

## Sultan Erdogan's Turkey Should Be Tossed From NATO

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An authoritarian at home, duplicitous abroad, he is no friend nor ally of the U.S.

Istanbul – A couple weeks ago I visited Turkey's largest city, cosmopolitan Istanbul. Pictures of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan promoting his party's candidate for mayor, former prime minister Binali Yildirim, dominated the cityscape and vastly outnumbered those for Ekrem Imamoglu, the opposition Republican People's Party's standard-bearer. Few observers thought the latter had much of a chance. Yet after the polls closed on Sunday, Imamoglu had narrowly triumphed.

Assuming the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) does not steal the election—it's contesting the result and controls most levers of power—the opposition will have won mayoralties in five of the country's six most populous cities, including the capital of Ankara. The AKP and related parties have ruled Istanbul and Ankara since 1994, making the losses doubly painful. The opposition also made significant gains at the provincial level. The AKP still picked up a plurality of votes and along with its nationalist coalition partner secured a bare national majority of 51.6 percent. However, Erdogan, seemingly on his way to being a modern sultan, no longer seems invincible.

His greatest weakness today was once his strongest advantage: the economy. Turkey has fallen into a recession; per capita GDP has dropped to the level of a dozen years ago. Unemployment has surged to the highest level in nine years. Inflation hit 20 percent, while last year the Turkish lira's value fell 28 percent.

The opposition's revival is good for the people of Turkey, who are suffering under Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian rule, as well as for Western governments, which should no longer view Ankara as a friend and ally. In fact, the transatlantic alliance should suspend or terminate Turkey's membership in NATO.

The Republic of Turkey grew out of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was an Ottoman military officer turned revolutionary leader who was instrumental in founding the new Turkish government. He created an authoritarian, secular state that allied with the West during the Cold War. Behind its democratic façade was a military-nationalist deep state. The armed forces occasionally ousted elected leaders, most recently in a "postmodern" coup in 1997, which forced the resignation of an Islamist prime minister.

The following year, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, then mayor of Istanbul, was ousted from office and jailed for reciting an Islamist poem. In 2001, he cofounded the AKP, which won the 2002

election with support from liberals seeking to end the repressive Kemalist regime. Once in office, he adeptly forced the military out of politics.

However, within a decade, Erdogan was moving in an authoritarian and Islamist direction, targeting businessmen backing the opposition, seizing control of independent media, and punishing critics, including journalists, academics, and even schoolchildren. This gave life to the report that as mayor he had declared: “Democracy is like a streetcar. When you come to your stop, you get off.” The attempted coup in 2016 became his Reichstag fire—in fact, some suspected, without proof, that he engineered the operation. It gave him an excuse to purge anyone with the slightest (and often imagined) connection to the aged Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, who he improbably blamed for the attempted putsch.

Some 80,000 people, including opposition politicians and journalists, have been jailed; the government actually paroled criminals to make room for political prisoners. Torture and other abuse continue, though Amnesty International reports that it is no longer as common as in the immediate aftermath of the coup. In excess of 160,000 Turks have been forced from their jobs, public and private.

The government removed 95 municipal, provincial, and district officials of the Kurdish People’s Democratic Party, replacing them with appointive “trustees.” Human Rights Watch notes, “Turkey remained the world leader in jailing journalists. An estimated 175 journalists and media workers are in pretrial detention or serving sentences for terrorism offenses at time of writing. Hundreds more are on trial but at liberty.”

Turkish agents kidnapped alleged enemies abroad. The regime imprisoned foreigners, such as the American pastor Andrew Brunson, who was later released under U.S. pressure, and NASA scientist Serkan Golge, on dubious evidence. Ankara shut down thousands of schools and foundations, and scores of media enterprises, publishing houses, universities, and trade unions. The regime displayed its brutal character in 2017 when during a state visit to Washington, Erdogan’s bodyguards beat up peaceful American protestors.

