

Erdogan's private police force: a new blow to Turkish democracy



People celebrating the re-conversion of the Ayasofya into a mosque on 10 July 2020

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Turkish parliament [passed a controversial bill](#) in the past weeks providing the neighborhood watchmen (*Bekci* in Turkish) with extended yet unprecedented powers, including the authority to stop and search citizens, and to carry firearms and use force whenever necessary. With the introduction of the new law, the neighborhood watchmen will have almost the same powers as the police. The new legislation elicited

immediate [backlash from the civil and political opposition](#) in Turkey, accusing the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP) of attempting to establish a paramilitary force loyal to the president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

[Night watchmen or Bekcis](#) have been a longstanding part of the policing structure in Turkey. Assigned to the neighborhood police station, the watchmen were basically uniformed auxiliaries responsible for assisting the police with their duties, patrolling neighborhoods during the nights to prevent disturbances and petty crimes, handing over burglars and other petty criminals to the police when arrested, as well as carrying out some administrative duties including notifying local residents of official communication and doing official paperwork.

They did not carry firearms but batons and whistles instead during their shifts. [The recruitment of neighborhood watchmen was halted in 2008](#) by the same AKP government before it was revived again following the [failed military coup of 15 July 2016](#).

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Since 2017, after [President Erdogan publicly uttered his desire to "hear the watchmen's whistles again at night"](#), thousands of new neighborhood watchmen have been recruited by the Turkish Ministry of Interior, who has command and control of the civilian law enforcement agencies, including the National Police and the Gendarmerie forces.

[The opposition has since then expressed their concerns](#) over the reinstatement of the night watchmen system, alleging that the nearly

30,000 member force would serve as a militia loyal to the president, and that most members of the guard are being recruited from the youth wings of the AKP.

[Research on coercive institutions in authoritarian regimes](#) suggests that authoritarian regimes/leaders reconfigure their internal security apparatus to more effectively manage popular or elite threats against their survival, creating separate security or paramilitary forces with overlapping functions with the existing institutions. Hitler's so-called [Brownshirts](#), Hugo Chávez's [Bolivarian National Militia](#), Maduro's [Special Actions Forces \(FAES\)](#), and Putin's [National Guard \(Rosgvardiya\)](#) are some prominent examples of such pro-government coercive structures.

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These forces are ostensibly created for maintaining internal security and public order. However, in practice, such loyalist forces have been sweepingly used to [suppress political opponents](#) or to serve as [counterbalancing](#) forces to protect the regime against coups, rather than fighting crimes or law enforcement. In this respect, the reinstatement of the neighborhood watchmen recruitment and the recent expansion of their powers constitutes a further step in the transformation of the structure and functioning of the internal security apparatus in Turkey in line with the security concerns of the increasingly autocratic Erdogan and the AKP regime, who would like to secure their survival against their perceived enemies, including political opponents, such as leftists, Gulenists, and Kurdish activists, as well as potential coup plotters inside the formal security apparatus.

Indeed, during [Turkey's authoritarian transformation](#) which further crystallized following the AKP's victory in the 2011 parliamentary elections, especially following the anti-government [Gezi Park protests in 2013](#) which unraveled the public outcry against AKP's increasingly authoritarian policies, several transformations happened with critical implications for policing and internal security structure in Turkey.

Following major corruption charges against senior members of the AKP government in December 2013, and particularly after the failed coup attempt of July 2016, the ruling AKP government launched mass purges in the National Police, which resulted in the [mass dismissals of about thirty three thousand police officers](#) over their alleged links to Gulenists, the former ally of AKP who have been since then [criminalized as a national security threat in Turkey](#).

In March 2015, [a new Domestic Security Bill was passed into law](#) which allocated expanded powers to the police, including a broader authority to use weapons at protest sites, and the authority to more easily search homes and wiretap telephones without obtaining a search warrant. The bill also allowed the government to shut down the Turkish National Police Academy, which prepared students for command roles in the Turkish National Police, and the Police Colleges established to lead to matriculation at the Police Academy.

Instead, a new Police Supervisor Training Center (Polis Amirleri Egitim Merkezi, or PAEM) was established to train prospective commanding officers for the national police. Many in the opposition alleged that the goal of these changes in police training was to ensure government's control over the allocation of police jobs to their supporters and to claim the loyalty of police cadres graduating from the newly established police training centers.

Moreover, pro-government paramilitary structures such as [People's Special Forces \(Halk Özel Harekat, or HÖH\)](#) and the notorious private

security contractor firm [SADAT \(International Defense Consulting\)](#), whose founder was a top advisor to President Erdogan, [have gained increasing visibility in Turkey as possible tools of regime protection](#) following the failed coup of July 2016. Indeed, [multiple Turkish language and foreign media outlets reported](#) eyewitness accounts that members of the pro-AKP armed groups, including SADAT and People's Special Forces, were involved in the killing of civilians and lynching of the alleged coup-plotters on the night of the failed coup attempt.

The reinstatement of the neighborhood watchmen system and the introduction of legislative changes furnishing the guards with greater coercive powers just represents another layer in the reconfiguration of the internal security apparatus in Turkey in line with the AKP and Erdogan's concern with maintaining their political survival.

Empowered neighborhood watchmen, together with other pro-government paramilitary groups, might serve as a separate armed force loyal to Erdogan, allowing him to balance against other formal security forces, including the military and the police, enabling him to secure his political and personal survival against another coup attempt, which [Erdogan is still worried about](#).

With the introduction of legally-vague provisions which would enable the guard members to bear firearms, to stop and search citizens on "reasonable ground" and "to take necessary measures against demonstrations and marches that might disrupt public order", the expanded and strengthened neighborhood watchmen also might be used by the AKP government to further monitor and suppress political opponents under the pretext of public security and combating crimes.

Moreover, the new duties granted to the neighborhood watchmen by the new legislation, including reporting suspected individuals or places to the police, would increase the state-sanctioned surveillance of public life under the pretext of crime prevention, creating [concerns among the](#)

[opposition](#) that the night watchmen might easily turn into a copy of the Iran's [Basij militia](#), a loyalist paramilitary force responsible for suppressing dissent and policing morals under the Iranian regime.

Given the opposition claims that the neighborhood guards are mostly recruited among the young men affiliated with the youth wing of the AKP and [the recent reports of violence towards citizens](#), empowered neighborhood watchmen, as a potential loyalist group of armed auxiliaries, are likely to bring further abuse and oppression of anyone perceived as the enemy of the AKP and the Erdogan regime, wreaking more havoc on the already suffering human rights and civil liberties in Turkey.