

Turkey: After the bomb attacks in Ankara, the dealings of Tayyip Erdoğan's government will come under scrutiny

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Turkey is in shock - but many will have seen this attack coming

As Turkey comes to terms with the worst terrorist outrage in its history, the dealings of Tayyip Erdoğan's government will come under scrutiny.

The blame for the horrific bomb attacks in Ankara that killed 86 people at a rally involving Kurdish peace activists is likely to fall on Islamic State terrorists operating across Turkey's long border with Syria and Iraq. But the proximity of Turkish general elections, due on 1 November, is certain to raise suspicions among opposition parties that dark forces supportive of the hardline government led by president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan may be involved.

Isis is in open conflict with Kurdish nationalist fighters in both northern Iraq and Syria. Last July a suicide bomber or bombers, reportedly of Turkish origin, attacked a pro-Kurdish peace rally in Suruç in the south-east of the country. On that occasion, 37 people were killed.

Isis is also at war with the Turkish state, which recently agreed to allow US fighter-bombers to use its Incirlik airbase to target the terrorists in their Syrian HQ at Raqqa and elsewhere. Erdoğan and his prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, also initiated Turkey's own airstrikes against Isis, partly in an attempt to push the terrorists away from the southern border, where they have vainly sought to create a safe haven or buffer zone.

Turkey has admitted up to 2 million Syrian refugees since the civil war there erupted in 2011 [\[1\]](#). Although most are genuine victims of the war, some are thought to be sympathetic to Isis and its aim of an Islamic caliphate. This has led Turkish politicians to worry about the "enemy within". Like the British government, they fear the radicalisation of their Muslim population.

Isis views both the Kurds and the Turkish state as legitimate targets, enough in its twisted view to justify murderous attacks on unarmed civilians.

All the same, suspicion of responsibility for Saturday's attacks will inevitably also fall on ultra-nationalist groups, including the shadowy Grey Wolves Turkish nationalist group and rightwing elements within Turkey's security apparatus. Erdoğan is currently involved in a life-or-death political struggle with the main pro-Kurdish opposition party, the HDP, ahead of the 1 November polls. Major advances by the HDP in elections earlier this year destroyed the parliamentary majority of Erdoğan's

Justice and Development party (AKP) for the first time in more than a decade.

Erdoğan was forced to order Davutoğlu to try and form a coalition. But this he failed to do, given the AKP's high-handed and uncompromising attitude to opposition party agendas, hence the new round of polls. More significantly, the election setback meant Erdoğan's long-nurtured plan to create an authoritarian, Vladimir Putin-style executive presidency was torpedoed due to lack of parliamentary support.

Many in Turkey accuse Erdoğan of deliberately fuelling a reviving conflict with militant Kurdish groups, including the outlawed PKK, in order to scare voters into supporting his law-and-order, security-first platform in the coming elections. If he succeeds, it is argued, he will seize more powers for the presidency and promote himself as a sort of modern-day Sublime Porte. Thus, it is suggested, the last thing Erdoğan really wants at this juncture is a Kurdish peace.

Reacting to the attacks, opposition politicians from the HDP and other parties pointed to previous, similar bomb attacks on HDP party premises round the country. These have been attributed to ultra-nationalist reactionaries opposed to any kind of peaceful compromise with the Kurds. In particular it was noted that Saturday's bombings followed an attack on the HDP in Diyarbakir, in the mainly Kurdish south-east, in June, when four people died.

The AKP government has also used the Syrian crisis with Isis to mount parallel, more sustained attacks on PKK fighters in Iraq. In this distrustful pre-election atmosphere, the swift and lengthy statement issued by Erdoğan after the Ankara attacks will also be viewed with caution by many Turks. Erdoğan said the outrage, in effect, demonstrated the importance of all Turks rallying behind his leadership in fighting terrorism. Erdoğan argued that all such attacks, big or small, whether domestic or foreign in origin, and whether mounted against civilians or the police or army by the Kurds or anybody else, all amounted to terrorism.

