

# Turkey at a Crossroads

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Turkey has gone through periods of political and economic crisis in its history. During the 1970s, the country's economy collapsed, and the ensuing instability led to a near-civil war fought between hard left and hard right-wing militant groups and security forces, which killed thousands of people. In the 1990s, Turkey was pummeled by triple-digit inflation and a full-blown Kurdish insurgency that left tens of thousands dead. Turkey survived both of these periods. Once again, Turkey faces a number of challenges which include deep political polarization and instability, economic slowdown, and threats of violence – from both inside and outside Turkey –, all of which could soon, unfortunately, add up to a catastrophe. Although Turkey might also withstand the coming shock, things may turn out differently this time.

For starters, Turkey is extremely polarized between two camps, namely the supporters and opponents of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), in power since 2002. For the most part, this polarization is induced by the country's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's electoral strategy. Erdogan has won four consecutive elections, while targeting and brutalizing his opponents along the way, including the military, secularists, social-democrats, leftists, liberals, media, businesses, Alevis (who are liberal Muslims) and now Kurds. Categorizing all of these groups as "traitors" or "foreign agents" conspiring

to bring him down, combined with the story of Turkey's economic success during the AKP rule, Erdogan has managed to build a cult of personality, attracting right-wing voters to the AKP's fold.

This polarization along the pro- and anti-Erdoganist fault lines is so severe that the country does not seem able to come together, even as it faces massive terror threats both from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). ISIL attacks have killed over 150 people in Turkey since the summer of 2015, and the group regularly fires missiles from across the Syrian border into the Turkish town Kilis, having left at least 21 dead to date. Furthermore, Turkey's fight with the PKK reignited last year, following over two years of ceasefire. This has turned the country's majority Kurdish southeast region into a war zone, while the group regularly carries out terror attacks in large cities in western Turkey, killing dozens of civilians.

Whether Turkey will be able to overcome the simultaneous challenges of multidirectional terror threats and extreme political polarization depends on its all-powerful President Erdogan. Yet, Erdogan seems to be more invested in changing Turkey's parliamentary democracy into an executive-style presidential system rather than bringing together the country's disparate halves, establishing rule of law or solving its Kurdish issue. Turkey is at an historic crossroads and will have to decide whether it wants to embrace democracy or continue its downward spiral into authoritarianism.

## **Turkey's One-Man Show**

President Erdogan has ruled Turkey since 2002 as Prime Minister and head of the ruling AKP, and as President since 2014. While, traditionally and

constitutionally, the presidency is more of a symbolic and non-partisan office, Erdogan managed to consolidate power after 2014, becoming the most powerful politician in Turkey since the country became a multiparty democracy in 1950. In fact, the 5 May resignation of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and appointment of Erdogan's close ally Binali Yildirim as the new head of the AKP demonstrate that the consolidation of power in the hands of Erdogan will only continue. The new Prime Minister will serve as a compliant partner of President Erdogan, his primary objective being the elimination of his own position to install Erdogan's long-desired presidential system.

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This hyper-personalization and consolidation of power will come at the expense of Turkish democracy. Erdogan has been cracking down on journalists, banning peaceful opposition rallies and harassing dissidents. In the process, the country's political and civil institutions are being hollowed out, rendering Turkey extremely brittle in light of the difficult challenges it is facing. Yet at the moment, Erdogan's concern appears to be elsewhere. He knows that demonizing and brutalizing groups that are not likely to vote for him will only help bolster his image as a strong leader, helping him in the referendum or early elections he will most likely seek to change the constitution.

Erdogan's renewed popularity as a strong-man leader is most damaging for the country's Kurdish population. Before fighting between the government and the PKK broke out last year, Erdogan had maxed out his electoral support as a conservative-

Islamist President capable of delivering economic prosperity and good governance. During elections in 2011 and November 2015, Erdogan's AKP won about 49.5% of the vote, which is not enough to win in a referendum or win a legislative supermajority in early elections. Therefore, he is looking to boost his popular support well beyond 50%, and has targeted the Turkish nationalist vote at the expense of the Kurds.

