

## Position Paper

# Renewed Escalation of Erdogan-Gulen Conflict Increases Internal Polarisation

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**Conflict between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Gulen movement escalates amid corruption allegations [AlJazeera]**

### Abstract

A massive wiretapping operation by Gulen affiliates in the government has uncovered alleged corruption by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his family, leading to renewed escalation of the crisis between the two sides. These allegations are meant to undermine Erdogan and his party (Justice and Development or AKP) politically and tarnish his image as a clean leader. Erdogan has responded by denying the allegations and labelling them unethical, escalating an ongoing exchange of attacks on moral credibility between the two sides.

### Introduction

The modern Turkish state has been shaped by internal conflict, and the Erdogan-Gulen confrontation falls within this tradition. Previously, the army and Kemalists were in conflict with the Islamic movement and the Gulen movement. The latter two allies were able to overcome only to find themselves enamoured in a new conflict with each other. The Gulen movement and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan are vying to control the Turkish state, with the former using its influence in the judiciary and police to confront Erdogan, and the latter using his executive and legislative powers to limit the movement's influence.

## Wiretapping as a weapon

The morning of February 24, 2014 began 48 hours of unprecedented political developments in Turkey. Two pro-Erdogan newspapers, Yeni Safak and Star published almost identical news reports on massive wiretapping operations under the direction of two prosecutors from the Istanbul Chief Prosecutor's Office. Thousands of politicians, businessmen, journalists, researchers and academics were targeted in the operation that lasted for years. On February 25, what seemed to be telephone conversations between the Prime Minister and his son, Bilal, were posted online, with Erdogan allegedly instructing his son to get rid of funds in his home. The conversations supposedly took place December 17, 2013, the day which the first corruption case commenced in a Turkish court.

The two prosecutors believed to have ordered the vast wiretapping operation, Adam Ozcan and Adnan Chemin, denied the reports published by Yeni Safak and Star. In response, the AK Party to which Erdogan belongs, Cabinet members and Erdogan himself denied the authenticity of the recordings and called them a montage operation meant to undermine the Prime Minister and divert attention from the wiretapping scandal.

The wiretapping operation was conducted under the guise of an investigation targeting a fictitious terrorist organization, "Salaam," and included not only political but also personal conversations. The recordings were filed with the Istanbul Chief Prosecutor's Office and apparently were also delivered to other, unspecified parties. Erdogan was quoted on more than one occasion after the first case commenced in an Istanbul court, stating that he was the target of a wiretapping operation carried out by "criminal groups of a parallel state within the state."

While the groups were not identified by name, it is not a secret that the Gulen movement was the intended suspect in Erdogan's remarks. Prosecutors Ozcan and Chemin denied the accuracy of the newspaper reports but did not deny the operations themselves, instead demanding the Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors initiate an investigation into the matter. After the Council commenced the investigation, Istanbul's Chief Prosecutor, Hadi Salihoglu released a rare written statement on February 25, 2014, stating that the massive wiretapping operation lasting over three years was carried out by an office affiliated with Istanbul's prosecution department but without the presence of reasonable grounds to justify spying on thousands of people or evidence of an armed terrorist organization. Salihoglu did not have knowledge of the operation and promised an investigation into the matter as well as the removal of the files from the prosecutorial archive.

## YouTube © war

The first corruption case commenced in court on December 17, 2013. In February of this year, four YouTube videos dated the same day of that court case were anonymously posted, supposedly between Erdogan and his son, Bilal. In the recordings, Erdogan is allegedly directing his son to meet with other family members and dispose of funds in Bilal's home. After the YouTube videos were released, Erdogan once again stood on the defensive, declaring the scandal to be a conspiracy against him and his party. He claimed the calls never took place and were fabricated by the opposition. Two opposition parties, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party, took the recordings as an opportunity to demand Erdogan's resignation.

In response, Erdogan addressed his party's legislators on the evening of February 25, 2014, accusing those making the allegations of targeting the country's independence and the people's electoral will.

Supporters of Erdogan also presented several defences against the alleged calls, saying that one of the calls supposedly originating from Ankara was on a day which Erdogan publicly spent in Konya. Furthermore, they said the calls' timings coincide by the minute with a public speech given by Erdogan in Konya as well as with his farewell meeting with AKP and city leaders. There is no final statement on the accuracy of the calls yet.

