

At first sight, President Erdogan appears to hold all the cards. An executive president within a highly centralised system, with all-encompassing authority, a tame judiciary and none of the checks and balances of, say, the United States, he does not face re-election until 2023. The overwhelming mass of the media offer uncritical support. Erdogan has a comfortable majority in Parliament, thanks to AKP's electoral alliance with the ultra-nationalist MHP, and can anyway rule by decree. He controls all the levers of power, including the army. Thousands of his real or suspected opponents are in prison. Anyone who steps out of line faces dismissal and/or prosecution, often on implausible grounds of membership of or support for a terror organisation. Recently elected mayors in the Kurdish majority South East have been replaced through administrative fiat by state officials. There is an atmosphere of intimidation. People are afraid to speak out.

Yet all is not well in the state of Turkey. The loss by AKP of Turkey's three largest cities (Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir), which together account for half of national GDP, in municipal elections this Spring dented Erdogan's image of invincibility. Istanbul was an especially bitter blow since it was for many years his power base and he was mayor from 1994 to 1998. The economy is in serious trouble, thanks to over reliance on the construction sector, crony capitalism, unviable vanity projects underpinned by generous government guarantees, unwise borrowing in dollars, lax credit for consumers which has left many ordinary families heavily in debt, and the sharp deterioration in the exchange rate. Add to this a market risk premium of nearly 10.

In foreign affairs, the policy of 'zero problems with neighbours' now looks a distant dream. Relations with Saudi, Egypt and Israel are especially bad, and with Iraq not much better. Turkey has invaded Syrian territory twice in the past year and there is no obvious exit strategy. Putin is clearly trying to detach Turkey from her moorings in NATO, with some success, though Erdogan has an ongoing bromance with President Trump, which he hopes will confound Turkey's enemies in Congress. Relations with the EU are poor, and Turkey's application for full membership of the EU is in the doldrums.

Strategically, Erdogan seems undecided between Turkey's traditional westward looking orientation and the charms of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. This may seem extraordinary, even bizarre, but there has long been a strong Eurasian lobby in the Armed Forces, and polls consistently show that the Turkish public regard the US and Israel as greater threats than Russia. Many, perhaps most, Turks believe that the CIA were behind the failed 2016 coup, the first violent coup in modern Turkish history. Repeated rebuffs by the EU of Turkey's EU membership aspirations have not helped.

Dragoman

In domestic politics, AKP's electoral alliance with MHP appears to have benefited the latter rather more than the ruling party, in that AKP voters disgruntled by economic hardship simply transferred allegiance to MHP. Erdogan seems trapped for now in the alliance, since he relies on MHP for AKP's parliamentary majority. This accounts at least partly for his hardline nationalist, hard power only policy on the Kurdish issue.

Erdogan is an obsessive student of polls. He must worry about the underlying trends. The heterodox Alevi community (15-20%) were never with him. Nor were the relatively secular and developed western coastal provinces of Turkey. The Kurds (25-20%) used to vote 50/50 for AKP, but even conservative Kurds dislike ethnic nationalist rhetoric and Turkey's excesses in 'Kurdish' Syria. Erdogan's bedrock support among pious, conservative Turks is estimated at about 25%, but they are not enough - and some will turn away if the economy continues to suffer.

Erdogan is adept at finding others to blame and Turks are susceptible to talk of foreign plots. But such talk eventually wears thin and you have been in power uninterrupted since 2002. Hence perhaps the lure of foreign adventures. Samuel Johnson once said that 'Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel'. The current operation is wildly popular, but that may not last.

Perhaps unease about his re-election is why Erdogan is alleged to be considering a further tweak to presidential elections: from a requirement for victory by 50% plus one, with a runoff if necessary, to a simple, one round, first past the post system.



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