### **Erdogan's Embrace of Turkish Nationalism**

Even though the AKP's platform has always contained elements of Turkish nationalism, its primary political ideologies were Islamism and conservatism. In fact, they received significant backlash from Turkish nationalists when they initiated the unprecedented 'Solution Process' in 2012 with the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. Now, having abandoned the peace negotiations with the Kurdish insurgency and returned to a hardline military approach on the Kurdish issue, Erdogan seems committed to peel off voters from the opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP). Erdogan managed to turn the AKP's platform into an Islamist-nationalist one that nearly matches that of the MHP and appeals more to its recent 12% voter base. Peeling off a few percentage points from the MHP might be what Erdogan needs to fulfill his presidential ambitions.

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However, Erdogan's recent embrace of Turkish nationalism means completely forgoing his liberal and forgiving stance on the Kurdish issue early in his rule. Erdogan and the AKP implemented historic reforms on the Kurdish issue, from opening up a publicly-funded Kurdish language news network to addressing Kurdish cultural demands. But since last summer, Erdogan has adopted an uncompromising, hawkish stance on the Kurdish is-

sue and the PKK, boosting his credentials as a Turkish nationalist. To this end, the PKK will serve as his unwitting accomplice.

### Enter the Kurds

The PKK, a left-wing Kurdish group that has been designated as a terrorist organization by NATO, the United States and Turkey, has been waging war against the Turkish State since 1984. Before the PKK ended a two-year ceasefire with the Turkish government in July 2015, the prospects for peace were better than ever. At that time, the PKK, emboldened by the ability of its Syrian franchise – Party for Democratic Unity (PYD) – to capture large swathes of territory in northern Syria, hoped to recreate the same model by trying to seize control of Kurdish majority towns in Turkey's southeast.

This gambit, however, failed miserably and has taken a tremendous toll on the civilian Kurdish population. In order to root out the PKK's military infrastructure from urban centres, the government enforced week-long curfews, suspended civil liberties and sent in thousands of security forces to establish a tenuous hold in the region. Heavy bombardment and urban warfare obliterated the infrastructure of the region and resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties. The return to violence also stunted the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the sole peaceful voice for Kurdish rights in Turkey, which stood as a key political obstacle to Erdogan in his turn towards authoritarianism.

### Kurdish Politics: the HDP Factor

The HDP made a historical move by deciding to enter the June 2015 and November 2015 elections as a party – previously it only fielded independent candidates – and managed to cross the electoral threshold for the first time to enter the Parliament. In June, the party received more than 13% of the vote and gained 80 out of 550 seats in the Turkish legislature, and in the November 2015 elections, its popularity slipped somewhat and it garnered 10.7% of the vote and won 59 seats. In fact, the HDP had increased its vote share in every Kurdish majority province in the region compared to 2011. This was

a very significant change in the dynamics of Kurdish politics in Turkey.

Up until the 2015 elections, Turkey's 10 to 12 million-strong Kurdish community, representing about 15% of Turkey's population, was not a unified political force; its internal splits followed the fault lines of the country as a whole. Historically, nationalist Kurds voted for parties sympathetic to the PKK, while left-leaning Alevi Kurds, who adhere to a liberal branch of Islam, have voted for the Republican People's Party (CHP). Most importantly, conservative Kurds, who represent nearly half of the Kurdish population, tended to vote for the AKP. The HDP, riding the wave of rising Kurdish nationalism in the region and creating a social liberal platform, led by its young and charismatic leader Selahattin Demirtas, attracted conservative, nationalist and liberal Kurds alike. Kurds, for the first time in Turkish political history coalesced around a single party, causing further division between the AKP and the Kurds. Viewing itself as the Kurdish people's civil rights champion, the AKP government felt betrayed by them and chose to resort to old-school military tactics to defeat the new Kurdish insurgency.

