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Moderniser, mystic or militant: Who is Fethullah Gülen?

Turkey's Gülen movement is a worldwide phenomenon. And Erdoğan intends to fight it on a global scale

A key player in Turkey's political life for around a decade, the Party of Justice and Development (AKP) and its charismatic leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have transformed the nation enormously. Much like a passive revolution, the reforms initiated by the conservative government with Islamist roots have led to significant changes in Turkish society, modernised its political institutions and boosted the national economy, which is today ranked 16th in the world. However it would be wrong to say that the AKP alone is responsible for the successes that enabled Turkey, a G20 member, to become a major regional player. In fact, the Erdoğan government benefited from the support of several political forces, as well as some religious and social ones, which were influential in Turkey. The "neo-brotherhood" of Fethullah Gülen, a nebulous, socio-religious movement that played a key role until recently in Turkey's social and religious life, is among the most important. Yet its influence is hard to assess. The AKP and the Gülen movement belong to two different traditions of Turkish Islam. The former emerged from political Islam, whereas the latter has its roots in mysticism. Still, in 2002 they joined forces. The marriage has been a rocky one. In 2012 the two sides began to differ sharply on domestic and foreign policy. By the end of 2013, they were practically at war.

A Muslim mystic

Multifaceted, complex, intangible, the Fethullah Gülen movement is defined by the man himself. A religious authority in the 1970s, he gradually emerged as a popular spiritual leader whose supporters number millions and operate in every sector of the economy, in education, in the media and in the state apparatus, the police and the judiciary. Living in the United States since 1999, Fethullah Gülen is chiefly a mystical thinker and an inspirational figure for his disciples – whom he encourages to be modern and moderate Muslims. As a liberal, he advocates the Islamic faith and the spirit of capitalism. As a nationalist,

he has tried to exercise Turkish soft power worldwide through his network of schools. With a taste for secrecy and influence, the Gülen movement has much in common with the Jesuit order, from which it has clearly drawn inspiration. Just as the Jesuits trained up leaders among the supporters of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (known as Kemalists), founder of the modern Turkish republic, through their own schools set up after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, so Gülenist teachers are busy training the next generation of conservatives. Though officially apolitical, the Gülen movement has held increasing sway in the corridors of power. Until 2013, thousands of supporters and graduates of the Gülen schools held top positions in the nation's institutions, the key sectors of the Turkish economy or the media.

Yet the AKP and the Gülen movement initially sprang from the same social base. These were the Anatolian middle classes, morally conservative but economic liberals who favoured globalisation. Both streams opposed the Turkish army and the bureaucracy held by the Kemalist intelligentsia. The AKP and the Gülen movement formed an informal pact with the AKP, which has governed the country since 2002, supporting Gülen-led education in Turkey and abroad. In return, the AKP benefited from significant coverage in the pro-Gülen media.

Bad blood

The brotherly relationship, however, soon turned sour when in May 2010, a Turkish humanitarian convoy tried to overcome the Israeli government's blockade of the Gaza Strip. Gülen disapproved, criticising the government for having supported the NGO's actions and distancing himself from the anti-Israeli rhetoric of then Prime Minister Erdoğan. The Gülen movement, which sees itself as ecumenical and enjoys strong support from pro-Israeli Americans, has always avoided harsh criticism of the Middle Eastern state.

The movement's representatives acknowledge their supporters hold several government posts, but deny any kind of entryism, or that Gülenist civil servants have used their position to further the movement. That said, it is clear that Gülen supporters in high places ensured the movement's views prevailed on two key issues: the army's role in Turkey and the question of Kurdish self-determination.

The Ergenekon Affair

Relations between the Turkish army and the Gülen movement have always been fraught. In his speeches and sermons, Gülen has made sure to praise the military. But he has also impugned hidden motives.

The so-called *Ergenekon* affair allowed the movement to settle its score with the army. *Ergenekon* was an alleged secret network of hard-line nationalists – comprising far right militants, former soldiers, police, journalists, academics and mafia figures – who wished to bring down the Turkish government and end the reign of the AKP and its ally Fethullah Gülen. Their aim was to safeguard the Republican and secular values.

