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Fethullah Gulen: Moderniser or Wolf in Sheep's Clothing?

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Fethullah Gulen, leader of one of the world's largest Islamic movements, is accused of attempting to topple Turkish President Erdogan in a failed military coup. Is Gulen a modernist religious leader or a conspirator?

Commentary

BELIEVERS SAY he preaches a new, modernist form of Islam. Critics charge he is a wolf in sheep's clothing preparing to convert secular Turkey into an Islamic republic. They accuse Fethullah Gulen of being a conspirator who has created a state within the state and attempted this weekend to topple the democratically elected Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in a failed military coup.

That was not how past Turkish governments or for that matter Erdogan in his eight years as prime minister saw Gulen, the leader of one of the world's largest and wealthiest Islamic movements.

Cherished Ally and Weapon

Back in the 1990s, secular prime ministers Tansu Ciller and Mesut Yilmaz and other prominent political leaders viewed Gulen as their weapon against the pro-Islamic Refah (Welfare) Party, the predecessor of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), that advocated Turkey's divorce from the West and a return to its Islamic and Ottoman roots.

Erdogan too initially saw Gulen as a cherished ally. The two men worked together to force the staunchly secular military to accept civilian control in line with one of the European Union's demands for future Turkish membership. It fitted both men's goal of lifting French-style laicist restrictions on freedom of religious expression that had long been resisted by the military. Erdogan had at the time no problem with Gulen's followers establishing a power base in the police force and the military.

This weekend's failed coup suggests that elements of the military still believe in a non-constitutional role of the military. Yet, at the same time, it is to the credit of Erdogan and Gulen, that significant parts of the military, the opposition and the public backed Turkey's democratically elected president and helped foil the coup irrespective of what they thought of his politics and leadership.

Gulen's moves into branches of government, reflected his long-term strategy. Gulen preached obedience to the state and recognition of the rule of law while at the same time inserting his followers into key institutions of the state and educating a next generation in his ideological mould.

Indeed, more than half a century after he first became a government employed imam, Gulen adopted the role. He often dresses in a crumpled sports jacket and slacks, looking the part of a modern religious leader rather than a fervent Turkish nationalist or a militant Islamist. A doleful 75-year-old, he moreover talks the talk, avoiding language often employed by Turkey's right-wing nationalists and Islamists.

Modernist approach

As a result, Gulen's modernist approach appealed to urban conservatives and some more liberal segments of the middle class. His approach contrasted starkly with that of Mr. Erdogan, who targeted the more rural conservatives and the nationalists.

It was indeed Gulen's advocacy of tolerance, dialogue and worldly education as well as his endorsement of Turkey's close ties to Europe that endeared him to the country's secular leaders of the 1990s and subsequently to Erdogan. "By emphasising our support for education and the media, we can prove that Islam is open to contemporary things," he said in a rare interview with a foreign correspondent.

A diabetic with a heart ailment, Gulen has devoted himself since officially retiring in the early 1990s to writing tracts on Islam. Yet there is little in his writing or the administration of institutions linked to him that points in the direction of theological renewal.

Gulen among other things takes a conservative view of the role of women. Not surprisingly, Gulen's movement operates separate schools for boys and girls. Yet, even Gulen has evolved.

When in the mid-1990s a woman visitor asked directions to a toilet at the Istanbul headquarters of his Zaman newspaper, officials said the multi-story building wasn't equipped for women visitors. That has changed and women's toilets were installed long before Erdogan's police went in in March of this year to take over the paper.

Long term objective

Critics charge that Gulen's professed moderation may not be what he really hopes to achieve. "Fethullah's main project is the takeover of the state. That is why he was investing in education. They believe the state will just fall into their lap because they will be ready for it, they will have the people in place. That is their long-term plan," said a prominent liberal Turkish intellectual.

Indeed, Gulen's movement, despite the imam's long-term vision, effectively sought to check Erdogan's government in late 2013 with charges of corruption against ministers in the then prime minister's cabinet and members of his family. The charges and alleged evidence to back them up were never tested in a court of law.

For Erdogan the charges were the straw that broke the camel's back. What had been an increasingly public parting of ways that started with a soccer match fixing scandal in 2011 turned in late 2013 into open warfare with Erdogan firing or moving thousands of judiciary personnel and police officers to other jobs, shutting down the investigation, and seeking to destroy Gulen's religious, educational and commercial empire.

The fact that the police played a key role in foiling this weekend's coup attempt bears testimony to the degree to which Erdogan has succeeded in erasing Gulen's influence in the police. This weekend's dismissal of almost 3,000 judges and the issuance of arrest warrants for 140 of them on allegations of involvement with Gulen, suggests that Erdogan believes that his efforts to destroy the imam's infrastructure were more successful in the police than they were in the judiciary.

None of this amounts to evidence of Erdogan's assertion that Gulen engineered this weekend's coup attempt. Like so much in recent years, Erdogan has used the alleged threat of a state within a state as well as increasingly authoritarian measures to remove his critics from the media and academia and to cow the parliamentary opposition to turn Turkey into an a more authoritarian state.

Erdogan's illiberal version of Turkish democracy in which the public is invited to protest on his behalf but not against him makes uttering unsubstantiated allegations relatively easy. Erdogan will however have to produce hard evidence if he formally goes ahead with a request that the United States extradite Gulen, who is a green card holder resident in Pennsylvania.

Even if those that staged the failed coup turn out to be followers of Gulen, Erdogan would still have to prove that Gulen was aware and involved in their plans.

Back in 2011, during the soccer match fixing scandal, Gulen apologised to one of the involved club executives. The preacher said if his followers were involved in prosecuting soccer executives and players, he was not aware of that. It was a rare admission that Gulen, by now a frail old man, may no longer be in control of the empire he built.

*James M. Dorsey PhD is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and author of the just-published *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*.*

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg