

Human Rights Violations in Türkiye: Loss of Job, Mobbing, Loss of Freedom of Travel, Denial of Health Services, and Persecution

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ABSTRACT

The Turkish government implemented antidemocratic policies and practices after the attempted coup in 2016, leading to the victimization of its own citizens. This qualitative study examined alleged constitutional and human rights violations in Türkiye using a phenomenological research design and semi-structured, in-depth interviews to document the lived experiences of 25 participants who were selected through snowball sampling. The main themes found in the study were loss of jobs, mobbing, loss of freedom of travel and movement, denial of health services (within and outside the criminal justice system), and physical and psychological persecution. The results of the study support previous research, contribute to the literature by revealing additional types of victimization, and, through first-person accounts, shed light on the serious harm that Turkish citizens suffered at the hands of the Erdogan government. Policy implications and limitations of the study are included.

KEYWORDS: Türkiye, human rights violations, victimization, loss of job, mobbing, loss of freedom of travel, denial of health services, persecution.

History presents the portraits of power-hungry individuals, some of whom wasted their talents and skills while others destroyed the lives of many individuals. In the words of 19th-century British politician Lord Acton, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Acton Institute, 2023). Therein lies the nexus between the concepts of power and destruction, as persons in positions of power, particularly in positions of political power, feel free to oppress and control the weaker members of society. Historical examples include Italy’s fascist prime minister and dictator Benito Mussolini; Germany’s Nazi Party leader and dictator, Adolph Hitler; the Soviet Union’s Communist Party leader and dictator, Joseph Stalin; and Mao Zedong, leader of the Communist Party in China and dictatorial leader of the People’s Republic of China. All of these leaders played a significant role in the mass destruction of their own people and individuals around the globe. A case can be made that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become a member of this ignominious club of ruthless dictators.

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The people of Türkiye (formerly known as Turkey) gave Erdogan and his party the political power and authority to form the government through a democratic election in 2002. Some years later, Erdogan worked to consolidate his power through brutal and destructive actions that led many people in Türkiye to view him as a sultan or a tyrant (Cagaptay, 2017; Gul & Akyuz, 2018; O’Doherty, 2017; I. Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018).

It is widely believed that in the aftermath of an attempted coup in 2016, the Turkish government implemented antidemocratic policies and practices, which led to the victimization of its own citizens (Amnesty International, 2023; Freedom House, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2023). The U.S. Department of State (2023), for example, argues that significant abuses of human rights have occurred in Türkiye, such as:

... arbitrary killings; suspicious deaths of persons in custody; forced disappearances; torture; arbitrary arrest and continued detention of tens of thousands of persons, including opposition politicians and former members of parliament, lawyers, journalists, human rights activists, and an employee of the U.S. Mission, for purported ties to “terrorist” groups or peaceful legitimate speech; political prisoners, including elected officials . . . significant problems with judicial independence . . . restrictions on movement . . . crimes involving violence targeting members of national/racial/ethnic minority groups. (pp. 1–2)

The aim of this study was to examine acts of victimization and violations of constitutional human rights allegedly perpetrated by the Turkish government since the coup attempt in 2016. This article begins with a discussion of the historical and contextual background and then continues with a review of previous studies in the literature. The methodology and sampling results are presented next and followed by a discussion of the findings, conclusions drawn from the study, and finally, a summary of policy implications and limitations of the study.

Historical and Contextual Background

To fully understand the current situation in Türkiye and to comprehend the rise of President Erdogan and how he was able to expand his powers and shift governmental control to himself, an overview of Türkiye’s foundational, structural, and historical context is presented here.

The Foundation of a New Republic

Türkiye was founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. At the end of World War I, the 600-year-old Ottoman Empire was dissolved. Ataturk and the rest of Türkiye’s founding fathers, mostly military men, won the Independence War (1919-1923) and signed the treaty of Lausanne on July 24, 1923 (Davison, 1990). After establishing the new Republic, Ataturk founded a democratic secular regime and a multiparty political system. Ataturk’s political party, the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, or CHP), led many progressive reforms between 1923 and 1938. However, after his death in 1938, the CHP slowly lost its popularity among the Turkish people and was viewed more explicitly as an oppressive and anti-Islamist party. Specific policies of the single-party regime during this time were later used as battle cries for conservative parties during general election campaigns.

The Rise of Erdogan and AKP

Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*, or AKP) stepped forward as an alternative. Erdogan and the AKP abused the negativities of the CHP more than any conservative party in Türkiye's modern-day political history. The AKP won the 2002 general elections less than a year after its founding.

Erdogan, who initially served as the mayor of Istanbul, gained a national reputation and rose to fame because he presented himself as an Islamic, charismatic, "people's man," which created the perception that there were no other politicians like him. Erdogan understood the political and social currents well and used them to his advantage. As a skillful orator and public speaker, he earned the respect of many conservatives. During his first three terms as prime minister (2002-2012), Erdogan made much progress in addressing social, economic, and legal issues. He also appealed to many world leaders, mainly those in the United States, various European countries, and Cyprus. As he continued to rule, Erdogan became increasingly popular and eventually morphed into the absolute holder of power in Türkiye (Human Rights Foundation, 2019).

Signs that Türkiye is no longer as democratic as it once was—despite government claims that political parties, elections, and the rule of law continue to exist—are apparent in actions such as arbitrary changes in election dates, voter intimidation, ballot-box stuffing, and vote-buying (I. Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018). According to Phillips (2017), the irony of Erdogan's initial electoral success paved the way for his authoritarian regime. Phillips also argues that this authoritarianism did not happen overnight; rather, Erdogan was intentional and methodical in the use of tactics designed to undermine democracy. Key events include the Gezi Park protests, the Hizmet movement, the 2013 police investigations of government graft, the 2016 coup attempt, and what has become known as the great purge.

