

WILL EARTHQUAKE BE ERDOGAN'S TARPEIAN ROCK?

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No one knows whether the deep well of popular anger the recent earthquake has opened in Turkey up will affect the vote next spring. Might this be the beginning of the end for the man who has dominated Turkish politics for more than twenty years? Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Law and Justice Party (AKP) will have greater difficulty than hitherto in deflecting blame.



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There is a correlation between lack of democracy in a country and the level of destruction left in the wake of natural disaster. In a functioning democracy, those in power can be held accountable, a system of checks and balances will control spending and the public will be informed at every step. Where there is no democracy, there is bound to be more human suffering." This is how the best-selling Turkish writer **Elif Shafak**, who lives in exile in London, sums up the mixed feeling of anger and grief felt after the earthquake by many Turks in Turkey and abroad. The failure of the state to carry out swift and systematic emergency rescue effort, leaving many victims to their own devices simply compounds the problem.

Having run Turkey for more than 20 years, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Law and Justice Party (AKP) will have greater difficulty than hitherto in deflecting blame. They have turned the country into a highly centralised executive presidential system after a referendum in 2017, but that has not made government faster or more efficient. That very centralisation has hindered a swift reaction to local needs. The politization of all institutions have spread a crony system where senior jobs across the administration are in the hands of like-minded AKP party members and prevented the ability to produce a truly professional civil service. Senior officials dare not act without a greenlight from above. The consequent paralysis has cost many lives.

The endless speeches by Erdogan promising the authorities would tighten building regulations, in the wake of the 1999 earthquake, which claimed 20,000 lives have proved to be so many empty words. Those who criticised him were dismissed as traitors. Those who denounced the nepotism and greed which characterise certain sectors of economic life, notably construction, always earned a sharp rebuke from AKP leaders. Not for them the greed and discarding of rules which were a characteristic of Turkey's building sector well before the AKP

came to power. Thus, building permits were given when they never should, despite the fact that the country has experienced the deadliest earthquakes worldwide four times in the last fifty years – 1975, 1983, 1999 and 2020.

Construction amnesties to buildings which blatantly defied earthquake regulations are a reality in this sector. Private residential buildings collapsed but so did state hospitals and airports, and this in a country which, as Shafak points out, boasts of “an amazing array of scientists and engineers...many of whom have been begging officials to pay attention” to the likely consequences of corruption and lack of respect for state rules in the building sector. Such voices were never heard. Worse, their authors were accused of “fearmongering”. According to Pelin Pinar Giritlioglu, Istanbul head of the Unions of Chambers of Turkish Enterprises, construction amnesties were granted to 75,000 buildings that blatantly defied regulations in the earthquake zone.

For a president who has turned Turkey into an active – critics would say aggressive and brittle – international player in international affairs, the botched response to the quake leads to more fundamental questions. What is the point of having a more diversified industrial base than any Arab country, a capacity to design and manufacture sophisticated drones if you cannot even protect your own people?

After 1999 a tax was imposed whose proceeds were supposed to be used for the next emergency. They were misspent, thus rendering the official narrative that this was the disaster of the century sound ludicrous. The opposition accuses the government of corruption and cronyism – all agreed that these ills have exacerbated the destruction. The earthquake hit ten provinces which are inhabited by nearly 14m people and could cost as much as 80bn, or 10% of GDP. A fragile economy and rampant inflation, negative foreign reserves and extensive account deficits means that Turkey’s economic woes are likely to get worse in the short term.

For a president who has turned Turkey – recently rebranded Turkiye, into an active – critics would say aggressive and brittle – international player in international affairs, the botched response to the quake leads to more fundamental questions. What is the point of having a more diversified industrial base than any Arab country, a capacity to design and manufacture sophisticated drones if you cannot even protect your own people? What is the point of lecturing the West – critics would say hectoring the EU and NATO, if you cannot ensure the safety of your own people? Rebranding your country now looks like a cheap political gimmick.

The presidential elections must be held at the latest in mid-June. The constitution states that elections can only be suspended if Turkiye is at war. A few months ago, Erdogan was keen to advance them to May. Holding them in June with hundreds of thousands of Turks displaced was considered a huge challenge. No one knows whether the deep well of popular anger this earthquake has opened up will affect the vote next spring. Might this be the beginning of the end for the man who has dominated Turkiye politics for more than twenty years? Erdogan started as the bad guy on the block in one of the poorer districts of Istanbul. He rose to the top and has centralised power brutally, imprisoning, often under false pretences, thousands of journalists, civil servants, and army officers, many of whom were tortured. No better expression of his contempt for the people he rules can be found than his government's decision to disrupt Twitter after the earthquake – promptly restored after public outcry over the debilitating effects the ban was having on rescue efforts, often carried out by NGOs and *ad hoc* groups.

We will know at the forthcoming presidential elections whether his hubris has finally caught up with Erdogan. Will the earthquake which has cost over 30,000 lives be Mr Erdogan's Tarpeian rock? Many of his countrymen are not in doubt, today, that his political reputation has been badly, maybe irretrievably, damaged.