

CAPITAL AND CAPITALISTS IN TURKEY

Gülen sect: Reached for the state,
got capital instead

Ayşe Çavdar

A religious sect now defies the strongest political party in Turkey. There must be a reason for this alarming self-confidence. Is it rooted in history; that is, does the sect have a long heritage? Not really -it is a movement that started to take shape in the 1970s. What about economic clout? Well, sort of; but in a country where each transaction must be approved by the state, economic force can translate into business investment only as far as the state allows it.

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As such, it is hard to talk about huge business power in this respect. International connections? The Gülen sect is being investigated by the FBI, branded as “suspicious” by Germany and its schools are banned in Russia, Uzbekistan, Iran, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan; it is now trying to gain clout in religious conflicts in developing countries such as Nigeria, Sudan and Somalia. This kind of international influence is not enough to challenge a ruling political party which has secured 50% of votes. Although Prime Minister Erdoğan suggests otherwise, Gülen’s followers cannot be likened to the Assassins of Hassan-i Sabbah, that is, an army of believers willing to die for their faith. Well, what is really at stake then? How have they come to secure so much political power?

A familiar starting point: Fighting communism and evolution

The name of the association where Gülen chose to step into politics is rather telling, considering the conditions of the epoch. After completing his military service in 1963 in İskenderun, Gülen returned to Erzurum and participated in

the establishment of Anti-Communist League of Turkey (TKMD). During the Cold War era, Anti-Communist League (KMD) was one of the prominent projects designed for Turkey. KMD became active in 1950 in Zonguldak and opened its first official branch in Istanbul in 1956. However, the association was not to be long-lived, and was closed down after the 1960 military coup. In 1963, it was reestablished under the name TKMD and came to be associated with CIA-supported counterinsurgency operations. After the association was eventually closed down, some members of TKMD played a role in the establishment of Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and Society for Dissemination of Science (İlim Yayma Cemiyeti).

Various biographies of Gülen suggest that in this period, despite being a co-founder of TKMD he also attended meetings at People’s Houses (Halkevleri), probably to compensate for the negative historical image associated with the former.

In following years, Gülen worked as preacher (vaiz) at mosques in Thrace and the Aegean Region, in particular, Edirne, Kırklareli and İzmir.

Stately aspirations inside the state

Subsequently Gülen rose to notoriety because of two political lawsuits. In the first lawsuit, he was placed under custody in the aftermath of the March 12 military coup on May 5, 1971 for violating the Article 163 of the Turkish Criminal Code, which could be summarized as “conspiring to establish a religion-based state.” After seven months of imprisonment, he was finally released in 1974. Meanwhile, he continued to give sermons in Edremit, Manisa and Bornova. Gülen can be said to have shot to fame after imprisonment and acquittal. In 1975 and 1976,

Gülen travelled across Anatolia, preaching against communism and Darwinism. He started to publish the periodical *Sızıntı* in 1979, which took up similar themes.

Gülen got into trouble with the state once again during the 1980 military coup. A search warrant was issued against him, obliging him to hide. The Prime Minister Turgut Özal at the time had the warrant cancelled a few years later. Mehmet Keçeciler, who then was their go-between, recalls that period in a long biographical interview, published by Hayy Kitap:

“Fethullah Gülen vanished into thin air just before the military coup. Following the 1983 elections, we came to power. I was the head of ANAP’s [Motherland Party] party organization back then. There was a search warrant for Fethullah Hodja. The late Burdur Governor İsmail Günindi was an old friend of mine from when we were working as state employees.... One day Günindi came to the ANAP Headquarters to say thank you. Alaattin Kaya and Mevlüt Saygun were also in my office. Kaya was the publisher of *Zaman* newspaper, and Saygun the manager of Fethullah Hodja’s education institutions. I introduced my visitors to one other. İsmail said ‘Fethullah Gülen Hodja is in hiding for no good reason. The prosecutor of Burdur only wants to take his statement; then they will let him go. The sect is causing unnecessary trouble by urging Fethullah Gülen to flee.’ Naturally, Kaya and Saygun were all ears. İsmail said all this, and then left. A few days later, Kaya and Saygun paid me a visit; Kaya said that they had talked to the Hodja about the issue. He had said ‘I will turn myself in, if Turgut Özal gives his word; I will give a statement.’ They said that they wanted to meet with the Prime Minister. I expressed their wish to Mr. Özal. I was a bit worried though. To make sure, I called İsmail (governor of Burdur) and said, ‘Talk with the prosecutor and double check. It would be very unpleasant if Fethullah Hodja turns himself in, only to be arrested. Our prestige is at stake here.’ İsmail then contacted the prosecutor and called me back: ‘No worries. They won’t arrest him; they will just take his statement and let him go... Once I made sure that he would not be arrested, we paid a visit to Mr. Özal together with Kaya and Saygun. Özal said to them, ‘I confirm what Mehmet has told you.’ A few days later, Fethullah Hodja did turn himself in in İzmir, gave a statement and was let go.”

