

Turkey: 'Surreal, Menacing...Pompous'

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Osman Orsal/Reuters

Antigovernment protesters at Taksim Square, Istanbul, July 20, 2013

Now, more than ever, it is harder to argue for the compatibility of political Islam and democracy. The ejection of the Muslim Brotherhood from the government of Egypt has delivered a heavy blow to the prospects of an accommodation between the two. The Brotherhood came to power democratically, governed dimly and repressively, and was toppled in a bloody military coup. Many Egyptian Islamists now associate democracy with pain, humiliation, and death.

The effects of the Egyptian debacle have been widely felt. Saudi Arabia and Jordan feel more politically secure than at any time since the start of the Arab Spring, although Jordan has the heavy burden of absorbing some 500,000 Syrian refugees. The prospect of a democratic Syria has in any case long since disappeared behind the blood and smoke. But now another nightmare may be emerging in Turkey, the Middle East's most prominent proponent of what might be called Islamic democracy. The stability and prosperity that Turkey has enjoyed over the past ten years had associated the country with a type of political arrangement known flatteringly as the "Turkish model." This summer, the model came unstuck.

On May 27, small numbers of environmentalists occupied Gezi Park, in Istanbul's Taksim Square, protesting against plans to replace the park with a shopping center inspired by the design of an old Ottoman barracks. Over the next few days they were joined by others expressing dissatisfaction with what they regard as the government's meddling

Islamist agenda. The police responded violently and the agitation grew; by the time of the brutal eviction of a huge crowd from Taksim Square, more than two weeks later, some 3.5 million people (from a population of 80 million) had taken part in almost five thousand demonstrations across Turkey, five had lost their lives, and more than eight thousand had been injured. Clearly, the “Gezi events” were about more than trees.

The unrest of this summer divided Turks on the same issues that have caused civil strife elsewhere in the region: among them political Islam, ethnic and sectarian divisions (involving the Kurdish and Alevi minorities), and authoritarian rule. Although a meltdown on Egyptian lines is implausible, a transition to Islamic authoritarianism is not. That would do further injury to the idea that Islam and democracy can share the public sphere. It would also be the end of an experiment of which Turks are justifiably proud.

The reforms that Turkey embarked upon in the mid-2000s were long overdue. For decades, the country’s pious majority had been suppressed by a secular elite claiming to uphold the values of the republic’s founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In 1923, Atatürk set up the Republic of Turkey from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire; he spent the rest of his life secularizing institutions and propagating European education, mores, and dress. Atatürk was a visionary and a genius, but Kemalism, the credo built around his memory, had degenerated into ancestor worship long before I was first able to observe it, after moving to the country in 1996. Atatürk’s picture and sayings were everywhere; the country’s leaders made countless pilgrimages to his tomb and used his memory to defend measures such as a ban on the Islamic head-covering in state institutions, which effectively denied millions of young women a university education.

The country’s powerful generals were the ultimate Kemalists. They kept the elected politicians to heel by using the threat of a military coup. (The army overthrew four governments between 1950 and 1997.) All the while, a dirty war against Kurdish rebels fostered a sense of beleaguement that excused human rights abuses. Torture, miscarriages of justice, state-sponsored assassinations—Turkey was a leader in all.

And in little else. The country was an economic basket case. Foreign diplomats saw the capital, Ankara, as a hardship posting. There, amid the brutal architecture of the ministries, under a severe Anatolian sky, one had the sense of a secular elite’s loathing for the people it claimed to represent—their Islamic modes of dress, their guileful provincialism, and above all their belief that religion was the answer to the country’s problems. “Two-legged cockroaches,” some of my secular friends called the fundamentalist women in their black sheets.

Kemalism started to drain away with the victory of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the general election of 2002. In not the least of Kemalism’s follies, Erdoğan had been jailed for declaiming a poem that could be interpreted as an Islamist call to arms; but the message he conveyed after he was released and became prime minister was not one of revenge. On the contrary, in the aftermath of September 11 and amid the widening perception in the West that Islam equaled *jihadi* Islamism, his stress on moderation, democracy, and the rigors of the free market was welcome not only to waverers inside Turkey, but also to the United States and its allies.

