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Turkey's Gülen Movement: Between Social Activism and Politics

Bayram Balci
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Article

Since its election in 2002, the ruling Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP), under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has transformed Turkey. The reforms initiated by this conservative government with Islamic roots have amounted to a passive revolution—they have profoundly altered Turkish society, modernized its institutions, and strengthened its economy, which is now the sixteenth-largest in the world in terms of GDP.

Yet it would be a mistake to attribute the many successes that have enhanced Turkey's role as a major regional and international player to AKP leadership alone. Erdoğan's government has enjoyed support from a number of political organizations as well as from influential religious and social forces within Turkey. The most invaluable, but also the hardest to assess, is a movement that plays a fundamental role in Turkey's social and religious life: the Gülen movement of Fethullah Gülen, referred to by the terms *cemaat* or *hizmet*.

The AKP and the Gülen movement established an alliance in 2002 based on a common desire to push back the central role of the military in the country and create a new, more conservative, and more Muslim Turkey. Each brought different skills to the task—Erdoğan and his AKP colleagues were experienced in political activism and electoral politics, while the Gülen movement used education and social activism to promote its objectives. This alliance was not without disagreements, but until recently common interests outweighed differences.

During the past few months, however, tensions have deepened between Erdoğan and the Gülenists in the realms of both domestic and foreign policy, causing speculation that the alliance is headed for a fundamental break. There can be no doubt that rifts have emerged over a variety of issues, from the rising power of the Gülen movement to the increasingly authoritarian actions of the prime minister. But talk of a complete break may well be premature.

The Gülen Movement

Fethullah Gülen emerged as a religious authority in Turkey in the 1970s, and little by little he became the spiritual leader of a vast community that now boasts an estimated 3 million sympathizers. Gülen, who moved to the United States in 1999, encourages his disciples to become modern, moderate Muslims. An adherent of free markets, he champions the Islamic faith and the spirit of capitalism. He is also a nationalist, seeking to boost Turkey's influence and prestige abroad.

Gülen relies heavily on education to transmit his ideas, and he has formed a network of hundreds of schools and businesses worldwide. This network is active on every continent, including in the United States, where his sympathizers run approximately 130 charter schools, mainly in Texas.

He focuses his efforts on educating new generations and promoting the emergence of elites who are simultaneously pious, modern, patriotic, committed to globalization, and comfortable with economic success. Like the Jesuits and other missionaries who trained Turkey's republican, Kemalist elites to value secularism and follow a Western path through the schools they founded at the end of the Ottoman

Empire, Gülen aspires to use education to help forge new generation of Anatolian, conservative elites (or counterelites) that might play a key role in creating a modern, more openly Islamic Turkey.

For this reason, Gülenists have always given great importance to the training of elites. As far back as 1998, a study on relations between Turkey and the Turkic republics of Central Asia, where Gülen's schools represented the best of Turkish policy in the region, showed that Central Asian students who were trained at Turkish police academies returned to Central Asia very familiar with Gülen's religious and social ideas.

After emerging from Gülen's schools, many of these elites have assumed key positions within the Turkish administration. Gülen's disciples are influential in key institutional bureaucracies and the media. Many hold important positions in the state apparatus, the judiciary, the educational system, and key sectors of the Turkish economy. While the movement's representatives do not deny the presence of sympathizers within state structures, they insist that this is not the result of any strategy to infiltrate the state apparatus and instead point to the fact that these educated individuals have reached high ranks in the civil service thanks to their work ethic and perseverance.

Political Influence

Indeed, the Gülen movement is quick to emphasize that it is essentially religious and social, not political. In practice, however, Gülen's community is interested in politics. But it must refrain from coming across as partisan, which could divide its members, many of whom are attracted to Gülen's religious discourse rather than to his ideas and political initiatives.

Still, over time the presence of Gülen's disciples in the state apparatus has given the movement a significant amount of political influence, a development that may have contributed to the AKP's desire to form an alliance. After coming to power, the AKP offered Gülen's community its political and, especially, its symbolic backing, publicly supporting his educational initiatives in Turkey and abroad. In exchange, the AKP benefited from the social connectedness of Gülen's movement and from the support of the media outlets with which the movement enjoys a close relationship.

And the alliance was based on more than just pragmatic concerns. The AKP and the Gülen movement also share the same social base—the rising Anatolian middle classes, which are morally conservative, economically market-oriented, and open to globalization. In addition, the religious conservatism of the AKP and the Gülen movement is directed against a common enemy: the Turkish army and the bureaucracy, which are dominated by the Kemalist intelligentsia. This has created an unwritten pact between the two groups, bolstering their complementarity.

Gülenists have been uncharacteristically active in the public debate on a new Turkish constitution, advocating for a political system that is more parliamentary than presidential. The movement has also organized conferences and discussions in Turkey and abroad through its prestigious Abant Platform, which aims to strengthen democracy through dialogue.

