

Research Article

Networks of Power and Political Order in Contemporary Turkey

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Abstract

The transformation of Turkish politics during more than two decades of Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule has generated a substantial literature on democratic backsliding, presidentialism, populism, clientelism, political Islam, and competitive authoritarianism. These perspectives have considerably advanced understanding of Turkey's changing political order, but they tend to privilege either formal institutions or regime-level characteristics. This article develops a complementary relational explanation. It argues that political power in contemporary Turkey is produced through the interaction of formal institutions with networks connecting political parties, state bureaucracies, municipalities, businesses, religious communities, civil society organizations, families, local intermediaries, and individual citizens. Formal institutions establish authoritative positions and control important resources, but networks shape access to those positions and influence how resources, information, opportunities, protection, and political influence circulate. Drawing on the literature on embeddedness, social capital, brokerage, clientelism, business-state relations, local government, digital surveillance, religious organization, and Kurdish politics, the article traces the historical foundations of relational politics in Turkey and examines their transformation during the AKP era. It develops the concepts of social liability and network revaluation to explain why connections that provide resources under one configuration of political power may generate dependency, exclusion, suspicion, or exposure when that configuration changes. The Turkish case demonstrates that political transformation involves more than institutional change. It entails the construction, displacement, fragmentation, and revaluation of networks. Contemporary Turkey is therefore best understood as a networked political order in which formal authority and relational power are mutually constitutive.

Keywords

Turkey, Informal Networks, Political Order, Patronage, Clientelism, Brokerage, AKP, Municipalities, Gulen Movement, Kurdish Politics, Social Liability

1. Introduction

The transformation of Turkish politics during the first quarter of the twenty-first century has produced one of the most extensive debates in contemporary comparative politics. Scholars have examined the rise and consolidation of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi,

AKP), the declining political role of the military, the concentration of executive authority, changes in judicial and media institutions, the transition from parliamentary to presidential government, the changing relationship between political Islam

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and the state, and the conditions under which opposition parties compete. Other strands of scholarship have concentrated on clientelism, welfare provision, public procurement, business-government relations, municipal politics, civil society, and the organizational capacities of the governing party. These literatures illuminate essential dimensions of Turkey's transformation, but they frequently operate at different levels of analysis. Regime studies emphasize institutions and political elites, whereas research on patronage and clientelism often concentrates on transactions, constituencies, or local political practices. The relational infrastructure connecting these levels consequently receives less systematic theoretical attention.

This institutional transformation forms part of a longer movement between democratic opening and political centralization. Gabbay (2024), examining Turkey's democratic evolution and authoritarian drift, situates contemporary political change within this broader trajectory [11]. The relational argument developed here extends that analysis by asking how institutional transformation affects the networks connecting political authority with businesses, municipalities, religious organizations, local intermediaries, and individual citizens.

This article argues that contemporary Turkish political order is more fully understood when institutions and relationships are analyzed together. Turkey possesses a dense formal institutional architecture consisting of the presidency, parliament, ministries, courts, political parties, municipalities, regulatory institutions, universities, security institutions, professional organizations, and an extensive bureaucracy. Yet citizens, businesses, activists, politicians, and organizations rarely encounter these institutions in the abstract. They encounter officials, party representatives, municipal employees, intermediaries, lawyers, business associations, community leaders, and other actors positioned within networks. A municipal government may possess formal authority over social assistance or licensing, for example, but citizens' practical access to these services can also be influenced by neighborhood representatives, party activists, professional acquaintances, hometown associations, or community brokers. Similarly, businesses formally interact with the state through procurement, taxation, licensing, and regulatory procedures while simultaneously operating within political and commercial networks that affect information and opportunity.

This argument draws on a well-established sociological insight. Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness challenged accounts of economic behavior that treated actors as socially atomized, arguing that economic action is embedded in ongoing structures of social relations [12]. Portes (1998) subsequently emphasized that social networks can generate both valuable resources and negative consequences, warning against treating social capital as inherently beneficial [20]. Burt's (2000) work further demonstrated that the structural position of actors within networks affects their access to information and brokerage opportunities, while Woolcock and Narayan (2000) emphasized the importance of relationships linking communities with institutions [5, 26]. These insights are

directly relevant to political order. Formal institutions determine who possesses recognized authority, but networks influence who can reach those actors, what information reaches them, which resources circulate through them, and who can bridge otherwise disconnected institutional and social environments.

Recent research on Turkey increasingly supports this relational interpretation. Bektas (2025) argues that presidentialism, centralized party organization, and electoral institutions can themselves reinforce patron-client relationships rather than simply being displaced by them [4]. Kiroğlu and Koytak's (2026) prosopographic study of 684 AKP district municipal council members in Istanbul demonstrates how local political authority is structured through differential access to social, economic, and organizational resources [14]. Kuran (2024), meanwhile, shows how AKP brokerage among Kurdish voters in Istanbul combines material distribution with trust, affective relationships, solidarity, and everyday problem solving [15]. These studies point toward a political system in which formal institutions and networks are not separate domains but interconnected components of political organization.

