

NATURAL DISASTER REVEALS POLITICAL DISASTER

By Yavuz B. Basaran

At 4:17 am local time on February 6th, two earthquakes hit the southern part of the country causing the greatest natural disasters of the Turkish Republic. A magnitude 7.8 earthquake followed hours later by a 7.5, has devastated cities and towns with and the lives of millions of people in 10 provinces across southeastern/south central Turkey and northern Syria. Combined with the already treacherous weather conditions as temperatures drop below freezing, death, destruction, and social turmoil has spread across an area roughly the distance between Washington D.C. and Long Island. As of Sunday February 12th, the official numbers from AFAD (The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency) cite over 30,000 deaths, 80,000 injuries, 400,000 left homeless, and at least 12,000 destroyed or uninhabitable buildings. The death toll is expected to rise significantly.

Turkey is predominantly situated on the Anatolian plate, which borders two major fault lines: the North Anatolian fault and the East Anatolian fault. Turkey has been the site of some of the deadliest earthquakes in recorded history, dating as far back as the second century. Natural disaster is a grim reality of the Turkish nation. The catastrophic occurrence of two large earthquakes on the same fault line, coupled with the harsh weather conditions, inadequate preparation, and an uncoordinated response has created a never-before-seen disaster in the country.

In fact, President Erdogan is very familiar with this reality. In 1999, the 7.6 earthquake that hit Izmit brought the Ecevit regime under serious scrutiny. The dysfunctional government, incompetent state institutions and widespread corruption became conspicuous with the slow response to the earthquake relief efforts. It marked the end of the Ecevit regime, allowing for the rise of an unlikely leader; Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP). The promises of Erdogan and the AKP were simple: a competent, transparent government, and as stated in the very name, economic and physical development. To this day, Erdogan has cited the development of infrastructure and state institutions as a clear success, even using it to taunt the opposition during election time with the well-known saying “they talk, AKP does”.

With the 2023 general election looming in June, Erdogan and the AKP are now on the opposite side of the spotlight. On the 100th year anniversary of the Turkish Republic, many Turks

will be going to the polls for what is the most important election of their lifetimes. The AKP and MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) forming the People's Alliance (*Cumhur Ittifaki*), will be facing the Nation Alliance (*Millet Ittifaki*); a 6-party coalition of opposition parties who have banded together under the anti-Erdogan umbrella.

The current earthquakes add another layer of complexity to the already challenging political landscape, as the crumbling economy, ineptitude of the centralized presidential system, and refugee crisis were on the forefront of the people's agenda. Now, there is a "new" concern with the country's capabilities to handle such a disaster. Especially considering the expected 7+ magnitude earthquake that will hit Istanbul in the near future, and the potential for such a disaster for over 95% of the population, it is likely that this event will be a significant factor in shaping public opinion and political discourse leading up to the election.

It is hard to delineate between government neglect and failure, and the reality that we as humans are helpless against mother nature when there is a disaster of such magnitude. It becomes easy to assign blame, and the poor millions look for a responsible party. However, in the case of Turkey, the role of corruption, neglect, and misrule is too evident.

Thousands of buildings have collapsed, many in ways unfathomable to even the everyday citizen. There are buildings that have completely toppled to the side from the foundation, illustrating the lack of any building standards, let alone the seismic building codes. There are entire apartment buildings that share walls with each other, some that are missing critical structural elements like columns or steel framing, and many more horrific discoveries are expected if the necessary investigations are conducted. Perhaps the most shocking example is the 12 story, 250-unit residence building constructed in 2013. The entire building, which was advertised as earthquake resistant and a "square from heaven", completely toppled over and became a mass grave for hundreds of people.

Following the 1999 earthquake, earthquake taxes were implemented across the country. Now, the Turkish public is questioning the whereabouts of those millions of dollars. Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the likely presidential candidate of the Nation Alliance, and leader of the main opposition party, the CHP, took to social media hours after the earthquake. He lashed out at the current administration; "They grease their cronies' palms with earthquake taxes. Where is that money? It's gone." (Translation taken from NPR, Rob Schmitz)

Erdogan and the AKP have relied heavily on large infrastructure projects to bolster its image as the party of “development”. Building new roads, bridges, nuclear power plants, and the infamous Istanbul airport, the AKP regime has often been cited as “*caliyor ama yapiyor*”, meaning they “steal, but they do.” Erdogan has not only effectively used these projects to deceive the public, but for years reaped the economic benefits. The goal has always been to save the day by fueling a corrupt, unregulated industry, and allowing an influx of funds to showcase a strong economy and truly developing nation.

The Istanbul Canal project, which already was a hot topic due to environmental concerns, will now likely hold a central place in the upcoming election. This massive project aims at building an artificial sea-level waterway connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Completely ignoring the many experts who have repeatedly warned that such a canal would put the city at greater risk from earthquakes. Erdogan has been deadset on completing this project. It will now be important to monitor his stance after this disaster.

Cited by many as one of the world’s most dynamic construction sectors, most projects are given to those in Erdogan’s close circle. It is impossible to walk around Istanbul without seeing the bulldozers or posters with the name BAYRAKTAR. From shopping centers to apartment homes, from nuclear plants to the notorious TB2 UAV- Bayraktar Construction is everywhere.

The current CEO, Selcuk Bayraktar, is Erdogan’s son-in-law. Utilities in the earthquake-stricken areas are operated privately by Cengiz Holding and Kolin Holding, two firms known globally for their close ties with Erdogan. Both firms were revealed to hold offshore accounts thanks to the Panama Papers. The inner-circle of Erdogan- whether it be family, friends, or merely those from the same town as him, enjoy extremely lucrative projects, with no oversight or regulation.

