



Erdoğan's Turkey: Peace Built on Sand?



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Abstract

Since the inception of the Republic of Turkey, its history has been rife with political conflicts: authoritarian control, military coups, ideological clashes, and unstable coalition governments. Erdoğan's rise to power in the past 15 years has changed the Turkish political landscape, with Erdoğan being revered by his supporters almost like a neo-Sultan. This article provides a brief historical discussion and discusses the political context of Erdoğan's rise to power. Given Erdoğan's majoritarian politics and the resulting socio-economic problems, political division, and radicalization of the insurgency, this paper argues that peace in Turkey may be maintained only in the foreseeable future but the country is susceptible to conflict and political instability in the long run.

Keywords: Turkey, Erdoğan, Peace, Conflict

Introduction

Since the founding of the modern Turkish republic in 1923, Turkey has had a turbulent past: a series of military coups, social and political upheaval in the 1980s, and an unstable democracy under coalition governments. The 2002 victory in the national election by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, ushered in a period of political stability and economic development. Since 2013, however, Turkey has faced a resurgence of various problems, including terrorist attacks in major cities, insurgency in the Southeast, and a failed military coup attempt. Following the coup, there have been mass arrests of alleged coup “plotters” or “supporters” and a harsh crackdown on dissent. The PM-turned-President has become increasingly authoritarian, winning a referendum to adopt a system that will essentially grant the President more executive power as well as giving him a mandate to stay in office longer. Erdoğan has repeatedly claimed that only the AKP, under his leadership, can secure peace, stability, and prosperity for Turkey, a reasoning many Turks actually based their decision on when voting for him.

This paper argues that though this may be true in the short and medium term, Erdoğan’s majoritarian form of politics and authoritarian leadership style will likely bring social and economic crises, and political upheaval in the longer run.

Methodology

This research relies heavily on secondary sources and data. Through the use of various news articles, papers from independent think tanks, and academic articles and books published on Turkey,

this paper will analyze the flimsy foundation on which the current Turkish period of peace is built. However, there are shortcomings to this approach. First, no primary sources such as interviews or direct observations have been used as the authors were not present in Turkey. Second, the sources used were written exclusively in English, hence empirical data in the Turkish language have not been cited. Notwithstanding, this paper should be able to provide an analysis of the current Turkish situation and why Erdoğan's rule would only be able to maintain peace in the short-run.

Historical Background

To understand Turkey's contemporary politics and Erdoğan's ability to dominate the political landscape, a brief discussion on the historical background of Turkish politics is needed. The Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. He also founded the Republican People's Party (CHP), which was the single ruling party in Turkey until 1945, when the Democratic Party (DP) was formed by members who broke off from the CHP. In 1950, the Democrats won the elections, and thus ushered in an era of a multi-party system in Turkey. However, the DP "assumed a more authoritarian administration" by 1955, following a series of riots perpetrated against Greek minorities, dubbed the 'Turkish Kristallnacht' (Ekinci, 2016). Turkey then slowly descended into an era of coups, following the overthrow of the DP in 1960, and another coup in 1971 during the height of Cold War tensions. The 1970's were a turbulent time for Turkey, with violent protests erupting all over the country (Sadar, 2015). By 1980, the Turkish military once again stepped in

and staged another coup; things then took a turn for the worse. Under the leadership of Kenan Evren, the new president, there were harsh crackdowns on dissent, and censorship of all forms of media. He maintained a secularist stance, so as not to provoke the anger of religious groups. He incorporated Islam into his rhetoric by using it to “rationalize his new program of restructuring the Turkish political system on more authoritarian principles” (Eligür, 2010). By 1991, Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the Welfare Party (RP), became Prime Minister in the coalition government. The RP, which held an Islamist stance, undermined secularism in the country and this provoked the so-called “postmodern coup” of 1997. To uphold secularism, the military issued an ultimatum to Erbakan on limiting the involvement of Islam in government affairs. This resulted in Erbakan resigning, marking another successful military coup. There were a few other coup attempts after that, but none proved successful including the July 2016 coup against Erdoğan.

Since the inception of a multi-party system in 1950, the Turkish coalition governments were synonymous with instability, as these were formed in contentious political environments. Although the intention of these coalition governments was to facilitate a more democratic political environment where, ideally, the parties in power would keep each other in check, in reality, these parties more often than not tried to wrestle power away from one another. In other words, rather than keeping a system of checks and balances, they instead created an environment of contention. The four coalition governments from 1961-1965 sought to “[avoid] uncertainty and political unrest and, second, [prevent] military intervention” (Özlem &

Yoldaş, 2016). However, due to disagreements on ideologies and how to run the country, these coalition governments had more fallouts than cooperation. There were difficulties in achieving consensus when making decisions, and the unwillingness to bargain and compromise also contributed to the conflict between different parties (Özlem & Yoldaş, 2016). These conflictual relationships resulted in political unrest in the country throughout the 1960's and 1970's.

Given the history of Turkey's unstable coalition governments, the coalition system is not looked upon favorably by the political parties or by the public. Turkey's shaky start on the road to multi-party democracy created a tradition of contentious politics and a lack of trust toward coalition governments in contemporary politics. This was evident when former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu from the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) failed to reach a compromise with the Kemalist and secularist CHP (Al Jazeera, 2015 August). The AKP's ascent to power under Erdoğan's leadership in the early 2000s, by and large, marked an end to coalition politics. But while his party's control in Turkey put an end to the instability that had plagued Turkish politics in the past, it also ushered in a period of increasing authoritarianism, as will be discussed in the next section.

The First Decade of Erdoğan's Rule

a. Early Years in Politics and Preliminary Achievements

Erdoğan had been involved in politics as a youth, first, appointed as head of the youth branch of the MSP in Beyoğlu and Istanbul in 1976. The MSP was an Islamist party founded by Erbakan in 1972 but was dissolved after the 1980 coup. From the beginning, Erdoğan mixed religion and politics, something that was entirely

frowned upon in the Turkish political atmosphere at the time. So much so, that when he recited a poem that alluded to religion in 1997, he was jailed for the crime of "Islamic fundamentalism" (Purvis & Turgut, 2002). He served four months of a ten-month sentence, which also caused him to resign from being mayor of Istanbul and to be banned from participating in parliamentary elections (Al Jazeera, 2011).

However, during his time as mayor of Istanbul from 1994-1998, he achieved many good things through his environmentally-friendly approach. Though people thought he would be radically Islamist during his time in office, he actually made practical decisions that were not necessarily based on religious considerations (Al Jazeera, 2011). He managed to solve the problems of water and garbage, as well as reduce air pollution by adopting environmentally friendly public transportation. He also alleviated the problem of traffic and paid off most of Istanbul's debts. (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, n.d.). His reforms drastically improved the city of Istanbul, which is why it was not hard for people to believe that he would be able to extend these achievements country-wide.

Before Erdoğan's rule, Turkey suffered from economic problems such as slow and fluctuating growth, low GDP per capita accompanied by low productivity, high rates of unemployment, and corruption, amongst other problems (Öztürk, 2011). Erdoğan formed the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001 and was elected Prime Minister in 2002. Though he was always criticized and accused by his opponents, of Islamist tendencies, due to his early start as a member of the MSP and a supporter of Erbakan, he took a more moderate stance in politics and made sure that he stood

for pragmatism and secularism. Erdoğan was elected to office in the aftermath of an economic crisis in 2001. People were hoping that he would be able to improve the situation of the country just as he had done earlier in Istanbul. And indeed, he delivered. Erdoğan's administration began with remarkable achievements. A most notable example is how he managed to bring the country out of the financial crisis of 2001 and oversee an "economic miracle," securing Turkey's economic growth at a steady average of 5% per year (The Economist, 2014). For the period 2002-2007, Turkey reported its highest growth at 6.7%. Furthermore, Turkey was able to bounce back quickly after the 2009 financial crisis, reporting an impressive growth of 9% the next year, despite all odds (Öztürk, 2011). During the AKP's rule, GDP per capita also rose to three times what it had been prior, and Turkey became part of the top 15 economies of the world (Loizides, 2013). According to Murat Yulek, who is a former IMF economist and professor at Istanbul Commerce University, "[i]n the last 13 years or so, there has been a success in terms of economic stability: inflation went down [and] growth was less volatile and much more stable" (Al Jazeera, 2015). Erdoğan not only improved the economy overall, but also improved infrastructure and healthcare. With these achievements and an ability to rule with an iron fist, he also managed to bring the military under his control and prevent further coup attempts (The Economist, 2014) -- at least, until 2016. The EU membership application process also helped reduce the influence of the Turkish military over Erdoğan's civilian government. Furthermore, he increased the representation and participation of women in politics (Al Jazeera, 2011).

Under Erdoğan, Turkey engaged more actively in formal negotiation talks with the EU member states in order to become a member. Turkey was declared eligible for member candidacy in 1999. In 2001, the Turkish constitution underwent significant reform, when one-fifth of the 177 articles in the 1982 Constitution were amended as a move to reconcile the constitution with the requirements of the EU Acquis. These articles needed to be fulfilled and negotiated in order for Turkey to be considered as a candidate for membership. They also put forth the National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis (NPAA), which "demonstrates the will of Turkey to adopt the EU acquis in all areas that are required for the accession to the EU" (Oktay, 2009). On 03 October 2005, formal negotiations for accession started; in that same year, Turkey was able to successfully close the Science and Research chapter. As of 2018, sixteen out of 35 chapters have been opened for negotiation, and one provisionally closed.

Similarly, Erdoğan also granted more rights to the Kurds. The Kurds are a minority group in Turkey and have long faced oppression from the countries where they reside (namely Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Armenia), including Turkey itself. For many decades, the Kurds have been victims of Turkey's nationalist policies. Ethnic Kurds' basic rights, such as the freedom to practice their culture by speaking their language and wearing their traditional clothing were banned (BBC, 2016). However, Erdoğan reversed some of these oppressive laws. In 2012, he passed a reform that allowed the Kurdish language to be taught in schools (BBC, 2012). Furthermore, in 2013, he lifted the ban on wearing headscarves for women and also granted Kurds the freedom to use Kurdish names for their towns (BBC, 2013). Though

these reforms were branded as “insufficient” by Kurdish politicians, they were still a step forward for the Kurds, considering that no leaders before Erdoğan had even acknowledged these basic rights. Also, at the very least, he acknowledged the problem of representation in the parliament and the unusually high threshold required, that a party have 10% of the national vote in order to be represented. Erdoğan expressed his desire to lower this number, but so far this has not yet been realized. He also managed, on multiple occasions, to declare a ceasefire with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) -- a separatist Kurd group whose desire is to break away and create an independent state for the Kurds living in Turkey. The PKK was formed in 1974 and has, since then, incited violence to try and achieve its goals because Turkey, the United States, and other countries have labeled them as a terrorist group. One notable ceasefire was called in 2005, months before the scheduled negotiation talks for accession to the European Union (EU), possibly in an effort to present Turkey as a democratic country that cares about the human rights of all people residing within its borders. Fighting again stopped in 2013, when the leader of the PKK, Ocalan, called for a ceasefire. However, this soon collapsed after the June parliamentary election of 2015 in which the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP) won seats as an independent political party while the AKP was unable to form a majority government on its own. Unwilling to form a coalition government with the HDP, the government called for a snap election in November 2015. Between the two elections, believing that the Turkish government was not serious about the peace process, as it refused to bring Kurdish demands into the Grand Assembly for legislation, the PKK relaunched its insurgency. In retaliation, Turkish

security forces launched counterinsurgency operations that led to hundreds (if not thousands) of civilian deaths and displaced even more. Anti-HDP discourse has continued to resurface since then. (Aydin & Emrence, 2016).

