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The Megalomania of Erdoğan the Magnificent

By Stanley A. Weiss

LONDON--It was the first time young Turks would march on the streets of Istanbul, when it was still known as Constantinople. On a hot spring night 105 years ago, a movement of student activists, nationalists and secularists rose up against the autocratic rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II, who was the 99th caliph (or, religious leader) of Islam and 34th sultan of the 600 year-old Ottoman Empire. Their demand was simple: restore the short-lived constitution that the sultan had suspended in 1878, which granted greater freedom to Turkish citizens. Cowed, Abdulhamid quickly capitulated, reconvening Parliament and initiating what came to be known as the Second Constitutional Era in Turkey.

It was too much for the Islamic traditionalists in the Turkish military, who overtook their officers in March of 1909 and marched through the streets demanding restoration of Islamic sharia law. As the Young Turks fled, one writer feared that "Turkey seemed poised to go down an Islamist path." But it was not to be. Within ten days, democratic reformists had recaptured Constantinople. The Islamic rebels made their last stand at Taksim military barracks on the city's European side before surrendering to reform-minded troops, including a young officer named Mustafa Kemal. For Kemal--later known as Atatürk, founder of modern, secular, democratic Turkey--the Taksim barracks would serve as a reminder of the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism.

It is no accident that the protests that began in Istanbul before spreading to 78 Turkish cities the past two weeks were sparked by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's plans to build an exact replica of the Taksim barracks (torn down in 1940) on the same spot where it once stood, razing a popular park in the process. While two very different Turkeys encircle the Istanbul stand-offs of 1909 and 2013, the issue at the heart of both is the same: should Turkey--which is 99 percent Muslim--be ruled by the laws of God or the laws of men? This is not a question that can be resolved by tear gas or water cannon, no matter how much misery Erdoğan's riot police reign down on protesters. This is a battle for the very soul of modern Turkey itself, one that will ultimately determine whether the long-time NATO member and U.S. ally will stay on Atatürk's secular path or become a Turkish version of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

Throughout his career in Turkish politics, the megalomaniacal and deeply Islamic Erdoğan--who has called himself both "the imam of Istanbul" and "a servant of Shari'a"--has never really hidden where he stands. As he once said during his decade-long tenure as Istanbul's mayor, "our only goal is an Islamic state." He believes, as he thundered in a mid-1990s speech posted on YouTube, "one cannot be a Muslim and secular. For them to exist together is not a possibility."

The real surprise is how willfully blind Western governments have been to Erdoğan's true intentions, reflected in an absurd editorial that recently ran in a leading American newspaper that observed "for the past few years, there has been a general optimism about Turkish democracy in Western capitals." For the 48% of Turkey that did not support Erdoğan's re-election to a third term in 2011--as well as the 50% that did, based in part on his successful stewardship of Turkey's economy--there is no such confusion over whether Erdoğan sees himself, as the Economist asked this week, as "Democrat or Sultan." In the words of journalist Ron Ben-Yishai, Erdoğan's clear goal is to bring about "a return to the Ottoman Empire's glory days."

After all, does this sound like the record of a secular democrat?

As has been expressed repeatedly in this space, since taking power in 2003, Erdoğan's Islamist Justice and Development Party has imprisoned more journalists than any nation on earth. For good measure, it has also incarcerated more than 2,800 students, most for the crime of exercising free speech. Similar offenses have led to more than 20,000 complaints filed against Turkey's government in the European Court of Human Rights.

Having once publicly read an Islamic poem that includes the lines, "the mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets, and the faithful our soldiers," Erdoğan has used public funds to build more than 17,000 mosques while announcing plans to create a super-mosque overlooking Istanbul. Last month, to celebrate the 560th anniversary of Istanbul's conquest by the Ottomans, Erdoğan broke ground on a third Bosphorus Bridge linking the Asian

and European sides of the city, naming it after the controversial conquering Sultan Selim I--who adopted Sunni Islam as the official religion of the Ottoman Empire, and then ordered the murder of 45,000 Alevites for not being Muslim enough. Along the way, he has ordered the separation of boys and girls in primary and secondary schools; lowered the age requirement for religious schools to 11 while tripling enrollment; and ruled that tens of thousands of graduates of Islamic madrassas have the equivalent of college degrees so they can be hired for high civil service posts.

What upsets secular Turks the most is what Turkish scholar Seyla Benhabib calls Erdoğan's "moral micromanagement of people's private lives." Saying he wants to create a "pious generation," Erdoğan has spoken out in favor of keeping men and women apart on beaches; supported announcements last month urging subway passengers to refrain from kissing in public; and led the passage of surprise legislation to ban the sale of alcohol while publicly calling Atatürk a "drunkard." After famously overturning a 90-year ban on headscarves in public, Erdoğan also called on all Turkish women to have three children while restating his opposition to day-care centers, interpreted by the Economist as "women should have babies and stay home."

One wonders if that bit of wisdom came up during Erdoğan's visit last month to the White House, where President Barack Obama publicly asked--again--for the prime minister's advice on raising daughters while praising him for his "courage" and "friendship." For a leader that has preferred the company of Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hezbollah the past ten years--rebuking the U.S. on Iran's nuclear program while severing Turkey's seven-decade long friendship with Israel--it's puzzling why Obama continues to refer to the Turkish prime minister as his most trusted ally.

Erdoğan is precisely the kind of Islamic fundamentalist that Atatürk warned against, and the very reason he entrusted Turkey's military with the responsibility of safeguarding the nation's secular traditions. Four times in 90 years, the military led coups to do just that--most recently in 1997, when it forced Erdoğan's mentor, Necmettin Erbakan, to resign. At times, it has performed its job too zealously.

For those who wonder why the military has been silent the past two weeks, it is a measure of the prime minister's brilliance that he found a way to use Turkey's hopeless bid to join the European Union to his advantage. Acting on the EU's insistence that Turkey bring its military under greater civilian control, Erdoğan castrated military leaders, eventually throwing one in five of the nation's generals and half of its admirals in jail on specious charges, while placing Islamic loyalists in leadership positions. For good measure, in 2010, he also led the passage of new constitutional amendments to take power away from the other guardian of secular power in Turkey--the judiciary--giving his party control over judicial appointment while investing it with the power to "investigate" judges.

Which is why secular Turks took to the streets two weeks ago: it's the only forum for redress they have left. If nothing comes of the protests--the prime minister insists he will now build a mosque at Taksim Square, in addition to the Ottoman barracks--at least woke the West to the reality that Turkey is a long way from the secular democracy we've known for 90 years.

As Erdoğan undertakes a high-profile campaign to bring the most extensive changes to Turkey's political system since Atatürk--re-writing the Turkish Constitution to give the President more power while brilliantly working to end a 30-year war with Kurdish separatists to win the support he needs to pass it--he will be in position to run for President in 2014, just as he is term-limited out as Prime Minister. If this month's protests don't derail those efforts, there is no telling what Turkey will look like--or who it will be allied with--by the end of two likely terms of an Erdoğan presidency in 2024.

But the question of whether Turkey will be ruled by the laws of God or the laws of man will be made moot--because in the mind of Erdoğan the Magnificent, who truly sees himself as the reincarnation of rulers like Suleiman who served as both political and religious leaders, they are one in the same.

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