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Why Both Erdoganism and Kemalism May Finally Be Dead in Turkey

Doug Bandow

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Two years ago, protestors took over the streets of Istanbul, Turkey's first city. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan beat them down and last year was elected president. His critics feared his plan to invest the largely ceremonial post with Putin-like authority. Three weeks ago, however, Turkish voters revoked his party's majority. A new government has yet to form.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. Erdogan initially allied with liberals to systematically dismantle the authoritarian, nationalistic, coup-prone system that had replaced the Ottoman Empire.

Military leader Mustafa Kemal Pasha, who achieved distinction defending against the allies in the infamous Gallipoli campaign, rose to power in World War I's tumultuous aftermath. He became the first president of the Republic of Turkey and took on the name Ataturk ("Father of the Turks"), which parliament reserved for him. His ubiquitous image dominates the landscape; his mausoleum and memorial cover an entire city block in the capital of Ankara. The only comparable personality cult which I've seen is in North Korea.

Ataturk was no self-effacing republican. He ruthlessly modernized, enforced secularism, and constructed a one-party state. After his death there were elections but the politicians didn't really rule. The military staged three hard coups, the last in 1980, and a softer putsch in 1997.

The generals executed and jailed opponents. Even criticism of Ataturk and "Kemalism" resulted in prosecution. Academics and journalists risked their jobs. Ruthless repression of the Kurds (which Ankara denied were a separate people) led to a 30-year war which cost 40,000 lives. In 1974 Turkey invaded Cyprus, seized nearly 40 percent of the island, and ethnically cleansed the occupied zone of Greeks; the division of the island lives on four decades later. Religious minorities, such as the Armenian and Greek Orthodox, were marginalized. The military attempted to suppress even moderate Islamic sentiments. As Istanbul mayor Erdogan read an Islamist poem in public, for which he was ousted and imprisoned briefly.

Eventually, the nationalist establishment imploded. Weak coalition governments tolerated corruption and delivered economic malaise. In 2002 the AKP won a dramatic victory.

The party delivered liberty and prosperity. The AKP dismantled repressive elements of the "Deep State," put the military back in its barracks, created a more business-friendly environment, moved towards Europe, and pushed social reforms. A few years ago, a female journalist told me that the mildly-Islamic AKP paid more attention to problems of domestic violence than had previous nationalist-secularist regimes. Author Graham Fuller argued that the AKP's first decade was "extraordinary" and "may have been the best government Turkey has ever had since it adopted democratic rule in the 1950s." Turkey grew wealthier and more influential, and the Turkish people rewarded the AKP with a steadily larger proportion of their votes.

However, Erdogan had foreshadowed an uglier future when he declared a couple decades ago: "Democracy, for us, is a train you get off once you reach your destination." He apparently believed he reached his destination by 2011, when Fuller dates Erdogan's shift. That year the AKP purged more moderate members. By then several more liberal Turks told me they were becoming increasingly concerned over the government's direction.

Today, Erdogan denounces critics domestic and foreign, using every repressive tool of the state against them. He dallies with Islamist and terrorist forces as he tries to make Turkey into a regional Weltmacht. He waxes paternalistic, discussing what Turks should eat and drink, and how many children they should have. While switching positions, he constructed a \$615 million presidential palace, four times the size of Versailles. No Sultan lived so opulently.

Even Turks see that his past accomplishments are fading. Widespread prosperity cemented his rule, but the Turkish economic engine is slowing: Growth is down, unemployment is up, consumer confidence has fallen, the current account deficit is the biggest in the OECD, stock values have declined, and the lira has lost some 40 percent of its value compared to the dollar since 2013.

Growth greatly increased opportunities for corruption. Charges of misconduct reached the cabinet and Erdogan, as prosecutors began investigating. After stealth recordings of damning

conversations leaked to the public, Erdogan blamed an earlier ally, cleric Fethullah Gulen, and purged police, prosecutors and judges. The charges were dropped.

Although elections remain free, political rights and civil liberties are only middling. Overall Freedom House rated Turkey as partly free. The organization downgraded Ankara in its latest report because of the government's "more pronounced political interference in anticorruption mechanisms and judicial processes, and greater tensions between majority Sunni Muslims and minority Alevis."

The State Department's human rights assessment includes a list of depressing particulars. For instance, the government interferes with freedom of assembly and expression, uses excessive force in breaking up protests, makes arbitrary arrests, politicizes the judiciary, maintains impunity for security forces despite claims of torture and unlawful killings, and provides inadequate protection for vulnerable populations.

Despite some reforms, noted State, "The penal code and antiterror law retain multiple articles that restrict freedom of expression, the press, and the internet." After battling against misuse of security laws, including against himself, Erdogan deployed the legislation against military officers and civilians. The government claimed improbably vast conspiracies, most notably the Diyarbakir KCK (Kurdish), Ergenekon (nationalist), and Sledgehammer (military) cases. Roughly 500 people were arrested and 300 charged in the Ergenekon case alone. Although some of the convictions were ultimately overturned, many defendants spent years in jail awaiting trial.

Erdogan has led a particularly virulent campaign of intimidation against journalists, with Turkey for years leading the world in the number of imprisoned journalists. As of last October, roughly 150 awaited trial. In its latest media freedom report, Freedom House ranked Turkey as "not free" and 142 out of 199 countries. The group noted that press freedom continued to fall "as the government moved more aggressively to close the space for dissent." Turkey registered the ninth biggest drop worldwide from 2010 to 2014. Of course, officials denied any impropriety and regime supporters insisted to me that the media was conspiring with the military.

