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Peace Under the Shadow of Authoritarianism: The Prospects of Illiberal Peacebuilding in Türkiye

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Abstract

This article critically examines Türkiye's ongoing peace process with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Initiated by the ruling bloc in October 2024, the process has been conducted through an illiberal approach primarily aimed at achieving negative peace. The government maintains that its central objective is to end terrorism by disarming and dissolving the PKK. At the same time, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights have been in significant decline in Türkiye. In parallel with global democratic backsliding, authoritarian practices have intensified, shaping both the structure and the substance of the peace process. Drawing on the illiberal peacebuilding literature, the article analyses the ongoing initiative through three dimensions: the governance of the process, the understanding of conflict and peace, and the political implications of the process. The article further argues that illiberal peacebuilding and authoritarianism have a reciprocal relationship in the Turkish case. While authoritarian governance shapes the conduct and substance of the peace process, the process itself may contribute to the further consolidation of authoritarian rule. This article explores whether positive and sustainable peace can be achieved through illiberal peacebuilding under conditions of deepening authoritarianism.

Keywords: illiberal peacebuilding; Kurdish Question; liberal peacebuilding; authoritarianism; democratic backsliding; Türkiye

1. Introduction

On 1 October 2024, Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), shook hands with the leaders of the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), surprising many observers given his long-standing opposition to the Kurdish political movement. Until this point, Bahçeli had repeatedly called for the closure of the DEM Party (Bianet 2020; Aposto 2024). Following this unexpected shift in the MHP's political stance, a new peace process has begun to unfold. Bahçeli's move was followed by a call for peace in light of global and regional dynamics. He argued that the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan, the founding leader of the PKK, should be lifted and that Öcalan should be allowed to address the parliament to call for the disbandment of the PKK. Bahçeli's statements were welcomed by both the DEM Party and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who agreed that Türkiye needs peace more than ever (Bianet 2025c). On 27 February 2025, a committee composed of DEM Party MPs and mayors publicly read Öcalan's message, titled "Call for Peace and Democratic Society," at a press conference. In this message, Öcalan called on the PKK to lay down its arms and dissolve itself (Bianet 2025c).

The PKK held its 12th congress in May 2025 and announced its decision to disband and disarm in response to Öcalan's call. The statement emphasised that the relevant institutions,



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including the Parliament, must take the necessary steps to achieve a democratic and political solution to the Kurdish Question (Bianet 2025d). On 11 July 2025, the PKK organised a symbolic event in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, during which 30 PKK members burned their weapons. Following this step, the National Unity, Solidarity, and Democracy Commission (NUSDC) was established at the invitation of Numan Kurtulmuş, President of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, and began its work on 5 August 2025 (DEMOS 2025).

Significant developments have taken place in the course of the process, which will be examined in detail in the fourth section of this article. However, it can already be argued that the current initiative is being conducted through an illiberal approach. It differs from the previous peace process, which was initially designed within a liberal framework and aimed to resolve the Kurdish Question through democratisation. It should be noted, however, that despite this initial design, the earlier process ultimately took on a hybrid character, incorporating both liberal and illiberal elements. As Dilek (2024) argues, the process was asymmetric and non-inclusive, and the government did not allow third parties to participate. By contrast, the current process does not appear to have any liberal aspects at all.

This article argues that the ongoing peace process in Türkiye is being conducted through an illiberal approach characterised by authoritarian governance, a narrow understanding of conflict and peace, and authoritarian practices that seek to control the political sphere. As a result, the process is unlikely to achieve positive and sustainable peace and may instead contribute to the further consolidation of authoritarianism. The article contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it is arguably one of the first scholarly analyses of Türkiye's ongoing peace process through the lens of illiberal peacebuilding. Second, it demonstrates that illiberal peacebuilding and authoritarianism have a reciprocal relationship. The authoritarian character of the regime shapes the conduct of the process by limiting transparency, participation, inclusiveness, public ownership, democratisation, engagement with past injustices, and third-party involvement. At the same time, the political and security environment remains tightly controlled, executive authority is consolidated, and political competition is restricted. The process itself, however, also has the potential to further consolidate authoritarian rule by fragmenting the opposition, strengthening the government's centralised authority, and legitimising the securitisation of governance.

This article adopts illiberal peacebuilding as an analytical lens rather than as a fixed model with universally applicable indicators. Drawing on the literature, it analyses the ongoing initiative through three dimensions: the governance of the process, the understanding of conflict and peace, and the political implications of the process. Through this framework, the article shows how authoritarian governance shapes the conduct of the peace process and how the process itself may contribute to the further consolidation of authoritarian rule.

This research adopts a qualitative document analysis of publicly available sources, which allows for an examination of how the current process is unfolding, as well as how it is framed, interpreted, and contested by different actors. Although academic and legal materials are incorporated, the ongoing nature of the initiative means that there is still limited scholarly literature specifically addressing the current peace process. Therefore, the analysis also draws significantly on public statements, media reports, political party documents, and reports by non-governmental organisations.

It should be noted that the current peace process is ongoing, and its future trajectory remains uncertain. At the time of writing this article, approximately 17 months have passed since the process was initiated by Bahçeli. This study aims to analyse the process to date, even though its direction and ultimate outcome remain unclear. Rather than engaging in an in-depth examination of the historical background or underlying causes of the conflict, the

article adopts a critical perspective on the conduct of the current peace process. In doing so, it seeks to offer constructive criticism regarding the prospects for success and to contribute to the literature by illuminating the anatomy of an illiberal peacebuilding initiative.

The second section of the article provides a brief overview of the Kurdish Question and the earlier peace initiative. The third section examines the crisis of liberal peacebuilding and the emergence of illiberal approaches to peacebuilding. The fourth section offers a critical analysis of the ongoing peace process and evaluates its prospects, limitations, and associated risks. The article argues that positive and sustainable peace cannot be achieved through authoritarian means in Türkiye. Authoritarian regimes are structurally prone to conflict, and illiberal peacebuilding approaches cannot reliably prevent the recurrence of violence (Toft 2009, 2024). Even where negative peace is maintained over the long term, illiberal peacebuilding initiatives are unlikely to foster a genuinely peaceful society, as they carry a significant risk of deepening authoritarianism in the post-conflict period.

2. The Search for Peace in the Kurdish Question

The Kurdish Question has a long history in Türkiye, with its roots often traced back to the late Ottoman period. Following the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, these tensions intensified, and several rebellions took place in predominantly Kurdish regions during the first two decades of the Republic (Barkey and Fuller 1998; Bruinessen 1992; Keyman 2012). After this period, no major rebellion occurred in the region until the 1980s.

Following the establishment of the PKK in 1978, the organisation launched its armed struggle against the state in 1984. Since then, violent conflict between the Turkish security forces and the PKK has persisted. During the conflict, gross human rights violations took place, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, deaths in detention, torture, village destructions, and forced displacements (Gunes and Zeydanlioglu 2014; Ayata and Yukseker 2005). As victims were unable to obtain effective remedies through national courts, many victims or their families applied to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The Court has issued numerous rulings finding the state responsible (Bakircioglu and Dickson 2017; Kurban 2023).

Over the years, there have been several ceasefires and a peace initiative that temporarily halted the fighting; however, each attempt ultimately failed, and the conflict resumed. It must be noted that, since the beginning of the conflict, Türkiye's response has been primarily framed from a security perspective, with solutions pursued largely through military means. However, it gradually became clear that military approaches alone were not effective in ending the conflict. This was because the conflict constituted one dimension of the Kurdish Question, with deeper underlying causes of violence. Therefore, addressing the conflict solely through a military lens proved inadequate. In this context, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government acknowledged the Kurdish Question and initiated a previous peace process. Unfortunately, this initiative was not successful. The violence has continued since the collapse of the previous peace process in 2015. Nevertheless, following Bahçeli's unexpected initiative, a new process has been launched with the aim of ending a conflict that has endured for more than four decades. At this point, it must be taken into account that the current initiative also appears to be framed from a security perspective and does not acknowledge the underlying causes of the conflict. This poses a risk to its success, as framing the solution from a security and military perspective has been proven ineffective.

It is important to briefly outline the previous peace process in order to enable a comparative analysis of the current one. The earlier peace process was initiated by the AKP government with the aim of resolving the Kurdish Question through democratic means. A crucial aspect of this initiative was the government's acknowledgement of the existence of

the Kurdish Question, which marked a significant departure from the state's long-standing official approach that framed the conflict solely as a security and terrorism issue (Kirişci 2011). This acknowledgement represented an important step at the time, as it implied recognition that the conflict had political and structural roots. Accordingly, the previous peace process accepted that there were underlying causes of the conflict that needed to be addressed in order to achieve a lasting resolution. Several initiatives were developed to identify and understand these causes. In addition, efforts were made to communicate the process to the public, mobilise societal support, and foster public ownership of the peace initiative (Savran 2020; Ünal 2015). Although this process had notable shortcomings and ultimately collapsed, the state's approach differed from that of the current peace process.

The most significant feature of the previous peace process was the government's discourse, which placed democratisation at the centre of the initiative. Several measures were introduced to ease long-standing restrictions on the Kurdish language and identity. These included the establishment of a state-run television channel broadcasting in Kurdish, the introduction of elective Kurdish-language courses in schools, and the relaxation of bans on Kurdish publishing (Kirişci 2011). In addition, the Wise People Committee was established to create dialogue platforms through which the public could discuss their expectations and concerns regarding the peace process. The committee was composed of seven groups, each operating in one of Türkiye's seven geographical regions. The Committee was composed of politicians, academics, journalists, artists, commentators, and representatives of civil society (Baser and Ozerdem 2021).

