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ANALYSIS

Erdogan's Counter-Revolution: What Went Wrong in Turkey?

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The history of the twentieth century is littered with the carcasses of failed revolutions. Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Mussolini, and Hitler all tried to master modernity—to curb or accelerate it—and all failed. After the attacks on September 11, 2001, it appeared the most consequential revolutionary of the last century might turn out to be Mustafa Kemal Pasha, better known as Atatürk, founder of the secular Republic of Turkey. Amidst the wreckage of the multinational Ottoman Empire, Atatürk emerged victorious, using bourgeois nationalism as a basis for reforming a Muslim country in an attempt to demonstrate that popular sovereignty and Islam could successfully coexist. That proposition remains to be disproven, but the Atatürk revolution itself died on April 16, 2017—the day Turkey's current president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, succeeded in his longstanding effort to transform the country's parliamentary government into an executive presidency.

It is a cliché in Washington to say that a given country or issue is at an "inflection point," but that hackneyed phrase tells the truth about today's Turkey. Atatürk ruled the republic for about 15 years. So has Erdogan: He became prime minister in 2003 and president in 2014, with an eye to enlarging the power of the latter office. The constitutional changes that Turkish voters approved by the slightest of margins in an electoral landscape most objective observers regarded as unfairly tilted in Erdogan's favor make it possible, his health permitting, for Erdogan to serve as president until 2029 or 2034 (when he will be 80). Should he do so, he will have dominated Turkey's political life twice as long as its founder did—and complete the work of undoing Atatürk's secular revolution, remaking the country in his own image.

Atatürk died relatively young but had put Turkey on the road to what Dean Acheson described as an "imperfect democracy." As his biographer Lord Kinross noted, he undertook to secure a profoundly liberal end using extremely illiberal means. Along the way, he left many questions about Turkey's future unanswered. What is the role of the military in politics? What is the role of ethnicity in the nation? What is the role of the state in the economy? And, finally, what is the role of religion in society?

Much of the country's subsequent history was an effort to realize this modern, European vocation in the face of such open questions and a Kemalist system that after the death of the founder became rigid and unbending in its insistence on secularism at all costs. Progress was uneven, but there was a goal towards which Turkey was striving. The more sophisticated Islamists understood this. When Erdogan's Justice and Development party (AKP), which had arisen from the wreckage of confrontations between the secular state and Islamist political currents, came to power in 2002, it rode uneasily on the Turkish public's broad aspiration to join Europe. In those heady, early days of his rule, Erdogan proclaimed that the so-called "Copenhagen criteria" for EU accession should be renamed the "Ankara criteria" because they were touchstones Turkey should reach in any case to become a successful, prosperous, modernized state.

This attitude changed, however, almost as soon as the EU agreed to open Turkey's candidacy for membership in December 2004. Historians will attempt to unravel "what went wrong" for years to come. There is plenty of blame to go around. The Turks bungled the issue of a Cyprus settlement in 2003 before successfully orchestrating what looked like a winning compromise in 2004, only to have it scuttled by Greek Cypriot hardliners. The EU, in turn, foolishly allowed the Republic of Cyprus into the EU, complicating Turkish accession. Germany and France elected new leaders far less sympathetic to Turkey's case than their predecessors, but truth be told, enthusiasm for EU membership was already waning with Erdogan and his base voters. When the European Court of Human Rights upheld a French law banning the wearing of head-scarves in the workplace, many Islamists began to sour on the notion that adopting European norms and rules would open the way to changing Turkey's unyielding laws governing expressions of Islamic piety. Erdogan launched on a totally different trajectory, with important implications for both domestic and foreign policy.

