

Türkiye'nin 2017-2024 Yılları Arasındaki Demokrasi Süreci

Türkiye's Democracy Process Between 2017 And 2024

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Özet

Günümüzde en çok arzu edilen yönetim biçimi olan demokrasi, kökeni ekseninde tanımlandığında içerisinde halka dair doneler taşıyan ve özgürlüklere erişim noktasında çekirdek bir kavram statüsündedir. Demokrasi ile yönetilen ülkeler, yurttaşlarına çeşitli alanlarda belirli özgürlükler sağlar ve bu özgürlükler ülke içerisindeki iç çatışmaların ve haksızlıkların önlenmesi gayesinde önem arz eder. Ülkelerin özgürlük oranları bağlamında belli bir puan sistemi ile demokratikliklerine yorum getiren Freedom House, demokrasiye yönelik kabulleri bağlamında dikkat çeken bir sivil toplum kuruluşudur. Buna binaen Türkiye için yapmış olduğu incelemeler ve çıkarımlar, Türkiye'nin demokrasi geleneğini ve özgürlüklere vermiş olduğu önemin tarihsel süreçteki değişimlerini anlamak adına dikkate değerdir. Bu çalışmada Freedom House verileri ışığında Türkiye'nin 2017-2024 yılları arasındaki demokratiklik puanları incelenerek, yaşanan olayların, sivil özgürlüklerden olan ifade ve inanç özgürlüğü özelinde nasıl bir etki yarattığı ve Freedom House verileri açısından demokrasiye nasıl etki ettiğini ortaya koymak amaçlanmıştır. Bu doğrultuda demokrasi, sivil haklar, özgürlükler kavramları incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Demokrasi, İfade Ve İnanç Özgürlüğü, Freedom House, Türkiye

Abstract

Democracy, which is the most desired form of government today, has the status of a core concept in terms of access to freedoms, which, when defined in terms of its origins, carries public elements within it. Countries governed by democracy provide their citizens with certain freedoms in various fields and these freedoms are important in preventing internal conflicts and injustices within the country. Freedom House, which comments on the democracy of countries with a certain point system in the context of their freedom rates, is a non-governmental organization that draws attention in the context of its acceptance of democracy. Accordingly, its analysis and conclusions for Turkey are noteworthy for understanding Turkey's democratic tradition and the changes in the importance it attaches to freedoms in the historical process.

This study aims to analyze Turkey's democratic scores between 2017 and 2024 in the light of Freedom House data and to reveal how the events that have taken place have affected freedom of expression and freedom of belief, which are among civil liberties, and how they have affected democracy in terms of Freedom House data. In this direction, the concepts of democracy, civil rights and freedoms will be analyzed.

Keywords: Democracy, Freedom of Expression and Belief, Freedom House, Türkiye

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1. INTRODUCTION

Democracy, which prioritizes the political participation of the people, fundamental rights and freedoms, the subordination of power to the people and political pluralism, is a constitutional concept in many countries today. However, it is always open to debate whether every country that fulfills these principles is democratic or not. Although constitutionally guaranteed, in the practices of some countries these principles do not proceed in parallel with the constitution. We can say that democracy, which is effectively practiced in most of the countries governed within the framework of universal rules of law, has sort of existed with these rules. These rights, which guarantee the freedom, equality and security of the individual in every sense, cannot be ignored in terms of their contribution to democracy (Beetham and Boyle, 1998: 1).

Turkey is a country that shows variability in terms of freedoms in parallel with the events in terms of its level of development and political and social mobility. It would not be correct to say that Turkey, which is governed by a president elected by the people, is not governed by democracy. In this respect, it can be interpreted that Turkey is eclectically committed to democratic issues. What adds originality to the study is the examination of the impact of the scores given to civil rights and freedoms by Freedom House between 2017 and 2024 on the democratic rate in a holistic sense. The reason for examining civil rights and freedoms in particular is that the social and political events that the country has experienced largely determine democracy. Basically, the implementation of states of emergency since the coup d'état on July 15, 2016 and the transition to the presidential government system with the regime change in 2017 can be considered a milestone in terms of the democratic ratios of Freedom House data. In this study, it is aimed to examine the democratic ratios given by Freedom House to Turkey between 2017 and 2024 in the context of freedom of expression and freedom of belief, which are under the heading of civil liberties, and to reveal the effects of political and social events on these freedoms, and at the same time to examine the arguments on the basis of which Turkey, which was considered partially free in 2017, fell to the status of an unfree country in the following years. The main reason for choosing 2017 as the starting point is that a fundamental change in Turkey's political regime began to institutionalize from this date onwards. In particular, the state of emergency regime imposed after the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, created significant restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms. The transition to the presidential system of government with the constitutional referendum held in 2017 expanded the powers of the executive branch, directly affecting democratic checks and balances. Therefore, 2017 represents a turning point in understanding the trajectory of Turkey's level of democracy. It also provides a suitable starting point for evaluating the institutional and political developments that emerged in subsequent years. In this context, firstly, the concept of democracy will be mentioned, then the working system of Freedom House and its assumptions about democracy, which are in line with universal rules of law, will be mentioned, and the effects of Turkey's general atmosphere between the relevant years, which is the main subject of examination, on the freedom of expression and belief, which are included in subparagraph D under the heading of civil rights, will be discussed. On the basis of these discussions, it would be appropriate to review the literature on the theoretical definitions of democracy and the people, as well as the basic characteristics of authoritarian and totalitarian systems in order to ensure the integrity of the subject. Historical and descriptive research techniques were used in the study and data analysis was conducted.

