



The Erdoğan-Gülen Rivalry

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Ankara has sent evidence to Washington allegedly proving that Fethullah Gülen, who resides in Pennsylvania, orchestrated the recent failed coup in Turkey. The US is understandably hesitant to agree to his demand for Gülen's extradition, given Erdoğan's post-coup purge to consolidate power and unapologetic silencing of his critics, as well as his tyrannical behavior in recent years. But if Gülen was, in fact, behind the plot, it can be argued that Erdoğan's actions, however unsavory, are justified for the sake of protecting the integrity of the state.

This summer, the world was riveted by the attempted military coup in Turkey and the subsequent purge by President Erdoğan, who exploited the crisis to strengthen his own grip on power. Tens of thousands were detained, fired or suspended, including military personnel, police, teachers, deans, academics, journalists and judges. This was followed by the suspension of annual leave for more than three million civil servants nationwide until further notice.

The attempted coup was allegedly the culmination of a rift between the Fethullah Gülen Movement (FGM) and Erdoğan's AK Party. In November 2013, Erdoğan began an action to close down FGM's many prep schools (the *dershaneler*) for purportedly serving as a parallel educational system, which is against the Union of Education Law of 1925. (The issue is a sensitive one because the *dershaneler* are considered incubators for the nation's educational elite.)

That clash was the public's first inkling of the depth of the rivalry. A month later, at the Dershane debate, friction erupted openly between the groups, culminating in corruption charges being published by the FGM against the AK Party.

At one time, the AK Party and the FGM looked to one another to further their own agendas, influence and interests. FGM members tended in the past to support the AK Party both politically and morally. So strong was their original bond, in fact, that

Erdoğan felt it necessary to apologize to the nation for ever having cooperated with the FGM.

Gülen's philosophical-religious roots are in Said Nursi's writings (the Nurcu Order). In keeping with those roots, Gülen has long assumed a posture of political neutrality, and has advised his followers to shape their political actions according to their religious and moral preferences. Those followers have, for the most part, responded by supporting the AK Party.

The AK Party, by contrast, has always strongly believed in taking decisive political stands, a position that reflects its orientation with Erbakan's Millî Görüş and the Naksibendi Sufi order. On a practical level, the AKP opposes any influence from civil-social movements on politics and sees itself as the real power in Turkey.

The rivalry between the groups was relatively latent until the AKP began to perceive that it was being directly threatened by Gülen. In 2013, actors within the government and pro-Gülen lobbyists targeted Erdoğan and his family personally, tapping phone conversations and personal meetings and putting them on the internet. Erdoğan's son, Bilal Erdoğan, was accused of corruption, as were other top members of the AK Party.

The AK Party's response was to tag pro-Gülen elements within the AK Party and in Erdoğan's immediate circle as a "parallel state", a term that has been in use ever since as a pejorative code name for the FGM.

The parties have clashed over many issues, including Turkey's access to the EU. The FGM is in favor, but the AK Party, especially after 2006, has been less and less enthusiastic. The Gezi Park protests in 2013, too, were a source of great mutual suspicion. The AK Party accused the FGM of being behind the protests (along with the CIA, Mossad and other European institutions).

Another issue dividing the groups is the Kurdish problem. Both sides have attempted to reduce PKK power in the Kurdish zones in eastern Turkey, the AK Party through a reform package and the FGM through educational projects. The parties have clashed not only over the matter of assistance, but also over peace talks between the AK Party and PKK, to which the FGM is opposed. (The PKK, considered a terrorist organization, is also a Leninist-Marxist organization, an ideology that contrasts with that of the FGM.)

Another important bone of contention was the Mavi Marmara incident and, more broadly, Turkish relations with Israel. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* in 2010, Gülen – reflecting the FGM's sympathy with Israel – claimed that the Turkish vessel should have sought permission from Israel rather than provoke her by attempting to run the blockade. In doing so, he widened the rift between himself and Erdoğan.

In an attempt to minimize the influence of the FGM, the AK Party blocked popular social media sites frequently used by the FGM to criticize the AK Party and expose

corruption. But it did not stop there. Dictatorial measures were taken against every institution related to the FGM, and these measures intensified in both scale and severity after the attempted coup.

Using the abortive *putsch* as justification, Erdoğan embarked on what amounts to a witch hunt. An academic was reported to have been incarcerated simply for keeping a copy of Gülen's book in his university office. Prior to the coup attempt, 75% of the country's media channels were controlled by the government. After the coup attempt, it is even harder to find an independent media outlet anywhere in Turkey.

Erdoğan has largely succeeded at presenting the conflict between the AK Party and the FGM – which is, in fact, a largely personal conflict between himself and Gülen – as a clash between democracy (embodied by Erdoğan) and the FGM “terrorists,” to use his term. This strategy is both clever and effective. Who, after all, is going to oppose democracy?

Though this message might appear self-serving and manipulative from the outside, the ground among Turks is relatively fertile for such an interpretation of recent events. Though the FGM does have influence in Turkey, many Turks have been opposing it for years (e.g., Kemalists, Communists, and other Turkish religious groups both inside and outside Turkey). Many of these people firmly believe the coup was real, and that it was orchestrated by Gülen. They do not need much convincing that Erdoğan's actions against the FGM are justified.

To accompany their request for Gülen's extradition, the Turks have sent the US dozens of documents supposedly proving that Gülen was, in fact, behind the coup. Despite this evidence, the US – and the West at large – is reluctant to believe the Turkish government. This is not entirely surprising, given Erdoğan's tyrannical behavior in recent years. It is obvious that he is exploiting the coup attempt to significantly consolidate power.

But if the coup attempt was indeed the work of the FGM, one could argue that Erdoğan is right; that he is trying to save Turkey by bringing together a range of political parties and gathering their leaders in tight cooperation.

It might be difficult to see this with Western eyes. However, with regard to the specific threat from the Gülen movement, it can be argued that Erdoğan's autocratic behavior is excusable if his object is to rescue Turkey from immediate peril.

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