

The Last Thirty Years of Turkish Political History

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1. Erdogan's rise to President of Turkey

To better analyze the last thirty years of Turkish politics we must do so by considering a central figure: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. A long-time political activist and Islamic fundamentalist, he began his career in 1976, when he became head of a youth section of the National Salvation Party¹. However, he obtained his first position in Turkish politics in 1991, when he was elected to parliament, but he did not enter it for technical reasons. This was followed three years later by his appointment as mayor in his hometown of Istanbul, where he dealt with problems that had been unsolved for decades such as: the management of waste collection, the resolution of traffic with the construction of bridges, highways, and aquifer conduits. for water problems. However, in 1997 following the Memorandum², Prime Minister Erbakan was forced to resign, while Erdoğan was found guilty of inciting religious hatred for having uttered the verses of Ziya Gökalp³: "The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers".

The following year he was therefore sentenced to ten months in prison but served just over four months and was however banned from holding political office for life. Nonetheless, upon regaining freedom he founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP⁴). The other creator of the newly formed political group was Abdullah Gül, who participated as party leader in the 2002 parliamentary elections. This occasion proved to be a triumph for the AKP which obtained 34.2% of the vote, 363 seats out of a total of 550 of the Turkish Parliament, by virtue of the 10% threshold. In 2003, a constitutional amendment granted political rehabilitation to Erdoğan, allowing him to run in by-elections in Siirt province.⁵ He triumphed, thus becoming the prime minister of the nascent one⁵⁹th government of the Turkish Republic.

As head of government, he initiated privatization practices of public giants such as Türk Telekom, of gas and oil companies but also of ports and airports. He then introduced policies aimed at liberalizing the labor market, allowing the development of the entrepreneurial phenomenon. To understand in more depth what Erdoğan has done both in domestic and foreign policy, please refer to the following paragraphs where the figure of the "reis" will also be analyzed.⁶, with his election as President of the Republic on 10 August 2014, a role he still holds today.

2. Turkish Internal Politics with Erdoğan as Prime Minister

When the AKP rose to the top of Turkish national politics it benefited from some important sources of funding. These include the extension of the loan by the International Monetary Fund, the result of the agreement with the previous Ecevit government and another by the European Union. Consequentially we witnessed a growth in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which went from just under 5% to a maximum of over 8%. The economic theme was a central topic in Erdogan's party program which was based on three fundamental points: reducing inflation, reducing unemployment, and restoring fiscal discipline.

In fact, starting from 2005, inflation stopped at 10%, compared to 55% just four years earlier. This allowed the lowering of interest rates, the possibility for Turks to make installment payments with credit cards and the tripling of the population's income. The salaries of state employees were also increased but also the scholarships for poor but deserving students were multiplied. While between 2002 and 2007 policies were adopted to allow the industrial development of the country with the creation of "organized industrial zones" which benefited from fiscal and structural incentives. Therefore, in this period, small and medium-sized industries with cutting-edge equipment were born in areas that had been depressed for centuries such as the cities of: Kayseri, Konya, Sanliurfa, Gazientep, Deninzli, Eskişehir and Adana. Old Antioch was a commercial

¹ Millî Selâmet Partisi, Turkish political party founded in 1972 on an Islamic-inspired theme founded by Necmettin Erbakan.

² Coup d'état conducted by the military which however was singular because no gunshot was fired

³ Turkish sociologist and writer who participated in the activities for the drafting of the Turkish Constitution of 1924.

⁴ Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi based on the tradition of conservative Islam and religious nationalism.

⁵ Territory in South Eastern Anatolia which during the First World War was affected by the Armenian genocide.

⁶ Term of Arabic origin which translates as "chief" or "president" modified in Turkey from the original rais also used by virtue of the fundamentalist origins of the party which has dominated the Turkish political scene for more than 20 years.

and agricultural center that grew above all in the textile, metallurgical, clothing, furniture, and food sectors. There was also a significant amount of production still underway which, following the political advent of the AKP, concerned car components and household appliances: refrigerators and washing machines above all. Construction was also encouraged because of a demographic boom which also saw the growth of new figures within society. The figure of a restricted elite was born in the cities of Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. In these territories, bars and restaurants were also created at government expense to encourage the employment of unemployed or underemployed people.