Perhaps one of the most shocking acts of Erdogan related to this disaster is the “zoning/construction forgiveness” process. Every couple of years, in different parts of Turkey, the government announces a forgiveness for construction sites built without permits or regulatory oversight. These illegal projects are sometimes an additional room to a house, or entire apartment buildings. Once the government announces forgiveness, these sites are given a deed, and formally registered, in return for a “tax.” There is predominantly no process to ensure these sites comply with any standards or regulations. In the simplest terms, illegal construction projects are given government approval for purchase. It is impossible to understand the reasoning behind

such a process, especially in an earthquake-ridden nation like Turkey. A recent speech by Erdogan from a few years ago has surfaced on social media and gained a lot of traction. Erdogan praises himself, saying he has resolved the concerns of 145,000 Kahramanmaras residents by providing such a forgiveness. Those residents who Erdogan was seeking votes from are now in the heart of the earthquake, and many are still under rubble.

The centralized, dictatorial “presidential” system that was adopted by Erdogan in 2018 has completely crippled state institutions. The governments lack of efficiency, coordination, and competency has been substantiated once again with the response to the disaster. The disarray amongst the federal government, local government, civil society organizations, and rescue teams is fueling the chaos, and exponentially increasing the number of deaths. The presence of civil society organizations and volunteers is incredible. There is international support from across the world like never before seen. Yet, the government’s own emergency response protocol only allows for the Interior Ministry to organize the efforts. The result is an overwhelmed and non-functioning response.

Such a centralized system where all roads lead to the head, Erdogan, calls for positions to be filled with loyalists instead of those who are qualified. AFAD, The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, leads all efforts in such natural disasters. The head of AFAD is Ismail Palakoglu. Palakoglu attended an Islamic high school and majored in theology at Ankara University. Prior to his role as head of AFAD, Palakoglu served as an executive in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. It is also valuable to note that AFAD’s budget is a fraction of the Ministry of Religious Affairs’.

Erdogan laid the foundations of this centralized system since his very first election in 2002. One of the most important steps was to cripple the Turkish army by taking away all autonomy and jurisdiction. Knowing the power of the army as the “gatekeepers of the constitution”, and fearing a coup for his future actions, Erdogan performed a massive purge of the armed forces, appointed his unqualified loyalists to these positions, and tied the military at the end of his very own leash.

How this relates to the current earthquake is the 2010 decision by Erdogan to rescind the EMASYA protocol. EMASYA enabled the military to respond to domestic crises such as natural disasters and internal security operations without waiting for the slow bureaucracy of the federal government. To put into perspective the effect of this act, there were 34,000 boots on the ground

within 2 hours of the 1999 Izmit Earthquake. On February 6th, 19 hours after the current earthquake, there were only 3,500 boots on the ground. This number was 6,200 on the second day, and 16,785 on the third. (Numbers from 1999 earthquake are cited Aytunc Erkin from Turkish Armed Forces archives. Current numbers provided by the Turkish Armed Forces and cited by Vice President Fuat Oktay.)

Knowing the possible impact this disaster may have on the current administration, Erdogan and the AKP have tried to act swiftly. Yet, the response has been slow and haphazard at best. Some of the responses have been catastrophic mistakes.

On February 8th, Erdogan went as far as shutting down access to Twitter, where so much of the rescue coordination was being done, for nearly an entire day. Since the night of the earthquake, this writer has woken up every single morning, and gone to bed every single night, scrolling through the hundreds of posts on Instagram and Twitter where people are crying for help, prompting to addresses where they hear voices from under the rubble. It is the incredible unity and support of the Turkish citizens and civil society organizations that is trying to compensate for the failures of the government, and these efforts are being blocked for the sake of protecting the image of a singular figure and regime.

Just today, this writer saw the headline that all universities have been closed down and will finish the remainder of the school year online. The university dorms will be opened to those impacted by the earthquake. Even though any effort to aid those impacted by the earthquake is morally hard to criticize, such a decision is hard to comprehend. When there are so many hotels, businesses, and government buildings such as Erdogan's 1,150 room palace, none are being offered as a resource, yet perhaps the most important institutions of the country are being shut down. As if the COVID pandemic was not enough, this generation of Turkish university students have been robbed of their most fundamental right.

Erdogan is known for his divisive rhetoric against any dissidents, which he attempted to conceal in his response to the earthquake. However, the Turkish people were shocked to hear that it was the municipalities that support the AKP which were honored with a phone call from the president.

On February 7th, Erdogan took to live television, where he delivered a diatribe against the opposition parties and any who dared question the government response or bring attention to the

horrors of the situation. The anger in his eyes was mirrored with his intimidating threats, as he warned that “when the day comes, we will open the notebook we have kept”.

The same day, the investigations and prosecutions of journalists who voiced public criticism began. Then Twitter was shut down. It seems that Erdogan has forgotten his campaign in 1999 where he visited the disaster tents with his wife, campaigning for his future election, fueling the unrest and questioning the absence of the government. It seems that when the roles are switched, even those whose lives are directly threatened by the government response, are deprived of their most basic right to ask, “where is the government?”

In conclusion, a 2020 tweet from Seyma, a young Turkish woman, after the earthquakes in Elazig and Izmir province, is a poignant testament to the Turkish people. “As someone who lives in an earthquake (ridden) country and high-risk province like Kahramanmaras, if we one day share the same faith as Elazig or Izmir, do not sugarcoat it and say I, my family, or anyone else became angels. Fight for our rights.”

Seyma died under the rubble of her home a few days ago.