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Erdoğan in Trouble: A Series of Resignations in the Erdoğan Government Marred by Corruption

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Since June 2013, the government of the Turkish prime minister has faced elaborate expressions of public discontent. The charismatic and egocentric Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suffered another dramatic setback to his authority. The justice department has put his closest collaborators including three of his key ministers under investigation for corruption—leading them to resign. The informal coalition between Erdoğan's party, AKP (The Justice and Development Party) and the influential Fethullah Gülen movement shattered on December 17. Lurking in the shadows, Gülen is an enigmatic religious figure at the head of a sprawling movement whose growing influence is omnipresent in Turkey and beyond. Erdoğan has as much to lose as Gülen in this tussle and a third figure could emerge victorious, the current President Abdullah Gül.

The AKP, the party of political Islam, has governed Turkey exclusively since 2002. Erdoğan has benefited from the strong support of a large religious community founded and guided by Gülen, including many supporters that are suspected of infiltrating the police and justice systems. This coalition formed a very coherent pair for several reasons. They share the same social base and the same form of Islam: moderate, and with a hint of Turkish nationalism, representative of Anatolian culture, while being anchored in modernity. Both aspire to secure the new conservative bourgeoisie in the global economy. Both are big promoters of international capital in Turkey. They are both opposed to the omnipotent Kemalist establishment, a political and ideological system founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk that remains very present in the army and bureaucracy.

Counting Down...

After ten years of a harmonious facade, the alliance is waning. First, the military and the Kemalist bureaucracy have been marginalized losing the lead they had on the management and direction of

policy. Nearly 300 senior officers and officials are in prison for the attempted coup. The muzzled army is already encouraging victory for democracy and Turkey owes this alliance to two of the most influential leaders in Turkey: Erdoğan and Gülen. However, some insiders criticize the replacement of the former military security system with a new equally authoritarian system controlled exclusively by the prime minister.

The former Gülenist allies are wary of this drift and urge resistance. The media battle between the two camps reveals the nature of their dispute. After the Arab Spring, the crisis in Syria, the coup in Egypt (underlining the failed AKP model), and the protests of June 2013 against his policy, Erdoğan, exhausted and paranoid, has wrapped himself in an authoritarian mantle. Disorganized and discredited because of its historical links with the Kemalist regime, the Kemalist opposition has been unable to counter this trend—at least until now. The only resistance came from the Gülen movement but this didn't serve democracy directly. The Gülen movement exercised control and influence over the executive branch by "infiltrating" the judiciary and police departments. Still, tradition maintains that everything be done away from the public eye, in secret, and this inevitably feeds frustration. The move on December 17 against dozens of Erdoğan's close colleagues was implemented by prosecutors and police officers close to the Gülen movement; but this was only revealed to the public after the event. Gülen was retaliating for the prime minister's decision to close a vast network of educational centers, *dershane*, that comprise the economic and social strength of the Gülen movement in Turkey.

Following the resignation of three ministers Wednesday, December 25, Erdoğan is facing strong criticism; many are asking for heads to roll. This crisis, unprecedented in Turkey's recent history, threatens the political future of the prime minister and the AKP party. It also undermines the image and central role of Turkey in the region.

Prime Minister Erdoğan is crying conspiracy and swearing vengeance against the coup hatched by dark political forces jealous of the unparalleled success of the AKP in recent decades and the progress it has assured Turkey. This war-time posturing merely betrays his vulnerability and weakness. Once the case had been made public, in self-defense he made numerous dismissals and changes within the police and judicial institutions—a wildly un-Democratic move. This reorganized cabinet reveals Erdoğan's paranoia: of the twenty ministers appointed, ten are new, and mostly insignificant.

Fear ignites doubt more than a vulnerable and tarnished image. Erdoğan's inflexible authoritarianism in the management of mass protests made him even more vulnerable and discredited the AKP as a whole even in the eyes of his constituents. When challenged, Erdoğan responds with arrogance and refuses dialogue. When accused, he responds by purges and reprisals. As a result, he has distanced himself from moderate and democratic Muslim leaders and lost his power of inspiration in the Arab-Muslim world. Through policy choices, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has shown he prefers a different path: the authoritarian and arrogant non-democratic model, *à la* Putin. Not only Erdoğan but his office and his party, the AKP, will suffer—along with Turkey's soft power and its image as a stable, prosperous country and mediator in the region.

The break between Erdoğan and Gülen appears definitive and both come out as losers. Democratic and moderate Erdoğan is now branded as authoritarian and the head of a corrupt government. He might cry conspiracy, but his corruption is undeniable. As for Gülen, he presents himself as a herald of anti-corruption and guarantor of the struggle for democracy, but he discredits himself by openly revealing the clearly political nature of his hidden role in the state. As Erdoğan and Gülen both lose their prestige, the Turks seek an honest and straightforward third man to take the reins of a state adrift. This providential man could come from the secular camp, but the Turkish left does not seem to truly grasp this historic opportunity. Many people believe it will be Abdullah Gül, the current president of the Republic.

What's Next?

Gül, Erdoğan's faithful and loyal collaborator with whom he founded the AKP in 2001 could be the right man to bring Turkey out of its political stagnation. A moderate, he is appreciated by Turkish people of all political leanings. At the height of the popular uprising last June, the president made wise and appeasing statements that contrasted the vindictive comments of the prime minister. Now, in response to the December 17 uproar, Abdullah Gül spoke out saying that if there is corruption, there must be an investigation to clarify things. 2014 and 2015 will be rich in elections, first presidential then general. President Gül's mandate expires in the summer of 2014. Erdoğan might be tempted to reverse the roles and become president, provided that Gül plays the straw man as prime minister for an omnipotent president. Is this wise and moderate man who will hold the office of president until August 2014 ready to make this sacrifice again—or will personal ambitions reveal themselves? The verdict of the ballot box will soon be heard. It promises fierce campaigns and a rich political debate. However, the current crisis is of such magnitude that it could completely upset the elections. In addition, Erdoğan and Gülen have not finished gutting each other and nothing indicates that more cases of corruption will not emerge. In Turkey, as elsewhere, they tend to come out during election campaigns. The coming months are likely to be eventful in Turkey.