

Protests hit Turkey as corruption probes target Erdogan government

By Johannes Stern
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Protests erupted last Friday in Istanbul, Ankara, and other cities in Turkey against Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government, amid growing international criticisms after corruption probes have claimed top ministers of his cabinet.

In scenes reminiscent of the Gezi Park protests this summer, Turkish riot police cracked down on anti-government protests. Security forces fired teargas, water cannons, and plastic bullets at protesters gathering on Istanbul's central Taksim Square. According to media reports, 70 people have been detained.

Thousands of protesters shouted "Catch the thief", referring to Erdogan and his government. One protester told a reporter from the BBC: "Stop robbing and plundering Turkey. I am here to condemn bribery and ask the government to resign."

The renewed protests erupted against the backdrop of an escalating power struggle inside the Turkish ruling elite over the Erdogan government's corruption scandal and its conviction of hundreds of top army officers over coup threats in the so-called Ergenekon scandal.

On Saturday, a defiant Erdogan addressed thousands of supporters in the city of Manisa, vowing to take on any opposition against his rule: "They said 'Gezi' and smashed windows. Now they say 'corruption' and smash windows. These conspiracies will not succeed. Their concern is not corruption, law, or justice. Their only concern is damaging this nation's power."

Erdogan reiterated his allegations that the crisis is sparked by internal and external forces seeking to undermine his government. "There is a serious smear campaign and there is an organization, a gang that has established itself within the state," Erdogan said. "There are judicial officials who are... smearing innocent people. They are with the police too."

It is widely believed that police and prosecutors close to US-based preacher Fethullah Gülen opened the corruption

probe against ministers, leading businessmen, and bankers close to the government. Gülen's Hizmet movement is one of Turkey's most influential Islamic groups, with a significant base in the judiciary and the police.

Erdogan did not name names, but his comments were clearly directed against Gülen and his movement. Since Erdogan responded with a reshuffle of his cabinet and purge of the judiciary and police—most prominently, the sacking of public prosecutor Muammer Akkas—the formerly allied Erdogan and Gülen factions inside the state apparatus are increasingly at war with each other.

In a video recording denouncing the sacking of police and judicial officers, Gülen preached: "Those who don't see the thief but go after those trying to catch the thief, who don't see the murder but try to defame others by accusing innocent people—let God bring fire to their houses, ruin their homes and break their unities."

For his part, Erdogan threatened not to "walk together with those who started on the same path with us and then betrayed us." Speaking at a rally in front of thousands of his supporters at Istanbul's main airport on Friday, he threatened that "the judiciary will pay".

Newly-installed Justice Minister Bekir Bozdog, considered a stalwart ally of Erdogan, immediately accused the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors of unconstitutional acts after taking office. Erdogan himself announced that he would sue the council after it overturned one of his changes to police regulations, aimed at ensuring that corruption probes are handled by sections of the police loyal to him.

These conflicts are breaking out inside the Turkish ruling class amid a broad political crisis in the Middle East, after Erdogan was surprised this September by Washington's sudden postponement of war with Syria and the opening of talks with Iran. He had supported the US and European military offensive in the region that

followed the mass uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011. He backed NATO wars in Libya and Syria, fought in alliance with Sunni Islamist forces linked to Al Qaeda, and the installation of unpopular, right-wing Islamist governments in Egypt and Tunisia.

The confusion provoked in Erdogan's government by Washington's sudden shift was intensified by the July 3 coup in Egypt against Islamist President Mohamed Mursi, and the Egyptian army's bloody crackdown on Mursi supporters, killing thousands. As the Gezi protests began in Turkey, the Egyptian coup made patently clear that Washington and Berlin could sanction the toppling of an elected Islamist president and the massacre of his supporters. This example was not lost on Erdogan or the ruling Islamist AKP in Turkey, which has a long history of military coups.

In the aftermath of these events, there was both increasing concern about possible political turmoil in Turkey and growing criticism from the imperialist powers. Leading European Union and German politicians, who were willing to back Erdogan's brutal crackdown against the Gezi Park protests in summer, are now issuing more concerned and aggressive statements.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) stressed Turkey's importance as a "stable anchor" in the Middle East, stressing that its handling of the corruption affair "will serve as a test for every politician to uphold the rule of law."

Others were more aggressive. The chair of the European Parliament's foreign affairs committee, Elmar Brok, criticized Erdogan's government for "exercising dramatic influence on the independence of the judiciary."

Cem Özdemir, chairman of Germany's Green Party, accused Erdogan of having "decided upon the [Russian President Vladimir] Putin model as a form of government."

As tensions mount, cracks are emerging within the AKP itself. One faction is urging Erdogan not to escalate tensions, as this might cause protests to slip out of control.

Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc, a founding member of the AKP, advocated cooperation between the Islamist factions. "We come from a ring of fire," he said. "We didn't find this country on the street and don't intend to lose it there. This is a trial."

At least two AKP lawmakers have reportedly resigned from the party. Haluk Özdalga, who resigned on Friday declared: "The steps taken to cover up the corruption allegations cannot be defended in any way. Excuses used

to explain everything don't work when it comes to graft. Statements that blame domestic and foreign agents are diminishing the reputation of Turkey's politics."

In its first public statement since the corruption scandal broke out on December 17, the Turkish military declared that it did "not want to be involved into political debates," but "on the other hand" vowed to "keep on closely following the developments regarding its corporate identity and the legal positions of its members".

Turkey has a long history of military coups, and Erdogan's presidency has seen a continuous power struggle between the Islamic-led government and the largely secular-nationalist military. In August, Erdogan replaced all the force commanders of the Turkish armed forces two days before the Ergenekon trial, jailing hundreds of top army officers for plotting against his government.

Coming only shortly after the Gezi Park protests in Turkey and the military coup in Egypt, Erdogan's move pushed speculations that he also feared a coup.

The *British Guardian* writes that the recent military announcement came "after a close adviser to Erdogan wrote in a newspaper column that the corruption investigation might be an outside attempt to push Turkey towards a military coup."

The Kemalist Turkish newspaper *Cumhuriyet* reported on Saturday that Turkey's army chief had asked the government to review the Ergenekon case and demanded a retrial.

Like Erdogan, Gülen has a contradictory relationship with the military. He backed military coups in 1971, 1980, and 1997 and has been tolerated and promoted by secular and nationalist forces for years. He left for the US in 1999, however, after being accused of plotting to overthrow the state.

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