

In the past year, Turkey has taken two giant steps away from democratisation and towards authoritarian one-man rule by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The twin catalysts were the abortive coup of 15 July 2016, and the referendum of April this year that changed Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system (without any of the checks and balances of countries such as the United States or France).

The coup was a disaster for Turkey. It unleashed a 'cleansing' process (the term used by Erdogan and his supporters) reminiscent of the Stalinist purges of the Soviet Union in the 1930's. Some have described the coup as Turkey's equivalent of the Reichstag fire - though the coup was genuine, traumatic and not under any circumstances to be condoned. A State of Emergency was declared a few days later and remains in force.

More than 200,000 public servants - civil and military - have been dismissed or suspended since the coup and are without salary, pension or means of employment. Some 50,000 people are in prison, including more than 200 journalists and the leadership of the Kurdish parliamentary opposition. More journalists are incarcerated in Turkey than in Russia, China and Iran combined. Roughly 8,000 academics were dismissed after signing a petition critical of the army's brutal counterinsurgency tactics in densely populated urban areas in south-eastern (i.e., Kurdish) Turkey. At the same time, their passports were withdrawn - a double punishment. The state has seized or closed down businesses and newspapers allegedly owned by Gulenists worth more than \$8 billion. Due process is conspicuous by its absence.

The ostensible targets of the purge are members of the 'Fetullah Gulen Terror Organisation', allegedly responsible for the coup. But the net is plainly spread far wider since Gulenists are followers of a shadowy Sufi brotherhood led by a Sunni mystic resident in Pennsylvania yet those arrested include ardent leftists, secularists and Alevis whose political and religious views are very different from those of Gulen or non-existent. In fact, we are seeing a crackdown on alleged terrorism so broad as to encompass respected journalists accused of 'subliminal' support of Gulen or the Kurdish insurgency, the PKK, or even both!

The other major development in the past year was the referendum held on 16 April 2017 to change Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system. Erdogan campaigned heavily, playing to the public's paranoia about the threat from terrorism and foreign plots, manipulating the media and ensuring a blizzard of propaganda for a yes vote. Advocates of 'no' were hardly seen or heard. Yet the official result was close: 51.4% yes, 48.6% no. Since the referendum was more about Erdogan than the system of government, it confirmed what we already knew, namely that the voting population of Turkey is polarised pretty well 50/50 for and against him.

The result fell far short of what the President and his acolytes (he does not have colleagues) were expecting. They had counted on a yes vote of 56 or 57%. Erdogan always leans well to the right in the run-up to elections, and the combined votes of his AKP and the ultra-nationalist MHP in the November 2015 election amounted to 61.4%. So, 10% of votes from Erdogan's core constituency were lost somewhere en route. Worse still from his point of view, there have been allegations of vote rigging and ballot

stuffing, and well placed third party observers of my acquaintance do not dismiss them as unfounded.

This raises the question whether the April referendum represents a watershed and a Pyrrhic victory for Erdogan. He now controls all the levers of power in Turkey. But with sole power comes sole responsibility. If things go wrong, there is no one else to blame other than foreign plots - and even that reliable old saw must be wearing a bit thin. Moreover, whereas AKP could expect to win a parliamentary majority with only 40% or less of the vote, thanks to Turkey's undemocratic 10% parliamentary threshold, Erdogan will need 50%+1 of the popular vote to be re-elected in 2019.

It is evident that Erdogan's thoughts are already very much focused on 2019. If I were him, I would be worried. Despite unexpected growth in the first quarter of 2017, thanks to short-term measures to kick-start the economy, the economic auguries are not good. Inflation and unemployment are at recent highs. Investment is low and interest rates high. The Turkish lira has recovered a little against the dollar but is still way down on the levels of 2015, making the many loans taken out in US dollars difficult to service. Crony capitalism is coming home to roost. Tourism, a mainstay of the economy, remains a disaster area though Russians have begun to return to Antalya.

Tourism is not the only problem area. Turkish foreign policy is also in distress. The European Parliament has voted to suspend Turkey's accession negotiations. Turkey has serious differences with nearly all her neighbours: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt and others. In Syria, the United States has decided to make the Kurds their strategic ally, ignoring strenuous objections from Ankara. Turkey's aspirations to a significant role in Middle East affairs have been shown to be fanciful.

Erdogan seems far better at controlling domestic issues than foreign policy, where his impulsive side has been dominant, not to his advantage - publicly taking the side of Qatar against Saudi, the UAE and Bahrain being only the latest example. But the hitherto weak and acquiescent parliamentary opposition has recently shown unexpected signs of life, notably the striking success of the current March for Justice on foot the 350 miles from Ankara to Istanbul, led by the leader of the Opposition (Kemal Kilicdaroglu of Ataturk's old party and himself both a Kurd and an Alevi).

Erdogan is an avid reader of private polls. His approach to the 2019 presidential elections will be influenced by what he reads there. This has particular relevance to the Kurdish issue. Since August 2015 he has pursued an almost exclusively security-based approach, abandoning any attempt at dialogue with the Kurdish leadership - most of whom are currently in prison. The question preoccupying him will be: can I rely on the religious/nationalist vote to get me over the 50%+1 line in 2019, or do I need to resume some type of negotiating process with the Kurds, including the PKK leadership in jail and in the Qandil Mountains of Northern Iraq? If so, how far can I go to woo the Kurdish vote without losing nationalist support?

This is the sort of triangulation at which Erdogan excels. There is no current sign of a change of policy - the drones are flying up and down the valleys and mountains of northern Iraq and the South-East 24 hours a day, and there is a steady trickle of casualties on both sides. Each side proclaims that it distrusts the other, rejects a

ceasefire and sees no point in dialogue. But both know that there can be no military solution to this 40-year conflict. Erdogan will also be keenly aware that although most Kurds voted 'no' in the referendum a sizeable and slowly growing minority have sided with him and AKP in recent elections. He will not regard them as a lost cause. Moreover, if the MHP are an unreliable ally, who knows.....

It is not yet clear which way Erdogan will jump. Depending on how the economy develops, he might even bring forward the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 2019 to 2018. I doubt if he would take the risk of making the major compromises necessary for a settlement of the Kurdish issue - recognition of Kurdish identity, cultural and language rights, significant measures of devolution and decentralisation - since this might cost him a sizeable chunk of his core electoral support. But there is plenty Erdogan could do short of that as elections approach to signal a willingness, such as releasing the Kurdish parliamentary leadership from prison and resuming dialogue with the emblematic imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan. No doubt, the possibility of a more supple policy on the Kurdish areas of Syria is likely also to come into the mix.

What is for sure is that President Erdogan will be thinking all this through, planning and strategising, reading the polls, intent on giving himself and AKP the best chance of success in the elections. One big unknown is whether the opposition can unite in support of a credible presidential candidate to stand against Erdogan. I would be surprised if 'divide and rule' were far from the President's mind. There's a lot to play for.



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