

The bully's rise to power: Erdoğan's conquest of Turkey

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During his reign Erdoğan has defeated and silenced political rivals and allies alike, consolidating his grip on power. Now, he's after the jackpot.

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One of the most interesting things to watch in Turkish politics over the past ten years or so has been one man's ability to come out triumphant in every single one of his battles for political hegemony. There is not a single example of someone daring to question President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authority and then managing to avoid political liquidation. It has always gone one of two ways: retraction of criticism or political/economic wilderness.

Erdoğan has often been called a kabadayi (Turkish for "ruffneck" or "bully") by his opponents. Although primarily used to defame the Turkish president, Erdoğan has successfully owned this characterization and has undoubtedly reaped its rewards. His artistic extraction of political points from traditional sympathy for the kabadayi — ever-present in Turkish folklore, cinema and current TV dramas like Kurtlar Vadisi — has afforded him "leadership qualities" that his adversaries simply cannot match.

Although President Erdoğan's personal traits have played a significant — if not decisive — role in his hegemonic ascendancy, the sovereignty over and appropriation of the country's economic production has surely been an important source of motivation. Both political power and economic capital can be accumulated; more often than not, the accumulation of both is positively correlated. It is the story of this correlation during Erdoğan's reign that requires closer inspection.

Before 2002, Turkish economic clout was largely based in Istanbul in the hands of the "White Turks" — the term popularly used in Turkey to describe the elitist, secular, urban population from the west of Turkey. The headquarters of all the major corporations were — and still are — based in Istanbul, the economic capital of Turkey. Many political scientists and commentators would even agree that the heads of these corporations, together with the politically dominant military of the time, enjoyed greater political capital than any of the political parties in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey at the time.

THE RISE OF THE GREEN TURKS

Until the 1980s the economies of cities like Konya and Kayseri, home to the “Green Turks” — a new term describing the aspiring bourgeoisie among the religious, conservative, mainly rural population — in Central Anatolia, could be considered the periphery of Istanbul, which remained the center of political and economic power in the country. Istanbul alone is allocated roughly one-sixth of the 550 deputies elected to the Turkish parliament.

Although economically vibrant, “Green” capital from Central Anatolia was unable to fully utilize the freedom afforded by the free market and threaten Istanbul’s undisputed dominance over economic production. Politically and economically “White” capital effectively capped the “Green” potential for expansion. It was within this context that political Islam would reemerge as a political force in Turkey; a trend that had effectively been eliminated, or at the very least pushed underground, by the young secular generals who built the Turkish Republic in their own image.

It was Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the Refa Partisi (“Welfare Party”), who broke new ground for political Islam by achieving significant election victories in the mid-1990s. Around the same time, an Islamic cleric named Fethullah Gülen was making headlines in the Turkish media after sermons in high-profile mosques around the country in which he called for systemic change in the direction of a more Islamic state. It is well documented that these two men never liked each other.

While Gülen was meeting with secular prime ministers like Tansu Ciller and Bulent Ecevit, he never once publicly met Erbakan. What seemed to be a natural alliance never materialized and eventually both men, independently of each other, were discharged from mainstream politics in Turkey by the still almighty “White” alliance — Erbakan via a “postmodern coup” in 1997 that dismantled his already frail coalition government, and Gülen via self-imposed exile in 1999.

During this time, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül, Bulent Arinc and Abdulatif Sener were the students of Erbakan, until they defected to form the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001, with the economic backing of Erbakan’s nemesis, Fethullah Gülen, and the comparatively adolescent Central Anatolian bourgeoisie. Less than a year after it was formed, the AKP won a majority in the 2002 general elections. The partnership paid off, and after almost 90 years in hiding, political Islam found itself ruling the Turkish Republic. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was the obvious leader of the movement, but by no means was he messianic — not yet anyway.

Although the “White Turks” knew that they were dealt a heavy blow, the AKP did its best not to make them feel this way. The memories of Erbakan’s overthrow and Gülen’s exile were all too vivid, and so the AKP softened the transition by internalizing “White” values: EU accession remained a priority, reform packages for minorities were drafted, relations with the West were solidified, and civil liberties were enhanced to some extent.

The “Green” AKP, in short, acted as a good “White” government. There was too much at stake, the old elite was constantly sniffing around for a weaknesses in the new unsecular government. And the AKP admittedly did very well for itself, even managing to convert certain portions of the “White” sector — both private and military — to its side.

