

## UNDERSTANDING ERDOGAN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE "NEW TURKEY"

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### Abstract

In 2001, the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey led to the emergence of a moderate path between Kemalist and Islamic wings. After a first term focused on foreign diplomacy, Erdogan and the party saw their policies gaining broad social support internally, reinforcing their stance in areas of ideological and religious confrontation with secular opposition. Erdogan, although elected president in 2014, has led Turkey on an increasingly conservative route from the standpoint of social values, and less democratic regarding the political language of the state. If Erdogan reveals a conception of state that departs from the democratic values and the ideal of Atatürk's secular Turkey, and, at the same time, focuses on an Islamic-conservative perspective of society and an authoritarian conception of political power, what explains and stimulates this strategy? This article is based on the premise that perceiving "New Turkey" implies understanding Erdogan's leadership style, even if it does not exhaust all explanatory variables. From this premise, the goal is to identify and explain internal factors – associated first and foremost with the dualist structure between Turkey's centre and periphery) – that, along with Erdogan's individual variables, such as Islamic solidarity and authoritarian tendencies) – put him at the centre of decision-making in Turkey.

### Keywords

Turkey, Erdogan, political leadership, civil society

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## **UNDERSTANDING ERDOGAN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE 'NEW TURKEY'<sup>1,2</sup>**

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Turkey presents itself as an interesting case study due to the discursive and ideological transformations that operated a conservative-liberal variation through an authoritarian transversion of political power. Much of this transformation can be attributed to the role of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Aydin-Duzgit, 2018: 20). By using the Kemalist paradigm of a Westernised and secular Turkey, Erdogan starts the implementation of a "New Turkey",<sup>3</sup> which establishes a regenerative political hegemony of Turkish society's perceptions (Gorener & Ucal, 2011: 359).

Erdogan experienced challenges to secularism in Turkey in the 1970s. The foundation of the National Order Party (MNP) and the National Salvation Party (MSP) are amongst these challenges as they are the first Turkish parties of Islamic orientation. He knew how to capitalise on Turkey's economic, religious and cultural circumstances in order to form a base of support loyal to his political discourse. It was a base consisting essentially of religious and rural populations, but also the neoliberal electorate and Turkish nationalists – all of them having in common a critical reading of secularism, although for different reasons.

The exploration of the idea of new social conflicts Erdogan's discourse in has facilitated the emergence of a new paradigm in the Turkish political culture, which identifies the people as a unified nation that is simultaneously associated with the idea of marginalisation, precariousness and abandonment.

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<sup>3</sup> The "New Turkey" is considered the assimilation of Islam to Neo-Ottomanism, in an attempt to interpret the political, cultural, religious and behavioural reorganisation of Turkey. The concept of Neo-Ottomanism refers to the theory of "strategic depth" – formulated by Ahmet Davutoglu, former Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009-2014) and former Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey (2014-2016) – which significantly influenced the country's foreign policy. This theory is based on the approach that the end of the Cold War provided Turkey with a historic opportunity to become a global power in case it pursued an expansionist policy based on Islamic ideology. According to this, Turkey must dominate the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Asia and the Caucasus region. On the concepts of Neo-Ottomanism and the theory of strategic depth, see Ozkan, 2014: 119-140.



In 1923 with the creation of a pro-Western modern state that contradicted the political thought of Islamic and imperial influence of the time, modernisation reforms undertaken in Turkey were essentially orientated towards the centre and not to the periphery, which was thus relegated to a secondary position. Being aware that the modernisation of Turkey – inseparable from the presence of secularism in political life – mainly meant subjecting the peripheries, Erdogan began to explore this aspect, taking the peripheries as the geography of the authentic Turkey, forgotten in favour of a development paradigm that, in this reading, is more culturally distant (Cagaptay, 2002a; 2004). From this geography of authenticity, the New Turkey can be created.

As Burak (2011) argues, it is true that this strategy had already been used by Turgut Ozal (Burak, 2011: 60).<sup>4</sup> However, whilst he took a realist attitude focused on the country's economy, Erdogan reveals a more emotional approach, also centred on the people (Heper, 2013: 155). This project allowed him to build a system of power around those who had been excluded by previous governments, through a neoliberal reformist agenda associated with an Islamic policy, under the premise of responding to many of the social concerns and taking into account political and economic interests of the population (Hadiz & Chrysogelos, 2017: 403).