2. DEMOCRACY

The concept of democracy, which is based on the principle of government of the people by the people for the people, has been subjected to different definitions by many thinkers throughout the historical process. Democracy, an ancient Greek word, is a concept that emerged with the merger of the words demos (people) and Kratos (administration) and means popular rule (Heywood, 201: 102; Gökçe, 2021: 59). In other systems of government, people become leaders through birth, lottery, wealth, violence, co-optation, knowledge, appointment, or examination, whereas in democracy, the main

method is for leaders to be elected by the people they will govern through elections (Huntington, 1996: 4). The most important issue in democracies is that the government is in the hands of the people. This can only be achieved by a government elected by the people through regular and fair elections. The concept of the people, which defines all people living in the country, is a human community where everyone has equal rights regardless of differences such as color, language, religion, gender, ancestry and economic power. In addition, the concepts of equality and rights are two important concepts that complement the word democracy. Democracy requires equal representation and participation of all segments of society. In order to ensure this participation, political elections should be held regularly and fairly, as mentioned above, and at the same time, people should not face harsh obstacles in exercising their right to freedom of expression. (Gökçe and Aksu, 2020: 195; Ateş, 1994: 9-11; Gökçe, 2013: 66). Otherwise, the functioning of democracy will be interrupted and the country's regime will inevitably become authoritarian. Democracy and elections, a concept that has been discussed since the ancient Greek period, began to be held with unequal and limited participation, far from fair understanding, as far as possible not to the detriment of the ruler. The fact that slaves and women did not have the right to vote in ancient Greece, when the slavery system was still in place, was in a position that was not equivalent to the definitions of democracy by historians and thinkers close to the present day. However, the emergence of concepts such as equality, nation, participation and rights, which emerged as feudal societies entered a process of evolution in terms of governance and law by joining the developments in the world, is a valuable step in the context of moving democracy away from its initial definitions. While the concept of democracy was defined in the 18th and 19th centuries from a normative perspective such as "common good" and "general benefit," changes occurred in this perspective in the second half of the 20th century, and definitions emphasizing its analytical dimension began to dominate democracy studies (Beetham, 2014: 70; Özcan, 2022: 37). At this point, I find it necessary to mention some of the most well-known definitions of the concept of democracy, which has been subjected to many definitions.

Dahl, who prefers to explain democracy based on 5 criteria, defines the opportunities provided by democracy as effective participation in terms of taking the views of the individuals involved in politics, the right to vote with equal value and voting equality, the right to be informed about the final policy to be implemented, the right to have the last word on the agenda that makes their opinions on how they want the items to be put on the agenda valuable, and the involvement of adults who have the rights in these four items. He sees these opportunities as essential for members of society to have equal rights (Dahl, 2021: 47-48). At the same time, the regime Dahl calls polyarchic democracy shapes six institutions. These are: elected officials, free and fair elections, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information, organizational autonomy and inclusive citizenship. According to Dahl, a regime cannot be considered a democracy if it lacks any of these (Tilly, 2014: 27).

Touraine, on the other hand, does not define a government without political pluralism in which the rulers are not freely elected by the ruled as democratic. Especially if the voters have to choose between the oligarchy, the military and only two factions of the state, there can be no talk of democracy at all (Touraine, 1997: 17). Touraine, like Dahl, speaks of the complementary dimensions of democracy, which he characterizes in three ways: respect for fundamental rights, citizenship and the representativeness of rulers. The interdependence between these three concepts constitutes democracy (Touraine, 1997: 45).

For Lijphart, who theoretically supports democratic governance within the framework of the majoritarian model of democracy, democracy is a form of government by and for the people that is compatible with the wishes of the majority and governed by the majority, as opposed to government by and for the people that responds to the wishes of the minority and governed by the minority. As an equivalent interpretation, Lijphart adds to his definition that the rule of the majority is more democratic than the rule of the minority and sustainable without the danger of authority (Lijphart, 2024: 16).

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Finally, Charles Tilly, in defining democracy, mentions four dimensions, focusing on democratization and the reversal of democracy. These dimensions are: Breadth, equality, protection and mutual binding. While he considers the movement of these four elements towards the upper ends as democratization, he defines the movement towards the lower ends as the reversal of democracy (Tilly, 2014: 35).

Considering the diversity of definitions of democracy, it can be said that there is no common definition of this concept. Liberal, socialist, communist, conservative and communist ideas list the virtues of democracy and defend their own understanding of democracy. Therefore, the democratic tradition does not offer a single ideal of governance for the people, but it is also an area of debate on how the people's governance will be realized (Nodia, 1993: 40; Heywood, 2012: 273; Barry, 2018: 425).

In addition to the diversity of conceptions of democracy, it is noteworthy to mention the definition of democracy and the scoring system of Freedom House, which scores democracy within the framework of certain elements, for the analysis of Turkey.

3. FREEDOM HOUSE

Beyond these definitions of democracy, Freedom House, which proceeds with a point system within the framework of certain assumptions based on the forms of governance of countries, takes into account the events that take place in countries every year and concludes the results with a percentage rate as free, partially free and not free. It would not be wrong to define free countries as democratic, partly free countries as limited democratic and not free countries as non-democratic. After the Second World War, with the spread of democracy on a global scale, similar to these classifications, we see regimes classified as full democracies, imperfect democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes. Schedler, Levitsky & Way, and Diamond, who are among the most important names in political regime studies and published three articles under the heading "Elections without Democracy" in the *Journal of Democracy* in 2002, classified hybrid regimes as a subtype of authoritarian regimes. In these articles, Schedler defined hybrid regimes as electoral authoritarian regimes, while Levitsky and Way defined them as competitive authoritarian regimes. Diamond, on the other hand, sought to identify the distinguishing features between electoral democracies and electoral authoritarian regimes (Aksu, 2021: 2; Özcan, 2022: 42–43; Begtimur, 2025; 1696).

In the context of the process of transition to democracy, it is possible to say that countries are analyzed in three classes: countries in transition to democracy, countries that consolidate and strengthen their democracy not only as a "political regime" but also as a "political culture" and countries that deepen their democracy as a way of social life (Kemahlioğlu, Keyman, 2011: 4).

It would not be wrong to say that Freedom House, which acts in line with universal legal principles and an understanding of freedom and democracy, considers the results mentioned above to be equivalent to three forms of government. This situation is summarized in Table 1 below.

Tablo 1 The relationship between freedom and democracy, according to Freedom House

Free	Democratic
Partly Free	Authoritarian
Not Free	Totalitarian

Before addressing the working system of Freedom House and the elements of democratic understanding, it would be more useful to explain the above forms of state in order to explain the original part of the study in the following pages.

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When defining democratic countries, it is very likely to see a government elected by the people and fair, regular and egalitarian elections. To paraphrase Tilly, "A regime is democratic insofar as the political relations between the state and its citizens involve broad, equal, protected and mutually binding consultation" (Tilly, 2014: 104). Let us expand on this definition. The elimination of class imbalances, where all segments of the population are exposed to state policies and, more positively, have rights (especially the right to vote), is fundamental to the governance of a democratic country. It would not be wrong to consider the principle of equality as another fundamental characteristic of democracy. Beyond the equality between citizens, the notion of equality is important in the sense that those who are later naturalized citizens have the same rights as those who were born citizens. Although the notion of protection here is linked to statism, it actually emphasizes equality. He mentions the importance of protecting the holistic structure of the state and states that in order to ensure this protection, all citizens should be evaluated under the same criminal responsibility and should be free from favoritist policies. Finally, Tilly mentions the principle of mutual bindingness, which prevents the rulers from making decisions on their own, thus putting a big stone in front of the transformation into authoritarian and totalitarian systems and limiting the effectiveness of the ruler's domination. In the context of this principle, citizens can easily communicate their demands, requests and complaints to the rulers, in other words, it is a principle that enables them to overcome the obstacles to their relations with the ruler due to the bureaucrat accumulation in between. In addition, Dahl's argument is also indispensable for democracy. By defining a participatory, pluralistic and competitive democracy, he did not only focus on the freedom of elections, but also placed freedom of expression, freedom of association and access to information in a valuable place for democracy.

Authoritarian systems are those that allow for a limited but unaccountable political pluralism, have a mindset that is unique to them rather than guiding, and do not make a concerted effort to involve individuals in political processes, or do not emphasize it at all unless it is in their own interest to do so. Based on the rule of a small group or a leader, these systems are based on the exercise of power within limits that are not well-defined in form, but in practice are quite predictable (Linz, 2008: 137).

Authoritarian systems, defined as a transitional administration in the context of the transformation of democratic regimes into non-democratic ones, may eclectically adhere to democratic elements. In these systems, where there are opposition parties to the ruling party, it is not very likely that opposition parties will come to power. There is a certain domination over the people, but in some cases there are also freedoms. In general terms, we see that the transition of various countries of the world to authoritarian and then totalitarian systems or the continuation of the authoritarian system depends on a state of emergency. For example, Ernst Fraenkel, in his book *The Dual State*, made inferences about the formation of the Nazi regime in Germany by analyzing the trial minutes of political trials. He cites the appointment of Hitler as Reich Chancellor on January 30, the declaration of a state of civil emergency contained in the decree law of February 28, 1933, and the signing of the Powers Act of March 2, 1933 as the beginning of authoritarianism (Fraenkel, 2020: 36). He proves that a form of state shifting towards totalitarianism emerged in the aftermath and that the temporary martial law and state of emergency regimes gradually turned into permanent ones. Fraenkel then states that the state is divided into two, the state of norms and the state of precaution, and explains that the reason for this is the continuity of the regime throughout the book.