b. Road to Authoritarianism

Despite all of his achievements, Erdoğan's rule has increasingly turned authoritarian, particularly in the later years of his rule. One turning point that stands out is the Gezi Protests in 2013, starting on May 27 of that year. Initially, the protests began as environmentalists expressing their discontent at the Taksim Development Project, whose aim was to demolish Gezi Park at the Istanbul city center and build a shopping mall on the land. Those who were involved in this project were backed by the government. While the protests started out with different motives, this should not have warranted a violent response. pPolice started throwing tear gas and using water cannons on the protesters and physically hit and beat them. This was an unprecedented, over-the-top response to a rather peaceful protest. In response to the authority, riots and protests started erupting all over the country, and what started out as an environmentalist rally opened the floodgates for various other criticisms against Erdoğan, particularly that he was increasingly acting as an authoritarian. According to Ugur Tanyeli, an architecture historian quoted by Constance Letsch, a reporter for the Guardian newspaper, "[t]he real problem is not Taksim and not the park, but the lack of any form of the democratic decision-making process and the utter lack of consensus. We now have a PM who does whatever he wants" (2014). It is also interesting to note that although the protests started out because the people were against the development of Gezi Park,

in the later weeks of June 2013, only 20.4% of the protesters cited this as the reason they were protesting; the majority, 58.1%, said that they were protesting due to curbed freedoms (Acar & Uluğ, 2015). The main issue of contention was the lack of transparency and the failure to take public opinion into account. As a result of these protests, the government responded with further crackdowns and censorship. According to Edhem Eldem, a historian quoted by Ian Traynor and Letsch, reporters for the Guardian newspaper, “[Erdoğan] sees any form of dissent as treason” (2013). He warned that those who expressed support for these protesters would be seen as traitors. Pro-government newspapers continued to lash out at the protesters, including those overseas who supported them and other dissidents (The Economist, 2013). Even those who merely happened to be standing in Taksim Square or those who banged pots and pans in their homes were considered supporters of the protesters and considered criminals (Amnesty International, 2013). His censorship schemes will be explored in more detail in a later section, but it is notable to point out that as a result of these protests, Erdoğan tightened his control on the media, using different methods of censorship, from silencing dissidents through arrests and detentions, to forbidding the media from talking about the protests.

Later that year, another event prompted Erdoğan to sink further into the pit of authoritarianism: his fallout with Fethullah Gülen, founder and inspirational leader of the “Hizmet” (Service) movement. Gülen is a cleric who “preached a ‘middle way’ for Turkey between secularism and piety and preached multicultural tolerance [...]” (El-Kazaz, 2015). This was in line with Erdoğan’s approach to politics, being a practicing Sunni Muslim but running the country in a

secular, pragmatic way. The philosophy of the Gülenists was not to create an Islamic society, but rather to create a unified society based on Islamic values yet remaining secular (El-Kazaz, 2015). Despite their different roots, the AKP and the Gülenists were perceived to be close allies who managed to curb military influence in Turkey, particularly through conducting political trials of military officers who were accused of planning to overthrow the AKP (Dombey, Fontanella-Khan, Samson, Yuk, & O’Byrne, 2016). However, they faced a major fallout in late 2013 amidst the corruption scandal that enveloped the AKP, leading to investigations, arrests, resignations and eventual firing and replacement of many corrupt AKP officials. Erdoğan believed that such a move was carried out by Gülenists within the government. The investigations even included probing into his sons’ activities. Erdoğan accused the Gülenists of creating a parallel state and staging a coup against him. As a result, when Erdoğan won 52% of the votes for the first presidential election in 2014, he began to purge suspected Gülenists from the police forces and arrest journalists affiliated with Gülenist media (El-Kazaz, 2015). This was the start of his extreme crackdown on the media, censorship, and persecution of Gülenists. Erdoğan accused Gülen (who has been residing in the U.S.) of orchestrating the July 2016 attempted coup, despite failing to produce proof to support the claim (Hudson, 2016). For his part, Gülen alleged that the coup may have been “staged” by the government and that it “could be meant for further accusations [against Gülen and his followers]” (Fontanella-Khan, 2016). In fact, a report released by the Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF) supports Gülen’s bold claim that the coup was staged. According to this report, there were many “false

flags,” about the coup; it defied the traditional methods of how a real coup is carried out and points out that the disorganization, poor management, and small numbers are not something characteristic of military coups in Turkey. Amongst many other reasons, it is possible to believe that this coup was actually staged in order to give Erdoğan an excuse to further consolidate his power (Stockholm Center for Freedom, 2017).