The argument developed here goes beyond the proposition that patronage exists in Turkey. Patronage and clientelism are important mechanisms, but politically consequential networks include a broader universe of relationships. Kinship, religious affiliation, professional connection, hometown origin, business association, friendship, municipal employment, political activism, and organizational history can acquire political significance even when politics was not the original purpose of the relationship. The central question is therefore not simply whether individuals participate in clientelist exchanges but how their position within overlapping networks affects their access to institutions, resources, information, protection, and risk.

A second contribution concerns temporality. Network ties do not possess permanently fixed values. A connection that facilitates professional advancement under one political configuration may become damaging after an alliance collapses. Business relationships that provide access to public contracts can simultaneously create dependency upon incumbent political actors. Membership in a religious community may provide education, trust, employment, and professional mobility but later become politically costly if that community enters into conflict with the state. Political relationships can therefore operate as social capital under one set of conditions and social liability under another.

Turkey provides an especially revealing setting for examining this process because its recent political history contains several episodes in which the value of relationships changed rapidly. The AKP's rise reorganized relationships among political parties, municipalities, businesses, religious organizations, charitable institutions, and social constituencies. The subsequent rupture between the AKP and the Gülen movement provides an unusually clear case in which previously

valuable affiliations were radically reinterpreted. Kurdish politics provides another setting in which parties, municipalities, civil society organizations, families, activists, and state institutions intersect in ways that cannot be reduced to formal organizational membership. More recently, competition between the central government and opposition-controlled municipalities has highlighted the continuing significance of local government as an institutional base from which alternative political networks can develop.

The article develops two concepts to capture these dynamics. Social liability refers to costs arising from an actor's relationships, network position, or attributed associations. Network revaluation refers to a change in the political, economic, or social value of a pre-existing relationship as the wider configuration of power changes. Neither concept replaces established approaches to authoritarianism, patronage, clientelism, institutional change, or social capital. Rather, they identify relational mechanisms connecting macro-level political transformation with organizational and individual experience.

2. Relational Power, Embeddedness, and Social Liability

Network analysis begins from the proposition that resources are distributed not only according to individual attributes but through relationships. Granovetter's (1985) analysis of embeddedness established that economic behavior cannot be adequately explained without considering ongoing social relations [12]. Burt (2000) similarly emphasized network position, particularly the advantages available to actors bridging otherwise disconnected groups [5]. Applied to politics, these insights direct attention away from formal authority alone and toward the pathways through which authority becomes accessible. Two citizens may possess formally identical political rights while occupying dramatically different relational positions. One may have relatives in government, professional relationships with lawyers, acquaintances in municipal administration, membership in business organizations, and personal access to elected officials. Another may possess none of these relationships. Their formal citizenship is equivalent, but their practical capacity to mobilize institutions may not be.

Social-capital theory provides another foundation. Portes (1998) defines social capital in terms of actors' ability to secure benefits through membership in networks and other social structures but simultaneously emphasizes its negative consequences, including exclusion of outsiders, excessive claims upon members, restrictions on individual freedom, and downward-leveling pressures [20]. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) likewise distinguish different forms of social capital and stress the importance of connections between communities and institutions [26]. These insights are important because they prevent a romantic understanding of networks. Dense relationships may generate trust and solidarity while simultane-

ously producing monitoring, obligation, exclusion, and conformity. A network can protect insiders while restricting outsiders.

The concept of social liability developed here extends this reasoning into the explicitly political domain. Social liability arises when relationships or attributed network positions impose costs upon an actor. These costs can be economic, professional, political, reputational, or physical. An individual can become dependent upon a patron, excluded because of affiliation with a competing network, disadvantaged because a previous association has lost influence, or exposed to investigation because a past relationship has acquired a new political meaning. Social liability therefore does not imply that the relationship was always harmful. Its theoretical importance lies precisely in explaining how a previously productive relationship can change value.

Network structure matters as much as network membership. Burt's (2000) analysis of brokerage suggests that actors connecting otherwise separated networks can obtain informational and strategic advantages [5]. Conversely, actors whose economic, political, and social relationships are concentrated within one dense network may become highly dependent upon it. Podolny and Page (1998) similarly caution that network forms of organization should be studied not only for their functional advantages but also for constraints and dysfunctions [19]. A Turkish businessperson whose customers, government contracts, financing, and political relationships all depend upon a single political network may possess considerable influence while that network controls relevant institutions. Yet the same concentration can produce vulnerability following political turnover.

This dynamic can be described as network revaluation. Network revaluation occurs when a change in the surrounding political field changes the resources or liabilities associated with an existing relationship. The relationship itself need not change. Nor must the beliefs of the individual actors change. What changes is the political environment in which the relationship is interpreted and used. In periods of rapid political realignment, actors may thus become more powerful or more vulnerable even when their own behavior has not changed.

