

## **ERDOĞAN'S FOLIE DE GRANDEUR\***

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The latest example of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's *folie de grandeur* is the new presidential palace built at a cost of \$615 million on Atatürk's Forestry Farm in Ankara.

The farm was originally owned by the founder of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and donated to the Turkish state in 1937. It was declared a protected zone in 1992, a first-degree protected zone in 1998, but was reduced to a third-degree zone in 2011 to make way for what (then) Prime Minister Erdoğan determined would be an "unforgettable" new prime ministerial building. However, when he won Turkey's first presidential election in August, Erdoğan decided he would move to the new complex instead of the traditional Çankaya Palace.

There was a great deal of opposition to the construction from architects, engineers and environmentalists, as the farm, known as the lungs of Ankara, has been a favourite spot for the people of Ankara at the weekend. Nevertheless, the green area has gradually been reduced by the building of an amusement park, a tractor factory and a wholesale market – and now the palace – as well as being intersected by highways and roads.

In February an Ankara administrative court reversed the decision to reduce the degree of environmental protection granted to the area, in effect halting the construction of the new complex. Erdoğan's reaction was characteristic: "If they have the power, let them demolish it."

The palace, known as "Ak Saray", the White Palace, is built on an area of 300,000 square metres, and is set to outdo the Sultan of Brunei's palace, the Kremlin and Versailles, and dwarfs the White House in Washington. Erdoğan has said it can host 2,000–3,000 people in receptions and, in fine weather, up to 5,000 guests. "These are the conditions to be a great state".

According to David Blair, The Daily Telegraph's chief foreign correspondent, its architectural style seems to cross the Ottoman and Seljuk traditions with that of a modern Chinese railway station, and Turkish economist Emre Deliveli has dubbed the building "the new Reich Chancellery".

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There is also the question of the palace's legal status and whether a proper construction licence and occupancy permit have been issued. In defence of the extravaganza, the Prime Minister's Office has stated that the palace belongs to the people, and there is no doubt the people will pick up the tab. In addition, Turkey's president has been provided with a new Airbus A330-200 Prestige at a cost of \$185 million.

### **Lavish spending**

Erdoğan has earlier claimed, "We cannot condone any lavish spending and have to stick with budget discipline." Nevertheless, it is estimated that the president's palace and plane will account for 7 percent of Turkey's budget deficit for 2014.

A report from the Turkish Court of Accounts also reveals that the Prime Minister's Office exceeded its budget allocation by 50 percent in 2013, and according to an opposition deputy, Erdoğan's expenditure from his discretionary fund during his period as prime minister was 20.5 times higher than that of the previous three prime ministers combined. At the same time, there has been a cut in overall expenditure in the 2015 budget, but the allocation for the presidency has been increased by "only" 49 percent.

Not content with his new palace in Ankara, President Erdoğan has also designated the Vahdettin Mansion in Istanbul, originally home of the last Ottoman sultan, as his office in Istanbul. This historic mansion, situated in a 50,723-square-meter grove, is at present under renovation, including the demolition of local houses and building larger structures, parking areas and a helipad.

Another project close to Erdoğan's heart is the construction of a vast mosque complex on Çamlıca hill in Istanbul, which is intended to accommodate 35,000 worshippers and rival the city's Blue Mosque and the Süleymaniye Mosque, built by the famous architect Sinan for Sultan Süleyman (known as the Magnificent).

Indeed, the hallmark of Erdoğan's rule has been the predominant role played by construction in Turkey's economy: highways, airports, housing, hotels, shopping malls and skyscrapers, which has led to many businessmen shifting from production to construction because of the immense profits.

This frenzy has had severe environmental consequences as mega-projects such as the construction of the third bridge over the Bosphorus and the third international airport have resulted in the deforestation of Istanbul's northern forests and a threat to the city's water supply.

A new bill plans to allow construction of energy facilities and mining in olive groves under 2.5 hectares, but as this means 90 percent of the country's olive groves, this will threaten the livelihood of 500,000 families and Turkey's olive oil production, which now comes fourth after Spain, Italy and Greece.

The first popular uprising against Erdogan's authoritarian rule was sparked off last year by the plan to tear down the trees in Gezi Park in Istanbul and replace them with a shopping mall. The current protests against the construction of a mosque in Validebağ Grove in Istanbul, despite a court's stay of execution order, which have been met by the police with pressurized water and pepper spray, are yet another example of the refusal by Turkish activists to accept government-inspired vandalism.