

Post-Conference Report: Opposition and Democratic Futures in Turkey and Beyond

This conference brought together scholars, practitioners, journalists, and civil-society actors to examine how democratic opposition and civic resistance operate under deepening autocratization in Turkey. Across four panels, participants discussed electoral strategy, municipal governance, civil society, institutional resistance, media capture, lawfare, minority rights, and coalition-building.

A central theme was that democratic resilience cannot depend on a single election, leader, institution, or arena. Municipal governments, parties, courts, universities, professional associations, civic organizations, journalists, cultural producers, and informal networks all create political capacity, but each can also be restricted, captured, or isolated. The discussion therefore focused not only on how opposition actors survive repression, but on how different forms of resistance can reinforce one another and contribute to democratic change.

Opposition Strategy and Electoral Competition

The first panel examined how opposition parties can compete when elections remain meaningful but the political playing field is increasingly unequal. Municipal politics emerged as a major source of opposition capacity. Since 2019, and especially after the 2024 local elections, opposition municipalities have gained resources, direct access to citizens, and opportunities to demonstrate governing competence. Strong local performance can challenge longstanding claims that the CHP lacks the competence to govern effectively and can increase national support, particularly among non-aligned voters.

Municipal success also creates vulnerabilities. Opposition-led municipalities have faced resource restrictions, administrative obstruction, lawfare, arrests, and the removal of elected officials. Many of these practices were used against Kurdish municipalities before being extended to the mainstream opposition. This raised a broader question: can opposition actors respond collectively to repressive tools before they spread from one constituency to another?

Panelists also discussed the danger of a two-tiered political system in which competitive local elections coexist with entrenched national authoritarianism. Successful municipal governments may build national credibility, but voters may also come to associate opposition parties mainly with local services while continuing to see the governing coalition as the natural holder of authority over national security, foreign policy, and the state.

The 2024 elections nevertheless showed the importance of adaptable strategies. Locally rooted candidates, informal alliances among Kurdish, center-right, non-aligned, and dissatisfied government voters, and more professional use of surveys, field research, and targeted resources contributed to opposition gains. Even failed national coalitions can generate organizational skills, networks, and routines that carry into later contests.

Lawfare formed another major theme. Speakers emphasized that contemporary judicial repression must be understood alongside the longer history of exceptional legal measures directed at Kurdish parties and politicians. Strategic litigation, including greater use of regional and international human-rights mechanisms, was identified as one possible response. Deep canvassing was discussed as another. Sustained interpersonal outreach to persuadable voters can reduce dependence on mass media, social-media platforms, and charismatic leaders.

Civil Society, Memory, and Institutional Resistance

The second panel shifted from parties to civil society and institutions that preserve democratic capacity under pressure. Its central message was that repression often changes the form of civic life rather than eliminating it.

In Sur/Suriçi in Diyarbakır, a UNESCO-listed historic district that also carries deep significance for Kurdish collective memory, struggles over heritage showed how documentation can become political. When official reporting and mapping were constrained, architects, heritage professionals, activists, and local custodians of memory relied on alternative maps, oral histories, and other records to preserve evidence of physical destruction and symbolic erasure.

At Boğaziçi University, resistance similarly relied on more than visible protest. Faculty networks, detailed documentation of administrative change, and the preservation of institutional memory became tools against political capture. Refusing to normalize new arrangements was itself a form of resistance.

Student mobilization showed how private hardship can become a collective political claim. Housing insecurity, inadequate dormitories, economic precarity, and uncertain employment prospects helped generate movements that connected material grievances to broader political participation.

Human-rights organizations face a related problem. Legal harassment, criminalization, funding pressures, and imprisonment have pushed many organizations into survival mode. Defensive strategies may keep institutions alive, but they do not necessarily generate wider political leverage. Across the panel, documentation, professional expertise, memory, and durable networks emerged as forms of democratic infrastructure that allow civic actors to preserve capacity across cycles of repression.

Media Capture and the Information Ecosystem

The third panel examined how media control operates through overlapping legal, economic, digital, and social mechanisms. Restrictive laws, concentrated ownership, financial sanctions, platform regulation, citizen surveillance, and anticipatory self-censorship shape what journalists, activists, and citizens say, publish, and circulate.

Participants stressed that the government does not need to punish every act of dissent once journalists and citizens understand the likely consequences of crossing political boundaries. CİMER, the Presidential Communication Center, can further distribute surveillance through society by enabling citizens to report one another over speech, political views, and lifestyle.

The panel also showed that the information ecosystem shapes not only which voices become visible, but how social problems are interpreted. The discussion of femicide reporting illustrated how media framing can erase perpetrators, focus on victims' private lives, or explain violence through jealousy, anger, or romantic conflict. Political rhetoric and sensationalized journalism can thereby normalize victim-blaming and reproduce broader gender hierarchies. In this way, media practices can reinforce the social norms and hierarchies within which political and civic resistance operates.

