As Erdogan Tightens His Grip, Is This the Last Stand for Turkey’s Liberals?

Frida Ghitis | Thursday, July 13, 2017

One year after a coup attempt in Turkey, liberals are scrambling to defend what’s left of the country’s democracy. They are up against an increasingly assertive government campaign to dismantle many of the institutions and practices that had made Turkey the world’s freest, most open and democratic Muslim state.

Liberal leaders, with massive popular support, have launched what looks like a make-or-break effort against steep odds. On Sunday, more than a million people (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/09/world/europe/turkey-march-for-justice-istanbul.html?_r=0) turned out in Istanbul, joining tens of thousands who had braved brutal heat to take part in a 250-mile, three-week march from the capital Ankara.

The participants in the March for Justice are focusing their efforts on defending the independence of the judiciary, tapping into a growing sense that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his AKP party have subverted the system to serve their political goals. The crowd roared its approval when opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu of the Republican People’s Party, or CHP, called the moment a national turning point. “This is a rebirth for us, for our country and our children,” he declared, vowing, “We will revolt against injustice!”

Organizers are hoping the message resonates with people of all political parties, saying the movement is “not an anti-government protest,” but a peaceful, nonpartisan effort that expresses a “nonpartisan desire for an independent and fair judicial system.”

The loss of judicial independence is beyond question, as is the steady erosion of secularism, democratic practices and social liberalism. The trends all started years ago, as Erdogan rose rapidly to power, but they all intensified sharply a year ago, after the failed coup to depose the president.
In the aftermath of the July 15 coup attempt, Erdogan launched a harsh crackdown that undercut not only the opposition, but democracy itself. The measures played a pivotal role in securing a narrow win in an April 16 constitutional referendum that will secure his position and make him far more powerful long into the future.

The opposition has fought off complete demoralization, watching powerlessly as authorities swept away tens of thousands of people who they perceive as posing any threat to Erdogan’s plans—imprisoning, firing and silencing any critics or potential critics.

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The full tally of the crackdown is difficult to know, but a top government official confirmed some of the numbers in recent interviews marking the coup anniversary.

Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus said the government has fired 103,824 state employees (https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-07-12/100-000-and-counting-no-letup-in-turkey-coup-purges-a-year-on) and suspended an additional 33,483 since the July 15 operation. The Justice Ministry says it has processed 168,206 people in connection with the coup, saying 48,000 of them have been released but remain under court monitoring.

In addition to the arrests and firings, the coup opened the door to an even harsher assault on media freedoms. Press freedom was already under government attack long before last summer, but the coup gave authorities a pretext to launch a much more aggressive campaign.

The Prime Minister’s Directorate of the Press acknowledged that authorities have shut down 110 media outlets and temporarily closed 20. Some 715 journalists have had their accreditations revoked. The government justifies these actions by claiming that the outlets had links to the network of the exiled cleric Fettullah Gulen, an ally of Erdogan turned critic. Erdogan blames Gulen for the coup attempt and has labeled his followers a terror group (http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-gulen-idUSKCN0YM167).

The government has essentially eliminated any critical media, not only closing independent outlets, but prosecuting and discrediting individual journalists. The prominent opposition newspaper Cumhuriyet has come under withering pressure (http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-seeks-43-year-jail-terms-cumhuriyet-journalists-897740478). Currently, 19 of the paper’s journalists have been in prison for several months, accused of
belonging to a terrorist group. Prosecutors are asking for jail terms of up to 43 years. Cumhuriyet’s former editor-in-chief fled to Germany after he was sentenced to almost six years in prison.

International organizations, including media watchdogs, say the government is dismantling media freedom, silencing the opposition and showing an increasing intolerance for any form of criticism. Those arrested include prominent editors and reporters, political activists and, most recently, the country director for Amnesty International.

In addition to attacking critics, perceived critics and potential critics, Erdogan is trying to recast social norms, starting with the youngest of Turks.

The country’s famed secularism—its most distinguishing feature since the days of Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey—is facing a concerted assault, albeit much subtler than the one targeting press freedom. Erdogan’s gradual Islamization program is underway on a number of fronts. The government quadrupled the budget of the Religious Ministry, or Diyanet, doubling its staff.

In the long term, the most consequential Islamization policies are the ones in the school system, where a new generation of devout Muslims is being groomed by a government that was once committed to staying out of religion. Two years ago, Erdogan said that the state-run religious schools, known as Imam Hatip schools, had boosted their enrollment from 65,000 students to 1 million (https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/turkeys-atheists-and-religious-minorities-join-forces-to-protest-religious-instruction-in-schools/2015/02/18/6c8d7e58-b791-11e4-bc30-a4e75503948a_story.html). That number is much higher now.

Erdogan’s social engineering has raised the alarm of women, who saw his public statements (http://www.newsweek.com/turkey-referendum-women-rights-feminism-584456) on the role of women in society morph to suit his political objectives. Earlier in his career, the former Istanbul mayor spoke approvingly of women’s rights, hoping to secure the support of female voters. But more recently, playing to his conservative base and perhaps in alignment with his own views, he has mocked working women, shuttered the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and expressed openly sexist views (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/24/turkeys-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-women-not-equal-men) about women and their role in society.

Last year, the AKP tried to change the law so that men who rape minors could avoid punishment if they married their victims.

For LGBT Turks, tolerance is becoming a thing of the past. Authorities banned a gay march for the third time this year. Activists who tried to march were met by riot police (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlFD1MiAv0c&feature=youtu.be&aa) firing rubber bullets and tear gas, and plain-clothes officers who physically assaulted them.
Turkey appears to be sharply and almost evenly divided between conservatives and liberals. Erdogan is pushing the views of conservatives and utilizing their support to solidify his power. To liberals, this is the moment of truth, a last chance to preserve the freedoms they cherish. Despite their large numbers, they face daunting odds.

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