

Turkey's High-Stakes Power Struggle

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Turkey's military has staged coups before, but never one like this week's: by resigning, they created a power gap that destabilizes the government -- and shows how much the country needs them.

The Turkish military has carried out many coups, some by force and others by decree. But never before has the military done what it did on Friday, staging an "inverted coup" not by stepping into politics but by stepping out of its job, through a strike-style walkout by its top leadership.

On Friday, Chief of Staff General Isik Kosaner resigned, as did the heads of the Turkish Army, Navy and Air Force. Never before have so many top commanders of the Turkish military walked out together.

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a coalition of conservatives, reformed Islamists and Islamists, came to power in Turkey in 2002, relations between the AKP and the military have been tense. But thus far, the military has played along. By staging a walkout at the leadership level, the Turkish Army has finally told the AKP, "We are done playing with you. Set up your own team -- if you can."

The dilemma for the AKP is that this may not be possible. All Turkish military officers undergo the same training, with the same discipline, commitment to secularism, and subsequent opposition to the AKP. It will be difficult for the AKP to find supportive officials in the military's top ranks.

This leaves Turkey with two options. It could operate with a headless military, a risk in a country flanked by Iran, Iraq, and Syria, the last of which is undergoing revolutionary turmoil on the other side of a 500 mile-long border.

The other option would be an agreement by which the AKP and the military decide to cohabitate.

In this regard, the big issue is the Ergenekon case.

In 2007, the AKP launched a court case, known as Ergenekon, which alleged a coup plot against the government and accused the military of involvement.

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Four years and hundreds of arrests later, the case has yet to reach a verdict. Yet, the military has borne the brunt of these arrests: Around half of all Turkish admirals have been jailed. The final straw came this week, when pro-AKP media suggested that 14 active-duty generals and admirals who had been arrested, though not yet indicted in connection with the Ergenekon case, would not only be bypassed in their promotions but also forced to resign. Furthermore, only yesterday, the police arrested 22 additional top-brass officers, blocking their likely promotion.

By walking out, the military has in a way conceded defeat to the AKP. Yet, at the same time, the military hopes to force the party to give in. After all, the government needs a military, and a secular military is currently its only option. To use collective bargaining terminology, while the military can afford to "strike" against the government, the AKP cannot afford to "lock out" the army.

If the military plays its hand well, it can get what it wants, persuading the AKP to make the Ergenekon case a tool with which to prosecute likely criminals rather than as an instrument of persecution against the Turkish military.

However, the military's strategy may backfire. Lately, Turkey has seen a rise in terror attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). On July 14, the PKK killed 13 Turkish troops. If the group tries to benefit from the current instability, the military would be seen as "striking" when it is most needed. The military may have contingency plans to avoid this: the commander of the gendarmerie, responsible for fighting the PKK, did not resign, taking over the chief of staff office immediately after the resignations of his peers.

Yet, the AKP does not have a history of backing down; rather, the party typically veers slightly to avoid direct collisions. Now, however, the AKP is on a direct collision course with the military. Turkey's stability hinges on the success of collective bargaining: The AKP and the military must agree that although they hate one another, they cannot do without each other.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the [Turkish Research Program \(/template102.php?](#)

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