

A “Turkish Century” in the new world order – a weekly news review

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Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was re-elected president of Turkey because he controlled the media and most state institutions, and his most serious

opposition had been sent to prison or forced into exile. To treat this election as a democratic decision is to play into his hands. At the same time, it is impossible to deny that he has used his autocratic power to build mass popular support, with many of those who voted for him convinced by his rhetoric. So, what is the story that has captured them, and how does it fit into the emerging multipolar world?

In his victory rally in Ankara last Monday night, with the illuminated backdrop of his presidential palace of over 1,000 rooms, Erdoğan [told](#) the ecstatic crowd, we will build the Turkish Century together.

This October will see the centenary of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, and it has long been Erdoğan's dream, not only to be ruling over Turkey on that day, but to commemorate it by leading Turkey into a more powerful second century. He wants to reverse the concessions made by the Republic's first leader, Mustafa Kemal, known as "Atatürk", when he signed the treaty of Lausanne that brought the Republic into being. He wants to extend Turkish power and control, especially in Syria and Iraq in the areas claimed by the 1920 National Pact (Misak-i Milli). At the same time, he is undoing Atatürk's creation of Turkey as a secular westernised nation state by bringing religion back into politics and orientating Turkey more towards the east and the Muslim world. Erdoğan's turn towards religion was welcomed by large numbers of people who resented the imposed secularism forced on them by the ruling elites, exemplified by the headscarf ban, and it has built him a loyal conservative base. He has cultivated and ridden on popular anti-western sentiment – without actually severing ties with western nations – and his foreign policy gamesmanship has proved a strong political move at a time when US hegemony is being forced to give way to an increasingly multi-polar world. (More on that later.)

Weaponising hate

In that victory speech, Erdoğan's promises of future greatness were interspersed with exhortations against his enemies, and he is a master at harnessing the power of hate to distract from his own failings and unite his supporters. He hit out at the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP)

of course, and at the Western press that had called for his defeat. And earlier – in Istanbul – he had again [attacked](#) all opposition parties by accusing them of being pro LGBT+ and hence, in his terms, against the sacred institution of the family. But he reserves his full venom for the Kurds, and he uses any link with them – including links that only exist in his own propaganda – as a tool to attack others.

The most sobering moment in the Ankara rally was Erdoğan's insistence that the imprisoned former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş, would never be released from jail under his rule; which was met by calls from the crowd for Demirtaş to be given the (abolished) death penalty. Demirtaş, along with 107 others, is currently being tried in what is known as the [Kobanê Case](#). In 2014, when the Kurdish city of Kobanê, just across the Syrian border, was under siege from ISIS, Turkish troops sat on the border, preventing volunteers from joining Kobanê's defence and doing nothing themselves to help halt the ISIS attacks. Demirtaş and the HDP's Executive Board decided to put out a tweet calling on people to protest. The protests were large and angry but initially peaceful, however they were met by live fire from the state security forces, and by violent counter protests, including members of the far-right Huda Par party, which had been encouraged by the state. As a result, around 50 people died, the majority of them supporters of the HDP. The defendants are being accused of their murder, and Erdoğan describes Demirtaş as a "terrorist who caused the death of 51 Kurdish brothers". The fact that Demirtaş should be deemed innocent until proved guilty makes this contempt of court, but that doesn't bother Erdoğan, who has all but eroded the independence of the Turkish judiciary.

The refusal to release Demirtaş is also a statement of defiance against Europe – specifically the European Court of Human Rights, which has ruled and that Demirtaş should be immediately released. The European Court made clear that the tweets were not a call for violence, that the violence could not be seen as a direct consequence of the tweets, and that the case had been conceived with the ulterior motive of closing down political debate. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, Erdoğan's presidential challenger, had promised that Turkey

would abide by the European Court's ruling, as they are obliged to do by the Turkish constitution.

Although Erdogan claims contempt for Western opinion, the official English language report of his victory speech [omitted](#) all these attacks.

