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The Rise and Fall of Erdogan's Turkey

To Progress and Back

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No other state has catapulted itself into the future quite as rapidly, nor relapsed back into its dark past as suddenly, as Turkey. First there was modernization, and now the beginnings of a civil war. The country is divided by mistrust and hate.

This is Recep Tayyip Erdogan's country: a gorgeous mountain scenery on the Black Sea. On lush, green hillsides, people pick tea leaves and only interrupt their work to pray.

Erdogan calls them "his people," and for them, he erected an Ottoman-style mosque atop one of the highest peaks. It stands so high above the villages that it is barely discernable from below. A death-defying path winds up the mountain and takes about 45 minutes to traverse in a car, but many people here make the climb by foot anyway in order to feel closer to God -- and to Erdogan, their beloved president.

"I wish I could kiss his hand!" cries Aysel Aksay, 40. She is out of breath but her smile radiates all the same. Aksay is from Güneysu, the village at the foot of the mountain from which Erdogan's family also hails. In a headscarf and a black coat, Aksay gazes at the white marble structure as it glows in the sun. She is excited and happy to pray here, even though she may only

do so inside the windowless room reserved for women. "On the opening day, I watched as the president's helicopter flew over our country," Aksay says. "We are so proud of him."

Many people here share Aksay's sentiments. They worship Erdogan, whom they see as one of their own -- a pious, simple man who made it to the top by working hard.

If the rest of the country were like Güneysu, Erdogan -- who has ruled almost single-handedly for 13 years -- would have had no trouble securing another triumphant victory in the June 7 election. But the people of this region aren't the only Turks, and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) only got 40.9 percent of the vote and lost its absolute majority. The defeat destroyed Erdogan's dream of turning the country into a presidential republic with himself at the all-powerful helm until 2019. Adding insult to injury, the People's Democracy Party (HDP) also made it into parliament, the first time that a pro-Kurdish party cleared the 10-percent hurdle.

Yet Erdogan still clings to power and to his dream. He let coalition talks break down and scheduled new elections for Nov. 1. For Erdogan, the only acceptable result is an absolute majority for the AKP. Erdogan is risking everything to secure it.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan -- a devout Muslim, gifted populist, modernizer and father of the country's economic miracle -- is in danger of becoming an autocrat, one who is dragging his own nation into civil war and stoking external conflicts. First, he wanted to overthrow the Syrian dictator Bashar Assad, then he ignored the Islamic State (IS) for far too long. And now he's fighting the Kurds, the West's only partner in its battle against the Islamic extremists. Erdogan is reinstating old battle fronts and stirring mistrust and nationalism. He is imprisoning journalists and his critics. And his soldiers are cordoning off and firing on entire Kurdish cities.

Erdogan used to have ambitious goals. He wanted to solve the Kurdish conflict and boost the economy. He wanted to modernize his country and align it more toward Europe. And he wasn't entirely unsuccessful.

Until very recently, Turkey, a NATO member, was regarded as democracy's only hope in the Islamic world. The country served as a mediator between East and West, and was on track to become a candidate for EU accession. But today's Turkey is quite the opposite: It is a country at risk of falling into a collective insanity, driven there by fanaticism, excessive nationalism and bizarre conspiracy theories.

Traveling through Turkey reveals a country divided. On the one side, there is Erdogan's Turkey. It includes his hometown on the Black Sea, cities of Anatolia's economic miracle, such as Kayseri, and of course Ankara, the seat of power. The other side is the land of his enemies. It stretches from Kurdish Diyarbakir, where people fear for their lives, to the Qandil Mountains, where Kurdish fighters have holed up, and finally to Istanbul, the nucleus of Turkish democracy.

Diyarbakir: The New Civil War

Gültan Kisanak closes her eyes as the window panes in her office begin to shake. Every few minutes, fighter planes thunder over the town hall of Diyarbakir heading toward the Qandil

Mountains. There, in the autonomous region of Kurdistan, the Turkish air force has been bombing positions of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) since July 24.

