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Presidential Election Set to Seal Erdogan's Supremacy

One-Man State

By Hasnain Kazim and Maximilian Popp

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Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan began his political career as a democratic reformer. But those days are long gone. His battles against the country's old elite and the demonstrators of Gezi Park revealed his despotic tendencies. Now, he wants to become president.

Snipers are in position on the roofs while helicopters circle above the square, where a crowd of people are waving flags depicting a crescent moon. Thousands have come from Istanbul, Ankara and the Black Sea to the small city of Yozgat in Central Anatolia. They have waited for hours in the heat to cheer for their leader. They chant his name as his campaign's theme song booms from the loudspeakers: "Man of the People, Recep Tayyip Erdogan."

When the Turkish prime minister walks onto the stage, women in headscarves break out in tears and bearded men fall to their knees. Erdogan raises his hands and shouts: "Are we brothers and sisters? Are we Turks?" The crowd responds: "Tayyip, we will go to our deaths for you!" It's campaign season in Turkey, but that barely explains the frenzy. Erdogan has described his campaign as a war of liberation. His voters, the ones he hopes will make him president, are his troops.

"War of liberation" was the term with which Mustafa Kemal, known as Atatürk, referred to the campaign against the Western allies that led to the establishment of the Turkish republic. His election campaign has seen Erdogan travel to the places where that war began. And like a modern-day Atatürk, he bellows into his microphone: "We will not allow outside forces to harm Turkey!" He is referring to the students who occupied Gezi Park in Istanbul, the secular opposition and Europe.

Erdogan, 60, has been in power for 11 years, and because he can no longer serve as prime minister after three terms in office, he is now seeking election as president on Aug. 10. Ideally, he would of course like to become ruler for life, or at least until 2023, the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. He often mentions 2023, and the number is also featured prominently on his campaign posters.

Turkey has undergone enormous change during his tenure, growing from a nation in crisis to a regional power. Erdogan, too, has changed, from a religious fundamentalist to a democratic reformer who deprived the elites of their power, unleashed an economic boom and lifted the country's conservative, religious majority out of poverty and gave it a political voice.

But he has become more and more authoritarian with each election win. He has had protests quelled and critics arrested, and has gradually implemented Islamic moral values. The reformer turned into a patriarch; the country's hope became a danger. When Erdogan says goodbye to his fans in Yozgat, he nods to the Muslim Brotherhood with a four-finger salute and says: "Our mission has only just begun."

To gain a sense of what motivates Erdogan, what he wants and where he could take his country, it helps to look back at this man's rise to power. This is the story of his transformation.

His Rise

In Istanbul's Kasimpasa harbor district, doors are unhinged and the homeless sniff glue under bridges. This is where Erdogan grew up and where he has his roots. The adolescent Erdogan was a "Black Turk," an outsider, whose father Ahmet made a living shipping goods across the Bosporus. The young Erdogan learned to assert himself at an early age. He sold sesame pastries on the street, and was reportedly quick to lash out when someone tried to cheat him. Old people in the neighborhood remember him as an angry youth. "Tayyip never shied away from a fight," says one man. "He used to climb on to the roof of the mosque and recite verses from the Koran."

Erdogan was a striker with Erokspor, the local football club. He attended a religious Imam Hatip school, studied business administration and worked as a bookkeeper in a sausage factory before

joining the Islamist Refah Party, where he met his wife Emine. He had already made it to the top by the age of 40, when he was elected mayor of Istanbul. The elites despised him, but Erdogan was an efficient mayor, expanding public transportation, improving the water supply and keeping the streets clean.

Even as a youth, Erdogan was obsessed with the idea of rising to power. The contempt he believed he was shown by the secular middle class at the beginning of his career both embittered and motivated him. "Erdogan has the ambition and the stamina of an outsider," says attorney Turgut Kazan, who has known the premier for years. "As a politician, Erdogan has remained a street fighter."

The people in Kasimpasa are poor but proud, and so is Erdogan. "Just look at the way Erdogan walks and talks -- that's Kasimpasa," residents say. But being proud also means that he sees any criticism of his government as a personal insult, and as a challenge to strike back. Erdogan punishes and persecutes those who disappoint him.