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When the HDP became a player in national politics, this challenged both Erdogan and the PKK. The HDP formed a unified anti-Erdogan bloc in the Parliament, publicly and aggressively opposing Erdogan's presidential ambitions. Denying Erdogan and his party the supermajority in the Parliament, the HDP forced Erdogan's hand in his quest to push forward with the constitutional change. Erdogan responded by leading the charge to lift the parliamentary immunities of HDP deputies and prosecute as part of his broader strategy of crippling the Kurdish political movement and mobilizing Turkish nationalist sentiments for his benefit.

The PKK, on the other hand, has eagerly embraced violence to undermine the rise of the HDP and Selahattin Demirtas. Uneasy with the fact that the HDP was becoming the voice of the Kurdish movement at their expense, the PKK once again managed to make violence the language of the conflict.

### **Solving the Kurdish Issue**

Rising polarization between the Kurds and the government presents a major challenge, especially as Turkey debates the drafting of a civilian-made constitution and amid rising concerns over Erdogan's authoritarianism. The question of what sort of political rights to grant to the Kurds still remains. The HDP and the PKK push for an extensive set of group rights, including recognition of the Kurds as a national community and Kurdish as an official language in the country's constitution and most importantly, broad autonomy for the Kurdish provinces. However, as Turkish politics stand today, the AKP has little to gain politically from writing such promises into Turkey's new constitution. President Erdogan is well aware that a liberal and compromising stance on the Kurdish issue would not win him enough Kurdish votes to offset the many Turkish nationalist votes he would lose.

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Nevertheless, Ankara needs to reexamine its role in the current escalation with the PKK and find a solution to its Kurdish problem if it is to emerge as a regional player, free of domestic and regional violence, and a provider of long-term stability. The solution to the Kurdish problem is to allow broader liberties for all citizens. Turkey has to provide its citi-

zens with the broadest individual freedoms imaginable if it is to satisfy its Kurdish citizens, including the Kurds in western Turkey, regarding their rights. Accordingly, addressing Kurdish demands in Turkey means granting comprehensive cultural rights to all of the country's citizens, Kurds or otherwise, irrespective of location. Reforms would include access to education and public services, not only in Kurdish but in other minority languages as well. This type of formula within the new charter would likely satisfy both nationalist Kurds and also majority Turks who generally do not favour group-specific rights given to the Kurds.

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Addressing the Kurdish issue, the country's most pressing problem, within the framework of a new constitution might be the best means to this end. As is bringing together the country's two disparate halves by using the same charter as the basis for a social contract that defines liberties for all Turks, but also ensures that these liberties cannot be used to trample on others' rights.

### **Syria and ISIL Dynamic Complicates the Picture**

There is no doubt that Turkey's Kurdish problem will not simply disappear if left to smoulder on its own, and due to shifting regional dynamics following the Arab Spring, Turkey is now more pressed than ever to develop a more permanent, peaceful response to its Kurdish issue. The Syrian civil war and instability in Iraq brought ISIL to Turkey's doorsteps. While the Turkish government has at least in part contributed to the mess with its miscalculations in

foreign policy, it now finds itself directly affected by the negative developments in the neighbourhood. In fact, five of the six deadliest terror attacks in Turkish history have taken place in the last three years, and they are all connected to the fallout from the war in Syria. Furthermore, two of these attacks in Ankara and Suruc intentionally targeted pro-Kurdish groups, demonstrating the broader regional aspect of the Kurdish problem, as well as showing how easily the war between ISIL and PYD in Syria can be imported into Turkey.

This is perhaps the first time Turkey is facing a two-country Kurdish insurgency, as well as a two-pronged terrorist threat between the PKK and ISIL. In the first few years of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey's open door policy to facilitate the passage of fighters against the Assad regime unintentionally made the country into a major transportation and supply hub of jihadi groups, including ISIL. Turkey, for the most part, turned a blind eye to this emerging threat. Now, Erdogan is on the same page as the United States and the West in their efforts to defeat the group. But by agreeing to open its bases to US planes and joining the campaign to bomb ISIL targets in Syria, Turkey has ensured that ISIL sees it as an enemy. Reportedly, at least 2,000 Turkish citizens have joined ISIL, and the number of sympathizers within Turkey is certainly many more. Unfortunately, the group will continue to target Turkey with cross-border missiles and terror attacks, and Turkey needs to be ready to deal with simultaneous threats.