Calling on its influence in the judiciary and intelligence services, the Gülen movement used the Ergenekon affair to justify the trial and detention of journalists, civil servants, and members of the military that it viewed as enemies. The scale of the arrests and the severity of the sentences attracted international condemnation, damaging the AKP's reputation abroad. The witch-hunt also harmed relations between the Gülen movement and the AKP, which feared becoming itself a target of a legal system dominated by the ideas of Fethullah Gülen. It was a legitimate concern. Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey's intelligence services and a close associate of Erdoğan was questioned in February 2012 during the wave of arrests of members of the KCK, a secret urban branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In Turkey, this group is considered a terrorist organisation. Erdoğan had nominated Fidan to engage in secret negotiations with the PKK in a bid to end the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. Yet the prosecutor, who was close to the Gülen movement, called Fidan out on his secret meeting with PKK representatives in Oslo.

There can be no doubt that the Kurdish question was a bone of contention between the AKP and the Gülen movement. Gülen's chief spiritual mentor, Sait Nursi, was a Kurd and there are a good number of Kurdish supporters within the Gülen movement. But as Turkish nationalists, Gülenists did not like the way the Prime Minister was making concessions to Kurds in order to resolve the Kurdish question. Though many applauded the peace process between the Turkish government and Kurdish nationalists, they were also peeved that Erdoğan had not included them in the negotiations and felt that he had given too many concessions to the Kurdish minority.

"Irreconcilable differences"

The breakdown in relations between the AKP and Gülen was not unexpected, and it continued. The AKP, with the support of the Gülen movement, considerably weakened the role and influence of the army. Who would have imagined that Ilker Basbug, army chief-of-staff between 2008 and 2010, would one day be jailed along with hundreds of senior offices for attempting to overthrow the state and colluding with alleged terrorists? With the common enemy side-lined, it made perfect sense that

an alliance born to confront it, losing its main raison d'être, would finally shatter. The rivalry between the AKP and the Gülen movement was played out in public, and in December 2013 the alliance fell apart.

Old rifts already existed within the AKP between hardliners such as the Prime Minister, and pragmatists including then president Abdullah Gül and deputy prime minister Bülent Arinç. The recent protest movements and the Gülenists' public opposition to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's increasing authoritarianism have only pushed the two sides further apart. With the media warning of a possible split within the party, Erdoğan has manoeuvred to take complete control of the AKP.

The rift became public knowledge after two attempted coups d'état, in December 2013 and July 2016. In 2013, the Gülen side, anticipating that Erdoğan would try and wipe them out – the government had already announced the closure of thousands of schools – went on the offensive. With many of the movement's disciples working within politics, the police force and the judiciary, the movement ordered investigations into Erdoğan's ministers. Corruption was exposed in his entourage. But rather than forcing Erdoğan's resignation, the opposite happened. Erdoğan denied the allegations and ruled the nation with even greater force. He restructured the justice and police departments, purging them of the Gülenist figures who had tried to bring him down - a judicial coup d'état. Then companies close to the movement were seized, pro-Gülen media outlets were taken over or closed down, and hundreds if not thousands of the movement's supporters ended up in jail.

Yet the purges have managed to crush the Gülen movement, as evidenced by the attempted military coup in July 2016. For although the Gülen movement was most likely not the main instigator, as the Turkish authorities claim, it probably had at least an indirect hand in the coup. Evidence suggests that several groups within the army joined forces to get rid of Erdoğan. One of these groups was driven by senior army figures that the Gülen movement is said to have trained. Whatever the extent of their involvement, the Gülenists are paying the heaviest price today through a new wave of purges. Officially declared a "terrorist organisation", Erdoğan is trying to eradicate the movement completely. The official rhetoric has won over the minds of the general public.

The war between the two former friends now stretches beyond Turkey. In every country where the Gülen movement is present, Turkish diplomats are on the offensive. Some countries have complied with Erdoğan's demands by closing the schools, as has happened in Tajikistan, Ethiopia and Morocco. Some, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have refused while others have changed the status of Gülenist schools and are

keeping a closer eye on the movement's members.

The simultaneous emergence of, and cooperation between the two most powerful families in Turkish Islam – one political, the other mystical – as well as the impressive transformations in Turkey during the decade-long alliance between Erdoğan and Gülen that ended in 2013, appeared to show that Turkey had undergone two successful revolutions. The first, driven by the AKP's political Islam, had transformed Turkey into an exemplary Islamic democracy, and a model which could be exported to many other Muslim countries. The second, driven by Fethullah Gülen, a reformer of Islam in the mould of Martin Luther, highlighted how Turkey could reconcile openness, prosperity, Islam and modernity. But Erdoğan's drift towards authoritarianism and the political meddling of the Gülen movement unleashed a fratricidal war in the heart of the country's institutions and sounded the death knell for this Turkish model. It has been a failure twice over, invalidating the Turkish experience of Islamic democracy and damaging both Turkey and the wider Sunni world.



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