Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Resistance in Turkey
Construction, Consolidation, and Contestation

Edited by
İmren Borsuk · Pınar Dinç · Sinem Kavak · Pınar Sayan
Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Resistance in Turkey

“These well-researched articles draw a striking and timely picture, at the ground level, of a regime that has become a conduit for plunder and dispossession. The authors describe an arena where authoritarian repression of criticism and opposition has grown, but resistance has also been mounting. As media activism and social movements addressing corruption and environmental carnage proliferate there is, at long last, some hope that an already frayed cloak of legitimacy may give out. The unique focus on resistance of this excellent collection injects a much-needed note of optimism into the literature.”

—Çağlar Keyder, Professor of Sociology, State University of New York, Binghamton

“Has neoliberalism been in decline in the past decade? Is resistance against authoritarian governments no longer possible? In response to both questions, Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Resistance in Turkey convincingly says no! The edited volume lays bare the modus operandi of authoritarian neoliberalism in contemporary Turkey, yet its contributions do not end there. It also articulates the possibilities for and forms of resistance against authoritarian neoliberalism. The strength of the conceptualization comes from the robust studies on a diverse set of cases of repression and contestation ranging from urban transformation projects to the environment, from education to academics for peace, from media activism to civil society and women’s labor. Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Resistance in Turkey is a must-read for students of authoritarian neoliberalism, populism and social movements. No less important, it is also a guidebook for progressive activism.”

—Deniz Yükseker, Editor, New Perspectives on Turkey

“This exemplary edited collection adds depth and clarity to our understanding of the dynamics of authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey, as well as providing insights applicable beyond the Turkish case. It does so through the combination of a clear and systematic conceptual framework on consolidating and contesting authoritarian neoliberalism, and eight original case studies on multiple facets of authoritarian governance and neoliberalization in Turkey. As such, this unique and comprehensive book is a major contribution not only to our understanding of the consolidation of authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey, and resistance to it, but also to the general neoliberalism and autocratization literatures.”

—Yunus Sözen, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Le Moyne College
Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Resistance in Turkey

Construction, Consolidation, and Contestation
To our mothers…
Acknowledgements

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Last but not the least, we are forever grateful to those who continue to resist despite various forms of oppression. We hope that the readers of this book will not be overwhelmed by the aggravating authoritarian neoliberalism that is upon Turkey, but observe that resistance always continues.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

İmren Borsuk, Pınar Dinç, Sinem Kavak, and Pınar Sayan

Abstract  While capitalism has been associated with democracy for a long time, the neoliberalisation that has coincided with the rise of populism...
and authoritarian resurgence in the global context demands further inquiry into the relationship between capital accumulation and political regimes. The growing literature on authoritarian neoliberalism examines the relationship between authoritarian governance and neoliberalisation, and interrogates how neoliberal reforms buttress the legal, administrative, and coercive power of states, creating leverage for ruling governments to enhance authoritarian forms of governance. While these studies highlight the vulnerability of these regimes and emphasise their crisis-laden character, there is a need for an extensive analysis of the dynamics of resistance in authoritarian neoliberal regimes to understand the limits and potentials of counter-hegemonic practices. Using in-depth case studies, this book demonstrates the repertoires of resistance against authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey and discusses how different sections of society, including NGOs, bureaucrats, media, workers, marginalised communities and activists, challenge or reinforce neoliberal policies with their claims, tactics, strategies, and discourses. Drawing upon multidisciplinary scholarship from sociology, politics, law, media, urban development, and feminist studies, this book sheds light on the capacity of resistance to challenge the authoritarian forms of the neoliberal regime from within.