At home, Erdogan's overarching objective became systematically breaking down the restraints on religiosity in the public square and moving society in a more conservative direction. Municipalities controlled by the AKP stopped serving alcohol at public events; all the hotels in town would follow suit. It wasn't even close to the imposition of sharia—it was far more subtle and sophisticated—but it clearly aimed at transfiguring the decaying Kemalism of Turkey's state institutions. Koranic instruction was introduced in public schools and religious school graduates were given a form of affirmative action for public-sector jobs. Erdogan provoked and survived crisis with the military, always the torchbearer of Atatürkism, by insisting on a president, Abdullah Gül, with a head-scarf-wearing wife in 2007. This would have been unthinkable as recently as a decade earlier. Eventually the ban on headscarves in public institutions was abandoned.

Long years of single-party rule after 2002 allowed the AKP to stock the bureaucracy with supporters (although Erdogan was forced to rely heavily on some cadres of educated Islamists supplied by exiled cleric Fethullah Gulen). The AKP, originally a coalition of "modernist Islamists," liberal reformers, and refugees from other center-right political parties, began to play more and more to Erdogan's Islamist base. In 2008, after surviving a judicial attempt to close down the party (a fate that earlier Islamist parties had suffered), Erdogan inaugurated, in an uneasy alliance with the Gulenists, a series of conspiracy trials that began not only to eliminate political opponents but ultimately undermined any institution that might provide a check or balance on his power—including the media and the military. Although the takedown of the military played well with EU audiences, the other deviations from European standards of rule of law and free expression consistently depressed support in Europe for Turkey's candidacy.

Erdogan, with the assistance of his aide Ahmet Davutoglu, later foreign and ultimately prime minister, in fact began to turn Turkey away from its traditional Western orientation. Davutoglu touted Turkey as a potential Muslim superpower that would have "zero problems with neighbors." When the Arab Spring sprouted in late 2010, however, "zero problems with neighbors" rapidly shifted to nothing but problems with neighbors, and Erdogan's foreign policy took a decidedly Sunni sectarian turn.

Because the Obama administration was bound and determined to do nothing directly about the Syrian civil war that erupted in 2011, it was all too happy to subcontract its policy to the Turks for the first two years of the conflict.

Unfortunately, and predictably, Turkey's reach exceeded its grasp. Unhappy with the lack of commitment from the United States and suffering from the flow of refugees into Turkey, Ankara began to support the most radical elements of the Sunni opposition to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, most notably Jabhat al-Nusra, al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. It also turned a blind eye to the even more violent jihadism of the Islamic State, providing sanctuary for IS fighters and allowing funds and weapons to flow to the front via Turkey. When IS proclaimed a caliphate in 2014 after the collapse of the Iraqi security forces, Turkey's policies became an enormous source of frustration to the Pentagon, which chafed at Ankara's seeming inability to control its borders, its restrictions on U.S. activity at Incirlik Air Base, and its refusal to contribute much of anything to the fight against IS.

It was around this time—2013 to 2014—that Erdogan's seemingly insatiable thirst for power began to make his domestic political ambitions inseparable from his foreign policy. His quasi-alliance with the Gulen movement came apart over revelations of gross corruption in his government. These "oil for gold" disclosures appear to have come from the Turkish National Intelligence Agency, which had been thoroughly penetrated by the Gulen movement. They revealed that cabinet officials, and perhaps Erdogan and his family members, had benefited from Iran's efforts to evade U.S. sanctions. Erdogan denounced the Gulenists first as a "parallel state" and then as a terrorist organization.

One casualty of the ominous turn in Turkey's domestic politics was the one undeniably constructive effort undertaken by Erdogan: the opening to the Kurds and peace negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK). The latter, as much a personality cult centered on Abdullah Ocalan as a guerrilla movement, had waged a loathsome and violent insurgency against Turkey for 20 years, costing as many as 30,000 lives. Erdogan's attempt to bring the conflict to a conclusion via negotiations could have ended in a major achievement and a valuable contribution to stabilizing the country's southeast, which sits cheek by jowl with Syria and Iraq.

But Erdogan abandoned it in 2015 after watching with alarm the emergence of a self-administering Kurdish enclave in northern Syria and the growth of a Kurdish political party, the HDP, in Turkey that threatened the AKP's ability to govern alone, without any pesky coalition partners.

