Turkey: The Political Economy of Hagia Sophia

Turkish lira, as of recently, has been in a freefall, indicating the overall health of Turkish economy. Since the beginning of 2020, Lira has fallen by 20 per cent against US dollar. Its adverse impact on the economy and politics has, however, been largely absorbed by the euphoria of Hagia Sophia and the intense symbolism of return to Ottoman glory. Whereas Turkey’s Erdogan blamed the pandemic and Beirut explosion for the recent devaluation, Turkey’s economy was already on the verge of collapse even before the pandemic hit Turkey. As it stands, the Turkish central bank has lost almost a third of its foreign exchange reserves this year, despite heavy foreign-currency borrowings from Turkish banks to artificially boost reserve numbers. Coupled with Erdogan’s stunning defeat in elections last year, when his party lost control of major municipalities, including the capital Ankara and commercial hub Istanbul, the on-going economic crunch was already hitting the self-styled ‘neo-Ottoman’ leader in his face when he decided to convert Hagia Sophia, a cathedral-tuned-museum, into a mosque.

Surely, Turkey was in no dire need of mosques. Just a year ago, Erdogan inaugurated the Çamlıca Mosque on the Asian side of Istanbul—a huge complex designed to accommodate more than 60,000 worshippers per day. Certainly, Hagia Sophia was not converted into a mosque to accommodate more faithful worshippers; the conversion was/is meant to give a religio-nationalist boost to the domestic political landscape to help Erdogan raise his political stature above the dwindling economy and Turkey’s costly external interventions in Libya and Syria.

Indeed, just when the pandemic was only beginning to spread in Turkey, Turkey’s economy was in tatters, forcing Ankara, lacking the essential funds to provide a meaningful social shield against the economic fallout of the pandemic, to launch a campaign to collect donations from the public. The fact that these measures have failed to put the economy back on track and that a dwindling economy does not bode well for Erdogan’s political future also explain why the regime has not decided to knock on the IMF’s door.

Already, about 85 countries have went to the IMF for bailout packages due to adverse impact of the pandemic on their economies. Going to the IMF at this stage when the official narrative continues to paint Turkey as a ‘strong economy’ would have been self-defeating. Indeed, Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have long maligned their predecessors for borrowing from the IMF, depicting a new, economically strong Turkey that no longer needs the IMF support. While the AKP regime would not go to the IMF, there is no gainsaying that a continued economic fall will have severe political implications for Erdogan, allowing the opposition to rally people against him; hence, Erdogan’s increasing resort to populism to buttress his failing fortunes and create a smoke screen of ‘Ottoman glory.’

As such, by projecting this conversion as a ‘reconquering’ and a ‘great victory’ and calling ‘Al-Aqsa’ mosque as the next target, Erdogan underscored the political message of creating a ‘neo-Ottoman’ territory that goes beyond Turkey’s current territorial borders. Indeed, Erdogan regime has also been projecting Turkey’s foreign interventions, particularly in Libya, as the key to reclaiming the lost ‘Ottoman glory.’

The drive towards reclaiming the lost glory is rooted in Erdogan’s brand of Turkish nationalism and the way he diffuses it with religion. Hagia Sophia’s conversion, in this context, symbolises the increasing rise of religious forces in Turkey and the hegemony of the practitioners of a particular brand of faith. Indeed, while a lot of Western countries were quick in their criticism of the move, Erdogan was clever enough to even use this criticism to his advantage to pitch even more effectively his ‘neo-Ottoman’ credentials to his voters.

Indeed, popular media punditic close to the regime have equally been investing their time and energy in glorifying
this conversion as the revival of the lost glory. For Yusuf Kaplan, this conversion shows “Turkey’s recovery, reclaim of its identity, history and spirit, its mental liberation… The re-opening of the Hagia Sophia Mosque is the spark that will trigger the great journey we have been called upon so that we can escape the web spun by the West – and which we had entered voluntarily – to build the new age…”. The rhetoric speaks a lot of populism whereby Turkey is projected as “going away” from the west, even though the same regime continues to pitch to the US ideas to create a global supply route to counter China. These ideas show a desire far deeper engagement with the West than a calculated distance.

For Erdogan and AKP, this conversion is also the key to Turkey’s leadership in the Muslim world. Indeed, this is how the regime is speaking to its voters.

“The conversion of Hagia Sophia signifies that Turkey will rise to the position of a founding country that will a kick-start a new age, build a new age, lead the Islamic world in the establishment of a new world, and the declaration to the whole world that Turkey is the only country that can achieve this”, wrote Kaplan.

This is Erdogan’s populist political strategy that he intends to use to counter political opposition which was able to focus their campaign entirely on the questions of economic development and corruption in the AKP to defeat the ruling party in Istanbul elections twice. For the opposition parties, the task will now be to focus on the regime’s economic and political performance than this conversion, which is anyway is a ‘popular’ measure, to build a strong counter-narrative.

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