

Research Lab: Constitutional politics in Turkey

During the past years, Turkey has witnessed a profound social, political, and economic change. In the course of political reforms, the Turkish constitution was extensively changed as well. Nevertheless, the constitution is still considered a major obstacle to complete democratization of the country.

A constitution contains fundamental principles about ways of governance and about political life in general, mostly written down in legal documents. Once these basic decisions have been made, they do not need to be discussed any further. The Turkish constitution was released in 1982 following the military coup by a selectively composed assembly. Besides this undemocratic formation, the constitution is often criticized for containing principles that conflict with the rule of law. To give an example: The constitution includes a concept whereby the existence and security of the state are considered a primary objective; basic rights and freedom of those citizens subject to the Turkish state power are regarded as subordinate. Another source of fundamental social and political conflicts is the rigid interpretation of the “unitary state”. The historical shadow cast by the military over politics is an additional noteworthy conflict: In crisis situations, even the current political actors resort to military action, thus hindering peaceful political discussion. All these points show that the constitution contains basic decisions that do not comply with the social and political reality in Turkey and do not provide a sustainable foundation for it. Instead of providing mechanisms that help to solve political conflicts, it becomes its own source of conflicts. Social conflicts in Turkey are therefore also reflected within this conflict around the constitution.

Against this backdrop, the main focus of the research lab lies in the struggle for a sustainable, democratically legitimized constitution – can the process and results of drafting a new constitution have a balancing effect on existing social conflicts? Master’s and PhD students as well as post-doctoral fellows from Turkey,

Germany, and other countries discuss this question within the scope of the research lab. Central to the common interest is the “democratic potential” of Turkish constitutional politics.

The research lab fellows address the subject matter “Constitutional politics in Turkey” from different disciplinary angles, with a wide range of applied methods: some members of the research lab analyze records of the commission introduced during the last unsuccessful constitutional process (2011-2013). Others examine previous constitutions and related amendments, or conduct interviews with members of the Constitutional Commission or constitutional judges.

Supervisors of the research are the two project leaders Prof. Dr. Silvia von Steinsdorff at Humboldt University in Berlin and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ece Göztepe at Bilkent University in Ankara. The latter is the central contact for research stays in Turkey. As the project is designed as a research *lab*, exchange among the fellows in Ankara and Berlin during the *process* of their research is essential. Not only results but also experiences and obstacles that might be encountered during the study are discussed during regularly held workshops in Ankara and Berlin. Further insights into the lab and its work on the topic of constitutional politics are presented on the homepage of the project.