How The West Lost Turkey
By James Rockas

Presidential elections this summer will mark the formal end of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s two decades atop the Turkish political establishment. The man has left an indelible mark on the country he leads, but such an impact has not been made without controversy. Much of that controversy stems from a dissonance between the Erdoğan we observe today and the one that so many people attached their hopes and dreams to as he first swept to power in 2002. The Liberal reforms and vibrant economy of his first years in power are now sadly juxtaposed with the last decade of authoritarianism and stagnation.

Upon his Justice and Development Party’s election in 2002, Erdoğan espoused a vision for Turkey that would see it accede to the European Union with all its requisite elements – Liberal democracy; a Liberalized economy; political pluralism; and ethno-religious equality – perhaps all a utopian farce, but one that seemed just within the Turks’ grasp as early as 2004. So what happened? Why did this crucial strategic country change course so drastically?

Perhaps it is the West that pushed Erdoğan down the path he took. Perhaps it is The West that lost Turkey.

Erdoğan is a man undoubtedly concerned with legacy. Massive and numerous public works projects, like bridges and undersea tunnels across the Bosporus, and like the mosque overlooking Istanbul that will be the world’s largest upon its completion next year, are some of the physical vestiges of his search for legacy. But Erdoğan has always wanted to also forge a legacy in the international sphere.

It seemed at first that his legacy would be as the man who completed Ataturk’s dream of bringing Turkey into the European fold while domestically reconciling that desire with modern standards of pluralism, tolerance, and perhaps even equality. His bid to make this the case was bolstered by economic and political stability after a decade of volatility that stripped the entrenched political establishment of its mandate and allowed the AKP to take power in the first place.

This consistent economic growth provided Erdoğan the support necessary to finally break the Turkish military’s decades-long political tutelage – a crucial step in democratic consolidation that has been the ongoing project of the Turkish body politic since Ataturk’s death.

But this end in tutelage coincided with Turkish faith in the EU accession process hitting rock bottom. And so, the promise of EU integration that had fueled economic growth for much of the decade had waned just as the unifying spectre of the military disappeared.
We must not blind ourselves to the fact that it was European rejection of the idea that a Muslim nation could be European that robbed Erdoğan of his international *raison d'état*. *This* was the inflection point that sent Turkey hurdling toward the turmoil Turkey would see just a few years later.

To fill the hole left by European rejection, Turkey’s new driving international policy was the “zero problems” with neighbors policy conceived by Ahmet Davutoğlu. Many saw this as an attempt at “Neo-Ottomanism,” or a reassertion of Turkish dominance over former imperial holdings – a legacy befitting Erdoğan’s narcissism.

This new era of energetic regional and then global diplomacy opened up new markets and invited foreign investment in what appeared to be one of the most stable economies in the region. Quickly, the financial world came to regard Turkey as one of the world’s most promising emerging markets.

Suddenly, however, Erdoğan was a man less concerned with Western ideals and with Western opinion in general. As Europe forced Turkey to look eastward, the yardstick for progress was no longer a European one, but an Asian and Middle Eastern one. Growth became king, driven by increasing but opaque regional trade and domestic infrastructure and real estate investment. The value of pluralism was lost and, predictably, discontent followed.

Erdoğan’s response to the Arab Spring, supporting failed transitions in Egypt and Syria, failed and drew criticism from an increasingly vocal civil society; the pace and manner of development drew criticism for its apparent corruption and disregard for those whom it negatively affected; and “Neo-Ottoman” policy itself stoked suspicions that Erdoğan wanted to impose theocracy as his government passed modest regulations on alcohol and he encouraged women to have more children.

Then came the Gezi protests.

Almost overnight, Erdoğan and Turkey’s international image as a model for Muslim Liberal democracy was decimated in a hail of pepper spray and tear gas as the harsh crackdown on protests drew criticism even from Erdoğan’s allies like US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen. In the following months, the Lira depreciated almost twenty percent, corruption scandals implicated Erdoğan, his family, and his closest advisors, and Gülen’s initial critique threw him and the Prime Minister into open conflict over everything from free press to private education to social media. In a bid to quiet criticism, Erdoğan imprisoned dozens of journalists, threatened news outlets, and blocked Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, all while proudly, not unlike his neighbors, claiming not to care what the West thinks.

Despite this turmoil and reactionary policy, Erdoğan maintained his hold on power. His core rural conservative constituencies that cared little about the complaints of Turkish liberals, nationalists, and urbanites remained steadfast while a dearth of credible opposition parties deprived moderates of any chance of success. The main opposition
party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), had an image that was hopelessly tarnished, ironically, by decades of exclusionary rule and brutal repression, while its attempts at rebranding failed.

Just more than a year after the Gezi protests, Turkey elected Erdoğan its President, and did so again five years later. In the intervening years, Erdoğan has maintained an almost Putin-esque control over the political establishment. The Turkish economy has predictably suffered, first from a credit crisis and then from drastic declines in entrepreneurship and foreign investment.

So where to go from here?

Erdoğan’s lasting positive impact is his integration of people of faith and ethnic and religious minorities into a more vibrant Turkish identity. He abolished the ban on headscarves. He brought an end to the guerilla war with the Kurds and allowed them to speak their own language freely. He returned seized properties to Christian minorities. He offered minority religious establishments legal identity. And perhaps most importantly, he helped dispel the idea that religion and minorities represent threats to the state and to Turkey itself.

This proves that, after decades of hardship and conflict, Turkey is a cosmopolitan society capable of accepting, and deserving of, a leader that can build bridges, rather than put up walls.

A nation like Turkey deserves more than strong man rule and opaque, exclusionary politics. Two decades later, Turkey must recapture the spirit of 2002 and begin anew the process of Liberal democratic reform started by Erdoğan. If a leader is able to capture this sentiment, Europe must be ready to overcome its Islamaphobia and give Turkey the respect it deserves. If it doesn’t, the West is doomed to lose Turkey yet again.