



# **The rise of The Reis**

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## A portrait of Recep Tayyip Erdogan

He has been reigning over Turkey for 20 years. And it is no coincidence that they call him the Sultan. But there is perhaps a form of presumption in trying to define Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Only one thing is sure: no scenario can be ruled out when the time comes for such a character.

With only a few days before the second round of the election that will mark Turkey's future for decades, the crossroads awaiting the Sultan cannot be reduced to victory or defeat.

Some argue that Erdogan's identification with Turkey is such that his empire will go down in ruins, like the thousands of houses demolished by the devastating fury of the 6 February earthquake. After all, hasn't he always said he built modern Turkey? Has fate finally turned its back on one of its favourite sons?

To understand it, one must go back to the origins of the Sultan. Where did Erdogan come from? From one of the poorest neighbourhoods in all of Istanbul. They are migrants from the Black Sea area. And this is not a detail. Tough people, even brawlers, are different from those you want to meet in a dark alley. Dad Ahmet is the crucial figure in the formation of young Recep. Recep Tayyip will study in a religious school. He will be a good boy the family can rely on. But in the secularist Turkey of those years, faith makes Erdogan and those like him 'second-class' citizens. This constant feeling of being on the margins of society, this perennial sense of injustice experienced on his skin, convinces the young Erdogan, in the mid-1970s, to join the National Salvation Party, of which he soon becomes the youth secretary. It is an Islamist formation. And even this is not a detail in a country like Turkey, which geography has made a natural bridge between West and East.

The balance point is the military. Anyone entering politics in Turkey has in their eyes and mind what happened to Adnan Menderes, the prime minister hanged by the Turkish armed forces on charges of betraying the Republic's

secular principles. Who can oppose such a power?

The breakthrough year for Erdogan is 1994. He wants to become mayor of Istanbul, a city overwhelmed by rubbish, lacking infrastructure, and struggling with unmanageable traffic. On the night of 27 March, with as many as five candidates finishing in double figures, the would-be Sultan only needs 25% of the vote to achieve his exploit, to put the city's keys in his pocket. No one can imagine the obstacles Erdogan will have to overcome, the patience he will have to show, and the acumen and daring he will have to display to get where he wants to be.

The military is starting to experience the rise of the rampant leader with deep concern. The military claims that his political formation violates Turkey's constitutional principles, bringing religion into the country's political life. The armed forces thus issued a harsh 'memorandum'. The domino effect is that Prime Minister Erbakan is forced to resign, and the Welfare Party, in which Erdogan militates, is dissolved. That is the first moment of truth in his parable. Recep becomes the face and voice of the protests. Millions of people all over Turkey recognise themselves in storytelling. The one summed up in the verses of an ancient national poem from the Ottoman era that Mayor Erdogan decided to recite during a rally in Istanbul:

*Mosques are our barracks.  
The domes are our helmets,  
the minarets, our bayonets  
and the believers are our soldiers.*

These verses earned him a charge of inciting religious violence. Erdogan ended up under arrest, on trial, forced to resign as mayor of Istanbul, and sentenced to 10 months in prison.

Erdogan serves his sentence, but when he gets out of prison, he has a huge problem: his conviction prevents him from running for prime minister—another critical moment. On the strength of enormous popular support, Erdogan's plan is clear: he will form a new party, the AKP, and with this, he will win the elections and, once in power, change the laws that now prevent him from governing. Bold as it may be, his plan will succeed.

This is how he begins his battle against the so-called 'deep state', an association of deviant powers within the state that survives every

government and influences Turkish civil and political life. With the need for a relentless fight against this 'criminal force', Erdogan explains to his people his intention to build new military and otherwise apparatuses that they can trust. And there is only one man who can help him in this endeavour, a preacher who, like him, believes in the Islamist turn of Turkish society and has been training the bureaucrats of tomorrow in religious schools for years: Fetullah Gulen.

It is in that political climate of high tension, where anyone who does not think like Erdogan and Gulen is accused of being an enemy of democracy, that the Turkish leader embarks on the authoritarian turn that will mark his later years in power. This was made evident in 2013 during the brutally repressed protests in Gezi Park, a historical urban park a stone's throw from the iconic Taksim Square in the heart of Istanbul, where the government plans to replace the public green with a shopping centre.