The Gezi Park Protests

Erdogan's quest for absolute power started to show in the summer of 2013 when peaceful protesters gathered in an attempt to prevent the government from cutting down trees in Istanbul's Gezi Park (Ugur, 2018). The government responded violently and aggressively to these protests, which were held throughout the country. In the end, 12 people were killed, more than 4,000 people were injured, 5,513 civilians were taken into custody, 189 civilians were arrested, and hundreds were charged with terrorism (Aydin & Avincan, 2020). The oppressive government showed its true colors.

After quashing the protests, the government further restricted human rights and began shutting down media outlets and mainstream newspapers, removing employees from their jobs (Aydin & Avincan, 2020; Solidarity with Others, 2023) and targeting individuals affiliated with the Gezi Park protests and groups, such as the Hizmet movement, that were viewed as opponents of the Erdogan regime.

The AKP and the Hizmet Movement

Hizmet is a social movement that seeks to spread Sunni-Islamic principles through education, peace, and prosperity. Turkish-Muslim scholar Fethullah Gulen started the Hizmet movement in Türkiye in the 1960s and, since then, Hizmet has expanded significantly (Tee, 2016, as cited in Pandya et al., 2021). The movement advocates for greater access to schooling, improvements in literacy, respect for humanity, and dialogue to enhance civility and create peace worldwide while also preserving the Muslim identity.

Since 2002 in the early days of the AKP, the political party and the Hizmet movement had close relations and collaborated on efforts to achieve mutual goals. Gulen himself spoke openly about his trust in Erdogan and how Erdogan promised honesty and expressed hope for moving in a positive direction (Pandya et al., 2021). The relationship continued and was strengthened as supporters of the Hizmet movement also supported the AKP and Erdogan (Pandya et al., 2021). Together, Hizmet and Erdogan paved the way for the expansion and expression of freedom of religion after it had been suppressed for many years in the name of secularism (Pandya et al., 2021). This relationship, however, ended after extensive Turkish National Police investigations in December 2013 found that Erdogan's government was involved in graft, corruption, and other wrongdoings.

The December 2013 Graft Investigations

Two police investigations in 2013 made public on December 17 and 25 exposed the greatest political graft in Turkish history and represented the first cracks in Erdogan's democratic façade. Police officers from the Financial Crimes Unit in Istanbul seized \$17.5 million in cash linked to many high-ranking individuals in the AKP, Erdogan's cabinet, and Erdogan's sons (Phillips, 2017). Further proof came with the discovery that Erdogan, one morning during the investigation, called his son Bilal Erdogan and asked him to dispose of incriminating items that were in the house (Phillips, 2017).

The December 17-25 investigations revealed the extent of Erdogan's corruption, which included conducting illegal business transactions with non-Turkish citizens and engaging in efforts to evade U.S. sanctions against Iran. Erdogan and other members of his government facilitated the evasion of sanctions by providing a connection between Iran and Türkiye's state-owned bank, Halkbank, for secret transactions of gold for which "key members of Erdoğan's government took bribes and colluded" in the trading of natural gas for gold (Pandya et al., 2021, p. 204). The irony in this drama is that the AKP had initially risen to popularity on its firm stance against government corruption (Phillips, 2017).

Instead of letting the independent judicial system do its job, the Turkish government retaliated by imprisoning those officers who exposed the government's wrongdoings. They were declared enemies of the state and "terrorists working for a parallel state" (Aydin & Langley, 2021, p. 5). Following these events, in February 2015, Erdogan's government created specialized High Criminal Courts specifically designated to oversee and prosecute these supposed terror offenses (Human Rights Foundation, 2019). One year later, an attempted coup allowed the Erdogan government to expand its power and begin cracking down on those who opposed it.

2016 Coup Attempt

The attempted coup that took place in Türkiye on July 15, 2016, was not the first coup in Turkish history. Türkiye has experienced multiple instances of coups and authoritarian governments in year past, specifically in 1960, 1971, and 1980 (Harris, 2011). During the 1980 military coup and continuing through 1983, the government not only created a new constitution but also adopted several laws and decrees that weakened democracy and put the country on a path toward more authoritarian rule (Yazici, 2015). Erdogan and his government followed a similar path in 2016, appointing acquaintances and family members to governmental positions while working to gradually consolidate his powers. For example, as president, Erdogan granted himself the authority to appoint all 15 members of the Constitutional Court, the authority to appoint more than half of the 13 members of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors, and the authority to appoint and

fire ministers and senior state executives as he so desired. Erdogan also declared that he could not be held criminally liable for any of his actions and that he could not be the subject of any parliamentary scrutiny (Ugur, 2018). Without a system of checks and balances in place, the Turkish government can easily change the rules of the game in any way it chooses to strengthen Erdogan's grip on power and undermine democracy (Harris, 2011). This is why Erdogan has been able to hold the titles of both prime minister and president until taking the presidential oath of office on August 28, 2014 (Yazici, 2015). This is inconsistent with Article 101 of the Constitution [of Türkiye], and Article 4 of the Law No. 6271 on presidential elections (Yazici, 2015). These articles provide detailed descriptions of how elections should be held *democratically*. For example, Article 101 clearly states, "The President of the Republic shall be elected directly by the public" (Constitute Project, 2017).