The Committee held open public meetings in which all individuals willing to express their views on the process were invited to participate. Following these meetings, the Committee prepared reports containing policy recommendations addressed to the government. Although these reports were intended to be compiled and made publicly available, this ultimately did not occur (Baser and Ozerdem 2021). International Cultural Research Center (UKAM) compiled these reports through considerable effort, obtaining them from committee members and media sources. According to the UKAM's (2014) compiled report, some committee groups were more comfortable carrying out their work in the Southeast and Eastern regions, where the population is predominantly Kurdish; however, they received critical reactions in certain regions such as the Black Sea and Aegean regions. Overall, the reports indicate that across all regions there were individuals who supported the process, as well as those who were sceptical or opposed to it. They also reveal a range of concerns, including issues related to national unity, security, and the government's political motivations. Supporters, in turn, expressed demands such as equal citizenship, democratic reforms, the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, cultural rights for Kurds—particularly language rights—and mechanisms to address the past. Despite criticisms directed at the Committee—particularly regarding its limited independence from the government—the information it gathered remained important. The meetings enabled the Committee to identify public expectations from a peace process, as well as the priorities, demands, and concerns of different segments of society. However, there is serious doubt as to whether this information had any meaningful impact or whether the government took these findings into account.

Although certain democratisation measures were introduced during the 2013–2015 peace process, a combination of regional developments—most notably the Syrian civil war—domestic political dynamics, and escalating security concerns ultimately led to the collapse of the initiative (Baser and Ozerdem 2021; Savran 2020; Ozkahraman 2017; Dag 2018). Both parties accused each other of failing to fulfil their respective commitments. According to the PKK, the government did not implement the necessary reforms for democratisation, whereas the government accused the PKK of failing to withdraw its

forces (Pusane 2015). In addition, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) coordinated during the 2015 elections in an effort to prevent the AKP from securing a parliamentary majority and further consolidating authoritarian rule (Selçuk and Hekimci 2020). The elections had a significant impact on the process, as the AKP lost its absolute majority while the HDP considerably increased its vote share, surpassing the 10% electoral threshold. It is often argued that one of Erdoğan's motivations for pursuing the peace process was to gain the support of Kurdish voters. However, this had a negative effect on his nationalist base. Furthermore, the mutual distrust between the parties could not be overcome (Toktamış 2018; Baser and Ozerdem 2021), and despite limited efforts to foster public ownership, the process was widely regarded as elite-driven and lacked inclusiveness and meaningful participation (Savran 2020; Dilek 2024; Bakiner 2019). Following the termination of the process, armed conflict resumed, and the government reverted to a hard-line security strategy, conducting extensive military operations not only within Türkiye but also in Iraq and Syria, where the PKK maintained an active presence.

Between 2015 and October 2024, the resumption of armed conflict was accompanied by intensified political repression targeting Kurdish political actors. Numerous Kurdish politicians were imprisoned, and elected mayors in predominantly Kurdish municipalities were repeatedly removed from office and replaced by government-appointed trustees (HRW 2024; Medyascope 2024; Saeed 2019). For instance, the co-chairs of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, along with many other Kurdish politicians, were arrested and remain in prison. Curfews were imposed in predominantly Kurdish cities, and thousands of people were displaced as a result of security operations in these areas (Ünal 2015; Baser and Ozerdem 2021). These practices are interpreted as forms of authoritarian conflict management (ACM) (Dilek 2024; Daşlı 2024). According to this analysis, the government exercised hegemonic control over public discourse, public space, and economic resources.

Pressure on the media, curfews imposed in predominantly Kurdish cities, and the expropriation of property are cited as examples of ACM practices. During this period, official discourse increasingly framed the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and its successor, the DEM Party, in criminalising terms. This securitised narrative was also mobilised in electoral politics, particularly during the 2023 presidential elections, when the ruling bloc accused the CHP and its leadership of collaborating with terrorist organisations (T24 2023). This criminalising discourse also continued after the presidential elections. For instance, in the 2024 local elections, the CHP and the DEM Party formed an Urban Consensus (Kent Uzlaşısı) to collaborate in certain districts by nominating joint candidates. However, this strategy was initially criticised by the AKP, as Erdoğan described it as a 'Qandil Consensus,' referring to the PKK (Anadolu Ajansı 2024). A year after the elections, an investigation was launched into the Urban Consensus, alleging that the strategy had been developed on the orders of the PKK (Duvar English 2025). Several politicians, including two CHP mayors, have been arrested on terrorism charges, and Ahmet Özer, the elected mayor of Esenyurt Municipality, was sentenced to six years and three months in prison on terrorism-related charges (BBC Türkçe 2026b).

Although these electoral collaborations have not always achieved their immediate objectives, as illustrated by the 2023 presidential elections, they nevertheless represent a significant effort by opposition parties to coordinate against democratic backsliding and increasing authoritarianism in Türkiye. Indeed, a growing body of literature points to the emergence of a democratic-authoritarian cleavage in the country, arguing that opposition parties have increasingly cooperated across ideological differences to counter the consolidation of authoritarian rule (Selçuk and Hekimci 2020; Yavuzylmaz and Esen 2025). The ongoing peace process may have important implications in this regard, as it has

the potential to fragment an opposition bloc that has largely cooperated around democratic concerns. Opposition parties have adopted differing positions towards the process. For instance, the Good Party (İyi Parti) has openly opposed it ([Cumhuriyet 2025a](#)), while the CHP and the DEM Party have displayed different approaches towards the government's broader political agenda. Whereas the CHP has continued to criticise the government's authoritarian practices, the DEM Party has been more cautious in its criticism, partly due to its support for the continuation of the process. These diverging positions may weaken opposition coordination against democratic backsliding, strengthen the government's monopoly over the peace process, and ultimately contribute to the further consolidation of authoritarian rule.

3. The Crisis of Liberal Peacebuilding and a Critical Assessment of Illiberal Alternatives

According to the indices of Freedom House, V-Dem, and IDEA, democracy has been in global decline for more than a decade ([Freedom House 2025b](#); [V-Dem Institute Democracy Report 2025](#); [International IDEA 2025](#)). Alongside democratic erosion, fundamental rights and freedoms have also deteriorated, while authoritarian tendencies have gained significant ground worldwide. This authoritarian wave has influenced the fields of conflict and peacebuilding, rendering liberal peacebuilding far less prominent than during its "golden era" in the 1990s and early 2000s. Until the 2010s, liberal peacebuilding theory was widely implemented in numerous post-conflict societies across the globe ([Lewis et al. 2018](#); [Cheung 2019](#)). It often included "internationally brokered peace negotiations, often accompanied by peacekeeping forces or other forms of military intervention; internationally monitored elections; a focus on human rights, gender equality and protection for minorities; the promotion of rule of law and Security Sector Reform (SSR), and constraints on the use of force by parties to the conflict" ([Lewis et al. 2018](#), p. 488). Its tools were often applied in non-Western contexts without sufficient critical reflection and frequently in a one-size-fits-all manner. Similar policy packages were introduced in vastly different contexts without adequately accounting for local political, social, and cultural conditions ([Roberts 2011](#); [Richmond 2011](#); [Chandler 2017](#)). Moreover, even when international actors seek to support local initiatives, they have often been unsuccessful due to the lack of effective frameworks and tools ([Autesserre 2017](#)). Consequently, liberal peacebuilding was often perceived as a Western imposition on non-Western societies, which became one of the central criticisms directed at both its theory and practice.

External actors have typically promoted liberal peacebuilding approaches aimed not only at ending violence but also at advancing democratisation, the rule of law, and human rights. However, these ambitious objectives have rarely been achieved simultaneously, as the establishment of peace has often failed to coincide with democratisation. [Wolpe and McDonald \(2008\)](#) argue that the conventional wisdom linking peacebuilding and democratisation suffers from significant shortcomings, largely due to an insufficient understanding of the local contexts of non-Western post-conflict societies. In particular, the absence of common ground for political competition and a weak sense of national community have hindered democratisation efforts. Nevertheless, it is important to question whether these shortcomings stem from the normative conception itself or from the way it has been implemented in practice. It may be that linking peace and democratisation remains conceptually sound and even essential, while previous failures resulted primarily from flawed or context-insensitive applications rather than from the underlying normative framework.

Another major critique concerned the top-down nature of liberal peacebuilding, in which international actors dominated decision-making processes while local actors were largely deprived of agency ([Smith et al. 2020](#); [Chandler 2017](#)). This lack of local ownership

meant that the needs, expectations, demands, and concerns of affected societies were frequently overlooked. As liberal peacebuilding initiatives were predominantly driven by international organisations and external donors, they often failed to be sufficiently inclusive and participatory. Due to these structural shortcomings, many liberal peacebuilding initiatives fell short of their stated objectives. The United Nations (UN) has frequently acted as the primary actor in liberal peacebuilding missions, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states such as Liberia, Angola, Haiti, Mozambique, and Yemen (Watts 2023; UN Peacekeeping Operations 2026). Although these missions aimed to simultaneously achieve peace and democratisation, only a limited number have delivered sustainable and successful outcomes (Watts 2023; Zürcher et al. 2013).

As liberal peacebuilding theory lost its prominence, a range of theories and approaches were developed. Some of them were developed to either reform or replace liberal peacebuilding, whereas some others such as digital peacebuilding have brought new perspectives to peacebuilding literature and application. These included but not limited to post-liberal peacebuilding, local peacebuilding, hybrid peacebuilding, feminist peacebuilding, decolonial peacebuilding, digital peacebuilding, environmental peacebuilding and critical peace approaches (Jackson 2015; McLeod and O'Reilly 2019; Richmond 2011; Paris 2011; Väyrynen et al. 2021; Zondi 2017; Hudson 2016; Schirch 2020; Zelli and Krause 2025). Among these, however, illiberal peacebuilding emerged as the approach that most widely supplanted liberal peacebuilding in practice. ACM and illiberal peacebuilding have increasingly been embraced on a global scale. These two concepts are closely related, with the former sometimes considered a subset of illiberal peacebuilding (Smith et al. 2020; Lewis et al. 2018). The rise of this illiberal approach can be largely attributed to shifts in the global order. Democratic backsliding and the growing influence of authoritarian powers such as China, Russia, and Gulf countries have played a significant role in this transformation (Conde 2025; Lewis et al. 2018). These regimes have either implemented illiberal peacebuilding strategies domestically or become key donors and sponsors of illiberal peacebuilding initiatives abroad.

