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## Turkey's Erdogan Plays Dictator in Constitutional Fight: Divides Nation as Popularity Wanes

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Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan secured near dictatorial powers in the recent constitutional referendum. Yet all is not well for the would-be sultan. He predicted that he'd win 60 percent or more of the vote, but barely broke 51 percent after rigging the ballot, destroying a free press, and criminalizing criticism. The opposition is divided and broken, but Erdogan increasingly is feared rather than loved. His reign may be shorter than expected.

The Republic of Turkey was created amid the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire by Mustafa Kemal, a military officer later anointed with the name Ataturk, or father of the Turks. The state eventually evolved into an authoritarian democracy, with heavy-handed military interference which limited political and religious liberty. Coups were common, with civilian politicians often ending up in prison and on occasion on the gallows,

Islamic parties were routinely ousted from the political process and Erdogan, then Istanbul's mayor, was jailed for reading an Islamic poem in public. Secular liberals weren't safe either: to publicly criticize the philosophy of "Kemalism" risked job loss and imprisonment.

In the early 2000s the country was ruled by an unstable nationalist coalition. Erdogan led the relaunch of the principal Islamic party, winning the 2002 election. He became prime minister the following year. A series of election victories for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) followed.

Erdogan liberalized the economy, spurring growth which especially benefited the rural poor. He sought peace with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, and expanded Kurdish participation in Turkish society. He revamped Turkish laws to meet requirements for European Union membership. In 2008 he barely avoided a legal attempt to outlaw the AKP, but rebounded to systematically dismantle the authoritarian "deep state," returning the military to its barracks.

Although his power base was conservative, traditional, and religious Turks, 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. People prospered. Erdogan appeared to be creating the moderate Islamic democracy that Turkey always had been said to represent, even when it was in reality a secular autocracy.

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. Journalist Claire Berlinski contends that the AKP was illiberal from the start, though in ways the West chose to ignore. However,

Erdogan was moving the country in a freer direction, which even Turkish liberals saw as positive.

Analysts debate why Erdogan changed, but the best guess may be that his ambition fully flowered after he'd cemented his electoral dominance and defanged the military. He apparently meant it when he said "Democracy is like a streetcar. You ride it until you arrive at your destination and then you step off." Once he felt unchallengeable, he abandoned democracy.

Around 2010 or so Erdogan began using his authority in a more illiberal fashion, punishing academics, businessmen, and journalists, in particular, who challenged him. He went to extraordinary lengths to not just break the military's ability to intervene in politics but destroy individual military officers, accusing them of participating in fantastically crazed conspiracies (some of which he repudiated years later).

Erdogan prosecuted even his most harmless critics, including children, for insulting him on social media. He morphed from an ambitious politician seeking to silence those who could hinder his rise into an egocentric narcissist outraged that anyone would tar his dignity. If Kemalism was receding, Ottomanism was advancing.

His political brutality grew along with challenges to his rule. In 2013 Erdogan's government was hit with serious corruption allegations from police and prosecutors apparently linked to Hizmet, the movement headed by Muslim teacher and cleric Fethullah Gulen. Erdogan and Gulen had been allies, but as differences emerged their partnership dissolved. Secure in his control of the state, Erdogan purged the legal system of those thought to be disloyal to him.

Two years later the AKP lost its parliamentary majority. Erdogan responded by abandoning his conciliatory policy toward the PKK and hyping security issues. Some critics saw his hand behind alleged terrorist attacks by the PKK and ISIS. He impeded attempts to form a coalition government and forced another election five months later, which restored his party's majority.

Along the way he purged the AKP of officials insufficiently subservient to him. In 2014 he effectively forced Abdullah Gul, his predecessor as president (also prime minister and foreign minister), into retirement. Two years later Erdogan pushed out his activist successor, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. Others similarly fell afoul of their onetime mentor.

Thus, democracy was in dismal shape, though not quite dead, last July when some members of the military attempted to stage a coup. Most of his critics joined his supporters in rallying against the putsch. Although it is very unlikely that Erdogan organized the effort as a black flag operation or knew of it and allowed it to occur, as charged by some, he called it "a great gift from god." Erdogan then treated the failed coup as his Reichstag Fire, allowing him to aggrandize his own power.

Before the coup even had been suppressed Erdogan charged that Gulen was the mastermind. The claim was far-fetched: the aging cleric had lived in rural Pennsylvania for years. Those who struck at Erdogan included some Gulenists, but were a varied lot. In fact, the military had long resisted Gulenists' efforts to join its higher ranks.

A committee of the United Kingdom's parliament as well as German and European intelligence officials reported that they found no evidence backing Erdogan's claim. Rep. Devin Nunes, Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, was similarly dismissive. The plotters apparently were responding to leaked plans for another purge of the military by the AKP. At this stage reliable evidence is almost impossible to obtain: mass arrests based on flimsy pretexts and highlighted by bouts of torture irredeemably taint Turkey's legal and judicial processes.