The Sultan had been clear years before: *"Democracy is like a tram. You use it until you reach your destination, then you get off"*. Recep Tayyip Erdogan got off. And he has no intention of getting back on. His journey has now taken another direction.

During the 2013 protests in Gezi Park, the Sultan, for the first time, perceived himself as fragile, exposed to the moods of the square, vulnerable to a change from below that he did not think possible.

There is life outside his ivory tower, and this life hurts him and outrages him. How can it be that his Istanbul demands his head? In the square, in the streets, many people express so much hatred that it upsets the Reis. Recep Tayyip cannot accept being at the mercy of anyone, let alone those ingrates. Thus begins the vicious circle. The Sultan does not make amends. Instead, he raises his hand and convinces himself of the need to close ranks, to eliminate all possible rivals from the public scene, including the most dangerous former ally, Fethullah Gulen.

He starts an all-out war. Erdogan orders the closure of all Gulen's religious schools, thus blocking the enemy's most significant source of income. But the latter reacts in mirror fashion, raising the bar if possible. Media close to Gulen publish sensational interceptions: Erdogan talks on the phone in conversation with his son Bilal about the need to hide a large sum of cash.

What the apparatchiks close to the cleric are leaking to the press is a corruption scandal of incredible proportions. Erdogan denies all charges. But new thunderous protests erupt in the centre of Istanbul. Once again, the end appears near, but Recep Tayyip Erdogan has other plans. Instead of hiding, the Sultan comes out into the open rather than remaining on the defensive. Appearing in parliament, he openly challenges his rivals.

Erdogan denounces a conspiracy against him, purging dissidents within the AKP. And he does so because he understands once again how much the levers of power are a guarantee for his life and that of his family. What he conducts is no longer (not only) a political game but an existential battle. This is how he once again pulls the rabbit out of his hat. A few months before the presidential elections, the Sultan ends his third (and last, according to the Constitution) term as prime minister. The decision to relinquish executive power may seem risky, considering that the Turkish presidency is largely ceremonial. But Erdogan is a strategist with few equals: first, he wins the elections and then nominates his ally Ahmet Davutoglu as prime minister.

All that is missing is the icing on the cake, a successful parliamentary election to secure power. But he desperately needs the 11 million Kurdish votes. Erdogan summons the two leaders of the Kurdish minority, Selahattin Demirtas and Ahmet Turk, and assures them of his utmost commitment to solving the long-standing ethnic issue.

What's more: it mandates the Turkish intelligence chiefs to meet secretly, in Oslo, with PKK representatives so that they can sign a truce with the terrorist organisation.

One breathes the air of a historic turning point, but History has other plans. The Syrian Kurds on the border are fighting against Isis and gaining ground: Erdogan fears that Turkey's Kurds also feel emboldened by this progress and does not want them to pick up their rifles again. It is said that to promote balance on the ground, Erdogan is collaborating with Islamic State terrorists, secretly sending weapons and intelligence information to slow the Kurdish advance. Accusations were rejected outrageously by the Sultan. But in the meantime, the vote comes. And the young lawyer Selahattin Demirtas - now in jail in the hope that success for Kılıçdaroğlu will bring him amnesty - by uniting most of the Kurdish formations under one banner succeeds in the feat: with 14% nationwide, his party obtains 80 deputies, enough for the AKP

to lose its parliamentary majority.

Now anything can happen. For the first time since 2003, Erdogan is in danger of having to relinquish power by election. But with the consultations still in progress, when barely a month has passed since the vote, two policemen are killed on the border with Syria. And Erdogan's party doesn't hold back. It was the PKK that murdered them, say the Reis loyalists. It is the spark that starts the fire. Between attacks in major Turkish cities, bombings against Isis and on the Kurds, it is chaos. Erdogan calls snap elections to break the stalemate. The message is clear: must people choose between the disorder and the man of stability? Again, as always, he wins his bet.

Yet, a few months before the elections, something is cracking in the relationship between the president and one of his key men, PM Davutoglu does not seem to respond to the Sultan as he should. A dossier attributed to Erdogan's son-in-law is passed to the press: Davutoglu's attempts to disobey or sabotage the president are highlighted. *'They wanted a puppet,'* Davutoglu claims today, *'My resignation was an indirect coup'.*

It is May 2016: it will take about 60 days for a real coup to occur in Turkey.

