

# **COMMENTARY**

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## **The Demise of Turkey's Democracy: An Open Letter to President Erdogan**

**Alon Ben-Meir**  
**New York University**

Dear President,

I have been in your country scores of times and developed close and friendly relations with many Turks from all walks of life, who all took pride in the incredible progress Turkey made under your leadership. During your first ten years as prime minister, you transformed Turkey economically, socially, and politically, and put the country on the path to greatness as an emerging regional and global power. This is why, Erdogan, it pains me to witness a once-great reformer destroying his own impressive achievements that any leader would have sustained with all their might. You have chosen this destructive path at the pinnacle of your career, when you could have left a historic mark on Turkey's future that rivals even Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

The list of your transgressions is painful but necessary to numerate because their magnitude has far-reaching implications on Turkey and may well doom its prospect of capturing its rightful place on the world's stage. My hope is that Turkey can still be saved from your tyrannical reign that has transformed Turkey into a police state, divided its citizenry, and wrecked what's left of its democracy.

You had a historic opportunity to offer a model of Islamic democracy to the Arab world in the wake of the Arab Spring. Instead, you froze all political reforms and pushed Islam deeper into the country's secular education by expanding religious education in learning institutions to

cultivate a new observant Islamic generation. This is not what the Turkish people aspire for; they want a true Western-style democracy with Islamic values as was envisioned by Atatürk.

You came close to fulfilling your people's dream when you adopted the Accession Partnership with the EU that provided Ankara with a roadmap to make Turkey an active member of the European community, using its vast human and natural resources to make it a constructive powerhouse on the global stage. But then, you abandoned European social and political ideals, destroying Turkey's prospective EU membership while flirting with Russia to the utter dismay of the Turkish people and Western allies.

What a noble idea it was to pursue a sound foreign policy doctrine based on "zero problems with neighbours," that you proudly advocated. But then you alienated both traditional and new friends of Turkey, and sadly today Turkey has problems with just about every neighbour—Cyprus, Greece, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Armenia, and the Caucasus are all estranged from Turkey, not to mention your tense relations with the EU and the United States.

And how could you reverse course with your own Kurdish community? They are Turkish citizens—why deny them their inherent right to live in accordance with their cultural heritage? You went on a rampage to discriminate against them as if they were your sworn enemies. No, Erdogan. When you clamp down on the legal pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party and arrest Kurdish notables and intellectuals for presumed links with the PKK, don not expect loyalty—you are merely inviting increasing violence. You openly threaten the Iraqi Kurds with retaliation as they pursue independence, fearing your own Kurds would follow, in their footsteps—yet you fail to realize your belligerent policies are only exacerbating the separatism you fear.

You cynically claim that Turkey is a democracy, but you restrict peaceful public demonstrations, which is the hallmark of a democracy. The Taksim Square unrest and your harsh treatment of demonstrators only reaffirms that Turkey under your rule has become a one-man government. Following the demonstration, you initiated a brutal campaign against those who participated in the demonstration to spread fear and suppress the people's voice.

I know you take pride – and for good reason – in growing the economy by nearly tripling Turkey's GNP during your first years as prime minister. But then, the poverty rate of the population in Turkey is at a high of 22.4 per cent—a staggering one quarter (20 million) of the Turkish population. This is not a reality that, you care to recognize; you deny it to suit your inflated ego about the wonder of Turkey's economic miracle.

You flagrantly abolished the State Security Courts, violated the rights of defenders and detainees, restored police brutality, and put civil and political rights in free play. Have you

glanced at Human Rights Watch's World Report documenting that under your watch the government unjustifiably prosecuted alleged speech crimes and used arbitrary terrorism laws? Ordinary Turks are terrified that someone is listening to their conversations, and they cannot even tweet without fear of being investigated for their thoughts.

You emasculated the military, which has served as the custodian of a secular and democratic country, using NATO's demand to subordinate the military to the civilian authority as an excuse. With no compunction, you discharged nearly 3,000 officers while assuming the prerogative to issue direct orders to the heads of all military branches, to prevent the military from ousting you from power and prosecuting you for pursuing an Islamic agenda, the way they prosecuted three of your predecessors.

You display unbridled arrogance to the West, accusing Germany of using "Nazi measures" for their refusal to allow your supporters to hold rallies in Germany to demonstrate your sway and outreach, just so you can feed your oversized ego. You exhibited naked satisfaction as you watched your bodyguards shamelessly beat peaceful protesters in Washington and New York, because the concept of dissent and protest is completely alien to you, even in foreign lands.