Erdogan is a gifted populist, a charismatic figure with the ability to win over large crowds. But he has no practice in achieving his goals through diplomacy. At the 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, he stormed off the stage during a discussion when he felt challenged by then Israeli President Shimon Peres. The premier is simply a "Kasimpasali," a go-getter, his advisers say by way of apology. But his voters adore him for such antics. Erdogan is the kind of person many Turks would like to be: self-confident, dominant and fearless.

But the premier also values obedience and loyalty. He has, for example, remained loyal to the barber of his youth, whose son cuts his hair to this day and a photo of Erdogan hangs on the wall in Yaar Ayhan's barbershop in Kasimpasa. "Tayyip has never forgotten his roots," says Ayhan, who will also vote for Erdogan in the presidential election. "Tayyip makes us proud of Kasimpasa, our country and our religion."

Erdogan the Reformer

Before Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, about half a million people lived in Kayseri. Today the population of the city, which epitomizes Turkey's economic success, has more than doubled. It is the center of the "Anatolian Tigers," a group of up-and-coming cities that have been the source of Turkish prosperity in recent years. The city lies at the foot of the Mt. Erciyes, a 3,916-meter (12,848-foot) dormant volcano. A new resort with a chair lift, ski runs and restaurants has just opened at the summit, where there is snow six months of the year. There are fast food restaurants and branches of European fashion chains in downtown Kayseri, and Mercedes, BMW and Audi sedans and SUVs are parked in front of mansions in the suburbs.

Hundreds of new companies have emerged in Kayseri, including textile mills, machine makers and international corporations like Boydak Holding, which includes a bank, a cable factory and Turkey's largest furniture company, Istikbal. Virtually all sofas, wall units and kitchen cabinets sold in Turkey are made in Kayseri, and European companies also have their goods manufactured there.

"Kayseri is Turkey's Swabia," says Safak Çivici, referring to the prosperous and industrious region in southwestern Germany. "The people are conservative, hard-working and modest." After growing up in Stuttgart, the 50-year-old entrepreneur decided to move back to the country of her parents. In 1997, she and her husband opened a carpentry business, which has since grown into a company that employs 60 people and produces chairs for Europe. "This too is one of Erdogan's successes," says Çivici. "Inflation was above 40 percent before he came into power. The governments were chaotic and corrupt, there was constant strife within the coalitions and nothing was reliable." Many of her friends voted for Erdogan and the AKP out of protest, says Çivici. "Since he came into office, the Turkish lira has been relatively stable and has even increased in value."

The Kemalist elite controlled the economy before Erdogan's time, but then he opened the markets to businesses from Anatolia. He privatized large, state-owned companies like Türk Telekom, the oil and gas industry, ports and airports. He also liberalized the labor market, reformed the banking and credit sector and stimulated the economy.

Growing Dissent

At the beginning of the AKP era, the Turkish economy was growing at annual rates of up to 9 percent. Foreign investors injected about $400 billion (€300) into the economy between 2003 and 2012, as compared to only $35 billion in the previous two decades. Once insignificant places in central Anatolia turned into industrial centers and a new, conservative Islamic middle class emerged, people who were both affluent and religious. At the same time, new developments were built throughout the country for the rural poor who had migrated to cities.

Erdogan would like to see all of Turkey become more like Kayseri, where alcohol is not served in restaurants, many women wear headscarves and almost every business has a prayer room. Faith and performance complement each other, say local residents, who sociologists refer to as "Islamic Calvinists." The AKP routinely captures up to 70 percent of the vote in Kayseri.

But Erdogan is no longer as uncontested as he was only a few years ago, says Çivici. She doesn't understand his harsh treatment of the Gezi Park protesters and critical journalists, "or his departure from reformist policies and his turning away from the European Union." Erdogan's most important selling point, the economy, is also looking shaky. It grew by only 3 percent in 2013, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned that Turkey was the most fragile of all emerging markets.

Turkey's economic success has long belied a structural deficit fostered by the AKP. For years, Turkey has imported significantly more goods than it exports, accumulating debt as a result. Under Erdogan, the trade deficit grew from $16 billion to $84 billion in 2012. Besides, says Çivici, foreign investors were only in it for the short term. "The global financial crisis had hardly begun before they pulled out their capital again." That, she explains, is why development is so unsustainable in Turkey. "We have malls, malls and more malls, and the construction industry is booming," says the entrepreneur. "But we lack a solid industry or a robust IT sector."

