
A Face-Off Over Turkish Democracy

By Pelin Turgut/Istanbul

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Turkey is in a turmoil that has all the drama of a Hollywood epic.

There is a new venue for the ongoing power struggle that pits the old-guard elite - led by a military used to calling the shots since the country's founding in 1923 - against a powerful, newly moneyed class rooted in political Islam. The political vehicle of this class, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), was reelected last summer with an overwhelming 47% of the vote. The old guard, having failed to beat the newcomers at the ballot box, has now asked the country's top court to ban the AKP and its leaders for undermining secularist principles they say are enshrined in Turkey's constitution.

Heading the all-male cast in this drama is the solitary, hawkish and staunchly secularist chief prosecutor, Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya, who has become an Islamist hate target for his 162-page indictment accusing the AKP of seeking to overthrow secularism. Arrayed against him is Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a tall, moody former football player who grew up a hard-line Islamist and was once jailed for reciting a poem deemed to incite religious hatred. His ally, President Abdullah Gul, a moderate, must now balance his party loyalties against the requirement that he be neutral. And lurking in the wings is the army chief of staff, Yasar Buyukanit, who sees himself as protector of the republic as conceived by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Turkey's Westernizing founder. The lanky military man views his task as upholding Turkey's hard line against Kurdish separatists and in divided Cyprus (where Turkey retains a military presence) and in keeping pro-Islam forces in check. Both sides are equally fervent; one has the Book (the Qu'ran), the other, Kemalism, a homegrown ideology named after Ataturk. Neither has any empathy for the other, and there is no hero on the horizon to save the day.

The fate of Turkish democracy currently rests in the hands of the 11 becloaked members of the constitutional court. In past rulings, the court has banned several other political parties on similar grounds of violating the Turkish constitution. But this is different: the AKP enjoys more popular support than any of its predecessors, and it has formed the first single-party government in decades. The AKP under Erdogan has also distanced itself from traditional Islamist rhetoric, particularly in the impious fervor with which it has embraced liberal capitalism: foreign capital inflows and economic growth have been at a record high.

Parallel to the AKP case, Turkey has been gripped by the arrests of an alleged cabal of nationalist ex-army officers, military and civilian militants accused of killings and extortion to uphold what they saw as Turkey's interests. Their views are deeply isolationist and anti-Europe, and they oppose rights for minorities. Turks have long harbored suspicions about the existence of a "deep state," as this network is popularly called. But Feride Cetin, a lawyer for the Turkish Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, who was shot dead last year, considers this the first time specific linkages to elements in the security forces have emerged. "This is a very important opportunity," she says.

On all levels then, Turkey's democracy is at a turning point; an age-old political shell is cracking, and it is unclear what will emerge from the debris.

The AKP now has a month to submit its initial defense, and court proceedings could take up to six months. Meanwhile Erdogan has taken to the war path, reciting Quranic verse in heavily emotional public speeches, with repeated references to "us" and "them." That polarization could ultimately be the most dangerous aspect of this debacle. Responding to calls by international organizations to take a step back, he bristled, and essentially said never. "The AKP say they want democracy and the European Union, but they don't have much to show for this," says Hakan Altinay, director of Istanbul's Open Society Institute. "In the next six months, the right thing to do would be to launch a hearts-and-minds campaign to win over society as a whole, to truly prove to everyone that they are democrats. That they are genuinely as much for the rights of Kurdish nationalists, gays or Christian missionaries, as they are for their own." If they do this convincingly, Altinay says, it could affect the trial outcome.

There are no signs of that so far. In an gesture of defiance, the AKP is considering passing a constitutional amendment that could render the case moot, making it harder to ban parties and reducing the penalty for the charges applied. But the court could argue that such a change, enacted while the case is pending, is not admissible. In that event, Erdogan - who faces a five-year ban from politics should the AKP lose - could call early elections, or even urge his supporters to take to the streets. "The man is a fighter," said one leading businessman. "He won't give up. If necessary, he'll take it to the bitter end."

Hollywood epics tend to paint their antagonists in comfortingly black-and-white terms; Turkey's dispute has many more gray tones. The conservative Muslims appear as new democrats, though only when it suits them; some cast the social democrats in the role of new hard-line nationalists; and Ataturk, whose biggest aspiration was for Turkey to join the "civilized West," would no doubt be stunned to hear that his military is skeptical of entry into the European Union.

Meanwhile, investors are spooked, leading Turkish unions are on strike over a proposed social security reform law, unemployment is over 10%, and the Kurdish conflict is brewing. "This is a struggle in the palace," says political scientist Hakan Yilmaz. "It has nothing to do with the people." But if Turkey's polarization increases further, it could have profound consequences both inside and outside Turkey.

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