Yazici (2015) argues that Erdogan's rule can best be described as "competitive authoritarianism," a system of governing where "electoral competition is real, but unfair, in the sense that the playing field is uneven between the government and the opposition parties" (p. 655). In other words, the individuals in positions of power have the upper hand in terms of materials, exposure, capacity, and resources.

The attempted coup in 2016 reflects the lengths to which Erdogan will go to ensure that his grip on power is not usurped by his opponents. Phillips (2017) argues that Erdogan used the coup attempt as a political strategy and "an opportunity to strengthen his dictatorship, using pre-prepared lists to eliminate opponents" (p. x). Gul and Akyuz (2018), meanwhile, note that Erdogan called the coup attempt a gift from God because it paved the way for Erdogan to consolidate his power. Erdogan responded to the coup by declaring a state of emergency, which provided Erdogan and the AKP with the authority to "eliminate cracks within the current power bloc, purge thousands of state employees and violently repress political opposition" (Z. Yilmaz & Turner, 2019, p. 695). Erdogan blamed the Hizmet movement for being the mastermind behind the attempted coup and the military for being willing participants. For its alleged involvement, Erdogan purged the ranks of the military. Proof that the military and the Hizmet movement were directly involved in the coup has not been found, leading to speculation that the coup was staged by the Erdogan government (Aydin & Langley, 2021).

The logistics of the coup lend credence to the idea that the event was staged. The tanks and soldiers on the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul and blocking access to the roadway made it look like a coup was under way. Some soldiers were military academy cadets who had been brought to the bridge in buses in the middle of the night from their summer training campsite after being told they would be taking part in a drill. In the documentary *Mavi Otobus* (Askeri Ogrenci Komitesi, 2022), which translates into "Blue Bus" in English, the cadets who survived that night speak out about the events that took place. They recalled being woken up in the middle of the night, told to board blue buses, and being taken to the Bosphorus Bridge. The cadets were armed, but they did not discharge their weapons even after being viciously attacked by a rowdy and violent crowd of people on the bridge (Askeri Ogrenci Komitesi, 2022). Two of the cadets were killed in the mayhem. The deaths were especially tragic because the cadets had been duped into going to the bridge and were totally unaware that their presence was intended to create the perception that the military was part of the coup attempt. Ironically, the top generals who were blamed for planning the coup were on vacation and not in Istanbul that night. Many unanswered questions regarding the coup attempt remain, as Erdogan and his government did not allow a proper investigation to be conducted nor did they provide an explanation for what transpired on the night of July 15, 2016 (Cengiz, 2019) but instead used it to begin a purge.

The Great Purge

The coup attempt in 2016 was the beginning of a widespread maltreatment and oppression of Turkish citizens and led to what many refer to as “the great purge.” Erdogan quickly branded anyone who did not cooperate with and support him as being part of a terrorist organization that masterminded the coup attempt. His motivation was to spark fear among the Turkish people and sway public opinion in favor of a false narrative about who was responsible for the coup attempt and how the events of that night unfolded (Gul & Akyuz, 2018). Indeed, Erdogan cast a wide net for silencing his perceived enemies. For example, the government “shut down, confiscated property from, or appointed state-aligned trustees to more than one thousand private organizations, including media outlets, private schools, hospitals, unions and companies” (Human Rights Foundation, 2019, p. 3). People who had no ties to the military and who had no means of arranging or partaking in a coup, such as journalists, teachers, policemen, businessmen, and academicians, were arrested in the aftermath of what Erdogan falsely referred to as a military coup (Cengiz, 2019).

Prime targets of the great purge, however, were those who knew about the wrongdoings of Erdogan and his government and withdrew their support for the Turkish president and those whom Erdogan believed threatened his grip on power (Gul & Akyuz, 2018). The state of emergency that Erdogan declared after the coup attempt was used as justification for the persecution of thousands of people and for the great purge (U.S. Department of State, 2023). People were charged criminally for simply having bank accounts, going to certain schools or colleges, or volunteering at organizations affiliated with the Hizmet movement.

The effects of the great purge on the lives of Turkish citizens are staggering: 2,217,572 people were prosecuted; 129,410 people were expelled from public service by decree; 50,000 public servants were dismissed by administrative decision; 4,383 judges/prosecutors were dismissed from their jobs; 5,990 academics were expelled from universities; more than 300 journalists were arrested; more than 1,500 lawyers were detained; more than 3,000 people were kept in solitary confinement; and 132 people lost their lives in prison (Solidarity with Others, 2023).

The suspension of due process rights contributed to the rapid detainment of those who had been falsely accused of involvement in or connection to the coup attempt. To make room for the influx of new prisoners, the government released 38,000 convicted criminals from Turkish prisons (Butler, 2016). While in prison, some of the new arrivals were tortured, assaulted, or killed. Those lucky enough to avoid Erdogan’s net of retribution were forced to flee the country. Both groups were deprived, at the hands of the government, of the basic human rights guaranteed in the country’s constitution. For example, the right to life, which is guaranteed in Article 15(2) of the constitution, was not afforded to the prisoners or those who fled the country. The article stipulates that the right to live is non-derogable, meaning that such right cannot be denied under any circumstance or any conditions, including “in times of war, mobilization, martial law, or a state of emergency” (Constitute Project, 2017). The article further states that an “individual’s right to life, and the integrity of his body and mind shall be inviolable.”

Since the coup attempt, at least 75 people either died while in custody or in prison or died after release and succumbing to the ill-treatment they had endured (Stockholm Center for Freedom, 2018). The treatment of detainees was, indeed, harsh. At the behest of Turkish authorities, for example, some individuals jailed on charges related to terrorism were subjected to “long solitary confinement, unnecessary strip and cavity searches, severe limitations on outdoor exercise and out-of-cell activity, denial of access to prison library and media, slow medical attention, and in some cases the denial of medical treatment” (U.S. Department of State, 2023, p. 23).

Such treatment is a clear violation of not only Article 17(3) of the Turkish Constitution, which states that “no one shall be subjected to torture or ill-treatment; no one shall be subjected to penalties or treatment incompatible with human dignity” (Constitute Project, 2017) but also international commitments that Türkiye had once agreed to, including the European Convention on Human Rights, the United Nations Committee against Torture, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Each of these agreements strictly prohibits the human rights violations committed by the Erdogan government in the aftermath of the coup attempt. For example, the ICCPR, which was ratified by Türkiye on September 23, 2003 (United Nations Human Rights Treaty Bodies, n.d.), guarantees various rights and liberties, such as the right to a fair trial, the right to freedom of speech, and the right to freedom from torture and cruel punishment (Equality and Human Rights Commission, n.d.). The Turkish government flagrantly disregarded the standards of human rights that it had pledged to uphold.

Previous Studies

Human rights violations by authoritarian governments have been the topic of a considerable body of research. Of particular interest to researchers are the types of violations and increases in the frequency of such violations. Türkiye is a prime example of a country in which human rights violations have skyrocketed. Researchers have sought to understand the phenomenon, noting a significant increase in violations of basic human rights since the failed coup attempt in 2016 (Avinçan et al., 2023; Aydın & Avinçan, 2020, 2021; Aydın & Langley, 2021; Girdap, 2020).

In a qualitative study of 15 individuals affected by Erdogan’s great purge, Aydın and Avinçan (2020) documented human rights violations such as government persecution in the form of torture and denial of the right to a fair trial. One year later, the researchers conducted a similar study that focused primarily on the diminished educational rights of Turkish citizens and found that academic freedom was curtailed, educators were harassed, and educational institutions were shut down (Aydın & Avinçan, 2021). Avinçan et al. (2023), however, found that oppression and maltreatment were not confined to educational institutions and were instead widespread throughout society. For example, individuals were labeled as traitors or targeted because of their views and lifestyles. Many victims, the researchers found, fled the country in hopes of escaping the persecution they faced.

Girdap (2020) found that individuals who fled from Türkiye to other countries encountered a new set of difficulties and challenges that included highly strict and restrictive residency requirements for asylum seekers, the inability to find jobs quickly, the economic hardships that followed, having a difficult time communicating in a language they did not know, and a lack of organizations and institutions to help with resettlement.

Data and Methods

This qualitative study consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 individuals whose basic human rights were violated by the Turkish government after the failed coup in 2016 and who were willing to share their stories. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity so they could speak freely about their experiences. The study was submitted for and received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the second author’s institution in 2017.

Participants and Sampling

The participants were selected through snowball sampling, which relies on networking and referrals among an initial group of prospective participants. Each prospective participant is asked “. . . to recommend other contacts who fit the research criteria and who potentially might also be willing participants, who then, in turn, recommend other potential participants, and so on” (Parker et al., 2019, p. 3). The initial group of three participants the authors knew and had contacted after they fled from Türkiye to other countries. These individuals were then asked to contact people they knew who also had fled their homeland. The study included Turkish citizens now living in Greece, Belgium, Germany, Canada, and the United States.

Of the 25 participants, 8 were female and 17 were male. Their ages ranged between 23 and 52 years old ($M = 39$). All but two of the participants were college graduates. The prior occupations of the participants included teacher, police officer, businessman, public servant, religious cleric, accountant, certified public accountant, laborer, doctor, principal, and university staff. At the time the participants were interviewed, most of them (61%) were unemployed. The other 39% were working at jobs unrelated to their prior occupation (see Table 1).

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Previous Occupation	Current Occupation
1	Male	43	College	Police Officer	Farm Worker Market
2	Male	42	College	Police Officer	Construction Worker
3	Male	37	Associate Degree	Businessman	Unemployed
4	Male	37	College	Teacher	Unemployed
5	Female	50	College	Teacher	Retired
6	Female	36	College	Teacher	Unemployed
7	Female	41	College	Teacher	Unemployed
8	Male	46	College	Public Servant	Laborer
9	Male	45	College	Religious Cleric	Unemployed
10	Male	46	College	Certified Public Accountant	Unemployed
11	Female	31	College	Accountant	Laborer
12	Male	48	College	Teacher	Unemployed
13	Male	36	College	Public Servant	Unemployed
14	Female	40	College	Housewife	N/A
15	Male	52	Elementary	Laborer	Farmer
16	Male	44	College	Teacher	Unemployed
17	Male	33	College	Teacher	Unemployed
18	Female	30	Master's Degree	Housewife	N/A
19	Male	42	College	Businessman	Blacksmith
20	Male	23	College	Student	Businessman
21	Male	45	College	Doctor	Unemployed
22	Female	31	College	Teacher	Unemployed
23	Female	30	College	Principal	Unemployed
24	Male	39	College	Teacher	Construction Worker
25	Male	28	College	University Staff	Unemployed

Data Collection and Analysis

The authors asked two open-ended questions during the interviews:

1. What is your story in terms of human rights violations and victimization in Türkiye?
2. What perceptions, experiences, challenges, and aftermath stories would you like to share regarding the loss of constitutional or human rights, if any?

The interviews were conducted from October 31, 2017, until October 31, 2018, in the Turkish language, as the interviewees were more confident and comfortable in their native language. The responses were then translated into English. The participants were able to choose their preferred interview format: face-to-face, telephone, or videoconference. Thorough notes were taken during the interviews, though interviewees were contacted again if additional information was needed for clarification. Supplementary answers to additional or follow-up questions were obtained from the participants through email. The duration of the interviews varied, with some lasting 30 minutes and some lasting up to two hours. All the names and locations of the participants were withheld for their safety and protection.

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was used because it allowed the researchers to capture the participants' lived experiences (Frechette et al., 2020; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). The authors coded and categorized the data around similar subjects (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and synthesized and analyzed the data to reveal patterns, determine themes, and draw meaningful conclusions. No analysis software was used.

The authors reviewed the transcripts individually and separately to increase the validity of the study. They also used peer debriefing, which “allows a qualified peer researcher to review and assess transcripts, emerging and final categories from those transcripts, and the final themes or findings of a given study” (Janesick, 2015) and shared the study findings and manuscript with two external scholars who hold doctoral degrees in different disciplines to check the accuracy of the findings and ensure credibility (Creswell, 2007).

Findings

The authors carefully read, coded, and analyzed the data for the five main themes, or categories, that emerged: loss of jobs, mobbing, loss of freedom of travel or movement, denial of health services (in the criminal justice system and in daily life), and persecution (physical and psychological).

Loss of Jobs

Termination of employment is one of the primary methods of victimization under the Erdogan government. All respondents and/or their spouses were unemployed when they fled the country. Some were dismissed from their jobs by government decrees, while others lost their jobs because the private institutions or companies for which they worked were closed by the government. One participant said:

I was on vacation and learned that there was a military coup. I received an SMS instructing me to go to work. So, I did. The same day, I was called by Human Resources. The deputy chief of police asked me to submit my ID and gun. He said that it was a direct order from the Ministry of Interior. With a plain piece of paper called 'government decree,' I was suspended first, and then, dismissed from my job, and even deprived of applying for another public position. (Participant 1, male, age 43)

Not only were the participants dismissed from their jobs, but they also struggled immensely trying to find another one—mainly because employers were either convinced that the applicants were state enemies or were afraid of being punished by the government.

Getting a job is almost impossible. First, even private companies do not want to give you a job because of the slanders constructed by the government and media. When a job provider wants to hire you, s/he gets you insured, and the state figures out that you are employed and thus sends a notice to the employer to have you dismissed. Let's say, if the employer does not issue insurance, then, the employer is still at risk. All these are more than mobbing. These can be only a massive pogrom. (Participant 13, male, age 36)

Another victim explained the difficulties in applying for any kind of job to get by, including janitorial services and housekeeping, even though she has a master's degree:

They [employers] said we do not give jobs to the FETOists.² I applied for a job in many places, but none of them were accepted, not even the cleaning company even though I had a master's degree. (Participant 18, female, age 30)

Those suspected of being part of the fabricated terrorist organization behind the stage coup attempt also were removed from their jobs, leaving many families struggling with financial issues and unable to support their families.

Mobbing

Day-to-day struggles worsened with the increase in mobbing by the community, friends, family, and even loved ones. Mobbing is more than maltreatment; it aims to corrupt a person's dignity, reputation, and honor. Victims of mobbing often respond by socially distancing themselves from friends and loved ones (Eurofound, 2007). As one participant recounted: "People were either afraid or believed the labeling about me and were hesitant to give a job to me. There was mass mobbing in the city, neighborhood, and among people" (Participant 2, male, age 42). Another participant stated: "The propaganda and media were so strong that my family was influenced enough to ostracize me; they nearly disowned me" (Participant 23, female, age 30).

² FETO (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization) is a label constructed by the Erdogan government to brand those who are followers or believed to be followers and those who are sympathizers or believed to be sympathizers of the cleric Fethullah Gulen and his Hizmet movement.

State officials have also used mobbing to brand targeted individuals as social outcasts and cast them in such a negative light that even hospitals will refuse to provide necessary medical treatment. Participant 11 (female, age 31), for example, recalled that her son was denied medical assistance by doctors at the hospital where they had sought treatment. Other participants recounted their experience with mobbing in a nonmedical setting. One participant stated: “It was time for my car insurance renewal. I went to do that, but my insurer said the vehicle is on a blacklist and that insurance companies no longer provide coverage for those vehicles” (Participant 19, male, age 42). Another participant said:

I applied to many places to earn a living for my family. But business owners told me that if we were part of ‘FETO,’ we cannot give you a job because if we give you a job, tax inspectors come, and they impose a large amount of fines. (Participant 8, male, age 46)

A third participant said: “We heard there were warnings and suggestions made to the public about not shopping or buying anything from us or our businesses. We have also witnessed this multiple times” (Participant 20, male, age 23). Mobbing, however, was not limited to the direct victims of Erdogan’s great purge; family members, including children, also were targeted. For example, victims’ children were ridiculed, teased, and bullied while at school. As one respondent said: “They called our children’s parents terrorists in their schools. They were excluded in their schools” (Participant 7, female, age 41). Another participant said:

My children were transferred to a new school. The teachers at their school openly began questioning the students if any of their family members had been dismissed. My children could not even tell them about their father’s profession, and they left school feeling guilty every day. (Participant 24, male, age 39)

Family members were investigated by the government, arrested, and detained for no reason other than their familial relations. One participant said:

My mother was detained because of a phone number I used. Her house was searched, and her retirement pension was confiscated. My father’s agricultural support was withdrawn. They victimized not only us, but also our parents. (Participant 4, male, age 37)

Another participant said: “My wife has been arrested for nine months. They arrested my wife because they could not find me” (Participant 12, male, age 48).

