

Republic of Fear

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Articles & Testimony

Last week's arrests in Turkey of dozens of high-ranking military officers mark the country's latest step toward authoritarianism. Neither Europe nor the United States can afford to ignore Turkey's transformation.

Since coming to power in 2002, the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party, or AKP, and the ultra-conservative Fethullah Gulen Movement have gained significant leverage over the police and media. Emulating Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, the AKP has made selective use of the legal code to effectively silence the country's two largest independent media groups.

Dogan, which owns about half of the media outlets in the country, faces a record \$3.5 billion fine on delayed tax payments. Liberal media mogul Mehmet Emin Karamehmet has been sentenced to 12 years in jail on charges related to dealings at his bank for which he was earlier acquitted. Editors now think twice before running stories critical of the government.

Until recently, the judiciary and the military were able to keep government excesses in check. That apparent equilibrium between Islamists and secularists was shattered a few weeks ago, when Gulenist papers published a 5,000-page memo allegedly written by military officers planning a coup.

U.S. diplomats I have talked to and Turkish analysts say that if the military really had planned to overthrow the government, it would have hardly written it down in a detailed 5,000 page document. The idea that the military would bomb Istanbul's historic mosques and shoot down its own planes to precipitate such a coup -- as the alleged memo describes -- is simply outlandish. The military denies any plans for toppling the government and says much of the document is actually taken from a 2003 war game exercise. It says that the incriminating elements detailing the alleged coup were added to the document.

For the past two years, the Turkish military has been the target of illegal wiretaps and accusations that it is plotting against the government. The question is whether the military will tolerate the assault or strike back, as it has done in the past when it thought the secular nature of the state was threatened.

The Islamist government has also targeted Turkey's other secular bastion -- the judiciary.

Last month, a Gulenist prosecutor arrested a secular prosecutor in Erzincan. He was officially charged with belonging to an ultranationalist gang known as Ergenekon, which the Gulenists and AKP claim is trying to overthrow the government. Whether that's true or not, there is no doubt the arrest solved a lot of problems for the government. Before his arrest, the Erzincan prosecutor was investigating alleged connections between Gulenist fund raising and Chechen and Hamas terrorists. He was also looking into the armed activities of Ismailaga, a radical Islamist movement.

The Gulenists and the AKP are further targeting the courts by appointing a disproportionate number of Gulenist jurists, thus eroding the secular nature of the judiciary. And the courts seem to have been wiretapped as well. According to media reports, the police have bugged over 130 top judges and prosecutors, as well as the high court of appeals. This is not that hard to believe, given that the justice minister admitted in 2009 that the police have wiretapped 70,000 people.

What is the way forward for Turkey? A military coup isn't the answer and a court ban against the AKP would likely backfire, boosting the party's popularity. The next general elections are scheduled for 2011, but by that time the cards might be stacked too much in favor of the governing parties. That's why the West should press for elections that are free and democratic. The next elections won't be fair if the Turkish media are not independent and if Turks fear that they live in a police state that wiretaps its judiciary and citizens.

It is good that Turkey's military is finally becoming like that of a European country. But if Turkey is to have a European-style military, then it also has to have European-style freedoms for Turkish democracy to function.

Hoping to win Ankara's support for tougher Iran sanctions and more troops in Afghanistan, the U.S. and Europe have so far been hesitant to criticize the AKP-led government. The "pragmatists" fail to realize that an illiberal and Islamist Turkey will be increasingly opposed to Western policies.

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