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## Erdogan's Bus Ride to Redemption

by Anthony Silberfeld

After 13 years in power, Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has reached a crucial fork in the road that offers clear choices between rejoining the community of democratic leaders or attaining pariah status reserved for those who violate basic human rights and demonstrate contempt for the rule of law. The early days of Mr. Erdogan's journey were promising, but his recent behavior has caused consternation among policymakers in the European Union and the United States, who understand the strategic importance of Turkey, but cannot countenance blatant disregard for Western norms and values. Erdogan famously telegraphed his intentions by once declaring that for him democracy is a bus ride; once he reaches his stop, he is getting off.

If the recent trajectory of Erdogan's behavior is any indication, we may be rapidly approaching his final stop. In a recent assessment, Human Rights Watch reported that "for three terms since 2002, and enjoying strong parliamentary majority, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has demonstrated a growing intolerance of political opposition, public protest and critical media. Government legislative and other efforts to limit corruption investigations have undermined judicial independence and rule of law." Combine these serious violations with the arrest of human rights lawyers on trumped-up terrorism charges with the silencing of journalists and social media outlets that exposed alleged corruption in the president's inner circle, and you have many of the hallmarks of a prototypical authoritarian regime. The internecine conflict with the Kurds offers additional evidence, but there is no need to belabor the point.

The key question is whether leaders in Europe and the United States can entice Erdogan to stay on the bus. For a man who prides himself on meticulous control of his political environment, it is fitting that three events beyond his control may actually provide the impetus for his return to a more democratic path.

### The Refugee Bargain

While the media has captured harrowing photos of overcrowded rafts capsizing and children drowning in the sea, it often ignores the burden Turkey has accepted as the first port of call for refugees destined for Europe. Recent reports indicate that of the more than 600,000 refugees who reached Europe this year, approximately 80 percent transited through Turkey. And that just takes into account those passing through. Turkey is now home to 2.2 million refugees – more than any other country in the world.

Against this backdrop, German Chancellor Angela Merkel embarked on a diplomatic mission to Ankara to offer a deal on behalf of the EU that would stem the flow of refugees from Turkey to the EU, and provide Turkey with sufficient resources to continue hosting these potential asylum-seekers on its soil. To that end, the EU plan reportedly included a \$3.4 billion aid package to maintain the refugee camps and a requirement that Turkey improve its documentation procedures and border security. In return, Turkey has asked for the liberalization of EU visa requirements and a serious commitment to resurrect EU accession negotiations.

The engagement on the refugee issue is meaningful, and it also presents a second chance for the EU to bring Erdogan back into the democratic fold. Despite significant political and demographic challenges that stalled EU accession talks with Turkey, leaders could have found a way forward. The consequences of this failure have contributed to Turkey's alienation from its European partners, which manifested itself in anti-democratic ways. A good-faith effort on the part of Brussels to open several EU accession chapters

will bring Turkey closer to western institutions, and with it, a requirement that it adhere to western democratic values.

### **Vladimir Putin: Relationship Counselor**

Russian President Vladimir Putin can be credited with providing much-needed reconciliation counseling at a time when the alliance was becoming more fragmented and irrelevant by the day. Russian adventurism in Ukraine has re-energized and strengthened NATO commitment to its Baltic members in a way no series of summits or joint declarations could. Likewise, the Kremlin's decision to intervene in the Syrian civil war has led Turkey and NATO to reassess their value to each other.

On October 3 and 4, Russian military jets entered Turkish airspace in a move that was provocative, dangerous and unintentionally helpful to the NATO alliance. The reaction from NATO was swift, when on the next day it reaffirmed that "the security of the Alliance is indivisible, and Allies stand in strong solidarity with Turkey." This commitment, however, comes with strings attached. Indeed, there is a democratic requirement for NATO member states that the Turkish government seems content to ignore.

According to NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept paper, adopted by all members (including Turkey), "NATO member states form a unique community of values, committed to the principles of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law." Closer NATO cooperation to address instability on the Syrian border and as a bulwark against Russian provocations ought to force Erdogan to move in the direction of the democratic principles to which Turkey is committed.

### **Elections without End**

On June 7, Erdogan's AKP lost its majority in the Turkish parliament for the first time since coming to power in 2002. This was a serious blow for the party and a personal rebuke of Erdogan, who attempted to leverage an election victory to strengthen an executive presidency in Turkey. AKP's failure to form a coalition triggered another election due to take place on November 1.

Recent polls indicate that AKP maintains approximately 42 percent support, which would not be enough to win the 276 seats necessary to hold a majority in the 550-member parliament. Given this electoral math, the most likely outcome will be a repeat of the June results, requiring AKP to find a willing coalition partner. There has been speculation that if AKP fails to gain a governing majority, it could seek a third election, but this cannot go on indefinitely. Erdogan's attempts at political overreach in Turkey have been rejected by the populace once. And a second spurning at the polls in November might force AKP to adhere to the traditional democratic processes that exist in Turkey.

A coalition government in Turkey may serve to moderate some of the more undemocratic tendencies of the Erdogan government, and restore the necessary balance and accountability that have been lacking in Turkey of late.

### **A Captive Passenger**

There are times when global events wreak havoc, and other times when they change behavior in a constructive way. This unique confluence of events has the potential to create the latter scenario, but Erdogan holds much of the leverage. In recent years, Turkey has been neglected by its traditional allies in the U.S. and EU, and the results are neither in the West's nor in Turkey's interests. Erdogan has been riding this democratic bus for more than a decade, but he appears ready to alight. Though the Western

leaders have limited options at their disposal to impact Erdogan's calculus, Washington and Brussels must engage Turkey in a way that makes it more attractive for him to stay aboard.