

# Opinion// Elegy for Turkey, Now a One-party State

Louis Fishman | Nov 07, 2016

The grotesque sight of parliamentarians being dragged into police cars, mouths covered by the hands of the security forces, is the latest sign that Erdogan's Putinization of a once proudly secular democracy is reaching a point of no return.



Kurdish demonstrators hold a placard against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Paris, France, November 5, 2016. Credit: Francois Mori, AP

- Turkish protesters met with water cannons, tear gas during march against arrests
- Turkey condemned internationally after arrests of pro-Kurdish party lawmakers
- Analysis Liberal Turkish journalists champion freedom of expression, to a degree
- Analysis Turkey's Erdogan loses his cool and launches all-out war against the Kurds

In late night raids last Thursday, Turkish security forces rounded the heads of the mostly Kurdish HDP party and 11 of its Members of Parliament. The government accused

them of an array of charges alleging membership in, or support of, the outlawed Kurdish PKK terrorist organization. The two leaders, Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yuksekdag, are now officially under arrest and in prison awaiting trial.

With the recent sequence of aggressive government clampdowns, it would be a lie to say that many in Turkey were surprised at the arrests. Just last week, the HDP co-mayors of Diyarbakir, including a former MP, Gultan Kisanak, were also arrested. However even for seasoned observers already used to the Erdogan government's accelerated post-coup authoritarianism, the speed and manner of the operation to arrest the HDP leaders was nonetheless shocking. The sight of lawmakers being forced into police cars, at times pushed around by security officials young enough to be their children, was a grotesque show of force. One former MP, Sebahat Tuncel, was literally dragged and gagged while being detained at a protest.

With the arrests, Turkey has erased this summer's sympathy and support, not least internationally, following the ruthless attempt a group of army officers to take down the state on the night of July 15, bombing the country's parliament and shooting down hundreds of civilians who were defending its country's democracy. Internationally, and despite fears by many that Turkey was already well on its way to turning into an authoritarian state, the Turkish government's slate was wiped clean and it was in effect given a window of time to "clean house."

Inside Turkey, in the attempted coup's immediate aftermath, it had seemed that a new found unity between Turkey's religiously-oriented AKP-led government and the CHP, the major secular opposition party, might lead the country on a new path: of stability and hope for change.

However, following the post-coup purges, which have left over 100,000 citizens fired from jobs in the private and public sectors and almost 40,000 arrested, those among the opposition who had supported the summer's unity slowly started to realize that what they had imagined as a new beginning was merely a passing midsummer delusion. The Wall Street Journal has termed these collective events as "the largest mass purge the world has seen in decades."

This feeling has only been exacerbated by the fact that the purges are extending far beyond the Gulenists—followers of the U.S.-exiled Fethullah Gulen, blamed for the coup attempt—to include diverse opposition voices as well as harsh critics of the government.

It was reported that among last week's purge of academics, some signatories of the January 2016 pro-peace petition have been sacked. One outspoken human rights activist and world-renowned author, Asli Erdogan, has been under arrest for over two months as well. At the same time, a recent decree has targeted the autonomy of Turkish academia by cancelling the election of rectors by universities themselves. Now the head of each

university will be appointed directly by the president, from among candidates chosen by the government-appointed Council of Higher Education.



Supporters of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) who live in Greece, chant slogans and display Victory signs during a rally in Athens, Nov. 5, 2016. Credit: Yorgos Karahalios, AP

Then, early last week, the secular newspaper Cumhuriyet, the closest press organization to the opposition CHP (the same party that supported national unity after the coup) was raided, with its Editor-in-Chief detained along with twelve other executives and journalists and staff members. Included among those rounded up is Kadri Gursel, a well-seasoned and mainstream journalist. The clear message from the government was: Everyone is within our reach and we can shut you down too, if needed, just as we forced the closure of 15 other media outlets just days before. Those outlets are part of a total of a 130 media outlets forbidden to broadcast or print in Turkey.

It is important also to remember that aside from the famous journalist, authors, musicians, and politicians detained or arrested, there are many more ordinary citizens who have been deemed guilty by association and rounded up. As in previous crackdowns, they're especially hard to keep track of: they lack the name recognition or specific affiliation which attracts the attention that facilitates keeping track of the progress of the charges against them; Turkey has famously untransparent procedures regarding their treatment or trials. We can only imagine how many innocent people have been caught up.

Turkey seems to be quite close to the critical threshold where other countries will simply write it off. The barrage of bad news is just too much to absorb. Where news stories about Turkey use to excite interest, today, I imagine most readers of the international press don't even bother to read them. The country that for so many years captured their

attention and led them to visit, study and even move there, and invest in it. The Turkish government is caused extreme damage to the country's image, a degradation that will take years, if not decades, to reverse.

In fact, just last week, the United States ordered consulate staff families in Istanbul to leave the city due to fears of an ISIS orchestrated attack against Americans. Just a week before that the U.S. State Department warned Americans they could be subject to attack or kidnapping in Istanbul by "extremist groups," such as ISIS. These warnings confirm a deep and telling lack of trust in the Turkish security apparatus by Western intelligence agencies.

As someone who led educational trips to Turkey, can I honestly take international students there now? With what can I convince academic colleagues to bring groups to a place where the freedom of speech they enjoy and uphold is disappearing, where newspaper editors and parliament members are being arrested and media outlets are shut down on a whim?

It would be wrong to ascribe all Turkey's problems to the coup attempt and its aftermath. But rather than using a rare moment of unity to push forward a new agenda, its government has set it back on a path of continued turmoil. However, Turkey's democracy and civil society won't be rescued by another round of scathing criticism, from the U.S. or by the European Union, which has already demonstrated its disinterest in prioritizing democratic freedoms over a deal keeping Syrian refugees in at bay from Europe.

The answers to Turkey's problems can only be found inside Turkey. If its government adamantly continues on this dangerous path of usurping power, it won't only be the opposition who will face an unrecognizable homeland. It will also be the fate of government members, blindly marching forward in an insatiable hunt for more power, who, in their quest to rule the country, are tearing the country apart at the seams.



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