Over the next several years, in election after election, the will of the pious majority was reflected at the ballot box; political stability brought investment and wealth creation. At the same time, the AKP pushed through important pro-democracy reforms. Torture and extrajudicial executions declined. The dirty war lost intensity as Kurds were granted some cultural rights, and Kurdish nationalists, long denied parliamentary representation, became a voluble presence in the Ankara assembly. All the while, the army was being stripped of its political authority, a process that concluded this August with the jailing of dozens of retired officers, including a former chief of the general staff, on charges of plotting against the government. The case, known as “Ergenekon” after the mythical Central Asian home of the Turkish nation, was based on the claim that there was a widespread conspiracy, involving not only the army but also sympathizers in parliament and the media, to destabilize the government and overthrow it in a coup.

Some experts who have scrutinized the relevant court documents believe that the conspiracy was greatly exaggerated and used by the government as a means of destroying the old Kemalist elite and severing its ties with the public.¹ And this is what seems to have happened, as the muted public reaction to the Ergenekon verdicts suggests. Back in the 1990s, polls had shown the army to be the institution most trusted by Turks. Its final humiliation this autumn elicited hardly a murmur from a population that has now rejected the old presentation of the army as embodying a virile, honorable Turkishness essential to the country’s survival.

Although Erdoğan came from a political tradition, that of Turkish Islamism, that was hostile to the West, his government pursued good ties with Europe and the United States, notwithstanding some prickliness over the question of Turkey's long-standing application for membership in the European Union. (France and Germany are against, and Turkey's chief negotiator recently acknowledged that the country will probably never join.) Previous Turkish governments had cold-shouldered the Muslim Middle East. No longer; rather than contain neighbors such as Syria and Iran, the AKP government penetrated them using trade and engineered a rapprochement with the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. Erdoğan also pleased many Turks by allowing his country's historically good ties with Israel to deteriorate.

Naturally, the people who benefited most from Erdoğan's rule were his own supporters, not only because specific measures like the headscarf ban fell into partial disuse—universities now admit women in headscarves, as do many courts—but because the tenor of public life became more pious. Erdoğan and his ministers did not conceal their links to religious orders—such as the Nakshibendis—that the Kemalists had regarded as a major threat to the state. God, rather than Atatürk, was invoked at groundbreaking ceremonies; new mosques rose in the big cities. All the while, the prime minister's friends in the private sector—often pious businessmen from the interior of the country who bankrolled his election victories—were rewarded with contracts for building, improving infrastructure, and producing energy. Turkey gained a new elite, both brassy and devout.

The army fought several unsuccessful rearguard actions, including a threat—empty, as it turned out—to launch a coup in 2007, but the secular rebellion that some had anticipated didn't happen. An important reason for this was that other, non-Islamist groups were also benefiting from the dismantling of Kemalism. The old establishment had given protection but no dignity to members of the Alevi sect, who practice a highly eclectic version of Shiism and make up between 15 and 20 percent of the population. Fearing assimilation, the Alevis have long demanded recognition of their separate status; these efforts were stepped up during the 2000s and Alevi organizations increased in size and visibility.

Human rights groups had been another bugbear of the Kemalists, who regarded them as special pleaders for the Kurds or, more generally, a carrier of Western values in their dissolute, morally degenerate form. Such groups multiplied under the AKP; Turkey now has the most exuberant feminist, gay, and environmentalist movements in the Middle East. In the new atmosphere it became more possible for people to argue—as did a small but growing number—that the massacre of Armenians in 1915 was a case of genocide. That, too, had been taboo.

Perhaps most important of all, Erdoğan's Kurdish policies marked the end of the state's policy of denying legitimacy to the Kurds. Ministers I had visited in the late 1990s had been unable to utter their name, referring to them as “our brothers in the southeast.” Now, no one would dream of denying Turkey's multiethnic, multicultural composition. This March, the Kurdistan Workers Party (or PKK, according to its Kurdish acronym), which began its bloody war against the Turkish state in 1984, announced what may end up being its final cease-fire. A peace process between the government and the PKK has been slowly and fractiously advancing since then.

