

THE RISE OF THE TURKISH REICH*

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Totalitarian leaders of the 20th century were known variously as Der Führer (Germany), II Duce (Italy), Generalissimo (Spain) and El Maximo Lider (Cuba), and now neo-Ottoman Turkey has its Reis (leader), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

One definition of democracy is the freedom to elect our own dictators, and the way things are going, Turkey certainly fits the bill. It could equally be argued that the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk -- "the father of the Turks" -- was a dictator who enforced his reforms with a heavy hand, but the present government under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came into power in 2002, has dismissed the 90-year period of Republican rule as "a parenthesis" and declared themselves to be a "restoration movement."

The ideological roots of the AKP were formed with Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party (RP), which was established in 1983 and banned in 1998. Already in 1995, the AKP's later foreign minister and president Abdullah Gül stated, "This is the end of the republican period," and that "the secular system has failed and we definitely want to change it." Erdoğan's later undersecretary Ömer Dincer was also specific and stated the principle of secularism should be replaced with the integration of Islam.

When Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit's coalition government collapsed because of widespread corruption and mismanagement of the economy, it was replaced by Erdoğan's AKP, which could form a majority government with the support of only a quarter of the electorate and a third of the votes. The AKP came to power with the promise of clean ("ak") governance but, as I pointed out in the Financial Times eight months later, it was business as usual with an amnesty to cover tax fraud and an amended public procurement law to render state tenders in certain fields opaque.

Both the US and the EU were enamored with then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's promises of reform, and in October 2004 the EU Commission agreed that Turkey had "sufficiently" fulfilled the Copenhagen criteria for membership, which include a guarantee for democracy, the rule of law and human rights. However, when NATO held its summit in İstanbul in June of the same year, the Turkish (now Hürriyet) Daily News published a special edition, where I expressed a justified skepticism about the AKP government's intentions.

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Religious generation

Both Erdoğan, who when he was mayor of Istanbul famously declared, "Thank God Almighty, I am a servant of the Sharia," and the AKP set out to redress the imbalance created by Atatürk's reforms and restore the role of religion in public life. Both the preamble and Article 24 of Turkey's secular constitution from 1982 stipulate that no one shall be allowed to exploit religion for the purpose of personal or political influence, but nevertheless this is what they have done.

Three years ago Erdoğan stated that it was the AKP's aim to raise a religious generation, and this is what they are well on their way to doing. There has been an explosive increase in the budget allocated to the Religious Affairs Directorate and in the number of personnel, which has increased from 70,000 in 2002 to over 120,000 in 2014. For example, from 2010 to 2014 about 40,000 people were recruited as Quran teachers, imams, preachers and muezzins.

In 2003 there were 3,000 Quran courses, but at the beginning of the school year last September the president of the Directorate announced that there were 24,757. There are now 85,000 mosques compared to 75,000 in 2003, and there are plans to build mosques at more than 80 universities; by law prayer rooms ("mescit") are required in shopping malls, cinemas, theaters and other public places.

Religious high schools (imam-hatip schools) play a major role in the AKP's plans to transform Turkish society. In 2002 they had 65,000 students, but now there are about 1 million. Originally planned to train imams, their numbers far outstrip this need and instead they are intended to provide the cadres for "the new Turkey." From 2010 to 2014, there has been a 73 percent increase in the number of imam-hatip schools, and in the same period almost 1,500 general high schools have been closed and around 40,000 students have been placed in religious high schools against their will.

Pupils can now go to religious high schools after only four years of primary education, and graduates from these schools can now enter university on an equal footing with students from other high schools. President Erdoğan is himself an imam-hatip graduate and their alumni hold key posts in the administration.

Furthermore, Turkey's National Education Council has proposed that compulsory religious classes in high schools be increased from one to two hours a week, and that compulsory religious classes be introduced in the first three years of primary school (they are compulsory from fourth grade); also to introduce "values education" in kindergarten.

The ban on the Islamic headscarf at universities, from fifth grade and in public office (but not in the military or judiciary) has also been lifted. So the Gezi Park revolt in 2013 must have seemed the height of ingratitude

to the government, but it was led by educated, articulate young people who objected to the AKP's interference in their lifestyles.

Gleichschaltung

The gradual control by the AKP government of all aspects of Turkish society resembles Nazi Germany's policy of Gleichschaltung (coordination). Like Stalin's elimination of Trotsky and his followers or Hitler's elimination of Ernest Röhm and his Brownshirts, Erdoğan has turned on his former ally, Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish cleric resident in Pennsylvania, and his followers in the Hizmet (service) movement.

