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AN INWARD-LOOKING TURKEY IN A TURBULENT MIDDLE EAST

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Beginning this century, with a new political party, AKP, in government and a new philosophy, Turkey started asking itself: Why not abandon this cold war mentality? Why not have a zero-problem foreign policy with our neighbours? We may not support Iran but we refuse to see it as a threat. We have Syria on our borders and we need to encourage it to join the modern world. The world of realpolitik has offered a harsh reminder that reengaging with your neighbours when you sit on such a regional fault-line is not easy. Turkey is now reengaging with Russia and Iran, two of Assad's key backers, which it had ineffectually tried to topple after 2011.

But it is the failed coup attempt of last July which has, more than any aspect of the country's foreign policy, offered a stark reminder that the new political philosophy of a decade ago was not producing the modernisation and stability that many inside and outside the country had hoped for. Under an extended state of emergency since July 20, the government has been able to rule by decree devoid of judicial control. Thousands have been detained so far in the process, be they judges, academics, teachers, military personnel or MPs. Having just put Selahattin Demirtas, a.k.a "the Kurdish Obama" –the most popular Kurdish leader among non-Kurdish citizens in Turkey, as well as in international public opinion- and his fellow MPs of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) behind bars, the road is now open to an executive presidency in Turkey.

To get a new charter through parliament, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has played the nationalist, xenophobic card to the hilt. This policy is paying dividends as he is likely to win the support of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which has sufficient MPs to help the AKP pass a draft constitution through parliament. But, deprived of the HDP, this is a rump parliament.

For many years, the president had good reason to worry that the antipathy towards him and his political allies –which included the Gülenists, who are now in disgrace after their alleged role in the attempted coup-, also shared in much of Turkey's ultra-secularist establishment, would seek to remove him from power. In 2007, the military opposed the AKP's candidate for president, Abdullah Gul, then largely a figurehead and the following year the party narrowly escaped being shut down by the country's top court for "anti-secularist activities".

Rather than pursue a less confrontational style, Mr Erdogan, encouraged by the followers of the cleric-in-exile Fethullah Gülen, set about culling the top ranks of the army and jailing journalists accused of plotting against him. Paranoia became the trademark of the president's approach to domestic politics and international affairs, which included ever harsher attacks on the West, notably the US, for plotting to overthrow him.

Already infiltrated in the security apparatus, the Gülenists were able to place their own sympathizers in the senior ranks of the officer corps vacated by officers facing sham trials. The sad irony of the last July's attempted coup was that it was apparently a pre-emptive move by Gülenist officers, fearing a major purge of their ranks decided by the president. A further irony is that the Gülenists helped AKP build a network of sympathisers in the judiciary, the police, and the educational establishment as well as among junior officers that AKP did not have when it first came to power in 2003.

Upwards of 100,000 teachers, public officials, army officers have been dismissed from their jobs, more than 76,000 detained, including the director of the board and editor of the arch-secularist newspaper, *Cumhuriyet*, founded by a confidant of the builder of modern Turkey, Kemal Atatürk in 1924. According to the most recent report of the Platform for Independent Journalists, more than 160 media outlets have been closed down and 144 journalists are in prison under the coup probe since last July. Many of these journalists appear to have no links with the Gülenists. The rule of law is seriously under threat in Turkey and few citizens are willing to speak out. Few dare to criticize the president as they could easily end up in jail accused of sympathising with the coup plotters or the PKK.

There are those in Turkey who wonder whether Mr. Erdogan might have responded differently, arguing that the failed putsch created a rare opportunity for national unity. All political parties, including the HDP, condemned the coup attempt, as did the vast majority of ordinary people, regardless of their political orientation. Millions of them poured into the streets across Turkey in a show of national unity, defence of democracy and support for the president. Mr. Erdogan could have used the opportunity to rise above Islamist, liberal, secularist and Kurdish identities and attempted to build a new political consensus around democratic norms. He has chosen repression on a massive scale rather than a policy which could have unified Turkey around democratic norms. Had he moved down that road, the EU would have given its blessing and relations between Europe and Turkey might have improved. Many Turks felt European leaders were lukewarm in their condemnation of the attempted coup, maybe they were simply confused. Whether they were actively involved in supporting the plotters as many Turks like to argue is open to doubt. Paranoia is gaining ground among many Turks.

By keeping Turkey on high alert against perceived enemies and inflaming nationalist and religious passions, the president keeps his base mobilized. This has the added advantage of neutralising the very nationalistic MHP, whose votes he needs to change the constitution; but not the old Kemalist CHP, which is asking for the release of all imprisoned journalists and MPs. MHP is a valued ally in the war against the PKK; but CHP is keen to explore political solutions for the Kurdish question. Nationalism in its current form further alienates Turkey's Western allies, but that does not bother the president. Turkey's never ending cycle of victimisation of Islamists, communists, secularists, the Kurds- and now of the Gülenists does not bode well for the future stability or economic well-being of the country. The post-coup purge has not been the first time that Erdogan has spurned respect for democratic norms and made moderation into a dirty word. Turkey could pay a high cost for the president's paranoia and his tragic mistake.

Whether Erdogan's legacy will be one which gives Turks the confidence they need to move ahead in a troubled region is an open question. Steering the Turkish ship of state through the troubled waters of the Middle East requires a greater consensus at home than currently exists. By the same token, the EU does not want to overtly criticize a country that plays a key role in stemming the flood of refugees from the Middle East from crossing into Europe. Greater forbearance and understanding of the complexities of the situation in Turkey will be required in Europe if the EU hopes to keep some influence in Turkey.