

Who Lost Ergenekon: The View from Washington

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Articles & Testimony

When the Ergenekon case started in 2007 based on allegations of a coup plot against the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government, Washington agreed: "this is serious stuff." Three years, two hundred arrests, hundreds of house raids and wiretaps and a 5,800-page indictment later, with no verdict in sight, Washington now asks with a skeptical eye: "What is all this about?"

From the corridors of the government of the United States to the meeting rooms of the K Street lobby firms, opinion-makers have moved from supporting the Ergenekon case to questioning its legitimacy. Many who believed in 2007 that Ergenekon would put coup allegations to rest and make Turkey a fully-fledged liberal democracy are now much more skeptical of such claims. Some are even saying that they see Ergenekon as a tool with which the AKP is cracking down on the opposition.

Why the shifting views on Ergenekon? The shift happened not because analysts wrote reports, highlighting the lack of due process in the case -- people arrested have languished in jail for years before seeing their indictment. Rather, the shift has come about gradually because of two people the case has targeted: Professor Turkan Saylan, a respected physician renowned for her efforts to promote education for poor girls; and General Ergin Saygun, former deputy chief of staff of the Turkish military and one of NATO's most respected generals. In the U.S. capital, the treatment of these two prominent Turkish citizens has come to embody everything that is wrong with Ergenekon.

Ms. Saylan, a 73-year old terminally-ill cancer patient who founded Turkey's most prominent non-governmental organization promoting girls' education, had her house searched by the police in an early morning raid in April 2008. The police are only supposed to use such early morning raids if they have reason to believe the suspect will flee. Instead, the police seized Ms. Saylan from her deathbed, searching her house for evidence of her alleged involvement in a coup plot. Nothing was found in the house and no charges were pressed against Ms. Saylan, but liberal Turks opposing the AKP were collectively intimidated by the incident. If that was the purpose for such an act, the mission was accomplished. Ms. Saylan died a month after the raid.

Washington reacted to Ms. Saylan's arrest with dismay and confusion. That the Ergenekon prosecutors targeted Turkey's foremost educator on her deathbed was not lost on D.C. Many began to question the true intentions behind the case, recognizing that the actions taken against Ms. Saylan had little to do with making Turkey more democratic. Those looking to encourage liberal democratic reforms in Turkey came to realize that the case instead serves the AKP government and its allies, giving them a pseudo-legal pretext to harass liberal voices in the country.

Ms. Saylan's arrest was Ergenekon's first major strike out in Washington. The second came last week, when the police took Gen. Saygun into custody. Gen. Saygun is one of the most popular Turkish officers in Washington, and one of the most respected at the Pentagon. Through his service in NATO, he developed a working relationship with practically all U.S. generals and gained a positive reputation in D.C. as one of the finest officers in the alliance.

Thus, when Gen. Saygun was arrested for supposedly taking part in the Ergenekon conspiracy -- a conspiracy which, according to the prosecutor's indictment, is allegedly "carrying out Islamist and Marxist attacks to overthrow the government," Washington and the Pentagon were shocked and bewildered.

That such accusations could be used as a pretext to arrest one of NATO's top commanders during an ongoing military engagement in Afghanistan convinced many people of the potentially sinister motives underlying Ergenekon. Other opinion-makers concluded that rather than making Turkey more democratic, the Ergenekon case is serving the government and its ultraconservative allies in the police to intimidate the secular Turkish military. At a time when the need for Turkish military support in NATO engagements has never been greater, this has understandably caused great concern.

In the busy world of Washington, few may be familiar with the intimate details of Ergenekon, but all can recognize that the treatment of Professor Saylan and Gen. Saygun indicate that something is fundamentally wrong. Saylan and Saygun have become keywords in the U.S. capital for the Ergenekon case -- keywords that suggest incredulity, undue legal process and persecution of liberal and secular Turks.

Who lost Ergenekon in Washington? Blame those who persecuted Professor Saylan and Gen. Saygun, not those who debate the merits of the case. Not that there is anything wrong about debating an ongoing case, but when the Turkish government targets decorated officers and the terminally ill, the critics don't need to say anything for people to recognize that something is wrong with Ergenekon.

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