### **Bringing Together the Country's Disparate Halves**

Yet, some of Turkey's toughest domestic challenges still lie ahead. Perhaps the most difficult challenge will be reforming Turkey's deeply ingrained social and political culture that has stifled pluralism and stoked conflict in the past. To this end, the AKP will need to go back to its reform agenda. In the past, the AKP government implemented reforms to accommodate different religious and ethnic groups, from Kurds and Christians, to Jews and Alevis. It is time Turkey grew into a society of consensual politics and one that brings together the country's small and large disparate halves.

This would also mean establishing a well-ordered political framework to lend inclusiveness and coherence to Turkey's fragmented political landscape, which includes nationalists, secularists, religious conservatives, liberals, socialists and minority rights activists.

### **Whether or not Turkey will be able to overcome the multipronged terror threat, social polarization and political instability will all depend on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his agenda**

Turkey's ascendance in the past decade has prompted Turkish policymakers to craft a new vision of their place in the world – a vision that reflects the deep societal shifts that have taken place under the leadership of its conservative AKP government. These shifts have meant the erosion of secularism, much to the detriment of Turkey's secularists and liberals, represented by its public institutions and military. These groups are concerned about the threat that government-backed social conservatism poses to individual liberties. The 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations, which started as a small environmentalist protest against an urban redevelopment project, were actually fuelled by these groups' frustrations about the crackdown on these liberties. Since Turkey is divided between AKP supporters and opponents of Erdogan's divisive policies, the demonstrations were quickly embraced by any group who felt marginalized by the AKP government. The country was paralyzed for months, causing Erdogan to back down, perhaps for the first and only time during his rule.

### **Writing a New Civilian Constitution**

Unless the country heals this split, it will be difficult for Ankara to realize its potential to become a regional player. Political and social polarization could keep Turkey bogged down and looking inward. Turkey has to bring together its disparate social segments if it wants to emerge as a regional and global

player, especially considering that the country is currently debating drafting its first ever civilian-made constitution.

Turkey has had five constitutions so far, including Ottoman-era ones, but has always shared the same disdain for public inclusion in their crafting. The current 1982 constitution – a product of the military junta government – is ironically the most liberal of all. Yet, it still has articles that ordain that Kemalism – representing strict political, social and cultural Western ideology as introduced by the country's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – is the State's official ideology, Turkish is its national language and Turkishness is the basis of citizenship. The document adds that these articles cannot be scrapped or amended. The AKP and President Erdogan have been adamant about their intention to write an entirely new constitution, yet seem reluctant to alter these three articles. The big picture is that this is an opportunity Turkey cannot miss if it is truly determined to become the first Muslim majority society to practice a fully mature democracy.

If this new charter outlines the groundwork of true liberal democracy – for instance, providing for freedom of religion as well as freedom from religion – AKP supporters and opponents alike will be on their way to reconstituting a Turkey where individuals from all walks of life can thrive. This new document could provide space for the country's polarized ends to live together and allow Turkey to address its burning Kurdish problem. A united Tur-

key, in which all of its citizens' social, cultural and political rights are granted by a truly liberal charter, would be on its way to unlocking its potential in many areas. Sealing this social accord will set the stage for Turkey to unleash the creative energy of its diverse cultural richness and allow the nation to focus its energies outwards to accomplish its regional and global ambitions, without being held back by the region's violent turmoil.

### **Turkey's Way Forward**

Whether or not Turkey will be able to overcome the multipronged terror threat, social polarization and political instability will all depend on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his agenda. Erdogan needs to realize his pursuit of power is taking Turkey down a dangerous path, rendering it vulnerable to internal and external threats. Given the country's deep divisions, Turkey's only way out is for Erdogan to pull back to the powers defined for his office by the Turkish constitution: a non-partisan President who is not in charge of government. Instead, the new civilian constitution should focus on guaranteeing broad individual freedoms and cultural rights for all citizens of Turkey. This is the only way Turkey can quell the deep divisions within the country. It will ultimately be up to Erdogan to tamp down social and political tensions before they explode.