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# A Turkish Sultan's formula: Erdogan masters successful but dangerous populist recipe to win again

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**Sreeram Sundar Chaulia**

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The victory of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey's presidential election is a milestone in the history of illiberal democracy. With this umpteenth win since he first came to power in 2003, Erdogan has reached a level of absolute control with few parallels in contemporary times.

WRITE



Having methodically chipped away at constitutional checks and balances and tightened his grip over all levers of the state, the Turkish strongman is a classic right-wing populist who has mastered the art of accumulating endless authority through a well-honed bag of tricks.

A combination of factors underpins the Erdogan phenomenon and its longevity. Firstly, the Turkish leader is an Islamist who has carefully cultivated and energised devout rural Turks from the Anatolian heartland by appealing to their deeply felt grievances of being discriminated against by secular urban elites since Mustafa Kemal Ataturk formed the Turkish republic in 1923.



The hoi polloi from the countryside had for generations felt marginalised by Ataturk and his successors' military dominated and Western oriented policies. Erdogan, who himself grew up as a discarded 'backward' slum dog in Istanbul, has structured incentives in every sphere of socio-economic policy making over the last 15 years to benefit



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these pious Turks and raise their levels of dignity and political participation.

His Justice and Development Party (AKP) counts on the fealty of these formerly oppressed sections of Turkish society who adore the populist Erdogan for his relentless crusade of revenge against secular forces. But culture wars of 'us' God-fearing common folk against 'them' deracinated pro-Western upper class aristocrats are not sufficient for Erdogan's machine to keep rolling over opponents election after election.

Under his rule, Turkey's per capita income tripled and broadened beyond the mega cities and oligarchs who once owned all levers of the economy. Reducing the number of Turks living below the poverty line from 23% to just 2% and expanding the middle class is no mean achievement for a president who experienced privation and rose from the gutters.

While the mixture of religious revivalism and economic service delivery explain much of why Erdogan has been such a colossus, there is a third and most controversial element behind his repeated triumphs at the ballot box – extreme social polarisation along ethnic and sectarian lines.

Contrary to his self-proclaimed status as a great unifier and defender of the rights of



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the global community of Muslims, Erdogan has launched vicious military campaigns and crackdowns against Turkey's Kurdish and Shia Alevi minorities with the instrumental goal of consolidating the 'nationalist' vote.

After 2011 he also enabled jihadist Sunni terrorists of various hues, including Islamic State, to assault the Shia regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria and fulfil Turkish nostalgia for the prestige of the Ottoman Empire which had colonised neighbouring Arabs for centuries. Once Erdogan's early garb of a moderate and 'zero problems' diplomacy fell, what Turkey beget was a basket full of problems and conflicts with countries in the Middle East and the West.

This aggressive majoritarian strategy has been used more devastatingly in Erdogan's later years as PM and president, especially when he is in danger of losing polls or facing internal obstacles. National unity has suffered irreparable loss because of his divide-and-rule game and Turkey has earned the hatred of adjoining Arab countries as a neo-imperial and meddling power.

But the new Sultan never cared for his plummeting international image and turned all the liberal criticism on its head, to convince his voting faithful there were myriad foreign conspiracies to sabotage



his restoration of lost Turkish glory. His legendary oratory filled his loyalists' hearts with so much hatred and disdain for all sorts of enemies that he himself cannot backtrack from the mode of perennial confrontation.

The journey of Erdogan holds a mirror to the political future of populists presently surging across the world. Populism sells not only via partisanship and rancour but also by promising uplift of the wretched of the earth. Populists who fail in economics cannot repeat Erdogan's magic. Populists who do deliver economic goods and sideline independent institutions will flourish, even if it means tearing apart social fabrics and setting back democracy.

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