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Turkey

Turkey and the Neofascist Contagion

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The ongoing battle in Turkey has become increasingly significant for the entire world. If the Turkish popular movement wins, its victory will have a significant impact in galvanizing resistance to the rise of neofascism worldwide.

The events unfolding in Turkey since last Wednesday are extremely serious: they constitute a new and very dangerous step in the country's slide towards the suffocation of democracy. The arrest of Ekrem Imamoglu – the popular mayor of Istanbul and candidate of his party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), to the next presidential election scheduled for 2028 – and the detention of nearly 100 of his collaborators in the municipality of Turkey's largest city, on charges that combine corruption (the Turkish judiciary should have better investigated corruption in Erdogan's entourage, starting with his son-in-law) and links to "terrorism", i.e., contact with the Kurdistan Workers' Party-PKK (at a time when the government is negotiating with this party for a peaceful settlement), is behaviour straight out of the familiar playbook of dictatorships.

If anyone had any doubt that the charges were fabricated and that the intent was to eliminate the strongest opposition figure to the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who seems determined to rule his country for life like other autocratic rulers, Istanbul University's decision to invalidate Imamoglu's degree on the eve of his arrest leaves no room for doubt. A university degree is one of the requirements for running for president in Turkey, and the university's decision was based on a completely flimsy pretext, especially since Imamoglu received his degree thirty years ago!

Almost a year ago, in the aftermath of the last municipal elections in Turkey, I recalled Erdogan's role in establishing democracy in his country during the first decade of his rule. Despite his subsequent autocratic drift, including by dismissing those leaders of his party whom he perceived as rivals, I praised his acknowledgement of his party's defeat in the municipal elections, which distinguished him from several neofascists who do not accept defeat, including Donald Trump who tried to overthrow the electoral process that took place in the autumn of 2020, and still refuses to acknowledge his loss, claiming that the presidency was stolen from him ("Two Valuable Lessons from the Turkish Elections", 2 April 2024 – in Arabic only).

The moral of this story is that the same man who began his political career with a courageous struggle against a dictatorial regime, and who, during his tenure as mayor of Istanbul, suffered what is very similar to what he is now inflicting on his opponent, the current mayor – this man, who played a commendable role in establishing democracy in his country, has been led by the intoxication of power and the enjoyment of a great popularity, to desire to perpetuate this condition, even if by imposing it coercively at the expense of democracy. And yet, until last year, Erdogan did not cross the qualitative red line separating the preservation of a margin of freedom that allows democracy to survive, albeit with increasing difficulty, and encroaching upon this margin in a dictatorial manner.

This was despite the fact that Erdogan exhibits some neofascist characteristics, by relying on an "aggressive, militant mobilization of [his] popular base" on an ideological ground that incorporates some of the key components of far-right ideology, including nationalist and ethnic fanaticism against the Kurds (in particular), sexism, and hostility, in the name of religion or otherwise, to various liberal values (see "[The Age of Neo-Fascism and Its Distinctive Features](#)", 4 February 2025). His current drift suggests that he is now completing his adherence to the ranks of neofascist regimes with regard to their stance on democracy. In the aforementioned article, I described this stance as follows: "Neofascism claims to respect the basic rules of democracy instead of establishing a naked dictatorship as its predecessor did, even when it empties democracy of its content by eroding actual political freedoms to varying degrees, depending on the true level of popularity of each neofascist ruler (and thus his need or not to rig elections) and the balance of power between him and his opponents."

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There are two main factors behind Erdogan's drift towards neofascism. The first is that the neofascist temptation increases whenever an authoritarian ruler faces rising opposition and fears losing power by way of democracy. Vladimir Putin provides an example of this in that his drift intensified when he faced rising popular opposition upon his return to the presidency in 2012 (after a charade of transferring to the prime ministership in compliance with the constitution, which at the time prohibited more than two consecutive presidential terms). At the same time, Putin resorted to inciting nationalist sentiment towards Ukraine (in particular), just as Erdogan later did towards the Kurds.

The second, and crucial, factor is the rise of neofascism to power in the United States, represented by Donald Trump. This has provided a powerful incentive for the strengthening of various forms of actual or latent neofascism, as we clearly see in Israel, Hungary and Serbia, for example, and as we will increasingly witness globally. The strength of the neofascist contagion is proportional to the strength of the main neofascist pole: the fascist contagion was greatly strengthened, particularly on the European continent, when Nazi Germany's power went on the rise in the 1930s. The neofascist contagion has become even stronger today, with the United States shifting from a role of deterrent to the erosion of democracy, albeit within obvious limits, to encouraging this erosion, directly or indirectly. The erosion is already underway and accelerating within the United States itself.

It is thus no coincidence that Erdogan's attack on the opposition began following a phone call between him and Trump, which Steve Witkoff, Trump's close friend and envoy to various negotiations, described last Friday as "great" and "really transformational". Witkoff added that "President [Trump] has a relationship with Erdogan and that's going to be important. And there's some good coming – just a lot of good, positive news coming out of Turkey right now as a result of that conversation. So I think you'll see that in the reporting in the coming days." (Witkoff's statement was made two days after Imamoglu's arrest, even if he was not necessarily referring to that arrest.) Moreover, Erdogan believed he has succeeded in neutralizing the Kurdish movement through recent compromises, which were blessed by his allies of the Turkish nationalist far right themselves (he was proved wrong: the Kurdish movement came out in support of the opposition and the popular protest). He also believes that the Europeans need him, and his military potential in particular, at this critical juncture for them, so that they would not exert any real pressure on him.

What remains a source of hope in the Turkish case is that Erdogan is facing a popular backlash far beyond what he apparently anticipated. This mass backlash is far greater than what Putin faced in Russia, where the popular movement was atrophied after decades of totalitarian rule. It is far greater than what most of the pioneers of neofascism have been confronted with, including Trump, who has met only very weak opposition from the Democratic Party since his second election. Erdogan is attempting to quash the popular movement by escalating repression (the number of detainees is approaching 1,500 in a country with a prison population of 400,000, including a high percentage of political prisoners and many journalists) at the expense of Turkey's security, stability, and economy (the Central Bank was forced to spend \$14 billion to avoid a complete collapse of the Turkish lira, and the stock market has experienced a sharp decline).

The ongoing battle in Turkey has become increasingly significant for the entire world. Either Erdogan succeeds in eliminating the opposition, which could require a bloody crackdown similar to Bashar al-Assad's suppression of the Syrian popular uprising in 2011, thus risking the country's slide into civil war, or the popular movement will prevail, causing him to backtrack or fall one way or another. If the Turkish popular movement wins, its victory will have a significant impact in galvanizing resistance to the rise of neofascism worldwide.

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