Whereas liberal peacebuilding initiatives were predominantly supported by the UN, the United States, and European countries, emerging authoritarian powers have increasingly positioned themselves as influential actors in contemporary peacebuilding missions. As a result, the peacebuilding landscape has shifted away from democracy- and rights-based frameworks toward more state-centric, stability-oriented, and authoritarian models (Conde 2025). In parallel, proponents of liberal peacebuilding have increasingly adopted a more pragmatic stance toward illiberal peacebuilding initiatives. In some cases, actors such as the UN have even supported autocratic leaders in the name of stability (Gowan 2015).

Although liberal actors have not entirely abandoned liberal principles, they have increasingly prioritized strategic arrangements and cooperation with authoritarian regimes. Consequently, their influence in shaping contemporary peacebuilding missions has comparatively diminished (Conde 2025; Smith et al. 2020; Russell 2014). One manifestation of this shift can be observed in the tendency of international peacebuilders to focus predominantly on a single leader for practical reasons, as maintaining relations with one central actor is often perceived as easier than engaging with a diverse set of political actors. This approach, however, risks contributing to the consolidation of authoritarianism. This dynamic was evident in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the UN “contributed to the personalization of politics by investing heavily in its relationship with an individual leader rather than a wider spectrum of actors” (von Billerbeck and Tansey 2019, p. 18). This pattern may be interpreted as the triumph of pragmatism over normativity in contemporary peacebuilding practice.

There is also a growing discussion on how international peacebuilders—particularly the UN—may inadvertently reinforce authoritarianism in post-conflict societies (Day et al. 2021; von Billerbeck and Tansey 2019). International peacebuilding missions often contribute to authoritarianism in two main ways. First, by providing financial and institutional assistance to incumbent leaders and elites, they may facilitate the consolidation of autocratic practices. Enhanced institutional capacity enables these leaders to tighten their autocratic control over political opposition, civil society, and the broader public. Second, peacebuilding missions may create a permissive environment in which ruling elites can employ authoritarian measures with limited international scrutiny, as undemocratic practices are tolerated in the name of stability. Rather than facing sanctions or meaningful pressure from the international community, illiberal practices are often overlooked (Day et al. 2021; von Billerbeck and Tansey 2019).

In the post-conflict Democratic Republic of Congo, the UN prioritised stability over democracy, resulting in the overlooking of the leader's oppressive policies and even serious human rights violations (von Billerbeck and Tansey 2019). In the context of Türkiye, the first mechanism may be less salient, as the ruling bloc already commands strong institutional capacities through which authoritarian practices are exercised. The second mechanism, however, may be more significant, given that the West's engagement with Türkiye has often been accompanied by a degree of tolerance toward its illiberal governance, as cooperation with the government has largely continued. Sustained criticism has been limited, and meaningful sanctions have been relatively rare, with the government instead frequently being treated as a pragmatic and cooperative partner (Stein 2021; Esen and Gumuscu 2025). Should a peace initiative prove successful, additional international credit is likely to accrue to the AKP government, which could then be leveraged to further entrench its oppressive policies.

A comparison of liberal and illiberal peacebuilding models reveals significant differences in both their normative foundations and practical approaches. Liberal peacebuilding aims to achieve both negative and positive peace by addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (Cheung 2019). Within this framework, conflicts are understood to emerge from structural conditions such as oppression, marginalisation, inequality, grievances, and systematic exclusion, which necessitate comprehensive political, legal, and social reforms. By contrast, illiberal peacebuilding primarily prioritises negative peace and conceptualises conflict through a markedly different lens. In this approach, conflict is often explained in terms of state weakness and the greed of political opponents, rather than as a consequence of structural injustices or long-standing grievances (Lewis et al. 2018). Because this perspective does not acknowledge the existence of deeper root causes of conflict, illiberal peacebuilding refrains from adopting measures aimed at addressing such causes. Instead, its central objective is to create a tightly controlled political and security environment in which the outbreak of conflict is prevented. This is typically pursued through the consolidation of executive authority, the restriction of political competition, and the use of coercive or authoritarian practices to neutralise perceived challengers (Russell 2014; Samset 2011; Smith et al. 2020). Consequently, liberal and illiberal approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding differ fundamentally in both their understanding of the origins of conflict and the strategies they employ to manage or resolve it. These differences can be observed in Türkiye's two processes: while the discourse in the earlier process framed the conflict as rooted in the Kurdish Question and its underlying causes, the current process frames it solely from a security perspective.

Smith et al. (2020) distinguish between thin, medium, and thick versions of illiberal peacebuilding. The thin version pursues the goals of liberal peacebuilding while employing illiberal methods to achieve them. The medium version is agnostic about the final political

order, as long as conflict does not recur. The thick version explicitly embraces illiberal methods to achieve illiberal ends. They argue that even the thin version tends to produce a more illiberal order, because once elites consolidate power, they are unlikely to relinquish it. Thus, while such authoritarian arrangements may achieve and maintain stability and order in the short and medium term, they are unlikely to deliver liberal outcomes or inclusive political and social arrangements. This poses a significant risk in the context of Türkiye, as the government has not articulated a strong commitment to democracy, the rule of law, or human rights in relation to the process, instead framing it predominantly through a security lens. Even where these principles are sometimes referenced in official documents—such as the commission report, which will be discussed in detail in the next section—they remain largely rhetorical, as empirical developments and political practice suggest otherwise. Accordingly, even if Türkiye's approach is characterized as a thin version of illiberal peacebuilding, it is likely to result in the further entrenchment of an illiberal order.

Smith et al. (2020, p. 4) compare liberal and illiberal peacebuilding across three key dimensions: "In place of Western powers, illiberal peace-building is dominated by domestic actors. In place of economic neo-liberalism, illiberal peacebuilding runs on clientelism, cronyism and corruption. In place of liberal ideals of equality and liberty, illiberal peace-building emphasises illiberal norms of inequality and order." These dimensions are crucial for understanding the fundamental differences between liberal and illiberal peacebuilding models. First, liberal peacebuilding has long been criticised for its Western-dominated character and limited inclusiveness (Richmond 2011). This critique is significant, as internationally driven peace initiatives often fail to adequately grasp local contexts or to meaningfully incorporate the demands, expectations, and concerns of affected societies. However, illiberal peacebuilding models are frequently not immune to similar shortcomings. Despite being dominated by domestic actors, illiberal approaches are typically elite-driven and lack meaningful participation and inclusivity. As such, the mere localisation of peacebuilding does not guarantee responsiveness to societal needs or public ownership of the process. This is also the case in Türkiye at present, as there are no efforts to identify the needs of the people, nor are there meaningful efforts to address them. Moreover, local elites may present themselves as the sole guarantors of peace and stability, thereby securing both financial and political support from international actors. This support is often leveraged to consolidate and entrench authoritarian practices (von Billerbeck and Tansey 2019; Day et al. 2021; Autesserre 2017).

Second, liberal peacebuilding theory has been criticised for promoting a neoliberal economic model in post-conflict societies, and this critique holds considerable validity. The imposition of an economic framework without sufficient sensitivity to local conditions can exacerbate existing inequalities and grievances (Pugh et al. 2008). Nevertheless, illiberal peacebuilding does not necessarily offer a more equitable alternative. Practices such as clientelism, cronyism, and corruption, which often characterise illiberal approaches, are unlikely to address structural injustices or advance social justice. Where inequalities, grievances, and distributive injustices remain unaddressed, the lived outcomes of liberal and illiberal peacebuilding may appear indistinguishable from the perspective of affected populations. Although illiberal peacebuilding does not promise social justice or a more equitable society, its economic practices are likely to generate further grievances due to corruption and cronyism, which pose a risk to sustainable peace.

Finally, while liberal peacebuilding has often fallen short of fulfilling its normative promises—such as equality, liberty, and democratic consolidation—illiberal peacebuilding does not aspire to these objectives in the first place. Its primary focus is the maintenance of stability and order, as described by Smith et al. (2020, p. 4): "what characterises

the core of illiberal peace-building is the prioritisation of regime security and stability over accountability, human rights and social inclusion.” However, in contexts marked by persistent injustice, marginalisation, and repression, stability alone cannot constitute a desirable or sustainable outcome of peacebuilding. For instance, in Türkiye, maintaining stability is likely to entail the continuation of human rights violations and injustices against Kurdish people and the wider opposition.

Prioritising order at the expense of democratic governance risks entrenching authoritarian practices and may ultimately undermine peace itself, as authoritarian regimes have been shown to be more prone to renewed violence and conflict. Moreover, the consolidation of authoritarianism should not be reduced solely to the risk of conflict recurrence. In some cases, such as Rwanda or Chechnya, large-scale armed conflict has not resumed; yet these contexts remain characterised by pervasive human rights violations, weak democratic institutions, limited rule of law, and deep social inequalities (Russell 2014; Diehl 2016). Russell (2014) uses the case of Chechnya to illustrate illiberal peace, arguing that some people may come to view an authoritarian regime as preferable when contrasted with the horrors of war. While there may be some truth to this claim, he also acknowledges that the sustainability of such an illiberal peace remains questionable. Moreover, despite the reduction in the intensity of violence, the regime remains highly repressive and civil liberties are virtually absent. He concedes that it remains unclear whether the people of Chechnya would prefer to endure the current negative peace under a repressive regime or to risk instability for the possibility of a democratic state (Russell 2014). The following statement by a Chechnya resident is particularly illustrative in this regard:

“Now when I think back to the war, . . . we were not as frightened as now. Fear of a bomb, fear of a bullet—it’s something we could live with. . . . But this . . . utter humiliation—I just cannot deal with it, I’m ashamed of myself. Every day, they take away another piece of my dignity. . . . It’s like always walking a mine field, always. . . waiting for them to drag you away.” (HRW 2016)

Similarly, another resident of Grozny remarked: “It’s not even violence that is scary. They will disown you, publicly humiliate you (. . .) You won’t be able to live with dignity in this republic anymore. This is worse than death” (International Crisis Group 2015, p. 35). These statements cannot, of course, be generalized; nevertheless, they invite reflection on the value of maintaining negative peace under an authoritarian regime. Under such regimes, violence may persist, albeit in different forms. Therefore, the risk of the consolidation of authoritarianism must be taken into account in the case of Türkiye. While achieving negative peace is important, serious consideration must also be given to the means through which positive peace can be realised. Otherwise, violence may merely assume new forms in a context where human rights are not protected, and democratic standards continue to erode.

