

THE MENDERES METAPHOR

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has frequently compared himself with Adnan Menderes, most recently after his August 10th presidential victory. This article examines the validity of this comparison, its popularity among academic historians, and its role in facilitating Erdoğan's success. It considers how the coup that toppled Menderes in 1960 helps explain both Erdoğan's authoritarianism and his popularity. The author characterizes Turkish politics from 1960 to the present as a series of parentheses; the latest one being the era of civilian authoritarianism that the AKP government has ushered in, thereby ending the era of military tutelage that took shape after the 1980 coup.

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On 28 May 1960, US Ambassador Fletcher Warren sat down with Cemal Gürsel, the general who, at 4 o'clock the previous morning had seized control of Turkish government.¹ Ambassador Warren, citing the many coups he had seen as a diplomat in Latin America, told Turkey's new leader that his had been "by far the most precise, most efficient, and most rapid coup" he had ever seen. Warren warned that after the military had seized power once, they would find it increasingly difficult to avoid doing so in the future when the political process faltered. Though Ambassador Warren had been nicknamed "the tall idiot" by Turks and was blamed by Washington for not anticipating the coup, his warning proved prescient.

Addressing the country after his August 10th presidential victory in 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that the parenthesis opened by Turkey's 1960 coup had finally been closed. By making him the country's first popularly-elected president, Erdoğan suggested that the Turkish people had finally achieved the true sovereignty that had been taken from them almost half a century earlier. In praising Adnan Menderes, the prime minister deposed and later executed in the 1960 coup, Erdoğan reprised his victory speech from the 2011 general elections, in which he declared the AKP's triumph at the polls was also a triumph of the democratic ideal for which Menderes had sacrificed his life.

In the wake of Erdoğan's victory, it is worth reconsidering the story of Menderes, who was neither the pious democrat imagined by his modern-day supporters nor the reactionary demagogue denounced by their secularist opponents. Menderes's decade in office offers an all-too-familiar example of courageous democratic aspirations collapsing into paranoid authoritarianism. Menderes's fate, meanwhile, helps explain how today, following increasingly serious accusations of corruption and authoritarianism, Erdoğan's presidential ambitions could win the support of the majority of Turkey's voters. Faced with a choice between civilian and military authoritarianism, Turkish officers in 1960 chose the latter. Now, by curbing the power of the military and securing his election as president, Erdoğan has earned Turkey the opportunity to try the former.

Before handing control back to a newly formed civilian government, Turkey's coup leaders tried and hung Prime Minister Menderes and two of his closest associates on a host of more and less legitimate charges. The military feared that if they spared his life after the coup, he would simply return to power in the next election and exact his revenge. But even after Menderes was dead, the Turkish people never voted the

¹ "Telegram from the Embassy in Turkey to the Department of State," *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Vol. X, Part 2, p. 845.

way the military wanted. The next several decades saw several more coups, against leftists, Islamists, and politicians of all stripes who were seen as unable to rule. The brutality and humiliation of the military's rule, the exaggerated version of secular authoritarian nationalism it promoted, and the dirty, decades-long guerrilla war with Kurdish separatists have traumatized Turkey. The experience has understandably led many, most notably now-President Erdoğan, to romanticize Menderes as a democratic martyr and his decade in power as a lost opportunity for Turkish democracy.

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Erdoğan and his supporters seldom mention, however, that within five years of being elected, when his party still had a solid grasp on power, Menderes began shutting down newspapers and jailing opposition journalists. *The New York Times*, in language that would sound familiar today, repeatedly declared itself “disturb[ed] to read about an increasing curtailment of the freedom of the Turkish press.”² During these years, the consistent critique from American liberals was that in supporting Menderes; the US was backing another right-wing dictator against communism. By 1960, the regime had put the leadership of the country’s opposition party on trial for treason. The US government, though privately concerned about Menderes’s autocratic behavior, continued to back the man who brought Turkey into NATO while overseeing 10 years of free-market reforms.