Kisanak, 54, is a sturdy woman whose gray hair falls down to the shoulders of her pink blazer. Since early 2014, she has been the co-mayor of Diyarbakir -- the first woman to hold the job. The pro-Kurdish HDP party, which received more than 80 percent of the vote here in June, mandates that all important offices are shared between one man and one woman.

During the election campaign, the HDP billed itself not only as a party for the Kurds, but also as an advocate of gender equality and gay rights. Above all, its candidates promised to challenge Erdogan's plan of establishing a presidential republic. As it became clear that the HDP had received a solid 13 percent of the vote on June 7, people in Diyarbakir, the largest city in the southeast, were jubilant. They danced in the streets to an endless chorus of car horns and fireworks. All that was only three months ago. Today, the mood is grim. By nightfall, it's quiet. Stores close early and people prefer to stay home out of fear for their lives.

Nearly every day, skirmishes break out between Turkish security forces and PKK supporters. In Cizre, near the border between Syria and Iraq, a curfew was imposed in early September. The city's 113,000 citizens were trapped and at least 30 of them have been shot and killed, according to locals. Things are back to the way they were during the last civil war, which began in 1984 and cost 40,000 people their lives. And this at a time when things seemed to finally be settling down.

Kisanak also fought for the Kurdish cause, but never violently, as she puts it, and despite the fact she hardly speaks any Kurdish. In 1983, after a military coup, the Kurdish language was banned. Shortly thereafter, the PKK began to agitate for its own state and against Ankara. Kisanak, who still feels uncomfortable when she speaks Kurdish, is a product of that policy of repression, which has attempted to wipe out anything Kurdish -- the language, the traditions and the identity.

Tactical Turnaround

The fact that things have been easier for the younger generation is an achievement of Erdogan's. He was Turkey's first head of government to speak of a "Kurdish problem" in August 2005. He apologized for the errors of the state in dealing with the country's largest minority and heralded a new beginning. The peace process was Erdogan's boldest initiative. He invested billions of euros in infrastructure in the southeast, loosened the ban on the Kurdish language and permitted Kurdish radio and TV stations.

In 2012, peace talks began with imprisoned PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan, who in February 2015 urged his followers to renounce violence. At the time, Öcalan spoke of a "historic decision." But half a year later, his words have lost their meaning. Erdogan has suspended the peace process.

Why the sudden relapse to violence? Kisanak says the AKP is now steering the country back into civil war because the HDP has entered parliament. Erdogan needs the escalation in order to secure his absolute majority and throw the HDP out of parliament. Many Kurds share the

mayor's view, and they're not alone. A lot of people now believe the escalation in violence serves Erdogan by enabling him to sell himself as a guarantor of stability ahead of snap elections -- or to simply postpone the poll in the name of national security.

For its part, the government accuses the Kurdish rebels of having started the violence. "The PKK misused the peace process in order to secretly replenish their arsenals and lay mines," says Muhsin Kizilkaya, an AKP member of the national parliament of Kurdish descent.

The reasons may be debatable, but one thing is for sure: The violence flared up again on July 20, the day when a suicide bomber, allegedly affiliated with IS, killed more than 30 people in Suruc, near the Syrian border.

Two days later, PKK fighters gunned down two policemen in their apartment in Ceylanpinar, around 200 kilometers (124.3 miles) from the site of the bombing. The PKK spread the word online that the executions were in revenge for the attack in Suruc. The police officers, the PKK said, had been IS supporters. Then, on June 24, the Turkish government began bombing PKK positions.

Since the military campaign began, the government has said it has killed 2,000 Kurdish fighters. But that number excludes the countless Kurdish civilians who have fallen victim to the air force's bombs. It also doesn't count the Turkish soldiers who have been killed by the PKK.

Caykara: Martyrs and freedom of expression

A few days after Erdogan inaugurated the mosque on the mountaintop above Güneysu, he attended a funeral for a police officer named Ahmet Camur in the nearby town of Caykara. Burials of those killed in the southeast have become a nearly daily occurrence across the country. Thousands of people showed up for the ceremony in Caykara.