Turkey Since the July 2016 Coup

a. Brief Background

On the night of 15 July 2016, several tanks blocked the Bosphorus Bridge, which connects the European and Asian sides of Turkey in Istanbul. Later, they put forth a declaration: the “political administration that has lost all legitimacy has been forced to withdraw” (Narayan, Karimi, Fawzy, & Pavlak, 2016). It is important to note here that past military coups in Turkey have been justified through the use of a similar phrase. Every time a coup happens, the military declares it is because the ruling party has failed in their duty to run the country. In other words, the military intervenes when it feels the government no longer has the ability to effectively govern. According to an article from *Time* published after the 1980 military coup, “the Turkish constitution authorizes the military to step in whenever the security of the state is in jeopardy” (1980). This, however, does not mean that the military should be involved in politics. Atatürk himself stated that the military should distance itself from political affairs. However, the military should “act as a guardian of the constitution,” which means that any time they feel the government is acting unconstitutionally, they should intervene

(Glazer, 1996). In this sense, the 2016 coup was carried out based on the same rationale, as Erdoğan was growing more authoritarian.

At the dawn of 16 July, Erdoğan appealed to the people of Turkey to rally themselves against the coup makers. Thousands of them answered the call and gathered in the streets to face the tanks. Shots were fired, and within a few hours, the coup was over, resulting in a death toll of some 290 and more than 1,400 injuries. Erdoğan quickly took control of the situation, and immediately afterward went on to accuse Gülen of orchestrating the coup. Ironically, although the coup failed, the country has been under an increasingly authoritarian civilian government as a consequence.

b. Human Rights Violations

Human rights violations had been a grave concern in Turkey even before Erdoğan's rule, but there have been more pressing issues in recent times, starting with the aftermath of the 2013 Gezi protests, and particularly following the coup in 2016. According to Amnesty International (2013), the Turkish government's response to the protests in Gezi denied the right to peaceful protests, since the people did not instigate violence and yet were met with heavy-handed measures, including water cannons, tear gas, pepper spray, and beatings. Protesters were eventually detained without due process. More systematic violations took place after the corruption probes into the AKP political apparatus. In early 2014, Erdoğan sought to purge, without due cause, suspected Gülenist officials who worked in the police, creating political oppression.

Likewise, the months following the 2016 failed coup attempt saw a rise in Erdoğan's authoritarianism and in grave violations of human rights. Five days after the coup, a three month state of emergency was declared. During this state of emergency, the government could perform arbitrary arrests on those suspected of being involved in the coup. These detainments did not follow the usual legal process and most of the detained, if not all, did not have access to their lawyers. Furthermore, their friends and families were also investigated, illegally detained, and in some cases forced to pay for what their family member or friend did "in lieu of suspects who remained at large" (U.S. Department of State). Censorship, which will be discussed in detail in the next section, was especially rampant. It was not only illegal detainment and arbitrary arrests that were practiced; members of the judiciary were also fired on baseless grounds, which made the legal system even slower and less reliable. The government also purged the military ranks. As of August 2016, more than 60,000 people who worked in the military, judiciary, civil service, and education were implicated in the coup, subject to arbitrary arrests and investigations; more than 40% of the generals were also dismissed (The Telegraph, 2016). Another important issue involves the plight of the Kurdish population, who have suffered from destruction, displacement or even death as a result of the Turkish government's heavy-handed counter-insurgency operations in the Southeastern parts of the country (U.S. Department of State, 2016).

In April 2017 alone, more than 1,000 people were arrested and detained by the Turkish police for allegations that they were

involved in the failed coup orchestrated by Gülen. This was the biggest crackdown in months, following the national referendum spearheaded by Erdoğan in an attempt to consolidate his power as the future executive President (discussed in the next section). Overall, since the coup attempt, more than 45,000 people have been detained and about 130,000 people have been forcibly removed from their positions (Kingsley, 2017). These numbers represent the fact that Erdoğan is very serious about purging and silencing dissent. While the Gülenists were primarily accused of being behind the coup and have been branded as “terrorists,” those who have been persecuted came from different walks of life. Their only common “crime” is their criticism of Erdoğan.