The most remarkable thing about the diversification of Turkey is that it happened under a socially conservative Islamist. When Erdoğan became prime minister, the question being asked was whether this highly effective and popular leader would use his new authority to impose an Islamist vision. As the 2000s wore on and the economy grew by an average of 5 percent a year, attracting some \$100 billion in foreign investment, Erdoğan felt able to voice a different kind of aspiration: to regional leadership and a level of prestige that Turks had not enjoyed since the Ottoman heyday.

Naturally, many citizens were pleased by the rise in the national fortunes, but others felt unease at the prime minister's increasingly hubristic manner. This unease was strong among the minorities and interest groups that had benefited from Erdoğan's reforms but felt no affinity with the man or his ideals. Together, these people—including members of the Alevi and Kurdish minorities, as well as secular-minded journalists, entrepreneurs, and many young people—made up something Turkey had not had before: a liberal constituency.

It was this liberal constituency that clashed with Erdoğan last May, and that now continues its campaign of opposition and dissent. Small-scale protests have been taking place every week since the beginning of September, some of them violent, and armed police are present in big numbers in the country's big cities. The government continues with its policy of limiting freedom of expression. The government, its media supporters, and the judiciary combine their efforts

against people and groups associated with the opposition; the latest target is the Koc Group, a secular-minded conglomerate whose hotel in Taksim Square opened its doors to protesters during the Gezi events. Since then, the Koc Group had to give up a defense contract it had won, and it is being investigated for fraud and plotting against the government.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the government's intolerance of anything it perceives as a challenge to its authority is its repressive treatment of the press. Around sixty journalists are currently behind bars. Most of them have reported favorably on the Kurdish nationalist movement, the PKK, and are victim to the country's draconian terror laws. At least twenty journalists received prison sentences of between six and thirty-four years as part of this summer's Ergenekon verdict. For the most part, they are accused of activities such as gathering news from sources close to the PKK and expressing hostility to the government in telephone conversations, actions that have been interpreted as "aiding and abetting" terrorists or "attempting to change the constitutional order by force."

In many cases denied bail and access to the charge sheet that has been prepared against them, these allegedly pro-Kurdish prisoners are presumably being held as political hostages by the government for use as the peace process with the PKK inches forward. But others, writing on non-Kurdish issues, have also been indicted, not least by Erdoğan himself, who has issued writs against several journalists who have made fun of him. Self-censorship is the result. It is directed from the boardroom, as newspaper owners try to avoid the fate suffered by two antigovernment newspapers, *Milliyet* and *Sabah*, which lost control of their well-known publications as a result of government pressure. (A company run by Erdoğan's son-in-law bought *Sabah* at auction—he was the sole bidder.)

Equally insidious is the widespread use of intimidation to pressure newspapers and their employers. Columnist friends of mine have lost their jobs as a result of a phone call from the prime minister's office. One well-known broadcaster and columnist, Nuray Mert, told the Committee to Protect Journalists last year that her career had effectively been ended as a result of the prime minister's criticism of her in a public speech. The huge court case that ended recently with the jailing of the former army chief of staff, along with many other retired officers, journalists, and politicians, was held under similar highly politicized conditions, its fairness compromised by what human rights advocates regard as the misuse of protected and partisan witnesses and the lengthy pretrial detention of many of the accused.

A vindictive authoritarianism is taking hold of Turkey. To the prime minister's supporters this is regrettable but necessary; many I have spoken to think that the protest at Gezi Square was organized by foreign agitators, and that the protesters should have been crushed more harshly than they were. In a democracy, these people believe, the will of the majority is determined at the ballot box and then carried out. This, they say, is what had been happening quite successfully until the liberals, realizing they were too few to win an election, turned to seditious activities instead. The idea that the beliefs of liberal minorities should be legally protected and might actually have an influence on policymaking has not been accepted by the government, which claims to speak for the majority.