Loss of Freedom of Travel or Movement

All of the 25 study participants said that their passports were either confiscated or canceled, placing those travel documents among a total of 234,419 passports canceled (Olağanüstü Hal, n.d.) by the Turkish government since a state of emergency was declared on July 21, 2016 (BBC, 2016). As one participant said: “After I was dismissed from my job with a government decree, my wife was dismissed, as well. Further, the passports of my family members were canceled, as well. We do not have the freedom of travel anymore” (Participant 1, male, age 43).

The Erdogan government also placed restrictions on movement within the country. Some individuals who had been arrested or detained but released on probation for alleged offenses related to the failed coup attempt, for example, were not allowed to travel beyond the borders of the city where they lived. In some cases, these individuals were confined to their homes. As one participant wrote:

When I was released from jail after 12 days, I was no longer a free man in my own home country, as I had a digital foot cuff [ankle bracelet]. I have been digitally monitored every moment for 18 months. I could not travel freely, either, as leaving the city was prohibited to me, as well. Also, I have mandatory police station visits every day. I cannot move whenever I want, wherever I want freely. (Participant 2, male, age 42)

For at least one participant who had been placed in home detention, the government's travel restrictions had tragic consequences. The participant recalled being unable to go to the hospital after experiencing a medical emergency, saying:

Despite my medical condition, the court sentenced me to 24-hour house arrest with electronic handcuffs. I could not go to my treatments. I missed the monthly and quarterly checkups I had, and due to my treatment being interrupted, I suffered a heart attack. (Participant 16, male, age 44)

Denial of Health Services

The denial of health services affected not only the person being victimized but also the family members of the victim. In some cases, essential medicines and medical assistance were withheld from persons in detention or undergoing interrogation. In other cases, such individuals were prohibited from going to a hospital to see a doctor or to receive needed treatment from other medical professionals. As one participant, a former detainee, said:

I was kept for interrogation from 9 a.m. till 8 p.m. During that time period, the officials did not provide me with any food. They did not allow me to take my medicine which is about rejuvenescence of cells (deadly when not treated right). They did not even allow me to drink water. Therefore, I passed out because of my sickness. When I was in custody for the second time, I had the court's decision to use my drugs; however, I was not allowed to take my drugs once again. They kept me in jail for hours without any food and my drugs. I passed out again. Only then, they ordered me some food, with my money. And when my sugar level was normal, they took me to the hospital. (Participant 16, male, age 44)

Family members, especially the children and spouses of those imprisoned or victimized, have suffered from not only anxiety and other mental health issues but also physical illnesses and stress-induced diseases. As one participant said:

We were victimized in many ways by the government and criminal justice system. After my husband lost his state job and was convicted over ten years, my older son was diagnosed with stress-induced cancer and has

undergone many treatments. He was influenced by the arbitrary applications so badly as his father was taken away from him, he was worried about his future, and all of a sudden he had to become the man of the house. First, he was given chemotherapy, and then, had two surgeries. My husband in prison has never known about my son's health issues. . . Without any job, without any salary, without any insurance . . . The whole process has been so difficult for me that I could hardly breathe. Here are just some of the expenses: 1st Surgery: 12,000 TRY [Turkish new lira; approximately \$3,150 USD³], Chemotherapy: 15,000 TRY [approximately \$4,000 USD], 2nd Surgery: 15,000 TRY [approximately \$4,000 USD]. (Participant 9, female, age 45)

For some participants, losing their job also meant losing their government-provided health insurance. Treatment for existing health conditions suddenly became unavailable. Others who were shunned were declared persona non grata. As one participant said:

We are getting sick but trying to heal without seeing any doctor or going to a hospital. For instance, I have a neck hernia, and my feet get numb, but I cannot go to a doctor, nor to a hospital, as they do not accept me anymore due to the cancellation of our rights to health services [by a decree]. (Participant 6, female, age 36)

Another respondent, who was pregnant at the time, said:

There is a lot to tell. However, the most important thing is, we're expecting a baby. It's been six months already, but we could not have any tests, exams, checkups, and other standard requirements done due to the lack of health assurance and insurance. We could not even be happy about the pregnancy due to the worry about these health concerns. For years we could not have a baby. Now, we're having one, but our concerns increase every day as the due date approaches. (Participant 22, female, age 31)

A third participant focused on the psychological and physical effects on prisoners with existing illnesses being forced to serve their time in solitary confinement:

My husband is sick. He has several serious illnesses and those are officially and medically confirmed and reported. That's why we objected to solitary confinement; however, they said, 'Unless it is a terminal illness, we cannot do anything.' He has gout illness and colon problems. We lost our father-in-law to colon cancer. It is actually a very serious threat. (Participant 5, female, age 50)

Crowded cells and the lack of air ventilation and conditioning precipitated various health issues, all of which prison officials completely ignored. As one participant said:

³ Values calculated at the time of the interviews.