Social liability and network revaluation provide a useful bridge between network sociology and political analysis. They direct attention to a dimension sometimes obscured by institutional approaches: political change reorders not only offices and rules but also the value of relationships accumulated under earlier conditions.

3. Historical Foundations of Network Politics in Turkey

Network politics in Turkey predates the AKP by generations. Clientelism, patronage, local brokerage, religious communities, kinship relationships, hometown solidarity, and relationships between local notables and central authority have long shaped political life. Recent historical research reinforces the importance of continuity. Öztan and Özdemir (2026) trace

patronage and clientelism across Turkish center-right politics from the Democratic Party period through the Justice Party, Motherland Party, and True Path Party, demonstrating how clientelist mechanisms adapted to changing economic structures and patterns of urbanization [18]. Rural networks were particularly important during the Democratic Party period, while subsequent industrialization and urban expansion produced more diversified and multilayered forms of brokerage. Clientelism therefore cannot be treated as an AKP innovation. The AKP inherited a political environment in which parties had long depended upon intermediaries linking national organizations with local constituencies.

The growth of multiparty competition after 1946 strengthened these incentives. Parties required local actors who could mobilize voters, interpret community demands, and mediate between citizens and increasingly important state institutions. Classic work on Turkish clientelism, subsequently synthesized by Sayarı (2014), emphasizes how patronage and personalized exchange became embedded within party politics [21]. Public employment, state investment, access to services, and political mediation became resources through which parties could establish durable relationships with constituencies. Political brokerage was therefore not external to institutional politics. It became one of the mechanisms through which formal party competition operated.

Urbanization transformed rather than eliminated these structures. Migration from Anatolian villages and provincial towns to Istanbul and other metropolitan centers created new demands for housing, employment, information, municipal services, and social assistance. Migrants frequently relied on relatives, fellow villagers, and hometown networks to navigate urban environments. Kiroğlu and Koytak's (2024) systematic study of hometown associations in Istanbul demonstrates the continuing density of organized solidarity among internal migrant populations [13]. Their analysis shows substantial variation in organizational density across migrant groups and illustrates how shared origin can be institutionalized through formal associations. These organizations constitute a social infrastructure through which information, assistance, identity, and potentially political influence can circulate.

The historical roots of such organizations reach even further back. Cora's (2020) study of Armenian homeland associations in late Ottoman Istanbul demonstrates that migrant solidarity organizations served as durable intermediaries connecting migrants, home communities, economic resources, education, and communal institutions [8]. The historical contexts differ profoundly, but the organizational principle is revealing: migration does not necessarily dissolve local ties. It can institutionalize them in new forms. Hometown networks therefore provide an important bridge between Turkey's history of internal migration and contemporary urban political organization.

The AKP's significance lies not in having invented network politics but in its capacity to reorganize, expand, and integrate relational structures with new forms of institutional power.

The difference is more than semantic. If clientelism were simply an AKP strategy, its durability could be explained primarily through party organization. If instead relational brokerage is deeply rooted in Turkish political development, the AKP's achievement must be understood partly as its ability to adapt an existing political repertoire to changing urban, economic, religious, and institutional conditions.

4. The AKP and the Reorganization of Political Connectivity

The AKP entered government in 2002 following a severe economic crisis and widespread dissatisfaction with established political parties. Its subsequent longevity cannot be explained by any single mechanism. Economic performance, conservative social identity, leadership, nationalism, institutional transformation, opposition weaknesses, foreign policy, welfare expansion, and electoral strategy all contributed at different stages. Yet organizational penetration into everyday social life constituted an important component of the party's durability.

Ark-Yıldırım (2017) demonstrates how socially embedded AKP activists connected voters to networks of public and private resources in low-income urban neighborhoods [2]. The importance of these activists was not limited to delivering benefits. Their local embeddedness provided information about households and communities, allowing political organizations to identify needs and mediate access to assistance. Yörük's (2020) historical analysis of Turkish welfare politics similarly shows that the expansion of social assistance cannot be understood separately from political mobilization and grassroots politics [28]. Welfare provision and political organization intersect because the distribution of assistance creates repeated points of contact between institutions, intermediaries, and citizens.

This mechanism is clearer still in Kuran's (2024) analysis of Kurdish voters in Istanbul's Bağcılar district [15]. Kurdish entrepreneurs, women, and associations served as co-ethnic brokers between the AKP and Kurdish constituencies. These intermediaries distributed material benefits, but their effectiveness also depended upon enduring personal relationships, trust, care, solidarity, and practical problem solving. In this setting, clientelism is relational as well as transactional. A broker who repeatedly helps residents negotiate everyday problems acquires a reputation and position that cannot be reduced to the monetary value of the benefits distributed.

The contemporary composition of AKP local elites supports this interpretation. Kiroğlu and Koytak's (2026) study of Istanbul municipal councilors identifies different social bases of local power, including rural notables embedded in hometown relationships, professionals connected with occupational and business organizations, and ideological cadres linked with religious, educational, and charitable institutions [14]. Political authority, on this account, draws upon several

forms of embeddedness. Individuals enter the political field carrying networks accumulated elsewhere, and these networks become resources for political organization.

