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Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: More than a lame duck

By JULIUS MOTAL

I was halfway through a lamb wrap at a restaurant near the Bosphorus this past June when a van drove by blaring political messages in Turkish. When I turned to look, I caught sight of the Prime Minister's face, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, writ large, with unnaturally smooth skin for a 60-year-old man. Invariably the words "SAĞLAM IRADE" or "MILLI IRADE," Turkish for strong will and national will, were emphatically printed next to his face. The Erdo-van was a common feature of daily life in the city during my summer there. It was a significant feature, too, because it was part of Erdoğan's presidential campaign in Turkey's first presidential election in its history. Beneath that was his campaign logo, a setting red sun with a winding white road into what could be a tunnel and his name in blue. It bore a striking resemblance to President Barack Obama's campaign logo, but Erdoğan's team would probably tell you otherwise.

The political van's loudspeaker that cut into my lunch had the tonal quality of a call to prayer, the message heard from the top of every minaret five times a day. I turned to my companion who, despite being able to speak Turkish, could not make any sense of the message. Historically, the presidency was a ceremonial position elected by members of Parliament, but on August 10, Erdoğan became Turkey's first popularly elected president.

My arrival coincided with the height of the election season. Billboards adorned the sides of buildings, roads and buses, and no matter which ferry I got on, whether it was crossing the Bosphorus from the European side to the Asian side or vice versa, he was on television giving a speech. When I arrived in Istanbul, I had a vague sense of Turkish politics, but nothing could prepare me for how deeply ingrained politics is in the culture. I had come to Turkey to work for a lifestyle magazine for three months, so my professional occupation had more to do with vintage

shops and bars than Erdoğan's omnipresence in Turkish life. I never saw the man in person. He existed in images, advertisements and television appearances each time I crossed the Bosphorus. All of this is to say that Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) dominated the election cycle.

His strongest opponent was Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, an academic, diplomat and former Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the second largest intergovernmental organization after the United Nations. İhsanoğlu was the joint candidate of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Turkish politics is a game of acronyms, with the three most important being: AKP, CHP and MHP. The CHP is a Kemalist party, that is to say it adheres to the politics of Turkey's modern founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a strident secularist who sought to Westernize Turkey in a break from its past as the center of the Ottoman Empire. The MHP is a conservative nationalist party that has secured its spot as the third largest party in Parliament, behind the CHP and Erdoğan's AKP. The CHP and MHP's coming together in support of a joint candidate was a political marriage of convenience against Erdoğan's political powerhouse.

Of course, I learned all of this along the way. I had arrived in Istanbul on May 27, several days ahead of the one-year anniversary of the Gezi Park protests that shook the city and the country to its core. In 2013, there were plans to build a barracks that would house either a mall or a museum in Gezi Park, one of Istanbul's most frequented parks in Taksim, a popular neighborhood for locals and foreigners alike. Those plans were met with civil disobedience. The quiet sit-ins soon turned violent when police raided the park in the middle of the night on May 29, 2013 with tear gas, water cannons, batons and other forms of crowd control. The result was explosive in many ways, and the effects are still being felt.

The Gezi Park protests were the spark that set the city and the country ablaze. For the first couple of weeks following the police raid on Gezi, there were nightly protests in which police were out in full force with riot gear, tear gas launchers and TOMAs, large, armored trucks outfitted with water cannons designed for crowd control.

Video accounts show just how massive the protests during the first few weeks were. Much of the action took place on Istiklal Street, the main thoroughfare in Beyoğlu, one of the most popular districts in Istanbul of which Taksim is a part. Police would fire tear gas canisters at will, sending protesters onto side streets and into buildings where they could rest before heading back into the fray.

Gezi, and all the protests that followed, were indicative of growing unrest with Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian rule and the wide-ranging reach of his party. The proposed construction of the barracks in Gezi Park was just one large project in a string of large projects that Erdoğan was determined to complete. The public's outcry and demonstrations against his wishes did not sit well with him.