As illustrated in this section, there is no clearly established framework of illiberal peacebuilding, as different scholars and case studies emphasise different characteristics. Nevertheless, three interrelated dimensions can be identified from the literature, all of which also reflect features commonly associated with authoritarianism. The first dimension concerns the state-centric and elite-driven nature of these processes. As a result, illiberal peacebuilding initiatives are typically conducted by a limited number of political actors and often lack transparency, inclusiveness, participation, public ownership, and third-party involvement—characteristics that are also frequently associated with authoritarian governance. The second dimension relates to the understanding of conflict and peace. Since illiberal peacebuilding prioritises negative peace and stability, it tends to adopt a narrow understanding of both concepts. Consequently, such processes often fail to address the root causes of conflict, promote meaningful democratisation, or engage with past

injustices through transitional justice mechanisms. The third dimension concerns the political implications of the process. Illiberal peacebuilding initiatives tend to maintain tight control over the political and security environment, consolidate executive authority, and restrict political competition. Consequently, there is often little political willingness to share power or make meaningful concessions to address the demands of relevant actors. These three dimensions are broadly consistent with the characteristics of authoritarian governance. They will therefore be used in the following section to analyse the ongoing peace process in Türkiye.

4. Türkiye's Illiberal Peacebuilding Initiative: Prospects and Limitations

Türkiye presents a complex case, as its economy and state capacity are considerably stronger than those of many conflict-affected or post-conflict countries that have undergone peacebuilding processes. State institutions and human capital largely remain intact, unlike in many countries emerging from violent conflict. This does not mean, however, that the country is free from serious economic, political, or institutional challenges. Over the past decade, Türkiye has experienced significant democratic backsliding and has increasingly been characterised as a competitive authoritarian regime. This context is particularly important for analysing the current peace process, as the broader political environment significantly shapes both its conduct and its prospects. As argued earlier, illiberal peacebuilding and authoritarianism are likely to have a reciprocal relationship. While the authoritarian character of the regime influences the way the process is conducted, the process itself may further contribute to the consolidation of authoritarian rule in Türkiye.

Accordingly, this section begins by examining Türkiye's political context, developments in Syria, and the NUSDC, as these factors also reflect the illiberal nature of the process and its relationship with authoritarianism. The NUSDC represents the most significant institutional initiative undertaken by the government since the beginning of the process; therefore, its composition, mandate, and functioning are critical for understanding the broader trajectory of the peace process. The section then analyses the process through the three dimensions of illiberal peacebuilding identified in the previous section, using this analysis to discuss the prospects of the ongoing peace process and assess whether it is capable of achieving sustainable and positive peace.

4.1. Türkiye's Current Context: An Unfavourable Setting for Peacebuilding

The heading should not be misunderstood as implying that specific conditions are strictly necessary for a peace process to take place. Peace initiatives can, of course, emerge in a variety of contexts. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that Türkiye's current context presents particular challenges for a peace initiative, and this reality should be taken into account. The Turkish economy has been in a prolonged economic crisis since 2018 and has continued to deteriorate, with persistently high inflation and severely reduced purchasing power. Income and wealth inequality have also worsened significantly ([World Inequality Report 2026](#)). Nevertheless, Türkiye remains one of the world's twenty largest economies. However, economic hardship may negatively affect the process. For instance, during disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes, ex-combatants are often provided with financial allowances and employment opportunities to facilitate their reintegration into society. This can generate grievances among the broader public, particularly in contexts where many people struggle to find employment and make ends meet. Therefore, such processes must be designed and implemented with great care.

Although state institutions are generally regarded as well established, they suffer from profound problems related to accountability, equality, and transparency. Public trust in these institutions is alarmingly low, with widespread dissatisfaction—particularly

concerning the judiciary (TÜSİAR 2025; Cumhuriyet 2025b; Panorama 2025; Gündemar 2025b). These structural weaknesses may also hinder the implementation of policies associated with the current process. For example, if an amnesty law were enacted for political prisoners and imprisoned members of the PKK, it could generate public discontent. This does not suggest that an amnesty law should not be adopted; such measures are often components of peacebuilding processes. As Gurses and Çelik (2024, p. 626) states: “Ending war requires gaining societal support for peace by overcoming the fears of the majority while addressing minority demands.” So, the necessary steps must be taken, but societal support must also be ensured at the same time. However, in Türkiye’s context, there is significant distrust toward the judiciary, alongside serious concerns regarding the rule of law and human rights. In an environment where the judicial system lacks public confidence, both the adoption and implementation of such laws become more challenging. Substantial institutional and judicial reforms are therefore necessary to restore public trust. Such reforms would also constitute an important step toward achieving positive peace.

Compared to most conflict-affected or post-conflict states, Türkiye has a relatively strong democratic culture, having held competitive elections for over seventy-five years, despite their democratic shortcomings. Yet, Türkiye’s democracy—already marked by significant deficiencies—has undergone severe erosion over the past decade. As mentioned earlier, the post-2015 period is particularly significant. Following the failure of the previous peace initiative, the government adopted increasingly authoritarian tactics and exerted intense pressure on the Kurdish political movement, the opposition, civil society, and the media. After the collapse of the peace process, the 2016 coup attempt provided further justification for the government to intensify its authoritarian grip across the country.

There is no consensus on the precise starting point of authoritarianism in Türkiye; it has been variously associated with the Gezi protests in 2013, the failure of the peace process in 2015, the coup attempt in 2016, or the 2017 constitutional referendum. Rather than a single turning point, it can be argued that authoritarianism has gradually intensified over the past decade. The separation of powers has been severely eroded, as Erdoğan holds extensive powers under the new presidential system and exercises control over the state apparatus. Fundamental rights and freedoms have been severely violated by the government, while civil society and the media have been subjected to intense repression. It must also be noted that the government’s control over the media and the state apparatus makes elections far from democratic, as there is no level playing field for competition. Although there is an extensive body of literature on this issue, it is beyond the scope of this article to examine it in detail (Esen and Gumuscu 2016; Arat and Pamuk 2019; Somer 2016; Baser and Ozturk 2017; Cilliler 2021; Esen 2025; Akçay 2021). Yet, it is important to acknowledge these dynamics in order to fully understand the context in which the process is unfolding, as well as how they shape the conduct of the process and render it illiberal.

The oppression of the government reached a new level after the operation against the main opposition party’s candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, for the presidential elections on 19 March 2025 (Bianet 2025b). The imprisonment of the main opposition party’s presidential candidate calls into question the existence of a genuine democratic playing field and shared democratic rules. Since then, not only the opposition politicians but also journalists, academics and civil society members were put in Silivri Prison which became the symbol of the regime’s authoritarianism (Guardian 2025). Moreover, the leadership of the CHP was replaced following a court decision in May 2026. Given longstanding concerns regarding judicial independence in Türkiye, the decision was widely perceived as a further crackdown on the opposition (HRW 2026). The fact that the leadership of the main opposition party could be reshaped through judicial intervention raised serious concerns about government interference in opposition politics and the future of democracy in the country. The ruling

also created a leadership dispute within the CHP between the former and newly appointed leaderships. At the time of writing, it is expected that members of the former leadership may establish a new political party to continue their political activities ([BBC Türkçe 2026a](#)). If realised, such a development could further fragment the opposition by dividing its electoral base and organisational capacity across multiple political parties.

It should also be noted that public debate has been largely dominated by developments surrounding the CHP since the beginning of the process. This may have had the effect of diverting public attention away from the peace process itself. Rather than discussing the prospects, content, and implications of the process, public debate has focused primarily on the crisis within the main opposition party. This concern was also expressed by DEM Party Co-Chair Tülay Hatimoğulları, who stated that the court's annulment decision had overshadowed the peace process ([Cumhuriyet 2026](#)). In this sense, developments surrounding the CHP have not only intensified opposition fragmentation but have also constrained broader public deliberation on the peace process.

The government has been using judiciary as a tool to suppress critics, as many opposition politicians, journalists, lawyers, civil society representatives, human rights advocates, and even ordinary citizens face judicial harassment. Numerous individuals have been arrested, investigated, or sentenced simply for exercising their fundamental rights (such as participating in protests or expressing criticism online) or performing their professional duties (such as reporting news or representing clients in court). These authoritarian practices continue and may have even intensified since the beginning of the process. By using these authoritarian methods, the government aims to control the political and social spheres during the process, which is a significant indication of illiberal peacebuilding. However, such practices do not appear to be consistent with a genuine peacebuilding process. For instance, the PKK had shifted its objective from the establishment of an independent Kurdish state to the pursuit of democratic autonomy in the Kurdish region, aimed at securing the rights of the Kurds ([Saeed 2019](#)). Yet, since the beginning of the current process, the PKK's recent discourse indicates a strategic change from explicit claims of democratic autonomy toward a broader emphasis on democratic politics and rights-based demands, although core ideas of self-governance remain embedded within its ideological framework ([Bianet 2025a](#)). However, the realization of these rights remains uncertain in light of the broader deterioration of human rights, the corruption of the legal system, and the erosion of democracy in the country.