Religious civil society provides another important channel. Arbatli and Arbatli (2025) use a close-election research design to show that religious associations proliferated more extensively in municipalities narrowly won by the AKP than in municipalities narrowly lost by it, and that AKP incumbency was associated with subsequent electoral advantage [1]. Their findings demonstrate how municipal control, civil society organization, and electoral politics can reinforce one another. Civil society should therefore not automatically be conceptualized as an autonomous sphere standing between state and society. Under some conditions, civil society organizations can become embedded within political networks connecting governing parties with local constituencies.

The shift toward presidential government further altered this architecture. Bektas (2025) argues that presidentialism, centralized party organization, and electoral institutions interact with patronage and clientelism [4]. The concentration of formal authority increases the value of relationships providing access to those controlling centralized resources. Informal networks, in other words, do not flourish only where formal institutions are weak. Strongly centralized formal institutions can increase the value of relational proximity to the center.

5. Relational Domains of Political Power

5.1. Business Networks, Procurement, and Political Dependency

The political economy of procurement provides particularly strong evidence for the conversion of relational position into material advantage. Çeviker Gürakar's (2016) extensive study of public procurement during the AKP era documents patterns of favoritism and politically connected firms [6]. Çeviker Gürakar and Bircan's (2019) subsequent analysis of 17,937 high-value construction procurements involving 5,945 winning firms found that politically connected firms benefited particularly under less competitive procurement procedures [7]. These findings demonstrate that formal administrative procedures and political relationships operate simultaneously rather than as mutually exclusive alternatives.

Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness is especially relevant here [12]. Firms do not encounter procurement markets as atomized economic actors. They exist within relationships with politicians, municipal officials, other businesses, banks, subcontractors, professional advisers, and business associations. Winning a public contract can strengthen these networks because the resulting economic resources finance employment, subcontracting, investment, and further organizational expansion. Political connectivity can therefore be converted into economic capital, which can subsequently create additional political and social connections.

Longitudinal research on Gaziantep business groups provides unusually direct evidence for the temporal dimension of this argument. Firms adjusted political relationships as governments and political circumstances changed, while business associations supplied channels through which political capital could be cultivated. The experience of firms associated with the Gülen network after the rupture with the AKP illustrates how connections that once supported growth could later become liabilities. This evidence reinforces the central claim of network revaluation: the value of a political tie depends on the wider configuration of power.

Political connections, then, are not simply assets. Concentrated incumbent relationships may generate substantial returns while political conditions remain stable but simultaneously create dependence. Firms maintaining more diversified relationships across business and political networks possess a different risk structure from those whose economic position depends heavily upon one political coalition. Political connectivity can involve a tradeoff between immediate access and longer-term resilience.

Political-economic networks can also become self-reinforcing. Political access generates contracts and opportunities; those resources facilitate business growth; growing firms employ workers and subcontractors, support associations, and develop local influence; and this enlarged organizational presence can strengthen political access. But recursive systems also transmit shocks. When a politically central network loses legitimacy or access, the consequences can travel outward through firms, employees, associations, and communities linked to it.

5.2. Municipalities as Network Hubs

Municipalities occupy a distinctive position in Turkey's relational political order because they connect formal authority with everyday social life. Local governments influence transportation, infrastructure, planning, licensing, social assistance, cultural programs, procurement, employment, public spaces, and numerous other services. Their work brings them into continuous contact with citizens, businesses, contractors, charities, neighborhood organizations, professional groups, and political activists. Municipalities should consequently be understood not simply as administrative units but as institutional hubs around which networks develop.

The evolution of Turkish local government demonstrates the political importance of this position. Research on decentralization and recentralization under the AKP describes an initial expansion of aspects of local authority followed by processes strengthening central control. The Housing Development Administration and other central institutions acquired important powers, while relations between metropolitan municipalities and the central state became increasingly hierarchical. After 2015, the replacement of elected Kurdish municipal administrations with appointed trustees represented a particularly strong form of institutional displacement.

The opposition victories in Istanbul, Ankara, and other metropolitan municipalities beginning in 2019 altered this relational geography. Opposition parties acquired control over institutions capable of delivering services, employing personnel, entering procurement relationships, communicating with millions of residents, and establishing relationships with civil society and business. Research on the post-2019 period describes recentralizing pressures affecting opposition-led municipalities through administrative, judicial, fiscal, and media mechanisms [23]. Whatever interpretation is attached to individual political conflicts, the structural point is clear: municipal control matters because it provides an institutional base from which networks can be constructed.

The relationship between religious associations and municipal incumbency reinforces this argument. Arbatli and Arbatli (2025) find that AKP-controlled municipalities facilitated greater proliferation of religious associations, which in turn formed part of the local political environment associated with incumbency advantage [1]. Municipalities do more than distribute services; control of local government can also shape the associational landscape of a city or district.

