

Trump and Erdogan Are Alike: Both Are ‘Thin-Skinned’ and Relied on ‘Deplorables’ to Win

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The apparent communications problems that have arisen between US President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan are basically due to Trump's failure to understand that Erdogan is essentially his Turkish counterpart in more ways than the title of the office that they both hold. They rose to power in a similar fashion, based on an understanding that there were large numbers of disenchanted essentially conservative voters, and they continue to rule in an unorthodox fashion that combines a high level of personal sensitivity with a tolerance for corruption plus a tendency to come out with brash misstatements.

One does not expect Trump to actually know anything about Turkey and its history, or, for that matter, about the political trajectory of Erdogan, but the American president's businessman's belief that his personal relationship with other countries' leaders is enough to run a foreign policy is nevertheless seriously flawed. Trump has described Erdogan as a "friend" based on several personal meetings and phone calls, though it is very unlikely that the canny politician Erdogan would describe the relationship in the same manner. Trump's most recent personal letter to the Turkish leader was reportedly thrown into the waste basket without being read.

Istanbul-born Erdogan, unlike Trump, came from a poor family and first became known as a professional soccer player. Also unlike Trump, he was and is deeply religious. He became a ward politician in Istanbul and was subsequently elected Mayor of the city in 1994 as the candidate of the moderately Islamist Welfare Party. Openly espoused religious parties were at that time illegal under the secular constitution imposed by the military in 1982, so he was stripped of his position by a military tribunal, banned from political office, and imprisoned for four months for the crime of "inciting religious hatred."

After he was released from prison, Erdogan considered how to get around the ban on religion in politics, co-founding the ostensibly moderate and secular conservative Justice and Development Party known as [AKP](#) in 2001. In 2002, AKP won a landslide victory in national elections, but as Erdogan was technically still prohibited from holding office, the AKP's co-founder, Abdullah Gul, instead becoming Prime Minister, which then led to the Chamber of Deputies' legislative annulling of Erdogan's political ban. Erdogan replaced Gul as Prime Minister in 2003. Erdogan led the AKP to two more election victories in 2007 and 2011, before being elected president in 2014, winning again in 2018.



The first years of Erdogan's prime-ministership were politically moderate as Turkey was still governed under the military imposed constitution. There were promising negotiations for Turkey to enter the European union, foreign investment was encouraged, the economy benefited from measures to free up businesses from state control, and there was considerable state money spent on infrastructure. Behind the scenes, however, Erdogan worked closely with Fethullah Gulen and his Gulen Movement, currently designated as a terrorist organization, to purge the government of secular bureaucrats and army officers using Gulen's networking and the judicial system, most notably through several show trials of military officers that led to constitutional referenda that both weakened the military's grip and enabled the legalization of expressions of Muslim piety.

Erdogan was damaged by a series of anti-government protests that began in 2013. His response, like that of Donald Trump, has been to become increasingly authoritarian, claiming that the opposition to him was treasonous. He banned social media, took control of the judicial system, and arrested both journalists and opposition politicians. Opponents responded by going after massive corruption in the administration that included the prime minister's sons and his chief financial supporters. A file containing recordings of conversations between Erdogan and his son in December 2013, in which he appeared to be providing instructions on how to conceal very large amounts of money, was made public. Erdogan denied that the conversation was genuine, instead calling it an "immoral montage."

Subsequently, a widely publicized failed military coup in 2016 was blamed on Gulen but was more likely than not allowed to develop by Erdogan himself to provide an excuse for further repression of critics. More than 150,000 civil servants have since that time been fired and replaced by Erdogan loyalists.

In 2017 Erdogan formed an alliance with the far-right National Movement Party (MHP) to promote a constitutional referendum on the form of government. In spite of fierce opposition and considerable electoral fraud, the referendum passed and the new system of government, a presidential system without a prime minister, formally came into place after the 2018 national election, which was won by Erdogan and the new AKP-MHP People's Alliance.

A currency and debt crisis beginning in 2018 have caused a significant decline in Erdogan's popularity and led to a loss in the 2019 local elections in which the ruling party lost control of the capital Ankara and largest city and financial hub Istanbul for the first time in 25 years. After the loss, the Turkish government ordered a re-election in Istanbul, in which AKP-MHP lost the election again by an even greater margin. The two successive losses severely damaged Erdogan politically speaking. He had once said that if we "lose Istanbul, we would lose Turkey," with critics calling the loss the "beginning of the end" for him.

The central point is that, like Trump's plea to Make America Great Again, Erdogan rose to

power by virtue of his realization that the often deeply religious Turkish peasantry, which was increasingly moving to the country's large cities, was a disaffected pool of voters that had not been tapped emotionally or even practically by any of the major political parties. That that was so was largely due to the fact that the country's military imposed constitution enshrined the secularism of the nation's founder Kemal Ataturk and appointed the army as the guarantor of the Ataturk principles. Erdogan was arrested but he subsequently skillfully avoided prosecution during his rise due to his willingness to use language and metaphors that appealed to what he perceived as the devout but largely un-politicized majority. This is not dissimilar to Trump's appeal to the so-called "deplorables" and it explains why both leaders have core supporters who follow them with a real passion.

Other similarities between the two include a propensity to say things spontaneously that are both absurd and politically damaging, a belief that the chief executive should have no restraint exercised over his policies and positions, sons who are benefitting from their father's position, and a lack of discretion when using the telephone.

And then there is the style issue – both men are blunt, thin skinned and assertive, unwilling to be upstaged by anyone, which suggests that they have had a tendency to talk past each other either on the phone or in person. This explains the curious misunderstanding of what the Americans and Turks pledged to do over the phone in the aftermath of the partial withdrawal of US troops from the Syrian border region several weeks ago. It also explains why there will be no quick resolution to the problems that both Ankara and Washington have created as Syria struggles to return to something approaching normalcy.

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