Totalitarian systems, on the other hand, are systems of domination that do not allow for even a limited political majority and are not based on an electoral process. In his book, Linz, quoting Friedrich, emphasizes six features that distinguish totalitarian systems from heterocracies and autocracies. The first is the existence of a totalist ideology, which constitutes the root word of the regime type. The second is the existence of a single party under a single leader, the dictator, who is committed to this ideology; the third is a highly developed secret police and the possession of certain monopolies (communications, weapons, economic organizations) that embody the other three characteristics (Linz, 2008: 34).

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Rather than defining totalitarian systems directly, Linz analyzed them in two stages: before totalitarianism and after totalitarianism. The Nazi and Soviet regimes, two of the most well-known totalitarian systems, did not come into existence as totalitarian systems. They were subjected to a transition process like the Nazi example in Fraenkel's book above. Pre-totalitarian authoritarian regimes operate semi-loyally to democracy, making tactical deals in order to gain the support of other parties and institutions. In post-totalitarian authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, totalitarian control was consolidated and maintained for a long time. However, this established regime has undergone a process of adaptation and transformation under the influence of economic and social variables. In other words, what Linz means by the aftermath of totalitarianism is the evolution of the regime into a more participatory democracy with the wave of change and democracy in the world (Özbudun, 2011: 33).

Following the definitions of democracy, authoritarian system and totalitarian system, it is essential to make a detailed analysis of Freedom House's working system and scoring criteria. Based on the above definitions of democracy, we can summarize that democratic systems are those that allow the free expression of political preferences based on the freedoms of association, information and communication in order to realize free competition for leaders (Linz, 2008: 23). Freedom House's criteria are in line with these and the criteria mentioned above. The methodology of the report is largely derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. This organization, which argues that it is not enough for a country to be legally committed to democratic principles, conducts research on whether this is also the case in practice and obtains an output as a result of scoring. This scoring system works like this:

When Freedom House rates a country's democratic values, it bases its assessment on criteria such as a competitive multi-party political system, the right to vote for all adults, regular and reliable elections, and the ability of political parties to reach voters in a transparent manner (Duyar, 2022: 90). Freedom House's work is divided into two categories: political rights and civil liberties. The questions under these categories shed light on the fundamental issues facing countries (Becker & Vlad, 2015: 2). 10 political rights indicators and 15 civil liberties indicators in the form of questions about a country or region are scored on a scale of 0-4, with 0 representing the smallest degree of freedom and 4 representing the greatest degree of freedom. Questions on political rights are categorized into three sub-categories: 3 questions on the electoral process, 4 questions on political pluralism and participation and 4 questions on the functioning of government. Questions on civil liberties are divided into four sub-categories: 4 questions on freedom of expression and belief, 3 questions on associational and organizational rights, 4 questions on the rule of law and 4 questions on personal autonomy and individual rights. The maximum score for political rights is 40, while the maximum score for civil liberties is 60. The sum of these scores indicates how democratic a country is out of 100. In the end, the country is positioned in one of three statuses: free, partly free and not free (Freedom House, 2025). I stated at the beginning of the study that the original part of the study is the evolution of freedom of expression and freedom of belief in the context of the relevant years in Turkey, which is examined in Article D under the heading of civil liberties. Before moving on to this section, the questions addressed in Section D, the answers sought, and the criteria for freedom that are considered important are outlined in Table 2.

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Table 2 Criteria considered when determining freedom scores for item D

D1	D2	D3	D4
Is there a free and independent media?	Are individuals free to practice and express their religious beliefs or non-beliefs publicly and privately?	Is there academic freedom and is the education system free from overarching political indoctrination?	Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive issues without fear of surveillance or reprisals?

I will examine these headings in the table above, starting in 2017 and extending to 2024 (including 2024). The methodology for this examination will be to compare each year with the previous year. While making comparisons, if there is no difference in the reasons for the questions and answers that received the same score in the previous year, they will not be mentioned again. Only Freedom House data will be analyzed from an objective point of view. The reason for using Freedom House data is that it is one of the most frequently used and long-standing data sets in democracy measurements. The organization's systematic scoring method, mentioned above, facilitates research by enabling comparisons of countries' democratic performance. However, Freedom House assessments have been criticized for adopting a Western-centric normative approach and sometimes relying on subjective interpretations. While this study is based on Freedom House data, it is important to link the findings with data from other indices such as V-Dem, Polity, and The Economist Intelligence Unit in order to increase their objectivity. The measurements of these indices, which are based on variables such as electoral processes, civil liberties, judicial independence, and political participation, generally correspond with Freedom House data. For example, while the aforementioned indices indicate that Turkey has shown a tendency toward authoritarianism since 2013, Freedom House data has also commented on Turkey's level of democracy with parallel explanations. This situation supports the credibility of Freedom House.

4. TURKEY ACCORDING TO FREEDOM HOUSE DATA |

After the Second World War, a period of gross violations of human rights, important changes were made to protect human rights. States such as the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy and Japan firstly felt the need to regulate freedoms in their constitutions and especially to establish their guarantees, and then established Constitutional Courts to protect human rights against the law. With the strengthening of parliaments, constitutional courts, which aim to protect freedoms against the legislature, have also contributed to the transition to democracy and are equipped with duties and powers that will be effective in protecting fundamental rights and freedoms (Gökçe & Gölek, 2018: 135).

