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Is Turkey Still a Bridge to the West?

Recep Tayyip Erdogan has destroyed founder Ataturk's secular heritage and taken his nation down an Islamist path.

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Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan put his power and prestige on the line this month, pushing a constitutional referendum to create a Putinesque, all-powerful executive. He purged and arrested tens of thousands of Turks, closed or cowed the opposition press, made criticism a treasonable offense, manipulated electoral rules, and committed vote fraud. Yet the measure still barely passed, 51.4 percent to 48.6 percent.

Erdogan originally was a figure of hope, lionized by some in the West. His Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power in 2002, pushing aside a weak nationalist coalition. He spent several years liberalizing the economy, addressing Kurdish grievances, and dismantling the repressive, militaristic "deep state." Even liberal secularists and feminists backed him. Turkey prospered economically and Turks enjoyed greater freedom. Erdogan knocked on Europe's door and his government adopted legal reforms to prepare for negotiations to join the European Union.

There always were doubters. Erdogan once said "Democracy is like a streetcar. You ride it until you arrive at your destination and then you step off." But the AKP won a succession of electoral victories and appeared to be turning Turkey into a modern and moderate Islamic democracy. The West was pleased to find such a model and many of us, present writer included, let our hopes outrun reality.

Around 2010 or so, Erdogan changed direction, harnessing state power to punish critics in academia, journalism, and business, as well as enrich his cronies. Tax investigations became just one tool of repression. Erdogan concocted fantastic conspiracy charges to destroy the old military leadership. Critics, even children, were prosecuted for insulting his majestic person on social media.

He used greater political brutality to surmount every political obstacle. After spending years cooperating with Muslim teacher and cleric Fethullah Gulen and the latter's Hizmet (or "Service") movement, differences emerged in 2012 and the two allies dramatically turned on each other the following year. After so-called Gulenists were involved in charging leading AKP

officials and family members with corruption, Erdogan purged the police, prosecutors' offices, and judiciary.

In June 2015 Erdogan's AKP lost its parliamentary majority. Rather than accept coalition rule, Erdogan reignited the conflict with Kurdish separatists and called another election five months later; his emphasis on security issues yielded victory. Even AKP officials were not above Erdogan's suspicions: he sidelined a former president/prime minister/foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, and ousted Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, preferring men he could better control.

Erdogan blamed last July's coup attempt on Gulen even before the putsch had failed and anyone had been arrested. Although some Gulenists appeared to be involved, the movement never had much success in penetrating the military, especially its top ranks. Western intelligence agencies discounted the claim that Gulen organized the plot.

Nevertheless, Erdogan used the failed putsch, which some believed he orchestrated or at least tolerated, to his advantage, rather like Adolf Hitler used the infamous Reichstag fire. Erdogan outlawed the opposition and seized extraordinary power. To be sure, Erdogan is more Putin than Hitler, but that is of little comfort for those who languish in jail on dubious charges, with little chance of a fair trial and even less hope to make a living if released.

Parliament granted him emergency powers, which he used against opponents and critics. Opposition leaders and lawmakers were arrested. Academics were dismissed. Schools were closed. Civic organizations were disbanded. Judges were ousted. Businesses were seized. Employees were fired. Bank accounts were frozen. Freedom of assembly was restricted. Publications were shuttered. Journalists were jailed, more than in any other nation, including China.

Even the most modest criticism of Erdogan, reasoned sympathy for the Kurds, or limited connection to Gulen—for instance, having an account in Bank Asya, founded by Gulenists—resulted in ostracism, detention, and prosecution. Some people were arrested for possessing a dollar bill, supposedly a signal of the Gulenist conspiracy. Those acquitted were rearrested and charged with new offenses. Judges who acquitted defendants were dismissed. Many spared jail were barred from leaving the country. Those able to flee Turkey had their passports canceled and, unlike other expatriates, were barred from voting.

The latest count is 47,000 arrested and 130,000 purged from civic life, including those forced from their jobs. Most are social pariahs, shunned by fearful friends and surviving on handouts from relatives. Some Americans have been caught up in the purge, including a Christian missionary, Pastor Andrew Brunson, bizarrely charged with being a member of an “armed terrorist organization.”

