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Turkish Freedom Wanes Along with Erdogan's Popularity: America's Moral and Strategic Interests Violated

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Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, secured near dictatorial powers in a recent constitutional referendum. Yet the would-be sultan barely broke 51 percent of the vote after rigging the ballot, destroying a free press, and criminalizing criticism.

The Republic of Turkey was created amid the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire. The state eventually evolved into an authoritarian democracy.

Erdogan relaunched the principal Islamic party, winning the 2002 election. He liberalized the economy, sought peace with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, and revamped Turkish laws to pursue European Union membership.

He won the backing of liberals, secularists and women. Journalists enjoyed greater freedom and Europeans believed he could bring Turkey into their continent's orbit.

Alas, many observers, this writer included, overestimated Erdogan's commitment to a Western model. What looked too good to be true turned out to be so.

Once Erdogan felt unchallengeable, he abandoned democracy. Around 2010 or so Erdogan began using his rule in a more authoritarian fashion, punishing the academics, businessmen and journalists in particular who challenged him.

Erdogan prosecuted even his most harmless critics, including children, for insulting him on social media. He morphed into an egocentric narcissist outraged that anyone would tar his dignity.

His political brutality grew along with challenges to his rule. In 2013 Erdogan purged police and prosecutors linked to Hizmat, the movement headed by Muslim teacher and cleric Fethullah Gulen, a former ally.

Two years later Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (or AKP) lost its parliamentary majority. Erdogan responded by restarting the conflict with PKK and hyping security issues. He forced another election five months later, which restored AKP's majority.

Democracy was in dismal shape, though not quite dead. Then last July some members of the military attempted to stage a coup. Erdogan treated the failed plot as his Reichstag Fire, allowing him to aggrandize his power.

Erdogan immediately charged that Gulen, who had lived in rural Pennsylvania for years, was the mastermind. A committee of the United Kingdom's parliament as well as German and European intelligence officials found no evidence backing Erdogan's claim. Rep. Devin Nunes, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, was similarly dismissive.

After the coup's collapse Erdogan closed publications and jailed journalists. He charged opposition leaders and lawmakers who had opposed the coup with backing terrorism.

He restricted freedom of assembly and punished critics. He purged government universities, closed private schools, and shuttered civic organizations.

So far some 47,000 people have been imprisoned, 113,000 detained at least temporarily, and another 140,000 or more ousted from public-sector jobs and banned from civil life more generally. Equally devastating private firings go uncounted. For many people Turkey now is an open-air prison.

The Turkish authorities did not bother attempting to demonstrate that those punished had anything to do with the coup. Nor did Erdogan only target Gulenists. Anyone critical of him or linked to someone critical of him is at risk.

Turkish prosecutors even are investigating leading Americans for their alleged roles as closet Gulenists and coup plotters, including Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, former CIA Director John Brennan, and former U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara. Erdogan's paranoia brings to mind Josef Stalin.

Freedom House rates Turkey as only "partly free" and moving in the wrong direction. The State Department's human-rights assessment cites "inconsistent access to due process," "government interference with freedom of expression," "inadequate protection of civilians," and a potpourri of other issues.

Nevertheless, after taking over the presidency Erdogan proposed changing Turkey from a parliamentary system into a hyperpresidential government, akin to the one dominated by Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Erdogan placed a package of 18 constitutional amendments on the ballot last month to expand his power. The campaign occurred during a state of emergency. The Stockholm Center for Freedom cited "widespread and systematic election fraud, violent incidents and scandalous steps taken by the biased Supreme Board of Election."

Yet the measure barely passed. Even the Istanbul district of Uskudar, in which Erdogan owns a home and where he voted, came out against him. So the Turkish government expanded its crackdown.

Turkey's saga of liberty lost is not only a tragedy for the Turkish people. It further undermines the country's relationship with the West.

Erdogan's government helped arm, sell oil from, and open Turkish territory for use by ISIS. More recently his military targeted the Syrian Kurds, U.S. allies against ISIS. Erdogan's government has snuggled close to Putin's Russia.

Turkey has abandoned its long-standing affinity for the West. The Erdogan government now violates America's moral and strategic interest.

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