Growing Tensions

For nearly ten years, the alliance between the AKP and the Gülen movement—natural and spontaneous, for the most part—has functioned well, but it is now showing increasing fragility, exacerbated by changes in the conditions and the sociopolitical context that initially gave rise to it. Indeed, the *raison d'être* for this alliance—the vital need for both groups to protect themselves against the Kemalist apparatus, embodied in particular by the army—is gradually disappearing. With support from the Gülenists, the ruling AKP has considerably reduced the role and power of the army, which no longer enjoys the political prerogatives that made it even recently the true power in the country. A host of other factors have also contributed to growing tensions, and the diametrically opposed temperaments of the two leaders—Erdoğan is impetuous and hot-tempered, and Gülen is prophetically calm—do not facilitate dialogue.

The first rift between the AKP and the Gülen movement was in the foreign policy arena. As prime minister, Erdoğan has cooled relations between Turkey and Israel for political, strategic, and ideological reasons. A crisis broke out between the two countries in May 2010 when a Turkish relief organization attempted to send a flotilla of humanitarian aid to Gaza in defiance of the Israeli government's blockade of the Gaza Strip. The Israeli navy boarded several ships of the flotilla, including the Turkish MV *Mavi Marmara*, and faced resistance from the activists aboard. Nine activists, including eight Turkish nationals, were killed.

Gülen publicly disapproved of the Turkish NGO's initiative to break the Israeli blockade. He criticized the Turkish government for supporting it and distanced himself from the prime minister's anti-Israel rhetoric. Indeed, Gülen's community has always refrained from strongly criticizing Israel, in part because doing so

would run counter to the ecumenical, interreligious discourse that has contributed to the movement's global success. This stance also reflects the fact that the Gülen movement has a strong presence in the United States, where it enjoys backing from many friends of Israel, and this powerful American support reinforces its influence.

Gülen's disapproval may also reflect the fact that the NGO that organized the flotilla, the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief, was close to the AKP and to some extent in competition with the Gülen movement's own activities in the social sector.

On the domestic front, the two organizations have begun to clash with more frequency. The Turkish media report that the AKP government is increasingly annoyed and concerned that its decisionmaking power and sovereignty are being challenged by the growing influence of Gülen's community on all government structures as well as on the police, judiciary, and public education system. But unlike the secular opposition, which responds vehemently to what the media call the infiltration of state structures by Gülen's disciples, the AKP has reacted with restraint to avoid publicizing the emerging rivalry at the heart of the state.

The scope of Gülenist influence over the Turkish judiciary became clear during a somber affair known as Ergenekon. The case concerned a criminal network composed of right-wing extremists, former military personnel, police officers, journalists, academics, and organized crime figures, among others, all united by the desire to bring an end to the undivided rule of the AKP and its ally, Gülen, in order to preserve the republican and secular gains of Kemalism. The network hatched a plot to overthrow the government, but the conspiracy was discovered.

Wielding its influence in the judiciary and even allegedly in the intelligence services, the Gülen movement used its clout to exploit the Ergenekon affair. Instead of targeting only people involved in the conspiracy, the movement had warrants issued for the arrests of people who appeared hostile to the Gülen community—journalists, bureaucrats, and especially figures from the military. Relations between the Turkish army and the Gülenists have always been poor, and many military figures who suspected Gülen of having hidden intentions actively sought to contain the influence of his followers within army ranks. Exploiting the Ergenekon plot gave the Gülenists a chance to settle the score.

Gülen's response to Ergenekon was hasty and heavy-handed, and it earned the movement international criticism that the scope of the arrests and the length of sentences were excessively harsh. It also undermined relations between the Gülenists and the AKP, which became concerned that it too would eventually become the target of a legal system strongly influenced by Gülen's ideas.

That concern has led many in the AKP to object to the way in which one of Erdoğan's close colleagues, Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey's intelligence services and Erdoğan's right-hand man in many thorny issues, was questioned following a wave of arrests of members of a secret branch of an organization affiliated with the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The prosecutor, who was close to the Gülenists, accused Fidan of holding secret meetings with PKK representatives in Oslo—meetings he claims he was instructed to hold by the prime minister to end the long-standing conflict between Turkey and Kurdish separatists seeking political autonomy.

Indeed, the Kurdish question is yet another point of contention between the AKP and the Gülenists, although it should be placed in perspective. Gülen himself has never been fundamentally hostile to the Kurds, who, as Sunni Muslim in their majority, have always played an important role in Turkish Islam. Gülen's spiritual mentor, Said Nursî, was himself a Kurd. The movement, given that it is well-known for its Turkish nationalism but at the same time harbors a substantial number of Kurdish sympathizers and runs many schools in Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish provinces, has always taken an ambivalent stance on the Kurdish issue.

