



The military's role in shaping Erdoğan's authoritarian power - Ümit Cizre

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In the third in a series of four articles on the nature of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's regime, Ümit Cizre looks at the role of the military.

Read [part one](#) and [part two](#).

In the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) early years focused on reforms, which lasted roughly from when it came to power in 2002 until 2011, then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan challenged and weakened the ideological foundations of Turkey's secular establishment.

In doing so, he curbed the political role of its leading institutions, namely the military, judiciary, and civil bureaucracy on the back of a programme to advance Turkey's accession into the European Union.

Although the reforms themselves were progressive, the reason for Turkey's increasingly authoritarian turn is partially to do with their precariousness. A hostile secular establishment provided both the impetus for liberalisation, and perhaps also Erdoğan's search for unfettered power later. In this sense, we can speak of a never receding "establishment effect" on Erdoğan's decision making.

address the cultural and structural conditions that produced military tutelage over politics in the first place. Rather than subordination to the civilian government, the reforms were designed to establish total allegiance to the political authority.

Erdoğan's strong desire to liberate his government from the past by ending Turkey's troubled history of coups saw him introduce a system of pro-government appointments and promotions aimed at creating a loyal officer corps.

Translated into real politics, this policy amounted to ousting 'foes' of the government identified with the secular establishment and replacing them with Erdoğan-supporting cadres, who were often followers of Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen.

In 2007, the so-called *Ergenekon* and later *Sledgehammer* court cases were opened against an alleged network of military officers and their civilian accomplices, charged with planning a series of coups against the AKP government.

State bureaucrats, including former force commanders, a former chief-of-staff, as much as 10 percent of the army's generals, as well as right-wing intellectuals and journalists were implicated in the plots, which helped convince Erdoğan and his allies that the secular establishment had been hostile to them from day one.

This view was further compounded by the military high command's attempt to block the presidential elections in 2007, and a court case led by the chief prosecutor office aimed at closing the AKP on anti-secularism charges in March 2008.

Threats from a hostile military have played a significant role in spurring Erdoğan's counter-strategy: an executive presidency, custom-made to allow the massive aggrandisement of executive powers. However, the *Ergenekon* and *Sledgehammer* cases could not have been brought without the support of Gülen's followers, who had been infiltrating security agencies since the 1990s.

Relations between Erdoğan and the Gülenists descended into open hostility in 2013, when members of the movement released damaging phone conversations between the AKP leader and his son, Bilal Erdoğan, implying widespread corruption within both the

The meaning of the acquittals was clear. Faced with a serious threat from the Gülenists, Erdoğan once more made a "reverse deal", seeking the support of his previous foes in the military to counter the emergent challenge to his rule.

For the old guard in the military's high command, cracking down on Gülenists allowed a purge in the rank and file in their favour, while taking revenge on the movement for its key role in the military's persecution.

That said, underlying tensions and suspicions on all sides remained in place until the July 2016 coup attempt, which Erdoğan blamed on Gülenist officers before doubling down on his rapprochement with the old guard.

This new alliance was facilitated by a group of mostly retired generals setting aside their historic hostility to the AKP in an effort to recoup lost power and glory. Often referred to as Eurasianists for their anti-western ideas, they felt they had been rendered powerless just as their authoritarian brand of politics had begun to rise internationally. Now they saw an opportunity.

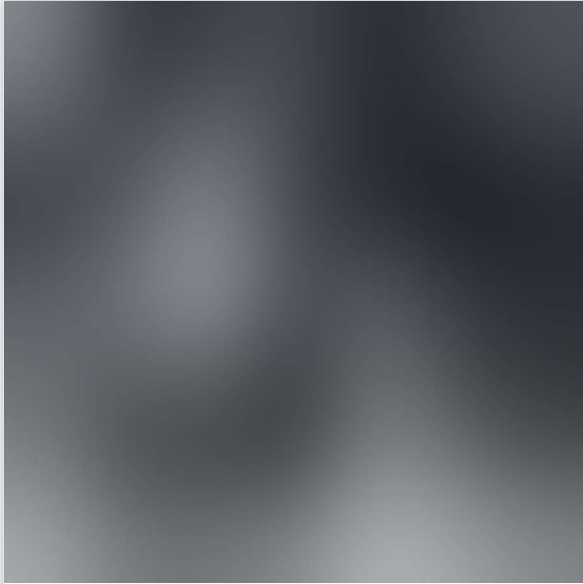
Similarly, the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), struggling at the ballot box and never large enough to take power itself, threw its full support behind the AKP, brushing over previous criticism to become a coalition partner in Erdoğan's governments after 2016.

These forces constitute the semi-fascist character of Erdoğan's current regime. They have the upper hand in key policy areas, shaping Turkey's domestic political landscape and foreign policy, while making important appointments in the military. In return, they enable Erdoğan to trample on individual rights, constitutional restraints, and judicial independence.

More than half a decade after their prosecution and conviction, Erdoğan is more dependent than ever on the old guard in the military high-command.



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