



# THE TURKISH GOLD

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Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is the architect of Yeni Türkiye, the "new Turkey". In the city of Istanbul, a growing number of pharaonic projects have been underway since the 2000s. In some districts skyscrapers multiply. Shopping malls are becoming part of daily life. Gated communities are exacerbating spatial segregation. Rapid urbanisation is changing the features of entire neighbourhoods. Because of the aggressive neoliberal policies of the Turkish government, society, especially in the larger cities, is fragmented by barriers, not only architectural, representing the new normal life. The opposition wasn't able to hinder the hyper-urbanisation carried out by Erdoğan in the last twenty years. Even if, in part, nowadays Ekrem İmamoğlu's political success could be considered as a revenge of environmentalism against the Akp physical changes that have affected metropolis. This situation is affecting not only cities but also the citizens with a dramatic increase of the middle class and the gap between rich and poor people. All this is 'Turkey's gold', strongly desired by Erdoğan, that today could stop shining under a harsh economic and pandemic crisis.

It's recently news that one of downtown Istanbul's last remaining green spaces, Marmara University's campus in high-brow Nişantaşı district, was rezoned to allow construction despite the protest of locals. Not only the main cities: the locals of the Aegean district of



Akyaka have recently launched mass efforts to petition against the expansion of commercial construction by sixfold. Moreover, the Lake Salda Protection Association petitioned UNESCO to dub Turkey's Maldives a "natural heritage site" in an attempt to protect the natural water source from construction by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The physical changes in the country go hand in hand with the widening of the social gap, which is clearly visible in the big cities. A survey currently conducted with 2000 of the poorest families in Turkey's largest city indicates that they face grueling living conditions exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic that has resulted in malnutrition.

The Erdoğan government has built its political hegemony through urban transformation projects, especially in the economical capital of the country. Many pharaonic projects in Istanbul have already implemented, others magnificent ones are still open. Some of them are blocked due to the economic crisis. Turkey's Urbanization and Environment Minister Murat Kurum has said that the government will proceed with the controversial Kanal Istanbul project as planned. The project aims to connect the Black Sea north of Istanbul with the Marmara Sea to the South and is estimated to cost \$11.6 billion. The project, which was effectively on hold after a currency crisis in 2018 drove the economy into recession, came back on the agenda in December of 2019, leading to heated exchanges between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Istanbul's new Mayor. Ekrem İmamoğlu has emerged as the project's chief opponent, warning it will cost too much and wreak environmental havoc. Istanbul's rapid growth and its lack of green space are a major public concern. The canal is the latest in a series of massive construction projects fueled by cheap foreign credit that drove a mostly booming economy under Erdogan's 17-year rule.

Certainly, the result of the last administrative elections was a heavy setback for the Turkish presidency because it concerns the internal system that he himself has created since he has been in power. But It would be a mistake to think that İmamoğlu's victory could, in the



short term, undermine the power of the president. The Turkish leader strictly controls the major levers of power: from the judiciary to the police, from the economy to services, to the armed forces. Nowadays the hard economic crisis and the ongoing pandemic pushed Erdoğan to adopt strong solutions of immediate impact. Only after four months in office, Tayyip Erdoğan fired Governor Naci Agbal, who was appointed in November, and gave the job to Sahap Kavcioglu. Erdoğan is openly averse to high interest rates, claiming high rates cause inflation, which stands in opposition to mainstream economic theory. He has pressured the central bank to keep rates low to fuel borrowing and growth. Critics say the independence of the central bank has been severely damaged through political pressure.

To have an idea of the grandeur and modernity flaunted by the Turkish president, we just have to consider the presidential palace. Turkey's presidency spent some 3.92 billion liras in 2019, Vice President Fuat Oktay said. Meanwhile, the presidency's budget proposal for 2021 totaled 4.39 billion liras. The presidential palace is, for all intents and purposes, part of the urban changes and the over-ambitious projects that the Islamist pro-conservative government has brought to the country over the last decades. A revolution that has changed the political and social dynamics, reshaped the forces of opposition to the Islamist government, triggered new forms of protest, brought new urban movements in defense of public space and above all brought the country to the brink, at the mercy of a financial storm that has brought Turkey's economy to its knees. In the meantime, his popularity has fallen due to his authoritarianism and power grabbing.

A new scenario is thus opening in the country in which the Turkish president will have to reconsider many of his strategies - both in the economic, political and communication fields - to protect 'Turkey's gold': his greatest creation and more ambitious project.