

Erdogan's Empathy for Morsi

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The AKP sees a bit of its past in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's military ouster, and also a bit of its imagined future.

Among all Middle East powers, Turkey has uniquely stood behind Mohamed Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood party after their ouster from power in July. This has cost Turkey dearly. Egypt has pulled its ambassador from Ankara. To rub salt on the wound, Cairo has entered talks with Greece to delineate Egyptian and Greek maritime economic areas in the Eastern Mediterranean, to Turkey's apparent detriment. What is more, Turkish businesses, the source of Ankara's ascendancy in the Middle East, have been driven out of Egypt by the new government in Cairo. Still, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has not flinched. What, then, explains his steadfast support for Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood?

Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Ankara has thrown its full support behind the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt because Erdogan sees a bit of the AKP in the Brotherhood.

The AKP, too, was once upon a time shunned as being an Islamist party. Since then, the party has come a long way. When the Turkish courts shut down the AKP's predecessor, the Welfare Party (RP), in 1998, Erdogan and other AKP leaders broke away from that movement, reforming and jettisoning the RP's anti-democratic rhetoric. This gave the AKP credibility in the eyes of the common Turks, and coupled with the 2001 economic crisis in the country, which discredited the parties in the political center, allowed the AKP to become the country's most popular political party. In 2002, the AKP received 34 percent of the votes. After delivering a decade of economic growth, the party increased its support further, getting 49.9 percent of the votes in the 2011 elections.

For all practical purposes, the AKP is an omnipotent force in Turkey. The party has ruled the country for three consecutive terms, longer than any other democratically-elected government. Erdogan has brought the Turkish military -- once an independent power and considered the grand arbiter of Turkish politics -- under his authority.

To put it succinctly, and to borrow from my colleague Steven Cook, the AKP not only governs, but also rules. The AKP

has nearly supplanted the Turkish state. Erdogan has more power than any other elected Turkish prime minister in modern Turkish history.

Still, the AKP cannot abandon its perception of a threat from the military.

In February 1997, during what was later dubbed the "February 28 Process," the Turkish military acted to orchestrate a civilian protest movement to oust the RP government from power. This resulted in a court ban of the RP. At that time, the outside world stood with the military, castigating it as an unwanted Islamist party.

Today, the AKP sees a parallel between the February 28 Process in Turkey and Morsi's ouster in July 2013. For Erdogan, what has happened to Morsi is unacceptable because the same had happened to him, and that, too, was and is unacceptable. This is why even if Ankara ultimately manages to establish a modus vivendi with Cairo -- perhaps a tall order -- it will be hard for Turkey to come to terms with the way Morsi was ousted from power.

But this is not the only similarity. Despite their control of the military, the AKP elites seem to deeply fear it acting against them, leading them to conclude: "If the world accepts what happened to Morsi today, what reason do we have to believe they will not accept a military coup against us tomorrow?"

Turkey is well over military coups, but that ungrounded fear looms in the back of the minds of many in the AKP, and the governing party in Ankara is unlikely to put its cash behind Morsi's ouster. This is because the AKP sees not just a bit of its past in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, but also a bit of its imagined future.

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