



## Dani Rodrik

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# Turkey's Democratic Dusk

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CAMBRIDGE – When questioned recently about a constitutional law professor who was arrested for lecturing at an institute run by the country's main pro-Kurdish political party, Turkey's interior minister, Idris Naim Sahin, couldn't hide his irritation: "I am having a hard time understanding those saying a professor should not be arrested while thousands of other people are being arrested in Turkey."

Presumably, Sahin meant to say that a professor cannot claim special treatment under the law. But his remark inadvertently underscored Turkey's new reality, in which any perceived opponent of the current regime can be jailed, with or without evidence, for terrorism or other violent acts.

Special courts, tasked with prosecuting terrorism and crimes against the state, have been working overtime to produce charges that are often as absurd as they are baseless. For example, journalists have been imprisoned for producing articles and books at the behest of an alleged terrorist organization called "Ergenekon," whose existence has yet to be confirmed, despite years of investigation.

Likewise, military officers have been charged on the basis of blatantly fraudulent – indeed, amateurishly produced – documents containing obvious anachronisms. A senior police commissioner is currently languishing in jail for allegedly collaborating with far-left militants he spent his entire career hunting down. These prosecutions have cast an ever-widening net, ensnaring scores of journalists, authors, and academics, hundreds of military officers, and thousands of Kurdish politicians and activists, among others.

Self-censorship has become routine. Media bosses anxious to retain Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's favor have fired many of those journalists who continue to criticize his regime. And government control now extends beyond the media, judiciary, and academia to the worlds of business and sports. Previously autonomous regulatory bodies (such as the competition authority) have been quietly subordinated to the government, with no debate or discussion.

Even the Turkish Academy of Sciences has been targeted. A recent decree, widely condemned abroad, allows the government to appoint two-thirds of the Academy's members, thereby ending even the semblance of scientific independence.

Erdoğan seems immune to criticism. His success at expanding access to health, education, and housing has enabled him to win three general elections – each with a greater share of the popular vote than previously. He has broken the power of the military old guard and the hold of its stale Kemalist ideology – the secular nationalism introduced by Turkey's first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – thereby permanently altering the makeup of Turkish politics. He has presided over the emergence of a vibrant new class of Anatolian entrepreneurs. And, under his rule, Turkey has become a regional power.

Yet, while Erdoğan may appear to be at the pinnacle of power, it is his government's "Gülenist" allies who have grown increasingly powerful. Members of the transnational Gülen movement – inspired by followers of Fethullah Gülen, a Pennsylvania-based Muslim theologian – are staffing Turkey's police, judiciary, bureaucracy, and universities. The Gülenist media now set the country's new ideological tone, producing a steady stream of disinformation in their vocal support of the country's show trials.

These trials are, in fact, often staged to serve Gülenist ends specifically. Prominent detainees, such as the journalist Nedim Sener and police commissioner Hanefi Avcı, landed in jail after exposing the wrongdoings of Gülenist police and prosecutors. Editorials in *Zaman*, the Gülen network's Turkish-language daily newspaper, no longer mince words: a new Turkey is being created; those who stand in the way are getting what they deserve.

Erdoğan has benefited greatly from Gülenist support, yet he detests sharing power and remains suspicious of the movement. Early on, he successfully exploited the Gülenist-supported political trials in order to demonize the opposition. But, as the charges have increased in scope and implausibility, the trials have complicated his relationships with the military, domestic liberals, and outsiders such as foreign media and the European Union. Moreover, individuals close to him and his administration have recently become entangled in the net of judicial manipulation, which suggests that he may be losing control over the police and the special courts.

Given that the fight against the common enemy, the secularist old guard, has been decisively won, an eventual break between Erdoğan and the Gülenists is perhaps inevitable. Unfortunately, regardless of which side emerges victorious, the outcome will not be good news for Turkish democracy.

For Turkey's friends abroad, it is time for some tough love. So far, the European Union and the United States have reacted to Turkey's descent into authoritarianism with little more than vague statements of concern. No official has offered criticism analogous to Swedish Foreign Secretary [Carl Bildt's](#) condemnation of former Ukrainian Prime Minister [Yuliya Tymoshenko's](#) show trial in that country, or US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's frank statements about Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's erosion of the rule of law. Incredibly, the EU's progress reports on Turkey have continued to call the Ergenekon trials, which are heavily supported by the Gülenists, an opportunity to *strengthen* the rule of law.

It wasn't long ago that Turkey appeared to be a bright beacon of democracy and moderation in a region accustomed to autocracy and radicalism. Now it looks more like a country heading towards authoritarianism at home and embracing adventurism abroad.

It is understandable that Europeans and Americans do not want to offend a regional power. But playing Erdoğan's game only reinforces his sense of invincibility. It does not advance the cause of democracy in Turkey; nor does it make Turkey a more reliable ally.

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