This economic growth led to the introduction of the new Turkish lira starting in 2005⁷ which favored a new exchange rate with foreign currencies. To conclude this part regarding the Erdoğan premiership, mention should be made of those who manage Turkish development and construction affairs. We are talking about Toki⁸ or the Public Housing Administration, the office that oversees public housing. It also deals with urban renewal and the demolition of dilapidated buildings, with the construction of new ones with the removal of the previous tenants, in favor of the richer classes. With Erdoğan's rise to power, the construction of shopping centers and luxurious neighborhoods began without considering the environmental impact. All this essentially allowed the enrichment of many government officials, including the Prime Minister.

3. Turkish Foreign Interests during the Erdoğan Government

With the advent of the AKP in the Turkish political landscape, the activity carried out in the diplomatic sphere also radically changed. Since the first months of 2003 at the dawn of the Second Gulf War⁹, the United States with then President George W. Bush, asked for consent to fly over Turkey and to transit troops headed for Iraq. At that time Erdoğan had only recently become prime minister, after questioning Parliament and the related vote, he decided to allow the Stars and Stripes militias to fly over but not for military transit. The main motivation for this choice was to reserve legitimacy for the Kurdish populations present in Iraq. However, to fully understand this argument one should focus only on the history of the Kurds. As for Turkey's foreign political activities during the period of Erdoğan's premiership, we must consider essentially three main international relations: the European Union, Africa, and the Balkans.

In the first years the "reis" did a lot to establish relations with the European Union to encourage the entry of "its" state into the community area. More precisely, starting from 2005¹⁰, the Anatolian peninsula obtained the status of a candidate country for membership. The sectors on which the intergovernmental conferences between Turkish politics and European governance would be based, the so-called chapters, were therefore determined. This was then followed in 2008 by a review of the conditions also by virtue of the Ankara Agreements, a 1963 model according to which the then European Economic Community and Turkey wanted to create a synergistic economic-commercial political model. With this event, relations between the parties effectively ran aground and then foundered between 2018 and 2023 with the Union denouncing Turkey's total distancing from community policies, especially in terms of democratic principles. All this also considering the power that Turkey exercises over the northern area of Cyprus after the invasion of 20 July 1974¹¹ As regards relations between Turkey and the African continent, the origin can be dated back to 1998 with the drafting of the Africa Action Plan which, however, initially did not come into force but only in 2005. With the introduction of the Ankara consensus drawn up with the coming to power of the AKP it allowed the Anatolian peninsula to be recognized as a power that stands in the way of Western powers and Chinese capitalism. Precisely on the black continent, embassies, consulates and third sector practices were opened with the involvement of civil society at least until 2014. Precisely on this date with Erdoğan who assumed the role of President of the Republic the situation changed. We have moved from population and diplomatic involvement activities for the development of the sub-Saharan area and the Horn of Africa, to militarization practices such as the creation of training camps in Mogadishu. As for Turkish interests in the Balkans, the activities originated in the second half of the 90s of the last centuries. In the aftermath of the fall of Yugoslavia, Ankara first participated or SFOR missions¹² and KFOR¹³. Subsequently

⁷ The Yeni Türk lirası

⁸ Toplu Konut İdaresi

⁹ Invasion by the US army which led to the subversion of the regime and the start of a civil and tribal war.

¹⁰ On 3 October of that year the European Council decided to start the procedures for Turkish entry into the Union.

¹¹ It represented the counter Qensive to the military coup ordered by the dictatorship of the colonels present in Greece who had alternated the balances achieved between Cyprus, Turkey and Greece, with the Treaty of Zurich in 1960.

¹² The Stabilization Force is a military team launched by NATO to protect the Dayton Agreements with which the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina ended.

it then created trilateral cooperation relations starting from 2010, on one side with Bosnia - Herzegovina and Serbia and the other again with Sarajevo but with Croatia. At the basis of all this there are two main reasons for the signing of these agreements:

1. The historical, cultural, social, and religious ties that bind the country to the western Balkan area, by virtue of the former Ottoman Empire.
2. The attempt to intervene in the area between the European Union and NATO for the prevention of conflicts but also to strengthen the role of promoter of free trade.

