

TURKEY'S POLITICAL SHIFT: A RISING POWER WITH NEO-OTTOMAN AGENDA

Labib Murshed*

Abstract

Since President Erdogan and his AK Party came to power in 2002, Turkey, which used to be a close US ally and NATO Member state, has gone through some drastic changes. Possessing full control over powerful state agencies like the military, judiciary, bureaucracy and media in 17 years, Turkey under Erdogan is now conducting an "Ottoman-oriented Islamic" foreign policy that is confrontational not only with the US or West, but also against most of its Middle Eastern neighbours ruled by dictatorial, monarchic or Shia'a-Islamic regimes. The country already possesses a strong military, defence industry and economy, and now making a greater strategic alliance with Russia to counter the dominance of USA and Europe. Furthermore, it is strengthening relations with most of the Muslim world as part of its policies. Hence, in this paper, first the political shift in Turkey will be analysed; then Erdogan's power and policies, Turkey's physical strengths and bonding with its allies, there will be efforts to understand how Turkey is exerting its "Neo-Ottoman" agenda in the Greater Middle East geopolitics.

Keywords: Rise of Erdogan, Neo-Ottomanism, AK Party (AKP)

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire between 1918 and 1922 had a severe impact on the Greater Middle East geopolitics as well as in the Sunni-Muslim world. After the end of World War II, the newly independent states of the region that got involved in the Cold War began to choose sides between the United States (US)-led capitalist bloc and Soviet-led communist bloc – turning the entire region into a theatre of war and chaos. Later in 1979, the Shia'a-oriented Islamic revolution in Iran and the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union in late 1980s changed the power orientation of the region, but the Sunni-Muslim majority countries ruled by dictatorial, militaristic, monarchic or secularist governments and backed by the US, maintained the status quo as they crushed anything that challenged it. However, countering this long-established scenario, the rise of Erdogan and his pro-Islamic AK Party (AKP) in Turkey, and their subsequent takeover of Turkey's secular establishment changed the power orientation in the region once again in a different way. Turkey, a long-time NATO ally of the US that used to conduct a pro-American foreign policy, is now following an

* **Labib Murshed**, Former Research Assistant (International Affairs), Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA).

Ottoman-oriented Islamic ideology under Erdogan, portraying Turkey as successor of the bygone Empire and now exerting its neo-Ottoman agenda in the Sunni-Islamic world.¹ Under the guardianship of Erdogan who now enjoys immense power in Turkey, the country is gradually increasing its influence in the Middle East and also to the rest of the Muslim world. Turkey's growing economy, strong military, defence and other industries with a sizeable population, on one hand, working as deterrence against any external threat, and on the other, increasing its global influence. Hence, in this article, the objective is to discuss about this new Turkey, its strength, ideology and political role of the AKP government that is on a mission to unfurl a neo-Ottoman agenda in the Muslim world, particularly in the Greater Middle East.

The article contains seven sections. After the introduction, the second section focuses on Erdogan and the AKP's rise in Turkey and their subsequent monopolisation of power. The third elaborates Turkey's strength, while the fourth discusses ideological viewpoints of the AKP and its reflection in domestic and foreign affairs. The fifth is about challenges faced by the AKP and Turkey. The sixth section is about Turkey's present role in global and regional arenas followed by the conclusion in the seventh.

RISE OF ERDOGAN AND THE AK PARTY IN TURKEY

Beginning from 2002 at a time of political chaos and economic turmoil, the AK Party today is the longest-serving party in Turkey's democratic history, where its leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan has outstripped even Turkey's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, in office. Serving since 2003, first as Prime Minister and then as President, Erdogan's 16-year rule in Turkey is now unparalleled. In this long-time, he not only succeeded in toppling Turkey's secular establishment – police, military, judiciary, bureaucracy and the media – but also took full control of these powerful state agencies. Hence, in this section with some brief of Turkey's chaotic secular military-political history, attempts will be made to observe how much power Erdogan and the AKP possess on such vital state agencies and how they made possible.

TURKEY BEFORE THE AKP: A SECULAR-MILITARY COMPLEX

Turkey was born out of the multi-cultural Ottoman Empire that had its legitimacy from Islam, but unlike the Ottoman Empire, it was founded on secular-nationalistic principles of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk who transformed Turkey into a westernised republic.² Since its birth, its secular military was self-declared

¹ Hasan Kosebalaban, *Turkish Foreign Policy: Islam, nationalism and Globalization*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

² *ibid.*

guardian of Atatürk's secular legacy, playing a pivotal role in Turkish politics.³ Thus, from 1960-1980, Turkey went through three military coups or indirect interventions which were undertaken by fiercely secular and fiercely pro-Western officers who felt that Turkey's Western, progressive path was being compromised, subverting governments that tried to involve Islam in politics. However, political Islam was still very strong in Turkey during the late 1980s⁴ and in 1995 Turkish general election, the "Welfare Party" became the first Islamist party to lead the country. But once again in 1997, the military intervened, an incident known as "post-modern coup", forcing Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan to resign for his attempt to raise the portrayal of Islam.⁵

ERDOGAN, AK PARTY AND WINNING HEARTS

Recep Tayyip Erdogan was a staunch supporter of political Islam since his high school life. He was very close to Necmettin Erbakan and an active member of the Welfare Party at a time when religion based political parties were banned in Turkey. In 1994, he became the mayor of Istanbul under the umbrella of the Welfare Party, an unprecedented and controversial event in Turkey's secular history as he was the first Islamist leader who became mayor.⁶ But burying all controversies, he through his competent leadership, made tremendous development in Istanbul and proved himself as a prudent leader. However, meeting the similar fate of Erbakan's government in 1998, he was banned and put into jail convicted of promoting Islam in politics and instigating religious hatred because of his reciting an Islamic poem previous year. He was released four months later.⁷

In 2001, he formed the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* or AK Party) and in alliance with Fethullah Gulen's Fethullah Gulen Movement (FGM), another Islamist party but ideologically different than the AKP,⁸ they achieved an overwhelming victory in the 2002 parliamentary election with two-third majority. In 2003, Erdogan became Prime Minister of Turkey and within few years, implemented some crucial reforms. From 2002 to 2012, high

³ D. L. Phillips, *An Uncertain Ally: Turkey under Erdogan's Dictatorship*, New York: Transaction Publishers, 2017. p. 19.

⁴ A. E. Amraoui, F. Edroos, "Why Turkey's military is not what it used to be," *Aljazeera*, 5 Jun 2018, available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/turkey-military-180527105359421.html>> (accessed on 10 December 2018).

⁵ D. L. Phillips, 2017, *op. cit.* p. 9.

⁶ *ibid.* pp. 3-9.

⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: President of Turkey," available at: <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Recep-Tayyip-Erdogan>> (accessed on 10 December 2018).

⁸ H. Taş, "A history of Turkey's AKP-Gülen conflict," 16 May 2017, *Journal Mediterranean Politics* Volume 23, 2018 - Issue 3, available at: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/kEz5Yf9jDstH5t87TD3m/full>> (accessed on 10 December 2018).