Menderes’s transformation into a tyrant was a tragedy for Turkey. Like Erdoğan, he had begun his career as a bold young politician, challenging an established autocracy in the name of his people’s material needs and democratic rights. He won admiration for loosening the government’s strict, often anti-Islamic interpretation of secularism while liberalizing the economy to bring increased prosperity to the country’s rural population. But he never felt secure in his power. When İsmet İnönü voluntarily stepped down after 12 years as “*Milli Şef*” (National Chief), Menderes, it seems, came to power (in the somewhat more modest role of Prime Minister) without ever quite believing it. His fear that it could all be taken away spurred his party’s descent into paranoia and authoritarianism until, with the 1960 coup, Turkey’s remarkable progress toward full democracy flopped out of the frying pan and into the fire.

² “Turkey and a Free Press,” *New York Times*, 9 March 1960.

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For those of us who optimistically cheered Erdoğan’s efforts to democratize Turkey and join the EU, it is painful to watch this tragedy repeat itself. Like Menderes, Erdoğan had the ability to substantially help consolidate Turkish democracy. Also like Menderes, he overcame important obstacles early in his career to advance the country towards that goal. It is easy now to forget that during the first years of the AKP’s time in office, a number of high-ranking military officers appear to have considered mounting an effort similar to the one that brought down Necmettin Erbakan’s Virtue Party-led coalition government in 1997. As the Ergenekon trials – which emerged in response to this fear, but posited a far more grandiose and sinister form of conspiracy – gradually devolved into a farce, many people lamented that a unique opportunity to hold the military accountable for its undemocratic behavior had been squandered. Strikingly, every round of Ergenekon arrests seemed to include at least a few of the military officers who actually had been eager to topple the government alongside others guilty of nothing more than being its outspoken critics. Admiral Özden Örnek, for example, whose diaries provided the most plausible evidence of real military malfeasance, was arrested as part of the *Balyoz* investigation in early 2011, by which point the entire affair had been discredited by a surfeit of forged evidence and absurd accusations.

Throughout this process, the AKP continued to benefit from the fact that, in Washington, its harshest critics were outspoken neo-conservatives, many of whom had never been that concerned about the anti-democratic behavior of Turkey’s military and who seemed unable to articulate their fears of Erdoğan’s authoritarianism without exaggerated references to the onset of Shariah law or the emergence of a Turkish Ayatollah Khomeini.³ US diplomats had admired Menderes’s religiosity, seen as a wholesome alternative to godless communism when coming from a close Cold War ally. But when Erdoğan’s foreign policy proved less cooperative than Menderes’s enthusiastic anti-Communism had been, his Islamist rhetoric made him a natural target. This, in turn, made it all too easy for Erdoğan’s supporters, already defensive, to assume that this was the source of all American criticism about their party and their leader.

³ See, for example: Michael Rubin, “Turkey’s Turning Point: Could there be an Islamic Revolution in Turkey?,” *National Review Online*, 14 April 2008.

In 2008, the AKP government imposed almost half a billion dollars in fines against a leading newspaper conglomerate whose papers' political coverage Erdoğan found less than satisfactory. Responding to accusations in Washington that the fine was politically motivated, an AKP parliamentarian later explained that of course it was not, but if it had been, that was because someone needed to punish the media for trying to influence politics instead of objectively reporting the news.⁴ Like Menderes, former US President Richard Nixon, and many other leaders from different decades and continents, Erdoğan's excesses seem to be motivated by the belief that he has been unfairly targeted by his enemies. Of course, Erdoğan has been, and it is harder to accept that criticism, even unfair criticism, is a normal, even necessary facet of democracy when some of your country's previous experiences with the system have ended on the gallows.

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Indeed, it is the long shadow cast by Turkey's military coups that has led Erdoğan and so many of his supporters to see authoritarian means as justifiable, and even crucial for achieving democracy. And certainly Turkey would be much worse off today if Erdoğan had suffered his predecessors' fate. While some kind of poorly organized, partial, or failed coup attempt still remains a dangerous possibility, it is to the AKP's lasting credit that no one in the country has any reason to expect another real coup. Even a number of Erdoğan's opponents give him credit for ending an era of military tutelage, and worry more about his current efforts to mend relations the institution he once maligned. Indeed, the retrial of many of those convicted in the *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* investigations represents a dramatic sign of the military's rehabilitation under Erdoğan's aegis.⁵

Erdoğan also bolstered his popularity by campaigning against the exaggerated, heavy-handed version of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's ideology implemented by the Turkish military and their bureaucratic allies after 1980.⁶ Atatürk fashioned his version of secularism in response to the exaggerated Islamic rhetoric of Sultan

⁴ This statement was made at a talk with members of the Turkish-American Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group hosted by Georgetown University and attended by the author during the group's visit to Washington DC from 27 September to 2 October 2010.

