

CUI BONO? WHO DOES THE ANKARA MASSACRE BENEFIT?*

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Saturday's two bomb explosions at a peace rally in Ankara, which have killed at least 97 people and injured over 500, are a consequence of President Erdoğan's desperate attempt to hold on to power and to save him and his family from charges of corruption.

It all began so well. When the AK (Justice and Development) Party came to power in 2002, it promised clean governance ('ak' in Turkish means 'white' or 'clean') instead of the morass of corruption associated with previous governments. But it was not long before it was business as usual. Erdoğan reneged on his promise to remove deputies' immunity from prosecution for non-parliamentary offences and the public procurement law underwent the first of innumerable amendments, rendering the process of awarding state contracts opaque.

Western and Turkish liberals swallowed hook, line and sinker the AKP pitch that they were conservative democrats, and as Sedat Ergin, now editor-in-chief of the secular daily *Hürriyet*, remarked: "There was a scenario that they had bought and they did not want to listen to anything that would refute that scenario." Three years ago US President Barack Obama spoke of "the bonds of trust" he had formed with Turkey's leader, but he too has since had cause to eat his words.

When Turkish (now *Hürriyet*) Daily News published a special edition on the occasion of the NATO summit in Istanbul in June 2004, like the spectre at the feast I warned: "There is evidence that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government is trying to effect a stealthy Islamization of Turkey." Little good did that do. Now Erdoğan, who became president last August, has triumphantly stated that there are 1,600,000 students at imam-hatip (religious) high schools instead of previously 60,000.

In a series of electoral successes, Erdoğan has also increased the AKP's votes from 34 percent in 2002 to 50 percent in 2011, and the apogee was when he was directly elected president with 52 percent of the votes. However, Erdoğan and the AKP got their comeuppance in June, when instead of an expected minimum of 50 percent their share shrunk to 41 percent, and instead of an overall majority they sat with 258 out of the Turkish parliament's 550 seats.

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Erdoğan's ambition of a constitutional change and with it full executive power was thwarted, in particular by the Kurdish HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party), and since he has made every effort to ensure the AKP is reelected with a new overall majority at a reelection on November 1, since efforts by his stooge, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, to form a coalition predictably failed.

Erdoğan's downfall is his attempt to ram his version of Sunni Islam down everybody's throat, which is why the younger, predominantly better-educated section of Turkey's population revolted two years ago against plans to turn Gezi Park in Istanbul into a shopping mall. A few months later, a round of arrests began, allegedly led by police and prosecutors belonging to the Gülen movement, targeting not only prominent businessmen, bureaucrats and government ministers but also Erdoğan's son, in the largest corruption case in the history of the Turkish republic.

Again predictably, the charges have been dropped but the stigma remains.

Erdoğan's abiding fear is that in the event of a coalition government being formed, the case will be reopened. Since the AKP's setback in the June elections, Erdoğan's son Bilal has chosen to relocate to Italy, ostensibly to work on a PhD thesis.

Another threat to Erdoğan's hold on power is an anonymous whistleblower who calls himself Fuat Avni. Avni, who has about two million followers on Twitter, has with uncanny accuracy predicted Erdoğan and the AKP government's moves.

For example, he has predicted Erdoğan's recent crackdown on critical media ahead of the November elections, and has earlier claimed that Erdoğan together with his Praetorian guard, MIT (National Intelligence Organization), intended to foment chaos in southeastern Turkey to reinforce his demand for a strong government.

There is a similarity in the modus operandi behind the bomb attack on a group of activists in the Kurdish town Suruç in July, which unleashed the present round of PKK violence, and the attack in Ankara. Prime Minister Davutoğlu has placed the blame on 'the usual suspects' (ISIL, the PKK and two leftist organizations), but nobody has yet taken responsibility.