After the coup's collapse Erdogan won emergency powers from parliament. He closed publications and jailed journalists—more now languish in prison than in any other country, including China and Russia. He charged opposition leaders and lawmakers who had opposed the coup with backing terrorism. He restricted freedom of assembly and punished critics. He ordered private companies to fire employees and had the latter's bank accounts frozen. He closed private schools and civic organizations. He replaced university administrators and dismissed professors. He fired government officials.

The extent of the ongoing purge is extraordinary—so far some 47,000 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. The equally devastating private firings go uncounted. For many people Turkey now is an open-air prison.

Prosecution was nominally tied to the coup attempt, but no evidence of involvement in the coup was necessary for the government to fire or arrest any individual, seize or dissolve any organization, or otherwise penalize anyone anywhere. The vaguest connection to Hizmat, including attending a Gulenist school, owning a Gulenist book, or frequenting a business founded by Gulenists, was taken as evidence of guilt. Possessing a one dollar bill became a supposed sign that one was a Gulenist conspirator.

The Turkish authorities did not bother attempting to demonstrate 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 was at risk. Those who criticized the brutal war against the Kurds or denounced Erdogan for his calculated destruction of civil and political liberty also were arrested and accused of terrorism. On the rare occasion when judges dismissed dubious charges, the government often rearrested the defendants on new charges and dismissed the jurists.

Those fired, even from private businesses, found it difficult if not impossible to find other work. Many were shunned by friends and family and left dependent on handouts for their survival. People not charged with any crime were prevented from leaving the country. Those who fled before the authorities targeted them had their passports cancelled, marooning them in foreign nations. Unlike other Turkish expatriates, they were barred from voting in the recent referendum. Some Americans were caught in the dragnet.

Indeed, Turkish prosecutors announced that they were investigating several Americans for their alleged roles as closet Gulenists and coup plotters. On the list: Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, former CIA director John Brennan, former CIA deputy director David Cohen, former U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara, Turkic American Alliance President Faruk Taban, the Wilson Center's Henri Barkey, American Enterprise Institute scholar Michael Rubin, political analyst Graham Fuller, columnist Ralph Peters, and almost a dozen others. If Erdogan was not deadly serious the "case" could be dismissed as self-parody. His apparent paranoia brings to mind Joseph Stalin.

After spending several months tracking down most anyone brave or foolish enough to oppose his rule, Erdogan should have felt secure. The rule of law was dead. An independent police and judiciary had vanished. The elected parliament was supine. A free press was destroyed. No meaningful checks or balances remained on Erdogan and his government.

Even before the referendum Freedom House rated Turkey as only “partly free” and moving in the wrong direction. The group found that Ankara performed poorly on political rights and worse on civil liberties; in terms of the press Turkey was unfree. Freedom House cited multiple examples when constitutional protections were ignored and violated. In practice, there evidently was no effective limit on Erdogan’s power.

Similar was the State Department’s assessment, which ran 75 pages. Among the problems cited were “inconsistent access to due process,” “government interference with freedom of expression,” “inadequate protection of civilians,” and a potpourri of issues including a climate of fear in court, overcrowded prisons, and violence against religious minorities.

Nevertheless, murdering democracy was not enough for Erdogan. His ambition was reflected by his \$615 million presidential residence; with 1150 rooms it rivals the homes of the Ottoman sultans, such as Istanbul’s Topkapi Palace. After taking over the presidency, a position of little formal power, he had proposed changing Turkey from a parliamentary system into a hyper-presidential government, akin to that dominated by Russia’s Vladimir Putin.

After the coup attempt he coopted the nationalist opposition and placed a package of 18 constitutional amendments on the ballot to expand presidential power. The vote would merely ratify reality and few imagined that he could lose. Even if he lost, few imagined that he would retreat. As in 2015, it was believed, he would simply concoct another security crisis, justifying another ballot, this time backed by even more extreme tactics.

As he prepared for the referendum he declared: “If we were not sure of [winning] we would not have embarked on this business.” Yet he left little to chance, rigging a process which European observers said created an “uneven playing field” and “fell short” of international standards. The Stockholm Center for Freedom cited “widespread and systematic election fraud, violent incidents and scandalous steps taken by the biased Supreme Board of Election.”

The entire campaign occurred during a state of emergency with the government doing everything it could to hype a climate of fear. Several Kurdish areas under military control mysteriously returned majorities for Erdogan. Opponents were intimidated, criticism was muted, opposition rallies were barred, critics were accused of promoting terrorism, impartial electoral information was absent, election monitors were prohibited, opposition demonstrators were beaten, positive press coverage was forced, and displaced Kurds were prevented from voting.

