

Protests in Turkey threaten Erdogan government

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Riot police have responded savagely to mass protests in more than 32 towns and cities across Turkey, following the death Tuesday of 15-year-old Berkin Elvan. Police fired tear gas, pepper spray and used water cannon to disperse demonstrations.

Berkin Elvan had been in a coma since being hit by a tear gas canister fired by police when he went out to buy bread during the Gezi Park protests last June. The teenager became a symbol of the brutal tactics used by the police to rein in the biggest demonstrations that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan faced since coming to power in 2003.

This week one person was killed in Istanbul, and several others were injured in the clashes. A policeman died of a heart attack while attacking protesters in the east of the country. Crowds shouted anti-government slogans in Istanbul, lit a huge fire and threw fireworks into police lines on their way to the funeral.

The prime minister has said he will resign if the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) loses the March 30 local elections, which the AKP has been expected to win.

The latest protests add to the pressures facing Erdogan's regime, already reeling from a massive corruption scandal that has embroiled the top echelons of the government and their families, including Erdogan and his son, Bilal.

Erdogan has blamed the faction of the AKP led by Muhammed Fethullah Gülen, organised in the Hizmet movement, for working with the US to orchestrate his overthrow. While Erdogan was once feted by President Barack Obama, relations soured following US acceptance of the military coup that toppled his close political ally, the Muslim Brotherhood-led government of Mohammed Mursi in Egypt, and the US failure to follow through on its threat to carry out a military strike against Syria's President Bashar al-Assad.

The White House has been angered by Ankara's efforts

to secure alliances with Russia and China, including a plan to buy a Chinese missile system from a company under US sanctions for dealing with Iran, North Korea and Syria.

In a bid to stop the corruption charges and investigations from spreading, Erdogan has fired or reassigned thousands of police officers, judges, prosecutors and other top officials, many of whom are linked to the Gülen movement. New legislation will shut down private preparatory schools belonging to it in 2015.

The AKP has also introduced draconian new laws tightening control over the Internet—any website can be closed down in four hours—threatened to close down access to Facebook and YouTube, strengthened the data gathering powers of the security services, and brought the courts under government control.

After years of seeking to rein in the military through the trials of hundreds of top military officials for participating in the Sledgehammer and Ergenekon plots (See: "AKP government moves against Turkish army"), which many believe were a frame up, Erdogan is now in favour of retrials in an effort to shore up his waning position.

The shifting political situation in the Middle East has isolated Ankara, which has lost key allies, trade and investment under conditions where its economy and currency is plummeting. Erdogan's backing of Islamist militants against the Assad regime in Syria has led to a huge influx of Syrian refugees, unrest in Turkey's southern provinces where his policy is very unpopular, and the loss of control of parts of its southern border with Syria.

Ankara now finds itself walking a tightrope between the US and Russia in relation to the rapidly escalating Ukrainian crisis. Obama has threatened retaliatory measures against Moscow should Crimea vote to secede from Ukraine, whose pro-Russian elected government has been overthrown by a fascist clique installed by

Washington and Brussels. Turkey's strategic geographic position makes Ankara a key player in the region. It controls the narrow straits of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus that provide access to the Black Sea, bordered by European Union members Bulgaria and Romania, as well as Ukraine, Russia, Moldova and Georgia. Thus, it also controls the right of entry by naval warships from non-Black Sea countries. It is for this reason that the US sought Turkish membership in the NATO alliance 60 years ago. Since 2004 NATO has tightened its hold on the Black Sea by including both Bulgaria and Romania.

Recently Ankara has sought to strengthen its ties with Ukraine, in order to secure an agreement for the transit of Ukraine's Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) through the Bosphorus to Europe as part of its broader strategy of becoming one of the most important energy hubs for Europe and the Middle East. But its foreign policy towards Moscow is heavily influenced by its dependence upon Russian natural gas, which provides 55 percent of Turkey's gas imports.

This was one reason prompting Erdogan's call to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a full member, promising in return to abandon any attempt to join the European Union. Crucially, he also asked to join the Eurasian Union that Russia is establishing with the former Soviet republics, further exacerbating tense relations with Washington.

Russia is Turkey's second biggest trading partner after Germany, and at the end of 2012 was home to \$9 billion of foreign direct investment from Russia.

Any US-EU economic embargo on trade with Russia, with which Turkey, as a NATO ally, would have to comply, would have a huge adverse effect. It is for this reason that the AKP has been reluctant to come out openly and criticise Russia, and is trying to seek a diplomatic solution.

Erdogan, during a March 5 telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, placed responsibility for the Crimea situation "foremost" on those now in charge in Kiev, adding that "instability would negatively affect the entire region."

In addition to Washington's campaign, Erdogan is coming under pressure from the main opposition party, the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) to support Crimea's Tatars, who form 15 percent of Crimea's population and are ethnic Turks. Once part of the Ottoman Empire, it was lost to Russia in 1774, and still holds an important place in Turkish nationalist lore.

In 1944, Crimea's entire Tartar population was

deported by Stalin to Central Asia where many died within a year, on the grounds that they collaborated with Nazi Germany. They were only gradually allowed to return after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and many are hostile to Russia. Turkey has a significant Tartar community numbering hundreds of thousands, and some have held rallies in Ankara and other cities demanding Erdogan support Crimea's Tatars.

Although Erdogan is unwilling to antagonise Russia, he has to be seen as the protector of Crimea's Tatars. Furthermore, he can give no quarter to a referendum on secession for fear of encouraging a similar call by Turkey's Kurds. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu on March 3 reassured Tatar leaders living in Turkey, saying, "Don't let it cross your mind that our prime minister and president will be indifferent to any issue affecting our people of kin in Crimea and anywhere in the world."

At a press conference in the Crimean capital, Simferopol, on March 6, Crimea's Tartar leader Mustafa Jemiliyev claimed that Davutoglu had told him Turkey "would immediately get involved" if the Crimean Tatars found themselves at risk.

Turkey's interest in the Crimean Tatars stems also from its recognition that Crimea provides an entry to the Eurasian landmass that is so crucial to its ambitions to secure its position as an energy hub.

Erdogan's misgivings notwithstanding, the Tatars could well be used as the pretext for a military intervention against Russia. Last week, as the crisis escalated, Turkey scrambled eight F-16 fighter jets in response to a Russian surveillance plane flying along its Black Sea coast, although the Russian plane had not entered Turkish air space.



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