However, the *New Yorker's* Dexter Filkins cited "an extraordinary climate of fear among journalists." Several reporters and columnists with whom I spoke feared criticizing the prime minister; their editors were reluctant to pursue stories against the government. A number of journalists lost their jobs. Affirmed Freedom House: "Government harassment of journalists is also common, leading to self-censorship and dismissals."

The government also applies sustained though often invisible pressure on media organizations, including the threat of public investigations and loss of television licenses. Last month a government prosecutor sought to ban two television stations associated with Fethullah Gulen. Businessmen privately admit that they fear political retaliation. The dearth of coverage of the 2013 protests and disproportionate attention given the supposedly nonpartisan President Erdogan campaigning for the AKP in the recent election demonstrate government tactics at work.

After taming the traditional press the Erdogan government began targeting internet freedoms, with, noted Freedom House, "an overall strategy of demonizing and discrediting social media."

Although half of Turks are online, Freedom House rated Turkey as only partly free. People face significant obstacles to access, limits on content, and restrictions on use. In recent months the government has blocked access to Soundcloud, Twitter, Vimeo and YouTube as well as thousands of websites, arrested dozens of individuals for comments on social media, prosecuted bloggers and websites for postings, and mandated access to user information through ISPs. Those charged include a former Miss Turkey and 16-year-old student. Government critics also suffer from organized online attacks, including denial-of-service assaults on newspapers.

While relaxing unfair restrictions on Muslims -- such as the ban on women wearing headscarves -- the government has yet to address the lack of legal protection for religious worship and practice by every faith. Indeed, individuals critical of Islam or the Prophet Mohammed face prosecution under the blasphemy statute. Religious minorities remain particularly vulnerable to arbitrary state decisions. For instance, the government continues to interfere with internal operation of the Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches. Ankara has returned a number of confiscated religious properties, but the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary, remains closed despite government promises to act. Jews can worship freely but, warned the latest report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "they remain concerned about rising anti-Semitism in society and in the media and occasional derogatory comments by government officials." One Turkish Jew hoping to emigrate told the *New York Times*: "last year the level of hate speech in Turkey reached an unnerving level."

In short, Turkey is headed in a dangerous direction, toward a corrupt, authoritarian state. The country needs an Arab Spring of sorts, but within the democratic process. An electoral revolution, not a street putsch. The use of the rule of law to end an illiberal government. The ballot box must make political power accountable.

On Sunday that process began. One article last week pessimistically warned: "This might be Turkey's last election." However, the AKP received less than 41 percent of the vote, down from roughly 50 percent four years ago (and 52 percent in last year's presidential contest). The ruling party fell 18 seats short of a majority in the 550-member Grand National Assembly.

None of the opposition parties is a likely coalition partner, though the lure of power might prove attractive. The Republican People's Party (CHP) upholds the Kemalist vision and is nationalist and social democratic. More extreme is the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), described as "a stone's throw from fascist" by Aaron Stein of the RUSI think tank. Making a dramatic entrance in fourth place was the People's Democratic Party (HDP), a liberal-left Kurdish-based coalition which came together less than three years ago. But these parties also are unlikely to form a countervailing coalition. The AKP could establish a minority ministry and dare its opponents to oust it or trigger early elections. In any case, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu may not survive, despite claiming victory and calling the AKP the "backbone of Turkey."

Certainly Erdogan's vision of an enhanced presidency appears dead. Said Selahattin Demirtas, head of the HDP: "The discussion of executive presidency and dictatorship has come to an end in Turkey with these elections." Even half of AKP members oppose the idea. The government no longer can even pass common legislation if the opposition unites. The electoral result also is

likely to embolden Erdogan's opponents. For the first time in more than a decade AKP rule no longer appears to be inevitable.

Indeed, Erdogan may find it hard to control his party. Past prime ministers turned presidents such as Turgut Ozal and Suleyman Demirel lost influence. Some AKP members indicate privately that they do not like being asked to subordinate their beliefs to Erdogan's ambitions. Moreover, Prime Minister Davutoglu holds the stronger institutional position and may have grown to enjoy making his own decisions. After the president criticized some government actions and policies, Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc responded that "we love our president," but added: "please do not forget that there is a government in this country." That sparked a call for Arinc's resignation.

Erdogan might try to oust his critics, but an intra-party civil war could wreck the AKP and government. Potential aspirants for power abound, led by Abdullah Gul, a former AKP prime minister, foreign minister, and president with international credibility. Erdogan's and Gul's partnership ended badly and the former ostentatiously bypassed Gul in tapping Davutoglu as successor. Other senior AKP officials also have run afoul of Erdogan and might enjoy a little revenge served cold.

Of course, fear of losing power could impel Erdogan to launch a crackdown. Daniel Pipes of the Middle East Forum warned that the former "will barrel, bulldoze, and steamroll his way ahead, ignoring traditional and legal niceties with or without changes to the constitution." But doubling down would be risky. Although the military is unlikely to launch a coup, it might also not stand behind the government. The regime doubted the reliability of the police in reassigning some 45,000 officers, as well as several thousand prosecutors and judges, as suspected Gulen followers. The election demonstrated that Erdogan represents only a plurality of the population. Civil strife could risk his future.

President Erdogan made the democratic transformation of Turkish politics possible. The Turkish people must take full advantage of their opportunities in a new Turkey. Only they can ensure a prosperous and free Turkey.