

The Conflict within Turkey's Islamic Camp

Ömer Taşpınar*



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The roots of the conflict between Turkey's moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and the Gülen movement go back to the 1970s. Yet it is only in the last couple of years that the rift has gained unprecedented domestic and international media coverage. This is hardly surprising. Until recently the AKP and the Gülen movement shared a common enemy. The *raison d'être* of the Gülen-AKP alliance was the need for both groups to protect themselves against the staunchly secularist military, which considered both groups an existential threat to Kemalism, the official ideology of the Republic named after the founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

With support from the Gülenists, the AKP considerably reduced the role and power of the army. The scope of Gülenist influence over the Turkish judiciary is probably real, as became clear during the Ergenekon investigation. The investigation targeted a network composed of active duty and retired military personnel, ultra-nationalist extremists, political activists and organized crime figures – a conglomeration often referred to as the “deep state” – all united by the desire to bring an end to the rule of the AKP and its ally, Gülen, in order to preserve the Kemalist nature of the republic. According to the Ergenekon trial, the network had hatched a plot to overthrow the government. The net effect of the Ergenekon investigation was the emasculation of the Turkish military.

Wielding its influence in the judiciary and intelligence services, the Gülen movement used its clout during the Ergenekon affair. Yet what started as a legitimate

attempt to arrest coup plotters rapidly turned into a witch-hunt against all enemies of the AKP and the Gülen movement. Instead of targeting only people involved in the conspiracy, the prosecutors, often presumed to be Gülenists, had warrants issued for the arrests of people who appeared hostile to the Gülen community – not only military officers but also journalists, academics, civil society activists and bureaucrats. The politicization of the Ergenekon investigation earned the Gülen movement international criticism. In time, it also began to undermine relations between the Gülenists and the AKP, with the Prime Minister showing signs that he wanted to reach a less confrontational *modus vivendi* with the military.¹

Although the AKP and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan strongly supported the Ergenekon investigation from the outset, once the military was sidelined, the AKP-Gülen rift re-emerged. At the broader level, the AKP circles appeared increasingly annoyed and concerned that the executive branch's decision-making power had come to be challenged by the growing influence and presence of the Gülen's community on all levels of the bureaucratic structure, particularly the police, judiciary, and public education system. In many ways the AKP began to see the Gülen network as a “state within a state.”

1 For a detailed and highly critical analysis of the Ergenekon investigation see Gareth H. Jenkins, “Between Fact and Fantasy: Turkey's Ergenekon Investigation”, in *Silk Road Papers*, August 2009, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/0908Ergenekon.pdf>.

* Ömer Taşpınar is a nonresident senior fellow at Brookings, a professor at the US National War College and an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.

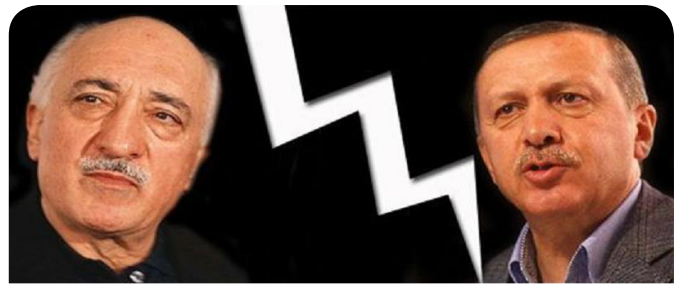
The Roots of the Conflict

The rift between the Gülen movement and the AKP has deep historical and ideological roots. At the ideological level, the most important divergence is their approach to Islam. The AKP stems from the Muslim Brotherhood tradition. The Muslim Brotherhood is a “political Islam”-oriented movement that wants to come into power in order to change the governing system. It prioritizes the brotherhood of the “umma” in the classical Islamic sense, as a universal community of believers. The concept of the nation-state is rejected by the Muslim Brotherhood because it is seen as divisive and tribalist, in addition to being a relatively modern Western invention. The predecessor of the AKP was the Welfare Party, under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan. The ideological tradition of Erbakan was known as the “Milli Görüş” movement, which followed the same precepts of classical political Islam, in the footsteps of Arab Islamist theorists like Sayyid Qutb and Hassan Al Banna in Egypt.

The Gülenists, however, come from a Sufi and Turkish brand of Islam that is not against the nation-state. To the contrary, it embraces Turkish nationalism and shows great respect for the Ottoman/Turkish state tradition. This patriotic and nationalist brand of Sufi Islam embraced by the Gülen movement has considerable disdain for the Arab world’s Muslim Brotherhood tradition. The roots of the Gülen movement go back to Said Nursi (1878-1960), a preacher from Eastern Anatolia whose teachings (the Nurcu movement) emphasized the compatibility of Islam with rationalism, science and positivism.²

Fetullah Gülen’s vision of promoting such an approach to Islam led him to focus on education. The real struggle had to take place not in the political arena but in civil society, by trying to win hearts and minds. This is why the Gülen movement began investing in modern schools that would educate students in line with positive sciences and the modern world but also with great admiration for the Islamic philosophy of Said Nursi and Fetullah Gülen. In time these schools began the main export of the Gülen movement, which expanded beyond Turkey into Central Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the United States, where Gülen now resides in self-exile. Gülen decided to leave Turkey in 1999 mainly because he felt threatened by the staunchly secular Turkish military.

2 Nursi’s main contribution to Islam was a 6,000-page commentary written during his lifetime on the Koran. This body of work is known as the *Risale-i Nur* (the Light Collection), and it advocates the teaching of modern sciences in religious schools as the way of the future for an Islamic age of enlightenment. The Nurcu movement of Said Nursi, in time, has become the most popular brand of Sufism in Turkey. The moderate, pragmatic, patriotic, and harmonious approach to Turkishness, nationalism and positivism also enabled the Nurcu movement to develop a less confrontational approach to secularism and Atatürk.



