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Et tu, Gul? Then fall, Erdogan

TURKEY IN TURMOIL

By M K Bhadrakumar
6/5/2013

One thing that Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said before pushing ahead on Tuesday with a four-day tour of the Maghreb tour still hangs suspended in the air. Hardly anyone picked it up. He said Turkish intelligence is looking into possible links between the recent incidents in Istanbul, scene of violently suppressed protests, and foreign elements.

Erdogan hinted that some leads are already available with the Turkish intelligence. "Our intelligence work is ongoing. It is not possible to reveal their names. But we will have meetings with their heads."

His words suggested that there might have been concerted foreign interference. Logically, the eyes turn toward Damascus, Tehran and Baghdad. But then, Erdogan also blamed Twitter for inciting unrest. He said,

There is now a menace, which is called Twitter. The best examples of lies can be found there. To me, social media is the worst menace to society.

The regimes in Syria, Baghdad and Iran should be out of their minds to dabble in the US-controlled social media as instruments of their regional policies. Besides, the reactions of the three countries to the Turkish unrest are conspicuously reticent under the current circumstances of intense mutual hostility, and quite apparently they have been taken by surprise that the ground beneath the feet of the Sultan in Istanbul could shift just like that.

Straws in the wind

What stands out in sharp contrast is the shrill, intrusive reaction of the United States. Washington has so far made six statements regarding the unrest in Turkey through the past five-day period since May 31, mostly at the level of the White House. These statements have been highly critical of Erdogan.

They viewed the protests as peaceful acts by ordinary law-abiding citizens exercising their rights to free expression. They expressed concern about the government's response to the protesters and "expected" Ankara to work through the issue while "respecting its [Turkey's] citizens' rights".

The White House considered that the Turkish government resorted to excessive use of force and called for the events to be investigated. Secretary of State John Kerry added that the Obama administration is "deeply concerned" by the large number of people who have been injured. Kerry said:

We are concerned by the reports of excessive use of force by police. We obviously hope there will be a full investigation of those incidents and full restraint from the police force with respect to those incidents. We urge all people involved ... to avoid any provocations or violence.

The US has taken up the matter with the Turkish government through diplomatic channels.

Indeed, something is strange in this overreaction, and it is not only as regards the disproportionate and harsh US pronouncements - considering that Erdogan and President Barack Obama had some special chemistry between them - but also because the US reaction looks suspiciously defensive.

These are early days, and firm conclusions cannot yet be made as to what exactly is happening in Turkey. However, there are straws in the wind.

Hereby hangs a tale

No sooner had Erdogan's jet taken off from the Essenboga airport on his scheduled trip to North Africa than Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc visited the presidential palace in Ankara to meet President Abdullah Gul. The two leaders thereupon publicly took a radically different approach than Erdogan's to the ongoing unrest.

Erdogan had summarily dismissed the protesters as "ideologically" motivated hoodlums with links to foreign powers and had no word of regret for the police excesses. Arinc, on the contrary, acknowledged that the original protesters were "right and legitimate" and the police methods were brutal, for which he even apologized. Indeed, he has since agreed to meet the protesters on Wednesday.

Again, Erdogan was harsh on the opposition Republican People's Party for inciting the protests, whereas Gul received its leader at the presidential palace for a discussion.

Erdogan argues that he won a handsome mandate in the last parliamentary poll, which gave him

the prerogative to implement his programs, but Gul contradicts him that democracy is about more than holding elections.

To be sure, the secularists and liberals and the Kemalist camp have promptly greeted Gul as more conciliatory, more receptive to democratic ideals and generally more pro-Western than Erdogan.

Curiously, Erdogan, Gul and Arinc are being described in the same breath as the "founding fathers" of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), although Turks all over would know that Erdogan is as peerless as any sultan in their history.

And the intriguing part is that this characterization of an AKP "Troika" is the handiwork of the Zaman newspaper. Of course, Zaman is run by the followers of the hugely powerful faith-based Fetullah Gulen movement. Hereby hangs a tale.

Paragon of 'moderate' Islam
Although the Gulen movement had supported the Islamist AKP's march to power, a distance had developed between Erdogan and Gulen in recent years. Erdogan has been plainly indifferent toward Gulen and averse to submitting to him. In contrast, after meeting Gulen recently, Arinc showered praise on him in a TV interview and pointedly called him as "*Hocaefendi*", a title that his followers use for him. Arinc said Gulen is the "conscience of 75 million people" in Turkey.