The Kurdish municipal experience illustrates the consequences of disrupting such networks. Tutkal (2022) analyzes the replacement of elected Kurdish mayors with appointed trustees, while Whiting and Kaya (2021) demonstrate how local polarization, clientelistic politics, and the historical treatment of Kurdish regions as exceptional facilitated the institutionalization of emergency governance [24, 25]. Removing a mayor therefore does considerably more than replace one officeholder. It can alter employment relationships, contracting arrangements, cultural programming, access to municipal institutions, and the political networks through which local communities interact with government. Institutional intervention is simultaneously network intervention.

5.3. Religious Networks and the AKP-Gülen Rupture

Religious communities have long provided organizational environments through which education, charity, trust, professional relationships, and economic cooperation can develop. Such communities can create social capital because shared identity reduces uncertainty and facilitates cooperation among people who are not related by kinship. Religious networks can provide scholarships, housing, employment information, business contacts, charitable assistance, and professional introductions. These resources help explain why religious movements cannot be understood solely through theology or formal organizational membership.

The relationship between the AKP and the Gülen movement demonstrates the political consequences of such embeddedness. Taş (2018) describes how the AKP and Gülen movement, although organizationally separate, initially developed a mutually advantageous relationship rooted partly in their shared opposition to elements of the secular establishment

[22]. Both provided channels of upward mobility for conservative Anatolian constituencies, while political office strengthened the movement's social and bureaucratic influence and movement networks supported the broader political transformation. Martin (2022) similarly characterizes the relationship as moving from cooperation to increasingly intense conflict as the movement came to be regarded by the AKP as a political threat [16].

The subsequent rupture provides perhaps the clearest illustration of network revaluation in contemporary Turkey. Relationships with Gülen-associated educational, business, media, professional, or charitable institutions could once generate educational and occupational opportunities. After the political conflict escalated, and especially following the failed coup of July 2016, Turkish authorities treated the movement as a terrorist organization and initiated extensive dismissals, arrests, prosecutions, closures, and asset seizures. The sociological significance lies in the transformation of the political meaning attached to relationships accumulated during an earlier period.

The process reaches backward into an individual's relational history. Individuals acquire relational biographies over time: schools attended, employers worked for, organizations joined, financial relationships maintained, colleagues known, and associations participated in. When an organization is subsequently reclassified politically, these earlier relationships can themselves be reinterpreted. Political transformation therefore reaches backward into biographies.

This mechanism also illustrates why association and intention must remain analytically distinct. Individuals participate in organizations for heterogeneous reasons. Educational opportunity, employment, friendship, religious commitment, business interest, family influence, or professional advancement may all generate similar observable connections. A network tie establishes a relationship but does not automatically establish the subjective meaning of that relationship to the participant. Nevertheless, institutions can assign political significance to the tie. The divergence between relational fact and attributed political meaning is itself an important source of social liability.

5.4. Kurdish Politics and the Problem of Relational Equivalence

Kurdish political life in Turkey is composed of overlapping but non-identical networks involving political parties, municipalities, civil society organizations, cultural associations, professional groups, families, activists, businesses, diaspora communities, and numerous ideological currents. Earlier work by Gabbay (2014) approached the Kurdish question explicitly through the tension between formal state borders and cultural, historical, and religious social networks extending across Turkey and Iraq [9]. This distinction remains analytically important because state territory and social-network geography do not necessarily coincide. Kurdish familial, cultural, politi-

cal, and communal relationships may cross both administrative and national boundaries, while individuals situated within these networks can nevertheless differ substantially in political orientation and organizational affiliation.

Analysis that collapses these relationships into a single category risks confusing network proximity with organizational membership or political intention. A person may vote for a Kurdish-oriented legal party without supporting an armed organization; a municipal employee may work under a Kurdish-led administration without sharing every political position of elected officials; relatives may hold divergent political views; and participation in cultural activities does not establish membership in other organizations.

At the same time, networks are indispensable to Kurdish political mobilization. Political parties rely on activists, families, municipal institutions, neighborhood relationships, professional organizations, and civil society actors to communicate with constituencies. The governing AKP has itself relied upon Kurdish intermediaries in attempting to build electoral support among Kurdish populations. Kuran's (2024) study is particularly important because it demonstrates that Kurdish identity does not map onto a single political organization [15]. Competing political actors attempt to build different networks within the same social constituencies.

Research on clientelistic acceptance among Turkish voters adds another dimension. Experimental work indicates that politicized Kurdish identity and perceptions of relative economic deprivation can influence attitudes toward clientelistic benefits, demonstrating that material distribution is interpreted through group identity and network context rather than through income alone. Political brokerage is therefore simultaneously economic, social, and symbolic.

The trustee system introduced after 2016 dramatically affected the institutional environment in which Kurdish networks operated. Tutkal (2022) documents the removal of elected Kurdish mayors and their replacement with appointed trustees, while Whiting and Kaya (2021) situate this practice within the broader relationship between emergency governance, local polarization, and autocratization [24, 25]. These interventions changed more than formal representation. Municipalities were sources of employment, services, political visibility, cultural activity, and organizational resources. Replacing elected administrations therefore restructured local networks.

