

The Islamist Feud behind Turkey's Turmoil

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay/), [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](/experts/james-jeffrey/)

Dec 30, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay/)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



[James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](/experts/james-jeffrey/)

Ambassador is a former U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq; from 2013-2018 he was the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He currently chairs the Wilson Center's Middle East Program.



Articles & Testimony

Prime Minister Erdogan's increasingly autocratic rule has alienated the Gulen movement.

The news last week about a corruption scandal in Turkey seems on the surface a traditional case of prosecutors ferreting out wrongdoers in high places. But the turmoil that threatens Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government has been a long time coming and is the most public manifestation of a struggle between Turkey's two main Islamic-conservative factions hitherto united under the governing party: the prime minister's Justice and Development Party, known as AKP, and the influential, popular Gulen movement.

The past year has already been challenging for Mr. Erdogan. Demonstrations that began in May grew out of anger over plans to develop Istanbul's Gezi Park and were a liberal affair, challenging the prime minister's increasingly autocratic rule. The Gezi Park occupants would seem to have little in common with the Gulen movement, an opaque, Sufi-inspired group known for its Islamic piety and, until recently, its support for Mr. Erdogan. But the Gezi and Gulen movements are now de facto, if not actual, partners with similar aims: resisting Mr. Erdogan's near-total power.

The country's longest-serving prime minister since it became a democracy in 1950, Mr. Erdogan runs Turkey almost single-handedly. He has built a broad political coalition to win three successive elections with ever-increasing majorities. His coalition has included Islamists, nationalists, center-right voters and pro-business liberals. Mr. Erdogan has sway over the executive and legislative branches of government, as well as much of the media and

business community. His rule first worried secular liberal opponents but has now alarmed even the Gulenists.

The Gulen movement traces its roots to the 1970s, when founder and Islamic scholar Fethullah Gulen, now 72, began attracting followers. The Gulen message promoting a conservative yet relatively modern form of Islam has made inroads in Turkey. Some estimates of the movement's size run as high as five million supporters, though others peg it considerably lower, as little as under a million people.

The movement has its own media, universities, schools, think tanks and businesses; followers can also be found in the police and judiciary. With its widespread appeal and Islamic credentials, the movement appears to be the last remaining obstacle to Mr. Erdogan's consolidation of power.

The Erdogan administration became alarmed by the movement's growing power last year when prosecutors connected to it attempted to subpoena the head of Turkey's intelligence agency -- Hakan Fidan, a close confidant of Mr. Erdogan. The prime minister blocked this move by passing new legislation. But he saw it as a warning and responded by trying to close the Gulenists' powerful network of private prep schools.

The Gulenist pushback came quickly, with the movement's newspapers beginning to editorialize against Mr. Erdogan, who then postponed the move against the schools. On Dec. 12, prosecutors known to be close to the Gulen movement pressed corruption charges against prominent members of Mr. Erdogan's cabinet. With this move, the Gulenists, who have several supporters in key judiciary positions, presented an even more direct challenge to Mr. Erdogan's 12-year rule than anyone has before.

The corruption allegations have led so far to the resignation of three cabinet ministers, followed last week by the biggest cabinet reshuffle in the AKP since 2002. Mr. Erdogan has also fired hundreds of pro-Gulenist police chiefs, as well as, on Thursday, removing the key prosecutor, Muammer Akkas, from the graft case.

All of this is merely a prelude to what promises to be an even more high-stakes battle: the Istanbul mayoral election in March. The Istanbul race has always been closely contested between the AKP and the secular, leftist opposition Republican People's Party, which has a viable, populist candidate in Mustafa Sarigul. The Gulenists are unlikely to vote en masse for a liberal candidate. But simply by not voting the movement could tilt the election to the Republican People's Party, and thus show definitively that it is a powerful check against Mr. Erdogan.

If Mr. Erdogan's party wins in Istanbul, the prime minister would likely be emboldened to seek a popular referendum to blend the powers of the presidency and the prime minister's office ahead of elections in the summer. Mr. Erdogan would then run for the newly omnipotent executive presidency. If he won, he would become the most dominant political figure in modern Turkish history.

What happens in March has the potential to determine Turkey's democratic trajectory. This poses a major challenge for the U.S., raising thorny questions about the future of America's alliance with Turkey.

The threat to bilateral relations has been exacerbated by the remarkably explicit attacks on the U.S. by prominent AKP officials and pro-government media, which have accused America of being behind the corruption probes. Other allegations include an assertion that U.S. Embassy staffers have conspired with Turkish nongovernmental organizations to try to oust the AKP government. Last week, Mr. Erdogan publicly complained that the corruption investigation is a foreign plot. And he made matters even more precarious on Dec. 21 by suggesting that the American ambassador, Francis J. Ricciardone Jr., a stellar diplomat, leave the country -- the first such incident in living memory.

The stakes -- given Turkey's size, economy, military strength and strategic location -- are huge, and American influence is limited. The U.S. must play a careful game, avoiding the limelight, and focus on maintaining Turkey's basic Western, democratic, free-market orientation. This means not overreacting publicly to what are likely to be

new provocations.

But privately, the U.S. should make clear to audiences inside and outside Turkey that, while not taking sides in the country's current domestic disputes, America's ability to assist Turkey diplomatically, economically and within NATO hinges on Turks resolving these matters in a democratic fashion that preserves the rule of law.

Soner Cagaptay, the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, is author of the forthcoming book [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-century's-first-muslim-power) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-century's-first-muslim-power>). Ambassador James F. Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Wall Street Journal

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)