

A New Political Crisis in Ankara: Erdogan's Corruption in Turkey Unhinged?

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The struggle between rival camps in the Turkish political elite reached a highpoint on December 25 with the resignation of three senior ministers, followed hours later by a major cabinet reshuffle by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The three ministers who resigned headed the key Interior, Economics and Environment ministries. They handed in their notices following the arrests of members of their families by prosecuting authorities investigating allegations of corruption relating to business contracts and banking operations. Among the leading businessmen arrested by police in recent days is the CEO of the state-run Halkbank, which has extensive dealings with Iran. Also arrested was an Iranian businessman Riza Sarraf, who trades in gold and has close links with the bank.

The Minister for European Union Affairs refused to resign and was sacked by Erdogan, who also replaced another six of his ministers. This means that a total of ten ministers have been replaced in the country's 26-seat cabinet. The minister for Environment and Urban Planning complained he had been pressured to resign and declared, "All of the construction projects were approved by me on the instructions of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister should therefore also resign."

The wave of resignations and subsequent cabinet reshuffle represents a major crisis for the Erdogan government, which has held power since 2003. The prime minister reacted swiftly by dismissing or transferring dozens of police officers and attorneys involved in the corruption investigations, while at the same time claiming that "dark foreign powers" were conspiring against his government.

Last weekend Erdogan was more explicit, suggesting that the US Ambassador in Ankara, Francis Ricciardone, was involved in provocations against his government and could be expelled from the country.

Erdogan also referred to an "illegal gang operating inside the state." This is generally regarded as a reference to the movement headed by Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen, who is based in the United States.

A week ago four pro-government dailies ran the same story, claiming that Ricciardone had told a group of European ambassadors that Turkey had failed to respect the US sanctions regime against Iran. Ricciardone reportedly told the assembled ambassadors, "You are now watching the collapse of an empire," referring to the corruption investigations in Turkey.

Suspensions of US involvement in the Turkish government crisis were reinforced by the arrival in Ankara some days ago of the US Treasury's undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, David Cohen.

The turmoil at the summits of the Turkish ruling elite comes amid a broad political crisis provoked by sudden shifts in US imperialism's Middle East policy. In September, Washington decided to postpone its war plans against Syria—which the Erdogan government pushed for aggressively—and instead seek a broad settlement with the Iranian regime, Syria's main regional ally. Negotiations with Iran are still continuing, with Washington offering Iran only limited relief to sanctions that have devastated its oil industry and economy.

Turkey buys large quantities of oil and gas from Iran, which it has traditionally paid for in gold. As part of its sanctions offensive against Iran, the US expressly banned gold exports to Iran in July of this year, seriously impacting on Turkish trade with its eastern neighbor. Iran's main intermediary with Turkey for payments was the Halkbank, whose activities have now been severely disrupted by the latest arrests.

The precise role played in the latest crisis by the Hizmet movement led by Fethullah Gülen remains unclear. However, what is certain is that the Islamic preacher exercises considerable influence within the Turkish judicial system and police from his base in the US state of Pennsylvania.

The Gülen community is one of the most influential Islamic groups in Turkey, with hundreds of thousands of followers. It runs a network of private schools in 140 countries across the globe and has a major presence in Turkey's educational system. Measures to be introduced at the start of the new year by the Erdogan government to curtail the activities of secondary schools are largely aimed at reining in the influence of Gülen, who relies on his network of schools in Turkey for influence and financial support.

Hizmet also has its own media empire, including the Turkish-language *Zaman*(Time), the English language *Today's Zaman* and Samanyolu TV. Gülen's movement is also alleged to have played a leading role in the Ergenekon affair, which resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of a broad layer of the Turkish military elite together with a number of journalists critical of the government.

Fethullah Gülen's organization is right-wing, ardently nationalist, and anti-communist. For a time Gülen was an ally of Erdogan's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), with both movements sharing similar roots in rising layers of the Anatolian bourgeoisie. In 1998, Gülen fled Turkey following charges of subversion made by a Turkish prosecutor. Gülen was able to enter the US, where he quickly established a broad network of schools funded in part by leading US business figures.

Gülen has repeatedly sought to stress his pro-US positions; he has been able to increase his influence in these circles in recent years as Erdogan's own previously close relations with the West and the US have come under increasing strain.

Relations between the AKP and Gülen deteriorated rapidly in 2010, when the latter criticized the Turkish-led aid flotilla for Palestinian refugees for refusing to seek an accord with Israel before attempting to deliver aid to the Gaza Strip. Erdogan, for his part, criticized the Israeli assault on the unarmed flotilla which cost the lives of nine Turkish citizens.

Since then, Gülen has more faithfully followed the twists and turns of US policy in the Middle East, distancing himself both from Erdogan's uncritical support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Turkish premier's repeated calls for Western military intervention in Syria.

Gülen has also criticised the negotiations the Erdogan government has conducted with the Kurdish nationalist PKK and of Erdogan's hardline position against peaceful protesters this summer in Gezi Park.

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