

Endangered Democracy

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Articles & Testimony

All bets are off in Turkey. Its Islamist ruling coalition faces the secular courts and the military in a final showdown for Turkey's soul. In the balance hangs Turkey's immediate future. Will it move closer to the liberal democracies or away from them?

Turkish politics have been riven by tension since the nation was founded as a secular state by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. But the last two weeks have been unusually strained even by Turkish standards. The ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, and its allies in the Fethullah Gulen Movement, known as Gulenists, have been deploying friendly police agents to wiretap and arrest top military officials on coup charges. Gulenist prosecutors, furthermore, have been arresting their secular counterparts who were investigating Gulen's fundraising networks and its connections to terrorists in Chechnya and Hamas. The question is whether the military and judiciary -- the pillars of Ataturk's secular system -- will fight back by force or find a peaceful way out.

From the moment the AKP rose to power in 2002, Turkey has witnessed a low-intensity conflict between this moderate Islamist party and its secular institutions, topped by the courts and the military. But the conflict has become more intense recently as the AKP has grown closer to the power-hungry Gulenists, who have been working to infiltrate and subvert secular institutions.

Last week, police, who are almost certainly linked to Gulen, arrested 49 military officers, including active-duty admirals and former commanders of the Turkish Navy and Air Force and charged them with authoring a 5,000-page memorandum containing Turkish military plans to bomb Istanbul's historic mosques and shoot down its own planes to justify a coup. The absurdity of the charge was lost on no one.

Why would coup plotters create a massive paper trail to expose their own plot? "If the Turkish military was going to do a coup, they would not be writing a 5,000-page memo about it," a former U.S. ambassador to Turkey told me. Still, Turkey is convulsed by the coup rumors and denials.

The coup frenzy erupted just three days after an Islamist newspaper published a leaked wiretap of the military chief of staff, saying the military had been infiltrated. Though under Turkish law it is illegal both to wiretap without a court order and to publish such a wiretap, prosecutors made no move to investigate, suggesting a tacit official approval of any attack on the military.

The force behind this campaign is the Gulen Movement, which wields influence over the police and its domestic intelligence branch. The Gulenists did not take credit for this wiretap, but in recent years many wiretaps of the military have been leaked, always appearing first in pro-Gulen media.

This campaign could become the final battle for control of Turkey. In the 1990s, the military purged Islamist members and Gulenists from its ranks, which pushed the movement's founder to move to the United States, where he still resides today. But by the turn of the millennium, the Gulenists were making a formidable comeback by reestablishing themselves in the country's bureaucracy as well as setting up public relations outfits in the West.

In 2002 they threw their weight behind the AKP in the historic election that brought the Islamists to power, and in return, the AKP appointed Gulenists to prominent positions in the judiciary and the police. Today Gulen controls key positions in the government, several think tanks, banks, NGOs, business lobby groups and the media -- every secular institution except the military. Now Gulen is pressing the Turkish military to agree to its terms: "Stop kicking our guys out and we will agree to a ceasefire."

One possible outcome is the demoralized Turkish military will simply fold by agreeing not to kick out Islamists and therefore gradually shedding its secular identity. Another just-as-likely outcome is the military will respond to the Gulenist provocations by launching the coup -- God forbid -- it has been accused of plotting. This would destroy the military's standing as a defender of democracy and give a huge boost to the popularity of the AKP, slipping lately due to massive unemployment and failed efforts to pacify Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, terrorists. Turkish voters would flock to the unarmed underdog.

The courts face a similar dilemma. When Ataturk set up Turkey as a European-style republic, he built a secular judiciary to sustain the system. In 2008 the courts launched a case attempting to shut down the AKP on the grounds it had become a focus of anti-secular activities by following policies to ensure the supremacy of religion over education, government and politics. That failed case only helped the popularity of the AKP, and the party has become increasingly authoritarian since, dismissing checks and balances and pressing tax and criminal cases against the owners of secular and liberal media companies. But today, as in 2008, any judicial effort to shut down an elected ruling party is still likely to backfire and make it more popular.

The only way to avoid these potential outcomes is through new elections, which would inject fresh air into Turkey's democracy and might even benefit all sides. Though the AKP may not win as handsomely as it did in the past with solid majorities, the party is still reaping the benefits of coup allegations. Also, the AKP can prove wrong its massing critics, who say it does not believe in democracy, by showing its commitment to democracy and calling for early elections. Escalating the conflict further might lead to a catastrophe for all, even precipitating a military intervention -- God forbid -- and terminating the AKP. The next elections are scheduled for 2011. To push through the country's political bottleneck, the Turks should pass judgment on their country's soul in the polls now. Tomorrow may be too late.

*A different version of this article appeared in Newsweek on February 26, 2010.

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