Digital media provide alternative channels but do not necessarily provide autonomy. Critical and opposition-aligned digital outlets increasingly depend on platforms such as Google, Meta, and YouTube for visibility, traffic, and advertising revenue. Algorithms therefore influence which voices reach audiences and which organizations remain economically viable. State and corporate interests can align when governments seek political control and platforms seek continued market access. The discussion also cautioned against treating 'independent media' as synonymous with any outlet outside the pro-government camp, emphasizing ownership and funding structures.

Participants therefore emphasized communication strategies that do not depend entirely on centralized infrastructures. Small media, interpersonal networks, posters, graffiti, memes, popular culture, and other creative forms can provide additional channels for political expression. From Gezi-era humor to the political use of television characters and narratives, creative resistance has allowed political claims to circulate even when conventional media become constrained.

Democratic Means, Coalition Boundaries, and the Politics of Inclusion

The final panel asked how democratic actors can resist authoritarianism without reproducing the exclusions and institutional distortions they seek to overcome.

Participants emphasized that institutions commonly associated with democracy—elections, courts, rights, and civil society—do not automatically produce democratic outcomes. Elections can sustain participation while also legitimizing authoritarian incumbents. Universities, professional associations, media organizations, and other intermediary institutions therefore matter not simply because they exist, but because they preserve autonomous norms such as academic integrity, legal standards, expertise, and public service.

The Kurdish question was central. Repressive powers developed against Kurdish political actors have repeatedly spread to other parts of the opposition. Participants therefore argued that Kurdish political and cultural rights cannot simply be postponed until after a future democratic transition. Panelists questioned whether the dialogue process underway could develop into a meaningful peace process, emphasizing its one-sided character, opacity, and limited state reciprocation, while also discussing the opportunities that a reduction in armed conflict could create for Kurdish rights and democratization.

The government's use of Kurdish politics to divide opposition actors also featured prominently. Association with pro-Kurdish parties can be framed through terrorism, raising the costs of cooperation for mainstream opposition figures. Meanwhile, Kurdish voters have often been expected to support opposition candidates strategically without receiving equivalent solidarity when repression targeted their own institutions. Several participants therefore stressed the need to expand the political “we” and build reciprocal solidarity before particular groups become electorally indispensable.

At the same time, participants cautioned against replacing one exclusionary identity with another. A new nationalist or patriotic identity can reproduce exclusion by redefining who properly belongs. Shared concerns such as corruption, accountability, affordability, inequality, and public services may offer broader foundations for coalition-building.

The discussion of pious voters made a similar point. Opposition actors need to respect religious identities and reassure citizens that political change will not reproduce earlier forms of coercive secularism, but they need not organize their appeal primarily around religion. Material concerns can create common ground across the secular-pious divide.

Participants also revisited the CHP's “helalleşme” initiative. Symbolic acknowledgment of past injustices can matter, but reconciliation becomes credible only when accompanied by sustained engagement, representation, accountability, and concrete solidarity.

Finally, discussion of anti-Syrian racism highlighted an important warning: an anti-authoritarian coalition is not automatically democratic. Economic insecurity, nationalism, and resentment toward refugees can become powerful electoral tools, raising the possibility that political change could be built on a new form of exclusion.

Cross-Cutting Conclusions

Across the four panels, four cross-cutting themes emerged:

1. Democratic resistance in Turkey is distributed across many arenas rather than concentrated in a single organization or leader. Electoral politics, municipal governance, civil society, professional expertise, litigation, journalism, cultural production, and everyday networks all provide sources of democratic capacity.
2. Authoritarian resilience works partly through fragmentation. Political pressure can isolate municipalities from national politics, Kurdish movements from the mainstream opposition, civic organizations from electoral actors, experts from public audiences, and critical media outlets from the audiences and infrastructures they need to survive. Repression does not always need to eliminate these actors; forcing each into a separate defensive struggle can be enough to prevent their capacities from reinforcing one another.
3. Memory, documentation, professional expertise, and communication networks repeatedly emerged as forms of democratic infrastructure. They preserve experience across electoral and protest cycles, contest official narratives, and help movements avoid starting from zero after each wave of repression.
4. Coalition-building requires connection without homogenization. Democratic actors need solidarity across different movements and constituencies without erasing distinct interests or replacing one exclusionary political identity with another.

The conference therefore moved beyond identifying individual sites of democratic resistance to ask how these forms of resistance can become more durable, mutually reinforcing, and difficult to isolate. The challenge is not only to win elections or defend individual institutions, but to build a democratic ecosystem capable of carrying political capacity across arenas, constituencies, and cycles of repression.

Note: This report summarizes the discussions as they took place on May 8, 2026 and does not incorporate subsequent political developments. The summary of Panel 2 is based on contemporaneous notes; the summaries of Panels 1, 3, and 4 are based on conference transcripts. All substantive contributions are summarized without attribution.