

AK PARTI GOVERNMENT VS. GULEN MOVEMENT RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The ruling Turkish Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) is often called Islamist or Islamic-rooted, since their accession to power in 2002, they have enjoyed the support of the majority of the Muslim communities of the country. These pious brotherhoods normally have a spiritual agenda and do not interfere with the political sphere. Unlike other groups, the Gulen Movement tried to establish close links with the political elite and later on to introduce their own elements into the democratic arena. Gulen, the founding preacher of the community named after him, created a large network of schools, dormitories and cultural venues and positioned his followers in important positions of the civil service. This “state in the state” parallel structure became more and more uncomfortable for the AK Parti government and decided to uproot it by closing down the Gulenist schools, Gulen’s main source of revenue and centers of indoctrination. Operations from both sides have been common since the 17th December, 2013 when key government figures were put under arrest by Gulenist prosecutors. It is clear that after this conflict Gulenist distanced themselves from the Justice and Development Party, but political analysts are still unaware of their current political affiliation.

Keywords: movement, government, religion, politics

INTRODUCTION

The Turkish Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AK Parti), since its foundation and rise to power in 2002, has been representing the Muslim masses and the core Islamic values in a secular system. For this very reason, the AK Parti could successfully gather most Turkish Islamic communities and mystical brotherhoods. One of the largest of these communities, if not the largest one, used to be the Gulen Movement named after its initiator, Fethullah Gulen, a very authoritative Muslim preacher. Unlike most other Muslim groups supporting the ruling party, the Gulen Movement (or the Cemaat or Community as it is known to the Turks) has its own political agenda, therefore their aims might conflict with interests of the government. This conflict is very special in the sense that the members of the Cemaat secretly infiltrated into many important positions in the civil service.

Observing this clash resembling that of Quranic Habil and Qabil or Biblical Abel and Cain, one has the feeling that the participants are of the same origin, they all come from the early Turkish Islamic movements but have very different goals. Regarding their common origin, it is legitimate to wonder whether this “narcissism of small differences” (Freud, 1991) could be overcome or not. The aim of our

analysis is to demonstrate how it is possible to reconcile the two approaches: that of the AK Parti trying to build a society suitable for Muslims, and that of the Gulen movement focusing on the individual, which - due to a slow spiritual and religious transformation process - becomes a useful element of a future Muslim society. So, the AK Parti intends to change the society directly, the Gulenists take care of the Muslim individuals and by doing so, they indirectly form a society of practising Muslims. Despite the difference in the approach, both of them aim at creating an almost identical social structure. Obviously the partisans of the former one in Turkey are more numerous and the Gulenists are losing ground, so, if the open conflict continues in this way, the latter ones risk disappearing from Turkish politics and the sphere of civil society organizations and NGOs. We can assume that the ending of the dispute is in the interest of the Gulen movement, but its reunification with the mainstream Muslims is that of the whole Turkish nation. As far as our academic evaluation is concerned, we have to provide a methodology to strengthen this future national reunification in order to avoid inner discord at a time when Turkey is challenged by many political conflicts. and to prevent the destabilizing effects of external threats.

Who is Fethullah Gulen?

Fethullah Gulen is an influential Turkish religious figure, who was born in 1941 in the northern mountainous province of Erzurum. In his early ages, he got impressed by one Turkey's leading contemporary Muslim scholar, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi whose main work *Risale-i Nur* (Letters of Light) became one of the sources of Gulen's teachings such as inter-religious tolerance and dialogue, compliance with modernity, the importance of scientific learning and scholarship. Gulen managed to gather supporters first in Turkey, then in various other parts of the World as well. He used different means in order to promote his ideas. Already in the 1960's, Gulen took part in the People's Houses (Halkevleri) movement giving support to popular education, environment, women's and disabled rights. Later, he developed a large network of student dormitories, preparatory schools and cultural facilities and launched a certain number of religious and cultural events such as the "Olympic Games of the Turkish Language" aiming at fostering a solid Cemaat or Muslim community. This brotherhood was later named Nur Cemaat (Community of Light) reusing a key element of Said Nursi's ideas or Hizmet (Service), a central concept in the life of the Turkish Muslim groups. This Cemaat came to be known as Gulen Movement in the West.

