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The Death of Turkey's Democracy

"I no longer recognize the country where I was raised."

I no longer recognize Turkey, the country where I was raised and spend most of my time when I am not teaching in the U.S.

It wasn't so long ago that the country seemed to be taking significant strides in the direction of human rights and democracy. During its first term in government, between 2002 and 2007, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) worked hard to bring the country into the European Union, to reform its legal regime, and to relax restrictions on Kurds.

But more recently, the same government has been responsible for a politics of deception, dirty tricks, fear, and intimidation that couldn't present a sharper contrast to its rhetoric on democracy. Several Turkish intellectuals abroad who have expressed critical views have told me they are afraid to return to Turkey. Eavesdropping has reached such levels that even housewives refrain from chatting about "sensitive" matters on the phone.

The AKP government has launched massive, politically motivated court cases against its opponents. Most glaring are the hundreds of current and retired military officers, lawyers, academics, and journalists who have been charged with membership in an armed terror organization, dubbed "Ergenekon," which aims to destabilize and topple the AKP government.

Pursued by a group of specially appointed prosecutors, and loudly cheered by AKP-friendly and AKP-controlled media, these Ergenekon trials make a mockery of due process. They are based on indictments full of inconsistencies, rely on anonymous informants of questionable credibility, and evince systematic prosecutorial misconduct. The evidence behind the charges ranges from the insubstantial to the

blatantly manufactured. The main purpose of the prosecutions seems to be to discredit the accused and keep them under detention for as long as possible.

My personal wake-up call came in February when retired General Cetin Dogan, my father in law, was arrested in a parallel case. Mr. Dogan, an outspoken critic of the AKP, was charged with being the leader of an elaborate coup plot to overthrow the newly elected government in 2002-2003. The documents backing the charges, produced as usual by an anonymous informant, were full of anachronisms, discrepancies, and mistakes, raising serious questions about their authenticity. None of this derailed the government. Prosecutors ignored all indications of forgery, a government-controlled scientific body produced a patently misleading report lending support to the charges, and the pro-AKP media launched a vicious campaign of character assassination against Mr. Dogan. Mr. Erdogan and his circle joined in the chorus of attacks while denigrating judges that would dare rule in favor of the defendants. Mr. Dogan was kept for months in jail pending trial, along with tens of other active-duty and retired officers, despite the absence of credible evidence and obvious signs of fabrication.

Inexplicably, many supposed Turkish democrats and liberals have made common cause with the AKP government and have acted as cheerleaders for these cases. Their hope seems to be that the Ergenekon trials will bring the so-called "deep state"—clandestine networks of the military and their civilian allies—to account. There is little doubt that Turkey's pre-AKP secular order featured strong anti-democratic undercurrents. But the AKP government has shown little interest in uncovering actual crimes or bringing real culprits to justice. Even though some of the Ergenekon suspects may be guilty of transgressions, they have been indicted not for specific, demonstrable offences, but for nebulous or fictitious crimes unlikely to result in convictions in a fair trial. Moreover, in these and other cases the government engages in exactly the kinds of activities that the liberals

decry and want to bring to justice.

Consider some other examples. Despite considerable evidence that senior members of the police were, at a minimum, guilty of gross negligence in the murder of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in January 2007, none of the policemen have been prosecuted. It is not a coincidence that some of these same police officials have led the Ergenekon investigations. A distinguished chief state prosecutor has been imprisoned on trumped-up charges of being a member of the Ergenekon network, even though he was one of the few prosecutors courageous enough to go after the military gendarmerie's intelligence branch, a stronghold of the deep state, during 1998-1999. His real crime: Investigating religious orders connected to the AKP. Despite clear indications that the police and prosecutors have been involved in the planting of or tampering with evidence against Ergenekon suspects, there have been no attempts to explain, let alone investigate, the misconduct.

Given the trail of wrongdoings the AKP is leaving behind, it will likely do whatever it takes to avoid losing power in next summer's elections. Sadly, Mr. Erdogan's inclination will be to raise the temperature a few notches higher, both domestically and internationally (see its recent rapprochement with Iran, or its brinkmanship against its old friend Israel).

It's clear now that Turkey is no longer the liberalizing, emerging democracy under the AKP that it was only a few years ago. It's time the U.S. and Europe stopped treating it as such—both for their own sakes, and for the sake of the Turkish people.

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