Arinc's meeting with Gulen took place in Philadelphia during Erdogan's recent visit to the US, but the prime minister himself kept away.

Now, all this may seem out of context unless one has the background of Gulen, who heads one of the most influential movements in the Islamic world and which is regarded as drawing on the moderate mystical traditions of Sufism. He fled Turkey in 1999 amid accusations of plotting to overthrow the secular government at that time and has been living in exile on a 10-hectare haven in the mountains of eastern Pennsylvania.

According to a well-researched report by the New York Times, his Green Card application shows that Gulen's request to remain in the United States was endorsed by a former top official dealing with the Middle East in the Central Intelligence Agency. [1]

The mystery deepens when it transpires that the CIA's case officer also is an authority on the "Arab Spring" and political Islam, with a long career track specializing in the use of Islam as an instrument of US regional policies.

Suffice to say, Zaman newspaper has opened the heavy artillery on Erdogan and is exhorting Gul and Arinc to take on the mantle of leadership. Zaman commentaries have virtually called for a revolt against Erdogan by AKP stalwarts.

Erdogan faces an existential challenge. The heart of the matter is that he has grown in stature through the past decade in power taking Turkey to unprecedented heights of prosperity and striding the Arab Muslim world as a role model.

In the process, paradoxically, it has also become increasingly difficult for the US to harness his energy. Erdogan has become uncontrollable - be it in his stance on Syria, support for Iraqi Kurdistan, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, or his visceral hatred toward Israel.

Waving the red flag

Woven into all this is also a congruence of interests between the US and Gulen in weakening and destabilizing Erdogan. From Gulen's perspective, Erdogan not only defies him, but is also accelerating a historic compromise with the PKK, a Kurdish group that he is violently opposed to. By the way, a WikiLeaks cable dated 2009 by the then US ambassador to Turkey, James F Jeffrey, assessed that the Gulen movement was strong in the police and security agencies.

Interestingly, Ambassador Jeffrey wrote,

The political context for conversations about Gulen is complicated because President Gul is himself seen by almost all of our contacts as a Gulenist, while Prime Minister Erdogan is not. Indeed, some of our contacts have argued that Erdogan is so firmly outside the Gulen camp that Gulen loyalists view him as a liability. At the same time, the Republican People's Party and other AKP opponents of the ruling Justice and Development Party are quick to accuse the US of working covertly to prop up Gulen, allegedly to weaken Turkey's secular foundation to produce a "model" moderate Islamic nation. [2]

Make no mistake, Turkey's unrest is not going to wither away. Gulen is making his epic move to bring about an "in-house" political coup within the AKP to bring Gul to the fore. Gulen has Washington's support for this "regime change" in Turkey. The Middle East situation has reached a criticality, and who rules Turkey becomes of seminal importance.

But will Erdogan walk into the sunset without a fight? Such meekness wouldn't be the hallmark of a sultan. Marc Champion, editor at Bloomberg, is spot on:

If the president is able to calm the protests before Erdogan returns in three days - as the prime minister says he hopes - Gul will get the credit. If Gul can create a new coalition across the opposition parties, he would be a great choice to lead them and would provide a good change for Turkey. But don't count on it ... Erdogan isn't just a political bruise. He is a force of nature, and has a genius for turning events to his advantage. The party was built and succeeded around Erdogan's popular appeal, not Gul's. [3]

Meanwhile, the Syrian crisis has introduced another dimension into this. Gul is a protege of the Saudi royal family, whereas Erdogan shares the Qatari Emir's passion for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Evidently, Israel is terribly excited about the outcome of the turmoil in Turkey. The Ha'aretz newspaper has begun a "live blog" on the happenings. Equally, Tehran has counseled Erdogan to show "prudence", virtually waving the red flag, despite all the differences with him, that powerful forces could be arrayed against him.

Notes:

1. Turkey Feels Sway of Reclusive Cleric in the US, The New York Times, April 24, 2012.
2. See here.
3. Is Turkey's President Playing Good Cop to Erdogan's Bad Cop?, Bloomberg, June 4, 2013.