When I was in prison, we had a really hard time in the summer because of the heat. I wanted to be examined because of complaints such as blood pressure drop, dizziness, weakness, and heart attack. Although I wrote a petition every day and advocated to the guards, I couldn't be examined by the doctor. I was only able to get a hospital referral two months later. Meanwhile, no one cared that I had a serious permanent ailment in my body because of this. (Participant 25, male, age 28)

Given the massive influx of wrongfully arrested and detained inmates after the great purge, more people were coming into the prison than the facility was intended to accommodate. The cells were overcrowded, unhealthy, and inhumane. Resources that normally were available to prisoners had been depleted. As one respondent described the conditions:

I have been kept nine days in police custody and 14 months in jail without any evidence. While in police custody, we were not treated appropriately. We were too many people in one jail and not given a blanket, and slept on the concrete floor, and my lungs got severely affected and damaged. We were not even given water in spite of the instruction of the prosecutor. (Participant 15, male, age 52)

Persecution

All participants said that they or their family members feared persecution because the government applied its draconian actions arbitrarily. The most common forms of persecution were detention, arrest, and dismissal from jobs. Victims were denied due process and access to adequate defense representation. Evidence of any criminal misconduct did not exist, and none of the persons who were imprisoned had a criminal record. One participant said:

I was accused of participating in the coup of which I was unaware of. I was expelled from my 18-year teaching profession. As if that was not enough, I was detained and arrested. My children were left alone. I was tried in a court where there was no justice and was sentenced to nine years in prison. (Participant 7, female, age 41)

The prosecution also falsified and altered evidence, forced witnesses to sign statements they had not made, and used these coerced statements to corroborate the government's bogus charges at trial before a judge. The evidence presented against the victims included their involvement in volunteer organizations, having apps on their phones, and having bank accounts. One participant said: "The evidence brought up that I am a member of a terrorist organization, that I am a partner in a company, that I have an account in the bank, and false statements of a slanderer" (Participant 10, male, age 46). Another participant said: "They brought an 87% mentally disabled person to my husband's trial as a witness, and their statement was recorded in court as evidence" (Participant 14, female, age 46).

A third participant recounted being threatened and verbally abused by the police officer taking him to court to testify in the way the prosecutor's office wanted:

While I was on my 6th day in custody, I was being taken to the prosecutor's office, the police officer insulted and threatened me saying, If you do not provide a statement the way we want you to, I'll ruin you." (Participant 15, male, age 52).

A fourth respondent spoke about the fear of extrajudicial killings:

I am concerned about my spouse as there are rumors that the SADAT teams, the private security forces of Erdogan, just like the Revolutionary Guards of Iran, were planned to be used to assassinate the political and innocent detainees in prisons. In other words, they want to do some extrajudicial executions. Suspicious suicide killings increased. These are not normal developments in a normal justice system. To my knowledge, until now, there are some 60 unknown death cases that are usually announced to be suicide by the pro-government media. (Participant 5, female, age 50)

The participants also spoke about how their basic human rights—including rights guaranteed for every individual, regardless of their criminal history or record of imprisonment—had been taken away from them: “My wife was not allowed to benefit from any social activities for 4.5 months while in jail. She was not allowed to use the services such as phone calls, mail, contact visitation, or not even noncontact visitation” (Participant 3, male, age 37). The defenders of the persecuted fell victim to the same fate when attempting to provide legal counsel to accused individuals. As one participant said:

My right of defense has been taken from me. Arrest warrants were issued to my lawyers, as well. One of them is in prison now. The other two are seeking asylum in other countries. Now, other lawyers are scared of defending me. (Participant 1, male, age 43)

Without legal representation in court, the persecuted defendants knew they would not receive a fair trial. The judicial branch was under the government's control, and all actors did what they were told to do. As one participant explained:

The judicial branch is not independent, prosecutors act with the instructions they are given, if they do not they have no protection either, lawyers are afraid to defend innocent people, and many of them force their clients to confess, give up names, or rather slander, in line with the instructions they receive. The right to an impartial trial, which is indispensable for the criminal justice system, is trampled on, people have been waiting in detention without an indictment for years, and detention has turned into a penal execution . . . In short, the judicial system has been completely destroyed, turned into a command-and-command system, and has turned into a tool to destroy a section. (Participant 13, male, age 36)

The psychological toll of persecution was evident among the participants. As one participant explained:

You are getting dismissed from the job, discredited/disesteemed in the society and neighborhood, and also declared as a terrorist in a morning all of a sudden, in spite of all your devoted years to serve and help the people and the country to develop . . . that's the worst persecution. Despite being an innocent and law-abiding citizen, getting labeled as a "terrorist" and getting despised after all your respected reputation, is the worst persecution. (Participant 17, male, age 33)

For some of the participants, the toll of victimization came from being the subject of mobbing and from feeling like they were viewed as outcasts in society. One participant said: "We are exposed to some kind of psychological persecution with the looks of the people around us and in our neighborhoods, as well" (Participant 20, male, age 23).

Other participants spoke of living in constant fear not only for their own safety but also for the safety of their family members. The sources of this fear stemmed from losing their jobs and being unable to financially support their loved ones; being detained, interrogated, and arrested; and watching family members being treated like criminals when there was no legal basis to do so. As one participant said:

Every time the doorbell rings, it gives me heart palpitations, and I am worried if the cops come again. I've had this fear for a year and a half, and I still do. . . The police raided my house nine different times in the early hours of the morning. My wife was taken into custody, she endured severe insults and interrogations. Now every time the doorbell rings, we relive the fear of the police raiding our house and taking someone from our family again. My family is broken up." (Participant 21, male, age 45)

An increase in the number of missing persons, kidnappings, and the use of torture and other abuses while being interrogated, in prisons, under arrest, and being searched were other sources of constant fear among the participants. A female participant described being blatantly threatened and hit in the neck for not answering a question: "I felt very sick, I used the restrooms. I washed my hands and on the way back, the policewoman hit me on the back of my neck, and I kept being quiet" (Participant 18, female, age 30).