Using words such as "national unity", "solidarity" and "determination", his statement appeared to prefigure a wider security crackdown ahead of the polls. Mainstream opposition parties may struggle to resist Erdoğan's uncannily prescient seizing of the initiative and may be obliged to follow his lead as the shockwaves reverberate across Turkey. Erdoğan's suggestion was plainly that he alone was the leader equipped to defeat the common threat.

The government suspended election campaigning following the Ankara bombings, which will have the effect of closing down debate about who was responsible and what were their motives. Erdoğan has already moved to severely curtail media and press freedom ahead of the polls. Numerous well-known journalists have been accused of insulting the president, an offence carrying a five-year jail term, in a blatant attempt to silence criticism. Last week Erdoğan went to Brussels with the aim of curtailing EU complaints about his perceived authoritarian behaviour in return for Turkish help in curbing Syrian migrant flows to Europe.

The sudden Russian military intervention in Syria, including aerial border incidents with Turkey, has added to the growing nervousness inside the country over its security and its weakened democratic system.

On Saturday, Turkey, suffering the impact of the worst ever terror outrage on its soil, is a nation in shock. But it is also a nation living in fear.

Simon Tisdall

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<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/10/turkey-bombing-ankara-many-will-have-seen-this-attack-coming>

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Turkey bombings: innocent hearts beating for peace are brutally stopped

World must hear call of countless people in Turkey who are determined to defend peace and democracy, says award-winning novelist Elif Shafak

It was dedicated to “peace and democracy”, but the rally turned into a bloodbath. The participants were a motley group; among them leftists, liberals, trade unionists, feminists, and members of the Turkish Medical Association.

It was morning when the tragedy occurred. Some groups were just beginning to gather. Others were singing; holding hands, men and women, in a typical Kurdish folk dance.

Then came the first explosion, and immediately after, the second. One of the many placards sent clattering to the ground in the blast read: “We have missed looking up at the sky without having blood around.”

Ankara is no ordinary city. In addition to being the capital of the Turkish nation-state, and home to thousands of college students, it is a hub for democratic movements and anti-government demonstrations.

The mood in Turkey has soured alarmingly fast since the polls in June. For the first time since 2002, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP failed to win an overwhelming majority. Four parties entered parliament, raising the possibility of a pluralistic democracy.

But despite repeated attempts, a coalition was not formed. Instead the government, and Erdoğan in particular, who wants a presidential system, pushed the country towards another election. Turkey's economy was shaken, the society strained, media freedoms curtailed, journalists intimidated. Tensions escalated. Turkey surely did not need yet another election so soon.

Saturday's explosions seem to be part of a series of attacks. The first bomb was in Diyarbakir in June, again at a pro-Kurdish HDP rally. Then came the news from Suruç, where university students whose only aim was to restore playgrounds for children in Kobane were massacred by Islamic State. And now Ankara.

In times of crisis, nations need to be able to unite strongly against terrorism. But Turkey has been deeply polarised for a long time, and the gap between pro-government and anti-government forces is hard to bridge. The country is situated in a most turbulent region, with neighbours such as Syria, Iran, Iraq and Russia, whose jets have been violating Turkish airspace.

Turkey is going through turbulent days. The government has alienated itself from the people in its

desire to become more authoritarian. Instead of coexistence and compromise, the language of duality and animosity have become the norm. None of this is helpful.

But there are countless people in Turkey - Kurds, Turks, Jews, Armenians, Alevis, women and men from all walks of life - who are even more determined to defend peace and democracy. The world community must hear their peaceful call. In turn, they need to hear that when innocent hearts beating for peace were brutally stopped, there will be more hearts beating for them and for the peace they so believed in.

Elif Shafak

* Turkey The Observer. The Guardian. Saturday 10 October 2015 15.49 BST:

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/10/ankara-attacks-innocent-hearts-beating-for-peace-are-brutally-stopped>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/14/syria-protesters-defections-security-forces>