**Keywords** Authoritarian neoliberalism · Capitalism · Resistance · Turkey

In September 2019, we, colleagues from Lund University Centre for Advanced Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) and Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies (SUITS), discovered our joint interest in—and concern for—the social conflicts in Turkey. This is how we decided to organise a workshop to discuss inequalities and conflicts alongside other scholars and practitioners with similar research interests and called for papers that specifically focus on institutions, migration, environment, and urban transformation. The intense discussions in the first workshop in December 2019 convinced us to organise a second workshop on the same topic in March 2020, this time adding the ‘justice’ dimension to the prior focus on inequalities and conflict. For these workshops, we received an impressive number of applications from over 60 universities and NGOs from 21 countries. Individual presentations, panel discussions, keynotes, and all the coffee-break deliberations among colleagues pointed out the concept of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ as an important conceptual tool
to explain the transformations we have observed in Turkey for the last two decades. Moreover, we noticed that many presentations touched on the issue of ‘resistance’ or lack thereof against authoritarian neoliberal policies. Consequently, we selected a group of articles that come together under the concept of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism and resistance’. We compiled nine chapters that focus on different dimensions of authoritarian neoliberalism and various forms of resistance that have emerged in response to authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey.

This book endeavours to explain the dynamics of authoritarian neoliberalism and resistance by drawing on the enriching literature on authoritarian neoliberalism that has become the new vortex of critical scholarship on neoliberalism (e.g., Bruff, 2014, 2016; Bruff & Wöhl, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Smith, 2018; Tansel, 2017, 2018; Wigger & Buch-Hansen, 2015; contributions in Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Fabry & Sandbeck, 2019; Tansel, 2018). In doing so, our goal is to deepen the theorisation of authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey and to demonstrate the strategies of resistance that underlie the rise of authoritarian statecraft in line with neoliberal restructuring. Towards this aim, the chapters of this book:

1. Explore the mechanisms and common trends through which authoritarian neoliberalism manifests itself at micro-sites of accumulation and contested sites of struggle for power and authority.
2. Focus on understanding the multiple mechanisms and repertoires of resistance against authoritarian neoliberal policies.

**Why Authoritarian Neoliberalism?**

Neoliberalism has been a hotly debated topic in the literature ever since the emergence and proliferation of the neoliberal mode of accumulation. The academic agenda has been dominated by debates on its relevance as a useful concept for understanding the world (e.g., Cahill et al., 2018; Peck, 2013; Phelan, 2014; Springer et al., 2016; also Birch, 2017) and simultaneously how to dismantle it as an analytical concept with explanatory power. Advocates of the latter argue that because neoliberalism as a concept is slippery and lacks academic consensus on what it signifies (Dunn, 2017), it is at risk of becoming almost useless as a result of its indiscriminate use (e.g., Birch, 2015, 2017; Venugopal, 2015) or it is, at minimum, an ‘inflated’ concept (Collier, 2012; Dean, 2012). This
critique became more visible after the 2008 economic crisis which resulted in more authoritarian forms of governments amid the implementation of large-scale bailouts and strict austerity plans. The heightened power of the states during the crisis led to predictions of the end of neoliberalism and that it would be replaced by another form of capitalism. While ‘small government’ is seen as a central ideological tenet of neoliberalism, state institutions under neoliberalism intervene through markets and other institutions to extend and/or reproduce neoliberalism itself (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017; Lemke, 2001).

Despite the large body of scholarly work underlining the strong role played by non-market institutions reinforcing the process of neoliberalisation (Harvey, 2005; Saad-Filho & Johnston, 2005; Wacquant, 2009), the tendency to frame neoliberalism as a predominantly economic ideology based on the appraisal of the free market is still strong. Such accounts rest on the presumed analytical duality of state and the market, hence politics and the economy, which dates back to the birth of classical economics. Even though this duality has long been challenged both empirically and theoretically, its intellectual residues continue to reflect on the scholarship on state and economic policy.