Erdogan pushed Abdullah Gül aside in 2014 after changing the constitution to provide for a popularly elected president, but he had long desired to transform the largely ceremonial and nonpartisan presidency into a fully empowered executive office. He needed to get parliament to change the constitution again. In 2015, he decided to roll the dice and campaign for the changes in the context of a parliamentary election. The results were an enormous setback to his project. In June, voters returned a hung parliament. For the first time since 2002, the AKP did not have a majority and could not form a government on its own. One important reason was the rise of the HDP under the leadership of the youthful, charismatic Selahattin Demirtas. Traditionally, the system had been rigged to prevent significant Kurdish representation in parliament by setting a minimum bar of 10 percent under the country's complicated system of proportional representation. In the June 2015 election, the Demirtas-led HDP, appealing not just to Kurds but liberals, gays, and other groups marginalized in Turkey, received 13 percent and a record 80 seats in parliament. Davutoglu, now prime minister, prudently sought to put together a grand coalition with the secularist opposition Republican People's (CHP) and Nationalist (MHP) parties. But Erdogan had different plans.

The president methodically undermined his prime minister, ultimately replacing him with a colorless factotum, the current prime minister Binali Yildirim (who cheerfully advocated abolishing his own position in the referendum campaign).

Rather than convene a grand coalition to overcome the country's divisions, Erdogan sought to make Turks vote again, making another run at a parliament that would make the changes he wanted.

Then he made a series of fateful decisions. After more than a year of dithering, he provided the United States with access to Incirlik Air Base to run operations against IS, largely a tactical move to silence potential U.S. criticism of his moves at home.

More ominously, he ended the cease-fire with the PKK and responded to the predictable terror attacks that ensued with massive military force in the cities of Turkey's largely Kurdish southeast. This had two purposes. First, it helped him forge ties with the military, whose assistance he needed in the continued rivalry with the Gülenists, whose tentacles into the Turkish police and judiciary constituted a constant source of concern for him. Second, it allowed Erdogan to both depict the HDP as a front for Kurdish terrorism and peel away votes from the nationalist MHP. The formula worked. Erdogan's AKP in November regained the ground lost in June, racking up 49 percent of the vote.

Erdogan was now poised either to win approval from parliament or take the issue of enhanced presidential powers to the nation in a popular referendum. In the summer of 2016, in the midst of the U.S. presidential election, elements of the Turkish military, apparently instigated or aided by Gülenist sympathizers in the armed forces, attempted a coup. Within hours, the plot unraveled (although one should not underestimate how close the plotters came to success—Erdogan certainly didn't).

Erdogan galvanized public opinion and emerged with a popular wind at his back as he launched his referendum campaign.

Even before the failed coup, Erdogan had created a media environment conducive to his political project. Journalists who wrote critically about Erdogan or his regime were sued and fined or jailed. Media magnates were threatened with outlandish fines and forced to divest themselves of some properties. Newspapers were seized from their owners and turned over to the president's cronies. Papers that didn't toe the line before the November 2015 election were beset by mobs of thugs. In that environment, self-censorship became second nature to even some of the very best Turkish journalists. After the coup attempt, the media scene became even more one-sided as criticism of Erdogan could easily be portrayed as sympathy for the coup plotters and the supporters of the so-called Fethullahist [Gülen] Terrorist Organization. It is no wonder that the preliminary election-monitoring report by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe begins:

The 16 April constitutional referendum took place on an unlevel playing field and the two sides of the campaign did not have equal opportunities. Voters were not provided with impartial information about key aspects of the reform, and civil society organizations were not able to participate. Under the state of emergency put in place after the July 2016 failed coup attempt, fundamental freedoms essential to a genuinely democratic process were curtailed.

But even Erdogan's relentless campaigning and the "unlevel playing field" were not enough to ensure victory. Just hours into the voting, the High Electoral Board authorized ballots that hadn't been certified by local authorities. No one knows how many such ballots were included in the count; some estimates run as high as 2.5 million. YouTube videos began to surface of local election officials stamping "yes" on ballots approving Erdogan's proposed constitutional changes as well as voters questioning why they were given ballots that were already stamped "yes." Statistical analyses of the vote in Turkey's bloody and battered southeast also seem to indicate fiddling of the vote. That some voter fraud occurred is almost irrefutable. Whether it changed the outcome is less clear.