But the architect of Turkey's polarization isn't the liberals; it's Erdoğan. He has read into successive election victories a license to involve himself in every aspect of the nation. His abrasive, physical style of oratory betrays no self-doubt. Opening his arms to his audience, bringing his hand over his heart, he criticizes the lives of his subjects, and his views are rarely less than vigorous. All drinkers are alcoholics; every family should have three children; wholemeal flour is best ("our children will be stronger...the bonds of trust between us will increase"); abortion is murder and Caesarean sections should be avoided. Twitter is a "menace" and those opposed to road-building should go and live in a forest. The prime minister appears to dislike expertise when it disagrees with him. "You have nothing to teach us about sociology," he told a politely dissenting social scientist.

As much as the tear gas, water cannons, and plastic bullets, it was Erdoğan's contemptuous way of addressing the Gezi demonstrators that hardened feelings against him. Liberals are skeptical of a leader who commands slavish adulation



Riccardo Venturi/Contrasto/Redux

Supporters of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Istanbul, June 7, 2013

from his followers—a former adviser to the prime minister told me there is no “mechanism of self-criticism” in Erdoğan’s entourage. The government is touched by paranoia; Erdoğan’s chief adviser has accused foreign powers of using telekinesis to try to kill his boss. The government creates an aura that is surreal, menacing, and insufferably pompous. Unsurprisingly, it was the butt of humor during the Gezi protests. “Enough!” ran one graffito after a night of brutality by the security forces. “I’ll call the police.” A gay group unfurled a banner that said: “You have nothing to teach us about sodomy.”

Erdoğan has encouraged a species of conservatism that is now the dominant mode of life throughout Turkey. The culture is pietistic, implicitly anti-Alevi, and materialistic. This last factor is new, for until quite recently virtue was associated with austerity and self-reliance; now the faithful demand rewards in this world in the form of high-performance cars, iPads, and so forth—acquired using the family credit card.² Following a pattern that American conservatives would recognize, these Turks are both in sympathy with the conservatives in the government and growing more detached from it in their everyday lives. Private schools and hospitals have proliferated and the middle classes prefer to live in the private housing communities that have sprung up in Istanbul and elsewhere.

One can understand why minorities like the Alevis associate these gated developments with social and sectarian homogenization. While visiting a colossal housing colony in Istanbul, for instance, I met a woman of Alevi origin who had become a devout Sunni through marriage into a Sunni family and vigorously criticized the Gezi protesters. From the AKP’s point of view, however, Istanbul has improved greatly under its rule. The city has indeed boomed, with new infrastructure and a housing price bubble to rival any in the developing world.³ Among the recent constructions are homes for the poor; the spectacle of unregulated shanties clinging to the hillsides is rarer. Over the next few years Istanbul will have the world’s biggest airport, a gargantuan bridge over the Bosphorus, and two cities in the greater metropolitan area of one million inhabitants each. Each day seems to bring a new discovery for the city’s taxi drivers. “Lovely,” said one as we drove through a tunnel that had opened that very morning. “It’s all owing to Tayyip,” he went on—“lion of a man!”

By contrast, I have spoken to architects and planners whose relations with the government have broken down over what they describe as the haphazard and unplanned nature of the city’s expansion, inadequate oversight, environmental damage, and mass evictions of the poor to make way for the middle class. The new bridge over the Bosphorus, a very senior planner told me, could permit the urbanization of a huge stretch of old forest—on which, he said, the city’s fragile ecology depends. Work has now started on an enormous neo-Ottoman mosque that Erdoğan wants to be visible from everywhere in Istanbul, and that will have the tallest minarets in the world. At the same time, his deputy prime minister has hinted that the great domed space of Hagia Sophia, formerly a church, then a mosque, and now a museum, would be reconverted into a mosque.

Erdoğan’s opponents publicly celebrated the International Olympic Committee’s rejection of Istanbul’s bid to host the 2020 Olympics. (Tokyo won.) I have heard liberals express satisfaction that Turkey’s boom now seems to be slowing—the consequence of falling confidence in emerging markets in general, and the effects of the Gezi demonstrations. (The stock exchange dropped sharply following the unrest.) Anything that tarnishes the prime minister’s self-image is welcomed by Turkish liberals.

