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TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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From the Editors

Dear Friends,

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies is proud to present our latest issue of our monthly publication, *Turkeyscope*. This issue of *Turkeyscope* focuses on the June 24 Turkish elections and their ramifications on Turkish politics and the state mechanism, while underlining historical similarities between the founder of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Liane Silver contributed to this issue as assistant editor.

TURKEY'S ONE-MAN SHOW

Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

Despite all predictions, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in power since 2002, won a landslide victory once again in the first round of the snap elections that were held on June 24. With this triumph, and short of extraordinary circumstances, Erdoğan will continue to lead his country during the centenary celebrations of the Republic in 2023. This will enable him to break the record of the Republic's founder – Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – who was in office, de-facto and de-jure, for 18 years (1920-1938).

Similar to Atatürk, Erdoğan now rules the country with unhindered power. Thanks to the ongoing state of emergency, which was first declared after the failed coup attempt in 2016, as well as the 2017 referendum victory that turned Turkey into a presidential system, Erdoğan has begun to enjoy a sultan's power blunted by only cosmetic checks and balances. This has inevitably served his agenda of concentrating more power into his own hands, and has significantly contributed to the success of his campaign in the recent round of elections.

Notably, during the last election campaign, the Turkish president and his rivals did not fight on equal terms. While Erdoğan enjoyed the full power of the state apparatus and absolute media cooperation, his adversaries suffered from lack of media coverage. Kurdish People's Democratic Party's (Halkların Demokratik Partisi – HDP) presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş was even barred from meeting with his constituency, as he has been imprisoned since November 2016.

While this significantly overshadowed Erdoğan's victory, there is also another dimension working in favor of the Turkish president. He has not lost a single election campaign since 2002, and the most recent election results made it clear that Erdoğan is perhaps the most charismatic Turkish leader in recent memory. His growing concentration of power and his expanding popularity, edging toward canonization like Atatürk, invokes harsh criticism from his detractors. Nevertheless, as far as Turkish political history is concerned, Erdoğan's behavior of seeking to accumulate more power is not significantly different from that of other Turkish decision-makers such as Atatürk, İnönü, and Menderes, who ruled Turkey without relying on coalitions.

The ideological rifts within Turkish society fuel revulsion on the part of the Erdoğan's secular opposition; Erdoğan's 1150-room palace prompted fierce criticism from those who disapproved of his policies. However, while construction of such a compound might be considered a sign of corruption in many Western societies, the Turks, whose Ottoman past portrayed tremendous palaces as signs of power, do not necessarily see Erdoğan's new home as a sign of corruption but rather an essential instrument of a state in ascendance. Indeed, there are many Turks who criticize Erdoğan of extravagance; however, the same camp turns a blind eye when faced with the historical fact that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk spent his last days in Istanbul's Dolmabahçe Palace while enjoying his free time with his "yacht-toy," the Savarona which was bought by the state's treasury. Thanks to the lack of social media and media censorship in the late 1930s, Atatürk did not suffer from the same type of public criticism as Erdoğan.

Despite this, Atatürk certainly faces some criticism nowadays, as does Erdoğan. But taken as a whole, the Turkish people's admiration of Atatürk and Erdoğan in general reveals their perception of the type of behavior that is characteristic of their ideal leadership. In this respect, the majority of the Turkish people have no reservations awarding symbols of power such as palaces, statues, and even new coins, to their charismatic leaders.

Unsurprisingly, the aftermath of the elections immediately impacted Turkish politics and the state mechanism; Erdoğan has already begun to make drastic changes to the state. Having previously been challenged by his allies, namely former Turkish President Abdullah Gül and former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, it seems that Erdoğan no longer trusts his comrades in his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP). His recent choice of nominating technocrats to his new cabinet, beyond the few AKP officials who already proved their loyalty to him, indicates a new phenomenon of keeping the executive body of the state distant from his own party. By doing so, Erdoğan will most likely eliminate the chance that a charismatic rival might emerge from within his own party in the future. In the long run, most likely within 15 years, this policy may lead Turkey to a future crisis of leadership, assuming Erdoğan will succeed in re-election for two more terms as the new constitutional amendments permit.