As mentioned earlier, opposition coordination has been an important strategy employed by opposition parties in Türkiye to counter authoritarianism and democratic backsliding. In this context, it could be argued that the government is using the current process, at least in part, as a means of weakening this coordination. As the next presidential elections approach, President Erdoğan requires parliamentary support to pursue constitutional change and potentially call an early election, which could enable him to seek another term in office ([BBC Türkçe 2024](#)). Securing Kurdish electoral support—or at least ensuring that the DEM Party and its constituencies do not align with the opposition's presidential candidate—therefore appears to be a significant strategic consideration ([Gunter 2025](#)). This does not mean that opposition fragmentation is the sole objective or explanation of the process. Rather, it may constitute one of the mechanisms through which illiberal peacebuilding reinforces authoritarian governance. By placing opposition actors in a position where criticism of the process can be portrayed as opposition to peace itself, the government narrows the space for democratic scrutiny and weakens alternative political narratives regarding the meaning, direction, and ownership of the peace process.

4.2. *Developments in Syria and Their Implications for the Peace Process*

Developments in the Middle East—particularly in Syria—have had a significant impact on the peace process. Government representatives have repeatedly implied that peace in Türkiye has become a necessity in light of the conflicts and escalating aggression in neighbouring countries (Bianet 2025c; TCİB 2024). In addition, the current peace process primarily focuses on achieving negative peace by ending armed conflict. This objective requires the disarmament and demobilisation of the PKK, while the future status of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) remains a critical concern for Türkiye. In this context, the Turkish government has advocated for the integration of the SDF into the Syrian National Army (SNA).

Syria is of particular importance for Türkiye due to the presence of Syrian Kurdish armed actors and the emergence of a non-state armed coalition—the SDF—which exercised de facto control over Rojava, a territory sharing a long border with Türkiye. The SDF is a multi-ethnic and multi-group coalition; however, its core military component is the People's Protection Units (YPG), a predominantly Kurdish armed organisation. The relationship between the SDF, the YPG, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) remains complex and highly contested in both political and academic debates. While some actors and analysts treat these entities as organisationally distinct, others argue that they are closely interconnected. Türkiye, in particular, regards the SDF and the YPG as extensions of the PKK operating in Syria (Anadolu Ajansı 2026; Al Jazeera 2025a). Following the operations in January 2026, the new Syrian government and the SDF signed an agreement to integrate these forces into the SNA. These developments are likely to have significant implications for the ongoing peace process in Türkiye, particularly given that the ruling bloc has long framed the presence of the SDF as a major obstacle to the initiative.

This approach toward Syrian Kurds was articulated in the AKP's commission report. It refers to regional developments—particularly in Syria—as a key motivation for the process. It strongly asserts that the presence of the SDF and the YPG is unacceptable to the government, as both are regarded as extensions of the PKK. The report maintains that these forces should be dissolved and integrated into the SNA (AKP Report 2025). Developments in Syria appear to have aligned with the government's stated objectives, as the SNA regained control over large parts of the Kurdish-held region of Rojava in January 2026. A significant number of SDF components—predominantly Arab groups—reportedly withdrew from the organisation, and armed clashes occurred between the SDF and the SNA (van Wilgenburg 2026). These developments have been particularly sensitive for Kurds in Türkiye, given their close political and social ties with Syrian Kurds and Rojava. Indeed, the clashes triggered strong reactions among Kurdish communities, generating renewed tensions between the DEM Party and the government, especially after government officials publicly welcomed the SNA's operations in Rojava. This reflects the security-oriented nature of the process, in which peace is primarily understood as the elimination of armed threats rather than as a broader project addressing the underlying causes of conflict and promoting positive peace. This should not be understood to mean that governments cannot adopt a security perspective; it is normal for governments to seek to ensure security. However, disregarding the concerns and ties of Kurds in Türkiye does not align with genuine peacebuilding.

4.3. *The National Unity, Solidarity, and Democracy Commission*

While internal and external dynamics appear to pose significant challenges, the process is unfolding at its own pace. The establishment of the parliamentary commission represents the most significant step the government has taken since the beginning of the process. The Commission consisted of 51 members of parliament, including 22 from the AKP, 11 from

the CHP, 5 from the DEM Party, 4 from the MHP, and 3 from the New Path (Yeni Yol). In addition, one member each represented six other parties in parliament (NUSDC 2025). The Good Party refused to nominate members to the Commission, as it opposed the process (Cumhuriyet 2025a). During its work, the Commission held numerous sessions to hear testimony from victims, as well as from academics, civil society organisations, and bar associations (NUSDC 2025). On 24 November 2025, three Commission members—MPs from the AKP, MHP, and DEM Party—visited Öcalan at İmralı Prison, while the CHP decided not to take part in the delegation (Yetkin Report 2025b). This visit marked a significant moment, as a parliamentary delegation's visit to Öcalan had been unimaginable until that point. In addition, on 26 October 2025, the PKK announced that it was withdrawing its forces from Türkiye to Iraq, a move that was welcomed by the AKP government (Al Jazeera 2025b). This also constituted a historic step, given that the conflict has persisted for more than forty years.

The İmralı Records (2025) were not initially published but were made public approximately two months after the visit. The report primarily consists of Öcalan's statements. In these statements, he expressed support for a strong and democratic Türkiye rather than the establishment of a separate state, while also prioritising local democracy. He further stated that he sought the same outcomes for Syrian Kurds as for Kurds in Türkiye and suggested that he may have influence over the SDF. In response, members of the AKP and the MHP have argued that Öcalan should also call on the SDF to disarm as well (İmralı Records 2025). The İmralı records indicate that the ruling bloc prioritises the disarmament and dissolution of the PKK, which is consistent with the broader discourse it has articulated since the outset of the process. This suggests the existence of an elite bargain between the principal actors involved in the process, one that prioritises disarmament and stability. While elite bargaining is a common feature of many peace processes, the absence of meaningful participation and inclusiveness may result in the expectations, concerns, and demands of broader segments of society remaining unaddressed.

The components of the Commission submitted their reports in December 2025 in their capacity as political parties. These reports reflected their respective perspectives and positions regarding the ongoing process. The AKP Report's (2025) emphasised that there are no negotiations and that the primary objective is the elimination of terrorism and the dissolution of the PKK. The report frames the issue as a matter of democracy and claims that, from the outset, the AKP government has taken significant steps to address the Kurdish Question. Responsibility for the failure of previous processes is attributed to the PKK. Furthermore, the report stresses that the government's willingness to take further steps—including the enactment of legislation related to DDR—is conditional upon the dissolution of the PKK (AKP Report 2025). The denial of negotiations and the emphasis on the elimination of terrorism and the dissolution of the PKK can be interpreted as indicators of illiberal peacebuilding. The report frames the issue primarily through a security lens, paying limited attention to the broader political and social dimensions of the conflict and its underlying causes. Such an approach has also been observed in other cases associated with illiberal peacebuilding, including Russia and Sri Lanka, where peace has been pursued primarily through security-oriented strategies and the restoration of state authority (Lewis et al. 2018).

Throughout the report, the importance of transparency, accountability, trust, and public ownership is repeatedly emphasised as essential to the process. The report also places strong emphasis on democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, claiming that the government has strengthened all of these principles and that the successful completion of the process will further enhance them (AKP Report 2025). However, broader and long-standing concerns have been raised over the past decade about the state of democracy, the rule of

law, and human rights in the country. The discrepancy between the government's claims and the realities on the ground—both with respect to the process itself and the overall condition of the country—is therefore difficult to reconcile. Indeed, widely used international indices indicate a sustained decline across these areas, making the government's claims and promises difficult to accept ([Amnesty International 2026](#); [Freedom House 2025a](#); [International IDEA 2026](#); [HRW 2025](#)).

The AKP's report also refers to a possible DDR process and its legal basis. It argues that a specific and separate piece of legislation must be enacted for members of the PKK in order to facilitate their reintegration into society. Public acceptance of these individuals is presented as a critical factor, and the report emphasises that public support should be actively fostered. In this regard, the report notes that necessary steps need to be taken, acknowledging that "no social reintegration programme can achieve lasting success without public support" ([AKP Report 2025](#), p. 53). However, given that the process has thus far been elite-driven and has involved little effort to ensure public participation or inclusiveness, it is difficult to assume that broad public support can be readily secured. Moreover, this issue has not yet been brought before the Parliament for deliberation, despite the Parliament being the primary institution through which different segments of society are represented. According to media reports and political statements, progress on the proposed legislation appears to depend largely on the President's direction ([Birgün 2026](#)). This reliance on executive discretion, combined with the limited role of broader parliamentary deliberation and public participation, further reflects the illiberal character of the peacebuilding process.

The scope of this article does not permit an in-depth analysis of the reports issued by other political parties; however, it can be argued that these reports reflect their overall approaches to the process. For instance, the [MHP Report's \(2025\)](#) does not adequately acknowledge the underlying causes of the conflict and instead addresses the Kurdish Question primarily through a terrorism and security lens. By contrast, the [DEM Party Report's \(2025\)](#) presents a comprehensive account of the conflict's root causes from a historical perspective. While the MHP's report does not appear to open space for discussion regarding the expectations of the Kurdish people, the [DEM Party Report's \(2025\)](#) highlights a wide range of demands, including political and cultural rights, a call for facing the past, and reforms related to democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. These include extensive legal reforms, such as a constitutional amendment to redefine citizenship in an ethnically inclusive manner; changes to key legislation, including the Anti-Terrorism Law, the Criminal Code, and the Code of Criminal Procedure; and the implementation of decisions of the ECtHR. The report also calls for legal guarantees for the use of the Kurdish language in education and public services; the strengthening of local democracy and an end to trusteeship practices; the adoption of a democratic reintegration law for PKK combatants; the establishment of mechanisms to address the past, including transitional justice processes; the strengthening of civil society and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms; an end to the culture of impunity; the release of sick prisoners; and recognition of the 'right to hope' for Abdullah Öcalan. In this respect, there is a significant disparity between the two reports. The [CHP Report's \(2025\)](#), on the other hand, adopts a broader perspective, calling for democratisation and the strengthening of the rule of law and human rights—reforms that would benefit not only the Kurdish population but the wider public as well.