The debate becomes more complex in the broader area of political economy that focuses on theorising differences in manifestations of neoliberalism and/or capitalism across states. Comparative political economists search for frameworks to understand and evaluate distinct national models of capitalism, among which the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) approach (Hall & Soskice, 2001) gained dominance. The approach developed in VoC is based on the critique of the idea that there is no alternative to one-model-fits-all neoliberal orthodoxy (Howell, 2003). Developed against the overemphasis of state and labour, the VoC approach brings firms back into the centre of capitalism and focuses on national variations. To give sense to non-market mechanisms of economic regulation, the VoC approach classifies nation-states along the spectrum of liberal versus coordinated market economies. To explain the heightened role of the state in economic policy, proponents argue that firms rely more on political instruments in coordinated market economies (Howell, 2003). This position rests on the presumption that firms are rational actors that act according to political circumstances. However, it ignores the two-way relationship between capital and politics and takes the nation-state as a locus of economic regulation.
Against the urge to categorise nation-states based on distinct characteristics of the economic system, critical political economists have established distinct qualities of neoliberal modes of accumulation. According to this rich literature, neoliberalism is not reducible to a cogent ideology, but it is attached to a wide spectrum of ideas. These ideas display a changing relevance in rationalising current conditions and selected policies (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017, p. 688). Moreover, neoliberalism is intrinsically variegated and takes distinct shapes and forms according to the context (Brenner et al., 2010). In this book, we focus on the case of Turkey, where state power is so intermingled with capital that they function almost as a unified body. By looking at this case, we argue that concepts that prioritise the role of the state in the economy, such as neopatrimonialism and neomercantilism, still fall short in explanatory power due to the dominance and perseverance of neoliberalism as the latest phase of the capitalist mode of accumulation. Hence, we draw on authoritarian neoliberalism as a fruitful conceptual toolbox to analyse Turkey and show that authoritarian neoliberalism has been consolidated in Turkey through the mechanisms of executive centralisation, autocratic legalism, cronyism, and violence-fuelled rentier accumulation, which we elaborate in detail in Chapter 2.

A Focus on Resistance and Its Dynamic Relationship with Authoritarian Neoliberalism

We contribute to this emerging literature on authoritarian neoliberalism by adding a resistance focus, whereby we explore the changing forms of social struggles and popular and everyday resistance that have received less attention so far in the literature. Turkey provides an illustrative empirical case to discuss social dissent and resistance, as the country has witnessed one of the most dramatic democratic backslidings in the world (Freedom House, 2018) under a single-party government run by the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, AKP) that has been the vanguard of neoliberal restructuring in the country. The resistance against the authoritarian implementation of neoliberal policies took not only the form of protests and strikes but also reached national and global levels like the Gezi protests in 2013. This book complements the growing literature on authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey by providing new empirical and theoretical insights about social demands, popular frustration, and strategies of resistance that have arisen during the consolidation
of the authoritarian neoliberal order. Our aim is not to project doom and gloom either for neoliberal order or for authoritarian regimes, but to tease out the interconnections between resistance, authoritarian regimes, and neoliberal policies and shed light on the limits and potentials of resistance to unleash progressive politics through the prism of Turkey’s experience of authoritarian neoliberalism.

In light of this background, this book aims to answer these broad questions:

- How does neoliberalisation converge with authoritarianism? What factors cultivate or hinder this convergence? What are authoritarian neoliberal policies?
- How does this convergence shape the local dynamics? What are the grievances of people in the face of authoritarian neoliberal policies and what strategies do people develop to deal with the impacts of these policies?
- What are the limits and potentials of these resistance strategies against authoritarian neoliberalism? Do they foster any change?

**Structure of the Book**

Following this introductory chapter, in Chapter 2 we discuss the consolidation of authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey as well as various acts of resistance against it. Building primarily on the eight case studies presented in this volume, we put forward a framework that discusses the dynamics between the mechanisms of executive centralisation, autocratic legalism, cronyism, violence-fuelled rentier accumulation, criminalisation and stigmatisation, and contestations against authoritarian neoliberalism through strikes, protests, demonstrations, network building, litigation, everyday struggles, and armed acts of contention.

