

Akkoyunlu, Karabekir. 2024. *Guardianship and Democracy in Iran and Turkey: Tutelary Consolidation, Popular Contestation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 312 pages. ISBN: 9781474493134.

Reviewed by **Nikos Christofis**

University of Thessaly, Greece

n.christofis@gmail.com

In *Guardianship and Democracy in Iran and Turkey*, Karabekir Akkoyunlu offers a theoretically rich and empirically grounded comparative analysis of two ideologically distinct yet structurally comparable political systems. Anchored in the framework of tutelary democracy, the book interrogates the role of unelected 'guardian' institutions – namely, the military in Turkey and the clerical establishment in Iran – in shaping, constraining, and at times directly subverting democratic processes. Drawing upon an impressive range of empirical data and employing a multidisciplinary methodology, Akkoyunlu crafts a nuanced narrative of institutional persistence and erosion under varying domestic and international pressures.

The book is organized into four main parts, each contributing to a layered analytical structure. Part I revisits the foundational ideological legacies of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, highlighting how both leaders constructed powerful revolutionary narratives that legitimized the formation of tutelary institutions. Part II delves into the institutional configurations of each regime, emphasizing Iran's dual sovereignty model and Turkey's historical military centrality. Parts III and IV trace the trajectories of mass contestation and elite adaptation, culminating in the dismantling of military tutelage in Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the enduring strength of clerical oversight in Iran, despite episodic reformist efforts.

One of the most valuable contributions of the book lies in its comparative methodological orientation. While comparative history has been a recognized analytical tool since the early twentieth century, Akkoyunlu reaffirms its relevance by extending it beyond national historiography. As Christos Hadziosif has argued, '[h]istorians have always practiced comparison as a mode of reasoning – reasoning by analogy – in the framework of nation-state history, and there is no methodological difficulty in extending this practice to cross-border research.'¹ By situating his inquiry within this broader methodological tradition, Akkoyunlu aligns with Theda Skocpol's assertion that '[t]he purpose of comparison is not merely to point out similarities and differences, but to explain them.'² In doing so, the author elucidates the divergent trajectories of regime consolidation and democratic erosion in Iran and Turkey.

- 1 Hadziosif, Christos. 2010. 'Common Past, Comparative History and Regional Universalism in Greek and Ottoman Historiography'. In Baruh, Lorans Tanatar and Kechriotis, Vangelis (eds.). *Economy and Society on Both Shores of the Aegean*. Athens: Alpha Bank, 530.
- 2 Skocpol, Theda. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*. Top of FormBottom of Form, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 36.

While Iran and Turkey are often juxtaposed in terms of their ideological orientations – Islamist versus secular, Shi'a versus Sunni, theocratic versus republican – Akkoyunlu challenges this dichotomous framing through detailed process tracing. He convincingly demonstrates that both states function as hybrid regimes, in which democratic institutions coexist with entrenched unelected authorities. Drawing on the scholarship of Leah Gilbert and Payam Mohseni, he categorizes both countries as *tutelary hybrid regimes* – a form of political system in which nominally democratic institutions such as elections, parliaments, and constitutions operate under the shadow of unelected actors who wield veto power over key decisions, constrain democratic participation, and claim to act as protectors of the state or its founding ideology.³

A further conceptual strength of the work lies in its nuanced articulation of ‘guardianship.’ Akkoyunlu expands upon Carl Schmitt’s – although not explicitly stated – notion of the ‘guardian of the constitution,’⁴ applying it to real-world institutions whose self-legitimizing narratives frequently override principles of popular sovereignty. His exploration of how guardianship evolves from a protective function into a ruling authority is both original and unsettling, particularly in light of contemporary debates on authoritarian resilience.

Nevertheless, the book is not without its limitations. Although Akkoyunlu takes care to contextualize each case historically and institutionally, the asymmetry between Iran and Turkey in terms of political pluralism and the intensity of repression occasionally renders direct comparison analytically uneven. While the analysis of Turkey’s autocratization under Erdoğan is thorough, the Iranian case – especially post-2009 – could benefit from more granular attention to state violence and institutional closure. Additionally, although the book offers a robust macro-level framework, it pays comparatively less attention to grassroots mobilizations and civil society actors – a perspective that could have enriched the analysis of popular contestation, particularly within the Iranian context.

From a methodological standpoint, the book draws on a vast array of sources, both primary and secondary, resulting in a richly textured empirical base. Akkoyunlu’s linguistic proficiency and access to insider sources further enhance the credibility of his fieldwork. However, although the study lacks formal quantitative data, something that might be seen as a limitation by some readers – particularly within political science disciplines – *Guardianship and Democracy in Iran and Turkey* offers as invaluable work and indeed, advances the comparative political field and urges us to understand deeper the two countries.

In conclusion, *Guardianship and Democracy in Iran and Turkey* makes a significant contribution to the study of hybrid regimes, authoritarian resilience, and civil-military/clergy relations. It will be of considerable interest to scholars in Middle Eastern studies, comparative politics, and democratic theory. By illuminating the underlying tutelary

3 See, for example, Levitsky, Steven and Way, Lucan A. 2010. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4 Vinx, Lars. 2015. *The Guardian of the Constitution: Hans Kelsen and Carl Schmitt on the Limits of Constitutional Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

logic that structures political authority in both Iran and Turkey, Akkoyunlu offers an important analytical lens through which to understand broader trends in democratic backsliding in the 21st century.