On September 30, the prime minister announced new pro-democracy reforms. Under these, instruction in Kurdish will be allowed in private schools (though not in state schools) and an electoral threshold that has had the effect of limiting Kurdish representation in parliament will be abolished. A long-standing ban on women in hijab working as civil servants is also to be lifted—except for some judicial and military personnel.

Erdoğan’s pro-Kurdish measures were designed to revive the peace process. Politicians close to the PKK have described the new reforms as inadequate, and thousands of Kurdish nationalists remain in jail under Turkey’s anti-terror laws, but Erdoğan is the best Turkish prime minister the Kurds have ever had; a return to violence is unlikely.⁴ An injection of pious women into the civil service will advance the prime minister’s plan to make the state more religious. But he will do nothing that would help his opponents. The jailed journalists stay jailed. And there will be no recognition for the Alevis.

To many Sunnis, the Alevis are wayward Muslims who should be encouraged to return to the true faith—not encouraged

in their heresies. The Alevis had a prominent part in the protests in Gezi and the prime minister has hardened his tone against them. He has made disparaging asides about them in speeches and the new Bosphorus bridge is to be named for an Ottoman sultan who slaughtered Alevis by the thousands. Erdoğan's Sunni supporters and the Alevis also differ on Syria, the country's main foreign policy challenge.

Turkey's Alevis have only a hazy affinity with Syria's Alawites, but they felt acutely threatened when it looked as though Bashar al-Assad would fall quickly and be replaced by a Sunni regime supported by the AKP government. This is what Erdoğan had in mind when he became an early proponent of regime change in Syria back in 2011, receiving opposition leaders and facilitating the transfer of arms to rebel groups. But Assad did not fall and the price of this policy has been high. Half a million Syrian refugees have arrived in Turkey, the border areas are unstable, and the Erdoğan government has been embarrassed by accusations that it has been helping opposition groups linked to al-Qaeda, accusations it may have been trying to answer when the Turkish army shelled fighters from one such group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, earlier this month. In May, fifty-three people were killed in attacks, believed to have originated in Syria, on the Turkish town of Reyhanli (The prime minister pointedly noted that the dead were all "Sunni.") Erdoğan has not concealed his frustration at the United States's refusal to topple Assad; but he has been unable to do so on his own. These are all points made by Erdoğan's liberal opponents, Alevi politicians in particular.

Erdoğan is Turkey's most powerful leader since Atatürk, but the Gezi events have been a serious challenge to him, and their effects will continue to be felt. By picking fights with those who disagree with him and encouraging sectarianism, he is condemning his country to a period of turbulence, while undermining his own reputation as a path-finding democrat in the Muslim world.

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- 1 The Turkey analyst Gareth Jenkins is one of the few outsiders to have studied the Ergenekon case, as it is known, from all the angles, and his 2009 report on the subject depicted it partly as the product of a fevered prosecutorial imagination. "The indictments," he wrote, "are so full of contradictions, rumors, speculation, misinformation, illogicalities, absurdities and untruths that they are not even internally consistent or coherent." See Gareth Jenkins, "Between Fact and Fantasy: Turkey's Ergenekon Investigation," Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silkroad Studies Program, July 2009. ↵
 - 2 Erdoğan's Islamism is nothing if not pragmatic. The economy remains dependent on interest-charging loans that are banned under Islam. Erdoğan insists that a global network of financiers (by which he means Jews) is trying to weaken the country, but he has done more than anyone to expose Turkish consumers to what he calls the "interest rate lobby." The country's foreign debt has nearly tripled since the AKP came to power. ↵
 - 3 The flat I bought in 1999 for \$28,000 is now worth around \$800,000. Alas, it is now owned by someone else. ↵
 - 4 The government had been hoping to convince Kurdish nationalists in parliament to support proposed changes to the constitution that would attach new executive powers to the post of the presidency. Erdoğan is expected to run again for president next summer. Kurdish acquiescence in these plans now looks less likely. ↵

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