Modi and Erdogan: Birds of a Feather – From Opposite Sides of a Religious Divide

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Key Points

- Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have much in common despite their different religious backgrounds: Hindu and Muslim.

- Both India and Turkey are constitutionally secular states.

- Both leaders are committed to nationalist political views, as evidenced by the outcomes by which they define their approaches: the Ayodhya site awarded to Hindu diehards and the Hagia Sophia’s status as a world heritage museum returned that of a mosque.

- Both states have adopted majoritarianism – a traditional political agenda that supports a majority population as being entitled to primacy in a nation and the nation’s decision-making.

- The leaders’ nationalist ideals may empower further change.

Summary

As background, in May 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won an outright majority of seats in India’s Parliament, led by new Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Similarly, in 2003, a new Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was elected in Turkey. He served until 2014 before being elected President that year.

The Prime Minister and President have much in common, despite coming from different sides of a religious divide. Modi has professed life-long support for Hindutva (Hinduisation),
the nationalist commitment of his party, while Erdogan’s Islamist background saw him also promoting populist policies. Both have questionable political pasts: Modi, as Chief Minister in Gujarat, was tardy in officially preventing a massacre of Muslims in 2002. Erdogan was briefly imprisoned in 1994, when Mayor of Istanbul, for inciting religious hatred.

This paper draws attention to parallels between Modi and Erdogan across their religious divide, with reference to other populist leaders, and an examination of key changes they have made in their constitutionally secular states, that demonstrate that their countries’ legacy inherited from earlier leaderships has been substantially undermined.

The religiously backed changes in India and Turkey, represented by the awarding of the disputed Ayodhya site to Hindus and the return of the Hagia Sophia museum to a mosque are discussed with references to broader accounts of these events.

Analysis

The Indian Supreme Court’s judgement on 9 November 2019 that a Ram Temple had existed at the Ayodhya site in Uttar Pradesh before the Moghul building, the Babri Masjid Mosque – the culmination of periods of dispute since the sixteenth century – was closely reminiscent of the announcement that Turkey’s highest administrative court had revoked Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia’s classification as a museum, allowing its conversion back to a mosque, made by Turkey’s President Recep Erdogan on 10 July 2020.
Both India and Turkey are constitutionally secular states with no official religion and, in their current leaders’ actions have rejected, in India’s case Gandhi’s and Nehru’s legacy, and Atatürk’s in the case of Turkey.

Modi has a long history of involvement with organisations committed to a nationalist, religious and traditionalist view of India’s future. As a child he attended Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) drill meetings and as a young adult became a full-time RSS activist. Before the RSS was banned after the destruction of the mosque on the contested Ayodhya site in 1992, Modi had joined the BJP which also advocates Hindutva.

Bringing forward the case on ownership of the site at the start of his second term, the Supreme Court of India returned its verdict in favour of Hindu original ownership within six months of Modi’s re-election as Prime Minister, in May 2019.

While disputes by right-wing Hindu parties and their supporters occurred from time to time over the years with varying results, the ramping up of the dispute in the late-1980s that led to the unlawful demolition of the mosque in 1992 by Hindu “volunteers”, known as kar sevaks, led to an unsuccessful damages case in 2011 but, after some months of hearings by the Supreme Court in 2019, it came to a verdict in favour of the Hindu plaintiff, “Ram Lalla”, the infant form of the god Lord Ram, considered a “juristic person” in Indian law and a proxy for right-wing Hindus. The arguments, ‘on a preponderance of probabilities’, but with no substantial evidence, won the day.

While the claims and counter-arguments about original possession of the site are embedded in the Supreme Court’s judgement, the ruling that Hindus may now build a temple where the Babri Mosque stood until 1992, meets the intention expressed in Modi’s Election Manifesto barely six months before the judgement.
Erdogan, like Modi, is a traditional politician. Both grew up in religious nationalist movements with, in Erdogan’s case, little respect for what other countries or leaders think. His decision to re-convert the Hagia Sophia to a mosque had legal support in a court decision that its conversion to a museum by Ataturk in 1935 was illegal. The result has been the removal of a world cultural heritage site from its international ‘pan-religious status’ as a museum, in a rise of Islamic fundamentalism, amid global fears that its secular status of ‘artistic and architectural significance for the whole world’ will be lost.

Erdogan, as an authoritarian politician, has overseen the abolition of the office of Prime Minister and, as President, granted himself new powers to appoint his Cabinet and regulate ministries, without parliamentary approval. He can also make rulings on a raft of other issues, although parliament retains some powers.

Modi has pushed his Hinduisation barrow in other directions since his re-election, revoking the constitutional autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, India’s only Muslim-majority state, establishing new citizenship laws that discriminate against Muslims, and trialling a National Register of Citizens in Assam that has revealed the diversity of “illegal migrants”, denied citizenship. A similar nation-wide register is planned.

There are other interesting parallels between the leaders.

Both states have adopted majoritarianism – a traditional political agenda that supports a majority population, however categorised, as being entitled to primacy in a nation and the nation’s decision-making. Both men are strong right-wing leaders giving expression to nationalism and populism. Erdogan has also overseen a raft of reforms to grant him new powers at a time when each needs to shore up their voter bases, as both countries are in similarly precarious economic positions.

They are not alone in embracing nationalist positions. Trump’s “America First”, for example, has constant expression, Orban has militarised Hungary against “enemies” that include Muslim migrants, Brazil’s Bolsonaro is also pro-arms and an admirer of dictatorship, while Duterte is the authoritarian president of the Philippines.

There is another interesting parallel between Modi and Erdogan: both leaders were raised in economically disadvantaged circumstances; Modi in a small town, Vadnagar in Gujarat, and Erdogan, in a poor part of Istanbul. As children, both earned a childhood living by selling drinks, respectively tea and lemonade, on the streets. Both have been associated with religious groups since their early youth.

Where To From Here?

The Indian Supreme Court’s finding on Modi’s appeal, that Hindus may build a temple where the Babri Mosque stood until 1992 (albeit with a compensatory parcel of land for Muslims to re-build on) is beyond further dispute, governed as it is by the Indian Constitution.

This decision places another key step in Modi’s nationalist agenda within reach – campaigns to topple greater or lesser Muslim monuments that may proceed at any time, perhaps
ending up under the umbrella of the Supreme Court’s overarching power – all adding to a Hindu India.

On a different track, but arguably in parallel, Turkey has treated the Hagia Sophia as state property – asserting, as Erdogan did, that this was his state’s national right – where next might he assert that nationalist right?

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About the Author: Dr Auriol Weigold is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Faculty of Business, Government and Law at the University of Canberra. She has been a Fellow and Honorary Fellow at the Australian Prime Ministers Centre at Old Parliament House, Canberra, between 2010 and 2015, publishing on Australian and Indian prime ministerial relationships. In 2016, she spent a period as a Guest Scholar at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies at Shimla. Previously, she was Convenor of the BA International Studies at the University of Canberra, an Editor in the Faculty of Arts and Design and for the University of Canberra’s Personal History Project, and has been an Editor of the South Asia Masala weblog, hosted by the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University. In 2008, she published her first book: Churchill, Roosevelt and India: Propaganda during World War II. Since then, she has co-edited and contributed to two further books. Her research interests include the Australia-India bilateral relationship, India’s energy and security needs, and Indo-British relations in the 1940s.

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