Erdogan has engineered a shift from a parliamentary system to a strong presidency, filled by him. Freedom House rates Turkey as “not free,” near the bottom in civil liberties. Explains FH: “The government’s authoritarian nature has been fully consolidated since a 2016 coup attempt triggered a more dramatic crackdown on perceived opponents of the leadership.” Amnesty International agrees: “Dissent was ruthlessly suppressed, with journalists, political activists and human rights defenders among those targeted.”

Most freedoms have been curtailed, many dramatically so. Observes FH: “While not every utterance that is critical of the government will be punished, the arbitrariness of prosecutions, which often result in pretrial detention and carry the risk of lengthy prison terms, is increasingly creating an atmosphere of self-censorship.” Indeed, AI notes, “Thousands of criminal prosecutions were brought, including under laws prohibiting defamation and on trumped-up terrorism-related charges, based on people’s peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression.”

The fact that elections are still held does not mean that Turkey is a functioning democracy. Freedom House says that last year’s “elections were marred by a number of flaws, including misuse of state resources by the ruling party to gain an electoral advantage, as well as

intimidation of and attacks on the” opposition. Similarly, reports Human Rights Watch, “The June 2018 election campaign took place under a state of emergency imposed after the July 2016 attempted military coup and in a climate of media censorship and repression of perceived government enemies and critics that persisted throughout the year, with many journalists as well as parliamentarians and the presidential candidate from the pro-Kurdish opposition in jail.”

Moreover, Ankara’s foreign policy has drifted away from America’s and Europe’s. Turkey initially allowed the Islamic State to operate within its borders against the Assad government and later intervened militarily in Syria to target America’s Kurdish allies. Erdogan’s son allegedly enriched himself selling ISIS-supplied oil.

The Erdogan government nearly broke with Moscow after shooting down a Russian aircraft in Syria, but soon reversed course to stage a dramatic rapprochement. Thereafter, Erdogan cooperated with Russia and Iran in Syria, effectively abandoning his demand for Bashar al-Assad’s ouster. Turkey also purchased a Russian S-400 missile air defense system, despite Washington’s threats to halt the continued sales of F-35 aircraft in response.

Turkey’s relations with Israel have sharply deteriorated. Ankara violated U.S. sanctions on Iran and increased commercial ties with Venezuela’s government, also under sanctions. In his latest political campaign, Erdogan used the mosque attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, to advance his Islamist and nationalist message.

On Tuesday, a “Senior State Department Official” briefed the press and insisted that “Turkey has been and remains an important NATO ally, an important partner to the United States. Our relationship is not being defined by the single issue of the S-400.” (Is there any defense dependent on earth that is not said to be an “important partner” of America?) However, the SSDO did allow that “the S-400 is a deeply problematic issue for the United States, and we have made that clear to Turkey.” Without result so far, alas.

Increasingly, Ankara is no friend to America or the West. In fact, Turkey would not be invited to join the alliance today. Its international objectives are too divergent and its domestic institutions are too authoritarian. Complained Andrew Dawson, head of the Council of Europe election observer mission, “I am afraid we are not fully convinced that Turkey currently has the free and fair electoral environment which is necessary for genuinely democratic elections in line with European values and principles.” In 1952, when Ankara joined, it was little more democratic than today. But Turkey was committed to containing the Soviet Union, so the other members were willing to overlook its domestic failings. There is no reason to make similar allowances now.

Washington has little ability to influence politics in Turkey. However, the latest vote offers an important reminder that Erdogan will not rule forever. My Cato Institute colleague Mustafa Akyol notes that “the municipal election results in Turkey over the weekend suggest that there is still some hope for democratic change there—that despite a descent into authoritarianism, ballots still count.” The population’s deep-seated anti-Americanism will be harder to eliminate; for that, U.S. foreign policy needs to change. Moreover, any elected government is likely to pursue independent policies inconsistent with U.S. priorities. Best for Washington to loosen its ties with Turkey.

Rather than desperately attempting to hold Ankara in NATO, the allies should begin considering how to ease Turkey out. There will still be issues where we need to cooperate with Ankara. However, Washington should stop making policy based on illusions of friendship with a government seeking to revive the Ottoman Empire. Turkey today is neither friend nor ally. The U.S. should treat it accordingly.

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