

Will Gen. Koşaner maintain compromise?

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Turkey has two power centers: One is led by the strictly secular Turkish military and also includes several institutions and high-profile figures supported by certain segments of society who believe in the power of the state at the expense of the people.

The other is the elected governments, most of which have so far failed to resist against the pressures placed upon them by the establishment that has prevented Turkey from being governed democratically.

The equilibrium in favor of the establishment has begun shifting in favor of the political authorities since Turkey's acceptance as an EU candidate country in 1999 and the start of accession negotiations in 2005. But this overwhelmingly Muslim country's accession process has already been troubled for various reasons, including Turkey's lack of democratic reforms since 2005.

Military and civilian reforms in 2003 and 2004 under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) marked a turning point in changing the equilibrium in favor of the civilian authorities.

But such changes in the equation seem to have been temporary, as the power struggle among the two centers continues unabated. This has been observable in the ongoing polarization of society around the nearly two-year Ergenekon investigation, which has so far seen the arrest of retired generals, military officers on active duty, journalists and academics, in addition to ordinary criminals.

The investigation has centered on allegations that an armed gang was set up with the support of powerful elements within the state to destabilize the country and pave the way for the overthrow of the elected government. There is already a trial proceeding against 86 defendants over their alleged involvement in the Ergenekon terrorist organization.

In the midst of the discovery of alleged aborted coup plots in 2003 and 2004, retired Gen. Yaşar Büyükanıt became the chief of general staff in September 2006. During his two-year term, he is remembered, among other things, for the posting of a late-night e-memorandum on the Web site of the General Staff on April 27, 2007, warning the government against attempting to undermine Turkey's secular foundations.

This memorandum backfired when the AK Party won nearly 47 percent of the vote in the July 2007 general elections. Büyükanıt, representing the old guard of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK), thus lost the battle against the civilian authority.

Gen. İlker Başbuğ, who became the new chief of general staff in September of last year, has, however, established a working relationship with the AK Party, albeit reluctantly. Though in essence this working relationship has not changed the TSK's general attitude of mistrust toward political authorities, it has reduced the frequent, overt public tension created by the TSK under Gen. Büyükanıt.

New Strategy

Gen. Başbuğ's strategy of establishing a working relationship with the political authority may have the following motives:

- Allowing civilian prosecutors to arrest or investigate retired generals and officers alleged to have been involved in Ergenekon, thereby preventing the TSK as an institution from losing credibility.
- Avoiding frequent public tension with the political authority so the TSK will not be held responsible for the fluctuations taking place in the economic sphere.
- Remaining inconspicuous and using anti-AK Party institutions, such as some parts of the judiciary and bar associations or parties such as the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), to wear down the AK Party and the Ergenekon investigation. The government has faced criticism for neglecting the principle of a fair trial.
- Obtaining the best military equipment through the consent of the government.

At the same time, there have been unfair criticisms leveled against the government's handling of the Ergenekon investigation that are mostly aimed at closing the case because it has started affecting those who used to be untouchable but who are now equal before the law.

Such unfair criticisms should not sway the prosecutors and the government from their resolve in cleansing the state of illegal elements. But, at the same time, the government and the prosecutors should not allow violations of the law during the investigation so they can deprive their critics of ammunition.

The working relationship between Başbuğ and the government has so far lowered tension between the two power centers.

New risk

Başbuğ has already completed five months in office and he has one-and-a-half years left before he retires. This is not long enough to establish a permanent relationship with the civilian authorities. He will most likely be replaced by Land Forces Commander Gen. Işık Koşaner.

Now the question is: Will Koşaner, who is susceptible to the influence of the TSK, unlike Başbuğ, who has so far been able to resist those officers seeking much stronger reactions to the government, be able to maintain the working relationship that Başbuğ established with the government?

Sources

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