

Behind Turkey's Witch Hunt

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Articles & Testimony

In which country does a liberal woman who educates poor girls worry about her safety when she goes home at night? Pakistan, Afghanistan -- right -- but also add Turkey now. In an early-morning raid on April 13, Turkish police arrested more than a dozen middle-aged liberal women working for the Society for Contemporary Life (CYDD), a nongovernmental organization that provides educational scholarships to poor teenage girls. The arrests were part of the Ergenekon court case, in which police have arrested hundreds of people, including Army officers, opponents of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, renowned journalists, artists and now these women, charging them with plotting to overthrow the government.

When the case opened in 2007, AKP watchers saw it as an opportunity for Turkey to clean up corruption, such as security officials' involvement in the criminal underworld. But the case is much more than that. It is a tool for the AKP to curb freedoms, and more than anything else illustrates the power of the Gulen tarikat (Islamic order) that now controls the Turkish police and, you guessed it, educational scholarships for the poor.

The Gulen tarikat emerged in Turkey in the 1970s under the charismatic leadership of Fethullah Gulen, a respected imam. While tarikats serve as brotherhoods of solidarity much like orders in the Roman Catholic Church, the Gulen tarikat suggests blending conservative Muslim values with a modern lifestyle. Most Turks have a sinister view of the spiritual message of this tarikat that I do not share. Thanks to missionary and volunteer work, the Gulen tarikat obtained social and political power globally over the decades. It has business lobbying groups and think tanks in Washington and Brussels, owns universities, banks, TV networks and newspapers around the world, and operates schools in which more than 2 million students receive education, many with full scholarships.

The tarikat gained political power in Turkey in the 1990s through its support of various political parties. In return, it gained appointments to key positions in the police and Education Ministry. Its growing power was checked in 1997 when the Turkish military issued a declaration against the then-ruling Islamist Welfare Party (RP) warning that its policies violated Turkey's secular Constitution. Ensuing demonstrations and a media campaign brought down that government. Soon after, the Turkish courts filed a case against Gulen, alleging he was trying to take over Turkey by asking his followers to "move in the arteries of the system without anyone noticing your existence until you reach all the power centers." Gulen left Turkey, settling in the United States.

When the AKP, established out of the RP's ashes, came to power in 2002, the Gulen tarikat experienced a revival. It supported the AKP; in return, its members received government contracts and took charge of the police and its domestic intelligence arm. The recent arrests demonstrate the power of the Gulen tarikat: the police wiretapped liberal women, and only later asked the prosecutor to arrest them. They were questioned for days, and released without charges. Their police files, testimonies and details from their private lives were leaked to Gulen tarikat-owned media. These media described the women as members of a terrorist group and cast the CYDD's president, Turkan Saylan, in a negative light for having been born to a mother of Christian-Swiss origins -- a bothersome spin given that the Gulen tarikat's rhetoric promotes interfaith dialogue.

Saylan, a 74-year-old cancer patient undergoing chemotherapy, was questioned and many CYDD members have

since been released, but the damage to their reputations and their work in secular education is done. The case has become a show trial, helping the AKP and the Gulen tarikat pressure the liberals and tarnish their reputations. On April 26, Turkey's justice minister said that police intelligence listens to the private conversations of 70,000 people; almost one in every 1,000 Turks lives under police scrutiny today. In the United States, that ratio is one in 137,000.

The Ergenekon case has become a witch hunt. If you have doubts, call a friend in Turkey and ask for an opinion of the case. Your friend will respond with details of the weather. The last time people were afraid to discuss a public court case in the West was during the McCarthy trials in the U.S. Though it is in accession talks with the European Union, Turkey is devolving into a similar state of fear. Sad as it is, there is a way out of this conundrum if the AKP turns Ergenekon into a case that targets only criminals, and the Gulen tarikat lets go of its control over the Turkish police and truly becomes a spiritual movement.

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