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Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present



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The New Sultan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey

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The failed coup of July 15, 2016 has irreversibly transformed Turkish politics. Although the coup attempt was thankfully thwarted, the path that Erdogan chose to take after the coup—using the state of emergency powers he was given to go specifically after coup plotters, to embark instead on a much broader campaign against all dissidents, many of whom possessed no ties to the coup in any form—highlights an unfortunate truth about the country: Turkey is in a deep crisis.

The country is polarized between supporters and opponents of Erdogan, who has won successive elections in Turkey since 2002 on a platform of right-wing populism. Erdogan has demonized and cracked down on electoral constituencies that are not likely to vote for him, a strategy that has dramatically worsened polarization in Turkey, which is now sharply split between pro- and anti-Erdogan camps: the former, a conservative and Turkish-nationalist right-wing coalition, believes that the country is paradise; the latter, a loose group of leftists, secularists, liberals, and Kurds, thinks that it lives in hell.



Image credit: Poster Collection, Cairo Punch 0111, Hoover Institution Archives.

More alarmingly, terror groups such as the hard-leftist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the jihadist Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are taking advantage of this chasm in Turkey, adding bloodshed and sharpening the divide even further. Between summer 2015 and the end of 2016 alone, Turkey suffered 33 major ISIS and PKK terror attacks, which killed almost 550 people. To make things even worse, international actors, from the Assad regime in Damascus, which Ankara tried to oust during the Syrian civil war, to Russia and Iran, which support Assad, are eager to see Erdogan fall and Turkey spiral into chaos.

In short, Turkey is in crisis. Could it implode under such pressure? It certainly could, and, if it did, it would be nothing short of a disaster. Turkey occupies a crucial position—geographically and ideologically—between Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. It is the oldest democracy and largest economy between Italy and India; its implosion would plunge the world into chaos far greater in scale than that currently raging in Syria and Iraq.

But can Turkey walk away from such an unfortunate future? Any answer to this is impossible without a full understanding of Erdogan's ascendancy and political aspirations. The Turkish president is one of the most influential statesmen of our time. He and the party he leads—at first *de jure*, currently *de facto*—have won five parliamentary elections, three sets of nationwide local elections, two presidential elections by popular vote, and two referenda between 2002 and early 2018.

But what will Erdogan's enduring legacy be? Buried under all the criticism, his record has many positive elements, namely, his successful delivery of economic growth and improved living standards. This is Erdogan's bright side. When Erdogan's AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey was a country of mostly poor people; it is now a country of mostly middle-income citizens. Life has improved across the country, and citizens enjoy better infrastructure and services overall. In 2002, Turkey's maternal mortality rate was roughly comparable to prewar Syria's; now it is close to Spain's. In other words, Turks used to live like Syrians, now they live like the Spaniards. This is why Erdogan remains wildly popular and wins elections, even though Turkey's per capita income has inched up only incrementally since that "miracle" surge between 2002 and 2008.¹ Going forward, the economy will be Erdogan's Achilles heel. If Turkey continues to grow, Erdogan's base will continue to support him.

In any case, and barring economic meltdown, Erdogan will go down in history as one of Turkey's most memorable, effective, and influential leaders, likely ranking alongside Ataturk, who believed that the secular, Westernized political system he built in the twentieth century would never be torn down.

Secularism has been a hallmark of Ataturk's reforms and legacy in Turkey. Ataturk, an officer in the Ottoman military, was a product of the late Ottoman Empire: he was decidedly secularist and pro-Western. His attempt at the radical Westernization and Europeanization of Turkey was his response to the collapse of the empire, dubbed the "sick man of Europe." He believed that the Ottomans had failed because they had not secularized and Europeanized enough. If Turkey could become as powerful as the European countries of the day, which included many of the world's great powers,

then it might avoid the dark fate of the Ottoman Empire, which was dismembered by the European states at the end of World War I. Ataturk wanted to make Turkey completely European so it would become invincible again.

The theme of making Turkey great again would be picked up by later generations of Turkish leaders, most recently by Erdogan, whose recipe to this end would be to make the country a powerful Middle Eastern nation able to compete with the Europeans and other great powers.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire continues to shape Turkey's view of its place in the world, creating myths and goals that resonate in the Turkish psyche. Nations that were great empires never forget that fact, and they often have a malleable, exaggerated sense of their glory days, and a story about why they are no longer an empire—a combustible blend of pride in an idealized past, grievance over greatness lost or stolen, and readiness to be inspired (less flatteringly, vulnerability to manipulation) by effective politicians.