The renewed Kurdish political process beginning in late 2024 and developing during 2025 introduces the possibility of another network revaluation. Relationships viewed primarily through a security framework during periods of armed conflict can acquire different political functions during negotiation. Peace processes require communication across boundaries, often increasing the importance of brokers who possess relationships with actors on different sides. Connections that previously generated suspicion may therefore become valuable channels of political communication. Network revaluation can operate in both directions: capital can become liability, but liability can also become capital.

5.5. Digital Networks, Surveillance, and Relational Visibility

Digitalization changes the political consequences of networks because relationships increasingly leave durable and searchable traces. Social media interactions, electronic communications, photographs, online organizational activity, digital financial transactions, employment records, and government databases make aspects of relational history more visible than in earlier periods. The political significance of a relationship can therefore persist even when direct interaction has ended.

Research on digital authoritarianism in Turkey provides evidence of the institutional environment surrounding this transformation. Yeşil and Sözeri (2017) trace the expansion of online surveillance through legal, technical, and participatory mechanisms [27]. More recently, Aslan and Yilmaz (2024) describe a Turkish model of digital authoritarianism involving censorship, surveillance, legal regulation, and technological infrastructures, arguing that it developed through both external influences and internally driven political processes [3].

The consequences are not confined to direct state action. Öz and Yanık (2024) find that perceived government surveillance is negatively associated with willingness to express political opinions online [17]. Surveillance can change behavior even when no sanction occurs. Individuals anticipate that digital activity may be visible and modify their conduct accordingly.

This has important implications for network theory. Historically, relationships could weaken when individuals moved geographically or ceased participating in organizations. Digital records make relational histories more persistent. An individual may physically leave a city or organization while remaining connected through archived communications, social media, photographs, professional databases, or government records. A recorded association may thus outlast current participation.

The practical result is that past relationships are easier to reconstruct. Political institutions, employers, adversaries, and other actors may be able to reconstruct aspects of a person's network history. This does not mean that every digital connection is politically meaningful. Indeed, the abundance of weak digital ties makes careful interpretation more important. A social-media connection may indicate anything from close affiliation to casual acquaintance. Nevertheless, digitalization expands the capacity of institutions and individuals to identify and classify relationships.

6. State Protection and Internal Relocation

6.1. State Protection and the Relational Accessibility of Institutions

State protection is usually conceptualized institutionally. Analysts ask whether laws prohibit particular conduct,

whether police forces are available, whether complaints can be filed, whether courts operate, and whether authorities are willing and able to enforce legal protections. These questions are indispensable, but a network perspective adds a second dimension: the practical accessibility of institutions.

Questions concerning the accessibility of state protection must also be situated within Turkey's broader human-rights and institutional environment. Gabbay (2019) examined Turkish human-rights practices in relation to the country's European Union candidacy, emphasizing tensions between formal commitments and their implementation [10]. For a relational analysis, the key point is that the formal existence of legal protection does not by itself establish how protection is experienced by particular individuals. State protection is delivered through institutions populated by socially embedded actors, and access to those institutions can therefore vary according to resources, knowledge, locality, and network position.

Formal availability and relational accessibility are not identical. Two individuals possessing the same legal rights may differ substantially in their ability to mobilize institutions. One may have financial resources, professional knowledge, access to lawyers, relatives in public service, or connections to organizations capable of advocacy. Another may lack these resources. Network position can affect the cost, speed, confidence, and effectiveness with which an individual approaches state institutions.

The same principle operates from the opposite direction. A threatening actor may possess local political, family, commercial, or professional relationships that affect how the target perceives the possibility of protection. Such claims cannot be assumed and require evidence in individual cases. Nevertheless, the theoretical point is important: state protection is implemented by institutions populated by socially embedded actors rather than abstract bureaucratic entities.

Network closure can become particularly consequential at the local level. In a dense community where political, commercial, family, and professional relationships overlap, approaching an institution may itself transmit information through the network. Conversely, large metropolitan environments may provide greater relational anonymity and a wider choice of institutions and intermediaries. The significance of these differences cannot be inferred from city size alone, but network structure provides a mechanism through which locality may affect protection.

A relational approach supplements rather than replaces institutional assessment. The existence of laws and agencies establishes the formal availability of protection. Network analysis asks whether and how a particular individual can practically access those institutions and whether the relevant threat operates through relationships capable of affecting that access.

6.2. Internal Relocation as Network Relocation

The same distinction applies to internal relocation. Conventional analysis often begins with geography: can an individual

move from one part of Turkey to Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Bursa, Antalya, or another city? Yet relocation is not simply movement across territory. It is movement between social environments.

Research on hometown associations illustrates why this matters. Kiroğlu and Koytak (2024) show that internal migrant populations in Istanbul maintain highly variable but often substantial organizational networks based on common geographic origin [13]. Hometown associations can institutionalize solidarity among people who have moved considerable distances from their places of origin. Geographic movement does not necessarily sever social ties. In some circumstances, migration actually encourages their formalization.

