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Editorial

ERDOĞAN'S CESSPIT

FOR THE GATEKEEPERS of established wisdom in the West, the rise of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) was one of the great success stories of our age. Obama ranked its leader Erdoğan among his five most trusted friends on the world stage; David Cameron promised to be Ankara's 'strongest possible advocate' for EU membership. The *Financial Times* gushed over the AKP's 'constitutional revolution' and its record of 'good governance and strong growth', while the *NYT* hailed the emergence of a 'vibrant, competitive democracy' which was 'setting a constructive example for the entire Muslim Middle East'.¹ The European Union gave its seal of approval by formally opening accession talks with Ankara, despite the presence of 30,000 Turkish soldiers on the territory of one of its own member-states, Cyprus. The 'Turkish model', supposedly melding Islamic piety with adherence to democratic norms, reached its apotheosis after the Arab rebellions of 2011, when Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia pledged to follow the AKP's example, and Erdoğan claimed the right to determine the fate of Turkey's neighbours.

The stench of tyranny emanating from Turkish soil is now so overpowering that even the most sycophantic commentators have been forced to murmur their disapproval and deplore the AKP's supposed regression from its formerly exalted standards. In reality, there was never any golden age of liberalization under Erdoğan. The praise he attracted from Western elites as a 'moderate' and a 'reformer' was motivated above all by the AKP's staunchly pro-American foreign policy and readiness to maintain good relations with Israel (the same criteria that earn the Saudi regime its ludicrous plaudits as a moderating force in the region).

It also helped that NATO's favourite Islamists had taken up the neoliberal agenda with gusto, privatizing state assets into the hands of AKP cronies—including Erdoğan's close relatives. The AKP's attitude to democracy was purely instrumental: inside the party, Erdoğan ruled without challenge, and the only flutter of independent thought by its MPs, a vote against collusion with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, was briskly stamped out by party enforcers. On the key taboos of past and present for Turkish nationalism—the Armenian genocide and the oppression of the Kurds—the AKP had no intention of loosening the shackles. Turkish liberals hoped that Erdoğan's government would clip the army's wings, but the purges of the officer corps were intended to secure its grip on power, not to establish civilian supremacy. Critical journalists quickly discovered the limits of the AKP's much-vaunted 'Islamic liberalism'.

Predictably, as soon as Erdoğan faced a serious challenge to his rule, in the Gezi protests of 2013, the response was a brutal clampdown. This coincided with a rupture of the alliance between the AKP and the religious network of Fethullah Gülen, whose followers now became targets, having long supplied essential support to Erdoğan's power-grab. Threatened on the home front, and with his regional ambitions souring as Morsi was ousted in Cairo while Assad fended off the challenge of Turkish-backed rebel groups, Erdoğan pushed ahead with his plan to establish an overweening executive presidency, moulded in his own image. To his fury, this project was initially thwarted by the emergence of a new electoral force, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), reviving a left-wing current in Turkish politics that had been considered extinct, and drawing support primarily from a Kurdish population whose hopes for democratic reform had been comprehensively betrayed by the AKP.

In the panorama of new left forces in the Old World, the HDP forms a case at once apart and in common with progressive upsurges inside the borders of the European Union. In June 2015, the party—then only three years old—achieved the highest ever vote for the left in Turkey, and in denying the AKP a majority of seats in parliament, frustrated Erdoğan's autocratic ambitions. His revenge was not long in coming. Hundreds of HDP members have since been arrested, and the party's leaders dispatched to Turkish dungeons. Meanwhile the guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) have resumed their war after coming under intense

¹ FT, 21 March 2008, 28 July 2008; NYT, 8 June 2010, 28 January 2004.

military pressure from the Turkish state. NATO's second-largest army has unleashed wholesale carnage on the Kurdish-majority regions of the south-east, reducing entire cities to rubble and killing hundreds of civilians, without a murmur of protest from Ankara's Western allies.

The HDP can be compared to formations such as Syriza, Podemos and La France insoumise, but has faced a completely different political context, its very existence threatened by a brutal and reactionary regime. Its true counterparts are those left-wing or nationalist parties that have struggled to emerge from the shadow of an armed insurgency, in a state that permits elections but has a long history of repression (in particular, of national or ethnic minorities). In Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin faced multiple restrictions on its activity, but evaded an outright ban; a peace settlement in the 1990s allowed it to campaign henceforth without fear of restraint. Its Basque ally Herri Batasuna was outlawed by the Spanish courts as the government in Madrid rebuffed ETA's attempt to halt its campaign; more recently, following a permanent ceasefire, Bildu has overcome these legal barriers and raised the *abertzale* banner once more.

But the scale and intensity of repression in Turkey has always been far more ferocious, and the most realistic, and depressing, parallel for the HDP may be with Colombia's Patriotic Union (UP). Both parties had the approval of guerrilla movements outlawed by the state—PKK, FARC—but attracted support from a much wider pool of activists, unconnected to the insurgency, who saw an opportunity for lasting and fundamental change; both gathered momentum when the peaceful resolution of a long-running conflict seemed to be within reach; and both found themselves stranded in no man's land when powerful vested interests dictated a return to war. The UP was wiped out by state-sponsored death squads at the behest of Colombia's oligarchy, with the quiet approval of Washington. The situation in Turkey has not reached that grim point yet, but the vista since 2015 has been bleak enough. Erdoğan's onslaught began immediately after the election of June 2015; a botched coup attempt the following summer supplied the pretext for intensified repression. The details of that abortive putsch remain shrouded in murk; its half-cocked execution suggested a hasty manoeuvre by the AKP's residual enemies in the state machine before they were ousted for good. What is not in question is the manner in which Erdoğan has exploited the opportunity to crush dissent. More than 250,000 people have lost

their jobs; over 50,000 have been jailed; journalists and academics have been dragooned into custody for questioning the government's war in the south-east; state security forces routinely inflict torture on their prisoners, obliging even the *Economist* to wring its hands at Erdoğan's savagery. This pressure from above to eradicate dissent is reinforced by the aggressive mobilization of the AKP's mass base behind the ambitions of its leader.

The evidence of the AKP's despotism is plain for all to see, but Western governments have steadfastly looked the other way. For the EU, Erdoğan is performing an invaluable service by deploying his machinery of repression to stifle the flow of refugees from the Middle East, and by accepting deportees from Europe into a system of camps where abuse is routine. For NATO, strategic considerations outweigh any scruples about democracy; as the alliance's former secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen remarked, 'we need Turkey as much as Turkey needs us'. By defining the PKK as a 'terrorist' organization, the US and the EU have long supplied cover for Ankara's refusal to acknowledge the existence of a Kurdish nation within the Turkish Republic, and the legitimacy of its demands for political freedom. Talks over Turkish entry into the EU have still not been halted. Erdoğan's chief negotiator has recently singled out Britain as 'a real ally, a role model' for its sympathetic approach. Spanish police have even arrested Turkish-born journalists on trumped-up warrants, issued by the authorities in Ankara as part of their war on dissent. Whether or not the HDP can survive under these conditions, its efforts to date have exposed the hollow claim of the AKP to have ever represented a genuinely liberalizing force in Turkish society, and left Erdoğan's Western apologists standing naked.