

Turkey's almost coup and the need for perspective

Written by David Tittensor, Research Fellow, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was quick to quell the [attempted military coup](#) on July 15 and to accuse the [Gülen movement](#) of being responsible. This accusation has since dominated the news on the coup.

Even Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said it was [speculated that](#) ["Gülenists" were behind the attempt](#). This simple and uncritical reiteration of Erdoğan's accusations is problematic because Turkey is a land fond of conspiracy theories and Erdoğan's labelling of people as "Gülenists" may simply be code for anyone who opposes his [autocratic rule](#).

What is the Gülen movement?

So what do we know about the Gülen movement? Founded in the 1960s in Izmir, the movement is led by former Turkish imam [Fethullah Gülen](#), who seeks to blend modern secular education with religious values. In 1999, he went to America shortly before being charged for treason. He was tried in absentia and has been living in exile in Pennsylvania, United States, ever since.

Like its reclusive leader, the Gülen movement is a large opaque organisation with operations in around 160 countries and an estimated worth of US\$25 billion. It is speculated that the movement may have as many as 8-10 million followers and until 2013 it was closely aligned with Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party. Given its size and assets, one can understand how such an organisation could make Erdoğan uneasy.

But the Gülen movement preaches neither hate nor violence and explicitly values the democratic process. At its core it is a transnational educational movement with more than 1,000 secular schools around the world. It prizes the combination of science and religious values, and interfaith dialogue, with a view to creating pious yet modern Muslims who can actively participate in and shape the modern world.

This is one reason why Erdoğan's accusation seems so unlikely. The second reason is that the

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movement is on its knees in Turkey.

Sustained crackdown has sapped opposition

Since 2013, there has been a spectacular falling out and the Gülen movement has been brought low by Erdoğan.

A [corruption scandal](#) erupted in December 2013, which saw several ministers resign (and implicated both Erdoğan and his son Bilal in the embezzling of funds). This also resulted in the judiciary and the police force being purged. As with the recent coup attempt, Erdoğan alleged that the Gülenists were behind the corruption probe in an attempt to topple his government.

Following the 2013 scandal, about 500 so-called Gülenist police were sacked or reassigned. The prosecutors who presided over the case were later charged with terror offences and fled the country to Armenia. By early January 2014, at least 2,000 police and prosecutors had been dismissed or reassigned.

Alongside these purges Erdoğan has systematically stripped the Gülen movement of its bank, media holdings and flagship university. In 2015, the [government seized Asyabank](#), which was founded by movement followers, and placed it in a fund that answered directly to the prime minister. The movement's TV channel Samanyolu (among others) was dropped in 2015 from the Turksat satellite-TV platform as part of a [crackdown on media outlets](#) that were critical of the government.

Then, in 2016, the Gülen movement's flagship newspaper, [Zaman, was seized and shut down](#). Hot on the heels of this closure, the movement's premier university, [Fatih, was placed in the hands of trustees](#).

In no state to mount a coup

This prompts the question: How could an organisation that had already been humbled so dramatically organise a military coup?

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Such a notion becomes even more implausible when one considers that historically the military, a traditionally anti-religious institution in Turkey, has been hostile to the Gülen movement. Suspected Gulenists were systematically purged from both the military schools and the military itself during the 1980s and 90s.

This is not to say that such an alliance is impossible. But strong evidence is required to substantiate such an assertion, because history tends to suggest otherwise. This has been the line of US Secretary of State John Kerry, who has [asked for "evidence" rather than allegations](#) to support the Turkish government's request to extradite Gülen.

One of the alleged coup plotters has [reportedly confessed to being a Gülenist](#). However, there are also reports suggesting this confession may have been coerced.

Therefore, the need for reliable evidence is paramount. Otherwise it is simply grist for the mill for both Erdoğan and conspiracy theorists.

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