

The strongman's dilemma: on Recep Tayyip Erdoan

[With the electoral victory last month](#), 64-year-old President Recep Tayyip Erdoan created history by becoming the longest serving ruler of Turkey. So far, that distinction belonged to Mustafa Kemal 'Atatürk', the founder of the Turkish republic, its first president from 1923 till his death in 1938.

Mr. Erdoan was Prime Minister from 2003 till 2014, when he was elected President. Having successfully conducted a referendum in April last year to convert Turkey into an executive presidency, he advanced the elections, which were not due till November 2019, to now return as an all-powerful President. Under the amended constitution, he can have two terms, and with another win in 2023, he could remain in position till 2028.

Reversing Atatürk's legacy

The collapse of the Ottoman empire with the end of World War I was the tectonic event that had enabled the founding of the Turkish republic and empowered Atatürk to transform Turkish society. He imposed Western norms of dress, Roman script for the language and a European legal system and calendar, converting the former Islamic caliphate into a secular republic. He was a popularly elected leader but implemented many of his reforms, which often generated opposition, with a degree of authoritarianism as Atatürk (Father of the Turks).

Who is Recep Tayyip Erdogan and how did he rise to absolute power in Turkey

In many ways, Mr. Erdoan is taking Turkey through a change of similar magnitude. He became Mayor of Istanbul in 1994 on the strength of the pro-Islamist Refah (Welfare Party), which was banned in 1998 and he was jailed for 'inciting religious hatred'. He re-emerged to set up the moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001. Under his rule, Turkey has softened its secular image by giving greater importance to Islam. His anti-West rhetoric, sharper after an unsuccessful coup in July 2016, marks a significant shift from a Western-oriented North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) member state negotiating for European Union (EU) membership to one seeking to join a Russia-China dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Traditional elites in the judiciary, military and civil service, often described as those identified with Kemalism and belonging to the urban, secular, Western-oriented intellectual classes, are being replaced by the more religiously oriented, conservative, provincially oriented elite. These changes have already begun and with another decade ahead, Mr. Erdoan is set to change the nature of the Turkish republic.

An all-powerful president

It is clear that Mr. Erdoan's gamble in advancing the elections and establishing an electoral alliance between his pro-Islamic AKP and the ultra-nationalist right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) has paid off. In the presidential election, he ensured a first round victory by winning 53% of the vote. In the parliamentary elections, the AKP won 42% of the vote, giving it 295 seats in the 600-member legislature. Together with 48 seats of the MHP, it provides a comfortable majority though it will be the first time in 16 years that the AKP will depend on a coalition partner. Elections were peaceful but hardly fair, having been conducted under a state of emergency, though an 87% turnout lends credibility to Mr. Erdoan's victory.

The making of a Sultan: the rise of Erdogan

Coming after the constitutional referendum undertaken last April, Turkey will now have an executive presidency. With the abolition of the post of the Prime Minister, Mr. Erdoan is both head of state and head of government with the power to appoint one or more vice presidents and cabinet members. The President will continue to head the AKP, can rule by decree and enjoys full powers to dissolve parliament. Theoretically, the parliament is empowered to investigate wrongdoings by the President to impeach him with two-thirds majority but this requires approval by the Supreme Court, where 12 of the 15 judges are presidential appointees.

Mr. Erdoan had made his preference for an executive presidency clear soon after he took over in 2014 after being Prime Minister for 11 years. The unsuccessful coup attempt (2016) reinforced his convictions and provided the opportunity. Fethullah Gülen, a cleric in exile in the U.S. for two decades, was held responsible and a purge of his supporters followed. More than 100,000 government officials have been dismissed by decree and another 50,000 are in jail pending trials. These include more than a thousand military officers (over a hundred of rank of general) accused of complicity in the coup. Nearly 200 media outlets suspected of Gulenist leanings have been closed, and 120 journalists are in detention. During the early years in power, Mr. Erdoan had worked closely with the Gulenists to break the stranglehold of the secular Kemalists, particularly in the military and the judiciary. The relationship broke down in 2013 when Mr. Erdoan's family members were subjected to investigations involving influence-peddling and corruption, ostensibly by Gulenist sympathisers who were increasingly troubled by Mr. Erdoan's authoritarian tendencies.

Growing challenges

Even with the domestic political opposition decimated and in disarray, Mr. Erdoan faces tough challenges, both at home and abroad. Turkey's economy has slowed down in recent years. Inflation is in double digits and, in 2018 the Turkish lira has declined by 20% in value. This has raised foreign debt levels even as stories about cronyism do the rounds negatively impacting the investment climate. Yet interest rates have been kept low for political reasons and this is unlikely to change till the municipal elections in March next year. The reason is that the large cities like Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir are the places which opposed the referendum and also voted against the AKP.

Turkey vigorously supported the Arab Spring hoping to use the AKP's ties with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which had become stronger, as a lever to strengthen its role in the Arab world. This backfired as Saudi Arabia changed track quickly seeing dangers of a reformist MB gaining ground. In Egypt, the military made a comeback, welcomed by the Saudi regime. Turkey was critical of Mohamed Morsi's ouster as President and relations with Egypt broke down. In the embargo coordinated by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt against Qatar, Turkey has come out strongly in support of Qatar.

The Syrian fallout

The worst fallout has been on account of Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict. An early vocal supporter for the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad, Turkey initially was the corridor for the stream of Islamic fighters going to Syria. Nearly three million Syrian refugees entered Turkey, creating challenges for the EU which is committed to paying Turkey billions to man the barricades amid growing tensions.

The environment dramatically changed with the growing threat of the Islamic State (IS) moving from Iraq into Syria and the establishment of the Caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014. As the U.S. started attacking the IS in Iraq, Russia intervened in 2015 to bolster Mr. Assad. Use of the NATO airbase at Incirlik made Turkey a target with the IS mounting a series of attacks, including

at Istanbul airport in 2016 which claimed over 40 lives.

Turkey cracked down hard on the Kurdish militants (PKK) just when the U.S. was equipping the Syrian Kurds (YPG) to take on the IS in northern Syria, leading to a spike in Kurdish militancy in Turkey and further straining Turkey's relations with the U.S. Mr. Erdoan decided to get closer to Russia (and Iran) instead though the price was accepting the continuation of Mr. Assad. It is negotiating for the S-400 anti-missile system with Russia, raising the prospects of U.S. sanctions on a NATO member.

Ironically, Mr. Erdoan may find that even as he has become all powerful, his polarising brand of politics makes it more difficult to tackle the economic and security challenges facing the country.

Rakesh Sood is a former diplomat and currently Distinguished Fellow at Observer Research Foundation. E-mail: rakeshsood2001@yahoo.com

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