From this anecdote, we can see that Gülen already enjoyed protection and privileges from the highest officials of the state back then. However, it is not so easy to grasp the reasons behind this influence. That is because, although Gülen seems to act like the heir of Said Nursi, a



key figure in the Islamist movement in Turkey, his words and political activities are not representative of Nursi’s line. Although he once had ties to the Okuyucular branch of the Nur sect, he went his own way after the sect was divided into two: Whereas the *Yeni Asır* circle voted no to the 1982 Constitution, the *Şuracılar* branch voted yes. Gülen’s new line was harshly criticized by the followers of Said Nursi, although there was significant competition and strife amongst the latter. The criticism was mainly aimed at Gülen’s close ties with the state and private business.

Gülen started his political career in Accociation For Fighting Communism, which was know for its counter-guerrilla operations and was crucial to Nationalist Action Party’s (MHP) foundation.

The Gülen movement was fully aware of class-based and cultural divides and made good use of these. The Gülen sect did not aspire to social harmony; they translated existing class and culture divides into intra-sect dynamics, and offered upward class mobility as a source of promise and motivation.

The opus of Said Nursi is still read and discussed in student houses, schools and conversation groups controlled by the Gülen sect. Different branches of the Nur sect, although in discord about almost every issue, do agree that Gülen is far from being an heir of Said Nursi’s political and religious thought.

Gülen resigned from the civil service in 1981, as there was a search warrant against him. He continued to write articles for magazines and gave unofficial sermons. Then in 1989, he became a voluntary preacher at Valide Sultan Mosque in Üsküdar. His first books comprise the sermons delivered in this mosque. By the 1990s, Gülen was already a frequently cited political figure. Everyone talked about his schools,

students, prep schools called “dershane”, companies, and even attempts to place his followers in the army and police. In 1994, he established and became the honorary president of Foundation of Journalists and Writers (Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı), which became the flagship of the Gülen sect. The foundation became a prominent political player by organizing the Abant Meetings in the aftermath of the military memorandum of February 28, 1997. The objective of these meetings was to help Turkish political elites reach consensus, even if a basic one, on key issues. Indeed, the AKP project was based on such a basic consensus. The bureaucratic clout of the Gülen sect would thus be coupled with the political popularity of Tayyip Erdoğan and his entourage. Liberal intellectuals contributed to this alliance a legitimizing discourse with democratic references. Rocked by political turmoil, unsolved political murders, and cases of corruption in the 1990s, Turkey

could not fully capitalize on, has turned out to be a critical advantage for the Gülen sect and for National Vision. Both movements can thus develop a religious teaching steering away from moralistic principles and practices, which could otherwise lead one to question certain political and economical activities: They offer Anatolian religious groups—historically excluded from the economic sphere and distribution networks—an opportunity to thrive under current capitalist conditions. In a world where conventional, deep-rooted sects preach humility and moderation, and try to preserve their autonomy by keeping the state at bay, this lack of historical roots allows the Gülen sect and National Vision to uphold ambition and organization “for the sake of God”—the so-called “service”—to engage in conspicuous consumption on order to praise the force of faith, and to utilize the weapons of the enemy in the fight for survival. In other words, it allows them to disregard the discrepancy between the instrument and message. In this respect, the competition between the Gülen sect and AKP—itself a transformed representative of the National Vision—is far from surprising.

