

Turkey: A State Under One-Man Rule

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The July 15, 2016, failed military coup in Turkey, among others, has accelerated and strengthened the Erdoğan regime's authoritarianism (albeit the democratic aspiration reflected in the people's resistance against the coup), a process that was set in motion in the aftermath of the December 2013 corruption revelations about the regime. Turkey has been transformed into a state under one-man rule.

How does one explain Turkey relapsing into an increasing authoritarian polity under the very party (AKP) and regime credited with bringing in, between 2002 and 2011, a model of "Muslim Democracy" combining Islam, secularism, democracy, and economic success? Why does Erdoğan remain highly popular despite undermining Turkey's democratic heritage? What are the implications of a growing Turkish authoritarianism for the



stability of the region and the defeat of ISIS?

There are multiple factors that account for the gradual transformation of Turkey into an authoritarian entity under Erdoğan's leadership.

Weak democratic tradition of Turkey

The first factor is the weak democratic tradition of modern Turkey itself. The modern Kemalist Republic was anything but democratic! The "democratic experiment" was at best a series of piecemeal political reforms—the contraction and expansion of which was guided by the ruling regime's desire for survival. Both Kemalist and now AKP governments partook in this charade. For the political class, democracy, like secularism and nationalism, has been a tool of securing state power.

Given this political tradition, and with successive electoral victories between 2002 and May 2013, at all levels of elections, Erdoğan skillfully navigated the Kemalist-dominated political terrain with a combination of support from his own Anatolian Muslim constituency, the tentative support of the Gülen movement, which favored democratic reforms, and the po-

litical goodwill of the European Union, which desired a democratic Turkey. This enabled the AKP government to weaken Kemalist control over state institutions.

Once he began to consolidate his control over the state, Erdoğan came to view democracy, the Gülen movement, and the European Union as obstacles to his unfettered rule.

However, notwithstanding the growing democracy deficit in political governance, the 'Muslim Turkey' or what is called the Black Turks (representing religious, marginalized and discriminated Turkish Muslims under Kemalist rule), continues to provide crucial support. These voters fear the return of "Secular" Turkey, or "White Turks" as represented by the Kemalists, and when the AKP's voter base was disenfranchised. It is mostly elements of this Muslim support base who were at the forefront of resisting the army coup, given the fact that all previ-



ous military coup in Turkey (1960, 1971, 1980, and 1998) ousted Muslim-friendly governments. The government's allegations that the Gülen movement was behind this coup attempt found a receptive audience with these Muslim voters; since the corruption cases of December 2013, the Erdoğan regime has succeeded in portraying the Gülen movement as part of a Western conspiracy to dislodge the AKP government.

The Gülen Movement

The *second* factor in Turkey's authoritarian transition is that the political tradition of Middle Eastern States, including Turkey, does not tolerate the autonomous existence of any other religious-social movement or organization, lest the latter pose a threat to the regime in the future. The Gülen movement, with its Islamic roots, development, autonomous resources, and global networking and presence, is perceived to be a strong threat to the Erdoğan regime and hence needs to be eliminated at the earliest opportunity and context. The December 2013 corruption cases, which the government called a "civilian coup" and the July 2016 failed military coup provided golden opportunities for the government to eliminate the Gülen movement, resulting in the massive purge of state officials, numbering more than 140,000, and the confiscation of resources worth an estimated \$11 billion.

Statism

Thirdly, the State in Muslim Middle Eastern history, including Turkey, enjoys a very high degree of legitimacy on account of an undifferentiated understanding of the State, nation, and community among vast sections of people. Many citizens view the State as the "Benevolent Father or Guardian," especially as personified in a strong individual. Thus it is statism that strongly overlaps with the idea of nationalism, which, in turn, contributes to the legitimiza-

tion of the authoritarian tendency of the State. A crisis of State then easily becomes a crisis of Islam/community that swings the support of people in favor of the State against the perceived internal or external threat.

Political tradition

Fourth, in its public displays of authoritarianism, the Erdoğan-led AKP is also aided by the tradition of political activism that abuse Islam as well as the political tradition of the Turkish State, which seeks to control and dominate all aspects of national life. Beyond a crude instrumentalization of Islam, Islam's ethical and moral perspectives cease to be a factor in its governance. This partly explains the lack of political flexibility in accommodating dissenting voices, including the Gülen movement.

As Erdoğan has moved along the Islamic path of authoritarianism, and with the political ambition of becoming leader of the Muslim world, it has adversely impacted the stability of Turkey—both internally and externally.

Internally, it has deeply fragmented Turkish society along ethnic, sectarian, and religious lines resulting in Turkish-Kurdish, Sunni-Alevi, and Muslim-secular conflicts, even though it has paid good political dividends for the regime. Second, by crushing the Gülen movement, the AKP undermined the Islamic ideational resources needed most to fight Islamic terrorism. Further, by flushing out state officials and silencing all dissenting voices by linking them with the Gülen movement, the PKK, and terrorism, the Erdoğan regime has crippled its administrative capacity to effectively counter the menace of terrorism. No wonder, since 2013, terrorist attacks from many different groups have hit Turkey with greater frequency.

Externally, as Turkey increasingly became part of the "Sunni axis" with Saudi Arabia and Qatar,



and thanks to its political support of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Palestine's Hamas, Turkey further contributed to the Shia-Sunni conflicts in the region. These two actions in part explains Turkey's reluctance to decisively fight ISIS, but so does the AKP's fear of losing support from a section of Turkish Muslims.

Turkey's military foray into Syria, the Euphrates Shield Operation (which started in August 2016 and continued until March 2017), was intended to prevent a Kurdish state from becoming a reality on Turkey's border with Syria. The AKP government was willing to go to any lengths to stop the forma-



Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, Turkey, July 06, 2013.

tion of a Kurdish state, even if that meant resettling the Syrian Arabs living in Turkey into the Kurdish-dominated areas of Jazeera Kobane, Afrin, Manbij, Al-Bab, and Jarablus. The Turkish government would rather do this than to physically liquidate ISIS. In the past, the Turkish government even indirectly supported ISIS to push a section of Syrian Arabs living within Syria into Kurdish dominated areas to change its demographic structure.

In addition, the operation was also meant to end the increasing Turkish isolation and secure its presence on the table of future international negotiation related

to Syria. The AKP government's hypocritical attitude on Syrian migrants is further exposed when it chooses to remain silent on Arab governments closing their gates to Syrian refugees; while mocking European States and accusing them of racism for refusing to accept the Syrian migrants! As the Turkish government increasingly treated ISIS and refugee issues as bargaining tools with Europe and the US, the latter has increasingly come to view the Erdoğan government as an unreliable partner in the fight against terrorism and the promotion of peace and regional stability. Facing isolation and economic stagnation, the AKP govern-

ment quickly moved to mend its ties with Russia and Israel, partly to revive its tourist industry. But it is too late to stem the economic downturn.

In view of the above factors, Turkey's economic prospects and democratic future appear bleak. Rather, one fears a period of increased terror, given the fact that terror and terrorism often grow in the fertile conditions of political authoritarianism, a lack of democracy, and relative cultural and material deprivation.

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