Having governed Turkey for 16 years, from 2002, Erdogan has amassed powers sufficient to undermine Ataturk's legacy and, were they alive, make those original Kemalists question their absolute confidence in their system. He has dismantled Ataturk's secularism in just over a decade and has done so with little mercy for his opponents. He has flooded the country's political and education systems with rigidly conservative form of Islam and pivoted Turkey away from Europe and the West. This is—paradoxically—Erdogan's "Ataturk" side. Of course, Erdogan does not share Ataturk's values, just his methods. Just as Ataturk shaped Turkey in his own image following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Erdogan is shaping a new country, but one that sees itself as profoundly Islamist in politics and foreign policy—to make it a great power once again.

Erdogan is an anti-Ataturk "Ataturk." Having grown up in secular Turkey and faced social exclusion at a young age due to his piety and conservative views, Erdogan is motivated by deep-rooted animosity toward Ataturk's ways. And yet he has dismantled Ataturk's system by using the very tools that the country's founding elites provided him with: state institutions and top-down social engineering—both hallmarks of Ataturk's reforms. Erdogan has used Ataturk's means and methods to replace even Ataturk himself. The end product is that now Turkey discriminates against citizens who do not first and foremost identify themselves through Islam, more specifically conservative Sunni Islam, the branch to which Erdogan belongs.

However, Erdogan has a problem: whereas Ataturk came to power as a military general, Erdogan has a democratic mandate to govern. And what is more, Turkey is split almost down the middle between pro- and anti-Erdogan camps. Despite these facts, Erdogan desperately wants to change Turkey in his own image in the way that Ataturk did, and herein lies the crisis of modern Turkey: half of the country embraces Erdogan's brand of politics, but the other half vehemently opposes it. So long as Turkey is genuinely democratic, Erdogan cannot complete his revolution.

This has given birth to Erdogan's dark, illiberal side: in order to push forward with his platform of revolutionary change against a split society, he has subverted the country's democracy. Exploiting his popularity, he has eroded democratic checks and balances, including the media and the courts. Instead of delivering more liberties for all, he has cracked down on his opponents and locked up dissidents, providing disproportionate freedoms for his conservative and Islamist base. Although he has won elections democratically, Erdogan has gradually become more autocratic, ensuring that the political playing field is uneven in order to prevent power from escaping his hands.

He has accomplished this by playing the "authoritarian underdog." Building on his narrative of political martyrdom under the secularist system in the 1990s, Erdogan now portrays himself as a victim who is grudgingly forced to suppress those conspiring to undermine his authority. He has intimidated the media and the business community through politically motivated tax audits and by jailing dissidents, scholars, and journalists. And his police regularly crack down on peaceful opposition rallies. Accordingly, although Turkey's elections continue to be free, they are increasingly not fair. Erdogan's electoral strategy has created deeply entrenched polarization in Turkey: his conservative base, constituting about half of the country, has zealously rallied around him in his defense; the other half of the country, brutalized by Erdogan, holds a profound resentment for him. Increasingly, there is little common ground between these constituencies.

Yet, Erdogan wants to shape all of Turkey in his image. Erdogan's personalization of power and domination of political and civil institutions has rendered Turkey politically brittle, in a state of permanent crisis. He has achieved enormous success in elections by demonizing and politically brutalizing various demographic groups that will not vote for him. When combined, these groups make up nearly half the Turkish electorate, and there are still plenty of enemies waiting for him to fall from power. Erdogan knows that his actions have left him with no graceful way to exit the scene. What's more, when Erdogan does leave office—and one day he will—there will be few institutions left standing to keep the country together.

Turkey can exit its crisis only through a new constitution that provides broad freedoms for all citizens. Remember, the secularist system that created Erdogan was one that protected freedom *from* religion, but not freedom *of* religion. Erdogan has turned the tables. Moving forward, in order to make sure that the rights of both Turkey's pious and secular halves are respected, the constitution will need to guarantee both forms of religious freedom. A new liberal charter would also allow Turkey to solve its Kurdish issue by guaranteeing broad rights for everyone, including the Kurds. If Turkey can make peace with its Kurds, then it can also make peace with the pro-PKK Kurds in northern Syria, a welcome development that would in turn endow Ankara with a cordon sanitaire against instability, jihadism, sectarian conflict, and civil war, all of which are likely to hail from Syria and threaten Turkey for decades.

If Erdogan shepherds in a new constitution that brings together the country's disparate halves and opens the path for peace with the Kurds, he may leave behind a positive political legacy as well. Erdogan must recognize that the time for Ataturk-style revolutions—involving top-down social engineering in Turkey (or, for that matter, anywhere else)—has passed. The Turkey that Ataturk shaped in his own image in the 1920s was nearly 75 percent peasantry. Barely 11 percent of Turks were literate, and moreover many of these more educated people supported Ataturk's agenda. Contemporary Turkey, which Erdogan hopes to shape in his own image, is 80 percent urban and 97 percent literate.