Considering everything just described, i.e., in the early years of the 21st century, it is appropriate to analyze Erdoğan's work as President of the Republic from 2014 to today.

4. Erdoğan President of the Republic (from 2014 to today)

August 10, 2014, is a fundamental date in the contemporary history of Turkey. This is the first time for the Republic in which presidential elections were held which saw the triumph of Erdoğan, for a role that was previously designated by Parliament. The former prime minister achieved 52% of the vote with the participation of 76% of those entitled to vote. Having reached the highest political position, the following year he also legitimized his power in the parliamentary elections by triumphing and electing Ahmet Davutoğlu to the position of prime minister in addition to winning 317 seats out of 550. Since his inauguration, the reis has made it clear that not to be "satisfied" with the powers established by the Constitution, but to arrogate greater powers in the executive sphere. He also restored several traditions belonging to the Ottoman Empire as witnessed by the meeting between Erdoğan and the Palestinian president Abbas in the brand new "Ak Saray" palace¹⁴. The reference to the imperial age is one of the fundamental points of the president's foreign policy together with the theme of pan-Turkism¹⁵ and Turanism¹⁶.

Another event determining the growth of Erdoğan's power is what happened in July 2016. We are talking about the attempted coup d'état, organized by the military, in which hundreds of civilians lost their lives and consequently a state of emergency was approved for three months. However, the European Convention on Human Rights was not applied¹⁷. Proceeding chronologically in the political activities, the approval by parliament of 18 amendments in January and confirmed by a popular referendum in April 2017 is relevant. These constitutional changes effectively placed them in the hands of the president who then called the elections for the following year. At this round held in June 2018, the first after the constitutional reform, 600 parliamentarians were also elected. The turnout was 86.2% with Erdoğan's re-election and 295 seats for the AKP equal to 42.5% in total. Coming then to the situation of the present day, it must be considered that after twenty years in the high ranks of Turkish politics many of the reis is no longer as stable as it once was. All this can be said in consideration of what happened in the presidential elections of May 2023. On this occasion, for the first time in contemporary Turkish history, Erdoğan had to resort to a run-off to confirm himself as president. This is because the challenger Kilicdaroglu¹⁸ in the first round he had reached 44.8% against 49.5% for the outgoing president. The latter then triumphed in the second round with 52% and effectively guaranteed himself the position until 2028. Therefore, to date Turkey, although maintaining its status as a Presidential Republic, can be defined as illiberal also by virtue of the powers arrogated by the leader of the AKP, without forgetting the situation relating to ethnic and linguistic minorities. For this reason, it would be appropriate with a further analysis to delve deeper into the Kurdish question, the Armenian one but also the Christian one. Another issue is also that of women who, with the advent of Erdoğan, have seen their role reduced and forced to wear the veil in places such as the university or other places where equal rights were guaranteed to them and men. The fact remains that today Erdoğan will remain President of the Republic until 2028 barring new constitutional changes. But it can certainly be said that today, with his twentyone years as Prime Minister and Presidency of the Republic, the "reis" is the politician with the longest presence on the scene.

¹³ The Kosovo Force is a military force engaged in Kosovar territory since 1999 guided by the Atlantic Pact to safeguard the autonomy of the state which became autonomous from Serbia on 17 February 2008.

¹⁴ The White Palace built in the Beştepe district of Ankara is made up of 1,125 states and cost 615 million euros.

¹⁵ Ideology born in the 19th century which promotes the union of all Turkish peoples, including originally the Hungarians.

¹⁶ Nationalist movement of the 1800s aimed at differentiating Arab countries according to the language spoken locally.

¹⁷ It is an international treaty that came into force in 1953 that recognizes fundamental rights, such as the right to life, liberty and security.

¹⁸ Prominent member of the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) and member of the Turkish parliament since 2005.

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