It is important to analyze the perception of threat by the Turkish military vis-à-vis the Gülen movement. It is eventually this perception that led to a marriage of convenience between the AKP and the Gülenists. In the eyes of generals, the Welfare Party’s brand of political Islam was a concrete and identifiable phenomenon. The Welfare Party, after all, was not a social movement but a political party with a political project. It was controllable because it was out in the open and it clearly promoted an Islamic agenda. The Gülenists, on the other hand, represented a very different kind of threat because of their long-term social, cultural and educational strategy. There was a generational project. The Gülenists claimed to be above politics. Yet the graduates of Gülen-affiliated schools often entered public service in key government institutions. In the eyes of the army, this amounted to a secret agenda of political infiltration and represented an existential threat to the Kemalist/secular foundations of the Republic.

As Bayram Balci puts it: “After emerging from Gülen’s schools, many of these elites have assumed key positions within the Turkish administration. Gülen’s disciples are influential in key institutional bureaucracies and the media. Many hold important positions in the state apparatus, the judiciary, the educational system, and key sectors of the Turkish economy. While the movement’s representatives do not deny the presence of sympathizers within state structures, they insist that this is not the result of any strategy to infiltrate the state apparatus and instead point to the fact that these educated individuals have reached high ranks in the civil service thanks to their work ethic and perseverance.”³

The Implications of the AKP/Gülen Rift for Turkish Democracy

The tension between the two former allies peaked in early 2012, when an Istanbul prosecutor summoned Turkey’s top intelligence chief, a high-level confidant of Mr. Erdoğan, to question him about his covert negotiations with Kurdish militants. Erdoğan saw the prosecutor’s move as a personal attack by the Gülen movement and

3 Bayram Balci, “Turkey’s Gülen Movement: Between Social Activism and Politics”, in *Carnegie Articles*, 24 October 2013, <http://ceip.org/1vNNKEZ>.

initiated a purge within the police and the judiciary, demoting suspected members of the movement. The clash escalated when Erdoğan decided to target the educational institutions of the movement by announcing that private prep schools for high school students would be shut down. Many of these schools are a major source of recruitment and revenue for the movement. It is widely assumed that the movement then responded by unleashing a corruption investigation against the AKP.⁴ In short, once the military was subdued, the alliance between Erdoğan and the followers of Gülen began falling apart.

Erdoğan responded to the corruption investigation by launching an all-out war against the Gülen movement. His policies included sacking the prosecutors involved in the corruption investigation, reassigning hundreds of police chiefs, and rewriting laws in ways that would allow government control over the judiciary and corruption probes. After the resignation of four implicated ministers, he reshuffled half of his cabinet. In addition to the total number of 96 prosecutors and judges that were replaced, the government decided to push through draconian new laws giving it more control over the judiciary, and tightening monitoring of telephones and the Internet. The new legislation also enhanced government control over the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors, which is responsible for judicial functions and the appointments of judges, and thus severely undermined the separation between the executive and judiciary branches.

As the corruption probe swirled around his government and his family, Erdoğan returned to the familiar tactic of blaming his problems on a vast international plot, part of an orchestrated effort to weaken Turkey. Partly because Gülen lives in the US and has been critical of Turkey's confrontations with Israel, Erdoğan hinted that corruption allegations were the result of attempts by Israel and the United States to frame his party members. He even

threatened to expel the US ambassador on the grounds that he held meetings with opposition figures. Although such conspiracies do not travel well outside government circles, Erdoğan remains popular in Turkey. His party won the local elections in March with a larger margin than expected, and Erdoğan was elected to the presidency in August with more than 51 percent of the votes. Yet the way the AKP handled the corruption investigation has also exposed Erdoğan's authoritarian tendencies, his personalized system of strongman leadership, and, more importantly, the weakness of Turkey's liberal democratic institutions.

Over the last 10 years Erdoğan's chief accomplishment has been to establish the supremacy of civilian rule in Turkey. After 40 years in which the military ousted four governments, Turkish democracy no longer operates at gunpoint. Yet, an unexpected byproduct of the current rift between the AKP and the Gülen movement involves the potential return of the military tutelage system, as an embattled Erdoğan now seems increasingly willing to forge an unholy alliance with the Turkish army against the Gülen movement. The clearest evidence of this came when Erdoğan's top political advisor suggested that the military was framed by the same Gülenist prosecutors who launched the corruption probe against the government. This statement called into question the whole legitimacy of the Ergenekon trial. Not surprisingly, in the last few months almost all of the officers implicated in coup-plotting have been released. Such a development potentially paves the road for a return of the generals as powerful actors who may want vengeance. Although another military intervention in Turkey seems far-fetched, the country now looks increasingly unstable and polarized. It is no longer possible to rule out a scenario in which the generals would make their presence felt. They would probably do so not only by exploiting the division within the Islamic camp, but also by raising their voice on issues related to the Kurdish question in the country.

4 On 17 December 2013 the police arrested around 50 people on the grounds of tender fixing, influence peddling, bribery and covert gold transfers to Iran. The arrested included the sons of three cabinet ministers, an AKP mayor, and the general manager of Turkey's second biggest state lender Halkbank, in whose home police found 4.5m dollars crammed into shoeboxes. Soon it became clear that the probe drew closer to Erdoğan. A couple of days after the first wave of arrests, prosecutors ordered a second raid that would have involved Erdoğan's son and the CEOs of major construction companies that received recent government contracts.