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study support allegations that the Turkish government has engaged in antidemocratic actions and violations of constitutional and human rights against its own people (Amnesty International, 2023; Freedom House, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2023). The findings also support previous research showing that the Turkish government violated the human and constitutional rights of its people and harmed individuals physically and psychologically.

The current study used in-depth interview data collected from 25 participants, all of whom spoke about being victimized by the loss of a job, mobbing and persecution triggered by baseless allegations of criminal and other wrongdoings, the loss of freedom to travel outside of and move within the country, and the denial of health services. Instances of mobbing included being bullied and harassed in school and in the workplace. The baseless charges filed against the participants turned them into societal outcasts who then faced discrimination not only by members of the community where they lived but also, in some cases, by their own family members. The negative

psychological effects of being victimized in such harsh ways were apparent among the study participants.

The current study supports the previous (and limited) literature, which shows that persecuted individuals in Turkey were denied due process and the right to a fair trial (Aydin & Avincan, 2020) and that these individuals were refused services common to daily living (such as the ability to purchase or renew auto insurance) after being labeled as terrorists and enemies of the state (Avincan et al., 2023).

Unlike previous studies (Avincan et al., 2023; Aydin & Avincan, 2020, 2021), the current study uncovered additional forms of victimization, such as job loss, mobbing, restrictions on the freedom to travel outside and move within the country, and denial of health services while in the custody of the criminal justice system and as part of their daily lives. All participants in the study had been fired from their jobs and blacklisted to prevent them from obtaining other jobs. As a result, the victims lost their health insurance and were unable to obtain proper medical care. Those participants who had been arrested and imprisoned endured an even more significant deprivation of their right to health care. For example, victims were kept in overcrowded cells and denied medical assistance, medications, and proper care when they needed it. In some cases, they were kept in solitary confinement despite known health concerns that made such punishment risky for life, health, and well-being.

The participants' ability to travel abroad ended when the government either confiscated or canceled their passports. To escape the persecution, the only option was to flee the country by embarking on surreptitious journeys across the Turkish border to another country where they begin new lives and seek asylum. The journeys were dangerous and potentially life-threatening, but the alternative—remaining in Turkey—was deemed to be much worse. In their asylum countries, the Turkish refugees faced daunting challenges such as residency rules and regulations, finding a job and the income needed to support their families, inadequate assistance from government agencies, and mistreatment by other members of society (Girdap, 2020).

Türkiye has had many coups in its short history; however, none have led to such harsh policies and injustices as the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. Human rights violations soared; persecution was rampant; 500,000 people were dismissed from their jobs; 150,000 people were imprisoned; many became outcasts in society; many lost their government health insurance and were denied medical care; many were forced to embark on life-threatening journeys to other countries to save themselves and their families; and those who arrived in new countries were faced with fighting to survive and adapt to different surroundings and different cultures (Girdap, 2020).

Several people who were wrongfully charged and imprisoned nearly seven years ago have now been released after serving their sentences (Aydin & Avincan, 2020). A future study should examine the pre-, during-, and post-lived experiences of those released victims to reveal the social, psychological, physiological, and financial impact on them and on their families.

Policy Implications

The restoration of democratic values that once existed in Türkiye is necessary to begin combatting the severe violations of human rights that occurred in the aftermath of the July 15, 2016, failed coup attempt. A system of checks and balances must be implemented to prevent the government, an institution, or an individual from taking sole power over the country. The Constitution, principles, and legal framework of Türkiye should be made safe from changes or alterations by a power-hungry autocrat (Ugur, 2018) and should be strictly enforced and applied to preserve constitutional and basic human rights.

The study participants deny the charges brought against them. They expressed gratitude for the opportunity to tell their stories and hope that by allowing their voices to be heard, no one else will be forced to experience the injustices, victimizations, and persecution they have endured. They expect more action from Western democracies and international courts.

The authors of this paper argue that the United Nations and the European Court on Human Rights can and should use their position and power to better voice, defend, and assist the people affected by the Erdogan government's great purge. The emergency decrees should be revoked and innocent children, women, the elderly, and the sick should be released from prison immediately. All political prisoners who have been prosecuted, convicted, and detained based on unfounded criminal charges and laws that were instituted after the failed coup attempt should be released, all passports should be reinstated, all charges should be dropped (Aydin & Avincan, 2020), all false claims of associations with terrorism should be withdrawn, and the slandered names should be cleared. It is hoped that this study paves the way for some of these changes. Innocent lives have been altered by an autocratic regime responsible for another notorious act of tyranny in Türkiye's history.

Limitations

Like many other studies, the current study has limitations. First, this qualitative phenomenological research was limited to 25 participants. Second, the findings are based solely on participants' experiences and their subjective evaluations, understandings, and perceptions of the issue, though the researchers did apply some techniques to increase the validity and credibility of the study. These limitations, however, do not diminish the seriousness of the victimization the study participants faced under the Erdogan government's great purge in the abovementioned categories but rather acknowledge the naturally existing potential bias in human nature. It is important to note that some of the details about the participants' experiences were omitted from this paper to safeguard their identity and protect them from further victimization.

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