"If this is about holding demonstrations, if this is a social movement, where they gather 20 I will gather 200,000. Where they gather 100,000, I will bring together 1 million from my party," Erdoğan threatened in a televised speech last June, two days into the protests.

That rhetoric only stood to further enrage the demonstrators, and it is indicative of Erdoğan's outsized personality approach to anything he does not like.

"Turkish political culture is more of a one-man show," Baybars Orsek, the leader of an NGO in Turkey focused on getting Turkish youth politically involved, said.

Erdoğan is that one man. Born in Istanbul on February 26, 1954, Erdoğan grew up in a conservative Muslim household; his father was a member of the Turkish Coast Guard. The

young Erdoğan played semi-professional football, while studying business administration at Marmara University. It was in college that he became interested in politics, first by joining the National Salvation Party (MSP) in 1976, which was headed by Necmettin Erbakan, who would later serve as Prime Minister of Turkey for one year, from 1996-1997, before being pressured into stepping down for conflating religion and state. After a military coup in 1980, Erdoğan joined the Islamist Welfare Party (RP), and in 1984, became the RP's Beyoğlu District Chair; the following year, he moved up to the Istanbul City Chair. Erdoğan was elected to Parliament in 1991, but a legal technicality kept him from taking his seat; he remained politically active, until winning Istanbul's mayoral election in 1994.

Now, Erdoğan is the architect, and the face, of the AKP, which was formed in 2001, and won control of the government the following year. The prime ministership, however, did not immediately go to Erdoğan, who was technically disqualified because of a 1998 conviction for inciting religious hatred. The previous year, as Mayor of Istanbul, Erdoğan had been a member of the Welfare Party, which was Islamist in nature and because of that, it was deemed unconstitutional and shut down. At a party rally, Erdoğan had read a poem that contained the lines: "The mosques are our barracks, / The domes our helmets, / The minarets our bayonets, / And the believers our soldiers." That public display of Islamic faith in an adamantly secular society earned Erdoğan a 10-month prison sentence, of which he only served four. His sentence was reduced following an unsuccessful appeal to get it overturned completely.

TURKEY's secularism has its roots in the principles of its founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1922 left Turkey at a crossroads. Atatürk then led the country to victory in the Turkish War of Independence in 1923, and with

eyes toward the future, he essentially overhauled Turkish society from the ground up. Two of the most potent examples of that were the Romanization of the Turkish alphabet, which boosted literacy, as a Romanized version was better suited to the Turkish language; and the declaration of Turkey as a secular state, a clear break from its history as the capital of the Muslim world.

For Erdoğan, secularism meant suppression of his Muslim identity and, during the 2002 election, an outward realignment of his political ideology. While there are Islamist overtones to the AKP, it bills itself as a socially conservative party. Erdoğan would later gloss over the poetic incident that landed him in jail. According to Hugh Pope, the Deputy Program Director for Europe and Central Asia at the International Crisis Group, “During the campaign, Erdoğan told visitors to the AKP’s headquarters that he simply wanted to be known as a conservative, and explicitly stated that he had broken with his radical Islamist past.” Secularists, however, worried that Erdoğan, given his past, would conflate religion and government, which has been a point of contention, both for critics at home and abroad, in the years since he came to power as Prime Minister in 2003. He cruised to the prime ministership when then Prime Minister Abdullah Gül stepped down, in order “to make way for his party’s leader,” according to a [2003 article on CNN](#). Gül then became Turkey’s president, a largely ceremonial post. That change of power cemented Erdoğan’s, and the AKP’s, place in Turkish politics and society. But it would not be without its challenges.

