



Turkey: Are the *Anni di Piombo* Making a Return?

by Burak Bekdil

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,600, June 8, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey’s political polarization along conservative and secular lines is showing signs of being a slow-fuse time bomb. For most Turks, the domestic “political other” is not just a rival but a traitor, an enemy within—and Turks are increasingly expressing their willingness to kill or die to purge that other.

For two despicable decades starting at the end of the 1960s, Italy was racked by the *Anni di Piombo* (Years of Lead). That era was a period of nonstop political violence between extreme right- and left-wing domestic factions. The death of a policeman in November 1969, followed by a bombing, sparked a dreadful spiral of violence that would shake Italy until the end of the 1980s.

Turkey’s darkest years came between 1976 and 1980, when a campaign of political violence wrought by a multitude of far-left and far-right urban guerilla groups killed over 5,000 people. It only came to an end when the military took over the country in a *coup d’etat* and violence subsided.

While it lasted, the violence was extreme indeed. Professor Sabri Sayarı of Sabancı University in Istanbul [notes](#): “Terrorism caused more fatalities in one week during the early months of 1980 in Turkey than it did in Italy in an entire year or in West Germany during the entire decade” —although Turkish violence, unlike in Italy, did not lead to the kidnapping and subsequent [murder](#) of a prime minister.

For most Turks, the years of street violence “between brother and brother” are an ugly thing of the past, as distant as four decades ago. But the country’s increasing political polarization along conservative (i.e., pro-Erdoğan) and secular (anti-Erdoğan) lines during the 18 years of uninterrupted Islamist rule is showing signs of being a slow-fuse time bomb. In Turkey today, the “political other” is not merely a rival but a traitor, an enemy within.

The gravity of this enmity is increasingly visible. In 2014, Erdoğan fans began taking to the streets in burial shrouds. The [message](#) was clear: “We are ready to kill or die for our leader.” Just voting for their favorite politician was no longer sufficient to demonstrate their ardor. They had to show they were willing to kill or die for him—a very 1970s message.

In October 2016, Turkey’s religious affairs general directorate, Diyanet, issued a directive calling for the formation of “youth branches” to be created as part of Turkey’s mosques. According to Diyanet’s plan, youth branches were to be formed in 1,500 mosques initially and by 2021 should be present in 45,000 (the country contains about 90,000 mosques in total). This pro-Erdoğan “mosque militia” plan raised [fears](#) that it was to be a Turkish version of the Nazi Party’s Hitler Youth. It did not officially come into being, but social media teems with organized “warriors of Islam” threatening bloodshed.

In February 2018, a commentator and anchor for the fiercely pro-Erdoğan *Akit TV*, a militant Islamist media outlet, [said on his program](#): “If we start killing civilians we will start with ... [he named three Istanbul neighborhoods known for their liberal, secular lifestyles] ... There are too many traitors [to be killed]. Even in parliament.”

A shocking reminder of the Turks’ *Anni di Piombo* came in April 2019, when the main opposition leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, was set upon by an angry, pro-Erdoğan mob and nearly killed. Kılıçdaroğlu, a 70-year-old secular politician, was attending the memorial for a fallen soldier at a town near Ankara when the mob surrounded him and hurled punches at him from all directions. Several attackers were chanting nationalist and Islamist slogans. Kılıçdaroğlu and his bodyguards escaped into a house, but the attackers besieged it and shouted: “Burn down the house.”

The main attacker, a farmer and an official member of Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), served no time in jail. Instead, he became an [instant hero](#) to millions of Erdoğan fans.

Only a month before the lynching attempt, an *Akit TV* reporter [said on the air](#): “It is my opinion that Turkish public opinion wants the likes of Kılıçdaroğlu to be executed, to hang.”

Even in the days of coronavirus, the Turks do not neglect their principal political activity: Hate the other more and more.

A social media user wrote to Istanbul’s social democrat mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, to tell him that he “would make the mayor drink his own blood.” The writer was [angry](#) because İmamoğlu had ended, in June 2019, the

Islamists' 25-year stretch as municipal rulers of the country's biggest city. He was detained and then quickly released.

In May, another pro-Erdoğan "activist" [wrote](#) this to Kılıçdaroğlu on social media: "If we take to the streets do you know which ones of you we will collect? How will you defend your families, your wives, your children? For a drop of Erdoğan's blood there will be millions of [drops of] bloodshed in this country." This person is being investigated, but his "opinions" will most likely be considered by some judge to be protected by "freedom of expression." Freedom of expression does exist in Turkey, provided one uses it against opposition figures only.

Also in May, a woman television commentator [said](#): "We stand by our leader (Erdoğan). We won't let anyone harm him. My family alone can [kill] 50 people. I have my list [of enemies] ready. There are even three to five neighbors on the list." When asked if that speech constituted an offense, the head of the broadcast watchdog [said](#), "Well ... let's not overdo this issue."

Erdoğan believes that polarization, if controlled, would have a vote-boosting effect for him, which in turn would lead to ideological consolidation in the Islamist camp. He's probably right. He is wrong, however, if he thinks he will be able to control the aftermath when one insane "shrouded" soul commits an irrevocable violent act. Erdoğan himself will be the worst victim of a return to the *Anni di Piombo*.

Burak Bekdil is an Ankara-based columnist. He regularly writes for the Gatestone Institute and Defense News and is a fellow at the Middle East Forum.