Erdoğan has also been accused of human rights violations against Syrian refugees living in Turkey. This is against the backdrop of his seemingly ‘humanitarian’ nature towards such refugees. To quote his words from an interview conducted with him by Al Jazeera, he said, “we pursue an open door policy, which is a testament to our humanitarian nature...” and “we want to host [the refugees] here as much as our means allow us. They are our brothers. We cannot but extend a helping hand to them; we will do whatever we can” (2014). However, the situation of the refugees in Turkey does not reflect Erdoğan’s words. According to data gathered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are more than three million refugees residing within Turkish borders. Because of this, refugee camps in Turkey are cramped and overcrowded and refugees live in deplorable conditions; furthermore, the refugees who are living within the country and are outside of camps live on the streets and are subject to severe violation of human rights

(Broomfield, 2016). Many of them are also subject to exploitation, including working long hours in arduous conditions without adequate pay and being forced to live in cramped spaces (Zanolli, 2016). There have also been accusations of some refugees being forced to return to Syria even when it is obvious that they they will return to dangerous conditions (Payton, 2016). Despite these prevailing conditions, the fact that most Syrian refugees within Turkey are given a 'safe place', so to speak, away from the ongoing war tearing their country apart makes them feel a sort of gratitude towards Erdoğan. This means many of them actually support his stay in power (Cagaptay, Aktas, & Ozdemir, 2016). Because of this, the presence of a significant number of refugees may actually help Erdoğan in the long run; this will be discussed in the next section.

c. Censorship and Consolidation of Power

As mentioned earlier, Erdoğan held a national referendum on 16 April 2017 in order to further consolidate his power. The referendum was decided through people's votes in an effort to prove it was done democratically. The referendum asked the people if they would agree to amend the constitution to convert Turkey to a presidential system instead of the current parliamentary system. He won narrowly, with 51.4% voting in his favor. The amendment will take effect in 2019, which means that Erdoğan's power is already secured, contributing to the country's further descent into authoritarianism (Kirişçi, 2017). He has been preparing for this move since 2016, when in May of that year, Ahmet Davutoğlu, then prime minister of Turkey, resigned. There were suspicions that Davutoğlu disagreed with Erdoğan on various issues, and that Erdoğan felt like

Davutoğlu was not completely behind him, but rather had been trying to make a name for himself in politics (Malsin, 2016). While it was obvious that Davutoğlu served under Erdoğan despite technically having more power as prime minister (under the constitution before the amendment, at least), Davutoğlu's resignation is a symbol of Erdoğan's intolerance to the opposition, even from within the party.

Furthermore, the presence of a significant number of refugees in the country, as mentioned in the previous section, may also help him further consolidate his power in the long run. The naturalization laws in Turkey state that foreigners who have resided in the country for more than five years may be eligible for citizenship. Those who came to the country in 2011 are well on their way to naturalization; in the next five years, more than 2.5 million of them could also gain naturalization. As mentioned before, many of them (despite the glaring deplorable conditions they are subject to) are grateful to Erdoğan simply because they were allowed into the country to escape the war wracking Syria. Therefore, many of these refugees will likely vote for Erdoğan and support the AKP, which means their presence in the country actually will help secure his place as president (Cagaptay, Aktas, & Ozdemir, 2016).

As a means of silencing dissent, Erdoğan has put forth measures to censor the media. Turkey has, in fact, become the top jailer of journalists (Westcott, 2016). Aside from arresting and jailing journalists (with or without connection to the Gülen movement), the government has also blocked access to social media and even Wikipedia. In times of national emergency and/or increased tensions, Erdoğan's government seems to have a habit of blocking popular

social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube. The lack of coverage of major events is done in order to curb the chances for uprisings, riots, or protests amongst the people. In November 2016, these three sites, as well as WhatsApp, were blocked and restricted following the apprehension of MPs from the Pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) (France-Presse, 2016). In December of that same year, these same sites and apps were blocked when Andrei Karlov, the Russian Ambassador to Turkey, was assassinated (McGoogan, 2016). During the 2016 attempted coup, there were also suspicions that Twitter and Facebook had been blocked temporarily. In April of 2017, a ban was issued on Wikipedia under the grounds of protecting national security; this ban is still in effect. This prevents people from accessing articles about Turkey that might include less than stellar descriptions about Erdoğan, the government, or information about events such as the failed coup attempt that the government would otherwise not want the people to be aware of.