Courting the Kurdish Vote

Only 10 years ago, Diyarbakir, the largest Kurdish city, was under martial law. Today tourists flock to the city on the Tigris, there is a new Hilton hotel, and the airport is being expanded to become one of the country's largest. Where soldiers once patrolled, vendors now sell T-shirts decorated with a portrait of Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed leader of the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Until 2004, it was illegal in Turkey to speak Kurdish, read Kurdish books or listen to Kurdish music. Erdogan was the first Turkish leader to apologize for the nation's crimes against the Kurds. The government negotiated a cease-fire, loosened the ban on speaking Kurdish and boosted the economy in the region, which even has Kurdish television today. None of this was altruistic, because his policies enabled Erdogan to appeal to a new group of voters. In late June, the government introduced a bill into the parliament that would grant amnesty to PKK fighters, a campaign gift to the Kurds, whose votes Erdogan needs to gain a majority in the first round of the election.

One of Erdogan's rivals in the upcoming election is the country's first Kurdish presidential candidate. Selahattin Demirta grew up in the southeast where, as a child, he witnessed Turkish soldiers burning down villages and executing residents suspected of being PKK fighters or hiding them. Today Demirta, the leading candidate for the Kurdish party HDP, is popular among young and liberal Turks. Although opinion polls show him at only about 10 percent, his candidacy alone is a sensation.

"Erdogan has changed the country," Demirta admits. But, he adds, "a democratic Turkey is not possible under Erdogan." Demirta wants to establish a left-liberal opposition for Kurds and secular Turks. "We dream of a pluralistic Turkey, one that doesn't just belong to Kemalists or conservative Sunnis."

Outfoxing the Generals

"Don't be afraid! Come in!" shouts Abdüllatif Sener, trying to make himself heard over the noise of a drill, as construction workers carry debris through the stairwell. Sener, an economics professor, was unable to find a better office in Ankara, where most landlords refuse to rent to him. Ironically, he was one of the co-founders of the AKP and has served as finance minister and deputy prime minister. But then, in 2008, he left the party in the midst of a dispute.

Sener, fingering prayer beads, says that Erdogan was a controversial figure among the AKP founders. He had no political vision, according to Sener, and he was seen as provincial. Still, Erdogan was the country's most popular Muslim politician, especially after the military regime arrested him in 1997 and sentenced him to 10 months in prison, all because he had quoted a sentence in a speech that was viewed as an Islamist call to action: "The mosques are our barracks, and the minaret is our bayonet." The prison sentence turned Erdogan into a martyr.

The AKP founders wanted their party to appear as a moderate force, says Sener. For tactical reasons, demands such as the introduction of Sharia law and turning away from the West were eliminated from its platform. "We used secular rhetoric to appease the military." After the first Islamist premier, Necmettin Erbakan of the Refah Party, from which the AKP emerged, was

deposed in a 1997 coup, party leaders decided to take a more cautious approach. "But we did not discard our religious convictions," says Sener. "We understood that we could only change society slowly."

The secular-Kemalist military leaders viewed the premier with concern, but they chose not to act for several years, partly because Erdogan was pushing for closer ties with the EU and had not confirmed fears of Islamification. But by 2007, the generals realized that their power was seriously in jeopardy, following Erdogan's announcement that he intended to make his fellow party member, Abdullah Gül, the country's president. The generals planned a coup, but Erdogan quickly reacted. He publicly reprimanded the military leadership and installed Gül as president three months later. The fighter from Kasimpasa had outfoxed the generals and prevailed.

"No Longer Bound By the Law"

After winning the showdown, Erdogan began to purge state institutions of the old elites. The public prosecutor's office launched an investigation against the so-called Ergenekon group, which had allegedly planned the coup against the government. Erdogan portrayed them as the backbone of the "deep state" and promised to investigate their crimes. In the 1980s, members of this "deep state" had abducted supposed enemies of the state, partly at the behest of the government. But none of this was mentioned in the Ergenekon indictment. Instead, the investigators raged about supposed planned attacks. Their accusations were based on the statements of anonymous witnesses, and key documents often turned out to be forgeries. Hundreds of officers, academics and journalists were arrested and sentenced in show trials to long prison terms.

