

Corruption scandal threatens to implode Turkish regime

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14 January 2014

More than 20,000 people took part in demonstrations in Ankara Saturday in protest against Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government.

Demonstrators shouted "Revolution will clean this filth" and "They are thieves". The protests follow anti-government demonstrations in Istanbul on January 5 where police used riot shields.

Turkey is in the grip of an escalating political crisis over a huge corruption scandal involving the sons of government ministers, the State Bank and potentially the prime minister's son, threatening Erdogan's own position. The investigations have extended to five cities across Turkey.

The ensuing maelstrom has pitted Erdogan against his long-time political allies, the Islamist Hizmet movement founded by US-based preacher Fethullah Gülen, as well as President Abdullah Gul, who co-founded the AKP with him. It poses the biggest challenge to Erdogan's 12-year rule, under conditions where local elections are due in March, presidential elections in August in which Erdogan is expected to stand, and parliamentary elections next year.

The mounting political crisis is affecting the country's economy. Foreign investment, the Turkish lira and the stock market are falling in response to the turmoil. Economic growth in 2014 is expected to be lower than the government's forecast of 4 percent—itself less than half that in 2010 and 2011, and largely driven by debt-fuelled property investment and consumption—due to fears about interest rate rises. Inflation is running at more than 7 percent, and the current account deficit on trade is around 7 percent of GDP.

The graft scandal erupted on December 17, when 24 leading business and public figures, including the sons

of three ministers, were detained over allegations of corruption in relation to construction projects and the transfer of funds to Iran. The ministers were forced to resign, with the Minister of Environment and Urban Planning Erdoğan Bayraktar furiously turning on Erdogan and demanding his resignation, since he had approved the contracts.

Erdogan sacked a further seven ministers in a cabinet reshuffle, packing it with his cronies. He lambasted the corruption probe as a "dirty plot" orchestrated "internationally" to discredit his government, calling it a "judicial coup".

This was a reference to Gülen's Hizmet movement, once a key supporter of the Islamist AKP, which is if anything even more closely aligned with Washington and which Erdogan accuses of being a "US tool". Erdogan warned that the US ambassador to Turkey could be expelled.

Erdogan has sacked or demoted at least 2,000 police chief officers in financial crimes, anti-smuggling, cybercrime and organised crime units throughout the country, and appointed Selami Altınok, a little-known governor with no experience of police work, as Istanbul's new police chief.

He has even sacked some of the prosecutors leading the investigations. Muammer Akkas, a leading prosecutor, was barred from expanding his investigation, which could implicate the prime minister's son, Bilal, in order to ensure that the corruption probes are handled by forces loyal to him.

Public criticism and dissent are being met with worsening repression, including new Internet controls that follow already considerable user restrictions. Last week, the video-streaming service Vimeo was shut down. Press censorship, intimidation and self-censorship are rife, as Turkey was the world's biggest

jailer of journalists in 2013.

Erdogan refused to give seats on his plane to reporters from 12 major papers—including *Zaman*, *Hurriyet* and *Posta*—to cover his trip to Asia last week.

In a hugely controversial move, he has brought legislation to the AKP-dominated parliament to curb the powers of the judiciary. It would give the justice minister greater power in appointing the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors, the senior judicial body, and strip it of the power to pass decrees. The court has rejected the changes as unconstitutional.

So bitter is the dispute that fighting broke out in parliament, with a legislator supporting the judges jumping on the table and throwing a bottle of water at one of his colleagues, who then thumped and kicked him.

Turkey's allies, who supported Erdogan's brutal suppression of the Gezi Park protests last summer that led to the deaths of at least six people, have become increasingly critical of his response to this scandal.

Washington expressed its concern over "the quality of transparency and justice," while European Union (EU) officials have repeatedly criticised his interference with the rule of law. Ankara is under pressure from Brussels to reform its justice system, as a condition for joining the EU.

The AKP has all but broken up, with one faction urging Erdogan not to escalate the tensions. At least eight AKP legislators have jumped ship. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu reportedly told a group of AKP members in parliament that more resignations were likely.

Having alienated the police and judiciary, Erdogan—eager to shore up his support in the army to forestall a military coup—announced that he now favours retrying hundreds of senior military officers jailed for alleged Ergenekon and Sledgehammer coup plots.

The corruption scandal threatens the survival not just of his AKP government but Turkey's political system. While it is unclear precisely what role the Gulen movement has played, it has considerable influence with the Turkish judicial and police system, and has its own media empire, including *Zaman* and Samanyolu TV.

A right-wing nationalist and anti-communist tendency, it was until recently a major government ally.

But differences have emerged in recent years, as Erdogan's relations with the West have come under increasing strain—particularly since the Obama administration supported a military coup against Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Mursi.

On domestic policy, Hizmet has opposed Erdogan's rapprochement with the Kurdish nationalist movement's Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and his suppression of the peaceful Gezi Park protests last summer.

Last November, these disagreements prompted the AKP government to introduce measures to curb the activities of secondary schools to rein in the influence of Gülen, who relies on his network of schools in Turkey for influence and financial support.

The turmoil in Turkey takes place amid the broader political crisis in the Middle East following Washington's retreat from a long-anticipated military assault on Syria, in support of the "rebels" backed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the CIA, and its apparent switch to negotiations with Syria and Iran.

For nearly three years, the Erdogan government has been hosting right-wing Islamist groups, many of them linked to Al Qaeda, who have launched attacks on Syrian regime forces from southern Turkey. This policy is deeply unpopular with the Turkish people.

Just last week, the government declared a truck accompanied by the Turkish National Intelligence Agency (MIT) personnel and suspected of carrying arms a "state secret" and off limits to a local police force investigating the shipment.



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