d. Break down in International Reputation and Relations

Erdoğan's move towards authoritarianism and dictatorship has damaged Turkey's international reputation, as well as its relations with other countries, particularly with the EU and the United States. Following the 2016 attempted coup, Erdoğan laid the blame on the West, particularly the U.S., for helping orchestrate it. Gülen is residing there and the U.S. government has refused to extradite him unless Turkey is able to provide sufficient evidence that he was indeed involved. Erdoğan then accused the U.S. of being involved in the plans, saying that the "script [of the coup] was written outside. Unfortunately, the West is supporting terrorism and stands by coup plotters" (The Telegraph, 2016). In April 2017, relations between

the U.S. and Turkey became even more strained, when Turkey conducted airstrikes on Kurdish militias (YPG- People's Protection Units) in Iraq and Syria. These Kurdish militias, according to Turkey, have close ties with the PKK -- though the U.S. disagrees and says they are completely separate entities. However, the U.S. is an ally of the YPG, who mostly compose the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), since they are helping in the war against ISIS in the Raqqa Campaign. This was a move that Turkey disagreed with from the start due to their row with the Kurds in general (Malsin, 2017). Turkey even claimed that through this move, the US is supporting a terrorist group (Shaheen, 2017). On 17 May 2017, during Erdoğan's visit to the U.S. and meeting with Trump, some Turkish Americans peacefully gathered outside the Turkish ambassador's residence to protest Erdoğan's authoritarianism and foreign policy. In response, Erdoğan's guards beat up the protesters, justifying the act by claiming that the protesters were affiliated with the PKK (Hermann & Stein, 2017). When the guards who beat up the protesters were charged, Erdoğan was visibly outraged, calling the verdict baseless, and blaming the act on the failure of U.S. security to take appropriate measures (RT, 2017). Furthermore, the Turkish invasion of Afrin in Northern Syria in January 2018 was with the intent of stamping out the Kurdish YPG militia, whom Turkey suspects of being an extension of the Kurdish terrorist groups operating within Turkish territory. This has caused even more rift in the relations between the US and Turkey. Erdoğan also claimed that the US was setting up a "terror army" that was intended to target Turkey, following an announcement of their intent to form a border force with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that would commence operations at the borders of Iraq and Turkey (Wintour,

2018). This event was the catalyst for the Turkish invasion of Syria (Marcus, 2018). Despite being a member of NATO, there are concerns that this invasion is a sign that Turkey is moving further away from the West and is becoming more aligned with Russia, especially since Russia has done nothing to stop the invasion (Barchard, 2018). In fact, Turkey has become considerably more aligned with Russia ever since the US declared their support for the SDF (Brown & Karlin, 2018).

Turkey's relationship with the EU has also rapidly deteriorated due to Erdoğan's actions. He was the Turkish leader who successfully qualified Turkey as a candidate for EU membership, so it is ironic that he would be the one to also cause its undoing. In a symbolic, non-binding act, members of the European Parliament voted in Strasbourg last November 2016 on whether or not to freeze talks for EU accession; an overwhelmingly large number voted 'yes'. This infuriated Erdoğan, who dismissed the voting results, saying it had no value whatsoever, and that he would cancel the migration pact between Turkey and the EU if the latter continued to prevent accession talks (Rankin & Shaheen, 2017). In March 2017, ahead of the referendum in Turkey, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel was quoted by RT as saying "Turkey is now further away from EU membership than ever before" (2017). This is mostly due to his move towards authoritarianism, and also, that before the referendum, he wanted to conduct campaigns within Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the Netherlands that would rally the Turkish diaspora communities to vote 'yes' at the referendum that would consolidate his power. Due to this, relations with the Netherlands also soured, when the Dutch prevented the Turkish foreign minister from entering the country, this in turn caused Erdoğan to refer to them (and to the

Germans) as Nazis. Following this, Turkey responded by not allowing the Dutch ambassador to Ankara, into Turkey, causing suspension in high-level diplomatic relations (Roberts, 2017). Erdoğan has also insisted that he will keep referring to the EU as Nazis as long as they keep referring to him as a dictator, implying that this deterioration in relations will be the norm (Hurriyet Daily News, 2017).