### ***How Erdogan survived the 2016 Coup. Post-vote scenarios: will the Sultan relinquish power in case of defeat?***

On the day of reckoning, Fetullah Gulen's men are forced to anticipate their plans by a few hours. The state apparatuses have intercepted the coup plotters' preparations and intend to carry out purges. But the Gulenists sense the danger, so they spring into action. It is 10 p.m. on 15 July 2016 when the Jandarma, one of the branches of the Turkish armed forces, closes the two bridges over the Bosphorus with tanks.

Fighter jets and helicopters fly low over Istanbul and Ankara, and gunfire and explosions are heard. Nineteen minutes: Prime Minister Yildirim addresses the nation, confirming that a coup attempt is underway. It quickly becomes clear that the target of the operation is Recep Tayyip Erdogan. But where is the president? No one knows. Or instead, someone does. Metin Kulunk, AKP MP, feels compelled to alert the president's head of security immediately.

Erdogan is in Marmaris, in the villa on Turkey's southern Aegean coast where he usually spends his summer holidays. Kulunk's warning is probably

decisive. When a special forces team raids Erdogan's luxurious villa with orders to capture or kill him, the president has only taken off in his plane a few minutes before. At that juncture, millions of Turkish citizens watch in astonishment as the spectacle unfolds on the national channels. A public TV presenter is forced by soldiers who have broken into the studios to read out a statement in which the so-called 'Turkish Peace Council' declares its aim to form a new government in response to the violation of the constitutional principles of the current regime.

But that handling such a problematic coup is not so thorough becomes apparent after only a few minutes. At 22:22, access to all social networks in the country is blocked. But those planning the action do not consider using VPNs, services that allow one to simulate belonging to another geographical area, thus evading censorship. And while the most disparate rumours about his fate begin to spread on Twitter, while Erdogan is left for dead, captured or on the run, a journalist, Hande Firat, makes the move that changes Turkey's future. "I had known President Erdogan's chief of staff for 20 years," she tells the BBC today, "I called him: 'Where are you? What are you doing? Are you OK? Let's do a Facetime call'". Erdogan's face appears on Hande Firat's smartphone but also on the screens of his people. And his words mark the turning point:

*"I want to call my nation together. I urge Turkish citizens to take to the streets of our cities, to gather in our squares and airports, let us gather in our squares and airports and let them come with their tanks and cannons. Let them do what they want. I have yet to see any power more incredible than the people's."*

Prayers and chants are raised from all the mosques. It signifies that Erdogan's people are responding to the Sultan's call.

While thousands organise resistance, sending an unequivocal message to the coup soldiers about their unwillingness to support regime change, Erdogan's plane, after an endless time hovering in the Turkish skies, makes its way to the capital. The president has realised that his return to Istanbul is necessary to close the game with the Gulenists. Still, almost at the most beautiful moment, two jets led by soldiers in Gulen's service intercept the presidential plane. They have a chance to shoot it down. A former military officer who knows the facts will declare: 'Why they did not shoot it down

remains a mystery'.

But so be it: Erdogan is in Istanbul, despite the jets still threateningly flying at low altitudes. When he gets out of his escort car, receiving the crowd's embrace, it is clear to everyone that the coup is over. The coup has failed.

Many are now wondering whether a similar script will be repeated, with Recep Tayyip Erdogan, this time, in the role of the coup leader. The latest polls say that the leader of the opposition, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, in the presence of a complicated alignment of the planets might succeed in the second round. But it is precisely the margin of Kılıçdaroğlu's eventual success that could be the decisive discriminating factor in Erdogan's attitude. In the presence of a narrow margin, the Sultan could exploit his grip on the media and institutions to declare himself an early winner, thus creating the scenario of a contested election. At that point, as has happened before, Erdogan could attempt to 'govern the chaos'. A request for a recount would be almost a foregone conclusion. The annulment of the vote, with the calling of new elections, would be the nuclear option.

Yet some go even further: in case of defeat, they say, Erdogan could signal his willingness to reject the outcome of the vote. And from there negotiate a safe exit for himself, his family, and his allies. Again, this would be playing with fire. But no one, after all these years, can afford to limit the Reis' ability to use the levers of power, to walk a tightrope, to stay in the saddle.

Whatever the outcome of the vote, the future is still an enigma, but history teaches us something: it will be him, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who will again deliver the punchline.