

# Turkey: Climbing the Ladder of Authoritarianism

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Turkey will face a number of domestic and foreign policy challenges in 2018. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's tutelage, Turkey has all but abandoned its democratic past – as imperfect as it may have been – and is fast becoming another, almost ordinary, one-man authoritarian country. As if this were not enough, developments in Syria are pushing Ankara towards a new conundrum to which there is no end in sight, a deepening conflict with Turkish and Syrian Kurds and, potentially, towards a confrontation with its most important NATO ally, the United States.

Almost two years after the failed coup in July 2016, the Turkish government is having trouble reasserting its primacy at home without resorting to authoritarianism. In an effort to purge supporters of the exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen, who the Turkish leadership blames for the coup, government-initiated waves of repression have affected large segments of a once vibrant and effervescent society, effectively neutering it. Some 50,000 people have been jailed and another 160,000 dismissed from their jobs with calamitous results, having lost their savings and access to basic services, such as medical care. An errant tweet, an overheard conversation or an imagined insult is sufficient for someone to find themselves incarcerated for indefinite periods of time.

The new populist authoritarianism has been accompanied by a deliberate state-sponsored and manufactured campaign of nationalism that has

served to further restrict free speech and opposition to Erdogan's leadership. The decision to initiate hostilities against Syrian Kurds in Afrin has been the pretext for a new wave of constraints and a wave of repression, with anyone who opposes the operation being branded 'a traitor' and subject to imprisonment and prosecution.

The astonishing aspect of these developments is that they are happening in a country that only 10 years ago was celebrated as being up and coming, democratizing, prospering and making serious advances along a path towards European Union membership. Such reminiscences today are simply that; Turkey has seriously, and perhaps definitively, compromised its once promising course. Nevertheless, Turkish society, despite impressions to the contrary, is resisting this rapid descent into authoritarianism. For the most part, this resistance is not organized, often being haphazard and episodic. By eschewing traditional forms of acquiring legitimacy, the regime is increasingly creating the conditions for instability and unpredictability.

Erdogan is omnipresent; he is setting the stage for a long stay as the country's sole leader. As he labours on to create the institutional, political and social conditions necessary for his extended rule, he will be challenging Atatürk's place in history, the country's founder. He has already been in power as long as Atatürk and plans to remain there, possibly until 2033. More importantly, as he puts his own stamp on Turkey, he is systematically undermining the founder's legacy by redefining the role of religion in society or by simply challenging history. Atatürk was no democrat but neither is Erdogan. The difference is that democrats were not the norm but rather a curiosity at the beginning of the 20th century.

## How Did Turkey Get Here? Erdogan vs. Turkey

Erdogan had built his reputation as a pragmatic and maverick politician; after all he emerged from the ranks of a hardline Islamist party, the National Salvation Party. He successfully dissociated himself from his past comrades-in-arms to form the Justice and Development Party, AKP. His party won the 2002 elections and he assumed the position of Prime Minister in 2003. His success in the early years was due to two factors. First, it was the good stewardship of an economy that, thanks to Prime Minister and later President Turgut Özal's earlier structural reforms, had become dynamic and increasingly export-oriented; and second, the moderate image he cultivated and projected at home and abroad. Domestically, to populate the bureaucracy, he relied on the cadres that the Gülen organization supplied him with. The two allies, Gülen and Erdogan, had one common enemy: the alliance between the military and the military-backed state elites. In 2007 in a confrontation over the choice of Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül as President, the armed forces leadership overplayed its hand; in the ensuing elections called to ratify Gül's selection, Erdogan and the AKP won a decisive victory effectively terminating military tutelage of Turkish politics.

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The Erdogan-Gülen alliance would continue through the 2010 constitutional referendum that putatively strengthened democratic standards and further curbed the military's prerogatives. The two would part ways soon thereafter; they had emerged as the two most powerful forces in society and a power struggle was bound to ensue, first in the form of skirmishes and later on as a full-blown conflict. Erdogan would successfully manage to upstage Gülen at every turn.

More importantly, freed from any political and military opposition, Erdogan began to systematically reshape and undermine the institutions that most Turks had grown up with. These institutions were not perfect, by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, they were quite limiting, if not oppressive, especially if you happened to be a member of a disfavored ethnic or political group. Nevertheless they worked in a way that provided a degree of predictability.

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Today, the judiciary, military, educational system, press, financial system, bureaucracy, parliament and electoral system have all been subjugated to Erdogan's will. He has used a myriad of tactics to achieve the emasculation of the Turkish State. The military was purged wholesale after the attempted coup in July 2016. Some 149 generals and admirals were dismissed almost overnight, representing roughly 46% of all personnel of that rank, despite the number of soldiers out on the street the night of the coup being nowhere near commensurate with the troops these officers had commanded. Similarly, hundreds of staff officers with the ranks of colonel, major and captain, representing the top officer cadres, were also ousted.

