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# **The Polarization of Turkish Society and Politics: The Ergenekon Affair**

Berna Uzun

For the last three years, Turkey's elites and the public at large have been riveted by what is known as "Ergenekon", a euphemism meaning "ultranationalist covert network". At bottom, the Ergenekon Affair consists of a series of indictments against former and active senior military and civilian leaders who allegedly plotted to overthrow the elected AKP pro-Islamic government by fomenting civil unrest through false-flag operations, so that the Turkish army, the "unquestioned" guardian of the secular unitary Turkish state, would have to intervene and restore order. The indictments and trials have caused deep fissures in the Turkish political fabric, and their outcomes, whatever they may ultimately be, promise to have a profound impact on Turkish society and politics.

In Turkish nationalist lore, Ergenekon is a mythical place in the Altay Mountains of Central Asia where the ancestors of the Turkish nation were killed, apart from a single boy, who was raised by a wolf. His descendants lived in the valley until their numbers increased sufficiently so as form the core of a vigorous, powerful Turkish people. The legend was widely circulated during the early years of the Turkish Republic when this new nation-state valued national consciousness over religion as its primary focus of collective identity.

For the supporters of the Ergenekon indictments, a cross-section of liberals, leftists, ethnic Kurds and religious-traditionalists, the trials are a test of the country's evolving democratic system, which seeks to end the long-standing power of the Kemalists, i.e., the Turkey's bureaucratic-military elite that has dominated the country since Kemal Attaturk founded the Turkish Republic after World War I. By contrast, Ergenekon's detractors view the judicial proceedings as a move by an increasingly authoritarian

and oppressive civilian regime to consolidate its power and silence its opponents. According to this view, the trials are a stark example of how the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is seeking to abuse democratic institutions and the rule of law in order to deepen the role of religion in the country and eliminate opposition secularists as meaningful political actors. Thus, at bottom, the Ergenekon Affair has opened up an abyss of mistrust between the Turkish military and AKP, highlighting the profound polarization within Turkish politics and society that has emerged in recent years.

The investigation began in June 2007. Accused of being part of a “state within the state” illegal organization, Ergenekon is alleged to have been responsible for any number of political crimes and assassinations during the preceding two decades.[1] Numerous members of the Turkish elite, including six senior military ex-commanders and three senior military commanders on active duty[2], politicians, columnists and academics were arrested following the unearthing of hand grenades at the home of an ultranationalist military officer in the Umraniye neighborhood in Istanbul. In addition, according to the prosecution, the existence of a string of alleged coup plots was uncovered in the spring of 2007 by the Turkish magazine *Nokta*[3], which exposed the “coup diaries” of former Navy Commander Ozden Ornek. The document detailed two plans for a military coup, Sarikiz (“Blonde Girl”) and Ayisigi (“Moonlight”), aiming to overthrow the AKP’s government in 2004, and included the names of the participants, their plans for carrying out the coup and their motivations as well.

Following police raids of its office, *Nokta* was compelled to cease publication, and was included in the second round of indictments issued by the authorities. A subsequent technical examination of the published excerpts of the diary allegedly confirmed the authenticity of the reports[4]. However, the arrested military commanders denied all the charges.

In 2008, knowledge of an additional abortive plot concocted at the home of General Sener Eruygur was made public. Dubbed Eldiven (“Glove”), it appeared to be an extension of the previously failed coup plots. Eldiven was said to have been designed to “shape the Turkish Armed Forces [TSK], Parliament, the bureaucracy and local governments and [to] rewrite the Constitution, the entire [body of] legislation and the National Security Policy Document[5].”

Additional developments further polarized Turkey’s political arena. Another plan, codenamed Kafes (“Cage”), in which weapons found in Istanbul’s Poyrazkoy district after a police-raid at a retired Turkish Army major’s home. According to the prosecution, bombs were to be used against non-Muslim minorities to isolate the government in the eyes of international community.

Balyoz (“Sledgehammer”), the last abortive plan in the Ergenekon saga, was allegedly drafted in 2003. Revealed in the January 2010 issue of *Taraf*, the complex strategy was said to involve the bombing of Istanbul’s mosques during Friday prayers and the deliberate shooting down of a Turkish warplane over the Aegean Sea, for which Greece would be blamed.

Although a spokesman for the Turkish Army did not deny the existence of the Balyoz document, he described it as a typical “war game” of the military. Moreover, Chief of

Staff Basbug asked rhetorically, how could Turkish soldiers, who charge into battle crying 'Allah, Allah,' possibly bomb a mosque?[6]

The Ergenekon Affair has led to intense discussions in the media and political circles regarding the degree of the judiciary's independence. It has provided an opportunity for the AKP to propose changes in the Turkish Constitution[7], in favor of the greater democratization of political life and the deepening of judicial independence, both of which are criteria for membership in the European Union. There is already a broad consensus in Turkey to review the Constitution, promulgated in 1982, and drafted under the auspices of the military following its 1980 coup. The AKP proposed 26 changes in the constitution on March 22, including a restructuring of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Prosecutors and Judges (HSYK).

These proposed changes include:

- 1) Making it harder to ban political parties; this would effectively enable the AKP to veto any attempt to close it down.
- 2) Allowing the Turkish President to appoint judges to the Constitutional Court.
- 3) Allowing military officers dismissed by the Supreme Military Council (YA), which frequently cashiered officers suspected of Islamist activism, the right of appeal, while also insisting that military personnel accused of offenses be tried in civilian courts, rather than in Military Tribunals, except those directly related to their military duties and responsibilities. Thus, the suspects in the Ergenekon Affair could be judged in civil courts instead of military courts.
- 4) Allowing more government oversight of the HSYK.[8]

Two leading opposition parties in Parliament, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), have rejected the package because it was drawn up without consultation in Parliament. In any case, the amendments appear to have an excellent chance of being adopted: if they receive the support of 330 members of Parliament (the AKP has 336 deputies), the President can decide to put them to a public referendum, which would probably be held in late June 2010.

Ultimately, only time will tell whether the alleged Ergenekon plots are any more grounded in truth than the Ergenekon myth. The trials represent much more than a judicial matter – they mark the extreme polarization of Turkish society and politics: on one side there is an inner core of unelected, self-appointed and often state-employed arch-nationalists, who are long-standing beneficiaries of a "culture of immunity" which is now under threat: on the other side is an imperfectly democratic, but nonetheless legitimately elected new Islamist, populist and mainly Anatolian elite[9].

Turkey is facing two possible scenarios. In the more optimistic one, the trial will serve as a source of pride for Turkish democracy, a demonstration that Turkey has evolved to a point in which a military coup "in the name of the Republic" would no longer be considered acceptable; the truth behind previously unsolved political crimes will have come to light; and the country's civilian authority will have demonstrated its supremacy over the military, thus conforming to the exigencies of the European Union.

On the other hand, one of the other exigencies of European Union membership is the

judiciary's independence. Yet, Prime Minister Erdogan has already conferred upon himself the title of "*prosecutor*"[10], following the declaration by the head of the opposition CHP, Deniz Baykal[11] that he was an "*advocate*" of the Ergenekon suspects. Hence, in a country such as Turkey, where the manipulation of the judicial process is an integral and deep-rooted part of the political culture, there might be no point in hoping that the Ergenekon verdicts will be purely based on judicial considerations, free of political ones.

Turkey needs to do more than just keep its fingers crossed in order to realize the optimistic scenario. The rule of law, the existence of a thriving democratic opposition to the AKP and harmonious cohabitation among the various institutions of the State, including the military, are indispensable for the future of the Turkish democracy. One should remember that there is no substantive difference between an unelected oligarchic elite and an elected authoritarian government.

### **Berna Uzun is a visiting researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center from Marmara University.**

[1] Ergenekon is seen more as a remnant of the Gladio networks, those clandestine organizations stationed in NATO countries during the 1950s to counter a possible Soviet invasion. In 1990, the European parliament called on all its member states to dismantle such formations and investigate all related criminal activities. The Turkish Parliament did not respond to the call. However, the Turkish military and state authorities continued to deny the existence of any such organization in Turkey. For details, see Daniele Ganser, *NATO's Secret Armies: Operation GLADIO and Terrorism in Western Europe*, Contemporary Security Studies, Frank Cass, London and New York, 2005.

[2] At the time of writing, six senior military ex-commanders - Org. Cetin Dogan, Korg. Engin Alan, Tumgeneral Tuncay Cakan, Tumgeneral Behzat Balta, Tumgeneral Bekir Memis - and three senior military commanders on active duty - Tumgeneral Ihsan Balaban , Tumgeneral Abdullah Dalay, and Tumgeneral Ali Semih Cetin -are still under arrest.

[3] Between 29 March and 4 April 2007.

[4] "Darbe Gunlukleri Belgelendi" (in Turkish), *NTVMSNBC*, URL;<http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/440513.asp>

[5] "[Eldiven:Ergenekon'un ucuncu Darbe Planı](http://www.santralhaber.com/haber/874/)" (in Turkish), *MedyaKronik*. 2008-07-07. <http://www.santralhaber.com/haber/874/>.

[7] After its landslide election victory in July 2007, the AKP began work on drafting a new constitution. In early December 2007, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan promised that the draft would be made public by the end of the month. But, in early 2008, the AKP abruptly abandoned the draft in favor of attempting to amend the 1982 constitution, in order to lift the ban which currently prevents women wearing the headscarf from attending university. Gareth H Jenkins, "Turkey's Constitutional Amendments: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?" , Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program,

<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/turkey/2010/100329A.html> .

[8]See details for the proposed changes in Consitution;

<http://www.emedy49.com/1982-anayasasi-ve-akpnin-anayasa-teklifinin-karsilastirilmesi-haber.613.html> .

[9] [Bill Park](http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/ergenekon-power-and-democracy-in-turkey-0), Ergenekon: ‘Power and Democracy in Turkey’, 17 September 2009, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/ergenekon-power-and-democracy-in-turkey-0> .

[10] 16.07.2008, Turkish Journal *Vatan*

[11] Deniz Baykal resigned on 10 May 2010.

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