In the constitutions and laws of countries, citizens are granted political and civil rights. However, it is not possible to talk about democratic governance when these rights are not implemented effectively and fairly. In democratic countries, in addition to rights, freedoms and opportunities, citizens are granted freedoms such as freedom of belief and freedom of expression, and these freedoms are protected for the continuity of democracy. A democratic country ensures that its citizens fulfill their moral responsibilities. In order for an individual to have moral values and responsibilities, he/she needs to make decisions by exercising his/her right to free thinking, discussion and examination. In this respect, the freedoms of citizens have an important place in a democratic country to ensure continuity and order (Gökçe, 2013: 63). One of the important indicators taken into account by Freedom House, which measures the level of democracy of countries and proceeds with a scoring system, is civil rights and freedoms. Freedom of expression and freedom of belief, which have been most affected by the

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political changes in Turkey, are among the factors that directly affect democracy. Freedom of expression is one of the areas considered problematic in Turkey. Between 2008 and 2010, problems in the area of media freedoms caused Turkey to decline in The Economist Intelligence Unit's (EUI) Democracy Index ranking in recent years (Kemahloğlu, Keyman, 2011: 7). Freedom of belief, as well as freedom of expression, is a much debated and problematic area in Turkey. Questions have been raised about whether religious groups are subject to pressure, how leaders are chosen, whether there is government interference in this context, and the limitation of religious education (Kemahloğlu, Keyman, 2011: 7). In the freedom analysis conducted by Freedom House, various questions are included under the heading of freedom of expression and belief, as mentioned above. It is possible to say that there have been no significant changes in the scores given from 2017 to 2024 in response to these questions. Turkey's decline from being rated as partially free by Freedom House in 2017 to being classified as not free in subsequent years is not merely a numerical change reflecting a decline in scores. It is a result of the institutional restructuring that emerged after the presidential system of government was introduced. The new system has significantly weakened the executive branch's control over the legislature and judiciary, leading to the erosion of the principle of separation of powers. At the same time, the concentration of media ownership in favor of pro-government groups has led to a narrowing of press freedom and restrictions on alternative sources of information. Finally, the weakening of judicial independence has led to questions about the principle of impartiality in judicial proceedings against opposition politicians, journalists, and academics. These institutional changes have had negative repercussions on Freedom House's assessment criteria, including freedom of expression, the rule of law, and accountability in governance, leading to Turkey's categorical decline. However, as mentioned, differences can be seen in the reasoning behind these ratings due to sudden political changes in Turkey. The changes and their justifications for the relevant years are as follows.

Table 3 Turkey's Democracy Performance According to Freedom House Data (2017-2024)

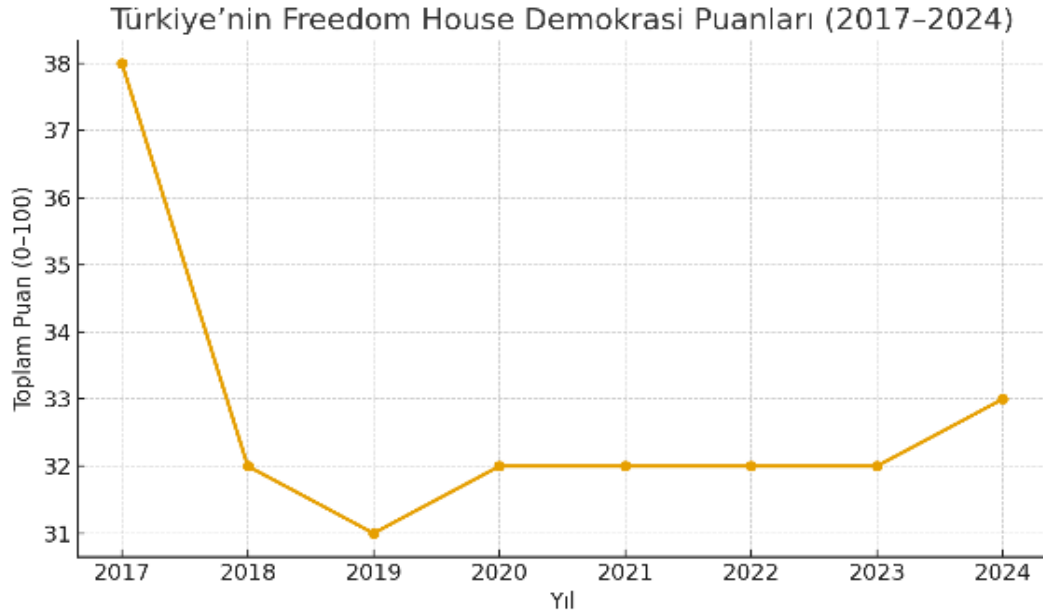
Year	Political Rights (0-40)	Civil Liberties (0-60)	Total (100)	Statü	Turning Point/Defining Event
2017	18	20	38	Partly free	State of Emergency after July 15, 2017 Constitutional Referendum
2018	16	16	32	Not free	Presidential Government System, Media Pressure
2019	15	16	31	Not free	Rector Appointments, Social Media Detentions
2020	16	16	32	Not free	RTÜK Influence, Wikipedia Ban Lifted
2021	16	16	32	Not free	Covid-19, Control of Information Flow, Karabakh Policy
2022	16	16	32	Not free	Bosphorus University Protests, Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention
2023	16	16	32	Not free	Election Law Amendment, Social Media Law, Kavala and İmamoğlu Cases
2024	17	16	33	Not free	Censorship and Detentions Following the February 6 Earthquake