In Chapter 3, Zeynep Ceren Eren focuses on the labouring practices and experiences of rural women from a feminist perspective. Based on fieldwork on peasant-worker women who are employed as waged labour in one of the large-scale, export-oriented agribusinesses in Western Anatolia (referred to as the *Greenhouse*), Chapter 3 explores the patterns of the emerging gender labour regime and discusses how the emergence of the *Greenhouse* as a large-scale factory-like enterprise with all-year
production became possible under AKP rule within the framework of authoritarian neoliberalism and the resistance strategies of women.

Diren Taş, in Chapter 4, looks at mass-scale neoliberal urban transformation projects that result in the widespread displacement and dispossession of subaltern classes from inner-city neighbourhoods through an ethnographic case study on the Sur district of Diyarbakır. The chapter elaborates on how the AKP government uses post-conflict neoliberal urban transformation projects to suppress oppositional politics and grassroots resistance. This draws on legal and coercive state apparatuses that function as counter-insurgency tools of security, control, and power, as revanchist mechanisms to displace and dispossess resistant neighbourhoods.

In Chapter 5, Ladin Bayurgil shifts our attention to the homeowners in the Bağdat Avenue neighbourhoods in the Kadıköy Region of İstanbul. The chapter shows the mechanisms through which the government’s authoritarian neoliberal politics are leveraged and reproduced by a local community in İstanbul, for whom the urban transformation is a mechanism of maintaining elite economic status by channelling capital investment into the region, while they simultaneously condemn the urban transformation and self-distance from the government’s authoritarian neoliberal urban policies as a cultural mechanism of signalling elite status.

In Chapter 6, Kutay Kutlu examines the prospects of litigation as a resistance strategy against authoritarian neoliberalism. With a legal focus, Chapter 6 concentrates on the implementation of urgent expropriations for land acquisitions towards hydropower plant (HPP) projects in Turkey, by looking particularly to the Pembelik HPP in Elazıg. Taking the approach of the European Court of Human Rights on environmental cases and the rulings of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Turkey into account, Chapter 6 shows the limitations of the liberal human rights framework in protecting ecological and cultural interests. These limitations mean that litigation as a resistance strategy against authoritarian neoliberal developmentalism offers only limited, if any, success.

Ezgi Murat, in Chapter 7, focuses on education as a contested area, which states often use as an instrument for strengthening their power and dominance, but which can also become a site of resistance. Through an ethnographic study in a neighbourhood of İstanbul, Chapter 7 focuses on the People’s Houses Summer Schools’ educational activities which
become a resistance tool and space not only against mainstream education but also against the increasing authoritarianism that affects the daily lives of the neighbourhood’s residents.

In Chapter 8, Zeynep Özen and Lülüfer Körükmez focus on higher education under authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey through the case of dismissed Academics for Peace (Barış için Akademisyenler, BAK). Chapter 8 draws on the findings of the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey’s fieldwork to show the stigmatisation of dismissed academics as well as the collective struggle of the BAK under the AKP’s authoritarian neoliberalism.

In Chapter 9, Özge Özdüzen explores the media activism and the transient and participatory do-it-yourself (DIY) media practices of urban and media collectives and image activists against authoritarian policies in Turkey in the post-Occupy period (2013–2019). The chapter frames how the use of urban and digital spaces following the Gezi protests marked a continuous activist effort in signposting the heart of İstanbul as a ‘rebel city’ against the top-down control of urban space as well as the government’s media ownership and regulation.

Finally, in Chapter 10, Bilge Yabancı highlights the impact of Turkey’s authoritarian neoliberal governance on the transformation of civil society and its latent counter-mobilisation. Building on original fieldwork and interviews with activists conducted in 2018–2019, this chapter argues that the government-oriented civil society sector aims to soften the immediate effects of the state’s withdrawal from social provision and generate bottom-up consent for authoritarian neoliberal governance in Turkey. By focusing on the case of a unique social movement that fuses class politics with Islamic social justice, Müslüman Sol hareket (Muslim Left movement), Chapter 10 shows how the socialist ideology synchronised with Islamic justice to challenge the neoliberal exploitation, instrumentalisation and politicisation of religion, and authoritarian governance by the AKP.

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