"The charges were obviously completely made up," says Riza Türmen, a former judge on the European Court of Human Rights. "Erdogan never intended to prosecute the "deep state" criminals. He abused the trial to eliminate critics." Between 2001 and 2011, 35,000 people were arrested worldwide on suspicions of terrorism; of that number, 12,897 were arrested in Turkey alone.

"The Ergenekon trial gave Erdogan the feeling of being omnipotent," says his former confidant Nazli Ilicak. "Since then, he believes he is no longer bound by the law." Some politicians become more relaxed and confident with growing success, but Erdogan became power-hungry and thin-skinned.

The premier's next move was to attack his closest ally,the preacher Fetullah Gülen, who had fled the military regime in 1999 and had gone to the United States. Gülen guaranteed the premier the support of religious voters, and in return Erdogan protected the business activities of his community, known as the Gülen movement. Erdogan would not have been able to conduct the Ergenekon trial without the help of the Gülen movement, which had inserted its members into positions in the judiciary. But after winning the parliamentary election in June 2011, Erdogan sought to disassociate himself from the movement, because he was no longer willing to comply with its demands for government positions and contracts. In the fall of 2013, he initiated a power struggle by announcing his intention to close Gülen tutoring centers.

Soon afterwards, police arrested more than 50 AKP politicians, businesspeople and the sons of three ministers, on suspicion of corruption. Public prosecutors who were apparently aligned with Gülen headed the investigations, which were eventually even expanded to include Erdogan's son Bilal.

Although Erdogan replaced half of his cabinet, he refused to investigate the scandal. He also behaved as if he had never cooperated with Gülen. After a number of Ergenekon defendants were released in the spring, the premier characterized the trial as a plot against the military by the Gülen movement.

Persecuting the Opposition

Eleven years ago, Erdogan came into office with the promise to democratize Turkey. He did indeed abolish the death penalty, liberalize criminal law, permit female students and government employees to wear headscarves and grant Christians and Jews more rights than ever before. But instead of reforming institutions, he filled them with his own people. Not unlike the Kemalists before him, he abused the judiciary, intelligence service and police to eliminate critics. Erdogan furnished the domestic intelligence agency MIT with almost unlimited powers, so that it can now wiretap telephone conversations without court order and can access the data of government agencies and companies.

Those who oppose the government are persecuted as an enemy of the state. In recent months, hundreds of prosecutors, judges and police officers that had fallen out of favor with the government were transferred. Journalists who had reportedly critically on the government were arrested or fired. Students who unfurled a banner calling for free education during one of Erdogan's speeches were charged with membership in a terrorist organization. Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have been blocked repeatedly.

"In Turkey, different, less subtle methods than in Europe are sometimes necessary to achieve political goals," AKP politician Osman Can says in defense of the government's authoritarian behavior.

Erdogan no longer seems to care about opinions in other European countries. In contrast to the beginning of his tenure in office, when he sought to use the prospect of EU membership to limit the power of the military, he no longer depends on Brussels. Enthusiasm for Europe has also declined within the population, with many Turks frustrated over the EU's half-hearted accession talks. While 73 percent of the population was in favor of joining the EU only 10 years ago, just 44 percent support accession today. Europe is a loser and is headed for collapse, says Erdogan's chief adviser today. Turkey, he adds, is on the path to becoming a world power and will soon be on the same level as China and the United States.

The Gezi Park Crisis

The park on Taksim Square was originally nothing but a footnote in Erdogan's grand plans. The premier wants to build a third airport in Istanbul that would be three times the size of Frankfurt airport; a third bridge over the Bosporus with the biggest supports in the world, and a mosque

with the world's tallest minarets. There are is also a plan to build a canal between the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea, a plan so absurd and costly that even the government has deemed it a "crazy project." These projects would be giant engines for the construction industry, but more importantly, monuments to Erdogan. And then there was this tiny, not particularly attractive park that was to make way for a shopping center.

Hundreds of thousands took the streets of Istanbul in June 2013 to prevent the park's demolition. But when the police brutally crushed the protests with tear gas and water cannon, they quickly turned into an uprising. Ipek Akpinar received a phone call during those days of protest. "Professor, what can we do?" an advisor to the premier asked. "How can we bring these people to their senses?"