Erdogan appeared before them, flanked by a Turkish flag. Holding a microphone in one hand, he leaned with one hand on Camur's coffin. "We say goodbye to our martyr, who, as we believe, has achieved martyrdom," Erdogan said. "How happy his family must be! How happy his next of kin must be!" After all, the president reminded everyone, in paradise, the martyrs sit next to the Prophets.

Is that a consolation? Mehmet Camur, the deceased policeman's twin brother, shakes his head. He's standing underneath a Turkish flag and a banner that bears a picture of his brother. For days, Camur has been receiving visitors. But he doesn't want to talk, he says, especially not to a foreign journalist. He only utters a single, bitter sentence: "My brother devoted his life to southeast Turkey."

Martyrs' relatives have to watch what they say. At a funeral in August, a relative of a slain soldier was charged with "insulting a statesman." During the memorial ceremony, the man had allegedly complained that Erdogan "had sent this young man to his grave."

Fighting on Many Fronts

In Caykara, the martyr's picture hangs on the doors of businesses. But anyone who inquires about him is viewed with suspicion. The proprietor of a teahouse, an old man with a peaked cap, is one of the few people who talks. He says Ahmet Camur was a good man who, like most people here, supported the AKP. "We're religious, that's why we love Erdogan. But these funerals won't win him any votes in the election."

Suddenly the old man goes silent and his eyes widen. Two policemen have appeared, one in uniform, the other in civilian clothing. They want to know what the questions are all about. Then they want to see IDs. One takes them and disappears. When he comes back, he makes a note of something and then hands back the passports. "You can leave now," he says menacingly.

For the government, the battle to remain in control of the political narrative is just as important as the actual battle raging in the country's southeast. That's why foreign correspondents and independent Turkish journalists are prevented from taking part in "martyr burials." Only authorized members of the pro-government press are allowed.

Freedom of speech and expression are on the decline in Erdogan's Turkey. For years, newsrooms have been raided and journalists arrested. But things have never been as bad as they are now. In late August, two British reporters in Diyarbakir were arrested and accused of "involvement in terrorist activities." They were first taken to a high-security prison and then deported. Soon thereafter, a Dutch journalist had a similar experience.

Turkey is waging a war against the foreign media, "such as Reuters, BBC, CNN and SPIEGEL," says Turkish Culture Minister Yalcin Topcu, which is comparable to the battle of Gallipolli.

This underscores just how nervous the government is of again failing to achieve an absolute majority in parliament after the new elections. For years, the AKP's monopoly on power seemed guaranteed. Now, there is no evidence to suggest that Erdogan's strategy will work. Polls have revealed that neither the AKP nor any of the other parties have managed to win significantly more voters since June 7.

Istanbul: Where It All Began

Anyone looking for the place where Erdogan's grip on power began to weaken should start in a park in central Istanbul. With little more than a few trees and a patch of grass surrounded by asphalt, the park is neither large nor pretty. But depending on who you talk to in Turkey, it either represents the origin of all that is evil or a nucleus of hope. The only thing that both sides agree on is that in early 2013, what happened here changed the country.

Today, the name Gezi stands for a turning point in the Erdogan era. Before the protests in Gezi Park, he seemed like an omnipotent, almost supernatural mover and shaker, the only person capable of keeping Turkey from falling apart while steering it into a successful future. But Gezi exposed Erdogan as the man he truly is: a power-hungry, paranoid autocrat who explained away the Gezi protests as a conspiracy of hostile powers seeking to weaken Turkey.

It began with a few environmentalists who were demonstrating for the preservation of the park, which was facing demolition to make way for a shopping mall -- one of Erdogan's countless infrastructure projects. In Istanbul alone, he planned to build a third airport, the largest in the world, a third Bosporus bridge, an enormous mosque with six minarets and an "artificial Bosporus," a second connection between the Black and Marmara seas.

The activists camped out in the park -- before Erdogan set the police loose on them. The security forces then burned down the tents and sprayed the activists with water cannons and tear gas. Pictures of the brutal crackdown spread like wildfire and hundreds of thousands of Turks joined the protesters in solidarity. Within days, the protest had grown into a full-fledged insurgency. For the first time, a broad group of people had suddenly articulated a feeling that had been on people's minds for some time: namely, their dissatisfaction with Erdogan's authoritarian style of government, his arrogance and his intolerance.