Therefore, Erdogan's political praxis became a distinct phenomenon because of the high level of reception of very unequal social bases, which facilitated the introduction of a reformatory socio-political agenda of the country's political system as well as the political regime itself. Invoking the honour and pride of the Turkish people – alluding to the demands of Turkish nationalism – and pro-Western religious conservatism, Erdogan came to grips with the political process, which has been rarely seen in Turkish state history, despite the preponderance of the leader's dominance being an underlying attribute of Turkish political culture and its partisan system (Gorener & Ucal, 2011: 357-58). As Turkey traditionally has had a rather patriarchal society, where many admire a strong and charismatic leader who leads the people and the nation (Cagaptay, 2002b: 42),<sup>5</sup> Erdogan put together the necessary conditions to change the conservative structures of the state to an authoritarian conception of political power (Ozbudun, 2014: 158). This led Turkey to democratic underdevelopment, due to Erdogan's substantial power over the political system and the characteristics of his individual leadership.

In this sense, it is our goal to explore the link between the values and worldviews conveyed by Erdogan's political praxis and the receptivity by Turkish civil society as a possible explanatory factor for the success of his leadership and what appears to be the gradual construction of a conservative and authoritarian Turkey. Thus, this article seeks to understand Erdogan's successes regarding the country's socio-political agenda and, in particular, his conception of political power and the way society reacts to this proposal.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Turgut Ozal was Prime Minister (1983-1989) and President of the Republic of Turkey (1989-1993). During its governance there was a high liberalisation of economic and social domains, and peripheral society came to occupy a prominent place in the country's politics and economy.

<sup>5</sup> However, this image needs to be reassessed in order to verify whether Turkish society remains faithful to this patriarchal conception or whether there have been more significant changes recently in its political culture that point to the emergence of a new conception.

<sup>6</sup> Understanding the complexity of the link between the partisan system and Turkish civil society, both its elites and social peripheries, has been the subject of increasing academic interest of several researchers. Amongst them, we highlight the recent work by F. Michael Wuthrich (2015), which analyses how leaders and parties shape their strategies and discourses in order to grasp the current social dynamics; and the work of Tahir Abbas (2017), which focuses on the growing erosion of ethnic, religious and cultural balances stemming from Erdogan's and AKP's interpretation of Turkish politics.



Erdogan's oratory and motivational speeches, coupled with a social and economic context favourable to his interpretation of power, allowed him to reformulate the regime according to his personal ambitions and axiomatic views. Therefore, charismatic leadership theory seems to fit this research objective as it highlights the influence of the leader's personal view on citizens. In order to do so, the contributions of House (1977), Weber (1978) and Trice and Beyer (1986) will be used as a theoretical basis to analyse the leader's role, focused on personality traits and behaviour.

This article proposes, through an interpretive approach on Erdogan's political action, to verify if his leadership has produced important transformations in Turkish society.

### **The Importance of Leadership in Political Decision-Making Processes**

The debate around effective leadership, and who is the leader and the led, is a recurring issue in studies about leadership and its nature.

Barling (2014) notes that control and centralisation of power dominated the definitions of leadership during the first decades of the twentieth century. Although, due to the need to understand the characteristics of the leaders in the post-World War II period, leadership studies focused on traits and personality. Leadership, then, started to be seen as the ability to persuade, centred on the effects of power and the surrounding circumstances (Bass & Bass, 2008: 15) insofar as it is the very claim of legitimacy<sup>7</sup> that will allow the actions of leaders to be validated (Weber, 1978: 684).

According to Weber's political sociology, societies and their constituent parts are held together by the exercise of power (Parkin, 2000: 53). However, only domination based on authority – as it involves an emitted order and, consequently, an acceptance of it – implies submission. In this sense, the subordination of whom is led produces a rational reaction to their own interests, subject to the objective circumstances of their own ambitions (Weber, 1978: 943). In general, still according to Weber's perspective, the specific arrangements for domination are thus dependent on a population group accustomed to obeying the orders of leaders and who have a personal interest in the continuation of domination due to their own participation and resulting benefits (Blaug & Schwarzmantel, 2016: 251).

Simultaneously, Abelson (1986) noted that it would be wrong to assume that leaders who experience the same political event have similar goals, since they hold different interpretations, beliefs and memories. In addition, the population groups also have experiences and expectations that make them react differently to the call of leaders. In an attempt to interpret the leader's level of success and acceptance in a given environment, Metcalf and Robbins (2012) concluded that the style adopted for each leadership condition will be different, since decision-making is affected by objects which make choices that keep themselves away from the ideal. In this sense, the forms of denomination differ according to the kind of pretension leaders have to legitimate their power (Parkin, 2000: 58), which reconfigure the leader's position in the decision-making process and influence the development of societies through foundations of obedience.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Weberian thought, legitimacy refers to claims accepted and subscribed by subordinate groups. Legitimation, on the other hand, starts from the claims that dominant groups make on themselves. Thus, while legitimacy is granted from the bottom, legitimation comes from the top (Parkin, 2000: 59).



