The Loneliness of Recep Tayyip Erdogan

by Soner Cagaptay **(/experts/soner-cagaptay)**

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Erdogan's lifelong resentment of secularists has decimated Turkish democracy.

Tomorrow marks the first anniversary of the failed coup against Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an event he has since used to further alienate his opponents. This alienation is reinforced by the authoritarian chamber that Erdogan inhabits, a result of both his upbringing as a pious yet second-class citizen in once-secularist Turkey, as well as his consolidation of power since 2002, when his Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power in Ankara.

As I explain in my book *The New Sultan*, Erdogan was born in 1954 to a poor family in Kasimpasa, a gritty neighborhood along Istanbul's Golden Horn, then a polluted waterway overflowing with sewage. He grew up in a deeply religious family at a time when Turkey had a staunchly secularist system, which banished all forms of religiosity to the private sphere, and in which people like Erdogan and his family felt profoundly marginalized.

Even Imam Hatip, the publicly funded religious school Erdogan attended, received second-class treatment in secularist Turkey. In a 2013 interview, Erdogan professed feeling "othered" along with his Imam Hatip peers, describing how he was repeatedly told that his education would disqualify him from any profession other than washing the bodies of the dead -- a task traditionally reserved for the clergy in Islam.

When Erdogan entered politics after graduation, his marginalization did not end. The country's secularist courts, in decisions backed by the secularist military, businesses, and media, shut down three Islamist parties he joined between the mid-1970s and the late-1990s. The courts also sent Erdogan to jail in 1998 for reciting an allegedly incendiary poem, which they said undermined Turkey's secularist system.

In 2001, Erdogan established the AKP as a reformed Islamist party. It took advantage of the implosion of the country's secularist parties, which stemmed largely from the Turkish economic crisis of the same year, to win the 2002 parliamentary elections. Even then, Erdogan's troubles with the secularist system did not end: he was barred from becoming prime minister because of his jail term. In 2003, this penalty was finally lifted, and Erdogan took

office as head of government. Subsequently, he delivered economic growth, building himself a power base among conservative Turks.

In 2014, he became Turkey's president. This past April, he won a referendum to become an executive-style president, assuming the offices of president, prime minister, and head of the ruling AKP party. He has thus become the most unassailable leader in Turkey since the country's first multi-party elections in 1950. Still, Erdogan carries a chip on his shoulder: a deep grudge against secular Turks, as if to remind them of how unkindly they treated him for nearly five decades as a poor, pious youth from a gritty Istanbul neighborhood and later as an Islamist politician.

Erdogan has rarely let his guard down against his secular opponents, even as their powers have waned next to his. This is a result of his persistent fear that one day those opponents could push him back across the tracks. His biggest strength as a politician and biggest weakness as a citizen is that, despite his tight control over the country, he feels like an outsider. It doesn't help that, in order to rally his right-wing base, Erdogan has demonized and cracked down on demographic groups that are unlikely to vote for him, including not only his former adversaries, the secularists, but also Alevis (who are liberal Muslims), liberals, social democrats, leftists, and Kurdish nationalists. This strategy has built broad constituencies that oppose him vehemently.

July 15, 2016, only sharpened Erdogan's dilemma. Although the initial post-coup purges and arrests targeted members of the conservative Gulen movement -- erstwhile Erdogan allies who seem to have turned against him in the coup -- Erdogan has since cast a wide net, arresting anyone who opposes him. He has **jailed 50,000 people since the coup, purging another 140,000 (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/21/world/europe/turkey-erdogan-state-of-emergency.html?_r=0)** . His opponents now loathe him. The problem for Erdogan is that these opponents now also make up nearly half of the Turkish population. He won the April **referendum (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/16/erdogan-claims-victory-in-turkish-constitutional-referendum)** by only a razor-thin majority, with 49 percent of the population voting against him.

Erdogan fears that if he allows democracy to flourish in Turkey again, his opponents could vote him out and then make him pay for his transgressions against them. Maybe they will not do the latter, but Erdogan is so deeply molded by his past that he will not take the risk. This is why Turkish democracy is in deep trouble: it is stuck in Erdogan's authoritarian chamber.

Soner Cagaptay, the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, is the author of The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey **(https://www.newsultan.info/)** . ❖

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