Turkey’s tough guy Erdogan cements grip on power

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A day after the coup attempt that almost unseated him a year ago, Recep Tayyip Erdogan climbed atop a bus and unleashed the performance of his career. The sun was setting over the pious Istanbul neighbourhood of Uskudar, and the call to prayer from the nearby mosque had just sounded. In the crowd were the Turkish President’s most devoted followers and the body of the man on whom, more than almost anyone else, he had come to rely.

Tears streamed down Erdogan’s face as he spoke. “Erol was an old friend of mine,” he said, his normally bombastic voice cracking. Then he broke down. “I cannot speak any more. God is greatest.”

The tough guy who had faced down the might of the Turkish military less than 24 hours earlier was showing his softer side. The pictures were beamed around the country. For almost a week afterwards Erdogan stayed in Istanbul — centre of the old Ottoman Empire, his home city and his power base — and made one triumphant public appearance after another. It was only when the last remnants of the coup attempt had been crushed that he returned to the capital, Ankara.

A year on, Erdogan is a headline fixture but the tone of most of the coverage is not to his taste. Human rights groups fret about his crackdown on dissenters and journalists. The West eyes his war on Syria’s Kurdish militias, our allies in the battle against Islamic State, with alarm. European governments baulk when he accuses them of Nazism. Increasingly, he looks more a pariah than an ally.

It didn’t used to be like this. At the start of his tenure, Erdogan was heralded as the man who might reshape Turkey into a model for Islamic democracy. It was he who kick-started EU membership negotiations and opened up the space to start hammering out a solution to Turkey’s long-running Kurdish conflict. He appeared to be on the right side of history when he backed protests against old secular dictators at the start of the Arab Spring.
Now almost everything has unravelled. The most salient question is how Europe can limit the fallout from his descent.

For the past two years, Erdogan has held a trump card that has stunted Europe's ability to castigate him: the hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants who began streaming from Turkey's shores in the northern summer of 2015. A deal struck between Brussels and Ankara in March last year has largely stemmed that flow. But Erdogan has made no secret of his willingness to open his borders should Europe not give him what he wants. As he grows increasingly mercurial, it is a guessing game as to what those desires might be.

Once a hero, now a villain. From abroad, Erdogan's image appears to have cracked. Among his base in Turkey, though, it is stronger than it has ever been and that is above all the work of one man. Erol Olcak, who lay in his coffin on that balmy July night, could have walked down almost any street in Turkey unrecognised, yet he was the most important architect of Erdogan's career. In 1993, when he was running his own advertising agency, he met Erdogan, a rising figure in the religiously inclined Welfare Party, and the two hit it off. When Erdogan was elected mayor of Istanbul a year later, he made Olcak his press chief.

Olcak had some great raw material to work with: the young, moustachioed Erdogan, a former semi-professional footballer, was already forging a reputation as a new kind of politician. In Istanbul, he inherited a city of former glories made decrepit by the mismanagement of corrupt and indifferent officials. He cleared up the rubbish and sorted out the faltering water and electricity supplies, becoming a hero to the hordes of impoverished Anatolian migrants who had flooded into the city over two decades. Previous mayors had been happy to leave them festering in the gecekondu, the illegally built shanty towns on the outskirts of the city, but Erdogan brought them bus services and decent housing. More than that, he talked to them and they greeted him as one of their own.

In affluent inner Istanbul, however, Erdogan was viewed with suspicion. His open Islamic piety, and his enthusiasm for expressing it in his politics, spooked the secular elite. In 1997, he appeared to have finally overstepped the line, reciting a poem that blended Islam and militarism in a series of baroque metaphors to a crowd of his supporters at a rally. He was found guilty of inciting religious violence under a law that jealously protected the Turkish republic's secularism, and was jailed for five months.

Rather than being the end of Erdogan's career, the prison sentence proved its making: "It was an attention-getter," Erdogan later said of the poem. His star soared among the conservative masses who were growing sick of having their voices muted by the elites. Once released, Erdogan's
reputation as a political rebel, a man of the people and the antidote to Turkey's withered old way of doing politics, was secured.

At the turn of the millennium, Erdogan and three of his allies broke away from their old party to establish the Adalet ve Kalkınma Parti — the Justice and Development Party, or AKP. The branding was smart. Its name could be pronounced "Ak Parti" — "Ak" being the Turkish word for white, or pure. The symbol was a lightbulb, a metaphor for hope in the darkness of Turkey's rampant economic and political crisis. Both were the brainchild of Olcak. His smartest move, however, was the promotion of Erdogan, the least politically experienced but best known of the four founders, to the forefront of the AKP despite the fact that his prison sentence barred him from becoming prime minister when the party stormed to its first election victory in 2002.