From this brief theoretical incursion, it is clear how the proposals of leadership interpretation are varied foremost according to its type of approach, either the subject as leader or the societal circumstances that interact with their proposal of discourse and action. Despite the difficulties inherent in the identification and conceptualisation of all the elements that interact in the formation of leader personality and style, the study of leadership itself assumes great heuristic utility, both from the perspective focused on the role of value and belief systems in the formation and conduction of leaders and analysis centred on discourse and action.

### **The Importance of Charismatic Leadership Theory in Erdogan-style Analysis**

Leadership theories are meant to explain the nature and consequences of leadership, making it possible for research problems in the political and social sciences to be defined.

Based on their effectiveness and satisfaction, theories<sup>8</sup> can be categorised into three groups: (1) instrumental theories, (2) informal theories and (3) inspiring theories. The latter – referring to charismatic, transformational and visionary leaderships – focus on analysis of emotional and ideological appeals, and behaviour that evokes trust, symbolism and concentrated or intrinsic motivation (Bass & Bass, 2008: 46).<sup>9</sup> Both charismatic and transformational leadership depend on the leader's ability to influence and inspire followers, motivate individuals for a greater good and mobilise them for a common purpose. However, unlike what happens with transformational leaders,<sup>10</sup> due to discourse that appeals to the moral passion of followers, the personal vision of the charismatic leader exerts a strong influence on targeted citizens.

Based on the high levels of emotional attraction and expressiveness of leaders, Max Weber introduced the concept of charisma in the social sciences to describe a leader gifted with extraordinary capabilities. They need to be self-confident, determined, active and energetic (Bass & Bass, 2008: 50), as if they were endowed with a divine grace, a kind of "mystical, narcissistic and personally magnetic saviour with extraordinary capabilities and a doctrine to promote" (Bass & Bass, 2008: 575).

For Weber (1978), charisma is self-determining and defines its own limits, not responding to any form of regulation or supervision. Charismatic leaders take advantage of the task for which they are destined and demand that others follow them due to their mission (Weber, 1978: 1112) and the heroic and virile gifts attributed to them, exercising denomination over the population (Carvalho, 2004: 124). When this denomination is recognised, the power of charisma becomes the belief in the emergence of a new hero who revolutionises men and shapes material and social conditions according to their revolutionary will (Weber, 1978: 1116). The Weberian conceptualisation of the emergence of the charismatic leader was later summed up by Trice and Beyer (1986) through the consolidation of five key elements: (1) an extremely gifted person; (2) a crisis; (3) a radical solution; (4) followers who are attracted to leaders due to the belief

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<sup>8</sup> Followers establish a relationship of trust with leaders through a mutual process of influence. For more information on the established trust process between leaders and followers, see Shahzadi et al., 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Intrinsic motivation arises in the execution of a task motivated by its inherent satisfaction. In contrast, concentrated motivation arises when task execution is done to achieve a specific outcome.

<sup>10</sup> For Bass and Bass (2008), transformational leaders act on the processes of changing their followers' attitudes, beliefs and goals, in articulation with the aim of making them aware of their needs.



that they have the solution to crisis; and (5) validation of the leader's powers based on successful experiences. Charismatic leaders are, thus, dependent on the emergence of a crisis, and only in times of turmoil does faith in leaders stand out and, consequently, charismatic domination becomes legitimised (Parkin, 2000: 66).

The attempted coup of July in 2016 is a case that illustrates the operationalisation of these five key elements. Indeed, if there were any doubts about Erdogan and the presence of the first key element in his type of leadership, they would disappear as soon as he responded to the attempted military coup.<sup>11</sup> First, he was able to explain discursively the traumatic feeling experienced by the Turkish nation, allowing much of the country to unite around the leader, recognising together the existence of a common threat (Cagaptay, 2017: 10). The existence of a harmony between the leader and the population's reading about a certain scenario as a crisis or threatening scenario is fundamental to the leader's action. Second, by asserting that the coup had been a conspiracy against the nation and instilling in the population the strong feeling that internal enemies were attacking them, Erdogan met the necessary conditions to impose severe restrictions on civil liberties, confirming, then, the third key element mentioned above. Such feelings have in turn resulted in greater support for Erdogan's charismatic leadership, corroborating House's (1977) statement about the emergence of charismatic leaders in times of crisis as potential saviours who fulfill the emotional needs of their submissive and obedient followers.