## Internal polarisation and external pressure

The Turkish government continues to confront a difficult internal and external situation that tests Prime Minister Erdogan's ability to rule. The past year saw mass internal protests in Taksim Square as well as an economic decline as a result of the political crisis and the wider international economic crisis. There are key local elections this month which will impact both Erdogan's future actions and the presidential elections which will be held near the end of this year. Externally, Turkey is dealing with complicated situations in Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Iran. Furthermore, the Western-Russian conflict over Ukraine has limited Turkey's relations with Europe.

Erdogan's top priority at this point in time is confronting his internal opponents through voters in the local elections. For him, these elections should act to consolidate his rule and legitimacy in dealing with both internal and external affairs. Erdogan regards winning these elections, especially in Istanbul and Ankara, a positive referendum on his continuation in power either as prime minister if his party endorses that or as president with extensive powers if a constitutional amendment passes.

There are no clear indications regarding the upcoming elections' outcomes, particularly given the Turkish lira's decline and the backlash from a number of businessmen as a

result of the current internal polarisation hurting their endeavours. This is particularly noteworthy because the AKP's main strength has been its economic success. Furthermore, the Taksim Square protests converged with the Gulen movement's resentment and refusal of what they call the "authoritarian nature" of Erdogan's rule. The measures taken by Erdogan are seen as a violation of the separation of powers principle, giving more strength to the executive branch in comparison to that of the judicial branch.

Given this context, European countries are now demanding that Erdogan respect the standards of joining the European Union (EU). This is ironic because Turkey's dream of joining the EU is what contributed to Turkish reforms that in turn facilitated the rise of the AKP to power and fervently motivated Turks. Moreover, Europe is Turkey's main partner and most Turks will not distance themselves from Europe or condone the deterioration of their economy as a result, again confirming that these local elections are Erdogan's opportunity to legitimize himself and the validity of his policies.

### Critical elections

On March 30, 2014, Turkish citizens will cast their votes in local elections, the third ones fought by the AKP since its inception in 2001 and subsequent rise to power in 2002. These local elections are highly significant given the context in which they are occurring and the impact their outcomes may have on Turkish history. They are critical for the following two reasons:

- First, after ten years in power, these elections shall demonstrate whether the AKP still enjoys enough popularity qualifying it to continue leading the country. In the previous 2010 local elections, the AKP attained 38.8 per cent of the vote, less than the percentage of votes attained in the parliamentary elections in 2007. This is a result of domestic considerations that characterize local elections and make them different from parliamentary elections. Key here is whether or not the AKP will maintain their electoral share from the 2010 local elections.
- Second, these elections are an important indicator of Erdogan's future as the AKP's top leader and strong prime minister. This is his third term and should be the last as prime minister according to his party's regulations that prevent any parliamentary member from maintaining the same parliamentary seat more than three successive sessions. It is projected that Erdogan will leave the prime minister post before the 2015 parliamentary elections and compete for the presidency next summer. A substantial decline in the AKP's vote share during upcoming local elections will cast heavy doubts on Erdogan's political future.

## Forecasts

There are three possible scenarios that could result from the factors surrounding the upcoming elections:

- The AKP wins a landslide victory in the elections, meaning Erdogan restores the initiative within the party and somehow enhances his power in the executive branch.
- The AKP wins a lesser victory in the elections, losing either Ankara or Istanbul, which would deliver a warning to the party, limiting Erdogan's manoeuvres. The Prime Minister refrains from seeking any office in the future in order to save the party, with a sub-scenario assuming that if Erdogan clings to power, the party splinters into supporters and opponents.
- The AKP loses local elections and Prime Minister Erdogan withdraws from politics as per regulations.

Regardless, however, the Turkish state will likely continue to experience internal conflict, causing it to focus inward and neglect surrounding external threats. This is not in the state's best interests, particularly because the external threats will only exacerbate the internal polarisation the country is experiencing. Thus, it is in the interest of all Turkish players to end the conflict, and that could happen in one of two ways: Erdogan wins but in such a manner that violates the standards of joining the EU, or his party (AKP) reaches some type of reconciliation with the Gulen movement guaranteeing the mutual interests of both groups.

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