

THE FALSE PROMISE

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Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, most Turks preserved the belief, beyond a simple expectation, that one day they would have ‘grandeur’ again. In fact, this was largely shared by some Western observers who regarded Turkey as a potential model for the coexistence of Islam and democracy. Almost a century after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, however, it would be fair to depict Turkey as a mediocre country, in terms of its military, economic, and socio-cultural capacities, and a competitive autocracy, regarding its political system. The promise of the Turkish case to combine the best parts of Islamic ethics and modern democratic institutions appeared to be false. What explains the failure of the idea of the ‘Turkish model?’

To simplify a complex story, one could define the competing groups in Turkish politics until 2012 as Kemalists and their discontents. For the former, it was the religious and multi-ethnic characteristics of the Ottoman Empire that led to its demise. The Turkish Republic, in contrast, had to be assertive secularist, and Turkish nationalist, to avoid repeating the maladies of the Ottoman ancien régime. This project required radical reforms, including the replacement of the Arabic alphabet with Latin, and an authoritarian regime, since the majority of Turks were conservative Muslims, and Kurds resisted assimilation. A major problem of the Kemalist understanding of Westernisation was its extreme formalism, probably due to the fact that Kemalism was primarily represented by the military. According to this formalist perspective, dress code and way of life defined the level of Westernisation of a person. A modern Turk was supposed to drink alcohol, wear a swimsuit on the beach, and keep anything religious in the private sphere. Someone fulfilling such criteria, even if the person did not have a successful career and was very unproductive, proved to be a good citizen. The most infamous reflection

of this formalism was the Hat Law, which made the omission by any man to wear a top hat punishable by imprisonment, and even death, as it was regarded as an insurgency in a dozen cases. Thus, unless someone fitted the formal requirements of being modern, the person's merits, achievements, and productions could be ignored.

Nevertheless, the Kemalists allowed democratic elections and power transition in 1950. They hoped that the conservative and Kurdish resistance would weaken after one party rule for three decades. To their surprise, the resistance continued. The centre-right Democratic Party led by Adnan Menderes ruled the country for a decade with popular support and some revisions in the Kemalist system. Authoritarian tendencies of Prime Minister Menderes solidified the Kemalist opposition against him. In 1960, the military staged a coup d'état, which started the vicious circle of the elections of non-Kemalist, right wing parties (1950, 1965, 1979, and 1995) and the military coups (1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997). Even beyond the coups, the Kemalist military and judiciary kept having 'tutelage' over the political system. A top item on their agenda was an exemplary obsession with formalism – to sustain the headscarf ban for university students. Another formalistic tendency of the Kemalists was to establish the personal cult of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk making him a semi-sacred figure.

A major Kemalist mistake in Turkish politics was the hanging of Menderes in 1961. This trauma consolidated right wing political activists, who, in fact, constituted a very broad spectrum from centre-right to Islamism. While the Kemalists had been blaming Islamic traditions as a barrier to modernism, the rightists began to blame Kemalism for most of the problems in Turkey. The so-called February 28 process provided an opportunity for the right to further popularise their criticisms of Kemalism. The process began with the soft coup against Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan on 28 February 1997, and continued about six years. This period of time experienced military-led oppression, mass level of corruption, and two economic crises.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) founded by Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül, and Bülent Arınç, came to power in 2002 with the promise to undo the Kemalist mistakes. Erdoğan declared that the AKP politicians had dropped their Islamist past and would work to make Turkey a

member of the European Union (EU). The AKP defined itself as a continuation of the centre-right trajectory, which was previously represented by Menderes, Süleyman Demirel, and Turgut Özal. In order to fight against the one-man rule in political parties, the AKP's by-law imposed the three-term limit for not only the party leader but also the parliamentarians.

Using the EU reforms as leverage, the AKP restricted the military's political power. Yet the institutional reform that eliminated several prerogatives of the military was not enough to stop the officers who planned coup d'états against the AKP. Several interventions were planned, especially in 2003-2004, and a failed e-coup attempt was staged in 2007 (when the military put an ultimatum onto its website). The failed closure case against the AKP in 2008 – the so-called judicial coup – was also supported by some generals.