Charismatic leaders reveal themselves as individuals who exude confidence, a sense of purpose and a remarkable ability to psychologically prepare their followers, and who, through the extensive use of symbols, reinforce a sense of moral authority over their followers (Bass & Bass, 2008: 576). Erdogan's own discourse – with constant references to the dichotomous relations between right and wrong, just and unjust, villains and victims (Panayirci & Iseri, 2014: 66) – reflects a perception of society as a moral community, which Erdogan alludes to through a discourse oriented towards the intrinsic discriminatory nature of citizens, essentially visible in times of crisis. As prime minister, Erdogan promised a "new social contract" between the state and Turkish society, referring to a series of liberal reforms to favour the separation of powers, the rule of law and freedoms. Nevertheless, it is evident that he is currently leading Turkey in a deeply illiberal and authoritarian way (Karaveli, 2016: 1-2).

For being a conceptual approach that integrates the leader's cognition, motivation and other traits of their personality, the charismatic leadership theory is considered the best option when analysing the construction of Erdogan's leadership profile, a charismatic and pragmatic leader who inspires followers and appeals to their emotions (Gorener & Ucal, 2011: 357).

### **Erdogan's Leadership Profile: from Islamic Conservatism to the Instrumentalisation of Human Rights Rhetoric**

In this section, some identity marks of Erdogan's leadership will be identified.

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<sup>11</sup> During the coup attempt, Erdogan was able to muster a broad support that easily allowed him to overthrow the group of opponents. A subsequent repression was quick and relentless, which indicated that Erdogan's response to the coup attempt showed that his control of power remained strong enough and that he would only be strengthened in the ensuing period (Karaveli, 2016: 1).



We begin with the importance of Islamic conservatism. Born in Kasimpasa, a low-middle-class neighbourhood in Istanbul, Erdogan grew up aware of the feelings and aspirations of ordinary people, where secularism defended by the urban elites not always seemed to say much or result in obvious benefits. This social and educational context of his first years of life played an important role in the construction of his political discourse, sensitive to the fringes of society. It has helped him to create a kind of "discursive economy" that is easily confused with a precise representation of reality, referring to a closer approximation between discursive identity and the concept of power, through which Erdogan, as a discursive agent, manages to impose his own identity (Aydin-Duzgit, 2018: 23).

From this perspective, the discursive construction of a "New Turkey" can be discerned through his discourses (Aydin-Duzgit, 2016: 46). After the first two electoral victories (2002 and 2007) and the constitutional referendum of 2010,<sup>12</sup> Erdogan was able to capitalise on a converging public opinion with his domestic policy options and later – after fostering the generalised view that he had become the most powerful figure in the country (Aydin-Duzgit, 2016: 47) – strengthen his and the government's political legitimacy.<sup>13</sup> This aspect, then transposed into Turkey's foreign policy, is well marked by a discourse where he honoured the Turks, which was used – even in international periods of crisis – to appease the concerns of social bases that supported him, with a discourse marked by sensitivity to Islamism and nationalism (Panayirci & Iseri, 2014: 66).

Erdogan's discourse begins, therefore, by exploring feelings of exclusion of the fringes of society, consubstantiated in the presentation of measures that aim to respond to social concerns at the same time that they are inserted in the logic of more conservative,<sup>14</sup> Islamic values.<sup>15</sup> Simultaneously, his discourse allows him to exert a strong emotional influence over the electorate, presenting a sense of purpose and a new mission for Turkey.

Since he joined national politics in the 1990s through the Welfare Party (PR), Erdogan has employed a political identifier based on the assertion of his humble origins, presenting himself as the voice of the common people and defending their interests of the elites (Cagaptay, 2017: 3). His understanding of local politics (Phillips, 2017: 9) allowed him to convey the image of a leader who eliminates the distance between the people and the exercise of political power, which guaranteed the integration of the masses in his political project.

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<sup>12</sup> The 2010 constitutional referendum was widely perceived as an important step in gaining government control over the judiciary. The high number of judicial proceedings against military personnel that would henceforth have led to a gradual weakening of military power over civilian authority in the country (Aydin-Duzgit, 2016: 47).