Erdoğan's heroes

Erdoğan is a ruthlessly pragmatic politician in the pursuit of personal power and glory. He has always appealed to both national and religious identities, but how these have been interpreted has changed with the times. His current story – of glory and hate – becomes even clearer when one looks at which past presidents Erdoğan chose to mention. Adnan Menderes, who became Prime Minister after Turkey's first free elections in 1950 but was removed by the 1960 coup and later executed, is presented as a symbol of democracy. However, Menderes, like Erdoğan, abused his elected office to crack down on free speech and on those who opposed him, from journalists to politicians. Menderes also reacted against imposed state secularism, reopening mosques and allowing the Arabic call to prayer. Turgut Özal had plans for greater unity of the Turkic states. Necmettin Erbakan created the movement and ideology of National View (Millî Görüş), which promotes pan-Islamism and rejection of the West. He led many Islamist parties that were banned for breaching rules demanding secularism in politics, and he was Erdoğan's political mentor. When his Virtue Party was banned in 2001, members split to form the Felicity Party and Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which was regarded as more pragmatic. Alparslan Türkeş was the founder of Erdoğan's far right alliance partner, the National Movement Party (MHP), and its paramilitary organisation, the Grey Wolves. In 1945 he was charged with racism, but like many others with far right and fascist sympathies he found a role in the anti-communist secret state organisations established by Western intelligence services after the second world war. He received training in Special Warfare in the United States and played a leading role in the counter guerrillas. Türkeş continued to work for a Pan-Turkic nationalism, while both the counter guerrillas and the grey wolves have been credited with extensive killings of people who opposed the state's dominant ideology.

There are many contradictory aspects in these men's political histories too, but so there are within Erdoğan's own trajectory. And there are contradictions within his People's Alliance, which includes both the ethnic-nationalist MHP and the Kurdish Islamist Huda Par, though they are united around conservative values and a lust for power. (Huda Par is accepted as a tool to attempt to undermine Kurdish support for the HDP.)

Supporters of all these views were also found in the competing National Alliance, whose unifying factor was a call to step back from one-man rule and return to a semblance of parliamentary democracy, and which officially [disbanded](#) on Thursday. So, opposition to aggressive nationalism and to much religious conservatism has had to rely on the heavily repressed HDP and small left parties.

The new world order

The broader politics of the Ukraine war has been accompanied by the growth of new political poles. Many countries around the world are looking for an alternative to US dominance and turning to other alliances, which are gaining in importance. This has played into Erdoğan's hands, and allowed him to use his undoubted skills in exploiting Turkey's strategic location and its ties to East and West and to the Islamic world. Turkey also seeks influence through its arms industries, which Erdoğan in his victory speech, proudly described as Turkey's economic engine.

Erdoğan has been able to boost Turkey's image as an important power, while also benefiting materially from new strategic friends, and he has felt secure enough to cock a snook at Europe and America, confident that they will still want to retain Turkey as a NATO ally and a trading partner. Indeed, the United States seems ready to [allow](#) Turkey to buy the F16 fighters they have been asking for, in exchange for Turkey lifting their veto on Sweden joining NATO. The Whitehouse claimed that during President Biden's congratulatory phone call, both presidents "expressed their shared commitment to continue working together as close partners to deepen cooperation". EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, [tweeted](#) that she looked forward to "continue building

the EU-Türkiye relationship”; however, this is not likely to [include](#) any progress towards EU membership.

Although Turkey is ostensibly neutral in the Ukraine war, and provided Bayraktar drones to Ukraine, they have, in practice, benefitted Russia, and Erdoğan and Putin have developed a tactical mutually supportive relationship. Even the application of the Montreux Convention has worked to Russia’s advantage, and Turkey has not applied anti-Russian sanctions. Turkey has welcomed Russian tourists and oligarchs, and Russia is building Turkey a new nuclear plant (despite this being an earthquake zone) and planning to make Turkey into a hub for Russian gas. Moscow [deferred](#) Turkish payments for gas to help prevent the Turkish lira from losing even more of its value in the run up to the election.

There is also the prospect of stronger ties with China, which sees Erdoğan’s win as a further loosening of Turkey’s bonds with the West. The commentator for the Chinese Communist Party-linked Global Times observed, “The West has not been able to bring down Erdoğan at a time when the Turkish economy is struggling. I think this reflects the slow decline of the West’s overall influence and the abrupt and severe loosening of its grip on Turkey.” And [China](#), too, could provide Turkey with financial relief. Turkey is currently a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which is led by China and Russia, and Erdoğan is seeking full membership.

Qatar, too, has shown itself ready to help stabilise the lira, as well as to build basic houses for Syrian refugees “returned” from Turkey to Turkish occupied Syria.

This week, Bloomberg reported major new contracts for Turkish construction firms to work for Saudi Aramco. (It seems that the earthquake collapses have not damaged the industry’s image.) Al Monitor [notes](#) that Saudi Arabia also helped Turkey with extra funding, after Turkey agreed to stop pursuing the Khashoggi murder case.

A cooperation agreement between Turkey and the United Arab Emirates was ratified on Wednesday.

