



Stunted Democracy

Erdoğan, the AKP, and Turkey's Slide into Authoritarianism

by Howard Eissenstat

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SUMMARY

- Turkey's democracy is being compromised by the ongoing suppression of journalists, civil society actors, and political opponents.
- This slide toward authoritarianism contrasts sharply with the AKP's significant strides in democratic reform in their early days in power.
- Erdoğan has cracked down on the opposition Gülen movement, thereby eliminating one of the greatest challenges to his rule.
- These anti-democratic steps are a reflection of President Erdoğan's recent strategy for consolidating power and are not an inevitable outcome of political Islam.
- Turkey's authoritarian slide is made more troubling by increased political control of the bureaucracy and security services and legislative reforms which have greatly limited judicial oversight.
- The future looks bleak in a Turkey with very few political alternatives to the AKP and with a narrowing of space for dissent even within the ruling party.

The once-popular idea that contemporary Turkey could serve as a model for Middle Eastern democracy is no more. Its authoritarian slide is now painfully evident and regularly condemned in Congress and in the press. The State Department, which has traditionally preferred "quiet diplomacy" in addressing Turkish human rights abuses, has become similarly critical. In December 2014, in response to news that Turkish authorities had arrested another wave of journalists, State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki noted, "Freedom of the media includes the freedom to criticize the government. Voicing opposition does not equal conspiracy or treason." Yet, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the U.S. finds itself balancing strategic interests with its democratic ideals. In particular, the ongoing crisis of the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State have simultaneously underscored shared interests

and highlighted tensions between the two NATO allies.

This brief aims to outline the scope of Turkey's authoritarian slide and its causes. In contrast to some observers of Turkey, I believe that the slide to authoritarianism was neither inevitable nor "Islamist." Nonetheless, Turkey's authoritarianism is now deeply entrenched, rooted in both long-standing Turkish traditions and the particular character and vision of Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It is unlikely to be dislodged or even substantially mitigated in the near future, by either internal actors or international condemnation.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE AKP

Turkey's downward spiral is made more tragic by the very real gains for which the

Justice and Development Party (AKP) can claim credit. It has become increasingly common to see commentaries that wax nostalgic for the days when the Turkish military kept its thumb on the scales of Turkish democracy. Like all nostalgia, however, this line of argument is selective in its memory. There are many ways in which the pre-AKP era was even worse than today. For instance, since the victory of the AKP in 2002, torture and extrajudicial killings are far less common, and the death penalty has been abolished. In contrast, during the late 1990s, disappearances were common place and police stations were the sites of grotesque torture with bastinado and electrocution, which could last for days or weeks. Romanticism about “the good old days” when the military acted as a guiding hand behind Turkish politics is ill-placed.

Even now, there are some specific, narrow areas in which the AKP continues to allow a more diverse and tolerant Turkish public sphere. Perhaps most significantly, restrictions on expressions of Kurdish language and identity have been softened. In contrast to the once common arrest of individuals for singing Kurdish songs or speaking Kurdish in public, there are now many Kurdish publications and even radio and television broadcasts in Kurdish. Kurds who had been forcibly relocated in the 1990s have been allowed to return to their villages. Negotiations between the government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), now seemingly stalled, nonetheless represent a remarkable shift in a country that has fetishized national unity since its founding. In addition, although Turkey does continue its state campaign against Armenian Genocide recognition, mere reference to “the genocide” is no longer likely to land one in jail. There are now unofficial commemorations of the genocide in a number of municipalities every April 24. If still subject to some harassment, LGBTI groups now act with a once unimaginable freedom; Istanbul has hosted a pride march every year since 2003.

In its early years in power, the AKP also took significant steps to increase basic freedoms including the right to free expression, though these steps have been quite dramatically reversed. Indeed, what makes Turkey's present

authoritarian slide so tragic is the stark contrast between its current direction and the very real accomplishments of the party's early period in power. The AKP, which once acted as a “big tent party” with a number of important wings of supporters, has become increasingly narrow. By the end of the 2000s, liberals, who had provided early support for the party, became increasingly disenchanted. Mr. Erdoğan, always the most charismatic and powerful figure within the party, gradually came to dominate it completely. Figures like Abdullah Gül or Cemil Çiçek, who were once seen as powers in their own right, are now clearly in the background. Although there is still evidence of discomfort within party ranks over Erdoğan's ascendance, his power is now absolute. While democratically elected, he nonetheless aims to rule as a dictator.