On 18 February 2026, the commission adopted a joint report by majority vote. [The NUSDC Joint Report \(2026\)](#) appears to adopt a security-oriented perspective, as evidenced by its frequent references to terror-free Türkiye. It places strong emphasis on the brotherhood between Turks, Kurds, and Arabs, portraying this bond both from a historical perspective and as a foundation for a shared future. With regard to the future, the report

highlights goals such as strengthening democracy, improving education and the economy, and enhancing overall living standards. It also includes recommendations aimed at reinforcing democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. However, significant doubts remain as to whether these recommendations will be implemented by the ruling bloc, particularly given the absence of meaningful confidence-building and positive steps since the outset of the process. Considering the illiberal nature of the process, it seems unlikely that these goals will be achieved through genuine efforts. Considering the illiberal nature of the process, it seems unlikely that these objectives will be achieved in a meaningful and sustainable manner. Given the broader political dynamics in the country—including growing pressures on the media, opposition parties, and civil society—it is difficult to envisage the emergence of the democratic conditions necessary for positive peace. This concern becomes even more significant in light of discussions that Türkiye may be transitioning from a competitive authoritarian regime towards a more hegemonic form of authoritarian rule (Esen and Gumuscu 2025). Rather than facilitating political pluralisation and democratisation, the process risks reinforcing existing authoritarian dynamics while simultaneously reducing armed conflict.

The NUSDC Joint Report (2026) further includes recommendations concerning a DDR process for PKK members. It reiterates that the commission was mandated to submit proposals and recommendations to the Parliament on behalf of the nation. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of the Parliament to enact the necessary laws and regulations related to the process. Although the DEM Party voted in favour of the report, it expressed objections. One of the party's members on the commission stated that they held differing views on certain issues, particularly regarding the discourse on terrorism. Similar objections were raised by two other commission members who voted against the Joint Report. They criticised the report for failing to acknowledge the Kurdish Question or the underlying causes of the conflict, instead portraying the issue primarily as a matter of security and terrorism (DW 2026). It must also be noted that the parliament and the government have not yet taken any action on the recommendations of the Commission. For instance, a reintegration law was expected to be enacted following the PKK's announcement of laying down arms. The NUSDC Joint Report also refers to this; however, not even a draft has been shared with the public. In addition, there has been no preparation of policies addressing key demands of the Kurdish side, such as ending trusteeship practices or securing cultural rights.

Lastly, one could argue that this commission is an important element of the process and, since it has held sessions to listen to various actors throughout its work, it constitutes a liberal element, making the ongoing process hybrid rather than illiberal. As the hybrid model incorporates both liberal and illiberal elements, it could be argued that the commission renders the process hybrid. However, this research argues that, so far, the process remains illiberal because, apart from the commission, there are no other significant liberal elements. In addition, for a hybrid model to apply, there need to be both internal and external actors, which is not the case in Türkiye, as there are no external actors involved so far. Moreover, it remains uncertain whether the commission's recommendations will have a meaningful impact on the trajectory of the process. As happened with the Wise People Committee in the previous process, the commission's work may ultimately come to nothing. Therefore, so far, it is not possible to classify the process as hybrid solely on the basis of the existence of the commission; the process remains illiberal.

4.4. Assessing the Current Peace Process: Illiberal Peacebuilding and Authoritarianism in Practice

This section moves beyond a descriptive account of the current peace process and analyses how recent developments reflect the three dimensions of illiberal peacebuilding

identified in the third section: the governance of the process, the understanding of conflict and peace, and the political implications of the process.

4.4.1. The Governance of the Process

Since the beginning of the process, a lack of transparency has constituted a major problem, as no clear information has been provided regarding the initiative's motivations, roadmap, or objectives. The previous process sought to address the Kurdish Question through the expansion of democracy, human rights, and fundamental freedoms (Savran 2020; Ozkahraman 2017). It must be noted that even the previous peace process was criticised for lacking transparency and inclusivity. Attempts to build societal support, such as the Wise People Committee, did not succeed in garnering broad public backing. In fact, both the government and the Kurdish side were not in favour of inclusivity. This contributed to the failure of the process, alongside other factors (Dilek 2024; Bakiner 2019; Ünal 2015). The current process has been conducted with even larger secrecy, managed by a narrow circle of political elites, with minimal public communication or participation. The absence of public information and deliberation signals an illiberal approach to peacebuilding.

The commission's meeting with the Minister of Interior, the Minister of National Defence, and the Director of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) was held in a closed session, and its transcripts will be sealed for ten years (Türkiye Today 2025). Although it is understandable that certain information may remain confidential during peace process negotiations, the decision to withhold the session's transcripts from the public for a decade is problematic. This raises serious transparency concerns, as the public has a right to know why the process was initiated, what motivations underpin it, and under what conditions the government decided to pursue it. Given that the conflict has been ongoing for four decades, it is important to ask why the process was initiated at this particular point.

On the other hand, there has been no substantive effort to include relevant actors or to ensure inclusivity and participation since the beginning of the peace initiative. An important question in peacebuilding processes is: "Who will benefit from the peace?" The answer depends on the motivation, objectives, and conduct of the initiative. As noted earlier, illiberal processes are typically elite-driven and fail to take into account the needs, expectations, and concerns of the broader public. This also appears to be the case in Türkiye's current process, given the very limited participation and lack of inclusivity. Smith et al. (2020) explain that local elites in restive regions often bargain with central elites to reach a political settlement. Once an agreement is achieved, it frequently serves the interests of both central and local elites rather than those of the wider population. Although such settlements may reduce or even end violence, the root causes of the conflict often remain unaddressed. This point is particularly significant, as similar concerns may apply to the current peace process.

Without meaningful efforts to ensure inclusivity and participation, there is a risk that the process will primarily serve elite interests rather than those of ordinary people. For instance, in Indonesia, "the successful shift from a wartime to peacetime order was accomplished by the central government assuring that the wartime elites maintained control over Aceh's political economy through rent-seeking privileges and patrimonial relationships" (Smith et al. 2020, p. 7). A similar dynamic may apply to local elites in predominantly Kurdish regions. Central elites may offer economic—and possibly political—incentives to local elites in order to achieve negative peace. While this remains difficult to substantiate at present, it is important to highlight the potential risk and to ensure that any peace process benefits society as a whole.

Since the beginning of the process, numerous civil society initiatives have been organised, bringing together politicians, academics, journalists, and civil society actors in an effort to contribute to the process (DEMOS 2025). Opinion polls indicate that, although the public broadly desires peace, a majority remains sceptical about the likelihood of the current process succeeding (Rudaw 2025; Haber7 2025; Gündemar 2025a; Yetkin Report 2025a). At the same time, these polls have certain limitations that must be taken into account, as the framing of survey questions can significantly shape the responses. For instance, when respondents are asked, “What do you think about the ‘Terror-Free Türkiye Process?’”, approximately 55 per cent express a positive view (Haber7 2025). However, when the question is framed as “Do you support a process conducted with Abdullah Öcalan?”, around 67 per cent of respondents answer in the negative (Cumhuriyet 2025c). Although there is broad public support for peace, understandings of what “peace” entails vary considerably. For some, peace may require the dissolution of the PKK and the punishment of its members. For others, it may imply the release of Öcalan and the implementation of a DDR process for PKK members.

Public perceptions of the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, remain largely negative among broad segments of society, creating a dilemma for the government. On the one hand, the government seeks to conduct the process through Öcalan and to present him as a representative of the Kurds. On the other hand, it is reluctant to be publicly associated with either the PKK or Öcalan due to the potential electoral costs ahead of upcoming elections. This ambivalence has been reflected in contradictory public statements and actions. For instance, when a parliamentary delegation visited İmralı Prison to meet with Öcalan, the AKP member initially denied having taken part in the visit when asked. This denial caused confusion on the day of the visit, although the same MP later acknowledged his participation (Birgün 2025). Similarly, government officials have repeatedly stated that there are no negotiations involved in the process (Evrensel 2025; Birgün 2024), despite the widely recognized fact that such initiatives inherently entail some form of negotiation. As mentioned earlier, the June 2015 election results had a negative impact on the process, as Erdoğan appeared to consider that pursuing the process had led to a loss of nationalist votes. A similar concern may also affect the current process.

It should also be noted that the ruling bloc has chosen not to include international mediators or observers. In the past, initial talks with the PKK were conducted in Oslo. When those negotiations collapsed and their records were leaked to the press, it became apparent that certain mediators had been involved. Although their identities were not disclosed and their role was limited, they nevertheless contributed to the talks in Oslo (Kadioğlu 2019). Moreover, the absence of a third party to observe the process and monitor the implementation of negotiated steps was criticised by a Kurdish deputy who participated in the previous peace process. He stated that “the third party should have played a more comprehensive role than only bringing both sides together by acting as a “third eye” to monitor progress” (Kadioğlu 2019, p. 923). Third parties could similarly contribute to the current process by fostering trust and monitoring the implementation of agreed measures. Their involvement could also enhance public ownership by increasing transparency to some extent.

4.4.2. The Understanding of Conflict and Peace

Türkiye constitutes a particularly interesting case as the current administration previously acknowledged the underlying causes of the conflict during the earlier peace process and adopted a discourse framing democratisation as a central pathway to conflict resolution. In contrast, the same administration has since shifted its position, with President Erdoğan declaring in 2021 that the Kurdish Question had been fully resolved (DW 2021).

Consequently, the ruling bloc has reframed the issue primarily as a matter of terrorism to be addressed through the disarmament and dissolution of the PKK. However, in light of the ongoing human rights violations the claim that the Kurdish Question has been comprehensively resolved remains highly contested. These developments suggest that absent meaningful democratic reforms and the protection of fundamental rights, the structural dimensions of the Kurdish Question, continue to persist. This is also closely related to political will. If the ruling bloc lacks the political will to achieve positive peace, it is unrealistic to expect that the process will lead to the enhancement of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights in the country, as Kurdish actors anticipate.

