

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

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## Democracy in Turkey

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*Dani Rodrik has just returned from Turkey, shunned while defending his father-in-law, the main defendant in the military coup plot case. The Harvard professor explains his take.*



IN DECEMBER I traveled to Turkey with my wife and young son, as we do every year during winter break. This time, though, we had more than visiting family and friends in mind. We were on a mission to demonstrate that what many have called the trial of the century in Turkey is in fact a sham built on fabricated evidence.

Nearly two hundred Turkish military officers stand accused of having plotted a gruesome coup back in 2003—codenamed Sledgehammer—against the then—newly elected Justice and Development Party (AKP) government.

Details of the alleged plot have gripped the nation ever since an anonymous source delivered a suitcase full of what appeared to be secret military documents to a newspaper reporter in January 2010. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and other AKP leaders have openly lent support and credibility to the charges. With few exceptions, mainstream commentators have also accepted the claims at face value. The prosecutors have produced a 1,000-page long indictment, along with supporting documentation running into tens of thousands of pages. When we arrived in Turkey (my wife is the daughter of Çetin Doğan, the lead defendant in the case), the trial had just started in Silivri, on the grounds of a prison in the outskirts of Istanbul.

Our mission seemed quixotic and presumptuous at best. And yet, stripped of all the frenzy and disinformation that surrounds the case, the facts were abundantly clear. The coup plot documents on which the charges are based were obvious forgeries.

Americans have not paid much attention to the Sledgehammer case or to Turkey's other ongoing political-military trials. Western observers typically assume that these trials, although far from perfect, are an opportunity for the country to come to grips with its murky past. Yet the Sledgehammer case reveals quite a different reality. It lays bare the machinations behind the judicial process, aimed evidently at achieving political advantage instead of justice. It calls into question Turkey's relevance as a democratic beacon for the Middle East and reveals the shaky domestic political foundations on which the country's foreign policy rests.

We recounted in a previous [article](#) [3] the myriad inconsistencies and violations of due process in this case. The evidence we uncovered left no doubt that the CDs containing the incriminating evidence had been tampered with. Most strikingly, we identified dozens of instances in which entities—hospitals, NGOs, companies, military units—were referred to by names that they acquired years later. The forgers seem to have checked to make sure these entities existed back in 2003, but apparently forgot to see whether they might have operated under different names at the time the coup plot was alleged to have been hatched. These conspicuous anachronisms made clear that the documents supposedly authored in 2003 by the officers on trial were in fact produced no earlier than August 2009.

However, when we presented our argument in Turkey in a book, several TV appearances, and meetings with journalists, we were bewildered by the reception we received. We encountered a mix of denial, deception, and fear, which says much about Turkey's recent history—and even more about the alarming direction in which the country seems to be headed.

THE REACTION we got from the country's liberal intelligentsia was symptomatic. The Turkish intelligentsia has made common cause in recent years with the AKP government, thanks in large part to the AKP's success in presenting itself as a force for democratization and civilianization of Turkish politics. These intellectuals see Sledgehammer and other similar trials as a chance to make ultra-secularists and militarists accountable for the crimes of the past. Given Turkey's history of military coups, this is understandable; we saw things pretty much the same way until recently.

What was much more difficult to fathom was these intellectuals' unwillingness to question their beliefs in light of mounting evidence that the defendants had been framed. Many of Turkey's leading "liberals" simply turned their backs on the evidence that we had amassed. They refused to meet with us, failed to show up at panels where we presented our findings, and left our e-mails unanswered. The reporter who first broke the Sledgehammer story in the newspaper *Taraf*, a ubiquitous presence in the Turkish media, declined invitations to debate us on TV. Ironically, while we were in Turkey prosecutors were forced to reveal—after persistent demands from lawyers—reams of material pointing to the inconsistencies we had identified (and more), which they had chosen to disregard (and hide from the defense).

Others tried to deflect our findings by personalizing our quest. Predictably, there were articles aplenty in the Islamist press that played off my Jewish identity. Pinar, my wife, was typically portrayed in condescending, often sexist terms that suggested her judgment was clouded by filial loyalty. Such articles were even published in the supposedly liberal *Taraf*.

But no publication worked harder to discredit us than *Zaman*, Turkey's largest-circulation daily. The pro-government *Zaman*—along with its English-language sister publication *Today's Zaman*—has been a steady source of disinformation on the Sledgehammer case from the beginning. At various times, the paper has reported that the infamous CDs bear authenticated fingerprints, that the Sledgehammer documents carry the planners' signatures, that civilian staff have admitted preparing the coup documents, that military prosecutors have certified the coup plans as genuine—all of which happen to be false. At one point, the paper had to quietly pull a piece off its web archive after we pointed out the countless errors it contained.

As our views gained some traction and the public debate began to shift, *Zaman* went into overdrive. It published several front-page stories trying to undercut our evidence. It argued that the "discovery" of a new stash of digital material in a navy base proved us wrong—even though the new files contained all the same anachronisms, plus more! Some of *Zaman's* attacks were nothing less than bizarre. The paper ran a story that suggested I was slated to become economy minister once the Sledgehammer coup took place and the military took charge. There were articles that focused on my Harvard affiliation and insinuated that I was damaging Harvard's reputation by providing support for "coup-mongers." When I invited *Zaman's* editor Ekrem Dumanli to a debate about the facts of the case, there was, predictably, no response.

*Zaman's* exertions to prove, against all logic, the coup documents' authenticity and to discredit anyone who would argue otherwise carry broader significance. *Zaman* is not just Turkey's largest-circulation newspaper; it is also the media flagship of the Fethullah Gülen movement. Gülen is a charismatic Pennsylvania-based Turkish preacher who has built a vast network of followers that is closely allied with the AKP government. His apparent espousal of a tolerant, humane, and moderate brand of Islam has led many to believe that the movement seeks nothing more than a culturally conservative, yet democratic Turkey. Yet *Zaman's* vilification campaign against the defendants and blatant distortion of the facts give the lie to these democratic pretensions.

They also lend credibility to the widespread perception that the dirty tricks behind cases like Sledgehammer are the work of Gülenists, who are known to have established a stronghold in the national police and among the prosecutors assigned to these cases and also to have infiltrated the military. There is more than a grain of truth to these allegations. A former U.S. ambassador to Turkey during 2003–2005, Eric Edelman, has revealed that he was passed fake coup documents by an individual connected to the Gülen movement. A police commissioner, who had been a Gülen sympathizer, published an expose this summer in which he wrote that the Gülenists were resorting to widespread illegal wiretaps and evidence fabrication, creating a state within the state. (He promptly found himself in jail, facing charges that bear the tell-tale signs of the manipulations he had described in his book.)

The Gülenists don't control all media in Turkey, and neither does the government. But in our contacts with other segments of the mainstream media, we encountered another worrying leitmotif: fear. We heard story after story about self-censorship and refusal to engage with subjects that might offend the Gülen movement or the government. Journalists complained about intimidation, and anchormen told us during commercial breaks about the risk they were taking by interviewing us. A very well respected

journalist, known for his middle-of-the-road views, told us that for the first time in his professional career he was worried about his future. This is not all based on paranoia: the country's largest independent media company is reeling under a huge tax fine, imposed for what is commonly believed to be political reasons.

BY THE time we returned back to America we felt we had made an impact. The problems with the evidence, and the anachronisms in particular, are now widely recognized. Our blog ([cdogangercekler.wordpress.com](http://cdogangercekler.wordpress.com), in Turkish) which used to receive a few hundred visitors a day now gets hits in the thousands and hosts a vigorous discussion of the case (including by those who do not share our views). Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP, who have exploited the case for political mileage in the past, have turned uncharacteristically silent despite general elections coming up in a few months' time.

To be sure, the trial still goes on and the proceedings ignore the fact that the incriminating CDs would be inadmissible as evidence in any proper tribunal. Many "liberal" commentators continue to treat the charges as fact. It would be too much to expect a quick about-face in a nation scarred by a history of military coups and by a judiciary that has long been manipulated by those holding political power.

Yet the facts of the case are simple and demand answers. Why is the Gülen movement, judging by the behavior of its mouthpiece, so intent on covering the forgers' tracks? Why is Erdoğan's government idly standing by despite the obvious miscarriage of justice?

These are uncomfortable questions that go the heart of the new political order taking shape in Turkey. They force us to reconsider how benign the AKP's alliance with the Gülen movement really is, and what the alliance portends for the future of democracy and the rule of law in Turkey.

Dani Rodrik is a professor at Harvard University, and the son-in-law of retired general Çetin Doğan, the lead defendant in the Sledgehammer case.

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