



Erdoğan Is in Trouble

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan is facing unprecedented political pressure that might precipitate the end of his rule. The results of upcoming municipal and presidential elections will not just be a popularity contest for Erdoğan, but a struggle for Turkey's soul.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the charismatic leader of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Prime Minister of Turkey, is embroiled in a significant graft scandal that might precipitate the end of his rule.

Erdoğan has won three consecutive national elections since 2002, serving as Turkey's Prime Minister since 2003. He was catapulted to power largely because of widespread disgust with the corruption of the old Kemalist elites. It is therefore ironic that graft may bring Erdoğan down.

AKP ascendance to a pivotal role in Turkey's political system came about as a result of several factors: rejection of discredited politicians and their blatant Kemalist secularism, an economic crisis, demographic trends bringing to the fore traditional elements in Turkish society, and the ascendance of an attractive political leader in Erdoğan.

Erdoğan's governments stabilized the economy and, for a while, demonstrated a cautious approach with regard to enhancing the role of Islam in the public sphere. This was accompanied by continuity in Turkish foreign policy: attempts to join the EU, membership in the Western alliance, and good relations with Israel.

But under Erdoğan, Turkey gradually adopted policies that amounted to a wholesale attempt to Islamize the country: putting restrictions on the sale of

alcohol, enhancing the status of religious schools, encouraging the establishment of Muslim-oriented institutions of learning, and nominating Islamists to sensitive positions in the public sector.

Many Turks started complaining about growing authoritarianism at home. This was particularly felt in the Turkish media that was subject to intimidation and takeover attempts. Journalists were sent to jail under a variety of charges. The business community felt informal pressure to conform to Muslim mores. More recently, the banking system was similarly subject to infiltration by government-sponsored Islamists.

Changes were also introduced in the foreign policy area. Fueled by Islamist and Ottoman impulses, Turkey devised a so-called “Zero Problems Policy” toward its Middle Eastern neighbors. Instead of the Kemalist hands-off policy toward the Middle East, the new approach emphasized good relations with Muslim neighbors in order to attain a leading role for Turkey in the Muslim world.

As part of this attempt to gain hegemony in the Arab and Muslim worlds, Israel-bashing became an important tool of Erdoğan’s foreign policy, causing deterioration in relations between Ankara and Jerusalem. This policy also reflected a Turkish distancing from the West, basically giving up the long-cherished Turkish goal of becoming part of Europe. (The Europeans are partly at fault for that). The apex of this foreign re-orientation was the September 2013 decision to purchase an air defense weapons system from China, which is clearly and blatantly at odds with Turkey’s NATO membership.

The Zero Problems policy backfired as its neighbors went into turmoil and Turkish hegemonic overtures were rebuffed. The political and economic crisis called the “Arab Spring” provided an opportunity for Turkey to sell itself as a model, as a successful bridge between Islam and modernity. But the Islamist zeal emanating from Ankara could not transcend the historic ethnic enmity between Turks and Arabs.

Foreign policy failures paralleled growing domestic discontent. The events around Gezi Park in Istanbul this past summer were a spark that galvanized popular opposition. Erdoğan seemed to have lost his touch and reacted aggressively to the demonstrators. Eliciting criticism even from allies, Erdoğan had to shelve the plan to hold a referendum to make the presidency a stronger political institution for which he could run in the future.

Most important, a rift developed between the AKP and the Fetullah Gülen movement. The Gülens are seemingly modern Islamists and an important

component of the AKP. They have become increasingly uncomfortable with Erdoğan's policies. For example, they were not happy with Turkey's new foreign policy, with Israeli-Turkish tensions, and with Turkish support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. They also criticized Erdoğan's clumsy treatment of the Gezi Park affair.

In November, the prime minister announced that he would close down the country's private exam prep schools, or *dershanes*, roughly a quarter of which are run by Gülen's followers. This further estranged the Gülenists, weakening Erdoğan's domestic support. Gülen's media outlet, *Zaman*, the largest newspaper in Turkey, has become openly critical of Erdoğan.

The police and the judiciary, largely under the influence of Gülen, were responsible for the recent arrests of several Erdoğan's protégés under charges of corruption. The prime minister executed a major reshuffling of his cabinet in an attempt to distance itself from the corruption scandal.

Erdoğan's leadership is contested these days as never before. It is not clear yet how he and his party, the AKP, will come out of the current political crisis. The secularists in Turkey now have a chance to further erode Erdoğan's popularity. Their own standing in Turkish politics has not improved much despite Erdoğan's excesses. However, the more conservative secular elements on the Turkish political spectrum might build an alliance with the influential Gülen to remove Erdoğan.

Municipal elections scheduled for March 2014 will be the first serious test of the extent of the political damage to Erdoğan, followed by presidential elections in June. Erdoğan's authoritarian streak and strains on the economy will be issues in the campaign. It remains to be seen whether Erdoğan's attempt to blame his domestic problems on foreigners is successful.

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