The biggest pushback came from the CHP, the secular party that was wary of Erdoğan’s Islamic tendencies, and also the military. The military was a sizable threat to Erdoğan’s AKP, as it had already overthrown the Turkish government three times: in 1960, 1971 and 1980. Each coup left Turkey increasingly unstable. Erdoğan was 48 when he became Prime Minister in 2003, which was considerably young, and that youthful vigor gave him a certain advantage. The

year before he became PM, Erdoğan went a whirlwind tour of European capitals, and as Pope writes, “European counterparts were impressed by Erdoğan’s direct approach and relieved by his reformist program.” While he made a good show abroad, Erdoğan’s monomaniacal approach to governance at home would cleave the country in half politically.

“He is the *buyuk usta*,” Steven Cook, a Turkish expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, said. “*Buyuk usta*” is Turkish for great master, a title bestowed on Erdoğan by his most fervent constituents. He is often introduced publicly as: “Here comes the Great Master!”

There is a cult of personality surrounding Erdoğan, particularly among religious conservatives, who favor his public displays of faith and appeals to the faithful. One of his strongest earlier moves was his rallying against the headscarf ban for state workers, which had been in effect since 1924, a year after the founding of the Turkish Republic. It was illegal for women working for the state to cover their heads, but with the rise of the AKP that began to change. In 2008, the ban was temporarily lifted before it was struck down by a court, and in 2013, it was officially lifted. Critics maligned it as creeping Islamism, whereas supporters leveraged it as a push for equality.

THERE were covered and uncovered women all around me in my time in Istanbul. From the metro barreling through Istanbul’s underground to the cafes overlooking the Bosphorus, religious expression abounded. At a bus stop early in my stay, three women approached the intricate map of Istanbul’s bus routes. Each headscarf was a splash of color and design, woven works of art that had personality and style, a testament both to their faith and fashion sense. There was the *ezan*, too, or the call to pray as it’s known in English, that added to the religious atmosphere. Given Istanbul’s sloping landscape, the call to prayer from every mosque had an enveloping quality, like waves continuously crashing on the shore. If I found myself at a certain

point, somewhere equidistant between several mosques, it felt like I was in an echo chamber, at turns comforting and not so depending, of course, on the quality of the singer. I didn't know Turkey when it was strictly secular, so all of this seemed rather natural. I had come here with the understanding that I was entering a Muslim country, that customs and sentiments were vastly different from New York City. Early in my stay, my companion told me about the phrase, "To be a Turk is to be a Muslim." As the summer moved on, the more I realized that this was true. Turkey was indeed a Muslim nation, and Erdoğan appealed to that sentiment strongly.

Erdoğan's tenure as Prime Minister, from 2003 until 2014, saw widespread gains for the AKP from multiple sectors of Turkish society. Renewed talks with the European Union and reforms that considerably boosted Turkey's economy, particularly during the 2008 world financial crisis, gave Erdoğan and his party the edge they needed to stay in power. In a piece in *The Atlantic*, Aaron Stein wrote, "Lots of people that did not compromise (sic) part of the AKP's core constituency, for example, would lambast Erdoğan publicly but would quietly vote for him because he was handling the economy well and they were pleased with growing liberal freedoms." Erdoğan could only ride that wave for so long before his grand ambitions, mostly in the form of large projects, like the barracks in Gezi Park, would become the clarion call for his opposition.

There was not really any doubt that Erdoğan would win the presidential election this year. In public appearances, he would get nearly all of the screen time, with his opponents getting relatively little by comparison. This translated into the election results on Aug. 12, with the Kurdish candidate Selahattin Demirtaş getting 10% of the vote; the CHP and MHP's Ekmelledin İhsanoğlu getting 38%; and Erdoğan squeaking by to victory with 52%, avoiding a run-off election with İhsanoğlu, had he gotten less than 50%. Ascending to the presidency meant

that Erdoğan had to resign from the AKP, as his party does not allow a member to hold more than three elected positions. While he may have resigned, the AKP is still very much Erdoğan's party. What remained an imperative for Erdoğan was finding a way to wield the power he exercised as Prime Minister, and he was put to the test almost immediately with a conflict brewing just across Turkey's southeastern border in Syria.

