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Erdoğan's 'human rights action plan': Much ado about nothing

	
	



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In what may be seen as pomp and circumstance, President Erdoğan revealed his government's much anticipated "human rights action plan" yesterday, on March 2. In a nutshell, the pages and pages long text, with headlines like "11 principles, 9 objectives, 50 goals and 393 activities.." offers nothing more than a storm in a teacup. Those who were patient enough to listen through the verbiage Erdoğan performed in his trademark "loud and confident" mood, were left, at the end, with the same question marks, doubts and concerns as ever before.

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In some circles at home and abroad, expectations were high, that the current regime had finally grasped the gravity of the systematic human rights abuses and the crippled state of the judiciary. It was Erdoğan and his team who had raised the stakes for weeks that a massive reform - in the justice system and economy - was underway, but the effect of the delivery was not only an anti-climax, but also raised fresh suspicions about a "frame up" with the EU and a new play to win more time with the Council of Europe - possibly involving some cynical European political actors. Experts - if they find any substantial reason - will certainly go into the details of the so-called "plan", but a careful enough reading in the jungle of platitudes (such as "every human is born free..." etc) shows only some timid steps. The text pledges that the maximum time to complete interrogations will be no more than 24 hours; arrests in the middle of the night will be discontinued; the students and civil servants will be free in their religious holidays; there will be tax reductions for defence lawyers; and the trial processes will be sped up. At best, the so-called "plan" contains some cosmetic changes, to cover up smoke and mirrors.

The details aside, the verdict about Erdoğan's text is clear and simple: his so-called "human rights action plan" seems prepared on the premise that it avoids confronting the fundamental reasons and causes of the deep judicial crisis his administration is responsible for. Instead, it seems focused on watering down the cruel effects of his oppressive policies and only speeding up the proceedings in the judicial system - for long subordinated to his Palace - without changing anything fundamental within it. He also delivered strong enough signals on his determination to discriminate against those he sees as his foes, such as Kurds and Gulenists. "We will not water every flower we see. While watering a flower with its head bent means justice, watering a thorn means cruelty" he said, implying a

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As Erdoğan's read-out went on, other events showed clearly the irony of the situation. Almost simultaneously, in the same hours, news broke out that the Chief Prosecutor's office of The Court of Cassation had launched an inquiry for eventual closure of the pro-Kurdish party, the HDP. Soon after, an AKP deputy declared that "we shall shut down this divisive party". In the same morning, there were also agency notices of mass arrests of people, allegedly belonging to "FETÖ", an acronym for the Gülen Movement. In Parliament, there is high tension. Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu, a deputy of the HDP and a staunch human rights defender, is about to lose his immunity - due to what many see as yet another travesty of justice - and risks being deported to prison for two and a half years. It is also imminent that Parliament handles the cases of "lifting immunities" of 33 deputies, 28 of which are of the HDP.

No wonder why the so-called "plan" impressed nobody, except pro-government pundits. Turkey ranks "not free" in Freedom House index, and is placed as 154th among 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders media freedom survey in 2020. And even more gravely, there are at least 50 thousand of people, defined as "political prisoners", according to Human Rights Watch, in the country. The latest letter by the U.S. Congress, addressed to Anthony Blinken, Secretary of State, mentions 80 thousand as jailed since the botched coup in 2016.

"This is a country where tens of thousands of people are jailed under terrorism laws who should never have been jailed, or should not even be prosecuted," said Emma Sinclair-Webb, Turkey Director for Human Rights Watch. Until such prisoners are released and "bogus" charges for dissenting opinion are dropped, "no human rights action plan is going to be more than the paper it is written on," she told Reuters. "Just saying the courts are going to be more independent won't make them more independent."

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Erdoğan is suffering deeply from a "crisis of confidence" with his counterparts across the democratic world. Under such circumstances, if he were sincere and serious with his "plan", a concrete step would have been expected to add meaning to it. The Turkish Justice Ministry, in sync with the "plan" could - or should - have declared an immediate moratorium in the actions - such as stopping arbitrary arrests, releasing dissidents in pre-trial detention and, declaring that Ankara will abide by the ECtHR rulings on Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş and free them along with the 71-year old author, Ahmet Altan. It fell gravely short of that - feeding further mistrust.

Now, probably we will hear a lot of "deeds, not words" type of reactions from Turkey's concerned allies and EU circles. But therein lies another suspicion, often covered with hush-hush. Is it that the sheer declaration of the so-called "plan" is a part of a frame-up with some of the EU and CoE circles? There are strong clues and signs that it is. A week or so before the announcement of the plan, Erdoğan spoke at length with Angela Merkel, whom he - after the departure of his good friend Donald Trump - seems to see as his "saviour" from the upcoming storm with the Biden Administration. There is no doubt that Berlin demanded that "something, at least on paper, should be done". During his read-out Erdoğan did not hide that some "changes" were done in order to negotiate visa-free travel for Turkish citizens into Europe. Yesterday, Mevlut Çavuşoğlu, the Foreign Minister, said that much in the "plan" was done in consultation with EU circles.

What does all this mean? First of all, all talk about "visa free travel" is empty-rhetoric, waffling. Both sides know it is not possible. According to Metropoll, a reliable pollster in Ankara, those who want to emigrate from Turkey has risen (as of February) to 47.3 %. The youngsters, between the age of 18-30 , who want to leave

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center-left think tank, SODEV. A study by Yeditepe University last autumn gives that rate as high as 76.4 %. So, the EU is fully aware of the consequences of the "visa-free travel", which consequently will remain only as a tool to lure the voters into false hopes.

But the second part is even more worrisome. If there is any "frame-up" between Erdoğan and his "friends" in Berlin, Strasbourg - and Madrid - what we may see soon will be the following: as the CoE and the EU prepare for their respective top meetings this month, with Turkey as part of the agenda - a lot of noise around "but folks, look, there are positive developments in Turkey!" will be taking a top position.

There are already "pro-positive agenda" lobbies in action in Turkey and Europe (as Mr Josep Borrell, EU's Foreign Policy Czar seems to be a voluntary part of) pretending that most things are normal in Turkey, and human rights abuses are only tiny exceptions. On an institutional level, within the CoE and EU Commission, on the other hand, we are bound to see some action, as if this "plan" is indeed serious enough, so that some "experts" will be busy for days and weeks to "study" it.

All this may be expected to happen and should not come as a surprise, with a cynical "Turkey game" on stage, as we shall witness further harrassment of the HDP, possibly a closure case, and dissidents doomed to stay in prisons, with continued arrests, often accompanied by torture. This is the real promise of Erdoğan's "human rights action plan" - a shrewd move to gain time and move on.

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