But Gülen and his associates disapprove of how the prime minister is handling the Kurdish question in Turkey—specifically, that Erdoğan is not involving them. These complaints persist despite the fact that, on several occasions, various information channels within Gülen's community have expressed their support for the peace process that Erdoğan is pursuing with the PKK. What the Gülenists seem to dislike is the form of the dialogue and the fact that they were not consulted on the issue.

In other instances, Gülen has intentionally distanced himself from Erdoğan to protect his movement, especially as the prime minister has come under fire for displaying increasingly authoritarian tendencies. This was the case with the recent protests in Istanbul's Gezi Park. In late May 2013, the government brutally evicted activists staging a sit-in to protest plans to develop the park. This response sparked outrage that led to widespread demonstrations, eventually encompassing a range of concerns and

participants. The government executed a harsh crackdown against the protesters, prompting accusations of authoritarianism and human rights abuses.

Strongly criticized in Turkey and abroad, the police response was enormously detrimental to the AKP government. Erdoğan's actions elicited reproach not only from his opponents and the international community but also from within his own party. A faction in the AKP represented by President Abdullah Gül and Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç that has been critical of Erdoğan's hardline stance in the past took a more conciliatory approach in the face of the violent Gezi Park crackdown, openly disagreeing with the prime minister.

Gülen wasted no time in adding his voice to this criticism, denouncing the government's approach and what he called Erdoğan's refusal to resolve the country's problems through dialogue. Indeed, Gülen sought to highlight his differences from Erdoğan, showing his closeness to liberal forces in Turkey and firmly opposing the prime minister's approach. For this reason, the Gülenists initially expressed sympathy for many of the protesters, particularly the citizen and environmental ones (although Gülenists kept their distance from other participants, such as those on the Far Left and the Kemalists).

By distancing himself from Erdoğan's attitude, Gülen was being cautious—his main objective was to protect his movement, and this required him to dissociate from the authoritarian style employed by Erdoğan so as to avoid being tainted by the prime minister's political mistakes. However, when the protests became less environmentally focused and the leftist and Kemalist aspects began to take over, media close to the Gülen movement started to distance themselves from the entire affair and ceased their criticism of the government's actions.

The Future of the Alliance

The deterioration in relations between the AKP and the Gülen movement, or more exactly between Erdoğan and Gülen, is undeniable. The tension of this situation has led some Turkish observers to speculate that a total break may be inevitable. Others posit that the weakening of the AKP–Gülen movement alliance may exacerbate the existing divide within the AKP between the prime minister's hardline faction and the more pragmatic contingent represented by Gül and Arınç, especially given the disputes over the Gezi Park crackdown. Indeed, the media has gone so far as to announce a possible AKP split between the Erdoğan and Gül camps in which, according to these analyses, the Gülenists are playing a key role by betting on the rise of a new power that would offer an alternative to Erdoğan.

But such a scenario still seems unlikely. While it is true that the AKP was divided after the Gezi Park protests, the ruling party is still solidly controlled by the prime minister months after the crisis. His prestige may be tarnished and his charisma damaged, but Erdoğan remains a strong figure within the AKP and the country.

And Erdoğan's alliance with the Gülen community, although strained, is still likely to last. Despite Gülen's concerns about the prime minister's growing authoritarianism and Erdoğan's fears about the Gülen movement's growing influence over state structures, ideologically the AKP and the Gülen movement remain close.

The alliance will stand for another reason—the Gülen movement lacks a viable political alternative. During the next municipal elections, which will occur in March 2014, and the presidential elections that will follow a few months later, the Gülenists will likely still be inclined to campaign for the AKP rather than supporting other parties whose ideological bottom lines are hard for movement sympathizers to swallow. The Republican People's Party and the Peace and Democracy Party, for example, emphasize secularism and Kurdish nationalism in a way that does not align with Gülen movement goals. A potential alliance between the Gülenists and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), whose nationalism certainly pleases a fringe element of the Gülen community, also seems unlikely. The Turkish economic sector, which maintains close ties with Gülen, is fully globalized and has interests to defend worldwide, and the MHP advocates a narrow, obsolete blend of Turkish nationalism that could damage the country's foreign ties.

The Turkish political chessboard offers Gülen sympathizers no alternative to the AKP, and the prime minister knows this. But he is equally aware that Gülen enjoys considerable prestige abroad, with networks in Central Asia, the United States, Africa, and Europe that are effective and useful to Turkey from a foreign policy standpoint.

Ultimately, these factors will outweigh the tensions that have emerged between the two groups. The Gülen community is therefore likely to maintain its relationship with the AKP by sending a message to the government that it remains present and vigilant on the political scene, and that the AKP can count on it and its influence to meet the challenge of the upcoming municipal and presidential elections.

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