Don't Call It Spring: Turkey’s Decisive Turn Away From the West

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SHORT SUMMARY

Erdogan's autocratic shift is not accidental. It is the byproduct of a strongly majoritarian political culture, mostly foreign to Western countries. Protests weaken the Prime Minister and confine his ambitions. But they don't erase the 'Turkish exception'.

FULL VERSION

“Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is dimmed; the best lack all conviction, and the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

William Butler Yeats

1. In one sense, even after everything that has occurred, there can be little doubt that history will be kind to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, undoubtedly the most important Turkish leader since Ataturk founded the post-Ottoman state. Most significantly, over the past decade Erdogan has gone a long way to at last fulfilling Turkey’s gigantic economic promise. Growth has averaged a whopping five percent a year since the Islamist AK Party took office in late 2002, with exports increasing nearly ten-fold. Over the past decade Turkish GDP per capita has tripled, with income levels per person now two times that of China and four times that of India.

Perhaps best of all, this vast expansion of prosperity spread from Europeanized Istanbul to small business owners and the Anatolian heartland, the bastion of AK support. And indeed, due to this enviable economic record, even after the seismic protests of this past month, Erdogan remains the most popular political leader in his country.

To some extent Erdogan has been lucky; following the topsy-turvy 1990s and the financial meltdown of 2001, the previous government had already signed on to tough IMF reforms. But he deserves more economic credit than that, as he stuck with the
unpopular prescriptions he inherited, rather than doing the politically expedient thing and junking them. By keeping his nerve early on, the Prime Minister and his country became potent symbols of economic success in a region desperately in need of such examples.

Nor has the Prime Minister has not been shy about using the vast store of political capital economic success has handed him. At great risk he has daringly moved forward on the Kurdish question, working out a precarious peace deal to lance the boil of this most nettlesome of Turkish domestic problems. As a reward for his success, the EU finally decided to start EU membership talks with Ankara, handing Erdogan a diplomatic prize that has eluded his country for the past 40 years. Again daringly and against the odds, Erdogan has finally defanged the coup-prone army, the snake in the garden of Turkish democracy for the past several generations.

This sterling record of economic success coupled with dramatic domestic reform has won Erdogan accolades both home and abroad. By standing up to Israel over specifics such as the Gaza flotilla matter as well as more generally over the continued disenfranchisement of the Palestinians, Erdogan has begun to sound like no one so much as the last great hero of the Arab street, the populist General Nasser of Egypt. Indeed, he remains the most popular leader in recent polling in the broader Middle East, with 69% of those polled favoring him personally. Domestically, he has decisively won the last three elections, with his last victory coming in June of 2011. Presently the AK has the parliamentary support to pass by simple majority anything it wants, with the exception of constitutional reform issues, where it needs cross-party support to reach the specific two-thirds’ threshold.

Mr. Jefferson would say that this is where the trouble starts. For Erdogan has been brave and impressive in removing undemocratic checks from Turkish politics, emanating from the military and the judiciary, the two pillars of the formerly dominant ‘deep state.’ But now he has gone too far. Without any discernible limits to his power being left in place, the Prime Minister has moved that short but critical distance from being the scourge of anti-democratic interests to all that is left standing. And that is inherently dangerous.

2. The astonishing protests of the beginning of June 2013 quickly morphed from an
environmental grousing about the destruction of sycamore trees into something more profound. All the very disparate groups taking to the streets—women, environmentalists, secular supporters of Ataturk’s secular Republic, the young, city dwellers—quickly congealed as they had one common, overarching very Jeffersonian complaint. Their rulers had grown high and mighty, wholly disregarding vast swathes (if not a majority) of Turkish public opinion.

Recently this heavy-handedness can be seen over four distinct issues. First, the Prime Minister has set his heart on replacing the militarily imposed constitution of 1982. Erdogan favors this for more than altruistic reasons. Internal AK Party rules mean that he must stand down as Prime Minister at the time of the next election in 2015. Before then, Erdogan hopes to transition Turkey to a more authoritarian and majoritarian system, with himself at the head of a newly empowered presidency as the key institution; think of the French Fifth Republic on steroids.