Besides his religious and cultural missions, Fethullah Gulen is also firmly linked to the political sphere. Already in 1971, after the second military coup in Turkey, the political police arrested Gulen who – at that time – did not play any political role but gave sermons in a local mosque. The reason behind his arrest and the arrest of many other mosque speakers was to put pressure on practising Muslims throughout the country. The next year, Gulen was put under arrest once more and served a three year long prison term for his speeches. After the coup d'Etat of 1980, Gulen had to flee to the southern city of Izmir not to be arrested again. In the 1980's, the political consolidation permitted Gulen to become an acknowledged

journalist and to establish good relations with major political parties. Among his contacts one can find even prime ministers such as Turgut Ozal, Bulent Ecevit and Tansu Ciller. His movement started to grow slowly and many of his followers took office in the civil service. “Democratic openness in the 1990s prompted Gulen movement members to penetrate strategic state institutions in the judiciary, security and education sectors. The group began to exercise strong influence in society given its ownership of large education, media and cultural institutions, acting as a power with the government and prompting competition” (Thalji, 2014) between the group itself and the government. With the words of Ali Carkoglu, “the most significant difference of the Gulen movement compared to all other and earlier pro-Islamist conservative circles is their long-term investment in placing their cadres of sympathizers into the state bureaucracy. The movement is determined to follow an autonomous line of policy formulation and influence rather than just adopting a servant’s role.” (Carkoglu, 2014)

Gulen first visited the United States of America in 1992. Later, he used to return to that country quite frequently. After the 1997 postmodern coup and the degradation of his health, he decided to move permanently to the US where he lives in a huge palace in the state of Pennsylvania. An American journalist describes this place as follows: “the leader of what is arguably the world’s most successful Islamic movement lives in a tiny Pennsylvania town called Saylorsburg, at the Golden Generation Worship and Retreat Center, otherwise known as “the Camp.” The Camp consists of a series of houses, a community center, a pond, and some tranquil, woodsy space for strolling. From this Poconos enclave – which resembles a resort more than the headquarters of a worldwide religious, social, and political movement.” (Hansen, 2014) The Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan frequently refers to him as the “Man of Pennsylvania” as Gulen opted for dwelling in that state. In the United States of America, his presence is a highly debated issue, while he argues that he stays there because his heart was operated several times by the specialists of the Mayo Clinic, an American health care service provider, his opponents think that he is supported by foreign forces and he serves foreign interests.

Gulen and politics

The Gulen Movement originally had good links with both sides of the Turkish political arena. For instance, Gulen was the one who led the burial prayer of Kasim Gulek, the Secretary General of the left wing Republican People’s Party, but he had connection with the ruling AK Parti as well. The Nurcular (members of the Gulen Movement) were widely believed for a long time to support the conservatives with their votes.

As we stated earlier, in its methodology and in its approach to society and politics, there has been a visible difference between the Gulen Movement and the Milli Gorus or National Vision movement backing political Islamism and various political parties including the AK Parti since 2002. The Gulenists’ ideal was the pious Muslim trained by the means of education and culture. “Up until the late 1990s, the Gulen and Milli Görüş movements were representing almost opposite

perspectives. The Gülen movement was focusing on faith service (iman hizmeti), by publishing magazines and books about Islamic faith, opening student housings and dormitories, and bringing business people together to fund this activities.” (Kuru, 2007) The emerging Islamists at the same historical period wanted to create a society where Muslim principles prevail. “The Milli Görüş movement, however, was representing political Islamism in Turkey, by founding Islamist political parties.” (Kuru, 2007) Some researcher even finds that in spite of the undeniable cooperation of this two spheres of Islamic and political activism, we can speak of collateral existence: “The Fethullah Gülen movement grew in parallel with the visibility of Islam in politics, i.e. the success of Islamist parties such as the MSP, RP, FP (Virtue Party), SP (Felicity Party) and, later on, the Muslim-conservative AKP. “ (Seufert. 2014)

The ideological division between the Nur Cemaat and the ruling party was evident from that moment when the government decided to close down the so called preparatory schools in Turkey (Table 1), the split between the Nur Cemaat and the ruling party was evident. According to government sources, these schools were providing education for those willing to begin their studies at prestigious universities and preparing for their entrance exams – several times belonging to the Hizmet – in places of political and ideological propaganda and indoctrination.