During these tough times, the main ally of the AKP was the Hizmet movement led by Fethullah Gülen. The movement had opened dormitories and then schools in Turkey in the 1970s and 1980s; and in the 1990s, expanded its education, media, and business networks abroad. Due to the Kemalist military's pressure, Gülen migrated to Pennsylvania, United States, where he still lives. Currently, the movement has over 1,000 schools and about two dozen universities in nearly 160 countries. It also has several newspapers (including *Zaman*), magazines, and TV stations in various languages such as Turkish, English, and Arabic. Its business association, TUSKON, and charity organisation, *Kimse Yok Mu*, are internationally active.

In Turkish politics, the Hizmet movement was influential with not only its media network but also its sympathisers in various levels of the bureaucracy. The movement provided key support to the AKP in its struggle with numerous coup attempts. In a series of court cases, supported by both the AKP and Hizmet, hundreds of military officers were imprisoned due to various coup plans. The judicial processes during these cases were criticised on many grounds and several court decisions were later cancelled. The critics of these trials questioned the authenticity of documents recorded in DVDs, which were discovered in the military headquarters. The proponents of the trials, however, stressed the Council of State attack in 2006, the arsenals found out in

various places, and documents leaked by military officers as convincing evidence; they also stressed that political assassinations ended following these prosecutions. Anyway, the main result of these cases was the consolidation of the AKP's power.

The AKP won the 2011 elections with half of the votes and the promise of drafting a new, liberal constitution. Erdoğan, however, blocked the new constitution project with his ambition to replace the parliamentary regime with a presidential one and to make himself the ultra-powerful president for ten years (2014-2024). The three-term limit in the AKP's by-law could not contain Erdoğan's ambition while it helped him eliminate all other founders of the party, including Gül and Arınç. Erdoğan established a one-man rule in the AKP, and later in Turkey by fulfilling the power vacuum that had occurred due to the decline of the Kemalist military and judiciary. He tried to take various spheres of life under his control from soccer to judiciary, from religion to construction, and from media to education. His goal of dominating all spheres eventually conflicted with Hizmet; the old allies turned into enemies of each other.

Erdoğan also tried to extend his influence by leading the Arab Spring. His interventionist foreign policy towards the Middle East, however, turned into a failure. Rather than pursuing a well-crafted strategy toward the region, Erdoğan used foreign policy issues to energise and expand his domestic constituency with a populist rhetoric. While criticising the 2013 coup d'état in Egypt, for instance, he said that in Turkey's March 2014 local elections 'the ballot boxes will be empowered with the spirit of martyr Asma – the symbol of the Egyptian Revolution.' (Asma Al-Beltagi, the daughter of a Muslim Brotherhood leader, was killed by Egyptian security forces on 14 August 2013). Erdoğan's populist demagoguery removed any possibility for Turkey to play an intermediary role between Muslim Brothers and Egyptian generals. For similar reasons, Turkey currently does not have an ambassador in Egypt, Syria, Israel, Libya, and Yemen. Turkey's border with Syria is under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and militias affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Due to the ISIS threat, Turkey evacuated its soldiers guarding the Süleyman Shah tomb, which was Turkish soil inside Syria. Turkey now has over two million Syrian refugees, who may

stay for good. Erdoğan's populist rhetoric also fed anti-Western sentiments and thus damaged Turkey's relationships with Western countries. He even asked Vladimir Putin twice to take Turkey in to Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (that includes Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), proposing it as an alternative to Turkey's EU membership bid.

Erdoğan's increasing level of authoritarianism coincided with his rising dosage of Islamism. He declared that his government would educate a 'pious generation'; for that purpose, he gave Islamic Imam-Hatip schools a pivotal role in the public education system. Instead of reforming the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) as an autonomous body, Erdoğan began to use it as a political instrument. His antagonistic attitude towards the Alevi minority was also a part of his populist Islamist discourse. He further inflamed the secularists by defining anyone drinking alcohol as alcoholic and by declaring a plan to prevent male and female students from renting apartments together.

In order to establish his ultra-presidential regime, Erdoğan also decided to build a media network exclusively loyal to him and to establish patron-client relations with millions of poor voters. For this project, he needed substantial amount of money. Yet unlike Arab rentier states and Putin's Russia, Turkey did not have oil. Erdoğan, therefore, focused on construction projects and selling public lands in Istanbul. The Gezi protests occurred as a reaction to the combination of Erdoğan's authoritarian tendency, his insistence to rule until 2024, and passion for construction while ignoring environmental issues. Erdoğan declared that the Gezi Park in Istanbul's main square would be replaced by a rebuilding of an historic barrack to be used either as a mall or residency. In May 2013, the police and municipal officers began to bulldoze the park and started to evict the protester by using tear gas and burning their tents. This led to demonstrations that lasted two months and included millions of people. In order to motivate his religiously conservative followers against the protestors, Erdoğan claimed that the protestors attacked a headscarved woman and drank alcohol in a mosque; both were later revealed as false accusations. Erdoğan and his followers also defined the Gezi events as a Western conspiracy. Due to the police's brutal crackdown, 11 people died and about 8,000 were wounded. By revealing Erdoğan's

authoritarian attitudes, the Gezi events discredited the idea of the 'Turkish model' of a functional combination of Islam and democracy in the international media.