Another dynamic powering the rapid ascent of the Gülen sect in the 1990s is related to the built-in inequalities of the socio-economic system. The Gülen movement was fully aware of class-based and cultural divides and made good use of these. The Gülen sect did not aspire to social harmony; they translated existing class and culture divides into intra-sect dynamics, and offered upward class mobility as a source of promise and motivation. If you studied hard, you could be accepted to a higher echelon. Otherwise you risked losing the advantages associated with your sect membership or remaining stuck with no socio-economic mobility. As such, the organization resembled the management of a large corporation, where awards and punishments are distributed according to performance and social capital.

And finally, the third dynamic was shaped in the area left vacant by the state. They helped each other when purchasing a car or house, or when setting up a business. Additionally, a vast network of businessmen also provided that key ingredient of well-oiled market mechanisms, that is, trust. Since they had trust in each other, they could sign long-term business contracts. In local chambers of commerce and industry, these business networks eventually led to political clout. The same was true for schools and student houses. After a person joined the sect as a very young university student, they no longer had to worry about choosing their job, their spouse or even the name of their child. The sect also

Sect members could easily repay soaring foreign currency debts despite exchange rate hikes, thanks to internal solidarity. They helped each other when purchasing a car or house, or when setting up a business. Besides, a vast network of businessmen also provided that key ingredient of well-oiled market mechanisms, that is, trust. Since they had trust in each other, they could sign long-term business contracts. In local chambers of commerce and industry, these business networks eventually led to political clout.

was in a pretty desperate position. It was almost inevitable for AKP—rivalled only by Cem Uzan’s Youth Party (Genç Parti)—to become the rising star of center right.

Gülen sect on the rise

The main dynamics underlying the stellar rise of the Gülen sect are to be found in the transformations of religion, politics and state. Let’s start with the first one:

Unlike the Süleymanlılar sect, which rose to prominence in similar fashion, and the National Vision (Millî Görüş), which first appeared as a political project before turning into a sect, the Gülen sect does not have a historically rooted tradition. Although Gülen traces his philosophical roots back to Said Nursi and certain Islamists even claim his sect to be a modern branch of the Kadiri denomination, Gülen has long abandoned these political and philosophical references. This lack of roots, which the Süleymanlılar

became the social guarantor of business capital, which the state could not provide. As the state became less and less reliable, sects become more and more so. However, this has also changed in recent years. Having lost its flexibility, the Gülen sect—and others, too—started closing themselves to the outside world, and sharing their beliefs and “acquisitions” only inside their own circle. As such, sects stopped expanding by offering reassurance to more and more people, and instead started to give a bigger share of the rewards to current members. Thus, the social and economic relations established by the sect turned into a sphere of privilege.

Transformation of capital as the scene of competition

The so-called Gülenist capital has come about by liberating itself of conventional Islam and its deep-rooted traditions. Although initially organized in the business organization MÜSİAD, Gülen-related businessmen soon differentiated themselves from other MÜSİAD members by business methods. In 2005, they set up TUSKON, which became a rival alternate that granted significant favors to its members. From 2007 onwards, MÜSİAD members started asking AKP officials why the sect received preferential treatment. To understand this competition, one must examine what funds were allocated to which companies by the development and investment agencies set up under AKP rule, as well as the political connections of concerned companies. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that AKP's animosity towards the sect has become more visible as MÜSİAD increased its clout.

On the other hand, the feeble percentage of MÜSİAD and TUSKON members among Turkey's largest corporations suggests that this competition takes place on a rather limited base and that this capital accumulation process has yet to find its own feet, independent of political support.

According to 2010 data provided by the Istanbul Chamber of Industry, the number of MÜSİAD and TUSKON members among the 500 largest members of the chamber does not even reach one hundred. The total share in employment of these two rival associations is around 10%. Their joint share in total profits is also around the same percentage. Considering that only 8 MÜSİAD members made it to the list in 1990, there obviously has been considerable progress. Judging by the table below, one could argue that Islamic capital does not have much weight among the top 500 members of Istanbul Chamber of Industry, and that it compensates

for this disadvantage through political and bureaucratic advantages offered by AKP. As such, the rivalry between TUSKON and MÜSİAD not only has a rather small stake, but also seems very risky. TUSKON has made significant headway by exporting 2.5 times MÜSİAD's export volume; however, this seems set to change due to the ongoing conflict between AKP and sect.