When the preliminary count was completed, Erdogan had squeaked through with a narrow 51 percent majority, far short of the 60 percent margin for which he had aimed. Every major city in Turkey (with the exception of Bursa) voted "no," including Erdogan's home of Istanbul. Opposition parties are challenging the vote, and nightly street protests are occurring in Istanbul and other cities. Erdogan won a short-term victory but at the cost of further polarizing an already deeply divided country and intensifying those divisions. Turkish elections had frequently been unfair in the past (previous governments also manipulated the media playing field to their advantage), but they had always been free and the losers had accepted the legitimacy of the results. That traditional standard has now been breached. At some level, Erdogan is aware that his "achievement" is tainted, but this makes it even less likely that, as some observers have suggested, a satiated Erdogan will now become more pragmatic and inclusive in his politics and a more constructive partner with the United States. On the contrary, the impediments to his accruing more power (the prime minister, an independent parliament, the courts, the media) are all being circumscribed, but his sensitivity on the legitimacy question will be heightened. The combination of empowerment and paranoia is likely to be a toxic mix for Turkish politics.

Erdogan is already insisting that any debate about the vote should cease, railing against the "crusader" nations that opposed him and calling for a return of the death penalty, which would bring Turkey's EU candidacy to an end. He is also planning for a long reign. Erdogan insists that he is not a "dictator" because at some point he will die, but that belies his effort to structure Turkish politics from beyond the grave. He is grooming his son-in-law Berat Albayrak, the minister of energy and natural resources, as his successor. Turkey could end up looking more like the Arab socialist republics of Assad, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Qaddafi than the modern, European, secular state to which Atatürk aspired. It will certainly not be the kind of democratic partner in a vital part of the world that the United States has traditionally tried to facilitate.

President Trump made a congratulatory phone call to Erdogan after the referendum—European reaction was far more muted—and scheduled a pre-NATO-summit meeting with him in May. These friendly overtures are almost certainly related to the U.S. government's desire to win Turkish acquiescence to the use of Kurdish forces to liberate Raqqa, the Syrian capital of the Islamic State. But no matter how much President Trump's aides try to spin them, his actions have already been seen in Turkey as providing the U.S. stamp of approval on Erdogan's referendum "victory." The half-life of Erdogan's gratitude for these gestures is likely to be short, though, and the continuing counter-ISIS campaign is sure to roil U.S.-Turkish relations for the foreseeable future.

If there is any shred of hope in this unhappy and dark tale, it is that corruption remains the Achilles' heel of the Erdogan regime. The party was initially elected to clean up the corruption that was rife in 1990s Turkey. The "oil for gold" scandal, however, has shown that after years in power the AKP is as corrupt as its predecessors in the heyday of Kemalism. Erdogan is well aware that in the wake of the referendum his legitimacy is more open to challenge than ever and the exposure of corruption could become the detonator for intensified popular protests. That is no doubt why AKP officials raised the case of Reza Zarrab, the alleged bagman for Iran in the sanctions-busting scandal, when Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Turkey in April. They sought, as have Zarrab's well-heeled lobbyists in Washington, to get the case against him in New York dismissed. At least in the United States the rule of law is still intact.

Turkey is showing the world Hegel's "cunning of reason" at work. Erdogan campaigned for a strengthened presidency on the grounds that he alone could provide stability for the country wracked by terror attacks, post-coup jitters, and the blowback of Syrian conflict. Instead, he has thrown into relief the deep divisions of a society riven by ethnic, confessional, and cultural differences. If he pushes too hard and too fast to implement his post-Kemalist vision in the months ahead, he may simply succeed in bringing the country to the brink of civil war. And that would make what is happening next door in Syria seem like a Sunday picnic in the park.

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