



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
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## Report

# Prep Schools, Elections and AKP-Gulen Clashes

*Mohammad Jaber Thalji\**

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# TURKISH GOVERNMENT AND GÜLEN MOVEMENT COLLIDE

## Critical Juncture in Turkish History







Amid speculations of a regional and international conspiracy against Erdogan's government, relations between the Turkish government and Fethullah Gülen's movement (Hizmet) have started to splinter






### What is the Gülen Movement ?

Considered one of the most important religious groups in Turkey, it has recently taken a more public political direction by withdrawing electoral support from the Turkish government, effectively declaring war on it and prompting the Turkish government to respond with decisive action.

#### Turkish Government's Strategy

-  Complete shutdown of private prep centres, including those of the Gülen movement.
-  Forced resignation and transfer of police officials to fight "the state within the state" they claim Hizmet is creating.
-  Closing corruption probes as quickly as possible to minimize losses.
-  Reducing movement's social and economic influence on civil society.

#### Gülen Movement's Tactics

-  Using freindly opposition members in security institutions (namely police) and courts to target the government.
-  Media campaign via movement's channels, including criticism of the Turkish-led Gaza flotilla campaign.
-  Supporting Taksim Square protests against the government.
-  Using movement's private prep centres to garner support against the government.
-  Attempting to weaken government via latest corruption probe.

### Government Win or Loss?

Erdogan's government maintains the highest percentage of popular support in the country even if it loses the Gülen movement's votes.

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### Abstract

Considered one of the most important religious communities in Turkey, the Fethullah Gulen movement was launched to achieve social goals but has experienced a shift to intervening politically in the state. This has become the cause for competition between the movement and the Turkish government, eclipsing their previous collaborations and resulting in a public confrontation. The movement has attacked the government and the government has taken strong counter-measures. This report analyses reasons for the crisis and its repercussions on Turkish political life, particularly after a series of attacks by the movement and retaliation by the government.

### Introduction

Recent months in Turkey have witnessed an escalating showdown between the government and the Fethullah Gülen movement, leading to two key questions which will be addressed in this study:

1. What are the reasons behind the confrontation between the government and the movement?
2. What are the effects of this conflict on Turkish domestic politics?

To address the first question, the report outlines developments leading to the crisis and its exacerbation, particularly the radical shift in the Gulen movement's goals and practices and its assaults on the government.

To address the second question, the report projects possible outcomes of the showdown by explaining the prep schools crisis and the implications of December 17, 2013 as well as the impact of the conflict on upcoming elections.

### **Radical shift in cemaat's goals and cemaat's government infiltration**

The concept of "cemaat," or community, is a modern heir to the earlier notion of Sufi orders and religious groups in Turkey. It relies on modern methods and tools with contemporary educational, social, economic and political dimensions.(1) The cemaat took two distinct paths in the 1970s, one of that of the late Necmettin Erbakan which saw direct entry into political life (seen in groups like the AKP and its variations), and one of that of other groups which refrained from direct political action and instead focused on education, media and economics, such as the Nur movement under Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960). This second path believed any political objectives would be the long-term by-products of efforts undertaken in other domains.(2)

The Fethullah Gulen movement, also called "service" or "Hizmet," emerged as one of the five key groups from the Nur movement.(3) 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 which has resorted into an exchange of attacks by the movement and counter-measures by the government.(4)

The first public intellectual-political clash between the two entities which served as confirmation of the movement's shift in goals was Fethullah Gulen's criticism of the Turkish government's allowance of the 2010 Freedom Flotilla without permission from Israeli authorities. The interview with Gulen was published by the Wall Street Journal.(5)

The movement also took the opportunity through its own media channels to attack Erdogan for his positions on the Kurdish and Egyptian issues and his ties with Israel and Iran. The movement's affiliates within security and judicial institutions only served to confirm that there was indeed the establishment of a state within a state, with cemaat supporters using their positions to place pressure on the government. For example, the state prosecutor decided on February 17, 2012 to interrogate the head of the Turkish

National Intelligence Organization (MIT) for negotiating with Kurdish parties. Erdogan seized this incident to publicly define it as a “state within a state” perpetrating anti-government schemes.(6)

The crisis seriously escalated when Fethullah Gulen made an invocation of harm against the leaders of the Turkish government, something which was negatively received by Islamic circles in Turkey. The prayer was seen as extremist and vengeful, quite contrary to the values of tolerance and forgiveness preached by the cemaat.(7)

**Prep schools “invaded” by government**

In the 1980s, dersane, or private educational schools preparing students for university,(8) triggered debate and a draft was submitted to parliament to abolish such schools. After lengthy discussions, the motion was voted down only for the National Security Council to turn around and close them. They were banned until July 1984, when the late Ozal’s government took steps to remove the ban after frequent petitioning by prep school owners.(9)

Table 1 below is an indication of how quickly these schools increased over the years, as well as their sheer volume. Students seek out these schools as a result of the Turkish educational system and the manner in which students are promoted from lower to higher education. These centres prepare high school graduates for university entrance exams, exams which they must pass in order to enrol in national and international education institutions.