As seen in the table above, Turkey's democratic performance between 2017 and 2024 declined from partially free status in 2017 to not free status. This decline is closely linked to certain turning points. The 2017 constitutional referendum, which strengthened the executive branch, led to the breakdown of institutional balances and the weakening of the judiciary. In the following years, increased pressure on the media and restrictions on freedom of expression inevitably led to a decline in Turkey's

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democracy scores. Even during the crisis caused by the February 6, 2023 earthquakes, the government appears to have imposed restrictions on the public's freedom of expression.

Figure 1 Turkey's Freedom House Democracy Scores by Year



4.1. Turkey in 2017

In 2017, Turkey scored 18 points for political rights and 20 points for civil rights, and its freedom rate was 38%, placing it in the category of partly free countries. This was a year in which the effects of the coup attempt in July 2016 had begun and the state of emergency was also in effect. Since the 2017 Freedom House data does not have a score out of 4, it will be sufficient to consider the outputs of the researcher of the organization in terms of Turkey. In addition to describing the Republic of Turkey as a country that organizes regular elections, the author also referred to the AKP's rule since 2002 and wrote that the government has shown a diminishing respect for civil liberties and political rights in the last five years. In 2016, the terrorist attacks in Gaziantep and Istanbul and the coup d'état are the main reasons for the declining respect. The analysis of free media in the light of the 2017 data on free media mentioned that many media outlets belonging to the Fethullah terrorist organization were closed down and banned. In the aftermath of this process, it is noteworthy that many journalists were imprisoned regardless of whether they were FETÖ members or not, and that the AKP tried to bring most of the media under its protection.

Although the Constitution protects freedom of religion, religion has become more prominent in the public sphere as a result of the policies of the AKP, which seeks to ensure its continuity through religious expressions. Studies showing that government-friendly sermons are preached in mosques prove that the connection between the AKP and religion is being strengthened. It is claimed that there is a religious agenda in favor of Sunni Muslims and the oppression of Alevis is mentioned as an outcome of this. The evidence for this is the unequivocal ruling of the European Court of Human Rights on discrimination. Finally, it mentions the official recognition of Jewish, Orthodox and Armenian Christians.

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Academic freedom has become a major concern, the company said, after more than 1,400 Turkish academics signed a petition calling for an end to military intervention in Kurdish-majority centers, and were investigated for what it described as treason. As a result, many academics were fired and detained. University deans were forced to resign, nearly 4,000 academics suspected of links to FETÖ were dismissed and 15 universities were closed down.

Many restrictions on internet access were imposed during the state of emergency, including restrictions on Twitter. The fact that pro-Gülen websites were blocked after the coup, as well as other accounts critical of the government, can be said to be a disability in terms of freedom of expression.

4.2. Turkey in 2018

In 2018, Turkey dropped 16 points in political rights and 16 points in civil rights, to the status of an unfree country with a 32% freedom rate. With the transition to a more centralized presidential government system, the governance system became more centralized and continued to adopt restrictive policies for the continuity of power as in 2017. The mass replacement of elected mayors with government appointees, the prosecution of rights defenders and other perceived enemies of the state, and the purges of state employees have also prevented citizens from expressing opinions on sensitive issues.

According to the research firm, Turkey's April referendum, which was characterized by a highly unbalanced electoral process, had its legitimacy undermined by an illegal ballot system and counting. The prolonged state of emergency and the government's use of decrees to govern was also a key issue undermining the rule of law.

In terms of free and independent media, Turkey did not deviate from the 2016 trend, and the banning of Wikipedia in 2017 was a notable change in this section of the company's research. It also noted that, unchanged from 2016, the mainstream media reported pro-government news and most TV channels ran headlines in favor of the government.

It also mentions the continued oppression of Alevis, the increase in the number of schools supporting Sunni Islam and the introduction of compulsory religious education.

In paragraph D3, which focuses on academic freedoms, it mentions that 5,000 academics were suspended at the beginning of 2017. In addition, in July 2017, the government announced a new school curriculum that excludes the theory of evolution and includes jihad lessons that it does not recognize with patriotic rhetoric. Another outcome of the research is that the curriculum is intended to continue the production of an increasingly religious and ideological content that conforms to the AKP's views.

Within the scope of the evaluation of sub-paragraph D4, the researches stating that citizens cannot easily express their opinions explained this process by referring to the discourse of self-censorship. Considering the long prison sentences and detention periods, citizens face this fear when expressing their opinions on a subject and cannot act freely. Freedom House, which had given me a score of 2 out of 4, later downgraded the D4 score to 1 due to increased self-censorship among ordinary people as a result of an ongoing government crackdown on dissent.

4.3. Turkey in 2019

In 2019, Turkey scored 15 points for political rights and 16 points for civil liberties and remained as an unfree country with 31% freedom rate. Although Turkey's score change is not in civil liberties, which is the subject of our review, it would be appropriate to look at whether there are any changes and additions between the sub-paragraphs.