<sup>13</sup> In the course of the Libyan crisis, opposition parties accused Erdogan of inconsistency as his stance against NATO involvement changed after the campaign was launched. Erdogan disregarded the criticism and dismissed it as misinformation. His discourse are thus shaped by the path of international developments with the aim of reinforcing Turkey's honour and moral whilst maintaining his charismatic leadership profile, both at home and abroad (Panayirci & Iseri, 2014: 74).

<sup>14</sup> Traditionally, religion and conservatism are two features parallel to the rhetoric of the Turkish right, which is a prominent position dating back to the pre-republican era (Çarkoglu, 2007: 255). Erdogan's great project has been to preserve a conservative social order and, since Islam is a creed shared by the majority of citizens, it acts as a unifying force (Karaveli, 2016: 1).

<sup>15</sup> The idea associated with discrimination of Muslim believers has been a constant mark in Erdogan's discourses. It can be observed in narratives such as "Westerners cannot say that Islamophobia is a crime against humanity... because killing a Muslim is legitimate for them" (Van, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014) and "The West has not followed an honest approach... Justice is needed for Palestine... We will not be silent and we will continue to fight for this cause" (Bursa, 18<sup>th</sup> July 2014).





However, Erdogan soon realised the limitations of a conservative project based only on Islamic readings due to the resistance that it could provoke internationally. He was convicted for inciting religious hatred<sup>16</sup> after reciting part of a poem by Ziya Gokalp<sup>17</sup> from the Turkish War of Independence. During his period in prison, Erdogan seemed to have learned the need to redefine his political strategy and what would become AKP's political project. Thus, instead of defining the implementation of rules of social organisation blatantly inspired by a conservative reading of the Muslim religion, Erdogan began to express them as a legitimate option that people have the right to choose, that is as a human right and freedom of expression issue. In this way, he differs from the RP's founder, Necmettin Erbakan, seeming to embrace Western values as a vehicle for building a more liberal and open country (Phillips, 2017: 10). With this change of strategy, it can be said that Erdogan increases the degree of complexity to the analysis that can be done on his leadership, not facilitating his allocation to simplified categories.

AKP's own action cannot be dissociated from Erdogan's action. With the dissolution of the Virtue Party (FP), which succeed the RP, AKP emerged in 2002 as a herald of change and progress, with a particularly motivating discourse towards the more liberal economic wings by creating partnerships that ensured the opportunity to replace the traditional structure of the Turkish political system. The inheritance of secularism seems to be safeguarded even if only in the Westernisation of economic ideas. At the same time, AKP emerged as a party attentive to the demands of different sectors of the population who accumulated resentment against the political elite for feeling less represented in their (rural) geography, social condition (the poorest) and identity (religious, e.g.). In parallel, the success of AKP's discourse and adherence by the population shows the weakness of the remaining parties in responding to the demands of the population, particularly of a large rural population historically far from the circuits of power (Aliriza et al., 2009: 11).

It is in this line of apparent contradictions that the AKP, despite its pro-Islamic roots, publicly commits itself to joining the European Union (EU). Erdogan's discourses reiterate the party's intention to guarantee freedom of expression through a transparent government and the strengthening of local governments. Working to reapproach society to the state apparatus, AKP presents itself as a new type of pro-Islamic party.

By defining his nationalism in terms of the ethnic and religious identity of Turkish society – respecting the confessional and ethnic identities as an integral part of civil liberties –, Erdogan was able to present a moderate and progressive view of Islam, in contrast to the "orthodox" view of the secular-inspired parties that historically sought to separate from Islam. This position allowed AKP and Erdogan to present the proposal for a new social contract,<sup>18</sup> supported by the reintroduction of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis that breaks with the traditions of the modern Kemalist state (Karaveli, 2016: 2), transforming the relationship between state and society (Ozsel et al., 2013: 551).

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<sup>16</sup> Although Erdogan was sentenced to 10 months in prison, he only served four months. However, the conviction made it impossible for him to hold political positions.

<sup>17</sup> "The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers".

<sup>18</sup> AKP's foundation was accompanied by the self-portrait of a "conservative democracy". However, this "conservative democracy" is presented as a new interpretation of liberal democracy, nevertheless adjusted to the specific needs of Turkish society. This approach of two apparently contradictory ideals (democratic and conservative) meets the ideas of Akdogan (2006: 50) when he states that "the field of politics should be firmly grounded in the culture of reconciliation", since "it is possible to solve social differences" (Ahmadov, 2008: 26 cit. Akdogan, 2006: 50).





