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Erdoğan's March Toward "Single-Party Democracy"

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The then-infant Turkish Republic held its first theoretically multi-party parliamentary elections in 1946. In 1950, however free vote brought to government the opposition Democratic Party, paving the way to a democratic experience that would end, a decade later, disastrously: a military coup that hanged Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and two of his cabinet ministers. Seven decades later, Turkey's Islamist/populist strongman, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is making strong signs that he intends to take Turkey on a path to a kind of Arab Baathism.

Erdoğan has never hidden his admiration for Menderes, the conservative/populist prime minister who was hanged after the 1960 coup d'état: Menderes is an almost flawless "statue of democracy who was martyred by a bunch of bloodthirsty army generals." Erdogan often likens Menderes's democratic struggle to his own, a struggle always under attack from dark, anti-democratic forces.

Following in Menderes's footsteps?

Ironically, Menderes's unchallenged popularity in much of the 1950s poisoned his democratic experience as he responded to criticism with increasing repression. In 1953, Menderes confiscated much of the property of his rival, the Republican People's Party (CHP). Anti-government newspapers in Ankara were seized. In 1954, the government dissolved an opposition party. Also in 1954 laws passed to punish dissident journalists on charges of "damaging the prestige of the state or the law." More severe laws were passed in 1956 to prosecute journalists with heavy sentences while other laws substantially abridged the independence of civil servants including university teachers and judges. In 1955, DP expelled critics within the party. In 1956, limitations were placed upon public meetings.

After three opposition parties intended to form a coalition alliance in 1957 the government-controlled parliament passed laws to declare coalitions illegal. Those were the years when Menderes famously said that "even if he nominated a piece of wood in parliamentary elections the wood would get elected." In another speech he addressed his lawmakers: "You can even reinstate the caliphate if you wanted to."

The national economy visibly worsened in 1958-60 as investment plunged while inflation and unemployment surged. In April 1960, about a month before the coup d'état, the Menderes government ordered the army to prevent CHP from campaigning in Anatolia. By then Menderes was probably considering to close down CHP and ban all opposition.

Turkish politics today features fascinating parallels to the second half of the 1950s, with one major difference, though: luckily, the days of military coups with massive public support behind are simply bad memories from the distant past. Scores of opposition MPs rushed to the parliament building on the night of July 15, 2016 in solidarity with the government in response to a failed putsch.

Erdoğan has not lost a single (parliamentary or municipal) election, including referenda, since his Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. Although his party emerged as the nationwide winner in March 31, 2019 local polls the loss of Istanbul after quarter of a century (along with Ankara, Izmir and a number of big cities) to the opposition was a sputnik moment for Erdoğan. He, too, could be defeated. As the opposition candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, won Istanbul with a narrow margin of 13,000 votes against Erdoğan's former prime minister and Istanbul candidate, Binali Yıldırım, AKP leadership claimed vote-rigging and pressured the Supreme Election Board to cancel the election: Erdogan had

nothing to lose; he had already lost Istanbul but could perhaps win it in repeated polls. After all, it was Erdoğan's dictum: Who loses Istanbul loses Turkey. In the repeat vote on June 23, 2019 Imamoğlu won, and with a much wider margin of 800,000 votes. Before the final vote Erdoğan and AKP had tried to discredit Imamoğlu with unprecedented rhetoric: Erdoğan said in the race for Istanbul it was Yıldırım v. (Egypt's dictator Abdel Fattah al-) Sisi. A deputy interior minister said "a Greek" (Imamoğlu) was running for Istanbul. All that racist campaign failed, leaving bitter memories in the mindset of Turkey's unchallenged supreme leader.

No Turk at the age of 18 or younger has ever seen a leader at the helm other than Erdoğan. All credible polls show him at the top though by different margins of the nationwide vote. Political observers agree that the only way the opposition can topple him in the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections is if they can unite behind a common candidate who can appeal to all of the leftist, social democrat, liberal, center-right, center-left, conservative, nationalist, and Kurdish voters – seemingly a Herculean task, a near impossibility. (The Turkish constitution dictates that the next elections be held in 2023. Senior government officials, including Erdoğan, have repeatedly ruled out early elections but the opposition says it is getting prepared for snap polls, traditionally an inseparable part of Turkish politics.)