Relocation capacity is also shaped by network resources. Individuals moving to a new city require housing, employment, information, transportation, documentation, and social support. Family members can provide accommodation; hometown associations can provide introductions; professional contacts can facilitate employment; religious communities can provide practical assistance; and friends can help newcomers navigate unfamiliar institutions. Two individuals with similar education and financial resources may therefore possess very different relocation capacities because their networks differ.

Relocation can also fail to remove vulnerability when the relevant relationships extend beyond the place of origin. Family disputes can travel through kinship networks. Political histories can remain accessible through nationwide institutions. Professional communities may connect actors across cities. Digital communication allows relationships to persist without geographic proximity. Some threats are tightly bounded by locality; others can follow existing family, professional, political, or digital connections across considerable distance.

The relevant question is not simply how far the proposed destination lies from the place of origin. It is whether relocation meaningfully separates the individual from the relationships through which vulnerability is produced. That inquiry requires attention both to the geographic limits of a threat and to the actual reach of the actors involved.

At the same time, reach should not be presumed merely because a network exists. Networks should not be assumed to possess unlimited reach. A local family, employer, municipal official, or community leader may have substantial influence in one locality and virtually none elsewhere. Relational analysis requires evidence about network reach rather than assumptions based on either geographic distance or the mere existence of connections.

7. Network Closure, Reputation, and Dependence

Network density influences political behavior because dense relationships facilitate both cooperation and monitoring. When individuals interact simultaneously through family,

business, religion, neighborhood life, and politics, information about behavior travels rapidly. Such closure can strengthen trust because violations become visible and reputational sanctions become credible. Yet the same mechanism can restrict autonomy.

An individual whose employment, customers, friendships, community standing, and political access all depend upon one network faces higher costs of exit than someone whose relationships span several independent groups. Public expressions of loyalty cannot always be read straightforwardly as measures of private political conviction. Individuals may remain aligned because breaking with a network threatens resources extending far beyond politics.

Portes's (1998) warning about the negative consequences of social capital is especially relevant here [20]. Strong communities can impose excessive obligations and restrict individual freedom precisely because their solidarity is effective. Social capital at the group level can, under these conditions, become a liability for particular members.

Bridging relationships provide an alternative structure. Actors connected to multiple networks may possess greater autonomy because exclusion from one does not eliminate access to all resources. Burt's (2000) theory of structural holes suggests why brokers positioned between disconnected groups can acquire advantages, but the Turkish evidence indicates an additional benefit: diversified networks can reduce political exposure [5].

Reputation is similarly relational. Formal institutions evaluate individuals through qualifications, documents, and records, but networks transmit additional information. Who knows a person, who recommends them, who employs them, and who will vouch for them can influence appointments, contracts, business relationships, and organizational membership. Reputation is, in this sense, a relational resource.

Yet reputation can also undergo network revaluation. Association with a prestigious or powerful actor can enhance status at one moment and become stigmatizing at another. The Gülen rupture represents an extreme example, but the underlying mechanism is general. Political change modifies not only material opportunities but the reputational meaning of relationships.

8. Political Change as Network Revaluation

Political science understandably concentrates on visible institutional events: elections, constitutional amendments, changes of government, judicial decisions, party formation, and changes in executive authority. Yet each of these events can produce a less visible transformation in relational value. New brokers acquire access, established intermediaries lose it, firms reposition themselves, civil society organizations gain

or lose institutional connections, and former allies become adversaries.

Network revaluation describes this relational dimension of political transformation. It explains how a person can become vulnerable without changing behavior, how a company can lose opportunities without losing productive capacity, and how an intermediary can acquire political importance without receiving formal office. What changes is the actor's position relative to a reconfigured institutional and relational field.

Turkey provides repeated examples. The AKP's rise increased the value of networks connecting conservative political, business, religious, and social constituencies to newly influential institutions. The declining political role of the military reduced the value of relationships centered on older structures of tutelage. The AKP-Gülen rupture radically reversed the value of relationships associated with the Gülen movement. Opposition victories in major municipalities created alternative institutional nodes around which new relationships could form. Changes in the Kurdish conflict may similarly alter the political value of intermediaries capable of connecting previously antagonistic actors.

Network revaluation also helps explain continuity. Institutional change does not erase relationships instantaneously. Family ties, friendships, professional relationships, commercial partnerships, and organizational histories persist after elections and constitutional reforms. New political authorities inherit institutions populated by actors whose networks were formed under earlier political configurations.

Formal institutions may also remain unchanged while their relational content changes substantially. A ministry, municipality, university, political party, or business association can function differently when the networks surrounding and occupying it change. Institutional continuity, accordingly, need not imply continuity in the relationships through which an institution operates.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

9.1. Discussion

The relational approach developed here is intended to complement rather than replace established interpretations of contemporary Turkey. Presidentialism matters because it redistributes formal authority. Democratic erosion matters because it changes institutional constraints on political power. Clientelism matters because resources can be exchanged through personalized political relationships. Welfare policy matters because social assistance creates institutional relationships with households. Municipalities matter because they control services and resources. Religious organizations matter because they create communities of trust. Digital surveillance matters because it changes the visibility and perceived consequences of relationships. Network analysis connects these mechanisms.