The AKP assumes itself as a party that advocates Turkish Muslim identity for justice and considers that this is the best way to ensure greater civil society participation in politics. Erdogan and the AKP define the course of their success (Phillips, 2017: 10) by building a base of support in a liberal electorate that does not see itself as on the left regarding economic matters; in a conservative electorate with a focus on the most religious and rural populations; and also in a heterodox group of other ethno-nationalist voters (Karaveli, 2016: 2), thanks to the stance adopted on Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Due to the Turkish economic crisis of 2001 that weakened the two main right-wing parties – the True Path Party (DYP) and the Motherland Party (ANAP) – the AKP not only maintained the trust of those who voted for the FP but also gained the support of the centre-right electorate. Despite the fact that in practice the AKP is the successor party to the extinct RP and FP, the Turkish electorate does not regard it as a necessarily Islamic force – at least not in a pejorative sense – and its rhetoric proves that it can encompass a diversity of social bases of support. Thus, by extending electoral support, Erdogan leads the AKP to its first electoral victory in the legislative elections of 2002.<sup>19</sup>

Initially, the great debate on the AKP's party strategy sought to discover whether the party would be able to maintain moderate discourse, moving itself to the centre and whether it would abandon political Islam. Unlike its predecessor, the FP, the AKP is committed to being moderate. By taking a pro-globalisation stance and rejecting the idea of an isolated Islamism, combining conservative Islamism with a liberal and global perspective, the AKP places itself in a position similar to that of conservative European religious parties (Kosebalaban, 2011: 147).

Erdogan promises a powerful Turkey, projecting it as one of the greatest powers in the Middle East, capable of competing with Europe and other world powers. The glory times of the Ottoman Empire seem to continue to foster the creation of myths and goals for the country, inspiring an exaggerated sense of recovery of the lost glory. In this perspective, the justifications related to the loss of influence of republican Turkey have become a fertile fuel for the idealisation of the past (Cagaptay, 2017: 7).

Relying extensively on the binary construction between Turkey and the West, Erdogan used an inspiring and motivational discourse that established a transformation in the power relationship for which Turkey was responsible.

*For years they have bowed down in front of the West, this is what they did. What did the West do? It gave orders, and they obeyed*

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<sup>19</sup> In 2002, with the establishment of the 10% barrier to guarantee parliamentary seats, seven parties did not obtain representation in the Great National Assembly. The AKP won 34% of the votes, but, due to the electoral barrier, it won a majority of parliamentary seats (363 out of 550). The Republican People's Party (CHP), the only one to join the AKP in parliament, won 19.39% of votes and 178 parliamentary seats (Schofield et al., 2011: 455). In the face of the 1999 elections, the Turkish right had only a 1.12% increase in popular votes. On the left, the CHP achieved the best result of the past 30 years – winning the electorate of the DSP elected in 1999 – and the Democratic People's Party (HADEP) had the best result since its foundation in 1994. In this sense, the victory of the AKP means an ideological vote, in the sense that, by not neglecting other factors, the party was the option of a broad liberal, nationalist, conservative and religious electorate. Due to Erdogan's inability to hold political office, Abdullah Gul assumed the post of prime minister during the first months of the AKP at the head of the government. After parliament approved a constitutional amendment in December 2002 aimed at suspending the disqualification of individuals convicted of ideological crimes, Abdullah Gul resigned and President Necdet Sezer appointed Erdogan to the post.



*those orders. But now there is no such situation. We sit down, we talk, we take our decisions, but we make the decisions, this is the Turkey that there is now* (Elzag, 6th March 2014).<sup>20</sup>

In this excerpt, it becomes clear that the previous rulers – “they” – are described as too submissive to the West, whereas the AKP – “we” – is represented as an active agent possessing the power needed to reject external impositions (Aydin-Duzgit, 2016: 51). Unlike the other parties – which, although questioned for their actions, did not change their political stance – the AKP emerges as an alternative to the usual parties of the Turkish political system (Schofield et al., 2011: 458), capable of recovering the greatness of the Turkish nation.

### **An Authoritarian Conception of Political Power**

In the 2007 legislative elections, the AKP was again the most popular party. Having obtained 46.6% of the popular votes and 340 parliamentary seats, Erdogan reinforces his image (Schofield et al., 2011: 472), exploring the receptivity that the electorate seems to demonstrate to the idea of legitimising the conduct and restructuring of the Turkish political system.