It is unlikely, and probably impossible, that Erdogan will be able to impose his vision of rigid conservative Islam on the whole of Turkish society, a mélange of social, political, ethnic, and religious groups, many of whom oppose Erdogan's agenda. Despite Erdogan's efforts to create a class of crony

Islamist capitalists, the bulk of the country's wealth is still aligned with TÜSIAD (Turkish Business and Industry Association), Turkey's Fortune 500 club that is wedded to secular, democratic, pro-Western and liberal values. Turkey is simply too diverse demographically, too big economically, and too complicated politically for one person to shape it in his own image against the background of a democratic system and competing political forces.² Democratically, Erdogan cannot have his political cake and eat it too. In other words, he can continue to shape Turkey from the top down only by ending democracy. Erdogan won the June 24th elections only after running a completely unfair campaign, and then only with a thin margin of four points. He knows that when left to its democratic devices, Turkish society would vote him out. It is "rational" for Erdogan to become more authoritarian going forward to avoid being ousted, whether or not he was once a "committed democrat."

Erdogan ought to be interested in avoiding this scenario for his own sake. The Turkish president wants to make his country a great power. He has made Turkey a middle-class country, and it now has a chance to become an advanced economy if he builds an information society driven by value-added production, including software and information technology. In other words, Erdogan's Turkey can continue to rise if it transforms itself from a country that exports cars (its chief export) into one that is a hub for Google. Turkey's capital and creative classes will flee if the government continues on its current path, and international capital and talent will avoid it if Turkey's leaders cannot provide unfettered access to the internet and ensure freedoms of expression, media, assembly, and association, and respect for individual rights, environmental concerns, urban spaces, and gender equality—key demands of the Gezi Park protestors and Erdogan's critics on the political left and right. If Turkey remains an open society, it will continue to rise. If it ceases to be democratic, it will not.

Turkey's growth and Erdogan's political fortunes are closely linked. They are also connected to the global economy and the freedoms available to citizens of most developed countries. In fact, the economy is Erdogan's vulnerability. Although Turkey's economy has grown significantly in size since 2002, it is still small enough to be woefully exposed to potential international shocks. Take note of the global downturn that nearly wiped out South Korea's economy in 1997, at a time when that country's economy was roughly comparable in size to that of Turkey in early 2017. It was an economic collapse that brought Erdogan to power in 2002, and a similar economic collapse could mean the end of his reign.

If Erdogan fails to listen to this advice, he will expose the country to conflict between its pro- and anti-AKP blocs, and ISIS and PKK attacks and foreign enemies will only exacerbate the ensuing crisis. On this unfortunate trajectory, Erdogan will further embrace authoritarian nationalism.³ This is the "muddle through" scenario whereby Turkey remains in a permanent state of crisis and social conflict. Regrettably, there is a chance that things could get even worse. While Erdogan strives to shape Turkey in his own image, cracking down on that half of the country that opposes him, his opponents will work tirelessly to undermine his agenda: violence will beget violence. Turkey's domestic polarization will expose it to the machinations of its foreign enemies: Moscow, which will work behind the scenes to undermine Erdogan's revolution; Damascus, which will take advantage of its ties with radical Turkish leftists to hurt Erdogan; and, last but not least, the jihadists, who will ultimately challenge Erdogan's brand of Islamism from the far right. Coupled with these external threats, the country's crisis could catapult Turkey into a dangerous civil war. In this scenario, Erdogan would be remembered as the "failed Sultan" who brought about the breakdown of modern Turkey. The choice is Erdogan's to make.

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¹ "Turkey: GDP per capita (current US\$)," World Bank [website] (n.d.). Available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=TR>. For a good and concise analysis explaining the dynamics that drove Turkey's economic growth between 2002 and 2008 and the slowdown of this growth since, see Daron Acemoglu and Murat Üçer, "Why Turkish growth ended: an institutional perspective," Centre for Economic Policy Research [website] (November 18, 2015). Available at <http://voxeu.org/article/why-turkish-growth-ended>.

² "Gross domestic product 2015, PPP," World Bank [website] (October 11, 2016). Available at http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP_PPP.pdf.

³ Halil Karaveli, "Erdogan's Journey," *Foreign Affairs* (December 2016), 131; Timur Kuran, "Turkey's electoral dictatorship," Project Syndicate [website] (April 10, 2014).