

Turkey's March of Folly

Robert Ellis

(Turkey analyst and commentator, and also an international advisor at the Research Institute for European and American Studies in Athens)

Copyright: @ 2025 Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr) Publication date: 7 April 2025

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies

If the celebrated historian, Barbara Tuchman, author of *The Guns of August*, lived today, she would undoubtedly update *The March of Folly*, which was published in 1984. This deals with the pursuit by governments of policies contrary to their own interests, from Troy to Vietnam, and an update would undoubtedly include events from the last decade.

The first that comes to mind is Brexit, the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union in 2016. Barbara Tuchman deals with the loss of America in 1776, but Brexit is an act of grievous self-harm which will reverberate for generations and has [beggared Britain](#).

The second is the global trade war which Donald Trump has launched, which can bounce back and confront the USA with the twin spectres of recession and stagflation. Martin Wolf, the Financial Times' chief economist, [finds this](#) "an act of unjustifiable, indeed economically illiterate, economic warfare". Which brings us to the third case, Turkey.

Since the adoption of [an executive presidency](#) in 2018, Turkey has transgressed from a system of parliamentary democracy to rule by presidential decree. In fact, in 2023 the decrees issued by President Erdoğan were [six times more](#) than the number of bills passed through parliamentary motions. In the last century Turkish history has been marked by two men: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded a secular republic, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who set out to transform Turkey into an Islamic state. For example, arrivals at Istanbul airport are greeted with [the twin portraits](#).

A former disciple of Necmettin Erbakan, the father of political Islam in Turkey, Erdogan set out to promote a liberal image of his AK (Justice and Development) Party when it came to power in 2002. By 2013, with [the Gezi Park protests](#) which spread throughout Turkey and their brutal suppression, the real face of AKP rule emerged.

As Aziz Babuşçu, the head of the AKP's Istanbul branch, [explained](#), "the Turkey that is to be built will not feature a future that they [the liberals] accept or desire." In Europe a once staunch supporter, British liberal Andrew Duff [stated](#) that Kemalism had been replaced by Islamism, and Dutch liberal Marietje Schaake [bewailed](#), "Our dream of a European Turkey has turned into a nightmare and it is time for a wake-up call".

The century of Türkiye

On the centenary of the Turkish republic in 2023, Erdoğan [declared](#) the next century to be "the century of Türkiye" and his intention to replace the 1982 constitution with one that is "civil, liberal and inclusive", whatever he meant by that.

When the AKP came to power in 2002, the opposition CHP (Republican People's Party), Atatürk's party, had become stultified and elitist, and the AKP set about a vigorous program of reform which took into account the religious sensibilities of the broad base of its voters.

This included "[the Anatolian tigers](#)", export-oriented, conservative entrepreneurs from Anatolia, which led to dynamic economic growth. At the same time, it also led to a boom in consumption and construction based on "hot money" inflows and ultra-low interest rates. As American economist Jesse Colombo [warned](#) in 2014, this credit-driven boom faced a bust, which is apparent today.

The same dogmatism that has marked Trump's approach to the economy has also marked Erdoğan's. His opposition to interest rates, which he considers "the mother and father of all evil", is well known, and he even claimed "the interest rate lobby" was behind the Gezi Park protests. At a meeting with TÜSIAD (Turkish Industry and Business Association) in December 2021 Erdoğan [made it plain](#) that as a Muslim he would continue to lower interest rates in accordance with Islamic teaching.

Yet after the 2013 presidential election, which he won, Erdoğan changed tack and reinstated Mehmet Şimşek as finance minister, who intends to return to [a 'rational' economic policy](#). The overnight lending rate is now 46 percent and although the official inflation rate in February was 39 percent (it fell slightly in March), [independent economists](#) calculated it was twice as high.

Mass demonstrations

However, it was the arrest of Istanbul's popular mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, that has upset the apple cart. İmamoğlu was prevented from running as president in the 2023 election because of [a spurious court decision](#), and now the same procedure repeats itself well ahead of the next presidential election in 2028.

In 2012 Erdoğan declared it was the government's intention to create "a pious generation" and [two years ago](#) he stated "we are walking towards the century of Türkiye hand in hand with our youth". But it is this generation that has turned its back on him both at Gezi Park and in the mass demonstrations against him after İmamoğlu's arrest.

These demonstrations, which have spread to [more than 55 of Turkey's 81 provinces](#), have been condemned by Erdoğan as "street terror" and [nearly 1900](#) have been detained. [According to the president](#), "the process for a terror-free Türkiye is proceeding as planned", and according to [the Council of Europe's report](#) from January 2023, a third of all the prisoners in the CoE's 46 member states are held in Turkey.

A Turkish delegate from the CoE's Youth Forum [has made it clear](#) Turkey's youth has had enough. "The police forces used disproportionate brutality including pepper spray, plastic bullets and water cannons. We are ready to go on the streets to regain our freedom. We are running out of time when it comes to saving democracy in Turkey. If you're looking for a wake-up call, this is it."

CHP chairman Özgür Özel calls the arrest "[a coup attempt on our next president](#)" and plans [a targeted boycott](#) of government linked businesses. Student activists have called for a "buy nothing" consumer boycott. Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya has called the boycott "[a coup attempt](#)" on the economy, but the Turkish government is the agent of its own downfall.

The Turkish lira and stock market have plummeted and it has so far cost the central bank more [than \\$25 billion in backdoor interventions](#) to prop up the lira. And foreign investors are heading for the door. It is fortunate that President Erdoğan a week after İmamoğlu's arrest [announced](#) that the coming Eid al-Fitr (Bayram) holidays, which

began on March 30, would be extended to 9 days, maybe hoping that the demonstrations would cool off and allow the stock market time to recover.

What is the point?

So far, finance minister Mehmet Şimşel and central bank governor Fatih Karahan are holding the fort, but the question is for how long? Economics professor Şebnem Kalemli-Özcan [asks](#) a more pertinent question. Why would any leader deliberately undermine their own country's economic prospects for political gain?

She answers her own question, referring to Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's *Why Nations Fail*, where they argue leaders often intentionally sacrifice economic growth to maintain personal power or enrich a narrow elite.

Turkey's foreign minister Hakan Fidan faces high level talks with the EU on an update of the customs union and visa legislation, and played a constructive role at the informal [five-party meeting in Geneva](#) on the Cyprus issue.

In addition, he was invited to [the inaugural meeting](#) of the "coalition of the willing" in London and included in the family photo. At [a NATO summit in Brussels](#) Fidan has just underlined Turkey's pivotal role in European security and its readiness to shape a new defence framework.

Why would Erdoğan choose to undermine his efforts in international fora?