The progressive discourse therefore becomes a reflection of the intentions to reconstruct the powerful image of Turkey, leading to a resurgence of Turkish influence in the regions of the extinct Ottoman Empire.<sup>21</sup> Secularism is no longer presented as the way to achieve this progressive agenda that articulates conservative values with democratic values (Ahmadov, 2008: 26). At the same time, the proposal of a socio-political system based on Islamic-conservative values is presented as the one that is most compatible with the Turkish collective identity and the aspirations of returning to a supposed Turkish greatness, moving the state away from the democratisation process and linking it increasingly with the borders of postmodern authoritarianism (Ozbudun, 2014: 162).<sup>22</sup>

It is in this way that Erdogan introduces his perspective of a New Turkey, “deeply Islamic in its internal and external politics, to make it, once again, a great power” (Cagaptay, 2017: 8). This synthesis of Islamic-conservative values and national grandeur increased Erdogan’s popularity and enshrined him as a charismatic leader of Turkish politics (Kosebalaban, 2009: 146). In 2009, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Erdogan staged an intense debate with Shimon Peres on the war in the Gaza Strip. Turkish population received him in apotheosis, consecrating him for his provision and welcomed him as the new hero of the country (Schofield, 2011: 472), revealing a strong emotional appeal for his leadership and placing full confidence in his role as the centre of decision-making in Turkey.

Focusing on the religious tendencies of voters, whilst not detracting from the principles of secular state organisation, Erdogan manages to shape popular perception with the

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<sup>20</sup> Aydin-Duzgit, 2016: 51.

<sup>21</sup> The influence on the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, associated with the conception of a new political ideology, not only represents an attempt to reorganise the sovereign states of the region (Neo-Ottomanism), but also resumes the influence of Islam in Turkish political praxis.

<sup>22</sup> Other authors consider Turkey as a regime of electoral authoritarianism that legitimises itself by holding multiparty elections and refutes civil liberties for the well-being of society (Shirah, 2015; Robinson & Milne, 2017).



notion of Turkish superiority, which appears to the electorate as credible and based on historical accuracy. This electorate, in turn, looks at Erdogan's figure as a "leader who defends the oppressed" (Aydin-Duzgit, 2018: 29).

Erdogan's cunning to conciliate in his discourse seemingly irreconcilable ideas, in a clever synthesis between conservatism and progressivism, makes it possible to understand why during the campaign for the 2011 legislative elections the AKP was committed to replacing the 1982 Constitution of Turkey, claiming that the country needs legislation more open to democratic freedoms. In June of that year, his third term was secured, after an election campaign divided between the leading role of the CHP's leader, Kemal Kiliçdaroglu, and Erdogan. Several references to the Alevist origins of Kemal Kiliçdaroglu were made by Erdogan in an attempt to discredit the candidate before the Sunni electorate, asserting that the CHP was a party deprived of ethical values and that had deviated from Islamic purpose (Borco & Verney, 2016: 205). In a progressive way, Erdogan then began to represent the opposition as a threat to Turkey's national values and religious identity, and later to repress those who question it (Cagaptay, 2017: 10).

However, in 2013, a setback seems to overshadow Erdogan's walk. An environmental protest in Gezi Park, Istanbul, quickly turned into an anti-government protest against the unequal treatment of minorities. The government appears as a synonym of the vehicle of Islamisation of society (Tucker, 2015: 290) and not of progressive Islam, being seen as having undemocratic practices that inhibit fundamental freedoms. In fact, instead of providing more freedoms for society as a whole, Erdogan seems ultimately to secure this space only for his Islamic-conservative base of support (Cagaptay, 2017: 10). This is challenged by a new generation of young people with expectations of expanding themselves as active citizens in society and opposing the Islamisation of society and social control promoted by the AKP (Gokay & Xypolia, 2013: 36).

Following these protests that reveal the weaknesses of this New Turkey, Erdogan presents the new "democratic package", referred to as an example of national concern for equal rights between ethnic groups and the resolution of internal security problems. The aim is clearly to appease popular discontent through a discourse aimed, primarily, at the Kurdish population. Amongst the reforms presented, the promise of greater autonomy for Kurdistan as well as the guarantee of civil rights for its population stood out. However, the reforms applied did not correspond, in practice, to the promises presented. Thus, the path traced by Erdogan was more of a setback than progress (Karaveli, 2016: 2-3).

On the same critical line, Cagaptay (2017: 10) considers that Erdogan has revealed himself as an increasingly authoritarian leader, convinced that his electoral victories legitimise the indiscriminate use of political power (Cagaptay, 2017: 10). At the same time, the AKP has become a party extremely focused on Erdogan, in which loyalty to the leader becomes a promotion criterion (Hefner, 2016: 166).

