

## Turkey's Turning Point

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Articles & Testimony

**T**urkey's Islamist ruling coalition faces the courts and military in a showdown for the nation's future. Will Turkey move closer to the liberal democracies or away from them?

This tension has riven Turkey since its founding as a secular state by Ataturk. But the strains are peaking now. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its ultraconservative allies in the Fethullah Gulen Movement, known as Gulenists, have been deploying friendly police agents to wiretap and arrest top military officers on coup charges. Gulenists prosecutors are arresting secular prosecutors who were investigating fundraising networks run by the movement and its connections to terrorists in Chechnya and Hamas. The question is whether the AKP will provoke the military and judiciary -- the pillars of Ataturk's secular system -- to fight back or will it find a peaceful way out?

From the moment the AKP rose to power in 2002, Turkey has witnessed low-intensity conflict between this moderate Islamist party and the secular institutions, topped by the courts and the military. The conflict is intensifying as the AKP grows closer to the power-hungry Gulenists, who are working to infiltrate the secular institutions. Last week police, 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 warning that the Turkish military planned 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. "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 coup rumors and denials.

The coup frenzy erupted just three days after a jihadist newspaper published a leaked wiretap of the Army chief of staff, saying that the military has been infiltrated. Though under Turkish law it is illegal to wiretap without a court order and or to publish such a wiretap, prosecutors made no move to investigate, suggesting tacit official approval of attacks on the military. Gulen 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 members of Islamist movements and Gulenists from its ranks, which pushed the movement's founder to move to the United States, where he still resides. But by 2000, the Gulenists were making a comeback, by reestablishing themselves in the bureaucracy and setting up public relations outfits in the West. In 2002 they backed the AKP in the election that brought the Islamists to power, and in return the AKP appointed Gulenists to key posts in every secular institution, from the courts to business lobbies and media, except the military. Now Gulen's pressure on the military is designed to crack the last secular bastion. One possible outcome is that the demoralized military will fold, accepting Islamists in its ranks, and losing its identity. Or the military may respond to Gulen provocations by launching the coup -- God forbid -- that it stands accused of plotting. This would destroy the military's standing as a defender of democracy and boost the popularity of the AKP, slipping due to massive unemployment and failed efforts to pacify Kurdish terrorists. Turks would flock to the underdog.

The courts face a similar dilemma. Ataturk built a secular judiciary to defend his European-style republic. In 2008 the courts launched a case attempting to shut down the AKP on the grounds that it was forcing religious control on secular institutions, and lost. That attempt only increased the popularity of the AKP, which has become increasingly authoritarian since, dismissing checks and balances and pressing tax and criminal cases against liberal media tycoons. Any new judicial effort to shut down an elected ruling party is likely to backfire, too.

The only way out is for the AKP to call new elections, which would help silence critics who say it is ruling with an increasingly authoritarian and Islamist hand. Even though the AKP is not likely to win as handsomely as it did the last time, new elections would defuse the coup rumors, and give the power to decide Turkey's future where it belongs. With the voters.

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