Table 1

Number of centers run, students taught and teachers employed in Gulen's prep schools

Year	Centres	Students	Teachers
2000-2001	1,864	523,244	18,175
2005-2006	2,984	784,565	30,537
2010-2011	4,055	1,234,738	50,232

Source: Thalji

The AK Parti government started to speak about closing down these prep schools from the second half of the year 2012. The government argued that these schools were expensive and not accessible for everyone, all Turkish students should be able to get all the necessary knowledge to be accepted at good universities without paying an extra fee for it. The prohibition of preparatory schools spelled a possible disaster for the whole industry. Ahmet Tasgetiren, as a member of another Muslim community operating preparatory schools, a leading Muslim thinker and journalist, points out that a government is not entitled to intervene in the private sphere of individuals and companies. Foreseeing the upcoming conflict between the Cemaat and the government Tasgetiren pushed the idea that the issue could only be solved if the level of education improved increasing the necessity of preparatory schools. He ends his article by arguing: “if the contacts between the Cemaat and the government get wounded all social environments get wounded as well as the whole of Turkey.” (Tasgetiren, 2012)

Open conflict with the government

In November 2013, the AK Parti government came to the final decision to abolish the preparatory schools. This step of the AK Parti government scandalized the Cemaat and an open letter was written by Fethullah Gulen published on the movement's controversial website, herkul.org. The name of this emblematic website regularly defended by Gulen, is problematic because "Her kul" in Turkish means "all servants of God", at the same time Herkul is the Turkish form of Hercules, the Roman name of the Greek divine figure of Heracles, a reference widely criticized in Turkey for not being Islamic. The above-mentioned writing entitled as "You will walk without stopping!" invites followers of Fethullah Gulen to continue to work in the Hizmet even though they might hear hideous things about its leader. (*Aljazeera Turk*, 2013)

On the 15th December 2015, the Turkish public was shocked when they learned that Hakan Sukur, the most famous football player of Turkish history, was an ardent follower of Fethullah Gulen. He had left the group of AK Parti in the Great Turkish National Assembly (Turkiye Buyuk Milli Meclisi, TBMM) and decided to keep his mandate to serve as an independent member of the parliament. In his open letter the practicing Muslim Sukur, who became a candidate on the personal invitation of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, explaining the reasons behind his resignation admitted that the ruling party succeeded in many fields but failed in attacking Hocaefendi (a name for Gulen used by his followers called by his adherents). Sukur says that he has been taking part in the Hizmet for twenty years and he describes their political activities as follows: "during the time of the referendum and the elections these honest persons supported the AK Parti government, ran from door to door, transported thousands of voters from abroad". (*Zaman*, 2013) Sukur in this quotation probably refers to the 2010 referendum on the change of the Constitution and when he speaks about transporting voters his reason for that is at that time Turkish citizens residing in another country were not entitled to vote unless they went home. Many Turks only proceeded to the border posts or airports where special voting polls were placed for them.

For Sukur, the Cemaat consisting of friends and supporters of the AK Parti until then became their enemies. If one considers what happened two days after Sukur's dismissal, one can say that it might have been only a prelude to the 17th and 25th December events when the main prosecutor of Turkey ordered the arrest of several people linked to the government including three sons of ministers (namely the minister of the interior Muammer Guler's son Baris Guler, the minister of economics Zafer Caglayan's son Kaan Caglayan and the minister of environment and urbanization Erdogan Bayraktar's son Abdullah Oguz Bayraktar.) Besides these persons, several famous businessmen were also pursued and even Bilal Erdogan, the prime minister's own son was also threatened to be put under arrest.

After these high tensions and the reactions of the government to which they called a mini-coup by the Gulen Movement, Fethullah Gulen wrote a peace message to the prime minister on the 4th January, 2014. Erdogan's response to this letter was clear: he was not ready to negotiate with a so called "parallel state" and he promised to restrict their opportunities. Using a recent secret service report, a new

operation started. On the 7th January, 2014 government loyalists arrested hundreds of police officers and civil servants who were believed to belong to this state in the state.

The next episode in the row of conflicts is connected to the more and more uptight security situation near the border with Syria. On the 1st and 19th February, 2014 prosecutors and civil servants linked to the Gulen Movement searched two trucks in two southern cities of Turkey without the proper authorization from the national intelligence service. Those who were doing this search claimed that they discovered weaponry to be smuggled into the war-torn neighbor country. This move of the Cemaat prompted the re-composition of the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors, as well as the re-organization of the police. Out of 260.000 Turkish police officers 1.000 have been dismissed and 4.000 were moved to other positions. The discharge of key judges and prosecutors - including Zekeriya Oz who played an important role in the Ergenekon trial judging the members of the so called Ergenekon conspiracy – continued in 2015, too. This means that the government operations against the presumed members and sympathizers goes on even at the time of writing this essay. The current accusations include the claim that the Gulen Movement put together an armed militia called Otuken after the name of the first Turkic capital in Central Asia.