THE MERGING OF THE AKP AND THE STATE

The first term of the AKP government passed by in an atmosphere in which the state bureaucracy and the Islamist movement were busy sizing each other up. The most severe crisis for the AKP in

this period occurred in early 2008, when a case was brought before the constitutional court that sought closure of the party over its “anti-secular” activities. The AKP narrowly escaped closure when the number of constitutional judges voting in favor of closing down the party was just one short.

Both the parliamentary elections and the constitutional referendum of 2007 were big victories for the AKP, but it was not until after the Constitutional Court’s ruling that the battle for power between the Kemalist, “White” establishment and the AKP had finally come to an end. After this, and with the help of tens of thousands of Gülen’s students inside the state bureaucracy, the “Green” alliance began to consolidate its political power.

The renowned Turkish journalist Hasan Cemal referred to this as the “Ankarafication” of the AKP. Political Islam was taking its revenge on the Republic: Fethullah Gülen, who does not believe in parliamentary politics, was deliberately positioning his followers in the bureaucracy to “change the system from within”, and the Central Anatolian bourgeoisie was finally able to fulfill its economic potential. Thus the AKP’s second term can be defined as the stage in which the party became the state and the state became the party.

The increasingly self-confident AKP subsequently declared war on the military establishment through the “Ergenekon trials” in which many serving generals accused of plotting to overthrow the government were imprisoned. At the same time, “White Turks” were threatened to stay in line, with arguably the most prominent “White Turk” and media mogul — Aydın Doğan — being slapped with a fine of billions of dollars in 2009 for tax evasion. Although it took the better part of ten years, the AKP’s takeover of the state was complete and there were no external threats left to reverse the process.

The AKP now had absolute power. A grammatical adjustment to this over-used quote could not be more appropriate here: “power corrupted; absolute power corrupted absolutely.” It is important here to specify that it was not only Erdoğan who had been corrupted by this absolute power — they all were. With the “White Turks” subdued and the military castrated, the economic, political and bureaucratic resources of the country were at the mercy of the AKP cadres; a sight that would water the mouth of those who for so long had been bullied by the very institutions they were now able to pillage.

But it was a curse in disguise.

THE BREAK BETWEEN AKP AND THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT

It was this sight of pillaging that would lead the undefeated coalition into a relentless internal fight to the death, in which the last man standing would take the booty all for himself. The cracks first began to appear in newspaper columns. Columnists writing for pro-Gülen papers began to veer away from their editorial policy of unconditional love for the AKP government. Similarly, in the pro-government papers columnists were no longer filling column-inches with sonnets on the saintliness of Fethullah Gülen.

Then, on February 7, 2012, all hell broke loose. Special Prosecutor Sadrettin Sarikaya ordered the head of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Hakan Fidan, to give a statement on meetings he had had — as the government’s special envoy — with PKK leaders in Oslo as part of what is now popularly called the “Oslo Peace Process”.

The Turkish Prime Minister at the time, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, would later define this moment as “the day we saw the real face of the parallel structure,” using the term used by government

supporters to describe and define the Gülen movement. This day was a huge milestone. Until then, the AKP in its totality had governed the country in unison. However, just like an irreversible chemical reaction, the events of February 7 dealt an irreversible blow to what from the outside seemed an unbreakable bond. The Gülen movement was the first to be purged from government and deprived of the booty.

The scale of this fallout cannot be overstated. The ensuing carnage was nothing short of surreal. The 10-year period leading to February 7 was more than enough time for both the cadres of Fethullah Gülen and the rest of the AKP to infiltrate the judiciary and security services from top to bottom. If February 7 was a milestone, the period since has been a bare knuckle cage fight.

In the summer of 2013, millions of people across Turkey took to the streets to denounce the government's Islamist turn, demand Erdoğan's resignation and to promote civil liberties in what has become known as the Gezi Uprising. The authorities' response was swift, violent and without compromise. Several protestors were killed, and hundreds injured. One of the outspoken critics of the violent crackdown orchestrated by Erdoğan was Gülen.

Over the course of the next months, while Erdoğan and the AKP government rushed to discharge or ostracize any pro-Gülen bureaucrat or sympathizer, the Gülen movement began releasing horrifically incriminating secret recordings of Erdoğan and several AKP ministers. While Erdoğan and the ministers deemed the tapes a "conspiracy", they never falsified the content.