The election commission allowed the counting of up to 2.5 million uncertified ballots, an open invitation to massive vote fraud. Multiple examples of intimidation and cheating were reported and occasionally filmed. Election monitors were often evicted and sometimes beaten.

Despite all of this, the measure barely passed. The 60 percent of which Erdogan originally spoke likely would have been against him in a fair ballot. He and other embarrassed Turkish officials immediately declared the issue closed.

While some of Erdogan's critics hoped that the narrow victory would humble him, he sounded irritated, even angry. His paranoia likely flaring, he insisted to an end to "unnecessary discussions." The debate "is now over," he insisted, and "We are not going to stop." Which offered a foretaste of what was likely to come.

Some observers still believed that after constitutionalizing his authority and trampling his enemies underfoot, Erdogan might return to a reform path, perhaps reaching out to opposition forces and restarting peace talks with the PKK. However, Erdogan's reform persona disappeared years, not months, ago. Even before the attempted coup his repression was equal parts petty and vicious. The vast majority of those penalized since last July posed no threat to Turkey or him. Politics has become very personal. Moreover, the referendum's result undoubtedly scared him. Eric Edelman of SAIS, who served as U.S. ambassador to Turkey, warned that "the combination of empowerment and paranoia is likely to be a toxic mix."

After the vote Erdogan's subordinates took the lead. For instance, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, chosen by Erdogan last year precisely for his lack of independence, asserted: "Against the traitors and dividers, we stood united as a nation." He promised that "Our struggle with internal and external enemies will be intensified."

There certainly was no hint of conciliation in the government's response to demonstrations against the rigged referendum, which Yildirim termed "unacceptable." Protestors were arrested, many in dawn raids as if they were terrorists. The government charged Abdurrahman Atalay, a political activist who filed an election appeal, with "inciting hatred." Law, courts, constitution, indeed most everything in Turkey, now is subordinate to Erdogan's wishes.

Still, the referendum, by highlighting Erdogan's willingness to subvert the vote of all Turks, may end up undermining his legitimacy. He looks like any other dictator wannabe seeking a democratic gloss for his oppressive rule. His claim to represent the Turkish people is further tarnished.

Even some AKP members and former supporters balked at his reach for dictatorial power. Istanbul, where he served as mayor, voted against him for the first time. He lost Ankara, the seat of government, Izmir, the third most populous city, and virtually every other major urban area. Even the Istanbul district, Uskudar, in which he owns a home and where he voted, came out against him.

These divisions almost certainly will deepen. Moreover, the economy has been deteriorating, threatening what many people view as his government's greatest achievement. With no peaceful means to oppose Erdogan, some of his opponents might eventually turn to violence. The only good news may be that it won't be easy for Erdogan to intensify the repression.

Turkey's saga of liberty lost is not only a tragedy for the Turkish people. It undermines the country's relationship with the West. Of course, Erdogan's Turkey is not America's only authoritarian ally. But Erdogan hasn't just destroyed freedom for Turks. He's turned his country into something other than an ally of the U.S. and Europe.

Obviously, as a sovereign nation Turkey is free to change direction—in fact, public opinion long has been among the most hostile to the U.S. But then Ankara's membership in NATO should be reconsidered. Erdogan long played footsie with the Islamic State; his government apparently helped arm, sell oil from, and open Turkish territory for use by ISIS. More recently he has

targeted the Syrian Kurds, U.S. allies against ISIS. Erdogan's government has limited military cooperation with Washington while promoting lurid conspiracy tales against the U.S. government and snuggling close to Putin's Russia.

Claims that Turkey is a "vital" member of NATO suggest a throwback to the Cold War when Ankara was an anchor against the Soviet Union. Today, despite the Ukraine conflict, Russia exhibits no aggressive designs against Europe and is not constrained by Turkey. Moreover, noted AEI's Michael Rubin, Ankara's purge carefully targeted pro-Western military offices. Unfortunately, he added, "The Turkish military tilt toward Russia has gone beyond the symbolic." Overall, Ankara is an inconstant, untrustworthy partner, actively flouting the alliance's democratic values while hindering its geopolitical goals

Nevertheless, President Donald Trump made a cheery phone call to congratulate Erdogan after the vote and apparently invited Erdogan to visit for formal talks. The State Department gamely issued a statement backing Turkey's "democratic development" and urging protection of "the fundamental rights and freedoms of all its citizens," but no one believed that reflected the president's position. Sadly, those betrayed by President Trump are America's closest friends, liberals, secularists, and others who believe in a free and tolerant society. The president's apparent hope that Erdogan will lead the fight against Islamic radicalism seems a long-shot at best. The latter is more likely to become its exponent and practitioner.

The United States cannot fix the world. But Washington should not ignore the betrayal of fundamental values by supposed allies. In the case of Turkey, President Erdogan has abandoned its long-standing affinity for the West. The problem today is not a conflict between America's moral and strategic interest. Unfortunately, the Erdogan government flunks both tests.

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