The Turkish case also challenges the assumption that informal politics is necessarily evidence of weak formal institutions. Strong and centralized institutions can increase the political value of informal access. The more resources concentrated within a ministry, presidency, municipality, or regulatory body, the more valuable relationships with actors controlling those institutions can become. Informality and institutional strength can develop together.

Recent work on Turkey's local political organization strongly reinforces this point. AKP municipal councilors draw political capacity from different social bases; religious associations can proliferate through municipal incumbency; Kurdish brokers translate party resources into trusted community relationships; hometown organizations maintain solidarity among internal migrants; and recentralization changes the institutional environment within which local networks operate. None of these mechanisms can be understood adequately by examining either institutions or interpersonal relationships alone.

Although the evidence examined here is Turkish, the mechanism is not uniquely Turkish. Every political system contains networks affecting access to information and resources. What differs is the degree to which such networks become necessary, concentrated, politically identifiable, and vulnerable to revaluation. Turkey is especially revealing because significant institutional and coalition changes have occurred within a relatively short historical period while many organizations and social structures persisted. Relationships can therefore be observed moving between different political environments.

Political durability likewise possesses a relational infrastructure. Governments do not endure solely because they win elections or control coercive resources. Durable political organizations construct relationships connecting institutions with constituencies, businesses, local intermediaries, civil society, and communities. These networks transmit information, distribute resources, solve problems, mobilize voters, and create expectations. Yet because networks require continual maintenance, they also constitute potential sources of fragility. Economic crises can reduce distributable resources, new generations can form alternative networks, opposition parties can gain municipal bases, and former allies can defect.

The Turkish case suggests that political stability and political change both have a relational dimension. Networks stabilize political orders by embedding institutions in social relationships, but those same networks become channels through which political change propagates when relationships are disrupted or revalued.

9.2. Conclusion

Contemporary Turkey is best understood as a networked political order in which formal institutions and relational structures are deeply intertwined. This does not diminish the importance of constitutional arrangements, presidential authority, political parties, courts, municipalities, bureaucracies, elections, or markets. These institutions establish positions of

authority and control resources that profoundly affect political life. But institutions alone cannot explain how individuals and organizations reach those resources, how influence travels across institutional boundaries, or why actors possessing formally similar rights and resources can experience the political system differently.

Power travels through relationships. The AKP's organizational durability has depended partly upon its ability to connect national political authority with local activists, municipalities, businesses, religious constituencies, civil society organizations, welfare recipients, and voters. Research on clientelism demonstrates how brokers transform resources into durable relationships. Public procurement demonstrates how political connections can be converted into economic resources through formal administrative mechanisms. Business networks show how political ties can produce both advantage and dependence. Municipal politics demonstrates how local institutions create network centers extending far beyond administrative offices. Kurdish politics demonstrates the danger of equating network proximity with organizational membership or political intention. Digitalization makes relational histories increasingly visible and portable. The AKP-Gülen rupture provides perhaps the clearest demonstration of the central mechanism developed here: connections that once generated resources can subsequently generate exposure.

The central theoretical claim is that networks have no permanently fixed political value. Their consequences depend upon the surrounding distribution of power. A relationship functions as social capital when it provides access to valued resources, but the same relationship can become social liability when political circumstances change. Network revaluation captures this transformation and draws attention to an aspect of political change that institutional analysis alone can overlook.

Political transformation involves more than the replacement of governments or the modification of constitutional rules. It is also a reorganization of relationships. New intermediaries acquire importance, old brokers lose access, businesses reposition themselves, organizations develop new political connections, and past affiliations acquire new meanings. Formal institutions structure these processes, but relationships determine many of the pathways through which their consequences are experienced.

Turkey's political trajectory during the past quarter century cannot be reduced to the AKP, Erdoğan, presidentialism, political Islam, democratic erosion, patronage, or state centralization. It is also a history of network construction, institutional embedding, rupture, adaptation, and revaluation. The actors controlling institutions have changed, the relationships connecting those institutions with society have changed, and the political meaning of relationships themselves has changed.

The distinction is consequential because individuals experience political order from positions within these networks. They possess different brokers, different relationships, different reputations, and different capacities to reach institutions.

Networks distribute opportunity unevenly, but they also distribute vulnerability unevenly. A relationship can provide employment, information, protection, contracts, reputation, or influence. Under altered political conditions, that same relationship can produce dependency, exclusion, suspicion, reputational damage, or risk.

Understanding contemporary Turkey requires attention not only to who formally governs but also to the relationships through which governance operates. Political power resides in institutions, but it also resides in the connections that make institutions accessible, useful, protective, restrictive, or dangerous.

Abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party
CHP	Republican People's Party
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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