

The reconversion of the iconic Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque has undermined the secular credentials of Turkey

On 10 July, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan issued an official decree which declared the iconic monument of Hagia Sophia which is currently a museum to be reconverted into a mosque. This decree follows a ruling by a local Turkish court which declared 'illegal' the founder father of modern Turkey Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's decision to declare the Hagia Sophia as a museum in 1935.

Erosion of 'Kemalist' principles

Turkey's tryst with Islam is not new, the country was the bastion of Islam since the rise of the Ottoman Empire in the early 14th century which was proclaimed as the fourth caliphate. The 'caliphate' survived for over six hundred years and provided a sort of adhesive force for the Muslim community worldwide. The weakening and the subsequent dismantling and the abolishment of the Ottoman caliphate by the founder father of modern Turkey Mustafa 'Kemal' Ataturk came as a shock to the global Muslim community. Kemal Pasha was a modern and dynamic leader who was enamoured by western civilization. He transformed Turkey into a modern secular state committed to the principles of liberal and constitutional democracy.



Image source: Qantara

However fast forward to early 1990s, steady erosion of secular 'Kemalist' principles has been witnessed. Samuel P Huntington in his magnum opus '[Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order](#)' highlighted that politicians, particularly from the Islamist parties, began to make steady use of religious symbols to bolster their electoral prospects. The new Turkish premier is no exception in this regard he has sought to denounce the legacy of the founding father of Turkey and pave the way for the increasing Islamization of the country. 'Kemalism' as such seems to be on the wane.

Hidden Agenda?

There seems to a hidden agenda behind such a decision. Mr Erdogan's Islamist AK party's popularity has been on the wane. In 2019 the [AKP not only lost the provincial elections](#) but lost the prized seat of Istanbul, perceived as the financial and tourist capital of the Turkish nation-state. Further, the citizenry of Turkey have grown increasingly dissatisfied with the increasingly dictatorial tendencies of the incumbent president. He has assumed sweeping powers in the aftermath of a failed coup in 2016 allegedly carried out by US-based [Islamic preacher and scholar Fethullah Gulen](#).

Turkey's economy is also faltering. The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the

Turkish economy and has signalled a death knell for the tourist industry which contributes close to [12% of the Turkish GDP](#). The Turkish incursions in Syria codenamed Operation peace spring and spring shield have generated mixed views in Turkey. Turkey is also trying to resettle some of the 3.6 million refugees it is handling since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. This decision to reconvert the structure is primarily aimed at bolstering his support base among Mr Erdogan's core vote base and shore up his already declining reputation.



Image source: Avhal

Decision fraught with risks

The Hagia Sophia gamble may have adverse international repercussions. The UNESCO has already expressed concern that the decree undermines a pillar of promoting Islamic-Christian harmony. Turkey is already at loggerheads with its NATO partners who have been particularly miffed at Erdogan for having opened the country's borders which has unleashed hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees on European countries. The decision may also undermine Turkey's ties with Russia because the iconic monument was for over 900 years since its inception in the [6th century AD](#) served as a Greek Orthodox church, [Patriarch Kirill, the head of the eastern orthodox church](#) who is the head of the roughly 300 million orthodox Christians has expressed grave concern, he said that the monument belongs to all of

humanity.

It may give more ammunition to the rival states of Turkey to paint Erdogan as an Islamist and a tyrant committed to undermine the secularist credentials of Turkey and violate international law.

Conclusion

Turkey was perceived by Samuel P Huntington as a potentially suitable candidate for 'core state' which can provide stability to the Muslim world and act as a possible bridge between the Judeo-Christian and Islamic world. Although Erdogan's gamble may help him to garner his domestic vote base as a fallout of the decision, Turkey can be perceived by the international community as a pariah state which no longer conforms to the principles of constitutional democracy which may have adverse consequences. Nevertheless, it does signal a new turn in Turkish politics.

CERTIFICATE COURSE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

SIX-WEEK ONLINE COURSE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS BY THE KOOTNEETI

JOIN TODAY!

team@thekootneeti.com
courses.thekootneeti.in
(+91) 120 4565994

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Kootneeti Team

Facebook Comments