Despite the fact that an overwhelming four-fifths of all Turks and fully two-thirds of AK party members are against such a wrenching change, Erdogan has ploughed ahead ignoring his own party, most of the opposition parties, and general Turkish public opinion. His strategy consists of trying to woo the smaller Kurdish BDP grouping to support him and get him over the two-thirds threshold, in return for their rights being enshrined in the new document. But by ignoring almost all other political opinions in drafting the document, Erdogan has managed to alienate almost everyone in Turkish public life, apart from his core supporters.

Likewise, over the absolutely essential issue of finally coming to terms with the 15 million Kurds living in the country, Erdogan has gone off on his own, unilaterally (and rightly in my view) trying to make peace with the PKK Kurdish terrorist group, in return for language concessions, an enshrining of Kurdish rights, and some decentralization of power. While the policy is laudable, again the delivery has been authoritarian, with Erdogan doing much of this himself, and certainly not involving the other major Turkish political parties in a meaningful way in the process.

This is playing with fire, as peace with the PKK, long demonized in the country at large, is unpopular in many quarters. Erdogan is right in that involving the secular opposition in talks would have significantly slowed down the peace process. However, by
not involving them he owns the whole gamble, shouldering all of the blame should the thing unravel. Once again, Erdogan’s impatience with other opinions has been amply demonstrated.

Thirdly, Erdogan’s idiosyncratic foreign policy has gone badly off course, mainly due to his strong and early support for the rebels in Syria. Wrongly believing that Assad was about to imminently fall, and eager to bolster his already strong regional popularity as the voice of the Middle Eastern street, Erdogan has been the fractious rebels strongest supporter, a fact not lost on the desperate and undoubtedly vicious Syrian government. Now the bill must be paid with a resurgent Assad regime, strongly bolstered by allies such as Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah, looking ever more likely to retain power on Turkey’s bloodstained doorstep. Internal support for this activist position is dismal, with presently only around 11% of the Turkish public agreeing with Erdogan’s pro-rebel policy. Once again, the Prime Minister has found himself out of touch with Turkish national opinion.

But it is the fourth issue, the perceived slow Islamicisation of Turkey’s long-cherished secular political culture, which truly lit the embers of the massive June protests. In late May 2013, the AKP proposed a bill in parliament that regulates the sale of alcohol; anyone who has ever been to Istanbul would have known better, with fully 61% of those polled against the policy. Such a draconian, divisive bill enraged Erdogan’s secular political opponents, long pushed to the margins. Here was irrefutable proof of the creeping Islamist takeover of Turkish society they had been warning about, a country whose very political culture was founded on a turn away from Islam and the Caliphate, with Ataturk positioning the modern Turkish state as being above all secular.

Erdogan, at this moment of greatest hubris, made matters infinitely worse, seeming to complain in parliament that Islam was not being taken seriously whilst the views of Ataturk and his successor Ismet Inonu, or “two drunks” as the Prime Minister seemed to refer to them, were treated with reverence. The reason that history is interesting is that people quite often make colossal mistakes, revealing far more about themselves and what they really think under pressure than they intend to. Certainly this was such a moment. Here was confirmation of the secular opposition’s deepest fears about the creeping ascendancy of Islam, always the bogeyman in the back of the room.
since Erdogan’s ascension to power.

But frankly, the Jeffersonian rather than the Islamic radical explanation of Erdogan’s behavior over these four crucial issues better seems to fit the facts. It is clear that Erdogan—and indeed most Turks—have a far more majoritarian view of democracy than is common in most of the west. Erdogan seems to think that once he has won elections, he is entitled to do what he wishes until the next election.

While this is a form of democratic government, in it’s downplaying of checks and balances and in its embrace of a far more authoritarian ethos, Erdogan is merely illustrating Turkish democratic exceptionalism. However, by cowing the media (there are more journalists in jail in Turkey than in China), the army, the judiciary, and provincial leaders, even within this more majoritarian political culture, the prime minister has gone too far for a significant minority of Turkish public opinion. It is this unease and common critique that knits the demonstrators together and poses the greatest threat in a decade to Erdogan’s continued rule.

It is in this context that Erdogan’s political over-reaction must be viewed. As if determined to confirm the worst fears of his opponents, Erdogan’s confrontational style—so useful in dealing with the secretive army and the judges of the deep state—has proved far less effective in dealing with the open demonstrations that have broken out in dozens of cities. Describing the protestors as ‘louts’ under orders from ‘foreign powers’, Erdogan encouraged a massive police response, complete with tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannon, all televised to a shocked world used to thinking of Turkey as a bastion of stability in a very rough neighborhood. Up to 5000 protestors have been injured in the fateful first two weeks in June.

