |                          |               |                 |
| Naci Ağbal               | Finance  | 2016- '18 | 2               | Governor of Central Bank | 2020- '21 | 1               |                          |               |                 |
| Nurettin<br>Canikli      | DPM      | 2016- '17 | 1               | MND                      | 2017- '18 | 1               |                          |               |                 |
| Fikri Işık               | MND      | 2016- '17 | 1               | DPM                      | 2017- '18 | 1               |                          |               |                 |
| Veysi Kaynak             | DPM      | 2016- '17 | 1               |                          |           |                 |                          |               |                 |
| Binali Yıldırım          | PM       | 2016- '18 | 2               |                          |           |                 |                          |               |                 |
| Recep Akdağ              | DPM      | 2017- '18 | 1               |                          |           |                 |                          |               |                 |
| Hakan<br>Çavuşoğlu       | DPM      | 2017- '18 | 1               |                          |           |                 |                          |               |                 |

Table 1.5 - Current Term, 2018-Present

| Politician     | Position | Years        | Number of Years | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Position | Years | Number of Years | 3 <sup>rd</sup> Position | Years | Number of Years |
|----------------|----------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-------|-----------------|--------------------------|-------|-----------------|
| Süleyman Soylu | Interior | 2016-Present |                 |                          |       |                 |                          |       |                 |
| Fuat Oktay     | VP       | 2018-Present |                 |                          |       |                 |                          |       |                 |
| Hulusi Akar    | MND      | 2018-Present |                 |                          |       |                 |                          |       |                 |
| Berat Albayrak | MTF      | 2018-'20     | 2               |                          |       |                 |                          |       |                 |

Position Abbreviations & Coding

MS – Minister of State, FM/FA – Foreign Minister/Minister of Foreign Affairs, DPM – Deputy Prime Minister, MND – Minister of National Defense, VP – Vice President, PM – Prime Minister, MTF – Minister of Treasury and Finance

**Green** – Elite is in first position for two years or less and then exits cabinet; **Yellow** - Elite served for two years or less, but had a subsequent position; **Orange** – Elite is in a subsequent position for 2 or less years

\* - Cabinet elite started position before Erdogan's first administration as Turkish Prime Minister  
\*\* - Ministers of State that allude to designated responsibilities of medium or low-levels

\*\*\* - Removed in 2013 Corruption Scandal

\*\*\*\*- In acting capacity

\*\*\*\*\* - Efkan Ala displayed as two separate terms with interim Interior Minister (Sebahattin Öztürk) replacing him for months during the 2015 year. The analysis takes into account for Ala's terms as Interior Minister both as one and two terms.

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