

Turkey's Way Out

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In Turkey's current political crisis, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been trying to compel Turkey's democrats and friends to choose between two evils: his own government's corruption and efforts to create an unaccountable one-party state, and an opaque and unaccountable "parallel state," which is allegedly formed by the followers of Fethullah Gulen's globally organized faith-based movement. This is a false choice. Turkey can and should be a fully lawful and democratic state free from both types of authoritarianism-cum-corruption. Erdogan is also presenting himself and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) as the guarantors of economic growth and regional peace with the Kurds, even though his own actions are destabilizing the economy and only a truly democratic government can deliver lasting peace with the Kurds. But given the ongoing confusion and weakness of the opposition parties, there is no easy way out. This is exactly a moment when Turkey's western allies and particularly the European Union can make a positive difference in the country's fate if they take the right steps. That is, if they genuinely want a stable and Western-democratic Turkey and if they want to avoid the opposite.

What is the current crisis about? For years, Erdogan and his AKP vehemently denied the existence of a Gulenist parallel state. Critics claimed that Gulen's followers — especially but not exclusively within the judiciary and police — were using illegal means such as fabricated evidence in order to prosecute military officers and dissident intellectuals accused of planning to overthrow the AKP government. However, Erdogan and Gulen silenced these critics by accusing them of defending military coups — even though many of these critics shared the goal of eliminating military tutelage over Turkish politics and were merely criticizing the way this

goal was being pursued — prioritizing secularism over democracy, and holding grudges against the AKP, pious Muslims, and faith-based politics.

The same Erdogan now argues that Turkey's democrats and Western allies should overlook massive corruption charges against his government and family because, he claims, Gulen's parallel state is making these accusations. He also maintains that his unlawful and authoritarian actions aimed at thwarting the prosecutions and at suppressing public dissent should be tolerated because he is fighting a greater evil, which is a Gulenist coup against his government. According to Erdogan and his supporters, Gulen is trying to stage such a coup with the assistance of the United States, other Western powers, and Israel, which want to topple his government and destabilize Turkey because they are threatened by mega projects such as a third airport for Istanbul.

But the one-party state that Erdogan is trying to build by constantly increasing his powerful grip on the judiciary, media, civil society, and the Internet threatens Turkish democracy as much as Gulen's ostensible parallel state. The corruption allegations — which apparently resulted from two-year-long investigations and wiretappings — became public on December 17, 2013. Since then, Erdogan has removed from their posts more than 2,000 police officers and the prosecutors heading the investigations, and publicly vilified the latter based on accusations in the pro-government media. Reportedly, government orders prevented the police from executing court orders to arrest or interrogate a list of suspects that included Erdogan's son. Though he has shown some openness to discuss an alternative bill with the opposition, Erdogan seems determined to reign over the judiciary and has introduced legislation that would practically bring the judiciary under total government control and would make it impossible to prosecute any government members. The AKP has also proposed new laws that would increase already heavy government censorship of the Internet and would, among other things, authorize government agents immune from prosecution to keep records of the online activities of every

Turkish citizen for two years. These pieces of legislation are currently being debated in the parliament where the AKP has a commanding majority.

It is not an exaggeration to say that these steps would effectively bring an end to the principle of division of powers and rule of law in Turkey. While seemingly pushing for democratization during the last six years or so, Erdogan has already overhauled Turkey's democratic institutions with apparent reforms that contained many authoritarian loopholes. And he has packed these institutions with loyalists, including his former Gulenist allies. In order to truly become a positive example of democracy for its region, the reforms should have made Turkey's institutions less personal and ideological. In fact, often, the opposite appears to have happened.

The Gulen movement had actually been a crucial ally of the AKP during this process. But once the AKP, with Gulen's help, had successfully managed to pacify the Turkish generals, many observers noted that the AKP-Gulen coalition began to crumble in the face of differences between the two groups that would no longer remain bottled-up. These differences include: Erdogan's peace process with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) — of which the Gulen movement is skeptical; Erdogan's hawkish policies toward Israel and Syria; some philosophical divergences — Gulen's teachings promote gradual, bottom-up Islamization through education and social policy, while the National Outlook ideology of the AKP's core cadres endorse top-down Islamization through politics; some social class differences — Gulen's followers are relatively more urban, globalized, and educated; and, perhaps most importantly, sheer competition to control economic resources and state power. In recent years, Gulen's Zaman, Turkey's largest newspaper, has become increasingly vocal in criticizing the government, including the AKP's brutal way of handling the massive Gezi protests during the summer of 2013. The government was especially alarmed in 2013 by a subpoena the judiciary issued for Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey's National Intelligence Agency (MIT) and a confidant of Erdogan, which the government attributed to Gulenist prosecutors and managed to avert with a

hastily passed new law. The AKP then announced its plans to shut down Gulen prep schools and dorms, a critical source of finance and recruitment for the movement, and began to purge the movement's followers from the bureaucracy.

But the full-blown crisis erupted on December 17, when police officials detained dozens of prominent figures accused of bribery and tender rigging in the amount of billions of dollars. Among those held included the sons of three cabinet ministers, the mayor of one of Istanbul's biggest districts, several businessmen, a number of civil servants, and the general manager of the public Halkbank, in the house of whom police found \$4.5 million stuffed into shoeboxes. Refusing to address the accusations, Erdogan blamed the Gulen movement, media bosses, the United States, and the "interest rate lobby" and went on with sackings and new laws to block the investigations. Gulen responded with a sermon in which he cursed those "who don't see the thief but go after those trying to catch the thief." Refusing to accept their government's response, five AKP deputies resigned. Erdogan replaced four government ministers who were directly or indirectly implicated with other loyalists. While three of them left quietly, one of them, Minister for Environment and Urban Planning Erdogan Bayraktar, said that the prime minister was aware of everything and should also step down. In a move that exemplifies the prevailing environment of government oppression and self-censorship, the major TV channel that aired Bayraktar's statement in a live phone conversation, NTV, later dropped it from its news. Other mainstream news outlets, including the state-run Anadolu also covered Bayraktar's resignation without mentioning his statement about Erdogan.

Despite all this turmoil, Erdogan so far seems to have managed to maintain his electoral support base. But this may rapidly change as the real scale of corruption becomes clearer. Nor should all this necessarily be interpreted to mean that the Turkish public does not support the rule of law and true democratization. The majority of Turkish citizens have eagerly supported Turkey's democratization and European Union-integration efforts since the turn of the century. They

deserve better. The problem is that Turkey's opposition parties such as the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) are still in disarray and, according to the Economist, even its leaders don't know what they stand for. This is overstated but more or less true.

However, Turkey's democrats and Western allies should also realize that, once hailed as the country's new "Muslim democrats," it is no longer clear what the AKP stands for either. The party does not seem to harbor a vision for democratization and Europeanization anymore. On the contrary, it is now manifest that it pursues personal and ideological goals incompatible with these goals.

Turkish failure would also be a Western failure — particularly an E.U. failure. So far, the European Union has had minimal impact on the crisis. However, Turkey is still officially negotiating with the European Union for full membership. The European Union played a critical, positive role during Turkish reforms between 1999, when the country became an official candidate for membership, and 2005 when the negotiations formally began. Thus, potentially, the European Union could help to resolve the current crisis.

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