CONFLICT WITH THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT

For the past year, Mr. Erdoğan has waged an unremitting war on the Gülen movement, which had once served as an important component of the AKP coalition. The origins of this conflict, like so much else about the Gülen movement, are opaque. Conversations with members of the movement dating back more than a decade suggest that the movement always saw Erdoğan as an imperfect vessel for its goals, too brash and too confrontational. Leading members of the movement had criticized Erdoğan for antagonizing Israel and Turkey's Western allies, for negotiations with the Kurds, and for being ham-fisted in his suppression of the 2013 Gezi protests. These tensions came to a head at the end of 2013 with a series of embarrassing leaks of taped telephone recordings of Mr. Erdoğan that highlighted his strong-arm handling of the press and seemed to indicate massive corruption. A graft inquiry, initiated by prosecutors seen as close to the Gülen movement, represented the single greatest challenge to Mr. Erdoğan's hold on power since he faced down the military in 2007. The Gülenists had, in other words, opted for a “nuclear option” that, if successful, had the potential to unravel the government by exposing wanton corruption among the party elite, including Mr. Erdoğan himself. The Gülenists had declared war.

Now, just a little over a year after the conflict between the Gülenists and Erdoğan came into the open, it is clear that Erdoğan has won. The prosecutions against his allies have been dismissed and their confiscated millions returned. Gülenist schools and organizations are besieged, while leading figures within the movement are targeted for investigation under the same anti-terror statutes that were previously employed against supporters of the military and Kurdish nationalists. The irony of this campaign is lost on no one. Many of the prosecutors and investigators who spearheaded the earlier cases are reputed to be Gülen supporters, and the Gülenist press had been vociferous in its support of the earlier crackdowns. Though the campaign against the Gülenists is likely to stretch on for months or years, their capacity to challenge Erdoğan has clearly ended.

In an earlier brief for POMED written in June 2013, I argued that in the wake of the Gezi protests:

Erdoğan would likely face rivals within his own party, most notably from the faction associated with the powerful Gülen movement. The movement has long been uneasy about Erdoğan's aggressive style, even if it shares his long-term vision for Turkey's future. It is noteworthy that Turkish President Abdullah Gül, who is close to the movement, has taken a markedly more liberal approach than Erdoğan in his response to the crisis.

Today, the Gülen movement is broken as a political actor, and Abdullah Gül has quietly retired from politics. The internal divisions within the AKP that I pointed to in 2013 proved too weak to threaten Erdoğan's grip on power.

Nonetheless, one can be forgiven for wondering how the AKP has retained its apparent hold on popular opinion. The Turkish economy seems to be cooling, with growth predictions down and inflation and unemployment numbers both edging upwards. If voters seemed to shrug off revelations regarding high-level AKP corruption a year ago, they may be less forgiving as times get tough. Negotiations aimed at ending the conflict with the Kurds have stalled

and, moreover, remain unpopular with a large number of Turkish voters. Violence, both between Kurds and Turkish forces and among the parties themselves, is becoming more common and claiming more lives each week.

THE CRISIS OF SYRIA AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

To this, one must add the repercussions of the Syrian civil war and rise of the Islamic State, which have exacerbated sectarian tensions within Turkey, overtaxed the infrastructure, and facilitated the emergence of new jihadi elements within the country. Turkey currently hosts more than one million refugees from Syria, and according to UNHCR projections, the total number of refugees in Turkey could reach 1.9 million by the end of 2015, of whom 1.7 million would be from Syria. Polls suggest that the AKP's Syrian policy remains unpopular with the Turkish public at large.

For many Kurds, the AKP's apparent tolerance of jihadi elements, particularly its unwillingness to forcibly intervene in the battle for Kobane, suggest that the government is hoping to use the threat of the Islamic State to force the Kurds to come to terms. Many believe that the government is falling back into an old, unsavory pattern of supporting Islamist Kurdish groups, a check on the PKK. The rapid rise of Huda-Par as a rival to secular Kurdish nationalism is particularly troubling given the former's apparent ties to Kurdish Hezbollah (no relation to the Lebanese party of the same name), which was responsible for hundreds of assassinations in the 1990s. Moreover, the AKP remains committed to maintaining the ten percent electoral threshold for upcoming parliamentary elections. This threshold, created by the military to limit Kurdish representation, has proven equally valuable to the AKP for the same reasons. Its survival can only be read as a cynical attempt to limit Kurdish political representation.

