

Turkey's Choice: Is there a way out for Erdoğan?

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been the leader of Turkey for more than a decade. As his regime tightens its grip on power, concerns are growing about the direction that Turkish democracy is taking, reports [Behlül Özkan](#).



Football is never just football,' as the Turkish saying goes. In Turkey, the national sport offers plenty of insights about the nation's status quo. A few weeks before being elected President earlier this year, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attended the opening ceremony of a football stadium. Such behaviour is hardly unusual for a politician seeking re-election but this time Erdoğan did not spend the match in the stands, but on the field. The 60-year-old politician, who played professional football as a young man, donned the jersey of the Turkish Super League team Başakşehirspor for an exhibition match, which was broadcast live on TV. By the time the game was over, Erdoğan had netted a hat trick, thanks to a number of 'fortuitous' chances provided by the opposing team. Though the match had obviously been staged, the following day pro-government newspapers still praised Erdoğan's 'magnificent' performance.

Having been elected president with 52 per cent of the vote this August, Erdoğan now occupies the highest political office in the Republic of Turkey. The Turkish presidency is a largely ceremonial position, serving as an arbiter between different state institutions. Nonetheless, the office has great symbolic importance. Erdoğan currently holds the same official position as Kemal Atatürk, the nation's founder and first president. Moreover, although free elections have been held in Turkey since 1950, the Turkish Army exercised considerable influence over politics until quite recently. Viewing itself as the custodian of the state, the army has carried out four coups in the past half-century. From 1960 (the year of the first coup) until 1989, the office of president was always held by a general.

Erdoğan's election to the presidency is a clear indicator of how much the army's influence over politics has waned. Turkey's last coup was carried out in 1997 against then Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan and his Islamist *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party), of which Erdoğan was also a member. Claiming that Turkey's secular system was under threat, the generals overthrew Erbakan's government. Soon afterwards, Erdoğan distanced himself from Erbakan and founded his own Justice and Development Party (AKP). As its name

suggests, AKP promised voters a more just political order, as well as economic development. In 2002, Erdoğan and his party came to power with a stunning election victory. In every subsequent election over the past 12 years, Erdoğan has come out on top. He has also clipped the wings of the military, with hundreds of generals being tried on charges of plotting a coup. Thus, Turkey's system of military tutelage has come to an end under Erdoğan, paving the way for the current era of 'civilian tutelage', which has itself raised serious questions about Turkey – and Erdoğan's – commitment to democracy.

Turkey's Crony Capitalism

Başakşehirspor, the team for which Erdoğan played his pre-election exhibition match, was formerly the official team of the Istanbul Municipality. The club's chairman, Göksel Gümüşdağ, is a prominent name in Turkish football (and is also Erdoğan's relative). Until last season, Başakşehirspor played its matches in an Olympic stadium capable of seating 80,000 people. The stands in this vast stadium were nearly empty during matches, with turnout rarely reaching triple digits. Nonetheless, Başakşehirspor now competes in the Super League and makes multi-million dollar transfers; it recently opened a new 17,000-seat stadium. The company that built the stadium – at a cost of £37million in public money – was Kalyon İnşaat, which has long had a close relationship with Erdoğan. Kalyon has received billions of dollars' worth of tenders from the state for various projects, including the construction of Istanbul's controversial third airport. In return, Kalyon provides pro-government coverage via the newspapers and television channels it has purchased.

The owners of Kalyon were implicated in corruption investigations which began in December 2013, and which extended to the highest levels of the government. Kalyon was also the company which was slated to build a shopping mall on the site of Gezi Park in downtown Istanbul. Protests against the planned Gezi Park redevelopment brought millions onto the streets of Istanbul and scores of towns and cities across Turkey. Describing the Gezi protesters as the puppets of foreign powers, Erdoğan attempted to suppress the demonstrations by force,

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was born in 1954 in the impoverished, religiously conservative Istanbul neighbourhood of Kasımpaşa. Social life in Kasımpaşa is dominated by the figure of the *kabadayı* or local strongman. In a sense, Erdoğan has become the strongman of Turkey, overcoming his humble origins to reach the highest levels of politics. Erdoğan's family is a good example of Turkey's complex ethnic mosaic: his father is an ethnic Georgian from the coastal city of Rize in Turkey's eastern Black Sea region, while his wife comes from a devout family of Arab origin in the southeastern province of Siirt.

The son of a ship's captain, Erdoğan acquired the nickname *reis* (captain) among his friends. Erdoğan attended an imam hatip high school, where he received an Islamic education. While still in his 20s, he became active in the Islamist movement, becoming the head of the Istanbul youth branch of Necmettin Erbakan's *Millî Selâmet Partisi* or National Salvation Party. Erdoğan's early political career, which he conducted under Erbakan's auspices, was extremely contentious. He soon became the voice of Istanbul's poor and oppressed classes. His election as Mayor of Istanbul in 1994 was a significant breakthrough for the Islamist movement: for the first time, the Mayor of Turkey's biggest city and economic hub had come from an Islamist party. His recitation of a poem by the Young Turks ideologue *Ziya Gökalp* at a rally in 1997 led to a four-month-long stay in prison on charges of 'inciting the population to religious and racial hatred'. After the 1997 coup, Erdoğan claimed to have thrown off his Islamist mantle. Under his tutelage, the Turkish economy has registered strong growth levels but Erdoğan has also shown no compunction about using religion for political ends as when he described the 301 victims of the Soma disaster as 'martyrs'.

resulting in eight deaths and thousands of injuries.

Why, one might ask, have millions of dollars of taxpayers' money been used to propel a local football team managed by Erdoğan's relative into the Super League? Why have vast sums of dollars been spent on a new stadium for the same team, when there is an empty 80,000-seat stadium just down the road? Meanwhile, the managers of prominent Turkish teams have received prison sentences for match-fixing, and the teams in question have been barred from competing in the European Championships.