Alarm bells for Erdoğan

Erdoğan's post-election trauma in 2019, an ailing economy, like in 1958-60, and growing opposition to his increasingly authoritarian governance have unnerved him.

Turkey's per capita income is barely \$8,900. Its economy features double-digit inflation and unemployment rates. A quarter of Turkish youth are unemployed. On Oct. 18, Turkish lira touched an all-time low of 7.9 to the US dollar (and 9.3 to the euro). The economy shrank by 9.9% in the second quarter due, mainly, to the coronavirus. The Central Bank and state banks have sold some \$120 billion in dollars since last year.

Ratings agency Moody's said Turkey is headed toward a balance-of-payments crisis and noted the central bank's "unsuccessful attempts to defend the lira" have cut its buffer down to lows not seen in decades. With that, Turkey's credit standing now equals that of countries like Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya.

That is alarming for Erdoğan. But there is more.

According to Bekir Ağırđır, director of KONDA research, a pollster, the biggest percentage of "disillusioned voters" is with Erdoğan's AKP. He says that support for AKP has fallen to as low as 25 percent. (The AKP won 49.5 percent of the vote in general elections on Nov. 1, 2015.) "Three-quarters of Turks are worried about an economic depression," Ağırđır adds.

Ibrahim Uslu, a political communications specialist, confirms Erdoğan's (and AKP's) vote is declining. "On Nov. 1 (2015) 17 percentage points of vote came to AKP from party fans who thought the government was unsuccessful. At that time the AKP and its partner, the Nationalist Movement Party, won 62 percent of the national vote. This combined vote went down to less than 52 percent in 2017. Since then the AKP has never reached 40 percent of the vote," Uslu says.

The crush on opposition

What to do? Erdoğan knows he must rely on his former foe and presently staunchest supporter, the ultra-nationalist Devlet Bahçeli without whose support he cannot win the 50-percent-plus-one-vote-threshold he needs in any presidential race. That need and Erdoğan's

Islamist/illiberal-self push him further toward hawkish policies designed to crush any opposition.

If, Erdoğan calculates, one way to appeal to the rich pool of nationalist/conservative votes is to tell them heroic stories of Turkish military might abroad, like challenging the enemies in the Aegean and Mediterranean seas, in Syria, Iraq and Libya, the other is to be tougher on Turkey's Kurds. In local elections in March 2019 voters elected 65 pro-Kurdish mayors in towns and cities. At least 59 of them have been forced out of office or locked up, or both. Several former pro-Kurdish members of parliament, including a former co-chair of the People's Democratic Party (HDP), are also behind bars. "The government...is using the judiciary to try to neutralize the HDP and to intimidate the whole opposition," wrote Selahattin Demirtaş, HDP's former leader, from a Turkish prison where he has been jailed since 2016.

Meanwhile, a Turkish court ordered the pretrial detention of 17 people, including senior pro-Kurdish opposition members, for their alleged role in a wave of violent protests in 2014 against the army's inaction during an ISIL (ISIS) attack on the Syrian Kurdish town Kobane. The violent protests led to the deaths of 37 people, but the question remains: Why a new indictment six years after the incidents? The answer lies probably in Mr Demirtaş's lines above.

"The replacement of 47 democratically elected HDP municipal mayors by centrally appointed trustees in the south-east [Turkey] put the results of the democratic process of the 31 March 2019 local elections into question," the European Union said in its 2020 enlargement report. "Arrests and dismissals of elected mayors and party representatives continued and seriously damaged local democracy."

There are more worrying signs that Erdoğan's Turkey is making unconstitutional law enforcement a new normal. In October a lower court ruled against and challenged a Constitutional Court ruling over the illegal imprisonment of an opposition lawmaker. That was the third lower court ruling challenging the supreme court while, according to Article 153 of the Turkish Constitution, the supreme court rulings are final and cannot be challenged. In all three cases the lower courts ruled against opposition figures, one MP and two journalists.

None of that is surprising. It's just that Turkey is going through another period of ballot-box democracy – a majoritarian, not pluralist, one-man rule that can even get a piece of wood elected to parliament. Most Turks thought the bad experience of the 1950s would remain a bad memory of too distant times. They were wrong.

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