

Turkey's Secret Power Brokers

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Articles & Testimony

Conspiracy theories have been popular in the former Ottoman Empire ever since the 19th century, when Turkey became a pawn in Great Power games. But even by that standard, the current stories swirling around Istanbul and Ankara take the cake. Tales of a sinister "Deep State" (Derin Devlet) have surfaced in a recent court case alleging that underneath Turkey's modern democracy lies a powerful but invisible security and bureaucratic establishment that is plotting to undermine the elected government.

The charges have arisen in a case known as Ergenekon. According to government prosecutors, the Deep State, identified as a group of judges, journalists, union leaders, artists and retired military officers, were plotting a coup against the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP). The court papers say these secular nationalists were also, implausibly, planning Islamist, Marxist and pro-Kurdish terror attacks -- all at the same time. In any other Western society, such incoherent accusations would be dismissed as fantasy. In Turkey, they've gained traction, for the simple reason that the country has long had a dominant security clique. Yet what the current rumors miss is that that power base has been broken up in recent years. Today it's the Islamists who are pulling the strings.

The old Deep State surfaced at various times in Turkey's history, stepping in to remove elected governments that strayed too far from the secular legacy of Kemal Ataturk, modern Turkey's founder. The sometimes corrupt and cozy links built by this establishment came to light most spectacularly in 1996, when an unlikely foursome -- a politician, a police chief, a beauty queen and a drug lord -- got into a car accident. Only the politician survived, and the ensuing embarrassing press coverage allowed Turkey's increasingly robust middle class to push back against this corrupt elite that had long limited their freedoms.

The Deep State was further weakened by the European Union accession process, which began soon after. In 1999, the EU decided to consider Turkey's candidacy -- but only if Ankara improved civil liberties, weakened the military's role in politics and consolidated the country's democracy. Then, in 2002, the AKP came to power. At first it seemed to abandon its Islamist roots and embrace EU accession in order to win liberal support. Many Turkish democrats hoped the AKP would eliminate the Deep State once and for all and threw their support behind the party.

Yet in the seven years since, rather than get rid of the shadowy power brokers, the AKP has used cases like Ergenekon -- which seems to have involved a genuine plot to overthrow the government -- to attack Turkey's secular judges, media, its military and practically any political opponents. The police have taken more than 100 supposed plotters into custody, including not just underworld figures, but also journalists, military officers, businesspeople, judges and academics. Political opponents of the AKP have been pulled out of bed in the early morning hours, only to be released after three days of harsh police questioning. Unsurprisingly, many of these "suspects" have subsequently become much more docile.

Lest there be any doubt about the absurdity of some of the government's claims, consider: the Ergenekon case is based in part on the testimony of one Tuncay Guney, who claims to be a former Turkish intelligence officer now living in exile in Canada -- where he says he's become a Hasidic rabbi. Never mind the fact that the Toronto Jewish community says Guney is neither a rabbi nor even Jewish; his assumed identity fits neatly into the anti-Semitism of

Turkey's Islamists, who like to portray Jews as a nefarious influence in their country. Some of the allegations are also wildly contradictory. For example, prosecutors claim that Ergenekon plotters were backed by Washington. Yet they also say they planned to attack NATO installations in Turkey.

The tragedy here is that the AKP is not just using Ergenekon to rid Turkey of the old Deep State, but to intimidate its legitimate opposition ahead of nationwide local elections on March 29. As the last elections suggested, more than half the population still opposes the AKP, but many are now afraid to speak out due to signs that the government is monitoring its enemies. Journalists critical of the government have had embarrassing personal conversations leaked to pro-AKP media, and the police have recorded more than 1.5 million phone calls and e-mails in the Ergenekon case alone.

Such signs suggest that the AKP has replaced the old Deep State with a new one of its own. While still using the ghost of the previous establishment to conduct a witch hunt, now the Islamists are pulling the levers of power. The Deep State may have once functioned to intimidate communists and Islamists, but today it is used against secular, liberal and nationalist Turks in order to crush dissent. Turkey's progressives must be heartbroken. They hoped that political modernization and the AKP would finally rid their state of conspiracy theories and shadowy powers behind the throne. But such a change would have required a liberal party at the country's helm.

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