But football is hardly the only area to suffer from the crony capitalism that has taken root in Turkey. According to the *Press Freedom Index* published annually by Reporters Without Borders, Turkey has gone from 99th in the world to 154th under the AKP, and the Turkish press is becoming more and more fearful of challenging the ruling party. In recent years, television broadcasters who have criticised the government have seen their programmes taken off air. Anti-AKP columnists have been fired from their jobs and unable to find work. Twitter, one of the country's few sources of uncensored information, was described as a 'curse' by Erdoğan in the wake of last year's Gezi protests, and was blocked for several weeks. News programmes are monopolised by Erdoğan's speeches. Mainstream newspapers, purchased by companies close to the AKP, paint a rosy picture of Turkey for their readers. The owners of opposition newspapers are cowed into submission with tax penalties amounting to billions of dollars.

Religion, Politics and Society

On May 13 2014, disaster struck the coal-mining town of Soma in Turkey's western Aegean region. In all 301 miners were killed following an explosion at the mine. Just a few weeks earlier, the AKP had rejected opposition calls in Parliament for an investigation into the highly unsafe working conditions in the Soma mine.

Erdoğan tried to minimise public outrage over Soma – one of the deadliest workplace accidents since the Industrial Revolution – by claiming that

such incidents are 'in the nature of the profession', citing mining accidents in 19th-century Europe. By neglecting safety measures and introducing harsher working conditions, the Soma Mining Company had lowered the cost of coal production from \$120 (£75) to \$24 (£15) per ton over a ten-year period, with a corresponding increase in production. The Turkish state is the sole purchaser of coal from the Soma Mining Company, which profits from the large influx of public funds. The state then distributes this coal to the poor, thus ensuring their continued support to the AKP. This scheme has been aided by the recent boom in bank credit, which has encouraged Turkish workers to increase their consumption of goods like homes and automobiles. In order to repay their debts, they are then forced to work in treacherous conditions in the mines.

In describing the victims of the Soma disaster as 'martyrs', Erdoğan showed a willingness to use religion to legitimise his party's economic policies. The AKP's neo-liberal approach to economics represents a decisive break with the political Islamism of Necmettin Erbakan, Erdoğan's erstwhile mentor. Erbakan called for 'just order' and was a proponent of a welfare state and a more equal distribution of wealth. Under the AKP, in contrast, basic services like education and health care have been privatised. Public spaces in city centres as well as forests, natural parks, and streams have been put in the hands of construction, mining, and energy companies close to Erdoğan, creating an Islamic bourgeoisie loyal to the AKP. Over the past 12 years, an annual £31 billion has been invested in the construction sector alone – roughly 80 per cent of total state investment in Turkey.

Moreover, organised labour has been hamstrung by de-unionisation and the subcontracting system, resulting in lower wages for employees and higher profits for their employers. In 1980, there were 2.5 million unionised workers in Turkey, out of a population of 50 million. By 2013, that figure had dropped to 600,000 in a country of 75 million. Today, Turkey ranks number one in Europe, and number three worldwide, in workplace fatalities. In September, ten workers died in an elevator accident at a skyscraper

construction site in the centre of Istanbul. In the immediate aftermath of the accident, before ambulances had even arrived, police turned up in order to prevent the outbreak of mass protests.

Erdoğan's New Turkey

The AKP, which came to power democratically in 2002, and has won three successive elections, is showing increasingly authoritarian tendencies. The party has said that it intends to stay in power 'until Judgment Day' and has set economic targets six decades into the future. However, unlike petrostates such as Saudi Arabia or Russia, Turkey cannot rely on natural resources like oil or natural gas to fulfill its economic promises. Rather, Erdoğan maintains his grip on power by distributing largesse in the form of construction, mining, and energy tenders, furthering the depredation of Turkey's natural and urban landscapes.

Erdoğan's image has suffered a serious dent in world opinion due to the Gezi protests and the ongoing corruption charges. Within Turkey itself, Erdoğan has been more successful at damage control, giving endless televised speeches claiming that the corruption investigations are an attempt at a coup. Erdoğan has dismissed the prosecutors, judges, and police officers conducting these probes, declaring war upon what he terms the 'parallel state'.

Under the AKP, the number of police in Turkey has increased more than twofold, exceeding 340,000. In all, there are now around 800,000 security personnel nationwide. At the same time, the activities of Turkey's National Intelligence Agency have been removed from legal oversight. Turkey is starting to resemble the police/intelligence states of the Middle East. Meanwhile, anti-government protesters of all stripes are being tried in kangaroo courts that recall the Soviet Union under Stalin. The latest example is the trial of dozens of members of *Çarşı* (fans of Istanbul's Beşiktaş football team), who are charged with 'attempting to overthrow the government' for their role in the Gezi protests last year.

If Erdoğan chooses to take a more democratic tack, as he did prior to 2011, then the charges of corruption against



Deadly accidents per 100,000 workers in European Union and Turkey



him – as well as lingering anger over Gezi – may bring his political career to an end. Conversely, if he digs in his heels and becomes more authoritarian, then growing social and economic problems may cause an explosion of social unrest.

At present, Turkey’s ‘free but not fair’ elections are its sole remaining democratic institution. Now that its European Union bid has been shelved, Turkey’s relations with NATO will play a more decisive role in determining its policies. With the Middle East in flames, will an authoritarian Erdoğan regime be tolerated by the West as an important NATO ally, like Salazar’s Portugal during the Cold War? Or will the West employ a carrot-and-stick approach towards Turkey, trying to nudge it towards democracy, as it did after 1945? The answer to these questions will determine the path taken by Turkey in the years to come.

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