

International

Turkey President Erdogan ousts mayors to boost election hopes

Purge of local officials designed to shore up support

ISTANBUL: President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has in the recent weeks forced from office several of Turkey's big city mayors, in a purge of local officials designed to shore up support for his ruling party. In a fast-moving and sometimes ruthless chain of resignations, four top city mayors have stepped down at Erdogan's request, paying the price for the ruling party's somewhat lackluster performance in the April referendum on constitutional change.

Analysts say that after 15 years in power, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Erdogan is genuinely worried about its levels of support, ahead of a critical election year in 2019. "The dismissals of the mayors are for different reasons but it's all with the aim of improving the electoral position of the party," Ilter Turan, a professor of political science at Istanbul's Bilgi University said. "The party is in a quandary as to why it is losing votes. The erosion of support was evident in the referendum. "The president is trying to develop ways to turn the electoral tide around," he said.

'Impossible to do politics'

First to go was Kadir Topbas, the mayor of Istanbul, a job Erdogan himself used to hold. Next went Recep Altepe, the mayor of Bursa, Turkey's fourth largest city and a key industrial hub. After weeks of resistance, the third big mayor to fall on his sword was Melih Gokcek, in charge of Ankara since 1994 and an ineluctable presence on social media with sometimes mind-bending tweets including blaming western powers for earthquakes. "An order cuts through iron," said Gokcek, emphasizing he was only resigning because of Erdogan's wishes.

The latest big city mayor to resign was Ahmet Edip Ugur of the western city of Balikesir who stepped down on Monday with a lacerating farewell speech that shook Turkish politics to the core. Choking with emotion and cheered raucously by supporters, Ugur said his family had been threatened amid the pressure to resign and the situation "had got beyond toleration". "Unfortunately, it has become impossible to do politics within the AKP," he concluded. "I thank you all. Goodbye!" he said, sobbing. Erdogan denied there had been any threat made to Ugur and said he had been "saddened" by the outgoing mayor's comments, adding that no-one was "untouchable".

'Not proof of control'

The changes come after the 'no' vote came out on top in both Istanbul and Ankara in the April 16 referendum on expanding Erdogan's powers. While the 'yes' was victorious nationwide, the outcome in both the Turkish capital and the country's biggest city rang alarm bells for the AKP as the two very diverse cities are seen as a microcosm for Turkey as a whole. The resignations also follow a wide-ranging purge of Turkish society. Over 50,000 people have been arrested since last July, accused of links to the Gulen movement-which



ISTANBUL: People hold the detained leader of Pro Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) Selahattin Demirtas' book 'Seher', during a symbolic book signing yesterday in Istanbul. —AFP

Erdogan blames for last year's failed coup-while more than 140,000 public sector employees have been sacked or suspended.

The wider political context is also giving the AKP and Erdogan more than just food for thought. While growth has impressed and surprised at over five percent, the economy remains brittle with inflation nudging 10 percent and much of the activity upsurge based on cheap credit which may yet unwind. Analysts see growing frustration with the judicial and education systems while Kurdish support for the AKP could be dented by Ankara's staunch opposition to the Iraqi Kurdish independence poll and the jailing of Kurdish politicians in Turkey.

The AKP's political ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), is performing woefully and a dissident anti-Erdogan nationalist force led by the charismatic ex-minister Meral Aksener founded last month may represent a new threat. Marc Pierini, visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe and former EU ambassador to Turkey, said the situation was bleak for the AKP, with its alliance with the MHP shaky, some "muted dissidence" within the ruling party and the new Aksener faction risking eating into its votes. He said the "vast rejuvenation operation" at the top of the AKP was a "demonstration of force, but not necessarily proof of solid control."

'Snap polls possible'

The referendum paved the way for a double helping of presidential and parliamentary elections in November 2019 where Turkey will for the first time choose a president who will rule without a prime minister. These will be preceded by local elections in March 2019. Capturing Istanbul and Ankara from the AKP could give the opposition intensified momentum. —AFP

'Left everything behind'

Moulay Dadi, 72, served tea in a large traditional tent, a vestige of the Sahrawis' nomadic past, and cooler than the nearby family cottage with its zinc roof. He recalled his life back in his desert homeland herding the family's animals. He was 30 when the Moroccan forces arrived. "We fled and we left everything behind us, our animals, our property, the houses," he said. "We left everything behind us." He settled in Algeria's Tindouf region with his wife and parents, who did not live to see their homeland again. Some 100,000 Sahrawi refugees live today in the camps around Tindouf.