⁵ See for example Halil Karaveli's "The Return of the Generals," *Turkey Analyst*, Vol. 7, No. 21 of the

⁶ Esra Özyürek offers an engaging discussion of how this played out in regard to images of Atatürk himself in: *Nostalgia for the Modern* (Duke University Press, 2006).

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Abdülhamid II, which Atatürk treated as characteristic of the late Ottoman Empire as a whole. Today, Islamists and liberals alike often project the brutal post-1980 version of Republican ideology they are familiar with – sometimes referred to as Atatürkism by those trying to avoid this conflation – back onto the Republic’s foundation.

This tendency has in turn been compounded by academic trends in the study of 20th century Turkey. Perhaps in part because of the number of scholars who

have experienced post-1980 Turkey first-hand after studying the early Republican period in their research, a narrative has emerged connecting these two periods in a linear fashion while eliding the complexity of what came between. A teleological narrative of triumphant secular modernity has been replaced with one in which resistance to Kemalism’s authoritarian and top-down modernizing project becomes the story of 20th century Turkey.⁷ The rise of the AKP thus becomes the culmination of a century-long clash between Atatürk’s secular, Western modernity and a more authentic alternative rooted in popular Islam. The Menderes government, in turn, appears as an intermediate step in this larger transformation.

At a moment when scholarly talk of “alternative modernity” in Turkey has come to mean “Islamist modernity,” no one can quite accept that Menderes’s vision of modernity seemed to include having his motorcade showered in the blood of sacrificed camels and also having an affair with an opera singer. Likewise, for anyone whose image of an Islamist paper is defined by *Zaman* or *Yeni Şafak*, the scantily-clad actresses and risqué cartoons that regularly appeared in the DP party paper *Zafer* would be shocking.

When, in May 2013, Erdoğan defended further restricting the sale of alcohol by claiming that Turkey’s current laws on the subject had been written by “two drunks,” some of his more outspoken critics on social media contented themselves with saying that Atatürk had run the country better drunk than Erdoğan had sober. It was left to a more limited group of historians to point out that İnönü, presumably the second alleged drunk, had been, whatever his views on religion, abstemious, almost

⁷ A representative example of the way this historiography is applied to political debates can be found in Sükrü Hanioglu’s column: “Batı ‘model’inden ‘sapmak,’” [“Deviation” from the Western “model”], *Sabah*, 30 November 2014.

ascetic, in his personal life. Menderes, by contrast, made his obvious eagerness to enjoy life a part of his populist appeal, which was especially compelling following the hardships Turkish voters had endured during the Second World War.

But if Menderes was not as democratic as many now portray him to be, the Turkish people nonetheless secured lasting benefits from the democratic aspects of the era he presided over. Any overview of the country's 20th century history should acknowledge the many

problems that could have been considerably worse had they not been tempered by the force of popular elections. Those who continue to fear Turkey's transformation into an Iranian-style theocracy often overlook the possibility that İnönü's decision to liberalize at the same time the Shah resorted to violent authoritarianism helped prevent Turkey from sharing Iran's fate. Likewise, the years between 1946 and 1980 saw an extended period of relative peace in southeastern Turkey. One need not imagine democracy as a *panacea* that, if left uninterrupted, would have solved Turkey's Kurdish problem to lament the dramatic intensification of violence that followed in the wake of the 12 September 1980 coup.

While Erdoğan claims to be closing a parenthesis that opened with the 1960 coup, Ahmet Davutoğlu has gone further in claiming that Turkey is now closing a parenthesis that opened with the declaration of the Republic in 1923. Perhaps amid this proliferation of parenthesis, we should return to the rules of arithmetic, whereby the closure brought by the AKP will apply to the most recently opened parenthesis. That is, the party's new dominance will simply end the era of military tutelage that opened with the 1980 coup. In place of a more historic transformation, however, it seems that AKP rule will continue an undemocratic tradition that is indebted to both Republican militarism and Menderes's civilian authoritarianism.

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