In the end, it was Fethullah Gülen who naively overplayed his hand, possibly thinking that his agents in the bureaucracy would at least ensure a fair duel. Erdoğan, on the other hand, fell back on his Kabadayi personality and weathered the tempestuous storm. The coalition that had digested all worthy adversaries before was now turning on itself — and Fethullah Gülen was to be the first victim.

THE MERGING OF ERDOĞAN AND THE STATE

This left Abdullah Gül and Bulent Arinc, both co-founders of the AKP along with Erdoğan, as the most influential voices that still had any chance of standing up against Erdoğan. At the time of the fallout between the AKP and the Gülen movement, Abdullah Gül was occupying the largely symbolic presidential office of the Turkish Republic and Bulent Arinc was the deputy prime minister. They were the only members of the Turkish executive to have the audacity to ever so slightly question Erdoğan's hegemony.

Today, both men have had their fates sealed. In 2014, Erdoğan, who had previously stated that he would not run for office again, became the first elected president of the Turkish Republic. The outgoing president, Abdullah Gül, has not been in active politics since. Bulent Arinc, who was not a candidate in the last general elections due to a three-term limit in the AKP's own party charter, was not even given a symbolic position in the administration. He is now openly critical of Erdoğan whenever he gets the chance.

Erdoğan, on the other hand, is now flying solo. The poorly concealed ousting of the current prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu — presented to the public as a "voluntary resignation", but seen across the board as Erdoğan consolidating his solitary rule — is but the latest example of the President sending his critics, no matter how moderate, off into the political wilderness. It would be no exaggeration to define the third and fourth terms of the AKP government as the terms in which Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the state and the state became Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

This pursuit of a one-man hegemony, however, is far from over. Although the current constitution is arguably not even worth the paper it is written on, Erdoğan — who, as president, has clearly stated that he does not respect the decisions of the Supreme Court — is pushing for a new constitution which will give him the presidential system he craves and has theoretically crafted already.

Today, Turkey is led by a man who has defeated almost all of his political rivals and allies. In the process, he and his family have pocketed millions — if not billions — of dollars. It is he who decides which newspapers are to be published and which ones are not, which columnists get to write and which ones do not, which television channels get to air and which ones do not — and most worryingly, which problems get to be solved and which ones do not.

THE KURDISH MOVEMENT AS THE FINAL OBSTACLE

Over the past decade, Erdoğan's rule has been characterized by a Machiavellian pragmatism that has earned him as much admirers as enemies. He brokered deals with opponents when it facilitated the promotion of his political agenda, and just as easily turned his back on former allies when they were no longer needed. Not taking any risks, Erdoğan would make sure to strip his adversaries of all political power if and when they grew too strong.

This has been the case with the "White" Turkish liberals, the military establishment, Gülen's Cemaat and the Kurdish movement. Throughout the AKP's rule, there have been multiple opportunities to bring the decades-old conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state to a peaceful end. But, while paying lip service to the promotion of peace, the AKP pulled the plug every time the political costs became too high. Significant progress towards peace and colorful promises were made in the run-up to elections and referendums, only to be forgotten and discarded as soon as the party had banked the Kurdish vote.

The Kobane crisis of 2014 and the Turkish government's refusal to come to the aid of the Kurdish town under siege from ISIS was a crucial turning point in which many Kurds in Turkey finally lost their trust in the AKP's bid for peace. They were proven right after the June 2015 elections in which the HDP — a leftist party with its roots in the Kurdish freedom movement — booked an electoral victory by passing the ten percent electoral threshold, thus denying the AKP a majority in parliament. In response, Erdoğan shed the cloak of a pro-peace politician, and launched an all-out war on the Kurdish movement in the country's southeast.

In this light, the AKP-orchestrated war in Turkey's Kurdish regions fits the pattern of Erdoğan's rise to power. Now that the Kurds are no longer needed to facilitate the AKP's electoral victories, and the Kurdish movement appears stronger than ever, there's only one way for Erdoğan to deal with this problem: trying to destroy the movement once and for all.

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P.S.

* ROARMag. May 18, 2016:
<https://roarmag.org/essays/erdogan-rise-to-power-turkey/>

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