



 Uğur Berk Kalelioğlu  
Westfälische Wilhelms-  
Universität Münster



**Received/Geliş Tarihi**  
03 March 2026

**Accepted/Kabul Tarihi**  
13 April 2026

**Publication/Yayın Tarihi**  
07 May 2026

**Corresponding  
Author/Sorumlu Yazar**  
Uğur Berk Kalelioğlu  
ukalelio@uni-muenster.de

**Cite this article**

Kalelioğlu, U. B. (2026). [Review  
of the book Why Turkey is  
authoritarian: From Atatürk to  
Erdoğan, by H. Karaveli]. Journal  
of International Relations and  
Political Science Studies,  
16, 51-56.



Content of this journal is  
licensed under a Creative  
Commons Attribution-  
Noncommercial 4.0  
International License.

**Book Review - Kitap İncelemesi**

**WHY TURKEY IS AUTHORITARIAN: FROM  
ATATÜRK TO ERDOĞAN**

**HALİL KARAVELİ, WHY TURKEY IS  
AUTHORITARIAN: FROM ATATÜRK TO ERDOĞAN,  
LONDON: PLUTO PRESS, 2018, 288 PP., ISBN  
9780745337555**

This review analyzes Halil Karaveli's Why Turkey is Authoritarian, which explains the persistence of authoritarianism in Turkey through a structural and class-based framework. Rejecting cultural explanations centered on secular-Islamist conflict, Karaveli argues that continuity lies in the enduring alliance between state power and capitalist interests from the late Ottoman period to the Erdoğan era. While the book offers a compelling reinterpretation of Turkish political history, its strong structural emphasis at times limits attention to contingency and ideological differences.

**Keywords:** Authoritarianism, Kemalism, Islamism, Capitalism

Halil Karaveli's *Why Turkey is Authoritarian: From Atatürk to Erdoğan* reinterprets the entirety of modern political history in Turkey, dispelling the commonly held notion that Turkey's authoritarian nature is due to a cultural divide between secularism and Islam. Instead, he suggests a structural and class-based explanation for the continued use of authoritarianism in Turkey as a result of long-standing right-wing dominance and the enduring coalition forged between capital and state power. The work, which stretches from the Ottoman Empire to the era of Erdoğan as leader, sets forth an original argument that forces readers to re-examine Turkish political theory in general.

In the Introduction, the tone of the book is established with the debunking of the "clash of civilizations" theory which has been used by the West to assess Turkey for many years, and especially after the events of September 11, 2001. Karaveli posits that both Kemalist secularism and Islamist conservatism do not affect the class nature of this regime—they are fundamentally the same; ideologically, they are opposites, but both ultimately exist to serve the capitalist interests of the ruling class and have restricted the development of democracy in Turkey. Karaveli argues that the ruling elite (military, secular, Islamist) in Turkey, regardless of who they are, continually protect large-scale economic strategies from the masses and do not allow any social redistribution to take place. Turkey has never completed its transition to being a liberal democracy.

In the first chapter "A Pattern of Violence," Karaveli documents how authoritarianism originated in the late Ottoman period and continued into the early Republican period; he contends that political violence is a constituent feature of the formation of the Turkish state itself. For example, the assassination of Mustafa Suphi and the first leaders of the Communist Party of Turkey in 1921 exemplifies a broader pattern of systematically eliminating leftist alternatives. This chapter demonstrates how Republican-era acts of repression influenced acts of violence in later years, such as the massacres of Alevis in the 1970s and persecution of Kurdish activists. By referencing the "deep state" and right-wing paramilitary violence, Karaveli points to a continuity of violence frequently absent from conventional historiography. By framing political violence as a permanently embedded mechanism of state-building, rather than an episodic occurrence, this chapter makes a compelling case for the view that repression was not an aberrant act but rather, one of the primary means used by regimes to consolidate power (p.9).

