

## Turkey Faces an Inflection Point

*In the same way Atatürk dragged Turkey struggling and screaming into the Western world, Erdogan has exerted every effort to drag Turkey in the opposite direction*

**Robert Ellis**

*(Turkey analyst and commentator. He is also an international advisor at RIEAS (Research Institute for European and American Studies) in Athens)*

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On October 29, Turkey celebrated the centenary of the Turkish republic, but there was not much celebration as far as the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) was concerned. The AKP, which came to power twenty-one years ago, was more concerned with burnishing its own credentials almost without reference to the republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Of the nine posters produced by the Directorate of Communications, only one, "From the Past to the Future," referred to Atatürk, where he figured on the left side of the poster with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the right. However, what Erdogan chose to prioritize was the war between Hamas and Israel. Four days earlier, the president addressed his parliamentary group and declared Hamas [was not a terrorist organization](#) but a liberation and mujahideen group fighting to protect its territory and citizens. Furthermore, he stated that the Turkish nation was the only nation in the world that had not practiced or committed racism.

Erdogan canceled his planned visit to Israel and instead called on all citizens to take part in a massive rally the day before the centenary in support of Palestine. In the event, this came to overshadow the official commemoration. However, in Turkey, the local elections in March loom large, when the AKP hopes to retake Istanbul and Ankara. As *The Times* correspondent Hannah Lucinda Smith has explained, Erdogan has made Palestine his personal cause.

It was not all Turkey that followed suit. For example, in Alanya on the south coast, there were banners of Atatürk everywhere and several thousand people took to the streets, singing "*Yaşa Mustafa Kemal Paşa yaşa*" ("Long live Mustafa Kemal Pasha") and chanting "We are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal." Not a word about Erdogan. Erdogan has declared the next 100 years will be "the century of Türkiye" and said he will [replace the 1982 constitution](#) (after the 1980 military coup) with one which will be "civil, liberal and inclusive." The Turkish republic that Mustafa Kemal founded in 1923 abolished the sultanate and the caliphate and introduced secularism as well as equality of men and women.

Ten years ago, former Turkish foreign minister and ideologue Ahmet Davutoglu declared the last century to be “a parenthesis” that the AKP intended to close, which it has set out to do. As far as femicide is concerned, it is a permanent feature of Turkish life. In 2010, the We Will Stop Femicide in Turkey (KCDP) was formed to keep women alive, but two years ago Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention (2011), which aims at preventing and combating violence against women. Ironically, Turkey was the first state to sign and ratify the convention. Religious conservatives and nationalists opposed the convention as a tool of Western imperialist powers to control Turkish society and undermine traditional family values. Consequently, Erdogan seized the opportunity to boost his waning support with the decree.

Recently, the president targeted the LGBTI+ community as the biggest threat against the family in Turkey and called for the population to increase. But it is Erdogan’s mismanagement of the economy that has caused young couples to give up having children because one income is not enough.

Erdogan’s dogmatic insistence on reducing interest rates in the face of crippling inflation together with credit-driven growth has beggared Turkey. The independent inflation group ENAG has put the [annual inflation rate at 126 percent](#) but according to the government, it is 61 percent. The World Bank ranks Turkey fourth (after Venezuela, Lebanon, and Argentina) in its food price inflation list.

In a U-turn, Erdogan has appointed a new finance minister and central bank governor, who has raised the benchmark interest rate from 8.5 to 35 percent. Yet the lira continues to fall and foreign investors stay away.

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The constitution stipulates no one shall be allowed to exploit religion for the purpose of personal or political influence, although this is what has happened since the AKP came to power.

In 2012, Erdogan stated it was the government’s intention to raise “a pious generation,” but the following year this backfired with the Gezi Park uprising, which until then was the most serious threat to his regime.

The Quran states there is no compulsion in religion but this has been ignored by the AKP government. Instead, the emphasis has been placed on religious (“Imam Hatip”) high schools and the curriculum has been amended accordingly.

A pilot scheme has also been launched to appoint imams and preachers as “spiritual counselors” to elementary and secondary schools.

The prominent role played by Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate ("Diyanet") was confirmed in the 2022 budget, where the directorate's allocation outstripped that of seven ministries, including the Interior Ministry, the Foreign Ministry, and the presidency.

There is also a call to remove secularism from the constitution, for example, from the imam of the Hagia Sophia mosque, and restore Turkey to its "factory settings" of 1921 and 1924.

Apart from Gezi Park, there has also been a backlash among the younger generation. According to Konda, a Turkish polling institute, only 15 percent of young people aged fifteen to twenty-nine consider themselves as religious or conservative, as opposed to 28 percent a decade ago. According to another survey, 43 percent of Turkey's youth plan to move abroad, which can hardly be considered a vote of confidence in the government.

Journalist and editor Murat Yetkin believes that Turkish people are [beginning to rediscover Atatürk](#), secularism, and gender equality as a reaction to the present regime. In which case, they will have the opportunity to show where their sympathies lie in the March polls.