"Gezi changed everything," says Gökhan Bicici, a 36-year-old activist. He was at the protest from the start. At the time, he was working for a TV station that was critical of the government. Many Turks realized then that most of the media was nothing more than "an extended arm of the AKP," Bicici says. After Gezi, the number of Turks on Twitter rocketed from 1.8 million to more than 9 million. Bicici decided to become self-employed and built a network of more than 200 citizen journalists in 45 cities. "We wanted to create a new kind of news agency by the end of the year," he says, touting the idea of a citizen-to-citizen information network that works even when journalists are prevented from doing their job.

Thus, Gezi not only heralded Erdogan's demise, it also created an alternative public sphere that no longer believes everything the government tells it.

Kayseri: Erdogan's Pious Merchants

Of course, the president still has loyal followers, many of whom live in Kayseri. Mahmut Hicyilmaz, 58, is one of them. He is the president of the local chamber of commerce. His organization represents the interests of 17,000 businesses in Kayseri. The city is the largest of the "Anatolian tigers," as the up-and-coming metropolises that witnessed the growth of a new middle class under Erdogan's reign are called.

For Hicyilmaz, the situation is clear and confusing at the same time. "Until May 2013, business was fine," he says. "But Gezi threw things in Turkey out of balance." The protests were no ordinary demonstrations, he says. What connects them to the current crisis is the fact that "foreign actors" were trying to weaken Turkey. After all, "what Turk who loves his country can be against building a third bridge or a third airport in Istanbul?" No one, of course.

There was another martyr's funeral in Kayseri the week before last, followed by two days of national rallies. Thousands gathered in the city center, transforming it into a red sea of Turkish flags.

Before the AKP came to power, Turkey's political and economic realms were controlled by a secular elite of generals, judges and bureaucrats. They saw themselves as the guardians of the

legacy of Turkey's founder, Kemal Atatürk, a man who cared little for the pious, conservative majority of the population. There was little investment in impoverished Anatolia. Well-paid posts were always awarded to the elite. And devout women were forbidden from attending university with a headscarf.

But Erdogan made the believers a promise: You can be religious and rich. He opened the markets for entrepreneurs from Anatolia. He privatized large, state-owned enterprises such as Türk Telekom, most utility companies, ports and airports. He liberalized the labor market and successfully fought inflation. And he permitted headscarves to be worn at universities.

During the first years of the Erdogan administration, the economy grew at an annual rate of up to 9 percent. In cities like Kayseri, many people became millionaires as new industries emerged, including export sectors that sold furniture and cutting-edge technology. The boom secured Erdogan the support of religious businessmen like those in Kayseri. But he also had another base of support: the poor. For the first time, lower-class citizens were able to move into social housing subsidized by the state.

In Hicyilmaz's office, a golden frame with the word Allah written in Arabic calligraphy adorns one wall. There is also a large photo of Hicyilmaz next to Erdogan. The AKP helped Turkey move forward, says the chamber of commerce chief. In addition, the party also convinced Turks that Kurds should have the same rights as everyone else. "We gave the Kurds their rights. We invested in their cities," he says. "What more do they want? What right do they have to kill our policemen?"

Qandil Mountains: Where the Enemy Hides

The PKK's headquarters is at the end of a mountain road that winds through a rugged, rocky landscape. Fighters with Kalashnikovs inspect the vehicles that pass through. Visitors may only enter the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq with explicit permission from the PKK. A portrait of incarcerated leader Abdullah Öcalan adorns a hillside. Craters left behind by bomb strikes line the road. Ali Haydar Kaytan, 65, waits in a stone house and has only one wish: He would like to return to Turkey, the country where he was born and whose government he has been fighting since his student days.