Karaveli undertakes a thorough examination of Kemalism in the following chapter to discuss the error of interpreting it as a progressive social democratic project, one in which nationalists could develop wholesale social democratic policies.

According to Karaveli, although many of the reforms associated with Kemalism were culturally radical and secular, they were fundamentally bourgeois in nature rather than indicative of a progressive social democratic project. For example, creating a centralized nation-state, abolishing the Sultanate, and promoting a "national bourgeoisie" (middle class) represented elite reconfigurations of dominance, rather than democratizing political authority. In addition, this chapter reviews the historical connection between Turkey's left-wing movements and Kemalism from a critical point. Through embracing nationalism and statism, parts of the left wing became linked to an authoritarian political culture. Based on this ideological complicity with the regime, Karaveli contends that the left has failed to mobilize independently from the state built on the reconfiguration of elites.

In "Capitalist Foundation," Karaveli shifts his focus to political economy. He argues that the creation of a Muslim-Turkish bourgeoisie after the displacement and consequent of Christian economic actors laid the structural groundwork for modern Turkey's authoritarian capitalism. The state did not merely regulate capitalism; it actively engineered a class that would be loyal to it. This chapter is central to the book's thesis. By foregrounding class formation, Karaveli reframes early Republican modernization as a project of capitalist consolidation rather than democratic transformation. While some readers may find the analysis somewhat deterministic, it offers a powerful counter argument to narratives that celebrate Kemalist modernization without scrutinizing its economic underpinnings.

In Chapter 4, "How the Right Won the People", the author addresses a crucial question: why has the Turkish working class repeatedly supported conservative and right-wing parties? Drawing comparisons with Thomas Frank's analysis of American conservatism, he argues that the Turkish right successfully mobilized religion, identity, and resentment against secular elites; cultural politics displaced class politics. The chapter examines the Democrat Party in the 1950s and later conservative movements, demonstrating how populist rhetoric masked pro-capitalist economic policies. This analysis effectively links Turkish developments to broader global trends of right-wing populism.

Perhaps the most compelling chapter, "Social Democratic Hope," explores the rise of Bülent Ecevit and the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi-CHP) in the 1970s. Karaveli portrays this period as a genuine opportunity for democratic transformation. Unlike Kemalist elites, Ecevit sought to prioritize labor rights, social justice, and redistribution. This chapter illustrates that Turkey's authoritarian trajectory was not inevitable.

A European-style social democracy briefly emerged, challenging entrenched interests. However, the experiment proved fragile in the face of economic crisis, Cold War pressures, and escalating political violence.

The losses of the left through 1975-1980 are chronicled in Chapter 6 "Vengeful Rights," where Karaveli explains how 'fascist' militias and the state's complicity destroyed (with the ultimate assistance of the 1980 military coup) the social democratic momentum that had been gathering in Turkey until the mid-1970s. The military government used this opportunity to define and enforce neoliberal economic reforms and to eradicate labor unions and the left-wing political movement. Karaveli convincingly indicates that the military coup has more to do with class and was undertaken to protect the capitalist economic interests of the nation and put it into line with the global neoliberal movement. The Cold War context was also important, and U.S. interests were a direct influence on the domestic authoritarianism of Turkey.

In "The Rise of the Islamists", Karaveli examines how the rise of Islamism has changed from being a minor force to a major political player. He argues that the rise of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi- AKP and Erdoğan does not represent a new democratizing process, but rather a reconfiguration of existing power structures among elites within Turkish society. The AKP formed alliances with and received support from the new Islamic business class that developed in the wake of the collapse of the Welfare Party and the rise of political Islam as a serious political force. Therefore, while there are similarities in the ways previous regimes in Turkey have been structured, including the relationship between political and economic liberalization, the intensity of Erdoğan's use of authoritarianism as a political tool is more pronounced than any past political leader in Turkey. Karaveli concludes that Erdoğan's illiberalism and its manifestations are not a departure from the authoritarian tendencies of earlier Turkish regimes but rather serve to amplify the existing long-term trends in Turkey's relationship with authoritarianism.

