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Consequences for Turkish Democracy from Split Between the AKP and Gülen

Bayram Balci

OP-ED

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SUMMARY

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been at the head of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the country since 2002. Fethullah Gülen reigns more discreetly over a vast moderate, progressive, transnational religious community. This community has been particularly successful in education, media, and business, with ramifications on all continents. The AKP and Gülen alliance serves Turkish interests inside and outside Turkey. It advances democratization within Turkey and radiates Turkish Islam and Turkish culture beyond national borders. Though complementary when facing Kemalism, they are divided on the fight for religious and ideological influence in Turkish society and beyond. The pairing of Erdoğan and Gülen has created undeniable tension that the renewed authoritarianism of the Prime Minister has only increased. In this delicate balance, does Fethullah Gülen become the best defense against Erdoğan's authoritarian drift—and the pivotal figure in a counter-force towards democratic principles?

This attractive hypothesis makes you want to get better acquainted with the mysterious and complex Fethullah Gülen. As an intellectual Muslim scholar coming from mysticism, he managed to build a strong community while resisting the persecution of the Kemalist regime and has been living in self-imposed exile in the United States since 1999. His Fethullahci or Hizmet community is a movement based on open-ended faith with millions of followers (though Hizmet membership is informal so it is difficult to quantify). This nebula with innumerable branches in nearly 140 countries is a religious organization that advocates a moderate, progressive, and global Islam. Gülen is especially popular because he combines Islamic faith and economic success and has attracted intellectuals and politicians because he is among the rare clerics in the Muslim world promoting interreligious dialogue.

Gülen and his followers, however, have a complex relationship with politics. Being neither totally disinterested in politics, such as the mystical brotherhood of Nakshibendiyya, nor openly supporting political Islam, like the Muslim Brotherhood or the AKP (with whom they share many ideas), they manage to escape labels. As is often put forth by Fethullah Gülen, the chosen strategy is something between politics and social engagement. Supposedly apolitical, they do give support to political forces that promote new forms of secularism that are more respectful of religious freedoms in the name of democracy. Thus, Gülen has supported left-wing politicians such as Bülent Ecevit for his softer stance on secularism. But in the Turkish society, Gülen's best partner is still the AKP. Both with ancient roots in Turkey, Gülen and Erdoğan, have sealed an alliance to mutually reinforce political Islam and social Islam for one another. They share the same vision on the place of Islam in society.

This union worked as they both faced the uncompromising secularism of the Kemalist establishment. And once in power, the AKP and its discreet ally, Gülen's Hizmet, released the state from the stranglehold of the army who had locked down democratization in the name of defending the republic. And this undeniably served Turkish democracy. In recent months however, the Erdoğan-Gülen union is showing signs of a break up. The first criticizes the second's lust for power in massively infiltrating institutions including the police and justice systems. The second criticizes the first's anti-democratic authoritarian tendencies that go against the spirit of cooperation that welded their alliance. This crisis poses many questions and only partial answers can be provided as their rivalry is played out in dark, secret backrooms of the state, although the conflict between them is currently more visible as the government expressed his intention to close thousands of private tutoring centers affiliated to Gülen movement.

But can we really speak of the infiltration of the Gülen movement in the state? Key stakeholders deny all allegations of active indoctrination and infiltration, particularly in the police and intelligence services. They recognize, however, that thousands of executives who now legitimately occupy important positions have been trained in their schools. These officials, recruited legally, are servants of the state as any other and have their own religious social and political beliefs. Gülen's slogan "School Before Mosque" has paid off. After three decades of investment in education, it seems natural that a political, economic elite, sensitive to the ideas of Fethullah Gülen has emerged. That this elite is fishing to infiltrate society as a whole with its ideas cannot be criticized of the Gülen movement itself. It would also be unfair to ignore the realities and mechanisms that govern the relations of power in Turkey where religious and ideological community groups have always tried to be politically influential to help their family or community. The analysis of this natural infiltration should take into account the subsequent indoctrination within institutions and their motivations. In other words, do the representatives of Gülen in the state apparatus work for the government or for their religious movement?

The lack of transparency in its objectives and operations is a real problem for democracy. Operating in secret to protect themselves against the excesses of government interference—just as other ethnic, religious or concessional groups—the Gülen community has maintained a sense of concealment that feeds the rumors and the fantasies of detractors. At the same time, this culture of secrecy shows the boundaries and the weakness of Turkish democracy. Still fragile despite the progress made by the AKP before it turned to authoritarianism, the Turkish political system is not reassuring and forces groups as powerful as the Gülen movement to protect themselves. Many groups in Turkey think that the AKP has replaced the kemalist authoritarianism by another one. In such situation it seems natural for Gülen movement, and others, to be cautious.

The deterioration of relations between Erdogan and Gülen could be beneficial to Turkish democracy. As an organization that emerged from civil society, Hizmet shows that Islamic movements can contribute to the emergence of a true civil society—confirming different theories developed by different scholars. Gülen's movement still lacks many democratic virtues; but in the

reality of today's Turkey, where the traditional opposition is more divided than ever, it seems like a valid safeguard against the excesses of the AKP: the CHP retreated to a hardened Kemalism, the BDP almost exclusively defends Kurds, MHP is closed-off in nationalism. Only Fethullah Gülen's movement, which includes all ethnic and social groups in their diversity, seems able to mobilize civil society to sound the alarm and organize a counter-force able to bring Erdoğan to reason, and maybe to be more democratic.

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