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	50,532

Given their large presence and increasing importance in determining students’ futures, such centres also gained business and commercial significance. Due to the trend among religious groups, particularly the Gulen movement, to invest in these institutions, owners of the centres began to accumulate serious but indirect social and political capital. There are 928 prep school centres which can be traced back to 29 Gulen-affiliated institutions that run them. Unofficial estimates indicate 30 per cent of all prep centres in the country are affiliated with the Gulen community. Not only are their centres known for lower fees, but also that they exempt hundreds of poor students from paying if they are unable to

do so. Perhaps most relevant and pertinent to this report is that Gulen-affiliated institutions steer students, particularly those living in dormitories, to adopt the cemaat's worldview during their formative years. This translates into social and political gains for the movement when students who are educated in their schools build careers and assume high positions in the state's judicial and security institutions, become members of cultural and media elites or lead civil society institutions.(10)

### **Crisis' political implications**

On December 17, 2013, public prosecutors summoned a number of AKP figures and businessmen in Istanbul, among them the sons of the ministers of interior and the economy, and charged them with corruption and bribery.(11) This episode sent a strong warning message to the AKP and involved judicial and political processes. Forces loyal to the Gulen movement in state institutions used it as an opportunity to settle political accounts with the AKP by working both within and outside of the state apparatus.(12)

There are three key political implications:

1. The crisis between the AKP-led government and the movement has reached a point of no return.
2. Arresting and charging the two ministers' sons suggests all leaders of the party are susceptible, including the prime minister.
3. This was a political manoeuvre to target businessmen close to the government in retaliation for measures taken by the government against prep schools.(13)
4. Turkey now faces the challenge of ridding itself of a deep state that is trying to use the government to fulfil its own political goals, an implication which may result in a change to the country's political process.(14)

It is worth noting the military's position given its past involvement in Turkish politics. Chief of Staff Necdet Ozel announced in a statement after the incident that the military had no business intervening in political events. He further stated the military accepted judicial proceedings against military and civilian officials, distancing the military from the political process and its repercussions.(15)

## Upcoming elections

The Gulen movement supported the AKP in previous elections, but the recent showdown may change this political landscape. It is difficult to estimate the loss of votes for the AKP in municipal, parliamentary and presidential polls, but the AKP is constantly conducting polls and studies to determine their likely percentage of votes.<sup>(16)</sup> This section of the report looks at the factors which can negatively and positively impact the AKP's vote share.

If the crisis continues to escalate between the Gulen movement and the government, and the Republican People's Party (CHP) is able to attract members of the movement instead, this could adversely affect the AKP's vote share.<sup>(17)</sup> If the Gulen movement continues to use its media outlet to smear the government, this could also have a negative impact on the AKP's vote share.

On the other hand, some of the AKP's vote share could be saved if the party reaches out to influence Gulen members for votes. Furthermore, the Gulen movement has a policy of not naming the party it will support in the elections and it is expected it will do one of two things this time around: either leave it to members to vote as they see fit with an implied message not to vote for the AKP, or demand a boycott of the elections altogether.

As it stands, the CHP is the AKP's strongest competitor, but their anti-Islamic values concerning state affairs is a positive for the AKP in terms of vote share – it means that most Gulen movement members would refrain from supporting the CHP. Many Sufi orders have declared support for the AKP, and a poll conducted by ORC showed that the AKP will surpass other Turkish parties, including CHP, in Istanbul and Ankara local elections.<sup>(18)</sup>

## Recommendations to mitigate crisis' impact

Despite the deepening crisis between the two sides, some analysts offer the following recommendations to overcome or at least mitigate the crisis' impact:

1. Negotiations in the presence of personalities acceptable to both sides. The cemaat should be willing to stop its incitement campaign against the government and issue public and internal directives to all members preventing actions leading to clashes with the state or government authorities. In return, the government should reconsider the decision to close prep schools or find a way to implement the decision in such a manner that is not harmful to Gulen-affiliated institutions.

2. In the event the cemaat continues with its hostile approach, the Turkish government can tone down the severity of its reactions as well as pursue strategic steps to distance or remove suspected pro-Gulen figures who hold sensitive positions in the state apparatus. AKP members can also reach out to cemaat members to win their support. This recommendation will provide space for negotiation and understanding in the future.
3. Although a coup is not likely, the final months of last year exhibited clear signs of internal and external schemes targeting the Turkish government – schemes which could develop further. The Turkish government must take clear account of the status quo and take bold measures to preserve its strength and existence.

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\***Mohammad Jaber Thalji** is a researcher specializing in Turkish affairs.

#### Endnotes

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