Under the cover of fighting ISIS, you focused instead over the past three years on fighting the Syrian Kurds. Several credible reports suggest that you have been buying oil from ISIS, thereby aiding them financially as well as in their recruitment efforts by allowing thousands of volunteers to cross the Turkish border into Syria to join their ranks. You turned a blind eye to ISIS' heinous crimes because their Islamic credentials mattered more to you than the lives of thousands of innocent people.

Corruption? It is rampant on your watch. Bribery charges have implicated municipal employees, businessmen, the sons of three of your ministers, and your own son. Rather than taking these charges seriously, you dismissed high-ranking officials who are pursuing the investigation. Your obstruction of justice was so obtrusive; it evoked criticism even from members of your own AK Party.

Thirsty for insatiable power, you have pushed to amend the constitution to codify the president's absolute authority while eliminating the office of the Prime Minister. You have made the parliament nothing more than, a rubber stamp to pass any laws that you desire to promote your personal agenda. You have betrayed the Turkish people, who trusted you as you amassed unprecedented powers while subjecting your fellow citizens to despotism and despair.

Scores of irregularities occurred during the referendum, which was held under a state of emergency, in place since the July 2016 coup. You masterfully exploited it – calling it a "gift

from God” – in order to rid yourself of your opponents, enacting a purge and spreading fear and anxiety throughout the country. Opposition members were intimidated, imprisoned, shot, or beaten. Voter fraud was pervasive and was captured on camera.

You thrive on conspiracy theories. Many government officials close to you and government newspapers accuse Fethullah Gulen, a powerful Muslim cleric, and his followers of conspiring to topple your government without any shred of evidence. You have heartlessly purged tens of thousands of innocent men and women for allegedly being supportive of the Gulen movement, denying them job opportunities and leaving their families economically despairing.

How convenient for you to systematically subordinate the judiciary to your whims. You issued decrees requiring prosecutors to receive permission for investigating ministers which violates the new constitution, helping you bend the rules to strengthen your authoritarian muscles. What a dismal state of affairs, when attorneys and solicitors are terrified of defending anyone accused of being supportive of Gulen or the Kurds, fearing retribution from your secret service.

You have made journalists one of your main targets, arresting and imprisoning them based on fabricated charges; over a hundred are languishing in jail. Reporters Without Borders, ranks Turkey 154th out of 179 countries in terms of freedom of press. Scores of media outlets, including newspapers and TV stations, were closed or taken over to, promote your skewed narrative, while disregarding basic journalistic ethics.

You expressed your false piety by limiting social freedoms, banning the sale of alcohol between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. and pushing to prohibit coed dormitories in state universities. You believe you have the right to impose your moral code on every home and control the personal space of every Turkish citizen, as if it were all ordained by a higher authority and you are simply the humble messenger.

Your extremism has also created a split in your own party between those who blindly support you and those moderates who are genuinely concerned about the way you are leading the country. You maintain a veneer of democracy, but in fact you stifle opposition political parties, making it extraordinarily difficult for them to challenge you. In May 2016, you pressed the Turkish parliament to approve a bill stripping MPs of immunity from prosecution in a blatant attempt to marginalize Kurdish MPs.

You are tenaciously instilling Ottoman images into the public consciousness, including building an extravagant 1,100-room ‘White Palace’ as your Ottoman-esque residence. Your most recent project was the Çamlica Mosque, the now-largest mosque in Istanbul. Another mosque in

Taksim Square was built with all the trimmings of the Ottoman era, which you are trying to resurrect when in fact it was rejected and vanquished a century ago.

You presume to be a man of faith, a reformer who put his country first, but you have been blinded by your thirst for power, betraying your fellow countrymen. Their hopes during Turkey's initial march to greatness, under your leadership no less, have faded away, leaving anguish and anger in its wake.

I know that you want to preside over the hundredth anniversary of the new republic of Turkey in 2023. But how do you want to be remembered? As the man who had all the power to make Turkey a shining star and a proud nation, or the ruthless Sultan who has squandered Turkey's potential to become a model of Islamic democracy with a brilliant future ahead?

You have failed your people. They must now await your departure from public life to breathe again, to think again, and yes, to dream again.

**Note:** This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://alonben-meir.com/writing/demise-turkeys-democracy-open-letter-president-erdogan/>

**Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in US and international newspapers. Email: [alon@alonben-meir.com](mailto:alon@alonben-meir.com)**

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