Akpinar, an architect who had helped initiate the protests, replied: "Tell the prime minister that he should reach out to the demonstrators." Erdogan was on a state visit in North Africa at the time, but when he returned to Istanbul he ignored her advice. He gave a hate-filled speech while still at the airport, calling the demonstrators "looters" and "terrorists." "Those who work against Turkey will tremble with fear," he said.

At the peak of the protests, Erdogan invited some of the activists to Ankara, including Akpinar. The premier seemed absent during the conversation, until a young female architect wearing a headscarf asked: "Mr. Prime Minister, why do you hate us?" Erdogan jumped up and bellowed: "Why do you deny your identity?"

Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested nationwide and sentenced to excessively long prison terms and Erdogan called the protests a conspiracy against his government. But in doing so he polarized his country, and his opponents and supporters alike have become more radical since then. And the more Erdogan came under pressure, the more he lashed out. This was also evident in the corruption scandal and the failure of his dream to create a new Ottoman Empire.

Upon reelection in June 2011, he said: "Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara." After the Arab Spring, the premier hoped to form a Sunni alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood then in power in Egypt. But the Egyptian military coup thwarted his plan. Turkey's support for the Syrian rebels in their struggle against the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad was also not very successful. In fact, the Syrian civil war is increasingly destabilizing Turkey itself.

Erdogan also quarreled with Israel, once a close partner of Turkey, and has since stirred up anti-Semitism among his voters. In his last speech to the parliament in late July, he appeared before the lawmakers wearing a Palestinian scarf and accused Israel of having "surpassed Hitler in barbarism."

An Authoritarian Patriarch

Erdogan invokes economic progress, but the premier refuses to believe the growing need of many Turks for self-determination. He cannot tolerate dissent. After the Gezi uprising, Erdogan

finally became an authoritarian patriarch, one who wants to control everything, including the private lives of citizens.

Abortion law was tightened in recent years, selling alcohol was limited and public advertising for beer and wine is now banned. Kissing is forbidden in the subway in Ankara, and male and female students will be required to live in separate dormitories in the future.

Last week Erdogan's deputy, Bülent Arinç, even claimed that it was an abomination for women to laugh in public. "Where are our girls who lower their heads and turn their eyes away when we look into their faces?" he asked. His remarks prompted Turkish women to post pictures of them smiling on Twitter, under the hashtag #direnkahkaha ("smiling protest").

Erdogan now exerts complete control not only over Turkish citizens but also his party. He handpicks every member of parliament and every governor. Several erstwhile allies have broken with the premier; Economics Minister Ali Babacan has announced his resignation; and lawmakers have left his party's parliamentary group in protest. Erdogan has replaced capable advisers with yes-men. Even President Abdullah Gül is thinking of withdrawing from politics. Still, the majority of the AKP continues to support Erdogan, fearing that the party would collapse without a leadership figure.

And now Erdogan wants to become president, and his election appears to be a foregone conclusion. The opposition has been weakened, the once-influential Republican People's Party (CHP) has almost no influence or supporters today. Its candidate, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, is an almost completely unknown diplomat.

As president, Erdogan will also cripple the last control mechanisms, warns the president of the Turkish Bar Association, Metin Feyzioglu. "There are no longer any limits to his despotism." The duties of the Turkish president are largely limited to ceremonial matters today, but Erdogan plans to expand his powers. And once he is president, there will no longer be anyone to veto new laws. As president, Erdogan will no longer be answerable to anyone, says Feyzioglu, and his successor in the office of prime minister will be a puppet at best. The constitutional court, which has repeatedly prevented Erdogan from becoming excessively high-handed, will likely be eliminated as a corrective body, because the president appoints the judges.

For these reasons, Istanbul law professor Bertan Tokuzlu believes that the vote on Aug. 10 will be the "most important election in Turkey's more recent history." There will be no turning back if Erdogan becomes president, he notes. "Then he will transform Turkey into a one-man state, once and for all."

Erdogan himself makes no secret of how he intends to govern in the future. In a television interview in late July, he announced his intention to introduce a presidential system, and he cited China and Russia as models. Government affairs, Erdogan said, are obstructed by "oligarchs in the bureaucracy," and "our path is interrupted by hurdles." In the Erdogan state, there will no longer be any hurdles.