

Islam, Secularism And the Battle for Turkey's Future

Executive Summary

A deep power struggle is under way in the Republic of Turkey. Most outside observers see this as the latest phase in the decades-long battle between Islamism and secularism. Others view it as a struggle between traditional Anatolia and modern Istanbul, egalitarianism and economic elitism or democracy and authoritarianism. Ultimately, the struggle boils down to a fight over a single, universal concept: power.

The following special report recounts how an Islamist-oriented Anatolia has emerged to challenge the secular foundation of the modern Turkish state, which was established in 1923 by former Turkish military officer Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. While those looking at Turkey from the outside are often unaware of Turkey's internal turmoil, a labyrinthine power struggle influences virtually every move Turkey makes in its embassies, schools, courts, news agencies, military bases and boardrooms. Though this power struggle will not resolve Turkey's identity crisis, the battle lines drawn during the fight will define how the country operates for years to come.

Representing the Islamists in today's struggle is the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which took power in Turkey in 2002, with the mandate of closing the political and economic gap between the Anatolian masses and the Kemalist elite. But the AKP is by no means pursuing the Islamist vision alone. A powerful force known as the Gulen movement has quietly and effectively penetrated the armor of the Kemalist state over the last four decades. The charismatic imam Fethullah Gulen, who lives in Pennsylvania, leads the transnational organization, along with a small group of "wise men." Inside Turkey, the Gulen movement seeks to replace the Kemalist elite and transform Turkey into a more religiously conservative society. Outside Turkey, Gulen presents itself as a multifaith global organization working to bring businesses, religious leaders, politicians, journalists and average citizens together.

For its part, AKP does not walk in lockstep with the Gulen movement, nor does it want to become overly dependent on the Gulenists. But the two sides also need each other and share a desire to replace the traditional secular elite. This objective, along with the common threat they face from the secularist establishment, forms the basis of their symbiotic relationship: The Gulen movement provides the AKP with a social base, while the AKP provides the Gulenists with a political platform to push their agenda.

Turkey's power struggle begins in the classroom, where the Gulen movement has been working aggressively to mold young minds. The goal is to create a

generation of well-educated Turks who ascribe to the Gulen tradition and have the technical skills (and under the AKP, the political connections) to assume high positions in strategic sectors of the economy, government and armed forces.

The first sector the AKP and Gulen movement gained control of was the police intelligence services. They are also making significant inroads into the national intelligence service MIT, which had long been dominated by the secularist establishment. Another strategic sector coming under their influence is the media, and newspapers like Zaman, Star and Sabah -- which now dominate the media landscape -- regularly provide pro-AKP coverage. As for the Turkish business sector, a handful of secular family conglomerates based in Istanbul remain dominant, serving as Turkey's economic outlet to the rest of the world. On the other side of the struggle stand the millions of small- and medium-sized businesses with roots in more religiously and socially conservative Anatolia. The AKP and Gulen movement also lack the leverage the secularist-nationalists hold in the banking sector, where institutions like Turkiye Is Bankasi -- created by Ataturk in the early days of the republic to maintain a secular stronghold on the country's finances -- are difficult to compete with.

The AKP and Gulen movement recognize the lack of space for competition with the Western-oriented trade markets. Instead, the Islamist forces have created their own business model, one that speaks for Anatolia and focuses on accessing markets in places like the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region. One of the drivers behind this business campaign is the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (TUSKON), made up of thousands of small- and medium-sized business owners. TUSKON is tightly linked into the Gulen movement and forms an integral part of the Gulenist business, education, political and even foreign-intelligence agenda. The association organizes massive business conferences in various parts of the world to bring hundreds of Turkish businessmen into contact with their foreign counterparts. The end result is a well-oiled and well-financed business and education network spanning 115 countries around the globe. Not only do these business links translate into votes when elections roll around, they (along with the schools) also form the backbone of the AKP's soft-power strategy.

And while the secularists continue to hold the upper hand against Islamists in the judiciary, a package of constitutional reforms recently approved in a referendum is designed to end the traditional secularist domination of the Turkish courts and deprive the military of its most potent tool to control the actions of the civilian government: the ability to ban political parties for violating the secular tradition of the state. As expected, secularists in the high courts and Parliament — with behind-the-scenes military backing — strongly oppose these changes, saying they will eliminate checks and balances in the government. The next phase of the battle will be the 2011 Parliamentary elections, in which the AKP is counting on winning a supermajority to draft an entirely new Constitution that would further cement its power.