	ISO 500	MÜSİAD	TUSKON
Number of companies	500	31	45
Ex-factory sales (TL billion)	210.6	7.6	12.4
Share in total (%)	100	3.6	5.9
Exports (USD million)	46.224	1.004	2.522
Share in total (%)	100	2.1	5.5
Profit (TL million)	15.555	671	986
Share in total (%)	100	4.3	6.3
Number of employees	516.305	19.981	33.469
Share in total (%)	1000	3.8	6.5

The first signs of tension between Gülen and AKP surfaced in 2007. The reason for conflict was same with that of their alliance in 2002. Erdoğan and his entourage enjoyed huge political popularity; however, they lacked support in the bureaucracy, which found itself in a straitjacket after the February 28th memorandum. According to their initial agreement, the Gülen sect would support AKP with members who graduated from its schools and then took office across the world; which could also be seen as a privilege granted to the sect by AKP. And it worked. Prime Minister Erdoğan's proud claim “We have eliminated bureaucratic red tape” actually pointed to a change of guard in the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy was now put to the service of the party. According to this equation, the party was equivalent to the general public, as it enjoyed 50% electoral support.

It is not hard to guess that the alliance between Erdoğan's team and the Gülen sect ran into problems from the very beginning. Nevertheless, the problem first surfaced with the Mavi Marmara crisis. This ship, which allegedly transported aid to Gaza under the control of the NGO called İHH, was supported by Erdoğan, whereas Gülen indicated that Israel's permission should be sought beforehand. With the subsequent killing of nine Turkish citizens on the ship by the Israeli army, this became a turning point in the relations between Gülen and AKP.

The second crisis, which triggered consid-



Compared to MÜSİAD, which is relatively narrow in scale and geographical reach, TUSKON has a wider imperial vision. TUSKON companies are competing worldwide with global companies.

nable public uproar, was soon covered up as it risked damaging both parties. The scandal was related to claims of corruption in the agency regulating university and civil service entrance exams, the ÖSYM, and thus concerned millions of people. The government and sect made their utmost to limit the scandal surrounding this key institution. In 2010, the civil service entrance exam KPSS was cancelled after claims that the questions were leaked to Gülenist test prep centers (dershane). AKP seemed to confirm these claims as it tried—in vein—to bring the ÖSYM under direct government control. Similar accusations were made about other exams organized by the agency; however, due to the extremely sensitive nature of the issue, the scandal was soon covered up, and the rivalry between the two sides inside the bureaucracy did not fully surface.

The third key moment in the tension between the sect and AKP concerned Hakan Fidan, the head of the Turkish intelligence service MİT. The crisis broke out on February 7, 2012 when the special prosecutor in charge of the KCK lawsuit, Sadrettin Sarıkaya, invited Fidan to give a statement about the case. Prime Minister Erdoğan clearly stated that Fidan would not do so. Immediately, a legislative change was passed to grant Fidan and his team legal immunity. In fact, this was the beginning of the nightmare for AKP, which had previously capitalized on the

support of Gülenists in the judiciary and police to end the army's control over the political arena. This was done by means of lawsuits dubbed Ergenekon and Balyoz. It must have become clear to Erdoğan that the Gülenist seeds he himself had planted in the bureaucracy would cause him serious headaches in any conflict of interest.

Finally, hell broke loose one year later, with the eruption of the dershane (university test preparation centers) scandal. The government wanted to close down the centers and increase the number of private schools (kolej) instead. However, the centers were the main channel of socialization for the Gülen sect. Even more importantly, the sect exploded with anger to see AKP, to which it had lent so much support in the bureaucracy, take a clear measure to eradicate its social base. Although the government finally passed legislation to postpone the closure of the test prep centers by two years, the looming crisis could not be avoided.

What happened after the police crackdown on government corruption on December 17 are the scenes of a duel between the two modern streams of Turkish Islamism: the Gülen sect and the AKP. In one corner we have the Fethullah Gülen sect and their business concerns, which boast great support in the bureaucracy, judiciary and police; in the other, AKP with its huge clout in the legislative and executive branches. What is positive about all this is that the scandal has revealed the banality of Turkish Islamism, as it turns around such worldly issues as corruption and nepotism. As such, Gülen and AKP have jointly put an end to an epoch when the historical power of Islam as a religion could be translated into political legitimacy by Islamists.

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