These criticisms walk into what is paradoxically evidence: despite a stance that many call authoritarian, a discourse increasingly close to religion (Bosco & Verney, 2016: 206) and the difficulties that his options seem to bring – as seen in the protests of 2013 – at a time when he could already accuse the weariness of governance, Erdogan wins the first presidential elections in August 2014 by popular vote. His main conception of democracy itself and the use of the polls as the only legitimate tool for democratic representation were accompanied by a notion of anti-government demonstrations, as an attempt by the



minority to impose its will on the majority, by illicit means (Ozbudun, 2014: 157). This perspective, which puts the periphery in the place always occupied by the centre, allowed Erdogan to achieve an electoral popularity that operates from society itself, where the periphery is now included and feels like an integral part of Turkish politics.

However, the coup attempt of 15<sup>th</sup> July 2016 seems to confirm our analysis of Erdogan's leadership based on the exploration of the five key Weberian elements synthesised by Trice and Beyer (1986). The attempted coup, which led to the deaths of hundreds of citizens and the arrest, suspension and investigation of thousands<sup>23</sup> emerged as an "incident of crisis" that provided Erdogan with a favourable context for the introduction of authoritarian measures that, on the one hand, made him an autocratic leader and, on the other hand, made him emerge as a unifying and saving figure of the great threatened nation (Cagaptay, 2017: 12).

In this line of action, the Turkish parliament's approval of a constitutional amendment withdrawing parliamentary immunity from deputies made it possible to investigate a number of Republican People's Party (CHP) deputies accused of insulting the president, and 50 out of the 59 deputies of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), a pro-Kurdish party. Faced by the population as a manifestation of fighting clientelism, the measure made it possible for Erdogan to solidify his popular support and weaken the opposition. With the adoption of the new constitution, approved by the referendum on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2017,<sup>24</sup> Erdogan will begin to control state budgets, appoint judges and resume the leadership of the AKP.

By entering into force only in 2019 and changing the limit of presidential terms, the new constitution will allow Erdogan to remain in office until 2029. This is a type of government longevity that is unprecedented in Turkey, which began with a proposal for a moderate and liberal political orientation and gradually becomes conservative and authoritarian.

Erdogan aspired to be the new "father of the Turks". Since the future of the country is still quite unpredictable, the only certainty is that the Turks now live in a country that has undoubtedly become Erdogan's Turkey (Karaveli, 2016: 6). A conservative, nationalist and Islamic Turkey that, under the leadership of a charismatic leader with a strong sense of purpose, strides along an increasingly authoritarian route.

## Conclusions

Erdogan, who grew at the height of reactionary attitudes towards Turkish secularism, was able to capitalise on the social, economic and political circumstances of his time by launching the idea of a "New Turkey" that promotes Islamic culture.

With the political support needed, he has succeeded in creating legislative and legal responses capable of holding rivals, reconfiguring the political system and transforming Turkey's historical, cultural and political presuppositions, which many analysts consider increasingly far from the West and its democratic values.

<sup>23</sup> According to Karaveli (2016), the government has ordered an arrest warrant for tens of thousands of alleged elements of Fethullah Gulen's religious movement. It has also suspended and arrested a significant part of the army and public administration, shut down mass media and suspended thousands of academics.

<sup>24</sup> Solaker, Gulsen and Butler, Daren. Erdogan wins narrow referendum victory, laying bare Turkey's divisions, 2017. Available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/turkey-referendum-erdogan\\_us\\_58f373dde4b0bb9638e4924b](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/turkey-referendum-erdogan_us_58f373dde4b0bb9638e4924b). Consulted on April 18, 2017.



This article does not intend to initiate any kind of discussion about the meaning of democracy and authoritarianism. It seeks to clarify the circumstances that allow us to better understand Erdogan's growing success in building a leadership line, that one must recognise, is closer to authoritarianism than democracy – regardless of how flexible it may be in terms of conceptual elasticity. This authoritarian path that Erdogan followed should not be seen, however, as an event that emerged in isolation in a period of his political action. It is true that his first term was marked by an attempt to diplomatically reproach the international community, but it may well be seen as a mechanism to facilitate the legitimation necessary in consolidating its internal leadership.

Before a democratic underdevelopment that places him in a central and isolated position in the exercise of political power, Erdogan reveals himself as a charismatic leader who cleverly inspired his followers by virtue of his purposes, beginning to exercise his dominion over society. However, it is equally important to realise that Erdogan's success cannot be understood apart from the fundamental role that society has played in this success. Therefore, further studies are needed, regarding political sociology, in order to understand Turkish society and its culture and political behaviour.

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