While there were no significant changes affecting the freedom score in sub-paragraphs D1 and D2, the score in sub-paragraph D3, which includes academic freedoms, remained the same, but in

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addition to the researches, the change introduced in July 2018 regarding the rector appointments, which can be considered as a threat to academic freedom, draws attention. In both public and private universities, rector appointments will be made by the president, preventing academics from researching sensitive topics. Freedom House states that this increases self-censorship and political pressure on academia.

While there is no significant change in item D4, the fact that hundreds of people, including doctors, construction workers and high school students, were detained in January and February 2018 for their social media posts criticizing the Turkish military offensive in Syria's Afrin region does not change the score but can be considered as an addition to the justification.

4.4. Turkey in 2020

In 2020, Turkey scored 16 points for political rights and 16 points for civil rights and remained an unfree country with a 32% freedom rate. The 2019 local elections proved that the AKP's authority is not unlimited. The opposition party, which won Istanbul and Ankara, remained in a position to change the course of politics after 2019. The imprisonment of Selahattin Demirtaş on new terrorism charges and the conviction of Canan Kaftancıoğlu, the CHP's Istanbul provincial chairperson, were also events in 2019 that affected 2020. At the same time, the military operation in northern Syria and the detention of those who criticized this operation were among the important movements in 2019.

Although the score in item D1 remains unchanged, there is a change in the rationale for the score. Freedom House mentions that RTÜK has come under the influence of the ruling party and its supporters. Journalists continue to be arrested regularly during this period. However, it also stated that 13 journalists were released. In addition, the Wikipedia ban imposed in 2017 was ended in late 2019 by a constitutional court ruling. While there is no significant change in D2, in D3, we come across an inference that journalists arrested after the coup period were released. In D4, as stated in the overview section above, the detention of those who criticized the military operations in Syria due to their social media posts constitutes a difference in terms of the reason for scoring.

4.5. Turkey in 2021

In 2021, Turkey scored 16 points for political rights and 16 points for civil rights and remained an unfree country with a freedom rate of 32%. The Covid-19 crisis, the defining event of this year, has been a threat to the economy and the political position of the government. The inconsistent information provided by the authorities in line with official health statistics and the initiation of criminal investigations against medical experts who published independent information about the pandemic had an impact on the non-free country status in 2021. In these years, during which various arrests and detentions continued, there are significant changes in Freedom House's D1 and D2 headings. However, these changes did not create a plus or minus compared to the previous year's ratings. In D1, in addition to the previous year, it mentions that the government continues to expand its attempts to control news and information sources. It mentions restrictions on the content of international applications such as Facebook and Twitter, which are legally guaranteed and subject to heavy fines if not complied with.

The difference in line D2 is related to the policies regarding the Karabakh war. In 2020, the increasing targeting of non-Muslims with hate speech and the Turkish government's attacks on ethnic Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh were included in the scoring rationale as another argument strengthening this discourse.

Although there is no significant change in lines D3 and D4, it is mentioned that the arrests due to Covid-19 and FETÖ continue.

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4.6. Turkey in 2022

In 2022, Turkey remained an unfree country with a 32% freedom rate, scoring 16 points for political rights and 16 points for civil rights. 2021 was marked by the dismissal of the rector of Boğaziçi and his replacement with a political ally, and violent protests among students and faculty. As a result, Erdoğan dismissed the rector, a political ally of his, and appointed another political ally as rector in his place. The constitutional court's acceptance of the case to shut down the HDP in June and the unilateral decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention were also listed as influential events in 2021.

Looking at row D1, Freedom House wrote that in August 2021, the government blocked the web pages of 141 news reports published by Bianet, an independent outlet, which documented government corruption, the prosecution of journalists, and the increase in gender-based violence in the country. The bans imposed on Facebook and Twitter continued to increase, and in March 2021, all major social media companies opened offices in Turkey and continued their activities within the framework of these bans.

While there is no change in line D2, D3 mentions the protests and student movements stemming from the rector incident mentioned above in the overview section.

In row D4, we again see the results of arrests and detentions. In 2021, many social media users were detained for expressing their opinions on the rector crisis at Boğaziçi University and faced prosecution for their complaints about the economy. It also mentions criminal complaints against 26 people, including a former central bank governor, several economists and journalists, for criticizing the central bank's social media policies in the midst of a major currency crisis in December.

4.7. Turkey in 2023

In 2023, Turkey scored 16 points for political rights and 16 points for civil rights and remained an unfree country with a 32% freedom rate. Freedom House began by noting that the reduction of the threshold from 10% to 7% as a result of an electoral law passed by the AKP-led parliamentary majority changed the way seats were distributed among party alliances. The reason for this, it said, was to prevent the formation of a broad opposition alliance before the elections. In October, a law was approved imposing prison sentences of up to three years for those deemed to have incited misinformation on social media. Canan Kaftancıoğlu's conviction was upheld and İmamoğlu was convicted of insulting state institutions. In April 2022, Osman Kavala was convicted of conspiring to overthrow the government and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Line D1 states that the law imposing prison sentences of up to three years for individuals spreading misinformation on social media, as mentioned above, has been approved. It also states that a Kurdish journalist was detained prior to trial for posting on Twitter about allegations of sexual assault against a 14-year-old girl by police officers and soldiers, and that the first arrest warrant was issued in accordance with the law. The journalist was released after his lawyer filed an objection, but the case remains pending until the end of the year.