A Sunni jihadist, terrorist organization known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham has been battling for control of Kobani, a small Syrian border town very close to the Turkish frontier, which it had overrun at the end of September. ISIS, as the organization is known, spun out of the Syrian civil war, and has made considerable gains both in territory and wealth for much of 2014. Its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared himself to be the caliph of the Islamic State, which ISIS had established on June 29, a caliphate which it claims extends over the territory it has captured in Syria and Iraq.

For Erdoğan, Kobani is a test of his leadership and tolerance. Turkey's foreign policy has for decades been a "good neighbor policy" in which Turkey has no problems with adjacent states, and while Erdoğan clearly detests embattled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, he has not taken military action against his regime.

What further complicates the Kobani crisis for Erdoğan is Kobani's strong Kurdish population, an ethnic group that spans several countries including Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The Kurds are Turkey's largest ethnic minority and one of Erdoğan's biggest headaches. Turkey has been in a 30-year conflict with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), which has been fighting for Kurdish autonomy and which the U.S. declared a terrorist organization in 1997. The conflict simmered during Erdoğan's tenure as Prime Minister; there were attempts at peace talks, but the talks never went anywhere. On top of that, Erdoğan was unwilling to intervene on behalf of the

Kurds in Kobani, and he initially prevented the Peshmerga, Iraqi Kurdish fighters, from passing through Turkey into Syria to fight alongside their brethren.

As the battle for Kobani intensified, President Obama authorized airstrikes on ISIS in Syria and Iraq, but he was met with opposition from Erdoğan when he wanted to use Turkish airbases. In a confounding move, the Turkish government ordered airstrikes against Kurdish militias fighting ISIS because of their alleged allegiance with the PKK. Turkey considers both the PKK and ISIS enemies of the state, but yet, the PKK and Turkey share a common enemy in ISIS. Perhaps Erdoğan hoped the PKK and ISIS would do each other in; but, faced with mounting internal and international pressure, he reversed course and allowed Iraqi Peshmerga to pass through Turkey into Kobani on October 31. Turkey has not, however, taken any decisive military action against ISIS, and that is most likely due to the threat of a spillover into Turkey. Any step in the wrong direction could have severe repercussions for Erdoğan who is trying to further build his legacy as the most important Turkish statesman since Atatürk.

During my time in Istanbul, the one face I saw in equal measure with Erdoğan's was Atatürk's, whose portrait adorned the walls of nearly every small shop and eatery in the city. There seemed to be a collective reverence for Atatürk, while the country is moving farther and farther away from the principles that so clearly defined his legacy and shaped much of Turkey's history until the formation and rise of the AKP under Erdoğan. In an extravagant move on October 29, Erdoğan unveiled Ak Saray (White Palace), his new residence in Ankara. It is a \$615 million, 1,150-room estate spanning 50 acres, with an additional \$135 million budgeted for it next year, [according to the BBC](#). Bigger than the White House, the Kremlin and Buckingham Palace, it has replaced Çankaya Köşkü as the official Presidential residence. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu can now call Çankaya home, while Erdoğan enjoys the spoils of a vast and

ostentatious new compound. What further complicates this for many is its incursion on protected forested lands, originally gifted to Turkey by Atatürk himself. Erdoğan then took matters further with the announcement of a 250-room extension of the complex, which will serve as his residence within Ak Saray, and will cut further into those protected lands. In a [blog post for CFR](#), Steven Cook wrote, “The new palace is a physical representation of what the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has sought to do since it came to power 12 years ago: Bury Atatürkism, rendering it a historical artifact – a fossil all the while aggrandizing the new great man, Erdoğan, who the faithful refer to as the “Great Master.””

Erdoğan has been at the helm of a new age in Turkey’s history, one in which he has sought to distance himself and the country from Atatürk’s legacy. Atatürk’s visage may be staring down from walls of shops and eateries, but Erdoğan is no longer looking up at him. There may come a day when those dusty portraits are replaced, and the face that will look down on the people passing by will be Erdoğan’s.