The epilogue of the work looks at how class interacts with ethnicity through the example of the Kurdish question and concludes that there is an increase in ethnic polarization as a result of the Kurdish issue and thus a fragmentation of the democratic opposition. The afterword discusses the renewal of repression towards Kurdish political organizations and suggests that this has led to a return to Kemalist-style nationalism through Islamist regimes. Karaveli argues that there is no left with social or cultural legitimacy, which has given the right a monopoly on popular legitimacy.

Karaveli's monograph offers a quite ambitious and bold discussion with a clear and logical structure. The most significant contribution of the book is its extended attempts to demonstrate how class relationships have been the most prominent factor in establishing continuity between the politics of Kemalism and those of Islamism. Karaveli's analysis challenges the historical and theoretical divides between secularism and Islamism by placing class relations at the centre of the analysis. His interpretation of continuity between Kemalist and Islamist regimes is both controversial and persuasive. Moreover, through the integration of historical narratives with political economy, the book has considerable strength regarding its capacity to explain historical events.

However, the strength of the book - its structural argument - has certain limitations. By placing class continuity and the persistence of right-wing rule in the foreground, many different historical events and episodes are treated mainly as examples of class struggle in support of a structural argument. As a result, there is not much room for contingency, changes in ideology, or significant institutional change. At various points in the book, Karaveli's emphasis on class may obscure the differences in the ways Kemalism and Islamism are expressed as ideologies. In particular, the significant cultural, social and institutional differences that exist between Kemalism and Islamism may warrant greater analytical independence from the framework provided by Karaveli.

The broad appropriateness of the term "right" in reference to Kemalism, conservative populism, and organized Islam as constituting a coherent analysis is daring; however, there is a tendency to level significant divergence in terms of ideology and politics by employing the term right to encompass a wide range of political and ideological structures. Similarly, by utilizing an analytical framework that focuses on capitalist relations and their corresponding dynamics, other forms of explanation—such as the dynamic relationship between populist movements, the nature of cultural identity, and the changing relationship between the state and its society—may be neglected or downplayed. The author in this book makes attempts to extend the dismissal of cultural discourse in reference to secular-Islamist conflict by employing the notion of structural determinism as an alternative framework; the result is a consistent and effective explanation of the phenomenon but is sometimes too schematic in form in its presentation.

Class-based frameworks are so heavily emphasised that Marxism in the Turkish context is often applied in conceptually problematic (and at times, quite strained) ways.

In relation to classical Marxist theory, it is not always possible to develop meaningful connections between the political/historical development of Turkey and the analytical categories of classical Marxism. The definition of Erdoğan as a “Bourgeois Conservative” (p. 15) exemplifies these tensions; the bourgeoisie not only denotes ownership of the means of production, but also implies political power associated with class position. Although the intent is to highlight structural continuity, the result is often analytical slippage and/or reductionism.

Moreover, the argument at times takes for granted the degree of agency associated with social movements and civil society, outside of elite-based institutions. Some readers might think that the author's description of the Turkish left is excessive. While it does an excellent job of presenting evidence of the left's complicity in nationalist discourse, there is less thorough examination of the debates that occurred within leftist movements, their ideological diversity, and the historical complexity that surrounds them.

The discussion of Kahramanmaraş raises a methodological concern about how to approach this history. The book presents a very emotionally charged account of the actions of French forces and the killing of thousands of Armenians in 1920 (p. 177) without citing any sources for these claims. Since similar accusations regarding mass killings and competing historical accounts during the late Ottoman Empire and early Republic period contain great political and historiographical sensitivities, it is imperative to provide careful documentation of the sources. Hence, the book's argument is weakened by the omission of footnotes; thus, with no way to verify what has been presented as fact, readers are not able to consider the merits of the argument.