For the next 14 years Olcak micromanaged his boss's image, overseeing the rise of the AKP from rebel breakaway to the most successful party in the history of the republic, and that of Erdogan from local politician to international statesman. Under Erdogan and Olcak's watch, neo-Ottomanism hit Turkey in the form of both symbolism and foreign policy; while the strongman was establishing himself as a figurehead for the Middle East's Sunni Muslims, the ad man was bringing images from the empire's golden age into his campaigns.

The law keeping Erdogan from the prime minister's office was overturned in 2003. Today, he still grips the reins of power and fiercely bats away anyone who tries to take them from him. In 2014, approaching the end of his third term as prime minister, Erdogan quit to run for president. He won — just — and then immediately began working to change Turkey's political system to one in which the president, rather than the parliament, holds ultimate executive power. That, too, he won, by a hair's breadth in a controversial and contested constitutional referendum in April.

Should all go according to his plan, he will stay in power until 2029. Even if he were to quit tomorrow, he has changed Turkey forever and not to the taste of all his subjects.

"Can you imagine, when Turgut Ozal was president (from 1989 to 1993), people went crazy because he went on the Hajj (the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca)," one Turkish friend told me recently. "This guy smoked cigars, he drank whisky, but they were convinced he was going to turn Turkey into an Islamic state."

Those same Turks, watching Erdogan's mosque-building spree, expansion of religious education and God-filled rhetoric from the podiums, might beg Ozal to rise from the grave now. But for every Turk who loathes Erdogan and all he is doing to the country, there is another who views him as a demi-god.
Each time I've watched Erdogan perform, I've been struck by one thing: how a 63-year-old man with a clipped moustache and a penchant for checkerboard jackets has assembled such a devoted following, especially among Turkey's youth.

“The pro-Erdogan rallies are the best kind of political theatre,” said Dan Cassino, a psychologist who specialises in the mind of the crowd. “They create a sense of threat, then bring in a resolution to the threat, in the person of Erdogan. There’s no question that his supporters used to be politically marginalised, but they’re now the dominant force. So it’s up to the ruling party to reinforce the notion that their hold on power is somehow tenuous, that they could go back to being oppressed.”

There could have been no greater threat than that which Erdogan faced on the night of July 15 last year. Shortly after 9pm, a rogue faction in the military launched a coup attempt. Tanks blocked Istanbul’s Bosphorus Bridge and commandos stormed the Aegean resort where the President was holidaying, with a brief to take him, dead or alive. He escaped by minutes, made an appeal for the nation to resist via a FaceTime interview, and then flew back to Istanbul to retake control of the country.

Post-coup, Turkey is undergoing a rebrand. Erdogan immediately pinned blame on the Gulenists, secretive followers of self-exiled Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen, who spent decades infiltrating the upper echelons of the Turkish state. A year on, tens of thousands of people have been imprisoned, sacked or exiled in the crackdown. The trials of alleged coup-plotters are sprawling, chaotic affairs where the charges, let alone the evidence, are often foggy. Still, on Turkish streets it is rare to sense sympathy for the Gulenists.

Meanwhile, Turkey’s new heroes are the sehitler, or martyrs: the 246 people who died on the night of the coup. Commemorative coins have been issued for them, children learn about them in school, and a bridge has been renamed in their honour. A vast monument is being erected next to the place where putsch soldiers fired into the crowds who had heeded Erdogan’s call to resist. The dead included Erol Olcak and his 16-year-old son, who had rushed to the bridge when they realised a coup was under way.

The real fruits of Olcak's project are the fanatics, the half of Turkey who would lay down their lives for their leader. Whatever road Erdogan takes them and the country down, they will follow. And the future that Turks face, one of economic crisis and political stalemate, looks grim. Turkey’s Europe ambitions appear to be over. This month the European parliament voted to freeze membership talks in light of the country’s plunging democracy and human rights outlook.
Erdogan doesn't much care. “Most Turkish people don't want the EU,” he said last week and, for his base, that is true. For the rest of Turkey, though, this trajectory is a tragedy.

“That is the problem,” a Turk from the other half of the country told me. “Back before Erdogan things were terrible, but everyone knew that they were terrible. Now, half the country believes that things have never been so good.”

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