The future of the conflict

The future of this conflict depends on how much the Gulen Movement would or would not erode in the near future. It is also evident that the Cemaat on its own is not powerful enough to form a successful political party. If it is so, would they vote *en masse* for an opposition party? The results of the 7th June, 2015 national elections show that this might be the most probable scenario with Gulenists gathering under the umbrella of the leftist-liberal People's Democratic Party, which is willing to represent all minorities, principally the ethnic Kurds (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP). Thanks to the Gulenist input "the Kurdish left has the opportunity to become a more mainstream actor in Turkish politics if the current dedication to the peace process is maintained and the Kurdish question is normalized. The three major parties – AK Party, CHP and MHP – cannot produce libertarian left-wing policies for various reasons." (Celep, 2014)

CONCLUSION

Our view, after presenting the main stages of this contention, is that the two parties, both the AK Parti side and the Gulenist side are centered on key personalities such Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Fethullah Gulen who are crucial to our proposed solution. A multiple conflict can be detected. There are three interpretations to what divides the AK Parti and the Hizmet, three levels, and we argue that the third might be the one leading to a certain compromise.

Detailing the three levels we have found that the first discontent is a conflict between world views, the two Islamic approaches: reforming the society in order to reform the individual or reforming the individual in order to reform the society.

This is the lowest level and the easiest discord to be solved. The second level is a conflict between two strong personalities, two bellwethers who are usually not ready to step back and divide the society. So, at the time of writing in July 2015, it is not feasible to side with both of them, Muslim Turks are forced to choose. This means that if the pacification of the personal conflict opposing them is not possible, other denouement is needed. The third level of the conflict is even more deeply rooted and linked to the secular nature of the Turkish Republic. In secular societies, such as the Turkish *laiklike system*, the spheres of religion and politics are strictly separated on one hand, but on the other, practising individuals might not follow the logic enforced by the government. In Islamic societies, the concept of *taqleed* is general and adopted by a large number of Muslims. Taqleed in Arabic means blindly following something or someone without looking for evidences from authentic sources. Taqleed works because of respect and the lack of knowledge. Muslims in their daily religious practice naturally require to follow a *muytahid*, a scholar of religion and therefore do taqleed in praying, fasting or paying the compulsory alms, but it is not necessarily the case when it comes to politics. Muslims should question themselves how far they should go in their taqleed outside the field of religious jurisprudence. This includes also the opportunity of having separate religious and political leaders. Considering religious leaders, political advisers might lead to dissension or *fitnah* like the conflict forming the topic of our present paper. Knowing that *fitnah* is called by the Muslim holy scriptures worse than killing humans, no Muslim would oppose that this practice of taqleed in Turkish domestic politics should come to an end. We think that the Muslim circles and foundations in Turkey should limit themselves to spirituality, and politicians - using the core values of Islam or not - should not pose as religious leaders in order to break the situation of today in which parallel structures can be built and minds can be controlled.

To settle the dispute between the AK Parti and the Gulen movement, the government has to reduce pressure and favor the religious communities by giving them a chance to reach out to the people after the closure of the vocational schools, but the first step is the duty of Hizmet, even more as they are the ones who are losing ground. As the Hizmet tries to focus on the individual - as we mentioned earlier -, they have to educate the ordinary members of the Gulen Movement so as to distinguish between religious and political leaders especially since the submissiveness to two authorities, the government and the Community, which is clearly taught by Islam. As the holy book of Islam, the Quran says in the chapter n. 4. verse n. 59: "O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the messenger and those of you who are in authority" (Pickthal, 1996) Many Muslims from the Hizmet think that in such a conflict obeying the government means betraying the religious authority, in our case Fethullah Gulen. This is the reason why even those who are unhappy with this political conflict are reluctant to quit the Community. One of the few who has already made this move is Munip Erdem who has known Gulen since 1968 when the latter one was a simple mosque speaker. (*Youtube*, 2014) The education of Gulenists would empower them, let them free choice in politics: they would get the chance in this way to decide whether they want to remain

conservative or really build a liberal Islamic alternative under the umbrella of the HDP, as we suggested in the previous point.

The Muslim brotherhoods are very useful in general in Turkish society by giving shelter, food or medical assistance as well as spiritual support to the needy, but at the same time they convey some secret teachings to their followers. Opening up this partly obscure world is the only way of avoiding a future movement of building parallel societies in Turkey.

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