In April 2007, the Turkish military in an e-memorandum declared themselves to be "the absolute defenders of secularism," but with the support of members of the Gülen community in the police and judiciary Erdoğan crushed military and secular opposition in a series of show trials. However, the revelations of large-scale government corruption in December 2013 led to accusations by Erdoğan of "a judicial coup" by the Gülen movement, who he claimed formed "a parallel state." Consequently, around 40,000 police officers and 4,000 judges and prosecutors have been reassigned and 4,000 preparatory schools ("dershane"), many of which were managed by the Gülen movement and prepared students for university and civil service exams, have been closed.

Like the Nazi Sondergerichte (special courts), specially authorized courts (ÖYM) were established to deal with the AKP government's political opponents, but since war has been declared on the Gülenists, these have been replaced by criminal courts of peace, where extensive authority is granted to single judges. This move is part of a restructuring of the legal system, including the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), the Supreme Court of Appeals and the Council of State, but the turn has not yet come to the Constitutional Court.

Employment in the civil service is normally on the basis of a written and oral exam, but the AKP has circumvented this procedure since 2011 by the appointment of around 300,000 loyalists on a temporary contract basis, which has later been converted to permanent employment. The Turkish daily Taraf has also leaked a plan by the government to replace the state personnel examination (KPSS) with an interview process to make up for the fact that AKP members tend not to do well in written exams.

Big business

In the same way that Hitler came to power with the support of German banks and industrialists, a symbiotic relationship has developed between Erdoğan and the AKP and the business world. A system of "crony capitalism" has developed, where allegiant companies are awarded lucrative contracts in return for donations to, for example, the Foundation

of Youth and Education in Turkey (TÜRGEV), where Erdoğan's son Bilal sits on the board.

Consequently, companies that do not toe the line are made to feel the government's wrath. In 2009 the Doğan Media Group, Turkey's largest, was hit by two massive tax fines totaling \$3 billion after coverage of corruption in AKP circles, and last year the critical daily Taraf was hit by a tax fine of \$2.6 million. Pegasus Airlines, a competitor to the state-controlled Turkish Airlines (THY), was also hit with a heavy fine, and the same has happened to the oil refiner Turkish Petroleum Refineries Corporation (TÜPRAŞ), owned by Turkey's biggest company, Koç Holding.

A year ago the president of the Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (TÜSIAD) warned against the damage done by the government's policies to foreign investment, but Erdoğan called him "a traitor" and both the president and his prime minister boycotted TÜSIAD's plenary session in January. However, there has been a marked drop in the inflow of foreign capital to Turkey, which has had a negative effect on Turkey's construction and credit driven economy.

Erdoğan's rise to power is also marked by the election results in 2007 and 2011, where the AKP gained 47 and 50 percent of the vote respectively, as well as the presidential election last August, where he won 52 percent of the vote. But the watershed was in 2011, when the AKP dropped overboard what Michael Rubin, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, has called "willing enablers" in a purge of the centrist and liberal elements of the party.

This has resulted in chest-beating and hand-wringing among both Turkish and European liberals, when they realized their hopes of a democratic Turkey had been betrayed. Marietje Schaake, a prominent member of the Friends of Turkey group in the European Parliament, has even admitted, "Our dream of a European Turkey has turned into a nightmare."

The media

As Michael Rubin points out, Erdoğan is no Hitler, but he has made use of the same mechanisms to come to and maintain power, including control of the media. A small number of holding companies own most of Turkey's press and TV outlets, and they also have a symbiotic relationship with Erdoğan and his party, as they are dependent on the government for contracts inside industry, construction, energy, mining, finance and tourism.

As newspaper circulation in Turkey is relatively low (around 5 million), for 90 percent TV is the primary source of information, but for younger people there is increasing reliance on the Internet and social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

When Erdoğan states, "I am increasingly against the Internet every day," this is quite understandable as this has been the main source of non-government controlled news. Attempts to block Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have largely been unsuccessful, thanks to the Constitutional Court, but the AKP government has put forward a new measure enabling the prime minister and other ministers to close a website without a court order for reasons of "national security and public order."

The cult of personality is age-old, ranging from the deification of the Roman Emperor Augustus to Atatürk, Der Führer, Comrade Stalin, Chairman Mao and Kim Il-sung. Turkey's first directly elected president is gradually perceived as being above the law, or rather, that is his own perception, particularly after his four former ministers have been cleared of corruption charges by the AKP's parliamentary majority.

The only threat to Erdoğan's rule is Turkey's faltering growth together with the increase in unemployment and inflation. There is also the risk of blowback from Syria as a result of Turkey's ideologically determined support of groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the al-Nusra Front. As Turkish security expert, Mete Yarar, has warned, "Being Muslim will not protect Turkey from radicalism."