The bureaucracy, under the guise of eliminating all Gülenist followers, was also cleansed of people thought not to be sufficiently loyal to Erdogan. The judiciary was cowed into submission as judges and prosecutors heeded the preferences of the AKP leadership, primarily Erdogan's, as decisions were taken in line with his wishes. Those who did not, found themselves removed, 'exiled' or relocated to other jurisdictions. The most absurd case occurred when the Constitutional Court, which has occasionally tried to buck the trend of political intrusions, found, in a most brazen form of abuse of

power, that one of its decisions to release two journalists from jail was overturned by a lower court.

One of the most dramatic turnabouts occurred in the press. Not always known for its high journalistic standards, the Turkish press was nonetheless a vibrant and muckraking assortment of journalists and newspapers. Erdogan has succeeded in establishing hegemonic control over the press. Almost 90% of outlets are either under his direct control or that of his family or friends, and any that are not have been made to fear his power. Turkey has the highest number of journalists behind bars of any country in the world. They are likely to find themselves incarcerated for long periods of time before they get their day in court. When found guilty, the verdicts have been unforgiving. The pressure to support the government has resulted in a supplicant Turkish press that is replete with widely exaggerated stories of Turkish leadership successes at home, in the Middle East and everywhere beyond.

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Many academics have been fired from their universities for having signed a petition criticizing the government's Kurdish policies. The resulting, chilling effect has forced many to leave the country or refrain from researching what some may consider sensitive topics, although the definition of the latter has been left to the government.

Parliament has been reduced to a do-nothing body that agrees with everything the presidential palace commands. The leaders of Turkey's third largest party, the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party, HDP, have been hauled to jail, many members of parliament, including those from other parties, finding that the concept of 'immunity from prosecution' has been nullified.

### What's Next?

Erdogan did not introduce such draconian measures overnight. The process has been gradual and composed primarily of two tactics. The first was the creation of a charismatic personality, through the control of the media, thereby enabling him to eschew rules and institutions. The second consisted in manipulating the electoral system. When his party was defeated in the June 2015 parliamentary elections he manoeuvred to block the formation of a government. He forced a second election in November 2015, which was conducted during a period of heightened conflict with Kurds in Turkey's southeast, allowing the AKP to regain its majority.

The single most determining event was the April 2017 referendum that expanded presidential powers, effectively making the office the sole governing node of the country. The AKP managed to eke out the barest of majorities (51-49) despite a one-sided campaign conducted under state-of-emergency conditions, in which the opposition was almost completely banned. Evidence of stuffed ballots and last-minute shenanigans have convinced many, including at least one academic study, that Erdogan lost the vote by a close and similar 51-49 margin. These results are telling; despite the heavy-handed pressure emanating from the State, half of the public still stood up to Erdogan. This does not mean that the opposition to Erdogan is by any means united and in a position to prevent him from running the country. However, what the referendum results signal are the potential dangers that lie ahead. It has already pushed Erdogan into making an alliance with an extreme right-wing party, the Nationalist Action Party, MHP, in the run-up to the next elections. The MHP is virulently anti-Kurdish, anti-European and prioritizes Turkish nationalism over all other issues. Erdogan, in his determination to ensure his own election in 2019, and because he knows of the strong opposition to his rule, is willing to intensify pressure on society. Nothing is being left to chance; electoral laws have been amended to ensure that the government will be able to influence results. With Turkey, already downgraded in many worldwide indexes to a status of 'unfree,' the likelihood of a backlash in Europe and the US is growing.

In the short-term, this backlash is likely to benefit Erdogan as his brand of Turkish authoritarianism, not unlike others, is imbued with significant amounts of dislike of 'the other,' be they ethnic or religious minorities or simply foreigners. The recent military operation in Afrin has already demonstrated his willingness to manipulate these sentiments. The vehement anti-American animosity displayed daily by authorities and the media has already affected bilateral relations. Efforts at containing the negative language, especially by senior Americans, have, for the most part, been ineffectual. In turn, the rhetoric is creating the conditions for a major miscalculation or mistake that could significantly derail bilateral relations.

Beneath the verbal animosity lie important differences, the most important of which is the question of the Syrian Kurds. Some 2,000 US military personnel are working to defeat the remnants of the Islamic State in close alliance with the YPG, People's Protection Units, who are closely affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, in Turkey. For the Turks, the emergence of a Kurdish zone, especially one protected by the American military is reminiscent of the post-Kuwait and Iraqi war encounters that ultimately produced a federal arrangement in that country. A repeat of this experience across its southern border in Syria, espe-

cially considering that the future of that country remains much in doubt, would be strategically problematic if not unacceptable to Ankara. Turkish troops and Turkish-armed extremist Syrian oppositionists operating in northern Syria in close proximity of and at cross purposes with Americans and their allies is a situation unlike any other in the history of the NATO alliance.

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Herein lies the greatest challenge: what happens next depends very much on Erdogan. He has become accustomed to getting his way, at least at home. In the absence of a system of checks and balances in Turkey, his calculations will be a decisive factor for future developments.