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Erdoğan is feeling the heat

Growing economic pains and a more united opposition threaten the Turkish President's grip on power. His regime resorts to ever more state repression

By pledging to draft a civilian constitution and further imagining Turkey's future in the EU, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his cabinet have recently sent out 'pseudo reform' signals to the rest of the world. At the very same time, the government has bluntly intensified its repression at home. In fact, just before European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel visited Ankara in March 2021, which led to the infamous 'Sofagate' incident, a slew of disturbing developments upended Turkish politics.

In the last two months alone, the Turkish lira crashed following the sudden dismissal of the country's central bank chief, Mr Naci Ağbal; the government started its attempt to dismantle Turkey's main pro-Kurdish opposition party (HDP); the influential Member of Parliament and human rights activist, Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu, was expulsed, followed by his imprisonment over a social media message; and, of course, Erdoğan signed a presidential decree withdrawing Turkey from the Istanbul Convention, which aims to combat violence against women.

To top it all off, the opposition accuses the government of using the Central Bank's foreign exchange reserves to prop up the currency as it came under fire amid interest rate cuts. $128bn were sold by state banks in foreign exchange markets to sustain the Turkish lira. In response, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) campaigned with banners asking 'Where is the $128 billion?', which the government eventually seized.

Growing repression

As Turkey's economic crisis deepens and the cost of living dramatically increases amid Covid-19 measures, Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) are unable to provide solutions to the daily challenges people are facing. According to a recent Metropoll, 58 per cent

of voters expect the situation in Turkey to worsen. The economy and unemployment are Turkey's biggest challenges, according to 65.9 per cent of respondents.

In fact, the presidential system initiated by Erdoğan in 2017 has created a *sultanistic* regime based on patronage and loyalty networks around its leader and not about providing real solutions to ongoing problems. By dismantling checks and balances as well as democratic institutions, decision-making and policy suggestions only serve to maintain the AKP's and its leader's grip on power. And, in order to maximise support, Erdoğan continuously doubles down on polarisation, rewards loyalty and suppresses any dissent in the country.

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At the same time, positive developments among the opposition threaten Erdoğan's seeming omnipotence – and force him to make ever more use of repression through the state apparatus. The 2019 municipal elections, from which the opposition emerged victorious in some of Turkey's major metropolitan cities like Istanbul, proves that electoral alliances among different ideological groups is a successful strategy to push back against the AKP and its ally, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). These victories also bolstered voters' hope for change and energised the opposition parties.

A more united opposition

The Future Party (GP) and the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), both formed by former AKP elites Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ali Babacan respectively, have recently joined the anti-AKP bloc and backed the opposition's main demand for a return to a 'democratic order'. The Good Party (İYİ) and its leader Meral Akşener have also become more popular. Because of the influence of DEVA, GP, and İYİ, undecided voters, who supported the AKP in previous elections but are politically opposed to the CHP, might now join the opposition.

Furthermore, amid all of the restrictions imposed by the central government, the mayors of İstanbul and Ankara, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, have emerged as potential presidential contenders to rival Erdoğan based on their good performances during the Covid-19 crisis.

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and-conquer strategy. The persistent allegations of terrorism against the HDP and attempts to ban the party – even though the Constitutional Court rejects such an attempt – are intended to maintain a degree of division within the opposition, especially between the pro-Kurdish HDP and the Turkish nationalist İYİ.

But the HDP is not the only target of state repression anymore. In fact, the government seems to now apply what it has learned from its attacks on the HDP against other political opponents too. Erdoğan's administration is currently considering to strip CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu of his parliamentary immunity, a move reminiscent of the fate of former HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş, who has been imprisoned for several years now.

The reason for leaving the Istanbul Convention

Erdoğan's strategy also consists in targeting any particular concerns that elicit widespread consensus among society's larger segments. One of them is the resilience against his attempts to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, a European treaty aimed at preventing gender-based violence. Following claims by Islamists and religious organizations that the treaty ruins families and encourages homosexuality, Erdoğan has pulled out of the İstanbul Convention by presidential decree on 21 March 2021.

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However, the according to a recent poll, 52 per cent of the population disapproves of this decision despite the fact that the government effectively controls the media and has launched a massive propaganda campaign based on false information. The withdrawal has sparked widespread controversy within Turkish society, including disputes among conservative women's groups and AKP members. Women's rights activists, who make up one of Turkey's most powerful opposition movements, have staged protests across the country and were met with police suppression.

Despite an epidemic of gender-based violence – over 382 women were killed in confirmed cases of femicide in 2020 alone – the AKP seems to have caved in to the demands of different religious groups in the attempt to create a new identity conflict. In this context, the withdrawal from the

Istanbul Convention has symbolic significance, as it demonstrates Erdoğan's commitment to building a conservative national identity through a populist right-wing agenda, which includes a more conservative stance on gender issues, endorsing patriarchal social relations and emphasising ‘family values’.

Is the EU selling out?

It is in this critical moment, when women’s right activists continued to protest against the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, that the diplomatic ’Sofagate’ crisis took place. At the official EU visit in Ankara, Ursula von der Leyen discovered there was no seat prepared for her during a meeting when President Erdoğan sat down to speak with her male colleague Charles Michel. Regardless of which side is ‘responsible,’ the Commission President has clearly been subjected to sexism. While it also casts doubt on Michel's attitude, it clearly highlighted Erdoğan's anti-gender politics.

As Turkey continues to restrict political and civil rights, and violate human rights and the rule of law, EU-Turkey relations appear to be focused on migration and Turkey's policies in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as strengthening trade relations. Progressive circles, in particular, are critical of the EU's engagement with Erdoğan's regime. They feel betrayed and sold out by the EU, while the regime will adorn itself with these talks. Meanwhile, the repression in the country just grows stronger.

Turkey’s progressive circles widely believe that the EU is only dealing with Erdoğan because of the refugee agreement and is thereby abandoning its own values. Although good ties between the EU and Turkey are essential for all sides, democratisation in Turkey's current domestic context should be a precondition for rapprochement, and relations should not succumb to the threats of autocratic rule.



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