Turkey - a mirror of Arab revolutions. Part 1

Hugely popular Prime Minister R.T. Erdogan, who has ruled the country since 2003, in ten years has turned Turkey into a role model for many developing Asian and African countries. The sky was blue, the country was green, rapidly developing, and the economy prospered. The combination of democracy with strict moral standards of Islam looked spotless, and the Turkish people applauded. Nothing foreshadowed big troubles.

Therefore, mass national protests, which erupted in June 2013 in Istanbul, for the international community, and especially for Mr. Erdogan, the national favorite, tribune, charismatic and flexible politician, seemed as a bombshell at the time.

The scale of popular unrest was also unexpected. As before that, were many revolutionary developments in the Arab countries, it started like a minor event, with a small demonstration in defense of Istanbul’s Taksim Gezi Parkth at authorities planned to close for the construction of a shopping center and a motorway. People throughout Turkey were outraged with the cruelty the police applied to suppress the demonstrators, and protests unfolded across the country.

The echoes from these demonstrations had hardly subsided, when in December, a new political storm broke out. As The Economist magazine aptly noted, “Turkey is following the Arab way.”

On December 18, five senior police officers leading the ‘Big Bribe’ Operation were sacked. Turkish newspaper Hurriyet Daily News, wrote that the heads of the five divisions of the Istanbul Police had lost their jobs due to the fact that they tried to expose an entire group of government officials and their relatives, suspected of taking bribes.

At the same time, public discontent with pending investigation sand attempts to cover up corruption at the highest levels led to the widening of the scandal. On December 25, obviously not without pressure from Mr. Erdogan, who began a purge of his own ranks, three Turkish government ministers suddenly resigned from their posts – Minister of the Economy Zafer Caglayan, Minister of Interior Muammer Gulerand Minister of Environment and Urban Planning Erdogan Bayraktar, which was an indirect proof of their guilt in the corruption scandal. “Obviously, that police operation (the arrest of 50 corrupt officials, including the sons of the mentioned ministers, was the cause of layoffs of police officers – Author’s note) was a dirty conspiracy against the government, our party and state. I am leaving the post of the minister of economy in order to prevent the implementation of this scenario, which involves my son and assistants, as well as to shed light on the truth in this situation,” Mr. Caglayan commented on his decision, explicitly trying to protect his patron. “We are faced with a large trap, whose goals and objectives are very clear. Neither I normy son, nor my colleagues at work have anything to do with this. Soon all will become clear.”

However, nothing became clear, in layperson terms. However, the damage to Mr. Erdogan and his coalition with the powerful religious movement of Fathulla Gulen – surrounded by an aura of secrecy, which provided broad popular support for the prime minister – was very serious. Turkish President Abdullah Gul, who is a supporter of F.Gulen, distanced himself from the prime minister. And no wonder.
Erdogan’s party (AK in Turkish means “pure”) gained its popularity also on its slogan of integrity, and that is why the December blow was “below the belt”. It turned dangerous to stand beside it (it should be noted, that the head of the government argues that the corruption scandal was triggered by Gulenists). Urgent “change” of government, appointment of ten new ministers, Erdogan’s loud statements about the “conspiracy” against him and his party from the forces that are “jealous” of its success, together with accusations of not only F.Gulen, living in Pennsylvania, but also Washington and Tel Aviv, impressed few people.

Now people are reproaching Erdogan’s party, first with the fact that it actually defeated the military caste, which held secular power in Turkey. By the way, this was done with the support of the West, who believed that it was a movement towards democracy, which almost happened later in Egypt as well. Erdogan’s party introduced virtually the same authoritarian rule, but this time based on the almost unlimited power of the prime minister. They started talking about gradual rejection of the secular state, the dominance of religious dogma, efforts of the head of the government to solve everything himself, including the wide spread use of violence against demonstrators in June 2013, the persecution of independent journalists, etc.

So, where did the Prime minister slip up? On his admiration of his own powers or on the corruption of his subordinates and relatives? It seems that this classic set of reproaches to any great political leader, reflects only the tip of the iceberg. The Turkish “Annushka” had started pouring oil much earlier...

To understand the reasons for what happened, we should go back a few years – to 2006-2007. At that time, the Turkish prime minister started being perceived in Washington and London – as a man who could start the democratization process in the Greater Middle East. Bush announced this with fanfare in 2003. This process stalled after the failure of the Iraqi project and finally exhausted itself in December 2006, despite its consecration with decisions by the G8, dozens of conferences and symposia.

Especially because Erdogan demonstrated himself as an active promoter of Turkey to be the “engine” of Middle East Democracy, as opposed to Gulen, professing pan-Turkism, though also mixed with religion, but aimed more at Azerbaijan and Central Asia. In addition, the moment seemed favorable, both to the Prime Minister himself and to his Anglo-Saxon patrons (at that time). Ankara by the end of 2006 – beginning of 2007, after decades of tough negotiations, understood that in the foreseeable future, it would not be accepted into the EU (naive people on Maidan still blindly believeth at Ukraine will be). Therefore, they had to find another field of activity.

At the same time, the Turkish economy was still prosperous (growth fell by half only in 2012-2013, after Erdogan’s reelection to his post in 2011), the political model of “moderate Islam”, multiplied by the new democratic decor of Turkey, seemed attractive. Soon Mr. Erdogan, apparently not without help from Washington and Tel Aviv, with which Turkey had warm relations, completely turned towards the Arab world, developing frenzied activity in this area under the “Zero Problems with Neighbors” motto of the then Minister of Foreign Affairs A.Gul. Even before this, relations with the Arabs were developing not badly, but after 2006, they gained unprecedented new dynamics.

Only with Syria, the Turkish governments signed more than fifty agreements on trade and economic cooperation during the reign of the current prime minister. Erdogan and Assad became best friends and together visited cheap cafes of Damascus, showing their affinity with the common people. Relations with Iraq, from where Turkey pumped a lot of oil at reasonable prices, were also developing well. An efficient propaganda maneuver, which raised the rating of the Turkish prime minister in the Arab world, was a quarrel with Israel in connection with the seizure by Israeli commandos in 2010 of the “Freedom Flotilla”, which was carrying humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, being in the grip of the Israeli blockade.

Later this act showed that in fact, this was a landmark gesture: it showed Erdogan’s preferences in favor of Muslim Brotherhood, ideologically close to him (the Hamas Group, ruling in Gaza since 2006, is part of this ‘brotherhood’). These actions were very favorably received in Washington, where it seemed, his advice became more and more valued.

(To be continued...)

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