3. While the prime minister has managed to clear Taksim Square in Istanbul for the present, his problems are far from over. It is not as if Erdogan is likely to fall; the demonstrators remain too disparate, and too weak to unseat him (the environmentalists and the army are not about to find common cause). This is not the Arab Spring or Tiananmen Square; remember Erdogan remains the three times legitimately elected leader of his people and retains much affection as still the most popular Turkish politician. So analytical perspective is certainly called for; but that does not mean that
there will not be a significant reckoning for the events of June 2013. In the immediate term Erdogan’s reputation as a successful Islamist reformer has been indelibly damaged, and along with it much of his domestic and foreign policy potency.

Domestically, a once unchallenged prime minister suddenly finds himself beset on all sides. It is unlikely that following the protests Erdogan can unilaterally go forward with his plans for a new constitution. With the presidential term of his longtime party ally and possible rival Abdullah Gul coming to an end in August 2014, Erdogan will likely have to find another way to stay in power, most likely changing party rules to allow him to remain prime minister. However, his dream of structurally changing the Turkish state by making it more presidential-based, more majoritarian and more authoritarian is likely at an end.

If this proves to be true, there is now a huge problem with the Kurdish peace process, predicated as it is on enshrining Kurdish rights in a document that may now never exist. Given the horrendous Turkish-Kurdish bloodletting of the past decades, it is unlikely that short of a new constitution the PKK will simply take Erdogan’s word for it that Kurdish rights will be respected. The laudable effort at reconciliation with the Kurds could well be an unintended casualty of the events of June 2013.

Finally, the convenient fiction of Turkey’s never-to-happen EU accession is also probably at an end. Since the long-awaited opening of talks with the EU in 2005, they have proceeded at a snail’s pace, with both sides seeming to lose interest. For this there is plenty of blame to go around. There is absolutely no doubt that over the years Turkey has been consistently over-promised accession by a slew of European leaders, who grew ever more embarrassed as despite the odds Turkey continued with myriad internal reforms, all designed to meet the EU’s standards.

It has become clear over time that whatever hoops Turkey managed to jump through, a blocking majority of European leaders were not ready to concede the accession they had so blithely offered, never believing they would be forced to live up to their promise. European hypocrisy over Turkey is a poison that has entered the Turkish body politic, with Ankara in response drifting ever farther away.

In turn, Erdogan’s brutal response to the events of June have vindicated the many European skeptics of Turkey’s fitness to join the EU, definitively ending any practical
hope of accession occurring. For the skeptics are right about one big thing: Turkey has shown itself to be different, especially in terms of its more majoritarian political culture. In a club that if it is to survive at all must rediscover the merits of unity, Turkey has unforgottably demonstrated that its history and culture are simply not similar enough to make its accession either palatable or practical.

Of course, all that was of true before the events of June 2011; but events have a way of making what is only whispered about suddenly common knowledge. In fact, over a decade ago when I met Mr. Erdogan—arriving in Washington to meet the powers that be there, just out of prison but not yet Prime Minister—he rather shrewdly wondered if Turkey would ever get into the EU, whatever the circumstance. But June 2013 has put an end to what may well have been just a fiction, but a convenient one at that.

For a Turkey engaged in everlasting talks with Brussels, safely in NATO and the European economic sphere, using the pretence of membership to push badly needed domestic structural reforms, and solidly pro-western, is a very different animal from a Turkey adrift. Given its economic success, Turkey does have options, playing an increasingly strong regional role in the Middle East and retaining strong bilateral ties with Washington, particularly over military and intelligence matters. Its flowering in the new era of multipolarity—like that of Indonesia, Brazil, South America, and India—heralds an era where rising local and regional powers will count for increasingly more in policy terms compared with far away and preoccupied great powers. Nothing that has happened over the past few weeks changes this structural reality.

However, Turkey has always been both fascinating and important because of its Janus-faced view on the world; certainly one of those faces has always pointed towards the west. An increasingly isolated Prime Minister Erdogan, definitively aware that Europe is no longer even a theoretical option, will look elsewhere to fill local power vacuums, turning over time away from the west. And that is a geopolitical tragedy, certainly for Turkey but even more for a west in need of her.