Far from producing such enhancements, authoritarian practices have persisted as the process has unfolded. Numerous democratically elected mayors in predominantly Kurdish cities—including Mardin, Van, Hakkari, Batman, Tunceli, and Siirt—have been removed from office and replaced by government-appointed trustees. The practice of trusteeship has also been extended to other cities and districts, such as Esenyurt, Şişli, and Ovacık, where mayors from the CHP were democratically elected. In addition, several mayors from both the DEM Party and the CHP have been imprisoned (T24 2025b). These practices raise serious questions regarding the sincerity of the peace process.

Some CHP mayors have been accused of forming electoral alliances with the DEM Party, allegations that have been framed as terrorist activities (BBC Türkçe 2025a). As mentioned earlier, the criminalisation of the Urban Consensus and the prosecution of CHP and DEM Party politicians on terrorism-related charges are difficult to reconcile with an ongoing peace process, as targeting political cooperation between the DEM Party and the CHP undermines, rather than advances, prospects for peace. Moreover, one could argue that, through these practices, the government seeks to shape and control the political environment during the process. As discussed earlier, this dynamic may contribute to opposition fragmentation by weakening cooperation among actors united around concerns about democratic backsliding and authoritarianism. In particular, the criminalisation of cooperation between the CHP and the DEM Party may increase the political costs of opposition coordination and discourage the formation of broader democratic alliances. Rather than expanding political space in line with the democratising aspirations of liberal peacebuilding, such practices risk reinforcing existing power asymmetries, narrowing opportunities for political cooperation, and further strengthening authoritarian governance.

In addition to these political pressures, democratic backsliding has also been observed across other spheres, including human rights, media freedom, and the rule of law. Media repression has intensified over the course of the process, with numerous journalists facing criminal prosecution, many of whom have been imprisoned and deprived of their fundamental freedoms. Television channels, news websites, and YouTube-based media outlets have likewise been subjected to legal proceedings, heavy financial penalties, and, in some cases, closure (ECPMF 2026). This trend is consistent with the illiberal approach embraced by the government, as ACM seeks to control public discourse and frequently result in the repression of journalists (Lewis et al. 2018). Comparative experiences from countries such as Russia, Sri Lanka, and Rwanda illustrate how journalists reporting on conflict have been targeted, and in some cases killed. In Rwanda, journalists were forced to flee the country even after the end of the war, as the new authoritarian regime sought to tightly control the post-conflict narrative (Lewis 2017). A similar dynamic appears to be at work in the current peace process, as the ruling bloc seeks to exert control over public discourse both in relation to the process itself and more broadly.

The government has also refrained from fully implementing decisions of the ECtHR and the Constitutional Court of Türkiye concerning prominent political figures and civil society actors, including Selahattin Demirtaş, the former co-chair of the HDP, who is

widely regarded as a significant political figure among Kurdish constituencies, and Osman Kavala, a businessperson and political activist who is a prominent figure in civil society ([Medyascope 2025](#)). The problem is not limited to politically motivated cases. Türkiye ranks first before the ECtHR, with 38.6% of the Court's pending cases originating from Türkiye. This illustrates the severity of the country's human rights record ([ECtHR Statistics 2026](#)). At the same time, the rule of law has experienced a marked decline, as reflected in Türkiye's drop in global rankings—from 80th to 118th—over the past decade ([WJP 2015, 2025](#)). Public opinion surveys similarly indicate that a substantial majority of the population expresses limited trust in the judiciary and the legal system ([Gündemar 2025b; T24 2025a; Panorama 2025](#)). This erosion of trust raises serious concerns regarding the peace initiative, as confidence in judicial institutions is a critical factor in securing public support and ownership of peace processes. For instance, within the context of the current initiative, the release of individuals imprisoned on terrorism-related charges has emerged as a sensitive issue, particularly as some releases have already taken place. While such measures may be perceived as necessary steps, they risk generating public discontent in a broader context where many individuals remain imprisoned for actions related to the exercise of fundamental rights ([Guardian 2025; Amnesty International 2025](#)). Consequently, in order to foster public trust and ensure broad-based support for the peace process and its requirements, comprehensive judicial reform appears to be a necessary precondition.

These dynamics provide insight into the motivations of the ruling bloc for initiating the process. From the outset, the government has consistently framed the initiative as an effort to end conflict and terrorism. Government representatives, including President Erdoğan, have referred to it as the “terror-free Türkiye” process, whereas both Öcalan and officials of the DEM Party have characterised it as a peace process aimed at advancing democracy and freedom for Kurds and for society as a whole ([TRT Haber 2025; DW 2025](#)). This divergence points to significant discrepancies both among key actors and between official discourse and actual practices. While the government emphasises conflict termination, it simultaneously invokes democracy and the rule of law in its official reports. Moreover, despite claims that democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights have been strengthened, there is substantial evidence of decline across all of these areas. At the same time, a clear mismatch persists between the ruling bloc and Kurdish actors regarding the objectives and ultimate trajectory of the process.

It can be inferred that the government lacks the political will to address the root causes of the conflict or to meaningfully resolve the Kurdish Question. Rather than aiming to build a genuinely peaceful society, the process appears to be driven primarily by political considerations, both domestic and international. This helps explain why the ruling bloc has embraced an illiberal approach to peacebuilding. Adopting a liberal approach would require the government to undertake substantial reforms in these areas. Instead, the ruling bloc appears to favour the opposite trajectory, seeking to consolidate its regime through authoritarian practices that are consistent with an illiberal peacebuilding approach.

4.4.3. The Political Implications of the Process

The failure of the previous peace process can be partly attributed to a lack of political will. The government was unwilling to make the necessary concessions—particularly in terms of democratisation—demanded by the Kurdish political movement, despite the fact that such concessions would have signalled a genuine commitment to the process ([Savran 2020; Ünal 2015](#)). Alongside other dynamics, this lack of political will played a significant role in the collapse of the initiative. [Bakiner \(2019, p. 487\)](#) notes that, in the previous process, the government chose to end negotiations when it perceived doing so to be in its interest. This was possible because “the cost of abandoning peace talks was limited—the negotiation

framework did not impose legal obligations, the public knew little about the status of the negotiations, and there was no third party to hold the actors in the process accountable". The concerns that the government faced during the previous peace process may also shape the current one. For instance, regional, electoral, and security considerations may influence the government's willingness to continue the ongoing process. Savran (2020, p. 9) notes, "what significantly influenced failure in the Kurdish Opening was the disparity between core Kurdish demands and what the AKP leadership was willing to offer in the end. This partially stems from the fact that the adversaries did not actually agree on what the key issues were." A similar pattern can be observed in the current process, where a serious disparity persists between the parties' demands.

As mentioned earlier, the Kurdish side has articulated a range of demands, including legal and democratic reforms; a reintegration law for PKK members; guarantees of political and cultural rights; mechanisms to address the past; reforms concerning the rule of law and fundamental rights; and specific measures regarding Kurdish prisoners, including Abdullah Öcalan. It can be argued that actors on the Kurdish side articulate largely similar demands, as those put forward by the DEM Party, Abdullah Öcalan, and the PKK largely overlap (Bianet 2025a, 2025d; İmralı Records 2025; DEM Party Report 2025). This is understandable, given that they act in coordination. One notable difference, however, is that the PKK explicitly reiterates its demand for Öcalan's release (BBC Türkçe 2025b). In addition, civil society actors and victims' groups express similar demands to those of the DEM Party, advocating for a democratic solution, guarantees for the rights of the Kurdish people, and, most importantly, justice for past human rights violations (Barış Vakfı 2026; İnsan Hakları Derneği 2026; Barış için Toplumsal Girişim 2025; Cumartesi Anneleri 2024). On the other hand, the government continues to frame the process from a security-oriented perspective, focusing primarily on the disarmament and disbandment of the PKK, while largely remaining silent on these demands. As noted earlier, although the governing party refers to democracy and the rule of law in its report, it does not provide explicit responses to these demands. It therefore remains unclear how the present initiative can succeed where the previous one failed.

The lack of political will is also evident in the absence of confidence-building measures that would encourage civil society, victims, the broader public, and other relevant actors to both support and actively participate in the process. For instance, since the beginning of the process, civil society actors and the DEM Party have called for the release of Selahattin Demirtaş as a confidence-building measure; however, this has not materialised. It could be argued that the government does not aim to provide a platform through which this issue can be discussed from different perspectives, where politicians, civil society actors, and the wider public could voice their opinions about the process. The refusal to release Demirtaş could be interpreted in this context, as it helps maintain control over the political and civic spaces. Likewise, Ahmet Türk, the elected mayor of Mardin, was removed from office shortly after the beginning of the process, and a trustee was appointed in his place. This decision is difficult to reconcile with a genuine peace process; given that he is also a prominent figure within the Kurdish political sphere. There have been calls—including from Devlet Bahçeli—for his reinstatement as a confidence-building measure; however, this has also not taken place. The refusal to release Demirtaş could be interpreted as an attempt to maintain control over the bargaining dynamics of the process rather than to expand political space for dialogue and debate. Such a preference is consistent with both illiberal peacebuilding and authoritarian governance, as maintaining tight control over the political sphere constitutes a priority in both contexts.

To ensure public ownership, people should be able to discuss the process openly, criticise the parties involved, and express their demands, expectations, and concerns. Yet,

under current conditions in Türkiye, where freedom of expression is under significant pressure, it would be unrealistic to expect this to occur. Moreover, no confidence-building measures have been taken to create an environment in which people's fundamental rights and freedoms are protected at a basic level, enabling them to organise, speak out, and engage in public debate on these issues. Under such conditions, fostering genuine public ownership appears unlikely. Although certain events have been organised by civil society, as mentioned above, the participation of ordinary citizens in these initiatives has often been limited.

