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# Not so clean after all - implications of corruption in the Turkish AK party

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On December 17th, Turkish police detained around 50 individuals accused of corruption and bribery. The [scandal](#), which implicated Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was that the arrested ranged from sons of government ministers to political allies in Turkey's financial sector. Thus began a new chapter in Mr Erdoğan's battle between his movement and the Turkish "deep state" – pockets of the administration loyal to their own interests and, notably, not Mr Erdoğan's.

While the prime minister has quelled both opposition from the military and from the street over the last five years, he holds less leverage over security forces and the judiciary. His response the next day was to fire police chiefs involved with the arrest and decry an "operation" against his democratic government, rhetoric he is wont to use. In return, by Christmas the most notorious of the arrested were charged with bribery, including Süleyman Aslan, the CEO of Halkbank who was accused of smuggling gold to Iran, and the sons of the economy and interior ministers. Both would resign within the day.

To reassert order and control, Mr Erdoğan chose to renominate half of his cabinet before the new year. But the damage to his reputation was done. Parliamentarians leaving his Justice and Development (AK) Party have lashed out at his authoritarian rule before the media. Many publicly called for the prime minister to resign in order to restore confidence. Meanwhile, the case's

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prosecutor has accused the government of threatening his work, and a second wave of arrests was called off. The prime minister, who has by now fired hundreds in the police force, is poised to remake this branch of the state in his image. To him, the scandal is a product of foreign meddling targeting him – a view his opponents are unwilling to concede.

Mr Erdoğan's AK Party was once seen as a model for Turkish governance. The moderately Islamist party came to power in 2002 and was credited with removing power from the military and reviving the Turkish economy. However, it was a difficult rise to leadership for Mr Erdoğan, who was once imprisoned over charges of seeking to topple Turkey's secularist regime. One of Mr Erdoğan's closest allies in his rise to authority was Fethullah Gülen, often considered the most powerful cleric in Turkey. Mr Gülen, a Muslim preacher born in the eastern Turkish city of Erzurum, has been based in the rural eastern Pennsylvania town of Saylorsburg in self-imposed exile since 1999, having fled Turkey over the same charges that led to Mr Erdoğan's imprisonment. Mr Gülen has a large following, which operates schools around the world and maintains strong ties to media, finance, and government in Turkey. Mr Gülen's movement played a key role in making the AK Party Turkey's most powerful political party today by helping it topple the old secular elite.

Mr Gülen's followers were able to infiltrate the secularist regime's judiciary and police in the 1990s and early 2000s by defying the stereotype of Islamists; they presented themselves as clean-shaven, Western-educated, and English-speaking. The prosecutors who beat the power of Turkey's authoritative military through mass trials were also believed to be Mr Gülen's followers. With several hundred military officers now imprisoned, Messrs Erdoğan and Gülen's common enemies have been defeated. Over time, each side has grown increasingly distrustful of the other and see each other as a threat to their power. They were united in fighting the secularist regime, but they originate from two different traditions of the Islamist movement in Turkey. And with their common enemy defeated, the alliance has frayed and intensified into a struggle to control state institutions. In early 2012, a Gülenist prosecutor tried to summon the head of the National Intelligence Agency, an Erdoğan confidant, as a suspect in a terrorism trial. Later that year, an eavesdropping device found in Mr Erdoğan's office was linked to Gülenists in the police. Mr Erdoğan's camp has retaliated by moving to outlaw extra-tuition schools, of the kind run by Mr Gülen, which provide funds and followers to the movement. This most recent scandal is believed to be yet another battle in the proxy war for power between the two camps.

Mr Erdoğan has built up a compelling image of his government as a corruption-free, clean alternative to a murkier past. These recent events have damaged this image. This is important not only with regards to the Turkish people but also to aspiring democrats across the Arab world and to friendly EU governments working to advance European-Turkish ties. For many people,

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both within and without Turkey, the AK Party represented a model of functioning democratic Islamism, an alternative to western secularism or the old totalitarian regimes of countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya.

The most recent allegations served only to further alienate secular and liberal Turks, who had drifted away from what they perceive as an increasingly pious Islamist movement prone to cronyism. Although the implicated ministers have since resigned, Prime Minister Erdoğan's reaction to the corruption allegations and police investigations, especially his administration's removal of dozens of high-ranking police officials and hundreds of other officers involved in investigating bribery allegations, has stirred up populist anger against the AK Party, especially in Istanbul. Sporadic street protests broke out in mid-December, and some Turkish politicians predict a return to street protests on the scale of the past summers, in which many thousands of Turks in Istanbul and other cities protested the violent suppression of an earlier protest to defend a popular Istanbul park.

The most immediate electoral effects of the corruption scandal will likely be felt in Istanbul's mayoral race in March. Mustafa Sarıgül, the opposition Republican People's Party candidate for the [mayorality](#), casts the choice between himself and AK Party candidate, the current Istanbul mayor Kadir Topbaş, as a choice between himself and Mr Erdoğan. The Republican People's Party hopes to use public disillusionment and disgust with the AKP to win the Istanbul mayoralty, an office often used by politicians (including Mr Erdoğan) as a springboard to national prominence.

In August Turkey will hold its first-ever direct presidential elections. Mr Erdoğan will run for office. Although he remains the favorite even in the wake of the recent corruption allegations, an AK Party loss in the Istanbul mayoral elections in March could damage his chances. Moreover, details in the corruption scandal continue to surface; even Mr. Erdoğan's populist appeal could not withstand evidence directly linking him to illicit activity. For over 10 years, Mr Erdoğan has served as the head of a model government, but now it looks like some cracks in that model might begin to show.

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