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MAY
2014

TURKEY: Tragedy in the Run-up to the Elections

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Turkey is back in the news. Not only because of the Soma mining accident—the worst in the country’s history—but also because of the protests and political controversy it has generated. The tragedy, occurring just a few months before the presidential elections, has accentuated the worrying levels of social and political polarisation in Turkey, which hardly seemed possible. For the followers of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, what has resulted is the political exploitation of a tragedy. For his critics, it is further proof of a clientelistic system that disregards its citizens.

Will the AKP pay a political price for what happened in Soma? Dealing with this kind of crisis normally leaves a government worn out. That was the case for George W. Bush following the disastrous handling of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, and, more recently, for South Korea’s prime minister, Chung Hong-won, who resigned after acknowledging the failings of the rescue operation that followed the Sewol ferry sinking. There have been exceptional occasions when a leader is strengthened by such a crisis. An example of this is Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who put on his Wellington boots and got stuck in during the aftermath of the 2002 floods in Germany, just a few weeks before the elections.

In Turkey, however, the precedents are generally negative. Best known is the Izmit earthquake of August 1999 which had tens of thousands of victims and eroded the credibility of the government, the local authorities, and even the armed forces. Scandals surrounding the granting of construction permits came to light, and there was open criticism of the inadequate help given to the victims. In the handling of the Soma crisis, what has been criticised is less the rescue mechanisms than the absence of pre-existing security measures, the tactlessness and lack of empathy coming from Erdoğan and other members of his team, and the links between economic sectors and political power, especially where privatised companies are concerned.

Great debate about Turkey's model of growth and its worrying levels of workplace accidents has also been generated. According to an International Labour Organisation report, Turkey is worst in the European ranking of workplace accidents, and third worst worldwide. The figures speak for themselves: since 2002 there have been more than 12,000 victims of fatal workplace accidents, 10% of which were in the mining sector. Turkey's energy dependence also explains the pressure on the sector to raise production and to do it more cheaply. In this context, it is necessary to ask where the limits lie. Erdoğan's comparisons of this accident with other tragedies in the United Kingdom and United States at the start of the 20th century do not help focus the debate.

Until now, Erdoğan has shown a notable capacity to emerge unharmed from all kinds of crisis. The recent municipal elections on the 30th of March were won with no toll being taken by the Gezi protest movement, the corruption scandals that purportedly involve some of the leaders of the AKP and their families, the decision to close access to Twitter (later reversed by the constitutional court), or the confrontation with the Hizmet movement (led by Fethullah Gülen), which Erdoğan accuses of conspiring against him and of manipulating state institutions. Erdoğan endures while the political and social climate deteriorates.

The electoral calendar only exacerbates this tension. On the 10th of August a unique presidential election will be celebrated. After a constitutional modification, Turks will elect the president of the republic by a direct vote. Everything indicates that Erdoğan—currently the prime minister—will stand. While Turkey is governed by a parliamentary system, the president has important prerogatives. These include a veto over the approval of new laws, the capacity to convene and chair the council of ministers when considered necessary, and the assigning of a significant number of key institutional posts. If elected, Erdoğan will attempt to take maximum advantage of the arenas of power permitted to him by the constitution as well as continuing to push for a new constitution that will augment presidential power. Hence, the coming presidential elections decide not only who will lead the country, but also how it is to be led.

Only when the results of these elections are known will it be possible to judge whether the handling of the Soma crisis has had a political cost for Erdoğan. While awaiting the verdict of the ballot boxes, it would be good if the political class, along with business and union stakeholders, were farsighted enough to set about reducing the worrying levels of workplace accidents, bringing Turkey further into line with European standards, signing the International Labour Organisation conventions and applying the regulations that are already in place. Because what is at stake is not only the political future of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, but also how Turkey should best reconcile economic growth with workplace safety.