People may refrain from participating in events organised by certain civil society groups, as there is currently no law that provides any form of protection for individuals who take part in the process. During the previous peace process, a law was enacted to guarantee protection for those involved ([Resmi Gazete 2014](#)). However, that law ultimately failed to protect participants, as many of them faced terrorism-related charges following the collapse of the process ([İHD 2020](#)). Although the previous legislation proved ineffective in this regard, it remains important to call for a legal framework that genuinely safeguards those who participate in the process. Without such protection, individuals may understandably fear taking part. Indeed, the DEM Party has also called for such a law, yet this has not been realised.

'Academics for Peace' constitutes an important example in this regard. In 2016, a group of academics signed a petition criticising the government's security operations, which they argued had led to severe human rights violations against civilians. More than 2000 academics signed the petition, and hundreds were subsequently dismissed from their positions, subjected to verbal and physical threats, prosecuted on criminal charges, and barred from working in the public sector, while also facing serious difficulties in securing alternative employment ([Academics for Peace 2026](#); [Tekdemir et al. 2018](#)). This case clearly illustrates how expressing views on the Kurdish Question can place individuals at significant personal and professional risk. Some of these academics were able to return to their positions, while others were not reinstated even after winning their cases in court ([Evrensel 2026](#)). Allowing them to resume their posts could have served as a confidence-building step for the current process; however, this did not occur.

Dealing with the past is an important component of liberal peacebuilding processes, as they acknowledge the underlying causes of conflict, which often include widespread and systematic human rights violations ([Sriram 2007](#)). In many post-conflict societies, various mechanisms have been implemented to ensure accountability and to achieve some form of justice for victims. Addressing past wrongs is critical not only for victims but also for society at large, as it sends a clear message that similar injustices will not be tolerated in the future ([Lambourne 2009](#)). Human rights are frequently violated during conflicts, and once violence subsides, a clear break with the past must be established to prevent the recurrence of such abuses. Transitional justice mechanisms are designed to serve this purpose and have been implemented in numerous post-conflict contexts. However, illiberal peacebuilding approaches typically exclude such mechanisms, as they tend not to recognise past injustices as underlying causes of conflict. Moreover, transitional justice generally requires at least a degree of democratisation, which stands in contrast to illiberal modes of peacebuilding.

[Alıcı \(2023\)](#) analyses the need for transitional justice in relation to the Kurdish question and identifies two previous attempts—the Truth and Justice Commission for Diyarbakır Prison and then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's apology for the Dersim Massacre—as efforts to address past injustices, although both were limited and represented only tentative, preliminary steps. In addition, Law No. 5233 on the Compensation of Damages Resulting from Terrorism and the Fight against Terrorism, adopted in 2004 to address problems

and compensate damages related to the forced displacement of Kurdish populations, may also be considered a form of reparation in this context. However, it remains difficult to expect a comprehensive transitional justice process in Türkiye. The current peace process appears consistent with other illiberal peace initiatives in this regard, as there is no meaningful reference to confronting past abuses or preventing future human rights violations. Transitional justice could be considered an essential component of efforts to achieve positive peace—an objective that, unfortunately, does not seem to guide Türkiye's current initiative.

Colombia can be considered a relatively positive example in this regard. Although the scope of this article does not allow for a comprehensive examination of the case, it can be argued that its peace process differs significantly from that of Türkiye. First, addressing justice and responding to the demands of victims were central to the process. Rather than adopting a narrowly security-oriented approach aimed solely at achieving negative peace, the government pursued a broader strategy that sought to address the root causes of the conflict, including power-sharing arrangements, land reform, and political participation. Transitional justice mechanisms were also established to deal with past atrocities. In addition, the process was participatory, inclusive, and relatively transparent, with civil society and victims' organisations playing a significant role. Third parties, including Cuba, Norway, Chile, and Venezuela, were involved in facilitating and monitoring the negotiations. The process also aimed to strengthen state institutions in order to build trust. Moreover, it incorporated a degree of legalisation and verification, which helped ensure commitment to the agreement. Of course, the process has faced certain shortcomings, particularly in the implementation of reforms. Nevertheless, it can still be regarded as relatively successful in bringing an end to a conflict that had lasted more than five decades (Bakiner 2019; Pabon 2018; Maldonado 2017).

Can illiberal peace endure? It may indeed endure, and even negative peace can be sustained over time. However, without a genuine effort to achieve positive peace, can it truly be claimed that the Kurdish Question has been resolved and that Türkiye has become a peaceful society? The answer would most likely be no. This view has also been repeatedly expressed by DEM Party politicians, including in their report (DEM Party Report 2025). Diehl (2016) criticises the notion that peace is understood merely as the absence of war. He provides the example of Gambia, noting that although there is no war in the country, the population remains extremely poor, only 31% have access to electricity, the government is authoritarian, and the human rights record is deeply problematic. He states: "Looking only at the absence of war, scholars place Gambia in the same peace category as Sweden and Norway, despite its tremendous gap with them on all dimensions of human security" (Diehl 2016, p. 2). This example illustrates the importance of positive peace. In Sri Lanka and Rwanda, illiberal practices have been justified in the name of stability and economic development, often at the expense of democracy, human rights, and fundamental freedoms (Piccolino 2015). It is difficult to consider these countries peaceful, even if negative peace persists.

Moreover, the sustainability of illiberal peacebuilding is problematic, as illiberal modes of conflict management may ensure negative peace and stability, yet this can change over time, as seen in Myanmar and Indonesia (Smith et al. 2020, p. 8). A similar concern has been raised in the case of Rwanda, where the regime's illiberal practices are seen as posing a risk even to negative peace, thereby increasing the possibility that conflict may reoccur (Piccolino 2015). Even when negative peace is maintained, the prospects for achieving positive peace remain low due to path dependency. The consolidation of authoritarian rule may lead to particularly detrimental outcomes, as the state possesses sufficient resources to sustain illiberal practices. It must be acknowledged that peacebuilding is a long-term

process, and that negative peace can evolve into positive peace over time. However, this transformation requires political will, sustained effort, and a clear commitment to placing it firmly on the agenda.

Finally, it should be emphasised that peace initiatives need not represent a choice between two evils—namely, conflict or autocracy. Democracy and peace can, and should, be pursued simultaneously. The fact that some liberal peacebuilding missions have attempted to advance both and have failed should not be taken to mean that democracy and peace are inherently incompatible. Democracy should not be sacrificed in the name of peace. Rather, peace efforts should be accompanied by democratisation measures, institutional reforms, and concrete steps to strengthen the rule of law and human rights. Even in the context of illiberal peacebuilding initiatives, there should be efforts to redirect the process toward positive peace by incorporating elements of democratisation and the enhancement of legal and human rights protections. Türkiye's current peace process may display illiberal characteristics, but this does not mean that its trajectory cannot be altered. Opposition parties, civil society organisations, academics, journalists, experts, and the broader public should strive to broaden the scope of the process beyond a narrow security perspective and orient it toward more comprehensive and inclusive goals. However, their efforts are unlikely to have a meaningful impact as long as the parties to the conflict do not allow for inclusivity and participation. Nevertheless, in the absence of viable alternatives, it remains important to continue striving toward the achievement of a peaceful society.

5. Conclusions

Türkiye's current peace process is being conducted through an illiberal peacebuilding approach. In parallel with the broader trend of global democratic backsliding, the country has experienced significant democratic erosion over the past decade, which has shaped the management of the current process. Amid this global decline in democratic standards, illiberal modes of peacebuilding have increasingly gained ground, in some contexts displacing liberal peacebuilding initiatives. Although liberal peacebuilding has been widely criticised on various grounds, illiberal peacebuilding does not appear to offer a more promising alternative for post-conflict societies. Given that even liberal peacebuilding missions have at times generated authoritarian outcomes, illiberal peace initiatives are even more likely to contribute to the consolidation of authoritarian rule. This poses a significant risk for Türkiye, where democracy, the rule of law, and human rights are already in a fragile state.

While negative peace is important, it should not be treated as an end in itself. Without a clear commitment to pursuing positive peace, it is questionable whether negative peace alone can create a genuinely peaceful society. Türkiye's ongoing peace process illustrates the implementation of illiberal peacebuilding under authoritarian conditions. The article has focused on three interrelated dimensions of this process. First, the governance of the process is state-centric and elite-driven, resulting in limited transparency, participation, inclusiveness, public ownership, and third-party involvement. Second, the process is characterised by a narrow understanding of conflict and peace that prioritises negative peace and stability, thereby excluding meaningful democratisation, efforts to address the root causes of the conflict, and engagement with past injustices. Third, the political implications of the process reflect broader authoritarian practices, including tight control over the political sphere, the consolidation of executive authority, and a limited willingness to undertake confidence-building measures or make meaningful concessions to address the demands of relevant actors. Taken together, these dimensions demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between illiberal peacebuilding and authoritarian governance. The authoritarian character of the regime shapes the conduct of the process by limiting transparency, participation, inclusiveness, and political pluralism. At the same time, the process itself has

the potential to contribute to the further consolidation of authoritarian rule by fragmenting the opposition, strengthening the government's centralised authority, and legitimising the securitisation of governance. Rather than fostering the political transformation associated with positive peace, the process risks reproducing and reinforcing existing authoritarian dynamics while seeking to reduce armed conflict.

At the time this article was submitted in June 2026, the process was still ongoing. It may be argued that analysing a peace process that has not yet concluded is premature, as its ultimate outcome remains uncertain. However, this article seeks to provide a preliminary assessment of how the process has been managed thus far. Moreover, this article aims to contribute to the process by identifying its deficits and potential risks to success. Such an analysis should be understood as constructive criticism rather than opposition to the current peace initiative. Indeed, any genuine opportunity for peace in a decades-old conflict deserves support. At the same time, academics bear a responsibility to offer critical and evidence-based assessments in order to enhance the prospects of success. Furthermore, the risk of authoritarian consolidation in Türkiye is a significant concern and must be taken into account in order to prevent further democratic erosion.

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