Where is Turkey Heading?

What, indeed, does the consolidation of Erdoğan's power mean for Turkey? His supporters contend that strengthening the power of the president will bring stability to the country, since a strong president is needed to bring the country out of the chaos that it has faced in the past few years. For Erdoğan's supporters, he needs to have more power to keep the military in check to prevent more coups and provide more stability for Turkey. However, this paper argues that while the consolidation of his power *may* indeed bring "stability" in the short run, the future remains uncertain, and Turkey may be more prone to further conflicts in the long run.

Erdoğan's narrow win at the referendum, with the opposition garnering a significant 48.5% of the vote, illustrates two things: first, he does not have as much support as he wants or as he thinks he has, and second, that the Turkish society is greatly divided. Even the city he previously governed as mayor, Istanbul, mostly voted 'no' to the referendum. Two other cities that have historically supported him, Ankara and İzmir, also overwhelmingly voted 'no' (Jacinto, 2017). This shows that his support is decreasing, especially in the urbanized cities. And with worsening economic conditions, it

is probable that people may be forced to take to the streets if their livelihood is severely affected. This looming possibility means that the peace under his rule may not last forever. Secondly, with this apparent social division, a clash between his party and the opposing parties may cause a rift in society. Erdoğan's increasingly divisive politics make the prospect of political conflicts more likely. This was already demonstrated in June 2017 with the 'March for Justice' by the supporters of the CHP. Supporters marched from Ankara to Istanbul on foot to protest Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian tendencies, arbitrary arrests, and the censorship he has performed on the media, which serves to undermine democratic ideals.

Secondly, the strong AKP-MHP alliance may cause even further isolation and radicalization by the PKK, thereby disrupting the peace process and stability Erdoğan had hoped to create. The MHP is an ultranationalist party whose rhetoric is to create a completely united Turkey without regard for minorities. Thanks to their alliance, the AKP has adopted a more nationalist stance and has become more reluctant about reaching a consensus with the PKK and the Kurds in general. Furthermore, Erdoğan's hostile reaction towards the U.S.' alliance with Kurdish militia in Syria and Iraq in their battle against ISIS also illustrates their move away from dealing with the Kurds peacefully. This could cause marginalization not only in politics but also in Turkish society, with the Kurds increasingly being excluded from participation. Any peace and stability created by Erdoğan may also be undermined if the PKK grows more hostile, especially as Erdoğan is disinclined to pursue any kind of appeasement towards them. In fact, military clashes with the PKK are already causing much disturbance in the southeastern part of Turkey, resulting in

displacement of people and in deaths. This is only likely to continue -- and may even spread to other parts of Turkey, if not contained either through peace talks or at the very least, ceasefire agreements.

Lastly, even if Erdoğan manages to hold on to power through the end of his life, the cult of personality being built around him could become a recipe for disaster in post-Erdoğan's Turkish politics, as his absence will create a power vacuum in the political arena. Turkey may face the prospect of reverting back to the old days of military coups and unstable coalition governments coupled with social and economic problems.

Conclusion

Since the inception of the Republic of Turkey, its history has been rife with political conflicts: authoritarian control, military coups, ideological clashes, and unstable coalition governments. Erdoğan's rise to power, in the past 15 years, has changed the Turkish political landscape. Erdoğan is revered by his supporters almost as a neo-Sultan. While credited with bringing about economic development, especially during the 2000's, his rule has become synonymous with serious human rights violations. The current peace and stability built on Erdoğan's authoritarianism could perhaps last only in the short-term. The prevailing problems of the PKK insurgency, his divisive politics and lack of tolerance of dissent, the deteriorating relations with key Western allies, specifically the U.S. and EU, and the empowerment and unification of the opposition parties, all pose a threat to Erdoğan's claim to power, and may very well cause his undoing. Erdoğan could still create a legacy for himself and exercise his power to foster the culture of inclusive democracy in Turkey.

But given the current context and judging by Erdoğan's rhetoric, the future does not look very bright, and Turkey is far from being the peaceful democratic country and role model for the Middle East as it once was imagined to be.

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