

Turkey's President Erdogan: A Classic Case of How Power Corrupts

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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This is the second in a series of articles based in part on eyewitness accounts about the rapidly deteriorating socio-political conditions in Turkey and what the future may hold for the country. The first article is available [here](#).

Much has been written on the endemic corruption in Turkey which involves virtually every social strata—including political, judicial, government administration, private sector, civil society, business, and military—and which stands in total contrast to President Erdogan's grandiose vision to make Turkey a significant player on the global stage. After fifteen years in power, Erdogan now presides over a state deeply entrenched in corruption, conspiracy theories, and intrigue. He uses every lever of power to cover up the pervasive corruption consuming the nation and overshadowing the remarkable socio-political progress and economic growth that he made during his first nine years in power.

To consolidate his reign, he intimidated his political opponents, emasculated the military, silenced the press, and enfeebled the judiciary; most recently, he pressed the parliament to amend the constitution to grant him essentially absolute powers.

Turkey ranks 75th in the world in transparency on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index—falling nine places since 2015—along with Bulgaria, Kuwait, and Tunisia. More than 40% of Turkish households perceive public officials to be corrupt.

The economy: Given the pervasiveness of corruption, economic progress in Turkey has slowed down. In Erdogan's initial years, the economy grew by 5-7 percent because he made it a priority while focusing on the poor and less educated, who subsequently became his core supporters.

When the global economy was strong Turkey registered significant economic growth, but the recent economic slowdown revealed the fault line in Turkey's economy. An inflated and corrupt bureaucracy made it extremely difficult to be granted licenses for development, making it ever harder for foreign and local investors to accelerate the process without bribing government officials.

During a corruption investigation in 2013, \$17.5 million in cash was discovered in homes of various officials, including the director of state-owned Halkbank. Fifty-two people connected to the ruling AK Party were detained in one day, but subsequently released due to "lack of evidence."

Given this grim reality, as long as the government continues to deny the existence of pandemic corruption, Erdogan's ambition to make Turkey's economy among the ten largest economies by 2023 (the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic) has become nothing but

a pipe dream.

Suppressing the press: Erdogan has shown zero tolerance for criticism and has worked to stifle the press. Any media outlet that exposed corruption cases became an 'enemy of the state.'

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 81 journalists are currently imprisoned, all of whom have been charged with anti-state offenses, and over 100 news outlets have been ordered closed by the government. In total, between July 20 and December 31, 2016, 178 broadcasters, websites, and newspapers were shuttered.

Whereas in a democracy the media is considered central to keeping the government honest, in Turkey investigative journalism has become taboo as the Erdogan government is terrified of the potential exposure of corruption cases where government officials are directly involved.

The implications of this are far and wide as other countries, especially democracies, become suspicious of Turkey's positions. The lack of transparency severely erodes its credibility and international standing.

Political: Two-thirds of Turks in a survey revealed they perceive political parties to be corrupt. Turkey lacks an entity that monitors the financing of parties, which are required to submit their financial tables to the Constitutional Court, an institution ill-equipped to handle audits.

Additionally, according to the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, Turkey "does not have a specific regulatory process to eliminate possible conflicts of interest" for parliamentarians who transition to the private sector after their terms are complete.

Commenting on former Prime Minister Davutoglu's "transparency package", Erdogan shamelessly stated that "If it [requiring party officials to reveal wealth] goes on like this, you can't find anyone to chair even [the AKP's] provincial and district branches."

Several of Erdogan's ministers (Economy Minister Zafer Caglayan, Interior Minister Muammer Guler, and Environment Minister Erdogan Bayraktar) resigned after their sons were arrested on allegations of bribery. Following their resignation, Erdogan "proceeded to dismiss thousands of police officers, prosecutors, and judges" and accused the Gulen movement of a coup attempt.

The arrest and indictment in US courts of Iranian-Turkish gold trader Reza Zarrab poses a significant threat to Erdogan's authority, as top AK officials are wrapped up in the indictment—including some of Erdogan's family members. Pro-government media quickly leveled accusations against the American prosecutor and judge involved in the case of being instruments of the Gulen movement.

The ramifications of the wide-spread political corruption also have major adverse impacts on Turkey's relations with foreign governments who interact with Ankara out of necessity rather than by free choice—particularly the EU—which makes Turkey's foreign relations tenuous and puts its long-term security at risk.

Judiciary: According to the 2013 Global Corruption Barometer, 13% of households reported

having to pay a bribe after coming into contact with the judiciary, which has increased in the past three years. The flaws of the Turkish judiciary have “undermined the acceptance of the ruling by all segments of Turkish society and tainted it with allegations of political score-settling.”

An even-handed judiciary is necessary to have a healthy and sustainable democracy. But when it becomes corrupted, as it has in Turkey, it is not just the cases before a court that become compromised—there is a ripple effect that occurs, impacting on behavior of officials engaged in criminal activity and who feel they can continue to act in such a manner with impunity.

Military: According to the EU Progress Report 2016, extensive legal protection is given to counter-terrorism personnel and “the military and intelligence services continue to lack sufficient accountability in Parliament.” The same report states that “Access to audit reports by the Turkish Court of Accounts on the security, defense and intelligence agencies remains restricted.”

Erdogan has replaced hundreds of generals, which led to a reduction in strategic planning and overall quality of military effectiveness. His purge of the military high brass three years ago on charges of conspiring to topple the government has eroded Turkey’s position in NATO.

Similarly, the purge of the top echelon of the military following the July 2016 coup further weakened military preparedness, which raises serious questions about Turkey’s military prowess and its effectiveness as a member of NATO.

Turkey defies the NATO charter that requires its members to “safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.” By not adhering to these principles, Turkey risks being potentially expelled, especially now that Erdogan appears to be increasingly gravitating toward Moscow.

Civil society: The EU Progress Report 2016 notes: “Participation by civil society in the budgetary process is poor...and independent civil society organizations are rarely involved in law- and policy-making processes.”

Corruption creates fear in society—individuals who might otherwise wish to expose acts of corruption are now afraid to be implicated. According to Transparency International’s Oya Ozarslan, “Today you can’t offer people neither a good nor a bad example because corruption trials have become impossible in Turkey. This in turn legitimates the notion that [the corrupt] get away with it anyway.”

The AK Party pledged “[to wage a] most intensive struggle [against corruption],” and fully ensure “transparency and accountability prevail in every area of public life... [to prevent] the pollution of politics,” but then Erdogan himself rejected any practical measures to tackle corruption, fearing damaging exposure.

Sadly, much of what Erdogan aspired for could have been realized had he continued the reforms he initiated and brought Turkey to the international status he desired without resorting to authoritarianism.

After 15 years in power, Erdogan provides a classic example of how power corrupts. It is

time for the public and the opposition parties to demand that he leaves the political scene and allow the formation of a democratically-elected government to begin the process of stemming corruption.

Otherwise, Turkey will forfeit its huge potential of becoming a significant player on the international stage.

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