The corruption probe, which began in December 2013, further questioned Erdoğan's regime. In the first 'wave' of the probe, prosecutors accused three cabinet ministers of receiving bribes from Iranian businessman Reza Zarrab. Several others, including a fourth minister, were accused of corruption on various issues such as government tenders and construction projects. Following the resignation of these ministers, the second 'wave' started with accusations against Erdoğan himself as well as his son, Bilal. Erdoğan defined the probe as a coup d'état staged by the 'parallel state' - an alias he used to imply the Hizmet movement. Erdoğan called Gülen 'a false prophet,' while calling the Hizmet movement's followers 'spies, collaborators of a US-based conspiracy, lovers of Israel, viruses, blood-seeking vampires, and assassins.' He declared an 'Independence War,' and has dubbed those who criticised his policies, including the main opposition CHP, Doğan media group, and Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen Associations, as 'traitors'.

But that was not enough. He also reassigned hundreds of prosecutors and tens of thousands of police officers, and ordered police chiefs to disobey prosecutors and judges in new corruption cases. Nevertheless, he could not stop the leakage of legal evidence, such as wiretapped phone conversations and indictments, to the Internet. The leaked conversations were about Erdoğan's villas acquired in exchange of doing favours for his cronies, his way of controlling media outlets, personal interference in governmental tenders, ambition to control judicial institutions, and interference in some court cases. Erdoğan confirmed some of these conversations, while denying others, such as the one in which Minister Egemen Bağış allegedly ridiculed the Qur'an. One particular recording had the biggest impact. Erdoğan rejected it as a 'montage,' but also said that his encrypted phone was tapped, which was perceived as an unintentional way of accepting the recording. The leader of CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, defined the recording as authentic as Mount Ararat. Some expert reports have authenticated the recording, which allegedly included five phone calls between Erdoğan and his son (Bilal) on the day the corruption graft began. In the recording, Erdoğan allegedly asked his son

to re-locate a large sum of money kept in houses of the family members. Bilal allegedly called his father back, toward the end of the day, reporting that he had handled most of the money but still had 30 million euros to dissolve. The recording emerged on Twitter, and watched about five million times in five days on YouTube. On 20 March 2014, Erdoğan said in his party's mass meeting: 'we will wipe out Twitter...I don't care what the international community says. They will see the Turkish republic's strength.' Few hours later access to Twitter was blocked for a day. Since then, the Turkish government has temporarily shut down Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook several times.

The AKP-controlled media produced a host of excuses for the corruption scandal, and claimed that money confiscated by the police was collected for Islamic services. For example, the police found \$6 million hidden in shoeboxes in the house of the Chief Executive Officer of Halkbank, who allegedly received the money as a bribe from Zarrab. They claimed that the money was not a bribe, but a donation for an Imam-Hatip school. Erdoğan repeatedly defended their narrative, defining Zarrab as a 'philanthropist.' The debate was extended to a discussion of some fatwas that permitted the government to request companies to make donations to particular Islamic associations in exchange of governmental tenders. This triangular arrangement between government, companies, and pro-government Islamic associations created a major public debate in Turkey – not just about corruption, but also secularism, because it meant secular associations and dissenting Islamic associations were facing discrimination.

Despite the corruption scandal and Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian one-man rule, the AKP maintained its dominant position in the March 2014 local elections with 43 per cent of the votes, and Erdoğan was elected as president in August 2014 with 52 per cent of the votes. The fact that the conservative voters were not too concerned about corruption or authoritarianism created a major debate in Turkey on the linkage between Muslim conservatism and public ethics. Moreover, Erdoğan declared a 'witch hunt' against the Hizmet movement. Hundreds of alleged members of the movement, including prosecutors, journalists, policemen, and military officers, were detained and held in prison for about a year without indictment. When two judges decided to release some detainees, Erdoğan's

followers in the judiciary ignored the court's decision and even detained the two judges themselves. The media and the judiciary under his control criminalised the Hizmet movement by declaring it to be a 'terrorist organisation.' Erdoğan repeatedly targeted Bank Asya, which is affiliated with the movement. He declared that the bank was 'already sunk'; and when the Bank Asya did not sink, despite deliberate speculation, he got the bank confiscated. Erdoğan's regime also opened a case against the movement's charity arm, Kimse Yok Mu, defining it as a terrorist organisation. Thousands of bureaucrats lost their jobs, including 1,150 of Turkey's top 1,725 police chiefs, accused of being members of Hizmet. Erdoğan also closed Turkey's police academy and police high schools arguing that they were dominated by Hizmet's followers. Over 2,000 students of these institutions automatically lost their rights without any judicial process.

Since December 2013, when Erdoğan began his campaign against Hizmet, the media under his control has maligned Hizmet almost daily, including absurd assertions about Gülen himself: he is alleged to be a freemason, his followers were Mossad spies, the Brookings Institute was under Hizmet's control, and Gülen personally ordered the assassination of Erdoğan's daughter. Hizmet is not the only group Erdoğan is demonising, but it has become Erdoğan's main target for the last two years, because it is perceived as the main barrier against Erdoğan's project to establish a personal hegemony over both the state and Islam.

The project faced a setback in the July 2015 parliamentary elections. The AKP received 41 per cent of the votes, a substantial decrease from its previous share (50 per cent) in 2011 elections. This decline becomes significant if seen in its specific context: the AKP, and Turkey's supposedly 'neutral' president, turned anything they could, including Islamic symbols, public institutions (except the armed forces), public funds, half of the TV channels and newspapers, and patron-client relations, as instruments in their electoral campaign. An AKP-controlled newspaper even declared the opposition as 'Crusaders'. Despite its declining popularity the AKP has stayed in power and pursued its two main objectives – to maintain the personal authority of Erdoğan and to conduct a witch hunt against Hizmet. Yet, the AKP is unlikely to make any progress in terms of re-establishing

the rule of law, reviving democratic institutions, and re-emphasising Islamic ethics.

Only a few years ago, Turkey was hailed as an ideal prototype, a demonstration of the true compatibility of Islam and democracy – not least in the pages of *Critical Muslim*. Unfortunately this promise has turned out to be false, especially in the last two years. Erdoğan had pledged to make Turkey a member of the EU and to draft a new, liberal constitution. After a decade in power, what he has actually built is a 1500 room palace for himself at a cost of around \$1 billion! Thanks to the presidential dreams of Erdoğan, the ‘Turkish model’ has failed.

There are, however, a few lessons to be learned from observing the Turkish experience:

First, Islamism is a powerful popular rhetoric with a strong appeal to the conservative masses but it does not have any serious policies to deal with social, economic, and political problems. Most modern political and economic institutions and principles, such as separation of power, have Western origins. Thus, Islamists’ anti-Western stance and rhetoric become a barrier against effective institution building and deployment of liberal principles in countries where they come to power. The increasingly anti-Western rhetoric of Erdoğan coincided with his claim that Turkey should embrace an ‘à la Turca presidentialism’ in which there would be no checks and balances, and the president would control both legislature and judiciary.

Second, assertive secularists and Islamists in Turkey have a great deal in common. While they accuse each other, they are equally devoted to nepotism, illiberalism, and leader-centric politics. Conservative Muslims are as formalistic as assertive secularists. In Turkey, the Kemalist idea of defining modernity with drinking alcohol and wearing swimsuits is reflected by the AKP supporters’ reduction which defines a true Muslim as not drinking alcohol and wearing headscarves. For dissenting groups, such as the Hizmet movement, the recent Turkish experience shows that an Islamist regime is as dangerous as an assertive secularist regime, in terms of restrictions over their freedoms of expression, association, and education, and even their property rights.

Third, ends should not justify means. The Machiavellian obsession to stay in power has been too costly for Turkish Islamists. Erdoğan became the

most powerful leader of modern Turkey, only second to Atatürk. Yet in order to attain and maintain power, Islamists gave up most of their ethical principles – bringing conservative Islam itself into disrepute. In the post-Erdoğan era, Turkey may experience a new secularist wave in which conservative Muslims are blamed and held responsible for creating and maintaining an authoritarian regime.