As for the opposition, the situation is no better. By recruiting the Nationalist Movement Party's (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi – MHP) Devlet Bahçeli to his side, Erdoğan triggered a split within the MHP, which gave birth to Meral Akşener's Good Party (İyi Parti – İP). This maneuver was crucial, since Erdoğan also enjoys the support of the nationalist camp, which he would not want joining the opposition. The election results highlighted the success of this strategy. While turning Bahçeli into a dependent political ally, Erdoğan destroyed Meral Akşener's hopes of becoming the new face of the Turkish opposition.

Despite a bitter defeat, Muharrem İnce appears to have emerged as the new leader of the secular camp. However this “new hope” may trigger another "MHP-İP" scenario in the secular Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – CHP). The current chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who defeated İnce twice in the party primaries held in 2014 and 2018, significantly increased his popularity last year when he walked 432 km from Ankara to Istanbul in 25 days in what became called the March for Justice. Nevertheless, the recent results are already signaling the start of an old-new Byzantine-palace-style stab-in-the-back festival within the CHP. In the event of a non-compromise, the only winner of such a split would be Erdoğan.

The Turkish Armed Forces (Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri – TSK), once the watchdog of secularism and considered part of the checks and balances system in Turkish politics, lost its influence in the decision-making process as a result of the failed coup attempt. Despite his significant gains in the aftermath of that event, at the expense of the TSK, Erdoğan continues to entrench his authority within the army, and even displays his strength by not respecting the TSK's traditional customs. On July 9, the loudest and clearest step in this regard was taken with the nomination of Chief of Staff Hulusi Akar to the office of National Defense Minister, while he was not removed and had not resigned from his post in the TSK. The following day, this drastic and arbitrary move was institutionalized by a statutory decree promoting General Yaşar Güler to the office of Chief of Staff, replacing Akar.¹ Having shown the uselessness of army customs based in tradition, Erdoğan abolished the legendary National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu-MGK) and the Supreme Military Council (Yüksek Askeri Şura – YAŞ). Both bodies were once considered to be the most influential posts, and had enabled the TSK to interfere in the state's affairs and to nominate high-ranking generals. Erdoğan's act set a new precedent and sent a clear message to the

ranks of the TSK that President Erdoğan is the sole commander-in-chief of the TSK, while humiliating the office of the Chief of Staff and deeming it a “post of military personnel working with a monthly salary.”

Despite holding the desired jurisdictional powers, it seems that Erdoğan will not need to expand the state of emergency, which is currently set to end on July 19.² However, up until that point he may launch a blitz of "state of emergency statutory decrees" in order to pass controversial bills which the judiciary will not be able to cancel later.³ Some examples of such decrees include the confiscation of state theatres,⁴ allowing non-lawyers to act as judges,⁵ and nominating rectors of universities who do not hold the title of professor.⁶

These acts prove that Erdoğan sees himself as the social engineer of his "New Turkey," as Atatürk was for the "Old." In this new historical chapter, Turkey will undergo many more revolutionary changes, while Erdoğan's charismatic leadership will be strengthened through a neo-Atatürk-style canonization which will likely remain even after the end of his political term.

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Notes

¹ "Yeni Genelkurmay Başkanı Org. Yaşar Güler oldu," *Karar*, July 10, 2018, <http://www.karar.com/guncel-haberler/yeni-genelkurmay-baskani-org-yasar-guler-oldu-908168#>.

² "OHAL 19 Temmuz sonrası kendiliğinden kalkacak," *Akşam*, June 26, 2018, <https://www.aksam.com.tr/siyaset/ohal-19-temmuz-sonrasi-c2kendiliginden-kalkacak-c2/haber-748578>.

³ Erdoğan Teziç, *Anayasa Hukuku*, (Istanbul, Beta, 2004) p.36.

⁴ "İlk kararnameyle sanata darbe: Devlet Tiyatroları kapatıldı," *Cumhuriyet*, July 10, 2018, <http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/kultur-sanat/1022912/ilk-kararnameyle-sanata-darbe-Devlet-Tiyatrolari-kapatildi.html>.

⁵ "Herhangi Bir 4 Yıllık Lisans Mezununa İdari Hakimlik Yolu Açıldı," *İşilanları Kariyer*, July 10, 2018, <https://www.isilanlarikariyer.com/herhangi-bir-4-yillik-lisans-mezununa-idari-hakimlik-yolu-acildi-6497h.htm>.

⁶ "Professor background not 'prerequisite' for rectorship in Turkey: New decree," *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 10, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/professor-background-not-prerequisite-for-rectorship-in-turkey-new-decree-134410>.