The Syria crisis has also served to intensify Alevi concerns; the reputed "Sunni bias" of Turkey's Syria policy is seen within the context of a broader Sunnification of the public sphere. Unlike Christians and Jews, Alevis cannot easily

opt out of required religious education, which is very much Sunni in character. Alevi *cemevi*, or prayer houses, are not recognized by the state. Once seen as largely apolitical, working class Alevi towns and neighborhoods have become increasingly politicized, and clashes with the police have become more frequent, particularly since the Gezi protests in 2013. The Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP/C), which reportedly recruits almost exclusively from the Alevi population, remains tiny but has shown increased signs of vigor since Gezi.

THE 2015 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

All of this points to a tough year for Turkey; nonetheless, as it moves towards new parliamentary elections on June 7, 2015, the AKP's hold on power appears firm. Polling data shows that the AKP's support remains at a little less than 50 percent despite the shocking revelations of corruption last year. Nonetheless, far more Turkish citizens consider corruption to be a major issue today than they did a year ago. A serious economic downturn could well cut into the AKP margin. The results of the election are particularly urgent because they will help to determine whether the AKP will be able to push through constitutional reforms that would cement Erdoğan's position and the extent to which the AKP will need to negotiate with other parties to do so. A big enough win in June will allow the AKP to effectively redesign the government in any way that it chooses.

The main opposition parties remain lackluster and weak. The Republican People's Party (CHP) enjoys some popular figures, but its leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, has proven unimpressive. More importantly, the party has not been able to paper over significant tensions between nationalists and liberals over Kurdish rights or created a convincing means of reaching out to those devout Sunni voters who have become disenchanted with the AKP. Similarly unimpressive is the right-wing nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) under the leadership of Devlet Bahçeli. The party has worked hard to make political capital from the AKP's corruption scandal and its negotiations with the PKK. Despite consistent support

from about 15 percent of the electorate, the MHP's brand of military fetishism and hand salutes seems to have a hard electoral cap that precludes them from being a major force. The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) enjoys a young and charismatic leader in Selahattin Demirtaş, but HDP's stated goal of surpassing the ten percent barrier seems optimistic. In a sense, it is the success or failure of the HDP that may be the most important outcome of the election. Should the HDP take its place in parliament, Erdoğan will need to negotiate with them for constitutional changes. If it fails, the AKP may well be able to rewrite the constitution at will.

The AKP does not seem to have suffered greatly from fatigue in the electorate. Mr. Erdoğan continues to enjoy a superstar status within his party. It also benefits from an electoral system that continues to reward small majorities with overwhelming representation in parliament. Moreover, the AKP has effectively monopolized the center-right of Turkish politics in a country that is largely center-right in its orientation. The basic components of the AKP's message, which include better services, economic opportunity, and a Turkish nationalism coupled with Muslim identity, have been the cornerstone of successful center-right politics in Turkey since the end of World War II. It remains a winning formula today.

THE PUTIN-ERDOĞAN COMPARISON

Comparisons to Vladimir Putin are useful. Both Erdoğan and Putin voice faith in the institution of elections as a tool for demonstrating legitimacy, and both ensure that no sustained critique of their policies can reach the public. While elections are no doubt fairer in Turkey than they are in Russia, there is good circumstantial evidence of significant election tampering in the 2014 municipal elections. Elections in Turkey are contested, but not on a level playing field. Both leaders employ legal action and harassment campaigns to cow opposition newspapers and weaken unfriendly businesses. State support and contracts help reward companies and media groups that are deemed loyal. Moreover, Putin and Erdoğan have embraced a similar vision of muscular nationalism that seems to suit their

countries. Images of a bare-chested Putin on horseback or Erdoğan's latest pronouncements on women's childbearing duties may grate on Western ears, but they clearly serve a purpose. Indeed, a key to understanding their success is to recognize how effectively they have each tapped into deep wells of social conservatism and anti-Westernism within their respective countries. Erdoğan is less cynical than Mr. Putin. Assassination of journalists is not part of his repertoire, but this is a matter of extent, not of kind. Putin seemed to acknowledge as much when he complimented Mr. Erdoğan after a recent meeting as "a tough man."

The Putin and Erdoğan comparison is particularly helpful in understanding the latter's attitude toward religion. The AKP is routinely defined as "Islamist," but, despite the clear importance of religion to the AKP brand, it cannot be understood as Islamist in the usual sense of the word. After more than a decade in power, there has been no attempt to amend Turkey's secular statutes with elements of *fiqh*. Polygamy, while not uncommon, is still illegal. Alcohol, while heavily taxed, is still easy to come by. With state support, religion is clearly playing a larger role in Turkish public life than ever before, but its use is clearly embedded within a nationalist rather than Islamic narrative. References to Islamic texts or to early Islamic history are exceedingly rare; Erdoğan speaks of the Ottomans, not the Prophet and his companions. His pronouncements on women in the workplace, childbearing, or alcohol consumption are couched in a rhetoric of traditional values or "science." Like Putin's embrace of the Orthodox Church, Erdoğan's embrace of Islam is coupled with a nostalgia for imperial greatness and a rhetoric of social conservatism.

AUTHORITARIANISM AND POLICING DISSENT

The central problem of Erdoğan's Turkey is not, in the final analysis, its embrace of Islam. It is its authoritarianism. This authoritarianism has deep roots in Turkish politics, which has fetishized national unity, treated diversity as suspect, and taken a hard line against popular dissent. In all of this, the AKP has merely

continued the bad habits of its predecessors. What is new, however, is the party's monopoly on power. It has beaten the political opposition, defanged the military, and is now effectively sidelining the courts. That is to say, what is new is a monopoly on power that has not existed in Turkey since the first democratic elections in 1950.

The mainstream Turkish press has been effectively brought to heel. There is little meaningful difference between the celebrations of Erdoğan's every action and utterance by the semi-official Anatolian Agency and that found in a mainstream paper like Sabah. Pressure on advertisers or other business interests are usually enough to force publishers to keep their writers in line (or simply sack them). When this proves insufficient, government prosecutors can rely on an array of statutes, including generous anti-libel laws and vague anti-terrorism statutes, to attack critical voices. Having decided for the moment that outright bans on social media are impossible, the government has chosen to intensify prosecutions, including prosecution of journalists, for tweets and Facebook postings. Anti-libel laws have similarly been used against protestors. A placard calling the president "thief" is enough to land one in court.

These prosecutions are not pervasive. They appear several times a week, punctuation marks within the daily discourse of the country. Meanwhile, thousands of people tweet similar messages without running afoul of the law. The point of these prosecutions is that they are random, aimed less at punishing individuals than at ensuring that political discourse as a whole is stifled. Like an effective speed trap, the goal is less to punish the few than to control the many.

Moreover, since the Gezi protests shook Turkey in the summer of 2013, the government has very rapidly and effectively worked to expand its police powers and consolidate control over civil society organizations. Attempts at major protests this past year were met by a massive police presence that effectively precluded protests. The Turkish parliament has passed a series of laws aimed at expanding police search

powers and diminishing the independence of the courts. A second wave of Gezi-style protests seems unlikely at this juncture and, were they to occur, the Turkish government is well prepared to suppress them. The greater danger now is civil unrest and radicalization of elements within the opposition. Should this occur, there is no question that the government will respond with overwhelming force.

With weak opposition, a pliant press, and powerful new tools for policing dissent, internal checks on Turkey's authoritarian slide seem unlikely for the foreseeable future. Even with a slowing economy, the AKP has every reason to be confident going into the June parliamentary elections. It has control of the media. The opposition is uninspiring. The independence of the courts has been whittled away through legal reforms and the appointment of party loyalists.

Mr. Erdoğan is an exceptional politician: capable of broad strategic vision and of inspiring remarkable personal loyalty. Sadly, he has also demonstrated that he is utterly unwilling to reach out to potential allies to increase his base. His goal is not to co-opt the opposition, but to destroy it. For now, he still believes in elections, but not in an independent judiciary or a critical press. The security services are increasingly politicized, party loyalists are actively recruited and promoted within the ranks. Turkey is fast becoming a democracy in name only.



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