The emerging geopolitics also has important implications for the future of Turkey's relations with Syria, but a proper look at this must wait for another time. The political equation has been made more complicated by Syria's return to the Arab League. Fehim Tastekin makes the intriguing – and tantalizingly brief – [observation](#): “Kurdish sources told Al-Monitor that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been encouraging Damascus – with tacit US approval – to integrate the SDF into the Syrian army as part of efforts to push back Iranian influence. Such moves clash with Ankara's interests as well.”

Selahattin Demirtaş and the HDP

For the HDP and the Green Left, under whose banner they campaigned, the question is not simply why Erdoğan won, but why they leached support. Their relatively poor showing has produced many promises of self-criticism. There has also been an announcement by Demirtaş that he is stepping back from active politics, though he says he would have done this whatever the election outcome. He remains a committed member of the HDP. As a political prisoner, his political involvement had been restricted, but, through his lawyers and family and other visitors he was able to keep in touch with his party and provide the wider public with a regular Twitter commentary. On Wednesday, Gerçek News [published](#) his harsh criticism of his party, in which he accused the party organisation of being unprepared, unresponsive, and without a correct sociological analysis. This was followed on Thursday by an [interview](#) with İrfan Aktan, in which Demirtaş made it clear that he felt the fault was not in the HDP's political line, but in their political practice. He was particularly critical of a lack of internal party democracy, especially with respect to the candidate lists, which he described as a deviation from the party's ideology. He called for a change of party leadership, and for critical discussion starting at local level and working up to a national party congress.

There will always be people who feel that the HDP has become too general and has forgotten its Kurdish roots, and others for whom the HDP's importance is in putting forward an alternative political programme that would benefit everyone. The party argues that justice for Kurds and a fairer future for

Turkey are two sides of the same coin, and neither can exist in the absence of the other. Demirtaş' response when asked about the failure to agree a joint list with the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP), the biggest party on the Turkish left, was to stress that what was needed was not simply an election alliance but long-term cooperation with Turkish socialists.

Demirtaş also makes clear that he didn't support the idea of not standing their own candidate for the first round of the presidential elections, though he put himself fully behind the decision once it had been made. In fact, he says he put his own name forward to be the candidate. An HDP/Green Left presidential candidate would have provided a focus for their campaign and a platform for their ideas; and instead of having their votes taken for granted while other political parties shunned them, they could have become a force to be wooed.

The elections have confirmed the Kurds' pariah status in Turkish politics, and that they can expect little support from the other main opposition parties. Demirtaş said that he expected to see continued violence against the Kurdish freedom movement, combined with attempts to undermine Kurdish political culture, using Hûda Par. And, indeed, the state wasted no time before demonstrating that Erdoğan's win meant violence as usual. Early on Monday in Batman (Êlih), some twenty opposition supporters were [arrested](#) for making the victory sign favoured by the Kurds in front of crowds celebrating Erdoğan's win, and a journalist filming the arrests was arrested too. And later that day in Hakkari (Colemêrg) young Kurds were violently rounded up and detained in house raids. One later described how he was beaten by two masked officers who spoke a language that was neither Turkish nor Kurdish and who left him with a fractured skull. He said that this was the latest in six years of [harassment](#) by the police, who were trying to force him to become a police informer. And so it goes on.

Again, my review has been dominated by the Turkish election, but I can't finish without a quick mention of other places.

Iraq and Iran

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq continues to demonstrate that Kurdish autonomy alone, without a functioning democracy, is not enough. Recently, there haven't even been elections as the two dominant parties, controlled by two dominant families, can't agree on the rules. Now the Iraqi Federal Government has intervened and ruled the extension of the parliament to be unconstitutional and all decisions made by it to be null and void. The Federal Government seems set to take over the running of the region's election, and Kurdistan Watch [comments](#) that the region's autonomy is being methodically eroded.

The stand-off at Makhmour Refugee Camp, which I wrote about last week, continues, with camp residents facing down the Iraqi army, which wants to fence in the camp like a prison.

In Makhmour, Iraq is under pressure from Turkey. They are also being put under pressure by Iran, which wants them to expel the Kurdish opposition groups exiled from Iran that have made their bases in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Iran threatens to [attack](#). Iraq has offered to control the groups' movement and activities, but Iran insists they want them gone.

In Iran itself, 142 prisoners were [executed](#) in May alone, the two journalists who reported the story of Jina Amini's murder by the state are being tried in secret and could face the [death sentence](#), and, after eight months of protest, the Balochi people of Zahedan are continuing to keep up their weekly Friday [demonstration](#) against the regime. Among the many chants and banners, people were saying, "This is our final message, our Goal is to overthrow the System!"

The struggle continues.

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