Thus, even before the referendum, democracy in any meaningful sense already was dead, with no rule of law, checks and balances, or any other restraint on government—especially executive power. Freedom House rates Turkey as only “partly free,” poor on political rights, worse on civil liberties, and unfree when it comes to the press. Unfortunately, the situation continues to deteriorate. The latest State Department human-rights report on Turkey runs 75 pages, and what it details is not pretty.

Erdogan called the referendum to ratify reality and satisfy his craving for affirmation. After years of trying to transform Turkey into a strong presidential system, Erdogan succeeded in placing 18 amendments on the ballot to make the president all-powerful and unaccountable. Despite the political Sturm und Drang, however, the campaign was largely Kabuki Theater. Erdogan already exercised dictatorial control, having gotten special “emergency” powers from parliament after last year’s attempted coup. Had he lost, his opponents figured he would create an incident to further hype fears and raise tensions, justifying another vote backed by even more brutal repression.

But he never intended there to be any doubt as to the result. European poll watchers politely said the election “fell short” of international standards. The surprise is the small size of his victory margin, even after intimidating opponents, guaranteeing positive press coverage, barring election monitors, rigging the electorate, preventing displaced Kurds from voting, banning public criticism, committing vote fraud, and counting uncertified ballots.

Optimists hoped that having legally secured his dominant position, he might now turn to uniting the country and pursuing the people’s business—for instance, restarting peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK. However, the Erdogan who became prime minister in 2003 is gone. The close vote appeared to anger rather than humble him. The ruthless yet petty nature of his purge of even the harmless and innocent suggests that politics has become very personal to him. Pervasive repression has little to do with stability and security and much to do with ego and revenge.

Indeed, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim pledged: “Our struggle with internal and external enemies will be intensified.” Hundreds of Turks protesting the referendum results were arrested, many in dawn raids the morning after. A leading activist who filed an appeal against the result was detained and charged with “inciting hatred” for questioning the vote’s legitimacy.

Of course, Turkey’s descent into authoritarianism, whatever Erdogan’s motivation, does not set it apart. Other U.S. allies, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are worse; the latter is a totalitarian state waging war on a weak neighbor. However, Erdogan is doing more than defenestrating democracy as part of the Turkish political system. He has destroyed founder Ataturk’s secular heritage and shoved his nation down an Islamist path and toward an unknown destination.

Moreover, Ankara’s foreign policy has become overtly hostile to the West. Turkey is drifting away from Europe, tolerating the Islamic State, supporting Islamist politics, reigniting war with Turkish Kurds, battling Syrian Kurds rather than ISIS, getting friendly with Russia, and treating the U.S. as a frenemy at best. Washington and Brussels must ask: how long can NATO tolerate a member at odds with the alliance’s democratic values and strategic objectives?

Unfortunately, President Donald Trump doesn’t seem to have noticed. He’s shown a strange affinity for foreign strongmen, including Egypt’s Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and the Saudi royals. Erdogan also appears to be on Trump’s “friend” list, originally put there, perhaps, by Michael Flynn, briefly Trump’s national security advisor, who represented Turkish concerns as a consultant.

However, the president appears to be a true believer, having been the first foreign leader to make a congratulatory phone call to Erdogan after the vote. Ankara claims that Erdogan has been invited for formal talks, though the administration has yet to confirm the visit. After the ballot the State Department noted its usual support for Turkey's "democratic development," but no one was fooled.

After all, the message the president sent, whatever his intentions, was an endorsement of the destruction of what little remained of Turkish democracy. Ironically, in doing so he, and by extension the U.S., rejected Turks who are the most secular, liberal, and pro-American and embraced those most hostile to Western values and objectives. Worse, the president's call ratified a geopolitical relationship that no longer exists. In practice, Turkey is no longer an ally. If President Trump wants to lead the fight against Islamic radicalism, he needs to look elsewhere than Ankara.

Washington sometimes has made ugly bargains in a dangerous world. But only when viewed as necessary to advance America's strategic objectives. The Ottoman Empire long was considered the sick man of Europe. The Republic of Turkey is headed for a different kind of decline today. The U.S. no longer should ignore that government's sustained assault on liberal democracy and other Western values.

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