In line D2, the company referred to violent attacks on Alevi institutions in 2022, stating that at least five Alevi NGOs and places of worship were attacked between July and August. In line D3, it is written that restrictions on academic freedom continued unchanged from other years. In D4, the arrest of singer Gülşen for her remarks on religious education and her release in September may also be a reason for the stable scoring. It also mentioned that following the deadly bomb attack in 2022, the government forced international social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook and Telegram to restrict access.

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4.8. Turkey in 2024

In 2023, Turkey scored 17 points for political rights and 16 points for civil rights and remained an unfree country with a 33% freedom rate. It is safe to say that the reason for the changes in this year's scoring system is not due to restrictions, bans and arrests, but rather to increasingly apparent wrong economic policies and a major earthquake on February 6, 2023. The organization mentions that in May 2023, Erdoğan renewed his power by defeating his rival Kılıçdaroğlu. It also writes that with the earthquake, the government deepened its restrictions on freedom of expression and toughened its censorship policies. As a reflection of these practices, he observes that arrests took place, no different from previous years.

While no significant changes were observed in rows D1, D2, and D3 compared to previous years, row D4 states that 78 individuals were detained after February 2023 on the grounds of causing fear and panic through social media posts related to the earthquake. It also states that authorities identified 613 social media users who made inflammatory posts, with legal proceedings initiated against 293 of them. It also states that the government, which blocked access to the x application on the grounds that it had a negative impact in the context of search and rescue efforts, detained a German MP for several hours in August 2023, whom a Turkish prosecutor claimed was spreading terrorist propaganda.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, based on Freedom House data, Turkey's level of democracy between 2017 and 2024 is evaluated within the framework of freedom of expression and freedom of belief under the heading of civil rights. The findings show that Turkey has moved away from a democratic regime and evolved into an authoritarian and even totalitarian regime. Turkey's democratic decline since 2017 is part of a broader trend that cannot be explained solely by domestic political transformations. Turkey appears to be moving toward a regime type defined in the literature as competitive authoritarianism. In these regimes, even if elections are formally maintained, the ruling party limits the competitive power of the opposition by using state resources to its own advantage. From this perspective, it is not wrong to compare Turkey's experience with the media control and weakening of judicial independence seen under Viktor Orbán's administration in Hungary, Vladimir Putin's neutralization of institutional opposition in Russia, and the concentration of executive power after Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Therefore, Turkey's regression to the status of an unfree country can be seen not only as a national phenomenon but also as a reflection of the trend of democratic decline observed in many countries in recent years.

2017 stands out as a year in which the state of emergency regime continued in the immediate aftermath of the July 15, 2016 coup attempt and the government's crackdown on the media and academia intensified.

In 2018, with the transition to the presidential government system, Turkey was relegated to the status of an "unfree country". Inequalities in electoral processes, media control and further shrinking of academic autonomy were effective in this transformation.

In 2019 and 2020, the crackdown on freedoms of expression and belief continued systematically, and detentions and arrests for criticizing the government increased. It is possible to see that arrests, especially of journalists, increased in these later periods. Again in these years, the criminal sanctions imposed on citizens due to the Boğaziçi protests and criticism of the Afrin operation revealed that freedom of expression was narrowed.

2021 and 2022 were a period in which developments such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the rector appointment at Boğaziçi University increased the government's efforts to control the flow of information. The strengthening of control over RTÜK and social media supports this trend.

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2023 was characterized by legal regulations for elections, criminal sanctions introduced by the social media law and judicial processes against opposition figures such as Canan Kaftancıoğlu, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Osman Kavala.

In 2024, with the post-earthquake crisis, the crackdown on freedom of expression took on a new dimension; detentions for social media posts increased and access blocking intensified.

In 2017, Turkey was recognized as "partially free", but in the following years, it has fallen to the status of "not free" for a number of reasons, one after the other. This decline has followed a parallel course with the authoritarianization of state policies towards freedom of expression and freedom of belief. It can be argued that freedom of belief has been restricted by a number of influences based on the conservative view held by the government and changes in foreign policy. At the same time, the systematic suppression of freedom of expression and the right to dissent, which Robert Dahl considers essential in explaining polyarchic democracy, has had significant effects on the decline in Turkey's democratic level. Democracy, which emphasizes the importance of the separation of powers rather than the concentration of power in a single subject and at the same time incorporates many concepts such as equality and freedom, has not been seen to develop without popular influence. Although the democratic tradition of the election of the ruler by the people is maintained in Turkey, fair and equal elections and the absence of pressure on the opposition, as mentioned above, are also important for the country's democracy. Political participation and civil liberties, which connect and influence each other at many important points, are crucial for democratization. In Turkey, which is becoming increasingly authoritarian, it is important for democratization to remove the tutelage over the media, to rebuild academic autonomy in universities, to introduce independent judicial control and to remove the pressure on the opposition as much as possible.

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