They belong to a mosaic of nomadic tribes who have for centuries plied the sandy expanses of the Sahara with their camels. The Dadi family's Boujdour camp, which, like the other camps, bears the name of an area of the Western Sahara controlled by Morocco, is dotted with brown-walled houses the color of the surrounding desert, one of the most inhospitable in the world. Their home consists of a large living room, a small dining room and a kitchen. The shower and toilets are in a separate building.

There is intermittent electricity and no running water. Trucks pass regularly to fill a large canvas water reservoir. Like the Dadis, many Sahrawis have set up traditional tents next to their houses in the camp, where life moves slowly. After the morning prayer, Selembouha Dadi and her mother, in her sixties, cook and clean. The youngest of the children, 12-year-old Mellah, goes to school. Some of her brothers work on building sites and the others are in the army of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Sahrawi refugees in Algeria live mostly on funds from exiled relatives in Europe and on international aid.

The European Union provides some, \$11.6 million (10 million euros) a year, despite the Polisario Front being accused of embezzlement in recent years. Some residents have set up small shops-groceries, bakeries, fruit and vegetable stalls-in the camps. Others work as officials for the SADR, which has its central administration in Rabouni, not far from Tindouf. Isolated for decades and largely forgotten by the world, many Sahrawis still believe that they will one day return to the lands of their ancestors. "We want our land whatever we find there," Selembouha said. —AFP

called soldiers," she told the Senate. But she warned: "Daesh's swansong will be accompanied by new clandestine terrorist acts, sometimes spectacular ones, and the group's online influence will absolutely endure."

She pointed to Africa's unstable Sahel region along the southern rim of the Sahara, as well as Yemen, Nigeria, the Levant and the Philippines as areas where "the cancer of blind hatred is still spreading". In Iraq, IS may have been drastically weakened, but "the military victory is not being accompanied by a political vision for after Daesh in terms of re-integrating the Arab and Sunni populations into politics," warned Jean-Pierre Filiu, a professor at Sciences Po university in Paris.

'From insurgents to terrorists'

In Syria, he said, "the prospects are even worse". "This absence of a long-term strategy leaves Daesh a lot of room for regrouping in the near future, while continuing to work its networks of supporters around the world." Analysts expect IS to revert to tactics it used in its earlier incarnation as the Al-Qaeda in Iraq insurgency of 2004 to 2008. In the coming months or years, they warn, it could potentially then re-emerge as a reinvigorated IS. —AFP

Refugees in Algeria yearn for homeland in Western Sahara

BOUJDOUR CAMP: Selembouha Dadi can only imagine the homeland she dreams of but has never seen, agonizingly out of reach beyond the Algerian refugee camp where she has spent her whole life. "They tell me it was beautiful," the 25-year-old said. The territory that Dadi yearns for is Western Sahara, a sprawling swathe of desert on Africa's Atlantic coast that has been disputed by Morocco and independence fighters from the Polisario Front for decades. Her father Moulay abandoned everything and fled 42 years ago when Moroccan troops arrived in 1975 during the rush to claim the former Spanish colony as Madrid let it go.

Now, along with tens of thousands of other refugees, their family of nine lives in one of a string of refugee camps just 50 kilometers away, beyond the Algerian border and a "defense wall" erected by Morocco in the 1980s. Morocco and Mauritania were meant to share Western Sahara when Spain relinquished control, but in 1976 the Polisario proclaimed the independence of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic-and was determined to fight for it.

Mauritania in 1979 gave up its claim, leaving Morocco to seize most of the 266,000 square kilometer territory, but it was not until 1991 that a UN-backed ceasefire came into force. Rabat considers Western Sahara an integral part of Morocco and proposes autonomy for the resource-rich territory, but the Algerian-backed Polisario Front insists on a United Nations-backed referendum on independence. The 2,700-kilometre barrier erected by Morocco slicing from north to south divides the 80 percent of Western Sahara controlled by Morocco from the 20 percent held by the Polisario.

Islamic State 'may survive' Deir Ezzor

PARIS: The Islamic State group may have just lost the last major city of its self-proclaimed "caliphate", but experts and officials warn this is far from being the jihadists' deathblow. Analysts say the Syrian army's recapture of Deir Ezzor announced Friday will push IS underground after losing territory once as large as Italy spanning the Iraq-Syrian border. The most widely predicted scenario is that the group will transform into a guerrilla force on the ground in Sunni areas remaining outside the full control of Baghdad and Damascus.

At the same time, its "cyber-caliphate" will continue to churn out jihadist propaganda of the kind that inspired Tuesday's deadly truck attack in New York. "Daesh is cornered," French Defense Minister Florence Parly said Tuesday, using an Arabic acronym for IS. "It has lost its two capitals. The final offensives are under way to annihilate this pseudo-caliphate and its so-

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