

Turkey's Choice

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Some books are published with exquisitely bad timing. That could certainly be said of Soner Cagaptay's *The Rise of Turkey*. Presented as the latest word on the state of the nation, this slim volume by a Washington think-tank hand has been overtaken by events that could determine the future of Turkey's democracy along with its domineering leader.

In December 2013, a corruption scandal erupted when prosecutors ordered the arrests of businessmen close to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has held power for 11 years. Erdoğan responded by lashing out in all directions—even suggesting that the US embassy was behind the investigation.

Soon, however, he settled on a more plausible archenemy and declared war on his erstwhile ally, the Pennsylvania-based cleric Fethullah Gülen. Alleging that Gülen's followers had infiltrated law enforcement agencies and now constituted a "parallel state," Erdoğan purged hundreds of police officers and prosecutors. His latest move to thwart the graft probe is legislation, passed by the parliament in February, that will allow the government to shut down websites deemed to violate privacy rights—a handy pretext for quashing any news reports that annoy the prime minister.

The corruption charges laid bare what had been an open secret in Turkey: Many cadres of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) got rich from a frenzied building boom in Istanbul through insider deals with real estate interests. This toxic mix of power and greed led to the Gezi Park protests last summer, when a pet project of Erdoğan's—to demolish a park in Taksim Square, the heart of Istanbul, and build a shopping mall in its place—caused so much disgust and outrage that it provoked the first major demonstrations against the prime minister's authoritarian ways. True to form, he reacted

by sending in the riot police, whose indiscriminate use of tear gas and water cannon inspired more protests across the country.

Now the corruption scandal and Erdoğan's desperate measures to stamp it out have intensified the polarization between religious and secular Turks that was already the hallmark of his years in power—even as his falling-out with Gülen splits their Islamist coalition. The current political instability is also putting at risk the AKP's greatest achievement: a decade of unprecedented economic growth that lifted

Turkey into the ranks of the world's most dynamic countries.

On top of all this, Turkish foreign policy is in shambles. A once-lauded pivot to the Middle East backfired badly in Syria and Egypt, and relations with Europe have suffered from deliberate neglect. Perhaps realizing belatedly that turning away from the West had been a mistake, Erdoğan visited Brussels in January, seeking to revive Turkey's languishing bid for European Union membership. He received nothing but a well-earned rebuke for his affronts to the rule of law.

Cagaptay argues that Brussels should play a more constructive role in encouraging Turkish reform: "Turkey could make faster progress on freedoms if the EU process were linked to the genuine prospect of eventual entry. . . . [W]hereas a decade ago Turkey needed the EU for mostly economic reasons, now the EU is essential to Turkey as an impetus for political advancement." As he points out, Turkey first applied for membership in 1959, and it has faced more tests than any other candidate.

There are obvious double standards at play, and still a great deal of European resistance to the idea of Turkish membership in the bloc, goaded by fears of cheap labor and religious or cultural differences. But these atavistic anxieties ought to be swept away by shared political and economic interests, and by the profound historical con-

The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power
by Soner Cagaptay. Potomac Books, 2014.

nections that have intimately bound Turkey to Europe for centuries.

FRAGILE GAINS

For all its unfortunate timing, Cagaptay's book is still a good short introduction to the long-term trends behind the events that unfolded after it went to press. Cagaptay credits Erdoğan and the AKP with presiding over a huge economic expansion: The size of the economy has tripled over the past decade and living standards have dramatically improved for ordinary Turks. Trade is booming with all quarters of the globe, particularly with developing regions where Turkey has cultivated soft power—often through the educational activities of the Gülen movement.

Yet Cagaptay rightly stresses the fragility of these gains. Especially dangerous, in his view, is the reversal of liberal reforms that the AKP enacted in its first years in power, mainly to meet EU membership standards. Erdoğan has since taken a sharply authoritarian turn, emboldened by increasingly large election victories. Hoping to entrench himself in power for years to come, he is expected to seek the presidency in an election this August.

As Cagaptay says, “[T]he more popular it became, the more the AKP felt it could ignore centrist consensual politics and the liberal vision for EU membership. In due course the party abandoned the EU process and instead started to go after those who disagree with it, including independent media and the courts.” Turkey now has the ugly distinction of jailing more journalists than any other country.

Meanwhile, fear of mounting political disorder has begun to dry up the heavy foreign investment flows that sustained the economic boom. Cagaptay's warning threatens to become a prophecy: “Turkey grows because it is deemed stable while the world around it convulses politically and economically. An aggressive foreign policy and political instability would court economic disaster, ending Turkey's bid for global influence.”

Cagaptay sees a new constitution that secures civil liberties as the best way to resume the process of domestic political reform and to reconcile the religious and secular halves of Turkish society. This is also essential, he says, for enhancing Ankara's soft power abroad: “If Turkey wants to become a true beacon of democracy in the Middle East its new constitution must protect broader

individual rights.” Far from promoting reconciliation, though, the AKP has deepened the internal divide, dismantling the “firewall” between religion and state that was the most important legacy of nationalist founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Unfortunately, Erdoğan's self-interested and illiberal priorities have smothered the potential for a productive constitutional debate. First he sought to shift power to the presidency, in preparation for his own anticipated change of office. That brazen power grab was derailed by the Gezi protests. Now, flailing in the grip of the corruption scandal, he is preoccupied with seizing control of the judiciary and deterring dissent. In this febrile context, Cagaptay's calls for mutual tolerance and reasoned compromise seem downright utopian.

BAD ADVICE

Finally, Cagaptay's oft-repeated central thesis—that Turkey can and should cast itself as a “Muslim power” with a “Western overlay”—is debatable in terms of both practicability and wisdom. Erdoğan's ill-fated foreign policy adventurism of the past few years has seemed motivated by a vision of Turkey as a Muslim power with an unmistakable Sunni bias. Siding with Saudi Arabia against Iran in an intra-Islamic holy war is not the ticket to peace and prosperity.

Cagaptay is not alone in encouraging the notion that Turkey has a vocation as a Muslim power that acts as a bridge between civilizations, but this is misguided advice. Religious nationalism is a dangerous, regressive brew. It poisons domestic politics and is incompatible with membership in a secular, postnationalist EU. A conflict of basic values cannot be covered up by a cosmetic “overlay” of merely instrumental associations with Western institutions such as NATO.

Turkey would surely be better off building on its own secular, modernizing history of the past century, keeping a respectful but clear separation of mosque and state, while also embracing its multicultural, multinational heritage (the latter is one of Cagaptay's better suggestions). Such an approach would allow Turkey to advance on its long path of convergence with Europe, and at the same time preserve its soft power appeal in the developing world. Progress of this kind will require less confrontational and more inclusive leadership, with a real commitment to democracy. This year's elections promise new opportunities to turn in that direction. ■