Turkey’s dangerous crossroads

The cancellation of this week’s commemorations to mark the 101st anniversary of the Battle of Lone Pine at Gallipoli would matter little to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. But it is indicative of mounting Western anxiety over events in the country with the second largest army in NATO, which is also a strategic bastion in the battle against Islamic State and in halting most of the flood of migrants from the Middle East to Europe. Confidence in Mr Erdogan and the stability of Turkey’s secular democracy is being severely tested by the extremist post-coup purge he has launched. As Germany’s Angela Merkel has warned, punishing the coup leaders is legitimate but the “principle of proportionality must be respected”.

Since the coup, Mr Erdogan has had 60,000 people detained in a campaign designed to overturn Turkey’s longstanding secularism and impose hardline Islamism. Army dissent is being eviscerated, with 2000 senior officers, including 200 generals and admirals, detained. Tens of thousands of government employees have been dismissed for alleged ties to the US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Mr Erdogan accuses of being behind the putsch. Schools, universities and even hospitals have been “sanitised”, with alleged Gulen supporters arrested or dismissed. Senior ambassadors have been purged, 89 journalists have been arrested and 16 television stations — including a children’s station — 23 radio stations, 15 magazines, 29 publishing houses and 45 newspapers have been closed.

Mr Erdogan insists Turkey remains a democracy and that he has no intention of deviating from the constitutional secularism entrenched by Kemal Ataturk 85 years ago. Yet in lifting the ban on women wearing headscarves and attempting to criminalise adultery and ban alcohol, the signs of a more repressive Islamist state are clear. Through the mosques, which the government uses to get its message out, Turks are being warned not to befriend Jews or Christians, because they serve the West. From two million Christians a few years ago, only 120,000 remain, fewer than in Iran.
Mr Erdogan survived the coup because opposition parties, including those representing the Kurds, answered his call to defend the constitution. Yet instead of seeking the national unity that should have flowed from that to restore stability, he appears to have embarked on his own coup against what was long regarded as the model of a prosperous and stable Muslim democracy. His purge and repeated terrorist attacks are decimating years of economic reforms and growth, with tourism down 50 per cent.

Turkey's Western allies must prevail on Mr Erdogan to calm down. The uprising on the streets when he was threatened by the coup showed he still has popular support. But he is endangering stability in a country geographically and strategically vital to combating Islamist terrorism.