



By: *Sharmila Devi*

Erdogan tightens grip on Turkey with seeming impunity



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan no doubt felt some satisfaction as he **surveyed** loyal troops on the 103rd anniversary of Victory Day on 30 August, marking the 1922 victory over Greek forces a year before the Turkish republic was born.

The authoritarian president proudly announced that Turkey's armed forces are now **stronger** than nine years ago when the country prevented a coup in which 253 people were killed and 2,734 were wounded.

Just a few days earlier, he formally inaugurated Turkey's air defence system known as the "Steel Dome" that integrates sea- and land-based air platforms and sensors into a network to protect Turkey's skies.

"In the next 50 years, Turkey will be a country that not only meets its own needs but also leads the world with its technology," Erdogan **said** at the Ankara facilities of Turkish defence company Aselsan.

The president must be feeling some relief that so far, he has navigated regional conflict amid tensions with allies and opponents over wars and tensions in Gaza, Syria, Ukraine, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh.

At home, after more than four decades and 40,000 dead, the war between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) appears to be ending.

A restive and young population agitating for change

But Erdogan's greatest challenge may be domestic. There is a restive and young population agitating for change, and they show no sign of giving up amid arrests and detentions that continue under the president's repressive rule.

Erdogan is facing little outside pressure. Turkish police even brazenly **arrested** a youth activist on his return to Turkey after he criticised the president's government at the

Council of Europe in Strasbourg in early August.

Ekrem Imamoglu, mayor of Istanbul, has been **imprisoned** since March in what his opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) called a "civilian coup" by Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP).

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Imamoglu was charged with corruption and terrorism links just before he was set to be announced as the CHP's candidate in the 2028 presidential elections. His arrest sparked a wave of protests that lasted for weeks.

Dozens of elected officials from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) are also **imprisoned**.

On 8 September, there were more demonstrations outside the CHP headquarters after a court ruled that its Istanbul chairman be replaced, while the government rejected accusations of political interference while **blocking** access to social media platforms in some parts of the country for a few days.

Opposition leaders, lawyers and protesters will be appearing in court this month to fight various charges.

Tightening grip on power

"Turkey stands at an inflection point. Its domestic governance will more and more shape its relevance abroad," **wrote** Imamoglu in The Economist last month. "To be a responsible regional power, Turkey must restore the integrity of its democratic institutions."

The president's tightening grip on power has led to new terminology, such as "Erdoganisation" when other leaders similarly amass power. "Turkey under Erdogan provides a potent example of "new authoritarianism", a political model where the leader or ruling

party maintains a veneer of democracy while skewing the system to their own advantage,” wrote William Gourlay of Monash University.

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He pointed out that Turkey’s political freedom is ranked 33 out of 100 by Freedom House, putting the country in between Pakistan and Jordan.

However, even though many young Turks have known no other leader than Erdogan, who has led the country as prime minister or president since 2003, polls show only about 11% of them support his AK party.

A quarter of Turkey’s population is aged between 18 and 29, and many of them have vowed to resist any attempt by the president to reset term limits in any effort to extend his rule.

A man to work with

Abroad, Erdogan might be viewed with distaste in private, but in public he is a man to work with. Turkey will **host** the 2026 NATO summit next July in Ankara.

This is despite Turkey saying recently it will not support the EU’s plans to end all Russian gas imports by the end of 2027 over the invasion of Ukraine.



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Turkey is an important conduit for Russian energy exports, and for EU refining companies to comply with sanctions, they would need information from their

Turkish counterparts about the origins of their fuel. But Turkey, as a non-EU member, has no legal obligations to comply with sanctions, and Brussels seems to have little to incentivise Ankara.

Erdogan has managed to balance good ties with both Moscow and Kyiv by refusing to apply most international sanctions on Russia while also selling military equipment to Ukraine.

Turkey has also offered to send troops to any peacekeeping operation in Ukraine that would help to ease pressure on any reluctant EU countries to provide military manpower.

The UK, meanwhile, is hoping to secure a multibillion-pound deal to sell Typhoon jets to Ankara. Agreement is closer after Germany dropped its opposition to the sale of the jointly produced aircraft earlier this summer.

All this bodes well for Erdogan and his policy of strategic ambiguity. Turkey was even confident enough to say no to a request from a group of European mayors to visit Imamoglu in prison late last month. They had instead to give a “Special Democracy Award” to his wife, Dilek Imamoglu, in Istanbul.

She read a message from her husband, in which he said the award belonged “to all citizens in Turkey and around the world who resist injustice and oppression.” He also called for “a more democratic, fair, and prosperous country” and that his determination “has not diminished but strengthened.”

Such determination will be needed if Turkey is to change course.