In 1974, along with Abdullah Öcalan and other activists, Kaytan founded an underground organization from which the PKK later emerged. Of the founders, he is the only one still fighting. Öcalan has been in prison since 1999. The others have since turned their backs on the organization. The PKK leader wears camouflage and sports a full beard and a scarf. He is protected by bodyguards and rarely spends more than one day in the same place. He knows that any prospect of returning to Turkey has evaporated in the past few weeks.

In recent weeks, the PKK has been fighting on two fronts. On the one, it has been battling the Turkish military. On the other, it has been fighting IS in northern Iraq and Syria. For several weeks, it has found itself in a strange situation. Both of its enemies -- the Turkish government and IS -- have mutually declared war against one another. Ankara long allowed the Islamic terrorist group to grow unfettered. Jihadis were treated in Turkish hospitals and IS was allowed

to recruit new fighters in Istanbul and Ankara. Even supplies of weapons and food passed through Turkey.

But when the government announced it would be carrying out airstrikes against the terrorists, it didn't bomb IS. At least, not really. Instead, it primarily bombarded PKK positions. Turkey's fight against IS provided an alibi for the war against the Kurds, who pushed Assad's troops out of Syria and established their own administration. In northern Iraq, there is already a Kurdish autonomous region. The Turks fear that one day a Kurdish state could emerge in their immediate vicinity.

This scenario, however, is contradicted by Ali Haydar Kaytan. The PKK has changed over the years, he says. It is no longer fighting for its own state, just autonomy. The blame for the most recent escalation of violence lies squarely with Erdogan, Kaytan says. The violence by the PKK, the ambushes, the murders, all that is merely a reaction to attacks by Turkish security forces. "Erdogan has declared war on us. And we are defending ourselves," he says.

Kaytan thinks it's possible that the two sides could return to peace negotiations, but only on three conditions: One, Turkey must halt its airstrikes against PKK positions; two, Öcalan must be released from prison; and three, a neutral intermediary would have to be called in to facilitate negotiations, such as the United States.

Erdogan, for his part, demands that the PKK lay down their weapons unconditionally. Otherwise, he has threatened to not rest until the PKK has been completely destroyed.

So, why should Erdogan bow to Kaytan's demands? "He doesn't have a choice," Kaytan says and cracks a weary smile. Today's young fighters are far more radical than his generation. "We elders are the last ones who can reach a compromise. Otherwise we're going to see 30 years of war."

Ankara: The Minister and the EU

The center of Turkish power is literally one giant construction site. Erdogan's government headquarters in Ankara looks like a city within a city. It is a collection of defiant buildings that is constantly growing. Inside, there is a large mosque surrounded by kilometers of heavily guarded fences and walls. It is three-dimensional megalomania, a bit like the pyramids of Giza.

What will happen to this monstrosity if Erdogan is forced to leave it one day? It's possible that he won't win an absolute majority in the upcoming election and will have to withdraw from daily politics. Maybe he'll defy all expectations and enter into a coalition. The most likely outcome, however, is that he loses and the country descends into intractable chaos.

Either way, all Europe can do is sit by and watch. At one point, the Europeans were probably in a position to steer the course of history in a different direction.

No other EU candidate country was kept in a holding pattern as long as Turkey, nor did any other prospective member face such resistance. Ten years ago, more than 70 percent of Turks wanted to belong to Europe. Today, less than 40 percent do.

In Ankara, it's hard to find anyone interested in talking about Europe, especially among AKP politicians. But there is at least one man who is. Ali Haydar Konca is his name. The 65-year-old cuts a small figure, and until he resigned earlier this week out of protest of the government's military offensive against Kurdish rebels, he was Turkey's EU minister. His presence in Ankara was a mere formality -- he didn't have any real authority -- but it was historic all the same. He was one of the first two representatives of a pro-Kurdish party in a Turkish cabinet.

Konca's tenure as Turkey's pointman on all EU-related issues was short-lived, but his opinions are no less strong. He wishes the Europeans wouldn't let their prejudices get the better of them when dealing with Turkey. "The biggest obstacle in the accession negotiations has always been the EU's worries about what it could mean to integrate a Muslim country," Konca says.

"But imagine if the EU had been willing to accept Turkey," he adds. The Middle East might be a very different place than it is today.