

COMMENTARY

No.417

Monday, 10 April 2017

Erdogan's Lust for Power is Destroying Turkey's Democracy

Alon Ben-Meir

New York University

During the past few months I interviewed scores of Turkish citizens who escaped from Turkey following the unsuccessful military coup, fearing for their lives. Many of them left their families behind, terrified of what to expect next. Although it has the potential of becoming a major player on the global stage, Turkey's brilliant prospects are being squandered because of President Erdogan's insatiable lust for power. He has used an iron fist to take whatever measure, however corrupt, to manipulate the rules and undermine the basic tenets of Turkey's democracy—freedom and human rights.

I have been puzzled for some time as to why Erdogan decided a few years ago to go on a rampage to systematically reverse the huge social, political, and judiciary progress he himself successfully championed. Had he guarded these reforms and protected human rights, he would have realized his dream of rising to the stature of Turkey's revered founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

He has been serving first as prime minister and now president for 15 years. Nevertheless, his hunger for absolute power seems to have no limits, prompting him to take extraordinary and systematic measures to neutralize any source that challenges him, including the judiciary, press, opposition parties, military, and academia. He uses scare tactics to silence his detractors, and provides economic assistance and other incentives to his cronies to ensure their continuing support while playing his political opponents against one another to reap every ounce of advantage. Most recently, he pressed the parliament to amend the constitution to codify his dictatorial powers, which will allow him to serve two more terms ending in 2029.

Following the unsuccessful July 2016 coup, 3,228 prosecutors in the civil and administrative jurisdiction (including 518 judges) were relocated, reshuffled, or demoted from their positions. Furthermore, 88,000 policemen, journalists, educators, and other officials have been detained, and 43,000 arrested. In July 2016, the parliament approved a bill allowing Erdogan to appoint a quarter of the judges at the Council of State, and new judicial appointments will be carried out by the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), which is under the jurisdiction of the Justice Ministry and by extension his own control.

Many attorneys were charged with belonging to the Gulen movement, which is deemed to be the sworn enemy of Erdogan, either through direct association or by having the most tenuous of ties. A lawyer who had an 18-year career in Kayseri had to flee Turkey because he and his law partners were representing schools connected to the Gulen movement. Due to that association, they were deemed suspicious by state authorities, despite the fact that the lawyers themselves were unaffiliated in any way with Gulen. Scores of lawyers were arrested and labelled as Gulenist just for having a common encrypted messaging app (that is, *WhatsApp*) on their phones.

For Erdogan, the coup attempt was a “gift from God” that gave him the license to purge any individual or organization perceived to be his foe, particularly when his popularity was waning.

The thousands of officials who were arbitrarily removed have not been replaced, leading to obstructions in the legal process. Moreover, attorneys who have been arrested have been unable to obtain legal representation, as any potential lawyer would subsequently be accused of association with the Gulen movement, thus opposing the state itself.

Given the history of military coups, Erdogan decided to emasculate the military by discharging nearly 3,000 officers and issuing a decree that enabled his government to issue direct orders to the heads of all military branches over the head of the chief of the general staff. In addition, in August 2016 he appointed the deputy prime ministers and the ministers of justice, interior, and foreign affairs to participate in the Supreme Military Council (SMC), which decides on promotions of generals and other issues related to the Turkish military.

Immediately following the military coup he enacted a state of emergency that allows the government to rule by decree and fire public employees at will. Security officials, terrorism suspects, and other alleged ‘enemies of the state’ can be detained for up to 30 days without charge, and the state is under no obligation to put them on trial. There are also allegations of torture and abuse of prisoners. In January 2017, the emergency law was extended again for three months.

To stifle his political opponents, in May 2016 he pressed the Turkish parliament to approve a bill stripping MPs of immunity from prosecution. This was widely perceived as an assault against minority Kurdish MPs who could be linked by the government to ‘terror activities’ and subjected to prosecution.

To codify the president’s absolute powers, Erdogan moved (with the support of his AK party) to change the president from a primarily ceremonial role to the sole executive head of state, and eliminate the Prime Minister position. The new constitution will also give the president power to enact some laws by decree, appoint judges and ministers, create at least one vice-president post, and increase the number of MPs to 600 from 550. In addition, it lowers the minimum age for lawmakers from 25 to 18, which will secure the political support of the next generation.

This is a move that constitutional law professor Ergun Özbudun, who was asked by Erdogan in 2007 to draw up a constitution, criticized, saying: “A democratic presidential system has checks and balances – this would be one-man rule.”

Most importantly, as a devout Muslim he skilfully uses Islam as a tool to further promote his political ambition without the need to produce any evidence for the correctness of his political agenda. When Erdogan became mayor of Istanbul in 1994, he stood as a candidate for the pro-Islamist Welfare Party. He went to jail for 4 months in 1999 for religious incitement after he publicly read a nationalist poem including the lines: “The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers.”

The number of mosques has grown from 60,000 in 1987 to more than 85,000 in 2015. Recently, a slew of government initiatives has pushed Islam deeper into Turkey’s secular education system. Examples include a plan to build mosques in 80 different state universities and convert one Istanbul University into an Islamic studies centre. In December 2015, “a government-backed education council recommended extending compulsory religious classes to all primary school pupils, as well as adding an extra hour of obligatory religious classes for all high school students.”

The climate in Turkey is such that even an insolent reference to Erdogan is grounds for criminal charges; over 2,000 have been indicted under such laws. Widespread phone tapping is no longer a secret, leading to fears of expressing oneself truthfully in phone conversations. To be sure, ordinary Turks do not discuss politics in public and refrain from criticizing government officials, fearing that a secret agent may be listening to the conversation. There is only one opposition television station left operating and one such newspaper (Cumhuriyet), but almost half of the newspaper’s reporters, columnists, and executives have nonetheless been jailed.

I have tremendous admiration for the Turkish peoples' creativity, resourcefulness, and determination to make Turkey a thriving democracy, but they are polarised between the secular and Islamic worlds—conditions in which Erdogan can further capitalize on his authoritarian political agenda.

Perhaps it is time for the Turkish people to rise and demand the restoration of the country's democratic principles—the same principles that made Erdogan the most revered leader during his first 10 years in power and that could have made him the new Atatürk of the Turkish people.

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://alonben-meir.com/writing/erdogans-lust-power-destroying-turkeys-democracy/>

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in US and international newspapers. Email: alon@alonben-meir.com

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy