



Fethullah Gülen and his Followers

Fethullah Gülen is a US-based Turkish imam who leads a transnational religious community known in Turkey as Hizmet (lit: 'service'), but referred to internationally as the Gülen Movement (GM). The GM emerged in western Turkey in the late 1960s, and subsequently expanded into the country's most affluent and influential religious organization. Active mainly in the sphere of private education, but also in the media, healthcare, finance and banking, at the height of its success in the early 2000s, the GM's global assets were estimated to amount to billions of US dollars. Underpinning the GM's activities is a philosophy of Islamic activism, first proposed in the early 20th century by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (d.1960) and later developed by Fethullah Gülen (1941-). Unlike many Islamist movements, Nursian philosophy suggests that Muslims should be inspired by their faith to influence civil society positively, rather than engage in party politics. Through its institutions, the GM has capitalized on neoliberal market conditions in Turkey and around the world to mobilize this religious philosophy in the service of major wealth accrual.

Throughout the early years of the AKP's tenure, the GM worked closely with the governing party in an unofficial alliance of patronage and convenience. United by a shared dislike of Turkey's staunchly secularist elite, the AKP and the GM collaborated in the early 2000s to weaken the institutions that historically upheld and defended the principles of Kemalism – namely the judiciary and the military. Once this goal had been largely achieved, however, cracks in the unofficial alliance began to become apparent. They held different positions on key issues including Turkey's relationship with Israel, as well as the country's long-standing Kurdish question.* By December 2013, the first major public rift between the two groups appeared, when prosecutors loyal to Gülen launched allegations of high-level fraud against the president, his family and various members of the AKP. The president and his administration survived the scandal, but the damage to the GM-AKP relationship was henceforth irreversible.

On 15 July 2016, a failed attempt at a military coup in Turkey left over 200 people dead and a nation traumatized by a night of serious violence. Before the coup had even reached its conclusion that night, President Erdoğan publically pinned the blame on his former ally Fethullah Gülen. Since July 2016, GM institutions in Turkey have all been shut down or appropriated by the state, and followers of Gülen have either been arrested or fled the country. Gülen's extradition from the USA continues to be demanded from the American administration: the Turkish government, as well as a great majority of its people, are determined that Gülen be returned to Ankara to face trial for his alleged crimes.

Read this article about the coup and its aftermath:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/14/one-year-after-the-failed-coup-in-turkey-the-crackdown-continues>



Read this article about the background to the war between the GM and the AKP:

http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/17027/the-irrepressible-charm-of-the-state_dershane-closn

Watch this interview with Fethullah Gülen, given in July 2017:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QseSvczllw>

Questions:

1. What are the historical and cultural circumstances specific to Turkey that facilitated the emergence of the GM in the late 20th century?
2. How do you think Gülen is able to successfully command such loyalty from his followers?
3. Who do you think was behind the failed coup of 15 July 2016? Why?